

Between histories and memories: Torgau's Memorial Museum for Germany's short twentieth century*

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Abstract:

Germany offers numerous examples of memorial museums, although beyond Berlin they are poorly represented in recent studies of the phenomenon. In studying the development of the Torgau Documentation and Information Centre in provincial Saxony, the article seeks to promote a more complex understanding of institutionalized remembrance in contemporary Germany. It argues for a closer look at the agency of East and West Germans and at the relationship between the Nazi and communist pasts. In particular, it considers dilemmas posed by depicting the history of Soviet internment camps in postwar eastern Germany, where former Nazi officials and bystanders and opponents of communist rule all became victims of Soviet mistreatment. The article raises key issues for the practice and study of memorial museums. It considers the difficulties of addressing multiple, interconnected histories within a single institution and the near impossibility of satisfying diverse and divided communities of memory. It also explores problems associated with the combination of historical documentation and morally grounded commemoration of victims that constitutes memorial museums' defining characteristic. It suggests that curators, administrators and scholars need to reflect upon, and weigh up the competing demands of moral certainty and historical complexity.

Key words: memorial museums, exhibitions, commemoration, victims, Germany

Germany offers numerous examples of memorial museums, although they are surprisingly marginal in recent studies of the phenomenon (Duffy 2001; Murphy 2005; Jenkins 2005; Williams 2007). One such example is the Documentation and Information Centre (DIZ) in Torgau in the eastern German state of Saxony. Established in the early 1990s, it has been funded since the mid 1990s by the Saxon state and German federal governments in recognition of its 'national' and 'outstanding historical significance' (Bundestag 1999: 3). That significance stems from Torgau's central place in the Nazi Wehrmacht's brutal system of military (in)justice and from its continued history of incarceration after 1945. After being constructed under Napoleonic rule near the strategic crossing of the river Elbe, the town's Fort Zinna has housed a prison used by successive regimes since the nineteenth century. Crucially, in the 1930s it became Nazi Germany's largest military prison. Along with Brückenkopf across the Elbe, Torgau held two of eight Wehrmacht prisons. From 1943 until 1945, it also housed the *Reichskriegsgericht* (Reich War Court), the apex of the *Wehrmachtjustiz* (military judiciary), which passed approximately 30,000 death sentences during the war, carrying out roughly 20,000 of them. At least 197 *Wehrmacht* soldiers were executed in Torgau.

As *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung* observed, 'that is already a great deal of history for such a small town' (Schneider 2004). Yet incarceration and suffering continued there after the Allied victory of 1945, lasting to the end of the 'short' twentieth century (1914-1991) (Hobsbawm 1994: 3). Initially, the Soviet occupiers used Fort Zinna and the nearby Seydlitz barracks to intern active National Socialists and others deemed a threat to Soviet security and to house prisoners sentenced by Soviet Military Tribunals. Between 800 and 2,700 inmates died due to the

disastrous conditions in these two Soviet *Speziallager* (special camps) between 1945 and 1948. Then, from 1950 to 1990, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) used Fort Zinna as a prison, some of whose inmates were political prisoners. Since German re-unification in 1990, the state of Saxony has continued to use it as a penitentiary.¹

In examining the memorial museum devoted to this complex history, this article aims to contribute to a fuller and more nuanced understanding of institutionalized remembrance in re-unified Germany and to consider what the specific case can contribute to the study of memorial museums more generally. The article explores three sets of questions that are crucial for both the specific and the general contexts, but that often receive insufficient attention: questions of context, agency and communities (I); questions about which pasts are remembered and how multiple, interconnected histories can be addressed within a single museum (II); and questions about the relationship between history and memory in memorial museums (III).

The Torgau case demonstrates that the focus of institutionalized remembrance in Germany cannot be reduced to the Nazi past, and that the crucial relationship between Nazism and communism requires further attention. Institutions devoted to the Holocaust and German-Jewish history dominate accounts of German remembrance within Anglophone museum studies (Sonnenberger 1999; Mönch 2001; Purin 2008; Thaler 2008; Chametzky 2008). Even if other pasts are less obscured than a decade ago (Koshar 1998), they are often treated in isolation from the Nazi past. The relationship between the Nazi and communist pasts is handled rather dismissively within and beyond museum studies (e.g. by Bordage 1993; Mönch 2001; Eryilmaz 2007; Berdahl 2005). Yet the contest over that relationship has been one of the most significant issues for German public remembrance since re-unification (Beattie 2006 and 2008). Advocates of remembrance of Nazism and communism have competed for public attention and funding, and there has been intense debate about whether they should be commemorated together or separately (Niven 2002; Faulenbach 2002 and 2005; Haustein 2006; Beattie 2010).

This is not simply a matter of unrelated histories competing for recognition and resources. The Nazi and communist pasts constitute entangled, contradictory legacies. Their entanglement is epitomised by the history and remembrance of the Soviet *Speziallager*. The *Speziallager* were publicly described by East German authorities as housing Nazi criminals and were intended to intern Nazi officials (among other potential threats to Soviet security). They actually held almost no serious perpetrators in the criminal sense, but large numbers of minor officials. They also held numerous opponents of and obstacles to communist rule in eastern Germany, including some who previously had been victims of the Nazis, and some persons arrested completely arbitrarily (Haustein et al. 2006). All of these groups became victims of a lack of due process and care in Soviet custody. Approximately a third of the inmates died (Haustein et al. 2006). Most internees were thus victims (under communism) *and* either perpetrators, collaborators or bystanders (under Nazism), categories that are usually held to be mutually exclusive in the black-and-white moral vocabulary of public remembrance. While many of the Nazis' victims objected to the prospect of former 'Nazis' being commemorated, many postwar victims felt unjustly stigmatized as Nazis. In this morally charged context, depicting the *Speziallager* posed considerable difficulties. Examining how the DIZ addressed those challenges offers insights into central issues in contemporary German remembrance.

It also challenges the common assumption in studies of memorial museums that 'the site has one story to tell' (Farmer 1995: 98). Definitions of memorial museums speak—in the singular—of 'a specific history of violence' (Pieper 2006: 24) or 'a historic event' of 'mass suffering' (Williams 2007: 8). Yet Torgau exemplifies the situation of eastern Germany and Eastern Europe, and no doubt other sites elsewhere, where memorial museums and public remembrance more generally face successive, intertwined histories of repressive regimes, war and occupation (Faulenbach 2005). A more sophisticated example of a post-fascist and post-communist memorial museum than the notorious Budapest House of Terror, the DIZ allows a more subtle analysis of the challenges of exhibiting rival, entangled pasts, that goes beyond identifying obvious political biases (Williams 2007: 116; Fritz and Wezel 2009).

The multiplicity of perspectives on Torgau's history highlights the importance of examining the agency of various communities of memory in context. After all, there is no homogenous 'community' that decides to erect (or oppose) memorial museums or whose wishes such institutions straightforwardly match (contra Watson 2007: 377). Instead, in

pluralistic societies such projects, like public memory more generally, are inevitably contested. Whose story gets told is anything but automatic (contra Farmer 1995: 98). Confirming recent theories about the production of public memory (Assmann 2007), the Torgau case demonstrates that contingency, agency and ideology are crucial. Social actors make significant choices in making the sites speak and translating individual and collective experiences and memories into public representation. The questions to ask of memorial museums are thus not just 'Who or what should be remembered, why, to what ends, but above all how?' (Pampel 2007: 61). It is also crucial to ask how decisions about who should (and should not) be remembered are made, by whom, in what socio-political context, and with what broader significance and consequences. This paper contributes to a more complete understanding of contemporary German remembrance by asking such questions about the Torgau case. It looks 'beyond Berlin' (Rosenfeld and Jaskot 2008), which dominates accounts of Germany's institutionalized remembrance, leaving the provinces relatively neglected (Frank 2006; Knischewski and Spittler 2007; Verheyen 2008), with the significant exception of Nuremberg (Macdonald 2008). It also takes a closer look at the roles of East and West German actors and the interaction of grass-roots activism and state sponsorship. It complicates the common, overly simplistic, dichotomous picture of state-sponsored West German condemnation of the GDR and an authentic, East German nostalgia for the communist past (Andrews 1999; Forest et al. 2004: 374; Gerstenberger 2005: 66; Berdahl 2005; Arnold-de Simine 2004).

Finally, the Torgau case raises questions about the relationship between history and memory, or between the functions of documentation and commemoration, whose combination lies at the heart of memorial museums. As Geoffrey White (1997: 10-1) notes, both functions 'are probably present to some degree in all public histories, from textbooks to monuments'; and such binary distinctions 'describe communicative practices that are neither dichotomous nor neatly aligned in separate institutional spaces'. Yet the more or less conscious attempt to combine them is surely what differentiates memorial museums from more traditional museums or memorials (Knigge 2002; Pampel 2007; Williams 2007). It is essential to determine 'how various modes of representation function in specific institutional contexts, [and] with what consequences for historical understanding and emotion' (White 1997: 11). This article poses such questions in relation to the DIZ. It asks about the roles victims play in memorial museums' representations of the past and about the dilemmas posed by competing expectations that memorial museums preserve and present the memory of the victims, perhaps rather simplistically and moralistically, as well as revealing more representative, complex and morally ambiguous histories.

I. Context, actors and communities

Torgau's history and its historical culture were not and are not commensurate with the histories of repression and imprisonment addressed by the DIZ and outlined above. Saxon electoral princes once resided in the town, which is proudly called a 'City of the Reformation – City of the Renaissance' on its municipal website.² Additionally, on 25 April 1945, American and Soviet soldiers met on the river Elbe at Torgau. Their encounter was the first between the advancing Allied armies and thus symbolized Allied victory over Nazi Germany. It was reported internationally in 1945 and commemorated throughout the Cold War (Davidson 1985).³ Since the latter's end, 'Elbe Day' has constituted the focal point of the town's commemorative calendar. Annual celebrations—generously supported by the town and several local associations—approximate a folk festival. Dixieland music and rhetoric about peace and European unity drown out echoes of debate about whether 1945 witnessed German defeat or liberation (*Torgauer Allgemeine [TA]* 1997; *Torgauer Zeitung [TZ]* 2001a; Niven 2002: 95-118).

In contrast, Torgau's history of incarceration remained a local and national taboo until 1990 (Haase and Oleschinski 1998: ix). The *Speziallager* were taboo in the GDR until the communist regime collapsed, and were largely forgotten in West Germany after the 1950s (Haustein et al. 2006). Critical appraisals of the *Wehrmachtjustiz* began in West Germany in the 1970s. Yet efforts to rehabilitate and memorialize convicted deserters, traitors and *Wehrkraftzersetzer* (those who undermined military strength) only started in earnest in the 1990s and continued into the 2000s, led by a Federal Association of Victims of Nazi Military

Justice (Wette and Vogel 2007; Surmann 2009). Such efforts were opposed by conservative circles across Germany who were loath to condemn the *Wehrmachtjustiz* for fear of dishonouring soldiers who had not breached military discipline (Wette 2004). Meanwhile, in the early 1990s there was considerable support in Torgau for an uncritical approach to the town's military history, prompting the initiators of the DIZ, on whom more below, to warn against reactionary military folklore (*Neues Torgauer Kreisblatt* [NTK] 1991; *Leipziger Volkszeitung* [LVZ] 1991).

First steps towards addressing Torgau's twentieth-century history beyond military commemoration and 'Elbe Day' followed the discovery in early 1990 of mass graves of inmates of Soviet *Speziallager* at other locations in eastern Germany. Press reports and witness statements about a Soviet camp in Torgau prompted local authorities and citizens to establish an investigative committee. It searched unsuccessfully for human remains, but developed a rudimentary understanding of Fort Zinna's use after 1945 (LVZ 1990a and 1990b; NTK 1990a). Initially, some journalists in the regional press rationalized the *Speziallager* in traditional East German antifascist terms as the deserved result of fascist warfare, implying that their Nazi inmates were rightly incarcerated (*Junge Welt* 1990; NTK 1990b). Others, seeking more complex accounts, called for a dignified approach to the memory of the dead and the lessons of this chapter of German history for the present (Hannig 1990a and 1990b). A newly established Torgau branch of the nationwide organization Victims of Stalinism subsequently led the push for a memorial at Fort Zinna (Beattie 2010).

In contrast with the spontaneous, local character of this early handling of the communist past, in 1991 the Nazi period shifted into focus with the arrival of western memory professionals and the beginnings of institutionalization. A seminar on the *Wehrmachtjustiz* brought together western scholars, memorial workers and archivists, as well as local citizens, including Torgau history teachers. The seminar catalyzed the foundation in 1991 of a Friends' Association of the Torgau Documentation and Information Centre (Diesener 1991; Hannig 1991). The driving forces behind the initiative came from West Berlin's controversial German Resistance Memorial Centre (Case 1998): political scientist and poet Brigitte Oleschinski, who was working on a dissertation on pastoral care in the penal systems of Weimar and Nazi Germany at the Free University Berlin, and historian Norbert Haase, who was writing a dissertation at the Technical University Berlin on resistance and the Nazi naval justice system. More interested in the Nazi past than in pursuing any anticommunist agenda, they stressed that the crimes of the *Wehrmachtjustiz* had been overlooked in both post-war German states (*Junge Welt* 1991). The initiative thus constituted an attempt by liberal West Germans to continue the critical grass-roots historical research and memory activism they had developed in the 1980s that focused above all on local history and Nazi Germany (Wüstenberg 2009).

Although a western initiative, the Friends' Association was not a western imposition or monopoly. It gained support from local and regional political leaders, both Christian Democrats (CDU) and Social Democrats (SPD). In 1991 Torgau Councillor for Cultural Affairs Wolfgang Geppert (SPD) became its chairperson and Saxon Justice Minister Steffen Heitmann (CDU) an active member. Further support came from prominent East and West Germans, including Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker (CDU), deputy SPD Bundestag leader Wolfgang Thierse, public intellectual Friedrich Schorlemmer, and professors Manfred Messerschmidt, the long-time scholarly director of the *Bundeswehr's* military history research centre, and Peter Steinbach, the head of the German Resistance Memorial Centre mentioned above, and from French and Belgian *Wehrmachtjustiz* victims. Such diverse backing indicated the initiative's regional, national and international significance (Förderverein n.d. [1991a]). Nor was interest in Torgau's history of repression an entirely post-1989 phenomenon. The Association repeatedly highlighted the fact that GDR authorities had frustrated the efforts of local librarian (and Friends' Association and Victims of Stalinism member) Gertraude Winter to explore Torgau's penal history in the 1980s (Haase and Oleschinski 1991). Such references served to pre-empt suggestions of that interest in that history emanated only from the West and to illustrate the stranglehold of the 'Torgau taboo' until the end of the East German dictatorship (Haase and Oleschinski 1998). Contrary to depictions of nostalgia for the GDR as the only authentic East German perspective, the easterners involved were if anything more interested than their western colleagues in a critical appraisal of the communist past. Yet rather than representing a peculiarly aggressive Saxon brand of anticommunism as sometimes suggested (Schulz

2004a), the agenda of the DIZ was illustrative of re-unified Germany's emerging 'anti-totalitarian consensus', which easterners and westerners across the political centre supported (Beattie 2008).

After a somewhat shaky start, the plan for a memorial museum in Torgau proved successful. Despite support from local, state and federal politicians, in late 1992 neither the town, nor the district, nor the state government felt responsible for funding the museum. A clerical assistant was funded through a back-to-work scheme, but the office could not afford stationery (*NTK* 1992b). The Torgau case thus qualifies Berdahl's suggestion (2005: 162-3, 165) that financial constraints and reliance on back-to-work labour were only to be found among regional eastern museum projects that promoted nostalgic memories of the GDR, in contrast to the rich state-funded museums that condemned the GDR. In fact, they were common to all civil-society initiatives addressing East German history, irrespective of their interpretation. Soon, however, the Saxon government provided a start-up grant and institutional funding from 1995, while the federal interior ministry subsidized early projects (Meisel 1993; Scholz 1994). By 1998 the DIZ was receiving institutional funding from the state and federal governments, from 1999 as a branch of the Foundation for Saxon Memorials in Memory of the Victims of Political Tyranny.

While state and federal support was reasonably readily forthcoming, local attitudes remained ambivalent. DIZ representatives regularly felt compelled to defend the initiative against 'Dachau syndrome', i.e. local resistance to the town's association with dark chapters of German history (Heilig 1998; Pragal 1992; Teske 1993; Rösner 1996). Unsurprisingly, some local residents and politicians found the town's penal history uncomfortable. A preference was discernible for glorious chapters of Saxon history, particularly among conservatives with an eye for the tourist market (Stadler 1997; *TA* 1998a). Even supporters of commemoration insisted that the prisons should not be mistaken for Torgau's entire history (*NTK* 1992a). In contrast, local journalists sought to increase awareness and acceptance of the DIZ's work. By 1995, a local newspaper almost took pride in the fact that Torgau, 'always a little unusual', had had not one but two Wehrmacht prisons and two *Speziallager* (Meisel 1995). In 1996, the Friends' Association had approximately 65 members nationwide, but Norbert Haase—by then director of the Foundation for Saxon Memorials—still wanted to 'improve the acceptance of the [DIZ] within the municipality and the district' (DIZ 1996: 8, 14). To this end, the DIZ hosted numerous public events and engaged local schools in projects. Its various exhibitions attracted large numbers of visitors and considerable media interest, even if local politicians were notably absent from the 1998 opening of its *Wehrmachtjustiz* exhibition (Töpfer 1996; Stadler 1997; Hübner 1998; *TA* 1998b; Stadler 1998).⁴ By the Friends' Association's tenth anniversary, the DIZ had successfully integrated itself into the cultural townscape (*TZ* 2001c). In relying on a small number of civil-society actors, having to overcome lingering local reservations and eking out a meagre existence before gaining financial security from the state, the DIZ's development mirrored that of many smaller and larger memorial museums across Germany.

II. Exhibiting Torgau's short twentieth century

Its successful institutionalization notwithstanding, the questions of what the DIZ would exhibit, how, and to what ends were less than straightforward. The continuity of Fort Zinna's use since the nineteenth century raised questions not only about totalitarian similarities but also about pre- and post-totalitarian continuities and discontinuities. However, its pre-1933 history was never on the agenda, while its post-1990 present gradually disappeared from it. The initial proposal for the DIZ to be located near Fort Zinna sought to promote 'active memory' by highlighting connections between the prison's past and present usages and including current prison staff and inmates (Haase and Oleschinski 1990: 21). The local press also realized that, in contrast to other memorials:

The special thing about the history of the Torgau prisons is that it continues to be written in "Fort Zinna" today. Working through the past thus has a chance at this place not just to be understood as a completed matter for the museum (Hanig 1992).

The DIZ hosted a conference in 1992 to consider the implications for present-day correctional services. Here there were calls to humanize and even abolish imprisonment altogether (*Neues Deutschland* 1992; Schuler 1992; Hanusch 1993). Such vague and ambitious claims indicated the difficulties of drawing meaningful lessons from history, and the conference marked the zenith of such debate. The disappearance of the post-1990 era from DIZ activities was reinforced by the abandonment of plans for the site near Fort Zinna in favour of Hartenfels Castle in the town centre.⁵ This move helped secure the DIZ's place among Torgau's main cultural institutions, but removed the present-day prison from view. Rather than tackling contemporary questions about incarceration, conscientious objection or military discipline, the DIZ increasingly conformed to the pattern familiar from other areas of German remembrance, such that addressing the totalitarian past is held, in general terms, to 'sensitize people today to the vulnerability of humanity and the value of human dignity as well as the fundamental values of the Basic Law', i.e. the (West) German constitution (Haase 2006: 209). Grass-roots history activists' gradual abandonment of a radical political agenda in the course of institutionalization and professionalization has also been noted in other German contexts at the same time (Wüstenberg 2009: 596, 611). The relationship between these developments warrants further study. Perhaps professionalization increases scepticism about the effectiveness of promoting political change through exposure to historical atrocities (Williams 2007: 146-55; Pampel 2007).

Subsequently, the key questions became whether and, above all, how a single exhibition could address Torgau's short twentieth-century history of incarceration, persecution and suffering. Here, Torgau offers a useful contrast to the better known memorial museums at Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. In those cases, the concentration-camp victims objected to the inclusion of the *Speziallager* inmates in 'their' institutions (Haustein 2006). Meanwhile, experts and administrators recommended separate exhibitions for the Nazi, Soviet occupation-zone (SBZ) and GDR eras and the subordination of the *Speziallager* history to that of the Nazi camps (Kaminsky 2006). Throughout the DIZ's development, no one seriously suggested that any of the three eras should be excluded. Yet views diverged over whether the Nazi, SBZ and GDR periods should or could be addressed in a single exhibition, and over their relative weighting and demarcation. Again, the physical space available was significant in shaping developments. Plans in the mid 1990s foresaw the DIZ's future permanent exhibition—called 'Traces of Injustice'—occupying four floors of Hartenfels Castle's tower (*Flaschenturm*). Each floor would house a separate exhibit:

- 1) In the Hinterland of the Second World War – The Centre of the Wehrmacht Penal System in Torgau;
- 2) The End of the Second World War in Torgau;
- 3) The Soviet Special Camps No. 8 and No. 10 in Torgau; and
- 4) A School of Repression – GDR Penal System in Torgau (DIZ 1996: 11).

This arrangement has been criticized for constituting a problematic hierarchy with the GDR victims paramount (Niven 2002: 55). However, such criticism overlooks both the chronological accuracy and symbolic significance of the *Wehrmachtjustiz* exhibit appearing first, and the likelihood that many visitors would never reach the fourth floor.⁶ It also ignores DIZ thinking, which conceived of the four levels as archaeological layers rather than a normative hierarchy with the communist past ascendant (DIZ n.d. [2003]: 2).

It is a moot point, because this concept was only partially realized (contra Kaminsky 2006: 162). The exhibit on 'The End of the Second World War in Torgau' opened in 1995 during a predictable spike in Elbe Day commemorations (Haase and Oleschinski 1995). The exhibit "'Hostile Elements are to be Kept in Custody": Soviet Special Camps Nos. 8 and 10 in Torgau, 1945 to 1948' followed in 1996 (Oleschinski and Pampel 1997). The next instalment, 'Torgau in the Hinterland during the Second World War: Military Justice, Army Prisons, Reichskriegsgericht', was ready in 1998. However, renovations meant that only two floors were available, so the War's End exhibit was removed (Eberlein et al. 1999). A lengthy stalemate ensued, due not least to plans to hold the Saxon State Exhibition in Torgau in 2004, which again suggested that local officials prioritised the tourist value of the glorious Saxon past. Eventually,

agreement was reached in 2001 that the Torgau History Association would occupy the tower, while the DIZ would move to the third floor of the wing of Hartenfels Castle overlooking the river Elbe (TZ 2001b; StSG 2001: 37-8).

This move did not simplify the exhibition of multiple, entangled and contested histories. The new space, comprising two larger and two smaller rooms, all running off a hallway, was still insufficient for all four exhibits. According to revised plans (DIZ n.d. [2003]: 4-5), the *Wehrmachtjustiz* exhibit would begin in one of the larger rooms, which looked across the Elbe to the site of the Brückenkopf prison. Two panels of the War's End exhibit would also be displayed here, while the rest again fell victim to lack of space. The *Wehrmachtjustiz* exhibit would continue in the adjoining smaller rooms. The final room—with as much display space as the first three combined—would contain the *Speziallager* and GDR exhibits. The loss of the War's End exhibit was unfortunate, because it had been conceived as providing a link between the pre- and post-1945 periods. It was intended to highlight the 'historical entanglement of injustice, guilt and new injustice' (DIZ 1996: 11) that is crucial for understanding the *Speziallager*, which are often interpreted either as a mere extension of the Soviet Gulag or a direct and legitimate response to Nazism, but which in fact constituted a mixture of both (Haustein et al. 2006).

The re-conceptualized 'Traces of Injustice' exhibition opened in 2004 to considerable controversy. In the context of scandals about the Foundation for Saxon Memorials' alleged relativization of Nazism and a federal CDU initiative to promote commemoration of GDR crimes (Beattie 2006; Pearce 2008: 217-9), the Federal Association of Victims of Nazi Military Justice went on the offensive. Its spokesperson Ludwig Baumann, who had been sentenced to death in 1942 for desertion and imprisoned in Fort Zinna, condemned the exhibition, demanding a separate exhibition on the Nazi period (Baumann 2004a). He complained that the Nazi past was marginalized relative to the post-1945 period and that the *Speziallager* exhibit presented Nazi perpetrators as innocent victims of Stalinism.⁷ Baumann's critique was widely reported, was repeated in the leftist press and has been partially endorsed by scholars (*Antifaschistische Nachrichten* 2005: 12; Gaebelein 2004: 3; Schulz 2004a; Niven 2002: 54-5). Raising crucial questions about the possibility of presenting these multiple, entangled histories in a single memorial museum, it warrants examination.

Baumann's first claim that the Nazi period was marginalized was unfounded. He refused to acknowledge that the DIZ distinguished three historical eras with distinct sets of persecution and victims, i.e. under the Nazis, the Soviets and East German communists, which were presented in three discrete exhibits. Instead, Baumann saw only two periods: before and after 1945. He repeatedly stressed that there were 14 portraits of victims from the Nazi period and 24 from the post-war era, and 18 and 31 information panels respectively (Reinhard 2004; *Leipziger Neue* 2006: 7; Baumann 2004b: 8-9). He commented further that the 'two parts' were barely separated, as one room passed into the next (Baumann 2004a). Extra doorways had indeed been added to increase flexibility of movement (DIZ n.d. [2003]: 3). Yet the Foundation and the DIZ were surely justified in insisting that the eras remained distinct, an outcome reinforced by a threefold colour scheme.⁸

The controversy over the exhibition's dimensions and layout reflected disagreement over the relative significance of the various regimes and their victims in re-unified Germany and the ambiguity of official responses to this question. Baumann reinforced his condemnation of the exhibition and the conservative Saxon government he deemed responsible by claiming that the post-war period's alleged prioritization contravened the policies of the Bundestag and the Foundation for Saxon Memorials. He claimed that their policies required that the *Wehrmachtjustiz* constitute the major focus. In relation to the Bundestag, this was inaccurate: the document Baumann (mis)cited, the federal government's 1999 memorials policy, described rather than prescribed DIZ activities.⁹ More generally, federal policy offered not concrete prescriptions for memorial museums, but (seemingly contradictory) proscriptions against both equating the Nazi and communist regimes and creating hierarchies among their victims (Beattie 2006). Baumann's claim was more accurate in relation to the Saxon Foundation. The latter had determined that the *Wehrmachtjustiz* should be paramount because Torgau was its epicentre and the appropriate location for its victims' commemoration (Meisel 1994), a position endorsed by DIZ representatives. Yet the Foundation and the DIZ were less than consistent here. In addition to this emphasis on

the singular importance of the *Wehrmachtjustiz*, they also suggested that precisely the multiplicity of Fort Zinna's uses was singular and significant (DIZ 1996: 13, 3, 5). Both positions were defensible, but they were mutually inconsistent. 'Traces of Injustice' reflected the second position more than the first, despite its sponsors' claim that the emphasis lay on the *Wehrmachtjustiz*.¹⁰ Such ambiguity and confusion were by no means limited to Torgau, but reflected the wider difficulties Germany has faced in giving due attention to the communist past without compromising the centrality of the Nazi past in public remembrance (Beattie 2006 and 2008).

Nonetheless, the 'Traces of Injustice' exhibition neither marginalized the Nazi period nor suggested the moral or historical equivalence of the various regimes and their abuses. Even without the full War's End exhibit, the DIZ successfully combined them in a single exhibition, displaying the connections and the distinctions among the various eras, regimes and events addressed. It thus constituted an exception to the 'decentralized' approach of creating separate exhibitions on the Nazi and SBZ periods that was adopted at Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen and that is widely held to be essential (Niven 2002: 38-9; Le Grand 2003; Haustein 2006: 146). Unsurprisingly, the DIZ was not dogged by complaints from victims of Stalinism about their marginalization and second-class status, as Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald were (Kaminsky 2006: 155). Similarly unsurprisingly, some in the leftist press insisted that the mere presentation of the different eras in one exhibition relativized Nazism (Schulz 2004b). In contrast, the mainstream press recognized the exhibition's remarkable balance (Reinhard 2004; Schneider 2004; Burger 2004). Exhibiting these competing and entangled histories together was controversial and posed numerous challenges, but was not impossible.

III. Between history and memory

Balancing the multiple legacies of Germany's short twentieth century, with its successive repressive regimes, was not the only challenge facing the DIZ. Another was to find a balance between history and memory. Apart from their focus on atrocities and suffering, the quintessential feature of memorial museums is their combination of history and memory, or documentation and commemoration (Williams 2007). Re-unified Germany offers numerous examples of attempts to find an appropriate balance between these two functions (Knischewski and Spittler 2007). On the one hand, commemoration is widely held to require supporting documentation in order to be meaningful and instructive. In the debate about the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, for instance, proposals for commemoration without documentation were seen as inadequate, leading to the addition of a subterranean information centre (Pearce 2008: 129-51).¹¹ On the other hand, attempts have been made to remove the normative and moral dimensions of commemoration from documentary exhibitions. At the Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen memorial museums, for example, officials and experts argued for the physical and cognitive separation of documentation and commemoration. This was simultaneously a response to the politicized antifascist memory inscribed on these sites in the GDR and a move to preclude the commemoration of former Nazis amongst the *Speziallager* inmates. According to standard accounts, normative, moral commemoration of the *Speziallager* victims was thus removed from the main camp sites and left to the victims' organizations at gravesites on the sites' margins (Kaminsky 2006: 154-5; Niven 2002: 38-9; Le Grand 2003). Meanwhile the memorial museums concentrated on documenting the history of the *Speziallager* in exhibitions governed by an ostensible normative and moral abstention. Such a separation of documentation and commemoration has been widely praised and is interpreted as essential at such sites with multiple histories (Kaminsky 2006: 154-5; Niven 2002: 38-9; Le Grand 2003). At first glance, it appears that a similar separation occurred in Torgau, even in exaggerated fashion due to the continuing use of the Fort Zinna prison. Ostensibly, commemoration occurs outside the prison, while documentation occurs at the DIZ, a distinction that is spelled out in DIZ publications (DIZ 1996: 6; Oleschinski and Pampel 1997: 46).

However, matters are surely more complex. The relationship between the two functions of documentation and commemoration warrants a closer look, both in Torgau and more generally. The distinction between them certainly informed the work of those responsible for the DIZ and other German memorial museums, and has been endorsed by numerous commentators.

Yet as noted above by White, elements of both functions are present in all public histories. Indeed, as much research on public memory shows, any distinction between memory and history is contingent, constructed and gradual rather than clear-cut (Assmann 2006: 43-47). Moreover, in the wake of the Holocaust and particularly with the memory boom since the 1980s, new alliances have emerged between memory and history, of which memorial museums are but one important example (Assmann 2006: 47-51). The motivation and justification for memorial museums—including those that purport to separate commemoration and documentation—derive not (or not only) from any 'neutral' interest in a disturbing, localized history, but (also) from a 'morally grounded' commitment to the memory of the victims who suffered at the site.¹² In such institutions there is thus no strict distinction between 'objective' history and 'subjective' commemoration.

Indeed, both moments characterized the motivation, goals and work of the DIZ. Despite the ostensible separation of documentation at the DIZ from commemoration at Fort Zinna, its initiators wanted the DIZ to serve both functions. Haase and Oleschinski's original proposal (1990: 1) envisaged a 'commemorative and educational facility', while the Friends' Association's constitution spoke of the DIZ combining 'the commemoration of the victims, contemporary historical research and historical-political educational work' (Förderverein n.d. [1991b]: 1). This combination applied not just to the institution generally, but particularly to the 'Traces of Injustice' exhibition, which relied on an 'integrative concept of education, research and commemoration' (DIZ 1996: 10). The exhibition sought both to document Torgau's manifold histories of incarceration and repression between 1933 and 1989 and to commemorate the 'fates of the victims', including the *Speziallager* inmates (Oleschinski and Pampel 1997: 129). Thus, despite the rhetoric about separating normative memory from historical enlightenment, the DIZ shared this twofold goal with *Speziallager* exhibitions elsewhere and with memorial museums generally (Kaminsky 2006: 158).

That the distinction between commemoration and documentation was nevertheless articulated and supposedly practised in Torgau and elsewhere seems self-contradictory and needs further scrutiny. Rather than accurately reflecting the memorial museums' aims, content or modes of presentation, it was primarily a response to certain local difficulties. First, the distinction emanated from the DIZ's separation from the authentic site, which was the main reason the DIZ was not called a *Gedenkstätte* (memorial site). Assigning 'documentation' to the DIZ and 'commemoration' to the memorial at the authentic Fort Zinna site offered ready labels for the two sites' functions, rather than an exhaustive description of the DIZ's aims. Second, as already mentioned, such rhetoric reflected a desire to draw a line under the excessively partisan commemoration that had dominated the GDR memorials at Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald. The distinction implied that, rather than replacing one normative memory regime with another, the new exhibitions would only show what was known (and not known) about the sites' histories, without moral or political interpretation. Third, emphasis on the distinction stemmed from concerns among experts, administrators and sections of the public about whether publicly-funded memorial museums should commemorate the *Speziallager* inmates. Such concerns applied much less to the inclusion of the postwar history of the sites than to the normative commemoration of the inmates; meanwhile, the desire of former inmates, their families and representatives for individual and collective commemoration was widely recognised (Beattie 2006; 2008). Highlighting the difference between documentation and commemoration, or between history and memory, thus allowed the memorial museums to take responsibility for and proceed with acceptable documentation, while minimizing their responsibility for the trickier issue of commemoration. Fourth, it no doubt also helped the experts and administrators in their competition with victims' organizations for influence on the memorial museums' development; they could claim research-based expertise on multifaceted history, as opposed to the victims' guardianship of particularist and partial memories (Knigge 2006; Haustein 2006). While ostensibly appealing, the distinction between commemoration and documentation was thus as much part of the conflict over remembrance as a solution to it or an accurate description of neatly allocated functions.

These important local circumstances notwithstanding, the distinction and much of the conflict about remembrance of the *Speziallager* inmates—at the DIZ, the Fort Zinna memorial and elsewhere—reflected more fundamental problems arising from certain structural features of the contemporary discourse of remembrance. That discourse is grounded in sharp moral

distinctions between good and evil and between perpetrator and victim. It criminalizes perpetrators, sanctifies victims and abhors complexity and ambiguity. Those victims commemorated at memorial museums are expected or assumed to have suffered innocently at the hands of the cruel henchmen of evil regimes (Williams 2007: 90). The complex, ambiguous history of the *Speziallager* poses problems for such a discourse. Which *Speziallager* victims should be commemorated in memorials and exhibitions? Should innocent victims receive overwhelming or exclusive emphasis, or does that offer a distorted view of history? Does including those with some degree of responsibility under the Nazi regime exonerate or sanctify them, or merely reflect historical reality? Does culpability under one regime nullify victim status under another, or vice versa?

Here we return to the second of Ludwig Bauman's above-mentioned criticisms of the 'Traces of Injustice' exhibition, namely that it presented *Speziallager* inmates as innocent victims of Stalinism. This complaint had more substance than that about the Nazi past's marginalization. The exhibition stressed—correctly—that the Soviets' inhumane treatment and lack of due process made victims of all the inmates, irrespective of their roles in Nazi Germany (Haase and Oleschinski 1997: 129; Kaminsky 2006: 168). Yet it paid insufficient attention to the controversial question of the presence of Nazi functionaries and perpetrators among the inmates, and thus of their innocence (Haustein et al. 2006; Beattie 2008). Of the fourteen inmates whose biographies were presented, (only) a couple had been nominal members of Nazi organizations, while the only 'perpetrator' was a Jewish woman who had worked for the Gestapo in the hope of saving her parents from deportation; the remainder were presented as innocent of moral or political responsibility for the Nazi regime, let alone culpability for Nazi crimes (Oleschinski and Pampel 1997: 129-74). Although far from suggesting that no further perpetrators or genuine Nazis had been imprisoned at Torgau, this unrepresentative selection presented a free hit to anyone—such as Baumann—looking for the exculpation of Germans or the relativization of their responsibility for Nazism.

The problematic presentation of biographies constituted more than an unfortunate oversight. On the one hand, the absence of Nazis' biographies did not so much reflect the DIZ's preferences as it did its limited material. Because Soviet records revealed almost nothing about individual *Speziallager* inmates, curators had to make the most of the scant personal information at their disposal, most of which came from inmates and their relatives (Oleschinski and Pampel 1997: 203; Kaminsky 2006: 159-60). It is hardly surprising that stories of perpetrators and Nazi functionaries were less forthcoming than those of innocent victims of Stalinism. The resulting unrepresentative picture was compounded by the fact that younger, less incriminated inmates were more likely to survive their incarceration, live into the post-1989 era and thus influence remembrance of the camps (Knigge 2006: 256).

On the other hand, the unrepresentative collection was intrinsic to the DIZ's role as a memorial museum. The exhibition sought to present 'individual fates which allow understanding of the personal suffering and conflicts of those affected' (DIZ 1996: 11). It was thus less concerned with presenting a comprehensive or representative history or with assessing the moral, political or 'legally determinable guilt' of the *Speziallager* inmates (Niven 2002: 54), than with highlighting their suffering and the injustice that their guilt or innocence was never properly determined (Oleschinski and Pampel 1997: 11, 45; Kaminsky 2006: 168). Indeed, the biographies were not intended to be statistically representative, but to show the diversity of the inmates (Kaminsky 2006: 165). In this light, the range of biographies presented makes more sense, and confirms Williams' observation (2007: 153) that memorial museums are better at presenting quality than quantity. It still made poor history in the eyes of anyone expecting that a representative account of the inmates be presented.

So, too, did the exhibition's nebulous statement that many internees 'had rather supported than opposed' Nazism (Kaminsky 2006: 168). Such vagueness stemmed in part from a legitimate desire to counter the myth that all inmates had been perpetrators. Yet it also reflected memory museums' general disinclination to pose difficult or irreverent questions about victims. Williams (2007: 8) notes that 'honest evaluation of the dead is normally seen as disrespectful'; yet it is precisely memorial museums' particular commemorative function that can leave them torn between 'reverent remembrance and critical interpretation'. While the guilt of the perpetrators 'is a concept that museums inevitably treat sensitively' (Williams 2007: 137),

the possible guilt of victims poses even greater challenges within the dichotomous moral discourse outlined above. The exhibition's suggestion that the chaotic postwar situation 'jumbled together all categories' like victim and perpetrator represented a capitulation, rather than a satisfactory attempt to come to grips with complexity and ambiguity (Oleschinski and Pampel 1997: 129). It ran the risk of compromising the goal of enlightenment in favour of an 'empty, historically and analytically hollow piety' (Knigge 2006: 258). It also failed to keep pace with the increasingly sophisticated debate on the issue, including the suggestion that minor Nazi functionaries and collaborators rather than major criminals pose the key challenge for contemporary remembrance (Beattie 2008; Knigge 2006). As this example shows, combining history and the victims' memory is a morally worthwhile, but far from uncomplicated undertaking, especially in contexts marked by complex and ambiguous relationships.

Conclusion

The case of the Torgau DIZ demonstrates that studies of institutionalized remembrance must consider context, agency and communities of memory in all their complexity. As Wüstenberg (2009: 613) has recently argued, 'Neglecting history activists means missing much of the story' of public memory. Closer inspection often reveals more community involvement and agency than is often assumed (Forest et al. 2004: 367), but can also demonstrate popular ambivalence, apathy and even hostility. Even if some local discomfort remained, the DIZ drew support from East and West Germans, from civil society and every level of government, demonstrating widespread support for critical remembrance of the Nazi and communist pasts. The Torgau case thus demonstrates that the cultures and milieus of remembrance for the two dictatorships are not as disparate, and remembrance of the communist past is not as marginalized as sometimes claimed (Beleites 2009; Knischewski and Spittler 2007). Indeed, in granting roughly equal attention to the Nazi and communist pasts, the DIZ reflected the views not merely of rightwing westerners, but of numerous East and West Germans from across the political centre in Germany. Their far from unambiguous and straightforward attempts to develop a common approach to anti-totalitarian remembrance are often overlooked by commentators and actors preoccupied with the Holocaust's singularity or with East Germans' post-unification disenfranchisement and nostalgia (Gallinat 2000; Knischewski and Spittler 2007).

The DIZ's development contributed to, and highlights the diversity of Germany's memorial museums. These exist throughout the country and go beyond the Holocaust and German-Jewish history. The case also captures numerous controversial and problematic aspects of this multifaceted institutionalized remembrance. It highlights the almost exclusive focus on the dictatorships of the short twentieth century to the exclusion of other eras, the difficulty of drawing meaningful lessons from those dictatorial regimes and their crimes and, most significantly here, the complicatedness of commemorating their many victims. A commentator's remark that the exhibition space the DIZ devoted to the various eras had to be measured and accounted for was no flippant suggestion (Schneider 2004). Instead, it confirmed that 'fundamental interpretative conflicts over history and its significance are carried out vicariously via practical questions about the "how" of the museum conception' (Pieper 2006: 8). The development of the provincial yet significant memorial museum analysed here is thus illustrative of Germany's broader struggle with the dictatorships and ruptures of its twentieth-century history, which resonates throughout post-communist Europe and beyond.

Indeed, the Torgau case raises significant questions for memorial museums in general. It demonstrates that such institutions can address multiple, interconnected histories of repression and suffering, but that doing so poses numerous challenges. It also highlights the potential conflicts and problems arising from memorial museums' twin objectives of commemoration and documentation. On the one hand, moral commitments to commemorate victims of public crimes do not always make for good history. On the other hand, pursuing complex depictions of history can undermine the commemoration of, and even offend victims. There is nothing inherently problematic about combining the historical documentation of mass suffering and the commemoration of those who suffered. Yet doing so poses challenges, particularly in contexts facing complex, ambivalent histories such as that of the *Speziallager*. Even memorial museums that exercise normative and emotional restraint can run into

difficulties. Insufficient clarity or reflection on aims or modes of remembering can create additional problems, especially by raising or shifting expectations that remain unfulfilled. Williams (2007: 159) notes that 'Museums normally struggle to show, through their relatively static displays, historical ambiguity'. This article has suggested that difficulties with ambiguity and complexity arise not just from methodological or practical limitations, but precisely from the very moral discourse that gives rise to memorial museums in the first place. White's observation that 'public histories constructed for diverse audiences are likely to take on multiple and often ambiguous functions' (1997: 11) warrants particular consideration in light of the inherently sensitive and controversial nature of memorial museums, whose continuing, diverse global expansion requires further, critical study.

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Notes

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- ¹ See the DIZ's website, which displays some historic photos of the site <<http://en.stsg.de/cms/node/876>> accessed 8 March 2010.
- ² See the town's website <<http://www.torgau.eu/>> accessed 15 January 2009.
- ³ See BBC, 'On This Day—27 April 1945: Russians and Americans Link at Elbe', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/april/27/newsid_3563000/3563723.stm> accessed 15 January 2009.
- ⁴ One source reports 30,000 visitors between 1995 and 2000 (StSG 2001: 38-9), another 58,000 by 1999 (Bundestag 1999: 21).
- ⁵ See the map showing the various sites on the DIZ website at <<http://en.stsg.de/cms/node/886>> accessed 8 March 2010.
- ⁶ Plans for a memorial at Fort Zinna that foresaw a reverse-chronological sequence, beginning with the present and proceeding with the GDR, SBZ and Nazi eras, were criticized because the Wehrmachtjustiz component came last (Beattie 2010).
- ⁷ See the May 2004 statement of the Bundesvereinigung Opfer der NS-Militärjustiz, 'Sachsens Dauerausstellung im Torgauer Schloss verdrängt das Gedenken an NS-Verfolgung' <http://www.kampagne.de/Kampagne/Verstaendnis/DesertionimNS/Torgau_Gedenkpolitik.php> accessed 15 January 2009.
- ⁸ StSG and DIZ, 'Wiedereröffnung der ständigen Ausstellung "Spuren des Unrechts" in Torgau', 5 May 2004 <<http://www.stsg.de/main/stsg/ueberblick/aktuelles/index.php?id=156>> accessed 15 January 2009. For an impression of the exhibition, see the photos on the DIZ website at <<http://en.stsg.de/cms/node/896>> accessed 8 March 2010.
- ⁹ Compare Bundestag (1999: 20) with the statement by the Federal Association (note 7 above) and Antifaschistische Nachrichten (2005: 12).
- ¹⁰ StSG and DIZ, 'Wiedereröffnung der ständigen Ausstellung' (as in note 8 above).
- ¹¹ Similarly, increasingly detailed information and references to the DIZ were added to successive plans for the memorial at Fort Zinna (Beattie 2010).

- ¹² Article 1 of the rules of the International Council of Museum's International Committee of Memorial Museums in Remembrance of the Victims of Public Crimes, <<http://www.wissensnetze.selfhost.de:8080/icom/de/gru.htm>> accessed 16 January 2009

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