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THE REPRESENTATION OF NAZI PERPETRATORS IN EXHIBITIONS IN GERMANY: AN UNDEREXPOSED PART OF MEMORY POLICIES

This paper examines the representation of National Socialist perpetrators in museums and memorials in contemporary Germany. Over the past 20 years, there has been increased interest and discussion within Germany about the representation of National Socialist perpetrators in museums. But so far, there has been relatively little investigation into this new discourse. This lack of reflection and analysis has various reasons, for example that research into perpetrators during the National Socialist period was only established as a segment of German history and historiography in the mid-1990s. By exhibiting National Socialist perpetrators, there are certain aspects to reflect on, such as the fascination that crimes and violence provoke. And exhibitions, like the Nazi Party Rally Grounds Documentation Centre in Nuremberg and the Wewelsburg Memorial Site show perpetrators in a different light, take for example the variety of photographs that are used. The paper argues that increased reflection would be helpful, including for developing new memory policies.

Keywords: National Socialism, Museum, Perpetrator, Exhibition, Memorial

The after-effects of National Socialism in the Federal Republic of Germany continue to this day; the "long shadow" of the past still hangs over the country (Rürup 2014; Assmann 2006). After 1945, critical examinations of National Socialism and its crimes was lacking for several decades in East and West Germany. A huge number of perpetrators were still alive and had made careers, partly in state bodies. Also, responsibility for the crimes was not fully assumed

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by various German Governments. But since 1989/90, there has been a fundamental change. An examination of National Socialism and the acceptance of responsibility now lies at the heart of German memory politics. A "process of nationalization of negative remembrance" (Knigge 2002a: 423) has occurred.

Contemporary Germany is the legal successor of the National Socialist state, and, according to its official and legal self-definition, strictly distinguishes itself from its predecessor. There are purposeful and concerted federal politics of memory concerning the National Socialist period. This includes memorial days such as January 27th, the date when the Red Army liberated the Auschwitz concentration camp in 1945, as well as other commemorations and memorial sites for the victims of National Socialism. Memorial sites, on which this essay focuses, were established largely through the efforts of survivors of persecution (Garbe 2005: 78); they have only been federally financed since the reunification of the two Germanys (Schwietring 2007: 160).

Despite the politics of memory, many victims of National Socialist persecution are still ignored, such as Soviet prisoners of war. So far, the German government also rejects claims for reparations, such as those from Greece.

Today's learning about the period occurs mostly through the representation of National Socialism in exhibitions, (school)books, films and on the internet. Learning and research are ongoing and there are numerous NGOs working on this topic. Also, new museums are being established, such as the planned documentation centre in Stuttgart and the recently opened documentation centre in Munich.

This "long shadow" is also visible through the continuous presence in society of particular elements of National Socialist ideology; such as, for example, the continued presence of antisemitism (Klein, Zick 2014: 35–43), and in the contemporary activities of radical right-wing groups. Large sections of contemporary German society carry an unexamined historical narrative of themselves as victims: for example, even though the expulsion of German-speakers from Eastern Europe and the aerial bombardment of German cities are themes that were widely discussed shortly after the war in both East and West Germany (Frevert 2003: 10), there continue to be public appeals today to finally memorialize and remember these events.

This article discusses one area in the contemporary representation of the history of National Socialism in Germany. This regards how Nazi perpetrators are represented in exhibitions. The legal prosecution of Nazi perpetrators continues to this day, although it has suffered from "shortcomings and blunders" (Greve 2003: 194), a fact clearly proven by its quantitative dimension: between 1945 and 2005, there were investigations against roughly 172,000 suspects. Only 14,000 of these cases arrived at a verdict, and half of these judgements were acquittals. Of the more than 6,750 people found guilty, the majority were sentenced to five years or less in prison (Steinbacher 2010: 416). One of the most striking failures was the planned investigation of 300 former employees of the Reich Security Head Office. This trial was due to begin in the late 1960s, but failed to do so due to a change in the criminal code that offered amnesty to outstanding Nazi criminals (Steinbacher 2010: 415). The German crimi-

nal code contains at least one other peculiar paradox. Those parts of the criminal code that, to this day, define murder and manslaughter in Germany date from the National Socialist period. The post-1945 legal decisions about Nazi perpetrators, therefore, are at least partly based upon legal criteria developed and implemented under National Socialism. Whether this particular paradox has affected the current historical imagination of Nazi perpetrators, as well as the image of them produced in exhibitions, can only be speculated upon at this time.

Given the background of the contemporary politics of memory, it is obvious that, although there are no official guidelines that govern the representation of Nazi perpetrators in exhibitions, their representation is essentially normative and distancing: Because Germany accepted guilt for the crimes and therefore accepted that there *have been crimes*, those responsible are not and cannot be shown as heroes or heroines.

There are roughly three categories of museums that include National Socialist perpetrators in their exhibitions: memorial sites (located where National Socialist crimes occurred); other contemporary history museums; and documentation centres, located at former administrative and representative locations from the National Socialist period. Memorial sites are often seen as National Socialist crime scenes, whereas documentation centres are often considered places where perpetrators gathered. This distinction is a naive one, because the differences between the two were historically very fluid: one can see this fluidity in the case of, for example, the Wewelsburg Memorial Site in Nordrhein-Westfalen, which was a training and conference centre for the SS[1], as well as a forced labour site where concentration camp prisoners worked. Generally, all three kinds of museum are publicly funded, as are the majority of museums in Germany: roughly 53 % are funded by a branch of the State, a municipality or a public foundation; 43.1 % of the museums are supported by private bodies, such as non-profit associations; a small amount of the museums are jointly funded by the State and other actors (Institut für Museumsforschung 2014: 37). The memorial sites with the largest budgets are usually public foundations (Lutz 2009: 139). Since 2000, seventeen memorial sites have been either started from scratch or reopened after refurnishing old permanent exhibitions with the support of the so-called "Bundesgedenkstättenkonzept"[2] (Lutz 2009: 22–23).

Museums are important sites of historical learning. The representation of National Socialist perpetrators in museums strongly influences society's understanding of National Socialist crimes. Believability is generally ascribed to exhibitions; exhibitions enjoy, in the words of Thomas Thiemeyer, "an advance on the public trust and can, with scientific authority, convincingly broadcast their version

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[1] Schutzstaffel – Protection Squadron, an armed part of the Nazi-Party.

[2] The Federal Memorial Site Concept defines how and why memorial sites can be funded by the Federal Republic of Germany. Based on that concept, the German government has been funding memorial sites, particularly for the victims of National Socialism and of communism, since 1999.

of history, particularly because they reach a much wider public than that typically reached by academic literature" (Thiemeyer 2010: 17). Visitors often do not realize that the displayed result is the combination of the current state of research, a chosen topic and curatorial decisions, rather than objective truth. Further, as Katrin Pieper states, the museum and its exhibitions are "locations of representation and identity <…> which display the cultural memory par excellence" and "therefore a relevant and material characterization of cultural memory which can be observed and analysed" (Pieper 2010: 195). Museums not only render cultural memory readable and visible, they also form and unify it (Pieper 2010: 200; Beier-de Haan 2005: 147). Similarly, the cycles of academic interest in particular themes and the political biases of an institution are also visible in exhibitions, maybe even more than cultural memory, which conceptually invokes empirically unprovable ideas about cultural homogeneity and identity (Siebeck 2013).

Current State of Research and Discussion

Over the past 15 years in Germany, there has been an increased interest in and discussion of the ideal representation of National Socialist perpetrators in museums. This discussion has almost entirely consisted of contributions from contemporary educators and scientists working in concentration camp memorial sites. So far, there has been relatively little investigation into this new discourse. The research that has been conducted exhibits an overriding loyalty to the memorial sites themselves. This continuing lack of reflection and analysis is due to various reasons. First, research into perpetrators during the National Socialist period was only established as a segment of German history and historiography in the mid-1990s (Paul 2002). Research into the opinions of the German population towards perpetrators is more recent still, as can be seen in research of attitudes towards concentration camp guards Irma Grese and Greta Bösel (Jaiser 2007; Heise 2009).

Secondly, exhibitions in memorial sites across Germany have historically concentrated on commemorating the victims of persecution during the Nazi period. The primary task of these memorial sites has been to honour and remember the victims. Only in the last ten years have some memorial sites, specifically Ravensbrück and Neuengamme, opened exhibitions about the perpetrators who were active there.

Thirdly, the lack of an established methodology is a general problem with exhibition analysis. A variation on Clifford Geertz's ethnological method of "thick description" is currently circulating (Muttenthaler, Wonisch 2006), as is a semiotic approach by Jana Scholze (Scholze 2004) and an investigation of exhibitions as performative acts of speech by Mieke Bal (Bal 2002: 36).

Finally, exhibitions in memorial sites are not *per se* cultural expressions that fit within the wider categories of Museum Research or even Exhibition Analysis. This is because their evolution has not been directly connected to wider developments in European museum culture (Knigge 2002b: 378). Throughout their history

the primary purpose of memorial sites has been to function as graveyards and places of forensic evidence. Museums, in contrast, developed out of the 16th century aristocratic practices of art display and curiosity cabinets. Indeed, many early founders and organisers of memorial sites specifically rejected the title of "museum" for their efforts (Lutz 2009: 75).

Currently, the practice of memorialization of perpetrators is fostering significant interest (Brebeck 1995; Gudehus 2006; Lutz 2009; Jelitzki, Wetzel 2010; Brachmann 2014a, 2014b). Other studies of the representation of Nazism in exhibitions – for example, the work of Matthias Haß (Haß 2002) – touch on the question of how perpetrators are represented. Janine Fubel (Fubel 2011), Wiebke Gröschler (Gröschler 2008) and Christine Eckel (Eckel 2011) have explicitly undertaken research on the representation of perpetrators in exhibitions. It is fundamentally important to recognize how multiple, diverse and different the crimes of National Socialism were. A wide range of crime scenes, moments of crime, perpetrators and victims can be observed. Similarly, the factors and structural conditions influencing each crime were very different and after 1945 the legal prosecution of crimes occurred with differing degrees of intensity. Hence, every exhibition's conceptualization is determined and influenced by various and specific factors such as the formulation of research questions, the state of research at the time of production and the artefacts available for exhibition. In the following section, I will summarize the significant and available academic research into the representation of National Socialist perpetrators in Germany.

Firstly, the representation of National Socialist perpetrators in exhibitions holds a certain allure for visitors (Brebeck 1995: 297). This, of course, has to do with a general fascination with and curiosity about violence. Saul Friedländer states that, with respect to National Socialism, this accomplishes an "ethical distancing via a sort of aesthetic fascination and moral ambivalence" (Friedländer 1999: 11). Additionally, representations of disfigured, tormented and seemingly helpless victims can arouse among viewers a fascination for and identification with the seemingly powerful, active perpetrators (Brink 1995: 60–61; Weckel 2010).

Secondly, the representation can lead to a deep, far-reaching alienation (Brebeck 1995: 297) from Nazi perpetrators as "the Other", leaving them as aliens rather than humans. It can also provoke their total demonization, which entails seeing the Nazi perpetrators monsters rather than humans. In contrast, other research about perpetrators has established a paradigm of perpetrator normality, held above all by Christopher Browning (Browning 1993) and Harald Welzer (Welzer 2005). In this paradigm, perpetrators were entirely normal, ordinary people, thus supporting the statement that "the majority of the Germans were involved, perpetration was quantitatively seen as normal and indeed not an exception" (Jelitzki, Wetzel 2010: 10). The concept of "normality" is, however, contested, and Rolf Pohl reminds us that there are no clear boundaries between a "normal" and a "pathological" personality (Pohl 2011, 2013). Furthermore, "normality" is not an ahistorical, stable category; rather, each "normal" personality

must be understood within its own specific social and political conditions. Pohl further adds: "If the average person is able to commit the worst crimes against humanity, the problem lies in this person's psychological evolution into a mass murderer and the social and political conditions which facilitate and support this development" (Pohl 2013: 15). Among the variety of artefacts and texts in any exhibition, it is essential to consider both the social integration and heterogeneity of the perpetrators, as well as the visitors' tendency towards withdrawal and alienation from the subject.

Thirdly, women are still comparatively underrepresented as Nazi perpetrators in exhibitions. Historically, it was men who became concentration camp commanders or members of the *Einsatzgruppen* special deployment forces. Such crimes were committed "within a framework of cooperation between the genders" that was "asymmetrically structured towards the exposure of male conditions" (Gravenhorst 2009: 89; Steinbacher 2009). Women worked as or were married with concentration camp guards and served as helpers within the armed forces; women working as nurses and carers took part in the social Darwinist murders of the so-called *T4 Action*[1]; and women worked as administrators in Gestapo offices (Kohlhaas 2010). Often, women's part in committing the crimes is inadequately addressed in exhibitions, because the subject is both under-estimated and under-researched.

Fourthly, the concept of "perpetrator" is borrowed from criminal law but it is a concept that must, when used for the purposes of historical research, be widened to include a discussion of those who benefitted from, facilitated and supported crimes. When it comes to the representation of National Socialist perpetrators in museums, Wolf Kaiser claims "perpetrators" are those who "carried a share of the responsibility for National Socialism that can be personally ascribed to them, including also that for which they could not be prosecuted" (Kaiser 2012: 16–17). Wulff E. Brebeck adds that in the case of crimes actively participated in and officially sanctioned by the state, "the acts of individual accomplices generally appeared unspectacular": "they mostly did not look – when considers the outward appearances – like part of a crime" (Brebeck 1995: 298). Brubeck's observation constitutes a challenge for exhibitions, as do the representation of individual choice and freedom of action within a larger context of structural conditions and forces (Jelitzki, Wetzel 2010: 258).

Fifthly, it is sometimes difficult in educational work about National Socialism to find precise and appropriate language with which to refer to perpetrators. As Christian Gudehus has shown (Gudehus 2006: 28, 67) phrases such as "the Nazis", "the members of the Nazi party", "the SS", "the SS Men", "members of the SS" or "the Germans" have very different connotations and implications. It can also be very challenging to provide an explanation or analysis of these various

[1] A state programme to kill the physically and mentally disabled. Between 1939 and 1941, more than 70,000 people were murdered.

terms in an educational moment that, for both pedagogical and democratic reasons, needs to offer an open-ended discussion.

Sixthly, the representation of perpetrators must be integrated with that of the victims. In the context of exhibitions in former concentration camp memorial sites, this necessitates the integration of the prisoners' perspectives (Jelitzki, Wetzel 2010: 267).

Seventhly, there are various dilemmas about artefacts and objects. For example, the display of the tools of murder can document the crimes, but such artefacts can also fascinate and enthral visitors. Private photographs of perpetrators, for example, from family events or holiday trips, can show the coexistence of crimes against humanity and the routines of daily life but they can also make the perpetrators' participation in murders seem less real. While official photographs, for example those taken for propaganda purposes, reveal perpetrators' grand self-perceptions, they also risk reproducing these same illusions. Photographs of the crimes themselves can act as undeniable proof, but they are nearly always taken from the perspective of the perpetrators, often reproducing the humiliation of the victim (Rupnow 2013). The methods and ways employed to show crimes and crime scenes are very relevant to how the general representation of perpetrators is portrayed.

Finally, the perspective of the visitors needs to be considered. It is mainly young people who carry stereotypes about perpetrators as subordinates or as brutal sadists. Those two stereotypes developed shortly after 1945 and are still very common (Brachmann 2014b: 54). Against this background, a realistic educational goal can be to arouse visitor interest as to why people *actually* turned into perpetrators (Brachmann 2014b: 62).

Examples of how Perpetrators are represented in Exhibitions

In this section, two examples of the representation of perpetrators in exhibitions will be given. The examples illustrate how differently perpetrators can be shown in exhibitions. The chosen examples are the exhibition of one documentation centre, the Nazi Party Rally Grounds Documentation, and the exhibition of one memorial site, Wewelsburg. Wewelsburg is also partly a documentation centre, because the historical site was not only linked to a concentration camp but played an important role for the self-representation of the SS. What I describe in the following section are results from my research on the exhibitions, which I visited to analyse the representation of perpetrators. The method used is a variation of Clifford Geertz's ethnological method of "thick description" (Muttenthaler, Wonisch 2006). In particular, I want to draw attention to the various ways in which the photographs in these exhibitions are used.

As Cornelia Brink has argued, photographs innately "simplify [their object]. They quote from reality, and, in quoting reality, they simplify it" (Brink 1995: 58). From 1933 until 1938, the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche

Arbeiterpartei, Nazi-Party) held their annual multi-day rally in Nuremberg, a city in the modern-day province of Bavaria. In November 2001, the Documentation Centre Nazi Party Rally Grounds was opened. The exhibition "Fascination and Terror" focuses on the

> history of the Nazi Party rallies. Given the availability of many documents, the building history of the Nazi Party rally grounds is represented extensively. <…> in addition, the exhibition shows the consequences of the National Socialist propaganda for millions of its victims (Museen der Stadt Nürnberg 2006: 21).

The exhibition is located in the former Congress Hall, an assembly building which was designed and built during National Socialism. It has an expanse of 1,300 square metres. There are few original objects on display because the building is the dominant exhibit. Exhibition texts, photographs and pictures are printed on glass boards. In addition to the building's history, the development of the Nazi party rallies is shown. Perpetrators are almost ignored, there is no separate sphere where names or biographies are exposed, although the area was a place of forced labour and the deportation of Jews. So the local perpetrators are widely ignored in the exhibition while enormous broadsheet photographs of nationally known perpetrators cover entire walls (such as, for example, a photograph of Adolf Hitler at a Thanksgiving feast in Bückeberg, and a photograph of a parade of SS "Death's Head" Units through the Nuremberg central market during a rally in 1936). The photograph of Hitler was actually included in the exhibition as an alternative to the original plan of having an even larger photograph, which was rejected as potentially too glorifying a depiction (MacDonald 2009: 137–138). The enormous images do not convey or facilitate any historical knowledge or learning. Instead they impress visitors and decorate the exhibition rooms, especially since they are neither deconstructed by texts nor complemented by showing "ordinary perpetrators."

The Wewelsburg site was a gathering place and educational institution for the "Schutzstaffel" (the SS). A concentration camp was specially constructed alongside it to provide slave labour for the site's expansion; over 1,200 people were murdered there. The contemporary Wewelsburg Memorial Site's permanent exhibition was opened in April 2010. The site is in the province of Nordrhein-Westfalen. Over a space of more than 850 square metres, a permanent exhibition on the "Ideology and Terror of the SS" provides information on "the organization, self-conception and terror of the SS and how this history is handled" (Kaiser 2012: 17). An important aspect of the museum's presentation are original exhibits (John-Stucke 2011: 22). This also includes objects which show the perpetrators. These are mainly objects obtained from the inheritances of former SS members including photographs and diaries or furnishings from Wewelsburg (John-Stucke 2011: 22). To avoid turning the exhibits into objects of fascination for the visitors, they are presented with certain precautions: the showcases look like depot cabinets, and their glass is partly covered with plastic sheets and text, so that the information stands between the visitor and the object (John-Stucke 2011: 23-25).

The first part of the exhibition – "The SS: Personnel and Structures" – presents the SS and its activities. The biographies of SS men who worked in Wewelsburg are shown in a large room. Each biography is accompanied by a small photograph of the person. The biographies include information about each photo's source and the reason for its inclusion. For example, the biography of the first captain of Wewelsburg Castle is accompanied by a photo and the following caption: "Manfred von Knobelsdorff, as seen in a photo from his SS Officer Dossier." The Director of the Wewelsburg Memorial Site, Kirsten John-Stucke, said: "*We refuse <...> to display these criminals in large-format photos, we don't want to somehow influence or shape the impression [the photos] conveyed [to visitors]*" (interview with the author, 20 November 2013).

These two exhibitions show the perpetrators in different ways. What is displayed and how it is displayed depends upon the historical site, the state of research, the available images and the concepts or decisions of those responsible for the exhibition. Because the Nuremberg exhibition does not refer to the Nazi Party Rally Grounds as a crime scene, the perpetrators are neglected and the consequences of using such huge photographs are not carefully reflected upon.

Further Considerations

I do not want to suggest that the representation of National Socialist perpetrators in exhibitions is particularly challenging, as every subject certainly requires reflection, critical examination and research. Memorial sites, contemporary history museums and documentation centres, however, should be critical in their representation of National Socialist perpetrators. The issue is not one of creating a normalized ideal of museum representation, but rather how to create an enlightened and enlightening presentation of National Socialism.

The "International Memorial Museums Charter", which was developed in tandem by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and the International Committee of Memorial Museums, to this end already suggests on a thematic level that:

> The perpetrators should not be demonized, but rather their ideology, aims and motives should be used to explain their actions. This includes the institutional and social mechanism as well as the individual biographies of perpetrators (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance 2012).

These suggestions would have to be expanded upon with ideas about design, staging and aesthetics. Further considerations should be added such as integrating the perspective of the victims, preventing objects such as weapons or SS devotionals from developing a fascinating quality and deconstructing the historical self-representation of perpetrators (in photographs). Above all, the representation has to be reflected on and discussed, one should shed light on that topic due to its relevance as part of memory policies. The way perpetrators are shown not only informs

us about history and genocidal crimes, but it also helps in the development of ideas for the prevention of such issues in the future.

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