



Peter Reichel. *Politik mit der Erinnerung: Gedächtnisorte im Streit um die Nationalsozialistische Vergangenheit.* München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1995. 387 S. DM 49.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-446-18296-7.



Reviewed by Stefan Gunther (Brandeis University)

Published on H-German (October, 1998)

James E. Young was one of the first Holocaust scholars to make the point that “memory of the Holocaust is... as plural as the hundreds of diverse buildings and designs by which every nation and people house remembrance.” [1] Peter Reichel, a political scientist at the University of Hamburg, attempts to elucidate this connection between the genesis and history of memorials and political culture for Germany after 1945. The goals he sets for this book are ambitious: following Maurice Halbwachs, he attempts to trace the trajectories of collective memory and the factors through which this memory manifests itself in what he calls “public memory culture.” Reichel has written a book that espouses both stylistic clarity and an awareness of complexity in the analysis of the contingencies—historical, ideological, and esthetic—of this culture.

Reichel starts with the premise that despite decades of research on Nazi Germany, “the consensus about the evaluation of these twelve years has not become greater but rather weaker and more difficult (p. 10).” He locates the main reason for the increased difficulty in interpreting Nazism primarily in the fact that public memory about these years has not only been subject to the interpretive conflicts inherent in historiography but has also—and he argues, primarily—been conditioned “by being embedded for decades in the intra-German conflict of

political systems (p. 10).”

From the onset, then, Reichel argues for a concept of memory and memorialization that is historically contingent—subject to the expediencies of the *Realpolitik* of each of the two German states and ultimately representative of the fact that especially in the political culture of a united Germany, tension will continue to exist between desires to maintain a discussion about Nazi Germany via airing out different approaches to memorialization and the desire to fix memory once and for all by designing monuments to end all ambiguities.

Reichel is especially convincing when he argues that every memorial, as a sort of cultural sign, inscribes in itself a dual movement: not only does it speak to the historical events made manifest in his production, but it also “documents... the reception and interpretive history of an event (p. 33).” This observation enables him to make a distinction between the ways in which East Germany, West Germany, and Austria engaged the public memory of Nazi Germany. Austria, in his interpretation, has been eager to construct the myth of being Nazi Germany’s first victim and has put itself, by this rhetorical sleight of hand, into the position of externalizing its Nazi past. East Germany, on the other hand, universalized the Nazi era by interpreting it as an outgrowth of the socio-economic factors of capitalism carried out to its logical extreme and

thus bestowed on itself an anti-fascist foundation myth. Finally, West Germany, by claiming the legal succession of the Third Reich, as well as through only half-hearted efforts at de-Nazifying the public sector, had no choice but to internalize Nazism's problematic heritage and engage all its repercussions.

It is this interpretive matrix that is, simultaneously, the book's biggest advantage and drawback. On one hand, Reichel succinctly explains the reasons for the divergent interpretations of the Nazi era in East and West Germany. For instance, his discussion of the Buchenwald concentration camp as a "monument of heroic self-liberation" and thus as reflective of a view of Nazi oppression as a mere precursor to the socialist revolution to follow neatly expresses East Germany's view of the victims as, ultimately, fighters and victors. Similarly, his account of the development of the Dachau camp into a memorial site reflects accurately the tensions between historialization and demonization; increased desire to force an end to ongoing discussions about the past and the officially sponsored "cult of dismay" (p. 128); and the eradication of Nazi past and the *mise-en-scene* of its memorial spaces. After the war, the camp site, after all, had been used as a refugee camp; had withstood attempts to demolish the erstwhile crematorium; had been subject to attempts by the German bureaucracy to table plans for a memorial altogether; and was finally established, albeit replete with Christian symbols of solace and reconciliation and thus a "clean-cut ambiance" (p. 151) unlikely to evoke memory of the horrors perpetrated on the site.

However, Reichel's analysis of the procedures leading in each case to the establishment of memorials (be they in the East or the West) ultimately runs the danger of unduly stressing the outcome over the ambivalence and complexities of the process itself. In other words, Reichel's account adequately explains the ideological and political force fields within which memorials exist, but it remains unsatisfactory in elucidating the intra-societal pressures that bear on the very thought of remembering and memorializing the Nazi era and the Holocaust. Undoubtedly, memorials *have* been erected; this outcome, however, should not blind the reader to the fact that these memorials had to be discussed and constructed in the face of an increasing societal desire to what Germans call *einen Schlussstrich ziehen* and by attitudes, especially from within the Kohl administration, to further that desire. Kohl's dictum of the "grace of [his] late birth" and the Kohl-Reagan handshake at Bitburg are telling examples of that desire. Reichel is not unaware of these developments. However, by interpreting them as merely one element in the complex interactions of public memories,

he seems to evoke the impression that a desire to gloss over the past and the attempt to keep its memory alive exist in equal measure. The record number of incidents of right-wing violence against foreigners and Jews; the recent electoral success of the DVP in Saxony-Anhalt (and tendencies in the CDU to make "crime and immigration" a central issue of the national elections last month); and the increasing tendency to collapse the particularity of the Nazi crimes and their victims into officially sponsored remembrance for all the "victims of war and the reign of terror" (thus the inscription on the *Neue Wache* in Berlin) all seem to indicate, if not a distinct desire to gloss over the past, at least an unwillingness to engage questions of how the past continues to influence the present and of what official position to assume *vis-a-vis* representing the Nazi era.

These reservations, however, do not detract from the merit of Reichel's book. Despite the somewhat too indiscriminate application of the interpretive matrix discussed above, the book does achieve a discussion of the "culture of memory," in both the East and the West, that is remarkably nuanced, even-handed, and informative. After finishing *Politik mit der Erinnerung*, no reader will ever be able to look at a German memorial without being aware of the distinct processes of remembering the specific, partial truths about Nazi Germany that have found expression in the specific artifact. James E. Young has written that "the best memorial to the fascist era and its victims in Germany today may not be a single memorial at all—but only the never-to-be-resolved debate over which kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end". [2] While Professor Reichel's book may be somewhat insensitive to what this reviewer considers to be increased tendencies towards the silencing of that very debate, the fact that it does chronicle the establishment of a large number of memorials in the first place provides a counterweight of sorts. It remains to be seen whether this establishment of memorials and the literal "making concrete" of memory will prove sufficient to stem the tendencies towards normalizing the Nazi past.

Notes:

[1]. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. viii.

[2]. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Stefan Gunther. Review of Reichel, Peter, *Politik mit der Erinnerung: Gedächtnisorte im Streit um die Nationalsozialistische Vergangenheit*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2395>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.