

Saunders, Anna: *Memorializing the GDR. Monuments and Memory after 1989*. Oxford: Berg-hahn Books 2018. ISBN: 978-1-78533-680-5; IVX, 368 S., 24 Abb.

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In her new book, Anna Saunders examines the memory landscape of the former GDR through monuments, a classic form of marking the past. Unlike the 19th- and early 20th-century form of monuments, which tended to unabashedly celebrate war victories and the nation-state with their ubiquitous men on horses, the monuments in this book cover a wide variety of forms and subjects. They range from sober stelae to clever constructions with tank treads, from artistic neon circles that flash the symbols for „rock, paper, scissors“ to solemn crosses, columns sprouting palm leaves, bells made from melted guns, a section of the Berlin Wall, a re-appropriated seven-metre-tall bust of Marx, and plans for the still-unbuilt Memorial to Freedom and Unity in Berlin. What these diverse monuments have in common is that they are all part of the process of coming to terms with the former GDR in all its complexity.

Saunders organises her exploration into five general categories, each further explored in detail through four or five specific cases. Each category raises a particular challenge to „working through“ the GDR past. The first is what could be called the dilemma of presence, or how to deal with the remains of prominent state socialist monuments with meanings that have suddenly, radically changed. Once sites of state rituals, these monuments are now being reinterpreted (such as Halle's flag monument being repainted to feature a starry sky), relocated (as with Leipzig's Karl Marx relief), or re-appropriated (as with Chemnitz's Marx monument, now the town's brand, reappearing in the guise of coffee cups, paperweights, and liqueur bottles).

The second challenge is the inverse of the first: the dilemma of absence, or the problem of dealing with what was repressed, specifically in the form of hidden histories and graves of Soviet „special camps“. Some of these camps were public secrets, such as

Buchenwald, but others had all but disappeared from memory, such as Fünfeichen in Brandenburg, where mass graves were discovered only in 1990, or cellars used by the NKVD for torture and imprisonment, such as „Haus 3“ in Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg district. The monuments erected on these sites tread carefully among the layered Nazi and Soviet pasts and the silence of the GDR. They resort to religious and traditional symbols of mourning such as stelae and crosses that, in Saunders' reading, „recalls the Christianization of memory in 1950s West Germany“ (p. 148).

The third challenge could be called the dilemma of re-appraisal, in which the problem is not how to deal with a once-prominent statue or a once-hidden mass grave, but how to commemorate a pivotal historical event that remained un-memorialised in the East, namely the uprising of 17 June 1953. This event can be seen as at once peculiar to the GDR and as part of longer German traditions of revolt and revolution (1848, 1918, and 1989), making it thus open to ongoing political appropriation. Saunders finds that monuments in provincial settings, such as two variations on tank tracks in Leipzig or Dresden or sculptures in the town of Hennigsdorf, are able to build active, if controversial, traditions of remembrance in ways that Berlin's highly political monuments fall short (which she analyses by comparing Wolfgang Rüppel's monument to the unbuilt proposal by Katharina Karrenberg).

The last two challenges concern how to commemorate events claimed in different ways by West and East: the Berlin Wall and unification itself. For the Berlin Wall, the better-known cases of the Bernauer Strasse memorial, the controversy over Alexandra Hildebrandt's „Freedom Monument“, and the older white crosses near the Reichstag are complimented by a moving account of a lesser-known memorial to two children shot and killed in Treptow in 1966, which only became known in 1997. Saunders notes an increasing complexity in the design of Berlin Wall memorials as time goes on, although they remain marked by „easily decipherable symbolism“, which she attributes to the relatively short passage of time since 1989. When it comes to unification itself, the key tension

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lies in whether to emphasise the „freedom“ symbolised by the protests of 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall or „unity“ in the rapid realisation of German re-unification the following year. While nothing seems to express the loaded politics of this tension more than the often absurd 20-year long debate about the (as-of-yet unbuilt) national „Freedom and Unity Monument“ in Berlin, once again, it is in the provinces that Saunders finds more substantive memory work in process. In Leipzig, Dessau, Magdeburg, and above all in the unsung city of Plauen, she finds examples of grassroots, bottom-up processes that allow for local ownership and public engagement.

The 21 cases explored in the book thus make for a rich, if occasionally unwieldy, journey across the memorial landscape. Along the way, Saunders argues for rethinking the relationship between the theoretical categories of communicative and collective memory (drawn from the writings of Jan and Aleida Assmann), although she does not quite explain where this might lead. I often felt that despite the length, I wanted a better sense of the possible effects of the kind of memory activism described here, both on German society and for the study of memory more generally. The book keeps circling back to an incipient argument about democracy in relationship to monuments and memory, but this remains at a level of generalisation that presents engagement and multiple narratives as ends in themselves. The social scientist in me wants to know how such civil society action is impacting larger social structures beyond Saunders' main finding that a new „self-confidence“ is leading to a „positive tradition of remembrance“ (p. 256). I am not entirely sure how to parse this conclusion that „Finally, more positive memories are [...] marking a shift away from notions of shame or victimhood, as well as a move towards more global narratives of freedom, democracy and human rights“. At a time when global narratives are being challenged by rising nationalism, and frustration with victimhood is being appropriated by the political right (as some of the examples in the book show), the optimism in Saunders' celebration of „the clear emphasis on democratic values“ (p. 256) may require some tempering.

All in all, Saunders makes a firm contribution to the field by showing how monuments can be important sites for democratic engagement around which multiple narratives can converge. Her wide-ranging monograph provides a needed update of the classic question about the relationship between monuments and memory and is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the memory of the GDR. Often poignant, sometimes playful, and occasionally provocative, the cases presented here ultimately tell of a grappling with the recent past that is, in its own way, one of the unheralded success stories of unification.

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