

Disturbing Pasts: Reverberations of the Second World War in Europe after 1945

Veranstalter: Mary Fulbrook, Stephanie Bird, Julia Wagner and Christiane Wienand, AHRC-funded Research group "Reverberations of the Second World War in Germany and Europe", University College London

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The memory of war and violence in twentieth century Europe continues to be a part of everyday experience for many contemporary Europeans. The interdisciplinary conference set out to explore the notion of disturbance in regard to the ongoing interaction between the past and the present after 1945. The aim was to investigate the range of forms through which the violent past both disturbs and is still disturbed by the present. Theoretically, the conference aimed to contribute to the larger discussion on the concept and application of 'collective memory'.

Opening the proceedings with an introductory presentation, MARY FULBROOK (London) pointed to the variegated nature of 'disturbance' with regard to the past. She identified three main questions for the conference: i) why particular pasts may be acutely disturbing for some groups and not others; ii) which communities are particularly disturbed by what aspects of the (Nazi) past; and iii) under what conditions people redefine or reinterpret their experiences. Fulbrook stressed that understanding the interaction between individual perspectives and wider social frameworks remains the main challenge for scholars. In what followed TSILA RATNER (London) and KATYA KRYLOVA (Nottingham) both focused on generational dynamics in approaches to the past. Ratner explored the quest of young Israelis to fill the void in their parents' histories by writing. She noted that the past remains a living presence for both second and third generation Holocaust survivors. However, whereas members of the second generation are obsessed with encrypting their parents' stories, the third generation attempts to end the obsession by finding

out what really happened in the past, even if the failure of information to substitute for the experience of trauma often results in disintegration of identity and muteness. Krylova discussed the much delayed process of 'coming to terms' with the Nazi past in Austria with reference to portrayals of the Waldheim Affair in Robert Schindel's novel *Der Kalte* [The Cold One] (2013) and Ruth Beckermann's documentary *Die Papierene Brücke*. She emphasized the contrasting responses of different generations to the events.

GILLY CARR (Cambridge) addressed the ghostly character of the memory of the Second World War in the Channel Islands which were under German occupation from 1939 to 1945. Carr showed that these narratives about the past are dominated by the notion of a ghostly presence of both German soldiers and, since the 1990s, of their victims too. According to Carr, these ghosts function as a form of 'postmemory', allowing members of the third generation to re-experience their grandparents' past. On the same theme of hauntings, UILLEAM BLACKER (Oxford) explored the complexities of cultural memory in Eastern European cities that experienced massive population transfers as a result of the Second World War. Blacker observed that the traces of „lost others“ that were often denied in Communism have resurfaced in the post-1989 space and literature, revealing the palimpsest-like construction of places such as Breslau/Wrocław, Lwów/L'viv or Wilno/Vilnius.

SUSANNE KNITTEL (Utrecht) explored the memory of the Nazi euthanasia program in Germany. She focused on Horst Hoheisel's and Andreas Knitz's „Grey Bus Memorial“ and Helga Schubert's book *Die Welt da drinnen*. Knittel argued that the commemoration of the victims of Nazi euthanasia disturbs the present in a number of ways as it challenges the memory of the Holocaust, the approaches to the study of the Holocaust and the contemporary attitudes to disability and mental illness. Next, ALEXANDRA HILLS (London) explored the notion of the 'creaturely' and its relation to suffering and victimhood in the work of Ilse Aichinger and Primo Levi. Hills argued that in 'creaturely', the otherwise inexpressible violence finds an embodiment and

thus becomes a way to express suffering and face trauma. Finally, JOANNE PETTIT (Kent) explored the accounts of „second-generation perpetrators“ in order to make sense of the intergenerational transmission of guilt and trauma. Focusing on two accounts, *Traces of My Father* (1979) by Sigfrid Gauch and *Let me Go* (2005) by Helga Schneider, Pettit problematized the notion of „inherited guilt“.

The second day began with PETER KRÄMER (Norwich), who concentrated on references to the Nazi past in Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Krämer argued that if Kubrick's work became a huge success in the United States but not in Germany it was because in Germany the elements of the Nazi past were found deeply disturbing and not understood. Film was also at the center of the next presentation, in which JULIAN PETLEY (London) highlighted the existence of limits to what can be shown in public media. Analyzing the various instances, in which the British Board of Film Censors removed parts of the war footage judged as unsuitable for public display, Petley questioned the applicability of social norms such as taste, decency and discomfort when confronted with the great atrocities of human history. The session was closed by JULIA WAGNER (London) who presented her research on the travel narratives by German tourists who went abroad shortly after the end of World War Two. Wagner pointed out many tourists expected that their holiday would be free of the burdens of the past and analyzed the strategies of omission, downplay and avoidance, constructed in response to reminders of a disturbing past.

The presentation by STEPHANIE BIRD (London) explored the role of the joke in the texts concerned with suffering. Analyzing how the spectator derives pleasure from following tragedies, Bird pointed out that anxiety is a productive response in the reception of text. She argued further that comic elements challenge conceptions of victimhood and trauma as ethical sites. ISABEL HESSE (York) discussed Timur Vermes's satirical novel *Er ist wieder da* (2013), in which Hitler wakes-up in the twenty-first century. Hesse argued that laughter affects the rela-

tionship to the past, not least through identification with the first-person narrator. For her, the novel therefore is symptomatic of a new culture of laughter, and critical engagement with the Third Reich among Germans. For the final presentation in this panel CAITRÍONA LEAHY (Dublin) focused on the work of visual artist Anselm Kiefer. Leahy showed how Kiefer's recent work has departed from the „undisturbing disturbance“ of his 1960s project „Occupations“. She argued that the process of commemorating the disturbance mitigates its „disturbing“ logic as the aestheticization of history takes away the power of the past to interfere with the present.

A presentation by CHRISTIANE WIENAND (London) analyzed young German volunteers' confrontations with and reactions to the recent past during their short work stays at the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial site in the mid-1960s and 1970s. Wienand argued that the young activists disturbed the present in a highly constructive way, as they underscored the generational transmission of responsibility rather than guilt. ANNA ZADORA (Strasbourg) addressed the „politics of memory“ surrounding the history of World War Two in Belarus. She gave an account of the changes implemented in the history textbooks in recent years and how these reflect Belarusian politics. Zadora argued that family narratives of the past also mirror these changes, showing the impact of the social framework on biographical memories. Finally, ULRIKE LANG (Munich) explored the changing significance of the Ghetto of Łódź/Litzmannstadt after 1945. Lang pointed out that the former ghetto currently poses a particular challenge to the local memory culture as it constitutes both a 'lieu de mémoire' and a functional urban space. She argued further that the recent wave of memorialization serves more an affirmation of the Polish nation than the commemoration of Holocaust victims.

DOMINIK RIGOLL (Jena) analyzed the differences and connections between '45ers' and '68ers'. Rigoll observed that the former only existed in Germany, whereas the latter could be found both in Germany and France. He concluded that 1968 did not oppose generations, but rather

two different „communities of identification“. Next ALEXEY TIKHOMIROV (Frankfurt) discussed the events of the 17th June 1953 in East Germany. He challenged the assumption that the events were fundamentally democratic. Looking beyond the conventional framework of the West-East divide, Tikhomirov proposed to view the 1953 revolt as the first public expression of the postwar social trauma, through which the violent and repressed past manifested itself.

GRZEGORZ ROSSOLINSKI-LIEBE (Berlin) discussed the role of survivor testimonies in bringing about a new understanding of the Ukrainian involvement in the Holocaust. Rossolinski-Liebe noted that the change in the dynamics between memory and history put an end to the dismissal of survivor testimonies as unreliable. GAELLE FISHER (London) then contrasted attempts to memorialize and transmit the past among Bukovina Jews and Bukovina Germans. Comparing the activities and the narratives of the two groups in the 1990s and 2000s, Fisher argued that the varying salience of identity among the two communities and their descendants can be explained by the different character of the disturbance and conceptions of what past can provide the basis for a better future.

The day ended with a public lecture by LISA APPIGNANESI, who discussed the dynamics of family memory in reference to her memoir *Losing the Dead* and her novel *The Memory Man* as well as Josh Appignanesi's film *Ex Memoriam*. Appignanesi stressed the complexities of memory transmission within a family context, since some speak about the past whilst others choose to remain silent, and nostalgia also often plays a role.

The third day began with a presentation by CHRISTIANE GRIEB (London), who analyzed the impact of the Second World War imagery from the Concentration Camp Mittelbau-Dora on today's understanding of Nazi crimes. Grieb argued that whatever the Mittelbau-Dora images document, they remain vulnerable to de-contextualisation. JULIA LANGE (Hamburg) then explored the politics of memory of German American organizations and their influence on American Holocaust discourse from 1945 to 2013.

Lange stressed the inter-dependence of German identity and Holocaust awareness in the USA. The last speaker in this session, JENNIFER SMYTH (Warwick), examined the construction of the wartime past through a case study of the Czechoslovakian director Fred Zinnemann and his film *The Search*. Although the film's cast was made up of European war orphans the film was banned in Communist Czechoslovakia. Zinnemann was charged with de-judaization of Holocaust and embellishing it for American audiences, and Ivan Jandl, a Czech actor who received a Golden Globe for his performance, was banned from acting.

ANTOINE BURGARD (Lyons/Montreal) and TAMARA WEST (Birmingham) explored the themes of loss and a quest for homeland. Burgard presented his research on the Jewish orphans who sought asylum in Canada between 1947-1952. Analyzing the documents used for the preliminary identification and candidate selection by social workers, Burgard demonstrated how the young survivors were assessed against the criteria of „attractiveness“ which was defined as the willingness to „fit in“ and thus to forget the past. West explored the complex relationship between space, memory and identity by looking at the memories of Poles in Displaced Persons (DP) Camps in postwar West Germany (1945-1961). West showed that the „in-between“ space of the camp led to changes in memory construction, as people shared stories among each other, which then became their own.

The closing discussion concluding the three-day conference brought together HELENA FLAM (Leipzig), DOROTHEE WIERLING (Hamburg) and RICHARD OVERY (Exeter). The three key issues to emerge from this discussion were how to deal with the unexpressed motives, cuts and edits and hidden transcripts in the evidence of a disturbing past; the emotions that accompany exploring the past; and finally, the issue of terminology.

The conference contributed relevant insights into these issues by providing nuanced analyses of diverse contexts, forms and manifestations of disturbance. A recurrent question throughout the conference was that acutely posed by Caitríona Leahy, whether what we observe is in fact the present haunt-

ing the past, rather than the past haunting the present.

Conference Overview:

Panel I: Challenging Narratives

Mary Fulbrook (London), *Disturbing the Past / Disturbed by the Past*

Tsila Ratner (London), *Unbearable Mending: The Holocaust in Contemporary Israeli Literature*

Katya Krylova (Nottingham), *Disturbing the Past: The Representation of the Waldheim Affair in Robert Schindel's Der Kalte*

Panel II. Hauntings

Gilly Carr (Cambridge), *Disturbing ghosts, German bunker restoration and postmemory in the Channel Islands*

Uilleam Blacker (Oxford), *Haunted Cities: Remembering Vanished Others and Urban Identity in Eastern Europe*

Susanne Knittel (Utrecht), *The Uncanny Memory of Nazi Euthanasia*

Alexandra Hills (London), *Victimhood through a Creaturely Lens: Reckonings with the Holocaust in Ilse Aichinger and Primo Levi.*

Joanne Pettit (Kent), *Second Generation Perpetrators? Inherited Guilt and the Holocaust*

Panel III. Fascination / Pleasure

Peter Krämer (Norwich), *„Mein Führer, I can walk!“ References to the Nazi Past in the Making and Reception of Dr. Strangelove (1964)*

Alissa Timoshkina (London), *The Past is Still Present: Representing the Second World War in Ordinary Fascism (documentary, Mikhail Romm, USSR, 1965)*

Julia Wagner (London), *Travelling to Remember, Travelling to Forget. German tourists in Europe and reminders of a disturbing past*

Stephanie Bird (London), *„Comedy – or more precisely: the pure joke – is the essential inner side of mourning which from time to time, like the lining of a dress at the hem or lapel, makes its presence felt.“ On comedy and suffering in post-war German texts.*

Isabelle Hesse (York), *Disturbing Laughter? Hitler's Return to Contemporary Germany*

Caitríona Leahy (Dublin), *Disturbing Anselm Kiefer*

Panel IV. (Dis)Placing Identities and Disturbing Memories

Christiane Wienand (London), *Creating a better Future by Disturbing the Past? Young West-Germans as Reconciliation Activists in the 1960s and 1970s*

Anna Zadora (Strasbourg), *Disturbing, Changing and Controversial Memories of the WWII in Belarus*

Ulrike Lang (Munich), *From Oblivion to Complex Memoryscape: The Changing Significance of the Łódź Ghetto for the Local Community after 1945 as a Result of Interethnic and Interinstitutional Transmission of Memory*

Dominik Rigoll (Jena), *45ers and 68ers in France and West Germany*

Alexey Tikhomirov (Frankfurt am Main), *Beyond „Fascist Sortie“ and „Popular Uprising for Democracy and Rights“: Rethinking the 17 June 1953 unrest in East Germany*

Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe (Berlin), *Survivor Testimonies and the Process of Coming to Terms with the Holocaust in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia*

Gaelle Fisher (London), *Disturbance and coherence in contemporary accounts of Germans and Jews from Bukovina*

Public lecture:

Lisa Appignanesi

Panel V. Redefinitions / reconstructing identities

Christiane Grieb (London), *Mittelbau-Dora trial / Crime scenes and later representations*

Julian Petley (London), *Too Unpleasant for Public Exhibition*

Julia Lange (Hamburg), *The past is a foreign country? German American politics of memory and the Holocaust*

Jennifer Smyth (Warwick), *Film, History, and the Search for Europe in Postwar Czechoslo-*

vakia

Antoine Burgard (Lyons / Montreal), „A sympathetic boy whom the years of suffering have not too heavily marked“. Identity construction, trauma's perceptions and stereotyping of Holocaust orphans through social workers' words in immediate Postwar Europe

Tamara West (Birmingham), Displaced Homes and Incomplete Narratives

Closing Discussion

Helena Flam (Leipzig)/Dorothee Wierling (Hamburg)/Richard Overy (Exeter)

Chair: Stephanie Bird (London)

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