EXHIBITING ANTIFASCISM: RAVENSBÜRCK AND THE AMBIVALENCES OF EAST GERMAN COMMEMORATION, 1945-1989

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ABSTRACT

(Under the direction of Konrad H. Jarausch)

This thesis examines the political messages enshrined in and transmitted by the Ravensbrück women’s concentration camp memorial in the former German Democratic Republic between 1945 and 1989. I argue that the ideology displayed at the site was the product of contestation and streamlining during the 1950s between the regime and intellectuals. Initially after the war, the memorial practices at the site varied and were not overtly political. By 1959, the regime successfully monopolized and instrumentalized the history of the camp, setting in stone an official narrative that upheld the legitimacy of the East German state but excluded the voices of the vast majority of victims. However, a “subjective” antifascism that was at odds with the master narrative pushed for a pluralization of public memory, particularly in the 1980s. Thus, a wider range of victim groups, hitherto ignored or marginalized, were accommodated room next to the glorified communist prisoners.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Though this thesis is hopefully just the first step in my academic career, its completion nevertheless fills me with pride and satisfaction. While working on this project, I have become professionally and privately indebted to a great number of people.

Above all, I would like to thank my advisor Konrad Jarausch for his tremendous support, patience, and invaluable feedback, all of which he delivers with a warm disposition. I am also grateful to Christopher Browning and Karen Hagemann for their assistance with this project and for challenging me to see my research from new angles. A word of thanks must also go to my graduate school friends and colleagues, who offered invaluable critique and feedback during the writing process.

My interest in this topic began while studying abroad in Berlin in 2006 and taking a class taught by Sigrid Jacobeit, the former director of the Ravensbrück memorial. A Fulbright Research Grant in 2007 allowed me to return to Germany in order to begin research in earnest; much of this work provided a basis for this thesis. I therefore would like to thank the staff of the memorial and its archive for their expertise and assistance. I am extremely grateful to Sigrid Jacobeit, who has been a source of insight and encouragement, as well as a wonderful person with whom to grab coffee on my trips to Berlin.

I want to thank my family. My parents John and Gisela, my brother Thomas, and my grandparents Margot and Norbert all have freely lent unwavering support and praise since I was young, and I am glad it continues now that I am an adult. The fascinating and
dramatic personal histories of Oma and Opa have undoubtedly inspired my aspiration to become a historian, and my father—a retired school teacher—sparked my imagination with frequent trips to historic sites and hours spent together wandering the halls of museums. He has been the greatest mentor throughout my life; his patience and dedication to a lifetime of teaching and guidance have left a profound influence on me. I would be proud if I can come close to his standards as an educator and as a father.

Last but certainly not least, I thank my loving wife Jenna, the person I am perhaps most indebted to. She encouraged my decision to attend graduate school and follow my calling. For that I can never thank her enough. She has never doubted my abilities or failed to offer her support during moments of self-doubt. Jenna is a caring wife and friend, tolerating the many hours I spend lost in books or in front of the computer. It also cannot be forgotten that she is a wonderful editor, bravely slogging through pages and enduring my frustration as she dissected, rewrote, and ultimately improved this work.

It may be presumptuous to offer dedications in a thesis, but the support of all the aforementioned individuals has moved me to acknowledge their importance in my life. Thank you for all that you do.
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<tr>
<td>BRD</td>
<td>Bundesrepublik Deutschland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDR</td>
<td>Deutsche Demokratische Republik</td>
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<tr>
<td>DFD</td>
<td>Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschland</td>
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<tr>
<td>FRG</td>
<td>Federal Republic of Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDR</td>
<td>German Democratic Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KdAW</td>
<td>Komitee der Antifaschistischen Widerstandskämpfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KPD</td>
<td>Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LfV</td>
<td>Liga für Völkerfreundschaft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMG</td>
<td>Nationale Mahn- und Gedenkstätte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OdF</td>
<td>Opfer des Faschismus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SED</td>
<td>Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPD</td>
<td>Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>Schutzstaffel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VVN</td>
<td>Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZK</td>
<td>Zentralkomitee</td>
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The quaint village of Fürstenberg/Havel, a one-time popular spa retreat in the early 20th century, lies about 75 kilometers northwest of Berlin in the idyllic Brandenburg landscape of dark forests and tranquil lakes. The serenity belies a pivotal episode in history that occurred across the Schwedtsee Lake from the town. Between 1939 and 1945, the Nazi regime imprisoned more than 130,000 individuals from across occupied Europe in Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück, the largest women’s concentration camp on German Reich soil; 30,000 women never lived to see liberation by the Red Army on April 30, 1945.

Given the relative solitude of the grounds today, the immense significance of Ravensbrück in the postwar period is perhaps surprising. In 1959, the German Democratic Republic declared the former concentration camp a national memorial of East Germany. From this point onward, millions of visitors streamed here, attending mass rallies and commemoration ceremonies organized by the regime. The memorial developed into an important site of commemoration, becoming a quasi pilgrimage destination. In this regard, Ravensbrück differed little from Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, the other national memorials of the GDR.

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1 According to a report compiled by the director, between 1959 and 1981 over 3.5 million individuals had visited Ravensbrück. It must be emphasized, however, that these numbers are very high because the regime
Nevertheless, Ravensbrück differed from other memorials. To begin with, not much could be seen at the site; the Soviet military used the former camp until 1992 as a depot, so that only the crematorium and prison building, along with a small area along the camp wall, could be accessed by visitors. Moreover, Sachsenhausen—on the same rail line as Ravensbrück—was much closer to Berlin and more convenient to travel to. Above all, Ravensbrück stands apart from other memorials because it was a former women’s camp. The memorial therefore took on a unique form and attracted an audience with a high percentage of women. Ravensbrück’s distinctiveness might explain why throughout the memorial’s existence, it was less highly regarded by both the regime and the East German public. The male inmates who left Buchenwald and entered into politics took center stage, while the women occupied a respected yet nevertheless ambivalent position in GDR memory culture.

Nevertheless, despite standing in the shadows of Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück also served the important role of acting as a presentation site for the politics of East German Antifaschismus, or “antifascism.” The ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) transmitted political messages and attempted to shape the socialist worldview of the citizens of the GDR by fostering this ideology. The national memorials and museums enshrined the communist inmates and glorified their resistance to fascism. Their sacrifice served as the foundation for a socialist Germany and justified the regime’s policies as the fulfillment of the resistance’s legacy. Antifascism thus legitimized the existence of the GDR. Moreover, understanding fascism in economic terms enabled antifascism to reject

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2 Sigrid Jacobeit, Interview by author, Berlin, Germany, July 3, 2012. There are no documents chronicling this, but former memorial staff and historians have privately felt that the gender aspect explains the disproportionate interested allocated to Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen.
the Federal Republic of Germany and its Western allies; because of their capitalist system, they were nothing more than derivatives of fascism. The memorials of the GDR, therefore, played an important role in presenting and reinforcing this tremendously important ideology that formed the moral and political basis of the East German state.

Although generally speaking this rhetoric lasted until the collapse of the East German state, beginning in the late 1970s a differentiation of commemoration can be traced at Ravensbrück. Although the strict boundaries of the “permissible” still existed, the memorial and those administering it afforded more room to previously ignored or dismissed topics that the regime’s antifascism had marginalized. Analyzing the development and establishment of Ravensbrück’s political messages—particularly antifascism—from the earliest forms of commemoration to the time immediately before the collapse of the East German state yields new insights into GDR memory culture.

A number of questions when considering this topic stand out. First, what messages did the Ravensbrück memorial transmit, how were they formed, and how did they change? The state propagated an antifascist narrative that legitimized its rule. Their version, however, initially needed to overcome competing voices. The establishment of the Ravensbrück memorial was crucial to the regime’s enshrinement of its brand of antifascism. Not until creeping reforms in the 1980s would a pluralized memory culture emerge and significantly challenge official doctrine.

Second, how did the memorial account for Ravensbrück’s unique status as a woman’s concentration camp, how were the experiences of the prisoners portrayed, and did this change? On the one hand, the function of the memorial did not differ from those at male camps; the antifascist message and the praising of members of the communist
resistance was the hallmark of all East German memorials. On the other hand, Ravensbrück projected a gendered antifascist narrative directed at a feminine audience. Moreover, the memorial and its museum differed significantly from the male camps in form; in the 1980s, new histories tried to capture the breadth of women’s experiences in the camp that went beyond the memorial’s rigid and gendered portrayals.

Lastly, from where did the impulses of reform emanate, how were they promoted, and where did limits remain? Intellectuals who subscribed to a “subjective” antifascism constructively criticized the official narrative in order to improve it. Commemorating diverse victim groups—such as Jews, Sinti and Roma, non-political prisoners, and members of non-communist parties—allowed for a “better” socialism. But much of the pressure for change emenated from abroad as well. As the GDR pursued a normalization of relations with the West, the door to cultural exchange opened, ushering in an era of reform that enabled the pluralization of memory at Ravensbrück.

Any assessment of Ravensbrück, the GDR’s memory culture, and East German antifascism inherently must contend with the various interpretations of what this now defunct state actually was.³ For those proponents who endorse an understanding of the GDR as an Unrechtsstaat or “unjust state,” focusing on the repressive nature of this dictatorship enables a strong moral condemnation of the unquestionably inhumane aspects of the GDR.⁴ Furthermore the totalitarian model typically discredits socialism,

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³ For an overview of the literature, see Corey Ross, The East German Dictatorship : Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR (London: Arnold, 2002). For an overview of the recent debates on GDR history, see Martin Sabrow et al., Wohin treibt die DDR-Erinnerung? Dokumentation einer Kontroverse (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).
relativizing its emancipatory ambitions. This includes the ideology of *Antifaschismus* or “antifascism,” one of the core founding principles upon which the GDR’s legitimacy rested. Critics dismissed this worldview as nothing more than a dictatorial decree meant to bolster SED. Moreover, these critics contend, antifascism promoted a selective historical narrative that rested on exaggeration and distortion, thus preventing a serious coming to terms with the legacy of the Third Reich.

These criticisms have been countered by those who seek to justify, relativize, or excuse the GDR’s shortcomings and humanitarian transgressions and uphold the achievements of socialism, including antifascism. Some historians defend “decreed antifascism” as a more desirable alternative than no antifascism at all, while others admit deficits in the transmittal of the ideology, but that this in and of itself should not call for a categorical rejection. More partisan pundits disavow any shortcomings of the antifascist historical narrative of the GDR, decrying the post reunification renovation of the former

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East German memorials and removal of the political messages as a second “murder” of the antifascist heroes.⁹

A growing body of nuanced scholarship has attempted to capture both the repressive reality of the East German dictatorship and the emancipatory ambitions of socialism.¹⁰ Despite coining differing terms that emphasize various aspects of the state’s rule, these studies share the notion that the historicization of the GDR must account for paradoxes and ambivalences.¹¹ This includes a differentiated assessment of antifascism. The state-propagated Antifaschismus has rightly been criticized as stale and overly ritualized, unable to foster a strong identification among GDR citizens with the values of the ruling party. Moreover, the antifascism as transmitted by the regime could not enable a deep historical understanding of the Third Reich and its causes, as it contained too many blind spots and silences on topics deemed subversive or “inconvenient” to the East German leadership. However, this “official” antifascism often differed from the convictions of intellectuals.¹² Their antifascism, which had a tremendous moral and intellectual force, lingered longer among these individuals and could motivate criticism

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¹⁰ This has been forcefully enunciated by Konrad H. Jarausch et al., Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999).


of the regime—not necessarily in the name of dissent but with the intention of creating a “better” socialism. In other words, there were many facets of antifascism “below” the “nationalized memory” of the GDR, particularly in the final years of the state’s existence.

This differentiated assessment of antifascism as a basic framework allows for a fresh analysis of the documentary evidence at Ravensbrück. Although there have been a handful of studies chronicling the postwar history of the site and the development of the memorial, none have departed significantly from the “decreed antifascism” interpretation. These monographs, written after 1990, depict Ravensbrück as dominated by the SED, which strictly controlled the political messages of the site. Certainly there is no denying the primacy of the state; final authority rested with the party. However, discursive analysis and a critical reading of the documentary evidence in the Ravensbrück archive and the German Federal Archive in Berlin complicates assumptions and adds breadth to the generic “decreed antifascism” utilized by historians of the memorial.

The SED forged East German antifascism in the face of contestation in the early postwar period, before it became official state doctrine. Moreover, the evidence suggests


pushes for changes in the narrative enshrined in the memorial and museum “from below” from Ravensbrück staff and mid-level functionaries in the government itself. These impulses stemmed from a “subjective” antifascism that relied on a broader historical understanding that tolerated ideological nuances. Previous studies have largely ignored the dynamism and ambivalences of a multifaceted antifascism that operated below the state level.

Besides leaving the term “antifascism” largely undifferentiated, previous studies of Ravensbrück and other former GDR memorials have continuously stressed the shortcomings of the site vis-à-vis “white spots,” or taboo chapters of history.\(^{16}\) It would go too far to surmise that these authors subscribe to the totalitarian model, but certainly the major thrust of the narratives concentrate on the repression of memory and the instrumentalization of the GDR’s memorials for political purposes. Again, this cannot be categorically denied; ultimately, the memorials in East Germany failed to adequately commemorate many millions of individuals belonging to diverse victim groups.\(^{17}\) However, the same sources these authors have used to illustrate how the regime controlled the master narrative at Ravensbrück also reveal contestations that have been overlooked or dismissed. They suggest attempts at liberalization and pluralization, however halted and limited, particularly in the waning years of the GDR. Investigating this development sheds a new light on the supposed rigid and uncompromising memory culture of East Germany, as well as those constructing and shaping it.


\(^{17}\) As will become clear, the official antifascism of the memorials privileged communist prisoners and ignored Jews, Sinti and Roma, Jehovah’s Witnesses, criminals, the “asocial,” homosexuals, Christians, and members of bourgeois parties.
CHAPTER 2
RAVENSBÜRCK CONCENTRATION CAMP AND
THE STREAMLINING OF MEMORY, 1939-1959

To understand the significance of Ravensbrück’s prominence and importance in the postwar period, a brief history of the camp during the years 1939 and 1945 is necessary. Who was imprisoned there, the functions of the camp, and the scale of the site had profound influences on the future memory of this history. Moreover, a broad overview underlines the character of East German commemoration, especially regarding its deficiencies.

In 1939 the SS came to the conclusion that various female detention centers should be closed and merged into a single concentration camp dedicated to imprisoning women. In May of that year, the first prisoners were transferred to Ravensbrück, designed—as were all of Germany’s concentration camps—along the guidelines and model pioneered at Dachau, the first concentration camp built in March of 1933. By 1945, more than 130,000 women would find themselves imprisoned in the main camp or one of its more than forty Aussenlager or sub-camps. In addition, beginning in the spring

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19 The significant difference at Ravensbrück, however, was that the camp would be guarded by female SS auxiliary. Typically, only these women were allowed to enter the camp, although the perimeter guards and the camp administration were male SS personnel.
of 1941, authorities established a small male facility within the main complex; around 20,000 men would be imprisoned here during the war. About a year later, the Ravensbrück command built Jugendschutzlager (youth protective custody camp) Uckermarck to the southeast. Here, over 1,000 girls aged 16 to 21 faced detention for criminal or “unruly” behavior. Thus, by the spring of 1942 Ravensbrück had become a sizeable and important part of the Nazi concentration camp system.

The first prisoners came from Germany. Most of these initial detainees were incarcerated for political reasons, either because they had been active in the opposition to the Nazi party or were married to an individual targeted by the regime. Criminals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, and the “asocial” also faced imprisonment in Ravensbrück. A small minority of women at this stage was Jewish, imprisoned for their politics as opposed to their ethnicity; virtually all of these were murdered or deported to death camps after 1942. After the outbreak of war in 1939, the prisoner population began to reflect the number of nations the German army had conquered. Polish and Russian prisoners constituted the majority of the non-German population, but the SS imprisoned the citizens of 40 nations, including a handful of British and American

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20 This blanket term included Roma and Sinti, the “work-shy,” women who had changed sexual partners frequently, and so-called “race defilers,” or women accused of relations with members of an inferior race.

21 The majority of Jewish prisoners at Ravensbrück, in fact, were murdered as part of “Aktion 14f13,” an extension of the adult euthanasia program. The goal of the action aimed at euthanizing Germany’s concentration camp prisoners, particularly those who had become too weak and emaciated to work, were mentally “feeble-minded,” asthmatic, and even those who had wet their beds. The policy, however, also included all Jewish prisoners within the camp system, regardless of their health. Several hundred Ravensbrück Jews, along with between 1,200-1,600 other prisoners, were gassed at the mental institute Bernburg near Dessau. For more on 14f13, see Ernst Klee, “Euthanasie” im NS-Staat: die “Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens” (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1983). For a specific study of the Ravensbrück inmates and 14f13, see Anise Postel-Vinay, “Gaskammern und die Ermordung durch Gas im Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück,” in Forschungsschwerpunkt Ravensbrück, ed. Jacobit (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1997), 33-46.
women, in Ravensbrück. Membership in the communist party, as well as participation in the resistance or opposition to the German occupying forces, sealed the fate of thousands of European women.

The primary function of Ravensbrück was economic. Several workshops within the camp produced uniforms and other materials vital for the war effort. In addition, Siemens constructed a factory just south of the main camp, drawing labor from the prisoner population. The various sub-camps, built around local industry and agricultural enterprises, were vital components of the Third Reich’s wartime economy. Ravensbrück also served as the central training center for the female SS auxiliary forces. Most of the over 3,500 female guards—some of whom would earn notoriety for their barbarity at Auschwitz and Majdanek—lived and trained here.

In the final phase of the war, the situation in the camp changed dramatically. Once Russian military gains threatened camps in the East, the SS closed these facilities and transferred prisoners westward. Ravensbrück thus became a transit camp, as the population swelled with newly arrived, predominantly Jewish prisoners. These developments led to extreme overcrowding, atrocious sanitary conditions, and exacerbated the strain on the already meager food supplies, so that the death toll rose drastically. Furthermore, the SS transferred the killing process from Auschwitz to Ravensbrück, when in early 1945 the camp administration erected a provisional gas chamber. In April of 1945, Folke Bernadotte of the Swedish Red Cross successfully negotiated the release of 7,500 prisoners. The majority of prisoners however suffered the

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22 Polish prisoners would even outnumber German inmates after 1939.

precarious conditions of the collapsing Third Reich until in late April of 1945, the SS forced all able-bodied prisoners onto death marches away from the encroaching enemy; only 3,500 sick women and children remained to see liberation by the Red Army on April 30, 1945.

British estimates after the war judged that about 92,000 prisoners did not survive, but more recent studies attribute the number of victims between 25,000 and 40,000.\textsuperscript{24} The range in these figures can be largely attributed to the chaos of the final months of the war. The transfers from Auschwitz, which were not adequately recorded, faced the most deplorable conditions, therefore succumbing to disease and malnutrition. Moreover, unknown thousands perished on the death marches, complicating a final tally. In either case, Ravensbrück’s size and death toll place it in the same league as the more notorious camps on German soil.\textsuperscript{25} Nevertheless, the history of the Holocaust and Nazi dictatorship often overlooks this camp in the tranquil Brandenburg countryside.

Postwar memorialization thus needed to contend with a major concentration camp in which a wide range of operations and activities occurred. Almost immediately after liberation, commemoration and remembering of the dead began at Ravensbrück. This revolved around caring for the remains and the graves of the deceased. Working voluntarily, a number of survivors organized the burial of the dead in several mass graves around the former camp. The local population, compelled by Russian troops, did most of

\textsuperscript{24} Stefan Hördler, who has conducted extensive research on Ravensbrück, estimates that about 28,000 women perished at the camp. This figure does not include the many thousands who died on the so-called “death marches” in the final days of the war, when the SS evacuated the camp of all prisoners able to walk. It also does not factor in deaths of women who had been transferred to other camps or satellite facilities and perished there. Stefan Hördler, “Die Schlussphase des Konzentrationslagers Ravensbrück. Personalpolitik und Vernichtung,” Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft 56 (2008), 247.

\textsuperscript{25} For instance, according to SS records, about 33,000 prisoners died in Buchenwald. It is estimated that around 30,000 men died in Sachsenhausen, the third national memorial in the GDR. This matches the toll at the major camp in West Germany, Dachau, where just over 31,000 victims are thought to have perished.
the physical labor involved with the interment of the victims. Furthermore, an order from
the Russian authorities obligated the community of Fürstenberg to tend and maintain the
graves.26

This early phase of the site before the founding of the German Democratic
Republic was marked by ad hoc measures and relative indifference on the part of the
local populace and the Russian forces.27 When beginning in 1947 organizations such as
the Opfer des Faschismus (Victims of Fascism) and Vereinigung der Verfolgten des
Naziregimes (Union of Persecutees of the Nazi Regime) became involved at
Ravensbrück, a more formal site of remembrance began to develop. These organizations
tended the graves, maintained the site, and planned the first memorial celebrations. It had
become clear, however, that for the time being the preservation of the area and honoring
of the dead would fall to a small group of individuals. Former prisoners expressed shock
at the dilapidated state of the site. Buildings had fallen into disrepair or had even been
dismantled for material by scavengers and Russian troops, who had converted the former
camp into a military depot. Only the crematorium, outside of the camp wall and therefore
outside of the Russian base, provided a feasible focal point for a future memorial.28

One of the first steps toward a formal site of commemoration began in 1948,
when the surrounding graveyards were exhumed as part of a process of searching for

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26 For more on this early phase, see Insa Eschenbach, “Zur Formensprache der Totenehrung. Ravensbrück
in der frühen Nachkriegszeit,” in Die Sprache des Gedenkens. Zur Geschichte der Gedenkstätte

27 For the ambivalent attitudes of the local population, see Annette Leo, “Das ist so ’n zweischneidiges
Schwert hier unser KZ...” Der Fürstenberger Alltag und das Frauenkonzentrationslager Ravensbrück
(Berlin: Metropol, 2007).

28 For more on this early history, see Eschenbach, “Zur Formensprache der Totenehrung”; Erika Schwarz
Jacobeit et al. (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1999), 218-239.
missing persons; the more than 300 remains were all reburied together along the camp wall by the crematorium, which had become the clear staging area around which a site of memory would be built. How and why the decision to gather together all the dead into a single grave remains unknown. It is significant, however, as whereas before the graves—even if they were mass graves—had been designed to at least look individualized, now the final resting place had taken on a martial air. This indicates a shift in memorial practice from individualized memory to something quite different. As George Mosse has pointed out, by declining individual grave inscriptions at military cemeteries, the primacy of the nation over the individual comes to full expression.\textsuperscript{29} In other words, these places become central sites of national commemoration. Frank Kämpfer asserts that the mass grave shrouds the victims in anonymity in order to accentuate the values of society, even if this is at the expense of remembering individual fates.\textsuperscript{30} This certainly is the case at Ravensbrück, where from this point onward the site increasingly celebrated the socialist values of the “new” German nation. Moreover, the fate of the prisoners served as an idealized model of socialist behavior for the rest of the population to follow. It inculcated notions of responsibility to advance socialism in order to honor the sacrifice of the departed, a hallmark of the first provisional memorials in the late 1940s.

Besides tending to the physical location, the VVN took it upon itself to document the history of Ravensbrück. Thus in May of 1947, the international council of the


organization decided to establish local and regional research branches.\(^\text{31}\) Although the VVN operated throughout postwar Germany, the political differences among the members and the emerging Cold War became increasingly palpable within the association. Because the majority of the members were also members of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), the VVN’s research primarily focused on the history of the German resistance—increasingly understood as the activities of the KPD—therefore seems hardly surprising. Engaged lay historians concentrated on the experiences of “fighters against fascism,” as well as the accomplishments of communist prisoners within the camp system. Of course, the recording of eye-witness accounts and experiences was very important, particularly in creating a record that could serve as evidence in postwar criminal trials of former SS personnel. This was particularly complicated at Ravensbrück, as the SS destroyed virtually all of the administrative records in the crematorium before evacuating the camp. Without daily reports, prisoner rosters, and various other relevant materials, the VVN’s engagement proved vital to the immediate postwar histories of the camp. It also, however, typically excluded the histories of other prisoners who were not of the same political persuasion, or simply did not fit the communist narrative.

Much of the indifference to non-communist prisoners on the part of the organizations that came to dominate the early historicization and commemoration of Ravensbrück echoes the ambivalence within the Soviet Occupation Zone toward a wide number of prisoner groups. Deep misgivings toward prisoners classified as “criminal” and “asocial” by the Nazis persisted. Members imprisoned because of Christian or “bourgeois” opposition fared better, but their plight ranked as “second” to that of the

\(^{31}\) Schwarz and Steppan, “Die Entstehung der Nationalen Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück”, 221.
political left. Those persecuted because of their membership in the Social Democratic Party (SPD) generally enjoyed respect, but the red triangle, symbolizing the political prisoner, increasingly represented solely communist prisoners. Above all, public debate revolved around how Jewish prisoners should be regarded, and whether their suffering could be included within the category of “resistance.” Furthermore, disagreements over whether Jews even qualified as “victims of fascism” emerged. This contestation revolved around moral and material concerns; individuals awarded this title received pensions, special privileges, as well as social prestige.32

A myriad of reasons explain the GDR’s reluctance to thoroughly engage with the fate of the Jews. Initially, after the Second World War ended, a sense of solidarity among liberated concentration camp prisoners suggested that Jewish plight fell under the rubric of antifascism. Many communist prisoners who had suffered in the Nazi camp system sympathized with and wished for solidarity with Social Democrats and Jewish victims. They envisioned a broad antifascist coalition that made room for their fellow prisoners. The politician and poet Johannes Becher, author of the lyrics to the East German national anthem, became a strong and impassioned early voice for Jewish victims.33 The Jewish communist Alfred Kantorowicz argued that the plight of the Jews could not be regarded


as passive; they were essentially fighters and part of the antifascist resistance. Other proponents included Julius Meyer, Heinz Galinski, Franz Dahlem, and especially Paul Merker, a longtime communist active before the war and a member of the Central Committee and Politbüro of the SED. These critics saw an obligation to Jewish victims and called for recognition from the state and restitution to them.

Although some Jews attained high-ranking SED positions and enjoyed political support among some of their non-Jewish colleagues, a number of factors converged which ruled out inclusion of racial victims in GDR memory culture. To begin with, Marxism-Leninism and communist scholarship had deep misgivings about “Zionism.” Moreover, the SED regarded Jewish “cosmopolitanism” as irreconcilable with socialism and dangerously sympathetic to the West. In addition, Stalin’s 1913 treatise opposing the Jewish national question ruled out the right for Jews to any special claims as a national minority in the Stalinist Eastern Bloc. Furthermore, Cold War politics and the Soviet Union’s opposition to the Israeli state made the recognition of Jewish suffering a delicate matter. A definite anti-Jewish sentiment descended upon the Eastern Bloc after the infamous “Doctors’ Plot” and Slánský show trials. Following these actions against

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35 For a more detailed discussion on the activities and positions of communists and the discourse over Jewish victims, see Herf, Divided Memory.


37 The fabricated “Doctors’ Plot” refers to the show trials of 1952/53, which followed the uncovering of a supposed conspiracy of Moscow doctors, mostly Jewish, who had plotted to murder Soviet leaders. The trials and ensuing anti-Semitic propaganda campaigns led to the purging of Soviet Jews from positions of influence, as well as a wave of similar actions aimed at Jews throughout the Eastern Bloc. The “Slánský Trial,” influenced by the “Doctors’ Plot” trials in the USSR, sentenced a number of Czech communist party
perceived “Zionist” threats, countless Jews and Jewish sympathizers were purged from
communist parties, the bureaucracy, and the military throughout Soviet Eastern Europe.
By the early 1950s, it had become clear that Jewish life in the German Democratic
Republic had been profoundly influenced by these political events.\(^{38}\)

With the supporters of Jewish recognition purged or forced to flee to the West,
streamlining the foundational narrative that glorified the communist resistance and
excluded the suffering of Jews became an easy matter. The Nazi racial barbarity never
entirely developed into a taboo, but a clear hierarchy of victims emerged. Non-political
victims were either remembered only after communist heroes or were lumped together
under the blanket term “victims of Fascism,” or simply ignored.\(^{39}\) Historians who
focused too much attention toward the genocide of the Jews faced criticism from peers
who felt that discussions over Jewish persecution relativized the Nazi terror against
communist functionaries.\(^{40}\) Even suggesting that Nazi aggression had aimed equally
against communists and Jews proved problematic. As one historian lamented, detailed

members, most of whom were Jewish, to death or long prison sentences. During the course of the trial, Paul
Merker and Franz Dahlem were named as contacts, which led to their purge from the SED and arrest for
being “Zionist agents.” Merker would eventually be sentenced to eight years in prison, and only face
exoneration after his death.

\(^{38}\) For more on the GDR and its positions towards Judaism, see Herf, Divided Memory; Robin Ostow,
Jüdisches Leben in der DDR (Frankfurt a.M.: Athenäum, 1988); Siegfried Arndt, ed., Juden in der DDR:
Geschichte—Probleme—Perspektiven (Sachsenheim: Burg Verlag, 1988); Olaf Groehler, Die SED-Politik,
der Antifaschismus und die Juden in der SBZ und der frühen DDR (Berlin: Gesellschaftswissenschaftliches
Forum, 1995); and Mario Keßler, Die SED und die Juden: zwischen Repression und Toleranz: politische
Entwicklung bis 1967 (Berlin: Akademi Verlag, 1995).

\(^{39}\) A complicated classification system of victimhood developed in the GDR. Ultimately, identification
cards differentiated between “Fighter,” “Persecuted,” and “Partially Persecuted.”

\(^{40}\) For instance, historians condemned Albert Schreiner’s contribution to a history volume because it
focused too heavily on Jewish plight. Albert Schreiner, “Disposition für das Hochschullehrbuch der
discussions over the genocide would make it “appear as if the fight against the Jews was worse than it had been against the Communists.”\textsuperscript{41}

In any case, the public contestations over who should be included in the antifascist narrative and in what form is reflected in the work of the VVN and the Ravensbrück Committee. Because of this organizations physical location near the camp, requests for information from all over Europe poured in. Survivors applying for compensation and recognition needed to have their histories verified; the responsible bureaucratic offices in turn wrote the VVN chapters in the Soviet Zone in order to corroborate the claims. All too often the destroyed records made this impossible. Instead, the Ravensbrück Committee, composed predominantly of former communist prisoners, reviewed these requests. They relayed the call for information to their extended network of “political witnesses.” Typically the character of the person in question would be evaluated, before issuing a reply to the requesting party. Thus, if the network remembered and approved of the person, a positive response was issued; if no one could place the individual, or worse if the person in question had not worn the red triangle or been a *Kameradin* (comrade), a negative reply ensued, jeopardizing the right to compensation and pension.

The process whereby a self-selected group of like-minded former political prisoners vetted inquiries of survivors and then conferred or withheld their approval can be illustrated by the case of Ilse Scheder. After having applied for recognition as a victim of Nazi persecution for political reasons in Jena, the city council wrote to the VVN

secretariat in Berlin on January 13, 1949 requesting information about the person, specifically regarding her conduct in the camp and the reason for her arrest. The Ravensbrück Committee of the VVN in turn sent out form letters to several “witnesses,” known political prisoners who constituted a network of authorities that evaluated these petitions. In this particular case, Erika Buchmann—who also led the improvised memorial as interim director before 1959—testified that Scheder had “always worn the red triangle,” the mark of a political prisoner, and that her conduct had been “comradely and very agreeable.” In this case, the circle of survivors composing and managing the rolls of prisoners corroborated the claims, although they were initially viewed with suspicion and skepticism.

Inquiries from outside of the Soviet Occupation Zone typically faced a greater degree of scrutiny. Although the VVN reached across the various sectors and encompassed all of Germany, the members in the Berlin office exhibited a palpable ambivalence when answering correspondence from the West. For instance, in December of 1948, the Office for Politically and Religiously Persecuted in Hof wrote the Ravensbrück Committee requesting information that could confirm the petition of Margarete Schiller, who had submitted an application for recognition and reparations as a victim persecuted for political reasons. The office provided Schiller’s account, which included a list of witnesses, her barracks number, and details of her work assignment in

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43 Letter from Erika Buchmann to the VVN Sekretariat in Berlin dated 9/30/49, SAPMO-BArch DY57/1056, unpag.
*Schneiderei II*, the camp’s second tailor workshop. The Committee sent out the usual information to their network of trusted authorities, none of whom could confirm Schiller’s claims. One respondent, who had worked in the camp’s other tailor building, not only disavowed knowing Schiller, but questioned the entire story because she herself had known “almost everyone” in *Schneiderei I* and that most of the women in the other workshop were “girls” who were imprisoned because of intimate relationships with Polish or Czech prisoners of war. Based on the limited knowledge and assumptions of a prisoner not even in the same workshop, who purported to know “everyone,” the Committee responded to Hof that it could not confirm whether Schiller had worn the red triangle, but that in all likelihood she had not been a political prisoner but rather a criminal. They closed the letter with the invitation for a follow-up, asking Schiller to name “political witnesses,” implying that the individuals she had cited were not adequate or reliable. Several “well-known” prisoners had worked in Schiller’s workshop, the Committee added.

The source material testifies to the fact that for a multitude of inquiries, this was the end result. If the Committee could not recall a single woman among the 130,000 prisoners incarcerated in Ravensbrück during the war, the claimant, from the perspective of the Ravensbrück Committee, did not exist or was not a member of the privileged network of political prisoners, which was tantamount to non-existence. Moreover, as was

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44 Letter from Hof a.d. Saale Betreuungsstelle für politisch und religiös Verfolgte to VVN Abteilung Frauenkommittee Ravensbrück dated 12/03/48, SAPMO-BArch DY57/1056, unpag

45 Letter from Olga Körner to Frauenkommittee Ravensbrück dated 01/25/1949, SAPMO-BArch DY57/1056, unpag

the case in this instance, if the claimant could not name the handful of camp luminaries who in the postwar period composed the prisoner rolls, the experiences and suffering of the survivor were questioned and denied, thereby threatening the claims to material and social recognition.

Margarete Schiller, however, could count herself fortunate, as the authorities in Hof responded vehemently with a sharply-worded letter in which they expressed their “disaffection” toward the Committee’s reply. According to their information, Schiller could never have been a criminal prisoner; she came from an old Social Democrat family, her father had been a union functionary, and in Hof she was a valued member of the community and did not possess a criminal record, before or after the war. Furthermore, they provided detailed records of her arrest and conviction, listed as “communist sympathies and listening to Radio London,” which they regarded as a political act. They closed the letter with exasperation, as in their opinion the long list of witnesses that Schiller had provided seemed comprehensive.\(^{47}\) The Committee responded defensively, back-tracking and denying that they accused Schiller of being a criminal, but rather pointed to the unfortunate reality that the SS had destroyed all records, complicating verification.\(^{48}\) After a long back and forth in which the Hof authorities insisted upon Schiller’s version of events, the Committee finally corroborated the story. The confusion, they imparted to Hof, stemmed from the fact that one of the witnesses that Schiller had mentioned had confused her with someone else, and that Schiller could now be recognized as a known political prisoner whose “political disposition was beyond

\(^{47}\) Letter from Hof a.d. Saale Betreuungsstelle für politisch und religiös Verfolgte to Frauenkomitee Ravensbrück dated 03/03/49, SAPMO-BArch DY57/1056, unpag.

\(^{48}\) Letter from Frauenkomitee Ravensbrück to Hof a.d. Saale Betreuungsstelle für politisch und religiös Verfolgte dated 03/05/49, SAPMO-BArch DY57/1056, unpag.
reproach.”⁴⁹ Had it not been for the admirable and persistent intervention of the Office for Politically and Religiously Persecuted, the selective and presumptuous imaginings of the partisan Ravensbrück Committee would have stood as the historic reality, bringing with it very real and serious consequences for a survivor depending on recognition and material compensation.

The public discourse over who should be regarded as a “proper” victim of Nazi barbarity certainly finds reflection here. However, just as important and plausible, the activities of this small handful of women of the Ravensbrück Committee—who now “controlled” the site and gathered information on it and the prisoner population—laid the groundwork for the future narrative of the camp’s history that the memorial would enshrine. These women had written “their” past and selectively created a history of the resistance movement that the future memorial could easily seize upon. Moreover, the conundrum of the destroyed camp files presented concrete problems to be sure, but also a convenient opportunity; the missing evidence that could have laid bare the scope of Ravensbrück did not exist and therefore could not contradict the imaginings of the survivors recreating the history of the camp. In other words, a reimagining of the camp was made possible, through which the communist gate-keepers could repopulate the barracks with “their” women and take their experiences as the standard for all the women in the camp. This had a profound impact on the contours of East German memory culture, before the 1949 founding of the GDR and the subsequent increased control over such sites as Ravensbrück.

Thus by the late 1940s, when the first organized commemorations began at Ravensbrück, the camp’s narrative was beginning to take form and find expression. Annual ceremonies, usually on the day marking the camp’s liberation, took place at the camp’s wall and the mass grave by the crematorium. These events, centered on a temporary structure such as an obelisk or an eternal flame, were organized by the survivors and involved the VVN and the Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschland (Democratic Women’s League of Germany). The rallies concentrated on the ideals of peace and international understanding between nations. Indeed, these early events were marked less by an overt celebration of socialism and partisanship, and focused more on honoring the “antifascist” victims. These ceremonies also seized the opportunity to impress international delegations, particularly from West Germany. Presenting this newer, better Germany that had emerged in the post-Nazi period was a very particular concern for the survivors in the Soviet Zone. Emmy Handke for instance, in a conference of the Ravensbrück Committee in 1949, stated that recent celebrations had left a favorable impression on the “foreign comrades,” who saw that “in the eastern zone and in Berlin a new Germany” had arisen. In other words, the early forms of commemoration, organized in a grass-roots sort of way by survivors living in the Soviet Occupation Zone, lacked a direct guidance from the SED but nevertheless sought to legitimize the GDR as a new, peaceful Germany and the legacy of those antifascists who had suffered at Ravensbrück.

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50 For a more detailed discussion on the forms and functions of the celebrations before the establishment of the Ravensbrück Memorial in 1959, see Insa Eschenbach, “Jahrestage”, 72-74.

51 MGR/SBG RAI/3-2 I, unpag.
These early commemorations, although organized by ardent communists invested in the fledgling GDR, by their very nature fell outside of the control of the regime, a development that proved problematic and intolerable from the perspective of the SED. Beginning in the 1950s, therefore, Ravensbrück underwent a process of increased politicization. For instance, in 1951 the Ravensbrück Committee proposed placing the names of 16 nations on the camp’s wall.\textsuperscript{52} The countries that had lost citizens at Ravensbrück numbered more than 40, but those listed by the mass grave on the “Wall of Nations” reflected the foreign policy of the GDR and the Cold War.\textsuperscript{53} Germany was included, thereby raising it into the community of nations who had been the victims of the Third Reich, and implicitly rehabilitating the word “Deutschland.” Furthermore, whereas before the deceased had often been remembered as “victims of the Nazi regime” or “persecuted,” an inscription raised those lying in the mass grave to a new status. Henceforth, they had struggled “for the liberation of their home from the fascist yoke.”\textsuperscript{54}

In other words, the control over the site and its message gradually shifted from the survivors to party functionaries, who increasingly formulated the message of Ravensbrück to suit the SED’s demands.

One primary way in which the regime achieved the streamlining of the political messages at Ravensbrück was through a tightened control over organizations such as the

\textsuperscript{52} Surprisingly, the 16 nations included remain unclear. Photographs from the time period, however, indicate that the “Wall of Nations” at least included the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Yugoslavia, Italy, Romania, and Denmark.

\textsuperscript{53} This is made all the more clear when in June of 1959, in conjunction with the preparations for the opening of the National Memorial Ravensbrück in September of that year, Erika Buchmann, the acting director and former prisoner of Ravensbrück, wrote to the Committee of Antifascist Resistance Fighters. She proposed expanding the list to 23 nations, including the United States, and requested a formal reply detailing which of the nations could and could not be displayed on the camp wall. MGR/SBG RAI/4-3 II, unpag.

\textsuperscript{54} Cited in Eschenbach, “Zur Formensprache der Totenehrung,” 19.
DFD and the VVN. This allowed for increased influence over the site itself, thereby subordinating Ravensbrück to the party. The DFD had been transformed by the regime into a “mass organization” of the GDR, bringing it under strict control of the state. The SED attempted to channel the efforts of the VVN as well. Initially, the VVN’s publishing house had focused on the resistance; beginning in 1951, its tasks were widened to include neo-fascism and remilitarization in the West, thereby instrumentalizing and encouraging political support for the SED. Moreover, the purges of the 1950s had attempted to eliminate rogue elements that refused to represent and instrumentalize a memory of fascism as defined by the SED.

Ultimately, the Central Committee of the SED dissolved the VVN in February of 1953, under the excuse that the organization had failed to write any meaningful texts on the illegal opposition to the Nazi regime or on individual heroes of the resistance. The Central Committee of the VVN itself announced that it was acknowledging the decision of the Politbüro, as the roots of fascism had been destroyed within the GDR anyways, and that the building of a socialist society had opened a new chapter in German history. The functions of the VVN were taken over by party and state organs, and the organization itself was replaced by the Committee of Antifascist Resistance Fighters (KdAW), founded on the same day of the disintegration of its predecessor.

This decision in 1953 proved profound for Ravensbrück. Since 1948 the VVN had developed plans for memorials at several former concentration camps and sites of persecution, including Ravensbrück. The State Commission for Cultural Affairs—a


56 Speech by Fritz Dahlem on February 21, 1953, SAPMO-BArch, DY 57/24/9, unpag.
forerunner of the Ministry for Culture—had voiced their support for these developments.\textsuperscript{57} The VVN’s disbandment could very well have been a result of the Politburo’s growing hostility to an organization with ties abroad and an altogether independent mindset, as exhibited on the discourse over Jewish restitution. The purges in the wake of the Slánský affair concentrated in particular on former board members and powerful figures of the VVN, especially those who had supported Jewish claims. This hostility toward the organization suggests that the regime refused to tolerate an entity that they could not fully control and that threatened to depart from official guidelines. The KdAW, often headed by Politburo members or other powerful apparatchiks, brought the survivors and the memorials under closer supervision. In other words, the SED had removed unreliable voices and replaced them with individuals who represented the antifascism as endorsed by the party.\textsuperscript{58} It also paved the way for turning the concentration camps of the GDR into presentation sites of the politics of this particular brand of antifascism.

With the creation of the KdAW in 1953, the VVN’s memorial designs fell to the regime. The State Commission for Cultural Affairs took over the planning, and was even urged by the KdAW to intensify the process by seeking funding for the construction of memorials in Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, and Ravensbrück.\textsuperscript{59} On November 6, 1954, a committee comprised of members of the KdAW, the Museum for German History in Berlin, and the State Commission for Cultural Affairs met under the direction of Otto

\textsuperscript{57} Arbeitsprotokoll über die Sitzung des Sekretariats des ZK der SED am 28.4.1950, SAPMO-BArch DY 30/JIV/2/3A/87, 586.

\textsuperscript{58} See Annette Leo, “Antifaschismus und Kalter Krieg,” in \textit{Mythos Antifaschismus: Ein Traditionskabinett wird kommentiert}, ed. Thomas Flierl, et al. (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 1992), 149.

\textsuperscript{59} Letter October 10, 1953, SAPMO-Barch DR1/7520, unpag.
Grotewohl in order to discuss the design of memorials at these sites and Hohnstein, a
castle in Saxony in which the SS had erected a concentration camp in 1933. Ravensbrück,
the committee concluded, should encompass the crematorium, the prison block or
_Zellenbau_, and the nearby lake, on which a terrace with a memorial would be erected.
The site should also feature a museum.\(^{60}\) Less than a month later, the Secretariat of the
Central Committee of the SED passed a resolution approving of these plans, thus
bringing them under central control further. The Central Committee tasked the State
Commission for Cultural Affairs with developing the final plans for the National
Memorials.\(^{61}\)

The State Commission for Cultural Affairs, renamed the Ministry for Culture in
January of 1955, commissioned a group of artists known as the “Buchenwald Collective”
to draft plans for what was to become the GDR’s _Nationale Mahn- und Gedenkstätten_, or
National Memorials. However, the memorial at Ravensbrück carried with it a logistical
challenge. The Soviet army, which occupied and utilized the former camp, presented a
significant concern, as it drastically reduced the amount of useable space. Ravensbrück
was thus the smallest of the East German national memorials. This meant that the camp
museum and national commemoration rooms of individual countries were confined to the
former prison building, located behind the four-meter-high camp wall. Besides this
concession from the Soviet military, the rest of the memorial remained outside of the
formal camp. This included the mass grave along the “Wall of Nations,” the
crematorium, and a platform built on the Schwedtsee Lake, the site where the SS

\(^{60}\) SAPMO-BArch DR1/7520, unpag.

\(^{61}\) SAPMO-BArch DY30/JIV/2/3, Nr. 409, 2. For more on the development of the national memorials, see
disposed of the ashes of the cremated. This represented the entirety of the memorial for the next 25 years.

The planners recognized that the museum played a vital role in the formation of socialist consciousness. It therefore overtly projected an antifascism as endorsed by the SED. Generally, the exhibit portrayed the struggle of the German working class and its democratic allies under leadership of the communists against the Nazi regime. The historical narrative also exalted the Soviet Union’s role in Europe’s liberation from fascism. The visitor likewise encountered the allegation that fascism and militarism continued to exist in West Germany, and indeed was on the rise. Only the GDR had broken with the past and properly fulfilled the legacy of the antifascists who had opposed Hitler. Therefore, the GDR was the true Germany and played an important historical role.62

The ideological content of the memorial thus mirrored the antifascism of the regime. This also applied to the opening ceremony, which took on the character of an international demonstration. The committee planning the event, under the direction of Otto Grotewohl, sought to avoid a “particularly commemorative or somber character.” The speakers further emphasized that the legacy of the antifascist resistance remained unfulfilled in West Germany, but that in the GDR this had been accomplished upon the moment of liberation.63 In other words, the ceremony provided an opportunity to identify and disparage the “other” Germany. Looking toward the ten-year anniversary of the

62 The 1961 “Statute for the National Memorials” codified these hallmarks and set the guidelines for the ideological content of the museums of Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, and Ravensbrück. For more see Hasko Zimmer, Der Buchenwald-Konflikt: zum Streit um Geschichte und Erinnerung im Kontext der deutschen Vereinigung (Münster: Agenda, 1999), 76-77.

63 Cited in Eschenbach, “Jahrestage,” 75-76.
GDR, the contrast between the two states took center stage. The inaugural address by Rosa Thälmann—a former Ravensbrück prisoner and widow of Ernst Thälmann, the former head of the Communist Party of Germany who was murdered in Buchenwald—exhorted the 70,000 attendees to see “these best patriots” and heroines as role models in the East German struggle for peace. The “ruling circles in West Germany, she warned, threatened to turn Europe once again into a “center of unrest and war.” The alternative to this lay in the “East of Germany, where the legacy of the dead of Ravensbrück and the great ideas of the antifascist fight for freedom has become a reality.” Thälmann expounded that this made the GDR the “fatherland of all Germans.”

With the opening ceremony, Thälmann and the memorial outlined the dominant tropes that would form the narrative and shape the political messages of Ravensbrück until 1990. A decade of diverse antifascist voices and competing narratives had contested the SED’s historical interpretation and complicated the instrumentalization of this ideology. Slowly, through purging and streamlining, the regime grasped control of its memorials and the discourse over the memory of the Third Reich.

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64 Ibid, 87.
Chapter 3

Who is Remembered? Contours of Ravensbrück’s Commemoration Politics 1959-1984

Through party organizations, the SED had fashioned Ravensbrück’s master narrative in the 1950s. The antifascist trope that the regime instrumentalized for its own political purposes pervaded the museum and memorial. This antifascism from the top down proved problematic, as it created “blind spots” that relegated the suffering of individual prisoners or groups of inmates to the margins. Ravensbrück also exhibited this development, but the rigid antifascist framework of this memorial took on a unique dimension. Because this had been a former women’s camp, the political messages of the museum and memorial took on a distinct form.

From the very outset, the issue of gender presented a challenge for the planners of the memorial. Sculpturally, the typical “socialist realism” as utilized in Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen seemed unfitting for the commemoration of women. At the male camps, the sculptures depicted prisoners at the moment of liberation, presented as the long awaited triumph over fascism (see Figure 3). This glorification often ignored the stark reality of emaciated bodies that the Soviet or American armies encountered, as well as the deplorable humanitarian conditions and the continued struggle for life even after the arrival of Allied forces. Socialist realism propagated an imaginary and teleological scene...
in which the antifascist resisters had foiled the Third Reich’s plans, thereby bolstering the ruling regime’s legitimacy and claims to the antifascist legacy as a consensus for rule.\textsuperscript{65}

The sex of Ravensbrück’s prisoners prevented such glorious scenes. For the designers, this women’s camp required a different approach. Highly regarded artists such as Will Lammert and Fritz Cremer, who also designed the sculptures of the other national memorials, envisioned a more delicate image. This highly gendered portrayal of weak and emaciated figures implied that women could not partake in the male experience of a triumphant liberation, or at least that their experience fundamentally differed from their male compatriots. Ironically, the female sculptures more accurately reflect the conditions within the camps in the spring of 1945. Nevertheless, they evoke a distinctively poignant and emotional tone that contrasts sharply with the masculine images at Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald. The latter signify action, dynamism, and the accomplishment of a feat, whereas the women of Ravensbrück conjure feelings of sympathy and a quiet, solemn pride. In part this reflects the belief that the barbarity of the Third Reich toward women and children constituted a greater savagery than that directed towards men.\textsuperscript{66} Violence directed against these prisoners was distinctive and therefore demanded an appropriately unique expression.


\textsuperscript{66} As a 1981 draft of the design for the new museum makes clear, the “sadism, disregard for humanity, and the systematic murder” directed toward women and children and the brutality of fascism was “especially expressed” at Ravensbrück. MGR/SBG RAI 3-5 K XXIII, 148.
Potentially, the ideology of East German antifascism encompassed all likeminded individuals. But given the rhetoric of struggle, fighting, and resisting, the state-propagated version of antifascism inherently was couched in masculine ideas. Moreover, the myth of the “self-liberation,” the exaggerated tale of the prisoners of Buchenwald overthrowing the SS guards before the arrival of American forces, provided a much more compelling and forceful image that matched the antifascist narrative more conveniently. In other words, fighting and heroic men served the regime and the self-representation of the GDR better than the women and events at Ravensbrück.

In addition to frailty and suffering, the artists relied on the motif of motherhood as resistance. At the entrance of the camp grounds stands a sculpture created by Fritz Cremer in 1959 and inaugurated in 1965 on the 20th anniversary of the camp’s liberation. The Müttergruppe or group of mothers (Figure 4) commemorates the children and women who were imprisoned at Ravensbrück. Cremer also intended, however, to pay homage to the care and protection the women offered the young, often at great peril to themselves. In postwar histories, this act symbolized the primary way in which the female prisoners opposed their SS guards. This gendered form of resistance and its representation point to a specifically feminine form of opposition, which again differed from the images of male struggle. The mothers, carrying a dead or dying child on a stretcher, exhibit deep emotion yet also dignity and hope, reflecting the optimistic dawn of a new socialist era.

67 The exaggerated representation of the communist uprising at Buchenwald constituted a central aspect to the GDR’s mythological rendering of the past. Many of the key political functionaries had in fact been imprisoned here.

Another sculpture that picks up on the theme of a distinct female experience is Will Lammert’s 1957 design, *Die Tragende* (Figure 5). This statue was designed as the topographical focal point of commemoration ceremonies and the symbol of the Ravensbrück memorial. The figure stands on an obelisk and overlooks the Schwedtsee Lake, where the SS discarded the ashes of the deceased from the nearby crematorium. The work projects solemnity, invoking the Christian image of the *Pietà* and a message of triumph over death and thus freedom. It also refers to the solidarity between the women within the camp. Originally, Lammert’s design called for a sculpture at the base of the obelisk depicting gaunt and shaved women and children (see Figure D). These figurines, though unused, would have further invoked the motherhood motif.

This gender-specific antifascist message differed from the male version not only visually, but in its content and rhetoric as well. The earliest commemorations organized in the 1940s addressed specifically a female audience, as seen by the language that accompanied these rallies. Photographs from this early period show banners and placards with slogans aimed at mothers in particular: “We mothers are raising our children to be friends of peace”; “Mother, think of your child—fight for peace!”; “Mothers, secure the future of your children”; or “With the mothers of all peoples for peace,” comprised the maxims of 1948-1959.

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68 For decades, photo albums, postcards, emblems, commemorative pamphlets, books, porcelain, posters, coins, and other various items used the iconic image.

69 Lammert sculpted the 13 other figures for the opening of the memorial but put them into storage when they were not used (See Figure 6). In 1985, Lammert’s son designed a memorial in the Grosse Hamburger Strasse to Berlin’s Jewish victims who perished in the Holocaust, using his father’s figurines. This memorial, incidentally, was the first memorial to Jews in East Berlin.

An inscription of Anna Seghers, standing at the camp gate, also evokes the virtue of motherhood: “They are all our mothers and sisters. You could today neither learn freely, nor play, yes perhaps you would not even have been born, had such women not placed their soft, slight bodies like iron shield between you and your future during the entire time of fascist terror.” These words evoke a female heroism and fabricate a reality of camp life that exalts the women of Ravensbrück. The natural desire to honor these individuals took the form of an idealization of women that romanticized their suffering and proposed an ideal type of female behavior. The prisoners were elevated into the position of role models, to whom the successor generations were indebted in a very specific way.

Overall, Ravensbrück’s messages created evocative images that captured the audience’s imagination in a distinctive manner, concentrating on the feminine form of the prisoners’ resistance. But like their masculine counterparts, these female figures served as orientation points for GDR society. The SED explicitly called upon the viewer to emulate the heroic prisoners’ political convictions and honor their sacrifice by creating a socialist Germany. The women of Ravensbrück could inspire all, but these heroines provided a political and moral compass particularly for East German women. Nevertheless, the memorial’s antifascist narrative did not always find a receptive audience. Particularly former prisoners of Ravensbrück contested the regime’s vision.

Some survivors who bought into the antifascist narrative rejected the aesthetic choices of the artists because they did not sufficiently illustrate the resistance of the political prisoners. For instance, members of the Ravensbrück Committee wrote Otto Grotewohl in November 1957 to complain that Die Tragende “exclusively expressed the
idea of solidarity, but not the struggle that the women engaged in within the camp.” In other words, they rejected the gender-based differences among the sculptures of the national memorials. The Committee demanded that the museum rectify this issue, where opposition should come to the forefront.\textsuperscript{71}

Other survivors felt alienated by the discussion of resistance and opposition. Even within the highly political Ravensbrück Committee, critical voices questioned the official history. Protocols reveal that some former prisoners took issue with what they characterized as exaggerated accounts of the resistance in Ravensbrück. They refuted, for instance, that the communist organization had prevented executions carried out by the SS; only in a few individual instances had this been possible. Moreover, these critics denied the existence of an “organization” as such in the camp. In reality, a loose yet understood cooperation dictated daily life in Ravensbrück.\textsuperscript{72} In addition, many women denied that they had offered resistance; commonly, survivors claimed that the men had struggled, while the women had merely relied on solidarity and the prisoner community.\textsuperscript{73}

Some critics, however, went further in their deviation from the memorial’s narrative, describing an existence that starkly contradicted tales of heroism and solidarity. Margarete Buber-Neumann, for instance, dismissed the notion that suffering could

\textsuperscript{71} MGR/SBG RAI/4-3 XI, unpag. For more on the sculptures of Ravensbrück, see Kathrin Hoffman-Curtius, “Caritas und Kampf: Die Mahnmale in Ravensbrück,” in \textit{Die Sprache des Gedenkens}, 55-68.

\textsuperscript{72} SAPMO-BArch DR1/7525, 102-103

\textsuperscript{73} Atina Grossmann encountered this gender-specific antifascist rhetoric as late as 1978. Visiting with survivors at Ravensbrück, she was struck by their own assessment that they had not been like the men of Buchenwald. Moreover, she found remarkably little discussion of the struggle as portrayed in the museum. Instead, most of the former inmates recalled the secretly organized 1944 Christmas celebration as the major act of solidarity in the camp. For more see Atina Grossmann, “Zwei Erfahrungen im Kontext des Themas ‘Gender und Holocaust,’” in \textit{Forschungsschwerpunkt Ravensbrück}, ed. Jacobeit (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1997), 136-146.
somehow beatify individuals. Life in the concentration camp had proven the exact opposite. Moreover, she affirmed that the conditions of the camp and the utter loss of dignity made any resistance impossible. “Full of envy and resentment one looked upon the other,” and fights broke out over just a little more nourishment.\(^{74}\) Hildegard Hansche spoke of the “law of the wolf” which dictated daily routines; prisoners did anything possible, even at the expense of fellow inmates, in order to survive.\(^{75}\) Committed communists and members of the celebrated and fabled antifascist resistance did not fully endorse the narrative, and stated this quite openly.

Beyond the ideological content, some women expressed discontent over the management of the site. Despite notions of parity with their male colleagues, a definite “separate but equal” tone permeated Ravensbrück. Portraits of leading statesmen, and not women, as the symbol of all antifascists greeted visitors in the entrance hall of the museum.\(^{76}\) The memorial received less funding, ostensibly because of the smaller dimensions of the site in comparison to the male camps. This limited financial support meant that research and pedagogical activities were not as developed as in Buchenwald or Sachsenhausen.\(^{77}\) Female staffers and historians continually felt that Ravensbrück received secondary attention from the state and the general public because it was a


\(^{76}\) These were to remain in place until 1990. Sigrid Jacobeit, interview by author, Berlin, Germany, July 3, 2012.

\(^{77}\) Not until 1975 was a “Pedagogical Department” instituted at Ravensbrück, followed by a dedicated “Research Department” in 1981. The site thus struggled to attract and retain trained professional historians. Because of its diminished stature, Ravensbrück was seen as a “back-water” and not a desirable place to work. Sigrid Jacobeit, interview by author, Berlin, Germany, July 3, 2012.
women’s camp. The fact that no major political functionary from the Central Committee of the SED ever spoke at any of the ceremonies was seen by many of the former prisoners and female staff as a sign that the memorial’s importance ranked behind that of the other national memorials. When middling representatives did attend and gave a speech, it was always a man, a fact that irritated many of the women in attendance.

Male functionaries predominantly directed and influenced the site, causing dissatisfaction among survivors. As early as January 1959, members of the Ravensbrück Committee voiced their opposition to the regime’s interference in appointing a director for the memorial. The Committee wanted someone from within their own ranks, stating that “when filling the position of director in Ravensbrück, women who were there should be given preference.” Ultimately, the SED backed the “outsider” Hildegard Guddorf of the VVN as the replacement for the acting director Erika Buchmann.

Despite the criticisms from survivors regarding the museum’s content and the management of the memorial, the regime insisted on creating Ravensbrück in its specific image. The site therefore upheld a glorified yet gendered narrative of resistance that vaguely and problematically incorporated women. The exhibit ambiguously celebrated the thousands who “participated in the production and distribution of materials against

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78 This can be measured by the fact that only two publications on Ravensbrück appeared in multiple editions. See Charlotte Müller, Die Klemmerkolonne in Ravensbrück, Erinnerungen des Häftlings Nr. 10787 (Frankfurt a.M.: Röderberg-Verlag, 1981) and Erika Buchmann, Die Frauen von Ravensbrück (Berlin: Kongreß Verlag, 1959).

79 Sigrid Jacobite, for instance, reported that her first trip to Ravensbrück was in conjunction with the 40th anniversary of the camp’s liberation. At this rally, Ministry for Culture Kurt Hager addressed the crowd. She felt that it was an outrage that a man, and not a woman, would give the opening address at a women’s concentration camp. Sigrid Jacobite, Interview by author. Berlin, Germany, July 3, 2012.

80 SAPMO-BArch DR1/7525, 101.

81 The documentary evidence does not illuminate the background to this decision or the reaction. Buchmann was a Ravensbrück survivor, while Guddorf had spent the war in exile in Moscow, and was therefore presumably closely tied to the party.
Hitler and the war.” These individuals “stood in the ranks of those who saved the honor of the German working class and the nation,” and were “equal partners of their male class comrades on all fronts of the class struggle.” The women of Ravensbrück, in other words, equally experienced suffering and shared in the glory of their male comrades.

But despite this assertion, the generic mantle of “resistance” said little about the actual experiences of the vast majority of the prisoners. Any concrete examples that illustrated opposition inherently emphasized “feminine” traits. For instance, women practiced resistance when they “supported the families of those imprisoned and much more.” “More” encompassed motherly functions such as “adopting motherless children, obtaining clothing and nourishment, playing with children, and organizing celebrations for them.” Political education constituted an important part of female resistance, thereby laying the groundwork for the future after the Third Reich. In other words, the discussions over what type of resistance these women were organizing revolved around their ability to fulfill motherly roles and carry out gender-specific behavior, such as providing a source of comfort, support, or solidarity. As the memorial made clear, “the mother-child problem played a dominant role for these prisoners.”

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82 SAPMO-BArch DR1/7526, 118.
83 MGR/SBG RAI 3-5 K XXVIII, 144. This emphasis on equality, a report from the Ravensbrück memorial noted in 1985, was often positively interpreted by West German visitors, who “on their own point out that for example the demands of working women—already raised by the KPD in the Weimar Republic—today have still not yet been realized in their own country.” MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K XXVII, 145.
84 SAPMO-BArch DR1/7526, 118.
85 MGR/SBG RAI 3-5 K XXVIII, 182.
86 SAPMO-BArch DR1/7178, 88. This trope remained constant for most of the memorial’s existence. Maternalism, Grossmann found, lay at the core of any discussion over prisoner social bonds even in the late 1970s. Moreover, she concluded, these memories complimented the GDR’s exaltation of motherhood as the guarantee of freedom and progress. Atina Grossmann, “Zwei Erfahrungen,” 139.
The gendered division of labor within the resistance itself partly explains the differing accounts of communist resistance between men and women. Generally, males carried out the more “traditional” actions associated with active resistance, while women filled other roles such as harboring fugitives, distributing leaflets, acting as couriers, or simply offering emotional support to their male comrades. That these acts were considered part of opposition yet still not on the same level as what men had accomplished under the Nazi dictatorship finds reflection in the fact that the GDR recognized men disproportionately as Kämpfer or “fighters.”

In other words, women had been “separate but equal” members of the communist struggle.

In either case, the embellished and problematic account of the political women of the camp excluded a great majority of women in the commemoration at Ravensbrück. For instance, the hostility toward the “criminal” and “asocial” prisoners led to their marginalization. The portrayal of the political prisoners as mythic and superhuman figures allowed no room for those with questionable backgrounds who threatened to undermine the moral ascendancy and legitimacy of communist party members. The regime showed an extreme reluctance to commemorate criminals, prostitutes, malingerers, alcoholics, and any number of women imprisoned for their inability or refusal to conform to the social norms that remained partly in effect even in the GDR; the Third Reich and East Germany shared some of the same aversions toward “undesirable” social groups.

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87 In 1986, an overview over the number of “recognized fighters against fascism and persecuted of the Nazi regime and their dependents” demonstrates this trend. Of 12,219 persecuted total, 5,306 were men and 6,912 were women. Within this total, the GDR recognized 3,312 men as “fighters,” but only 931 women. In other words, women fell into the passive category of “persecuted” and outnumbered men here nearly 2:1. SAPMO-BArch DY57/946, unpag.
This is especially true for one distinctive category of prisoners at Ravensbrück. Women imprisoned for prostitution and those victims forced into the “camp bordellos” of male camps remained an absolute taboo. Social stigma in part explains this; many women who suffered rape at the hands of occupation soldiers refused to report the crime out of shame. Similarly, upon liberation many may have remained silent.

But politics also played a role. Just as rape by Soviet soldiers went unmentioned because of political reasons, this chapter of concentration camp history proved a political liability. The SS built the “bordellos” to promote compliance among male prisoners, who were occasionally “rewarded” with a trip to these special barracks. This incentive particularly privileged high-ranking inmates such as Kapos or barrack elders. Senior prisoners who had been among the first imprisoned by the Nazi regime generally held these functionary positions. As such, many were political prisoners. The SED refused to acknowledge this reality that implicated the “antifascist resistance heroes,” particularly since many party functionaries had themselves experienced imprisonment in concentration camps. Female survivors, as well, relativized the aspect of forced prostitution, often concluding that most of the women who were forced into the “bordellos” had been prostitutes anyway. The suffering of sexual violence by as many as

88 This, incidentally, was also a little discussed topic in West Germany.

89 The privileged role of Funktionshäftlinge or “prisoner functionaries” in general was a difficult topic in the GDR. Certainly, such a position could facilitate opportunities for survival and were key to the success of an organization within the camp. However, it also could mean the abuse of power and inherently demanded cooperation with the SS. This “gray zone” meant that in order to succeed in their own survival or in protection of their group, Funktionshäftlinge many times needed to resort to brutal or discriminatory behavior to other prisoner groups.
35,000 women, most of whom were “recruited” in Ravensbrück, went unmentioned until well into the 1990s.90

The blind spots of the memorial toward non-communist political prisoners further illustrate the hallmarks of the antifascism enshrined at Ravensbrück. While inmates belonging to the SPD were marginally recognized, the suffering of those deemed to have been members of “bourgeois” resistance went largely unnoticed. This included those arrested in the wake of the July 20 attempt on Hitler’s life or members of the “Solf Circle.” The museum gave no indication that the SS had incarcerated members of these conspiracies in the camp’s prison building as “special prisoners” while awaiting trial. Thus individuals such as Hanna Solf, Elisabeth von Thadden, Julius Leber, Adolf Reichwein, Ulrich von Hassell, Friedrich Werner von der Schulenburg, Peter Yorck von Wartenburg, Helmuth James Graf von Moltke, and Nina Schenk Gräfin von Stauffenberg remained unknown to visitors of the site.

Commemorating individuals with staunchly bourgeois, aristocratic, militarist, and nationalist-conservative backgrounds proved incompatible with an antifascism that regularly decried these traits. Moreover, non-leftist resistance presented a tremendous challenge to the GDR’s heroic and glorified portrayal of the struggle against fascism; acknowledging that the most successful attempt on Hitler’s life had emanated from somewhere other than the working class undermined the monopoly over resistance that antifascism claimed, thus undermining the GDR’s legitimacy. Lastly, West Germany’s

celebration of many of these conspirators added yet another dimension that explained the silence.\textsuperscript{91}

Indeed, political reasons often prevented many women’s stories from finding a broad audience, as they challenged or contradicted official policy in the GDR. This affected Jehovah’s Witnesses in particular. About 10,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses were imprisoned in the Third Reich because their religious convictions brought them into conflict with the regime. Behavior such as refusing to swear oaths or give the “Hitler greeting,” as well as refusing military service, led to the persecution of this group. Although after 1945 the authorities recognized Witnesses as “Victims of Fascism,” the political neutrality and lack of support for communism was regarded as hostile to the state.\textsuperscript{92} This had the result that this religious group went entirely without mention in Ravensbrück until after the fall of the GDR.

Perhaps the most intriguing silence at the memorial, however, concerned the camp’s racial victims, particularly Jews. That this presented a problematic topic of discussion should hardly surprise, given the divisive rhetoric toward competing victim group in the early 1950s. How the memorial accomplished this, however, illuminates the idiosyncrasy and selectivity of the East German antifascist narrative. This is illustrated by a 1960 set of instructions to tour guides at Ravensbrück, providing tips and

\textsuperscript{91} Andreas Dorpalen argues that West Germany’s eventual fixation on the July 20 conspirators and dismissal of the communist resistance encouraged East German historians to inversely focus on the communist resistance and ignore bourgeois opposition. See Andreas Dorpalen, \textit{German History in Marxist Perspective: The East German Approach} (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 419.

\textsuperscript{92} Jehovah’s Witnesses faced continued persecution in the GDR and were closely monitored by the Stasi, until finally obtaining legal recognition in March of 1990. For more, see Gerhard Besier and Clemens Vollnhals, eds., \textit{Repression und Selbstbehauptung: Die Zeugen Jehovas unter der NS- und der SED-Diktatur} (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2003).
suggestions on how to increase the effectiveness of the experience.\textsuperscript{93} In this rendition, communists planned “resistance” (underlined in document) against the SS and “foiled” their measures, orchestrated sabotage, and fought for the lives of their comrades. The peculiarity of the document, however, stems from the instructions to explicitly describe Nazi barbarity and murder. Paradoxically, the detailed references to Nazi genocide entirely failed to mention Jews.\textsuperscript{94}

Visitors consequently learned how the SS “exterminated tens of thousands of Ravensbrück women and children,” and that the SS murdered 42,000 individuals in the camp’s gas chamber.\textsuperscript{95} Tour guides were encouraged to discuss the killing process in Ravensbrück and in Bernburg through Operation 14f13, as well as the deportations to Auschwitz, Chelmo, and Majdanek. Yet the instructions completely omitted that the SS murdered predominantly Jews at these facilities. Again, when Auschwitz-Birkenau closed and the SS transferred the killing process to Ravensbrück, the racial policies of the Nazis failed to come up. Thus, the museum accomplished a portrayal of the Holocaust without Jews. Moreover, the antifascist narrative had appropriated aspects of the genocide and experience in the extermination camps for itself. In other words, the museum seized upon Nazi barbarism by suggesting that it had been directed against “antifascist resisters,” without qualifying against who this violence was actually aimed.

\textsuperscript{93} SAPMO-BArch DR1/7525, 113-124. The document does not provide an author’s name or an originating office, but written in pencil at the top of the report is the name of Miethe. Based on other documents, I have been able to ascertain that she worked in the Ministry for Culture and frequently was involved in matters concerning Ravensbrück.

\textsuperscript{94} SAPMO-BArch DR1/7525 115, 122.

\textsuperscript{95} SAPMO-BArch DR1/7525, 115-116. As pointed out earlier, it is estimated that less than 30,000 women died in Ravensbrück. Where this figure of 42,000 comes from is unclear.
The 1959 Ravensbrück memorial thus further demonstrates the unspoken but implied characteristics of the SED’s “objective” antifascism. First of all, antifascism belonged exclusively to the left, particularly the communist movement. They monopolized victimhood and claims to moral legitimacy which suffering under the Third Reich had ostensibly brought. In addition, antifascism was temporal in the sense that it could include or reject incompatible elements based on the GDR’s policies and politics at the time. Lastly, the decreed antifascism as enshrined in the national memorials was morally impeccable and beyond reproach. Any challenges to this notion were completely expunged from the historical narrative.

These contours of the Ravensbrück memorial, shaped largely by the SED’s policies, characterized the site from 1959 onward. When the Soviet military vacated the camp’s administrative building in 1977, the increased exhibit space prompted a renovation of the old museum. Confined to the lower level of the prison building, the Ministry for Culture with approval of the SED made plans to relocate the museum and redesign the content of the exhibit. The regime entrusted this process to a committee composed of Ravensbrück staff, historians of Berlin University, KdAW representatives, and a handful of other party functionaries.

Despite ambitions for an updated museum, the planners ultimately replicated the hallmarks of the old exhibit. The familiar focus on the communist resistance, the role of women in this opposition, socialist solidarity, and the role of the Soviet Union in “freeing the peoples from fascism” defined the proposal. Once again critical voices raised their

96 The upper level of the prison block, containing the individual national commemoration rooms, remained in place and were not included in the relocation.

97 SAPMO-BArch DR1/7179, 246.
concerns and in particular questioned the continued marginalization of other prisoner groups.

For instance, in October 1981 the KdAW reviewed the committee’s proposed script and drafted a response that lambasted the lack of differentiation. The KdAW felt that the authors of the script had “approached the design from an incorrect point of departure” by focusing on the history of the Communist Party of Germany. The current design, the KdAW admonished, could not be approved without substantial revisions. The report emphasized that the history of a women’s concentration camp needed to remain the central point. While this nevertheless should be framed by the exposure of fascist criminality and the antifascist resistance led by communists, the “struggle” of social democrats, Christians, and “other antifascists” needed to be included. The KdAW therefore recommended that the new museum include an area where “all victims could be honored, including Jews, and gypsies.”

This rejection from the standard bearer of antifascism went unheeded, but did not entirely disappear. On March 11, 1983, multiple experts and party functionaries met in order to present the final draft of the museum to the representatives of the local and regional SED offices, as well as members of the Ministry for Culture and the KdAW. One of the lead authors of the renovation, Dr. Laurenz Demps of the Berlin University, began the meeting by bemoaning the difficulty that Ravensbrück presented, as the camp had not been freed through a revolt of the prisoners like at Buchenwald, thereby limiting

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98 MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K XXIII, 169. This idea had already been outlined in a conversation between Klaus Martin of the KdAW and Deputy Minister for Culture Siegfried Wagner in March of 1981. Wagner had at that time voiced his support for a greater commemoration of racial victims, agreeing with Martin that continued negative refusals to do so would lead to “unforeseen foreign relation problems.” MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K XXXXIV, 70.
the source material. Because the episode of liberation was integral to the presentation of the camp’s history, Demps suggested bringing the Soviet liberation to the forefront. In addition, he added, the detailed treatment of “every political fact” surrounding Ravensbrück’s history could only succeed by bringing in materials from the other concentration camps in order to fully illustrate the nature of fascism and the antifascist resistance. In other words, the liberation of Ravensbrück’s women lacked the drama of Buchenwald, which provided a more compelling historical drama. Furthermore, this women’s camp lacked the source material to support the antifascist account, thereby requiring the introduction of the male camps in order to buttress the narrative.

The KdAW’s criticism reemerged, this time from party functionaries. Dr. Berger of the Potsdam District Council intervened, saying that it was important to impart to youths who visited Ravensbrück that not just “well-known resistance fighters” were incarcerated here, but ordinary women who may have simply given bread to a POW. He made the case that the Nazi persecution of ordinary people should be emphasized, as well as the social support amongst the prisoners. He was supported in his statements by Dr. Krabiel, the First Secretary of the SED District Office Gransee. He rhetorically asked “against whom the fascist brutality aimed anyways.” He conceded that it targeted “first and foremost” politicals, but that the SS directed this also against “Jews, Gypsies, the religious, so-called sub-humans like Poles and Ukrainians.” Furthermore, Krabiel

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99 The exaggerated representation of the communist uprising at Buchenwald constituted a central aspect to the GDR’s mythological rendering of the past. Many of the key political functionaries had in fact been imprisoned here.

100 MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K XXVIII, 32.

101 MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K XXVIII, 32.
emphasized, Nazi barbarity was also directed against German women who committed *Rassenschande*¹⁰² and “criminals.”¹⁰³

Dr. Demps dismissed these interjections by pointing out the difficulty of delving into such subjects in great detail. It would be too “complicated” to portray “the complex fates of 132,000 individuals in such a manner that every remaining former prisoner could have the opportunity to recognize themselves.” He rejected the calls for greater focus on the daily life of the prisoners, as the “social aspect was the preservation of life against the destructive mechanisms.” In other words, the resistance within the camp constituted the dominant experience of the camp. The current design, therefore, sufficiently represented the “typical fates of those who do not carry famous names.”¹⁰⁴ The meeting ended with the words of Siegfried Wagner, the representative of the Ministry for Culture, who ignored the statements and instead endorsed the design, praising the work of everyone who had contributed. Of the 15 meeting attendees, four had been women and none had taken a position on this matter, including Dr. Gerda Haak, the memorial director.

When the “Museum of Antifascist Resistance” opened its doors in the renovated *Kommandantur*, the internal admonishments and suggestions had made no impact. Clearly, disinterest in far-reaching investigations of female experience in the communist resistance or in Ravensbrück ruled the day. The new museum generally followed the same narrative as its predecessor, using the increased floor space to display more artifacts.

¹⁰² Literally, “race disgrace.” Engaging in sexual relations with members of “undesirable” or “inferior” races qualified as a crime of this category.

¹⁰³ MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K XXVIII, 32-33.

¹⁰⁴ MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K XXVIII, 33.
such as uniforms or prisoner possessions. Furthermore, the 1984 exhibit continued the familiar relativized depiction of the Holocaust, relegating the topic to the periphery.

For instance, the museum referenced “over 17 million deportations to extermination camps Auschwitz, Belzec, Maidanek [sic], etc.” without further comment. In breaking down prisoner demographics within Ravensbrück in 1939, the nondescript figure of 36 women incarcerated because of “violation of the Nurnberg Laws” failed to elucidate the anti-Semitic body of legislation aimed at removing Jews from public life. Although the exhibit explained that in 1944, Jews constituted 15.1% of the population and “Gypsies” a further 5.4%, it did not mention either group when discussing transports from the camp to extermination facilities. These camps served the ambiguous purpose of “isolating, decimating, and physically destroying the opponents of German imperialism,” namely the “working class and its Marxist-Leninist party.” Although “individuals from various backgrounds, who because of their worldview, their beliefs, or their national heritage were unwilling to bow to the fascist mechanism of destruction,” this group remained an ambiguous coalition under direction of the communist resistance. In other words, East German memory culture continued to appropriate genocide as barbarity directed against political prisoners without explicitly including racial victims under the mantle of the antifascist resistance.

105 MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K XXVIII, 143.
106 MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K XXVIII, 161.
107 MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K XXVIII, 161-2.
108 MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K XXVIII, 164.
Despite the growing criticisms, a differentiated exploration of daily camp life and an unpacking of the regime’s monolithic category of “antifascist resistor” would not only need to fall to individual historians interested in such a task. It would also have to wait.
On September 20, 1984, the director of the Ravensbrück memorial authored a proposal outlining a planned collection of documents chronicling the history of the camp. The book aimed at contributing to the “political-ideological education” of especially the youth by inculcating notions of “freedom and the struggle for a happy socialist society.” The concrete research proposals implied that increased focus on different prison groups—such as the “religiously persecuted” and “special prisoners,” incarcerated in Ravensbrück in the wake of the failed attempt on Hitler’s life on July 20, 1944—would lead to a differentiation of the narrative that would fulfill the project’s ambitions. In other words, including more voices in the antifascist narrative would benefit it and have positive influences on public memory and socialist consciousness.

This document illustrates the emerging desires for a more nuanced narrative, as expressed in the critiques of the museum redesign in the years before. These calls, ultimately, had gone unheard and failed to have a meaningful influence on the museum by the time it opened in 1984. During the 1980s, however, a new political climate developed in which critical discourse not only emerged, but also exerted marginal influence.

109 SAPMO-BArch DR1/7178, 156.
110 SAPMO-BArch DR1/7178, 157.
In the case of Ravensbrück, this new atmosphere seems to have started around 1981 following a letter from Vinzenz Rose, president of the Association of Sinti and Roma in West Germany. Rose wrote the KdAW petitioning the placement of a plaque honoring the Sinti and Roma of Ravensbrück. The KdAW deliberated and denied the request on the grounds that the “memorials in the GDR had been built based on a particular design” that precluded any additions. The KdAW added that despite this decision, the GDR “eternally holds the incarcerated, martyred, and murdered in high regard.” Rose issued a snide response in which he bequeathed a “bravo” to the chairman of the organization and offered the thanks of his community for the GDR’s disposition toward the ethnic group. Rose furthermore questioned the justification for the decision, as the Union had successfully petitioned the Auschwitz memorial to fashion a plaque for the Sinti and Roma, despite the site’s strict historic preservation guidelines.\(^\text{111}\) Rose ended the letter with the request for at least a small marker honoring his mother, who had perished at Ravensbrück.\(^\text{112}\)

This letter had a curiously strong effect. The Secretary of the KdAW discussed the petition with the deputy Minister for Culture, imparting his disappointment over the outcome of Rose’s first request. The deputy minister agreed with the assessment that further refusals could lead to “unforeseen foreign policy problems.”\(^\text{113}\) The Secretary

\(^{111}\) In fact, this memorial in Auschwitz—from where Vinzenz and his brother had escaped—was privately financed by Vinzenz. It was inaugurated in 1974.

\(^{112}\) MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 XXXXIV, 69.

\(^{113}\) This concern seemed especially pronounced for the GDR, given Vinzenz Rose’s influence in West Germany. Vinzenz along with his brother Oskar founded the Verband rassisch verfolgter nichtjüdischen Glaubens (Association of Racially Persecuted Non-Jews) in response to the FRG’s refusal to recognize the genocide of the Sinti and Roma. From this the Association of Sinti and Roma emerged. His engagement earned him the German Federal Cross of Merit in 1978, and in 1982 this organization’s advocacy resulted in recognition of the genocide by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. Moreover, as a chairman of the International Romani Union, Rose represented a potential source of international criticism directed at the GDR.
introduced the KdAW’s idea of a specially designed room in the prison building in which racial victims could be honored. The deputy minister approved of the plan, stating that in the course of the renovation this would not be altogether difficult. He furthermore added that the placement of a plaque for Rose’s mother should be considered, and that the KdAW should direct him to the Ministry for Culture.\textsuperscript{114}

Ultimately, this second petition also received a negative answer.\textsuperscript{115} Despite this, Rose’s letter left an impact at Ravensbrück. The episode had prompted the KdAW to formulate a plan that would adequately honor the marginalized racial victims. Though it did not turn into a reality in the 1984 museum, this proposal remained a long-term project. In this they found support from the Ministry for Culture, which administered the memorial. Moreover, both organizations had become more aware and sensitive to concerns from abroad. A series of events at Ravensbrück reveal the lasting influence that Vinzenz Rose had left.

To begin with, Ravensbrück developed a sensitivity toward the various victim groups within the camp. On September 11, 1985, the director of the memorial wrote the Ministry for Culture that Ravensbrück’s staff increasingly used the term “Sinti and Roma” rather than “gypsies” (Zigeuner) in their work. This conformed to the “international standards” of referring to ethnic groups by the name they liked to call themselves, the letter explained. Moreover, the term “gypsy” was a pejorative used by the Nazis and therefore was inappropriate for further use. The director closed the letter by stating that the staff had reviewed the museum exhibits to see where changes needed to

\textsuperscript{114} MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 LXIII, 49.
\textsuperscript{115} The reasons for this are unclear.
be made, and that in general it had become imperative to be aware of any other ethnic
groups among the prisoner population. The ministry responded positively approving
this measure, stating that the Culture Department of the Central Committee of the SED
had ordered the term “gypsy” no longer be used in the national memorials.

Less than a month later another letter from the director to the Ministry for Culture
requested approval for a memorial plaque to the Jewish and Sinti and Roma who perished
at Ravensbrück. This plan resembled Rose’s 1981 request, and likely drew inspiration
from it; the director explained that this initiative had originated in discussions with the
Secretary of the KdAW. He proposed the plaque to read: “In honor of the countless
Jewish and other victims of fascist racial fanaticism [faschistischen Rassenwahn].” The
letter closed by saying that this would allow visitors to honor Jewish and Sinti and Roma
victims, and all those persecuted specifically because of their race.

This new interest in the overlooked victims of Ravensbrück did not confine itself
to the triad of the memorial, the KdAW, and the Ministry for Culture. Concurrently,
similar realizations for a much-needed differentiation of the memorial’s antifascist
narrative emerged. For instance, in July of 1985, Werner Händler, a concentration camp
survivor, party member, and head of the Sachsenhausen Survivor Committee, drafted a
plain-spoken letter to Hermann Axen, a member of the Politbüro. Händler had been asked
by Axen to put into writing his experiences following a four week goodwill trip to the
United States on behalf of the Liga für Völkerfreundschaft (League for Friendship
Between Peoples). Between participating in 40th anniversary ceremonies marking the end

116 BArch DR1/7178, 249.
117 BArch DR1/7178, 251.
118 BArch DR1/7178, 250.
of WWII and meeting American politicians such as Senator Joe Biden and Jesse Jackson, Händler had met with several Jewish journalists and attended a number of symposia. In the last decade, Händler noted, a broad identification with Judaism had developed in the United States in reaction to the Nazi genocide and “the influence of the State of Israel.” Händler reported that many non-religious individuals now felt strongly bound to Judaism. Furthermore, he went on, “this concerns a not yet concluded, strongly emotional process which should be taken into consideration, especially in our cooperation with the USA and with Americans.”119 In other words, Werner Händler had experienced the increased role that the Holocaust played in American consciousness. This phenomenon also explained why the “visit of memorials in former concentration camps becomes evaluated from the standpoint of whether the Jewish victims are commemorated in an appropriate form.”120 It was the widely-held opinion, Händler implied, that the GDR inadequately commemorated the plight of racial victims.

Turning to his influential friend Hermann Axen, Händler had brought his concerns to the attention of a prominent politician. As a Politbüro member, Axen wielded considerable influence and power. Moreover, as a chair member of the Committee for Antifascist Resistance Fighters, the GDR’s memorials and memory culture fell within his competency. Thus Händler could be assured of being heard and taken seriously. As head of the Sachsenhausen Survivor Committee, he was a functionary and could speak to the subject of memorialization within the GDR. Equally, the fact that he had been allowed to travel abroad indicated that the regime trusted him implicitly and valued his observations.

119 MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K VI, 100.
120 MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K VI, 100.
Moreover, a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Axen may have been intrinsically sympathetic to Händler’s concerns.121

Perhaps just in order to be sure of pressing his concerns home to Axen and other high-ranking SED luminaries to whom the letter may be circulated, Händler adopted a very pragmatic argument for why this mattered. He invoked specific incidents that occurred during the early 1980s, which Americans travelling to Ravensbrück had issued sharp criticisms of the memorial. In particular they had decried the lack of recognition of Jewish victims.122 Nevertheless, Händler wrote, nothing had been done about this. In order to push the issue, Händler ended on an ominous note: if again nothing would be done, the GDR would “expose ourselves potentially to further attacks from the USA media.”123

The discourse taking place among these functionaries and bureaucrats reflected the changing atmosphere brought on by Ostpolitik. The normalization of relations between East and West Germany led to hitherto increased cultural exchange. The greater contact with Western intellectuals and access to literature from capitalist countries became easier. In addition, creeping reforms opened new possibilities for historians,

121 This was not the first time that Werner Händler had travelled outside of the GDR. In the online index of the German Federal Archive, in the Protocols of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party 1981-1989 (SAPMO-BArch DY 30/J IV 2/3/3509), Händler is listed in the month of April of 1983 as having been sent as an envoy to Milan. This suggests, along with this letter, that he acted as a representative of the GDR in various contexts.


123 MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K VI, 101.
artists, and writers. In other words, the boundaries of the acceptable had been widened. Even the history of the Third Reich could afford new insights, even if here, because of this past’s centrality to the legitimacy of antifascism and the GDR itself, the regime still exerted tight controls.

This increased tolerance allowed historians more leeway. Academics with an eye to the work across the border had begun to see the need for approaching their research in a new light. The gap in quality between scholarship in the GDR and the West had become glaringly obvious and problematic. Inspired by the innovations of their Western colleagues and utilizing increased academic freedoms, some East German historians did in fact accomplish a differentiation of the antifascist master narrative. Thus more nuanced works appeared on previously ignored or marginalized topics such as bourgeois resistance to the Nazis and the extermination of Jews. Klaus Drobisch’s 1973 book *Juden unterm Hakenkreuz* became one of the first studies entirely dedicated to the Holocaust. The racial component of National Socialism, and its great importance in the

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124 In December of 1971, Honecker announced to the Central Committee that as long as socialism remained the firm basis of a work, there should be no taboos. Of course, censorship and restrictions remained, but nevertheless a slight thaw had begun.


126 GDR historians had become aware of the methodological innovations occurring in Western historical writing. This included the developing fields of women’s and gender history, which some tried to incorporate into their own research. Sigrid Jacobit, Interview by author. Berlin, Germany, July 3, 2012. For examples of some of the West German studies that East German historians were taking note of, see Gerda Zorn, *Widerstand in Hannover: Gegen Reaktion u. Faschismus 1920-1946* (Frankfurt a.M.: Röderberg-Verlag, 1977) and Hanna Elling, *Frauen im deutschen Widerstand, 1933-45* (Frankfurt a.M., Röderberg-Verlag, 1981). Sigrid Jacobit, Interview by author. Berlin, Germany, July 3, 2012.

politics of Hitler and the Nazi regime, began to be understood.\textsuperscript{128} A greater tolerance for these topics could be detected, as even PhD students were given permission to research on Jewish victims.\textsuperscript{129}

In the case of Ravensbrück, Dr. Sigrid Jacobite and Dr. Lieselotte Thoms-Heinrich’s 1987 \textit{Kreuzweg Ravensbrück} profiled hitherto unknown female prisoners.\textsuperscript{130} The biography seemed a less-politicized realm granting more freedom for the authors to focus on the varied experiences of the women, even though the Central Committee of the SED needed to approve of the final list of proposed biographies.\textsuperscript{131} This emphasis on individual identity allowed for slight departures from the “antifascist resistance fighter” trope. Women who had not been communists but were nevertheless progressive or had fiercely opposed the regime on religious or political grounds should be recognized, \textit{Kreuzweg Ravensbrück} implied.

Ostpolitik influenced more than just East German culture. The improved relations with the West and desire for international recognition on the part of the SED required a moderation in the regime’s rhetoric and policies. This is particularly true once the GDR began seeking financial support from its western rival. In other words, the criticisms from abroad carried more weight and were no longer dismissed outright, as the SED earnestly


\textsuperscript{131} Dr. Jacobite recalled that this as the “era of the biographies,” which continued after reunification and for the time was quite innovative and different from the typical publications. Sigrid Jacobite, Interview by author, Berlin, Germany, July 3, 2012.
evaluated the international climate. This is reflected in the letter by Werner Händler and indeed is evidence of the increased awareness on the part of the regime toward the admonishment from West German and American intellectuals who decried the GDR’s inadequate commemoration of the Holocaust and attitude toward Jewish issues.

This led to a widening of the pantheon of antifascist heroes, as new interest in the Jewish past and culture emerged in the 1980’s. For instance, in Berlin the city began to renovate and promote former Jewish sites such as the “New Synagogue” on Oranienburgerstrasse. The head of state, Erich Honecker, may have been responding to critical reports in the West over neglected Jewish cultural sites in East Berlin when he vowed to renovate this ruinous structure in the late 1980s, a project which would be completed after German reunification.\(^{132}\) Though historians and individual activists had already turned their attention to the overlooked history of the Jews in Germany, now the SED intervened.\(^{133}\) *Kreuzweg Ravensbrück* illustrates this development. By the time of the book’s writing, the regime had insisted that in each publication or collection of biographies, one Jew needed to be included. The regime preferred Jews who were politically active, so-called *Aushängjuden* or “model Jews.” In the case of *Kreuzweg Ravensbrück*, this was the communist activist Rosa Menzer.\(^{134}\)

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132 For more on the Jewish sites and their histories in the GDR in Berlin, see Michael Meng, *Shattered Spaces: Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

133 As Michael Meng has shown, the preservation of Jewish sites had fallen to concerned citizens who out of their own initiative had attempted to push the government into action. See Michael Meng, “East Germany’s Jewish Question: The Return and Preservation of Jewish Sites in East Berlin and Potsdam, 1945-1989,” in *Central European History*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2005): 606-636.

134 Sigrid Jacobeit wanted to write on relatively unknown women. Therefore, initially she proposed Hermann Axen’s mother-in-law. The Central Committee rejected this, however. Besides the Jewish biography that had been ordered, the Central Committee developed a sort of quota system. Thus, one prisoner needed to have been convicted because of their Christian beliefs, another woman had to come
This creeping liberalization had come too late for the 1984 museum. This exhibit therefore did not reflect the greater toleration for subjects beyond the communist resistance. It also contained a multitude of errors and inaccuracies; the captions and citations of exhibit photos were incorrect, and in fact often times the images were not even from Ravensbrück, the director of the memorial complained in a status report one year after the museum’s opening. Additionally, the male camp was nonexistent in the memorial’s commemoration. The report attributed many of these oversights to the fact that the understaffed memorial lacked the time to review the literature appearing abroad, so that the site threatened to fall behind international standards. In general, the director warned, the memorial lacked an “international character”; foreign visitors continually criticized the political and ideological tone, the lack of differentiation on topics such as the role of the Western Allies in the war and the experiences of Christians and Jews. In general, the annual reports beginning in the early 1980s continually emphasized such repeated criticism from visitors from abroad.

The deficits and foreign pressure prompted, therefore, a reform of the memorial almost immediately after the new museum had opened its doors. The director seized upon the KdAW’s suggestion of including a room designated for the racial victims of Ravensbrück in the prison building. The renovation of the national commemoration rooms, unchanged since 1959, was the memorial’s next major project between 1985 and

from bourgeois circles. Jehovah’s Witnesses remained one of the main groups which continued to be a taboo subject. Sigrid Jacobeit, Interview by author, Berlin, Germany, July 3, 2012.

135 SAPMO-BArch DR1/7178, 254.

These were framed as statements of fact and in a tone that suggested the ignorance of the visitors. Nevertheless, the reports continually passed on criticisms and assessments on how foreign guests viewed the site and the history portrayed there.
1987. The director of the memorial proposed on August 8, 1985 that the “Germany Cell” offered an opportunity to “especially commemorate” a diversity of prisoner groups, particularly Jews and Sinti and Roma.\textsuperscript{137} When the room opened in 1987, a large inscription proclaimed: “In commemoration of the women, children, and men imprisoned in the fascist concentration camp Ravensbrück, of whom many fell victim to terror, among them communists, social democrats, union members, Christians, patriots, bourgeois democrats, victims of fascist racial fanaticism against Jews, Sinti and Roma.”\textsuperscript{138}

The pursuit of a more pluralized memory continued. Sometime in 1988, the memorial inaugurated the plaque on the mass grave of Ravensbrück, discussed several years beforehand.\textsuperscript{139} In November of that year, on the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the “Kristallnacht” pogroms, the memorial held the first ceremony publically honoring the Jewish victims of Ravensbrück. Non-state entities—such as international peace organizations, church groups, and elements of the GDR’s growing dissident movement—prepared ceremonies at the memorial that attempted to realize new forms of commemoration. A “grass-roots” antifascism which demanded a greater breadth lay at

\textsuperscript{137} SAPMO-BArch DR1/7178, 87. The director also suggested that Jehovah’s Witnesses could perhaps be included, but that this needed to be “verified.”

\textsuperscript{138} Despite this, the “Germany Cell” was not free of controversy. The design proposal expressed the concern over the fact that two Germanys existed, so that a commemoration avoiding a suggestion of any commonality would have to be avoided. This included avoiding the use of the German flag’s colors, which both states shared. When West Germany asked that it receive its own room in 1986, the plans for the cell fell through. Instead, the final exhibit was known as the “International Memorial Room.”

\textsuperscript{139} Neither the memorial today nor any of the literature can definitively say when the plaque was placed. It seems likely, however, that it was around 1988. It is also unclear why this process took several years.
the heart of many of these initiatives. Ravensbrück staff recalled the late 1980s as marked by a sense of movement and departure, as the “beginning of a new era.”

These developments echo the growing discontent in the German population and the unraveling of state control. The inadequacy for state propagated antifascism to promote identity with the regime and the increasing pressures from “below” and outside the GDR forced the SED to concede and tolerate the differentiation of the antifascist narrative at Ravensbrück. In addition, the “subjective” antifascism of critical intellectuals began to work its way into the ranks of those hitherto loyal to the party line, as the involvement of the KdAW and the Ministry for Culture at the memorial testifies. This left the regime in an impossible situation of trying to maintain the master narrative. Indeed, the decrees and involvement of the SED in the reforms suggest that in this way, they were trying to direct and control the liberalization. A struggle to balance limited democratization and necessary reform, as well as continue to ensure the survival of the East German state, developed.

The growing presence of non-state groups and foreign visitors made the memorial a fluid site. Short of drastically putting on the brakes, the upper echelons of the SED simply needed to tolerate this situation. The palpable concern of party conservatives finds reflection, however, with the increased engagement of the party’s “shield and sword” at the memorial. The Ministry for Security or Stasi increased its surveillance, reacting to the pluralization of memory and commemoration at Ravensbrück.

Regular reports from Stasi operatives detailed the activities at the memorial and all suspicious behavior. Of particular interest were foreign visitors or delegations, as well

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140 Cited in Eschenbach, “Jahrestage,” 93.
as individual groups from whom provocative behavior could be expected. For instance, in 1986 the Stasi learned of the plans of a group of homosexual women belonging to an East German church group to lay a wreath at the mass grave at Ravensbrück. The Stasi had already noted the group’s “provocative attitude” during the ceremony marking the 40th anniversary of the camp’s liberation the year before. Stasi operatives prepared wreaths that could be laid over those of the women as soon as they departed the memorial. The agents also placed a guestbook that was nearly filled except for a few pages on display, so that in the event that one of these women would write something, the book could be pulled out of circulation under the excuse that it was filled. Seeing public commemoration as an opportunity for independent expression, the Stasi’s measures kept the existence of various social groups like lesbians invisible at Ravensbrück.

The Stasi increased its activities here particularly during anniversary celebrations, when thousands of attendees could be expected. For instance, 24 agents monitored the activities of visitors during the 25th anniversary of the memorial’s opening. Generally, however, the security apparatus relied on “unofficial collaborators” who reported suspicious activity at the memorial, such as “negative” entries in the guest book. The evidence suggests that several memorial staff members cooperated with the Stasi.

141 Der Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen der Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (BStU) AST Potsdam AKG 510, 24-31.
142 BStU AST Potsdam AKG 510, 9-23.
143 A suspicious individual had lamented that the museum contained too much ideology, closing his statement by drawing a Star of David and writing “Long live capitalism/Let’s go West,” alluding to the tagline of West cigarettes, a popular brand in West Germany. The guestbook was removed and dusted for fingerprints, as well as sent on for further analysis. BStU AST Potsdam AKG 510, 6-7.
144 I theorize that the informant mentioned in many of these Stasi reports was the penultimate director of the site, Egon Litschke. Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter or “unofficial collaborators” could actually choose their own codenames. As the collaborator “Doktor” frequently exhibits that he or she was in a position of authority in the memorial, it is plausible that it was the director.
Ultimately, although the dogmatic antifascism as endorsed by the SED survived until the end of the GDR, the developments at Ravensbrück reflected broader currents in GDR society. After March 1990, the first freely elected East German parliament called for a “revolutionary renewal” of the GDR, prompting plans for a critical assessment of the memorial and its museum. Reunification in the fall of 1990, however, prevented the reformatory trends at Ravensbrück. A panel of experts concluded that the memorial should be closed and the museum completely renewed in order to transmit an objective history of the site.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

It remains pure speculation whether the reformers in the GDR could have realized the “new era” that they envisioned. Perhaps the growing changes within the Ravensbrück memorial would eventually have achieved some of the developments which occurred after reunification. In the prison building, for instance, the memorial—now under the direction of Sigrid Jacobeit—dedicated three new rooms to the Jews, the Sinti and Roma, and the victims of the 20 July conspiracy. Arguably, the developments of the 1980s had been building to this already.

It was one thing for the SED to tolerate a modicum of change in the form of plaques and more inclusive rhetoric. It was another to have allowed a complete renewal of the antifascist narrative, as it would have utterly undermined the party and state’s legitimacy. Thus, it required the dethronement of the SED in order to accomplish the type of democratized commemoration that was enshrined in the memorial after 1990.

Nevertheless, judging GDR memory culture entirely on the basis of “decreed” antifascism, as is often the case, limits an understanding of East German memory. This reduces everything to the intention of the party and attributes to the memorials an influence on East German society that, in light of the evidence, must be regarded with skepticism. The efficiency of the SED’s socialist consciousness building is called into

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question by the antifascist convictions which existed “below” the state-propagated version that seemingly dominated public discourse.

There is no denying that the party remained the final arbiter of the memorial’s antifascist narrative and exerted control until the crumbling of the East German state. The SED needed the memorials of the GDR, as they projected the core values upon which the party’s rule rested. This ideology promoted identification with the state and called upon visitors to uphold the ideals of socialism by emulating their forbearers who had suffered under Nazism. These messages defined East Germany and made the difference between it and the West clear, justifying the critical disposition toward the “class enemies” who had not overcome the burden of the fascist past.

This state ideology, however, was the result of a streamlining of the narrative in the early postwar period that expunged deviating positions. In other words, the SED forged and pushed their antifascism in the face of contestation from intellectuals and camp survivors, who accommodated a number of voices from other social groups who had a shared experience of Nazi persecution. The establishment of the Ravensbrück memorial coincided with the regime’s domination of the master narrative and represented the culmination of this purging process. This “official” version remained virtually unchanged, until creeping reforms in the decade before reunification saw the reemergence of a pluralized antifascism that sought to include disparate voices.

As the developments of the 1980s make clear, this benefitted particularly Ravensbrück’s racial victims. The reforms also made possible histories that focused on the individual identity of the prisoners and elaborated on their camp experiences, “rescuing” women from the rigid and monolithic master narrative. This laid the
groundwork that allowed historians such as Sigrid Jacobeit to bring a wider understanding of the women and the diverse social groups to the forefront of the memorial after reunification. But a fundamental challenge to the gendered antifascism before the emergence and full application of women’s and gender history remained unthinkable.

Thus, Ravensbrück’s political messages remained gendered. The antifascist narrative here often addressed a feminine audience and the sculptures at the site embodied different qualities from male figures at the other camps. The museum also told a history of the camp’s women that was problematic on two levels. First, it privileged communist heroines and mythologized their resistance, thereby excluding other social groups. In this sense, Ravensbrück did not differ from the other GDR memorials. Secondly, however, Ravensbrück’s definition of resistance relied on the notion of motherhood and other qualities attributed to femininity.

Although Ravensbrück was one of three national memorials, the survivors and staff members continually felt that it stood in the shadow of Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. This can be attributed to the communist functionaries who had entered the SED after the war. Because even in socialist East Germany the government was male-dominated, an over-representation of Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen survivors controlled the regime. These men fashioned the antifascist narrative and influenced public discourse, so that the memory of female experience faded into the background. Furthermore, the male camps did not solely rank supreme in public memory because party luminaries had been imprisoned there, but rather because they fit the antifascist

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146 For more on Sigrid Jacobeit’s work at the memorial, see Hördler, *Der Nationalsozialismus im Spiegel des öffentlichen Gedächtnisses*, especially 287-353.
narrative more conveniently. The masculine rhetoric of struggle and resistance privileged male survivors.

Overall, in form and in the specific narratives of the women’s experience, the Ravensbrück memorial differed significantly from Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. In function, however, all sites shared the common purpose of legitimizing the ruling party and the East German state. In that regard, Ravensbrück also upheld the SED’s antifascism. In the official rhetoric the prisoners here as well shared in the legacy of the communist resistance, so that the generic maxims of socialist solidarity and peace remained stable from one memorial to the next.

The “subjective” antifascism that critics exhibited throughout the history of the GDR were the result of introspection on the part of individuals, as the case of Ravensbrück indicates. However, Western historical writing and political pressure had a profound influence, particularly in the 1980s. For one, the increased exposure to these academic standards and nuanced commemoration introduced new ideas that called the strict party line into question. Much of the reform thus came about from the political and scholarly desire to impress Western progressives and match their standards. Moreover, Ostpolitik and increased normalization of relations with the West allowed for greater cultural exchange so that the GDR’s deficits in memory culture became embarrassing political and moral liabilities. In order to gain political capitol and recognition, the regime needed to tolerate and even promoted limited reform. This created the spaces that allowed for a differentiation of the history of Ravensbrück and the commemoration of many of its marginalized victims.
The increasing nuances as exhibited in Ravensbrück came from intellectuals who no longer subscribed to the antifascist historical narrative. This did not necessarily signal disenchantment with socialism, but rather a declining identity with the ideology as prescribed by the SED. Their “subjective” antifascism thus criticized the communist master narrative in order to improve it. Historians and intellectuals thus found commemorating previously marginalized victim groups—such as Jews, Sinti and Roma, non-political prisoners, and members of non-communist parties—not only morally correct, but also in the spirit of antifascism. As the historian Annette Leo pointed out in 1987 in her calls for increased commemoration of members of the 20 July plot, remembering overlooked victims would result in a better, more comprehensive fulfillment of the legacy of the opposition to Hitler.147

As the case of Ravensbrück shows, a balanced assessment of the sites of public memory within the former GDR lead to paradoxical and complicated conclusions. These memorials to the victims of the Third Reich have become places where the history of the East German dictatorship is encountered and contested. The SED’s restrictive antifascist narrative makes white-washing the authoritarian nature of this now defunct state morally dubious and impossible. But it would also be an error to insist on depictions of repression and fixate on the short-comings of East German memory culture. Neither view is historically correct and prohibits a meaningful understanding of GDR history. Furthermore, the limited liberalization occurred shortly before the collapse of the regime illuminates the broader social currents within East German society. The ambivalences echoed at Ravensbrück reflect the larger social and political reforms that ultimately

147 MGR/SBG RAI/3-5 K XXXXIV, 2.
APPENDIX

FIGURE 1

View from southwest toward the camp wall and the crematorium. Behind the crematorium stands the Zellenbau or prison block. Photographed by author in 2007.
View from crematorium toward south. Pictured are the bed of roses and mass grave, established circa 1948, and the “Wall of Nations.” The two stones in the foreground commemorate the victims of Nazi racial persecution. The stone on the left, inaugurated in the early 1990s, honors the Sinti and Roma of Ravensbrück. The stone on the right, placed presumably in 1988, reads: “In honor of the countless Jewish and other victims of fascist racial fanaticism.” Photographed by author in 2007.
Figure 4

Sculpture in the Grosse Hamburger Strasse. Depicted are 13 figures which originally were meant for the base of Die Tragende. These were instead used in 1985 for a memorial to Berlin’s Jewish victims who perished in the Holocaust, located at the former home for the Jewish elderly on Grosse Hamburger Strasse. Photographed by author in 2012.
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