Introduction

War, Politics, and the Study of Memory

War was the central theme of Germany's twentieth century. The first half of the century saw unprecedented violence and destruction caused successively by the Kaiserreich and the Third Reich. The second half was shaped by the consequences of these wars and the realities of a resulting cold war: total defeat, utter devastation, a divided nation under Allied occupation, and a second dictatorship on German soil. Studying modern German history thus entails dealing with war and its social, political, and cultural consequences along with the narratives and memories it inspired in its aftermath. The two most terrible, closely intertwined crimes committed by Germans during World War II – the Holocaust and the war against the Soviet Union – gave rise to two diametrically opposed official memories of the Nazi past in the two postwar Germanys. Although the mass murder of about 6 million Jews would gain the most prominent position in West German public memory of the war, official memory in East Germany centered around the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union. This fundamental difference derived to a great extent, but not exclusively, from the political realities and ideological antagonism of the Cold War – the West German alliance with the West and the integration of East Germany into the Soviet sphere of influence. A multitude of personal, political, and ideological motives of those postwar politicians who came to dominate the political landscape in divided Germany also gave shape to this fundamental difference.

The emergence of the differing – what I call – political memories of the Nazi war against the Soviet Union – henceforth also referred to as the war on the Eastern Front or, simply, the Eastern Front – in divided and reunited Germany is the subject of this book. I present a comparative

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study that examines when and how the war was discussed in public, with a particular focus on the two social groups that often dominated the collective memory landscape: the political elite and war veterans. I investigate the relationship between public memory and politics by asking how memory formed and informed political culture, and vice versa. I am thus concerned with the "public use of history,"[1] with the recollection, appropriation, and narration of the war against the Soviet Union by politicians, state officials, and war veterans in the context of the most important domestic and foreign policy debates in postwar German history.

POLITICAL MEMORY: RECOLLECTING THE PAST IN THE POLITICAL REALM

For the sake of clarity, I shall use the term *political memory* to describe the images and narratives of the past that the protagonists of my study publicly told and debated.[2] Memory can be understood in two ways, as the "simple presence in the mind" of images of the past, that is, images by which the mind is merely "affected," or as an act of "*recollection* as a search."[3] The focus of this study is not on memory or *remembrance* as an individual or collective act (even though we occasionally encounter individuals who talk publicly about something they remembered). Rather, it is on *recollections* of past events in the form of images and pieces of the story of the Eastern Front in the political realm – images and stories invoked by politicians in composing narratives that always reflected at least a twofold perspective, that is, the presence of the past (the absent) in the present and the presence of the present in the recollection of the past. I use the term *political memory* to denote this process of recollection in the political realm. It underscores that the focus rests on a distinct kind of

[1] Jürgen Habermas, "Concerning the Public Use of History," *New German Critique*, no. 44 (1988): 40–50.
[2] This follows Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1–12.
[3] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 15 (emphasis added). Depending on our definitions of the key terms, memory and recollection can, of course, "blend together," as, for example, Levy and Sznaider have pointed out in respect to German collective memory of the Holocaust; the collective recollection of the past transforms social memories into historical recollection, thus blending memory and recollection into something one might call processed memory; see Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 35–36.

discourse,[4] namely, one in which political and historical themes are interwoven for the sake of argument, persuasion, or demarcation vis-à-vis friends and foes. The concept of political memory thus indicates that I am primarily concerned with the narratives forged and communicated publicly by the political elite and, equally important, with the contingencies and choices they faced in the course of the enduring debates on the legacies of Stalingrad and the war on the Eastern Front.[5]

Equally central for this study is the assumption that collective or public memory is "neither a thing nor merely a tool"[6] nor an "independent variable determining political culture and ultimately politics."[7] It rather is a social factor, a set of discourses, a process of making sense of and extracting meaning from events happening in the past. The question, thus, is not one of memory versus political culture, because "memory to some extent *is* political culture."[8] Still, political memory shapes collective memory, and vice versa. Defining and describing this complex relationship without reifying the historical discourses involved is a central objective of this study. However, while digging through the sources and crafting a narrative of the narratives myself, the notion of memory as a "thing" occasionally crept into my thinking and writing, yet I have tried to keep in mind the dialogic, often confrontational, nature of collective or group memory as social processes.

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[4] And here I use the term "discourse" in its common meaning (according to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary): a discourse is a verbal interchange of ideas (in writing or speech), a conversation.

[5] Herf, *Divided Memory*, 1–12.

[6] Jeffrey Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 11, 85–118, provides a summary of this critique and a "process-relational" methodology aimed at avoiding the often prevalent "reification, hypostatization, and overtotalization" of memory. Olick's dictum, however, that "memory is neither a thing nor merely a tool but *mediation* itself" seems to overemphasize the – often indeed existing – reconciliatory, dialogic aspects or intentions of memory discourses; what about those discourses that aim at confrontation, demarcation, and separation of groups and interests? Any nationalistic memory discourse might serve to illustrate this point, for example, Serbian and Albanian memory of the battle of Kosovo (1389).

[7] Jan-Werner Müller, "Introduction," in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 26.

[8] Ibid. (emphasis in original). Confino and Fritzsche's approach, which stresses "the work of memory," has given me valuable guidance in formulating my research questions, but it also tends to reify *the* memory as an independent variable or even acting historical subject; see Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, eds., *The Work of Memory: New Directions for the Study of German Society and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 5. For a discussion of the tendency to treat memory as a "thing," see Olick, *Politics of Regret*, 10–11.

Nonetheless, there are obvious empirical limitations to the study of collective, popular, social, or cultural memory – or whatever one might call it – not least because it seems impossible for the historian to reconstruct such fluid entities (without constructing something entirely new).[9] The concept of political memory, therefore, leads me to stress that I am concerned with memories of certain politically influential groups, namely, politicians – communist, social democrat, liberal, conservative – and veterans. Often, however, even those categories are too vague and imprecise and thus are of limited analytical value. Those who spoke were individuals with distinct biographies and worldviews, and they joined preexisting discourses but also framed and shaped those discourses with their individual contributions. In short, even though many scholars have attempted to systematize the study of collective memory, it remains difficult to reconstruct what an entire society or individual social groups thought, said, and remembered about the past – and it might not be so interesting after all. Instead, by focusing on political memory, I stress the fact that "the public use of history" is about more, even something quite different, than *commemorating* the past. It is political precisely because it transports a certain historical *knowledge* into the public sphere.

The political memory of the war against the Soviet Union (1941–45) – "Operation Barbarossa," as the Nazis called it – is an excellent case in point because it was one of the most important and most contested themes forming and informing postwar German politics and society. At the center of my analysis stand the legacies of this war, a conflict also often referred to as the Eastern Front or Russia Campaign (*Ostfront* or *Rußlandfeldzug*) – the costliest battlefield of World War II. The Eastern Front, indeed, embodies a basic feature of postwar German memory: the "stigma of violence,"[10] which derived from the conflict between the crimes committed by Germans on the one hand and the suffering endured by Germans on the other. After the war, any attempt to come to terms with this ambivalent legacy was further complicated by the growing political

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[9] For an overview of collective memory studies, see, most recently, Pascal Boyer and James V. Wertsch, *Memory in Mind and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Wulf Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 11–27; James V. Wertsch, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies," *History & Memory* 41 (2002): 179–97; and Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 105–40.

[10] See Michael Geyer, "The Place of the Second World War in German Memory and History," *New German Critique*, no. 71 (1997): 5–40.

and ideological divide in the wake of the unfolding Cold War. Thus, the historical and political context in which the "divided memory"[11] of the Eastern Front emerged was exceptionally complex and fraught. In East Germany, it was the calculated public *presence* of the Eastern Front memory, in West Germany its enduring *absence*, that bestowed the legacy of "Operation Barbarossa" with a tremendous potential for continuous (re-) negotiation and contestation.

My story begins with a prologue that recapitulates the National Socialist master narrative of the Eastern Front and the Battle of Stalingrad. The first four chapters follow the genesis of political memory of the war against the Soviet Union into the years of détente, through the era of remilitarization, Stalinization, and construction of the Berlin Wall in the East, and *Vergangenheitspolitik* ("politics of the past") and rebellion in the West. Chapters 5 and 6 address the transformations and continuities on both sides since the late 1960s. Finally, the revolution in 1989 and German reunification in 1990 are the subject of an epilogue, in which I outline the contours of political memory of the Eastern Front since 1990 and suggest areas and themes that merit further study. At the very end of the epilogue, I venture briefly into the realm of popular – East, West, and reunified German – memories by taking a closer look at the debates of the mid-1990s about the controversial exhibit "War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941–1944."

HISTORIOGRAPHY, APPROACH, THESES

Historical scholarship has previously neglected the crucial role of the memory of the Eastern Front in postwar German political culture. In his seminal studies on the Eastern Front, Omer Bartov has demonstrated how rank-and-file soldiers came to engage in a barbarized warfare that resulted from the thorough internalization of Nazi ideology, the essence of which was the "dehumanization of the enemy and a parallel deification of the Führer."[12] The war unleashed in the East in the spirit of these ideological core principles produced one of the most brutal battlefields in history and was the site of unprecedented crimes committed by SS *and* regular forces. Consequently, in this circle of violence, the traditional

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[11] This is the same complex context that framed the genesis of memory of the Holocaust in divided Germany, see Herf, *Divided Memory*.

[12] Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army, Soldiers, Nazis, and the War in the Third Reich*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 178.

military structures and value systems were destroyed just as, in turn, the destruction of these very traditions made the commission of such crimes possible. In his conclusion, Bartov contends, "the war remained a deep, painful memory, but it was a memory of one's own suffering, and it left no room for one's victims." Thus, the war in the East became the "most important element"[13] of German memory of the Nazi era because it had been Germany's costliest battlefield and because after 1945 its criminal dimension remained long obscure and vague – marginalized in West and hyperbolized in the East. Moreover, as Bartov points out, unlike the crimes committed in Nazi extermination camps, attributable to a select few, those committed in the Soviet Union could be ascribed to millions of men returning from the war in the East.[14]

My study seeks to expand on Bartov's concluding thoughts. It represents the first systematic effort to trace comprehensively and comparatively the history of the Eastern Front memory in postwar Germany based on evidence from various archives and published sources.[15] It explores the formulation, negotiation, and appropriation of the Eastern Front within the political realm and among veteran communities in East and West and thus closes a significant gap in our knowledge of German memory of World War II.[16] In the two German states, the political memory of the Eastern Front emerged as the backdrop of two general approaches to the past that were diametrically opposed. In the East, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) successfully built a *positive* historical narrative that underscored the German communists' share in the Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany. West German political culture and self-image rested on a *negative* identification with the past, that is, on the delayed but sincere realization and acceptance of responsibility for

[13] Ibid., 182. Bartov is referring primarily to West German memory, but this applies equally to the East.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Note on the translation of German sources: If not indicated otherwise, all translations are mine.

[16] Recent overviews include Sabine Behrenbeck, "Between Pain and Silence: Remembering the Victims of Violence in Germany after 1945," in *Life after Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe During the 1940s and 1950s*, ed. Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 37–64; Withold Bonner, *Recalling the Past: (Re)constructing the Past: Collective and Individual Memory of World War II in Russia and Germany* (Helsinki: Aleksanteri Institute, 2008); Wulf Kansteiner, "Losing the War, Winning the Memory Battle: The Legacy of Nazism, World War II, and the Holocaust in the Federal Republic of Germany," in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. Richard Ned Lebow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 102–46.

the Holocaust. In an influential essay, Rainer Lepsius has aptly described these processes as "externalization" in the East, and "internalization" in the West.[17] Each was closely connected with the respective founding myths of the two German states – communist antifascism and democratic antitotalitarianism – and served as the essential memorial fabric with which memory of the Eastern Front was woven.[18]

The event at the heart of the following analysis – the Nazi war against the Soviet Union – has been described in superlatives since the very moment it began: The Nazis referred to it as the "greatest war in history," but historians later called it the "most barbaric war" (Ian Kershaw) and "Hitler's essential war" (Jürgen Förster). Indeed, the number of victims is staggering – recent estimates show 25 million Soviet deaths, two-thirds of which were civilians,[19] and about 4 million German soldiers were killed in the war in the East or died in Soviet captivity.[20] From the start of "Operation Barbarossa," on June 22, 1941, the Nazis exported their racial policies to the East, to which the invasion of Poland in 1939 had already been a "prelude,"[21] a rehearsal for genocidal warfare. The 1941 attack paved the way for the mass murder of the Jews, which took place not only in the extermination camps but also both at and behind the front lines in the occupied territories. Stalingrad and Auschwitz, the two *lieux de mémoire* that denote these two historic crimes, deserve to be studied from this integrative perspective. They often remain separated in the collective memory of World War II, even beyond the German context. It is remarkable that most historical accounts of the Holocaust thus far also fail to connect the Eastern Front (the Eastern and Eastern-Central European territories occupied by the German Wehrmacht) to the mass murder of the Jews.[22]

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[17] Rainer M. Lepsius, "Das Erbe des Nationalsozialismus und die politische Kultur der Nachfolgestaaten des 'Großdeutschen Reiches,'" in *Kultur und Gesellschaft*, ed. Max Haller, Hans-Joachim Hoffmann-Nowotny, and Wolfgang Zapf (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1989), 247–64.

[18] Rainer Gries, "Mythen des Anfangs," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 18–19 (2005): 12–18.

[19] Gerd L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 894.

[20] Rüdiger Overmans, *Deutsche Militärische Verluste im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2000), 265.

[21] Jochen Böhler, *Auftakt zum Vernichtungskrieg: Die Wehrmacht in Polen 1939* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2006).

[22] See Omer Bartov, "Eastern Europe as the Site of Genocide," *Journal of Modern History* 80 (2008): 557–93, which also includes an extensive review of the scholarship on the subject.

The Battle of Stalingrad – the perceived culmination of the war on the Eastern Front – inspired the title of this work because it became a postwar symbol for German suffering during World War II. Consequently, Stalingrad is treated here not only as a historical event but also as the most important metaphor for the total defeat of Germany, as it was perceived by many Germans in East and West alike. The battle itself saw about 195,000 German soldiers perish – 60,000 died during the battle, 25,000 were injured and flown out by the German Luftwaffe, 110,000 were taken captive by the Soviets, and of those only 5,000 returned home after the war.[23] The battle was never remembered exclusively as a military event. It became rather a symbol for the suffering, perceived senselessness, and extreme brutality of the war on the Eastern Front. At the same time, however, remembering the dead of Stalingrad made it possible to evade – at least temporarily – the question of war crimes committed on Soviet territory. Like a prism, Stalingrad distills the essence of the "stigma of violence": the duality of German crimes and suffering. Moreover, it was one of the key events that sustained the myth of a "clean Wehrmacht."[24] The claim that German troops fought and suffered patriotically without becoming complicit in the Nazi genocide was connected inextricably to the saga of Stalingrad and the Eastern Front. This myth, to be sure, was not only a central element in West German memories of World War II but it emerged in a "red version"[25] in East Germany, and there is even a widely accepted "Wehrmacht myth" in the United States today.[26]

It was therefore a tremendous task for political elites to address the ambivalent legacies of Stalingrad and war on the Eastern Front in the ideologically and politically fraught atmosphere of German division. Yet this "difficulty of ending [the] war"[27] also derived from the undoubtedly traumatic nature of events at the heart of this unending task. In recent

[23] Rüdiger Overmans, *Soldaten hinter Stacheldraht: Deutsche Kriegsgefangene des Zweiten Weltkriegs* (Munich: Ullstein, 2002), 38.

[24] Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 195–250. On the discussion and scholarship on Wehrmacht crimes since the 1980s, see also Bartov, *Hilter's Army*, xv–xxvi.

[25] Karen Hartewig, "Militarismus und Antifaschismus: Die Wehrmacht im kollektiven Gedächtnis der DDR," in *Der Krieg in der Nachkriegszeit: Der Zweite Weltkrieg in Politik und Gesellschaft der Bundesrepublik*, ed. Michael Thomas Greven and Oliver von Wrochem (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2000), 251.

[26] Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[27] Hannes Heer, "The Difficulty of Ending a War: Reactions to the Exhibition 'War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941–1944,'" *History Workshop Journal* 46 (1998): 187–203.

years, scholars have increasingly used the term "trauma" to describe experiences of extreme violence and their aftermath and social relevance.[28] Nonetheless, I see no historiographical advantage in applying a clinical concept, which psychologists and psychiatrists use to designate individual experiences and subsequent behavioral and emotional symptoms based upon actual and direct testimony to the passed down narratives of historical figures, even if the stories they are telling – not to us directly but through the sources – may well contain truly traumatic events, including collectively experienced events.[29] Instead of venturing into the psychological realm, I view the narratives openly communicated about the Eastern Front as part of the story of how Germans dealt publicly and consciously rather than privately and subconsciously with war and defeat – much like the ordeal of arsonists trying to put out the fire in the house they themselves set aflame.[30]

[28] Recent examples are Duncan S. Bell, ed., *Memory, Trauma and World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Bernhard Giesen and Christoph Schneider, eds., *Tätertrauma: Nationale Erinnerungen im öffentlichen Diskurs* (Konstanz: UVK, 2004); Bernhard Giesen, *Triumph and Trauma* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm, 2004); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (New York: Metropolitan, 2003); Nancy Wood, ed., *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1999). On the use of the concept of "trauma" as historical category and its critique, see Astrid Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen: Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2005), 99–100; Wulf Kansteiner, "Genealogy of a Categorical Mistake: A Critical Intellectual History of the Cultural Trauma Metaphor," *Rethinking History* 8 (2) (2004): 193–221; Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004); Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, "The Politics of Commemoration: The Holocaust, Memory, and Trauma," in *Handbook of European Social Thought*, ed. Gerard Delanty (London: Routledge, 2006), 289–97.

[29] The French historian Marc Bloch called it unwise to borrow a term from psychology and expand its meaning by adding the word "collective"; cited in Joanna Bourke, "Introduction 'Remembering War,'" *Journal of Contemporary History* 39 (4) (2004): 473.

[30] To borrow a metaphor from a former German prisoner of war used in 1949. Klaus Willerding, "Referat für die Zentrale Heimkehrerkonferenz am 29.10.1949"; BA/SAPMO, DY 32/10057 DSF, 1; see, further, Chapter 1. There is a growing literature on the narration/culture of defeat and the transition into postwar society; see, e.g., Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009); Bessel and Schumann, *Life after Death*; Frank Biess, *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); Bourke, "Introduction 'Remembering War'"; Jeffrey Olick, *In the House of the Hangman: The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943–1949* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Monica Riera and Gavin Schaffer, eds., *The Lasting War: Society and Identity in Britain, France and Germany after 1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

Even though what was recalled and debated about the Eastern Front differed significantly, looking at the past was a (conscientiously) selective undertaking in both Germanys. After the remarkable "Nuremberg Interregnum" (1945–49), during which the causes and consequences of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union were discussed publicly and *en detail*, the "search for a usable past"[31] for many years did not entail confronting the full historical "truth" on both sides of the Iron Curtain. (I will briefly address the question of "truth" at the end of this introduction.) In the East German Democratic Republic (GDR), the war on the Eastern Front became the central historical event in the ruling party's view of World War II. Leading figures in the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and, after 1946, in the SED, forged a master narrative, which included facts that were not publicly acknowledged in the West for years, above all, the scale of suffering among Soviet POWs and the non-Jewish Soviet civilian population, and the Wehrmacht's involvement in war crimes. For the SED, led by Walter Ulbricht, who was a front-line veteran of the antifascist movement in the Soviet Union, the Eastern Front memory constituted a key issue that promised political legitimacy. The party forged a narrative of the Eastern Front that underlined the Soviet Union's role as Hitler's primary victim, enemy, and conqueror. This narrative one-sidedly denounced the crimes of the "fascist hordes" against "Soviet citizens" while exculpating German workers from these crimes and marginalizing other aspects, such as the mass murder of Jews, the Western Front, and the wartime alliance between the Soviet Union, the United States, and Great Britain.[32]

In contrast, the memory of the Eastern Front in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) long neglected the criminal legacy of the Nazi "war of extermination." It focused on the suffering of German soldiers in the East until a genuine interest in the Soviet perspective emerged in the 1960s. This shift was both precondition and result of the *Neue Ostpolitik* (the "new policy" towards Eastern Europe), which brought about lasting

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2008); Schivelbusch, *Culture of Defeat*; Christiane Wienand, "Performing Memory. Returned German Prisoners of War in Divided and Reunited Germany" (PhD diss., University College London, 2010).

[31] Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001). The term was used first in this connection by Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust and German National Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

[32] See Thomas C. Fox, *Stated Memory: East Germany and the Holocaust* (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 1999); Herf, *Divided Memory*; and Joachim Käppner, *Erstarrte Geschichte: Faschismus und Holocaust im Spiegel der Geschichtswissenschaft und Geschichtspropaganda der DDR* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse 1999).