1 Civil Society Activism, Memory Politics and Democracy

On the 5th of May 1985, a small group of activists from the *Active Museum – Fascism and Resistance in Berlin* gathered with shovels near a mound of overgrown rubble in West Berlin. They stood on the site of what had been the headquarters of the Gestapo and several Nazi ministries until 1945. Here, thousands of political dissidents had been interrogated and tortured in the Gestapo's subterranean prison cells. Among them were Jews, Social Democrats, Communists, trade unionists, and other political opponents of the Nazi regime. Key resistance groups, including the conspirators in the July 1944 plot against Hitler, were brought here before they were moved to execution sites or concentration camps. In a different part of the building complex, major elements of the plans for the Holocaust and the war of aggression were drawn up and implemented. And yet, the place had been all but forgotten in the postwar era. The site was used to pile wartime rubble, and one section had been cleared to practice driving without a license.

Three days before the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the activists began – symbolically and literally – digging up the past. These regular citizens, teachers and students, and several victims of the Nazi regime, no longer wanted to leave the task of remembrance to the authorities. They chose this location in central Berlin to highlight the failure of the government to commemorate the grim history of such centers of Nazi power. Their publicity stunt was highly effective in propelling the city's leaders to address the Nazi past. The memory activists' demand was to found an "active museum," which would offer research facilities, meeting places, and opportunities for collective deliberation, where visitors would not merely learn about history, but actively engage with it and reflect on its meaning for the present (Figure 1.1). Plans for the site where part of a rising tide of civil society activity at the time, the collective force of which made it unacceptable for the state *not* to reckon publicly with this history. Over the decades that followed, what is now called the Topography of Terror became one of the most important and

Figure 1.1. Banner at the Topography of Terror site in 1989: "We need an Active Museum!"[1]

highly frequented memory sites in Berlin. In 2013 alone, the memorial was visited by over one million people, including locals and tourists.[2]

I begin with the *Active Museum*'s digging protest – and depict it on the book's cover – because it is emblematic of the kind of civil society-led activism that has transformed the memorial culture in Germany. The Topography of Terror is especially important because it exemplifies the crucial role played by grassroots action in propelling both a normative shift and institutional change in how the Nazi past and the Shoah were confronted in a society that was initially unwilling to accept responsibility. The *Active Museum* was part of a highly successful movement that gained momentum throughout the 1980s and 1990s to transform the meaning and content of commemoration from the ground up and in every location. Its motto was "dig where you stand." And yet, these efforts were certainly neither the first nor the last time civil society intervened in postwar memory politics. Over the course of the postwar period, grassroots groups have profoundly shaped public commemorative politics and memory culture in Germany. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World

[1] Monika Rummler, Aktives Museum Faschismus und Widerstand in Berlin e.V.
[2] www.topographie.de/topographie-des-terrors/presseservice/pressemitteilungen/.

War, Holocaust survivors demanded the commemoration of victims. Throughout the decades that followed, victims' associations and interest groups representing German expellees and veterans erected their own monuments and lobbied state agencies to officially remember their experiences and suffering. In East Germany there were similar impulses toward memory activism – but they were quickly squashed by the regime.

These early efforts resulted in countless memorial markers across West Germany, but they did not succeed in overturning the mainstream and official memorial regime. The early 1980s, however, marked an inflection point when West German memory politics underwent both a qualitative and quantitative transformation. Myriad citizen initiatives and history workshops sought to investigate local and everyday history, uncover traces of the past, mark the sites of National Socialist terror and make their findings relevant to political education. According to a survey by Brigitte Hausmann, during the 1980s "about half of the monuments were initiated by history working groups, homeland associations (*Heimatvereine*), peace groups and citizen initiatives, by associations for Christian-Jewish cooperation and memorial initiatives"[3] – in other words, by civil society. The memory landscape that resulted was decentralized, antimonolithic, self-reflexive – and profoundly different from contemporaneous "official" monuments. For the first time, perpetrators, sites of crimes, and the range of Nazism's victims were explicitly named and commemorated. Much of this memorialization activity was driven by two key West German social movements – the Memorial Site and the History Movements – and took place against the resistance of state authorities. These movements became two of the most important instigators of new memorials about the Nazi past and had a lasting effect on the state institutions that govern how memory "is done" in the united Germany.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, a new wave of civic activism emerged – this time to memorialize the victims of East German authoritarianism – that was just as momentous in transforming German memory politics as the movements of the 1980s. The contested sites of memory now focused on former crossing-points between East and West, the locations where the East German regime had incarcerated its opponents, and the places that had become emblematic of resistance to dictatorship. Once more, civil society organizations emerged to challenge the government to do more to commemorate the central sites of repression. And again, the political contest over public memory commanded national media attention and steered a heated public debate. Fluctuating between the meticulous work of commemoration – making exhibits, holding vigils,

[3] Hausmann, *Duell mit der Verdrängung?* p. 13.

interviewing witnesses – and the contentious quality of protest actions – occupying sites, illegally erecting monuments, holding hunger strikes – these new memory activists have profoundly shaped the memory landscape of the Berlin Republic. Through these strategies, civic advocates have both pressured state actors to address the legacies of the East German dictatorship and challenged the prevailing norms about what "democratic remembering" means in unified Germany. A very clear example of this was the installation of a memorial dedicated to those who died trying to cross the Berlin Wall by a coalition of activists at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin. The controversial director of a decades-old private museum at Checkpoint Charlie had been instrumental in erecting over one thousand black crosses, some marked with names of the dead, on leased land at the former crossing point in 2004. Critics argued that this kind of remembrance was neither historically accurate – a study later put the number of Wall victims at 138[4] – nor in line with the aesthetic sensibilities of a diverse and multireligious public. But the site was defended vigorously by organizations representing victims of repression in East Germany. When the crosses where ordered removed (mainly due to a dispute about real estate), former political prisoners and their supporters chained themselves to the crosses in protest (Figure 1.2). These memory activists viewed the authorities' reluctance to defend the installation as a sign of its general unwillingness to adequately honor their experiences and grant them prominence in public space. They demanded that the East German dictatorship receive a level of attention comparable to the Nazi past. The clash between different memories – and between civic activists – becomes even more poignant at locations with a "double past." These are memorial sites that hold meaning both for victims of the Nazi regime and for those who experienced repression in East Germany. The Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen concentration camp memorials are the most well-known. Such sites encapsulate the tensions created by the commemoration of diverse pasts after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

This book analyzes the role and long-term impact of memory activists from 1945 to the present, examining a broad range of remembrance from that of the Holocaust and the Nazi past, to Germans' war experiences, to repression under the East German regime. The confrontation with history as an arena of modern German politics has long featured hotly contested debates and attracted intense scholarly scrutiny. Nonetheless, scholars have neglected the work of grassroots, civic organizations, which have played a central role in determining the evolving landscape of memorials and commemoration. Directly addressing this gap, this book

[4] Hertle and Nooke, 'Die Todesopfer an der Berliner Mauer.'

Figure 1.2. The cross memorial installation at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin: activists chained to the crosses to prevent their removal in 2005.[5]

examines the tensions between state institutions and memory activists representing different views of the past. I show why and how such activists shape outcomes in German memory politics and argue that the continuing contention about Germany's "dark past" and its meaning for democratic governance cannot be understood without considering civic memory activism.

By focusing on civil society action in memory politics, I examine the link between memory and democracy in two ways. First, through the study of grassroots activism, I offer a novel explanation of why Germany's approach to commemoration changed so dramatically in the course of the postwar period and followed a trajectory that is unique when compared to other countries. I examine how civic engagement has become interwoven with state institutions, transforming both in the process. Throughout, I detail the shifting balance between public remembrance that is *representative of majority opinion* and remembrance that promotes *norms that may challenge that majority*. My account traces how the normative regime of

[5] Roland Brauckmann, Union der Opferverände kommunistischer Gewaltherrschaft.

memory – those practices and narratives about the past that are considered acceptable by the public and by state institutions – changes over time through civic action.

Second, in this first comprehensive account of memory activism in Germany, I home in on the practice of memory initiatives and contend that it is precisely when the work of memorialization is contentious – *when memory work becomes memory protest* – that civil society challenges norms and institutional structures and directly impacts the course of democratic societies. This is not to say that civil society single-handedly drives normative change. In fact, it makes little sense to regard grassroots groups as separate from their institutional context. Rather, in postwar memory politics, civic initiatives of various kinds have pushed normative innovation by identifying and highlighting where memorial practices conflicted with contemporary public norms about what makes up a functioning and sustainable democracy.

Investigating the influence of memory activism in postwar and postunification Germany requires weaving together many and diverse stories about activist groups and local contexts into a coherent narrative in order to substantiate my broader arguments. As such, my conclusions cannot easily be generalized: my book is unapologetically about Germany, and Germany only. However, the concepts and mechanisms I identify – most notably the balancing act between representative and normative components of democratic memory and the tipping point between memory work and memory protest – should find fruitful application beyond the German context.

Memory Activism and Democracy

This introductory chapter explains how I employ key social scientific concepts and how they guide my analysis. However, the question of how memorialization relates to democracy is not solely an abstract one: most of the over ninety individuals I interviewed for this study are deeply invested in how their engagement and identity matter for the quality of Germany's democracy. The current Director of the Topography of Terror, Andreas Nachama, stressed the importance of activism in the memorial's history, arguing that "much like connected pipes in physics, if you put more civic engagement in on one side, more democracy will also come out the other end."[6] The causal link between public remembrance and democratic institutions is made explicit here, highlighting the importance of reckoning with the past for the stability and deepening of German democracy. Though Nachama made this statement in the context of

[6] See Interviews, Andreas Nachama.

remembering the Shoah, civic and governmental actors across the spectrum of remembrance have argued that greater civic engagement in memorialization leads to better democratic outcomes.

But is it possible to say that memory activism – irrespective of its aims or strategies – strengthens democracy? What do we make of activism of the kind that challenges the commemorative primacy of the Holocaust for German democracy? Can we regard civic engagement to commemorate the plight of wartime expellees as democracy-enhancing if it laments the location of the current border between Germany and its Eastern neighbors? What happens when victims justly commemorate the harm done to them by Communist perpetrators, but do so using the rhetoric of the extreme right? Does civic activism always translate into a more democratic memorial culture? In other words, is Nachama's equation a universally applicable formula?

The relationship between memory and democracy turns on two axes: first, the capacity and representativeness of state institutions to commemorate publicly; and second, the normative values of democracy (e.g., justice, human rights, and equality), which may or may not characterize popular memory or officially implemented memory at any given moment in time. State-supported commemoration can be (and in practice often is) broadly representative of public opinion, even while memorializing pasts or groups whose values are not democratic. The tension between representation in democratic institutions and the normative values of democracy form a central theme in this book.

To elaborate on this problematic, consider that a minimalist definition of democracy emphasizes the procedural provisions that ensure the "rule of the people" through elections, as well as other institutional safeguards against the abuse of state power. Thus, applying the idea of representative government to public remembrance might mean the representation of the historical experiences and symbolic references of the *majority* of society in public space. In other words, memories that are widely and strongly shared in society (though not necessarily "historical truth") dominate the memorial landscape. This, I argue, was the case in the early postwar period, when memorials to German "victims" of war far outnumbered those to the victims of Nazism. At the time, liberal elites feared that an honest confrontation with the crimes of the German majority through the honoring of Jewish and other victims would endanger the nascent institutional structures of the Federal Republic (FRG). As Jeffrey Herf writes, the "inherent tension between memory and justice on the one hand and democracy on the other would appear to have been one of the central themes of postwar West German history."[7]

[7] Herf, *Divided Memory* p. 7.

In contradistinction to such a majoritarian approach to memory, it is precisely the extent to which memories of *minorities as well as of historical failures of the majority* (the perpetration of crimes, racism, anti-Semitism, collaboration, profiteering, etc.) are represented publicly that characterizes a "deeply" democratic society. Hence there is a basic tension between a *representative* and a *normative* regime of remembrance. This tension can be captured in the distinction between a *democratic process of memory*, which is staked on the breadth of public support, and the *democratic content of memory*, which is found in the democratic values expressed through commemoration. Civic initiatives hold the potential to mediate this tension and create spaces outside of representative institutions that can host alternative democratic processes. At the same time, such spaces can be used to challenge prevailing norms about acceptable ways to confront the past.

A society that acknowledges its own wrongdoings and calls for respect and protection for the memories of its victims engages in what Konrad Jarausch has called "inner" democratization.[8] I argue that civic efforts to work through the Nazi past, to examine the crimes and name the perpetrators, and to mark sites of suffering and resistance in public space have contributed to such "inner" democratization in the Federal Republic. Since the early 1980s, the two social movements mentioned earlier – the Memorial Site and the History Movements – were particularly instrumental in shifting this form of remembrance from the margins of civil society to the central memorial institutions of the German state. Such normative change was driven to a crucial extent (though not exclusively) by memory activists. In order for this normative change to happen, the local *work of memory* – historical research, archiving, interviewing, presenting results – had to be become contentious action, or *memory protest*. Memory became protest both because the content of the commemorative work challenged the prevailing notions of what was acceptable remembrance in public space and because activists used confrontational tactics to force public change. These conflicts drew responses from the state (and sometimes other memory activists) and ultimately led to change through gradual resolution, compromise, concession, and sometimes even through the more rapid transformation of memory institutions.

By the 1990s and 2000s, I argue, the *normative regime of remembrance had become largely representative*. By "representative," I mean that a particular set of mnemonic values were evident in the practice of official memory institutions. This was a victory for the many civic initiatives that

[8] K. Jarausch, *German Studies Association Annual Meeting*, Denver, CO, October 3–6, 2013.

had fought for a critical reckoning with the Nazi past. However, their success also led to a decline in the power of mnemonic civil society and a concomitant decline in its critical potential. Moreover, despite the strong civic and state support now enjoyed by the "Holocaust-centered" memory regime, it has been challenged by new civic memory claims, with implications for the evolving norms of public remembrance.

Illustrating the unintended consequences of memory activists' successes, recent calls to recognize the plight of "ordinary Germans" during the war and under Communist dictatorship have often been derided as attempts to dismantle the work done to confront the Nazi past or even to relativize the memory of the Shoah. Victims of Communist repression have in turn decried the trivialization of their suffering. These debates are important reminders that public memory must strive to be representative of the different historical experiences present in society without violating the norms that are constitutive of a democratic political culture. Dealing with the commemoration of suffering in Soviet camps and East German prisons poses new challenges to mnemonic norms that have gone largely unquestioned since the 1990s. As with earlier periods of memory activism, the content of the commemorative activity of initiatives focused on the German Democratic Republic (GDR) challenges prevailing mnemonic norms. Furthermore, these new activists have explicitly adopted protest tactics, effectively triggering another wave of memory protest and memory work with the potential to change commemorative practices and norms of public remembrance.

The question now is whether the existing institutions, actors, and norms that constitute German memorial culture will allow a new generation of memory activists to shape a portion of public space – without prescribing rules of remembrance that have congealed in the course of earlier struggles. The task is to integrate the plight of victims of Communist repression in a way that takes seriously their own interpretation of history and does not impose an existing normative narrative on them. The democratic quality of German commemorative culture and its ability to address the complexity of history will be put to the test. There are no simple answers to the question of how the politics of memory interact with ongoing processes of democratization. However, this book contends that an understanding of the role played by civil society in the politics of memory does much to explain the link between memory and democracy. Civil society has a potentially decisive role in transforming the political culture of democracy – either toward or away from deeper democratization.

In a book seeking to bring grassroots actors "into" the study of memory politics, it would be tempting to regard civil society involvement as

a straightforward path to the creation of a democratic memory culture. As Andreas Nachama of the Topography of Terror would have it, the more activism you put into a memorial, the more democratic it will be. Though I stress the deep impact that activists have had on public memory, civil society is neither always the source of laudable impulses to memorialize, nor are there particular memories that are automatically beneficial to democracy. There are many instances of civic activism pushing for public memory that commemorate perpetrators or bystanders to violence above its victims, that deny or gloss over historical facts, or that support an exclusionary or antidemocratic political agenda. In other words, civic engagement is not virtuous in and of itself (as some theorists would have it), but depends upon its institutional context and substantive goals.

Another central argument is that the definition of democratic memory is not clear-cut. The history of German memory activism underscores that interpretations of the past that are widely felt in society (even if they are problematic from a normative standpoint) *and* those memories that evoke a deeper consideration of democratic values (even if they are felt only by a minority) must find their way into a negotiated public memory. Democratic memory politics can therefore be either representatively or normatively democratic (or both), and sometimes in contradictory ways. The arguments made by activists and others about the relevance and meaning of their own proposed commemorative approach must therefore be investigated without an a priori assumption about the democratic value of a particular narrative about the past.

Key Concepts

This study is situated at the intersection of scholarship about public memory, civil society and social movements, and the requirements of democratic institutions. In using concepts and theories from these three bodies of scholarship, my work draws from several complex and long-standing intellectual traditions. In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the existing theories and arguments that provide a frame for understanding the interrelationship between memory activism and democracy.

Given the multidisciplinary nature of memory studies and the terminological baggage that scholars from different fields bring to the table, the lack of agreement on terms is perhaps not surprising. This situation compels every work on remembrance to begin with a clarification of concepts – mine is no exception. Central to my analysis is "public memory," which can signify any expression or result of efforts to mark events, individuals, or lessons learned from the past *in public space*. Public