



WER IST WALTER?

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Resistance in Europe during
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Edited by

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Representing Resistance in Museums: The Case of the Buchenwald Memorial

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Introduction

The complex history of the Buchenwald Memorial offers an example of the way the museal representation of resistance has been shaped and transformed by the political context since the end of World War II. After 1945, the international resistance organisation in the Buchenwald concentration camp became an important component of East German cultural memory; the German Democratic Republic (GDR) instrumentalised it so it could depict itself as the heir of those it celebrated as anti-fascist fighters. The camp history exhibition (which opened in 1955) became a tool in the political misuse of the past, as was evidenced in its strong emphasis on resistance. Indeed, the Buchenwald Museum (and more generally, the Memorial as a whole) was sharply criticised after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, after which it was redesigned and a new exhibition inaugurated in 1995. By comparing the previous GDR museum with the redesigned one, this article examines the evolution of the representation of resistance in Buchenwald in the political context. Methodologically, the article refers to research that understands exhibitions as narratives, where specific messages are conveyed through the subjects they broach, the objects that are shown and the manner in which documents or artefacts are displayed.¹ An analysis of the museal depiction of resistance in Buchenwald required an examination of the archival material, providing insights into the contents

1 See for instance Ljiljana Radonic and Heidemarie Uhl, "Das zeithistorische Museum und seine theoretische Verortung. Zur Einleitung", in *Das umkämpfte Museum. Zeitgeschichte ausstellen zwischen Dekonstruktion und Sinnstiftung*, eds. Ljiljana Radonic and Heidemarie Uhl (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020), 7–25.

of both exhibitions: the design book (*Gestaltungsbuch*)² for the last GDR exhibition, the concept paper (*Konzeption*),³ the story script (*Drehbuch*)⁴ and the catalogue (*Begleitband*)⁵ for the 1995 exhibition.⁶

Resistance in Buchenwald

Since understanding how resistance was represented in the post-1945 period requires historical knowledge, the first part of the article provides essential background information. The uniqueness of the Buchenwald concentration camp was that the resistance was not just carried out by isolated individuals. It was also collectively organised with a high level of efficacy, within and thanks to a system of self-administration,⁷ in which the SS entrusted some inmates – called prisoner functionaries (*Funktionshäftlinge*) or kapos – with minor responsibilities in overseeing the camp's daily running. For instance, kapos were charged with supervising the work commandos and the block elders were charged with serving food or enforcing SS order in the barracks.⁸ The prisoner functionaries, 20 percent of all inmates, were a minority granted certain privileges by the SS (including more food or exemption from hard labour).⁹ Access to such privileges, which were usually enjoyed by non-Jewish, German-speaking inmates and which allowed for a better chance of survival, caused tension among prisoner

2 Buchenwald Archive/*Archiv Buchenwald, Gestaltungsbuch Museum des antifaschistischen Widerstandskampfes Buchenwald*, Teil 1-4, 1983, (hereafter cited as *Gestaltungsbuch* Teil 1, Teil 2, Teil 3 and Teil 4).

3 Harry Stein, *Das Konzentrationslager Buchenwald. Eine Geschichte des Verbrechens. Konzeption für ein historisches Museum zur Geschichte des Konzentrationslagers Buchenwald* (Weimar-Buchenwald: 1994) (hereafter cited as Stein, *Konzeption*).

4 Buchenwald Archive, *Drehbuch*, 1994/1995, (hereafter cited as *Drehbuch*).

5 Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, ed., *Konzentrationslager Buchenwald 1937-1945. Begleitband zur ständigen historischen Ausstellung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1999), (hereafter cited as *Begleitband*).

6 The 1995 exhibition was replaced by a new one in the 2010s. I will return to the latter in the conclusion.

7 Even if there were attempts to create international resistance movements in other camps, they were not as effective and well-structured as at Buchenwald. The one in Sachsenhausen, for instance, was discovered and dismantled by the SS in 1944. See Philipp Neumann-Thein, *Parteidisziplin und Eigenwilligkeit. Das Internationale Komitee Buchenwald-Dora und Kommandos* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014), 51.

8 Michael Löffelsender, *Das KZ Buchenwald 1937 bis 1945* (Erfurt: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Thüringen, 2020), 63.

9 Neumann-Thein, *Parteidisziplin und Eigenwilligkeit*, 31–32.

groups. This was notably the case of the so-called professional criminals and political prisoners, who fought against each other for years to obtain leading positions within the system. This conflict ended in 1942/43 after political inmates, especially the German communists, managed to assume the most significant functions in the main camp.¹⁰

The privileges given to the prisoner functionaries gave them greater agency and this offered the possibility of resistance. The German communists, who began forming a committee in 1938/39, used the opportunity to establish contact with political inmates from other countries, leading to the foundation of an international camp committee in the summer of 1943. By the end of the war, German, Belgian, Austrian, Yugoslav, Soviet, French, Czech, Italian, Dutch and Polish resistance fighters had joined the network, although their exact numbers cannot be reconstructed due to a lack of sources. It is known, however, that the aims of this committee were to promote international solidarity and continue the fight against Nazism within the camp.¹¹

A first example of international solidarity took the form of efforts to rescue the youngest prisoners, who, because they were not as strong as adults and could not therefore work as hard, had a smaller chance of survival. The German communists and the international committee created two special blocks (block 8 in 1943 and block 66 in 1945) with SS authorisation. These blocks provided some of the children and teenagers with spaces where they were, as far as possible, spared from violence and hard labour. As a result, 907 young people were saved.¹² Further actions of solidarity were carried out under the auspices of the labour administration, the political inmates from which had to take care of transports to Buchenwald's sub-camps or other camps (under the orders of the SS). While they could not change the number of fellow prisoners who were placed on the list, they could influence its composition. Following discussions held within the resistance organisation, the political inmates from the labour administration put certain groups of inmates on the list (such as the so-called professional criminals) or, conversely, spare certain groups or individuals from the transports

10 Ibid., 34.

11 Ibid., 51.

12 See the catalogue of an exhibition designed by the Buchenwald Memorial: Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, ed., *Buchenwald-Kinder. Eine Hörinstallation an drei Orten. Eine Ausstellung der Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau-Dora. 11. April 2010* (Weimar-Buchenwald, 2010).

(such as the cadres of the resistance organisation).¹³ In some cases, inmates belonging to the labour administration subsequently deleted the names of certain people and replaced them with other prisoners. The most famous example of this practice, controversially known as victim swapping today, was the September 1944 rescue of the three-year-old Polish-Jewish child Stefan Jerzy Zweig; Stefan's name was replaced with that of a young Sinti boy named Willy Blum on an Auschwitz transport list.¹⁴ Another strategy was termed name swapping: Since the inmates were reduced to numbers upon their arrival in the camp, the resistance fighters from the labour administration were able to exchange the numbers of some of those who died in the infirmary with the numbers of prisoners who were particularly under threat (e.g. inmates who were at risk of being murdered by the SS). Name swapping saved, amongst others, the lives of three British secret service agents who were to be executed in Buchenwald in 1944.¹⁵

As has been pointed out, continuing the struggle against Nazism was the second aim of the resistance. To achieve this goal, an international military organisation consisting of eleven national groups was founded in 1943. After the bombing of the Gustloff factories (where the prisoners had to produce weapons) by Allied aircraft on 24 August 1944, resistance fighters were able to smuggle several dozen rifles into the camp.¹⁶ As the US forces drew closer to Buchenwald in April 1945 and as the danger of a general evacuation or liquidation grew, the Soviet members of the international committee called for an armed uprising before the main camp was dissolved. The other resistance fighters rejected this strategy to prevent a bloodbath; they decided to slow down the evacuation process as much as possible and to send an SOS message to the Allies through secretly constructed radios.¹⁷ On 11 April, after the SS had fled, the military organisation used the smuggled rifles to take possession of the camp's main gate and search for SS men hiding in the forest – thus taking part in the liberation of the camp which was achieved by the arrival of the US troops in the afternoon.¹⁸

13 Sonia Combe, *Une vie contre une autre. Échange de victime et modalités de survie dans le camp de Buchenwald* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 49–64.

14 See the first chapter of Bill Niven's book on the so-called Buchenwald child: Bill Niven, *The Buchenwald Child. Truth, Fiction and Propaganda* (Rochester: Camden House, 2007), 10–47.

15 Löffelsender, *Das KZ Buchenwald*, 96–97.

16 *Ibid.*, 96.

17 *Ibid.*, 111.

18 *Ibid.*, 115.

This brief account sheds light on the ambiguities of inmates' attitudes within the camp system, accurately described by Primo Levi as the "grey zone".¹⁹ The members of the resistance network, who represented a minority within the camp's society, were not able to help everyone. In a world determined by SS rule, they had to make the difficult decision of who to try to save. Moreover, the (communist) prisoner functionaries were forced to carry out the orders of the SS to keep their positions. They therefore ran the risk of becoming – in the eyes of most of the inmates – Nazi collaborators.

Before 1989: Over-emphasis on collective resistance

Resistance gradually became the core of the state-controlled East German public memory of Nazism after 1945. The focus on so-called anti-fascism²⁰ enabled GDR politicians to justify the existence of a socialist German state during the Cold War, portraying the GDR as the "good" Germany that had broken away from Nazi ideology. Buchenwald played a prominent role in the process, given its history. It was not just the existence of the international committee but also the fact that Ernst Thälmann, the leader of the Communist Party of Germany (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* – KPD) during the Weimar Republic, was murdered there in August 1944 and the survivors under the communists' leadership swore an oath to fight for "the eradication of Nazism at its root" on 19 April 1945.²¹ In 1958, it became a so-called national site of admonition and remembrance (*Nationale Mahn- und Gedenkstätte*). Through the promulgation of a memorial statute in 1961, it was officially assigned the task of representing the history of European resistance to Nazism.²² The major tools employed to fulfil this

19 On the topic of "grey zones", see also part 3 of the present publication.

20 Although this article focuses on its instrumentalisation, anti-fascism in the GDR was much more complex than a political misuse of the past, as it had a personal dimension for at least a part of the East German population, who knew, through family or friends, communist resistance fighters. See Hasko Zimmer, *Der Buchenwald-Konflikt. Zum Streit um Geschichte und Erinnerung im Kontext der deutschen Vereinigung* (Münster: Agenda, 1999), 47–49.

21 The text of the oath can be found on the website of the Buchenwald Memorial: "Der Schwur von Buchenwald"; Buchenwald Memorial, accessed 23 October 2023, <https://www.buchenwald.de/geschichte/themen/dossiers/schwur-von-buchenwald>.

22 See Zimmer, *Der Buchenwald-Konflikt*, 76–77; Neumann-Thein, *Parteidisziplin und Eigenwilligkeit*, 66–174; Volkhard Knigge, "Buchenwald", in *Das Gedächtnis der Dinge. KZ-Relikte und KZ-Denk-mäler 1945-1995*, ed. Detlef Hoffmann (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1998), 92–173.

function were the three versions of the camp museum: the first one from 1955 onwards in the prisoner's kitchen; the second one from 1964 onwards in the disinfection building; and the last one from 1985 onwards in the storage depot. Since it is beyond the scope of this article to compare the three GDR exhibitions (as Richard Korinth has done in his master's thesis),²³ it will suffice to say that they reflected the evolution of the political situation in the GDR. In particular, they reflected the conflicts for the control of the party: between the communists who had fled to Moscow between 1933 and 1945 and those who had stayed in Germany and were imprisoned in concentration camps. Given that Walter Ulbricht, the leading figure of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED)²⁴ between 1950 and 1971 fled to the Soviet Union in the 1930s, the first exhibition highlighted the efforts undertaken by Ulbricht and other communists in exile to continue the fight against Nazism. Therefore, this exhibition offered very little information on the history of the resistance in Buchenwald. Following former political prisoners' protests – that the museum should deal with the history of the camp – the East German Ministry of Culture agreed to redesign the exhibition so that it gave greater attention to the organisation of the resistance. After Erich Honecker (who had first-hand experience of the Nazi repressive system) came to power in 1971, Ulbricht's name disappeared from the museum and the history of the Buchenwald communist resistance fighters was allocated a larger space within the exhibition.²⁵

According to its curators, the 1985 *Museum des antifaschistischen Widerstandskampfes*²⁶ had three principal goals. Besides presenting German imperialism as the cause of the war and depicting the GDR as the heir of the resistance, the exhibition aimed to show “how the anti-fascist resistance fight was carried on most consistently by the communists, also in Buchenwald, as a unified fight against fascism and war and, under the leadership of the illegal international camp committee organised by them, reached

23 See Richard Korinth, “Die Dauerausstellungen der Nationalen Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Buchenwald zwischen 1955 und 1985. Eine Ausstellungsanalyse sozialistischer Narrativ-Konstruktionen” (master's thesis, University of Jena, 2016).

24 The ruling party of the GDR, literally translated as Socialist Unity Party of Germany.

25 The last GDR exhibition was also the product of the professionalisation of the memorial: the historical department, from its creation in the 1970s onwards, researched the history of the camp and revealed new information on various matters (such as the fate of the children deported to Buchenwald or the sub-camp system) that had been included in the 1985 exhibition. See Korinth, “Die Dauerausstellungen”, 67–73.

26 In English: “Museum of Anti-fascist Resistance Struggle”.

its climax in the armed uprising on April 11, 1945, in the self-liberation from the SS".²⁷ To convey such an anti-fascist narrative, thereby reducing the resistance struggle to the collective action of communist inmates, the museum was divided into nine chapters in a space of approximately 1.500 square metres. After an introduction that dealt with the Nazis' rise to power and the establishment of the camp system, chapters two to six dealt with Buchenwald's history, offering a description of the internment conditions and resistance; chapters seven to nine were dedicated to the post-war period. Each part was designed to highlight the ongoing (and positive) role of the communists: first, in their capacity as the first fighters against the Nazi dictatorship in the 1930s, then as leaders of the collective resistance in the camps and finally (post-1945) as active supporters of the GDR.²⁸ Consequently, the ambiguous aspects of collective resistance were set aside, as can be seen in the way the self-administration system and the communists' first resistance efforts were depicted in section 3.2 ("Die Herausbildung des illegalen Parteiaktivs 1938/39").²⁹ After a brief presentation of the most important functions within the system and the conflict between the so-called political inmates and professional criminals, the testimony of Herbert Weidlich was highlighted. According to Weidlich, it was possible, when the most important prisoner functionaries were communists, "to improve in many aspects the inmates' working and living conditions".³⁰ The visitors were then able to read an extract from the post-war indictment against Ilse Koch, the wife of the first Buchenwald SS commandant: "It was difficult and dangerous to be a camp elder. The commandant's staff wanted to have as camp elder a man who was as compliant as possible with their plans to use him, if needed, against his own comrades."³¹ The curators, therefore, circumvented the topic of the prisoner functionaries' morally ambiguous position by emphasising the risks run by the resistance fighters and suggesting that the communists tried to hijack the self-administration system, which was initially designed by the SS to create inequalities amongst the inmates.

27 On this quote and the two other goals of the museum, see Buchenwald Archives/*Archiv Buchenwald, Gestaltungsbuch* Teil 1.

28 Ibid.

29 In English: "The constitution of the illegal party group 1938/39".

30 Buchenwald Archives, *Gestaltungsbuch* Teil 2.

31 Ibid. It should be noted that, as with all the other documents exhibited in the 1985 museum, neither the date nor the author of this quote was indicated.

To support the idea that the political inmates who obtained positions within the self-administration system used them to help fellow prisoners, several examples of the solidarity shown by (German) communists towards the most vulnerable detainees' groups (the Jews, the Soviet prisoners of war, so-called "gypsies" and the younger inmates) were depicted.³² Since the assistance provided to these groups is beyond the scope of this article, I refer to the two sections dedicated to the children (section 5.10, "Kinder und Jugendliche im KZ Buchenwald" and section 5.11, "Der Kampf der Antifaschisten um die Rettung des Lebens der jüngsten Häftlinge").³³ The first section described the fate of minors. Using lists from 1944, which revealed the high mortality rates amongst them and a mountain of shoes that belonged to children who were deported to Auschwitz and killed there, the exhibition made the visitors aware that underage inmates were especially defenceless.³⁴ The second section began with the following text on the actions of the international committee:

The resistance organisation uses its legal possibilities (camp functions) and its illegal apparatus to save children and teenagers from extermination transports. It facilitates their living conditions and organises lessons, even at the risk of their lives. This deeply humanistic action is based on a great respect for life, special care for the weak, and concern for the future. It succeeded in keeping 904 children from eight countries alive until the self-liberation of the camp. Amongst them is the four-year-old Polish Jewish boy Stefan Jerzy Zweig, the model for the child character in Bruno Apitz's novel *Naked Among Wolves*.³⁵

32 These examples were presented in the following sections: 2.4 on "Solidarität und Widerstand im Lager vor Ausbruch des Krieges 1938/39" ("Solidarity and resistance in the camp before the outbreak of the war 1938/1939"); 4.6 on "Der Widerstandskampf nach dem Überfall auf die Sowjetunion 1941/45" ("The resistance fight after the invasion of the Soviet Union 1941/45"); 5.11 on "Der Kampf der Antifaschisten um die Rettung des Lebens der jüngsten Häftlinge" ("The fight of the anti-fascists for the youngest inmates' lives"); 5.12 on "Zigeuner in Buchenwald" ("Gypsies in Buchenwald"). See Buchenwald Archives, *Gestaltungsbuch* Teil 2 and Teil 3.

33 In English: "Children and teenagers in Buchenwald concentration camp" and "The fight of the anti-fascists for the youngest inmates' lives".

34 See Buchenwald Archives, *Gestaltungsbuch* Teil 3.

35 Ibid. The novel, which was published in the GDR in 1958, told the story of a young child deported to Buchenwald who was saved by the resistance there. The book became a bestseller and was translated into multiple languages. See Susanne Hantke, *Schreiben und Tilgen. Bruno Apitz und die Entstehung des Buchenwald-Romans "Nackt unter Wölfen"* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018).

The visitors were shown the names of the (communist) resistance fighters responsible for the two barracks that were created for the youngest inmates; a list from the end of January 1945 of children who entered block 8; a portrait of Stefan Jerzy Zweig; and photographs of children in the liberated camp.³⁶ These documents did not give any detailed information on how the resistance fighters were able to save the children. Rather, they chiefly served to illustrate the fact that some underage inmates survived. This was especially striking in the case of Stefan Jerzy Zweig's story: though it could have been a great opportunity to deal with the grey zone of collective resistance by discussing the preparation of transports, no details were offered about the exact circumstances of his rescue. It may therefore be concluded that the museum, through very vague and general descriptions of the resistance, tried to overcome its ambiguities.

A further feature of the museum was that given the great emphasis on the role of communist resistance fighters, the non-communist opponents of Nazism were rarely mentioned. What was more, when they were mentioned, it was through the testimonies of left-wing political inmates. This was particularly the case in section 2.4, "Solidarität und Widerstand im Lager vor Ausbruch des Krieges 1938/39",³⁷ which told the story of Paul Schneider, a pastor who was deported to Buchenwald. Because Schneider refused to perform the Nazi greeting on the occasion of Hitler's fiftieth birthday, he was sent to the camp prison, whence he shouted messages of encouragement to his fellow prisoners. Schneider was murdered in July 1939. Following a short biography indicating that the pastor was a Christian and was murdered by the SS, the testimony of Hasso Grabner, a communist resistance fighter, followed: "I often talked with Walter Stöcker about Pastor Schneider and remember quite well the words of warm-hearted appreciation that he, the communist Reichstag deputy, found for the Christian martyr."³⁸ The curators had decided that, rather than providing concrete details about Schneider's actions, they would offer insights into the way prominent communists viewed the so-called preacher of Buchenwald. The preponderance of communist resistance fighters' perspectives meant that some important facts were undermined or ignored, as a closer look at the

36 See Buchenwald Archives, *Gestaltungsbuch* Teil 3.

37 For an English translation, see footnote 32 above.

38 Buchenwald Archives, *Gestaltungsbuch* Teil 2. Walter Stöcker, who led the KPD parliamentary group in the Reichstag from 1924 to 1929, was imprisoned in various concentration camps from 1933. From 1937 on he was in Buchenwald, where he died of typhus in March 1939.

representation of the war's end in section 6.3 indicated. This section dealt with "Die letzten Tage vor der Selbstbefreiung des Konzentrationslagers Buchenwald",³⁹ where the focus was set upon the introductory text on the preparation for "self-liberation", which appeared as an uprising that saved the lives of 21.000 inmates.⁴⁰ The visitors were then given examples of the self-liberation thesis (some of the weapons that were smuggled in after the bombing of the Gustloff factories and the radios secretly built by resistance fighters).⁴¹ Stories that did not fit the anti-fascist narrative were left aside (including that of the inmates who did not belong to the international committee and the American soldiers whose proximity to the camp forced the SS to flee).

After 1989: Towards a more balanced representation of resistance

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the German reunification in 1990, the political context of the memorial changed drastically. In short, the memorial lost its credibility as it was regarded as a symbol of the GDR; the staff were regularly described as an "SED clique"⁴² in the press and the exhibition was heavily criticised for focusing on the camp's communist led-resistance.⁴³ To resolve this crisis of legitimacy, the state of Thuringia, which oversaw the administration of the memorial after the reunification

39 In English: "The last days before the self-liberation of Buchenwald".

40 The introductory text stated that "the final stage of the resistance in the camp is characterised by the struggle to delay the evacuation of Buchenwald and the self-liberation of the inmates. As a result of the courageous delaying tactics of the political inmates in the camp administration – along with the efforts of the international camp committee and the illegal military organisation that made preparations for the uprising – 21.000 inmates were saved from evacuation". See Buchenwald Archives, *Gestaltungsbuch* Teil 4.

41 Visitors learnt about the leaders and the structure of the international military organisation in section 5.6. See Buchenwald Archives, *Dokumentation der Historischen Ausstellg.* 12.4.1985. 18.9.1994.

42 See Volkhard Knigge, "Buchenwald", in *Erinnerungsorte der DDR*, ed. Martin Sabrow (München: Beck, 2009), 116–25; Zimmer, *Der Buchenwald-Konflikt*.

43 These criticisms can be found in the museum's guest book. For instance, an English-speaking visitor stated in July 1991 that "the exhibit is extremely well done, however, it is still dominated by Communist propaganda and much is incorrect. Hopefully, this will be corrected". See Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, ed., *Jahresinformation der Gedenkstätte Buchenwald 1991* (Weimar-Buchenwald: 1992), 65.

treaty, chose not to fire the staff⁴⁴ but to create an independent advisory commission.⁴⁵ The commission, which was assigned the task of scientifically formulating justified guidelines for the reorientation of the memorial, advocated a redesign of the camp museum to guarantee an “appropriate representation of the fate of the diverse groups of victims [and] the correct representation of resistance”.⁴⁶ Following this recommendation, the memorial staff developed a concept for the redesign of the exhibition and presented a plan in February 1994. The museum was no longer to be a tool to convey simple political messages and an anti-fascist narrative; rather, it would aim to narrate “the story of crimes against humanity”⁴⁷ and make it possible for visitors to engage individually with the Nazi past.⁴⁸ To achieve this goal, the new exhibition was conceived as an open archive where the introductory and explanatory texts were kept at a bare minimum; artefacts were now to be at the core and visitors were encouraged to offer their own interpretations.⁴⁹ The abstract also suggested the division of the museum into six chapters “deal[ing] with the people, structures, actions, and fates of the perpetrators, the victims, and a society of accomplices that determined the history of Buchenwald concentration camp”.⁵⁰ The first part was dedicated to the general context, the next four presented the history of the camp chronologically and the last focused on the post-war era. After the abstract was approved by members of the historical commission, the memorial employees fleshed out their conceptualisation by elaborating an exhibition script between spring 1994 and the beginning of 1995.⁵¹ The redesigned

44 According to Volkhard Knigge, director of the Buchenwald Memorial between 1994 and 2020, nobody was fired after the fall of the Berlin Wall, apart from employees who had worked with the East German political police. See Volkhard Knigge, “Ich vermisse die Aufbruchstimmung der 90er’. Hanno Müller im Gespräch mit Volkhard Knigge über Arbeitserfahrungen in Weimar-Buchenwald”, in *Geschichte als Verunsicherung. Konzeptionen für ein historisches Begreifen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Axel Dofmann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2020), 469.

45 The commission comprised eleven West German experts (primarily historians); it was chaired by the Nazi history specialist Eberhard Jäckel.

46 Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, ed., *Zur Neuorientierung der Gedenkstätte Buchenwald. Die Empfehlungen der vom Minister für Wissenschaft und Kunst des Landes Thüringen berufenen Historikerkommission* (Weimar-Buchenwald: 1992), 10.

47 Stein, *Konzeption*, 4.

48 *Ibid.*, 6.

49 *Ibid.*, 6–7.

50 *Ibid.*, 11.

51 In 1991/1992, the historians’ commission called for the creation of a foundation to administer the memorial. From 1993 to the beginning of 1994, several of its members took part in debates on the creation of this foundation. Subsequently, in April 1994, the Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora

museum was inaugurated in the storage depot (i.e. the same place as the previous exhibition) in April 1995 – the 50th anniversary of Buchenwald’s liberation.

To offer what the historians’ commission called a “correct representation” of resistance, the topic was given lesser prominence. While the titles of around a dozen of the thirty-one sections dealing with Buchenwald’s history in the previous exhibition referred explicitly to resistance, the ratio was now two out of sixteen (section 3.5 on “Selbstbehauptung und Widerstand” and section 4.7 on “Überlebensstrategien und Widerstand”).⁵² Furthermore, the two above-mentioned sections from the 1995 exhibition were not dedicated solely to the resistance organised by the German communists; they also presented acts of protest or solidarity by individuals and non-communist groups. For instance, in section 3.5, Pastor Schneider’s story was depicted in greater detail than in 1985; visitors could now view an SS report and two survivor testimonies (from Leonhard Steinwender, a political inmate from Austria who knew Schneider and Ernst Cramer, a Jewish prisoner who had heard Schneider shouting words of encouragement from his cell).⁵³ Schneider’s life in Buchenwald and the significance of his actions for other deportees were documented in the redesigned museum using perspectives other than those of communist resistance fighters; this was the outcome of the intensive work the memorial staff had carried out in the first half of the 1990s. Schneider’s case was not the only example of individual resistance; visitors were told of the story of a Jewish inmate named Edmund Hamber, who was murdered after protesting the murder of his brother by the SS.⁵⁴ As was stated above, the exhibition also detailed cases of resistance stemming from non-communist groups. Section 4.7 presented, among other things, the so-called People’s Front Committee, which was created in August 1944 by the Social Democrat Hermann Brill to consider what a post-war Germany should look like.⁵⁵ While these examples revealed the efforts undertaken by the memorial staff to emphasise the diversity of resistance, they only took into account acts of

Memorials Foundation was established. See Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, ed., *Jahresinformation der Gedenkstätte Buchenwald 1994* (Weimar-Buchenwald: 1995), 34.

52 In English: “Self-preservation and resistance” and “Survival strategies and resistance”. See Buchenwald Archive, *Gestaltungsbuch* Teil 1, and *Drehbuch* (no pagination).

53 Buchenwald Archive, *Drehbuch*.

54 Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, *Begleitband*, 130.

55 *Ibid.*, 214–15.

protest or solidarity that occurred in the main camp; women's resistance was excluded.⁵⁶

After shedding light on other forms of resistance, sections 3.5 and 4.7 dealt with the solidarity shown towards Jewish prisoners in the first years of the camp and towards Soviet prisoners of war in October 1941, with the creation of the international camp committee and of the military organisation, as well as with the rescue of children and British secret service agents.⁵⁷ It is striking that most of these topics had been broached in the previous exhibition.

The presentation of these elements of the camp's history was, however, quite different from 1985, as proven by the introductory text to the passage on the children's rescue: "By setting up two barracks for children – block 8 (1943) and block 66 in the Small Camp (1945) – at least some of the children and young people in the main camp were saved, in shielded areas, from heavy forced labour, and they survived."⁵⁸ This raised two issues: first, the role of the resistance organisation was, because of the use of the passive, not explicitly underlined, which gave the impression that the memorial staff had downplayed the role of the communist resistance in their attempt not to over-emphasise it;⁵⁹ and secondly, the formulation "at least some" suggested that the resistance fighters could only help a small minority of fellow inmates.⁶⁰ The ambiguity and the difficulty of the decision as to who was to be saved in a world ruled by the SS were made even clearer in the subsection dealing with the rescue of the three British intelligence officers. The visitors were able to read a passage from *SS State*, a book

56 Buchenwald opened in 1937 as a camp for male inmates. Aside from the dozens of women forced to perform sex in the brothel, all the prisoners in the main camp were men. However, around 27.000 women were interned between 1944 and 1945 in sub-camps administered by the camp. According to survivor testimonies, some of these women led the resistance, for instance, by individually or collectively sabotaging war production. See Irmgard Seidel, "Weibliche Häftlinge des KZ Buchenwald in der deutschen Rüstungsindustrie", in *Die Frauen des KZ Buchenwald*, ed. Lagerarbeitsgemeinschaft Buchenwald-Dora e.V. (2016), 69–72.

57 See Buchenwald Archive, *Drehbuch*.

58 Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, *Begleitband*, 215–16.

59 As Bill Niven has pointed out, this was not the only occurrence. See Bill Niven, "Redesigning the landscape of memory at Buchenwald. Trends and problems", in *Rückblick und Revision. Die DDR im Spiegel der Enquete-Kommission*, ed. Peter Barker (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 168.

60 The vitrine on the children's rescue included testimony from Willi Bleicher, kapo of the storage depot, regarding his decision to do everything in his power to protect Stefan Jerzy Zweig. For unknown reasons, even though they appeared to know about Zweig's salvation, the memorial staff did not take the opportunity to mention the practice of name swapping. See Buchenwald Archive, *Drehbuch*.

written by the Catholic resistance fighter Eugen Kogon. In his description of name swapping, Kogon referred to the choice of the officers who were to be saved and their comrades who were to be executed as “a tragic moment”.⁶¹ Meanwhile, the subsection dedicated to the self-administration system (in section 3.2, “*Barrackendasein*”),⁶² revealed other dimensions of the ambiguities of resistance. For example, it presented an excerpt from the testimony of Austrian Social Democrat Benedikt Kautsky: “For the prisoners who took part in the camp administration, there was a constant series of problems that were difficult to solve because they had to take and carry out orders from the SS.”⁶³ Not only did section 3.2 shed light on the role of the prisoner functionaries as SS executioners, it also depicted the privileges enjoyed by those who held such positions in the self-administration system. The curators used sources that were located in 1992 in the East German party archives documenting hearings organised by the SED in 1946/47 to investigate the behaviour of the communist prisoner functionaries.⁶⁴ Franz Dobermann explained in October 1946 that “the notables had more than enough to eat and to booze, while others starved”.⁶⁵ The dichotomy between “notables” and “others” suggested the existence of a hierarchy among the inmates and indicated that hunger (not resistance) was the principal concern amongst most prisoners.

That resistance was depicted as one of the many dimensions of Buchenwald’s history was confirmed in an analysis of the representation of the events of April 1945. Chapter 5 on the camp’s end dealt first with the perspective of non-communist prisoners (i.e. inmates who were not part of the international resistance organisation), which enabled the curators to pay closer attention to the subject of evacuation transports from Buchenwald than before.⁶⁶ The camp committee’s actions were still portrayed through a

61 Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, *Begleitband*, 216.

62 In English: “Barrack life”.

63 Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, *Begleitband*, 99.

64 These documents were at the core of the so-called red kapo controversy. In 1994, the tabloid *Bild* published excerpts from the hearings (without providing any context). It gave the impression that the communist prisoner functionaries collaborated with the SS to save their necks and, rather than helping their following inmates, committed crimes against them. See Zimmer, *Der Buchenwald-Konflikt*, 181–82.

65 Because this quote was difficult to translate, the German original is also provided here: “Die ganze Prominenz hatte reichlich zu fressen und zu saufen, während andere hungerten”. Buchenwald Archive, *Drehbuch*.

66 *Ibid.*

display of the secretly-built radios and the flag of the French brigade within the illegal military organisation, but the role of the US army was also taken into account (in the form of testimonies of American soldiers describing their arrival in the camp).⁶⁷ Thus, the redesigned exhibition presented a “liberation from inside and outside” narrative,⁶⁸ wherein the camp committee’s actions were recognised to have been otherwise impossible had the SS not fled.

Conclusion

The case of the Buchenwald Memorial shows that the fall of the Berlin Wall triggered important memorial transformations that impacted the representation of resistance in the exhibition. Under the GDR, resistance tended to be reduced to that of a collective fight led by communist inmates, flawless heroes using their functions within the prisoner administration to help the weakest groups of prisoners and organise the self-liberation of the camp. The end of the communist system in East Germany made it both possible and necessary to break away from this simplistic anti-fascist narrative and develop a more nuanced representation of resistance at the museum. After 1989, the moral ambiguities of resistance were indeed addressed through precise descriptions of the self-administration system and the privileges it bestowed. Moreover, while the merits and the role of the international resistance organisation were not denied, forms of protest or solidarity by individuals as well as non-communist groups were also depicted, thus offering a more comprehensive picture of resistance. Finally, the exhibition made clear that the majority of the prisoners had nothing to do with organised resistance. Because the museum presented such a complex image of resistance, it was difficult to understand, especially for young visitors who did not have a great deal of prior knowledge on the camp’s history. When the memorial staff redesigned the exhibition in the 2010s, they therefore chose to make it more comprehensible. They still placed objects at the core of the exhibitions and underlined the different forms of resistance (while depicting their ambiguities), but they took great care to provide

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

more context and interpretative markers.⁶⁹ The question of how an exhibition is understood by the public could be interesting for further research: How do visitors perceive the presentation of resistance in the exhibition? What do they keep in mind, what not? Are they able to grasp complexities and ambiguities, or do they prefer to find simple answers? To what extent do visitors understand that the existence of an international camp committee in Buchenwald was a unique feature in comparison to other Nazi concentration camps? The question of visitor perceptions could be investigated through interviews, questionnaires and the analysis of entries in the exhibition guest book.

69 For an overview of the new exhibition see: Zofia Wóycicka, "Buchenwald revisited", *Cultures of History Forum*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.25626/0080>.

WER IST WALTER?

Resistance against Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration occurred throughout Europe during World War II. But how much do we know about this history in other European countries? Gathering 32 contributions and case studies on the history of this resistance, as well as on its transmission after 1945, especially in museums, the present book is an invitation to look at resistance in Europe in an interdisciplinary, international, transnational and comparative perspective. It is the result of the international research project “Wer ist Walter? Resistance against Nazism in Europe” which gathered historians, curators and other researchers mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany.



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