Creating a Museum of the People’s History: The German Democratic Republic’s Museum for German History

David Marshall, *University of California, Riverside*

The following is a synopsis of my dissertation on the former East German *Museum für Deutsche Geschichte* (*MfDG*). This paper is an updated dissertation prospectus and introduction to my research, most of which has been completed. It contains examples of my main sources, an analysis of my proposed chapters, my historiographical concerns, and general questions posed by my work. My objective is for readers to understand where I currently am in my research and what I wish this project to accomplish.

My goals for this project are ambitious. I have extensive data on the *MfDG*'s presentation of the East German anti-fascist myth, one that viewed the entirety of German history as an ongoing struggle between the workers and peasants, and those who oppressed them. Because of this I will discuss the German Democratic Republic’s (GDR) version of the German past; however, I do not intend to write another version of the anti-fascist myth. This has already been done. My work focuses more on the museum’s version and presentation of German history. There is a difference between writing about the actual content in the museum’s exhibitions and judging how they were presented to the audience. To address this, the middle three chapters examine how the museum’s exhibitions presented the German past. With the uses of pictures, these chapters will provide an idea of the content of selected exhibitions and the images that were shown to the visitors. However, there is not enough space to analyze the content of all my material and provide details of every exhibition. Therefore in my fourth chapter I have selected a display that focused on one of the most important periods in the museum’s version of German history, and concentrated on its layout. This chapter describes the structure of the exhibition and its images. Together with the other two middle chapters it explains the museum organizers’ version of the German past and how they communicated their message to the many visitors to the *MfDG* throughout its existence.

There are several issues for this project to address. The ideological division between east and west, and within the two post-war German states strongly influenced the museum’s presentation of German history. My work will also contribute to a greater understanding of the GDR, given that the *MfDG* was the major historical museum of East Germany, and presented the regime’s version of the German past. It is estimated that several hundred thousand people visited the museum each year. Children were an important focus for the museum’s
pedagogical division; the MfDG saw itself as a critical component in the teaching of German history to the youth of the GDR.3 I will also address the ongoing debate over the meaning of the German past, and seek to integrate my research in the field of History and Memory. How the Holocaust has shaped the understanding of the German past has been a critical part of the expanding research on History and Memory. Finally there is an art historical aspect to my work. As I mentioned above, I am working on a museum; therefore I can not overlook the importance of how the Museum für Deutsche Geschichte iconographically presented the German past to its visitors.

From 1952-1990 the MfDG was the central historical museum of the German Democratic Republic. The museum presented a Marxist interpretation of the past, which viewed the GDR as the result and positive triumph of the many struggles experienced by the German people over centuries. Nazism was the culmination of the negative historical forces within Germany and the western world. The GDR, created by “anti-fascist forces,” freed the people from the burden of their past. Because of this, the weight of history placed on the Federal Republic could be ignored by the “anti-Fascist regime.” Instead, the GDR "reclaimed" the German past, by locating the MfDG in the old Prussian armory building (Zeughaus), which had previously symbolized German imperialism and militarism. By housing the Marxist version of the past there, the Zeughaus, it was claimed, had a "positive" function for the first time in its existence. The viewers were supposed to recognize and understand the centuries of struggle that culminated in the establishment of a socialist democracy. This version of history changed shortly after the fall of the East German regime, when the Federal Republic inherited the MfDG and the Zeughaus. Once the German Historical Museum, which was being created in the late 1980s as a response to the East German museum, took control, both the permanent and temporary exhibits changed rapidly and assumed an entirely different character.4

Inside the Zeughaus, and at its earlier, temporary location on Clara-Zetkin-Straße, the museum created and maintained a standing and numerous narrowly focused special exhibitions on German history.5 The purpose of the standing exhibition was to show the viewer the conflict throughout history, between the “progressive” and “reactionary” forces of Germany. This struggle culminated in the establishment of the German Democratic Republic in 1949. The special exhibits throughout the museum’s history were to augment the standing exhibition. The permanent and temporary exhibitions presented German history through a narrow lens, focusing on important events in the struggle of the peasants and progressive workers. Considerable amounts of information were, of course, omitted; for example the compliance of the German people in the rise of Hitler and in the holocaust. There was little information representing women’s history and even less on Jews. Until the 1980s significant figures, such as Bismarck,
were viewed one-dimensionally because they were seen as agents of Germany’s reactionary past. This sharply contrasted from the way German history would be depicted after the Federal Republic’s German Historical Museum assumed control in 1990. Its initial objective was to correct these oversights. A result of this process has been the removal of the German Historical Museum’s Marxist perspective from having any significant influence in the debate on German historical identity. Lost has been a major version of history. Visitors no longer have the opportunity to view important aspects of the East German view, e.g., the struggles of the peasants, the history of the working class, and the Marxist interpretation of the negative consequences of imperialism, capitalism and fascism.

Work on a permanent exhibition began in 1953, and continued throughout the museum’s existence. Although a complete display existed from the beginning, it was constantly revised and expanded. The initial permanent exhibit, which opened in the museum’s temporary home on Clara-Zetkin-Strasse, presented a history of the Germanic peoples, from their migration in Central Europe through 1848. A temporary exhibition on Marx complemented the permanent display. The latter presented the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to show the viewer the final stages of the working class’ struggle against its oppressors. The struggle, inspired by Thomas Müntzer in the sixteenth century, and resumed by Marx and Engels, culminated in the establishment of the GDR. In the permanent and Marx exhibitions, quotations from respected party leaders and socialist icons, such as Marx, Engels and Lenin, explained the historical material. The viewers could read selected passages of Marx, Engels and Lenin’s important works. They could see pictures, paintings and statues of socialist icons, along with numerous other historical objects. The route through the Marx exhibition ended at a bust of Stalin, and example of how he had been elevated to an iconic level. Stalin’s representation would change over the next decade.

In 1952 the first parts of the museum’s permanent exhibition were opened in the museum’s temporary location on Clara-Zetkin-Straße. In its earlier years the museum divided the German past into the following segments: prehistory, the Middle Ages, 1517-1848, 1848-1895, 1895-1918, 1918-1945 and contemporary history. These divisions remained relatively intact for many years, with only the sections devoted to prehistory and the early bourgeois revolution (Die frühbügerliche Revolution) receiving significant changes. As the permanent display began moving into the Zeughaus in 1962, some of its divisions underwent a facelift. The most serious was the creation of a 1789-1871 section. My evidence indicates that after 1962 the divisions covering history before 1789 remained relatively intact, while those covering twentieth-century history underwent several revisions. The final revisions appeared in 1981; visitors in the
last decade of the museum’s existence would encounter divisions on prehistory, 500-1789, 1789-1917, 1917-1945, and 1945-present.

Significant turning points were obviously important in the museum’s presentation of the German past. The relevance of 1945 did not change over the years, while almost every other critical date seems to have become less important. In the early years of the museum’s existence, it was more concerned with German nationalism. Because of this, the *MfDG* placed greater emphasis on Martin Luther’s 1517 attack on the Catholic Church, the French Revolution, the Revolutions of 1848 and the end of the First World War. After 1970 the museum became more interested in questions of international socialism, which were reflected in the revisions of 1981. Obviously the *MfDG* continued to exhibit German history; its main concern, however, was to orient the German past within the international socialist movement. This was reflected most in the transformation of the 1789-1871 division into a 1789-1917 division. In the earlier one, the French Revolution inspired a struggle for German unification, that would culminate in the 1871 founding of the Reich. In the latter, the French Revolution began an international movement, which would culminate in the Russian Revolution of 1917. German history from 1789-1917 was analyzed within this framework.7

As mentioned above, the permanent exhibition was silent on many subjects. However, it displayed some important aspects of German history not found in the temporary exhibits. Although influenced strongly by the overall narrative, the standing exhibition provided the only opportunity for viewers to learn about the accomplishments of Goethe, Schiller, Bach, Leibnitz, and other German contributors to science and culture. Displays of their achievements were subordinated to the permanent exhibition’s overall narrative of struggle between the workers and those who oppressed them. The museum also used the works of these giants as examples of German bourgeois culture, even when this stretched the imagination. For example, Heinrich von Kleist, one of the premier German writers of the early nineteenth century, was not primarily concerned with criticizing the Prussian judiciary in his play, *der Zechbrochene Krug*. It is also difficult to believe that Bach and Beethoven were as indebted to *Volksmusik*, as the standing exhibition wished its viewers to believe. Goethe was certainly not an advocate of the rising bourgeoisie. Nevertheless these men had to be inserted into the narrative, as omitting them would have made the standing exhibition less credible.8

The special exhibitions were more narrowly focused. There were unashamedly political tributes to the museum’s important patrons, such as *SED* leaders Otto Grotewohl, Wilhelm Pieck and Walther Ulbricht. There were other exhibits that highlighted eras and events critical to the East German anti-fascist myth. Several temporary exhibits focused on the Reformation and German Peasants’ War. This
was the period of Luther’s attack on the Catholic Church; according to the anti-fascist myth, the middle class revolution originated during these years. The museum proudly displayed considerable material on Thomas Müntzer and the German Peasants’ War, a critical moment in the struggle of the people against their oppressors. Müntzer, their leader, was more than a nationalist unifier; the MfDG felt he advocated the equivalent of a “proto-communist” society, and was thus turned into an icon and early hero of the people’s struggle.9 There were plenty of opportunities to “see” his activities. He had an entire wall dedicated to him, where viewers could see, for example, a map detailing his travels, paintings of him, and a copy of one of his letters.

The special exhibitions also examined Marx, Engels and the working class movement of the nineteenth century. The struggle, which began under Müntzer, resumed in the mid nineteenth century, through the activities of Marx and Engels. Some exhibits concentrated on the successful Russian Revolution of 1917 and the failed German attempt of the following year. Lenin was practically beatified in one exhibit, and in the early years, Stalin received considerable praise.10 An aspect of these exhibits is the conflict over leadership of the class struggle; this would culminate first in the establishment of the Social Democratic Party, and then in the creation of the German communist party. The latter was critical to the anti-fascist struggle, especially because of the 1918 split between the German Socialist and Communist parties. Anti-Social Democratic rhetoric was prevalent, since the museum portrayed them as traitors. For example the Social Democratic Party supported war credits in 1914. In 1919 they were accused of siding with the conservatives against the revolutionaries. They refused to join a unified front with the communists against National Socialism until it was too late; after the Second World War, the Social Democrats aligned with the Americans and German “conservatives.” Through the use of political posters from the early 1930s, for example, the museum enabled viewers to “see” that the German Communist Party, the forerunners of the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED), was the only party that fought hard for the people against capitalism and National Socialism. It received sole credit for the victory over fascism.

Several special exhibitions contained sharp Cold War rhetoric, especially regarding West Germany. They portrayed a dangerous time of East-West struggle over the future of Germany and the world. West Germany was a revanchist power, and a front for the imperialist American led capitalist powers against the communist world. Everything wrong with the modern German past reappeared in West Germany after 1949. The Federal Republic was the creation of the capitalists; it was a belligerent power, headed by former Nazi officials, who would allegedly take all necessary measures to (re) conquer the eastern territories. Berlin was the major battleground. It was portrayed as an unstable city, full of CIA and West German spies, who would stop at nothing in their
attempts to undermine the GDR. Murder and sabotage were common, necessitating the construction of the Berlin Wall. This was an alleged act of peace; it halted the dangerous activities of the west, and enabled the GDR to concentrate on its social advancements without the constant threat of counter-revolutionary activity.\textsuperscript{11}

The standing and temporary exhibitions contained a combination of written material, historical objects, paintings and pictures. All were integrated into the exhibitions; although it seemed as if viewers were expected to read while walking through the displays, they had plenty of opportunity to “see” history. Puppets were used to explain the difference between social classes of the sixteenth century. There were recreations of the daily lives of peasants and proletariat, such as a room showing the living conditions of Silesian Weavers in 1844. There was considerable weaponry. One early special exhibition was dedicated to the historical development of uniforms and weapons from early human conflicts through the First World War. The presentation concentrated on the actual weaponry; the viewers could see the swords, spears, and suits of armor, along with reproductions of catapults and canons. There were large paintings of historical events, such as the 1830 Hambacher Fest. There was even the equivalent of a shrine to the Communist Manifesto in the \textit{Karl Marx Ausstellung 1953}. Large block letters on the wall declared “Proletarier aller Länder vereint Euch.” Between a bust of Marx on the left, and one of Engels on the right, the museum displayed an original copy of the Communist Manifesto under glass. Wreaths rested on the ground in front of the manifesto. The lighting on the Manifesto and surrounding busts of Marx and Engels made it seem as if this was a holy book, and that viewing it would be equivalent to a religious experience.

One of the questions I address is how the hundreds of thousands of visitors processed the version of German history presented in the standing and temporary exhibitions.\textsuperscript{12} Because of the available material, I can only provide a partial answer to this question. My evidence comes from a combination of visitor statistics, newspaper reviews, interviews and guest books. All journal articles and newspaper reviews were published in the official GDR media; their criticisms of the museum were always within the socialist framework.\textsuperscript{13} The most interesting evidence on “reception” comes from remnants of the guest books. They surprised me because there were some serious critiques of the museum’s presentation. The majority of the “capitalist” criticism came, however, from anonymous West German students. East German visitors seemed much less likely to express negative opinions of the museum, although some did claim that the history was a bit “one-sided.”\textsuperscript{14}

My other sources consist of display catalogs, official museum papers, and picture albums of certain exhibitions. I found more papers than picture albums in the archives. The former consisted of letters, articles and reviews by the
museum’s first director, protocol of the meetings of the executive committee, exposés and theses of the exhibitions, and early important documents, such as the museum’s basic guidelines. Although all of these were valuable, detailed picture albums were more thorough sources. These were more extensive than display catalogs, providing a written and photographic account of the entire layout of the exhibition, with less editing than the published material. Picture albums were by far the best means to determine how the MfDG presented its version of history.

The printed material included the political writings of Professor Alfred Meusel, first director of the museum. They provide important insight into the MfDG’s Cold War activities, showing his role in the East German regime’s attempt to define itself as a legitimate German state. Not only was the GDR the more legitimate of the two post war German regimes, it was allegedly the one dedicated to peace. Several of Meusel’s papers proclaim the GDR as the sole German representative of the peace loving, anti-imperialist socialist nations. His writings demonstrate a fear that the actions of the western nations, including Konrad Adenauer’s Federal Republic of Germany, will lead to a German civil war and a third world war. They show his participation in the inter-German discussions on reunification, and how he believed this should be based upon Germany’s humanist tradition. This would enable the dedicated, peace-loving peoples, and he includes the “anti-imperialists” living under western German control, to determine their future, and prevent the disaster that befell Carthage after the Third Punic War, i.e., its destruction.15

I analyze the museum’s entire history, but focus much of my attention on its first twenty years. As I have indicated above, the museum’s perspective changed over the years. Its outlook can be divided into approximately two periods, with some overlap between them. The temporary exhibitions show that 1970 does not form the tightest boundary between the museum’s earlier concentration on German nationalism and later orientation towards international socialism. There is considerable evidence of the importance placed on German-Soviet relations in the earlier exhibitions, especially 1958’s Oktoberrevolution. Not all the post-1970 special exhibitions oriented German history within the international socialist movement; one particular example is 1987’s Berlin 1871-1945 – an examination of Berlin during these years. However, there is a difference between pre and post 1970 special exhibitions. Those that appeared before 1970 tended to contain harsher rhetoric on the inter-German divide. They also placed more emphasis on national unification, criticizing Bismarck’s imperialism and militarism, but presenting a positive interpretation of his achieving a unified Germany. These views changed after 1970; the museum became more interested in promoting a separate GDR historical identity, and less concerned with proving which was the more legitimate German state.
The availability of evidence is one reason why my work focuses on the first twenty years of the museum’s existence. The archives contain a large amount of material on the permanent and temporary exhibitions. The majority of this, however, is in written exposés; there are fewer picture albums of the exhibitions. The percentage of pre-1970 special exhibitions with picture albums is greater than those after 1970, giving me better visual evidence of the museum’s first twenty years of activity. From this material I can construct a chapter on the temporary exhibitions between 1953-1969, and examine the development of and changes in the museum’s version of the anti-fascist myth. This chapter would begin with “Karl Marx Ausstellung 1953”, concentrate on the following two exhibits: “20. Jahrestag der Befreiung” (1965) and Revolutionäre Taten, Revolutionäre Traditionen (1969), and include the other, relevant temporary displays. I have picture albums of the Karl Marx and “20. Jahrestag” exhibitions. Not only was the former the museum’s first special exhibition, it reflected the political atmosphere of the early 1950s. “20. Jahrestag” appeared at the peak of the ideological struggle with the west. Anti-west German rhetoric was especially nasty in this display; the tone would change considerably afterwards. The 1969 exhibition Revolutionäre Taten displayed the efforts of so-called revolutionary GDR youth to discover their rural socialist heritage. It shows how the presentation of the anti-fascist myth changed after 1953; the rhetoric was much calmer. This exhibit appears to be a turning point to the museum’s newer perspective of the 1970s.

Although the bulk of my dissertation focuses on 1952-1970, I will not overlook post-1970 museum activity. One of the most interesting questions of the many exhibitions is how the examination of 1789-1871/1917 was changed over the years. There is some visual evidence of the presentation of these years in an album of the early standing exhibition, along with written material on the 1517-1848 and 1789-1871 divisions that appeared in 1952 and 1962 respectively. The available evidence does not indicate major changes. There is an intact picture album of 1981’s 1789-1917 division. This provides detailed visual evidence of the changes after 1970, and serves as a useful comparison with the earlier accounts of these years. I will discuss the 1789-1917 division, along with representative and available post 1970 special exhibitions, and in either this same chapter or an epilogue, conclude with some thoughts on how the new German Historical Museum has changed the museological presentation of German history after taking over in 1990 for the MfDG.

Although I am still mulling over my final conclusions, I have a few initial ones to share about the material within the MfDG and its presentation. The most serious and controversial involve the nature of the Holocaust, and the role of the German people in the rise of Nazism and destruction of Europe’s Jewish people. According to the museum’s narrative, the German people were victims of
Nazism. They were as oppressed as all other victims of Fascism. Fascism was the final attempt of the capitalists to stop the growing revolutionary activity among the working classes, and the fascists did everything necessary to defeat their enemies. This involved concentration camps, torture and murder. No one, other than the communists supported the average German worker.

The exhibits “show” that capitalists were responsible for the rise of Hitler. During his years in power, especially once Germany shifted to a war economy, the major corporations profited handsomely. This included the firms that benefited from slave labor during the war, and from delivering gas to the death camps. Each exhibition provided the attentive viewer with plenty of statistics to support these contentions.\(^{16}\)

Resistance to fascism was high among the Germans; it was led by the communists and inspired by the Soviet Red Army.\(^{17}\) Although there was considerable loss of life in the concentration camps, these were mainly represented as centers for heroic resistance to fascism. Resistance was inspired by and increased after the Red Army’s valiant defense of the Soviet Union. In some concentration camps, the prisoners eventually freed themselves without assistance from the outside world. Numerous statistics on the actions of the communist resistance, including the many individuals who gave their lives in fighting the Fascist enemy, were available for the attentive viewer.

The most trustworthy and helpful friend of the German people was the Soviet Union. This was demonstrated first in the 1922 Treaty of Rapallo, when the Russians broke the diplomatic isolation surrounding Germany. The Russians again showed how two political systems could coexist peacefully when, in 1939, they negotiated their “non-aggression” pact with Hitler. The darkest day in German history, and the worst crime experienced by the Germans was when their leadership broke this pact and attacked Soviet Russia.\(^{18}\) The Holocaust was included briefly in this discussion, but the album seemed to indicate that Hitler’s violating the German-Soviet pact was a greater crime. Despite this attack and its horrific consequences, in 1945 the Soviet Union again demonstrated its goodwill towards Germany, by providing necessary supplies to its vanquished enemy, and assisting them in creating a just and fair socialist society.\(^{19}\)

Another conclusion the Museum hoped its visitors would form was based upon Cold War polemics. East Germany was the peace-loving state, dedicated to improving the lives of its people. Konrad Adenauer’s West Germany was little different its Nazi predecessor. Imperialism and capitalism had been restored in the Federal Republic, resulting in the same powers that influenced Nazi Germany controlling the economic and political decisions in Bonn. Whereas East Germany had conducted an intensive land reform campaign, which finally restored the land to the peasants who had lost it centuries ago, powerful landowners still ruled over their estates in the west. The Federal Republic sided with the American
imperialists and helped prevent German reunification. All peaceful proposals to reunite the German states were rebuffed. Worst among all the anti-progressive actions of West Germany was the ability of former Nazis to regain prominent positions in business and politics.

Cold War polemics are clear in the exhibition 20. Jahrestag der Befreiung. Three sections show continuity from Imperial Germany, to the Third Reich, and on to the Federal Republic. The display begins with a picture of the Hohenzollern eagle, and the faces of the “real” powers within Germany. These are the “powerful and insatiable” heads of its major corporations. Statistics showing the profit of these corporations are included in these cases. Further into the display is a picture of the Nazi eagle situated above the “real” powers behind Hitler, who are also “powerful and insatiable.” Viewers were presented with pictures and names of the prominent corporate heads, followed by statistics showing how much each major corporation profited during the Third Reich. Not long after learning of the crimes committed by fascists against humanity, visitors encountered visuals on the creation of West Germany. The eagle of the Federal Republic stood over the “real” powers behind Adenauer. These were the corporate heads, and they were also “powerful and insatiable.” One of these leaders was Chancellor Adenauer. This was a clear message that nothing had changed in the west, and the corporations continued to reign.

20. Jahrestag der Befreiung contains other disturbing images that were influenced by the Cold War. One part of the section on the Second World War presented an image of the German attack on Russia. Pictures of German atrocities against Russians, Poles, and other Slavic peoples were nearby. Adjacent to this was a display case on the Holocaust. However, instead of simply presenting the story of the Holocaust, the exhibition included an indictment against prominent West German figures. Viewers would see images of Auschwitz, the selection ramp, and the atrocities against the Jewish people. Interspersed were pictures of politicians such as Hans Globke, a prominent official appointed by Adenauer. Viewers saw a list of Globke’s writings under Nazism, and his position in the West German government. The objective was for the viewer to conclude that Globke was a criminal against humanity; and the regime, which protected him and other Nazis, had no moral standing, and was an enemy of the working class.

Given his role in authoring the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, Hans Globke probably was justifiably portrayed as being little better than Adolf Eichmann. Globke therefore deserves little sympathy. However, should the Holocaust have been used as a means to morally indict West German officials? Should any display of German history that involves Nazism and the Second World War present the Holocaust for contemporary political purposes? Not only was the Holocaust used to condemn West Germany, the destruction of the European
Jewry was de-emphasized; viewers saw how Jews suffered and died, but they also saw the communist prisoners and the resistance they conducted in the camps. The message was that the Holocaust was an appalling evil; however, the idea of death and destruction, of the systematic elimination of human beings, was weakened in this display.

Some of these initial conclusions, for example the East German interpretation of the Holocaust, and the GDR’s reverence for the Soviet Union, are available in other works. No one, however, has analyzed exhibitions like “20. Jahrestag der Befreiung” or “Oktoverrevolution”, and how they visually communicated their messages to the average 200,000 yearly visitors to the museum. Included among them were school groups of children, who saw the brutal imagery of the holocaust, and linkages between the Nazi murderers and contemporary West German leadership. Through symbols such as imperial German, Nazi, and West German eagles, and other images of the “same” regimes with the same capitalist elite at the top, the MfDG hoped its visitors would notice the historical trends influencing the Federal Republic. “20. Jahrestag der Befreiung” is one example of the efforts the museum took to show its visitors how the Russians “liberated” the East Germans from these same powers who still “controlled” West Germany.

There is a considerable amount of available literature to help me analyze my material. Although other scholarly works have referred to the MfDG, it has never been the subject of a dissertation or a monograph. The only piece that focused on the museum was an article written by H. Glenn Penny for Central European History. This article analyzes the activities of the museum during its entire existence, and compares the museum’s work to its West German successor. Because Penny concluded that the standing exhibition remained relatively unchanged throughout its existence, he focused on the special exhibits, as these were more reflective of the changing political outlook of the MfDG. He uses them to portray a museum concerned with questions of German nationalism during its first twenty years of activity. Reflecting its times and the political shift of the GDR, the museum developed a more internationalist perspective in the 1970s, as themes of socialist brotherhood, especially seen in the ties to the Soviet Union, replaced the MfDG’s inter-German concerns. I found a few problems with certain details of the Penny article, e.g., his use of particular sources and the inability of his analysis to account for an apparent pre-1970 importance given to German-Soviet ties; however, he correctly argues that the museum’s perspective after 1970 had changed. It seemed less concerned with inter-German issues, and more interested in promoting a separate GDR identity. The harsh Cold War rhetoric had vanished; although the Marxist perspective remained, it seemed softer. This has influenced my research, including the information I sought and found, and how I have organized my data.
My examination of the *MfDG* would contribute to the complex struggle over historical memory in Germany. This debate focuses on how National Socialism and the events leading to it should be remembered, how Germans could view their overall history, e.g., whether modern German history began in 1949, and if not, how the previous years should be viewed, and the general identity of the newly reunited Germany. How long must Germans carry the burden of previous generations’ crimes? Are there positive aspects of their past, or has German history been little more than a progression that would culminate in the Third Reich and the Holocaust? American scholars have had little difficulty examining potentially controversial aspects of German history, such as the Prussian Army, the role of the Wehrmacht in the Second World War, Bismarck, and war guilt. However, when some German scholars - such as Andreas Hilgruber and Ernst Nolte - in the mid-1980s began questioning conventional theories of war guilt, and the Holocaust, a vitriolic debate ensued. Conservative historians focused on the losses of the German people after World War II, and some dared to question the singularity of the Holocaust. The leftist response was fierce. Because those on the left had determined the standard, academic interpretation of German history through the 1980s, many were unwilling to accept a more conservative approach. This debate over German historical memory raged into the early 90’s. It has not ended, and the Goldhagen controversy over whether nearly every German before 1945 was inherently anti-Semitic and capable of genocide, inspired considerable passion throughout Germany. Although savaged in the historical community on both sides of the Atlantic, Daniel Goldhagen’s book sold very well. His theories of and approach to the Holocaust, and the response they received, indicate that this struggle over memory will continue for a long time.  

The field of History and Memory continues to grow; its topics include the First World War, and the Holocaust. My data is most applicable to the latter concern. How should German history be remembered and understood in light of the Nazi crimes against humanity? For decades many scholars argued that the Germans repressed their memories of National Socialism, and focused on reconstructing the remnants of their country. This has changed in recent years, as the field of History and Memory has become more popular. Dominick LaCapra, one of the more prolific writers on this subject, has taken a different approach to the repression theory. His work focuses on the psychological problem of working through repressed memories of the National Socialist past. He views the Holocaust as so horrific, that an on-going process of working-through must continue, and that the historian should avoid all means of detaching him or herself from this topic. To write about this, the historian must be engaged in an on-going dialogue with the past.

There are other approaches to the question of history after Auschwitz, and what and how the Germans remembered. Within the growing field of literature on this
subject, the repression argument has been reformulated, as newer works focus on what the Germans remembered after 1945. This debate has taken at least two forms. The majority of studies have considered official forms of memory, while only a few works have analyzed private spheres of remembering. My data fit better into the official realm, as the MfDG was strongly influenced by East German SED. The major recent work on official memory is Jeffrey Herf’s *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*. Herf analyzes both sides of the Cold War German divide, and uncovers political traditions and multiple forms of remembering the German past. His is a useful top-down study; it analyzes memories of the West German Christian Democratic Union and Social Democratic Party, and the East German SED. He discusses official forgetting, especially within the SED. He defines the GDR’s anti-fascist myth, and discusses how the sufferings of the communist resistance during the Holocaust were made equivalent to those of the Jews. No mention, however, is made of the MfDG or how it presented the official SED interpretation of the past.  

Another relevant work is Alan Nothnagle’s *Building the East German Myth: Historical Mythology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989*. For the purpose of my work, Nothnagle complements Herf perfectly. The latter focuses on politics, while Nothnagle examines political culture. Herf analyzes how the East and West German regimes officially remembered the Holocaust; Nothnagle is concerned with the construction and maintenance of a political myth designed to instill loyalty within the East German youth. The anti-fascist tradition is part of his analysis; he uses this to discuss three important aspects of East German identity. According to Nothnagle East Germany never established the necessary balance between national myth and the rules and regulations at the heart of western societies. The emphasis instead was on the former; national identity relied on the continued acceptance of the anti-fascist myth. It had three components. Especially in the early years of the GDR, the people were encouraged to identify with German *Kultur*, that “apolitical” aspect of German culture that allegedly distinguished them from other societies. Goethe and Schiller were among the icons of German *Kultur*; it helped that the DDR inherited Weimar after the Second World War. The second component was the Ernst Thälmann brigade, a youth movement that essentially worshiped Thälmann, a communist martyr under National Socialism. The state encouraged these movements; the one that worshiped Thälmann was the most popular. The final component involved the movement that honored the Soviet Union and stressed the ties of socialist friendship between Russia and Germany. This movement promoted German-Russian friendship; not only was the Soviet Union the best and most trusted friend of the German people, it had liberated them from Nazi tyranny.
There are many other worthy studies of German historical memory. Mary Fulbrook’s work has focused on post-war German history, especially the GDR. *German National Identity after the Holocaust* presents an overview of various forms of commemorations in both Germanys. Fulbrook discusses *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the different means Germans used to confront the past. She looks at sites of memory, such as concentration camps. She discusses key events, such as trials of Nazi criminals, “unpleasant anniversaries” such as the 40th and 50th anniversaries of *Kristallnacht*. She shows how the latter were commemorated on both sides of the German divide. She defines the anti-fascist myth, explains historical writing in the former GDR, and the development of a sense that the GDR was the “good Germany” and that the Nazis were living in the west. She provides an extensive overview of the post-war memory debate in both Germanys; along with defining the East German anti-fascist myth, and its effects on citizens of the GDR, she discusses Holocaust survivors, the ongoing (West) German debate over the meaning of German history – including the *Historikerstreit*, and how East and West viewed the nation. She examines public and private means of commemorating the German past. Fulbrook provides her readers with considerable information on East and West German means of remembering Nazism, the Second World War and the Holocaust; there are numerous references for further reading. However, she never discusses the *Museum für Deutsche Geschichte*.30

Rudy Koshar and Brian Ladd have analyzed architecture and historical preservation. Koshar’s *Germany’s Transient Pasts: Preservation and National Memory in the Twentieth Century* discusses late nineteenth and twentieth-century cultural politics that focused on the value of historical architecture, and analyzes how these contributed to long-standing debates over German national identity. He presents an ongoing struggle over German national identity, one much older than the post-war attempt to understand Germany’s past. It has its roots in the nineteenth century, for example in the movements to finally complete the Cathedral in Cologne, or restore the Teutonic knights’ main castle in Marienburg. German national identity was originally connected with the significance placed on these old buildings; its meaning fluctuated over the years. Remembering Nazism is only a part of this larger discussion on German historical memory.31

Brian Ladd’s *Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* provides the reader with a historical tour of Berlin’s important architectural sites. It is an informative study; as Ladd leads his readers through Berlin, from the Nikolaiviertel to Potsdamer Platz, he highlights the most important monuments. Berlin’s past comes alive in this work, as the reader gains an impression of the historic and modern importance of major sections, such as Unter den Linden. Ladd examines the significance of Berlin’s Prussian
monuments; he also discusses the creations of the Nazis, the East and West German governments, and the wall that divided Cold War Berlin. A reunited city and capital of the new Germany emerges from Ladd’s study. However, this Berlin must still struggle to understand the meaning behind its many sites of memory.  

There are many more works on German historical memory. I have referred to monographs concerned with understanding either the identity of the German nation, or Berlin. That is a key element in these works. Few, however, examine the role of any historical museum, especially in East Germany. Sites of memory are important for an understanding of a national historical identity. Battlefields, concentration camps, churches, and old buildings are essential aspects of the German past. How these have been preserved, before and after 1945, helps understand German identity. What about historical museums? There is a growing literature on German art museums, and a few significant works on historical museums. Some interesting studies have appeared in articles on French museums. A representative example is Benjamin C. Brower’s, “The Preserving Machine: The “New” Museum and Working through Trauma – the Musée Mémorial pour la Paix of Caen.” Brower raises a standard criticism that appears in the literature on museums. He argues that the museum in Caen, whose objective is to provide the viewers with a space to reflect on the horrors of the Second World War, and war in general, hinders this because of its narrative. The museum’s “master narrative” prevents multiple interpretations of this historical subject matter; most people who view the museum’s presentation, at least subconsciously interpret the material based upon what they saw. This provides museum displays with considerable power, and in the case of the Musée Mémorial pour la Paix, limited the resources available to the visitor wanting to “work through” the trauma of war.

Post-war politics in the Federal Republic prevented the construction of an official museum dedicated to all of German history; West German politicians and intellectuals debated the meaning, location and design of the Deutsches Historische Museum for years, finally settling their differences when the GDR fell and the MfDG disbanded. Haus der Geschichte, the historical museum in Bonn, is dedicated to post 1945 history. No one has written a monograph on this either. The Museum für Deutsche Geschichte (MfDG) was active from 1952-1990. It had a standing and many special exhibitions, along with numerous international contacts. It published regularly; its employees were active in the political and intellectual life of the GDR. For example, Professor Alfred Meusel – first director of the museum – participated regularly in the periodic German wide meetings on reunification. The museum, in tandem with the East German SED, worked actively to promote a Marxist interpretation of the German past. How it did this, through its standing and special exhibitions, deserves serious study.
There is one final subfield of growing East German historiography that is relevant to the study of the *MfDG*. Paul Betts and Gregory Wegner have recently published articles on aspects of the growing nostalgia movement in the former East Germany. Both articles examine either practices or symbols of life under the former GDR, which are being maintained after reunification. Wegner’s “In the Shadow of the Third Reich: The Jugendstunde and the Legitimation of Anti-Fascist Heroes for East German Youth,” discusses the maintenance of the former East German *Jugendweihe*, as a means to preserve a rite of passage for their children, and to resist the monopoly of the church. Betts’ “The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture,” shows a growing nostalgia for symbols of East German material culture. Although these were clearly inferior to the goods produced in the west, the represent not only a time when GDR citizens believed in their society, but also something the west can not take from them. A common East German identity is the main argument in both articles. Although the citizens of the former GDR may never have fully accepted the socialist message behind their rituals or material goods, these have been an important part of their identity, one they wish to maintain after “absorption” by the west. The *Museum für Deutsche Geschichte* was also a part of the East German identity. Although the majority of its viewers may not have accepted the museum’s message about the German past, East Germans might want to remember and hold on to the distinct historical identity that their regime created between 1952-1990.\(^{36}\)

These works in the above discussion are only a small percentage of the material that could influence my chapters and guide my dissertation. From them, Alan Nothnagle’s *Building the East German Myth* has been among the most important monographs for my work. He clearly defined three important components of the East German anti-fascist myth and how these were used to instill loyalty among the youth. One of my main objectives is to show how the museum visually presented the friendship between the German and Russian peoples, the third component of the anti-fascist myth. The material on nostalgia will also influence my writing. If there is a growing interest in GDR consumer items as symbols of an Eastern German identity, along with a desire to maintain the former *Jugendweihe*, might there also be an interest in understanding the historical identity created to distinguish East and West Germany between 1952-1990? I am also concerned about the debates on museum master narratives. It is simplistic to argue that the *MfDG* hindered multiple interpretations of its historical material. That was exactly what the *SED* wanted the museum to do. The following quote provides an example.

Das Museum für Deutsche Geschichte hat eine breite propagandistische Aufgabe, d.h. eine Aufgabe der Schulung und Erziehung des deutschen Volkes. Es ist als eine Stätte der Volksbildung im weitesten Sinne des Wortes gedacht und soll dem ganzen deutschen

Professor Harig’s opinion was that of the East German elite; no one disagreed about the overall objective of the museum. Because of this, it is hard for me to be concerned about museum master narratives. The MfDG was an ongoing master narrative. Instead I am more interested in how the MfDG “differed” from its western counterparts. This was a Marxist museum that allegedly belonged to the people. Through it, the people were able to reclaim “their” history. Something therefore should have been fundamentally different.

1 For other portrayals of the anti-fascist myth, please see, for example, Jeffery Herf, Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys, (Cambridge, MA 1997), and Alan Nothnagle, Building the East German Myth: Historical Mythology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989, (Ann Arbor 1999)  
2 I found these my figures in a book of statistics on the MfDG. Please see Deutsches Historisches Museum – Hausarchiv – Bestand: MfDG: Arbeitsmaterial, Ausstellungsübersicht.  
4 There was a serious struggle over the nature of a German Historical Museum to be located in Berlin. This was one aspect of the struggle over memory. It involved what type of German History to display, and where to house the museum. Aldo Rossi had won the design competition, and had planned a futuristic building to house the new German Historical Museum. These plans were scrapped with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the federal republic’s assumption of control over the Museum for German History. For more on this process, see Christoph Stölzl, hg., Deutsches Historisches Museum: Ideen - Kontroversen - Perspektiven, Frankfurt am Main: Propyläen: 1988  
5 The museum’s first location was on Clara-Zetkin-Straße, the current Dorotheanstraße, behind the Humboldt University. The Zeughaus is on Unter den Linden, in the center of East Berlin’s cultural monuments.  
6 Before Müntzer’s era, people were struggling against their oppressors. The East Germans found Müntzer inspiring, because of his message.  
7 Again please see Deutsches Historisches Museum – Hausarchiv – Bestand: MfDG: Arbeitsmaterial, Ausstellungsübersicht.
I discuss this in my second chapter. For sources, please see something I have designated as *Museum für Deutsche Geschichte, Albums of the early standing exhibition*, book two. These were unmarked and caption-less photo albums I found. I was able to determine their origin.

For example, please see *Der Grosse Deutsche Bauernkrieg* (The Great German Peasants’ War) A66/1101

The earlier exhibits of the 1950s praise Stalin’s “genius.” Later ones hardly mention him. The exhibition “Karl Marx Ausstellung 1955” (Karl Marx exhibition, 1955) A55/3881a, contains many quotes from Stalin. The number adjacent to the “A” after each title is the year in which the exhibition was archived.

I have periodically encountered the need to read another perspective on the historical subjects in the exhibitions. For Cold War Berlin I am using David E. Murphy, Sergei A Kondrashev and George Bailey, *Battleground Berlin: CIA vs. KGB in the Cold War*. (New Haven and London, 1997) This study examines the activities of all major Cold War players in Berlin, 1945-61. The East and West German spy agencies appear to have received considerable treatment in this work.


For the newspaper reviews, please see Deutsches Historisches Museum – Hausarchiv – Bestand: *MfDG* 87. For the journal articles, please see, for example, Joachim Ave/Kurt Laser, “Die museumspädagogische Arbeit des Museums für Deutsche Geschichte, in *Museum für Deutsche Geschichte: Beiträge und Mitteilungen* 2, (Berlin 1974) 49-61

For the guest books, please see *Das Museum für Deutsche Geschichte, Paedagogische Abteilung*. I have read entries from the years 1953-1965.

Examples showing the role of capitalism in the rise of Hitler, and the dedication of the communists to defending the people against Fascism, can be found in many of the exhibitions. Please see “Karl Marx Ausstellung 1955”, “Buchenwald Teil 1-2” (Buchenwald parts one and two) A57/3411, and “15. Jahrestag der Befreiung” (15th Anniversary of Liberation) A61/516 Bd. A-D.

The exhibition “Buchenwald Teil 1 & 2” claims that the actions of the Red Army inspired the captives to revolt against their jailers. They make it seem as if the captives, who were mostly political prisoners, liberated themselves and received no help from the American troops advancing on the camp.

The launching of Operation Barbarossa, June 22, 1941. The exhibition was 1965’s “20. Jahrestag der Befreiung.”

The exhibition *Oktoberrevolution* (October Revolution) A58/3763 Bd 1-2 discusses this German-Soviet relationship.

“20. Jahrestag der Befreiung” (Twentieth Anniversary of Liberation) A66/2089 Bd. 1-4

See for example, Jeffrey Herf’s *Divide Memory* and Alan Nothnagle’s *Building the East German Myth.*


Two important theorists on collective memory are Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora. For Halbwachs, please see Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and translated by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, 1992); for Nora, please see Pierre Nora, “Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Mémoire.” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989). For a review of the literature on collective memory, and a criticism of Nora, please see Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam, “Collective Memory-What is It?” *History and Memory* 8, 1 (Spring/Summer 1996) 30-50

See for example, Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, 1998)

Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA 1997) There are many more studies on public and private forms of memory. Please see Heide Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany: Reconstructing National Identity after Hitler.* (Chapel Hill, 1995); Alon Confino “Traveling as a Culture of Remembrance: Traces of National Socialism in West Germany, 1945-1960,” *History and Memory* 12, 2 (Fall/Winter 2000) 92-121

*Building the East German Myth* consists of four chapters. The first is an introduction to myth in East Germany. Each of the following three examines a component I mentioned.

Please see Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1999)

Please see Rudy Koshar, *Germany’s Transient Pasts: Preservation and National Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1998)


Brower’s entire article focuses on how the museum’s master narrative subtly masked the most important traumatic elements of the war, compromising its ability to provide a sense of closure. Please see Brower 78-80. For a related critique of museum mater narratives please see Susan Crane, ed., *Museums and Memory* (Stanford, 2000) pp 3-4. For a sample of the other literature on museums, please see Kevin Walsh, *The Representation*

35 Please see note 2
