

## Remembering the Nazi camps in East and West Germany: The case of the Mittelbau-Dora camp

Jens-Christian Wagner

*“We didn’t know anything about what was going on in the Kohnstein and Camp Dora!” That’s what they all say – the people now being held responsible for the consequences of the Nazi regime. But anyone who says something like that is lying!*

*Every morning and every evening, everyone heard the zebra gangs marching through the City of Nordhausen. And everyone is sure to have turned and watched them pass at least once, and will have seen the men slinking along with their pale faces, accompanied by heavily armed SS. How often did a motor vehicle pass through the lower part of town headed for Weimar, stuffed with dead bodies being taken to the crematorium in Buchenwald.*

*... I could cite several further examples. They prove that we knew something about Camp Dora and its forced residents! We allowed things to take their course there; we didn’t dare to question them. We are responsible for what happened there.”<sup>1</sup>*

“*Process facts only with Com[rade]. Pelny’s approval*” is the hand-written memo on the title page of this report written by Fritz Güntsche, a teacher of Nordhausen, in 1951 and now archived in the Documentation Department of the Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp Memorial. Kurt Pelny was the director of the “Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Mittelbau-Dora” – the concentration camp memorial run by the government of the German Democratic Republic, the GDR – until 1989.

Güntsche’s report, from which the quotation was taken, is one of a kind. But it nevertheless reveals two things: First of all, it clearly indicates the detailed knowledge an onlooker had of the local camp system even if he did not work with inmates himself nor was directly involved in any other way. Secondly, it sheds light on the resistance encountered when the exact localization and identification of the crime was mentioned, even in the GDR. To all intents and purposes, it seems, the patterns of perception characterizing the commemorative culture with regard to the NS crimes were not so very different in east and west. Both perspectives took advantage of interpretation possibilities already offered by NS propaganda, means of delegating the crimes to out-of-the-way places and thus ex-territorializing their perception.

The crime, however, had been virtually omnipresent, not least of all as a consequence of the complex camp system which seeped into every corner of the German society during the final

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<sup>1</sup> Fritz Güntsche, *Das Konzentrationslager Dora. Seine Entstehung und seine Geschichte skizzenhaft dargestellt*, unpubl. ms., Nordhausen, March 1951 (DMD, EB/A 87), pp. 3 ff.

years of the war: By the time the war ended, a network of some forty camps constituting Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp had spread itself out over the entire southern Harz Mountain region. Along with the crimes, their perpetrators were also omnipresent; worse yet, they were strongly integrated in the region's social fabric.

Nevertheless, or perhaps for that very reason, after the war, the camps disappeared – and with them the memory of the National Socialist crimes – almost faster than the time it had taken to build and put them into operation in 1944. An image of supposedly self-contained, isolated camps now prevailed, and with its symbolist interpretation of that image, the post-war discourse virtually suggested a crime without perpetrators, or at least without witnesses, in east and west alike. The specific meanings attributed to the various sites reinforced this effect. Here it was the “death factory” Auschwitz, where murder had been committed quasi automatically, there Buchenwald Concentration Camp, moulded in retrospect to serve as a symbol of the state-propagated GDR legend of the antifascist resistance struggle, and up in the Harz, finally, Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp with its mysterious “vengeance weapon” production. The mystification transported by these patterns of interpretation contributed to the atmosphere of spatial and conceptual distance which banned the events to remote places.

A look at the way people thought at the actual scenes of the past crimes will help to clear the fog enveloping the sites of the Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp subcamps. In the process, we are virtually forced to undertake a comparative analysis of the regional and local patterns of remembrance in east and west, because after the war, the network of this particular concentration camp complex was divided in two, first by the demarcation line and later by the inner-German border.

#### *1945: Forced Tours of the Camps and the Camps' Demolition*

In early April 1945, the SS had the Mittelbau camps evacuated in view of the advancing front. Only in the main Camp Dora and in a subcamp in the Boelcke Casern in Nordhausen did a few hundred sick and dying inmates remain behind to be liberated by the Americans on April 11, 1945.

The corpses found in the two camps were buried on April 16, 1945 at a memorial cemetery set up on the periphery of the municipal cemetery, within the framework of a service the town residents were forced to attend. In early May, the American military commander in Nordhausen ordered every resident to visit the memorial cemetery, in order “to become completely aware of the full

*extent of these atrocities committed by the Germans.*<sup>2</sup> Already before that, the Americans had presented the German population with the sight of the corpses in the Boelcke Casern.

Among the town residents, however, the forced tours of the camps and cemeteries – like the photos documenting the camps – generally met with an attitude of massive resistance.<sup>3</sup> In all likelihood, the 1965 description by the former NS mayor Heinz Sting was not all that far from the truth: *“For the citizens of the town, it was particularly humiliating when one day they had to appear at the New Cemetery with flowers for the newly laid-out grove in honour of the concentration camp inmates.”*<sup>4</sup>

The forced tours of the camps underpinned the process of reinterpretation which turned the society of perpetrators into a society of the defeated, characterized by fear of punishment and the warding off of blame, a society with a pronounced sense of victimization.<sup>5</sup> Already during the war, the cliché of the concentration camp inmate as a threat to the “public safety” had cast the members of the perpetrator society in the role of potential victims, at least in their own minds.

The reinterpretation of history was accompanied by the gradual disappearance of the “authentic” sites. By the time an American military tribunal against former members of the SS and capos from Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp got under way in the summer of 1947 in the former concentration camp Dachau, many of the Mittelbau subcamps had all but vanished. In the autumn of 1946, the municipal administration of Nordhausen had had every single barrack in the main camp, Dora, dismantled and reassembled in the town and surrounding district to serve as emergency housing.<sup>6</sup>

At the instigation of the Soviet occupying power, only the crematorium had been left standing. At other Mittelbau sites, things hardly looked any different. Again, most of the barracks had been disassembled and used as construction or firewood. In the 1950s, all that bore witness to the history of these sites were the concrete foundations of the structures that had once stood there. Other former Mittelbau subcamps served as accommodations for displaced persons and refugees.

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<sup>2</sup> Order issued by municipal Allied commander McEllroy, May 7, 1945, Nordhausen Municipal Archives, S 888, Bl. 2.

<sup>3</sup> This description applies not only to the residents of Nordhausen. On Weimar, cf. for example Jens Schley, *Nachbar Buchenwald. Die Stadt Weimar und ihr Konzentrationslager 1937-1945*, Köln/Weimar/Wien, 1999, pp. 3 ff. On the attitude of resistance against the Allied photo documentation of the concentration camps, cf. Cornelia Brink, *Ikonen der Vernichtung. Öffentlicher Gebrauch von Fotografien aus nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern nach 1945*, Berlin, 1998 (scientific series published by the Fritz Bauer Institut; No. 14), pp. 82 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Heinz Sting (ed.), *Das 1000jährige Nordhausen und der schöne Südharz. Ein Volksbuch von Heimat und Zeitgeschichte*, Hannover, 1965, p. 263.

<sup>5</sup> On the refusal to acknowledge guilt, cf. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*, München 1969, pp. 35 ff. (English translation: *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behaviour*)

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Nordhausen Municipal Archives, S 139 passim and S 1182 passim.

### *Commemoration was Strange*

For many years, no endeavours whatsoever were made on the part of the Germans to preserve the camp locations as places of commemoration. The acts of commemoration were left to the “strangers”, in other words the occupying powers, who initiated the establishment of concentration camp cemeteries, and the survivors, who soon erected memorials – or had them erected – at the cemeteries, but also, in part, at the sites of the former camps.

The efforts undertaken at Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp Memorial were likewise initiated primarily by survivors. Of course, by seeing to it that the crematorium was left standing, the Soviets had, in a sense, laid the foundation stone for the later concentration camp memorial. But the grounds themselves were largely neglected until the early 1950s. Commemorative services were not carried out at the actual scene of the events, but on Station Square in Nordhausen, where a memorial stone for the Communist Party functionary Albert Kuntz – who had been murdered in “Dora” – was dedicated at the end of 1946.

French survivors visited the remainders of Camp Dora for the first time in 1950 and demanded the erection of a memorial stone.<sup>7</sup> Four years later, a “site of honour” was set up in front of the former crematorium, but the complaints voiced by the French survivors about the inadequacy of the memorial facilities are a recurring theme in the correspondence between the local authorities and their superiors in Berlin until well into the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> The first “Mahnmal” (in German a word used for memorials with an admonitory function) – The first “Mahnmal” in commemoration of Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp was also erected on the initiative of survivors. It was a memorial stone, put up in September 1945, in honour of the deceased inmates of an evacuation transport from Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp whose bodies had been interred by surviving fellow inmates at the municipal cemetery of Münchehof, a little village outside Seesen in the northern Harz.

As material for the gravestone, the survivors availed themselves of a huge granite stone which had been erected on the market square of Seesen in 1938, occasioned by the “annexation” of Austria. It bore the inscription “Großdeutschland” – Pan Germany – and the corresponding map. With the backing of Seesen’s Social Democratic mayor, this memorial stone was now divided into two equal parts by a local stone cutter. One of the two halves was then taken from

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. letter from VVN (Association of Victims of the Nazi Regime) to Mayor Himmler (Nordhausen), Aug. 23, 1950, **BwA**, unsigned.

<sup>8</sup> On the part of the concentration camp consortium and the responsible Minister of Culture in Berlin, the complaints of the French were the constant cause of conflicts with the persons in charge locally. In 1972, Walter Bartel, vice-president of the Buchenwald-Dora camp consortium, recorded the following in a memo: “I am not prepared to allow things to continue in this manner and it is unacceptable for some inferior organs to discredit the reputation of the GDR in the west in this manner.” **BwA**, unsigned.

Seesen to Münchehof and erected in such a way that, on its back, a part of the inscription and the divided map rise up out of the ground. On the front, an inscription was engraved in German and English in honour of the concentration camp inmates buried at the cemetery and bearing reference to the donors: “Committee of Concentration Camp Comrades”.<sup>9</sup>

The dedication of this memorial stone on September 16, 1945 was attended by several hundred former concentration camp inmates and Holocaust survivors as well as delegations of the Allied armed forces. The native population, for its part, seems in general to have stayed away from the service, and in the decades that followed, the stone never played a role in the local commemorative practises.

### ***The Western Version of self-victimization: The Division of Germany***

The majority of the group of survivors responsible for the rededication of the former Nazi monument in Münchehof were Jews, and they intentionally carried out that act as a symbol of the defeat of National Socialism. For the German population of the southern Harz region, however, the symbol of a divided Germany would soon take on an entirely different meaning.

This circumstance is illustrated very clearly by another stone erected ten years after the dedication of the concentration camp memorial stone in Münchehof. The occasion for the new inauguration was a gathering of natives of the District of Nordhausen and the location was Bad Sachsa, a small town which had belonged to that district until 1945 but then been assigned to the British-occupied zone within the framework of territorial exchange. We can assume that the members of the “Association of Friends of Nordhausen” who donated the memorial stone in Bad Sachsa knew nothing about the “Pan Germany” stone in Münchehof, either in its original form of 1938 or in that of 1945. Nevertheless: A comparison of the stones of 1938 and 1955 reveals certain similarities – semantic as well as iconographic – and shows the deep restorative gash that separated the West Germany of 1945 from that of 1955.

“Das ganze Deutschland soll es sein”; “It should be all of Germany” was the inscription on the front of the granite block, and on the back were the words: “Erected by the Association of Friends of Nordhausen in Bad Sachsa in Year 10 of the German division, Sept. 4, 1955”. The speaker at the dedication ceremony was the aforementioned Heinz Sting, the chairman of the association and former National Socialist Party mayor of Nordhausen. The festivities ended with nocturnal “loyalty fires across the zone barrier”.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Joseph Soski, *Memories of a Vanished World*, unpubl. ms., w/out place name, 1991 (US Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG 02.072\*01), p. 84. Soski was the spokesman of the “Komitee der ehemaligen Häftlinge des KZ-Lagers Dora-Nordhausen” (Committee of Former Inmates of Dora-Nordhausen Concentration Camp) in Seesen.

It would be difficult to find a more telling example of how the division discourse had already long spread out to cover the memory of the National Socialist crimes in the form of a kind of regional exoneration myth. The sites of several concentration camps were located in the direct vicinity of the monument to the German division in Bad Sachsa. Nothing remained to keep the memory of those sites alive except the overgrown concrete foundations of dismantled inmates' barracks. The extent to which the division postulate literally suppressed the memory of the National Socialist crimes is made very clear by the following quotation. In a Nordhausen memorial volume published by none other than Heinz Sting, the local historian Manfred Bornemann wrote these words about commemoration on the far side of the border:

*‘Let us not allow ourselves to be deceived when, every year, on the ‘Day of Liberation’, on May 8, powerful demonstrations are held in front of the crematorium on the grounds of the former Dora Concentration Camp, which has been set up as a dignified memorial site. The same people who talk about ‘fascist barbarianism’, about peace and liberty, there and at other sites, ... find it perfectly alright if, at the same time, escapees are shot at on the... zonal border. One cannot help but be reminded of that banal SS guards’ formula – ‘Shot to death in the attempt to escape’’.<sup>10</sup>*

The extent to which lamentation about the division of Germany served as a means of repressing the memory of the camps is nowhere more strikingly clear than in Ellrich-Juliushütte. There, the SS had operated a Mittelbau Concentration Camp subcamp between May 1944 and April 1945. This site, with its average inmate population of eight thousand, had become the place of death for thousands. Due to the fact that the camp grounds were partly on Prussian and partly on Braunschweig territory, it was divided into two after the war, first by the demarcation line and later by the inner-German border.

On the GDR side, the structural remains of the camp were levelled between 1952 and 1961 in connection with border security measures, and laid out as part of the so-called death strip. Sections of the former camp fence may even have been used as part of the border fence.

On the west side, the community of Juliushütte – which belongs to the district of Walkenried and was formerly a part of the camp – was resettled with the employees of a nearby lumber mill, among other persons.<sup>11</sup> In the course of the years, however, the site fell into decay as the residents moved away, partly on account of a fire at the lumber mill. Evidently, the site – located directly adjacent to the border fence – came to be regarded a scandal, even in the higher echelons of government.

<sup>10</sup> Manfred Bornemann: *Ellrich – Mahnung und Verpflichtung*, in: *Historische Nachrichten von der ehemals kaiserlichen und des heiligen Römischen Reichs freien Stadt Nordhausen*, publ. by Heinz Sting, Hannover, 1967, pp. 66-68.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. also in the following Manfred Bornemann, *Chronik des Lagers Ellrich 1944/45. Ein vergessenes Konzentrationslager wird neu entdeckt*, Nordhausen, 1992, pp. 88 ff.

In 1963, led by Rainer Barzel, the Minister of All-German Affairs, a delegation from Bonn toured the grounds. With all likelihood, it was on that occasion that the resolution was made to tear down the “eyesore”, as it was described by a local newspaper, which “*did not exactly offer observers on the other side of the zonal border an inviting sight*”.<sup>12</sup> The following year, engineer corps of the West German border police (Bundesgrenzschutz) came in and dynamited the remaining buildings in order to “*create a park-like landscape here*”, as the local press reported.<sup>13</sup>

Among the structures destroyed by this measure were several former inmate accommodation buildings and the camp crematorium, which had remained largely intact until 1963. Following detonation, bulldozers pushed the rubble into a natural depression where it is still to be found today.<sup>14</sup>

Later the regional government of Braunschweig declared the grounds a nature reserve, thus further impeding access to the few remaining relics of the camp.

At the same time, however, parts of the grounds were strongly frequented from the 1960s onwards because the West German border police erected a border surveillance station on a hilltop about a hundred metres up the slope from the site of the former crematorium. This lookout point offered a good view of the railway station in the GDR border town of Ellrich (and the grounds of the former camp), where two freight trains were cleared daily for goods traffic to Western Germany. The Ellrich Station checkpoint, located directly on the former concentration camp fence, was the regional symbol of German division throughout the 1960s to the 1980s, surpassed in emblematic significance perhaps only by the nearby Mount Brocken.

Until the end of the 1980s, the memory of Ellrich-Juliushütte Concentration Camp was thus completely suppressed by the exculpatory narrative about the local consequences of the German division. In his “Chronicle of Camp Ellrich” of 1987, the aforementioned local historian Manfred Bornemann wrote:

*“In view of the barbed-wire fences and watchtowers once again erected on the grounds of the camp, it is difficult to hold memorial services there. On the east side, no such ceremonies have been carried out since 1952. In view of this development, nobody on the west side felt obligated to confront the horrors of the past. The border fortifications speak for themselves. They are reminiscent of the fact that the legacy of the dead – recalled to mind by the survivors again and again –, namely to overcome hatred, discord and the enemy concept, has been ignored, and continues to be ignored, at this site. On the contrary, wire fences, other barrier facilities, watchtowers, armed guards and trained*

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<sup>12</sup> *Herzberger Zeitung*, May 27, 1964 and May 16, 1964.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 92, and Friedrich Reinboth/Walther Reinboth, *Walkenrieder Zeittafel, Abriss der Orts- und Klostersgeschichte*, p. 61.

*dogs are clear evidence of the fact that Ellrich-Juliushütte is no longer a site for coming to terms with the past (Vergangenheitsbewältigung), but for coming to terms with the present.*<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Eastern Version of the ‘Victim Legend’: Antifascist Resistance***

The competent persons in Nordhausen, Weimar and East Berlin had in mind a completely different aspect of the present – and how to come to terms with it – when they established the Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp Memorial in the 1960s. It was clear from the beginning that the memorial’s design was “*to serve the state doctrine of the GDR*”, as the East German historian Laurenz Demps wrote in late 1988 in an expert opinion on a planned exhibition in the former V-weapon tunnel at Dora.<sup>16</sup> It was no coincidence that the founding of the memorial had taken place on the fifteenth anniversary of the GDR, having been conceived by its initiators as a “*powerful demonstration against the militarism, revanchism and fascism*” which had been “*resurrected*” in Western Germany, as a local member of the SED, the east German communist party, wrote.<sup>17</sup>

To the east of the inner-German border, it may well have been precisely the decreed and ritualized antifascism which allowed the complicity of large sections of the population to disappear behind the propaganda against the “ultras” in Bonn.<sup>18</sup> Particularly in the border region in the Harz mountains, the GDR leaders assigned the state-decreed commemoration practises a system-preserving function.

A letter from Buchenwald survivor and later general of the People’s Police (Volkspolizei) Herbert Weidlich to the chairman of the Buchenwald-Dora camp committee, Walter Bartel, bears clear testimony to this circumstance:

*“I have always been in favour of Kurt Pehny’s plan to carry out courses for teachers similar to those at the National Buchenwald Memorial. From past experience in service, I know that Nordhausen is a difficult border district. The citizens of this district are subjected to the influence of the West German mass media to a particularly strong degree. We were compelled to enforce special security measures there after the majority of the residents of one*

<sup>15</sup> Bornemann, *Chronik*, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Laurenz Demps, Expert opinion on the tunnel museum, Oct. 16, 1988, **DMD**, Collection Kreisarchiv (District Archives) Nordhausen, n.p.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from town councillor Dojé (Nordhausen) to Erfurt Bezirksausschuß der nationalen Front (District Commission of the National Front), Aug. 4, 1964, **DMD**, unsigned.

<sup>18</sup> This circumstance is clearly documented, for example in a compilation of witness statements on the history of the Mittelbau camps commissioned in 1955/56 by an SED party commission against the background of resistance to the remilitarization of the Federal Republic (West Germany). Nearly every record of the respective statements includes identical passages on the “*indignation about the reinstatement of SS commanders in the NATO army*” (here statement by Walter Kasch). Cf. report of unknown provenance (SED), undated, [1955/56], Nordhausen Municipal Archives, A 1.1.4.4., n.p.

*small border village escaped. If the confrontation with fascism and neo-fascism is of significance in general, then it is particularly significant for this and other border districts.*<sup>19</sup>

When applied to local circumstances, however, ritualized antifascism as one important element in the legitimization of the GDR reason of state revealed a structural dilemma in an image of history which depicted the German population as the victim of a dictatorship formed by an alliance of “monopoly lords” and the National Socialist Party. Because upon closer inspection, the image collided with the historical findings according to which large segments of the German population had served as accomplices to the NS crimes. If the official version of history was to remain unquestioned, all attempts to inquire into the reciprocal effects between the camps and their surroundings were doomed to failure.

In the mid 1960s, for instance, the East Berlin “Student Research Group on Dora” failed to attain its self-imposed goal of investigating *“the relationship and connection of the civilian population to the former Dora Concentration Camp”*, and several years later, as the Department of Historical Memorials in the GDR Ministry of Culture was drawing up a new concept for the exhibition at Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp Memorial, plans for a section on the *“connections with the civilian population”* were suddenly discarded due to the fact that, as a member functionary of the ministry wrote to the Committee of Anti-Fascist Resistance Fighters in the GDR, *“unfortunately, almost without exception, the civilians had allowed themselves to be exploited as Nazi henchmen.”*<sup>20</sup>

On the one hand, by the early 1980s, commemorative facilities had been established at nearly all of the Mittelbau subcamp sites on GDR territory (a circumstance distinguishing these memorial sites from those in the western Harz mountains).

Due to the official GDR image of history, however, these sites remained unconnected to their local surroundings because, after all (the image suggests), it was the “monopoly lords” and their accomplices in the SS who were responsible for the local NS crimes.

This state of affairs is mirrored quite clearly in an article of April 13, 1970 in the (East) *Berliner Zeitung* bearing the headline “Mörder und Opfer nicht eine Nation” (Murderers and Victims Not One Nation) and reporting on the “Essen Trial” against three high-ranking members of the SS and the Gestapo from Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp.

Here Walter Bartel, summoned by the representation of the GDR as joint plaintiff to provide an expert opinion, is quoted as claiming *“that between the German people and the gentlemen of the armaments industry there is an unbridgeable gap”*. Anyone who talks about the unity of the German nation, he

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Herbert Weidlich to Walter Bartel, Aug. 20, 1980, **DMD**, unsigned.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Dora Miethe (Department of Historical Memorials) to the Komitee der Antifaschistischen Widerstandskämpfer in der DDR (Committee of Anti-Fascist Resistance Fighters in the GDR), Jan. 25, 1973; **DMD**, unsigned.

continued, *“should tell us whether the concentration camp survivors and the slayers of their comrades, the officers in command and the executors of the commands to murder, belong to the same German nation.”*<sup>21</sup>.

### **The Commemorative Sites Following the German Reunification**

In view of the reciprocal projections on both sides of the former inner-German border, the question arises as to how the local commemorative sites were handled after the “Wende” – German reunification.

It is important to make reference here once again to the “Germany” stone erected by the Association of Friends of Nordhausen in Bad Sachsa in 1955. In 1990, the city of Bad Sachsa gave this stone to the city of Nordhausen, which had it put up on its station square in place of the commemorative stone for Albert Kuntz – who, if you will remember, was a Camp Dora inmate who had been murdered there in 1945.

At about the same point in time, the new administration of the Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp Memorial had an oversized black, red and gold flag hung in the crematorium near one of the two incineration ovens. The flag marked the site at which visitors to the memorial had the opportunity to enter their names in a visitors’ book following their tour of the museum, which had been installed in the crematorium building. Reunified Germany was thus presented as the final, concluding chapter in the history of the Third Reich, having risen from the ashes of the concentration camp victims – a symbol that was actually the logical consequence of the older discourse conducted in the west, where the anti-Communist-shaded narrative of national unity had spread like a veil over the memory of the National Socialist past.

But those in charge ultimately decided not to make things quite so easy for themselves, and the flag vanished from the crematorium again a few months later, followed shortly thereafter by the entire former GDR exhibition. The fact that local confrontation with the National Socialist past has increased considerably since then on both sides of the former border may be related to the disappearance of the border, and with it the disappearance of mutual projections of guilt and blame. What is more, the connection to the camp sites on the respective other side of the former border is no longer cut off.

A very fundamental factor, however, is likely to be the change of generations. The perpetrator generation is all but extinct, and the personal loyalties to the perpetrators – which play a particularly strong role in the social fabrics of villages and small towns – are increasingly losing

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<sup>21</sup>*Berliner Zeitung*, Apr. 13, 1970.

their effectiveness. These changes are moreover accompanied by a change of paradigms in the local commemoration culture.

Just twenty years ago, it was nearly inconceivable for local politicians in the western Harz to openly face up to their regions' local Nazi past. As late as 1989, for example, the town council of West-German Osterode refused to erect a memorial stone to the victims of the two Mittelbau subcamps located within city limits. In contrast, for several years now, the participation of local dignitaries in commemorative ceremonies held on such dates as January 27 or the anniversary of the evacuation of the Mittelbau camps on April 11, 1945 is par for the course.

In many towns in the southern Harz, the laying of wreaths on Volkstrauertag (Remembrance Day for the victims of the war) is not limited to the local war monument, but is also carried out at the memorial plaques dedicated to the victims of National Socialism murdered in those towns. And finally: The topic of the local NS past – formerly reserved for the so-called “traitors” in the history workshops – has long gained acceptance in the bastion of the rather conservative local history associations and societies.

Is that the “historicization” of National Socialism feared by many, demanded by others? The first thing that strikes us in this context is the fact that, in the regional commemorative culture of the southern Harz, the former border has not entirely disappeared. It is almost as if the recourse taken to the shared National Socialist past has had an integrative effect in the search for a common identity in a region divided by the border for forty years.

What is more, in a certain sense, reference to the local National Socialist crimes provides a means of historically upgrading one's own region. In the late 1960s, Manfred Bornemann wrote about the “*dominance of the Auschwitz murderers in our native land*”.<sup>22</sup> The same image that once served the purposes of exoneration – the strangers were seen as the perpetrators – may possibly serve today, in a wholly different manner, to lend this provincial region historical significance: ‘Look at us,’ you can almost hear the region saying, ‘we're somebody, we had our Auschwitz too!’

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<sup>22</sup> Manfred Bornemann, “Ellrich – Mahnung und Verpflichtung”, in: *Historische Nachrichten von der ehemals Kaiserlichen und des heiligen Römischen Reichs Freien Stadt Nordhausen*, Neue Folge 1967, publ. by Heinz Sting, Hannover, 1967, pp. 66-68, here p. 67.