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Dresden in the wake of Germany: The myths of Dresden and the modification of German national history.¹

Which are the most moving moments of our 1000 years and more of history?

Guido Knopp, German journalist and TV history documentary producer²

This indicates what the Frauenkirche stands for – for the power of conciliation and what unites us. If we pay continuous heed to this insight we can rest assured that the chapter [of history] we are now writing together will be a good one.

Horst Köhler, Federal President of Germany³

In German public debate as well as in the minds of most Germans who are excited about 'their own' history, the Dresden Frauenkirche might very well represent one of the 'most moving moments' in *The History of the Germans*⁴, the subject of Guido Knopp's eager research.⁵ Dresden's fairy tales, such as the one about the Frauenkirche's wondrous resurrection (destroyed 1945, a ruin during the GDR, rebuilt by the unified post-totalitarian *Berliner Republik*, [Berlin Republic]⁶, are a core part of the historical frag-

¹ This article was originally written in German, I translated it myself. Since I am neither a translator nor very well versed in the written English language, I want to apologise in advance for any strange wordings or complicated sentences. I am thankful for the important corrections regarding my attempts at translation, provided by British colleagues. For critique and suggestions concerning the original article, I have to thank Rebekka Hufendiek und Tanja Röckemann.

² „Was sind die bewegendsten Momente unserer mehr als tausendjährigen Geschichte?“ Guido Knopp: *Die Sternstunden der Deutschen*, Munich and Zurich: Pendo, 2009, 11.

³ „Das alles zeigt, wofür die Frauenkirche steht – für die Kraft der Versöhnung und für das, was uns eint. Wenn wir diese Erkenntnis dauerhaft beherzigen, dann können wir gewiss sein: Dieses Kapitel, das wir gemeinsam jetzt schreiben, es wird ein gutes Kapitel.“ Horst Köhler in his speech entitled „Of what unites us“ held on the occasion of the consecration of the rebuilt Dresden Frauenkirche church, Oktober 30, 2005. Cf. <http://www.frauenkirche-dresden.de/ansprache-koehler.html> (Retrieved October 7, 2014).

⁴ Teja Fiedler/Marc Goergen (Eds.): *Die Geschichte der Deutschen. Von den Germanen bis zum Mauerfall*, Hamburg: Gruner and Jahr, 2006.

⁵ Guido Knopp is a German journalist and TV producer. For an analysis of his work as the head of German state TV station ZDF's history department see Wulf Kansteiner: *The Radicalization of German Memory in the Age of Its Commercial Reproduction*, in: Wulf Kansteiner; Richard Ned Lebow; Claudio Fogu (Eds.): *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, London 2006, 154-180.

⁶ *Berliner Republik* (engl.: Berlin Republic) is a term for the German nation state and society coined after reunification in 1990. It follows the historical designations *Weimarer Republik* (1918-1933) and West German *Bonner Republik* (1949-1990), referring to the site of the first National Assembly (Weimar) or the capital (Bonn). Among other political developments, the *Berlin Republic* is said to have brought about an unprecedented dynamism in Germany coming-to-terms with its National Socialist past.

ments that have been rearranged during the modernisation of German national history. They are now part of the supposedly self-critical and reformed mainstream narrative of normalised, *unverkrampt* (laid back) Germany.⁷ What does this new notion of German history look like in detail and what role does the modified discourse about Dresden's past play within it?

To begin with I will present a few highlights concerning the recent modification of media and official state representations of the history of Dresden and Germany. In 2010, Helma Orosz, conservative politician and current Lady Mayor of Dresden, made three speeches expanding Dresden's frame of reference of as a historical symbol. By doing so, she contributed to the wider trend which has recently been undermining the centrality that the days and nights of February 13 to 15 used to have for Dresden's history. The allied bombings were a central symbol here, serving as an icon of the suffering of innocent Germans as victims of the allied air warfare and World War II in general. In contrast, Orosz praised the June 17 1953 protests and unrest in the GDR⁸ as the democratic harbinger of contemporary Dresden, a city that since 1989 had supposedly left behind both its historical blemishes, National Socialism and actually existing Socialism: 'Our resistance to the abuse of our history in Dresden isn't restricted to February 13, but it includes June 17'.⁹ Secondly, by using the words 'This day has liberated us'¹⁰ as a reference to October 3 1990¹¹, Orosz identified it as a second day of liberation on equal terms with May 8 1945. This notion of identifying the end of National Socialism with the end of the GDR wrongfully equates the Third Reich and the GDR as one of the nation states of actually existing socialism in the Eastern Bloc. Thirdly, she demanded that 'the memory of the deportation of Dresden's Jews be much more visible in

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- 7 The term *unverkrampt* (laid back) in reference to a new German self-confidence was established in the German public in the first years of the 21st century. It describes a supposedly more relaxed relation of Germans towards their nation, national history and national identity which allegedly was acquired by the exemplary coming-to-terms with National Socialism, beginning in the 1990s. The Berlin 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe' and the previously unknown dimensions of German flag-waving during the soccer world championships in Germany in 2006 are, despite their different nature, both said to be visible proof of this change.
 - 8 The days around June 17 1953 saw a series of protests and demonstrations in the GDR. These were mainly directed against an increase in work quotas in state-owned factories and the lack of democratic structures. The protests initially spread, targeting state and party institutions as well but were then suppressed by Soviet and GDR troops.
 - 9 „Unser Widerstand gegen den Missbrauch unserer Geschichte beschränkt sich in Dresden nicht nur auf den 13. Februar, sondern er gilt genauso für den 17. Juni.“ Cf. http://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/oberbuergemeister/aufstand_17_juni.pdf (Retrieved October 7, 2014).
 - 10 „Dieser Tag hat uns befreit.“ Cf. http://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/oberbuergemeister/rede_orosz_20jahre_einheit.pdf (Retrieved October 7, 2014).
 - 11 October 3 1990 is the date declared to be the day of German Unity in the unification treaty between GDR and FRG. It was ratified by both GDR's Volkskammer and FRG's Bundestag on September 20 1990.

public'¹² which showed her to be in line with Germany's new official stance of acknowledging German crimes during National Socialism.

Since the mid-90s, changes have slowly taken place in the way Germany interprets its history of National Socialism, the Holocaust and the German *Vernichtungskrieg* (war of annihilation) in Eastern Europe. Within the political elite the *confession* fraction, those who admit German responsibility for the crimes and consequences of the Holocaust has taken over from the *Schlussstrich* fraction who wanted to draw a (historical) line consigning the Third Reich to the past, the dead history of a unique German error. So what used to be suppressed is now being acknowledged: the Holocaust as a part of German history, a historic crime perpetrated by German society. Public discourse has likewise shifted, though not without some backlash. As a result, national pride in the glory of Germany history – National Socialism having been split-off – has been recharged with national pride relating to the allegedly unparalleled process of re-civilising a German 'nation of culture, from Goethe to Grass'.¹³ Correspondingly, the liberal politician Gerhart Baum commented on the exemplary coming-to-terms with 'Nazi barbarianism'. 'Our democracy is strengthened by the open and self-critical way and intensity in which we are nowadays dealing with our past.'¹⁴

Thus, the view of German history has been modernised and, by the way, it fits in nicely with the political rhetoric of *universalisation*.¹⁵ In a brochure called *Memory Framework*, published by the city of Dresden in 2004, Ingolf Roßberg, then mayor, is quoted with a prime example of how historical German crimes are universalised and thus dissolved into an abstract notion of history that knows no political accountability. Roßberg incorporated National Socialism and the war of annihilation into the great horror of 'wars, which are still befalling planet earth, inhuman madness by humans'.¹⁶ Though the language of universalisation, with its tendency to moralise and to ignore concrete historical acts and liabilities by persons, groups and states might be bizarre at times, it certainly is not new. One of its many facilitators was the well-known long-time Chancellor Helmut Kohl who, during a speech in Dresden on December 19 1989, summoned up the 'unity of the nation' as well as the 'memory of the suffering

12 „... dass die Erinnerung an die Deportation der Dresdner Juden viel stärker in die Öffentlichkeit getragen werden müsste.“ Cf. http://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/oberbuergemeister/rede_orosz_erinnerungskultur.pdf (Retrieved October 7, 2014).

13 „Kulturation: Von Goethe zu Grass“ is the title of the second last chapter of a historiographical anthology for students taking the basic course in history. Michael Epkenhans, *Geschichte Deutschlands. Von 1648 bis heute*, Stuttgart: Theiss, 2008, 214.

14 Baum survived the air raids on Dresden at the age of 12.

15 Cf. Insa Eschebach: *Öffentliches Gedenken. Deutsche Erinnerungskulturen seit der Weimarer Republik*, Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2005.

16 Gerd Künzel (Ed.): *13. Februar – Dresden 1945. 60. Jahrestag der Zerstörung Dresdens*, Dresden: Landeshauptstadt Dresden, 2004. This brochure was the first major attempt by the city's elites to exert a stronger influence on the politics of history in the city. It was in reaction to, in particular, the annual neo-fascist demonstrations that take place on February 13, attracting several thousand participants.

and the many dead of this beautiful and old German city'. He continued: 'This is a century which has seen a lot of hardship, a lot of misery, especially in Europe and Germany. It is a century which, in the light of the bad things that happened has imposed a special responsibility on us.'¹⁷ 25 years later, this rhetoric is still not out-of-date, either. In 2011, Dresden's deputy mayor Detlef Sittel used similar words to acknowledge German crimes during National Socialism while at the same time making them unrecognisable.¹⁸ Now history seems to have been confronted and therefore can simply be filed away.

It is important to note that the universalisation of National Socialism, as described above, can be used within different discursive strategies: It fitted the ignorant *Schlussstrich* talk and wilful ignorance towards German crimes during National Socialism until the end of the 1980s. Likewise, since the 1990s it has been used in combination with the Bekenntnis discourse, the formal acceptance of the Holocaust as the result of German action and its responsibility. Nowadays the latter is set within a framework of the indiscriminate coexistence of myriads of historical narratives thereby converting it into an abstract 'century of suffering'.¹⁹

In line with the general modernisation of German national history, the panoramic view of Dresden's history has also been widened. The narrative of total German innocence in Dresden, of wilful annihilation by barbaric and unprovoked bombings (dominant between 1945 and the end of the 1990s) is now accompanied by a so-called contextualisation. This deals with National Socialism and the Holocaust while mouthing phrases such as 'the war that originated in Germany' which became prominent in the early 2000s. In spite of a number of updates, the victim myths – Dresden is historically emblematic

17 The dimensions of historical abstraction, denial and self-declared innocence are breath-taking. The crimes and mass murder have not been committed by National Socialism and the German society, but 'the century' let 'bad' things happen. Cf. http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Bulletin/1980-1989/1989/150-89_Kohl.html (Retrieved October 8, 2014).

18 Sittel said in his speech on February 13, 2011: 'Dresden und der 13. Februar 1945 stehen für die Sinnlosigkeit jeglicher kriegerischer Auseinandersetzungen, für durch nichts zu rechtfertigende Unmoral von Gewalt gegen Leben und letztlich doch auch für die Verpflichtung zu friedlichem und menschenwürdigem Zusammenleben'. [Dresden and the 13 February 1945 stand for the senselessness of all military confrontations, the immorality of violence – which can never be justified – against life and finally for the duty to live together in peace and humane conditions.] Cf.: http://13februar.dresden.de/media/pdf/presseamt/rede_20110213.pdf (Retrieved October 8, 2014).

19 Ingolf Roßberg as part of a city government public presentation: „Dresden zwischen Coventry, Grosny und Monrovia“, *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, 15.02.2005. This version of self-declared innocence has its physical manifestation amongst others in the infamous memorial site on the Heidefriedhof [city cemetery]. Cf. Fischer 2011, 126-158.

here²⁰ – the formerly dominant interpretations, have anything but vanished.²¹ On the contrary, they are alive and well, integrated into the symbolic date of February 13. In this form they have been incorporated into the recent three-part image of the 20th-century German catharsis: January 30, 1933 (the National Socialist takeover) as *sin*; February 13, 1945 (the Allied bombings on Dresden) as *atonement*; June 17, 1953 (the GDR uprising) and October 3, 1990 (the GDR joining the FRG to form a unified German state) as *purification* and liberation from the demons of history.

It's not by chance that religious terminology – e.g. catharsis, Greek for 'cleansing' or 'purgation' – comes to mind when describing the current articulation of the German history of Dresden. Dresden's *Frauenkirche* [Church of Our Lady] is both a physical manifestation of the *Dresden-as-victim* tale and the social space in which this tale is staged as commemorative politics and it has left its Christian stigmata on decades of debates about Dresden's past and its meaning. Moreover, the Protestant church as both a political institution and as social sphere was also of great importance for political opposition throughout the GDR. This was true for Dresden too. Here, the discourse of national victimhood and Christian thought are deeply interlocked – they share the theme of universalisation, the abstract expression of universal human suffering.²²

However, it is evident that the self-assured performance of an modernized, up-to-date German nation has prevailed in Dresden, too. Public mourning for the Germans as victims continues as a matter of course. But it is now done 'self-critically'.²³

Change of scenery. The scholars Etienne Francois and Hagen Schulze published an anthology called *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* [German Sites of Memory] in 2005. It assembles historical events, protag-

20 See: inter alia: Bill Niven (Ed.): *Germans as Victims. Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2006.

21 As late as 2009 the Sächsische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung – a federal institution for political education run by the state of Saxony – published a brochure which is proof for unreserved self-pity: Sebastian Kranich (Ed.): 13. Februar 1945. Zeitzegen über die Zerstörung Dresdens, Dresden, 2009. Greatly exaggerated numbers about the air raid fatalities can be found almost everywhere most notably in historical accounts where the air raids play a minor role. See: Mary Fulbrook: *The People's State. East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 25.

22 Thus a concert on February 13, 2010 was reviewed as 'enabling memory in a poetic form, as catharsis and forgiveness': 'Das Gedenk-Konzert in der Frauenkirche ermöglicht Erinnerung in poetischer Form, Katharsis und Vergebung.' (<http://www.mironde.com/content/website.php?id=/index/litterata/reportagen/1005.htm&PHPSESSID=nv7odhk8pvjkk25u57p8sv0p1> (Retrieved October 8, 2014).

23 In Dresden (qua city) public mourning is of fundamental importance to the politics of memory. It has a fixed symbolic places (Heidefriedhof cemetery, Frauenkirche) and its ritual date (February 13 each year). For decades now it has brought together a live performance of lighting candles in silence and those citizens of Dresden who want(ed) to mourn their city as a victim. And nothing else.

onists and ideas perceived as German and believed to enable *identification (Identifizierung)*²⁴ with the German nation and its supposed deeper meaning. This latest collection of national history is quite explicitly not conceived of as a *declaration of love (Liebeserklärung)*²⁵ for the nation because, given the history of National Socialism, this would be inappropriate.

Thus, having distanced the *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* from a romantic connection with the nation, it is now possible to dissolve the 'evil' German past into an expanded collection of purified national history. Bits of evil and good, fragments of pride and horror as well as the 'two German dictatorships' stroll along the boulevard of history in the new *Berlin Republic*. The greatness of this successor to the divided Germanies lies not only in its many cultural and historical merits, but also in an exceptional quality: the supposed exemplary coming-to-terms (*Aufarbeitung*) with its historical 'dark sides' (i.e. National Socialism and the GDR).

Nevertheless, this fragmented picture needs framing. The idea of a *history of the Germans* is the bracket that keeps all the historical bits and pieces together. The German nation is considered to be a historical constant and, despite its metamorphoses, is thought to be a fixed, superhuman entity. This basic notion leads to an understanding of history which is smoothed and homogenised to fit the lines of a national perspective. Within this national teleology, all differing and contradictory historical constellations and causalities tend to be rendered invisible.

The re-unification of Germany presents a historical moment which supposedly produced a brand new Germany. Thus, a political buffer zone was born, distancing the current German historical identity from National Socialism while allowing it to assume a certain kind of responsibility for it. The history of National Socialism has been handed over from the now resolved past of a divided Germany. Let by-gones be by-gones – the dirty work is done and history can shine once more for Germany. The national division however, to come back to Francois's and Schulze's *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, 'has ceased. Since October 3, 1990, the unified Republic of Germany has been the sole imaginable shell for the German nation'²⁶. The evils in German prehistory, have been terminated, so to speak, by the so-called Berlin Republic which now unites Germans once and for all. German prehistory – with the combined horrors of National Socialism and of division – has lost its power to haunt and menace contemporary German identity. Hence it is possible to take stock and put away its unbecoming aspects (consider the construc-

²⁴ Etienne Francois/Hagen Schulze (Ed.): *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte. Eine Auswahl*, Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2005, 7. The third volume of the complete anthology includes an article on 'Dresden' that contains central elements of the Dresden myth. It says a lot about Dresden's art and culture but almost nothing about National Socialism and the Holocaust: Olaf B. Rader: Dresden, in: Etienne Francois/Hagen Schulze (Ed.): *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte III*, München: Beck, 2001, 451-470.

²⁵ Francois/Schulze 2005, 10.

²⁶ Die Teilung 'ist nun zu Ende; seit dem 3. Oktober 1990 ist die Bundesrepublik Deutschland die einzig denkbare staatliche Hülle für das deutsche Volk.' Ibid., 9.

tion of the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* and the demolition of GDR's parliament building, the *Palast der Republik* [Palace of the Republic], both in Berlin) while 'normalising' the German attitude towards the glittering 'magic moments'²⁷ of national history. In this respect 'normalisation' means an increase of unreserved affection and love for the nation and its history, something supposedly lacking in German identity during the last 70 years.²⁸

In this article it is only possible to touch briefly upon the way in which the *Berlin Republic* version of *national identity* and its corresponding sense of history have both been produced by, and found their expression in, the products of pop culture. For one, there are major public events like 'Domino Day' which celebrated German unification in 2009 in Berlin in a game show fashion. It used the staggered fall of hundreds of six foot dominoes to demonstrate the alleged inevitable rise of German unity and freedom to a mass (TV) audience.²⁹ One of the main protagonists of the development of pop-culture historical awareness is a certain Guido Knopp, TV producer and head of the 'Contemporary History' branch of the TV station ZDF. Known for his 'histotainment' (a German neologism combining *history* and *entertainment*) and TV programmes like the infamous 'Hitler' series³⁰, one of Knopp's more recent projects is called *Gedächtnis der Nation* [Memory of the Nation]. It is a collection of video interviews with contemporary witnesses of 20th-century German history and is similar to the Holocaust survivors archive, *Shoa Foundation*.³¹ With *Gedächtnis der Nation*, it is all in the name: according to the project's website, it aims at collecting the 'individual experiences' of 'contemporary witnesses' and making them accessible to the public. These experiences clearly serve the purpose of identification: 'They are pieces in the historical mosaic of a nation, and shape the self-image of a society.'³²

Knopp also is the co-editor of a complementary book related to one of his TV shows, entitled *Die Deutschen. Von Karl dem Großen bis Rosa Luxemburg* [The Germans. From Charlemagne to Rosa Lux-

27 See: 'Sternstunden' of German history, Knopp 2009.

28 See: Francois/Schulze 2005, 10.

29 Cf. Jana König; Elisabeth Steffen: *Das Ende der Geschichte? Die Einordnung von DDR und 'Wiedervereinigung' in das postsozialistische Kontinuum der Nation*, in: Henning Fischer/Uwe Fuhrmann/Jana König/Elisabeth Steffen/Till Sträter (Ed.): *Zwischen Ignoranz und Inszenierung. Die Bedeutung von Mythos und Geschichte für die Gegenwart der Nation*, Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot 2012, 129-162.

30 Amongst them: 'Hitlers Helfer' (Hitler's Helpers, 1996), 'Hitlers Krieger' (Hitler's Warriors, 1998), 'Hitlers Kinder' (Hitler's Children, 2000) and 'Hitlers Frauen und Marlene' (Hitler's Women and Marlene [Dietrich, HF]), 2001).

31 'Zentrale Themen der deutschen Geschichte aus Zeitzeugensicht. Deutsche Teilung, Holocaust und Migration.' ['Core topics of German history, as seen by contemporary witnesses. German division, Holocaust and Migration.'] Cf. <http://www.gedaechtnis-der-nation.de/> (Retrieved October 8, 2014.)

32 'Sie bilden die Mosaiksteine im Geschichtsbild einer Nation und prägen das Selbstverständnis einer Gesellschaft.' Cf. <http://www.gedaechtnis-der-nation.de/> (Retrieved October 8, 2014).

emburg].³³ The volume is a vivid example of a suffocating embrace of historical persons that used to pose a major contradiction for German national history. In its modernised version, Germany's historical deeds are now not solely the classical merits of a nation – greatness, heroism, internal cohesion and war. They have been updated with the achievement of having been 'a country of cultural and political diversity at all times': Rosa Luxemburg – a revolutionary communist – 'fought against the Emperor's state and its militarism', Karl Marx – a revolutionary too – 'and his writings influenced the world's history like no other German (but Luther)'.³⁴ The book closes with the praise of Gustav Stresemann, liberal politician and Weimar Republic's Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1923 to 1929, as the incarnation of anti-extremist democratic politics.³⁵ According to the introduction, the reason for including Charlemagne – Emperor of Western Europe more than a thousand years before the political activities of Gustav Stresemann – is certainly not to stretch German history back in time.³⁶ Instead, it is supposed to show 'that many European peoples have their roots in the age of the great Franconian emperor'.³⁷

What's happening here? The explicit denial of glorifying German history – not stretching it back in time – works as a formal dissociation from national myths and legends. Simultaneously, national myths are reproduced both at the level of content and in narrative form. This, to be sure, does not happen in a subtle way, but accompanied by serious historical pageantry. The book's narrative framework is still the notion of 'the Germans', its time line stretches from Arminius' battle (Battle of the Teutoburg Forest – 9 AD) to Stresemann's death (1929). Even though the national frame is now said to be inclusive (integrating Rosa Luxemburg, for example), it still remains an exclusive and homogenising model of thought, restricted to one's 'own' national collective. The image may have changed, the frame is the same.

Another book edited by Knopp, a volume called *Die Sternstunden der Deutschen* [Magic Moments of the Germans]³⁸, must be described, quite simply, as a pop-nationalist hagiography. Contrary to *Die Deutschen. Von Karl dem Großen bis Rosa Luxemburg*, the 'magic moments' do not care to make a

33 Guido Knopp/Stefan Brauburger/Peter Arens (Ed.): *Die Deutschen. Von Karl dem Großen bis Rosa Luxemburg*, München: C. Bertelsmann, 2010.

34 Ibid., 8, 13.

35 'Mehr als 60 Jahre nach der Gründung der Bundesrepublik, 20 Jahre nach der Wiedervereinigung bleibt Stresemanns politische Haltung beispielhaft für jedes Bemühen, die demokratische Ordnung vor Extremismus und Fanatismus jeglicher Couleur zu schützen.' ['More than 60 years after the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany and 20 years after the re-unification, Stresemann's political stance still is exemplary for every effort that aims at protecting the democratic order from extremism and fanaticism of all kinds.] Ibid., 16.

36 The introduction states it's not about 'deutsche Geschichte vorzudatieren', which means *to date ahead*. The logical term would be 'nachzudatieren', *to backdate*, German history from, say, the 19th century to the 9th. But that's just a semantic point here. Ibid., 7.

37 Ibid., 8.

38 Knopp 2009.

disclaimer about 'backdating' German history. The book assembles 'the most moving moments from 1000 years of German history' which 'formed our history and our sentiments as Germans'.³⁹ To this end, it gathers all the great achievements of 'the Germans' in an emotionally highly-charged manner: the coronation of Charlemagne, Luther's 95 theses, the *Communist Manifesto*, women's suffrage, the White Rose resistance against National Socialism, Hitler's would-be assassin Stauffenberg, Pope Benedict XVI, and, as a matter of course, the notorious *Sommermärchen* [summer fairytale]⁴⁰ of the men's football World Championships in Germany in 2006. The book, which can be seen as a pop cultural version of the alleged 'self-critical', scientific *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, closes with a call to the individuals to immerse themselves in the national collective: 'It up to us and the generations that come after us to determine the future "magic moments" of the Germans.'⁴¹

Even explicitly critical publications carry within them the abstract notion of an essentially German past covering centuries. A volume published by the monthly magazine *Stern*, entitled *Die Geschichte der Deutschen: Von Karl dem Großen bis zum Mauerfall* [The History of the Germans. From the Germanic Peoples to the Fall of the Berlin Wall], makes a point of refuting the legends about Arminius' battle against the Romans and their commander Varus at the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, as well as myths about the 'life of the Germanic peoples'.⁴² This post-national, rational stance is emphasized by the statement that 'we no longer regard our ancestors as an eternal progression of Teutonic warriors'.⁴³ The ideological form of the modernised German national history is evident in this phrase. Leaving chauvinism aside, 'we' (contemporary Germans) do not consider 'them' (the Germans of the past) as heroic 'Teutonic warriors' anymore. They are, however, still 'our ancestors' and the 'German' past is still extended back in time, to an age that knew neither nation states nor collective identities that were as self-contained and self-flattering as the national identities of our times. Thus anyone who argues in favour of this kind of national imagination has to be able to answer the question as to why the fairy tale of national 'ancestors' from 'once upon a time' remains in place while the heroic 'Teutonic warriors' are

39 Cf. Knopp 2009, dust-jacket text.

40 *Deutschland. Ein Sommermärchen* is the title of a documentary about the German men's national football team for the World Cup 2006 which took place in Germany. The title is supposedly intended as an ironic reference to Heinrich Heine's poem *Germany. Ein Wintermärchen* (1844) which criticized German militarism and nationalist chauvinism at the time. The *Sommermärchen*, in contrast, is widely seen as an accurate description of the allegedly cosmopolitan and 'laid back' Germany identity of the 2000s.

41 'Es ist an uns und den nachfolgenden Generationen, die zukünftigen Sternstunden der Deutschen zu bestimmen.', *Ibid.*, 295. Obviously, the praise of the *Berlin Republic* which is depicted as the happy end of German history after a century of wandering the wilderness cannot be missing: 'Wir, die Bürger des geeinten Deutschland, haben allen Grund zur Dankbarkeit und Freude.' ('We, as citizens of unified Germany, have every reason to be grateful and happy.' *Ibid.*, 13.

42 Fiedler/Goergen 2006, 13.

43 It says that we – the Germans – see 'unsere Vorfahren nicht mehr nur als ewige Abfolge teutonischer Recken'. *Ibid.*, 7.

bid farewell. One answer seems to present itself: although purged of its most aggressive, chauvinistic edge, what is at work here is essentially still a form of nationalist 'tradition-making', which cannot do without reference to imagined 'ancestors'.⁴⁴

So, for a critical perspective the answer to the above question is evident. The construction of a modernised *national identity* is at stake here. What, other than this supra-individual sentiment of belonging to a bigger, higher cause, should induce the idea of connecting a Western European provincial prince who lived at the time of Jesus Christ (Arminius) to one of the numerous bureaucrats 2000 years later who spent their lives as ministers or state secretaries (Gustav Stresemann) in a nation state which is nowadays called the Weimar Republic? The act of shaping the past into a national narrative as a means of conferring meaning, of turning history into national traditions, serves to promote identification and thus social cohesion in the present-day nation state. In a society which pits everyone against everyone else, national history engineers a historical group which has been determined by fate (or nature), not by human acts.⁴⁵ Belonging to this group and participating in it – at least on a symbolic or sentimental level – can be an uplifting experience for individuals struggling with the adversities of life: a moment of unity in a world of competition. Looking at the volume *Die Geschichte der Deutschen* again, it needs to be stated that an ahistorical construction of Germanness (with its 'successes' and 'defeats') is certainly at work here and the metamorphosis of the past into national tradition is still taking place. The result of the metamorphosis is a revised design, though: the protagonists occupying national history are now allowed to be more European, more female, more *people of colour*. The latter are included explicitly with the argument that 'in a reunified Germany, an ebony-coloured football player can score goals for *Schwarz-Rot-Gold* [Black-Red-Gold, the German tricolour, HF] to the ecstasy of everyone'.⁴⁶

Within the context of the transformation of German politics of memory, scholarly as well as pop cultural publications – *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* as well as *Die Geschichte der Deutschen* the era of the *Berlin Republic*. The content of what is believed to be a German past and present might have changed: thoughts and sentiments about German history are now more self-critical and more plural. Its form, though, is unaltered: memory belongs to the *nation*, sites of memory are *German*, history is *German*. Scholarly and public tendencies towards a transnational perspective on historical processes have had hardly any effect within this modernisation. Thus, even this new version of a national history which

⁴⁴ See: the classical works: Eric Hobsbawm/Terence Ranger (Ed.): *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge 1983; and Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983.

⁴⁵ Cf. Christopher L. Hill: *National History and the World of Nations*, Durham and London 2008.

⁴⁶ 'Ebony coloured' is a reference to the German national player Gerald Asamoah who was born in Ghana, received German citizenship in 2001 and was the first African-born player to be selected for a German national team. In the book quoted, the national appropriation of black athletes apparently has no problem with using colonialist and racist vocabulary. Fiedler/Goergen, 7.

now exhibits more plurality, works as an exclusive narrative for the population of the nation state. It is supposed to unify individuals whose daily lives are fundamentally defined by competition and unequal relations of power under the bright lights of the great nation. Within this national historical discourse – past and present – those individuals and groups who do not fit into the ideal image of the nation, are ignored and intentionally forgotten. If their names – like that of Rosa Luxemburg, for example – appear in the modernised version they are stripped of any real historical presence – Rosa Luxemburg, a revolutionary who fought for socialism, now becomes simply one chapter in Germany's rise towards bourgeois democracy. It is precisely this violent combination of exclusion and inclusion that renders it unrecognisable to those who are included, those on whom national history is to be blamed, whether in the form of national ideology, historical writings, journalism, or public performances.

Clearly, recent years (and especially the last two decades) have brought a change to the German coming-to-terms with National Socialism: German perpetrators and their crimes have been specifically and publicly named, their victims are more often commemorated, sometimes with great effort and honesty. This has been praised as a self-critical confrontation with the horrors of the past, the post-Nazi coming-of-age of the German nation. As a result, the articulation of German crimes during National Socialism is often reduced to a simple extension of the national 'autobiography'.

In the case of Dresden, this means that the admission or co-opting of the Dresden victims of National Socialism – members of the opposition and resistance, Jews and people considered Jewish according to National Socialist ideology, the so-called 'asocials', forced labourers, concentration camp prisoners and many more – into the story of Dresdeners as victims. A fundamental distinction is rendered unrecognisable: the distinction between German crimes and the life and death of the people affected by them. This phenomenon of disposing of the historical specificity in a universalist 'Where's Waldo?' picture of historical fragments is not an innovation. As noted above, the Dresden *Heidefriedhof* cemetery is a crucially important example of the merging of the sites of German crimes (Auschwitz) and the war against National Socialist Germany (Dresden), rendering Auschwitz invisible by subordinating it to 'the war that originated in Germany'. The same goes for the aforementioned *Mahndepots* and their accompanying book *Erinnerungsorte an Nationalsozialismus, Krieg und Zerstörung* (Sites of memory of National Socialism, War and Destruction), which comes with an English translation and is dubbed a *city guide* to Dresden's past.

Referring to such (self-pitying) perspectives on history, critics of nationalist ways of thinking often point to the importance of contextualisation. The hope here is to bring to light the historical conditionality and actual meaning of the historical issue in question. In this instance the problem might be a

different one though: what, if the context itself is the problem? This has been rightly said about the new *Militärhistorisches Museum* (Museum of Military History) in Dresden.⁴⁷

The discourse on Dresden as part of German history seems to suggest that contextualisation is actually the (other) problem here. It is possible to use it as *screen memory* (those who are ready to talk about Dresden in the context of a war that came from Germany might keep silent about National Socialism and Holocaust), as well as to pluralise *national identity* (those who do not keep silent about the *Judenlager Hellerberg* [Hellerberg Jews' Camp (Dresden)]⁴⁸ might equally talk about German victims – again). *In the wake of* the modernisation of German national history, the Dresden narrations have reassessed the most drastic legends treating Germans as victims (in Dresden).⁴⁹ Having lost their sharpest chauvinistic edges, they are now suitable for the latest fashion in German national history, fitting an allegedly *unverkrampt* [more relaxed], post-national era. But just as the nation itself has not vanished (at all), the discourses on Dresden's past are still tightly bound to the narrative and ideological frame of the nation.

What is to be done in the light of these developments? What might be a means of coming-to-terms with the German history of Dresden in a way that transcends national boundaries? The politics of history are formed by spectacular public performances like the Dresden commemorative events focussed on the Allied bombings of February 1945. Commemoration and public mourning in respect of Dresden are bound to a central part of German history – National Socialism. They thus play an important role in contemporary forms of public and political collectivisation and serve to propagate the idea of the German nation. If this is the case, the first step towards a substantial deconstruction of the myths of Dresden and Germany is probably this: to bring an end to publicly staged self-pity, national romance and mere lip service to accountability and conciliation as soon as possible. This might well create space for a critical approach to *all* of Dresden's history as well as enable a political perspective on what German society was during National Socialism.

Hopefully, this article was successful in sketching the outlines of the correlation between the modification of the narrative of German history in Dresden with the modification of German national history

47 Thomas Mickan: *Wenn der Kontext das Problem ist: Das Militärhistorische Museum der Bundeswehr in Dresden*, in: IMI-Standpunkt 2012/003, <http://www.imi-online.de/2012/01/26/das-militarhistorische-museum-in-dresden-%E2%80%93-zwei-blickwinkel/> Retrieved October 8, 2014).

48 From November 1942 to February 1943 the *Judenlager Hellerberg* was the place of internment for almost all of the last Jews in Dresden. The camp inmates were forced to work for the Zeiss Ikon AG company.

49 Among these legends were low-flying bomber chasing civilians in the city, bombs containing phosphorus, a total number of 250.000 fatalities, the city's allegedly total lack of military importance and the notion of Dresden as a city of arts, free from involvement in National Socialist society and its crimes.

at large. The modernisation of the latter facilitated the break-up of the most extreme discourses of 'Dresden as victim', it promoted a reassessment of the worst legends about the Allied bombings. This, in turn, was to the benefit of both antifascist groups fighting the Neo-Nazi movement with their mass rallies in Dresden which fed on nationalist sentiments, and conservative modernisers who wanted to distance themselves and their city from the annual mass demonstrations by Neo-Nazis.⁵⁰ The modernisation of the Dresden version of German history – in itself a combination of actual political change and strategic considerations of Dresden as a economic location and tourist destination – has taken place *in the wake of* the modernisation of the historical identity of the *Berlin Republic*.

Within the 'self-critical' presentation of German national history, Dresden appears on the stage in three roles: as a hinge, as a symbol and as a memory screen or counterweight. As a 'German' city with a history dating back into the 10th century, Dresden is one hinge in the continuity of 'German history'. It is a symbol of the 'German essence', the site of 'German culture' from Caspar David Friedrich to Gottfried Semper, and it as a generator of the 'German achievement' of reconstruction after the destruction effected by Hitler, the Allies and the GDR. As a victim of the Allied *Bombenholocaust* [Bomb Holocaust]⁵¹ it was and still is useful for concealing Auschwitz – a memory screen; in modernised mode, Dresden can be placed next to the sites of German concentration camps and serve to balance German guilt during the 20th century totalitarian horrors.

In the end, a panoramic historical view has been created in which 'the best Germans of all times'⁵² might have finally found their place. Sorely afflicted and purified, they carry a historical burden which they have come-to-terms with, which no longer haunts them but is fixed in place, ready to be filed away or showcased in museums. For those who argue the need for a *national identity*, who yearn for the illuminating rays of national history, it may feel like this: They can hold their heads high now, direct their gaze forward, and set off on new adventures – towards future 'good chapters' (Horst Köhler) and and their corresponding 'magic moments' (Guido Knopp), travelling the unbeaten tracks of the good old tradition of German national history.

50 See also the article "Dresden calls" by Antifa Recherche Team Dresden.

51 *Bombenholocaust* is a phrase coined by German Neo-Nazis in an attempt to transfer the horrors and the political and ethical meaning commonly ascribed to the Holocaust onto the situation of Germans facing the Allied war against National Socialist Germany.

52 'Die besten Deutschen aller Zeiten' was the title of an article about the German soccer national team in the liberal newspaper taz on June 9, 2012. The close relation of public sports, pop culture and nationalism gives grounds for the assumption that the paper's readership didn't necessarily restrict the praise of the Germans to the 'sports' category.