

## HETEROTOPIAS IN THE FOREST ON THE PERCEPTION OF MEMORIAL DAYS (USING THE EXAMPLE OF BUCHENWALD, BERLIN AND YEREVAN)

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### Abstract

2025 marked the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar/Germany and the victory of the Allies over Hitlerite fascism. The interference caused by the current war in Ukraine with regard to the evaluation of commemoration days for their implementation provided an opportunity to resume and expand on an essay published a few years ago comparing the memorials in Buchenwald and on Tsitsernakabert in Yerevan. The results of wars not only have potential consequences for the further course of history, but also for the ideational content of monuments referring to them, which, if they are allowed to remain, can change the direction of their interpretative content. This is illustrated by the cursory history of the memorials near Weimar (Buchenwald) and Tsitsernakabert and their use in comparison with the Soviet Memorial in Treptower Park/Berlin and Red Square in Moscow. The monuments under discussion and the events that revolve around them are placed in the three-way relationship between past and present (Benjamin) and the respective changes in perspective are observed, taking into account the relationship between the individual and the collective.

**Keywords** – Armenia, Artsakh, Diaspora, pan-Armenian conferences.

### Intro: The 80th anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald

Days of remembrance are days on which groups, individuals, representatives of a state, etc. commemorate their dead or important events. In a publication, the renowned Federal Agency for Civic Education writes on the keyword “political memorial days”: “[They] are among the symbols through which a state presents

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itself to the public.”<sup>1</sup> Examples include June 17, which commemorates the workers' uprising of 1953 in the GDR and was officially the national day of remembrance of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1954 to 1990 as the “Day of German Unity”. After 1990, October 3 became the all-German “Day of German Unity”.

One of the problems I see here is the distinction between a “normal” day of remembrance and a “political day of remembrance”. Funerals in mafia milieu are a very good example of this. Where does individual pain begin and where does politics end? This is intended to illustrate the simple fact that every day of remembrance has a political character. This non-trivial fact comes to the fore when we look at the most recent events in the state milieu of remembrance. April 11, 1945 is the day of the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp inmates, which is commemorated every year on the Sunday around April 11. This year, the commemoration was overshadowed by the war in Ukraine, which raised the question for political leaders as to whether Russian representatives should be excluded from the events. This year is also the 80th anniversary of the liberation from Hitler fascism, which brings the present and the past into conflict. Inevitably, the topic of Ukraine and its official assessment is incorporated into the commemoration of Buchenwald, other events commemorating liberations are NOT considered a memorable event in their own right.

This is what happened in Buchenwald in April. Official representatives of Russia and Belarus were unwelcome, according to the director of the Buchenwald Memorial.<sup>2</sup> The Foreign Office in Berlin issued a “warning” “against Russian representatives at war commemorations” (Auswärtiges Amt warnt, 2025)

In January, a handout to local authorities and memorials warned of potentially “massive propaganda, disinformation and historical revisionist falsification” on the part of Russia. Accordingly, the ministry recommends that no official representatives of Russia or Belarus should be invited - and, in case of doubt, that they should not be admitted. The large community of former concentration camp inmates is becoming smaller and smaller in numbers. But those who remain keep coming forward with descriptions of that time, trying in this way to authentically rescue the past for the present. In ethnological terms, this is seen as a form of oral tradition or literature.

This year, on the day of liberation and its commemoration, the death of a former concentration camp inmate was given a peculiar reinterpretation. The now dead former concentration camp inmate did not die in the usual way, but in a Russian bombing raid in the Ukraine. The two pieces of information, i.e. the news of the

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<sup>1</sup> Schiller, Dietmar. “Politische Gedenktage in Deutschland: Zum Verhältnis von öffentlicher Erinnerung und politischer Kultur.” Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte 25 (1993). [https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/archiv/536541/politische-gedenktage-in-deutschland-zum-verhaeltnis-von-oeffentlicher-erinnerung-und-politischer-kultur/APuZ\\_25/1993](https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/archiv/536541/politische-gedenktage-in-deutschland-zum-verhaeltnis-von-oeffentlicher-erinnerung-und-politischer-kultur/APuZ_25/1993).

<sup>2</sup> Auswärtiges Amt warnt. Auswärtiges Amt warnt. vor russischen Vertretern bei Kriegsgedenken. 2025, <https://www.rbb24.de/politik/beitrag/2025/04/kriegsgedenken-auswaertiges-amt-kritik-russland-vertreter-handreichung-landkreise-seelower-hoehen.html>

death of the 96-year-old Ukrainian Boris Romantschenko as a concentration camp inmate and the reason for his death, are packaged by the Foreign Office in Berlin, in which he is incorporated into the official political and current commemorative rhetoric. In this way, an individual tragedy is duplicated. The declaration of official representatives as undesirable persons on the grounds that, “against the backdrop of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, there is a warning against the possible appropriation of commemorative events marking the end of the Second World War by Russian or Belarusian representatives”<sup>3</sup> is, strictly speaking, the preventive declaration of a possibility as a fact, which is followed by a punishment in advance that should actually only be imposed afterwards.

The circumstances that led to the war in Ukraine - which can by no means be explained by the term “war of aggression” by Russia alone - are contrasted with those of Hitler's fascism and made to resemble it: Romchenko was first tortured by Nazi henchmen and after 80 years killed by an aerial bomb by Putin, suggesting a certain lack of gaps in the proceedings.

The handout from the Federal Foreign Office is non-binding, not obligatory, but definite. In fact, there were opposing reactions. For example, on the 80th anniversary of the Battle of the Seelow Heights on April 16 in Seelow (Märkisch-Oderland), the Russian ambassador Sergei Netschajew was present despite the Foreign Office's warning, as were representatives of state and local politics and other groups. The Deputy District Administrator welcomed them and together they paid tribute with wreaths and bouquets of flowers. The district administrator commented on the handout with: “That’s absurd”. He thus argued in favor of the above-mentioned value of a commemorative event for itself, which includes what the district administrator critically argues against the Foreign Office's measure, “[e]veryone cannot exclude the highest representative of a country from a commemoration of their own countrymen.”<sup>4</sup>

At this point, we want to look at the description from two perspectives and take it further. On the one hand, against the background of the relationship between the individual and the collective, and then from the point of view of the relationships between the present and the past that are discussed here. According to the French memory theorist and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, every individual memory has an inherent group memory that is consciously and unconsciously reproduced. For our purposes, this has the consequence that the dead Ukrainian can be and is assigned to different “Ge-Schichten”<sup>5</sup> based on his origin and life experience. As a Ukrainian living under Selensky, he is also a survivor of Buchenwald and now,

<sup>3</sup> Auswärtiges Amt warnt. Auswärtiges Amt warnt.

<sup>4</sup> The battle on the Seelow Heights on April 16, 1945 is considered the battle with the heaviest losses on German soil (around one million soldiers of the 1st Belorussian Front and around 130,000 German defenders. Around 33,000 Soviet and 12,000 German soldiers were killed. (Auswärtiges Amt warnt, 2025)

<sup>5</sup> 80 Jahre Kriegsende: Landkreis und Stadt erinnern an Schlacht auf den Seelower Höhen. 2025 <https://www.rbb24.de/politik/beitrag/2025/04/80-jahre-kriegsende-gedenken-schlacht-seelower-hoehen.html>.

under wartime conditions, receives the posthumous favour of serving as an argument legitimizing the exclusion of Russian representatives on the basis of his fate. For our purposes, we can translate the German word “Ge-Schichte” into “history” (a term I borrow from the American cognitive anthropologist Stephen Tyler of Rice University in Texas) in order to express the close and manifold interlocking between the individual and the collective in a Halbwachsian sense. This interlocking also includes the construction of a political relationship between the present and the past shown here, which simultaneously extracts the individual relationship for itself and drowns it out collectively.

The events in Buchenwald and around the commemorative event there evoke a recourse to the methodology of the timeline, on which the important events relating to the day of remembrance are to be entered synchronously: April 11, 1945, the 60th anniversary in 2005 and the 80th anniversary in 2025. This year's commemoration undergoes an abrupt change in the content of the relationship between past and present. The Federal Foreign Office is aligning the events of 2025 with 1945 and linking the content of Buchenwald with those in Ukraine. In addition, as a constellation, it overshadows the entire relationship between the commemorative events on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the victory over Hitler-fascism and serves its potential to relativize history.

As a means of comparison - which is not exhaustive here - let us go backwards in time and look at how the construction of Buchenwald took place in 1945 and what happened in 2005. The genocide memorial in Yerevan will serve as an international point of comparison.

I have taken the description of Buchenwald, especially the one from the year 2005 and of Tsitsernakabert, from an earlier article I wrote.<sup>6</sup>

### **First differentiations between Buchenwald and Tsitsernakabert**

In the Soviet era, the Armenian genocide was not officially mentioned as part of an independent Armenian history, while in the GDR the genocide of the Jews was emphasized less than the proletarian struggle against imperialism and its heroes. The underlying pattern found its analogy in Yerevan, where the myth of the Armenian rebirth under Soviet rule was propagated. The Buchenwald memorial is the place where a) the atrocities took place and b) a monument was erected to them by the descendants of the perpetrators. The genocide memorial in Yerevan was erected by the descendants of the victims. With regard to the memorial day in Buchenwald in 2005, we can conclude that the instrumentalization of the genocide by the GDR after 1990 in the name of a united Germany was replaced by a ritual and an empty historiography, whereas in Yerevan we cannot speak of a *lieux de mémoire* (place of remembrance), as the French historian Pierre Nora put it. What

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<sup>6</sup> Gispert, Jürgen. “Die Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Tsitsernakabert: Ein Vergleich.” *Armenisch-Deutsche Korrespondenz* 170 (2016/1); Gispert, Jürgen. “The Memorial Places of Buchenwald and Tsitsernakabert: A Comparison.”

both places have in common is that their respective independent histories have been integrated into Soviet history.

### **April 10, 2005 in Buchenwald**

On April 10, 2005, I visited the Buchenwald concentration camp memorial. It was the 60th anniversary of self-liberation and a major commemoration ceremony. One of the highlights was the speech by the then Federal Chancellor Schröder (SPD) in the German National Theater in Weimar, before heading to the nearby Ettersberg, where the death camp was located. The Chancellor's program was called "State Protocol", a term used in diplomatic relations. It should be noted that former inmates of the concentration camp were part of the audience in the theater. They themselves were the main actors because they were the ones who had to assemble every day on the roll call square of the concentration camp during their imprisonment. I later overheard conversations with former inmates on the square and realized that the state protocol and the chancellor irritated them - his appearance was out of place for them.

One of the reasons is probably the nature of the state protocol, which is therefore also a diplomatic protocol. In terms of conceptual history, diplomacy points to conflict, which is to be resolved through it. It consists of a collection of various regulations "governing the conduct and presentation of state ceremonies" (Protokoll Inland der Bundesregierung)

It ensures that the event runs smoothly. In this way, it could have influenced the perception of the former concentration camp inmates with historical experience at the site itself.

One of the highlights of the smooth running of the event was Schröder's speech. In it, the Chancellor said: "But memory has a way of fading with time, of becoming powerless, of occasionally appearing distant from contemporary life. Because this is the case, places that are entirely dedicated to remembrance and convincingly bring the past into our present are so important. These places admonish us to resolutely resist the temptation to forget or repress."<sup>7</sup>

Schröder emphasizes the "uninhabited place of memory" (Jan and Aleida Assmann), only with regard to which one is able to remember what happened. On April 10, however, we enter a place with former inmates who are still alive. In the context of Schröder's explanation, this means that they are a deceased part of a museum and can only tell us something if we call them. But they can speak for themselves.

This takes us back to the beginnings of the Buchenwald concentration camp as a museum, the construction of which began just a few days after the liberation. The

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<sup>7</sup> Schröder, Gerhard. "Rede von Bundeskanzler Gerhard Schröder auf der Gedenkfeier zum 60. Jahrestag der Befreiung der nationalsozialistischen Lager am 10. April 2005." In Weimar: Bulletin 27-1, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/rede-von-bundeskanzler-gerhard-schroeder-796008>.

term “self-liberation” is controversial. In the last days of its operation, the prisoners took control of the concentration camp. This was organized by the Communist Party, which had secretly stockpiled weapons but was too weak to fight the Nazis alone. However, the protagonists had radio contact with the approaching American troops and so they waited for the right moment to overpower the remaining SS men, most of whom had already fled. During the Cold War, self-liberation was overemphasized, while the role of the American army was swept under the carpet. After liberation, this was part of the myth of Buchenwald, and under communist rule it was part of a common Soviet policy of remembrance.

The Buchenwald concentration camp was operated between 1937 and 1945. A total of around 266,000 people from all European countries were imprisoned there during this period. The death toll is estimated at around 56,000, including 11,800 Jews. From 1945 to 1950, Buchenwald served as a prison camp for the Soviet army. After the liberation of the camp, the fate of the Jews was not acknowledged. The role of the extermination camps was generally underestimated. Buchenwald itself was not initially an extermination camp.

The aforementioned creation of the first museum in Buchenwald took place on April 19, 1945. Members of the Communist Party, who had held important positions in the concentration camp during their imprisonment, took on this task. The opening ceremony consisted of a military tribute to the dead, a ceremonial swearing-in, as was customary for soldiers, and a victory parade. Now something emerged that the French theorist Maurice Halbwachs, who himself died in Buchenwald, would call “material form”. A material form not only reflects the corresponding expectations of the individual, but also shapes them.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, as members of a group, individuals retain an awareness of the material form. The problem is that the group of prisoners was heterogeneous in itself and not all members were taken into account by the communists. The organizers of the ceremony erected a wooden obelisk to give the anonymous dead an identity - they had either been buried, or the wind had blown their ashes away. But the obelisk itself had the function of categorizing the dead, dividing them into nationalities. Thus, the Jews were once again excluded as a separate group. This was manifested by a carving on the back of the obelisk; someone had carved the word “Jews” there. In this way, the obelisk was not designated as the material form to which the Jews could refer as an affected group. By engraving “Jews” on the back of the obelisk, the protagonists not only equalize their exclusion, as they have symbolically regained their own space within the memory community of concentration camp inmates, but they also show the contrast: with the back of the obelisk, they also inhabit the underside, the hidden side of the GDR memory system.

Religiously and mythologically, the obelisk in ancient Egypt is associated with the sun god, it connects heaven and earth, is a symbol for the rays of the sun, stands

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<sup>8</sup> Gispert 2022, Ch. 3.1.5

for rebirth and the cycle of life, connects man with heaven, the gods and the sun - in short, it embodies power and dominion. The subject of the obelisk in memorial construction will still occupy us in connection with the Armenian genocide memorial.

### ***The victim identities of Ernst Thälmann***

An important point of the ceremony was the so-called Oath of Buchenwald, which emphasized the role of anti-fascism. It contained this sentence: “[...] the building of a new world of peace and freedom is our ideal”.<sup>9</sup> The survivors were now less a collective linked by fate, with individual experience and attitudes, but were subject to a political collective, a social program represented by the SED and its practice. The Jews were then subordinate victims. As Jews, they were not the fighters against fascism.

This is attached to the architectural process. Architecture is not created in a space. Architecture first creates the space. However, this does not mean that the space is built. Space is not separate from everything else, but exists alongside and within it. Architecture creates artifacts that also enable the creation of space.<sup>10</sup>

We must add that every being places itself in a space as part of it, positions itself and thereby relates to it. Architecture is a form of thinking: an initial model proposed by the Association of Persecutees of the Nazi Regime attempted to use the entire rest of the camp for a “Museum of Resistance”. It was rejected by the SED. Instead of using the barracks for various nationally-oriented exhibitions, the camp was to be reconstructed solely as a Thälmann memorial. Ernst Thälmann was the leader of the Communist Party who was murdered in the camp in 1944. Therefore, with the exception of the crematorium - in the immediate vicinity of which Thälmann was shot and subsequently burned to death according to one version of his death - the entrance building, the western and eastern towers, all the barracks were demolished. The locations of the latter were marked with stones. The interpretation: “The essence of the Buchenwald concentration camp is not embodied in the barracks or the massive blocks [...]. The essence was the deep comradeship, the mutual help, united [...] by the fight against fascist terror...”<sup>11</sup> The final form of the memorial was to represent the deliberate crushing of fascist cruelty by the leadership of Ernst Thälmann's followers, which included the demolition of the barracks. This is where the character of socialist realism comes into play.

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<sup>9</sup> Buchenwald Schwur. 2005. <https://www.buchenwald.de/geschichte/themen/dossiers/schwur-von-buchenwald>.

<sup>10</sup> Waldenfels, Bernhard. “Architecture Based on the Body.” In *Sensory Thresholds: Studies on the Phenomenology of the Unknown*, 200–215. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999, 202.

<sup>11</sup> Hoffmann, Detlef. *Das Gedächtnis der Dinge: KZ-Relikte und KZ-Denkmäler 1945–1995*. Wissenschaftliche Reihe des Fritz-Bauer-Instituts 4. Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus, 1997, 119.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the GDR, a second attempt was made to commemorate Buchenwald. The history of the camp was extensively researched. Additional memorial sites were created that not only took into account the Jews, but also the Sinti and Roma and other groups. A striking example of the character of the new memorial site is the place where Thälmann was murdered: It is explicitly designated as the place that was assigned to him in the GDR. The memorial policy with its own ideology, which was practiced here after the unification of the former two German states, is comparable to that of the GDR representatives after the defeat. It acknowledges its character after taking over the memorial by describing the site of Thälmann's execution as having been assigned by the GDR's memorial ideology. In a way, this was a second museumization of Thälmann.<sup>12</sup>

Now we can go back to what the survivors said in 2005. They said that 60 years after the Buchenwald oath, fascists were marching against the protest of democratic demonstrators and being protected by the police. The German government supports the US war in Afghanistan, social and labour rights norms achieved through struggle against oppressive systems are being undermined, leading to desolidarization: "Against this backdrop, the Buchenwald Oath, with its legacy created by the political prisoners of Buchenwald, is as relevant as ever." (**Aus dem Aufruf der Lagergemeinschaft, 2005**) Here, the memory of Buchenwald is not understood as a remembered part IN the present, but as a part OF the present. The difference is that the former inmates do not remember the past, but the present. Chancellor Schröder, on the other hand, speaks of the survivors' obligation not to give injustice, violence, anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia a chance in Germany. He sees this problem as part of the past, but not of the present: "In order to understand, we are dependent on the memories of the survivors. They are our link to this very past."<sup>13</sup>

On the stage of the theater, the Chancellor speaks of the past, while the survivors from the concentration camp's roll call area echo Schröder's sound in the present. The Chancellor refers to the survivors as people from the past, but they name concrete conditions that can also be found today.

### The Tsitsernakaberd memorial

Now we turn to the question of how the monument on Tsitsernakaberd came to be built.<sup>14</sup> What happened in 1915 was called genocide, but the Armenian nation and

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<sup>12</sup> This double musealization of Thälmann in his ideological value is accompanied by the economic value of the name "Thälmann" itself. If the name Thälmann in this sense stands for the museum value of the memorial, then the character of Armenia as a living museum may come to mind: Let us take into account the naming practice of the people to give their children of such dazzling figures names like just "Telman" in order to make the investment of the museum value of the name of an internationally recognized communist economically useful to their own family.

<sup>13</sup> Schröder, Gerhard. "Rede von Bundeskanzler Gerhard Schröder

<sup>14</sup> Gispert Jürgen, 2022, Ch. 4.



its people were hidden behind the struggle against the Western imperialist powers, just like the Holocaust. During Stalin's time, there was no official discourse on this chapter of Armenian history. This changed during Khrushchev's rule. In short, the decision to erect a memorial to commemorate 1915 had already been made before the events of the 50th anniversary in 1965. On the other hand, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the first president of the independent Republic of Armenia, claimed that the memorial was the result of the demonstrations of April 24, 1965. In fact, however, the then First Secretary of the Communist Party of Armenia, Yakov (Hakob) Tsarobyan, convinced Moscow of the need for a memorial dedicated to the genocide. Tsarobyan's personal identity plays a role in this.

He was not only a party secretary, but also a descendant of genocide survivors. He was a member of a refugee family who had found their way to the Soviet Republic. As the bearer of a personal and national message, he was able to objectify this in the memorial. The problem was the official ideology that he had to take note of. As in the case of Buchenwald, the anti-fascist character of the memorial had to be emphasized. Now 300,000 Armenians died as soldiers in the Second World War, and quite a few Soviet Armenians held the rank of general. It is not possible to find out here whether they fought and died as anti-fascists or for Stalin's sake. However, one factor should be emphasized: It is often pointed out that before the decisive battle of Stalingrad, Turkish troops stood on the border with neighboring Soviet Armenia and waited to see what would happen. If Stalingrad had been lost, it would have been a sign for Turkey to complete 1915 and 1920.

At least (and probably not only) in the case of the Armenians, it was not just about whether they were anti-fascists or not. In this respect, the intentions in favor of the memorial must be seen not as a struggle of a supposedly peripheral Soviet Armenia against the headquarters in Moscow, but as a relationship between medium and message. We can identify the origin of this in the geopolitical dilemma in which Armenian history plays out again and again. Whether it was Byzantium and the Sassanids, the Ottoman Empire and Persia, later Russia or most recently Turkey and the Soviet Union: the Armenians developed their own culture under the influence of these other forces. This "inter esse" creates a culturally conditioned interest that runs like a paradigm through Armenian history. The resulting relationships are expressed through artifacts. In short, Armenia is not in a position to decide strictly between East and West. We have to take this into account when dealing with the monument, which by definition is the crystallization point of events and informs us about how culture deals with the past. What did this look like in practice?

### ***Dimensions of the inversion***

Once it had been agreed that this monument should depict the genocide, there was both an official and a secret competition. The latter took place with the participation of architects Arthur Tarkhanyan and Sashur Kalashyan. The exciting

thing about it was that it entered the competition with Moscow's specifications. The interplay between medium and message is particularly evident in the way in which Moscow was convinced of the need for a genocide memorial. They used the famous quote from Adolf Hitler, who had said a few days before the invasion of Poland: "Who is still talking about the extermination of the Armenians today?" The reference to Hitler's statement in the context of pushing through the construction of the memorial did not only result in Moscow's approval. It should be noted that the statement was later followed by the murder of six million Jews. The effect is that in Soviet ideological terms, the Holocaust disappears behind the anti-imperialist struggle of the Soviet Union, but for the Armenian side it represents the medium through which it transports its own message, the Armenian genocide, and in this way adheres to the memorial, but in turn indirectly superimposes the Holocaust, if not even leaves it behind. Ironically, this can be seen as a response to the ignorance of the Armenian genocide in connection with the adoption of the UN Convention in 1948.

We can support this view by examining the first model for the Tsitsernakabert Memorial, which consisted of three main elements. Initially, the architects planned a cross that would be buried nine meters deep in the ground. Cross stones would form the side walls. Behind it, a bell tower would be built, and in front of it, an equestrian statue of Vardan Mamikonyan would stand. By entering the cross, which was buried deep in the ground, people were to unite themselves spiritually with the murdered and the dead. The monument to Vardan Mamikonyan was rejected on the grounds that it would capture the nation's imagination. As is well known, Vardan Mamikonyan is a historical and mythological figure in Armenian history. He died in 451 at the Battle of Avarayr against the Sassanids. The often-quoted phrase "Unconscious death is death, conscious death is immortality" ("Unconscious death is death, conscious death is immortality") originates from this struggle. The figure of Vardan is an allegory of the Armenian hero and martyr. When we see or think about Vardan, we are also confronted with the relationship between border space and sphere of influence. This makes it clear why this figure was rejected: the role of the centralized Soviet Union was diametrically opposed to Vardan's visual symbolic power. Vardan would not be a good figurehead for Soviet anti-fascism, but rather for the Armenian cosmos. The architects had to comply with the authorities' orders but also wanted to implement their own ideas. So, they transferred them into another medium. The monument today consists of the symbolic tomb or mausoleum, the obelisk, and the large wall next to it and the Genocide Museum Institute, which was opened in 1995. There are also a lot of trees having been planted by prominent visitors.

Vardan's mythological significance is fully compensated or translated: In 1995, at the 80th anniversary, I saw a detachment of soldiers enter the symbolic tomb, spread out around the Eternal Flame, and shout "Glory and Honor!" This represented the idea of a symbolic yet conscious death, thus completing the circle of Vardan's figure and monument. This phenomenon is represented in the initial

design of the memorial by the cross in the ground and the cross-stones on its walls. The planned ritual was intended to visualize the meeting of the dead with the living. This, in turn, is expressed in practice through the existing ritual every April 24th. The ensemble of the memorial, inaugurated in 1967, did not include any cross-stones, but the mausoleum is built like the opening to a tomb, where people gather and meet the dead – added to this is the sun, which provides light and life from above. This creates an ideal connection to the museum opened after independence in 1995. There, in the large exhibition space, on the exterior wall, one could see so-called light crosses, crosses through which light falls into the museum's exhibition hall, thus again expressing the meeting between the dead and the living, as developed in the original model. This symbolism has been removed for the new exhibition.

The place of ritual, especially the mausoleum, creates, in Foucault's words, "contra-placement or counterforts, utopias made reality, where the real places within the culture are simultaneously represented, disputed, and repelled, to an extent places beyond place, although they can actually be reached."<sup>15</sup> It represents a heterotopia; it is another space. Moreover, it is a hybrid of utopias and heterotopias, something excluded from the cultural paradigm, yet actually present. The architecture of the memorial area is thus inherent in the space. The mausoleum part of the monument bears the symbol of "rebirth"; furthermore, the 12 basalt stones symbolize the opening of the grave, the resurrection of the dead. Those who have been murdered are honored with flowers. This process also corresponds to a spiritual union with them. The Armenian term for this is "woki arnel" ("receiving the spirit") or "wokekotshum" ("calling the spirit"). This can be demonstrated by ritual practice. The architectural arrangement of the monument causes people to literally leave the obelisk on the right; instead, they enter the tomb. Inside, we have the aforementioned rebirth, which in this respect counters the rebirth officially symbolized by the obelisk. Armenians prefer to unite with their dead, but it does not mean they live in the past. In this way, through the choreography of the entrance to the Tomb of Eternal Flame, we simultaneously witness a performance about the Soviet ideological politics of memory and its Armenian dissolution.

We have another possibility to compare Buchenwald and Tsitsernakaberd. In the case of Buchenwald, the original monument is followed by a counter-monument. In the Armenian case, the counter-character of the memorial is embedded in the official one. Tsitsernakabert is a people's monument, Buchenwald is not. If we look at the Genocide Memorial, there are gravestones to the left of the entrance to the symbolic grave. People who fell in the battle for Nagorno-Karabakh are buried there. These, as well as the cross-stones in front of the platform, are significant signs of the *milieu de mémoire* character of the memorial; it would be less appropriate to call it *lieux de mémoire*. The latter is preferred by Pierre Nora

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<sup>15</sup> Foucault, Michel. "Other Spaces." In *Aisthesis: Perception Today or Perspectives of Another Aesthetic*, edited by Karlheinz Barck et al., Leipzig, 1992, 38.

and Jan Assmann, his German colleague, while the former is chosen by Maurice Halbwachs to describe the relationships of the individual bearer of a collective memory.

At the state protocol celebrated by Chancellor Schröder on April 10 in Buchenwald in front of the survivors on the roll call square, they are transformed into the living dead, while in the Armenian case the real dead under the gravestones and the crossstones representing the dead and murdered of Sumgait in 1988, Baku in 1990 and the Karabakh War can be described in their entirety as “dead living”. During the state protocol celebrated by Chancellor Schröder on April 10 in Buchenwald before the survivors on the roll call square, the survivors were transformed into the living dead. In the Armenian case, the actual dead beneath the gravestones and the crossstones representing the dead and murdered of Sumgait in 1988, Baku in 1990, and the Karabakh War can collectively be described as “dead living.” In the Armenian case, this is due to their inherent connection to the original memorial. The laying of gravestones and cross-stones was not officially realized but rather carried out in the early years of the Karabakh conflict through spontaneous actions by people from the city who buried the first dead person on the memorial site or brought the first cross-stone.

## **Conclusion: On the Musealization of History**

### ***Time-Spatial Dimensions***

The triply coded relationship between past and present, exemplified above using two separate scenes related to invitations from official Russian representatives, can be summarized in a single event: On May 8th, a commemoration traditionally takes place at the Soviet Memorial in Berlin-Treptow (former GDR East Berlin). Following a lawsuit against this, the Berlin Administrative Court “confirmed the ban on USSR flags at the Soviet Memorial in Treptow Park on May 8th and 9th.”<sup>16</sup> With this confirmation, the interpretation of how the Soviet flags should be classified this year was provided: “In view of the ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, Soviet flags could, for example, convey a willingness to use violence and be interpreted as an expression of sympathy for the Russian war effort. The resulting impression would impair the dignity of the victims and endanger public peace.”<sup>17</sup>

The past (Pa) is overshadowed and determined by the events of the present (Pr) (1)  $Pr > Pa$ ), but in turn occupies the interpretive content of the actions in Treptower Park (2)  $Pa > Pr$ ): From the relationship between 1) and 2) follows the inevitable tendency to identify a threatening, repeating Soviet victory, but now with that of the Russians themselves - and in the middle of Berlin in the here and now!

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<sup>16</sup> Gericht: Keine Sowjet-Flaggen zum 8. Mai. 2025. <https://www.evangelisch.de/inhalte/243047/07-05-2025/gericht-keine-sowjet-flaggen-zum-8-mai>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

This is a simulacrum (Baudrillard): like is conceived as dislike, sign as countersign, similar as dissimilar. A fictitious future is conceived as an “imagined” past in a present. And a real measure is intended to prevent this: the flag ban on May 8 and 9, a historic date: On May 8, the Germans in West Berlin signed the capitulation document. One day later, on May 9, Stalin had the ceremony repeated in the Soviet area of East Berlin. Polemically, the ban was intended to provide posthumous clarification – “no Russians here!”, which, it must be emphasized again, is factually incorrect, but thereby allows for statements about the current official perception of history. This is relevant because the Soviet soldier, by his very nature, cannot be reduced to Russia. – However, a blanket identity is postulated and sanctioned accordingly. Currently, we can draw a comparison with the events in Armenia on May 9, 2024, when Prime Minister Pashinyan emphasized the Soviet-Armenian contribution to the Red Army and appeared to be balancing it. Here, however, a distinction was still made; in Berlin, however, only Russians are recognized, symbolically represented by the Soviet flag and condemned by it. Of particular importance is that the justification for the ban seems more than questionable: The flag is intended to prevent the remembrance of the dead from being compromised, which suggests a separation between the flag and the fate of the soldier.

The above quote speaks of the “dignity of the victims,” which remains relatively vague. Who is the victim here? Soviet soldiers then, Ukrainian victims today? It's unknown. Time and content blur. However, this has the tendency to decouple World War II, or rather the memorial as its artifact, from its historical basis and reverse it: The meaning of the day of remembrance is projected onto present-day activities and revalued. What's remarkable about the Soviet Memorial in Treptower Park is that it's both a memorial and a military cemetery, yet without actual graves. Completed in May 1949, it honors the 7,000 Soviet soldiers who fell in the Battle of Berlin and are buried here. The dead soldiers lie anonymously beneath a mound – a grassy area that people also cross. On May 8, it was also forbidden to fly Soviet flags here.<sup>18</sup>

By treating Treptow Park as a cemetery, we can draw a connection to Tsitsernakabert in Yerevan, as well as look ahead to May 9th this year in Moscow. A long time ago, the proposal to build a chapel on Tsitsernakabert was discussed, but this was ultimately abandoned. One counterargument was that this would turn the site into a cemetery and dilute the political nature of the commemoration ceremonies there. However, the Karabakh fighters buried there are individuals who symbolically unite family and nation. After the First Karabakh War and the creation of the graves in the memorial area, it became customary for the relatives of the dead to stand at the graves. The crowd flocking to the symbolic grave connects the individual deaths of the Karabakh fighters with the collective fate of

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<sup>18</sup> Tagesschau. 2025. [www.tagesschau.de/inland/regional/berlin/rbb-80-kriegsende-1-900-polizisten-bei-gedenkveranstaltung-in-berlin-im-einsatz-100.html](http://www.tagesschau.de/inland/regional/berlin/rbb-80-kriegsende-1-900-polizisten-bei-gedenkveranstaltung-in-berlin-im-einsatz-100.html).

the Armenian nation. At the Red Square celebrations on May 9 this year, or rather, the dress rehearsal for the parade, one spectator said: “You may know the line from the song: ‘There is no family in Russia that does not remember its heroes.’ And that is exactly the case; in every family there is a relative who is affected.”<sup>19</sup>

This is precisely what applies to the participants in the commemoration on April 24 in Armenia. The value of commemoration is not celebrated here as a formality of protocol. The actors are part of the backdrop, and they also admit themselves into the space, along with their respective positions. This also includes the viewer's assessment that for “many young people” “Victory Day is just another holiday.” (Aischmann Frank, 2025) Putin declared his solidarity with the units of soldiers from countries friendly to Russia, such as Vietnam, Egypt, and China, on Liberation Day. This may be seen as an imitation of Soviet customs, where the unity of the socialist brother nations was presented in this way. However, today it cannot be reduced to then in order to be measured against it.

Putin declared his solidarity with the Soviet soldiers of World War II – and claimed their legacy for Russia: “Representatives of various nationalities who destroyed National Socialism will forever remain Russian soldiers in history.”<sup>20</sup> (**Parade Moskau, 2025**) An informant told me, that he was right, considering the proportion of soldiers and Russian losses. Putin's statement, however, also includes the assertion of a continuity between today's fascism in Ukraine and the Soviet Union's fight against it back then. Not an equation, but a continuation. Consequently, Putin expresses solidarity with the Russian troops fighting there. (**Parade Moskau, 2025**) Thus, the circle closes on the Russian side, while, as we have seen, the German side accuses the Russian side of doing what it fought against 80 years ago. A peculiar convergence of German and Russian interpretations emerges here.

### *The Milieu of the Mémoire*

The fact that the oath taken by the survivors of the Buchenwald concentration camp after its liberation was ideologically “straightened out” shortly thereafter to suit the needs of the new power that took over—the official change in the oath from “ideal” to “goal”—clarifies the importance of the institution for the milieu created by its influence in general, and here of language in particular. Analytically, an institution cannot be separated from the milieu in which it appears, as Marcel Mauss and Paul Fauconnet worked out.<sup>21</sup> The survivors were now less a collective bound by fate with individual experiences and attitudes, but rather they were subject to a collectivization of their ideals into a political goal with conditional

<sup>19</sup> Aischmann, Frank. “Kriegsgedenken und Kriegspropaganda.” Tagesschau, 2025, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/feier-sieg-zweiter-weltkrieg-russland-100.html>

<sup>20</sup> Eydlin, Alexander. “Parade Moskau: Putin beansprucht Sowjetsieg im Zweiten Weltkrieg für Russland.” Die Zeit, May 9, 2025, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2025-05/parade-moskau-tag-dese-sieges-wladimir-putin>.

<sup>21</sup> Stadler, Manuel. “Soziologie als kollektive Psychologie.”

participation. In terms of memory, the Jews were subordinate victims. As Jews, they were not the fighters against fascism. In the means-end schema, a goal prescribed to a whole is not only contrasted with the ideal, but also replaces it: An ideal can not only encompass a goal, but also exceed it, which potentially poses a danger to the institution and the milieu. The local milieu in which commemoration crystallizes into practice determines the staging by the actors and their respective sphere of action. The substitution of “ideal” for “goal” seems to mark a fundamental change in the process of commemoration and its content, but only reveals what has always been inherent in official commemoration policy.

The survivors were now less a collective bound by fate with individual experiences and attitudes; instead, they were subject to a collectivization of their ideals into a political goal with conditional participation. In terms of memory practice, the Jews were subordinate victims. As Jews, they were not the fighters against fascism. In the means-end schema, a goal prescribed to a collective is not only contrasted with the ideal, but also replaces it: An ideal can not only encompass a goal, but also transcend it, which potentially poses danger to the institution and the milieu.

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The local milieu, in which commemoration solidifies into practice determines the staging by the actors and their respective sphere of action. The substitution of “ideal” with “goal” appears to mark a fundamental change in the process of commemoration and its content, but only makes obvious what has always been inherent in official commemoration policy. Between “Oath 1,” sworn in 1945, and “Oath 2” in 2005, lies a cultural and political development that solidifies Oath 2 into an amplifier and echo of the first oath—the oath becomes a call (from) history. With this second oath, the former inmates also catch up with the events in the GDR in 1945 (Obelisk) and 1958 (Substitution), taking them with them as an implicit commentary on what was happening.

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change in the process of commemoration and its content, but only makes obvious what has always been inherent in official commemoration policy. Between “Oath 1,” made in 1945, and “Oath 2” in 2005, there lies a cultural and political development that solidifies Oath 2 into an amplifier and echo of the first oath—the oath becomes a call (from) history. With this second oath, the former inmates also catch up with the events in the GDR in 1945 (Obelisk) and 1958 (Substitution) and incorporate them as an implicit commentary on what was happening. If we look at the two memorial sites described near Weimar and in Yerevan, the centralized nature of Buchenwald and the decentralized nature of Yerevan are striking, which is symbolically evident in the different positioning of the obelisks. The symbolism of the obelisk in Buchenwald can be narrowed down to the person of Thälmann and the victory of communism. We find an equivalent in Yerevan, the obelisk erected there as a symbol of the rebirth of the Armenians as part of the socialist community of nations. However, this image, with its basic centralist pattern, is reinterpreted in a decentralized way, as can be seen in the development of the building and the staging on the day of remembrance itself: The people leave the obelisk to the right and go down the stairs to their ancestors. We saw the same reinterpretation in Buchenwald, when “Jews” was carved into the back of the obelisk.

This brings us to the relationship between *lieux de mémoire* and *milieu de mémoire*. According to Nora, *lieux de mémoire* is to be understood as a causal consequence of the assumed loss of *milieu de mémoire*.<sup>22</sup> Collective memory clings to monuments as places of remembrance; one speaks of memory because it no longer exists. This pattern of thought follows an evolutionary approach, in which modernity creates said *lieux* in order to provide orientation for memory through the resulting places of remembrance. The case of Armenia, however, shows that *lieux de mémoire* cannot emerge without the *milieu* that selects it as such: we have *lieux de mémoire* because the *milieu* exists for them. The important difference is: in Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire*, *milieu de mémoire* seems to dissolve. In a figurative sense: the individual memory has been left at the cloakroom of the hall with cross stones because it is (forcibly) collectivized and archived in the form of cross stones.

*Milieu de memoire* is not opposed to *lieux de memoire*, but the principle of *lieux* becomes part of one’s own *milieu* and is always transformable. When we speak of *milieu*, we encounter the connection to the institution, which, through its materialization, helps determine the *milieu* and thus also the conditions under which the actors find themselves in this *milieu*, how they relate to it, and thereby reproduce the conditions. What are the conditions of the Jews and other inmates in Buchenwald and the later commemoration days, and what of the Armenians in 1965 and later? This could be shown using the instrumentalization of the obelisk in Weimar and Yerevan. Engraving serves here as a method to create counter-history.

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<sup>22</sup> Nora, Pierre. *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001.



Symbolically, space for interpretation is reclaimed here: the obelisk functions as a message transmitter, just like a cross stone in Armenia, which tells us about its origin and the meaning of its appearance through notches. Likewise, the genesis and impact of the obelisks in Buchenwald and Tsitsernakaberd are signs of the existence of other spaces, as demonstrated by Foucault above. In short, the ritual at the Eternal Fire, along with the architecture of the area, contains a hybrid of utopia and heterotopia. In the cultural order, it is actually something excluded, yet nevertheless present.

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### **Conflict of Interests**

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

### **Ethical Standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.