

Worthy Words: The Rhetoric of Speeches in Support of Exhibitions about National Socialism

Abstract

History exhibitions about **National Socialism** in **Germany** are generally endorsed by invited dignitaries who deliver **speeches** at the opening ceremony. Aside from a negative comment that such speeches are ‘inhaltlich völlig deckungsgleich’, they have received no scholarly attention. As part of Germany’s ‘**memory mainstream**’, the increasingly routine commemoration of National Socialist crimes and discrimination, this speech-making – and its undoubted tendency to repetition – requires better understanding. Drawing on concepts from the study of **rhetoric** and **commemorative discourses**, the essay investigates the speeches’ conventionalized performance and verbal expression, and considers what happens when the replication of standardized ideas fails.

Introduction

When a history exhibition about the National Socialist era opens to the public in Germany, it is customary for one or more invited dignitaries to give a speech and, in turn, to be addressed by other speakers. These speeches have received no serious scholarly attention. In fact, almost the only direct comments on them are two eye-witness accounts from irritated scholars, obliged to sit through speeches they did not enjoy. Harald Welzer writes in 2012 about a ceremony five years earlier:

Zur Eröffnung des neuen Museums der Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen am 28. Oktober 2007 wurden sage und schreibe sechzehn Grußworte und Reden gehalten, und alle waren sie inhaltlich völlig deckungsgleich. Alle repräsentierten sie jene ‘historisch entkernte Frömmigkeit’ (Volckhard Knigge), deren Sinn allenfalls darin noch erkennbar

ist, dass die Liturgie eben das Sprechen der Formeln erfordert, aber dass in all dem läge, was für die Zukunft des Erinnerns tauglich sei, wird niemand mehr behaupten wollen. Jugendliche jedenfalls werden damit nicht erreicht, sondern vor allem abgeschreckt.¹

Victoria Bishop Kendzia recalls similar feelings at an opening ceremony at the Jüdisches Museum Berlin not long afterwards:

On the evening of 27 September 2010, I attended the opening of an exhibition on Slave Labour at the JMB. It was a rather lavish affair with a wine reception. I was with my friend and colleague Irit Deckel, a sociologist who has done extensive fieldwork [...] at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. As the speeches began, we were both admittedly a little put off by what we perceived as the overtly self-congratulatory ring of the speeches, emphasizing what a great accomplishment it was to finally have an exhibition on this topic.²

Of the two scholars, Bishop Kendzia is the more ready to acknowledge that such speeches might serve a purpose. Noting that the speakers included the Bundespräsident, Christian Wulff, and memorial-site director Volkhard Knigge – the same Knigge who is, according to Welzer, a special enemy of ‘historisch entkernte Frömmigkeit’ – Bishop Kendzia reflects that the speeches demonstrate to the victims and their descendants that Germany now takes full

¹ Dana Giesecke and Harald Welzer, *Das Menschenmögliche. Zur Renovierung der deutschen Erinnerungskultur* (Hamburg: Edition Körber-Stiftung, 2010), p. 21. The study is jointly written, but Welzer identifies himself as the author of this part.

² Victoria Bishop Kendzia, *Visitors to the House of Memory: Identity and Political Education at the Jewish Museum Berlin* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2018), p. 40.

responsibility for its past. At the same time, she argues, the speeches present Germany as a model for other countries that must deal with difficult pasts.

Welzer and Bishop Kendzia are right that such speeches have a tendency to repetition and, on occasion, self-congratulation. While Richard von Weizsäcker is regularly invoked as a moral authority in this genre of oration, no recent speech comes close to the sophistication and impact of his seminal address to the Bundestag on 8 May 1985.³ Moreover, despite Welzer's assertion of their obsolescence in 2012 such speeches continued largely unchanged up to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which marks the rough endpoint of this study. In March 2020, just before the first lockdown, the mayor of Cologne gave a speech at the opening of an exhibition about the last days of the Second World War. A press report noted that the assembled crowd applauded her comment that the failure of Cologne's citizens to resist Nazism made it vital to fight for democracy today. For all its lack of originality, this sentiment had evidently not lost its rhetorical effect – albeit for a self-selecting audience – thirteen years after Welzer attended the opening ceremony at Bergen-Belsen.⁴

The persistence of these practices unaffected by intellectual objections helps explain historian A. Dirk Moses' even more damning criticism of commemorative practices in 2021. No longer just a hollow 'Liturgie', the rituals are now a 'German catechism', a set of beliefs about the memory of National Socialism that Moses claims all public figures are expected to profess, on pain of censure and exclusion.⁵ In the ensuing public debate, Moses' fellow

³ Daniela Beljan and Matthias N. Lorenz consider von Weizsäcker's speech to have had the widest reach of any post-war speech on commemorative issues: 'Weizsäcker-Rede', in *Lexikon der 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung' in Deutschland. Debatten- und Diskursgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus nach 1945*, ed. by Torben Fischer and Matthias N. Lorenz (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007), pp. 232-35 (p. 232). For a typical invocation of Weizsäcker, see Pastorin Janina Lubeck, 'Begrüßung zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung "Neue Anfänge nach 1945"' <https://www.nordkirche-nach45.de/fileadmin/user_upload/baukaesten/Baukasten_Neue_Anfaenge/NA_2018_Ploen_Eroeffnung_Pastorin-Lubeck.pdf> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁴ Cornelia Braun, 'Geschichte am Ort des Geschehens', *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 7 March 2020.

⁵ A. Dirk Moses, 'The German Catechism', *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, 23 May 2021 <<https://geschichtedergewegung.ch/the-german-catechism/>> [accessed 12 April 2022]. I am indebted to a peer reviewer for suggesting that I position my argument in relation to this debate.

historian Neil Gregor readily agreed with the call for German Holocaust Studies to open up to comparative approaches but he rejected Moses' apparent cynicism about those Germans involved in remembering the National Socialist era. In Gregor's view, these individuals were to be applauded for fighting doggedly, in a benign spirit of 'democratic activism and strengthening of civil society', for appropriate commemoration.⁶ Gregor notes in particular Moses' creation of a rhetorical bogeyman, an undifferentiated caste of 'high priests', '68ers', and 'elites'. Gregor might have added that – in the best traditions of polemic, it should be said – Moses chooses a sub-set of religious terms ('heresy', 'purging of heretics', 'exorcism', 'articles of faith') that denote long-discarded or pre-Enlightenment religious practices so that the views of these unnamed people are discredited a priori. While my own study does not operate at the same level of abstraction as Moses – it is not concerned with Germany's relationship to Israel or to the colonial past, for instance – the specificity of my analysis is precisely what positions this study in relation to Moses' arguments. In the spirit of Gregor's corrective view, I analyse the actual, individual pronouncements of named speech-makers who, even if they belong to an educated elite, generally operate at a middling level of influence and civic activity. I treat the speeches seriously – though not uncritically – as a textual and performative genre that, as Bishop Kendzia is willing to concede, serves a broadly positive social purpose.

Accordingly, I prefer a neutral term, the 'memory mainstream', for the routine and largely unregarded commemorative activities that have become institutionalized and automated in Germany in ways that would once have been unthinkable, what Aleida Assmann has called the 'allgemeine Routine und Betriebsamkeit der

⁶ Neil Gregor, 'Priests, Catechisms and Heretics: Some Thoughts on Dirk Moses' Remarks', *The New Fascism Syllabus*, 25 May 2021 <<http://newfascismsyllabus.com/opinions/priests-catechisms-and-heretics-some-thoughts-on-dirk-moses-remarks/>> [accessed 12 April 2022].

Erinnerungsaktivitäten'.⁷ As we have seen, one can view this routine as a welcome consolidation of democratic values or as proof of a hopelessly stagnant memory culture; still, it makes sense to investigate its cultural and social articulations, such as the speeches discussed here. I view this approach as a useful corrective to the tendency of scholarship in German memory studies to seek out the new and innovative, to track developments, and to identify watershed moments.

The analysis below shows how the speeches construct and enact a social consensus and generate a mutually endorsing effect: validating the exhibition and its makers while also validating the speaker as a person who engages appropriately with Germany's past. A comparison between speeches on the same topic ten years apart allows for some of the genre characteristics to emerge while demonstrating the overall stability of the discourse. The essay shows that while the speeches are indeed often 'inhaltlich deckungsgleich', even ten years apart, with repeated themes and keywords, the very need to repeat the same set of sentiments in slightly different contexts and with slightly different formulations over an extended period can sometimes lead to slips or diversions from the norm. The essay ends by evaluating Welzer's criticism that young people are repelled by this kind of speech.

The Corpus, Methodology, and Scholarship

The essay draws on a loose corpus of about 150 texts, mostly produced between 2009 and 2019.⁸ The Covid-19 pandemic set a fortuitous endpoint to the study, though one or two exhibitions opened between the lockdowns in Germany. Although I use 'speeches' as a shorthand in what follows, history exhibitions about National Socialism are sometimes

⁷ Aleida Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur. Eine Intervention* (Munich: Beck, 2013), p. 13.

⁸ While it is possible to follow the forewords of exhibition catalogues back to the 1990s, transcripts of speeches have only been reliably available online since the late 2000s.

endorsed by written statements, published in the exhibition catalogue under the title ‘Grußwort’, ‘Geleitwort’, or ‘Vorwort’. The high number of texts reflects the fact that they are generally short – just one or two pages – but is also a methodological choice. These texts are limited in their range of subject matter and rhetorical devices in ways that can, provided one studies a sufficient number, illuminate prevailing orthodoxies about how to perform the commemoration of the National Socialist past. The large sample of texts also helps to mitigate any bias arising from unpredictable practices of documentation online.⁹

It is rare for German history exhibitions about the National Socialist era to open without any such formal endorsement. While the thousand guests who gathered for the opening of the new permanent exhibition at the NS-Dokumentation Vogelsang in 2016 may be a statistical outlier,¹⁰ opening ceremonies for larger permanent exhibitions can have substantial audiences.¹¹ Even a modest local exhibition is usually opened by the mayor or another notable who formally addresses a small audience.

Political office-holders are responsible for many of the speeches and forewords, from the Federal President and Chancellor downwards through national ministers and MPs to regional ministers and mayors. Senior figures in public service, industry, entertainment, or religion also give speeches or provide forewords where the exhibition topic relates to their institutional history. Survivors or representatives of the victim groups sometimes also address the audience.

⁹ A few senior politicians – perhaps those with a press office – keep stable online records of their speeches. Some museums regularly post and/or archive these speeches online and some do not; evidently, different practitioners assess their publicity value differently.

¹⁰ See the press release <<http://www.vogelsang-ip.de/de/graues-menue/presse/pressemitteilungen/pressemitteilung/eroeffnung-forum-vogelsang.html>> [accessed 12 April 2022].

¹¹ At the end of his speech to mark the opening of a new documentation centre at the Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, the head of the memorial site was concerned that, after the speeches, the assembled guests might make their way as one to the exhibition space, which was unsuited to ‘[einen] Ansturm von mehreren hundert Menschen auf einmal’ [‘a rush of several hundred people at once’]. Johannes Tuchel, ‘Rede anlässlich der Wiedereröffnung der Gedenkstätte Stille Helden am 13. Februar 2018’ <https://www.gedenkstaette-stille-helden.de/fileadmin/_migrated/content_uploads/GSH_Eroeffnung__Rede_Tuchel.pdf> [accessed 12 April 2022].

Where speeches or forewords are written by politicians, they belong reliably to the mainstream parties: mostly the CDU/CSU and SPD, occasionally the FDP, Greens, or Die Linke. Given that most of the texts in the corpus were produced before the AfD won 94 seats in the Bundestag in September 2017 (followed by 83 seats in the election of September 2021), one might expect a different set of results from a new corpus stretching from, say, 2015-2030. However, little is likely to change except that the AfD itself will be identified in the speeches, implicitly or explicitly, as a force to be withstood, as has already begun to happen. AfD representatives are unlikely ever to be asked to write and perform these speeches and are unlikely, in the short term, to have the power to interfere with exhibition activity in this field.¹²

The speeches fit Gérard Genette's description of a 'paratext', a text that sits at the threshold between a main text (in this case, an exhibition) and public discourse.¹³ Scholarship on exhibition paratexts – not just speeches but also advertising, catalogue essays, and pedagogical materials – is limited.¹⁴ Where the term 'paratext' is invoked, it tends to be used of texts in the exhibition space.¹⁵ While several studies of German memory discourses offer useful points of reference for this essay,¹⁶ it is, rather surprisingly, a post-war study of ancient

¹² The AfD's Landesverband Schleswig Holstein reported in 2019 that its representatives accepted an invitation to attend the opening of an exhibition about German victims of Soviet and other internment camps, that is, about Germany's secondary victims, who were members of the non-persecuted majority under Nazism <<https://www.afd-sh.de/index.php/aktuell/1409-afd-folgt-einladung-zur-eroeffnung-der-ausstellung-in-lagern-schicksale-deutscher-zivilisten-im-oestlichen-europa-1941-1955>> [accessed 20 August 2020].

¹³ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). A speech given at the opening ceremony of an exhibition hovers somewhere between Gérard's 'peritext' and 'epitext': for the duration of its performance it shares the space of the exhibition (peritext), but subsequently it exists independently of it, commenting on it from the internet (epitext).

¹⁴ Two of many studies that take 'museum text' to mean 'text within the exhibition space' are Louise J. Ravelli, *Museum Texts: Communication Frameworks* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006) and Min-Hsiu Lao, 'Museum Texts: Intentionality and Acceptability', *International Journal of the Arts in Society*, 6.2 (2011), 99-110. The four volumes of *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, ed. by Sharon Macdonald and Helen Rees Leahy (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015) have no contribution specifically on museum texts; 'text' is not a keyword in the index.

¹⁵ Laura Bertens and Sara Polak ('Using Museum Audio Guides in the Construction of Prosthetic Memory', *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, 17.1 (2019), 1-11) apply Genette's 'paratext' to museum audio guides.

¹⁶ Melani Schröter and Torsten Leuschner, 'Historical Germanisms in British Newspapers: A Discourse-Analytic Approach and Four Corpus-Assisted Case Studies', *Angermion*, 6 (2013), 139-71, Thorsten Eitz and Georg Stötzel, *Wörterbuch der 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung'. Die NS-Vergangenheit im öffentlichen*

rhetoric that proves most immediately useful in identifying the genre to which the speeches belong.

In their seminal work of 1958, *The New Rhetoric*, Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca discuss the ‘epideictic’ genre of rhetoric, in which the orator ‘made a speech, which no one opposed, on topics which were apparently uncontroversial’.¹⁷ Rather than serving the role of the person to be persuaded, ‘the audience [...] merely played the part of spectators. After listening to the speaker, they merely applauded and went away’.¹⁸ Accordingly, the ancient theoreticians viewed the epideictic as ‘a degenerate kind of eloquence with no other aim than to please and to enhance, by embellishing them, facts that were certain or, at least, uncontested’.¹⁹ These criticisms are not dissimilar to those made today by Welzer and others. A small number of facts with broad public support – that the Nazis and their supporters committed horrific breaches of human rights, that the majority of Germans failed to resist these acts, and that post-war Germany failed fully to acknowledge responsibility or to support the victims – is ‘embellished’ in the sense of being reformulated over and over. The audience’s role is to be present, listen, and applaud, not to change their views or behaviours in any meaningful way.

While Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca share some of these concerns – for instance that the epideictic orator may ‘convert into universal values, if not eternal truths, that which

Sprachgebrauch (Hildesheim, Zürich, and New York: Olms, 2007), and *Lexikon der ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’*, ed. by Fischer and Lorenz. Von Weizsäcker’s 1985 speech, which is a touchstone for this study, is one of only three speeches considered worthy of inclusion in the *Lexikon*.

¹⁷ Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969; first publ. 1958), p. 48. The translators use the variant spelling ‘epidictic’.

¹⁸ Ibid. In their standard work on rhetoric, Gert Ueding and Bernd Steinbrink devote little space to the epideictic genre (in German *Festrede, Gelegenheitsrede*), but confirm that the ancients classified it as a speech about ‘etwas Feststehendes, über das kein Zweifel besteht’ and in passing characterize it as ‘eine Vergewisserung ideologischer, ästhetischer, sozialer Gemeinsamkeit’. They judge that parliamentary debate in contemporary Germany has degenerated into an epideictic discourse that announces the results of consensus rather than arguing a case. Gert Ueding and Bernd Steinbrink, *Grundriß der Rhetorik. Geschichte, Technik, Methode*, 5th edn (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 2011), p. 26, p. 226, pp. 182-83.

¹⁹ Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, p. 48.

has acquired a certain standing through social unanimity'²⁰ – their project is on the whole an optimistic one, exploring the possibility that rhetoric might, after the horrors of the Holocaust and Second World War, offer a humane response to the post-war crisis of reason.²¹

Accordingly, they seek to rescue the epideictic genre from the disdain of the ancients. Since few speeches, however persuasive, instantly spur the audience to action, a speaker may need to keep on winning the argument:

The argumentation in epideictic discourse sets out to increase the intensity of adherence to certain values, which might not be contested when considered on their own but may nevertheless not prevail against other values that might come into conflict with them. The speaker tries to establish a sense of communion centred around particular values recognized by the audience.²²

In the contemporary German case, too, the repetition of expressions of shame about the past and the repetition of the admonition to remember are not simply empty rhetorical gestures or, rather, the repetition that makes these gestures appear empty is also the assurance of their usefulness. The German speakers discussed here avoid converting values such as freedom and democracy into 'eternal truths' because, on the contrary, they insist on the fragility of democracy in the face of 'other values that might come into conflict with [it]' and the need to perform its values repeatedly in order to safeguard it. Justice Minister Katarina Barley expresses this idea in a 2018 speech: 'Der demokratische Rechtsstaat ist keine Selbstverständlichkeit mit Ewigkeitsgarantie. Vielmehr müssen Freiheit und Gleichheit von uns allen jeden Tag und immer wieder aufs Neue engagiert gegen Angriffe aus

²⁰ Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, p. 48.

²¹ Michelle Bolduc, *Translation and the Rediscovery of Rhetoric* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2020), p. 2.

²² Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, p. 51.

verschiedensten Richtungen verteidigt werden'.²³ Barley's speech practices what it preaches by reiterating – even at the cost of dull repetition – the need to repeatedly re-enact the defence of democracy. Whether this is effective is a question for a different kind of study. Every time a public speaker says that commemoration is needed now more than ever ('gerade jetzt') given the context of some new public expression of xenophobia in Germany, one might question what all the previous speeches have achieved, except avoiding worse.²⁴ Perelman's and Olbrechts-Tyteca's category of the epideictic at least gives a conceptual framework for understanding the iterative process.

Addressing the Audience and Constituting the Web of Endorsers

Speeches and forewords written to endorse history exhibitions about National Socialism are not notably different in tone or subject matter from speeches given at commemoration ceremonies. The texts being studied here also belong to wider genres: the *Festrede* and the *Vorwort*. The same speakers who have wise and worthy words for the opening of an exhibition about National Socialism are likely also to be called upon to speak wise and worthy words on quite other cultural topics.²⁵ Formulaic written instructions to journalists –

²³ Katharina Barley, 'Rede bei der Eröffnung der Ausstellung "Der Volksgerichtshof 1934-1945 – Terror durch "Recht"' <https://www.bmj.de/SharedDocs/Archiv/DE/Reden/DE/2018/042518_Ausstellung_Volksgerichtshof.html?nn=17101178> [accessed 12 April 2022].

²⁴ Moses expresses this argument in characteristically unequivocal terms: 'They [i.e. those involved in the memory mainstream] have failed profoundly: a huge percentage of Germans are racist against Jews, Muslims, Blacks, and others, while about a third wrongly think their grandparents resisted the Nazis. Neither did their Holocaust prevent the rise of the AfD' (Jonathon Catlin, 'A New German Historians' Debate? A Conversation with Sultan Doughan, A. Dirk Moses, and Michael Rothberg (Part II)', *Journal of the History of Ideas Blog*, 4 February 2022 <<https://jhiblog.org/2022/02/04/a-new-german-historians-debate-a-conversation-with-sultan-doughan-a-dirk-moses-and-michael-rothberg-part-ii/>> [accessed 12 April 2022]).

²⁵ Norbert Lammert who, as President of the German Bundestag from 2005-2017, spoke or wrote in support of exhibitions about National Socialism also spoke at the opening of the Bach Festival in 2006 and the opening of the exhibition 'Der frühe Dürer' in 2012, among many other duties.

‘Sperrfrist xx’ and the disclaimer ‘Es gilt das gesprochene Wort!’ – classify the speech as part of the speaker’s regular public communications output.

Despite these blurred genre boundaries, the notion of ‘genre’ is still useful in the sense in which Jeffrey K. Olick, drawing on Bakhtin, uses it to study German commemorative rhetoric.²⁶ For Bakhtin, argues Olick, ‘genre’ is not an ideal form which a work either does or does not exemplify, but rather an evolving series of ‘historical accretions’.²⁷ It follows that the rhetoric used to speak of the Nazi past necessarily draws – consciously or unconsciously – on earlier utterances, with the ‘genre’ providing ‘a horizon of terms, positions, and general precedents’.²⁸ Commemorative speeches about 8 May 1945 (including, of course, von Weizsäcker’s), exemplify this ‘genre memory’ by drawing on or responding to earlier speeches. This is true even in instances where, for rhetorical effect, the speaker acts as if earlier debates had not taken place.²⁹ As mentioned above, the speech-makers discussed here sometimes place themselves in the tradition of von Weizsäcker (or, occasionally, one of his successors as Bundespräsident, such as Roman Herzog, Johannes Rau, or Horst Köhler), but it is also notable that almost every speaker – also for rhetorical effect, since they want to validate the exhibition – acts as if the subject is not, in fact, a very well-known one about which they can tell the audience nothing new. The corpus has yielded no examples of *aporia* along the lines of: ‘Of course, you know all this already, but I must say something’.

While this essay, like Olick’s, focuses largely on verbal discourse, the visual component of speech-making is also important. The regularity with which still photographs of a speaker at a lectern appear in media reports of the opening ceremony testifies to the

²⁶ Jeffrey K. Olick, ‘Genre Memories and Memory Genres: A Dialogical Analysis of May 8, 1945 Commemorations in the Federal Republic of Germany’, *American Sociological Review*, 64.3 (1999), 381-402.

²⁷ Olick, p. 383.

²⁸ Olick, p. 391.

²⁹ Olick, p. 398.

centrality of speech-making at these events.³⁰ Indeed, the very dullness of the speaker-at-a-lectern motif (compared with images of the exhibits or portraits of survivors, for instance) indicates that the oratorical performance is a constitutive part of the ritual. While it might seem self-evident that a news photographer reporting on a ceremony must take pictures of its speakers, and that this, in turn, necessitates putting the speaker and the lectern in frame, Steffi de Jong has taught us that, in memory culture, apparently self-evident genre conventions have at some point been originated and developed. The ‘talking heads’ aesthetic of *Zeitzeugen* video testimony might seem equally self-explanatory, begging the naïve question ‘How can you show someone speaking other than by showing them speaking?’, but it had first to be established, honed, and accorded meaning.³¹ When the pandemic hit and exhibition-makers had to move their opening ceremonies online, a fixed camera pointed at the speaker behind the lectern was what exhibition-makers typically regarded as the *sine qua non* of the digital event.³² Thus, whereas invited dignitaries might, in other circumstances, simply cut a ribbon – and while an exhibition can perfectly well open without an event – the speakers discussed here ensure that the history exhibition is understood as a public declaration of Germany’s commitment to remembering past crimes by dint of standing at a lectern (which accords the speaker visibility, dignity, and prestige) and saying earnest but necessarily rather bland things about the exhibition’s content and context.

Words, too, can evoke performance (as when a speaker says ‘I stand before you’), and we will see several such examples in what follows, but from this point on the analysis focuses

³⁰ See, for instance, a sequence of press photos showing the opening of ‘Sieben Kisten mit jüdischem Material’ at the Jüdisches Museum München in 2018. Images of three separate speakers at the lectern are followed by an image of the audience listening to them: < <https://blog.juedisches-museum-muenchen.de/das-war-die-eroeffnung-von-sieben-kisten-mit-juedischem-material/>>. An accompanying YouTube video opens with images of speakers at the lectern and a rapt audience < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUGZ7QXeobU>> [accessed 12 April 2022].

³¹ Steffi de Jong, *The Witness as Object: Video Testimony in Memorial Museums* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2018), esp. p. 57, p. 63, and pp. 101-04.

³² See for instance the opening ceremony for the exhibition ‘“Rotspanier”. Spanischer Zwangsarbeiter im Zweiten Weltkrieg’ at the Dokumentationszentrum NS-Zwangsarbeit in June 2021 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MuetL-99GT0&t=3s>> [accessed 12 April 2022].

on the verbal. Overall, the speeches are framed by verbal codes of politeness. Organisers of the exhibition are ‘honoured’ that guests have attended and guests are ‘honoured’ to be there; long litanies of thank-yous often take up several minutes; and it is conventional to close by wishing the exhibition many interested visitors. Though different categories of speaker – politicians, civic activists, museum personnel, survivors – have different stakes in the performance, any tensions or differences of viewpoint are unlikely to be played out before the audience.³³

One aspect of the rhetoric that confirms both its conventionality and its distinctiveness is the first part of the exordium: the opening address. As with any *Festrede*, the speech-makers in the corpus expand the formula ‘Meine Damen und Herren’, singling out honoured guests and addressing them by their titles or honorifics where appropriate. A particularly lengthy welcome was delivered at the inauguration, in 2010, of the history exhibition at the Wewelsburg, a former SS centre and site of forced labour. The compère of the proceedings, Landrat Manfred Müller, greeted the following before delivering his address: representatives of the victim groups (in turn: of the Jews, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Sinti and Roma); representatives of the survivors; diplomats from the Czech Republic, Austria, Croatia, the Russian Federation, the Netherlands, and France; a minister from Berlin; a regional minister; representatives of the religious communities (in turn: Catholic, Lutheran, and Jewish); a national MP and a regional MP; the director of the local Landschaftsverband; the President of the district government; fellow district councillors; mayors of various local towns; and representatives of the media.³⁴ In its full form, with names, titles, and roles, this will have

³³ The only example in the corpus of a speech likely to make others on the rostrum uncomfortable is Romani survivor Rudko Kawczynski speaking at the opening of the exhibition ‘In den Tod geschickt’ in 2009. Kawczynski criticised the various attempts to commemorate and compensate the Sinti and Roma and argued that the descendants of victims and of the majority culture could never be united by a common memory. He ended his speech ‘In Wut und Fassungslosigkeit’. The online record of this speech has disappeared, but reference is made to it in Linde Apel, ‘Stumbling Blocks in Germany’, *Rethinking History*, 18.2 (2014), 181-94.

³⁴ Manfred Müller, ‘Begrüßung’, in *Reden zur Eröffnung am 15. April 2010. Wewelsburg 1933-1945. Erinnerungs- und Gedenkstätte. Ideologie und Terror der SS*, ed. by Der Landrat, Kreis Paderborn, and Kreismuseum Wewelsburg (Wewelsburg: Kreismuseum Wewelsburg, 2010), pp. 5-7, brochure accessible from

taken several minutes to deliver. Even during the pandemic, when this social practice broke down, a speech might begin by greeting a mayor who was detained on civic business but would have liked to come.³⁵ At the same time (October 2020), digital alternatives were establishing themselves, so that a live-streamed opening of an exhibition about ghetto experiences could once more begin ‘Sehr geehrte Frau Vizepräsidentin [...], sehr geehrte Frau Staatsministerin [...], sehr geehrter Herr Senator [...], sehr geehrter Herr Botschafter [...]’.³⁶

For the historian of memory, these addresses – when read by the dozen – attest to the routine presence of public notables at the opening ceremonies and to the routine invitation of survivors and descendants as guests of honour. The relative frequency with which speech-makers at major exhibitions address an ‘Exzellenz’ or the ‘konsularisches Korps’ testifies to the role of foreign dignitaries as witnesses to Germany’s contrition (as noted by Bishop Kendzia).

Yet the speeches are arguably a richer source for the sociologist of memory than for the historian. In the moment of performance, reading out the names and titles does not just document the people who are there; it *constitutes* the assembly rhetorically, making it visible as a meeting place in which people of status within German democracy – and, crucially, the *right* people – come together with fellow professionals, with past victims, with present-day successor communities, and with an audience notionally representing the German populace, to enact their joint commitment to commemoration. The enumeration of individuals who represent different public institutions (the State, industry, education, etc.) binds those

<<https://www.wewelsburg.de/de/gedenkstaette-1933-1945/dauerausstellung/entstehung.php>> [accessed 12 April 2022].

³⁵ Annegret Schüle, ‘Begrüßung zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung “‘Wohin bringt Ihr uns?’ ‘Euthanasie’-Verbrechen im Nationalsozialismus”’

<<https://www.topfundsoehne.de/ts/de/service/mediathek/veroeffentlichungen/2020/137093.html>> [accessed 12 April 2022]. No other dignitaries were present, only museum staff and professional partners, something that would have been unusual before the pandemic, even for a relatively small exhibition.

³⁶ Topographie des Terrors, official opening of the exhibition ‘Der kalte Blick. The Cold Eye’ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4-EJrfCUmw>> [accessed 12 April 2022].

institutions together in common purpose. The opening address both legitimizes the exhibition as a product of this democratic culture and legitimizes the speaker as a person who includes themselves within the inner civic circle. Social seniority (the Direktor/in, Bischof/Bischöfin, Staatsminister/in, etc.) works in two directions, vouching both for the credibility of the exhibition and for the represented institutions' commitment to *Aufarbeitung*.³⁷ Consciously or not, a stylized picture is created of German society united in commemoration, perhaps with the hope of realizing this unity in wider reality by conjuring it up in miniature.

In illustration of her point that such speeches serve a social and diplomatic purpose, Bishop Kendzia quotes from the speech given that evening by Volkhard Knigge. Knigge declares (in Bishop Kendzia's translation) that

exhibitions like this one, then, can demonstrate Germany's democratic credentials: and you, Mr President, deserve thanks because you do, through your patronage and your presence here today, not only honour the victims, but you also underline the significance of critical, historical self-determination for the development and preservation of humane and democratic culture.³⁸

While Bishop Kendzia adduces this passage as evidence that Germany wants to present itself internationally as a model of historical transparency (something that her study calls into question), in the context of the present argument it also demonstrates key rhetorical dynamics. In a gesture akin to 'I stand before you', Knigge spells out what is happening at

³⁷ An employee deputizing for a more senior colleague often invokes their superior, as permanent secretary Günter Winands does when he says that his minister, Monika Grütters, sends her best wishes and has financed the project from her budget. Günter Winands 'Grußwort anlässlich der Wiedereröffnung der Gedenkstätte Stille Helden am 13. Februar 2018' <https://www.gedenkstaette-stille-helden.de/fileadmin/_migrated/content_uploads/GSH_Eroeffnung__Rede_Winands.pdf> [accessed 12 April 2022].

³⁸ Bishop Kendzia, p. 40.

the ceremony of which he is a part: the more senior orator, the country's most senior statesperson, has endorsed the exhibition's message through his 'patronage' and 'presence'. This would be the case whether Knigge voiced it or not, but by articulating the effects, Knigge seeks to reinforce them. That he is qualified to do so is thanks to his own social capital as a well-known, high-ranking professional from the network of German memorial sites. Similarly, when the head of the Gedenkstätte Neuengamme, Detlef Garbe, opened an exhibition about the police force under National Socialism in 2012, he paused in his long address to the dignitaries (the president of the regional parliament, MPs, a senator, diplomats, a bishop, and a rabbi) to address the new Police President, whose participation 'dokumentiert einmal mehr, welche Bedeutung Sie der kritischen Reflexion über die Polizeigeschichte für das Selbstverständnis der Polizei in der Demokratie beimessen'.³⁹ The educated audience is perfectly well able to read the Police President's presence as a signal of institutional commitment to teaching the police force about its own history, but Garbe confirms what the Police President wants to perform and what the liberal audience want to understand: that this is a positive development in institutional responsibility for the past. Garbe thus fits the Police President's participation into a 'horizon of terms, positions, and general precedents', to use Olick's terms, with which the audience is readily familiar. Regardless of whether one adjudges this mutual social reinforcement to be 'historisch entkernt' or 'fromm', it plays a role in 'mainstreaming' memory of National Socialism by publicly binding social institutions in the common cause of remembrance.⁴⁰

³⁹ Detlef Garbe, 'Rede zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung "Dokumentation Stadthaus. Die Hamburger Polizei im Nationalsozialismus"' <https://epub.sub.uni-hamburg.de/epub/volltexte/2014/30019/pdf/Rede_von_Dr._Detlef_Garbe_Direktor_der_Gedenkstaette_.pdf> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁴⁰ Although the focus of the current article is Germany, practices are not noticeably different in Austria, at least at national level. In 2015, the outdoor exhibition '41 Tage. Kriegsende 1945. Verdichtung der Gewalt' opened on the Heldenplatz in Vienna. While the exhibition was produced by academics it was supported by the Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung und Sport, which supplied a military band for the opening ceremony, an Oberstleutnant as compère, and a brigadier to address invited guests, including the Bundespräsident and foreign ambassadors. Several national and regional ministers spoke before the

In a printed book, the endorsing ‘presence’ of a patron is less immediate and direct. Nonetheless, exhibition catalogues also illustrate the process by which representatives of different social institutions agree to be seen together, working in concord to strengthen the impact of the exhibition. Two signatures – that of the Mayor of Münster and of the President of Münster’s Tax Office – are reproduced in facsimile on the opening pages of the catalogue for ‘Verfolgung und Verwaltung’, a 1999 exhibition about the involvement of the Westphalian tax authorities in National Socialist theft from Jews.⁴¹ A fairly common feature of exhibition catalogues, these signatures suggest that the office – the key endorsing power – is realised in the person. In this instance, each man signs his own statement, but sometimes the signatories sign a joint statement, as when the creative director of the Hessischer Rundfunk radio station, the director of the Holocaust research institute the Fritz Bauer Institut, Hessen’s regional Minister for Science and Art, and the head of the regional Sparkassen-Kulturstiftung jointly endorse the exhibition ‘Legalisierter Raub’.⁴²

The Gedenkstätte Stille Helden: Two Opening Ceremonies, Ten Years Apart

The opening of a memorial site in 2008 and its re-opening ten years later can highlight continuities and shifts in rhetoric while also drawing out typical genre features. The Gedenkstätte Stille Helden honours those non-Jewish German civilians who gave assistance to persecuted Jews during the Nazi era. Its first iteration opened on 27 October 2008. The small memorial site, housed in an alleyway off the Rosenthaler Strasse, alongside the former

Bundespräsident formally opened the exhibition. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPP4IWPS29Y>> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁴¹ *Verfolgung und Verwaltung. Die wirtschaftliche Plünderung der Juden und die westfälischen Finanzbehörden*, ed. by Alfons Kenkmann and Bernd-A. Rusinek (Münster: Oberfinanzdirektion Münster, 1999), pp. 7-10.

⁴² *Legalisierter Raub. Der Fiskus und die Ausplünderung der Juden in Hessen 1933-1945*, ed. by Bettina Leder-Hindemith (Frankfurt am Main: Sparkassen-Kulturstiftung Hessen-Thüringen, 2005), pp. 5-7 (p. 7)ing

workshop of ‘quiet hero’ Otto Weidt, had too little space for a conventional opening ceremony. The readiness of Berlin’s Town Hall to host the ceremony indicates endorsement (and, as in all these cases, a degree of self-endorsement) by the city-state of Berlin. A decade later, when the lack of space in Rosenthaler Straße stood in the way of plans to expand, the memorial site was moved to the Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand in Stauffenbergstrasse, where it retains its separate identity. Once again it was opened with a formal ceremony, on 13 February 2018, this time in Stauffenbergstrasse. An obvious measure of continuity was provided by Inge Deutschkron, the guiding spirit behind memorialization of the quiet heroes, who was able to attend the ceremonies in 2008 and 2018 respectively in her eighties and her nineties. She received warm words from speakers at both ceremonies.

Unlike their ancient counterparts, modern speakers are unlikely to divide a speech neatly into a *narratio* and an *argumentatio*.⁴³ Nonetheless, these two components can still be discerned in the speeches discussed here, where the *narratio* is accomplished by relating selecting historical details from the exhibition topic (occasionally supplemented by the speaker’s own research) and the *argumentatio* by stressing the necessity and timeliness of the exhibition given current threats to German democracy. One clear *topos* of the *argumentatio* is condemnation of Germany’s dilatoriness in acknowledging responsibility for National Socialism. In their 2012 overview of the state of German Holocaust memory, Dana Giesecke and Harald Welzer argue that the apparent solidity of German memory culture serves only to hide the disgrace on which it was founded:

Dabei wird heute, in der Situation einer bis zur Erstarrung stabilen Gedenk- und Erinnerungslandschaft, oft vergessen, dass eben dies – die Verweigerung der

⁴³ Ueding and Steinbrink, pp. 262-74.

Anerkennung der Leiden der Opfer – der erinnerungspolitisch größte Skandal der Nachkriegsgeschichte war.⁴⁴

The use of a subjectless passive ('wird heute') obscures who is forgetting the post-war scandal: the general populace, politicians, academics? Whoever it is, it is not speech-makers at exhibitions about National Socialism, for whom acknowledging the years of forgetting or repressing is a recurrent motif. This expresses itself lexically in the use of time adverbials: 'erst' (e.g. 'erst in der Mitte der 1990er Jahre, also mit nahezu fünfzigjähriger Verspätung'), 'noch' (e.g. 'noch im Oktober 1986 erklärte die Bundesregierung, dass'), 'bis' (e.g. 'Fast fünfzig Jahre hat es gedauert, bis') and 'endlich' (e.g. 'Es ist geradezu beschämend, dass es mehr als 50 Jahre dauerte, bis der Deutsche Bundestag sich der Schicksale auch dieser Menschen endlich annahm'). As the examples here show, it is common to name the number of years, in multiples of ten (50, 60, or 70), that it has taken for an aspect of the past to be acknowledged. Alerted to this trend, Giesecke and Welzer might still criticise the ritual evocation of the 70 years of forgetting as a symptom of the 'Erstarrung' of memory culture. Besides, even if the self-criticism is sincere – we forgot for far too long – it is, as Bishop Kendzia suggests, also a form of self-congratulation: but here today we have righted that wrong. It is difficult to see how one sentiment can be evoked without the other. Often, the exhibition has unearthed genuinely new historical information so that speakers are not just performing a liturgy based on the ritual recall of events in a distant past but responding to an unfolding understanding of that past.⁴⁵ Admittedly, the chances of radical revisions in

⁴⁴ Giesecke and Welzer, p. 7.

⁴⁵ A typical example is an exhibition about the failure of the post-war Bundesministerium für Justiz to deal adequately with the Nazi past, revealed in academic research (2016) that then formed the basis for a touring exhibition (2018). Katarina Barley, 'Rede der Bundesministerin der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz Dr. Katarina Barley bei der Eröffnung der Rosenberg Wanderausstellung am 15. August 2018 im Bundesverwaltungsgericht in Leipzig' <https://www.bmj.de/SharedDocs/Archiv/DE/Reden/DE/2018/081518_Rosenburg_Leipzig.html> [accessed 12 April 2022].

understanding are now very slim, but the ongoing opportunities for finding unknown – especially local – cases are an important motor of this activity.

At the 2008 opening of the Gedenkstätte Stille Helden it fell to the national Minister for Culture, Bernd Neumann, to declare that recognition of the heroism of those who hid or helped Jews in the National Socialist years came ‘erst spät’. In other respects, the 2008 speeches by Neumann and by the Mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, are untypical since they are able to celebrate the already long *tradition* of fighting for the truth: twenty years in which Inge Deutschkron’s play *Ab heute heißt du Sara* has been performed to young people; fifty years since Berlin senator Joachim Lipshitz started an initiative to honour Berliners who had helped Jews.⁴⁶

This last point links to a further typical feature of both the *narratio* and the *argumentatio*: their localism. Within a national discourse of commemoration that values local initiatives highly for their dispersal of responsibility from the centre to each civic locality, the speeches studied here often express a kind of local patriotism, which may be articulated simultaneously in positive and inverted forms: an acknowledgement of the locality’s special complicity in crimes and inhumanity can license mention of local special contributions towards *Aufarbeitung*.⁴⁷ Wowereit only partly fulfils the first half of this contract, speaking rather generally and nationally about the crimes of National Socialism, perhaps because it is a given that National Socialism played out in Berlin, but he goes on to celebrate Berlin’s role in

⁴⁶ Klaus Wowereit, ‘Rede anlässlich des Festaktes zur Eröffnung der Gedenkstätte “Stille Helden” am 27. Oktober 2008 im Berliner Rathaus’ <<https://docplayer.org/25291834-Es-gilt-das-gesprochene-wort.html>>; Bernd Neumann, ‘Rede anlässlich des Festaktes zur Eröffnung der Gedenkstätte “Stille Helden” am 27. Oktober 2008 im Berliner Rathaus’ <<http://adrien.barbaresi.eu/corpora/speeches/BR/t/1356.html>> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁴⁷ This topos was already established in 1999, when the mayor of Münster pointed out that most of those working in the regional tax offices during the Nazi era (the topic of a critical exhibition) were born-and-bred Münsteraner before also noting that the city’s tax office was the first in the country to research its institutional past under the Nazi regime (Berthold Tillmann, ‘Grußwort’, in *Verfolgung und Verwaltung*, ed. by Kenkmann and Rusinek, pp. 7-8 (p. 7)). In 2012, Detlef Garbe, head of the Gedenkstätte Neuengamme, decried the fact that Hamburg clung for so long to the false legend of its exceptional status during the Third Reich, but also noted that it was Hamburg historians who pioneered regional studies into the role of the police force under National Socialism (Garbe).

righting the wrongs of post-war neglect, both in the 1950s, in the form of Lipschitz's initiative, and in the present day, through co-operation with the Bund to establish and fund the memorial site.

This is not to suggest that Wowereit hides behind Berlin's achievements. His speech insists that ordinary Berliners must share blame and shame: 'Es geschah vor aller Augen und in aller Öffentlichkeit'.⁴⁸ The idea that Nazi terror was openly administered and publicly witnessed has been a self-critical trope at least since von Weizsäcker's 1985 speech, pushing back against an earlier exculpatory myth that ordinary Germans could not have known what their leaders were doing, and is a recurrent theme in these speeches.⁴⁹ Wowereit also regrets Germany's failure, after 1945, to recognise the bravery of the helpers and rescuers. He conjectures that the minority who resisted Nazi race hatred aroused shame in the majority who did not. This view represents a step forward: early post-war Germans are no longer simply berated for their unwillingness to acknowledge their role in the Nazi past, as they arguably were before 2000. The inadequacy of their soul-searching is still criticised, but their psychological defence mechanisms are seen as a response to circumstances.

The corresponding speeches in 2018 were given by the head of the Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, Johannes Tuchel, and by a senior civil servant in the Ministry of Culture, Günter Winands.⁵⁰ Their *argumentatio* follows the same historicizing pattern as the 2008 speeches: there had been a shameful period of neglect and this had been remedied belatedly ('erst in den 1990er Jahren', 'auch 1988 [...] noch nicht unumstritten', 'erst nach seinem Tod'). Tuchel evokes the idea that Nazi persecution happened openly, 'vor den

⁴⁸ Wowereit.

⁴⁹ Von Weizsäcker said: 'Wer seine Ohren und Augen aufmachte, wer sich informieren wollte, dem konnte nicht entgehen, daß Deportationszüge rollten'. By the time the Topographie des Terrors made the photography exhibition 'Vor aller Augen: Fotodokumente des nationalsozialistischen Terrors in der Provinz' in 2001, the emphasis had shifted further: it was not only those who 'wanted to be informed' who knew what was happening; it was not hidden from anybody (not 'abgeschirmt', as von Weizsäcker had put it). 'Vor aller Augen' is a common phrase in the corpus of speeches (together with 'am helllichten Tag').

⁵⁰ Winands; Tuchel.

Augen der deutschen Bevölkerung'. Like Wowereit, he stresses his own institution's commendable role in pioneering work on the quiet heroes, while admitting that this could have happened sooner. Winand's speech specifically names his minister, Monika Grütters, as the budget holder providing 3.9 million euro for the move to Stauffenbergstrasse, thus offering the government's endorsement of the project while using the project to endorse the government. Tuchel repeats Wowereit's argument that post-war Germans did not want to be shamed for their own passivity by the memory of active resisters, a point now backed up with support from an academic source. He also intensifies Wowereit's rhetoric, giving a more vividly shaming illustration of the neglect of the quiet heroes: a prostitute who was rejected for the status of 'politically persecuted person' because helping Jews was not at that time considered to have been a means of undermining the Nazi regime. This happened 'noch im Februar 1959', the 'noch' implying that by that time democratic Germany might reasonably have been expected to have developed more sophisticated notions of resistance. The fact that this 'noch' is not entirely convincing (for why would Germany have reached a more sophisticated understanding of resistance to National Socialism by 1959?) serves to emphasize the conventionality, for this genre, of a small group of time adverbs expressing contrition for post-war failings.

While they mostly repeat the narrative of the 2008 speeches, Tuchel and Winands necessarily extend it into the present, updating the audience on the co-operation with Yad Vashem that had been promised at the 2008 ceremony by Neumann and welcoming the Israeli ambassador as a sign of that progress (though Moses might read it as confirmation of point 3 of his Catechism).⁵¹ Winands also makes an indirect reference to the AfD when he

⁵¹ 'Germany has [...] a special loyalty to Israel.' Moses.

lists a series of contemporary challenges to conscience, including: ‘Forderungen [...], die Erinnerung an die nationalsozialistische Zeit zurückzuschrauben’.⁵²

This rhetoric is typical of the wider corpus: the AfD (and before it Pegida and the NPD) is rarely named. In a 2016 speech, Benjamin-Immanuel Hoff, a Die Linke politician, speaks of ‘den dezidierten Willen einiger Menschen [...], einen Schlusstrich unter die Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts zu ziehen’ without mentioning the AfD, the party most closely associated with this argument.⁵³ The most recent speech in the corpus speaks of ‘immer lautere Stimmen von rechts’, who claim that disabled lives are less valuable than able-bodied lives. This is evidently a reference to a request for information on disability and immigration submitted by the AfD parliamentary group in 2018.⁵⁴ Possibly, speakers fear that to name the AfD is to lend it credence; possibly they do not want to link AfD voters’ fear of immigration (the defining viewpoint of AfD voters at the 2017 election)⁵⁵ with Nazi anti-Semitism, since this might confirm the suspicion of AfD voters that the liberal elite wants to label them as deplorables in order to discredit legitimate grievances.

Variant Views, Imperfect Replication

Just as the rhetoric remains predominantly stable over time, so it remains stable across the middle ground of the political spectrum. There is no discernible difference in the discourse

⁵² Winands.

⁵³ Benjamin-Immanuel Hoff, ‘Grußwort zur Eröffnung der neuen Dauerausstellung “Buchenwald. Ausgrenzung und Gewalt”’

<https://www.buchenwald.de/fileadmin/buchenwald/download/Ausstellung_KZ_neu/Final_Ansprache_Prof._Dr._Benjamin-Immanuel_Hoff.pdf> [accessed 12 April 2022]. In October 2020, the AfD was the only party to abstain in the vote on a bill to establish a documentation centre about Germany’s occupation of European countries in the Second World War. In debate, AfD MP Marc Jongen argued that the bill was an expression of the ‘Sündenstolz der Deutschen’ and of ‘hypermoralischer Büßertum’

<<https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2020/kw41-de-opfer-nationalsozialismus-797436>> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁵⁴ Schüle. For the AfD’s freedom of information request:

<<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/sozialverbaende-die-afd-wertet-das-leben-von-behinderten-als-nicht-lebenswert-ab-1.3956029>> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁵⁵ Michael A. Hansen and Jonathan Olsen, ‘Flesh of the Same Flesh: A Study of Voters for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the 2017 Federal Election’, *German Politics*, 28/1 (2019), 1-19.

used by members of the centre-left and centre-right parties in the speeches and forewords. As Hoff's comments about the AfD indicate, even occasional speeches by Die Linke politicians are indistinguishable from those of other parties. When, as Thüringen's Minister of Culture, Hoff spoke at the opening of the new permanent exhibition at Buchenwald in 2016, he stressed the importance of protecting social diversity against those who would impose homogeneity, he voiced the commitment of the regional government to preserve the experience of the victims of National Socialism in public memory culture, and he thanked central government, in the person of minister Grütters, for contributing funds.⁵⁶

Survivors who give speeches are less tightly bound to the conventions of the genre. This is clear when survivor Ivan Ivanji gives the two-word opening address 'Liebe Mitmenschen' at the same ceremony attended by Hoff.⁵⁷ He also asks himself (rhetorically, in the speech) why he is the one who is able to speak to the assembled audience. For him, speaking is not a function of his senior role in society but an existential coincidence fraught with survivor guilt.⁵⁸ Despite not being obliged to 'play the game' in their rhetoric, survivors are involved in the processes of validation and endorsement. They support the institution by accepting its invitation to be a guest of honour and this endorsement is activated when speakers thank them for their presence. At the same opening ceremony, survivor Bertrand Herz, much like Hoff, thanked the regional and central governments because their funding proved to him that Germany is committed to remembering Nazi crimes in the long term.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Hoff.

⁵⁷ Ivan Ivanji, 'Ansprache zur Eröffnung der neuen Dauerausstellung "Buchenwald. Ausgrenzung und Gewalt"' <https://www.buchenwald.de/fileadmin/buchenwald/download/Ausstellung_KZ_neu/Final_Ansprache_Ivan_Ivanji.pdf> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁵⁸ Similarly, survivor Naftali Fürst, who uses the unfussy address 'Sehr geehrte Damen, meine lieben Kameraden', expresses amazement at his return to this place and wonders whether he has the right to speak on behalf of his fellow inmates. Such aporia is almost unknown among those who speak on the basis of their political or cultural status in Germany. Naftali Fürst, 'Ansprache zur Eröffnung der neuen Dauerausstellung "Buchenwald. Ausgrenzung und Gewalt"' <https://www.buchenwald.de/fileadmin/buchenwald/download/Ausstellung_KZ_neu/Final_Ansprache_Naftali_Fuerst.pdf> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁵⁹ Bertrand Herz, 'Ansprache zur Eröffnung der neuen Dauerausstellung "Buchenwald. Ausgrenzung und Gewalt"'

Despite the linguistic and intellectual uniformity of the speeches given by civic speakers, small variations are possible, particularly at lower levels of civic practice, providing useful evidence that discourses about the past are never perfectly stable. Judith Butler notes ‘the *deconstructing* possibility in the very process of repetition’.⁶⁰ In other words, repetitive performance facilitates imperfect replications of the original model. One could perhaps link this with Bourdieu’s notion of ‘regulated improvisations’, since the habitus is not fixed and static but always generating practice within particular conditions, though in general Bourdieu associates the habitus with homogeneity.⁶¹ The possibility of imperfect replication is especially pertinent to the speeches examined here because, despite Welzer’s hyperbolic use of the word ‘liturgy’, speakers cannot – indeed, must not – speak the same words as other speakers before them. They are expected to express predictable sentiments *in a new way*, something that requires a high level of cultural competence and discursive skill to preserve core meanings in the process of reformulation.

Most of the speeches at the opening ceremonies for the travelling exhibition ‘Neue Anfänge nach 1945?’, about the Lutheran Church’s failure to face up to its failings under Nazism, focused on the Church’s shameful past actions, but the Bürgervorsteher in Elmshorn departed from the script.⁶² Having begun with an anecdote about a pastor who would not be bullied by Gestapo informers, he says that he has been reading about the town’s ‘braune Geschichte’, a euphemism unlikely to be used by more practised speakers. Despite a longstanding interest in the topic, he has only recently learned that Hitler was decidedly anti-church. A quotation from the *Tischgespräche* follows, in which Hitler is reported to have

<https://www.buchenwald.de/fileadmin/buchenwald/download/Ausstellung_KZ_neu/Final_Ansprache_Bertrand_Herz.pdf> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁶⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993, repr. 2011), p. xix.

⁶¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 78-80.

⁶² Karl Holbach, [no title] <https://www.nordkirche-nach45.de/fileadmin/user_upload/baukaesten/Baukasten_Neue_Anfaenge/Orte/Elmshorn-Stiftskirche/Elmshorn_Grusswort_Buergervorsteher_Holbach.pdf> [accessed 12 April 2022].

called Christianity ‘Jewish’ and to have said that people must choose between being Christians or Germans. The Bürgervorsteher’s only comment on this quotation is a non-verbal one, an exclamation mark at the end of the expression ‘Zitatende!’, which may suggest that his tone of voice invited the audience to find the quotation shocking. Yet the anecdote figures the Church as the victim of Nazism while obscuring the relationship between the Church and the Holocaust, to which the exhibition attests. The Bürgervorsteher goes on to concede – briefly – that the Lutheran church toed the Nazi line, but uses another euphemistic cliché avoided by more practised speakers, ‘in dieser dunklen Zeit’, and tells a supportive anecdote about a pastor who secretly married a Jew. A longer anecdote tells of a woman who wanted to have her children baptised but feared difficulties because her husband was in the SA. The husband also wanted the children baptised, despite having left the church for political reasons, but needed the pastor’s help to prevent the authorities from finding out. For the Bürgervorsteher, this is proof of how afraid NSDAP members were of being shown to have an allegiance to the church. Finally, he recalls the town’s ‘self-liberation’, the raising of white flags on the church tower several days before Germany’s capitulation, to avoid further bloodshed.

Here, then, we have the odd situation – for an opening speech at a history exhibition about National Socialism – that the audience is invited to sympathise with a member of the SA who is prevented from living out his Christian faith, and is invited to celebrate local courage rather than dwelling on local discrimination and a failure to resist. There is no indication that the Bürgervorsteher, an SPD politician, is attempting a revisionist reading of history; he is there explicitly to endorse the exhibition and – in full conformity with the accepted tropes of the *argumentatio* – stresses the importance of the exhibition in times when refugee centres are, in a frightening echo of the Nazi era, being set alight. However, given that the view of the church as victim of Nazi discrimination had long been debunked, not

least in the context of an earlier exhibition by the same organisers,⁶³ the *Bürgervorsteher* suggests that erroneous and muddled versions of the past may persist alongside better informed ones. It also shows that the very act of replicating sentiments about the past – under obligation to be a good speaker by finding new historical details or anecdotes – can generate imperfect replications. Possibly, the *Bürgervorsteher* is just less well versed in recent public discourses about the Lutheran church under National Socialism than other speakers; possibly, he feels constrained by the invitation from another institution to exercise inter-institutional politeness.

It is also possible – though rare – for those who are well-versed in these discourses to criticise aspects of *Aufarbeitung* even while wholeheartedly supporting its aims. Robert Vollborn, deputizing for the City President at the opening of the same church exhibition in Kiel, lists the positive ways in which the city of Kiel is dealing with its past: *Stolpersteine* (‘Stumbling Stones’) have been laid to commemorate victims outside their last freely chosen place of residence; a former director of the university hospital has recently been deprived of his title of honorary senator because of his involvement in National Socialism; and for similar reasons the portrait of a former City President has been removed from the Town Hall, replaced by an explanation for its absence. In this last case, however, Vollborn questions whether this was the right decision, given that the former President had entered city politics only in the 1950s, after which he had, as was generally agreed, devoted himself admirably to local causes. Some years before ‘cancel culture’ became a concern, Vollborn questions whether a life should be reduced to the National Socialist era. At a time when German society is hoping that young people who have been radicalised will undergo a conversion to democratic values might it not be better, he asks, to recognise that an honest conversion from

⁶³ Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, ‘Die evangelische Kirche und der Holocaust’, in *Eine Chronik gemischter Gefühle. Bilanz der Wanderausstellung Kirche, Christen, Juden in Nordelbien 1933-1945*, ed. by Hansjörg Buss and others (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2005), pp. 32-50.

Nazism to democracy was possible. ‘Dieser Vorgang zeigt’, says Vollborn, ‘wie schwer es manchmal ist, politisch korrekt und menschlich gerecht zu urteilen’.⁶⁴ Here, the space for criticism is perhaps opened up because Vollborn is not criticising any aspect of the exhibition to which he has been invited, nor of the institution that made it, but rather an aspect of his own institution. It may also be that appealing for ‘human fairness’ in relation to former Nazis is easier to do at an exhibition to which former victims have not been invited as guests of honour. Nonetheless, Vollborn’s nuanced thinking is atypical, as is his practical concern to help radicalized youngsters find a way back to mainstream society, which leads me to my conclusion.

Conclusion

By and large, this small-scale study of speeches and forewords has attempted to treat the texts neutrally, assuming that repetition and ritual serve a social purpose and that identifying the constituent parts of the ritual and the rhetorical tropes of the genre can produce a more nuanced understanding of German memory culture and politics. I return in my conclusion to the criticism levelled by Welzer. Given that nothing substantial has changed in the format of opening speeches since Welzer was irritated in 2007 – nor indeed since 2010, when Welzer himself addressed an audience at the opening of the Erinnerungs- und Gedenkstätte Wewelsburg 1933-45⁶⁵ – he appears to have underestimated the resilience of the format. His

⁶⁴ Robert Vollborn, ‘Grußwort auf der Ausstellungseröffnung “Neue Anfänge nach 1945?”. St. Nikolai, Kiel am 13. Mai 2016’ <https://www.nordkirche-nach45.de/fileadmin/user_upload/baukasten/Baukasten_Neue_Anfaenge/NA_Kiel_Robert-Vollborn_Grusswort_13-05-2016.pdf> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁶⁵ Welzer’s talk was a ceremonial lecture (‘Festvortrag’) rather than an opening speech, of which there had been seven. He began by observing some of the rhetorical niceties of an invited address, saying ‘Meine Damen und Herren, ich freue mich sehr, dass ich die Ehre habe, diesen Festvortrag zu halten’, and endorsing the exhibition as ‘wegweisend’. At the end of his lecture, however, he rejected the strictures of the genre, dismissing the term ‘Festvortrag’ because he saw nothing ‘festlich’ in the topic and declining to provide an appropriate closing statement. The lecture also refused the rhetoric of a formal speech by consistently deploying a spoken German

word ‘Liturgie’, though unhelpfully polemical (given that reformulation or ‘embellishment’ is fundamental to epideictic speech), at least puts a finger on Germany’s need to continually re-perform, in formal, public, and well-recorded situations, its acknowledgement of historical responsibility for the crimes and discriminatory practices of National Socialism. Welzer’s ‘Liturgie’ calls forth a second religious metaphor: preaching to the converted. Most speeches tell the assembled guests what they already know or feel, even though each orator speaks as if what they are saying is informative.

When Welzer wrote ‘dass in all dem läge, was für die Zukunft des Erinnerns tauglich sei, wird niemand mehr behaupten wollen. Jugendliche jedenfalls werden damit nicht erreicht’, his phrase ‘niemand wird mehr behaupten wollen’ assumed a ‘social unanimity’ that did not yet exist and that Welzer’s polemic could not seriously hope to create. However, in his anger at what he sees as the irrelevance of the speeches, Welzer identifies a key feature of their rhetoric: the adult-to-adult mode of communication. Young people are occasionally involved in the making of an exhibition, in which case they are invited to its opening, where they might play music or recite dramatic dialogue. At the 2001 opening of the Dokumentationszentrum Reichsparteitagsgelände, Bundespräsident Johannes Rau made the rare gesture of inviting a group of school students to come on stage with him.⁶⁶ Similarly, Annegret Schüle, Director of the Erinnerungsort Topf & Söhne, gave the ‘letztes Wort’ in a series of opening speeches to three students who worked on the preparations for a 2012 exhibition.⁶⁷

register, for instance using ‘der/die/das’ for ‘er/sie/es’. Harald Welzer, ‘Vortrag’, in *Reden zur Eröffnung*, ed. by Der Landrat, Kreis Paderborn, and Kreismuseum Wewelsburg, pp. 25-37.

⁶⁶ Johannes Rau, ‘Rede von Bundespräsident Johannes Rau zur Eröffnung des “Dokumentationszentrums Reichsparteitagsgelände”’ <<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/bulletin/rede-von-bundespraesident-johannes-rau-786302>> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁶⁷ Annegret Schüle, ‘Ansprache zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung Un-er-setz-bar. Begegnung mit Überlebenden’ <<https://www.topfundsoehne.de/ts/de/service/mediathek/veroeffentlichungen/archiv/127874.html>> [accessed 12 April 2022]

As a general rule, however, young people are not mentioned in the speeches; where they are invoked, it is as an absent group, spoken of in the third person. Senior figures in society implore young people to learn from the past even as their opening address mentions only adults by name – mostly fellow dignitaries – and even though the formula ‘Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren’ figures the audience as adult. This is Culture Minister Neumann speaking in 2008 (note, incidentally, that even a professional can use the cliché ‘dunkel’): ‘Ein besonderes Anliegen ist es mir, dass viele Jugendliche die Gedenkstätte Stille Helden besuchen, um dort etwas über Zivilcourage und Mut in dunkler Zeit zu lernen’.⁶⁸ Typically, he made no direct address to young people present in the room, though he addressed various adult guests.⁶⁹ Photographs of opening ceremonies suggest the average age is often 50 plus.⁷⁰

Jugend – figured as an abstraction – becomes a repository for hope or anxiety, imbued with both pessimism and optimism. One speaker cites the Bundespräsident’s concern that young people know too little about the Holocaust;⁷¹ another thinks young people are helping to shape the future of commemoration.⁷² The Director of a local Amtsgericht in eastern

⁶⁸ The word ‘Zivilcourage’, which was used by all three speakers at the opening of the Gedenkstätte Stille Helden in 2008, was used by none of the speakers in 2018. The authors of a pedagogical aid to teachers made available by the Gedenkstätte suggest that the word needs to be used advisedly in order not to obscure the very real differences between Nazi society and contemporary democratic society. Christoph Hamann and Beate Kosmala, *flitzen – verstecken – überleben? Hilfe für jüdische Verfolgte 1941-1945*, 2nd edn (Berlin and Ludwigfelde: Landesinstitut für Schule und Medien Berlin-Brandenburg and Stiftung Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, 2018), p. 17. Available at <https://www.gedenkstaette-stille-helden.de/fileadmin/data/publikationen/Handreichung_LISUM_GSH_flitzen_verstecken_ueberleben_2018.pdf> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁶⁹ Neumann. Cf. Ole von Beust, ‘Rede des Ersten Bürgermeisters Ole von Beust anlässlich der Eröffnung der Ausstellung “In den Tod geschickt. Die Deportationen von Juden, Roma und Sinti aus Hamburg 1940 bis 1945”’ <<https://hannoverscher-bahnhof.hamburg.de/8400442/eroeffnungsveranstaltung-artikel/>> [accessed 20 August 2021]; and Wolfgang Thierse, ‘Begrüßungsworte zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung “Im Objektiv des Feindes. Die deutschen Bildberichterstatter im besetzten Warschau 1939-1945”’ <<http://www.thierse.de/reden-und-texte/reden/eroeffnung-der-ausstellung-im-objektiv-des-feindes/>> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁷⁰ For instance <<https://www.hamburgische-buergerschaft.de/nachrichten/4665858/ausstellungseroeffnung-ns-opfer/>>, <<https://www.nordkirche.de/nachrichten/nachrichten-detail/nachricht/ausstellung-zum-umgang-der-kirche-mit-der-ns-vergangenheit/>>, <<https://www.nordstadtblogger.de/ausstellung-ordnung-und-vernichtung-die-polizei-im-ns-staat-ist-im-polizeipraesidium-dortmund-zu-sehen/>>, or <<https://www.paz-online.de/Stadt-Peine/Eroeffnung-Peiner-Kreismuseum-zeigt-Ausstellung-zur-NS-Zeit>> [accessed 12 April 2022].

⁷¹ Karin Feingold, ‘Rede zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung “In den Tod geschickt. Die Deportationen der Juden, Roma und Sinti aus Hamburg 1940 bis 1945”’, 16. Februar 2009’ <<https://hannoverscher-bahnhof.hamburg.de/8400442/eroeffnungsveranstaltung-artikel/>> [accessed 20 August 2021].

⁷² Manfred Müller, ‘Ansprache am Mahnmal des ehemaligen KZ Niederhagen’, in *Reden zur Eröffnung*, ed. by Der Landrat, Kreis Paderborn, and Kreismuseum Wewelsburg, pp. 21-22.

Germany is a rare example of a worker on the civic coalface who reports on what actual young people have told her about their motives for getting involved in far-right politics and who suggests practical ways forward.⁷³ Yet, in her speech, as in Neumann's, the assumption is that adults at the ceremony are discussing young people, who are not there, and that adults are responsible for planning how to address young people's social issues.

Of course, most of the exhibiting institutions have talented museum educators and state-of-the-art pedagogical programmes with which they can, in other situations, engage young people. Welzer deliberately isolates one element of museum activity in order to criticise memory culture. Besides, young people are equally routinely excluded from the openings of factories, parliaments, motorways, and other events that are organised by adult professionals for other adults. While a different model of the opening ceremony – with the routine involvement of young people – might serve educational aims better, the opening ceremonies show how the memory mainstream works precisely because they adopt practices that are recognisable from other social and cultural fields: the adult audience, the wine reception, the press release, the prominent invited speakers, the attendant photographer. This is how they help normalize remembrance of Germany's National Socialist past.

Whether this format will continue to prove resilient to its critics depends partly on whether young people, who (according to many voices, not just Giesecke's and Welzer's) are being bypassed by current commemorative practices, are willing and able to step into the dominant adult modes of discourse. In her own study of young visitors at the Jewish Museum Berlin, Bishop Kendzia suggests that the confidence to partake in German memory discourses is imparted to a privileged West German educational elite, leaving other young people – including those from migrant backgrounds – to flounder, even if they are interested

⁷³ Sigrun Lehmann, 'Eröffnungsrede gehalten bei der Eröffnung der Wanderausstellung "Justiz im Nationalsozialismus. Über Verbrechen im Namen des Deutschen Volkes"' <<https://www.yumpu.com/de/document/view/294457/eroffnungsrede-von-sigrun-lehmann-direktorin-des-amtsgerichts->> [accessed 12 April 2022].

in the topic.⁷⁴ However, given that the training for most professional roles begins in earnest only after 18, there seems to be no strong barrier to this form of discourse perpetuating itself even without a grounding before the age of 18. A more extensive longitudinal study would be needed to assess whether young Germans will lose the skill of making this kind of speech because previous speeches rarely engaged them as young people, or whether adopting this adult behaviour will remain a rite of passage on access to the professional classes. It seems more likely that participation by politicians and civic leaders will gradually drop away as it becomes less important to position themselves in relation to the topic. The Covid-19 pandemic may even break the chain of previously routine practices (such as inviting dignitaries to the opening ceremony), as museums have learned that alternative ways of operating are practicable.

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⁷⁴ Bishop Kendzia, esp. pp. 26-30, pp. 93-96, pp 136-38.