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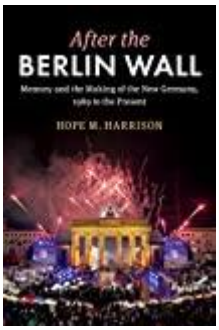
Hope M. Harrison. *After the Berlin Wall: Memory and the Making of the New Germany, 1989 to the Present.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Illustrations. 2019. 478 pp. $34.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-04931-4.



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When writing my book about the memory of the fall of the Berlin Wall, for a while I lived on Bernauer Strasse in Berlin and often took a walk at the nearby Berlin Wall Memorial. I was struck by the profound confusion visitors felt at the memorial. They had a hard time connecting its distinct parts or even figuring out where to start or in which direction to go. The Berlin Wall Memorial, consisting of multiple commemorative sites, is on a long stretch of land on what used to be the border between East and West. Tourists often jump from one side to the other, trying to beat the memory of separation. It was only after reading Hope M. Harrison's excellent book on the past and present of Berlin Wall commemoration that I really understood the reasons for the visitors' confusion. Harrison provides a thoroughly researched and meticulously presented description of the contestation around the Berlin Wall's memory and how it led to the powerful yet fragmented sites of commemoration across Berlin. She presents daunting questions to the reader: How would you remember a separation barrier that caused extensive pain and suffering? Do you need to preserve it to remember it? Who will be the "memory activists" pushing for related commemorative projects? And how will they narrate the Berlin Wall's past and present in ever-shifting national and international political landscapes?

Readers might start the book imagining that there was a clear understanding in reunified Germany that the Berlin Wall had to be preserved and that Germany thus poured extensive resources into related commemorative projects. Using archival research, interviews, and participant observation, Harrison shows that neither of these assumptions were true. There was profound disagreement over whether the oppressive memory of the Berlin Wall had to be maintained, and even when some consensus on commemoration was finally reached, projects were often severely understaffed and underfunded. How did Germany manage in the end to build memorials and organize major commemorative events? As Harrison shows in painstaking detail, it happened through the dedication and hard work of individuals and

small communities. They came from East and West, from all political parties and backgrounds. They often disagreed about the nuances of the narrative, yet they somehow all contributed to the commemoration of the Berlin Wall over the last three decades. She calls them “memory activists.”

Harrison’s particular strength is in the presentation of narratives through key figures. This method also helps the reader get through the very detailed descriptions of policy proposals and extended debates. Perhaps the most memorable character of the book is Manfred Fisher, a pastor of West Berlin’s Reconciliation parish, who became one of the key figures of the Berlin Wall preservation movement. In a riveting chapter, Harrison describes how in 1985 Fisher, a young pastor at that time on sabbatical in the United States, was watching on television as his congregation’s church—situated on the Berlin Wall’s death strip—was blown up by the East German authorities. Harrison highlights the difficult decision Fisher faced before the destruction of the church. Should he preserve the large and impossible-to-access church or rather do a land swap that provided East Germans with a new site of worship in return for giving up on the “symbolic” yet empty one on the death strip? A no doubt harrowing decision, which left no good solution for the young pastor.

Harrison also has a strong interest in what sociologist Michael Schudson termed "non-commemorative forms of commemorative memory": memory beyond planned memorials in the form of lives, laws, practices, and language.[1] She powerfully shows the contestation of the Berlin Wall’s memory, for instance, in trials of those who shot escapees at the borders and in ongoing political struggles in Germany. Every articulation of the Berlin Wall’s memory also tells us about national identity and the role of Germany on the global stage. A particularly fascinating and complex question is whether Germany has the “right” to offer a hopeful, “happy” narrative for the world. The fall of the Berlin Wall happened on November 9, a dense day in German history that is tied to the horrific memories of the Holocaust: November 9 also marks the day of Kristallnacht. Perhaps this clash particularly signifies the challenges Germany faces as it tries to “sell” a more cheerful narrative to the world and itself. As Harrison shows, since 2009 Germany has been invested in presenting a new founding myth for the unified nation. This founding myth tells the story of a peaceful, democratic revolution that brought down the wall and led ultimately to reunification. This narrative obviously will never be able to capture the complexities of the 1989 transition (how about reluctant “heroes” like some East German bureaucrats?), nor can it be representative of German history in all its fullness.

Throughout the book, Harrison mostly remains within the confines of the discipline of history. While she refers to memory classics, there is little engagement with the vast, interdisciplinary memory debates happening right now in media studies, visual studies, sociology, and art history, among others. This is something of a lost opportunity given the memory-focused title of the book and the rich ideas and nuanced details the author has to offer to memory researchers. But no book can accomplish everything. Regardless of this missed opportunity, the book will serve as a landmark for future researchers of the Berlin Wall. No other monograph has presented the commemoration battles of the Berlin Wall with such historical accuracy. The book also stands out by its dedication to the efforts of individuals, communities, and institutions at the frontlines of memory activism. With her meticulous research, nuanced thinking, and clear writing, Harrison has also erected a powerful memorial for all of the Berlin Wall’s victims and their families.

Note

[1]. Michael Schudson, “Lives, Laws, and Language: Commemorative versus Non-commemorative Forms of Effective Public Memory,” *Commu-*

nication Review 2, no. 1 (1997): 3-17, DOI: 10.1080/10714429709368547.

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