

# A Contested Latecomer

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# A Contested Latecomer

*The Munich Documentation Center for  
the History of National Socialism*

ALINE SIERP

This article traces the debates surrounding the conception of the Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism in Munich in order to understand why it took the city whose history is so deeply intertwined with National Socialism so long to acknowledge its dark past. It investigates whether the final conception of this unusual museum is the expression of a new transnational trend that provided new perspectives on memorialization. It argues that the museum actively attempts to create an arena for public engagement with the past by encouraging visitors to take responsibility for their own interpretation of history based on the material presented.

*Keywords:* memorial museum; World War II; National Socialism; transnationalization; historical memory

## INTRODUCTION

The first sentence on the home page of the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism, opened in 2015, reads: “The City of Munich is aware of its special obligation to keep alive the memory of the Nazi era and its crimes and to inform citizens and visitors about it.”<sup>1</sup> It reiterates the uncontested acknowledgment of responsibility for the wrongdoings committed during the Third Reich on German soil, an acknowledgment that has been firmly encoded in German memory culture since the 1970s. Variations of this sentence can be found in political speeches during commemorative events, public documents published by

the German government and on various websites of memorial museums.<sup>2</sup> It is thus not surprising that the website of the Documentation Center is no exception. On the contrary, given the specific history of the city of Munich and the role it played during the Third Reich, one would expect it to further underline its “special obligation” to keep the memory of National Socialism alive.

However, what the website does not mention is that it took exactly seventy years after the end of World War II before a museum dedicated exclusively to the history of National Socialism was opened in Munich. This is surprising considering that the rise of the National Socialist movement began in Munich after World War I. Munich was also the scene of Hitler’s attempted putsch of 1923 and his subsequent trial. It was in Munich that Hitler found influential patrons who gave him entry to bourgeois circles. The first concentration camp, Dachau, was erected in Munich’s direct vicinity and it was here in 1938 that Goebbels called for the nationwide pogrom against the Jewish population. After the Nazis seized power in 1933, Munich was chosen by Hitler as the “Hauptstadt der Bewegung” (Capital of the Movement). Even if in subsequent years political power was concentrated in Berlin, Munich as the place of origin of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (German National Socialist Workers’ Party, NSDAP) remained the center of the party’s bureaucracy throughout the Nazi period. That Munich opened its first museum dedicated to its Nazi past only in May 2015 is not only puzzling because of the special role the city played for the Nazi Party but also because it is situated in a country that is dotted with numerous memorial sites and museums dealing with exactly this history.

This paradox raises a number of important questions: Why did it take the city whose history is so deeply intertwined with National Socialism so long to acknowledge its dark past? What prevented the foundation of a museum dedicated to the history of National Socialism between 1945 and 2015? Who were the actors who hampered/obstructed this development and why? What caused the changes in 2015? And to what extent are they an expression of a transnational trend that provided new perspectives on memorialization and encapsulates what Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider have called a “cosmopolitan memory imperative”?<sup>3</sup>

In this article I will try to answer those questions. By tracing the genesis of the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National

Socialism, I will investigate why it took the city so long to come to terms with its past and whether the final conception of the museum that was opened at the end of a seventy-year delay can be seen as part and parcel of a wider process of the transnationalization of historical memory. Previous scholarship, especially that of Winfried Nerdingen and Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, has concentrated on the legacy of the Third Reich in Munich.<sup>4</sup> The article at hand aims to contribute to this body of literature by concentrating on the genesis of the Documentation Center within the wider context of the transnationalization of memory. Since this article does not focus on the legacy of the Third Reich in Munich as such, less space will be dedicated to this already well-researched analysis of local history and more to the struggles surrounding the development of this specific museum. By analyzing in detail how the museum interprets the interaction between memory and history, individual and collective memory, the local and the global, I seek to demonstrate how it manages to construct a specific historical narrative through processes of preservation, education and public exhibition. This will shed light on the larger issue of a museum's potential to universalize memory discourses in an era of uncertain moral touchstones.

#### THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF MEMORIAL MUSEUMS

Memorials and memorial sites often come into existence already during violent conflict;<sup>5</sup> history museums and other public institutions of remembrance are usually erected not long after. Most official remembrance sites dedicated to the memory of World War II experiences fall into those two categories. By contrast, memorial museums have had a relatively short history of development. According to Paul Williams, the memorial museum has emerged as a global cultural phenomenon only in the last thirty years.<sup>6</sup> It is positioned between a traditional history museum, which provides historical information, and a memorial that commemorates the victims of oppression. At the same time, memorial museums go beyond the work of mere history museums or memorials in representing past atrocities. They are inherent contradictions in themselves: while they are expected to provide the visitor with interpretations, contextualizations and critique and possibly also educate about the past, they also serve a commemorative function. The result is that they become core sites for the negotiation of historical

narratives and contested spaces for the manifestation of diverging memory frameworks. Mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion can be as present as cultural patterns of social, ethnic and religious contestation.<sup>7</sup> Memorial museums are not neutral public forums that transmit knowledge; on the contrary, they are highly normative public displays on how a society interprets its past. They are sites where the dominant (or officially approved) historical narrative finds its expression, official memory is canonized and identity is represented. At the same time, however, they are often also well positioned to challenge the hegemonic national narrative. That so many recent memorial museums find themselves instantly politicized demonstrates the extent to which they find themselves at the uneasy intersection between reverent remembrance and critical interpretation. They can thus best be described as spaces for memory performances, as political stages where powers compete to impress upon society their own versions of events.<sup>8</sup> This dynamic renders memorial museums highly complex places that are difficult to analyze.

What has stimulated the development of this specific type of museum? According to Williams, the amalgamation of respectful remembrance and critical interpretation of a contested past suggests that there is “an increasing desire to add both a moral framework to the narration of terrible historical events and more in-depth contextual explanations to commemorative acts.”<sup>9</sup> In this context, there are two elements that warrant attention: (a) the coalescence or merging of memory and history with the aim not only of adding an additional explanatory layer but also of spurring moral transformation in the visitor; and (b) the global character of those developments. Both elements correspond to what Levy and Sznajder term the cosmopolitan memory imperative. In their groundbreaking work, they describe the process by which global concerns (such as human rights and social justice) have become part of local experiences, cultures and concerns, leading to the eventual cracking of “the container of the nation-state.”<sup>10</sup> This prompted the transition from national to cosmopolitan memory cultures that have the power to transcend ethnic and national boundaries. Critical voices, such as Jeffrey Alexander, contest the claim to universalism put forward in the cosmopolitan memory imperative and stress that the observed transnational developments are confined to a limited number of Western states.<sup>11</sup> While they also criticize Levy and Sznajder for concentrating exclusively on the Holocaust as an example of “a truly transnational

memory culture framed by human rights concerns and rooted in a wider shared morality,” Astrid Erll also describes in her work how “carriers, media, content and forms and practices of memory” have traveled the globe.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, other scholars such as Chiara de Cesari, Ann Rigney and Michael Rothberg postulate the idea that memory in all its forms, content and modes has started to circulate over and beyond national borders, creating a new form of global connectedness.<sup>13</sup> While this process can facilitate the development of a shared consciousness across borders, it can at the same time deeply undermine existing hegemonic memory narratives.

In this article, I will analyze the Munich Documentation Center as a new form of memorial museum whose goal is to create a moral public that will work to prevent future violence, intolerance and hatred.<sup>14</sup> I will investigate in particular the extent to which it reflects the traveling, multidirectional and transnational forms that memory of a negative past takes in our globalized world today and whether it embodies the cosmopolitan memory imperative postulated by Levy and Sznajder. By analyzing the discussions preceding the foundation of the Documentation Center, it will be possible to shed light on the question whether its genesis was a product of “glocalization,” which was able to break the seventy-year deadlock that had characterized discussions on an adequate museum dealing with Munich’s “brown history.” Through the analysis of a museum that deals with the local involvement of citizens within a nationwide history, it will furthermore be possible to question Andreas Huyssen’s argument that “discourses of lived memory will remain tied primarily to specific communities and territories, even if the concern with memory itself has become a transnational phenomenon across the world.”<sup>15</sup>

#### MUNICH, HITLER AND THE NSDAP

The history of Hitler, his party (the NSDAP) and Munich were closely interwoven from the outset. Hitler moved to Munich in 1912 and had his residency there until he died in 1945. His rise to power was substantially aided by the degree of financial and ideological support he enjoyed in Munich in his early years. Hitler joined the Deutsche Arbeiterpartei—founded in Munich on January 5, 1919—in the same year and became its spokesperson before being elected party leader in July 1921. By that time

the party had changed its name to the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei and had grown to almost 20,000 members. In this process, Munich started to occupy a special position as political and cultural antithesis to cosmopolitan Berlin, as a place where nationalistic tendencies found a willing soundboard and could spread quickly. Initially Hitler concentrated his activities in and around Munich, which on the one hand allowed him to keep full control over the party and on the other provided him with access to financial supporters among members of the city's high society. On November 8–9, 1923, he initiated the Munich Beerhall Putsch in an attempt to overthrow the German government. The putsch failed and nine of its leaders, including Hitler, were prosecuted. Its memory, however, quickly became part of the mythos of Hitler's rise to power among the NSDAP followers, whose numbers constantly grew in the following years, despite the party's temporary ban in 1923.<sup>16</sup>

In 1925 Hitler re-founded the NSDAP and decided to establish the party headquarters in Munich. New members were recruited not only via political events but also through cultural and leisure activities. During the elections to the Reichstag in 1928, the party received 10.7 percent of votes in Munich and was thus considerably more successful than in other big German cities. The municipal government tried to capitalize as much as possible on the special link created between Hitler, the NSDAP and the local reality. In 1931, two years before Hitler was elected chancellor, the Reich leadership settled into a palace, which soon became known as the "Brown House." It not only hosted offices for Hitler and his secretary Rudolf Heß but was also the headquarters of the leading figures of the SA and the SS, the press office and the NSDAP legal office. Two years after the National Socialists seized power in 1933, Munich was awarded the title "Capital of the Movement," and an extensive administrative district of central and subsidiary party offices developed in the neighborhood, consisting of sixty-eight buildings with six thousand people working there. The Königsplatz was used as the main stage for the propagandistic display of the National Socialist regime, while the surrounding buildings in Briener Straße accommodated the central offices of the party's bureaucracy throughout the twelve years of Hitler's rule.<sup>17</sup>

## THE NS DISTRICT AND THE BROWN HOUSE AFTER 1945

The Brown House was almost completely destroyed in a bombing in 1945. Its remains were removed in 1947 together with the administrative buildings on Königsplatz. The significance of the area around Briener Straße and Königsplatz as the former administrative center and cult site of the NSDAP were largely forgotten: first the “Amerika Haus” (the US Information Center), then the Munich School of Music and Theater moved into the former “Führer Building.” The “Administrative Building” of the NSDAP became the seat of the Allies’ Central Art Collecting Point for looted art before turning into Munich’s chief institute for art history.<sup>18</sup>

The new functions attributed to those buildings effectively covered the memory of the original sites and made them disappear from public consciousness. In 1946 it was not Königsplatz but the roundabout between Briener Straße and Maximiliansplatz that became the Platz der Opfer des Nationalsozialismus, a square commemorating the victims of National Socialism, and thus the central memorial site of the Nazi era in Munich. There had been attempts to give that name to Königsplatz, but the proposal did not gather sufficient political support, and even the new memorial with its unspecific reference to the “victims of National Socialism” remained provisional for many years.<sup>19</sup> Munich’s postwar society was unprepared and unwilling to actively face questions of guilt and responsibility. A coming to terms with the political and social structures that had allowed the Nazis’ rise to power and had supported their crimes, as well as the reintegration of many perpetrators into postwar German society, was one of the greatest challenges of the 1950s and ’60s. The lack of attention toward the former perpetrator sites and their almost complete invisibility in the public realm mirrored the collective act of suppression that characterized those years not only in Munich but in the whole country.<sup>20</sup>

Despite being nowadays seen as a model for an effective *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, Germany’s trajectory toward acknowledging, researching and documenting its Nazi past was slow. The general avoidance strategy of the 1950s, which had been promoted particularly by the Christian Democratic government, was first broken by the wide-reaching societal debates triggered by the big Nazi trials—the Eichmann Trial of 1961 and the Auschwitz Trials of 1963–65. They carried the moral, judicial and political issues concerning the Nazi past into the public sphere, although

there is some disagreement on whether the trials indeed helped lead to a breakthrough in the West German consciousness.<sup>21</sup> On the national level a generational shift, on the one hand, and a political shift to the left, on the other—when the previous Christian-Democrat government was replaced by a Grand Coalition between Social Democrats (SPD) and Christian Democrats (CDU) in 1963 before the Social Democrats took over in 1969—prepared the ground for an increased public confrontation with the dark sides of German history.<sup>22</sup> A similar change could be observed on the local level, where in the local Bavarian elections the Social Democrats jumped from 30.8 percent in 1958 to 35.3 percent in 1962, with a subsequent moderate increase to 35.8 percent in 1966. They did not overtake the CSU (the Bavarian sister party of the CDU) but shifted the balance of power considerably toward a more left-wing approach to dealing with the past, characterized by a more active confrontation with National Socialist history.

As a result, private and civil society initiatives emerged in the 1960s, seeking to transform places notorious for the crimes that had taken been perpetrated there into memorial sites. Among them was Dachau, the first concentration camp established by the Nazis in 1933, located twenty kilometers from Munich. In a collaborative effort of former prisoners, church representatives and activists, the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site was founded in 1965.<sup>23</sup> In the following years, encouraged by the success of activist groups in Dachau, artists, representatives of municipal districts and committed citizens in Munich started to call for an open and critical handling of the city's Nazi history. They proposed the erection of memorials, honored posthumously Munich's resistance fighters (such as Georg Elser, who had carried out the assassination attempt on Hitler in 1939) and organized independent art events and exhibitions calling attention to the history of the former Nazi headquarters.<sup>24</sup>

#### THE TROUBLED ROAD TOWARD A MUSEUM OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM

In 1988 a first proposal to build a House of Contemporary History, which was supposed to also shed light on the local involvement of Munich during the Third Reich, was made by Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) politician Hildebrecht Braun. He argued that "Munich had distinguished itself in

repressing the horrors of Nazism in a near perfect manner” and that “it is time that our city expresses its respect to the victims of National Socialism and no longer points to the nearby Dachau concentration camp.”<sup>25</sup> The project was part of a wider discussion surrounding the restructuring of the Königsplatz and the fate of what had remained of its two temples built in honor of the Nazis killed in the Beer Hall Putsch. The plan was abandoned after heated discussions between representatives of the city council, the Munich city planning office and the Bavarian State, the main argument being that the didactic aims of the museum were inappropriately linked to what was supposed to be a purely functional-aesthetic project and that this might “harm the city.”<sup>26</sup> The whole project was quietly dropped in 1991. As one of the architects appropriately said: “Munich’s tendency is to complete, to fill out, paint, restore, close, unify and harmonize everything.”<sup>27</sup> As it turned out, the efforts of the local city and state authorities to remove all visible traces of the Third Reich boomeranged, sparking a counterreaction among Munich’s artists and residents. In 1990 two artists attached a sign to the Feldherrenhalle asking Jewish emigrants to return to Germany. The sign was removed almost immediately, causing fierce debates in society. Similar discussions had erupted when local associations asked the city council to pay for the cost of an eternal flame on the square dedicated to the victims of National Socialism. The city council refused and decided to let the flame burn only at night.<sup>28</sup> In 1996, following a private initiative by local citizens, a plaque was erected on the Königsplatz providing information about the specific history of the square and the buildings surrounding it. Despite those increased efforts by citizens’ initiatives in the following years, it was not until 2001–2002 that the city council decided to build a documentation center on the site of the former NSDAP headquarters. This delay revealed the increasing gap between an ever-growing group of engaged citizens who were able and willing to face the past, on the one hand, and a disconnected conservative city government, on the other.

From the beginning, the project encountered numerous hurdles. Initially, it was unclear where this new documentation center was going to be housed and, more importantly, how it was going to be financed. The Free State of Bavaria had agreed to contribute only the land for building and refused to undertake part of the estimated construction costs, whereas the federal state initially stressed that it was supporting “victim sites” and

not “perpetrator sites.” When in 2008 the federal government agreed to take over a third of the investment costs of 28.2 million euros alongside the city and the Free State of Bavaria, the financing of the project was finally assured. The estate was provided by the Free State of Bavaria and the city council agreed to take over the running costs.<sup>29</sup>

The finances were not the only issue that significantly delayed the project. A fierce debate also erupted concerning the name of the future museum. The proposal to call it “NS Dokumentationszentrum” was met with strong resistance by the designated director Irmtrud Wojak and her team, who were supported by the mayor of Munich and the president of the Jewish Council. In the minds of its opponents, using the acronym “NS” before “Dokumentationszentrum” was the equivalent to adopting perpetrator language. They were afraid that the acronym might not be understood abroad or could be misunderstood as indicating a “National Socialist center.” Representatives of the city council, however, thought that those fears were exaggerated. In the end the acronym was kept and the museum was called NS Dokumentationszentrum München.<sup>30</sup>

The third issue that caused delay was a scandal surrounding the designated director Irmtrud Wojak. Starting with the controversial name issue, she was subsequently accused of not sufficiently collaborating and communicating with her team. Wojak in turn suspected the city council of not liking her critical stance toward Munich’s dark history and of acting according to party political considerations.<sup>31</sup> In 2012 she was replaced by Winfried Nerdinger, officially because of “fundamental differences of ideas about the direction, content and function of the new museum.” Nerdinger had been one of Wojak’s greatest critics and completely overturned her exhibition concept, which was considered to be too theoretical.<sup>32</sup> That Nerdinger’s ideas were also not shared unanimously and that his authoritarian style was not only met with approval can be inferred from the fact that the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism opened its gates only on May 1, 2015, exactly seventy years after the liberation of Munich by the US army and one year later than planned.<sup>33</sup>

The difficulties, the amount and ferocity of the debates and the time that had to pass before a decision to build a documentation center about the history of National Socialism was taken seem surprising in a country that is generally considered to be a model for how to successfully face a troubled national past. It is also surprising given the special role that

Munich had played in the rise and consolidation of the Third Reich. If one considers the wider context however, it becomes evident that the difficulties surrounding the Documentation Center are far from unique. As we have seen, Munich has had a long history of denial of responsibility. Local politicians focused on preparing the city for the future and less on preserving the past. Commemoration plaques and monuments were erected only in the 1980s, and many buildings like, for example, the Wittelsbacher Palais, which had been the residence of the Gestapo, were simply torn down without any discussion on the potential need to protect their specific history.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, Munich was clearly lagging behind cities like Berlin and Nuremberg, where attempts to inform and educate citizens about the history and memory of both cities were made much earlier. The predecessor of the NS Documentation Center Reichsparteigelände in Nuremberg, for example, had already opened in 1985, thereby bringing the debate on the city's role during the Third Reich into the public sphere. Initially featuring only a small exhibition on "Faszination und Gewalt" (Fascination and terror), by the year 2001 the museum erected in the unfinished remains of the Congress Hall of the Nazi Party rally grounds had turned into one of the biggest museums in Germany on the causes, developments and consequences of National Socialism. The city council early on recognized that the city could not shy away from its specific role as *Stadt der Reichsparteitage* (city of party rallies). Consequently, a large part of the exhibition is dedicated to events that are inseparably linked with Nuremberg—the party rallies and the Nuremberg Laws—an element that policy makers in Munich had carefully tried to avoid for decades. It should be noted that the Documentation Center in Nuremberg faced similar issues of financing as did the one in Munich. Both the federal government and the Free State of Bavaria did not feel responsible for the museum. However, this did not prevent the city council from financing initiatives almost entirely out of its own budget until 2001. The museum's expansion in 2001 was nevertheless only possible once both the federal government and the Free State of Bavaria had agreed to contribute to the financial burden.<sup>35</sup>

Munich was also the only German city that refused to implement the *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones) project, which was initiated by the German artist Gunter Demnig in 1992. Small brass plates are installed in the pavement in front of the last known residence of victims of the Holo-

caust. With over seventy thousand stones having been laid in twenty-six different countries, the *Stolpersteine* project is the largest decentralized memorial worldwide. In July 2015, after more than ten years of dispute between supporters and opponents, the city council of Munich officially banned the stones from public space. One of the driving forces behind the ban was Charlotte Knobloch, president of the Jewish community in Munich and former president of the Central Council of Jews, who claimed that the stumbling stones did not allow for a sufficiently respectful way of remembering the victims since “most people step on them or walk across them without paying attention.”<sup>36</sup> In its official statement the city council took this argument up—contrary to the opinion of the city’s cultural adviser—and mentioned the problematic “form of remembrance” as being the main reasons for banning the stones. It nevertheless did not propose any alternative commemorative arrangements that could take their place.<sup>37</sup> The heated controversies surrounding the traveling exhibition *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1944* (War of extermination: Crimes of the German Wehrmacht, 1941–1944) in 1997 are also relevant in this context. In no other city in Germany was the exhibition met with as much resistance by both citizens and politicians. More than four thousand right-wing demonstrators took to the streets, which was to that date the largest protest march of right-wing extremists in the Federal Republic. The local CSU was firmly against the showing of the exhibition and the Bavarian minister of education advised teachers to avoid visiting it.<sup>38</sup>

To face the question of why Munich provided an important seeding ground for National Socialism was evidently something neither politicians nor citizens were willing to do publicly for decades. As noted, the only exception in this general avoidance strategy was the opening of the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site in 1965. However, it might have been precisely the existence of the externalized memorial site that allowed policymakers in Munich to avoid implementing memory policies in the city itself, cementing further the unflattering denomination “München—Hauptstadt der Amnesie” (Munich—Capital of Amnesia, a reference to “München—Hauptstadt der Bewegung”), a title that had started to circulate in the 1980s.<sup>39</sup> The opening of the Documentation Center marked a clear turning point by finally breaking with the tradition of inaction, silence and evasion that had characterized Munich’s local history since 1945.

## THE MUSEUM

The attempt to break with tradition is a defining feature that is given clear expression in the museum's architecture. The museum building looks like a big white concrete cube (figure 1). Its smooth white walls are interrupted by lowered windows that stretch over more than one floor. It thus stands in stark contrast to the surrounding buildings defined by neoclassicist features. Instead, it reminds visitors immediately of the Bauhaus style—one of the styles the Nazis had defined as “un-German.”



Fig. 1. The NS Documentation Center, Munich (photo by author)

The erection of most World War II museums in Germany have been accompanied by debates on the question whether the chosen architecture should provide a commentary to the content displayed inside or whether it should interpret history and provoke discussion. The Jewish Museum in Berlin and the Documentation Center in Nuremberg for example, indicate already by means of their slanted architectural lines that both museums aim at documenting a so-called *Zivilisationsbruch* (break with civilization). The award-winning proposal of the Munich Documentation Center offered a very sober solution to this discussion by entering into direct dialogue with its surroundings and marking thus a fundamental break with both the site's history and the former Nazi buildings in the neighborhood. Visitors start their journey through the exhibition on the fourth floor, whose windows offer wide views over the former NS-district, thus linking the museum

directly with its historical context. The building planned and designed by a young team from Berlin was nevertheless not met with unanimous support. The fact that the tall cube towers above the surrounding historic buildings caused sustained discussions about the adequacy of its location given that it was built on “historically contaminated ground.”<sup>40</sup> The spaces between the long windows furthermore reminded some critics of prison bars while the clinical white exterior seemed to indicate a “whitewashing” of the city’s history (figure 2).<sup>41</sup>



Fig. 2. Façade of the NS Documentation Center, Munich (photo by author)

The interior boasts a total exhibition space of ca. 1,200 square meters. A closer analysis of the museum’s content clearly contradicts the idea that the city might be trying to present itself with a “clean vest.” The permanent exhibition “Munich and National Socialism” is divided into four main sections and focuses exclusively on the city’s role during the Third Reich. The first section sheds light on the origins and the rise of National Socialism in Munich. This is followed by a presentation on the functioning of the Nazi state and the special role the city played within the terror system of the dictatorship. The third section describes the effects of World War II. The final section critically examines the city’s difficult process of coming to terms with its past after 1945, when it vacillated between a reappraisal of history, indifference and denial. Photographs, documents and texts as well as film projections and interactive media sta-

tions try to offer a varied and engaging museum experience. The large windows permit the visitors constant views of the surrounding buildings, relics of the former Nazi administrative district, allowing for the effective integration of the authentic site into the exhibition space. The mindful play with the contrast between the inside and the outside forces the visitor to actively engage not only with the content of the exhibition but also with the historical area in which the museum is located.

The exhibition starts with the end of World War I and examines in great detail the emergence and rise of the NSDAP. According to its creators, it was a conscious decision not to start the narrative in 1933 but to shed light on the wider context of the Nazis' rise to power.<sup>42</sup> The second and the third parts examine living conditions during the regime and present the time after 1945. The last part of the exhibition is arguably the most interesting and the most unusual: the section "What Has This Got to Do with Me?" and temporary exhibitions like *Never Again. Back Again. Still There: Right-Wing Extremism in Germany since 1945* (November 19, 2017–April 2, 2018) take the visitor not only beyond the collapse of the regime in 1945 but also examine the effects and consequences that the experience of National Socialism had on the present day. An interactive media installation—"Newsticker"—with current press reports about the continuing existence of the National Socialist ideology (such as racism against refugees, hate crimes or rampant anti-Semitism) not only in Germany but throughout the world, concludes the fourth part of the exhibition.

The exhibition does not limit itself to the interior of the museum. Several large monitors surround the building. They are half covered by the pavement or the grass and seem to emerge from the ground (figures 3 and 4). The associations evoked among visitors range from "tombstones" to "remains of an archaeological site."<sup>43</sup> The installations created by the brothers Benjamin and Emanuel Heisenberg and Elisophie Eulenburg are guided by the attempt to overcome the difference between our contemporary world and the images and narratives of the Nazi regime that countless reports have etched into our collective memory. All monitors break out of the normal documentary film mode by showing short films of three to six minutes that combine ten historical text documents with around 2,200 pictures. Each word in the different documents flashes out as the film progresses and has a picture connected to it, thus creating new associations in the minds of the viewer and aiming at translating the



Fig. 3. Monitor outside the entrance to the NS Documentation Center, Munich, with installation by Benjamin and Emmanuel Heisenberg and Elisophie Eulenburg (photo by author)



Fig. 4. Monitor with installation by Benjamin and Emanuel Heisenberg and Elisophie Eulenburg in the grounds of the NS Documentation Center, Munich (photo by author)

historical past into the present. According to the artists, through the linking of words and images, “the distance between the present and history is nullified and the timespan between today and back then ruptured.” The questions the artwork asks the viewer are the following: “What do

people who lived in extreme situations actually have in common with us? We may speak the same language, but how do we use the concepts from this time and what kind of images do they evoke in us?" One of the concerns of the Heisenbergs' work is "to establish a relationship—based on critical reflection—between experiences today and accounts ... of crimes committed in the 'Third Reich.'"<sup>44</sup>

The resulting disruption of the rules of perception by juxtaposing concepts and images of the present and the past in a sort of stream of consciousness across time triggers an emotional reaction and is similar to the effect the *Stolpersteine* project aimed to create. It is especially these two elements that distinguish the Documentation Center from conventional history museums on World War II (such as the Deutsch-Russisches Museum Berlin Karlshorst or the Imperial War Museum in London), indicating its categorization as a memorial museum: the active engagement of the visitor and the clear connection between the past and the present.

#### STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

The very first sentence in the official catalogue of the Documentation Center reads: "Time and again our society faces challenges that require us to stand up for our democratic values and convictions ... the NS Documentation Center is a commemoration and learning site that is geared toward the present and the future."<sup>45</sup> In providing a clear bridge to the present and the continuities of racist and xenophobic thought and behavior after World War II, the museum stands out from the crowd. It touches upon an area that many World War II museums in Germany try to avoid. The memorial site in Dachau for example, circumvents any kind of reflection on contemporary right-wing tendencies. Its permanent museum exhibition stops at the establishment of the memorial site. Connections to the present and the continuity of Nazi-Fascist thought are only made during guided tours, when the tour guides discuss this sensitive topic with their groups or during dedicated workshops with students. The Documentation Center, by contrast, dedicates a whole section ("What Does This Have to Do with Me?") to the issue. By connecting past and present, the section tries to demonstrate the extent to which the thought patterns and structures that led to World War II and the Holocaust are still present today.

The museum's education department at the same time aims at providing a "future oriented, political educational offer with the declared goal to foster an active civil society able to protect democracy and human rights."<sup>46</sup> It offers tours and seminars for individual visitors, families, school classes, university students and adult education groups. Around eight different seminars on topics such as "Youth in National Socialism," "Administration and Responsibility," "Munich's Police and National Socialism" and "The Culture of Remembrance" are offered to groups. Teachers and groups of professionals can book special training sessions to prepare class excursions to both the museum and the Dachau Memorial Site. The Documentation Center understands learning as "an active process which encourages discussion and opinion formation and calls for responsible actions also in view of current political developments."<sup>47</sup>

The step away from the mere investigation of the specific circumstances that led to the atrocities of the Third Reich toward a more encompassing consideration of an ethical dealing with the past is a challenge faced by many museums dealing with World War II and the Holocaust. With the disappearance of the last eyewitnesses and the transformation of a living communicative memory into a more static cultural memory, the question of how to keep the relevance of the experiences of World War II alive has moved to the forefront.<sup>48</sup> It is especially the question of how to make sure that the next generation—for whom that war oftentimes seems as far away as the French revolution—can link historical events to their contemporary experience. This is currently one of the most-discussed questions among museum staff.<sup>49</sup> According to a visitors' survey carried out in 2009 at the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site by the IQ Projektgesellschaft, young people in particular find it easier to relate to the history of World War II if a connection is made between the past and their own everyday experiences of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>50</sup> This would call for a move away from the simple presentation of historical events and facts toward encouraging an open discussion of the structures that led to these events and caused a specific course of action.

With its focus on integrated learning, the NS Documentation Center clearly follows this strategy. One could argue that a perpetrator site lends itself more easily to this task than a victim site. A museum built on an authentic site like the former Dachau concentration camp where many people have suffered is undoubtedly first and foremost concerned with

creating empathy with the persecuted. This often leaves very little space for an extensive discussion about the reasons why the victims were persecuted. In this sense the NS Documentation Center is better positioned to fill a gap that other museums have left, while at the same time breaking with another tacit agreement within the German museum and memorial landscape: the agreement of non-comparison. One of the mantras of German postwar political discourse has always been the recognition of the singularity of the Holocaust. Despite extensive political debates in the 1980s during the famous *Historikerstreit* (historians' quarrel)—the intellectual and political controversy in West Germany about how the Third Reich and the Holocaust should be remembered—it has become one of the most firmly encoded ideas influencing German memory politics.<sup>51</sup> The Documentation Center's attempt to highlight the continuities of racism and xenophobic thought does not necessarily break with this tradition but opens up space for comparison with other instances of human rights violations and genocide such as happened in Armenia or Rwanda (although without relating to specific examples of these)—something that has previously been avoided by many World War II museums in Germany.

Where the Documentation Center very much follows the model of many German museums, however, is its focus on what I would call “objective contextualization.” The museum display tries to let the documents speak; there are hardly any material objects such as artefacts originating from the former Nazi Headquarters that could lead to any form of aestheticization or auratization (charging the objects with meaning and giving them an aura of glorification). Indeed, there was a big debate about the difference between the new museum and the existing Stadtmuseum, whose permanent exhibition on the Third Reich was criticized for displaying auratic artefacts. The main focus of the NS-Dokumentationszentrum instead lies in the reproduction of authentic texts, small-scale photographs and digital learning material. As David Clarke explains, “[t]his historicizing approach is understood as providing the visitor with multiple perspectives on the site and presenting them with a range of evidence in such a way as to downplay emotional responses and encourage independent judgment.”<sup>52</sup> The lack of an emotional slant to the displayed narrative is characteristic of most German World War II museums and stands in stark contrast to museums in other countries like the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC or Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, which actively

seek to create an emotional response in the visitors.<sup>53</sup> Most German curators nowadays believe that emotions can inhibit rationalization and critical reflection and thus avoid displaying huge blown-up pictures and objects that can trigger strong emotional responses.<sup>54</sup>

This brings us to the question of comparison: To what extent is the conception of the Documentation Center in Munich an example of a transnational trend reflecting specific normative expectations around the appropriate aesthetic, political and ethical dealing with the past? Is the Documentation Center a good example of a twenty-first-century memorial museum that has taken on board the cosmopolitan memory imperative? And was this maybe the key that allowed the city to break its silence on its brown legacy seventy years after the war had ended?

#### CONCLUSION: THE DIFFICULT GENESIS OF A MEMORIAL MUSEUM

At first glance, the NS Documentation Center seems to correspond to a classic history museum, whose mission it is to provide the visitor with historical information that allows him or her to interpret, contextualize and critique. The historicizing approach chosen in the first sections of the museum would support this argument. The first element that indicates that the NS Documentation Center is nevertheless more than a space where a specific historical narrative is displayed becomes very evident if one takes into consideration the amount of space dedicated to contemporary issues in the last sections of the museum and in its multimedia installations. The analysis of the exhibition material, the presentation of the museum catalogue and the interviews with museum staff further support this impression. All of this points to an active attempt to create an arena for public engagement with the past by encouraging visitors to take responsibility for their own interpretation of history based on the material presented. The mere fact that it calls itself a “Documentation Center” or a “House of History” and not a “museum” already signposts that it understands itself as an institution with a political and social mission (in this case, to promote democracy and nonviolence) and not simply as an establishment displaying collected artefacts, which would correspond to the traditional definition of a “museum.” In carefully guiding visitors through the negotiation of past and present, politics and power, the Documentation Center aims at

fostering sustained reflection about the worrying continuities of racist and xenophobic thought in our contemporary world. The result is a museum that employs memory and history to educate about the past and to spur the moral transformation of its visitors to create a better future.

That this does not go without contestation becomes evident when looking at the difficulties that accompanied the foundation and creation of the Documentation Center. The extent to which local and national political and social structures and realities can hamper the open dealing with a difficult past is clearly demonstrated by its long and troubled genesis. If the politicization of the birth of the Documentation Center seems to confirm Andreas Huyssen's argument that "discourses of lived memory will remain tied primarily to specific communities and territories," it also indicates that those structures and realities can be overcome under certain circumstances. Paradoxically it might have been the specific combination of founding a museum in the very city in which the Nazi movement originated but which was the last one to actively engage with its past that allowed it to become a fascinating laboratory for rethinking the code of conducts that had guided earlier museums in Germany (such as the museum of the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site). The temporal distance from the time period 1933–45 and the fact that the Documentation Center was erected on a perpetrator site further contributed to its potential to revise some of the earlier ideas and concepts highlighted above (such as the availability of auratic objects and enlarged shocking photographs) and to connect to the global trends of display and pedagogy that characterize many of the newer memorial museums.

In this the Munich Documentation Center seems to have adopted elements of the cosmopolitan memory imperative at the risk of challenging in part some of the elements of a national and local narrative that has dominated German politics of the past for decades. By breaking with the tacit agreement of non-comparison and by opening up spaces for the discussion of other instances of human rights violations and genocide, it aims at creating a moral public that will work to prevent future violence, intolerance and hatred. In this it corresponds to the development of what Levy and Sznajder have called a "truly transnational memory culture."<sup>55</sup> It would indicate the move away from a narrow local and national memory framework tied primarily to specific communities and territories toward

a more global moral framework that does not shy away from drawing comparisons between the past and the present.

## NOTES

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19. Wolfram Selig, ed., *Chronik der Stadt München 1945–1948* (Munich: Stadtarchiv, 1980); Rosenfeld, *Munich and Memory*.
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