

Victims, heroes, perpetrators: German art reception and its re-construction of National Socialist persecution

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***Abstract:** Shortly after World War II, the German artists Horst Stempel and Hans Grundig created works that depicted National Socialist persecution. Stempel painted the triptych *Night over Germany* (1945/46), and Grundig worked on the same subject twice, called *Victims of Fascism* (1946/47) and *To the Victims of Fascism* (1947/49). They combined their own experiences as persecuted Communists with images from liberated concentration camps and those derived from Christian icons, creating paintings that shift between testimony and invention. As semi-fictional and semi-autobiographical accounts of the past, these artworks have caused art critics to develop their own views on National Socialist persecution for the last seven decades.*

*Within newspapers, art journals and exhibition catalogues, *Night over Germany* was widely received and reviewed in the late 1940s in Allied-occupied Germany and in the late 1970s in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), triggering a discussion on German guilt during both periods. In the GDR, Grundig's *Victims* paintings came to be regarded as major examples of antifascist art. Since 1990 art historians have referred to all three artworks as important examples of confronting and thereby allegedly overcoming National Socialism. What they, however, did not address was the history of the reception of these paintings, which, like the paintings, contributed to and shaped the post-war discourse on National Socialist persecution.*

In order to close the research gap on art reception as an active part of a larger political discourse on German National Socialism, this article examines the formation of narratives on National Socialist persecution. It traces the most influential terms and concepts, placing them in close connection with their historical and political contexts. In doing so, it shows how German art reception participated in the re-construction of National Socialist history since the end of World War II and reveals the amount of fiction involved. Comparing the critical writings with the subject matter of all three paintings, it shows the negligence the artworks have met with and disproves the success of the highly acclaimed German 'self-reflection'.

Introduction

‘Most people are indifferent to the existence of concentration camps. To them, accounts of the horrors seem exaggerated and propaganda’ (Grundig 1946, 118).¹ Here, the artist Hans Grundig (1901-1958) explains his decision to produce two large-scale paintings on his ‘concentration camp period’, *Victims of Fascism* (1946/47) and a second version *To the Victims of Fascism* (1947/49) (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1: Hans Grundig, Opfer des Faschismus I (Victims of Fascism) 1946/47, oil on hardboard, 110x200cm, Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016.



Figure 2: Hans Grundig, Opfer des Faschismus II (To the Victims of Fascism) 1947-49, oil on hardboard, 110x200cm, Galerie Neue Meister Dresden © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016.

Before Grundig, Horst Stempel had painted National Socialist persecution in a triptych with a predella, *Night over Germany* (1945/46) (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Horst Stempel, *Night over Germany* ('Nacht über Deutschland', 1945/46, oil on canvas, central panel 150x168cm, wings 150x78 cm, predella 79x168 cm, Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin (Saure 1992, plate 7). Reproduced by permission.

Directly after the war, both artists fused together their own experience as persecuted Communists with documentary photographs and footage shot in liberated concentration camps and motifs inspired by Christian iconography, activating the dividing line between testimony and invention.

Grundig's wife Lea (1906-1977) was persecuted both as a Jew and a Communist, and had fled Germany in 1939. Grundig was imprisoned in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp and in one of its satellites in Berlin, until he and his fellow prisoners escaped forced war deployment in Hungary in 1944. In Moscow Grundig underwent 'antifascist training' and studied the Stalinist party program to prepare for his return to post-war Germany in 1946 (Hirche and Seifert 1988, 54-57).

Both his large oil paintings show two prisoners in the foreground lying on a gold ground in front of a concentration camp wall with black birds flying around them and above. In the background of both paintings, pine trees and buildings refer to Sachsenhausen Camp, as does the number '18061' on the leg of the figure in the foreground in both Figures 1 and 2. This is the number that the artist himself had to wear during his forced imprisonment (Grundig 1957, 318).

In Figure 1 there is a red concentration camp badge next to the number, marking the figure whose upper body is covered with blue cloth as a ‘political prisoner’. In Figure 2 the red badge is replaced by a yellow and red Star of David-shaped badge, marking the figure as a “Jewish political prisoner”. Here the prisoner covers his bleeding face with his hand. In both versions, the second prisoner is lying on his back partly covered in red cloth, and it is unclear if he is dead or alive. In Figure 2, he is the one who is marked as a ‘political prisoner’ and wears the fictive number ‘43210’.

Grundig also commemorated three friends in these paintings, who had been murdered as prisoners during the National Socialist era, or who had died after their imprisonment. In ‘To the Victims of Fascism’, Figure 2, Grundig framed their names with red badges in a painted inscription which appears in the bottom border of the painting: ‘HELEN ERNST CRISTEL BEHAM FRITZ SCHULZE’. By referring to actual cases of persecution, Grundig established the credibility of his paintings, despite their surrealist mood and the compositional references to the Entombment of Christ. He added additional historical accuracy by referencing photographs of concentration camps and their exposure of the mass graves.

Similarly, Horst Stempel combined contemporary footage and photographs of concentration camps with scenes from the Biblical Way of the Cross in a composition dominated by black and white colors. Figure 3, ‘Night over Germany’, shows inmates in a concentration camp and a prison next to Jewish and non-Jewish people in hiding. The central panel depicts several prisoners in front of a concentration camp.

While both central figures, one standing in restraint and the other one sitting next to him, do not reference a particular iconic prototype, the depiction of three children with tattooed arms to the right of the central figures references a scene from the film *Death Mills* produced in 1945 (Hoffmann-Curtius 2014, 27). The film was produced by the United States Department of War to confront Germans with the crimes committed in National Socialist concentration camps, and in one scene it shows children in Auschwitz who present their tattooed arms to the camera.

The prisoners depicted in the background on the right side of the composition, pulling a wagon and carrying huge stones, reference forced labour as well as the bearing of the Cross. The prisoner hanging on the fence in the left mid-ground references both the crucifixion of Christ and photographs of concentration camp prisoners attempting to flee.

In contrast, the Jewish family in the right panel, three figures in a dark space in the left panel and the prisoners on the predella crouching in prison cells do not reference established iconic imagery. In the left panel, a woman is kneeling in front of the silhouettes of two figures, covering her mouth with her hand. In

the right panel, a man and a woman, marked as Jews by a yellow spot on their coats, are protecting a child. In the predella, one prisoner is sharing his food with another while the other inmates are passing messages.

Stempel (1904-1975), who like Grundig was also a Communist, emigrated to France as early as 1933. In 1939 he was detained in the Gurs Internment Camp, but in 1941 he returned to Germany. After a short imprisonment in a Gestapo prison in Berlin, he was forced to join the Wehrmacht. It still remains unclear why Stempel decided to come back to Germany, and where he had been stationed during the war. The only verified fact is that in 1945 he returned to Berlin where he joined several left-wing cultural organizations and taught at the East Berlin art college until he fled from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1953 (Saure 1992, 67-69, 78-79; see also Feist, 1989).

Grundig and Stempel confronted their fellow Germans with crimes they had committed and those committed in their name. During the early post-war years, they were two of a small number of German artists who dealt with the topic of National Socialist persecution (see Hoffmann-Curtius, 2014). Judging by the number of newspaper and journal reviews *Night over Germany* received after being exhibited twice in 1947 (Saure 1992, 127-128), it must have been the most discussed recent artwork at that time. After Stempel fled the GDR, *Night over Germany* was stored in the National Gallery's depots in East Berlin, only to be 'rediscovered' in the GDR after Stempel's death in 1975. The painting was included in the National Gallery's collection catalogue in 1976 (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 1976, 73) and was discussed intensely by Karl Max Kober, an art historian who focused on art from the Soviet Occupation Zone and who managed to rehabilitate Stempel in 1977. Since Kober, a number of East and West German art historians have studied Stempel's work, but the single monograph on Stempel's oeuvre was only published in 1992.

The major success of Grundig's *Victims* paintings began in the year of the artist's death in 1958. These two paintings became probably the most acclaimed post-war artworks on National Socialism in the GDR. They were reproduced in textbooks, children's magazines and newspapers alike and discussed by art historians as well as by numerous journalists. They were exhibited regularly in the GDR and used as educational and propagandistic tools.

In the late 1970s both Stempel's and Grundig's paintings were studied in the GDR as exemplary works from the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany, and since the 1990s they have been presented repeatedly as early artistic attempts to cope with National Socialist crimes. Being part of three important German art collections – with *Victims of Fascism* in the Museum der bildenden Künste in Leipzig, *To the Victims of Fascism* in Dresden's Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister and *Night over Germany* first in the National Gallery of the East and then in the Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin – these paintings have not only been exhibited regularly, but since the late 1970s they have also been included in

numerous publications on German art from the early post-war era (among many others see Donner 1979; Frankfurter Kunstverein 1980; Gillen 2009).

During the past twenty-five years, artistic depictions of National Socialist crimes have been discussed on several occasions. Ziva Amishai-Maisels published her key work on images from the Holocaust in 1993, James E. Young wrote about the younger generations' second-hand experience of the Holocaust in 2000, and in 2014 Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius published a critical, comprehensive study on German artworks depicting National Socialist persecution completed between 1945 and 1963. Even though Hoffmann-Curtius also considered the impact that German 'Erinnerungskultur' (remembrance culture) has had on art production over the decades, she failed to deliver an analysis of the discussions caused by the artworks she presented, discussions which in turn have partaken in shaping 'Erinnerungskultur'.

As semi-fictional and semi-autobiographical accounts of the past all three artworks have caused art critics to develop their own narratives on National Socialism. As part of a bigger socio-cultural discourse their writings took part in the construction of national identities and collective memories. But how exactly did art critics react to the images of persecution? How did they, in newspaper articles, essays, catalogue entries and monographs, relate to the artworks in question? How big a role did historical facts and/or current political events play? And how much fiction was involved?

This article aims to close the research gap on art reception's re-constructions of National Socialist crimes. A chronological discourse analysis will help to examine the evolution of the most dominant narratives promoted by the reception of the paintings by Grundig and Stempel discussed above. This article will trace the most influential terms and concepts, show which purposes they serve, and what kind of power they possess. Finally, it will contextualize the reception of these paintings and reveal analogies and breaches with contemporary memorial discourses.

Denial versus appropriation

Even though Stempel did not paint any perpetrators, the reception of *Night over Germany* has consistently revolved around the question of German guilt. The writer of the first 1947 exhibition catalogue, Herbert Schiller, has been the only author so far to address personal and collective guilt directly (Schiller 1947, n.p.): 'which of us could say that he has overcome the dark time we have just left behind, who that he has worked through the guilt we have accumulated?'

In contrast to Schiller, in 1947 most commentators employed strategies of denial, ranging from suppression to victimization. Confronted with allied re-education campaigns and the Nuremberg trials, they anticipated generalized accusations (Frei 2005, 147). Instead of facing their own involvement with the

National Socialist regime, reviewers painted the picture of an innocent people suffering from the war, or they appropriated Stempel's triptych as an example of how to overcome the past. As a result, most reviewers ignored the factual depictions of a concentration camp and a prison.

The triptych's title may have offered critics the chance to exonerate themselves and their fellow citizens, since *Night Over Germany* quickly became a post-war figure of speech to describe National Socialism as a dark era with a population blinded by the people in power, unaware of the crimes being committed. Whatever the artist's intentions might have been, critics took the opportunity provided by the title to ignore their own involvement in National Socialism. Some put the sole blame on Hitler (Justi 1947, 5; Redslob 1947) while others declared all Germans to be victims of National Socialism (anon 1947a; anon 1947b; anon 1947c). In the newspaper *Rheinische Post*, affiliated with the Christian Democratic Union of Germany, one anonymous author changed the triptych's title to *Maltreated Germany* (anon 1947b), and in the East German trade union federation's newspaper *Tribüne* another anonymous contributor wrote about the 'past barbarism's concentration-camp atmosphere burdening us' (anon 1947c). The former victimized the German population as a whole, without directly blaming either the war or the National Socialist regime, while the latter invented a German people imprisoned by a barbaric system, the uncivilized, depersonalized Other. German persecutors, followers and bystanders took the place of the persecuted figures actually depicted by Stempel.

Before publishing his most influential essay on *Night over Germany* in the art journal *bildende kunst*, Hermann Müller contributed to the victimization narrative (Müller 1947a, n.p.):

Do we remember the time when we crouched in the bunker, listening fearfully to the sound of sirens and motors, the explosions? Yes, we do remember. And we find it again captured in Horst Stempel's four-part image 'Night over Germany'.

Not only did Müller ignore the triptych's sole focus on scenes of imprisonment, like the other writers mentioned above he also constructed a collective suffering 'we' by imagining a bunker scene, that removed and buried the differences between German perpetrators, followers, bystanders and their victims. He exploited the fact that most Germans had been affected by the war in one way or another to, at least implicitly, absolve them.

Later in 1947, in *bildende kunst* Müller changed his approach slightly. Even though he misidentified the triptych's left panel as a bunker scene rather than the depiction of three figures in an unspecified dark space, he was the only author who in 1947 to mention the Jewish family depicted in the right panel. In addition, he described the central panel with its concentration camp barracks, a crucified-like prisoner in the centre, and the children's tattooed arms. Müller

also mentioned the prisoners in the predella who he interpreted as representatives of an immortal resistance movement (Müller 1947b, 32):

The resistance movement. Behind bars, still making plans, working, thinking in their last hour. Knocks go from cell to cell, immortal conviction in the regime's death chambers. In the world of the living, there is the sound of the sirens. People are crouching in bunkers with fearful eyes and knotted hands. They stand in front of black walls, marked by yellow stars, grimly looking up, hoping desperately, that it could not be possible, that it cannot be possible, that maybe ...

At first sight, it seems as if Müller had confronted the realities of National Socialist persecution, choosing empathetic words. But upon closer examination, his goal is revealed as exploiting the triptych for contemporary purposes. Like others, he appropriated the artist's attempt to deal with National Socialist crimes and used it as an example of successfully coming to terms with the past. To strengthen his point, he quoted two anonymous journalists from Denmark and Sweden (Müller 1947b, 32): 'Never before did they see a work of art that dealt with fascism as profoundly as this one. An artwork that even attempted to sum up this development'. Müller used the alleged approval of two journalists from 'neutral' countries to emphasize the ability of Germans to overcome the past and to appeal to a national and international public.

In addition to appropriating the artist's confrontation of the past, Müller referred to the resistance movement because it could serve to clear Germany's name. Declaring its immortality, he created a link between dead resistance fighters and living Germans who, through re-education, supposedly followed in the former's footsteps.

Müller recharacterized the victims depicted in Stempel's painting, and he identified with the Jewish family in hiding, fantasizing about their survival. He imagined a possible happy ending that had nothing to do with the realities of deportation and genocide and had everything to do with his intentions to present a reformed Germany, a country which through suffering could identify itself with its victims, incorporating the resistance movement and the fate of the persecuted alike.

In 1954 Wolfgang Hennig, a West German journalist who wrote for the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, picked up where Müller had left off and continued to construct a fiction of successful denazification. He described the international recognition that *Night over Germany* had gained, again without sharing his sources, and invented the topos of 'German self-reflection' which was to be referred to repeatedly (Hennig 1954): 'This "altar piece" has documented German self-reflection and has had a huge impact beyond our borders'.

Despite referencing a form of self-reflection, this journalist did not show any interest in actually coping with the past. He took advantage of the fact that

Stempel had been heavily criticized for his modernist style before he emigrated from the GDR, so as a West German conservative Hennig had this as a strong reason to criticize East German cultural politics. In the midst of the Cold War, his main objective was to attack the neighboring GDR. Hennig compared Stempel's problems with East German police forces with those he had had with the Gestapo and agreed with the contemporary conservative mainstream when he regarded Soviet socialism and National Socialism as equally totalitarian. In agreement with the general West German hush-hush attitude of the 1950s, he ignored past National Socialist crimes and focused on current conflicts, thus undermining real self-reflection (see Dubiel 1999, 176-177).

Victims and perpetrators

In 1977, East German art historian Karl Max Kober 'rediscovered' Stempel's triptych when he studied art from the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany (Kober 1977, 216):

A modern ghostly Golgotha is built up like an altarpiece, not with a crucified man at its centre but with a figure who could be a perpetrator or a victim, who could go down on his knees completely or still get up.

Kober agreed with those writers from 1947 who recognized Germany in the triptych, but instead of reinforcing victimization, he chose to discuss the central figure's status. He claimed that most Germans did not feel liberated at the end of World War II and concluded that Stempel would have depicted their mixed feelings (Kober 1977, 215-216):

Objectively speaking, May 8, 1945 was a liberation day. But at first, to most people and artists May 8 has been a day of defeat, and the important changes in society have been overlaid by the horrifying discovery of fascist cruelties, by existential angst, insecurity, and hopelessness. At that time Germany was the only country not standing side by side with the victors, and even German Communists and antifascists could not enjoy their victory over barbarism without bitterness as progressive forces did not manage to prevent the disaster in 1933.

Kober adapted the excessively used topos of historical objectivity central to the East German interpretation of Marxist theory and turned it against the official understanding of history. Not only did he undermine the dictum of May 8th as the liberation day celebrated each year by state officials and the (willing or unwilling) population alike, he also dared to mention the failure of 1933 despite the fact that the antifascist victory had been one of the founding myths of the GDR. For different reasons, the German Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party did not manage to unite in their struggle against the National Socialist Party's rise to power in 1933. Alluding to that, Kober opposed the general tendency to ignore the fallibility of the Communist Party, while the official reading was that German antifascists had overcome their failures and prevailed over

National Socialism as members of the anti-Hitler coalition. The foundation of the GDR turned defeat into victory not only for the former enemies of National Socialism but for every German who was willing to identify with the new state, transforming the conquered guilty into innocent victors (see Danyel 1995, 42-46). In contrast to the GDR's official version of a German antifascist victory, Kober stressed the failures of the German antifascist movement as well as the wide-spread feeling of German defeat in 1945.

While Kober's understanding of history does not explain his ambiguous reading of Stempel's central figure, who after all is a concentration camp prisoner in restraint, to characterize him as a figure between guilt and innocence finally meant accepting the existence of at least an abstract form of German guilt. Unsurprisingly though, in his book on GDR art from 1982 Ullrich Kuhirt, another East German art historian, did not agree with Kober. His interpretation corresponded with the official reading of the end of World War II, namely with May 8, 1945, as a new beginning. In Kuhirt's opinion, the triptych represented Stempel's hopes for the future of his people, for salvation and his longing for peace (Kuhirt 1982, 48):

The triptych represents the artist's thoughts on the fate and future of his people. His longing for peace and salvation from the darkness of the period is expressed vividly and shockingly. With its subject matter ranging from despair to hope the triptych is unique among the artworks that represent the situation at the new beginning.

Referring also to May 8th, the art historian Jörg Makarinus developed yet another reading in an exhibition catalogue in 1987. Based on the division between the foreground and background of the triptych's central panel, Makarinus described and traced the existence of a timeline. However, like Kober, he still did not manage to decide if the central characters represented prisoners or perpetrators (Makarinus 1987, 435):

The triptych's central panel leads the viewer's gaze back to the nightmarish concentration camp barracks. In the foreground, separated from the past in time and space, signifying the situation after May 8, 1945, children raise their tattooed arms in an accusatory manner. The pose of two central figures acts as a warning. They represent degradation, pain, horror and guilt as the German people's Passion.

According to Makarinus, the composition is divided in past and present around May 8th, yet the tattooed children in Auschwitz had been liberated on January 27, 1947, three months before the Wehrmacht surrendered on May 8, 1945. Alluding to the Passion of Christ, the writer aligns his choice of words to Stempel's iconographic use of imagery. More importantly, describing National Socialist persecution with the metaphor 'Passion', Makarinus makes use of an established imagery which tamed the crimes by describing them in religious terms. As a consequence, he did not do the victims justice, as terms from the

New Testament belittle their suffering. In addition, when connecting the Passion to the Germans' 'degradation, horror, pain, and guilt' he replaced the victim by the offender and transformed guilt into suffering. Even if he did draw attention to the children's tattooed arms, he produced the image of a German people being the victim of its own crimes. Once again, he ignored the factual depiction of most of the persecuted figures and returned to the victimization narrative established in the post-war era.

As a result of the left-wing movement of the 1960s and 70s and in response to Kober's writings, West German art historians began to approach the topic of early post-war art. As a left-wing art historian opposing the GDR, Gabriele Schultheiß took on the task of analyzing *Night over Germany* in an exhibition catalogue on Realism after 1945 in 1980. She quoted Kober's 'Golgotha' to criticize Stempel for his 'mechanically reduced understanding of National Socialism and the conditions of its overcoming' (Schultheiß 1980, 15). In her opinion, the artist chose the shape of a triptych because of his salvation-historical interpretation of the past, with the predella's resistance fighters introducing the promise of salvation depicted on the central panel (Schultheiß 1980, 15):

The crucified, sacrificed Jewish prisoner [the central figure] and the guardian, the fatherly leader of the solidary proletarian family in the right panel, are looking at the only open spot in a densely populated image space. Their orientation towards the sky means salvation, the end of terror and ascent into heaven as a necessity. The children's group, combatively raising their fists, appeals to the viewer with a certain belief: that within a gruesome reality lies a possibility for change.

Even though, unlike other reviewers, Schultheiß produced a detailed analysis, she misinterpreted the role of Stempel's protagonists – the central figure as a crucified Jew, the family as proletarians, and the children as fighters. Even if the sky lit up in the central panel, there is no compositional element suggesting that Stempel intended to depict salvation. In fact, *Night over Germany* shows scenes of imprisonment, suffering and death without a possible escape. Her undoubtedly justified questioning of the use of Christian iconography in the face of National Socialist persecution aside, Schultheiß's critique seems to be directed to the aforementioned East German fiction of an antifascist victory rather than to the artwork itself.

After the unification of Germany, most authors limited themselves to rephrasing Müller, Kober, Schultheiß and others (Gillen 2009, 64; May and Obenaus 2016, 250-255; Thomas 2002, 15). The art historian Gabriele Saure published the first monograph on Stempel in 1992 and combined different approaches (Saure 1992, 85):

According to the traditional interpretation of the Golgotha scene, the central figure should be innocent or the symbol of unjust suffering. If Stempel had really only wanted to document 'German self-reflection'

one cannot assume that he would have put a German in the centre at Calvary. Perhaps his goal was to criticize the population's self-pity. The indirect confrontation between those who really have suffered from the fascist system – concentration camp prisoners, political prisoners, forced labourers, Jews – and those who are put in the foreground, absent-minded and detached from the gruesome scenes in the background, speaks in favour of this assumption.

Instead of questioning Kober's 'Golgotha' or Hennig's 'self-reflection', Saure intertwined both ideas and presented a rather confusing interpretation of the triptych. According to her, 'self-reflection' meant putting a guilty German among victims, as if to confront the viewers with their self-pity in the face of mass murder and genocide. Saure tried to react to the changing public discourse on German guilt following the West German 'Historikerstreit' (historians' dispute) in the late 1980s. During the 'Historikerstreit', right-wing and left-wing intellectuals discussed the singularity of the Shoah and the question of German guilt. Saure agreed with the left-wing position which considered German guilt to be an undeniable, significant part of German history when she elaborated on Germans absorbed in self-pity after World War II. She differentiated between them and 'those who really have suffered', finally mentioning the depiction of forced labourers, prisoners and Jews, but she did not go beyond established interpretations. To emphasize her point, she still maintained the central figure's characterization as a German entangled in guilt, instead of conclusively questioning this view.

After the art historian Fritz Jacobi claimed in 1966 that National Socialist crimes came to be known only after the war (Jacobi 1996, 73), Hoffmann-Curtius acknowledged recent historical research and expanded on the topic of German guilt in 2014, facing the complicit behaviour of large parts of the German population (Hoffmann-Curtius 2014, 27): 'Stempel shows places a lot of Germans are being brought to during re-education. Places already known to those who lived nearby, having been their place of work and Sunday trip destination'. She revealed a blind spot that had been ignored for decades: the fact that Germans could and did know about the concentration camps, the forced labour camps, the prisons and the hospitals where mass murder took place. Surprisingly though, she kept wondering if the central character of *Night over Germany* represented a prisoner or a National Socialist German, exemplifying the power of Kober's narrative (Hoffmann-Curtius 2014, 28-29).

Most recently, *Night over Germany* has been the final piece in an exhibition on the National Gallery's history in Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. In the first half of 2016 'Die schwarzen Jahre' (The black years) presented the collection's history during National Socialism, exhibiting works both from supporters and enemies of the National Socialist regime. The show concluded with Stempel's triptych, offering two possible endings. One, that the artwork marks the end of the National Socialist period and the beginning of a new era, as if German 'self-

reflection' had been as successful as some critics claimed in 1947, and two, that the artwork offers the chance to finally begin to cope with the past.

Victims as heroes

While *Night over Germany* had not been spoken of in the GDR since 1951, the beginning of the success of Grundig's *Victims* paintings coincided with the opening of the first national memorial site at Buchenwald concentration camp in 1958. Here, the GDR government presented its understanding of National Socialist persecution and drew up the guidelines on its commemoration. The most important and the only honoured victims were to be the antifascist resistance fighters led by the Communists. According to those guidelines, the antifascist fighters' death had been meaningful because socialism had triumphed over 'fascism' when the GDR had been founded (see Overesch 1995).

In response to the official reading of history, Grundig's paintings have been perceived repeatedly as 'memorial', 'cenotaph', 'tribute' or 'reminder', most of the time without further specifying what and who they commemorated (see Feist 1970, 6; Kober 1978, 4; Sander 1988, 22). Up until the 1960s their purpose was considered to engage the viewers. As Artur Dänhardt put it in 1958 (Dänhardt 1958): 'One has to stop in front of 'To the Victims of Fascism', one has to empathize, to think, and then one should take an oath: This past shall never return, but we have to do something so that it does not'.

Dänhardt, who had been imprisoned during National Socialism as a Social Democrat and who worked as a cultural functionary in the GDR, referred to the oath of Buchenwald taken by liberated prisoners in 1945. The oath contained the promise to eradicate National Socialism, bring the perpetrators to justice and create a socialist society, thus being an important text in the GDR's remembrance culture.

As strong as Dänhardt's plea might seem, the call to prevent the past from repeating itself remains vague. Even if critics mentioned Hans Grundig's imprisonment, they used terms such as 'hell' (Grundig 1964, 25), 'barbarism' (Feist 1958, 660) or 'diabolic' (Jahn 1961, 111) to describe National Socialist persecution, taming it with religion or labelling it as psychologically and socially deviant.

Consequently, over decades most authors described Grundig's prisoners as anonymous fighters who had died for the greater good. As Günter Bernhardt, the author of Grundig's catalogue raisonné, put it in 1966 (Bernhardt 1966, 385-386):

The deep impact is a result of the singular and truthful representation of the fate of millions of victims of the brown terror, of their exemplary behaviour in resistance and in death. They herald the immortality of the

antifascists' great humanist fight during the fascist dictatorship in Germany.

Bernhardt glorified death, and also established the use of religious terminology in a socialist context when he referred to 'immortality', as Stempel's critic Müller had done twenty years earlier in the post-war period. Like Müller, Bernhardt used the artworks to strengthen the national identity and to counter notions of German guilt. The same mechanism was at work when the writer referred to antifascist fighters as 'millions of victims'. He drew the picture of a monumental German resistance movement that in fact had never existed – allowing his fellow citizens to identify with those fictive millions.

Following his lead, in the 1970s different writers spotted the promise of a socialist future in Grundig's paintings. They discovered the dawning of a new time on the horizon of *To the Victims of Fascism*, described the blue sky in *Victims of Fascism* as a future herald or claimed that Grundig's protagonists had broken down 'fascism' (Gärtner 1979, 63; Lammel 1974; Schiller 1979). These writers ignored the fact that Grundig had painted dead or dying prisoners and did not show any interest for his biography or that of the friends he commemorated. Instead, they used Grundig's paintings as vehicles to promote the GDR and its concept of antifascism.

In reaction to the awakening interest for concrete biographies (Hartewig 2001, 43), Grundig expert Günter Feist challenged the tradition of abstract commemoration in 1970. Even if he still juggled with terms like 'inferno' and 'martyrdom', he gave an account of Grundig's imprisonment, adding concrete biographical information to the discussion (Feist 1970, 6-8). Feist also confronted the concrete existence of National Socialist crimes (Feist 1970, 8):

They had brought him where the strongly protected facade of normality did not have any significance anymore and the SS state's true nature exposed itself. Because the equally insane and criminal division of humans in 'Übermensch' and 'Untermensch' and of Germans in 'Volksgenossen' and 'Volksschädlinge' had swept away all scruples, all reminders of human dignity. They hunted and choked the alleged subhumans and vermin every day, not too fast because the work should still bring profit; not too slow because the camp was not to lose its intimidating reputation. Again and again, torture, humiliation, starvation, disease and exhaustion ended in ruin, death and murder.

Feist rephrased results that Eugen Kogon had published in his important book *The SS State: The System of the German Concentration Camps* in 1946 (Kogon 2012, 55-59). Influenced by Kogon, Feist based his analysis on historical research and called Grundig and the other prisoners Hitler's and Himmler's prisoners. He named two specific perpetrators from Sachsenhausen, Gustav Sorge and Wilhelm Schubert, a singular event both in Grundig's and Stempel's reception (Feist 1970, 7-8). He elaborated on National Socialist racism and anti-

Semitism as well as on the role of forced labour, considering it to be an important aspect of National Socialist persecution in accordance with Georgi Dimitrov's theory on fascism which focuses on the economic reasons for the rise of European fascist movements and German National Socialism.

Feist laid the grounds for art historian Dietulf Sander who in 1988 presented historical documents on Grundig's imprisonment (Sander 1988, 7-11). Sander finally quoted Grundig on Sachsenhausen after decades of abstract glorification. As he outlined, Grundig did not present himself as a heroic fighter. Instead, the artist reported the mistrust he met with when he arrived in Sachsenhausen, the other Communist prisoners avoiding him because of his sensitivity and vulnerability. Not only did Sander undermine the invention of the artist/hero, he also challenged the narrative of the (camp) resistance movement as a place for unlimited solidarity and unity and broke with the antifascist myth altogether.

Victims and heroes

Hans Grundig's wife Lea published several texts on *To the Victims of Fascism*, the most influential one being part of a textbook on East German art history with nine editions published between 1962 and 1987. Here, she proposed a reading of the protagonists based on the distinction between fighters and victims, indirectly reinforcing National Socialist prisoner hierarchies. She ignored the double badge on the forward prisoner's leg and described him as a passive, defenceless Jew who – unlike the invincible political fighter at the back – forfeited the right to live (Grundig 1964, 25):

In this figure [the prisoner in the back], the artist expressed the ethics of fighting for human dignity and for the biggest cause, the liberation of mankind, Communism. The ideals of the working class are not destroyable, stronger than death. But even in death the weak [the prisoner in the front] is still bent, defiled and insulted. Still he wants to hide his dead face, always escaping, hunted to the last. He died without putting up a fight, he forfeited the right to live, the right to fight for his life.

In Palestinian exile Grundig herself had created a series on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising which she promoted in a brochure published by the East German National Ministry of Defence in 1959 (Grundig 1959, 8). Therein, she spoke highly of the Jewish resistance movement, but a few years later she reproduced the stereotype of the 'passive Jew' established in the 1950s (Hartewig 2001, 41).

It is possible that her developing career as a member of the ruling SED, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, influenced her writings, or that an East German textbook required a certain set of ideas on the resistance and Communist superiority. Whatever the case, Grundig's anti-Jewish narrative continued to be repeated by several authors until 1978 (Dreißiger 1978, 59-60; Lammel 1974; anon 1971).

After the GDR gained international recognition in the early 1970s, the official memorial discourse began to transform. While the heroism of antifascist fighters was not to be doubted, the Shoah started to be acknowledged, so that even Lea Grundig softened her tone. In her posthumously published book on Hans Grundig she almost revised her anti-Jewish interpretation (Grundig 1978, 96):

In the second version, the statement on the death camps is becoming more complete. Not everybody has been a fighting antifascist. In concentration camps the racially persecuted died as well: gypsies, Jews and the so called 'asocial', thousands and thousands.

Even if she maintained the distinction between fighter and victim, Lea Grundig was ahead of the times by openly referring to 'gypsies' and 'asocial' victims.

Having said that, it was not until 1988 – one year before the GDR collapsed – when Sander dared to criticize Lea Grundig's school-book text. For the first time he pointed out that Hans Grundig had painted a double badge and the number he had to wear in Sachsenhausen not only to show solidarity with Jewish victims but also – most tragically – to stand up for his own wife (Sander 1988, 17, 22).

Dis-continuities

In connection with debates on artists from the GDR and their political affiliations art historians focused mainly on Grundig's involvement with the SED after 1990. To point out Grundig's sceptical attitude towards party politics, art historian Eckhart Gillen brought to view the subversiveness of depicting a double badge in 2001, as it did not solely commemorate 'political prisoners' according to the SED's practices but also the Jewish victims of persecution (Gillen, 2001). To strengthen his point, Gillen traced the biography of Helen Ernst, Grundig's friend mentioned in the second painting. After her liberation from Ravensbrück concentration camp, Ernst was accused by fellow inmates of collaborating with the SS. She was put on trial by the SED and rehabilitated only when Grundig intervened. Shortly afterwards, she died. If the artist included her in his painting, Gillen seemed to argue, he implicitly criticized the SED and its treatment of survivors. Thus Grundig could not be criticized for his unlimited support of the SED regime, as had happened to several East German artists after the unification of both Germanies.

Despite criticizing the GDR as a dictatorship, art historians who wrote about the *Victims* paintings after 1990 generally continued to use the terminology established in the GDR, especially the terms 'memorial', 'cenotaph', 'tribute' or 'reminder' (Gillen 2001; Hoffmann-Curtius 2014, 119; Schröter 2010, 474; Weber 2001, 74). Whereas authors from the GDR tended to avoid the topic of con-

crete persecution and chose to repeat empty phrases, Ingeborg Kähler and Eckhart Gillen employed the topos of the 'Unspeakable' when referring to the *Victims* paintings (Gillen 2009, 61; Kähler 1995, 86). As both authors did not immerse themselves in the discussion on the 'Unspeakable', they employed a common strategy which replaced early post-war denial with the 'Unspeakable'. The strategy exploits the discussion on the (im)possibilities of representing the Shoah not to speak about persecution at all. Gillen stated that Grundig would have known that 'Auschwitz cannot be explained or made visible' (Gillen 2009, 61), ignoring Grundig's outspoken wish to find an adequate form of representation, a wish in complete contradiction to the aforementioned 'Unspeakable' (see Grundig 1947, 122). Instead of referring to Grundig's experiences as a Sachsenhausen concentration camp prisoner, Gillen employed the topos of Auschwitz, replacing biographical facts by a standing term.

Conclusion

Over the decades, the critics of *Night over Germany* have focused on German guilt, while the writings on Grundig's *Victims* paintings mainly revolved around antifascist heroism. Most shockingly, in both cases the factual subject matter, the depiction of the victims of persecution, has been secondary. *Night over Germany* has been called a 'Golgotha', an image of salvation. The prisoners and the people in hiding have been ignored, described as innocent Germans or considered to be guilty; the prison inmates in the predella and the tattooed children in the central panel have been described as resistance fighters, and the Jewish family in the right panel has mostly been ignored.

Similarly, Grundig's protagonists have either been labeled as heroic antifascist fighters or as an antifascist fighter and a 'passive Jew'. While Grundig's paintings have been celebrated as memorials, little interest has been shown for the artist's own suffering as a concentration camp prisoner, for the friends he commemorated or the general history of National Socialist persecution.

Critics reinvented the artworks according to their fictitious accounts of the past and used them as vehicles to promote their own agendas, to deny all personal and public involvement in National Socialism, to present the GDR as *the* antifascist state or to promote the success of German 'self-reflection'. Apart from one writer who admitted to personal guilt in 1947, the early post-war reception of *Night over Germany* has been dominated by denial or appropriation.

Interestingly, the use of religious terminology to describe National Socialist persecution can be traced throughout the decades and in the reception of all three artworks. It seems to be part of a general tendency of avoidance that started with post-war denial and ended with vague references to the 'Unspeakable' in the 1990s and 2000s. Not only have most writers ignored concrete responsibility and involvement, they have avoided facts about persecution altogether. It was

more than twenty years before an art historian would mention details from Grundig's imprisonment, and another twenty until historical documents were presented. It was fifty years before a Stempel expert discussed the problem of German self-pity, and another ten before the fact that Germans generally knew about the existence of National Socialist crimes long before the end of World War II was acknowledged, in the context of these paintings, in print.

Terminological, psychological and conceptual continuities can be found in the reception of all three artworks even after the change of political systems. They show not only a tendency to avoid conflicting views within the art critical community, but also the durability of a certain approach towards history, even in the face of paintings that confront their viewers directly with the existence of National Socialist crimes. The examination of the reception of all three artworks proves the highly acclaimed German 'self-reflection' to be nothing but wishful thinking. A new examination of these artworks is needed, one that dares to challenge established narratives and put the factual subject matter first.

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- 1 Unless otherwise noted all translations are by the author.