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Abstract

Writing History is Making History or How to Roll Back a Revolution or Two: *Naked Among Wolves* (1958; 1963; 2015) and the New Europe

Political and economic systems are built on trust and promise, that is, on forward-looking, future-oriented relationships of investment and reward—monetary and otherwise. However, since that future is always deferred und ultimately unknowable, we paradoxically take what we supposedly know, history, as a voucher. Much in the same way an insurance company will issue a policy based on statistics, historiography implicitly calculates future probability by probing patterns of the past.

For this reason, writing history is making history. The definition of a legacy uses the past to project a future. Configuring a trajectory and thus identity means delineating possibilities; it means precluding or evoking alternatives; and it means making assumptions as to the limitations or possibilities of agency. As a result, historiography can acquiesce or compel a cry for change.

Furthermore, narratives, historiographical ones included, produce social norms as Robert Shiller observes in his recent working paper on "Narrative Economics." As such, they can engender immense and immediate economic and financial upsides—and, by the same fierce force, downsides—with wide-reaching social and political implications.

The behavioral impact of historiography turns it into a veritable battleground for what is ultimately control or freedom from control. Indeed, it is the site of a great *Materialschlacht* where commemoration industries, academia included, produce exhibits that create memory and, along with it, a mental and emotional map that is supposed to guide consumers and constituents into their futures.

One such prominent battle site is the former Nazi concentration camp Buchenwald just outside the East German city of Weimar. Already in 1945, US intelligence officers, as if anticipating what contested ground they were supposed to measure, concluded their report about the liberated camp with, "The whole truth about Buchenwald will never be known."

While this finding still rings true today given the contradictoriness of the accounts as well as their imbricated silences, Buchenwald probably is, paradoxically, the best documented camp of all. This is due, in large measure, to a communist resistance group which had sought to take over the inmates' self-administration of the camp and used its powers—to the extent that was possible within the camp, though some argue otherwise—to safeguard especially politically persecuted inmates who it deemed friendly or useful to its own cause, such as Pierre d'Harcourt, Eugen Kogon and Bruno Apitz, and because it made a point of protecting young people such as Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel and Imre Kertesz, who lived to tell the tale when the next generation proved more receptive to their trauma than their own had been. And yet, it is this very administration and its achievements or crimes, which have proven particularly contentious, from the camp's liberation to the present.

Bruno Apitz's 1958 novel *Naked among Wolves* and its 1963 filmic adaptation by Frank Beyer interpret the communist resistance in the Buchenwald camp as part of the world revolution that puts the defunct capitalist system onto the trash heap of history in order to make way for a more equitable and just society. Both East German artists working within the German Democratic Republic, they use the story of a small child's rescue in the camp (where there had been at least 700 children, a great part of which were educated in the camp in a communist-run school), to highlight the inmates' preparation for armed resistance and to show the party organization's attempts to mitigate Nazi orders. Most importantly, however, both film and novel feature the inmates' joyous, empowering and almost peaceful rebellion against their oppressors, as they storm the camp's gate. As such, both served the legitimation of the East German state and seemed to fit conveniently into the commemorative schemes that, like no other, demonstrated the validity of the East German cause. Due to its dramaturgical trick of focusing on an individual destiny—untinged by political allegiances or due to its age of complete innocence—, the 1958/63 versions of *Naked among Wolves*, more than any other story of anti-fascist resistance, rallied people to defend the GDR's political and economic system or, at least, discount its problems as a lesser evil.

However, both the East German novel and the East German film also subverted the party rule, as their narratives not only revolve around the successful insurrection of the inmates against the Nazi camp leadership, but attribute that success to the equally successful insurrection of ordinary comrades and non-party inmates against the party leaders of the Communist resistance in the Buchenwald camp. It is the latter who resist party orders to send the child onto another transport, which would effectively sentence the small boy to death. In turn, this act, and, with it, the presence of a child in the camp as a promise and obligation to the future provide crucial motivation for the inmates to resist. While the 1958/63 *Naked among Wolves* acknowledged the party leadership's selfless intent to serve the community, they problematized party politics as misguided, betraying its own principles and in need of democratic correction. Only with the revolution from below, so the East German legacy of Buchenwald held forth, could fascism be vanquished.

Both the 1958 novel and the 1963 film exemplify the paradox of pre-1990 East German discourse, according to which the government needed historical narrative for its legitimation, but only could get it at the price of interrogation and challenge. When demonstrators took to the streets in the fall of 1989, they affirmed this dual reception of the East German *Naked among Wolves* by carrying banners such as "Naked among Volvos." While they affirmed the state's identification with the Buchenwald story, they also pointed out structural similarities between the East German elites and the Nazi leadership. Moreover, they demonstrated that the novel and the film were indeed understood as a parable of the present and a directive for the future. Given their understanding of their own political system's propensities, they fulfilled the communist Buchenwald Oath, which was "to eradicate fascism by its root." The 1958/63 narratives of *Naked among Wolves* had not only provided the analytical tools, the social norms and the courage to resist, but also communicated the obligation to do so for the sake of future generations. Ultimately, the 1989 revolution from below against a party elite that used means incompatible with its

professed goals enacted the script informed by *Naked among Wolves*' account of Buchenwald history: a joyous, peaceful and empowering run on the gates.

Before this background, my paper will examine the post-1990 rewriting of Buchenwald history, as it proved, for Easterners, a powerful identity to dispel. For indeed, while Western-dominated media turned the revolution of 1989 into a set of well-rehearsed clichés, every year following the 1990 takeover of the German Democratic Republic by the larger West Germany, the Eastern part of Germany was rattled by many more rebellions than the year of 1989, with some, such as the Bischofferode Hunger Strike, in which miners protested the divestment of their mine, being much more radical, organized and sustained than the 1989 upheavals without receiving commensurate media attention by the Western-backed institutions. The narrative of feasible equity and feasible change, of solidarity and human worth, remained virulent. Easterners were shaped by narratives such as the 1958/63 *Naked among Wolves*; for them to become second-class Germans in the Federal Republic and to arrive in a new Europe bent on neoliberalism, their narrative of revolution had to be rewritten.

While post-1990 scholarship has produced many volumes on the Buchenwald communists, the most popularized rewriting of the Buchenwald history ironically retakes the GDR's founding myth that the 1958/63 *Naked among Wolves* had become in retrospect. The 2015 remake of the film, like the pre-1990 texts, follows a dual strategy. On the one hand, it upholds, with some important concessions, the East German story in the wake of an aggressive post-1990 revision of the Buchwald history, in which the Communist leaders emerged as a parasitic, self-serving mafia, waiting to be liberated by the Allies, and in which the inmates' revolution against the camp-SS simply did not take place. On the other hand, it also deviates markedly from the East German historiography, in particular in how it renders the revolutions taking place within the camp, both of the inmates against the Nazi commanders and the inmates against their own leadership. The 2015 version of *Naked among Wolves*, for instance, strips the camp leadership of its Marxist narrative and strong orientation towards the future. Indeed, the Communist leadership of the camp is hardly recognizable as such, although it was precisely Communism's clear vision of a time to come and an ideological confidence that a more just and equitable society is feasible that allowed them to withstand the Nazi terror in the first place. Indeed, the Marxist narrative that socialism will be born out the squalor and deprivation of capitalism running amok in a sell-out of human values supplied their script; it enabled their agency and common agenda. Accordingly, where the 1958/63 communist camp eldest joined enthusiastically into the inmates' run on the Buchenwald gate, his 2015 counterpart, after announcing that the camp is now in the inmates' hands, rages silently. Instead of carrying the child as the token for, and owner of, the future across the open square as his 1958/63 version had, he remains alone in the SS's office, engaging in helpless, planless destruction, calling to mind the many recent titles, which like Pankaj Mishra's 2017 *Age of Anger* speak of frustration accumulating in a neoliberalist society. And while the inmates in the 1958 and 1963 versions seem to act coordinatedly and come together with energy, enthusiasm and ecstasy as a community in their storm on the gate, in the 2015 remake, they stumble out of their wooden barracks only after the camp eldest has made the announcement that they are free. They enter the picture in the background, singly and in small groups, like walking dead, forlorn, incredulous,

dazed, as if visually quoting Katherine Verdery's "Corpses on the Move" in her 1999 study of *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, the not-yet-dead heroine of Wolfgang Becker's 2003 *Goodbye, Lenin* or the dead undead of Olivia Vieweg's 2012 *Endzeit*.

The more charged a history, the higher the stakes. Reverberating the East like no other historical space, the history of Buchenwald needed to be rewritten for that bit of former Eastern bloc to fit into the 'Heart of Europe', or rather: into the 'heart of a neoliberalist Europe.' Yet, by the same token, rewriting the history of Buchenwald is also rewriting the legacy of the former East and, with it, the history of (the Other) Europe—a making of history that needs to be reflected as such.