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Conflicted Afterlives: Managing Wehrmacht Fallen Soldiers in the Soviet Occupation Zone and GDR

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jch**Laura Tradii** 

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Abstract

In the last months of the Second World War, as the Red Army approached Berlin, the Wehrmacht suffered catastrophic losses, resulting in thousands of war graves on East German soil. In the aftermath of the war, the Soviet Occupation Zone (1945–9) and the German Democratic Republic (1949–90) committed to a socialist ‘politics of history’ which centred on the liberation of Germany by the Red Army, disowning the German fallen. This article, based on my PhD research and current British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship, outlines how the central authorities of the Soviet Occupation Zone and the GDR managed the thousands of German Wehrmacht war burials on East German territory. I focus, in particular, on how Wehrmacht war burials came to constitute political and ideological liabilities, prompting concerns about their appropriations by the German Lutheran Church and West Germany. In doing so, I uncover a little-known yet highly significant dimension of the transition between the Third Reich and the German Democratic Republic.

Keywords

body politics, cold war, German Democratic Republic, politics of history, Wehrmacht, War Graves

The systematic recovery, identification, and reburial of fallen soldiers acquired exceptional cultural and political resonance in the twentieth century. In the aftermath of mass death in the Great War, states and the International Committee of the Red Cross

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laid an increasing emphasis on the humanitarian significance of registering the missing and the dead, notifying families about the fates of loved ones, and providing the dead with adequate burials where they could rest in perpetuity.¹ By May 1945, nowhere would an efficient management of war casualties have been more needed than in eastern Germany, the theatre one of the bloodiest and most chaotic phases of the Second World War. Between the end of January 1945 and the German capitulation on 8 May 1945, as the Third Reich fought to the bitter end, the inhabited areas between the river Oder and Berlin were engulfed by total war.² As German armed forces held the last defensive lines before Berlin, clashing with the numerically superior Red Army, the region was devastated by land warfare.³ Towns, villages, forests, and fields became strongholds, trenches, and emplacements in an immense battlefield. In these last, tragic months of the war on German soil the casualty toll was catastrophic. The Red Army lost some 300,000 men between 16 April 1945 and 8 May 1945, while the Third Reich suffered more military losses between January and May 1945 than in 1942 and 1943 combined.⁴ In Richard Bessel's words, in January 1945 'the numbers of German military dead reached their peak of over 450,000: in each of the next three months the number of German soldiers killed was more than 280,000', meaning that '[n]ever before had so many people been killed in Germany in so short a time'.⁵

After the war, the landscape of eastern Germany was strewn with corpses.⁶ Thousands of families across the four occupation zones of Germany mourned the loss of brothers, sons, and husbands who had fallen on the territory of what had become the Soviet Occupation Zone. Yet the systematic search, identification, and reburial of German military casualties became deeply problematic in East Germany. In the name of a socialist politics of history which claimed complete discontinuity with the Nazi past and Germany's bellicose nationalism, the German fallen were disowned by the Soviet Occupation Zone (1945–9) and the German Democratic Republic (1949–90), making their search, recovery, identification, and commemoration ideologically problematic or outright unviable.

This article outlines how the authorities of the Soviet Occupation Zone and the German Democratic Republic, and in particular the GDR's Ministry of the Interior, dealt with Wehrmacht fallen soldiers on East German territory from the end of the war to the Reunification. Focusing particularly on how these bodies and burials represented

1. See for example see F. Bugnion, *Confronting the Hell of the Trenches: The International Committee of the Red Cross and the First World War 1914-1922*, (2018); L. Tradii, "'Their Dear Remains Belong to Us Alone': Soldiers' Bodies, Commemoration, and Cultural Responses to Exhumations after the Great War', *First World War Studies*, 10, 2–3 (2019), 245–61.

2. For a vivid account see R. mBessel. *Germany 1945: From War to Peace*. (London, 2010).

3. On the Eastern Front, it is estimated, the Soviet Army counted 'eleven times more infantry, seven times more tanks, twenty times more guns, twenty times stronger in air-power' than Germany, see Ian Kershaw, *The End: Hitler's Germany, 1944–45* (London 2012), 168.

4. Richard Bessel, 'The Shadow of Death in Germany at the End of the Second World War', in Alon Confino, Paul Betts, and Dirk Schumann (eds.), *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York 2008), 52.

5. Ibid.

6. For an account of the enduring omnipresence and resurfacing of these bodies see L. Tradii, "'Everywhere" and "on the Spot": Locality and Attachments to the Fallen "Out of Place" in Contemporary Rural Germany'. *History and Anthropology*, (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2022.2139251>.

a political liability for the GDR, I argue that the German fallen remained a thorn in the side of the East German state for decades after the end of the war and that East Germany's fraught relations with both West Germany and the German Lutheran Church, and in later years its attempt to integrate itself in the global community, played a major role in shaping their management. I also argue that what was at stake in the management of Wehrmacht war burials by the GDR's Ministry of the Interior was not primarily a humanitarian concern, but rather the attempt to prevent political appropriations by actors perceived as inimical to the state, thus controlling a population deemed vulnerable to their ideological influences. This account of German war graves as political and ideological liabilities for the Ministry of the Interior, it should be stressed, captures *only a particular dimension* of a much broader and nuanced history of conflictual management of Wehrmacht burials, and of local involvements with and attachments to them, which I began researching with my PhD thesis (University of Cambridge) and which is the subject of my current British Academy Postdoctoral fellowship and intended monograph.⁷ Despite the significance of this phenomenon, the subject has yet to be extensively researched.⁸

As the last shots of the Second World War were fired on German soil, the corpses of war casualties piled high in the towns, fields, and forests of what became the Soviet Occupation Zone. Early reburials were often carried out by the civilian population, sometimes under the supervision of local councils, the Church, or soviet authorities. Although the bodies of both German and Soviet soldiers were often hastily interred on the spot, or in trenches and bomb craters, the SMAD began erecting monumental cemeteries and memorials for the Red Army immediately after the war, which became the foci of institutionally sanctioned socialist commemoration until the reunification.⁹ By and large, no such cemeteries were created for German fallen soldiers, let alone memorials. When they were not interred in temporary burials and 'field graves' in former battlefields, the Wehrmacht fallen were reburied in local civilian graveyards, their graves often marked with wooden crosses.

7. The author's research on this topic has been sponsored also by a DAAD grant and a German History Society grant. For the enduring local attachments to the German war dead in contemporary eastern Germany see L. Tradii, "'Everywhere' and 'on the Spot'". *History and Anthropology*, (2022).

8. Strikingly, even in publications about the 'memory' of the Wehrmacht in the GDR, or the politics of war history, the topic is hardly mentioned. Some publications by the Volksbund and the Brandenburg Centre for Political Education address it. See for example Norbert Buske's booklet *Das Kreuz Auf Dem Golm: Kriegsgräberfürsorge Im Schatten Der DDR* (Schwerin, 1995); B. Ulrich et al., *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Entwicklungslinien und Probleme* (Berlin 2019), chapter 4.3 'Kalter Krieg über den Gräbern - Der Volksbund und die SBZ/DDR', 364–98; R. Potratz and M. Stark, *Ernst Teichmann, Pfarrer Vom Waldfriedhof Halbe: Briefe Und Aufzeichnungen 1950–1983* (Potsdam 1997). See also Pietsch, Herbert, Rainer Potratz, and Meinhard Stark, eds. *Nun hängen die Schreie mir an ... Halbe. Ein Friedhof und seine Toten*. Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1996. Monica Black's brilliant *Death in Berlin* (Cambridge, 2013) briefly discusses the topic of war graves under socialism (see especially pp.187–197), while Alfred Lüdtke reflected on it in a series of 'vignettes' in 'Histories of Mourning: Flowers and Stones for the War Dead, Confusion for the Living - Vignettes from East and West Germany'. In *Between History and Histories The Making of Silences and Commemorations*, edited by Gerald Sider and Gavin Smith, 149–79. University of Toronto Press, 2016.

9. See P. Stangl, 'The Soviet War Memorial in Treptow, Berlin', *Geographical Review* 93, 2 (2003), 217. The SMAD (*Sowjetische Militäradministration in Deutschland*) was the Soviet Military Administration in Germany. It should be noted that, in practice, many bodies of Soviet soldiers were also hastily buried outside of cemeteries.

In the Soviet Occupation Zone, the identification of the war dead, the registration of German war burials, and the notification of next-of-kin were fraught with difficulties. The German Red Cross (*Deutsches Rotes Kreuz*) had been disbanded, and in 1945 two tracing bureaus had been established in Hamburg and Munich.¹⁰ In the East, a Tracing Bureau for Missing Germans in the Soviet Occupation Zone was established by the Soviet Military Administration in 1946, in an attempt to centralize the ‘fragmented’ tracing of civilians and fallen soldiers.¹¹ This later became the Tracing Bureau (*Suchdienst*) of the GDR’s Red Cross responsible for processing enquiries about the military and civilian missing and fallen. According to Andrea Brinckmann, however, investigating the fates of the missing was more of a priority for the Tracing Bureau in West Berlin than for its Eastern counterpart.¹² The East German Tracing Bureau nonetheless received staggering quantities of enquiries about the missing (2.6m in 1947, 2.14m in 1948, and circa 15,000 per month in 1950).¹³

Another important actor in the tracing of the fallen had been the *Wehrmachtauskunftsstelle* (WASSt), the bureau which managed the records of Wehrmacht personnel. Although the WASSt, later renamed *Deutsche Dienststelle für die Benachrichtigung der nächsten Angehörigen von Gefallenen der ehemaligen deutschen Wehrmacht* (German Office for the Notification of Next of Kin of fallen soldiers of the former German Wehrmacht), was a major source of information about army personnel, it was located in West Berlin, and its records were not readily accessible from East Germany without the mediation of the East German Tracing Bureau.

Finally, the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (German War Graves Commission, hereafter Volksbund), which had been a major actor in the reburial and commemoration of German casualties since 1919, was regarded as a revanchist organization devoted to the glorification of German militarism by East German authorities and was banned from operating on East German territory. The Volksbund was nonetheless able to covertly support the registration and reburial activities of the German Lutheran Church (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*), which was deeply involved in the reburial and identification of German war dead (more on this later).¹⁴

In the aftermath of war, without a centralized infrastructure and political impetus for the systematic registration of war burials and the transmission of information to next-of-kin, it was left to local authorities to meet the challenge of managing the dead. As illustrated by post-war correspondence, local districts and councils did so with varying degrees of solicitude and success, proceeding without detailed guidelines for exhumations and reburials. In 1948, for example, the District Administrator of Calau (southern Brandenburg) wrote in the district bulletin that the *Deutsche Verwaltung des Innern* (DVdI, German Administration of the Interior) had established

10. See: Andrea Brinckmann, *Das Rote Kreuz in Der DDR: Humanitäre Grundsätze Und Staatliche Lenkung - Die Geschichte Der Hilfsorganisation von 1952 Bis 1990* (Berlin 2019), See also: ICRC, *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross on Its Activities during the Second World War: September 1, 1939-June 30, 1947. Volume 2, ‘The Central Agency for Prisoners of War’* (Geneva 1948), ii, 187.

11. Andrea Brinckmann, *Das Rote Kreuz in Der DDR* (Berlin 2019), 25.

12. *Ibid.*, 25.

13. *Ibid.*, 25.

14. See B. Ulrich et al., *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (Berlin 2019), chapter 4.3.

that there was ‘no uniform [treatment] of the graves of German soldiers and civilians that were buried on the spot’ (*‘an Ort und Stelle’*).¹⁵ Efforts to investigate the identity of the fallen and to issue notifications of their deaths were still ‘inadequate’, and soldiers’ pay books, identification discs, and other items were still in the possession of private citizens, mayors, cemetery administrators and priests. The District Administrator then stated that, based on the DVdI’s Order of 29 July 1948, the dead in scattered graves should be exhumed and reburied in local cemeteries, and councils could decide whether to create a sector dedicated to the war dead in their burial grounds. All those personal objects that could have been useful to identify the dead should have been sent to the Tracing Bureau for Missing Germans in East Berlin.

Councils were then asked to report back on the enactment of the measures, and their replies testify to varying degrees of zeal in the matter, suggesting that individual initiative played a major role in securing and transmitting information vital for identification. Some mayors reported personally registering the dead after the war, drawing up name lists, and even writing to the families of the fallen. This was the case, for example, of the mayor of the village of Buchholz, who oversaw the burial of 36 German soldiers.¹⁶ He personally attempted to identify the dead and even arranged for the *Freie Deutsche Jugend* (Free German Youth, the socialist youth organization) to tend to the graves, something which would have likely been looked down upon by central authorities.

On 1 November 1949, not even a month after the foundation of the GDR, a letter from the Ministry of the Interior to the five Ministries of the Interior of the *Länder* of the GDR also referred to a lack of streamlined approaches to the management of German war graves.¹⁷ It stated that the care for graves and the exhumation of scattered burials had ‘begun in various ways’ and had partially been concluded. However, it continued, unlike Mecklenburg and Saxony-Anhalt, the *Länder* Brandenburg, Thuringia, and Saxony had not issued any particular guidelines, leaving the matter to local districts. The latter had partially relied on a law from 1922, which regulated the treatment of graves of the Great War.¹⁸ The Ministry of the Interior specified that if the DVdI had decided that, because of ‘the different [management] of the care for war graves a single regulation [...] is no longer intended’, it was nonetheless necessary to attain ‘a certain uniformity’ in a matter which deeply touched the sensitivities ‘of German women and mothers.’¹⁹ The letter therefore restated that the dead who had been buried in scattered graves should be exhumed to cemeteries in local

15. This and following citations from: Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Potsdam (BLHA), Rep. 250 Calau/Sfbg Nr. 260, Calauer Kresiblatt, 15.10.1948. The DVdI was in place between 1946 and 1949, when its tasks were taken over by the Ministry of the Interior.

16. BLHA, Rep. 250 Calau/Sfbg Nr. 260, Mayor of Buchholz to District Administrator, *War graves of German soldiers*, 13.12.1948.

17. This and following quotations: Bundesarchiv, Berlin (BArch), DO/4 2162, microforms 1638 and 1639, Ministry of the Interior to the Five Ministries of the Interior, 1.11.1949.

18. Gesetz Über Die Erhaltung Der Kriegergräber Aus Dem Weltkrieg. 29.12.1922. *Reichsgesetzblatt* 9.1.1923, part I.

19. This mention to the sensitivities of women and mothers is not to be underestimated: as I discussed elsewhere and with reference to the management of British casualties in the Great War, public opinion can have an important role in shaping government action on the treatment of the dead in the aftermath of conflict. See L. Tradii, “‘Their Dear Remains Belong to Us Alone’: Soldiers’ Bodies, Commemoration, and Cultural Responses to Exhumations after the Great War”, *First World War Studies*, 10, 2–3 (2019), 245–61.

communities or to already-existing war cemeteries from the second and the first world war. Individual and communal graves were to be registered, and the possessions of the dead were to be secured for the purpose of identification and sent to the Tracing Bureau in Berlin. The condition of cemeteries should be monitored, and the resources needed to finance the care of all war graves reported. The Ministry also recommended avoiding, in cemeteries, any inscriptions which could have glorified militarism and war. The *Länder* were then encouraged to issue orders or laws according to these guidelines and to be prepared to report back on their implementation.

While seeking a more streamlined approach to matters pertaining to German war graves, the Ministry's exhortation constituted a somewhat superficial attempt to grapple with an increasingly chaotic reality. For a start, despite openly acknowledging that approaches to the registration and care of war burials had been unsystematic, the Ministry of the Interior still expressed a reluctance to centrally regulate the phenomenon, leaving the issuing of orders and laws to the *Länder*. Several exhortations and reminders issued by the Ministry of the Interior to counties, districts, and councils for the following decade indicate that local authorities were not always prompt in mandating the concentration of war burials and that councils were often unaware that scattered graves should be exhumed to cemeteries in the first place.

Moreover, while the *Länder* were urged to concentrate scattered graves in cemeteries, the Ministry did not provide stringent guidelines detailing how the technically challenging task of exhuming the dead should be carried out to ensure the survival of information that was vital for identification. The physical management of bodies and burials on the ground was therefore left to local authorities, mayors, and administrators rather than assigned to trained personnel.

The reluctance to centrally and extensively regulate the recovery, exhumation, and identification of the German fallen and the Ministry of the Interior's concern that German war graves and memorials may have glorified militarism cannot be understood in isolation from the GDR's politics of history, and the place that the German fallen had in it. After the end of the war, the question of how Germany should position itself in relation to the Third Reich was central to the construction of new national identities in both East and West Germany. In East Germany, the writing and interpretation of the recent past (and German history at large) in line with socialist ideology acquired crucial importance.²⁰ Indeed, as aptly phrased by Rubie Watson, if 'Marxist-Leninism was not one ideology or political economy among many, but rather [...] the inevitable and glorious outcome of a discernible historical process', then the writing of history was integral to the legitimation of socialist rule.²¹ East German history was framed as a teleological process of class struggle which ultimately culminated in socialism. Conversely,

20. See for example: J.B. Olsen, *Tailoring Truth: Politicizing the Past and Negotiating Memory in East Germany, 1945–1990* (New York 2015); J. Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (London, 1997); M. Sabrow (ed.), *Verwaltete Vergangenheit: Geschichtskultur und Herrschaftslegitimation in der DDR* (Leipzig 1997).

21. R. Watson, 'Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism: An Introduction', in R. Watson (ed.), *Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism* (Santa Fe, N.M., 1994), 1.

capitalism was conceived as the basis for both fascism and the expansionistic war-mongering that twice in a century had led the German nation to catastrophe.

Thus, Moulding East Germany into a socialist state required more than rewriting the German past as a history of class struggle: it necessitated claiming complete discontinuity with the Third Reich.²² In a bid to distance East Germany from the Nazi regime, the Soviet Occupation Zone initiated a process of ‘denazification’ (*Entnazifizierung*) through which Nazi military elites, war criminals, SS, and Nazi Party members among others were trialled and prosecuted, and which was declared successful and completed after only a few years.²³ The fight against fascism became integral to the inception of the GDR: the liberation from Fascism by the Red Army became the cosmogonic myth of the East German state, and the main focus of institutionally sanctioned war commemoration.²⁴ Propaganda portrayed Soviet soldiers as heroes and liberators, and their burials and war memorials became the stage for regular celebrations and commemorations.

At the same time, the selection of antifascism as the core of the GDR’s memory-politics created what Morina aptly calls a ‘hierarchy of victims’ whereby ‘communist resistance fighters were declared the main martyrs against and victims of National Socialism, those who had suffered most; [while] the other victim groups, above all the Jews, were marginalised if not ignored all together’.²⁵ Embodying the Third Reich’s war-mongering and criminal ideology, Wehrmacht’s fallen soldiers were excluded from the commemorative canon altogether, and their public commemoration became unviable in the new regime.²⁶ The mourning of German military losses had no place in the official public sphere.²⁷ The mass death of German soldiers was only one of the many dimensions of the war which were excluded from official narratives about the war: the rapes perpetrated by Soviet troops, the internment of German soldiers in prison camps in the

22. Already in the Soviet Occupation Zone, the KPD (Communist Party of Germany, SED after 1946) invested resources in commemorative projects and in the rewriting of the history of Germany as one of class struggle, see J.B. Olsen, *Tailoring Truth* (New York 2015).

23. T. R. Vogt, *Denazification in Soviet-Occupied Germany: Brandenburg, 1945–1948* (Cambridge, Mass. 2000). As discussed by A. Bauerkämper in *Das umstrittene Gedächtnis* (Paderborn 2012), 305, the denazification of East Germany also resulted in the imprisonment of many ‘actual or supposed’ Nazis, as false allegations were frequently exploited to remove political opponents.

24. A. Bauerkämper, *Das umstrittene Gedächtnis* (Paderborn 2012), 306.

25. C. Morina, ‘Instructed Silence, Constructed Memory: The SED and the Return of German Prisoners of War as “War Criminals” from the Soviet Union to East Germany, 1950–1956’, *Contemporary European History*; xiii (2004), 326.

26. As discussed by Bauerkämper in *Das umstrittene Gedächtnis* (302–306), in the 1960s there were about 2000 veteran associations of former Wehrmacht and SS members in West Germany. These were outlawed in the GDR, as was any form of celebration of the former German military. There were however some exceptions, such as the organizations of former Wehrmacht members in the antifascist organizations *Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland* and the *Bund Deutscher Offiziere*. These, according to Bauerkämper, portrayed the experience of war prison as a ‘catharsis’, that triggered a ‘conversion to communism’, 306.

27. A notable exception is the fact that the Neue Wache memorial in Unter der Linden (Berlin) contained the remains of an unknown German soldier, together with that of an “unknown antifascist resistance fighter”. However, as noted by Jürgen Danyel in ‘Die Erinnerung an die Wehrmacht’, 1148, the Neue Wache was used first and foremost as a stage for the display of the GDR’s antifascism. The commemoration of the bombing of Dresden in anti-imperialist key was also significant, see A. Fuchs, ‘World War II in German Cultural Memory: Dresden as Lieu de Mémoire’, in S. Colvin and M. Taplin (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of German Politics & Culture* (2014).

Soviet Union, and the experiences of German refugees who fled from the lost German territories beyond the Oder were some of the many dimensions of the (East) German experience of war which could not find articulation in the public sphere.²⁸

In light of such characterization of Wehrmacht soldiers in the socialist politics of history, then, the Ministry of the Interior's main concerns when it came to German war graves were not primarily humanitarian in nature, if by 'humanitarian' we understand a preoccupation with the alleviation of suffering (in this case, the suffering of next-of-kin).²⁹ Rather, the Ministry was interested in German war burials especially when these came to represent political and ideological liabilities. The long-standing preoccupation of East German central authorities with the actual and alleged involvement of the Church and of West Germany in a management of war burials parallel to the State's epitomizes precisely such apprehensions.

After the war, the German Lutheran Church had become a major actor in the search, reburial, and identification of the war dead in East Germany.³⁰ Once it had become clear that the Volksbund would not be allowed to operate in the East, the Church had taken over the Volksbund's tasks through a 'Department for the Care of War Graves of the Chancellery of the Lutheran Church in Germany' (*Abteilung Gräberfürsorge – Kanzlei der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland – Berliner Stelle*, hereafter War Graves Department).³¹ The Church's War Graves Department, while never recognized as a legitimate actor by East German authorities, built a network of trusted clergymen and began registering war graves, exhuming the fallen to cemeteries, and identifying the dead by transmitting information to and from West Germany. Its operations, staff, and material supplies were largely covertly financed by the Volksbund.³² To overcome difficulties in obtaining passes for the Eastern sector, the Church's War Graves Department established an office in East Berlin, which received countless enquiries from relatives seeking information about the burials of loved ones.³³

The involvement of the Church in the registration, identification, and exhumation of the German war dead was regarded with suspicion and hostility by the Ministry of the Interior. As an atheistic regime hostile to religion and its organized forms, the GDR had a strained relationship with the German Lutheran Church. By the late 1940s, writes Paul Betts, 'Christian Democratic leaders in the Soviet Zone were purged as

28. For the rapes perpetrated by the Red Army see: H. Sander and B. Johr, *BeFreier und Befreite: Krieg, Vergewaltigungen, Kinder* (Frankfurt am Main 2005); N. M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949* (Cambridge, Mass 1995). On the return of German war prisoners to East Germany, see C. Morina, 'Instructed Silence, Constructed Memory: The SED and the Return of German Prisoners of War as "War Criminals" from the Soviet Union to East Germany, 1950–1956', *Contemporary European History*; xiii (2004). For German refugees in the Occupation Zone and GDR see H. Koschyk and V. Regente, eds. *Vertriebene in SBZ Und DDR* (Berlin, 2021); A. Demshuk, *The Lost German East: Forced Migration and the Politics of Memory, 1945–1970* (New York, 2012).

29. For a discussion of humanitarianism in relation to the registration and tracing activities of the ICRC, see F. Bugnion, *Confronting the Hell of the Trenches: The International Committee of the Red Cross and the First World War 1914–1922*, (2018).

30. For an overview see B. Ulrich et al., *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (Berlin 2019), chapter 4.3.

31. *Ibid.*, 366.

32. *Ibid.*, 370.

33. *Ibid.*, 370.

Western spies, church activists were intimidated and occasionally imprisoned, and the churches' access to the media severed. Christian publications were [...] curtailed, [...] promised state subsidies to the churches were scaled back, and Christian meetings blocked.³⁴ To manage relations between churches and the state, an 'Abteilung Kirchenfragen' (Department of Church Affairs) was instituted in 1954, succeeded in 1957 by a State Secretariat for Church Affairs.³⁵

Socialist authorities viewed the Church as problematic for several reasons. For a start, in the socialist worldview religion was a vestige of superstition which had no place in a 'developed socialist society'.³⁶ Moreover, until the Lutheran Church in East Germany was reorganized into a Federation of Evangelical Churches (*Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR*) in 1969, the Church operated as a single institution in East and West Germany, and its ties with West Germany were viewed as deeply problematic. Crucially, by rejecting Marxism-Leninism, the Church constituted an alternative centre of moral authority, a 'subculture' which did not primarily answer to the regime and threatened to undermine the citizens' loyalty to it.³⁷ Deeming the citizens vulnerable to the Church's influence, the SED made considerable efforts to instil socialist ideals in the population by supplanting religious sacraments, including funerals, with lay rituals.³⁸

Concerns over both the Church's role as an alternative centre of (moral) authority and the supposed vulnerability of the population to its influence characterized State-Church relations over the treatment of German fallen soldiers, resulting in repeated conflicts throughout the 1950s. In 1955, for example, various cases brought to the attention of the Ministry of the Interior demonstrated a systematic involvement of the Church in various dimensions of reburial work. One among them was the case of Pastor Kiesling from the Eberswalde District (Brandenburg), who claimed that he had been appointed by the Church as 'Pastor for the care of war graves' (*Pfarrer für Kriegsgräberfürsorge*).³⁹ According to the message received by the Ministry of the Interior from the County of Frankfurt (Oder), the pastor, questioned, had explained that his mission required untiring work and significant organization. He had also added that 'that the Lutheran Church in Germany works across the border and therefore [sees the search and reburial of the war dead as being its task] on both sides [of the border]'.

Another case that came to the Ministry's attention was that of a Pastor Friedel who, introducing himself too as 'Pastor for the care of war graves', had asked the Registry Office of Drebkau (Brandenburg) to send him lists of the war graves present in local communities, as these were needed for his search activities.⁴⁰ The Ministry of the Interior

34. P. Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford 2010), 55.

35. Boyens, Armin. 'Staatssekretariat Für Kirchenfragen Und Militärseelsorgevertrag: Anmerkungen Zur Geschichte Eines Amtes'. *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 6, 1 (1993), 218–19.

36. E. Peperkamp, and M. Rajtar, 'Introduction', in E. Peperkamp, and M. Rajtar (eds) *Religion and the Secular in Eastern Germany, 1945 to the Present* (Boston 2010), 5.

37. See P. Betts, *Within Walls* (Oxford 2010), 86.

38. See for example P. Betts, *Within Walls* (Oxford 2010), Chapter 2. See also F.R. Schulz in *Death in East Germany, 1945–1990* (New York 2013).

39. BArch, DO/4 2162, Head of the Department of Internal Affairs (County Frankfurt/Oder) to Ministry of the Interior, 14.10.1955.

40. BArch, DO/4 2162, microform 1728, Werner Friedel to Registry Office of Drebkau, 2.8.1955.

wrote to the local district, restating that the GDR's Red Cross was the only bureau recognized by the state to conduct research about the missing.⁴¹ The Church's Tracing Bureau was 'not recognized' by the state, and its activities were to be considered interference.⁴²

Again, in October 1955, the Church's War Graves Department wrote a letter to the town of Uckro (southern Brandenburg) to encourage the exhumation of a grave, reminding local authorities that, in the GDR, these should have been exhumed to cemeteries, and that identification was a priority.⁴³ The Church even offered to cover the costs for the exhumation, and attached extensive guidelines detailing how to properly carry out such an operation. These included forms to fill out about the physical appearance of the deceased and skeletal and dental charts on which to mark surviving parts and distinguishing features. The letter and forms sent by the Church were forwarded to the Ministry of the Interior, whose staff qualified the Church's operation and methods as 'inadmissible'.⁴⁴

The capillary fashion in which the Church's War Graves Department operated, directly approaching local administrators and communities, worried the regime. The Ministry of the Interior was particularly concerned that by reaching out to local administrations, offering support in the exhumation of the dead, or asking for information that could help identify the missing, the church claimed for itself an unofficial advisory role in the matter of war graves. Crucially, it also undermined the state by implicitly and explicitly challenging the adequacy of reburial and identification work performed by GDR authorities.

For these reasons, another thorn in the Ministry of the Interior's side was the activity of Pastor Ernst Teichmann (1906–83), active in Halbe, the theatre of one of the bloodiest episodes of the war on German soil.⁴⁵ Pastor Teichmann, assigned to the parish in 1951, tirelessly searched for war burials in the area and beyond, and oversaw the exhumation of thousands of dead to the war cemetery. While a detailed account of his activities is beyond the scope of this article, Teichmann's strenuous involvement in the search and identification of the dead in Halbe and beyond was not seen as approved by the regime. He repeatedly had to face what Potratz and Stark call the 'procrastination tactics' of GDR authorities, and the then-mayor lamented that as the Pastor was involved in the care of the dead, he acted as 'Mayor of the living'.⁴⁶ This statement exemplifies the authorities' apprehension that the Lutheran Church, by claiming for itself a role that no state-sanctioned authority or association seemed particularly keen on taking over, may have exploited this affect-laden endeavour to antagonize the regime and gain support among

41. BArch, DO/4 2162, microform 1706, Head of Department Fritzsche (Ministry of the Interior) to Council of the County Cottbus, 9.11.1955.

42. Ibid.

43. BArch, DO/4 2162, War Graves Department of the Lutheran Church in Germany to the Community of Uckro (Luckau), 14.10.1955.

44. BArch, DO/4 2162, State Secretariat for Internal Affairs (Ministry of the Interior) to Council of the District Luckau, *War Graves*. Undated, pertaining to letter from Council of the District Luckau of 21.10.1955.

45. For a detailed account of Pastor Teichmann's activities see R. Potratz and M. Stark, *Ernst Teichmann* (Potsdam 1997).

46. Ibid, respectively page 12 and 9.

the population. Indeed, commenting on an instance in which the Church had sent a letter to a GDR citizen to notify him of where a relative lay in a military cemetery abroad, officials stated that the Lutheran Church was attempting ‘to gain ground as benefactor of humanity with these methods’.⁴⁷

The East German state’s conflictual relationship with the Church was not the only reason why the Church’s engagements with Wehrmacht burials were deemed deeply problematic. If the official politics of history cast the Wehrmacht fallen as fascists and criminals, German war graves had the potential of being used to glorify German militarism. This is unsurprising: already before the war, what Mosse described as the ‘cult’ of the fallen soldier had played an important role in the Nazi rise to power, contributing to rallying the nation around the Great War martyrs who had died for the Fatherland, and *Volkstrauertag* ceremonies (lit. People’s Day of Mourning, renamed Heroes’ Remembrance Day during the Third Reich) for the fallen had become vehicles for the propagation of bellicose nationalist ideals.⁴⁸ Aware of the nefarious potentials of the glorification of the military, the Allied Control Council had issued the Directive No. 30 for the ‘Liquidation of German Military and Nazi Memorials and Museums’, which famously prohibited ‘the planning, designing, erection, installation, [...] of any monument, memorial, [...] which tends to preserve and keep alive the German military tradition, to revive militarism or to commemorate the Nazi Party, or which is of such a nature as to glorify incidents of war’.⁴⁹ With some exceptions, such already-existing monuments had to be ‘completely destroyed and liquidated.’⁵⁰

In the GDR, the notion of ‘militarism’ (*Militarismus*) acquired a particular connotation. It designated the bellicose and aggressive expansionism that had characterized the Third Reich, and which had brought Germany to catastrophe.⁵¹ And in the socialist reading of history, capitalism and militarism went hand-in-hand, as ‘militarism and war’ were thought to ‘result from the private ownership of means of production, from the existence of [competing] classes and the irreconcilable struggle between them’.⁵² Since socialist ideology linked militarism with capitalism and the West, repeated allegations that the church’s involvement in the reburial of the dead glorified militarism

47. BArch, DO/4 2162, microform 1620, Council of the County Karl Marx Stadt to the State Secretariat for Church Affairs, *Care for war graves of the EKID*, 24.2.1959.

48. A. Kaiser, ‘The Volkstrauertag (People’s Day of Mourning) from 1922 to the Present’, in W.J. Niven and C.E. M. Paver (eds.), *Memorialization in Germany since 1945* (Basingstoke, 2010), 15–25. For the cult of the fallen soldier see G.L. Mosse, ‘National Cemeteries and National Revival: The Cult of the Fallen Soldiers in Germany’. *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, no. 1 (1979): 1–20; G. L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York ; Oxford 1991).

49. *Control Council - Directive N.30. Liquidation of German Military and Nazi Memorials and Museums*, (1946). In *Enactments and Approved Papers of the Control Council and Coordinating Committee, Allied Control Authority, Germany (1945–1948)*, Volume 3, 134 https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/l1/lmlp/61035888_Volume-III/61035888_Volume-III.pdf. See also Stangl, Paul. ‘Landscapes of Commemoration’. In *Risen from Ruins: The Cultural Politics of Rebuilding East Berlin*, edited by Paul Stangl, 30–61. (Stanford University Press, 2018), 35.

50. Control Council, Directive No. 30.

51. For an overview see: G. Hass, ‘Zum Bild der Wehrmacht in der Geschichtsschreibung der DDR’, in R.D. Müller and H.E. Volkmann (eds.); *Die Wehrmacht* (München 2015); D. Niemetz, *Das Feldgraue Erbe: Die Wehrmachteinflüsse Im Militär Der SBZ/DDR* (Berlin 2006), 3–6.

52. Albrecht Charisius et. Al, cited in G. Hass, ‘Zum Bild der Wehrmacht in der Geschichtsschreibung der DDR’, in R.D. Müller and H.E. Volkmann (eds.); *Die Wehrmacht* (München 2015) 1100.

implicitly and explicitly drew a connection between the Church and West Germany. In instances in which the Church sent information about German cemeteries in non-socialist countries to GDR citizens, for example, the Church was accused of inviting citizens of the GDR to attend ‘militaristic events in soldiers’ cemeteries’ in the West-zone, and of pursuing the reburial of war dead as part of the Church’s ‘military politics’, inspired by the Military Chaplain’s Department (*Militärkirchenamt*) of the West German ‘War Ministry’ to kindle ‘hatred and revanchism’, seeding disquiet among the population.⁵³

Sure enough, as mentioned earlier, the German Lutheran Church did have ties with West Germany: until 1969 it operated as a single organization across the border, and the Church’s War Graves Department was covertly financially supported by the Volksbund. But the West German interest in war graves went beyond the work of the Church’s War Graves Department. The condition of the graves of loved ones, the hurdles to be overcome in visiting them, and difficulties in obtaining information about their whereabouts remained causes of great concern for those on the Western side of the border. West Germany and the Volksbund monitored the treatment of war graves in the East, much to the concern of the SED and the Stasi, which feared that the poor condition of war graves in East Germany could be exploited by the FRG to fuel anti-socialist propaganda. The Stasi and other ministries paid close attention to allegations made in the West German press about the treatment of war graves in the East, and in some instances, the Stasi monitored cemetery visits granted to FRG delegations in Halbe as well as the filming of the cemetery by West German TV.⁵⁴

If GDR authorities were apprehensive about the West German attention to war graves in East Germany it was also because the Wehrmacht fallen embodied an uncomfortable shared past, and an unwanted tie between the two states. In the words of a West German article filed by the Stasi, German fallen were ‘a matter of mutual interest’ because fallen soldiers who came from the area that became the GDR ‘also lie on the soil of the Federal Republic, and [are tended to by West Germany] in military cemeteries across Western Europe and Africa’. A two-way exchange of information about war graves would therefore have been ‘desirable and in the interest of the relatives’.⁵⁵

Such interest in the treatment of war graves and the desire to treat fallen soldiers as a pan-German matter was conceived by East German authorities as a challenge to the GDR’s sovereignty and as an attempt to claim authority over war graves on East German soil. This concern was all the more poignant for GDR authorities because, until the 1970s, the FRG did not recognize the GDR as a sovereign state. As we will see, later guidelines to manage war burials were cast precisely as a means to counter West Germany’s claim to have an exclusive mandate (called *Alleinvertretungsmaßnahme* in

53. BArch, DO/4 2162, microforms 1599, 1600, 1601, draft of a document on the ‘liquidation’ of the illegal activities of the Church, 6.12.1960.

54. For Stasi monitoring of West German press see for example: BArch, MfS, ZOS, Nr. 3233, 27–8. For Stasi commenting on the laying of a wreath by FRG representatives, as well as the filming of the cemetery of Halbe, see BArch, MfS, ZOS, Nr. 3233, 3.

55. BArch, MfS, ZOS, Nr. 3233, 27.

the GDR) to represent the whole of Germany, and its claim to have rights over German war graves on GDR soil.

Concerns about the involvement of the Church and West Germany in the exhumation and care for the war dead led to attempts to curb unauthorized activities of exhumation and reburial. From 1957, the Church was banned from carrying out exhumations, and pastors had to limit themselves to exhuming the dead within church-owned cemeteries and notifying the authorities when war burials or remains were found outside of cemeteries.⁵⁶ Still, the Church's involvement in matters pertaining to the German fallen did not cease, and in 1960 the Ministry of the Interior made further attempts at controlling the Church's work. A meeting was held in the Ministry of the Interior to discuss how the Lutheran Church misused 'the war dead in the interest of German militarism and against the GDR and the socialist camp'.⁵⁷ A representative of the GDR's Red Cross was also present at the meeting, and she claimed that no action had been taken on her part so as 'not to develop a new debate about these problems among the population'.⁵⁸ It was decided that the Church should be told once more that their activities were the exclusive remit of the Red Cross, and that the Church's War Graves Department 'does not exist' for the citizens of the GDR and had therefore to 'cease its activity'.⁵⁹ It should also have been verified whether the Red Cross had the means to take over these tasks. However, in the draft of a document outlining actions to be taken to "liquidate" the Church's illegal exhumations and reburials, doubts are cast over this possibility.⁶⁰ It was stated that if the sending of information about war graves and exhumations to relatives could no longer be considered an urgent matter after 15 years since the end of the war, the East German Red Cross should nonetheless have tried to be in the position of answering enquiries from GDR citizens. Yet, and this is a staggering admission, 'the Church is currently far better informed than the Red Cross in the GDR'.⁶¹ These attempts to curb the Church's illegal activities appear therefore to be characteristic of the attitude of the GDR's central authorities towards the German fallen in this period: while they did not wish to initiate systematic operations of search, exhumation and identification, they were also determined to keep others, and especially the Church, from appropriating these processes.

If, for decades, the day-to-day management and registration of war graves had been left mainly to the discretion of local districts and communities, the occasion to standardize and centrally regulate the management of war burials presented itself in the 1970s, in the context of an easing of East–West tensions. As Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* led to a détente between East and West Germany, diplomatic relations were formally established

56. B. Ulrich et al., *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (Berlin 2019), 370.

57. BArch, DO/4 2162, Note, *Care for graves*, 24.7.1960.

58. It is unclear whether she was referring to the actual task of reburying the dead, or to attempts to curb the Church's activities.

59. *Ibid.*

60. BArch, DO/4 2162, microforms 1599, 1600, 1601, draft of a document on the 'liquidation' of the illegal activities of the Church, 6.12.1960.

61. *Ibid.*

after decades of acrimonious confrontation. The GDR's sovereignty was, at last, internationally recognized, and East Germany applied to join the United Nations, to which it was admitted on 18 September 1973.

In this period, East German authorities began to produce guidelines regulating the treatment of the war dead in accordance with the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which the GDR had formally adopted in 1956.⁶² In particular, Article 17 of the *Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field* stipulated that the dead should be 'honourably interred,' their graves 'respected, [...] properly maintained and marked so that they may always be found'.⁶³ It also mandated that the dead should be identified, and 'lists showing the exact location and markings of the graves together with particulars of the dead interred therein' should be exchanged, at the latest at the end of hostilities.⁶⁴ In 1965, the XX Conference of the International Red Cross had also passed Resolution XXIII. Acknowledging that 'the tracing of burial places of persons killed during conflicts and the identification of such persons are important ways and means for carrying out [the tracing of the missing]', the Resolution recommended:

- (1) the exchange among National Societies in agreement with their respective Governments and in co-operation with the International Committee of the Red Cross, of all available data concerning these places of burial;
- (2) the tracing, by any appropriate means, of places of burial which have not so far been registered;
- (3) recourse, in the event of exhumation, to all possible identification procedures with the help of specialist services;
- (4) consultation among the National Societies concerned, in cooperation with the ICRC, in order to implement the recommendations contained in this resolution.⁶⁵

Despite the GDR had signed the Geneva Conventions, the graves of German war dead in the GDR had often been neglected, and the systematic registration of the war dead had not been a priority. Indeed, in a draft of a 'Resolution on the treatment of graves of the fallen and foreign civilians'⁶⁶ (1971, more on this below), it was openly acknowledged that the commitment to adequately 'mark and care for the graves of the fallen and foreign civilians', to which the GDR had committed by signing the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, had been perceived 'differently' by central and local authorities, which made

62. J. Danyel, 'Die Erinnerung an die Wehrmacht in beiden deutschen Staaten - Vergangenheitspolitik und Gedenkrituale', in R.D. M. Müller and H.E. Volkmann (eds), *Die Wehrmacht: Mythos und Realität*. (München 2012), 1144. See also: *Gesetz über den Beitritt der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zu den vier Genfer Abkommen zum Schutze der Kriegsoffer vom 12. August 1949* (1956).

63. *Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field*, 12 August 1949.

64. *Ibid.*

65. XXth International Conference of the Red Cross. Resolution XXIII - Tracing of Burial Places (1965).

66. BStU, MfS, RS, Nr. 608, Draft of 'Resolution on the treatment of graves of fallen and foreign civilians', 77-82.

necessary ‘a general regulation’ and coordination of the responsibilities at the central and local level under the leadership of the Ministry of the Interior.⁶⁷

Based on the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, and on the abovementioned Resolution 23 of the XX International Conference of the Red Cross, a Resolution on the Treatment of Graves of the Fallen and Foreign Civilians was issued in the GDR on 13 July 1971, followed on 1 December 1971 by the Directive No. 183/71 (*Anweisung Nr. 183/71*).⁶⁸ While a detailed discussion of such guidelines and their implementation on the ground is beyond the scope of this article, a few observations may be appropriate. First of all, these aimed at achieving a unitary and streamlined management of the war dead, and decreed that war graves should be tended to and adequately marked. Strikingly, they also ordered a systematic registration (*Erfassung*) or census of all war graves. The dynamics for its implementation were extensively detailed in Directive No. 183/71: it was to be carried out by the Departments for Internal Affairs of each district (*Kreis*), relying on information from councils, churches, as well as Soviet authorities in the case of Soviet graves. Commissions were to be formed to monitor the implementation of the guidelines.

Districts were thus expected to draw up and hand over overviews of the number of war graves in their jurisdictions, specifying if these were single or communal and subdividing them into three categories: graves of the fallen and foreign civilians of the Second World War, graves of members of the SS, of the ‘fascist police’, as well as other ‘criminal fascist organizations’, and graves of the fallen and foreign civilians from previous armed conflicts.⁶⁹ Interestingly, the Resolution of 13 July 1971 specified that ‘graves of members of the former German Wehrmacht are also to be registered and treated according to the principles of this resolution’.⁷⁰ This specification may suggest that, without it, some may have taken for granted that the Wehrmacht dead were to be excluded from the registration. By contrast, the graves of members of the SS were *only* to be registered.

As Willi Brandt’s Ostpolitik ‘amplified the interactions and expectations flowing across both sides of the Wall’, the Directive also testified to an acknowledgement that foreign countries, West Germany included, could have legitimate interests in the war graves on GDR soil.⁷¹ The Directive thus regulated the administration of enquiries from foreign citizens about war graves, the requests from individuals and foreign delegations wanting to enter the GDR to visit war graves, and the exhumation of human remains for burial elsewhere or abroad. While visits to war graves and replies to enquiries could ultimately be allowed if an assessment revealed no cause for concern, requests for visiting the graves of members of the SS and of other ‘criminal fascist organisations’ were ‘not [to be] authorised’.⁷²

67. BStU, MfS, RS, Nr. 608, Draft of ‘Resolution on the treatment of graves of the fallen and foreign civilians, 82.

68. BStU, MfS, RS, Nr. 608, *Directive No.183/71*, 84–9.

69. BStU, MfS, RS, Nr. 608, *Directive No.183/71*, 84.

70. BArc, DO4/1108, *Resolution on the treatment of graves of fallen and foreign civilians of 13 July 1971*.

71. F. Bösch, ‘Divided and Connected: Perspectives on German History since the 1970s’, in F. Bösch (ed.), *A History Shared and Divided: East and West Germany since the 1970s* (New York 2018), 14.

72. BStU, MfS, RS, Nr. 608, *Directive No. 183/71*, 87.

In 1974, further acknowledging foreign interests in the matter of war graves following the establishment of diplomatic relations with non-socialist countries, an addition to the Resolution of 13 July 1971 was issued. This opened to agreements for their care with countries with which the GDR maintained diplomatic relations, and stated that, at the request of states or of national Red Cross societies, lists about graves of the fallen and foreign civilians could be handed over or exchanged. However, also in this case, information could not be shared about the graves of members of the SS.⁷³ The document also stated that the care for war graves was to be limited to gardening, maintenance, and the substitution or erection of gravestones.

If for the Geneva Conventions and the International Committee of the Red Cross the registration of war graves and the transmission of information about their whereabouts were steeped in humanitarian values, a key principle of the ICRC being the alleviation of suffering of next-of-kin by resolving the painful uncertainty surrounding the fates of loved ones, these considerations appear to be mostly absent from GDR directives. The necessity of undertaking such monumental work of registration was not presented as a way of according particular rights to the dead, or of fulfilling an obligation towards their families. Rather, according to a draft of the Resolution on the treatment of war graves, the regulations were the 'expression of the sovereignty of our socialist state,' and served to counteract Bonn's claim to have rights and authority also over war graves in the territory of the GDR.⁷⁴ Similarly, in a document of the County of Frankfurt (Oder) on the implementation of the measures, it was stated that in implementing the regulations, the GDR asserted its sovereignty, counteracting 'any interference' contrary to international law as well as other 'speculations of imperialistic states'.⁷⁵ The regulations also worked to cut the ground from under the FRG, which allegedly misused the care for war graves 'as instrument of war-psychosis' and for the purpose of 'political-ideological sabotage'. As the German war dead were of interest to GDR authorities especially because of their their perceived vulnerability to appropriations by the FRG and the Church, their systematic registration was cast as a means to assert the state's authority over the dead, subtracting them from the GDR's great *Others* and countering the Church's tendency 'to consider the care for war graves as a Church matter'.⁷⁶ Thus, as far as GDR central authorities were concerned, political and ideological considerations took precedence over humanitarian ones.

Once the registration was underway, counties, districts, and councils were repeatedly asked to report back on the statistical overviews produced through the registration of war graves, and on the state of the care for war graves in their jurisdictions. Several letters indicate that pressures were made again and again for councils and districts to act, and that difficulties and delays were common. One such letter from the Council of the

73. BStU, MfS, RS, Nr. 608, *Resolution on the treatment of graves of fallen and foreign civilians of 21 November 1974*, 72–6.

74. BStU, MfS, RS, Nr. 608, Draft of 'Resolution on the treatment of graves of the fallen and foreign civilians', 82.

75. BLHA, Rep. 601 RdB FFO Nr. 23556, document from Council of the County Frankfurt (Oder), 29.09.1971.

76. *Ibid.*

County Frankfurt (Oder) to local districts stated that by the end of April 1974, it should have been guaranteed that every recorded war burial ground was maintained and cared for ‘in accordance with international agreements’, since inspections had revealed that ‘despite all positive changes’ the state of some war burials still did not meet international requirements.⁷⁷ Another letter, coming directly from the Ministry of District-led Foodstuffs Industry in Berlin, lamented that the reported numbers of war burial grounds were not consistent with the data of the Ministry of the Interior, and that the care for war graves was still inadequate in some places.⁷⁸ It also stressed the necessity of arranging inspections because of the ‘political significance of this task’.⁷⁹

Reports of discrepancies between overviews of war graves were common in the imposing correspondence between ministries, counties, districts, and councils resulting from the registration of war graves in the 1970s, indicating just how difficult putting together an accurate picture of Wehrmacht war burials across the GDR had become after years of neglect. Administrators were repeatedly confronted with the consequences of decades of malpractice and lack of centralized regulation. In the previous decades, for example, many war graves had been dissolved just like civilian graves after a certain amount of time, and countless war burials within cemeteries were no longer recognizable as such due to decades of negligence. The concentration of scattered war graves to bigger cemeteries or the exhumation of war dead after the dissolution of cemeteries had also occasionally been carried out carelessly and incompletely. The fragmentation of information across churches, councils, private citizens also complicated the task of determining how many dead were buried where, especially since local administrations often had no interest or incentive to carry out in-depth historical investigations. Discrepancies about the number and location of war graves across sources were therefore common, and in the occasion of the 1970s’ registration too, like in the early years after the war, the solicitude and commitment with which local authorities went about the task varied greatly.

Ultimately, the resulting overviews of the number of graves in each county and district presented themselves as neat summaries fit to satisfy international requirements, and helpful to calculate the financial resources to be allocated for the care of war graves. They reflected however only part of a much more complex and chaotic reality characterized by an endemic presence of unidentified, scattered burials across the former battlefields of East Germany, and especially in Brandenburg. Unexhumed burials, partially-executed exhumations, and dissolved war graves were the legacy of chaotic total war, compounded by decades of postwar malpractice.⁸⁰ War burials and war dead are searched and resurfaced across Brandenburg to this day.⁸¹

77. BLHA, Rep. 601 RdB FFO Nr. 36460, Council of the County Frankfurt (Oder) to local districts, 20.3.1974.

78. BLHA, Rep. 601 RdB FFO Nr. 36460, Ministry of District-led and Foodstuffs Industry to Council of the County Frankfurt (Oder), 2.1.1974.

79. Ibid.

80. L. Tradii, “‘Everywhere’ and ‘on the Spot’”. *History and Anthropology*, (2022); also author’s current British Academy project.

81. Ibid.

The identification and reburial of the fallen, the commemoration of the dead, and the notification of families living in uncertainty about the fates of their loved ones have acquired extraordinary importance in the twentieth century. As East Germany was the theatre of one of the bloodiest phases of the Second World War, the Soviet Occupation Zone and the GDR were confronted with the omnipresence of countless German war burials. Yet, because ‘the management of dead bodies is related to the constitution, territorialisation and membership of political and moral communities’, the exclusion of German fallen soldiers from the above-mentioned processes was integral to the East German nation-building in the aftermath of war.⁸²

Sketching the engagements of East German authorities, and particularly the Ministry of the Interior, with this particular category of war dead demonstrates that the treatment of the German fallen was primarily shaped not by humanitarian concerns for the needs of a population in mourning in the aftermath of mass death, but rather by apprehensions over their political appropriations. In the first decade after the war, such potential appropriations by the Church and West Germany elicited the Ministry of the Interior’s concerns, as it was feared that war graves could be exploited by forces inimical to the state to gain ground among a population deemed vulnerable to their influences. The vitriolic allegations linking the Church’s exhumations and reburials with West Germany, and the placing of the war dead in the domain of (foreign) influence, reflect the role that antifascism, and the positioning of both Germanies in relation to the Nazi past, had in characterizing and mediating East–West relations in this period. Indeed, in the 1950s, the purpose of East German antifascism was no longer to oppose the Nazis and prevent their return, but rather to antagonize the West.⁸³ And such antagonization of West Germany and its Western allies was integral to the construction of East Germany as an antifascist state: as East–West tensions escalated in the 1950s, writes Herf, ‘the Communists were comparing American policy in Europe and in the Korean War to Hitler’s aggression. [...] The presentist meaning of coming to terms with the Nazi past was obvious: it meant fighting against the “fascism” emerging in Bonn’.⁸⁴

By contrast, the issuing of guidelines for the management of war graves and their registration in the 1970s reflect both a broader process of distension in East/West relations and the uncompromising character of the East German politics of history. On one hand, East Germany’s efforts to become an accredited actor in international relations with West Germany and the rest of the world necessitated the registration and maintenance of all war burials in accordance with the Geneva Conventions. The normalization of East–West relations was therefore reflected in an attempt to bring the treatment of war graves and their registration up to scratch with international requirements, increased exchange of information about war graves with foreign countries, and the streamlining of travel to visit war graves. At the same time, domestically, the status of the Wehrmacht war dead in the GDR’s politics of history did not

82. Finn Stepputat, ‘Introduction’, in Finn Stepputat (ed.), *Governing the Dead: Sovereignty and the Politics of Dead Bodies* (Manchester, 2014), 5.

83. J. Herf, *Divided Memory*, 164–5.

84. *Ibid.*

significantly change. For a start, increased transparency in the registration of war dead, the sharing of lists, and the processing of requests about war graves were negotiated with East Germany's abhorrence for a particular subset of military fallen. Requests to visit the graves of SS and of members of other 'criminal fascist organizations', exchanges of information about them, and their exhumation within Germany or abroad were not allowed.⁸⁵ More broadly, as the GDR's very ideological foundations rested on the cult of antifascism, too much was at stake in adopting measures that could have implied a rehabilitation of German fallen soldiers as *victims* of the war. Despite the easing of East/West relations, and increased effort towards transparency, East Germany continued to compete with west Germany over representations of the past, and Wehrmacht soldiers remained ideologically tainted. The monitoring of travel to German war graves continued until the very last months of the GDR, when, for example, authorities sequestered the memorial plaques transported by an FRG citizen to a soon-to-be-inaugurated cemetery near Cottbus.⁸⁶ Even when, in the 1980s, the Soviet Union began to allow access to the Volksbund and West Germans to German war graves, the GDR refused to be involved in their care. Commenting on an instance in which the Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR had offered the GDR the possibility of sending memorial plaques for German war prisoners' cemeteries in the Soviet Union, Minister of Foreign Affairs Oskar Fischer wrote to Minister of State Security Erich Mielke that, as decided by the SED on 10 April 1974, nothing should be made public in the GDR 'about the existence of such cemeteries or graves' and German–German encounters, as well as 'a joint care for such graves by the GDR and FRG' were to be prevented.⁸⁷ Thus, the GDR's disowning of the Wehrmacht dead, a direct consequence of its claim to discontinuity with the Nazi regime, remained integral to its nation-building process until the last years of GDR.

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85. BArch, MfS, RS, Nr. 608, *Directive No.183/71*, 87–8.

86. BArch, MfS, BV Cottbus, AKG, Nr. 1295, *Information about the planned inauguration of a soldier cemetery in Daubitz, District Weißwasser*, 17.6.1988, 1–3.

87. BArch, MfS, RS, Nr. 581, Oskar Fischer to Erich Mielke, 31.8.1984, 28.

Biographical Note

Laura Tradii is a historian and social anthropologist specializing in the history and anthropology of war, with a particular focus on the practices, debates, and ethics pertaining to the management of military casualties in the First and Second World Wars. She is currently a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of History at the University of Kent, where she is working on a book on the management of Second World War fallen soldiers in the Soviet Occupation Zone and German Democratic Republic, and the legacy of mass death on East German soil.