After the Wall: Reconstructing and Representing the GDR
Workshop 3: Recalling the GDR Dictatorship

**Report on concluding discussion, 23 March 2010**

One of the main issues to have emerged from discussion was the question of periodisation – i.e. that we needed to distinguish between different ‘afters’ when referring to ‘After the Wall’. It was suggested that there had been a shift between the 1990s and the decade beginning 2000, with one comment that a more monolithic pictorial memory (conditioned by T.V. footage of October / November 1989 for example) had given way to a more textual memory, and that multi-layered fictional narratives had begun to supersede the single autobiographical narrative. It was also suggested that while the 1990s had seen the rise of various institutions for dealing with the political past (e.g. the Stiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur), the years after 2000 had seen an increased emphasis on the Heimatmuseum and a greater reliance on Zeitzeugen and communicative memory.

In the context of political institutions in particular it was suggested that the German Bund has never before had such responsibility for remembering its national past. It seemed clear that the new Germany is constructing a national identity through memory, and moreover that a clear moral consensus about the ‘correct’ past was emerging through the efforts of German history’s ‘winners’, i.e. the west. This was of particular concern because the efforts to construct the correct past were also seen to be conditioning the ‘correct’ future, with various memorial sites, e.g. the former Stasi prison at Hohenschönhausen, justifying their existence by appealing to the need to preserve such memories in order to ensure future democracy. The point was made, as in previous discussions, that members of the network needed to position themselves in relation to constructivist / determinist debates regarding German memory / identity.

The issue of genre was also raised and it was suggested that while the memory landscape of the former GDR is diversifying rapidly, the multiplicity of genres used are united in their claim to authenticity and their insistent truth discourse. It was suggested that the role of academics – especially British academics – when faced with these multiple claims to truth is to appraise these re-workings of the past from a more critical perspective, though it was not clear to what extent we or our work could influence the memory landscape produced.

We also considered the theoretical framework we had been using thus far during the network and felt that while Assmann’s theories of collective memory had enabled us to reach a number of important insights, there were weaknesses in this framework. There was some consensus that Assmann’s terminology had too often been used in rather reductive ways; in particular it was clear that memory was not a neat linear process, proceeding from individual to social and thence to political and cultural memory, but that these forms of memory co-exist and frequently clash. It was also suggested that there was a problematic hierarchy implicit in the apparent privileging of cultural memory above the other forms, to which members of the network who work primarily with literature and the arts might be particularly susceptible; it was felt we should beware of succumbing to a certain hidden snobbery about the superior value of literary texts as vehicles for collective memory. Ultimately we concluded that Assmann’s terms were useful in enabling us to ask certain questions of our material, but should not be regarded as a means of giving definitive answers to those questions. It was also felt that we should continue to be careful with our own terminology, as ‘memory’ seemed to be developing rapidly into a convenient ‘catch-all’ term to mean anything to do with the past. We need to continue to distinguish clearly between history and memory by focusing on the moral demands of memory (for example, its role in the ‘Täter / Opfer’ debates characteristic of memories of the GDR) and its role in constructing identities.

**Website**

AS and DP appealed for teaching resources in English to build up this aspect of the After the Wall website.

**Conference (8-10 September 2010)**

It was felt that the conference needed to maintain as far as possible the interdisciplinary focus of the network, and also the exploratory, discursive nature of the workshop sessions. Members expressed the view that abstracts / questions to be explored in individual papers should be available on the website for consultation before the conference, that panels should as far as possible be organised thematically rather than by discipline, and that there should be as much space allowed for open discussion as practicable. It was also felt that participants should be encouraged to remain in the same panel for all papers in that session (i.e. avoiding panel hopping) as this would allow for fuller discussion of the common themes.