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“A Wall Victim from the West”: Migration, German Division, and Multidirectional Memory in Kreuzberg

Jeffrey Jurgens

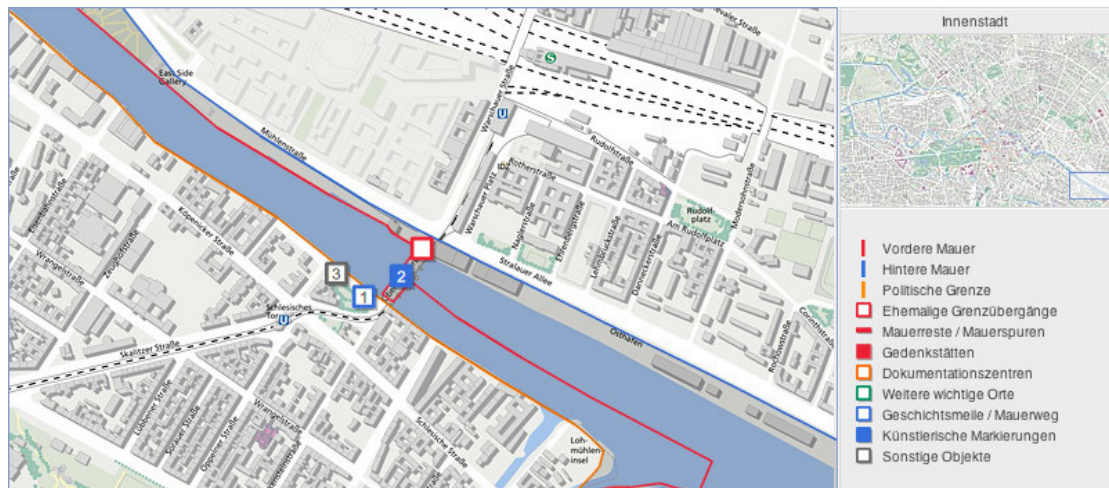


Figure 1: The Spree River between Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain (from <http://www.berlinermauer.de/mauer/grenzuebergaenge>).

Çetin Mert, the five-year-old son of a Turkish guest worker family, drowned in the Spree River on May 11, 1975. The bank in Kreuzberg from which he fell (labeled number 1 in fig. 1) belonged to West Berlin, but the river itself was part of East Germany, even though it was located outside the fortifications that constituted the Berlin Wall (marked in fig. 1 by the blue line along the northern bank of the Spree).¹ As a result of this peculiar jurisdictional arrangement, East German border soldiers did not permit West Berlin police and fire personnel to search for Mert when they arrived on the scene, and East German divers only recovered his body after a two-hour delay. This incident, which marked a contentious moment in a long-running diplomatic battle over the waters between East and West Berlin, was the last of five drowning deaths among West Berlin children (all of them boys) to occur on this portion of the river: the prior victims had included Andreas Senk (1966), Cengaver Katrancı (1972), Siegfried Kroboth (1973), and Giuseppe Savoca (1974).² As the names suggest, three of these five boys were from Italian and Turkish migrant

¹ For the sake of consistency and easy reading, I use “East Germany” and “West Germany” to refer to the two states that co-existed from 1949 to 1990. I generally avoid usage of their official names and abbreviations, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), unless they appear in cited quotations. All translations from German and Turkish are my own.

² For more on these deaths, read the entries on the children at “Chronicle of the Wall” (*Chronik der Mauer*, <http://www.chronik-der-mauer.de>), an online project sponsored by the Center for Contemporary Historical Studies in Potsdam (*Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam*), among other sponsors. See also Hertle and Nooke. The fact that all of the drowning victims were boys is not mere coincidence, I suspect, but can instead be traced to gendered patterns of child-rearing that allow boys more license than girls to engage in adventurous and dangerous play. Such patterns cut across ethnic and national differences and cannot be attributed to any reified “culture” or “cultural background.”

families who had come to West Berlin as a result of the labor recruitment programs that the West German federal government had administered since the mid-1950s. Significantly, the deaths of Mert and the other boys have not figured prominently in subsequent public memories of the Wall, although the past few years have witnessed a growing if still modest awareness of Mert’s death in particular.

I argue that the boy’s shadowy presence in local and national recollection is closely related to migrants’ marginal place in prevailing narratives of postwar German history, narratives that continue to inscribe an ethnically uniform nation that encompasses East and West Germans but largely excludes non-German migrants. At the same time, I contend that Mert’s recently heightened visibility attests not only to an increasing (if at times still reluctant) engagement with the realities of pluralism in Germany, but also to the “multidirectional” dynamic of memory more broadly. Literary scholar Michael Rothberg has proposed this conception of memory to “draw attention to the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse times and places during the act of remembrance” (11), and he employs it to theorize the commonly unrecognized points of articulation and interaction that mark recollections of the Holocaust, transatlantic slavery, and European decolonization. Working in similar fashion, I draw on the notion of multidirectional memory to illuminate how prevailing representations of Cold War Germany have intersected with and often displaced the remembrance of migration and imperialism on the bank where Mert died. I also rely on it to grasp how the site has recently begun to accommodate the experiences and perspectives of minority groups, including people of Turkish and Afro-German backgrounds, that have played little prior role in public narratives of postwar division.

My analysis thereby contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship that has sought to reframe conventional understandings of modern Germany through an examination of migration and its social consequences (e.g., Bade; Herbert; Hoerder; Motte, Ohliger, and von Oswald). The strength of this literature lies in its efforts to relate the emergence and public perception of large-scale population movements to important geopolitical developments, economic exigencies, and modes of cultural production. This commitment is well illustrated in recent research on the West German recruitment of guest workers from Turkey and other Mediterranean countries as well as the East German employment of contract workers from Vietnam and other socialist states (e.g., Behrends, Lindenberger, and Poutros 231-324; Chin; Göktürk, Gramling, and Kaes 21-103). As historian Rita Chin has noted, however, scholarship on labor migration after 1945 continues to be “peripheral to the master narratives of West German history such as Allied occupation, democratization, and the problem of two states and one nation” (12–13). In keeping with her observation, I cannot help but note the lack of academic attention that has been paid to migrants’ experiences of German division and reunification, although some recent scholarship has begun to address this lacuna (e.g., Blumi; Çil; Motte and Ohliger, “Einwanderung—Geschichte—Anerkennung” 44–47; Sieg). More pointedly, I am struck by the general absence of migrants from Turkey, Vietnam, and other countries in many scholarly portrayals of postwar Berlin and the erection, dismantling, and recollection of the Wall (e.g., Broadbent and Hake; Huyssen 30–84; Ladd 6–39; Verheyen 199–259). If and when these analyses acknowledge the presence of postwar migrants, they often merely allude to the settlement of guest workers in working-class districts of West Berlin while otherwise neglecting the ways that those workers’ arrival was intimately connected to the Wall’s construction. This omission does not simply fail to draw links between historical events that can and should be related to one another. It wittingly or unwittingly contributes to a process of selective forgetting,

one that occludes migrants from memorials and narratives that cast the Wall as an emblem of national trauma and redemption.

This essay attends to the social and material circumstances of Mert's death and to the representations through which it has been rendered ambiguously (in)visible in German public memory. On the one hand, the circumstances of the drowning highlight the salience of borders as sites where modern states claim and attempt to realize their territorial sovereignty by regulating the people and goods that both belong within and move through their jurisdictions (Agnew 178–179, 183–187). In the almost three decades of the Berlin Wall's existence, the East German state invested heavily in a security apparatus that was designed to police cross-border traffic and exercise violence over those bodies that transgressed its boundaries in unauthorized ways. Hence, Mert's death must be understood in relation to East German efforts to exert sovereign power and to have that power recognized by West Germany and the Western Allies. On the other hand, Mert's public (in)visibility points to the significance of borders as key sites in the production of collective affiliations and narratives of the national past. As anthropologist Daphne Berdahl has argued, the boundary between the two German states provided an important material and metaphorical means for East and West Germans to formulate mutually opposed identity categories and differentially powerful interpretations of historical events, and it retained this significance even after the border became porous and then disappeared altogether (3–9).

My analysis runs along analogous lines, although I shall be primarily concerned with the ways that dominant memories of the Berlin Wall have long foreclosed recognition of non-German migrants and their descendants, and are only gradually acknowledging their presence. I accordingly examine not only the state discourse that emerged on both sides of the Wall immediately after Mert's death, but also the texts, images, objects, institutions, and names that subsequently contributed to his shadowy presence in German public memory. My use of the term "public memory" rests on the premise that memories are not fixed vessels in which past experiences and impressions are retained, but mutable social forms through which the past is reworked and interpreted in the light of present circumstances (Halbwachs 46–51). Public memory in turn refers not to the recollections of particular individuals, but to shared objects, images, and narratives that circulate widely in the mass media, popular culture, and public memorials. These representations must be analytically distinguished from official historical discourse since they both align with and depart from the authoritative accounts produced by professional historians and other institutions (Nora 8–9; Sturken 3–7). Nevertheless, they play a vital role in constructing personal and social relations to the past, even as they also reveal the conflicting desires and agendas that guide the formation of national and other group identities. Public memory is thereby implicated in political struggles not only over what defines legitimate knowledge of the past, but also over who and what define the terms of collective membership (Sturken 12–14).

The traces and sites of memory I discuss here have not merely written East and West Germans into narratives of the Wall in particular ways, but have tended to displace other group experiences and perspectives, including those of postwar migrants. Indeed, many of the accounts of the Wall formulated by local and federal state agencies, journalistic and publishing enterprises, and public memorials and museums continue to fortify a conception of the reunified German nation (and its West German predecessor) as a homogeneous collectivity founded on a common ethnic essence. The persistence of this ethnic conception mirrors the long-standing

retention of *jus sanguinis* as the primary means of allocating citizenship in the postwar Federal Republic, and it stands in tension with the recent efforts of political parties, migrant and post-migrant associations, and other activists to reckon with both the Nazi past and contemporary racism.³ Public memories of the Berlin Wall thereby constitute one realm where the acknowledgement of difference and its implications for German liberal democracy have not been fully explored, even as alternative recollections of the past have recently begun to emerge.

The Death and its Aftermath

The very presence of labor migrants in West Berlin is closely related to the country’s postwar history and the Wall’s construction. During the economic expansion of the 1950s, West Germany relied on ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe as well as refugees from the Soviet occupation zone and the later East Germany to remedy its pronounced labor shortage. With the erection of the Wall in August 1961, however, these sources of workers were effectively cut off, and the West German federal government responded by increasing its reliance on foreign labor, which it had begun to import from Italy, Spain, and Greece as early as 1955. Among its other effects, this shift resulted in the signing of a bilateral recruitment agreement with Turkey in October 1961, a move that ultimately led to the arrival of more than two and a half million guest workers and their dependants from Turkey by late 1973.

West Berlin became the primary destination for many of these migrants. The city’s wartime damage and uncertain geopolitical status adversely affected its industrial recovery, and it did not experience a sizable demand for foreign labor until the late 1960s (Elkins and Hofmeister 219–220). Significantly, this was precisely the period when recruitment from Turkey was at its highest and when other labor-exporting states, wary of potential military conflict, were increasingly reluctant to send their citizens to the city. As a result, recruited laborers from Turkey formed the largest contingent of guest workers in West Berlin, and many of them took up residence in low-rent neighborhoods in Kreuzberg, Wedding, and northern Neukölln that ran along the course of the Wall. Çetin Mert’s parents Ramis and Münevver, who rented an apartment in eastern Kreuzberg, fit within this broader pattern (Güngör 25).

The events surrounding Mert’s death took place on and near the riverbank known until recently as the Gröbenufer (see fig. 2). Only a few minutes’ walk from the subway at Schlesisches Tor, the Gröbenufer occupies a central location in Berlin’s Wall topography. It lies just west of the Oberbaum Bridge (labeled with the number 2 on fig. 1 above), which functioned after 1963 as one of eight regulated border crossings between West and East Berlin. It stands directly across from the former border strip in the Mühlenstrasse, where the East Side Gallery currently displays the murals of an international cast of artists. And finally, it was the site of multiple dramatic escape attempts: in two separate incidents in the early 1960s, for example, two East Berlin men, Udo Düllick and Hans Rāwel, tried to swim across this stretch

³ Here I use “Federal Republic” to refer both to the West German state that existed from 1949 to 1990 and to the reunified Germany that emerged thereafter. Prior to the passage of a new citizenship law in 1999, the reunified state retained its predecessor’s emphasis on *jus sanguinis* in the determination of individuals’ nationality and, by implication, its broadly ethnic conception of German nationhood.

of the river but either drowned or were shot and killed by East German border soldiers.⁴



Figure 2: Gröbenufer (now May-Ayim-Ufer) and Oberbaum Bridge, Berlin (2007).

According to West Berlin newspapers, Mert was playing on the Gröbenufer on Sunday, May 11, 1975 when he fell into the river at 12:20 p.m. A neighbor notified the police at 12:30, and units from the police and fire departments arrived on the scene four minutes later, with a special team of scuba divers following fifteen minutes after that. They were not allowed to search for Mert immediately on their arrival, however, because this portion of the river fell in its entirety within East Berlin's jurisdiction.⁵ As a result, West Berlin divers had to seek permission from East German authorities, which they attempted to do first with a passing patrol boat, then with the border post on the Oberbaum Bridge. Border personnel prohibited them from diving in both instances. East German divers eventually arrived at 1:15 p.m. and, as a large crowd watched, pulled Mert's body from the river an hour later.

Observers in West Berlin acknowledged that the chances to rescue the boy had been slim, but most nevertheless reacted with an outpouring of righteous indignation: West Berlin Mayor Klaus Schütz, the Allied military and diplomatic authorities, and the major West Berlin papers all condemned East Germany for giving the integrity of

⁴ Düllick drowned in the Spree as he came under fire from border soldiers on October 5, 1961. Rável was shot and killed by border soldiers as he swam across the river on January 1, 1963. See the relevant entries on the "Chronicle of the Wall" webpage and in Hertle and Nooke.

⁵ According to Detlef Krenz, a staff member at the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg District Museum, local officials had shifted the border between Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain from the middle of the Spree to the Kreuzberg bank in April 1937. The move was related to civil defense measures that the Nazi regime, already preparing for war, was then undertaking against expected aerial bombing. The border remained in this location after the establishment of the West German and East German states, and it only took on broader geopolitical significance with the construction of the Berlin Wall (Detlef Krenz, personal communication, 2011).

its territory priority over the preservation of human life (“Kind an der Oberbaumbrücke ertrunken” 1-2; “Unsere Meinung: Ein Kind” 1; “Ost-Berlin schiebt die Schuld auf den Westberliner Senat” 3). The sharply worded critiques were accompanied by wrenching photos of East German divers pulling Mert’s body onto a patrol boat. These images were in some ways reminiscent of the iconic photographs of Peter Fechter, the eighteen-year-old who had been killed at the foot of the Wall while attempting to escape East Berlin on August 17, 1962 (see fig. 3).⁶ In both instances, the published images were compelling not simply because they depicted the



Figure 3: Images of Mert and Fechter. (The photograph of Mert is from the May 13, 1975 edition of the *Berliner Morgenpost*.)

agonizing ends of healthy young people, but because they offered visceral portrayals of the East German regime’s readiness to take hold of those bodies that did not conform to its territorial discipline. The photos of Fechter had sparked widespread outrage against the East German state when they first appeared in the West German press, and they established a potent visual vocabulary for subsequent representations of the Wall and its associated security practices. Viewed against these preceding photographs, the images of Mert were difficult for West Germans not to interpret as a denunciation.

Yet the commentary was not entirely uniform, and it did not single out East Germany alone for criticism. One editorial in the *Berliner Morgenpost* took rescue personnel and other bystanders to task for their lack of initiative: “how many children have to drown,” it asked indignantly, “before a man finds the courage to end this unbearable situation by taking off his jacket, jumping in the water, and rescuing the child?” (Brückmann 1). It thereby implied that East German border personnel would not have prevented a rescue attempt if one had actually been undertaken. The

⁶ Fechter had been attempting to scale the Wall near Checkpoint Charlie when East German border personnel shot him and left him bleeding just beyond the reach of American soldiers and West Berlin police officers. Fifty minutes later, a team of East German soldiers gathered Fechter’s body in their arms and carried him to a nearby hospital, where he died shortly thereafter. Several photojournalists and a television crew documented his final minutes from the western side of the Wall. For more details, see the “Chronicle of the Wall” webpage and Hertle and Nooke.

Tagesspiegel, meanwhile, ruefully noted that the Gröbenufer, unlike other banks along the river, had not been rendered “child-proof” (*kindersicher*) with a fence (“Unsere Meinung: Ein Kind” 1). In fact, the Gröbenufer ran in a steep incline from the street down to the river’s edge, and it lacked any barrier that might have prevented a person from falling into the water (“Auch nach dem Tod des türkischen Kindes” 1). In the aftermath of the accident, Kreuzberg’s local administration planned to hang signs in German and Turkish that would warn passersby. It initially refused to erect high fences, however, since these might have hindered “refugees” (*Flüchtlinge*) seeking to escape East Berlin (“Ost-Berlin schiebt die Schuld auf den Westberliner Senat” 3).

Mert’s death and the ensuing accusations drew a heated response from the East German government, which declared that West Berlin bore full responsibility for the incident. According to statements in *Neues Deutschland*, the East German government had not only demanded that the West Berlin Senate take precautionary steps to prevent “tragic accidents” like this one, but had also proposed an agreement that would allow for rescue efforts from the West (“Schuld liegt allein beim Senat von Westberlin” 1; “Kommentare und Meinungen” 2). The West Berlin Senate’s refusal to entertain this proposal, East German officials contended, only served to underline the fact that it was “not ready to recognize the sovereignty of the GDR in its border waters and the consequences that follow from it” (“Tragischer Unfall an der Oberbaumbrücke” 2). From the perspective of West German officials, however, the agreement had not been completed because the East German regime had wrongfully insisted that the Wall and the river marked a “state border” (*Staatsgrenze*) between East and West Germany, while West German and Allied authorities argued that they only constituted a “sector border” (*Sektorengrenze*) between the American, French, and British zones, on the one hand, and the Soviet zone, on the other. The East German regime had introduced this “state border” language in the context of recent negotiations, and West German officials regarded it as an illegitimate effort to undermine Berlin’s status as a city under joint Four Power supervision (Pragal and Stratenschulte 58–65).

West Berlin public discourse quickly turned to the incident’s Cold War implications and paid relatively little attention to the local aftermath. The *Tagesspiegel*, however, did run a short article on a May 19 protest organized by and for migrants from Turkey, one whose details closely align with those in a West Berlin police report (“Türkische Protestdemonstration am Kreuzberger Gröbenufer” 2).⁷ According to this report, approximately seven hundred demonstrators initially gathered at the Hermannplatz, a prominent landmark in Neukölln, before marching over the course of the afternoon to the Gröbenufer, where speakers addressed the gathered crowd in German and Turkish and led several prayers for the drowned boy. By that point, approximately twelve hundred people, including an estimated three hundred children, had joined the demonstration. East German patrol boats monitored the gathering, and several protesters threw stones at them, apparently without hitting their mark.

Significantly, the demonstration’s participants responded to Mert’s death by drawing widely on the idioms of West German Cold War politics, secular Turkish nationalism, and Islamic social and political mobilization. On the one hand, some protesters carried West German flags as well as signs in German and Turkish with

⁷ For the May 20, 1975 police report, consult the Berlin Police Historical Collection (*Polizeihistorische Sammlung Berlin*). I thank Detlef Krenz for making a copy of this report available to me.

slogans like “Communism Enemy of Freedom” (*Hürriyet Düşmanı Komünizm*) and “Down with GDR Politics” (*Nieder mit der DDR-Politik*), while another group of migrants installed a plaque on the riverbank that stated: “we abhor the communist cruelty that left the young Çetin Mert to his death” (*wir verabscheuen die kommunistische Grausamkeit, die den jungen Çetin Mert dem Sterben überliess*). On the other hand, many more protesters waved Turkish flags and, even more pointedly, placards for the National View (*Milli Görüş*), an organization that has historically aligned itself with Turkey’s Islamic political parties. Moreover, the organization that registered the demonstration, the Turkish Culture and Solidarity Association (*Türkischer Kultur- und Solidaritätsverein*), was based in a mosque affiliated with the Gray Wolves, a right-wing Turkish nationalist organization (Detlef Krenz, personal communication, 2011).

The previous drowning deaths had generated considerable outcry from Allied representatives, the West Berlin and West German governments, journalists, and other city residents, and the East German government had also issued a statement that defended the actions of its border personnel after Giuseppe Savoca’s demise in 1974. Nevertheless, the reaction to the earlier deaths paled before the public outpouring that followed Mert’s drowning. What then was different about this particular incident? Both the West and East German governments had obviously seized on the tragic events in their increasingly pointed efforts to discredit their respective ideological opponents. Yet an exclusive focus on the geopolitics of German division cannot explain migrants’ increasing readiness to engage in public protest, which had not been evident to nearly the same degree prior to Mert’s death.

To a significant extent, the demonstrators’ antagonism toward the East German regime both reflected and refracted the political landscape in Turkey, where clashes between leftists and anti-communist nationalists (including the Gray Wolves) had grown increasingly bitter and violent over the course of the 1970s. When viewed from this perspective, the protest’s condemnation of the East German state can be situated within the wider Turkish nationalist mobilization against leftist ideological and political forces. Yet I would argue that the protest also needs to be related to the increasing assertiveness that labor migrants from Turkey were also beginning to display in relation to West Germany. In the spring of 1973, thousands of Turkish metal workers joined their non-immigrant German counterparts in a series of spontaneous work stoppages and, in August and September of that same year, more than five hundred participated in a controversial wildcat strike at the Ford auto plant in Cologne (Chin 63–64; Motte and Ohliger, *Geschichte und Gedächtnis* 235–285). In addition, labor recruitment had officially ended in November 1973, and by the time of Mert’s death, many workers from Turkey were digging in for a longer stay than they had first anticipated. The protest may thus have signaled migrants’ growing awareness that their presence in Berlin would be long-lasting as well as an increasing readiness to voice their concerns.

Remembering and Forgetting Wall Victims

For all of the attention that Mert’s demise momentarily received, there has been little subsequent recollection of the incident in the German public sphere, and there has been little reflection on the ways it might lend a more overtly multidirectional cast to public memories of the Berlin Wall and German division. To some degree, this elision of Mert was already evident in the German-language media coverage at the time of his death. Although some reports noted the bewilderment and grief felt by his

family and other migrant observers, most public commentary in East and West Berlin tended to foreground the diplomatic dissension between the two German states that followed the boy's death. In the process, public discourse on both sides of the Wall circumvented the economic and political circumstances that had led to the settlement of labor migrants from Turkey and elsewhere in Kreuzberg. It also overlooked the ways that the migrant demonstrators had worked across national contexts and idioms as they commemorated the boy's untimely end. As a result, the prevailing media coverage framed the events surrounding Mert's death as an affair that primarily concerned East and West Germans, and it effectively relegated migrants and their descendants to the margins of the unfolding drama.

At the same time, Mert's relative invisibility can be partly attributed to the uneven formation and belated accessibility of local and national archives. The newspaper department of Berlin's Staatsbibliothek, for example, contains Germany's largest collection of domestic and international periodicals, but its holdings do not include the contemporaneous European editions of Turkey's major newspapers: the Staatsbibliothek only began to archive the European edition of *Hürriyet* on a consistent basis in June 1977, and it did not add the European edition of *Milliyet* to its holdings until 1982.⁸ Such reporting would have presumably provided more focused and extensive coverage of migrants' responses to Mert's death in Kreuzberg and other parts of Berlin. Many of the best available photographs of the May 19 demonstration, meanwhile, were taken not by West Berlin journalists but by East German Stasi operatives, who had surreptitiously documented the migrants' activities that day from the other side of the Spree. These images only became readily available, however, when the records of the East German Ministry for State Security were opened to the public over the course of the 1990s.⁹ Archival voids and lags like these have limited the resources that officials, scholars, journalists, and other citizens might use to reconstruct a more layered, multidirectional account of Mert's demise.

Nevertheless, these circumstances should hardly suggest that there is no memory at all of Mert and his death. Popular recollections of events on the Gröbenufer have certainly circulated among migrants from Turkey and their descendants in both the past and present. During an unpublished interview with me in 2011, for instance, the playwright and director Hakan Savaş Mican (born in 1978) recalled how he had heard about the deaths of Mert and the other boys at age five or six, when his family visited the Spree with guests: "children drowned there on the water," he was told. "Don't fall in, or GDR soldiers will shoot you." According to Mican, the bank where Mert died was one of the West Berlin landmarks to which his parents always took their fellow migrant visitors, along with the Victory Column on the Strasse des 17. Juni, the Mercedes sign atop the Europa-Center on the Kurfürstendamm, the Wannsee, and the green space adjacent to the Reichstag building, where many migrants from Turkey went for picnics and grilling. Mican's recollections thereby embody the intersection

⁸ The Staatsbibliothek did archive one Turkish-language newspaper at the time, the Istanbul edition of *Cumhuriyet*. But the paper's coverage provided only a brief initial report on Mert's death (the boy himself goes unnamed) and, a few days later, a lengthier article on the accusations exchanged by East and West German officials ("Bati Berlin Belediye Başkanı" 1; "Bonn hükümeti Spree Nehrinde" 1 and 9). *Cumhuriyet* staff writers appear to have drawn on West German and other international reporting in the composition of their articles, and they ultimately reproduced the prevailing concern with the incident's Cold War dimensions.

⁹ Images of the protest from the Ministry for State Security can be seen in the entry for Çetin Mert on the "Chronicle of the Wall" webpage. Additional photographs from the same source can also be found in the archives of the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg District Museum. I thank Detlef Krenz and other staff members for allowing me to consult the museum's collected materials.

and interweaving of multiple pasts that characterize the practice of multidirectional memory.

At the same time, a few sources published in German have made at least passing reference to Mert and the other children’s deaths. I first became aware of Mert, for example, through writer Dilek Güngör’s article “A Wall Victim from the West” (*Ein Maueropfer aus dem Westen*), which appeared in the *Berliner Zeitung* in May 2000 (Güngör 25). Güngör’s editors had asked her to write about Mert on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death (Dilek Güngör, personal communication, 2009). They in turn had learned about the boy from Peter Pragal, another journalist for the paper, who had briefly discussed Mert in a book he had co-written on the divided Berlin (Pragal and Stratenschulte 58–65). Güngör’s article initially caught my eye because it unsettled one of my entrenched assumptions: like many other readers, no doubt, I had simply taken it for granted that the term “Wall victim” (*Maueropfer*) referred to residents of East Germany who had died while attempting to cross the border. Yet the story does much more than point out that West Berliners were also casualties of the East German security regime. As with Mican’s recollections, it implies that migrants’ lives and deaths were entangled in German division in intimate ways, and that they too might have a stake in how the Wall is to be remembered.

On the whole, however, Mert’s recent place in the pantheon of Wall victims remains rather ambiguous, and the shadowy nature of his (in)visibility has tended to reinforce dominant conceptions of an ethnically uniform German nation and its postwar history. Mert and the other boys do appear in an extensive “Chronicle of the Wall” webpage (<http://www.chronik-der-mauer.de>), and they also figure in the timelines of Wall victims in the Berlin Wall Documentation Center in Wedding as well as the street-side exhibit on display in the Friedrichstrasse (see fig. 4). These latter sites, however, do not provide specific details concerning any of the victims’ lives and deaths, so Mert and the other children are more or less submerged within the

Dieter Beilig	* 05.09.1941	† 02.10.1971
1972		
Horst Kullack	* 20.11.1948	† 21.01.1972
Manfred Weylandt	* 12.07.1942	† 14.02.1972
Klaus Schulze	* 13.10.1952	† 07.03.1972
Cengaver Katranci	* 1964	† 30.10.1972
1973		
Holger H.	* 1971	† 22.01.1973
Horst Einsiedel	* 08.02.1940	† 15.03.1973
Manfred Gertzki	* 17.05.1942	† 27.04.1973
Siegfried Krobot	* 1968?	† 14.05.1973
1974		
Burkhard Niering	* 01.09.1950	† 05.01.1974
Johannes Sprenger	* 03.12.1905	† 10.05.1974
Giuseppe Savoca	* 22.04.1968	† 15.06.1974
1975		
Herbert Halli	* 24.11.1953	† 03.04.1975
Cetin Mert	* 11.05.1970	† 11.05.1975
Herbert Kiebler	* 24.03.1952	† 27.06.1975
Lothar Hennig	* 30.06.1954	† 05.11.1975
1977		

Figure 4: Names of the Dead, Berlin Wall Documentation Center, Berlin (2007).

longer chronology of Wall casualties and the Cold War narrative that conventionally accompanies it. During my visit to the Berlin Wall Documentation Center, for

example, one young boy asked his mother about the names and dates that adorned one wall of the exhibition space. She replied: “those are all of the East Germans who died while trying to get into West Berlin.” Two prominent but less scholarly locales, meanwhile, effectively exclude Mert and the other Kreuzberg boys from their accounts. The well-known memorial between the Brandenburg Gate and the Bundestag, maintained for many years by East German dissident Gustav Rust, deals only with refugees who died while seeking to flee East Berlin. Tellingly, two crosses commemorate Udo Düllick and Hans Rāwel, two of the thirteen East Germans known



Figure 5: Remembering Düllick and Rāwel, Bundestag—Brandenburg Gate, Berlin (2007).

to have died near the Gröbenufer, but there is no reference to Mert and the other boys (see fig. 5). The Wall Museum at Checkpoint Charlie, meanwhile, positions East Germans as the Wall’s primary if not sole casualties by devoting its exhibit to the cruelties of the socialist regime and some of its citizens’ ingenious efforts to escape.

Nevertheless, one display at the Museum does refer to the situation on the Spree River. This is the so-called “water accident reporter” (*Wasserunfallmelder*), an eye-catching intercom unit with instructions in German, Turkish, and Serbo-Croatian (see fig. 6). As the accompanying text relates, twenty of these intercoms were installed



Figure 6: The Water Accident Reporter, Wall Museum at Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin (2009).

along the river as part of the security agreements that were eventually reached between the West Berlin Senate and the East German government, approximately six months after Mert’s death. Significantly, one of the images in the display is a photo of the East German divers recovering the boy’s body. I can say this, however, only

because I recognize Mert from the photos that initially appeared in the *Berliner Morgenpost* and the *Tagesspiegel*. No caption explains who the boy is or how specifically he died. The text only notes: “after the construction of the Wall, children often drowned where only the bank belonged to West Berlin but the waters to the GDR.” In the end, then, Mert is an instance of “visible invisibility,” a trace of an occluded past “hidden in plain sight,” that enacts but also obscures the articulation of diverse histories (Rothberg 282). Although Mert can be seen, he does not represent the migrants who had made a home in West Berlin by the mid-1970s. He is instead an icon of childhood in general, an evocation of innocence and needless suffering that furthers the museum’s larger indictment of the East German state.

An analogous displacement has recently taken place on the Gröbenufer itself. When I first visited the bank in 2007, the plaque that migrants had placed on the site in May 1975 was nowhere to be found, and the only reference to the Wall was a modest stone marker dedicated “to the unknown refugee” (*dem unbekanntem Flüchtling*; see fig. 7). This marker once belonged to a larger memorial that a group of young West Berlin protesters had erected in November 1961 to commemorate the



Figure 7: To the Unknown Refugee, Berlin (2007).

death of Udo Düllick and that local authorities had rededicated in 1984 to honor eleven additional Wall victims.¹⁰ Because the memorial’s other components had been

¹⁰ An image of the original memorial appeared in “To New Banks” (*Zu neuen Ufern*, 2010 and 2011), the exhibit that I discuss below. Further information can also be found on the entry for Udo Düllick on

removed at some point in the ensuing two decades, the remaining marker appeared to offer a generic tribute to the Wall's victims, much as the tomb of an unknown soldier honors the collective sacrifice of a nation's war dead (Anderson 9–10). Yet I would argue that this fragment deflected past events at least as much as it commemorated them. The emphasis on an “unknown” victim was particularly curious given the likelihood that most—although perhaps not all—of the people who died near the



Figure 8: Gröbenufer (now May-Ayim-Ufer), Berlin (2009).

Gröbenufer are “known” to the extent that their names and some aspects of their lives and deaths are inscribed in accessible records, accounts, and memorials. At the same time, the use of “refugee” in this context drew attention to those East Germans who attempted to flee East Berlin and away from the Wall’s other casualties in the western half of the city. Once again, Mert and the other boys remained outside the scope of commemoration.

When I returned in the summer of 2009, even this memorial had disappeared. The area had become a construction site, part of a renovation project that would eventually turn the riverbank into a public promenade with a restaurant and an exhibition area (see fig. 8). According to a sign posted by the Senate Administration for Urban Development, the significance of the Gröbenufer as a “place for remembering Wall victims” (*Ort des Gedenkens für Maueropfer*) would be retained through its incorporation into the government-sponsored Berlin Wall historical mile and the erection of an informational placard. At that time, however, it remained unclear whether this new framing would acknowledge Mert and the other boys as Wall casualties with specific connections to the riverbank.

Emerging Forms of Multidirectional Memory

Given the patterns of ambiguous inclusion and displacement that I have just outlined, I was not expecting any dramatic shifts in Wall-related memory, either on the Gröbenufer itself or within the larger German public sphere, prior to my 2011 visits to Berlin. I was therefore surprised to note the somewhat greater visibility that Mert has attained in the years immediately before and after the twentieth anniversary of the Wall’s end. The boy’s modest ascendance is owed, in no small part, to a cluster of emergent representations that have simultaneously staged and encouraged the practice of multidirectional memory. To note a few examples: along with the “Chronicle of the Wall” website and the museum exhibits that I have already mentioned, the *Tagesspiegel* profiled Mert’s death in August 2009 in two features on the history of the Wall (“Sie starben an der Mauer”; Hampel). The article “A Wall Victim from the West,” meanwhile, has attained a prominent place on the Internet, and its author Dilek Güngör has not coincidentally received numerous inquiries from journalists who hope to contact the Mert family and write about the boy’s death (Dilek Güngör, personal communication, 2009).¹¹ And, perhaps most notably, the playwright Hakan Savaş Mican has fruitfully engaged with the deaths of Cengaver Katrancı and Çetin Mert in *The Swans of the Slaughterhouse* (*Die Schwäne vom Schlachthof*, 2009 and 2010, see fig. 9), a critically acclaimed play that has enjoyed multiple runs at the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, a Kreuzberg venue that specializes in post-migrant theater (Sieg).



Figure 9: Video trailer from “The Swans of the Slaughterhouse,” Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Berlin (2009). Available at <http://vimeo.com/16409016>

In this last case, the particular form of the recollection is more elliptical and associative than strictly documentary: the play does not merely frame the dramatic action as the haunted dreaming and reminiscence of a troubled elderly journalist, but also threads allusive references to the boys’ demise through other narratives of

¹¹ Güngör’s article, which is downloadable from the *Berliner Zeitung*’s online archive, is currently the third entry in searches for “Çetin Mert” and “Cetin Mert” on www.google.de (accessed 31 March 2012). Journalists’ inquiries about the family’s whereabouts have been in vain: the family is not listed in the Berlin telephone book, and while Güngör did speak with one of Çetin Mert’s brothers, she does not retain his or his parents’ contact information (Dilek Güngör, personal communication, 2009). In any event, many indicators suggest that the Mert family does not wish to speak publicly about the incident (Jurgens 188–189).

Turkish (post-)migrant experience in the past, present, and possible future. Despite and even because of the oblique nature of its remembrance, then, the play delivers an aesthetically compelling perspective on the city's braided histories of division and mobility.



Figure 10: Documenting Wall Victims on Both Sides of the Spree, Berlin (October 2011).

When viewed together, these developments suggest that Germans' contemporary engagements with the lived realities of pluralism may be beginning to reconfigure, gradually but significantly, prevailing memories of the postwar era in Berlin. Such a trend is also evident on the Gröbenufer itself. When I returned to the riverbank in June and again in October 2011, the renovation announced by the Administration for Urban Development was nearing completion, and the site included two glass panels with photographs and brief biographical entries for the Kreuzberg boys and the refugees from East Berlin (see fig. 10). Remarkably, the marker "to the unknown refugee" had reappeared: although it was tucked behind a line of construction fencing in June, by October it stood, without any explanation of its initial provenance, a short distance from the new panels. This juxtaposition is likely to perplex visitors who read the two memorials against one another and attempt to reconcile their not entirely concordant recollections of Wall victims.¹² Yet even if the assemblage appears flawed when viewed as an instance of authoritative *history*, it becomes more compelling, I would contend, when regarded as a formation of multidirectional *memory* that frames the riverbank as a site of layered, intersecting pasts. Considered from this latter perspective, the ensemble effectively highlights how recollection of Germany's postwar history of migration, here embodied by three of the five Wall victims from West Berlin, has the capacity to reorient prevailing narratives of the city's division.

My 2011 visits also coincided with two temporary displays on the riverbank organized by the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg District Museum, both of which incorporated Mert's death into their more encompassing representations of local

¹² The panels take note of an "unknown refugee" who died on January 19, 1965 in the vicinity of the old Brommy Bridge. The Brommy Bridge was another thoroughfare between Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain, located approximately one third of a mile northwest of the Oberbaum Bridge, which was destroyed in the course of World War II and never rebuilt. Visitors might infer that the marker "to the unknown refugee" refers to this particular Wall victim. As I have already mentioned, however, the marker was actually part of the memorial that initially commemorated Udo Düllick, whose name, biographical details, and image have since been incorporated into the new memorial.

history. The first, “To New Banks” (*Zu neuen Ufern*, 2010 and 2011), traced the transformation of the Spree from a landscape of meadows and gardens in the eighteenth century to its more recent incarnations as a site of intensive industrialization, a contested border, and a locus of commercial redevelopment after reunification. Several captioned photos documented the deaths of refugees from East Berlin as well as the migrants’ protest following Mert’s death. Perhaps the most striking showed a man (who might or might not have been a migrant from Turkey) near the site of the drowning as he indignantly waved his fist at the regime across the river. According to the accompanying text, it had been taken by an East German operative and labeled “Provocateur on the Gröbenufer, 19 May 1975” in the archives of the Ministry for State Security.

The second display, “The Spree Border, 1949–1989” (*Die Spree-Grenze, 1949–1989*; 2011), offered an even more detailed account of the river during the city’s division. The accent of the narrative initially fell on the circulation of people, money, goods, and media between Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg when Berliners could still cross the Spree relatively freely. The focus shifted to the circumstances of the Wall’s construction, the subsequent transit agreements (*Passierscheinabkommen*) that allowed West Berliners to cross the border for short visits, and the protests that emerged in both West and East Berlin against the East German state’s partitioning of the city. The display then concluded with the consequences of the East German security regime for both East German refugees and Kreuzberg children after the construction of the Wall. Here the curators relied on case studies of individual victims to illuminate the violent enactment of sovereign power: archival material related to the deaths of Udo Düllick and Anton Walzer illustrated the fates of those refugees who attempted to cross the river from East Berlin unsuccessfully, while documents, photos, and excerpts from local television coverage once again cast Çetin Mert as the paradigmatic representative of Kreuzberg’s young Wall casualties.¹³

Renaming and Remembering

The dynamics and stakes of multidirectional memory have also come to the fore in recent debates over the very name of the riverbank where Mert died. In this particular instance, the contention has diverged in important respects from the naming controversies that occupied activists and government officials in the years after 1989–1990. Those conflicts typically concerned the retention or revision of names given to East Berlin streets and subway stations by the East German state, many of which had commemorated leading figures in the workers’ movement, noted communists and antifascists, and deceased East German politicians (Ladd 209–215). By contrast, this latest moment of discord turned on the name of a locale in the western half of the city, and it was implicated in a debate that related not so much to Germany’s postwar division as to its imperial past.

The riverbank where Mert died had been known as the Gröbenufer since 1895, when local authorities bestowed the name in honor of Otto Friedrich von der Gröben (1657–1728). As a military officer under Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, Gröben had led a naval expedition to the West African coast that established a colonial garrison and trading post, Gross-Friedrichsburg, in what is now Ghana. This garrison had in turn secured a foothold for the principality of Brandenburg in the transatlantic slave trade,

¹³ Anton Walzer was shot by East German border soldiers as he swam across the Spree on October 8, 1962. See the relevant entries on the “Chronicle of the Wall” webpage and in Hertle and Nooke.

and an estimated nineteen to thirty thousand Africans were routed through it prior to their transport to Europe and the Caribbean. The riverbank's commemoration of Gröben had drawn little comment for more than a century, but in the spring of 2009 a coalition of Afro-German and other organizations successfully petitioned the district council of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg for a name change (see fig. 11). Following the passage of a council resolution in May of that year, the riverbank and the adjacent street were rechristened the May-Ayim-Ufer, after the Afro-German activist, scholar, and poet also known as May Opitz (Kwesi Aikins and Hoppe 532–534).¹⁴



Figure 11: The New Name, Berlin (2011).

Interestingly, the renaming of the Gröbenufer met with opposition not from conservatives or figures on the extreme right, but from liberal and left-leaning observers who also sought to represent the perspective of a minority constituency. In 2009, Frank Segebade, an urban planner and long-time Kreuzberg resident, responded to the district council's decision by proposing yet another name for the riverbank: the Çetin-Mert-Ufer. In a letter to the Turkish Federation of Berlin-Brandenburg, the city's most prominent Turkish migrant organization, Segebade contended that the May Ayim resolution would "blur the special character" of the place, while renaming it after Mert would remind residents that the Wall had been located there and that Kreuzberg children, not just East German refugees, were among its victims (Eren Ünsal, personal communication, 2009). Two years later, another group of activists proposed that the green space on the Kreuzberg side of the Oberbaum Bridge, rather than the riverbank itself, be named after Mert ("Kein Platz für Cetin Mert" 1).

¹⁴ Under the name May Opitz, Ayim co-edited one of the early touchstones of scholarly inquiry into Afro-German experience, *Farbe bekennen: Afro-Deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (Oguntuye, Opitz, and Schultz).

Although these recommendations seem to have met with some initial interest, neither of them ultimately gained traction with migrant associations, government officials, or the public at large. To my knowledge no one has accused their proponents of any ill intent, but there are nevertheless several reasons why the notion of a site named after Mert has not received more support. Above all, serious pursuit of these proposals would have likely stoked a divisive climate of zero-sum struggle, one in which different minority constituencies might have vied with one another for public recognition of their respective pasts. Berlin had witnessed outbursts of precisely such “competitive memory” in the 1990s, when debates flared over the dispensation of government-sponsored memorials for Jews, Roma, communists, and homosexuals persecuted by the Nazis (Rothberg 1-12; Ladd 169). My sense is that many local activists, officials, and other commentators were understandably eager to avoid a similar controversy.

As a result, the riverbank and its commemorative figuring currently invoke three intersecting pasts: the era of the city’s Cold War division in the wake of military defeat and Allied occupation; the age of postwar labor recruitment and migration; and the epoch of German imperialism and its lingering postcolonial echoes. The memorials that evoke these varied histories do not merely co-exist in close proximity. They instead inflect and reframe one another in a manner that reworks established narratives of postwar German history, and they go some way in drawing previously marginal minority groups into the compass of the nation’s past.

Conclusion

By tracing the circumstances of Çetin Mert’s death and the contours of his ambiguous displacement and recollection, I have sought to offer another angle from which Germany’s postwar division can be apprehended. My analysis certainly underscores the fact that the East German state’s violent assertion of sovereign power was not always directed at its own citizens but in a few instances targeted residents of West Berlin as well. More importantly, though, it throws into relief some of the lingering presences and absences, visibilities and invisibilities that continue to mark public memories of the Wall and broader understandings of German nationhood. For the most part, these memories and understandings still situate postwar migrants (and other minority groups) as at best additive rather than integral components of the nation and its postwar history. And yet the recent transformation of the Gröbenufer/May-Ayim-Ufer suggests that public memories of the Wall can be refigured in more multidirectional ways to accommodate a wider palette of collective identities and relations to the past. In this sense, the riverbank exemplifies an ethical and political practice of memory that does not presume neatly differentiated groups, affiliations, and histories, but is instead attuned to specific confluences and layerings that cut transversely across established temporal and spatial boundaries.

Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the continuing power of the dominant memory and historiography of German national division. Such power is evident, for instance, in the rather nominal impact of the two displays installed by the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg District Museum on the May-Ayim-Ufer (see my previous discussion in “Emerging Forms of Multidirectional Memory”). As I have already noted, these displays incorporated Mert into their accounts of local history in ways that reworked and reoriented prevailing narratives of Berlin’s division in novel ways. Yet even as they garnered accolades from visitors and local politicians (one even received an award sponsored by the Deutsche Bank), their resonance within the larger

German public sphere remains decidedly contained. As museum staff member Detlef Krenz lamented, most official and other representations continue to rely on “the clichés of the Cold War” to interpret past events on the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg border (Detlef Krenz, personal communication, 2011).

Such dynamics of remembering and forgetting constitute a crucial dimension of the cultural and political struggles that are waged in relation to state borders, including the border that separated East and West Germany. These struggles have not merely concerned the status of the Wall as a “state” or “sector” border in the context of the Cold War, however important a role this issue played in the deaths of Mert and the other boys. In the wake of reunification, they have also turned on the very definition of the people who constitute the Wall’s victims and the social groups with a stake in recollections of Germany’s division. Attending to postwar migration should thus prompt us to re-examine the collective affiliations that public memories of the Berlin Wall both underwrite and foreclose. In the end, the master narrative of “two states and one nation” is itself a limited and limiting rubric, one that a more fully transnational—and multidirectional—perspective can fruitfully complicate.

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