

From Stonewall to Mauerfall: Transatlantic Collective Memory in German LGBTQ Organizing

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Ascendant right-wing populism in Germany—especially following 2017 parliamentary elections, which saw the ethnonationalist party *Alternative für Deutschland* gain thirteen percent of the seats in the upper house—has energized social justice activism in Germany and Berlin in particular. LGBTQ activists specifically have more vocally worked to protect the rights of LGBTQ migrants, people of color, families, and others targeted by a right wing movement whose agenda many LGBTQ activists fear carries troubling parallels with both Nazi and Soviet German twentieth-century authoritarian regimes. Doing so has involved using transnationally iconic symbols of gay liberation, including rainbow motifs and references to the Stonewall uprising, to draw attention to the threat right-wing movements pose to queer life. These histories—twentieth-century German authoritarianism and gay liberation, respectively—thus shape the social and political life of LGBTQ activist work in Berlin. My project uses ethnographic and archival methods to investigate how contemporary interpretations of these pasts shape how organizers determine their goals and tactics, and how activists decide who should be included in their movements. Specifically, I focus on how, in the context of rising right-wing influence in government, LGBTQ activists see their work implicated in now-transnational histories of gay liberation, and German collective memory of twentieth century atrocities.

My project focuses on a central question: how do German LGBTQ activists relate their work, its political outcomes, and collective memories of both twentieth-century German authoritarianism and transnational LGBTQ activism? Anthropologists of collective memory have studied how people interpret the past within the social and political context of the present (French 2012). Following Durkheim's theories of collective consciousness (1915, 1933), anthropologists and literary scholars have theorized how collective memory affects the way people define group boundaries and feelings of belonging to different kinds of collectives, from kinship to citizenship (Anderson 1983, Carsten 2008, Connerton 1989, Halbwachs 1980, Hirsch 2012, Nora 1989). Furthermore, anthropologists studying social movements have noted how activists seek to “uncover hidden histories of their political ancestors in order to fortify their legitimacy and forge new collective identities” (Edelman 2001: 294). In the case of Berlin LGBTQ activists, this means positioning their work within the historical trajectories of a gay liberation movement coded as simultaneously American and transnational, and particularly German legacies of state violence, to construct both political solidarities and oppositions in an increasingly divisive political moment. By investigating how activists construct historical narratives to speak to rights claims across national political contexts, this project seeks to understand how social movements come to transcend the boundaries of nation-states and national histories.

Berlin's widely-known history of persecution and activism throughout the twentieth century has yielded an urban landscape pervaded with reminders of the last century's events. Specifically, the density of the city's memorials to the Berlin Wall and GDR, fascism and genocide, and queer progressivism and nightlife, has rendered Berlin a geographic focal point for a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that shapes Germany as a nation, global diaspora, and postwar and post-Soviet geopolitics (Till 2005, Huyssen 2003a, 2003b, Assmann 2010). For LGBTQ activists, working in Berlin involves constructing political agendas alongside charged public debates over how to remember these pasts on a world stage. As a result, seemingly local debates over the design of a memorial for Berlin's 1920s queer progressive movement, or

the video content of a monument to homosexual Holocaust victims, become party to larger conversations about German responsibility for twentieth century atrocities, or finding redemption for German national identity. By situating my project in this urban setting, I aim to explore how activists position their work within both transnational debates about LGBTQ rights and national history through the social construction of German queer pasts.

Over the course of one year starting in October, 2018, I will use a three-part methodology to produce comparative ethnographic data on collective memories of Berlin LGBTQ organizers: participant observation at three different LGBTQ organizations in Berlin, oral history interviews with Berlin LGBTQ activists, and archival research at queer-focused Berlin archives. For my project, participant observation involves participating in the daily organizing activities of Berlin LGBTQ activists to understand not only how they work to accomplish their political goals, but how they develop those goals, and understand them within the social, political, and economic context of Berlin today. Likewise, oral history interviews with both older and younger LGBTQ activists in Berlin will provide insight into the different ways they construct historical narratives of both German and transnational LGBTQ histories, and archival research will complement my ethnography with analysis of LGBTQ organizational materials (brochures, flyers, meeting agendas, professional correspondence, etc.) from the early twentieth century through today. Together, these data will enable an integrated, holistic analysis of the significance of the past to contemporary queer activism. Through this work, I hope to reveal how collective memory influences both how activists argue for rights and justice, and the political outcomes those agendas produce.