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Grand national narratives and the project of truth commissions: a comparative analysis

Molly Andrews

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON, UK

Perhaps the 20th century will be best remembered by the harrowing phrase 'Never forget'. In the post-Holocaust age, committing the unthinkable to memory has become a moral obligation. Renate Siebert, reflecting on her position as a German living in a post-fascist Germany, articulates some of the most critical questions of our age:

> What is our relationship with the past . . . which is a heavy burden on our consciousness, and which shadows our historical and social memory? Who are we, as individuals, in relation to this past? Do we have choices in the face of what the past forces upon us? What strategies do we have to face the past? to remember? to forget? (Siebert, 1992: 165)

The questions Siebert raises invite many answers, and many layers of answers, and indicate, too, both the potential and the challenge confronting truth commissions in documenting national memory. Indeed, the report of one of the most famous truth commissions, that of Argentina, was entitled Nunca m´as (Never again). Truth commissions are one way in which citizens of a country help to determine what shall be included and what shall be left out in the story a nation tells itself about a traumatic past.

Ethically, we have a responsibility to remember, 'to keep memory alive, not to forget – the Jewish "zakhor" ' (Siebert, 1992: 166). But never forget what? Keep which memory alive? Nations are, among other things, communities of shared memory and shared forgetting (Renan, 1882/1990). Truth commissions are one way of mediating memories – consisting of both the remembered and the forgotten – and thereby weaving the nation's post-traumatic identity. Citizens of a nation come together in a communal activity of telling and listening to stories of one another; and through such a process the stories of individuals become transformed into threads of a new national narrative. In Country of My Skull, Antjie Krog's account of her experiences observing South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, she writes 'by a thousand stories I was scorched a new skin' (1998: 279).

Woods (1999) describes national or public memory as performative; memory is not something we have, but something we do. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) represents one dramatic illustration of the 'doing of memory'; for two years, private memory was performed publicly in town halls across the country, and re-performed for the rest of the country on nightly news and in the daily paper.[1] 'In the cities and in many smaller towns, in improvised courtrooms fashioned out of town halls and community centres and churches, the drama of Apartheid and the struggle against it was played out' (Krog, 1998: vii). In this article, I will argue that truth commissions act as conduits for collective memory; as individual stories

are selected as being somehow representative, these stories come to frame the national experience. Truth commissions are not, however, mere conduits for stories; rather they wield an important influence on which stories are told and how they are to be interpreted. Thus they both produce and are produced by grand national narratives, and must be understood in the particular context(s) in which they emerge and the particular goals, either implicit or explicit, which guide their work.

Truth commissions and stories

When a society suffers an 'administrative massacre' 'its members will often seek to reconstruct its institutions on the basis of a shared understanding of what went wrong. [They do this through a variety of means.] But mostly, they tell stories. The "telling and retelling" of a people's central stories constitute its collective identity' (Osiel, 1997: 76). Thus, in the words of Jose Zalaquett of Chile's Rettig Commission, truth commissions write into being a new 'collective memory' (cited in Wilson, 1996: 14). But which stories are to be included in this new national narrative? What is the relationship between the experiences of individuals and the fate of a nation?

In the case of South Africa, more than 21,000 victims of apartheid have given testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In makeshift courtrooms across the country, in the presence of an officially sanctioned body of listeners, headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, person after person has recounted the horrors they endured in the apartheid years. Telling and listening to stories is a key component of the journey to reconciliation, for it is in this exchange that individuals can begin to make sense of their experiences, to understand if not to condone why things happened in the way in which they did. But documenting such stories is only part of the work of truth commissions. As Charles Villa-Vicencio, Research Director of the TRC, comments:

> Reconciliation is facilitated, *inter alia,* by telling one another stories, as a basis for getting to know the other – for understanding the nature of their suffering and their aspirations. It has to do with uncovering the 'motives and perspectives', something which the mandate of the Commission requires it to make known. Story-telling is a central part of the Commission. And yet, it will take a damn side more than that to heal the nation. Healing depends to a significant extent on how we respond to those stories. (Villa-Vicencio, 1998: 13)

But as painful and unique as each individual story is, it is in their collectivity that their indictment against apartheid is most powerful, not only because of the strength of numbers, but because of the transformation from individual into collective narrative. The relationship between individual and collective memory is symbiotic: not only do 'private accounts become woven together into a larger narrative about the period as a whole' (Osiel, 1997: 276), but the country, in the officially sanctioned body of the truth commission, helps scarred individuals to rebuild their lives. As the Chair of one of the TRC hearings told George Oliphant, the brother of an activist who had been killed:

We are enormously grateful to all of you who come to give testimony here to expose your

pain to the public. We hope so very much that in that process a healing will begin to happen because the nation acknowledges that something did happen to you. (TRC unpublished transcripts vol. 6, Case GO\1094, p. 400)

Another observer describes the relationship between the healing of individuals and the healing of the country: 'as victims put their own lives together, they also pull the whole country together' (Human Rights Program, 1997: 26).

The 20th century has seen a sharp rise in the number of truth commissions globally; Hayner (1995) has identified 15 between 1974 and 1994 alone. In this article, I shall compare the truth commissions of South Africa and East Germany, exploring how the very different sets of circumstances leading to their creation also helped to define their purposes and to influence, if not determine, their outcomes. Any comparison between East Germany and South Africa must, however, begin by noting the obvious: the difference in the scope of the battle in the two countries. Although repression was systematic and pervasive in East Germany, the price for falling out of line with the regime was most often an extended prison term. As Hayner notes:

> The repression under the East German system was different from the extensive violence seen in other regions [which have had truth commissions]. . . . Although there certainly was physical repression against dissidents, many of those who expressed opposition to the system suffered less violent consequences: they were barred from universities, prohibited from working in their chosen profession, or continually harassed by authorities, for example. (Hayner, 2001: 61)

It is possible that the very differences between the circumstances of East German activists and those of South Africa ultimately contributed to the nature of the truth commission adopted by each country, although this is beyond the scope of the current argument.

Collective memory and contested terrain

Irwin-Zarecka comments that 'in its common usage the expression "collective memory" suggests a consensus' (1994: 67). This consensus, however, is only 'an ideal that memory workers aspire to and willingly struggle for' (1994: 67). In fact, the force of collective memory can best be understood by examining the 'dynamics of conflict' (1994: 67) which it embodies. Memory, both individual and collective, is a contested terrain; claims about the past are very often met with counter-claims. Sturken uses the term 'cultural memory' to refer to:

> . . . a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history . . . a field of contested meanings in which [people] interact with cultural elements to produce concepts of the nation, particularly in events of trauma, where both the structures and the fractures of a culture are exposed. (1997: 1–3)

Sturken argues that such cultural negotiation occurs in myriad settings, and that cultural memory is 'produced through objects, images, and representations' (1997: 9). Truth commissions function as such a setting, and are virtually unique in their capacity to expose 'the structures and fractures of a culture': through the different voices that are heard, truth

commissions illuminate the conflictual nature of collective memory.

But, because of the shifts in the balance of power – the hallmark of truth commissions – the precise nature of the 'dynamics of collective memory' can, at times, be difficult to articulate. Concepts such as 'counter-memory' (Foucault, 1977) – calling attention to the 'residual or resistant strains [of memory] that withstand official versions of historical continuity' (Davis and Starn, 1989: 2) – and 'oppositional memory work' (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994: 83) are inadequate to describe the complexity of relations between a community's rememberers. In the context of South Africa, is 'oppositional memory' or 'counter-memory' to be found with de Klerk or Mandela? As it is the work of truth commissions to establish a new 'official history', it is not clear who or what is to be considered 'the outsider', precisely because such commissions are the products of societies in transition. As Wilson remarks, 'the main subtextual statement [of truth commissions] is how previous victims of the state are now having their story documented in an official state setting, demonstrating how the balance of power has shifted away from the perpetrators to the victims' (1996: 16). Whereas national identities are usually forged by 'othering' those who live across some imaginary border, truth commissions offer nations the opportunity to construct an identity in which it is the former national self which is the primary focus of the 'othering'. This is the case of South Africa, where the new national identity is premised upon two key sites of othering: (1) 'other' South Africans, and (2) the 'old South Africa' (clearly the two are not entirely unrelated). Regarding the second of these, Wilson comments 'the new South African identity is constructed upon a discontinuous historicity' (Wilson, 1996: 18), with the TRC being the representative benchmark between the old and the new. As such, the commission is involved in the fundamental nation-building task of creating a 'new official version of the nation's history' (Wilson, 1996: 18), a topic to which I shall return. This contrasts with East Germany, where the primary site of otherness has been West Germans and the western part of the now unified Germany, the boundaries demarcating us and them being both more important and more complex because of the shifting status of the East Germany nation.

The conflict of memory articulated in truth commissions is primarily of an interpretative nature – much of what is 'revealed' in the course of testimony is uncontested. Indeed, its ultimate utility is questioned by people such as Nigerian poet and Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, who questions the power of such 'revelations' to heal:

> Will the South African doctrine work, ultimately? Will society be truly purified as a result of this open articulation of what is known? For even while we speak of 'revelation', it is only revelation in concrete particulars, the ascription of faces to deeds, admission by individual personae of roles within known criminalities, affirmation by the already identified of what they had formerly denied. Nothing, in reality, is new. The difference is that knowledge is being shared, collectively, and entered formally into the archives of that nation . . . [but] will it truly heal society? (1999: 33)

The power of truth commissions lies not so much in discovering truth – in the form of new facts – as in acknowledging it. Moreover, once the facts of the past have been established (for instance the fate of loved ones, etc) the challenge of deciphering meaning behind such facts

still remains. The courtroom contest between the tales of victim and victimizer is not, then, primarily factual, but interpretive. But, ironically, the political context in which the events described at truth commissions originally occurred is often implicitly accorded less importance than the subsequent political context of the recounting. The case of East Germany is particularly illustrative in this regard.

East Germany: the Enquete Kommission

There were five primary mechanisms through which a unified Germany attempted to 'work through' the (East German) communist past: (1) criminal investigations into the crimes committed by particular individuals, ranging from border guards all the way up to Erich Honecker. Hundreds of border guards and other officials have been convicted, most of whom received parole or suspended sentences (Kamali, 2001: 105); (2) the screening of individuals for connections with a Stasi past, resulting in approximately 50,000 people in both the public and private sectors being dismissed from their positions after testing 'Stasi-positive' (McAdams, cited in Yoder, 1999); (3) restitution of property, as dictated in the unification treaty demanding 'return instead of compensation' for land confiscated under the totalitarian regime; (4) the passage of the Act Concerning the Records of the State Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic ('the Stasi Records Act') granting individuals the right to see files collected on them by the East German Secret Police, and, finally (5) the establishment of a truth commission. This article will deal primarily with the last of these – the creation, functioning and ultimate performance of the truth commission – but will also draw on primary data collected immediately after the opening of the Stasi files as evidence for some of the arguments.

In March 1992, two and a half years after the 'bloodless revolution' of East Germany, the German Bundestag founded the Enquet Kommission Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktator in Deutschland – the Study Commission for the Assessment of History and Consequences of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) Dictatorship in Germany – whose goal it was to produce 'a judgment of Communism and its methods' (Kamali, 2001: 117) and to 'improve the preconditions for scholarly inquiry into the SBZ/GDR past' (Weber, 1997: 203). (Yoder comments 'The choice of the term "dictatorship" in this Enquete Kommission's title to describe the GDR suggested to many the bias of the commission. It is not possible to say that a consensus exists in the former GDR that the regime was a dictatorship' [1999: 70].) Although all truth commissions are in some sense comprised of memories and counter-memories, or contesting versions of the same events, Maier comments that one of the key problems with the truth commission of East Germany was its 'failure to make contestation central'. Rather, he states, the Enquete hearings were:

> . . . touchingly didactic . . . [but] only the contestation of truth, the simultaneous unfolding of rival perspectives, can assure an adequate history. . . . At a minimum, rulers and ruled, those advantaged and disadvantaged, government and opposition, sometimes oppressors and victims, offer their own narratives. (1997: 326–7)

But what is aired in a truth commission depends very much on the purpose behind it being established in the first place. Unlike the 'bottom-up' approach of South Africa's truth commission, which explicitly set out to engage a large portion of the population and which permeated South African media, the East German commission was never intended as a means of collective catharsis. The 'project' of the commission was not so much to heal a broken nation, as with South Africa, but rather one of setting the record straight. Its intended audience was never the people of East Germany – indeed, many still are not aware that such a commission ever existed – but rather the Bundestag. The Enquete Kommission was intended as a scholarly investigation into the history of the GDR, and as such it solicited expert academic opinion (Weber, 1997: 205). There were 148 reports commissioned on 95 questions. In addition to these special reports, 'The author of each report was asked to present the problematical dimensions of the issue on the basis of the latest research and the archival material that had recently become accessible. Special emphasis was placed on suggestions for further research' (Weber, 1997: 205). It is not surprising, then, that 'the hearings had the atmosphere of a political science or sociology congress, rather than a people's tribunal' (Yoder, 1999: 72). In addition to these 'special reports', the commission collected 759 academic papers on all aspects of the East German regime, which it published in a 15-volume compilation; all in all, the commission accumulated over 15,000 pages of testimony and expertise (McAdams, 2001: 90).

The original Enquete Kommission was in operation for two years (from May 1992 to May 1994), and was made up of 16 Members of Parliament and 11 outside 'experts'. While 10 of the 16 commissioners were from the East, they were all from the 'dissident milieu of the former GDR' (Yoder, 1999: 73); the rest of the commissioners, and all the outside experts, were West German. The composition of the truth commission led many to suspect its motives; for them 'the past was filtered and evaluated through western eyes and easterners were again subjects rather than participants in the corrective justice process' (Yoder, 1999: 73). This of course contrasts with South Africa's TRC; Richard Goldstone, South African Constitutional Court Judge, like many, believes that 'the TRC was morally justified because it was created by South Africa's first democratically elected legislature – a legislature that represents the victims of apartheid' (cited in Kamali, 2001: 126) – a view shared by many, if not most, South Africans, as well as by the international community.

The East German truth commission, then, focused its work on establishing didactic public history; this mission, in turn, created space for only certain kinds of tales to be told about daily life in the GDR. The commissioners, as noted above, shared a perspective that was highly critical of the GDR. Of the 327 witnesses who told their stories to the commission, many were 'the unsung victims of SED rule' (McAdams, 2001: 91). (This statistic itself speaks volumes. The Enquete Kommission listened to the testimonies of 327 persons (out of a population of 16 million); by comparison, the TRC heard evidence from 22,000 people, out of a population of 41 million.)

The final report of the first Enquete Kommission recommended that more research must be done into the GDR's past. In May 1995, the second Enquete Kommission was established by the Bundestag, this time with a more explicit agenda regarding the kinds of stories it was seeking to document. Its purpose, as described by Rainer Eppelman (the Chair of both the first and second commissions, and himself a former dissident of the GDR), was to investigate 'the thousands of people . . . who did not permit themselves to succumb to the criminality or immorality . . . of the SED dictatorship, who complained, stood firm, and achieved some kind of protest' (as quoted in Yoder, 1999: 73–4). It is not the case, then, that there was no attention given to stories 'from below' (i.e. personalized accounts of life under state communism) but rather that such interest was selective. As McAdams comments:

> When this perspective could be equated with the hardships of citizens who had been directly victimized by the SED's policies, the commission had no difficulty addressing the subject. Over two years of proceedings the body's [the second Enquete Kommission] deputies heard testimony from scores of individuals – teachers, journalists, artists, students, and pastors – who faced formidable odds in leading fulfilled lives under authoritarian rule, and, in many cases, made substantial sacrifices to remain true to their convictions. (McAdams, 2001: 111)

Indeed, as evidence of the utility of these kinds of stories for embracing a new national identity (and discarding the old), the final report of the second Enquete Kommission speaks of the importance of the stories of the victims of Communism, especially at a time 'when memories of the horrors of the fallen dictatorship are weakening in the face of an undifferentiated "GDR nostalgia'[2] (cited in McAdams, 2001: 111).

> The effect of this weighting, as Yoder describes it, was that:

> . . . exploring the past and assigning blame invariably took on a right–wrong, and in many ways, west–east dimension. For some, the entire GDR past, the society's whole set of experiences, and in some ways the individual's sense of identity were all cast in doubt and, in the extreme, interpreted as being of no value. (1999: 75)

One can only understand this if one considers the context in which the commission was established, that is, the unifying of the two Germanys. As Weber comments, 'It was the goal of the Commission of Inquiry . . . to help cement a democratic consciousness and to foster a common political culture for the whole of Germany' (1997: 203). Its purpose, then, was not only to document the GDR past, but to establish an interpretation of that past. In bringing together certain kinds of stories about the past, it sought to establish a national memory, and thus a national identity, which was part and parcel of the new Germany.

The Enquete Kommission was unusual in two ways. First, while most other truth commissions have focused their investigations on a relatively limited period of time – Chile, Uganda and South Africa being exceptional in the length of the period covered (16 years, 24 years and 33 years respectively) – the GDR commission covered the full 40 years of the country's existence. Second, the truth commission was intended to document the events of a country which, even at the time of the commission's establishment, no longer existed. One can only really appreciate

the project of the commission if these factors, particularly the latter, are borne in mind. As one commentator described it: 'In Germany, the offending regime is no longer in power. The new regime has instigated a process of settling accounts with a discontinuous past' (Geoffrey Hawthorne, cited in Human Rights Program, 1997: 71).

East Germany: the Stasi files

Much has already been written on the unique decision on the part of a unified Germany to make the Stasi files available to the former citizens of the GDR. As historian Timothy Garton Ash comments: 'There has been nothing like it, anywhere, ever' (1997: 19). Joachim Gauck, East German Protestant clergyman who chaired the Gauck Authority, custodian of the Stasi archives, outlines what he sees to be the significance of this act.

> Thanks to this law, we are not walking in the fog: we can eliminate the doubts and restore the faith in democracy to the segment of society that had come to think this country could not be democratically ruled. . . . Just imagine what would have happened if the files had been kept secret: not only would it have been impossible to create a climate of trust, but the files could have been used to threaten and blackmail people. (cited in Kritz, 1995: 609)

How did the stories which emerged from this process contribute to creating a national memory of the GDR past? To appreciate the significance of the opening of the files, it is important to note the utter pervasiveness of the Stasi in East German life. The Stasi kept records on the lives of approximately 6 million East Germans out of a population of 16 million (Yoder, 1999: 63), although its ultimate goal was 'the perfection of an espionage network that would cover every citizen in the GDR' (Darnton, 1991: 125); 97,000 full-time employees, and an additional 170,000 informants, 'unofficial collaborators'. (The precise number of unofficial employees has been difficult to ascertain, for obvious reasons. One account cited by Yoder estimates the figure as high as 2 million [1999: 63]). Of the official, full-time employees, 1052 were surveillance specialists who tapped telephones, 2100 steamed open letters and 5000 followed suspects. Thus, the Stasi earned its internal slogan 'We Are Everywhere'. As a result of all this activity, when the leaders of the citizens' groups stormed the Stasi headquarters across East Germany in late 1989 and early 1990, what they found was approximately 110 miles of files.

Interestingly, these files contain a relatively high level of accuracy (though Vera Wollenberger, whose husband reported her dissident activities to the Stasi, describes the files as 'a dangerous mixture of fact and fiction' (Miller, 1999: 13)). One reason which explains this is that 'information deemed significant was generally confirmed from a number of informers, whose identities often remained unknown to one another' (Miller, 1999: 17). The Stasi prided itself in being interested in 'correct information'. Accordingly, it often sent spies to spy on its own spies. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that there seems to be a general consensus among those who have consulted their files that, at some level, what is reported as having occurred did in fact happen. The inaccuracy of the files is not in the facts that they contain, but rather in the interpretation of those facts (for a discussion of this see Andrews, 1998). Garton Ash describes the experience of reading his Stasi file, and comparing it to his diary, which covered the same time period.

The Stasi's observation report, my diary entry: two versions of one day in a life. The 'object' described with the cold outward eye of the secret policeman and my own subjective, allusive, emotional self-description. But what a gift to memory is a Stasi file. Far better than Proust's Madeleine. (1997: 10)

This reviewing of the files of the Stasi has made possible open (and sometimes public) encounters between victims and perpetrators (*tater-opfer* – victim-victimizer – talks), which, in contrast to the proceedings of the Enquete Kommission, did whenever possible receive much media coverage.

I travelled to East Berlin in February 1992, one month after the opening of these files, and spent six months there speaking with people about how the transition to the new Germany had transformed their daily lives. Perhaps because of the timing of my visit, the subject that appeared to be the most absorbing for the people I encountered was how to deal with the revelations made by the opening of the files. For many with whom I spoke, this question had profound implications. In an interview with East German dissident Werner Fischer, he described one *tater/opfer* event in which he had participated with a former friend, who, he learned, had been reporting to the Stasi on him. Following the meeting, the friend joked with him about what a charismatic media duo they made, and suggested they consider it as an alternative career. For Fischer and others, the question emerges: can one, and should one, seek to repair relationships which have been marked by deceit? What are the costs and benefits to be weighed, not only personally but politically? If this is a desirable goal, what is the best way to go about trying to achieve it?

The unusual situation of East Germany has produced interesting and sometimes surprising alliances between 'victims' and 'victimizers'. For instance, in the days when the East German state still existed, the relationship between the spies and the spied-upon, was one of 'us' and 'them.' However, since unification – what Gunter Grass describes as 'the unity that knows no mercy' (cited in Wolf, 1997: 206) – many in East Germany feel that what was promised as a partnership was in fact a takeover. As a consequence, East Germans who were once adversaries now find themselves attached by a peculiar bond, living with a kind of siege mentality.

Werner Fischer was one person with whom I spoke about this strange bed-fellowship. In the days of East Germany, Fischer had been one of the key figures of the underground opposition. Because of his anti-state activities, he spent much time in and out of prison, finally being exiled to Britain at the end of the 1980s. After the changes of 1989, he was appointed to lead the disbandment of the Stasi, something he regarded as one of life's great ironies. Speaking in 1992, he describes the transformed environment to me:

Today I am sitting in a pub with my former interrogator and ask him how it was at that time . . . what went on in his head while he was interrogating me daily for 12 hours . . . what he told his wife in the evening he had been doing all day when I was taken back to my cell. . . . many Stasi people try to establish a feigned or real relationship to former opposition

members by being chummy and by asking 'Well, tell me now, did you want things to be as they are now? We really were on your side, we admired what you were doing and thought what you were writing was quite reasonable, but, you know the GDR legislation'. . . . They always hide behind the law and insist that that is how it was and that they could not act in any other way.

Similar stories were repeated to me time and again during my stay. For instance, in the midst of an interview with Gerd and Ulrilke Poppe, leading East German dissidents, the telephone rang. The caller had informed upon them for the Stasi, in what were commonly referred to as 'former times'. Now this same person was phoning to talk about what he saw as the bond between himself and them: they were all East Germans, after all. Perhaps now that things had turned out the way in which they did, could the Poppes not understand why he had done what he had done? They were appalled but not surprised by this sentiment. It is not uncommon for those who once informed upon friends, colleagues, even spouses, now to cling to the present circumstances as a form of justification for their past behaviour; the damage which it wreaked in the lives of others, while perhaps unfortunate, was a necessary and relatively small price to pay for holding at bay the onslaught of the voracious West. Importantly, this shared citizenship of a country which is no longer helps to frame the way in which stories of the past are both told and received.

Despite the fact the Enquete Kommission sought to establish a clear moral boundary between 'good pasts' and 'bad pasts', in fact close investigation of the Stasi files reveals the fragility of such boundaries. What Vaclav Havel said of Czechoslovaka can also be said of East Germany: 'everyone in his or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the [old communist] system' (quoted in Kamali, 2001: 131). Fulbook contrasts what she calls the 'Checkpoint Charlie theory of GDR history', complete with villains and heroes, and the 'Octopus theory of GDR history' which 'emphasizes the ways in which an all-pervasive state extended its tentacles into nearly every corner of society' (1997: 190). While Fulbrook comments that 'the easiest history to narrate is one in which one can easily identify with the Goodies and Baddies . . . [and] the easiest history to sell is one that explores in loving detail the vicissitudes of the Baddies . . . and depicts the heroic resistance of those who dared to rise up and challenge injustice' (1997: 180) the past is never so simple, and East Germany is no exception. We shall examine this further in the following section.

Moral narratives, nation-building and nation dismantling

Osiel (1997) has explored the idea of truth commissions as modern morality plays, where characters function allegorically: the forces of good and evil are clearly separated, and those who have done wrong must come forward and be made responsible for the suffering they have inflicted on others. Victims often look to truth commissions to provide 'a grand metanarrative of liberal redemption, recounting of an epic of collective destruction and rebirth' (1997: 275). While Osiel's metaphor is in some ways appealing, a close examination of the truth commissions of East Germany and South Africa reveals a level of complexity that challenges its applicability.

Indeed, Osiel himself discusses the limitations of the morality-play model for some truth commissions, stating 'when complicity in such crimes is widespread throughout a society, because of diffuse support of connivance enjoyed by immediate perpetrators, the simple bipolarity of the morality play is inadequate' (1997: 286). In our conversation together, Werner Fischer highlights the relevance of Osiel's comment to the East German situation:

> I refuse to accept a polarization of victim/victimizer. . . . I am not able to draw a clear line. I am very cautious with this categorization. Do I know in how far I, as a so-called victim, who was in prison and so on, contributed in a certain way to a stabilization of the system? Because the Stasi strengthened this apparatus, could only strengthen it by constant referral to the opposition. That is how the system legitimized itself. In that respect I belong to the criminals, who ensured that the Stasi found more and more reasons to expand. Who can judge this?

While Fischer admits to using the language of victim and victimizer occasionally, he regards this polarity with caution, even aversion. While such a dualistic model is in many ways attractive – as a linguistic shorthand, and more importantly, as a mechanism by which to exculpate oneself – it oversimplifies and thereby obscures the reality which characterized everyday life in East Germany. Fischer comments on the investment of many in a model of moral polarity:

> People are only too eager to point a finger at the other person, to the guilty one 'that was him, the Stasi' in order to disguise their own shame of not having been able to – even only in a very minute way – show resistance. This simply must happen, but at present does not, that people ask themselves, 'how far have I contributed to make this system function, if only by my silence?' This is an exceedingly difficult process.

The internationally renowned East German writer, Christa Wolf, who was herself accused of Stasi collaboration in her youth, comments upon the difficulties of personal reckoning, exacerbated by the context of Western triumphalism:

> I know how hard it is to work yourself out of feelings of injury, hurt, helpless rage, depression, and paralyzing guilt and soberly to confront the events or phases in your life when you would prefer to have been braver, more intelligent, more honest . . . the people I am talking about are 'ordinary' people. (1997: 301)

Despite the difficulty of the circumstances, she comments 'you really must reach the point at which you can account to yourself for your life, regardless of how difficult other people may make it for you, and regardless of how much guiltier other people may be' (1997: 241). In the context of daily life under the East German dictatorship, guilt and heroism are not absolutes, though many may persist in the discourse of good and evil in framing their stories of former times.

If one questions the use of the dichotomous descriptors of victim and victimizer, as Fischer explicitly does and Wolf does by implication, is there not a risk of imposing chaos on the moral order? Surely, at some level, it is important to be able to distinguish between opposing

moral forces. In the words of Wolfgang Ullmann, one of the founders of the East German truth commission, some people were spies and others were spied upon; this is clear and the distinction is important. Ullmann's concern is that the relativism suggested by those like Fischer provides a shelter for those who should be made answerable for their actions: if all are guilty, none are guilty. In my interview with Stasi employee Jorg Seidel, he stresses the point that people like him were motivated in their work 'by the same ideas' as the country's dissidents. He rejects the terms victim and victimizer 'because you have to see the background'. He suggests that his willingness to participate in research such as mine is proof of his ideological bond with dissident activists: 'I believe if I wouldn't have had these ideas, I wouldn't sit here in this very room. I will say we are thinking of a human who is really in the centre of the interests of the society.' He concludes by comparing himself with Jens Reich, one of the key opposition figures and co-founder of the anti-state group Neus Forum, which spearheaded many of the changes in the autumn of 1989. Reich, Seidel comments, is someone whose ideals he 'almost fully' shares. In a subsequent interview with Jens Reich, I relate this comment; not surprisingly, it is greeted with disdain. Yet Reich himself is someone who rejects any stark construction that obscures the complex reality which characterized East German life.

How different is the East German situation from that of South Africa? Did the level of violence in the latter create more stark contrasts – goodies and baddies? Does Osiel's morality play have more applicability in describing the central figures in the South African truth commission proceedings, where presumably the boundaries between victim and perpetrator were not nearly so opaque as they were in East Germany? Before addressing this, I would like to call attention to the original purpose behind the creation of the TRC.

It is instructive here to examine a passage from the Preamble of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, which among other things established the TRC.

> This Constitution provides a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterized by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence and development opportunities for all South Africa, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex. . . . The pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all South African citizens and peace require reconciliation between people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society. . . . The adoption of this Constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past, which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge. (quoted in Ntsebeza, 1998: 4)

First and foremost, the truth commission of South Africa was intended as a bridge from the past to the future, a key lynchpin in healing the wounds of a deeply divided nation. In the Foreword to the final report of the TRC, Desmond Tutu appeals to fellow South Africans to use the report not to attack others, but rather as an instrument that can contribute to 'the process that will lead to national unity through truth and reconciliation' (Tutu, 1998: 4). The importance to the nation of looking forward is echoed by Nelson Mandela, in the handover ceremony of the Truth and Reconciliation report in October 1998, when he comments upon the

country's 'hope and confidence in the future' and refers to the report as 'the property of our nation [which] should be a call to all of us to celebrate and to strengthen what we have done as a nation' (BBC Online Network http://www. monitor.bbc.co.uk).

The transcripts of the proceedings of the TRC are peppered with the phrase 'the new South Africa', and the thousands of pages are awash with sentiments like the following:

> We hope that as we listen to those who are not statistics but human beings of flesh and blood, that you and I will be filled with a new commitment, a new resolve that our country will be a country where violations of this kind will not happen, that the context will be inhospitable for those who seek to treat others as if they were nothing. (TRC, 1998: vol. 5, p. 411)

Victims of horrendous crimes are thanked for having given their testimony, as their special contribution to building this new country, and the entire endeavour is seen as an important aspect of the overriding goal to achieve national unity and reconciliation. While there are many in South Africa who support this nation-building function of the TRC, there are some who regard it as part of a specifically ANC vision. As one spokesperson for the far right Freedom Front phrased it:

> The ANC wants to build one nation out of a large variety of people's [sic] and tribes. . . . We . . . oppose the concept of one-nation; we don't believe in it, one nation does not exist in this multiracial country. . . . The TRC not only seeks to give the people a common memory; they want to rewrite history. . . . We will not accept their version of history. (quoted in Christie, 2000: 109)

The Freedom Front are not alone in their cynicism about nation-building, and indeed the project has been the target of some controversy within South Africa. As one observer describes it: 'what the ANC meant by national liberation as their goal, while appearing inclusive of all groups, is not shared by all groups' (Christie, 2000: 113). While most countries have some degree of diversity within their populations, South Africa is perhaps unusual in that there are approximately 160 different ethnic groups (Christie, 2000: 116); perhaps not surprisingly, then 'there are multiple visions, perspectives and solutions to what constitutes South Africa and in turn these have consequences for what it means to be engaged in a nation-building project (Christie, 2000: 98). In contrast to the Enquete Kommission, which it could be argued was involved in constructing a narrative around a once again unified Germany – although, of course, historically there has never been a Germany that was comprised of the GDR and the FRG and, for this reason, many reject the phrase 'reunification', preferring 'unification' – the TRC was building a grand narrative of a country which never existed. As Christie comments, 'South Africa has never really been a nation in the classical sense of what constitutes nationhood. . . . A South African nation has yet to be born' (2000: 106). The role of the TRC was but one component of many engaged in this task of giving birth to the nation.

> Not only is it [the TRC] seeking to examine and acknowledge aversion [sic] of South Africa's past which lays claim to a more objective truth, it is seeking to institutionalize that memory to reconcile different groups in society. A common memory in theory is one of the first steps toward a more unified nation and nation-building. (Christie, 2000: 117)

While the TRC is trying to construct a grand national narrative of its past, it is doing so with the purpose of reconciling a painfully fragmented society. Some feel that the perpetrators of crimes have not been dealt with harshly enough (for instance in being granted amnesty for their actions), others feel that the TRC has acted as a witch-hunt. (Christie reports a study in which roughly 46 percent of the white South Africans surveyed thought that the TRC was 'an ANC inspired witch-hunt to discredit its enemies' [2000: 115]). In reality, as still others have argued, 'the TRC was a compromise and should be seen in that light' (Christie, 2000: 114). While the commission made no attempt to disguise its clear moral vision, during the proceedings the commissioners emphasized time and again that wrongs were perpetrated on both sides of the struggle. Moreover, unlike the case of East Germany, where many felt that the Enquete Kommission was yet another form of 'victor's justice' and that the history of the GDR was written by its strongest critics (from both East and West), 'there was no clear victor in South Africa after the collapse of apartheid' (Kamali, 2001: 121). As Desmond Tutu commented, '[n]obody was in a position to enforce so-called "victor's justice" . . . without some amnesty provisions, our reasonably peaceful transition from repression to democracy would instead have become a bloodbath' (cited in Kamali, 2001: 121).

Andre Du Toit comments:

> If truth commissions address fundamental moral questions – of justice and truth, violence and violation, accountability and reparation – they do so not at the level of theoretical reflection or by means of established institutions but as eminently political projects. Conversely, the politics of truth commissions is informed by distinctively moral notions and objectives to a degree that is unusual in modern and secular societies. (du Toit, 2000: 122)

The goal of the TRC is to advance national reconciliation, but this political end is encased in the spirit of *ubuntu*, a concept which Desmond Tutu explains as follows:

> I am human only because you are human. If I undermine your humanity, I dehumanize myself. You must do what you can to maintain this great harmony, which is perpetually undermined by resentment, anger, desire for vengeance. That's why African jurisprudence is restorative rather than retributive. (Tutu, 1996: 53)

The spirit of *ubuntu* is expressed by Ms Cynthia Ngewu, whose son was murdered by the police. She explains:

> What we are hoping for when we embrace the notion of reconciliation is that we restore the humanity to those who were perpetrators. We do not want to return evil by another evil. We simply want to ensure that the perpetrators are returned to humanity . . . all South Africans should be committed to the idea of re-accepting these people back into the community. We do not want to return the evil that perpetrators committed to the nation. We want to

demonstrate humaneness towards them, so that they in turn may restore their own humanity. (TRC, 1998: vol. 5, p. 367)

A similar sentiment, from a very different perspective, is voiced by Mr Kimpani Peter Mogoai, an '*askari*':

> As I regard myself today as a disgrace to my mother, my family and my relatives . . . and the nation as such . . . it is with my deepest remorse that I ask for forgiveness and hopefully wish to be reconciled with everybody once more and be part of a better and brighter future of South Africa. (TRC, 1998: vol. 5,
> p. 391)

It is not only for the sake of the individual (both perpetrator and victim) that it is important to recognize dignity in all persons; it is crucial in building the new nation. Unfortunately, the sentiment expressed here – acknowledging responsibility for past misdeeds – is not very typical. As Christie comments, 'the white population in general have had difficulty coming to terms with the past. There is a state of denial in most quarters and a refusal by most to accept any kind of responsibility for the past' (2000: 114). Christie then cites a study carried out by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation which showed that 'a majority of white South Africans . . . were unconvinced they had any role in apartheid abuses, and more than 40% of them thought that apartheid was a good idea, but with poor implementation' (2000: 114).

The importance of the principle of restoring dignity to all South Africans is apparent throughout the transcripts of the TRC, and seems for many to be a core component of the new nation. As one of the commissioners summarizes this position at the end of one of the hearings:

Ultimately . . . you give people the chance to change. You open a door for someone to move from a dark past to a new and enlightened present and future. . . . All of us need to change, all of us are wounded people, all of us are traumatised people, all of us are people who need to forgive and who also need to be forgiven. And for all of us then to move together into what is a wonderful prospect . . . and look at the wonderful contribution that all of the wonderful people can make to this new South Africa. (TRC proceedings, Johannesburg, Case GO/0135, p. 10)

Conclusion

Truth commissions are conduits for collective memory, and that memory, like all memory, is constantly changing. The 'national narratives' about a country's traumatic past which emerge from the proceedings of truth commissions document stories of the past, and these stories are in turn firmly situated in the circumstances of the present. Terms such as victim and victimizer thus reflect not only the moral dimensions of the *ancien régime*, but also the realities of the present, the latter wielding a powerful influence in distinguishing and categorizing that which is memorable. As 'the struggle for possession and interpretation of memory is rooted in the conflict and interplay among social, political, and cultural interests and values in the present' (Thelen, 1989: 1127), in truth commissions we witness the dynamics of the making of collective memory, with all of the tensions and ambiguities that this entails.

In South Africa and East Germany, truth commissions were established which had as a key focus bringing together, or reconciling, a fragmented populace. In South Africa, this project of reconciliation is a key component of a larger, and somewhat controversial, project of nation-building, bringing together the 'rainbow people of the new South Africa'. It is based on principles which recognize the dignity of all South Africans – victims and perpetrators alike. South Africa is, as one author phrased it, a nation still to be born, and the TRC is a vital component in the success of this endeavour. In its work, the commission is guided by a vision which must include all of its divergent groups, if it is to work at all.

In East Germany, the truth commission functioned primarily as a means of establishing a shared history for all of the newly united Germany. The cost of doing this, however, was the silencing of the stories of the majority of East Germans, for whom state socialism was not the focus of resistance but merely a fact of daily life. In East Germany, the contestation of memory was more in evidence in the open talks between victims and victimizers, although here the public nature of these meetings tended to mitigate against any genuine possibility for dialogue.

Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd refer to the close link between process and product of the TRC, adding:

> The commission sought, however imperfectly, to implement and manage an inclusive, accessible, and transparent process in order to facilitate a pluralistic public account, generated by diverse individuals 'telling their own stories'. . . . The alternative would have been a more typical, 'elitist' commission of experts attempting to produce an authoritative version of the truth. (2000: 289)

These observers have perhaps captured the key difference between the commissions of East Germany and South Africa; the former saw its mission to compile an authoritative account of the 40 years of state socialism. The TRC, in contrast, offered a many-sided truth, seeking to include all South Africans in the renewal of their country.

If truth commissions are a 'method of remembrance, a way of developing shared memories' (Christie, 2000: 187), they are also eminently political projects. Truth commissions are a vital means of establishing a link between a nation's traumatic past and its future, and they must be examined within this 'bridging' function. Ultimately, the truth or truths that they uncover are those that help to establish the new grand national narrative, embodying a journey out of darkness into light.

Notes

The East German data reported in this article was collected as an Associate Research Fellow at the Centre for Socialization and Human Development of the Max Planck Institute in Berlin.

1. Yazir Henry writes poignantly of the personal cost which testifying before the truth commission can exact from the individual, summarizing his own experience by saying: 'It took me almost a

complete year to recover psychologically from my testimony and the form it took publicly after
having testified' (forthcoming: 5).
2. For a rich and nuanced discussion of this nostalgia, see Berdahl (1999). For a discussion of the
effects of a decade of unification on East German identity, see Andrews (forthcoming).

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Molly Andrews is co-director of the Centre for Narrative Research and Senior Lecturer in Psychosocial Studies at the University of East London. Her research interests include the psychological basis of political commitment, psychological challenges posed by societies in transition to democracy, the impact of political context on the process of forgiveness, and gender and ageing.