

## **The Narrative Architecture of Political Forgiveness**

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### **Abstract:**

Although there is widespread agreement with the argument that Hannah Arendt made more than half a century ago, that forgiveness is 'one of the human faculties that make social change possible', beyond this, there is little consensus of what it means. Applying a narrative structure to this discussion, there is a lack of clarity around questions of who, what, where, when, and why to forgive. This paper will explore the politics of forgiveness in East Germany, where these issues have been hotly contested for more than twenty-five years. The data examined in this article suggest that the fraught process of forgiveness embodies not consensus but contest, as people disagree on key questions such who has the right to forgive whom, for what, how long the window for the opportunity of forgiveness stays open, and even why these questions matter, not only for individuals but for the whole of society.

**Key words:** political forgiveness; transitional justice; victims and perpetrators; political narratives; East Germany

## **The Narrative Architecture of Political Forgiveness**

In principle, there is no limit to forgiveness ... no 'to what point?'.  
Provided, of course, that we agree on some 'proper' meaning of this word.  
Now, what do we call 'forgiveness'? What calls for 'forgiveness'? Who calls for, who calls upon forgiveness? (Derrida 2001:27)

Thus Jacques Derrida opens his treatise on the meaning of forgiveness, a topic which also captivated Hannah Arendt, who, writing in the aftermath of atrocity, identified it as 'one of the human faculties that make social change possible' (Misztal 2011:43). In recent years, questions of forgiveness (and apology) have become 'a major political topic and a very visible part of public life', indeed 'a new political fashion' (Misztal 2011:41-42). And yet, Derrida's questions continue to haunt us; put simply, there is a lack of clarity around questions of who, what, where, when, and why to forgive<sup>i</sup>. This article will explore one particular setting in which the politics of forgiveness have been hotly contested for more than twenty-five years, and will examine whether individual testimonies might offer useful insights to this debate.

In 1992, I conducted interviews with 40 East Germans, most of whom had been leading critics of the East German government, and played an important role in contributing to the bloodless revolution of 1989. I conducted my first interviews in February 1992, weeks after the opening of the Stasi files; questions of betrayal, confession, remorse and forgiveness filled the air. Although I had begun with no intention to explore the complex nature of this morally charged landscape, in fact I spent much of time listening to accounts in which project participants were dealing with the challenge of processing the wrongdoing which had been perpetuated against them. I learned much through these conversations, which will form the focus of the discussion to follow. (See Andrews 1999 and Andrews 2000).

Two decades later, having been given the opportunity to return to Berlin to re-interview a number of the people who had been part of my original study, I wondered how, if at all, those issues would resonate after all this time. Speaking with Wolfgang Templin, the man Erich Honnecker once described as 'the Number One enemy of the state', I asked him whether questions of forgiveness were still relevant, he responded 'I think it's still one of the most important questions, in the larger and the smaller sense.' This article will explore the micro and macro levels indicated by Templin here.

### ***Forgiving those who do not seek to be forgiven***

I remember well the first time the complex dynamics of forgiveness in the context of political rupture was brought to my attention. I was interviewing Katja Havemann, a longtime anti-state activist and one of the leaders of the women's peace movement, and widow of Robert Havemann, who for many symbolised East German resistance. The last two years of Havemann's life was spent under house arrest, at his home in Grunheide which he shared with Katja (the same

home that years later, in September 1989, would be used for the initial gathering of members of Neus Forum, the leading citizen's movement which contributed decisively to the events which followed in the wake of its formation). Naively, it now seems to me, I ask Katja Havemann if she can forgive those who deprived her husband of his freedom in the last two years of his life. .

It's almost worse ... They still can't forgive us [for] what they did to us... We are the living guilty conscience... We're still alive, we experienced it all. We are also still witnesses... We were naive in extending too quickly our forgiveness. We had hoped that they would readily say "we were really wrong about this one" ... We imagined that they would also feel relieved when they finally were able to come out of this role.

This comment from Havemann encapsulates some of the primary questions surrounding the first question of political forgiveness: who is to forgive whom? Following my interview with Havemann, (and with others who echoed similar sentiments) I dedicated considerable effort to understanding the phenomena of the 'offended offender' (Beatty 1970) in the context of a highly charged political context such as that of the newly reunited Germany (see Andrews 1999).

Although questions of forgiveness are most often articulated in interpersonal terms, in this setting it is highly complicated to disentangle personal wrongdoing with actions which were carried out by order of the overstretching arm of a dictatorship. For many East Germans, even till this day, categories of perpetrator and victim are not always clear. As Wolfgang Thierse commented, amongst East Germans "there are real perpetrators and real victims, guilty ones and innocent ones and then in between the many others, we – who lived there, busy getting by, more or less decent, more or less clever, more or less cowardly or brave.' (Miller 1999: 99.)

My research into this topic (Andrews 1999 and 2000) shows that project participants for the most part agree with this sentiment, i.e. most people in the GDR were neither clearly victims nor victimizers, though there were some exceptions. Even if one were to argue that official employees of the Stasi (who, in 1989 numbered 91,000) and Stasi informers (in 1989, numbering 174,000) were perpetrators because they actively collaborated with the state, their work would not have been possible without the lack of resistance, perhaps even silent acquiescence of the bulk of the population, 'the many others' to whom Thierse refers. The existence of the oppressive state as a backdrop complicated matters of forgiveness considerably, as it offered both those who were harmed and those who perpetrated the wrongdoing a ready made framework of explanation, which in many ways serves as an effective obstacle to the personal reckoning which must be the starting point of forgiveness.

Digeser (2001) describes some of the complications which arise when trying to determine moral responsibility of citizens – who is a victim, who is a perpetrator? - which is accentuated in a context of an authoritarian state. He identifies a 'moral spillover' of responsibility which accrues to citizens "who were either accomplices in the wrongs or had the knowledge and freedom to prevent or resist them but did not do so" (p.199)

The scope of this [moral] spillover can vary widely, depending on the nature of the wrong and the knowledge and freedom of the citizenry. .. In oppressive regimes, the number of collaborators may be quite large, even though the avenues for action are narrowed considerably. The question of politically forgiving citizens who collaborated with an unjust regime... can arise only after the government has been replaced with a just set of arrangements. (p. 199)

Whether or not such a replacement has happened in the now unified Germany is something which is debated amongst those who participated in my research. Many of the people with whom I spoke really grappled with the question of who, if anyone, could be said to be responsible for the harm which had been done to them; on the one side they weigh the call for a moral amnesty for perpetrators on the basis that wrongs which they committed were sanctioned by the state, and on the other side there is an ethical imperative for individual accountability. The challenge of this is particularly evident in the testimony of Annette Simon, a well-known East German psychoanalyst.

Speaking together in 2012, I remind her of our conversation from twenty years before, in which we discussed the meaning of, and necessary conditions for, forgiveness. She tells me of an article she has written, and says that for her the question which emerged was “if I can forgive the GDR [German Democratic Republic].” As I hear this, I wonder what would it mean to forgive a country? Her response to this question is in the negative, as she asserts: “Not the GDR, but the people who lived in it. Not the system, not the structures, but that people can be in difficult conditions.” And yet, for Simon there are persons who must be held to account, whose actions went above and beyond what one might call ‘ordinary’ compliance with the state. “And [yet] still”, she tells me, “I would distinguish: A Stasi general who still says today that he enjoyed spying on people – I don’t have to forgive him. “ To say that she is not obliged to forgive him leaves open the possibility that she might. This prompts me to ask: “What would he have to say?” to which she responds “That he is sorry.” All he has to do is say he is sorry, not only for spying on people but for enjoying doing so, and there might be the possibility of forgiveness. (Later in this article I will take up the question of the role of apology and remorse as it is discussed in the literature on political forgiveness and as it appears in my data). In this exchange with Simon, I want to explore further what this ‘saying I’m sorry’ would mean to her, and so I ask, somewhat provocatively, “And then it’s okay? To this her response is emphatic and immediate. The first sentence she utters is in English, not waiting for the translator to communicate her sentiments: “No, then it’s not okay.” Then, returning to German, she elaborates:

I think the major problem is, that one can push oneself too far with forgiveness. Because there are things that should have been punished in court. No one was convicted. No one from the investigational prisons of the Stasi. Not convicted or punished. The leaders of these prisons, the Stasi generals. Today, often enough, they get a higher pension than their former inmates. Forgiveness is out of place there. That’s enough. But there are other biographies which are more differentiated. Where one

can talk about things, where things could have been different, or where one could have decided otherwise.

The relevance of Digeser's argument is evident here. From Simon's point of view (one which is shared with many other project participants), it is not simply that collaborators participated in wrong-doing in the past, but moreover, they continue to benefit from their former positions of power, even at the time that we are speaking which is nearly 25 years after the demise of the state. This lack of justice being served is galling for many, not only those whose lives were immediately affected by the actions of particular individuals, and it serves as an impediment to the possibility of forgiveness.

Digeser describes the 'difficult question' of 'whether to initiate the pursuit of justice and truth telling when the collaborators are uncooperative or when they sincerely believe that they also stood for what was right and just... in many cases, those who did wrong did nothing illegal.' Further, one of the most challenging aspects of the East German situation is that those who might be regarded as perpetrators do not regard what they did as something for which they personally should be held accountable, and in many cases still regard their actions as justifiable; rather than asking for forgiveness, they instead offer explanations. While Digeser identifies a danger "of finding someone guilty merely by association because they subscribed to objectionable ideas or organizations" which in turn can lead to the larger danger of "eventually poison[ing] the possibilities for civic trust" (p. 201), for many East Germans there is a continuum of degrees of responsibility which are highly relevant in considerations of forgiveness.

Returning to Simon's articulation of the conditions for forgiveness, while she might consider the offering of an olive branch to a perpetrator who had acknowledged and apologized for their wrongdoing, unless and until justice is served, all would not be 'okay.' Simon's reference to "biographies which are more differentiated. Where one can talk about things, where things could have been different, or where one could have decided otherwise" illuminates the importance for her of adopting a nuanced perspective on the prospects for engagement with perpetrators, and she alludes to the process by which this might be realized, a coming together 'talking about things' and an attempt for mutual understanding 'of where things could have been different, or decided otherwise' - ideas which will be developed later in this article. In Simon's commentary here, one sees quite clearly the complex set of variables which persist in former East Germany which complicate the very question of who should forgive whom, which must be the starting point of any consideration for a coming together.

### **The Negotiated Meaning of Forgiveness**

But it is not only the designation of victim and perpetrator which are contested and complex labels. Equally unclear is what, precisely, is meant by the term 'forgiveness.' In my 1992 interview with actress Ruth Reinecke, she comments

'you have to be able to forgive, but what'? This comment reveals the general belief that while forgiveness is perceived to be desirable, it is not clear what should be forgiven, and by implication, what that process constitutes.

Donald Shriver (1995), who was one of the first to provide a comprehensive study of political forgiveness, identifies four constituent elements of forgiveness: 1) forgiveness 'begins with memory suffused with moral judgment'; if there is no agreement between two parties that a wrong has been committed, then 'forgiveness stalls at the starting gate' (p. 7); 2) forgiveness requires 'forbearance from revenge' (p. 8); 3) there must be 'empathy [as distinct from sympathy] for the enemy's humanity' (p. 8); and, finally, 4) forgiveness 'aims at the renewal of a human relationship... forgiveness aggressively seeks to repair the fractures of enmity' (p. 8). While Shriver's four constituent components help to provide a sense of what forgiveness looks like, it accomplishes this in broad strokes only. However, in terms of political forgiveness, its key contribution is that he establishes that forgiveness requires the participation of the wronged and the wrongdoer to be in communication with one another, and to share at least a minimal understanding and assessment of moral trespassing. Accepting this as the first requisite step for forgiveness 'to get past the starting gate' is in juxtaposition to other theories of forgiveness (eg Enright et al 1992) which posit that forgiveness can be unconditional and unilateral and need not involve the engagement of one who has perpetrated harm. As I have argued earlier, (Andrews 2000), and building on Shriver's model of forgiveness, forgiveness requires three steps on the part of one who has perpetrated a wrong: 1) confession, 2) ownership and 3) repentance. First the wrongdoer must admit that he or she has committed the offending action. Second, s/he must take responsibility for the action, or "own" it, with all of its consequences, without providing excuses. Third, the offending party must express remorse for what they have done. (Andrews 2000). These steps do not so much describe forgiveness as much as identify conditions for its possibility, as articulated in my study of East Germans.

In 2012, I am speaking with Konrad Weiss, who amongst other things was a documentary filmmaker, and well known member of the opposition. He tells of a situation where it was not possible to forgive a person who had spied on him and other members of his oppositional group. The person was, he tells me, 'defending his actions till this day. That is the real problem.' Having just reread the transcript of our interview twenty years earlier (in preparation for this meeting), I remember his words on the necessary conditions for forgiveness, and quote these back to him: "I have the words of a very wise man here, I want to share with you." I say to him. "It says - this is you! 'Forgiveness presupposes the confession of guilt.' An insight. Do you remember this?" To this he responds:

That's what makes it so difficult.... I remember these thoughts well, and they are important. But the problem was that the overwhelming majority of those concerned did not take that step. I mean those who worked for the Stasi. To acknowledge what they did only under pressure, but never to come out with the whole thing on their own. To speak about it, to stand up for it, and to show that they thought about it. To put it in general,

somewhat rough terms: The persecutors expect their victims to forgive them without any apology. That's not possible. That's the principle conflict in many of these cases.

It is, then, not only the acknowledgement of wrongdoing which is a necessary precondition for forgiveness, but making oneself accountable for those actions; not merely a recognition that certain things happened, but taking responsibility for them.

It is instructive here to consider the meaning of apology. Smith (2008) warns against "temptation to apply some binary standard and declare whether something 'is or is not' an apology. Instead... [we should ask] how well it serves certain purposes and to what extent it conveys certain kinds of subtle social meanings" (p.2) Smith argues that apologies can 'explain the history of an injury' which is critical to the process of forgiveness as 'contested facts often lie at the heart of moral conflicts' and thus this 'meeting of the minds between the offender and offended can in certain circumstances be the most significant and hardest-earned aspect of an apology" (p. 13).

Wohl (2011) provides a captivating account of the history of the word apology, derived from the Greek legal term 'apologia.'

Within the Greek legal system it was customary for a defendant to provide an apologia or rebuttal to the prosecution's accusations. To deliver an apologia meant making a formal speech or giving an explanation to reply and rebut the charges. In effect, the original understanding of the modern phrase "to apologize" was to publicly defend against charges lodged. It was not until the end of the 16th century that the people began to employ the apology in a manner that approximates modern usage—an expression of regret and sorrow for a fault (2011: 73).

One of the most pressing problems for East Germans who over time have developed a somewhat more reticent attitude towards forgiving than the one they had initially adopted is the lack of remorse which those who have perpetrated wrongs have demonstrated: where they had hoped to encounter regret, they found instead that they were met by justifications.

Irene Kukutz, in the days of the GDR a member of the underground 'Women for Peace and Human Rights' and latterly, archivist of the East German citizens' movement, describes as 'astonishing' the fact that

there were only just a few people that said 'yes, well I made mistakes', who would confess so that on the other hand the others who were affected by their actions could have said 'I forgive you.' It was more that some of them ... actually wanted something like an absolution. Like, well, 'now I have told you everything, now everything is good. And now we can move on to the daily routine.' So there was no consciousness about injustice...There I can ... become quiet furious.

In Kukutz's testimony here, one can hear her frustration and disappointment with those who for whatever reason could not bring themselves to be held morally accountable for the actions they had done, and the lingering affects on the lives of others which they had caused. Her sentiments are echoed by those expressed by the author Stefan Heym, who described a visit he had had from a man who had reported on his activities to the Stasi. He describes a 'confession syndrome' in which "those who worked for the Stasi are constantly being convinced that it will all be okay if they just come forward and confess their sins in the media, while others lust greedily for these sensational confessions." (Cited in Miller 1999: 105).

Although encounters between the spied and the spied upon were somewhat unusual, they did sometimes occur, but rarely with successful results, precisely because of the tendency of the former to explain actions rather than to critically assess their own role. Reinhard Weisshuhn, once a member of the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights, and post-1989 a member of the Green Party recalls a meeting with a 'successful, comrade, SED<sup>ii</sup>-member, a very intelligent guy" who had spied on him. When they met, 'He gave me explanations, they didn't convince me, and then our ways parted again...No opportunity for reconciliation." And Wolfgang Templin, identified earlier, tells a similar story, involving an encounter with a longterm colleague, who had collaborated with the Stasi, reporting on the clandestine activities of their political group. "It's impossible with Arnold", he tell me. "He says until today: 'I had no choice. I was right.' ...I cannot forgive anybody who doesn't even ask himself any questions."

For Templin, Weisshuhn, and indeed most of the East Germans who participated in my study, 'forgiveness' – in the words of Konrad Weiss – 'presupposes the confession of guilt.' (Here, the term 'guilt' implies a negative moral self-assessment, pointing at least potentially to regret.) Forgiveness for these East Germans is, then, predicated upon the existence of an apology – in its modern sense, which is not explanatory in nature but rather a statement of acknowledgement combined with remorse.

There is, however, one notable exception to this shared sense of explicit – and spoken – accountability. Ruth Misselwitz is a pastor, and in the days and months leading up to the changes of 1989, was a leader within the church peace movement. She was the target of particularly intensive observation by the Stasi. Upon reading her Stasi files, she was able to identify the person who was responsible for very invasive infractions upon her life. She describes a meeting with him:

I did once have a meeting with a Stasi-officer who had been responsible for me and my husband and the Peace Circle at Pankow. During the GDR-era, he was responsible for many inconveniences, impediments, attacks on us, and I had a conversation with him. The man confessed everything I asked him about. He said: Yes, I was accountable for this, but he didn't apologise. In that sense, there was no sense of having committed acts of

injustice. But for me, it was a very liberating experience, because I finally saw a face.

To this, I respond by asking if the man showed any kind of remorse, to which she replies in the negative. Our conversation continues:

MA: Did you feel forgiving towards him, even though he didn't apologise?

RM: Forgiveness [and reconciliation] – those are such big words! I did not have any feelings of revenge, I had no need to report him to the police and insist on retaliation and justice... I didn't feel any of that.

MA: Let's leave forgiveness. It's a big word. But is it important for someone to say I'm sorry? Not just to acknowledge, what they did, but to apologise?

RM: I didn't need that from him. It was enough that he came. That was a very, very difficult step for him.

This exchange with Misselwitz represents a departure from what I have heard from most of my project participants in two ways: first, she dismisses the language of forgiveness and reconciliation. (The passage cited here is introduced by a statement from her that 'forgiveness and reconciliation are very big words, too big' so in fact she repeats this sentiment twice within a few minutes.) It is not insignificant that a person of the church so emphatically dismisses the language of forgiveness. Second, Misselwitz is not particularly concerned that the person who had perpetrated such a sustained attack on her life expresses no remorse for having done so. For her, it is 'liberating' simply to have a face (being able to identify the 'who'), who is willing to articulate the wrongs which he committed (the what); she does not need for him to express remorse 'it was enough that he came.' Whether or not one should include this in a discussion of political forgiveness is debatable, as Misselwitz herself does not use this language. Still it is clear that the meeting between herself and the Stasi agent is significant in drawing a line under past, and fulfills the four criteria identified by Shriver, earlier, of political forgiveness.

### **Narrative and Forgiveness**

Critical to Misselwitz's story is the meeting which she has with the Stasi agent. As already discussed, for her what is important that he came, which she acknowledges would have been a 'very, very difficult step for him.' She describes their meeting in further detail:

We sat together here in this apartment – and he talked about his life. In the end, he seemed too miserable and pitiful to me, because he had had no life of his own in the GDR. He was not allowed to tell his family about his work. He was not allowed to tell his children – that was so pathetic! In comparison to that, we had a rich, a full, a wonderful life!

At this point, Misselwitz breaks out in a warm laughter, and it is difficult when being with her not to be absorbed by her obvious compassion. The description of this encounter demonstrates the power of narrative to function as a catalyst for moving beyond a traumatic past. Engaging with the humanity of the Stasi employee, and with the very depleted personal confines within which he led his 'pathetic' life, leads her to be able to see "a real person, and that demythologized everything." Clearly, she cannot change what has gone before, but through this encounter, she is 'liberated.'

Hannah Arendt regards the narrative of forgiveness as a solution to "the predicament of irreversibility" (1958: 237). Clearly the past cannot be undone, but the way in which the past is internalised into the make-up of the current and future self can in fact change over time. Griswold (2007) addresses this powerful potential of forgiveness, which:

confronts in a particular way the brute metaphysical fact that the past cannot be changed. The idea of narrative helps to explain just how the past can nonetheless change without pretense to undoing it, or ignoring, avoiding, rationalizing, or forgetting it. One may adopt a different perspective on it, attach a different meaning to it, respond to it in a different way, adapt it to one's evolving life 'story' (p. 100).

Griswold identifies three aspects of the victim's narrative which are changed in the course of forgiveness: "first, it expands to include the offender's narrative; second, it projects her own narrative into the future; and third, it incorporates a view about the sort of person one would want to be, about the 'ideals' one wishes to live out" (p. 104). Griswold argues, and I concur, that the process of forgiveness is intertwined with that of narrative, not only in that encountering the biography of another greatly facilitates one's ability to see life from their perspective - and by implication, to alter one's understanding of their actions - but that it critically alters the story of the original trauma. Here, the role of narrative imagination plays a central if not defining role in the process of forgiveness, in that the past is reframed to include the story of the offender, and this pursuit is influenced by a reimagining of the future, including questions about the ideal life (what is the life one will want to look back? How is it that one will evaluate one's own life?). In this sense, Griswold describes narratives of forgiveness as "projective as well as recollective..." (2007:104) "both backward looking and forward looking - they involve a commitment to make certain changes such that one's life story will unfold in the ways desired" (p. 108).

Griswold argues that it is not only the narrative of the victim which changes in this process, but also that of the offender, indeed in dialogue with the offender. This possibility of mutual transformation arises when the offender is able to show "that she is not just a wrong-doer; that wrong-doing is not 'all' of her", a re-framing of her earlier self which engages the injured party to try "to understand how the other could have made sense of her actions at the time, how the reasons she gave herself could have been reasons for her then" (p. 104), an exercise which Griswold describes as an "imaginative engagement" (p. 104). But

in order for the past to be re-framed, it must first be remembered. This is why for many an ethics of forgiveness is integrally tied to an ethics of remembrance (Blustein 2014): “remembrance makes forgiveness possible” (p. 17).

The narrative model of forgiveness discussed here is one in which both offender and offended have an opportunity “not to be determined by the past alone” but rather through a re-interpretation of the past, there is created the possibility for “renewal [which] may be compared to that represented by a new circle in the trunk of a tree; it surrounds what came before, and in a sense builds on it so as to develop new life” (Griswold 2007:109).

### **Forgiveness over time**

Griswold paints a model in which forgiveness is understood not as an endpoint, but rather as a process, which is temporally fluid, revisiting the past and in so doing, ‘forging a future that is not trapped in a closed loop determined by the past. ... At stake is... the interplay of perspectives over time’ (2007: 184). But is there a limitation on this interplay?

One of the defining features of narratives is that their meaning is contextual, and changes over time. Some things which were once unsayable can become over time, and/or in a different place, possible to articulate. The reverse is also true: individuals (and groups) might become silenced about topics they could once discuss. Thus it is that the same words do not necessarily carry with them the same meaning, even when the speaker and audience remain constant. The meaning we attach to what we hear and speak is altered as our lives, and the world around us, changes. When applied to the topic of forgiveness, this invites the question of the importance not only of time, but of timeliness. Do opportunities for forgiveness exist as open windows, indefinitely, or rather is there a period of time beyond which it is simply ‘too late’ for such a dialogic renewal to occur? This is a question upon which there was not a consensus amongst my project participants.

Here, a story told to me by Irene Kukutz is illuminating. As one of the core members of the group Women for Peace, Kukutz had worked closely with a small group of like-minded women, so effective in their efforts to frustrate the state that their code name in their Stasi files was ‘die Wesps’ (the wasps). Upon reading her Stasi file, she learned that one in their group, ‘Monika’, had been an informant for the Stasi. In order not to be overcome by such a deep betrayal, Kukutz and Katja Havemann (identified earlier) decided to interview their former friend. Ultimately, they published a book based on their series of interviews.

Following its publication, a letter which was written to Monika, ultimately finds its way to Kukutz. This is where the story picks up:

Irene: There came a letter for Monica, where a woman was saying thank you for her bravery and the great accomplishment to write that book. Yes.

And because Monica is dead I opened it and I answered her back because in this letter she explained that she has kind of the same history but that she hasn't spoken with her girl friends about that. And I became so angry about that. And first of all I told her that we wrote that book, Katja and me. So I wrote her a really bad letter. And in this letter I told her that now she doesn't have to tell her friends anymore. Everything has its time. And she should wander around with her story. She was really hurt. And full of anger she answered. So I say to myself now 'well, they should keep their stories to themselves.'

MA: Twenty years of silence

Irene: Yes, so late, and then they want to get acknowledgement. And there are others who then come and say suddenly [they wish to confess], like the Stasi stories are always present. People who want to come clean now after all that time...Yes, well it is too late.

Kukutz is utterly clear in her meaning here: 'Everything has its time.' The punishment for those who have waited too long is that there is no longer an audience for their stories. In contrast to those for whom the process of forgiveness allows them to reframe their past wrong-doing and thus to move beyond it, those who have remained silent, who have not engaged with the opportunity presented to them, are forever condemned to 'wander around with their stories' like lost souls in a moral desert.

Ulrike Poppe, who is a well-known public figure in the unified Germany, with a leading role in the attempt to reintegrate former collaborators and Stasi employees into society, feels differently from Kukutz. I ask her "Is there ever a moment when it all becomes too late for perpetrators to come forward?" She responds:

No, I don't think there's a moment when it's too late. I believe, on the contrary, that that takes time. Some people don't speak about what weighs heavily on their soul until very late. That is true for perpetrators as for victims. My father will be 90 next year. I visited him yesterday, both my parents. Throughout my entire childhood and afterwards he never spoke about the war. And we never asked. He was a soldier on the eastern front, a medic... he experienced terrible, gruesome dying all around. Yesterday, when I visited him, he started to talk. All of these stories he lived through in the Baltic States. That's coming only now. In my circle of friends and acquaintances... their parents don't tell their stories until the end of their lives. That is why I believe that this has [its own] time...

Given Poppe's work, it is interesting that she chooses to tell a story which is not about East Germany, but rather about Germany during the Third Reich. Moreover, the tale she offers is a personal one, and though it concerns accounts of experiences which happened to her parents more than half a century earlier,

the stories are fresh in her ears, having been told them only the day before. Although she delivers this story in response to my question about forgiveness, it is not absolutely clear how this concept relates to the story she tells, as there is no obvious transgression on the part of her parents, only a belated account of having witnessed atrocity, “terrible, gruesome dying all around.” Her point seems to be somewhat different: sometimes people – be they perpetrators or victims- only become capable of telling certain stories ‘in their own time’. Stories whose wounds touch the psyche deeply might take a very long time to be voiced: the opportunity to come forward, to speak, and to make oneself responsible for one’s past, should remain open.

A third position, which lies somewhere on the continuum between Kukutz and Poppe, is that expressed by Konrad Weiss. In the context of speaking about the high volume of people who chose not to acknowledge what they had done in the past, he rather shrugs his shoulders, and says,

I believe that in the end, time passed the people by. It is no longer important. There’s no point in arguing with old men of 80 about their activities in the Stasi. They won’t change, they won’t see their wrong, but they can’t do any harm any more, either.

These former Stasi agents are not condemned in the same sense as the woman who wrote the letter to Monika, because for her, she had wanted to wipe the slate clean, but had waited too long. They, on the other hand, appear to be committed to their silence. Not only do they not wish to speak of their pasts, but, critically, from Weiss’s point of view, it is no longer important – from the societal perspective - that they do so. Their burden is that they have become irrelevant. It is as if they have been written off.

When I ask Ruth Misselwitz whether or not it is ever too late to ask for forgiveness, she responds “Well, that depends on every individual.” Recalling the meeting she had with the Stasi agent assigned to her and her family, she elaborates:

If people are deeply hurt and cannot cope with what was done to them throughout their lives, then it is never too late. But many never had the chance to have a talk like this. That is why I think a conversation with a real person is very, very important, irrespective of whether he says “sorry” or not. The meeting is important.

Misselwitz’s comment highlights the importance of the setting – the where – over the temporal dimension of forgiveness. For her there may well be situations in which ‘it is never too late’ simply because there have not been enough opportunities for offenders to participate in meetings such as that which she organized. Smith (2008) argues that the important question is not ‘what is an apology’ but ‘what does it mean to give and receive an apology in a given context?’ (p. 22). Although, as already noted, there was no apology offered in the encounter Misselwitz had with the Stasi agent, the general point being made here is pertinent: apologies and acts of forgiveness do not happen in social and

political vacuums, but rather are positioned within a particular social space, and their meanings are affected by this location.

### ***Forgiveness and social space***

In the months and years following the demise of the GDR, there existed a considerable range of forums in which victims and offenders could come together to discuss what had transpired between them, with the ideal encounter or encounters helping both parties to come to a shared recognition of one another, and even possibly to enable a disposition towards forgiveness. These included the public meetings between Stasi collaborators and those upon whose activities they reported (the so-called 'victim/victimizer talks'), sometimes held in iconic settings such as Check Point Charlie, as well as in more private places, such as in pubs, or – unusually – in someone's home (such as the meeting described by Misselwitz). One place these encounters did not happen, however, was in the proceedings of East Germany's Enquete Kommission, or truth commission. The commission was founded in March 1992, several weeks after I arrived in Berlin to begin my field work. Unlike, for instance, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission – perhaps the best known of the approximately forty which were set up around the world in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – East Germany's truth commission was relatively unknown, not only internationally, but even to many East Germans. The purpose of the commission was to establish 'facts' about life in the former GDR, to establish an accepted version of its history. There were 148 reports commissioned on 95 questions. In addition to these, they gathered 759 academic papers on all aspects of the former regime, which it published in a 15- volume compilation. Overall, the commission accumulated over 15,000 pages of testimony and expertise (see Andrews 2003; and McAdams 2001). Only a very small portion of the proceedings of the truth commission involved personal testimony, which has come to be widely associated with truth commissions more generally. In East Germany, only 327 individuals – of a total population of 16 million - told their stories to the commission. Unusually for truth commissions, however, perpetrators were not included in this; those who gave witness tended to be 'the unsung victims of SED rule' (McAdams, 2001: 91). As Maier (1997) comments, this 'failure to make contestation central' was a key problem of the truth commission.

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)

That this did not happen with the East German truth commission is directly attributable to its purpose, which was to 'wrap up' the history of the GDR. Weber describes the goal of the commission as being to help cement a democratic consciousness and to foster a common political culture for the whole of

Germany' (1997: 203). 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).

For all of these reasons, East Germany's truth commission was not a place where victims and offenders could come together in hopes of establishing between themselves a way of processing their shared problematic past. Rather, its existence confirmed for many that the integrity of the citizens of East Germany was being brought under review, intensifying the already existing gulf between 'us' and 'them' – East v. West - which effectively positioned East German victims and offenders 'on the same side.' So if forgiveness and national healing were watchwords of the South African TRC, the reverse can be said of the Enquete Kommission, which firmly established moral story lines with villains and heroes of a nation whose purpose it was to both document and conclude.

In our interview in 1992, Annette Simon discusses the importance of the political context which was then hampering efforts of people to come to terms with the past. The Stasi files had only been open to the public for two months when we spoke, and by then less than 200 people had been able to read their files. When I ask her what effect if any the opening of the file has on East German identity, she responds:

It's really too early to say anything. Only 200 people have read their files so far. It's a double-edged sword. I think it's very important that it happens, and it would be good if at the same time, the files of the Verfassungsschutz [German secret service] were opened. [chuckles] If it were a mutual process. [The way it has happened], all of the blame is shifted to the East yet again. But the shame is there. It's something you must deal with. But at the moment, all it does is to further embarrass the East Germans. .... In the rapid unification process, it wasn't possible for each side to sort out their affairs in peace and quiet. If this were only the business of the GDR, it would be easier. ..., it is an East German affair! And then you could sort things out in your own family, if you will. But this way, you have to do it with the other family that can't stand you anyway! That's the hard part.

Simon's comment here speaks to the importance of creating a 'safe space' where, to use her metaphor, 'the family' of East Germany can attend to its own problems. But what is such a safe space? Ruth Misslewitz's account of her meeting with the Stasi agent indicates one possibility. Still, though the setting was private, (they met in her home), the distinction between the public and private spheres is not absolute; the two realms co-exist and dynamically interact with one another. Both the Stasi agent, and Misslewitz herself were positioned as they were not (only) because of who they were as individuals, but because of their different locations vis a vis the operations of a totalitarian state. In this sense, the very encounter between them could be regarded as an offshoot of the 'risks of citizenship' (Rai 2017), coexisting in, and mediated by private and public

spaces. Critically, however, the audience for the 'performance' was very different. As noted above, the audience for the Enquete Kommission was effectively the Bundestag. The more public encounters such as the Tater/Opfer talks at Check Point Charlie were more of a spectacle, where each had a certain script to follow. Only those which occurred in the most private settings (the home, the pub), away from the public gaze, were able to create an environment conducive to the process of forgiveness, discussed above, and even these meetings, which were very rare, were not necessarily deemed satisfactory by those who participated in them.

### ***Why forgiveness?***

There are a range of arguments regarding why forgiveness is generally something to be desired. Included in most if not all of these is the basic tenet that forgiveness releases both the injured and the offender from a traumatic past. Only in more recent scholarship on political forgiveness is there the argument that forgiveness (often associated with reconciliation) is important for communities – though whether, and how, groups can either ask for or offer forgiveness remains a point of contention. It is rarely, however, considered that what might be healing for the community might in fact be counter-productive for individuals. The cases I have discussed in this article have been those of individuals who are willing to consider engaging in a dialogue with those who have harmed them (either directly or indirectly) but only if certain conditions exist. For them, a forgiveness offered in the absence of acknowledgement, accountability and remorse would be, in the words of John Dewey, an instance of 'presumed good... serv[ing] as a cloak for actual bad' (cited in Brudholm 2008:176).

Werner Fischer was one of the better known oppositional figures of East Germany. He was arrested and incarcerated numerous times by the Stasi, until 1988 when he, with four others, was ultimately deemed too much of a threat to the state, and forcibly exiled from the country. Less than two years later, he was appointed as the key official responsible for disbanding the Stasi. He describes his reaction to his changed circumstances:

I had a body guard, all former MfS<sup>iii</sup> people, and a secretary, also former MfS, and there I was sitting at this desk and was thinking to myself: where were you two years ago? then I was in this room being interrogated! And I visited the cell I was held in ... I somehow couldn't comprehend all that had happened

Fischer describes time and again his initial attitude towards those who had worked for the Stasi:

I was much more tolerant then, because I took the view that, if we manage to create an atmosphere in which people relax and admit that they were spies then... it need not be made public, it is sufficient if every one is confronted with his counterpart and has a chat face to face. Then we have

the situation where one can say... well, ok, may be under similar circumstances I would have acted the same.

Once again here, we see the distinction being made between public and private encounters. Although Fischer is initially optimistic, his hope ultimately recedes when offenders are not forthcoming.

Unfortunately, what I had expected from people, did not happen, that they come clean about their actions. Of course, they can only do so if they are without fear. And the atmosphere was, and still is today, not very conducive for that to happen. ... many people hope that their collaboration with the system will never be discovered. I think that this is tragic not only for their personal future development but for the inner peace of the country. In human terms, I find this reprehensible.

For Fischer, what is at stake here is not personal redemption, but something of a much higher order: the 'inner peace of the country' – even if, as is sometimes the case, this might be at the cost of the individual. Fischer and other East German dissidents regarded being open to dialogue and a preparedness to forgive as a civic responsibility, something with which they felt morally obliged to engage, not for their own individual selves, but rather as a critical building block for the future. This explains both their initial predisposition, as well as the acute disappointment that this invitation for dialogue did not occur. Throughout the longitudinal study, participants mentioned time and again the importance of forgiveness 'for the next generation' – echoing Griswold's views cited earlier, that narratives of forgiveness represent growth which extends beyond the individual self: "The hoped-for growth or renewal may be compared to that represented by a new circle in the trunk of a tree; it surrounds what came before, and in a sense builds on it so as to develop new life" (2007:109).

### ***Closing thoughts***

In this article, I have offered an in-depth narrative exploration of the concept of political forgiveness, as manifested in the personal testimonies of East German dissidents interviewed over two decades. An investigation of the questions who, what, when, where why and how reveals the complexity of the multi-layers of political forgiveness. The range of accounts presented here have demonstrated the hard work that lies at the heart of political forgiveness, and some of its key obstacles. We have heard the voice of Katya Havemann describing why the spies cannot forgive the spied upon, as they are the 'living guilty conscience,' and that of Annette Simon who struggles to forgive the GDR, even while she acknowledges the 'difficult conditions' that impacted upon decisions which individuals made while living under the dictatorship. Konrad Weiss and Irene Kuktuz both offer stories which highlight the importance of the passage of time, and frame the possibility of forgiveness as existing within a particular window of opportunity. For them, as the decades have passed, the importance of the absent apology has diminished, and those who did not confess and repent are condemned to live with their untold stories, a life of irrelevance. Yet for others,

like Ulrike Poppe, until one's last breath, it is never too late. Ruth Misselwitz's extraordinary tale of compassion for the man who would have killed her had circumstances been different demonstrates the role of dialog and the importance of space in overcoming a traumatic past. Together these stories reveal the human dimension – the passion, the heart ache, the necessity and near impossibility – of political forgiveness.

Friedrich Nietzsche famously advocated abandoning the idea of forgiveness altogether; for him, it was a sign of weakness. The data examined in this article suggest that while the process is indeed complex, it is not for the weak, but for those who are prepared to struggle for an alternative vision of the future. Derrida argues that forgiveness is possible only in exceptional circumstances: "Forgiveness is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalising. It *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible, as it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality" (2001:33). The fraught process of forgiveness embodies not consensus but contest, a battle over the past, in the present and for the future. Although difficult, maybe even rare in its full realisation, forgiveness represents one of our most human capabilities, that of transformation – of self and society - through communication, accountability and understanding. The hard work of forgiveness upholds the principles of the moral universe even while they are contested, and links hope to change.

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<sup>i</sup> I have used the term ‘narrative architecture’ to indicate the storied, foundational framework of political forgiveness. In keeping with this, I have organized the current article around the basic building blocks of who (‘Forgiving those who do not seek to be forgiven’) what (‘The Negotiated Meaning of Forgiveness’), how (‘Narrative and Forgiveness’), when (‘Forgiveness over Time’), where (‘Forgiveness and Social Space’) and why (‘Why Forgiveness’). While I am aware that there are other methodological tools for studying political forgiveness, my contention is that such a narrative model uniquely allows for an exploration of the complexity of the phenomenon.

<sup>ii</sup> SED stands for Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or the Socialist Unity Party, which was the governing political party of East Germany for the forty years of its existence.

<sup>iii</sup> The MfS stands for Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, or the Ministry for State Security, otherwise known as ‘the Stasi’