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Reenactment in the GDR and the FRG

An Actor-centered Study

Abstract: While the formative phase of the Anglo-American reenactment scene has already been well researched, a historicisation of reenactments as a popular cultural practice of visualising the past is still largely lacking for Europe. In particular, little is known about the developments in East and West Germany. This is the starting point for our article, which provides an initial reconstruction and classification of the developments in the two German states, which gained momentum especially in the 1970s and 1980s. Our focus is on the subjective experience of contemporary actors, on the basis of which it we trace how various groups of people interested in history in the two German states formed and consolidated and in which ways they were similar or different. It also sheds light on the political and everyday conditions under which people acted. On the basis of these initial actor-centered explorations, the text draws attention to desiderata for further research and suggests research questions for future studies in this field – for example with regard to the transnational relationships and networks of both reenactment scenes and the developments during the post-reunification period.
Keywords: reenactment, public history, German contemporary history, historical and popular culture, American Civil War and Napoleonics

1. Scholarly Interest and Historical Context

History that can be touched and experienced, is colorful and spectacular – that is the promise of historical reenactment. Reenactments turn history into an emotional and sensory laden experience for both actors and spectators, and, as such, are an expression of a late-modern appropriation of the past in specific discursive and biographical contexts (Bendix 2000; Groschwitz 2010; Uhlig 2020). They have been a prominent element in historical and popular culture in Germany at least since the large-scale reenactment put on for the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Leipzig in 2013. As such they are an object of historically reasoned ethnographic and historiographic scholarship.

In spite of the currently observable boom, reenactments of the past are not a phenomenon exclusive to the late modern period. This practice of visualization has its roots in various different phenomena, such as religious pilgrimage, *tableaux vivants (*living pictures), historical processions and world's fair expositi-

ons (Sénécheau and Samida 2015; Tomann 2020). The founding of open-air and living history museums with elements of reenacted history, such as Skansen in Sweden (1891) and subsequently Colonial Williamsburg (1926) and Plimoth Plantation (1947; now called Plimoth Patuxet Museums) in the United States, helped shape the development of the recent reenactment phenomenon.[1] Furthermore, the popular culture form of historical appropriation and presentation in the US is traditionally closely connected to practices of American Civil War (1861–1865) remembrance.[2] The 100th year anniversaries of the various Civil War battles were taken as opportunities to put on elaborate reenactments (Lowenthal 2015: 481). The founding phase of the US-American scene has been well explored in scholarship (Jureit 2020). Much less is known, however, about the development of the phenomenon in post-Second World War Europe, especially in the two German states. While this article represents an initial contribution to the reconstruction and classification of the topic, its focus is deliberately limited to the dynamic developments in the GDR (German Democratic Republic; Deutsche Demokratische Republik) and FRG (Federal Republic of Germany; Bundesrepublik Deutschland) in the 1970s and 80s, and to the perspective of the participants who were then active in the scene. We pose the questions of how these groups of history enthusiasts in the two German states formed and consolidated over the course of these two decades, and in which ways they were similar or differed from each other. We similarly highlight the political stipulations and everyday conditions under which the participants were acting. Based on this first study, we refer at the end of this text to the currently existing research desiderata and develop further research questions for future studies.[3]

The use of the word 'reenactment' as an analytical term carries with it some challenges. 'Reenactment' and the closely related 'living history' are emic terms (Tomann

1 The historic antecedents were, however, phenomena with different objectives and audiences, which, in spite of their shared quintessence, should be considered distinct from each other. Drawing a single line, for example, from the *tableaux vivants* of the 18th century to the battle scene reenactments of the present day inevitably leads to problematic abridgments.

2 According to Wolfgang Hochbruck (2016), the performative examination of the Civil War battles began in the United States just shortly after the final hostilities of the war had ended in 1865. In contrast to the present day, the early forms of these reenactments could be understood as a processing of the war experience, as the actors in the first 19th century reenactments were invariably Civil War veterans.

3 Our research follows historian Christoph Kleßmann's interpretive approach of the two countries' "asymmetrically interwoven parallel history." This attempts "to better do justice to the deadweight and the interlocking of West and East German history than a straight history of contrasts or a new national history" (Kleßmann 2005: 10). In order to make this approach, which deals with accounts of personal experiences and multi-perspectivity, adequately fruitful for the field of reenactment studies, our investigations of the formation of this scene necessarily initially concentrate on the depiction of the actors' perspectives – which have so far received little attention – in relation to the developments on a national level.

2020, 2021). However, the differentiation between the two terms on a theoretical level is not always consistent in German-language scholarship (Pleitner 2011). Our approach concentrates exclusively on reenactments as a historical- and pop-cultural leisure phenomenon, in the setting of which temporally and spatially delineated historical events (as found in authenticated sources) – mostly battles or smaller skirmishes – are actively reconstructed. That contemporary self-perception and socially founded discourses are reflected in this phenomenon makes it informative for cultural analysis.

In order to contextualize the first heyday of the development of reenactment in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a closely related phenomenon of historical culture must first be discussed. Starting in the 1950s, so-called "hobbyism" spread through both the FRG and GDR. This refers to, in the ethnological literature, the "amateur preoccupation with the lifestyle of North American Indians" (Feest 1999: 176).[4] An essential leisure-time activity for some citizens of East and West Germany alike was, through costume and playacting, to temporarily step into the lives of American Indigenous people (Kalshoven 2012; Penny 2014).[5] Diplomatic negotiations, Indigenous customs and ways of life, and sometimes even military skirmishes were all subjects of reenactment. This practice, also referred to as "Indianistik" in the GDR, largely had a decidedly critical stance towards capitalism and the United States. The ideological framing conveyed a (spiritual) solidarity with those oppressed by U.S.-American imperialism and helped to solidify an image of America that was compliant with the GDR's political system. In the politically and spatially constricted circumstances of the GDR, however, this practice of Indianistik also offered some cultural leeway and created a niche in which the longing for "freedom, expanse and adventure" (von Borries/Fischer 2008: 189) could be indulged. Enthusiasts in the FRG organized themselves primarily into so-called Western Clubs, which became a gathering place for all those who found themselves captivated by the costumed reenactment of North American history. These clubs centered on the social interaction and common interest in this playful immersion in history (Drexl 2022). A differentiation of this scene began to develop in both countries from the 1970s onward. Groups began to form

4 We explicitly use hobbyism here as a technical term, per Christian F. Feest's definition. For a discussion of the scope and alternatively used meanings of the term, we refer readers at this point to the relevant literature (Kalshoven 2012: 8–46). So-called history workshops, whose members dealt with the local and regional gaps left in the process of coming to terms with the past, especially the era of National Socialism, are additionally of significance in the context of the public grappling with and examination of history in the FRG. This dealing with the past also had a concrete bearing on local and regional history, but was following other objectives than the recreation of the past in reenactment (Lindenberger and Wildt 1989).

5 Birgit Turski (1994: 20–21) notes that the hobby was widely popular in Western Europe as well as in the Eastern Bloc states (such as the Polish People's Republic, the CSSR and the USSR).

in the 1980s, for example, that were no longer satisfied with the interpreting of Indigenous customs or romanticizing of cowboys, but, instead, wanted to oppose it with their style of role-playing. The Southerners of the American Civil War served as a model for this. Although these representations, as described in the case of Indianistik (Turski 1994: 65–66), were understood to be controversial,[6] the Confederates, characterized as rebels, found more and more adherents. However, in this context and according to the current state of knowledge, no elaborate battle reenactments were put on.

The impetus to bring history out of the books and "to life" to be physically experienced with all senses was one that actors in both the GDR and the FRG pursued with a similar intensity beyond Indianistik practice and hobbyism. Some actors found themselves increasingly desiring their reenactments to be closer and truer to the historical record, and spent their free time researching the details. The reenactment of historical events in the GDR – apart from Indianistik – developed alongside the close examination of and grappling with local and regional history. Taken all together, these various developmental strands culminated in a practice that we today refer to as reenactment.

2. Actor-centered Approach and Sources

The origins and later centers of the evolving reenactment scene in the GDR could be found in Leipzig and Jena, along with other smaller places in Brandenburg. Interviews were conducted in 2018 with two actors – referred to here as Mr X. and Mr Y. – who, starting in the late 1970s, were significantly involved in organizing events in Leipzig and Jena. The initial contact with Mr X. came about during a reenactment we attended in Großgörschen, south of Leipzig. Mr Y., on the other hand, is one of the longest-standing members of the group *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Jena 1806* ('Working group Jena 1806'), which we contacted. A wide-ranging interview with him, thus, seemed promising. Both interviews were conducted at the reenactors' respective homes, south of Leipzig and near Jena, respectively. Through Mr Y., we were granted access to the association history of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Jena 1806*, which we reviewed along with press clippings found in the Jena City Archive.[7]

Regarding the reconstruction of the formational phase in the FRG, we relied primarily on empirical material that were collected in the spring of 2019 and that already served as the basis for our initial work in this field (Uhlig and Kathke 2021).

6 Von Borries and Fischer (2008) point out that the adherents of the Southern states in the GDR held the first gathering of their own in Riesa in 1985. It does not seem, however, that any sustainable growth or development followed.

7 The association's history is held in private possession by one of the interviewees and was written by a member of the group at the beginning of the 1990s.

In the context of efforts to retrace the genesis of the West German scene, we were able to identify and interview the organizers (who we call Mr A. and Mr B.) of the first Civil War reenactment, which took place in 1985 on a military parade ground near the city of Baumholder in Rhineland-Palatinate. This event was organized and carried out by private citizens, to the almost complete exclusion of any public or wider audience.[8] We became aware of the reenactment in Baumholder thanks to a retrospective published in a magazine of military history and weapons technology, *RWM Depesche* (Heinz 2011). However, the subsequent systematic evaluation of relevant periodicals (the newspaper *Rhein-Zeitung* and the local events calendar of the Birkenfeld district) produced no results. Neither did phone calls to a local history and geography society (*Geschichtswerkstatt Baumholder*). No mention that a Civil War reenactment had been held there in 1985 was to be found in any of the sources we reviewed, nor did anyone in Baumholder seem to have any knowledge of it. It was only through correspondence with the author of the article mentioned above that any progress was made, as the author put us in contact with Mr A. Although the latter was neither mentioned nor quoted in the article, he provided background information as a co-organizer and active participant in the reenactment. This strand of development in the West German scene was additionally pursued because, as the qualitative inquiry would go on to show, the *Napoleonik*[9] – that is, the preoccupation with the era of the Napoleonic Wars (1800–1814) and the Wars of Liberation (1813–1815) – served as a thematic link between reenactments in the GDR and the FRG. Only email correspondence and telephone conversations were possible with the current secretary (Mr C.) of the *Freundeskreis Lebendige Geschichte e. V.* ('Friends of Living History') and the co-founder (Mr D.) of the *Napoleonische Gesellschaft* ('Napoleonic Society') due to the ongoing Corona pandemic restrictions.

Employing the actor-centered perspective notoriously poses some specific challenges for research. The things which are memorized and reported in an interview are "above all incidents that are prominent and suited to the construction of a story worth telling" (Lehmann 2007: 277). Memory is, accordingly, not only an intentional reactivation of stored knowledge, but a highly subjective and selective process and, thus, already in itself an autonomous interpretative power (Schröder 2005). That reenactors, at times, reproduce biased narrative templates that are well-tried in the scene for their self-descriptions, has been the subject of recent note and criticism (Jureit 2020: 16). To conclude from that, however, that the interviewing of the actors

8 On order that the statements of the actors presented and quoted here remain comparable to those made in previously published work, we decided to use the same pseudonymization here as well (Uhlig and Kathke 2021). This is why those first named in this text are referred to as Mr X. and Mr Y., which we understand some might find an irritating or perplexing choice.

9 The actors themselves use the term 'Napoleonik' to refer to their hobby.

involved would offer little to no analytical insight would also fall short. This recourse to the stereotypical is not a specific characteristic that is exclusively inherent to the phenomenon being researched here, as has been shown by the fields of biographical and narrative research. It is, instead, a general feature of autobiographical representation that must be taken into consideration in all scholarship that relies on interview material and/or egodocuments. The confrontation with and analysis of the past – whether it takes place in the setting of an academic interview, an everyday conversation or in the context of a reenactment – always happens in the here and now. When interpreting self-disclosures, attention should also be given to the phenomenon of "multi-directional memory" (Rothberg 2021). That means, simply put, that the act of remembering and the life story of the person doing the remembering are always interconnected. One possible consequence of this is that a specific sequence of memory can determine or trigger another, which, at first glance, might not seem to be congruent in terms of content, and from an external viewpoint, might seem arbitrary. However, these overlaps and interferences are of great importance for personal memory because they allow for narrative coherence and, thus, individual sense-making. They can serve as instructive indicators for cultural analysis, in that they can help us capture and more incisively map out – and, thus, be able to discuss the intertwining of – various social discourses.

It is important for the critical classification of the material relevant to the West German context to know that neither of the interviewees (Mr A. and Mr B.) have actively participated in Civil War reenactments since the turn of the century, nor kept in close contact with any of their former fellow reenactors, nor have close contact with any who are currently active. For both actors, the abandonment of their hobby followed hurt feelings they experienced while they were still active participants. These include, for example, insufficient appreciation from others for extraordinary commitment, or interpersonal frictions that did not have anything to do with the hobby's content or focus. That resentments or nostalgic romanticization of the early days could be reflected in these narratives is something that we have taken into consideration. The East German actors, on the other hand, are still active, and they highlight this continuity in their lives with pride. Yet, it also remains valid here to look out for and label any possible romanticization.

3. Line of Development in the GDR

Leipzig and the surrounding region, with a multitude of events, currently counts as one of the most important places in the German reenactment scene. The origins of this development can be traced back to the end of the 1970s, when a small group of history enthusiasts started reenacting incidents from the Napoleonic Wars that took place locally. Leipzig had a variety of reference points to offer in this respect: the city and region have notably and traditionally served as a memorial site of the Napoleonic

Wars, at least since the dedication of the Monument to the Battle of the Nations in 1913. Additionally, the so-called Apel-stones, which are scattered throughout the city at the locations of various battle skirmishes, serve as local memorial makers.

Mr X. and Mr Y. belonged to the group that played such a significant role in shaping this early formational phase of the reenactment scene in the GDR. Both still actively participate in this hobby, as they are respectively able, and they have supported, shaped and influenced the development of the scene from the beginning through to the present day. They see themselves as autodidacts in the field of history, do not have an academic education and worked in manual professions – one as a mason, one as a printer – until retirement. The intensive engagement with – and resulting reenactment of – local history served both as a fulfilling and meaningful recreational activity, which they vigorously pursued in the evenings and weekends. Mr Y. even describes his relationship to the past as a kind of "addiction" that grabbed him back then, and to this day has not let go. For Mr X., as a printer, it was his interest in Leipzig's historical development as a major center of the publishing and book trade that was paramount. He was active in the *Fachgruppe Buchgewerbe* ('Book Trade Professionals' Group') in the Cultural Association at the start of the 1980s, where he focused on the history of Leipzig's printing industry during the Napoleonic era. Even then, he noted a growing interest in local and regional history, as well as the different ways people were interacting with it; it was increasingly being reenacted by "small groups from Liebertwolkwitz, Schkeuditz and Jena" at historical locations. Mr X. recalls that these initial historical reenactments around the anniversary of the Battle of Leipzig started out "rather small." As far as he remembers, the first large event occurred in 1988, a 'bivouac' around the monument to the Battle of the Nations that his *Fachgruppe Buchgewerbe* was invited to:

> And [we] were naturally quite proud of that. Now we also had a uniform. And so I said: [...] And where should we go now? Oh well. We'll come up with something. There were a few poles, a tarpaulin and some rope. And so, we rigged something up, as it were. And then there [we] were in the middle of this bivouac-life. It was all new to us, we didn't know anything. They really had it like in 1813 [...], they were sleeping on straw and [...] no one was smoking cigarettes. They smoked pipes instead. And evenings around the campfire [...], it was [...] rugged and romantic.

Mr X., when he first personally encountered the reenactment groups already in existence, found himself astounded not only at their attempts to recreate the historical reality of 1813 in as much detail as possible. He also thought it remarkable that all the participants were equipped with weapons they had fashioned themselves. The military equipment had been assembled "with all the resources the GDR had available," with materials "from the German Reichsbahn" ('National Railway') to "sabre blades that [were] forged from the suspension system springs taken from a Wartburg car." Yet, it was early 19th century printing technology that by far most impressed Mr X., a

trained professional printer. In addition to his military equipment, he gradually built a printing press, an apparently historically accurate recreation, that he dubbed *Felddruckerei 1813* ('Field Printing Works 1813'), made out of a "wagon with a printing press and type cases."

There was also, however, a second no less important aspect to all this for Mr X. Looking back, he says, that those in the groups "got involved and didn't just [have to] run around in a uniform. That was never just it, not even in the GDR era, but rather, they wanted to see: would they also still be there when there was work to be done?" It became abundantly clear over the course of the interview that the reenactment groups saw the preservation and maintenance of the various material relics of the Napoleonic War era, such as the smaller monuments and memorial stones, as under their purview, as a matter of their own self-conception and identity. Indeed, according to Mr X., from the very beginning, the preservation of this material legacy played as central a role in the activities of these reenactment groups as the actual reenactments of military actions.

Our conversation with Mr X. left the exact circumstances surrounding the emergence of Leipzig's reenactment scene mostly unexplained. The reference to smaller groups that were already actively reenacting Napoleonic history prior to the first large event in 1988 became clearer with the help of contemporary media coverage. The conjecture seems likely that public historical reenactment had already become popular in the GDR by the early 1980s and did not remain a purely niche phenomenon. A report in the national daily newspaper *Neues Deutschland* ('New Germany') in October 1983 about the ceremonies marking the 170th anniversary of the Battle of Leipzig suggests that the group of actors had quickly increased in number and got themselves swiftly organized.

> Members of the *Interessengemeinschaft 'Völkerschlacht 1813'* ['Interest Group "Battle of Leipzig 1813"'], of the Liebertwolkwitz branch of the Cultural Association, marched last week following in the tracks of the Russian-Prussian troops from Mutzschen to Neunitz [...]. The historic uniforms of Russian, Prussian, Saxon, Austrian, Swedish and Napoleonic soldiers [...] made for a powerful and colorful picture. [...] 118 participants were counted in the march, which was greeted by mayors and residents in every town. (Wenk 1983: n.p.)

In addition to Leipzig, Finsterwalde in Brandenburg and Jena and the surrounding area in Thuringia played an important role in the development of the reenactment scene in the GDR. At the beginning of the 1980s, Mr Y. (born in 1951) was living in a small village near Jena, that was located very close to the Jena-Auerstedt battleground. Although the battleground had fascinated and appealed to Mr Y. since he was a child, his path to reenacting the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt did not begin on his own doorstep, but in Leipzig instead. Between 1981 and 1986, he and a number of his fellow history enthusiasts from Jena were members of the *Interessengemeinschaft*

Völkerschlacht 1813[10] , organized under the auspices of the Cultural Association. In all likelihood, they belonged to the groups to which Mr X. had referred that had been reenacting skirmishes from the Battle of Leipzig since the beginning of the 1980s "on a small scale." It was only on the occasion of the 180th anniversary of the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt in 1986 that the opportunity was taken to found the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Jena 1806*.[11] In February 1987, the Jena group was registered as a separate entry with the Cultural Association, in the local group Neuengönna/Jena-Land. Mr Y. recalled that registration in the Cultural Association required a minimum of seven members. Without further ado, the three men enrolled themselves, their wives and one of their children, who was more than 14 years old at the time, as members.

3.1 Hands-on Local History in the Cultural Association of the GDR

That these history-related activities in both Leipzig and Jena played out under the auspices of the Cultural Association is hardly surprising, given that there were no clubs or associations allowed in the GDR beyond the officially organized and politically dictated framework of the mass organizations permitted by the state. The Cultural Association covered a broad spectrum of activities and, in that way, was similar to other mass organizations, although it differed regarding the intensity of its alliance with state structures (Dietrich 2019: 1743–1750; Zimmer 2019). The Cultural Association, although it was part and parcel of the existing political order, had a special status of sorts, in that it allowed its members some room for personal initiative. It was an extremely heterogeneous institution without a tightly organized governance structure and explicit "hierarchal relationships [...]" (Meier 2000: 599). Most of those who joined the Cultural Association wanted to pursue a recreational activity or cultivate personal interests, but not ostensibly to express any political convictions (Dietrich 2019: 1745).

The Cultural Association, on the one hand, officially embedded the developing reenactment scene and its preoccupation with regional history in the state structures of the GDR. On the other hand, it allowed for local history-related activities without restricting them.[12] Although its treatment in research has been predominantly

10 The *Interessensgemeinschaft Völkerschlacht 1813* was a subgroup of the larger *Arbeitskreis 1813* ("Working Group 1813"), which in addition to those in Leipzig and Jena, also had members in Finsterwalde (Zimmer 2019: 490). Zimmer does indeed mention Fürstenwalde, but that it was instead Finsterwalde is evidenced by, among other things, an article in the newspaper *Neues Deutschland* about the "Cultural Association members in true-to-original uniforms" (Herr 1986: o. S.).

11 This comes from the association history of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Jena 1806*.

12 To what extent actors' regional history related activities in the *Gesellschaft für Denkmalpflege* ('Society for the Preservation of Historical Monuments'), founded in 1977, or in the *Gesellschaft für Heimatpflege* ('Local Heritage Society'), founded in 1979, were connected to the Cultural Association remains a question for future research.

ambivalent (Maubach 2012; Meier 2000), both interviewees gave decidedly positive assessments of the Cultural Association. Mr X. considers it fortunate that the Cultural Association "tolerated wacky guys like us." From this retrospective self-description, it can be inferred that Mr X. recognized the potential for conflict with the official party line in the GDR posed by the battle reenactments. As he saw it, the Cultural Association was not a mass organization with a political objective, but rather an institution that provided organizational cover for his hobby, including, for example, accident insurance with continued payment of wages. He perceived the Cultural Association as only loosely tied to the state system. Mr Y. also continually highlighted that there was no 'paternalism' emanating from the Cultural Association.

Both Mr X. and Mr Y. stressed that the reenactment of the Battle of Leipzig had always found historical-political backing in the construct of the 'German-Russian brotherhood-in-arms.' This is also reflected in the in the *Neues Deutschland* mentioned above, which cites an illustrated lecture at Leipzig's Moritzbastei in which the reenacted battle was subsequently categorized as symbolically in line with the "tradition of the German-Russian alliance." The ideological construct of a fraternal alliance – a brotherhood-in-arms, as it were – between the GDR and the Soviet Union formed a legitimizing framework that the reenactors could appropriate. The alliance originated with the neutrality treaty signed by Prussia and Russia in 1812 in Tauroggen that lead to a Prussian-Russian alliance against Napoleon (Müller 2004: 71). The common rebellion against French foreign rule was the defining moment for this element of East German historical ideology.

In contrast to the group in Leipzig, the Jena group were not able to put this historical-political construct to good use for their activities. At the 1806 battle, it was the French Army against Saxony and Prussia; Russian troops were not involved. Beyond that, the Jena group were enthused about the victorious French troops, who – from the reenactors' point of view – were not adequately commemorated in the GDR. Nonetheless, the *Jena 1806* group's reenactment and commemoration of local history took place within a protected historical-political space, because the victory of the French Army at Jena and Auerstedt, in a way, marked the beginning of the end of feudalism in Prussia. The battle reenactments in the 1980s were additionally politically appropriate in light of the GDR's foreign policy and affairs towards the end of its statehood. The expansion of trade relations with France and the development of cultural ties, which saw the opening of culture centers in East Berlin and Paris, as well as the visit to the French capital in January 1998 by the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands's* ('East German Communist Party') General Secretary Erich Honecker, where he was received with all state honors, are all emblematic of the attempt to foster connections between the GDR and France. The trend of this general political situation favored the activities of the Jena actors, who were staging the true-to-life historical dimension of the French-German relations for their fellow citizens.

3.2 "Conservators in Uniform"[13]

In addition to the reenactment of battle scenes, caring for the physical historical relics was of central importance for Mr Y. He reports that the three original founders of the *Jena 1806* group had begun restoring battlefield memorials even before the group was officially formed. In the course of the ceremonies marking the 180th anniversary, parts of the battle were reenacted on a large scale for the first time.[14] The reenactment drew more than 3,500 onlookers, some of whom even came from abroad – including "an entire busload of French 'history tourists'" (Das Volk 1986: n.p.).

The emphasis on this type of historical-cultural initiative regarding the battlefield and its markers and memorials was a recurring theme throughout the entire conversation with Mr Y. He repeatedly reiterated concerning the battlefield: "We were the actors."[15] Their commitment did not seem to be restricted by the political authorities or the regional administration. The newspaper *Thüringer Landeszeitung* (A.K. n.y.: n.p.) reported on the "[q]uiet work of three Cultural Association members" who not only took it upon themselves to erect the commemorative "Napoleon stone," but also financed the work themselves.[16] The would-be founders of the *Jena 1806* group laid a wreath in 1981 for the first time at the central memorial in the Jena city district of Vierzehnheiligen. As Mr Y. recalls:

> There were [...] some people watching from inside their windows, peeking out from behind the curtains. Thinking, look at the weirdos here with the historical [...] uniforms. [...] But then, at the latest [when] we started to really restore the old monuments [...], then they thought [...], they're doing something [...] for history.

As the author of the article in the newspaper *Thüringer Neueste Nachrichten* put it: "A few years ago, people were saying in some places 'Here come the weirdos' when they dedicated a memorial marker in uniform. These days they are referred to as 'our Napoleons'" (Friedrich 1988: n.p.).

13 Headline of an article in the weekend supplement of the newspaper *Das Volk*, October 26, 1984 by W. Kiesel.

14 Many newspaper articles also bore witness to this, such as in *Das Volk*, local edition, October 21, 1986; and in *Volkswacht* November 8, 1986 (Schuster 1986).

15 This statement requires some contextualization that can only be offered to a limited extent here. It should perhaps be kept in mind that in addition to the activities of the *Jena 1806* group, the Cospeda 1806 memorial site had been in existence since 1956 and had an exhibition memorializing the battle. The memorial site stems from the private collection of Walter Lange (1887–1969), the proprietor of the tavern *Grüner Baum zur Nachtigall*. During Lange's lifetime, he was hardly known by his actual name; instead, given the similarities in both stature and bearing with the namesake general, he was always called the 'Napoleon of Cospeda,' an appellation he gladly embodied for his guests and beyond his place of business as well. The memorial site has been redesigned several times since its initial conception, and has belonged to the Jena City Museum since the 1994 incorporation of Cospeda into Jena (Kaufmann 1996: 36–40).

16 Article found in the association history of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Jena 1806*, glued in, undated.

The first glimpses of the formational phase exemplify that reenactment in the GDR provided a sanctuary for both actors from everyday life under socialism, one that allowed for a "meaningful hobby" (Mr Y.) and, thus, opened up space for thought.[17] Political dissidence or even considering fleeing from the GDR were never options for our two interviewees – even when their many foreign contacts, such as those in France, might suggest otherwise. The ties between the actors and their hometowns and surroundings were too strong. This can be seen particularly in the case of Jena in the drive to erect and maintain memorial markers on the historic battlefield. Gerd Dietrich (2019: 1748) points out that in the 1970s and 80s, "on the fringes of local history, a relatively impartial pursuit of regional and local history [was] possible." The focus on local and regional history demonstrated by the actors introduced here confirms this observation, although in its specific active, physical manifestation it requires further placement in the context of the GDR of that time. For a proper understanding of this context, it is important to note that from the end of the 1970s, the historiography of the GDR followed a modified integral approach with a more open view of history; one that transcended a concentration on the strict revolutionary tradition of history in the GDR.[18] The very proposition of a socialist nation was, thus, not thrown into doubt, but instead it was intended that "the mediation of a more flexible, expanded view of history would especially promote an East German identity and consolidate the country." (Dietrich 2019: 1723) The shift in the GDR to a national history of its own that was meant to strengthen the citizens' awareness of and pride in the socialist state and nation was accompanied – and helped along – by a turn to the regional. It, thus, becomes clear why the reenactors had so much leeway in their pursuit of local and regional history and why they were apparently mostly left to their own devices politically.[19]

17 On the "tolerated 'niches'" and the question of the extent to which the GDR could be considered an "abandoned society", see Ralph Jessen (1995).

18 In this context, there is also a discussion about the differentiation between tradition and heritage (Dietrich 2019: 1724). Fundamental to this debate in the historiography of the GDR, see Meier and Schmidt (1988).

19 With the focus on local and regional history, the term *Heimat* (a connotatively rich German word for home or homeland) also comes more into view. In the context of the GDR, *Heimat* is a complex concept. As mapped out by Cornelia Kühn (2020), the leadership of the East German Communist Party kept itself distanced from traditional notions of *Heimat*. In the early days of the GDR, the concept of *Heimat* was reframed politically; regional allegiance and local identification were pushed to the back and traditional ideas and connotations were given new interpretations. As Jan Palmowski (2016: 27) points out, however, the political leadership of the GDR had recognized in the late 1960s that the sociological ideology "would be reinforced with cultural and historical roots if socialism and the GDR could be woven tightly together with the idea of 'Heimat'." *Heimat*-related practices that were meant to feed the socialist identity at the local level, and, thus, also undergird the (cultural) autonomy of the GDR, were increasingly valued. The exact nature of the relationship between the

There were, nonetheless, boundaries to this relative freedom enjoyed by the reenactors. Indeed, while Mr X. expressed more than once that "the Stasi didn't cause any problems" over the group's way of portraying history, he was, at the same time, of the belief that his activities were being observed by unofficial collaborators of the Ministry for State Security. This supposition is not far-fetched. The increasing discontent of the people of the GDR in the 1980s was mirrored by the growing interest of the Stasi in the activities of the Cultural Association, and the organization was subject to more intense scrutiny, which directly impacted the *Interessensgemeinschaft 1813*. Andreas Zimmer (2019: 517) pointed out that between February and November 1989, 'Maik Gärtner,' an unofficial collaborator, was a member of the *Interessensgemeinschaft 1813* and reported to the Ministry for State Security about the group. To what extent the developing reenactment scene had the attention of the state security apparatus, how the activities of the various Cultural Association groups were being monitored and what influence possible surveillance had on the shaping of the reenactment scene remain, for the time being, in the realm of research desiderata.[20]

4. Line of Development in the FRG

In contrast to the development in the GDR, it seems that the desire to grapple with one's 'own' local history while also getting involved with the 'care' of that history's relics were not the driving force for the West German reenactment scene. The political scope in and under which it operated was also quite different. What follows is an outline of the scene's formational phase in the FRG.

4.1 The American Civil War and the Napoleonik – Pop Culture Inspiration and the Examination of One's 'Own' History

A group of enthusiasts staged the first battle reenactment in the FRG – or, at least, the earliest found in our inquiry – in 1985 on a military parade ground near the city of Baumholder in Rhineland-Palatinate. Mr A. and Mr B., who were then both active members in Western clubs and the organizers behind this first reenactment, called attention to the fact that their involvement in the scene – in contrast to the actors

upward valuation of the socialist concept of *Heimat* as a part of the debates around the historical theory of heritage and tradition in the GDR, and the practices of reenactment discussed here, for the time being remains a desideratum.

20 An initial glimpse into the surveillance activities of the Ministry for State Security is available at the website of the Ministry for State Security archive, where there are some documents to be viewed under the heading "*'Napoleon' im Visier der Staatssicherheit. Wie das MfS auf preußische Traditionspflege reagierte*" ("'Napoleon" in the Sights of State Security. How the MfS reacted to the Cultivation of Prussian Tradition'). Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv. Accessed September 28, 2022. https://www.stasi-unterlagen-archiv.de/informationen-zur-stasi/themen/beitrag/napoleon-im-visier-der-staatssicherheit/.

in the GDR – was largely fueled by pop-cultural media representation of American history. Mr A. (born in 1964 in Rhein-Lahn-Kreis) reported in his interview that he was captivated as a child by American-produced Westerns, such as *Bonanza, Gunsmoke and The Virginian*. Mr B. (born in 1955 in Rhein-Sieg-Kreis) shared a similar pattern of media consumption. In his interview, however, he also spoke of a changing awareness that was attributed to the turn in the 1970s that took the Western genre to the so-called *revisionist Western*, from the glorification of the heroic narrative in the former to the deconstruction thereof in the latter (Schneider 2016: 48–51). In this context, Mr B. found the previously solid good-versus-evil narratives had become more fluid, which led him to look more critically at historical events. At the end of the 1970s, in the years following the 200th anniversary of the founding of the American Republic in 1776, the treatment and depiction of US history in popular media experienced an upswing. New novels, films and TV productions brought new facets to the subject and offered new perspectives to the fans of the then already exceedingly well represented 'Wild West.' Shaped as they were by *Americanization* after the Second World War, (Lüdtke et al. 1996; Maase 1992) along with older topoi such as a longing for America and *Indianthusiasm* (Kalshoven 2012; Lutz 2002) that were well served by pop culture in the postwar era, Mr A. and Mr B. met at a convention of various Western clubs in 1984. There, the idea to put on an American-style reenactment was given serious consideration.

By way of a detour through an intense preoccupation with US history, the two men formed connections to their 'own' German history. It was in this context that Mr B. "for the first time came across the Revolutions of 1848" and then looked into the historical pro-democracy movement in greater detail. He felt a growing desire to see a portrayal of German-born troops who had fought on the Union side in the American Civil War.

Even if the 1985 reenactment in Baumholder was indeed the first recreation of a military skirmish in West Germany, and given that the subsequently founded association *Union & Confederate Reenactors – Völkerkundlicher Verband für die Nachstellung nordamerikanischer Militärgeschichte* (UCR; 'Union & Confederate Reenactors – Ethnological Association for the Reenactment of North American Military History') made communication and access to the hobby easier, confining the scope of the West German reenactment interests and activities to the subject of the American Civil War would be shortsighted. As was the case in the GDR, enthusiasts in the FRG came together around both their common interest in the early 19th century and their desire to play it out. At the same time that the Civil War reenactors were founding a club based around their interests, those who were interested in the possibilities of Napoleonic reenactment were also forming an organization. The *Freundeskreis lebendige Geschichte* club was founded in February 1985 – several months before the Baumhol-

der reenactment.[21] As one of the founders of the group (Mr C.) put it, it was people with various particular interests – "collectors of tin figurines, muzzle-loaders / black-powder shooters, American history buffs and local historians" – who came together in the mid-1980s in order to find "the palpable, visceral experience, understanding, and authenticity" that they were missing in the very hobbies that had brought them to the idea of reenactment. Mr C. and his fellow enthusiasts found out about reenactments "from the newspaper" or through "film productions that endeavored to be historically accurate. It stirred the curiosity," and Mr C.'s group attended "events in Great Britain and far-away America."[22] That kind of contact with foreign countries in the West was, with a few exceptions (namely France and Belgium), difficult for the GDR reenactors interviewed; their network was, nonetheless, internationally positioned, with contact to Poland and Czechoslovakia.

A further significant group driving the development of the Napoleonic in West Germany was the *Napoleonische Gesellschaft – für europäische Kultur und Geschichte und lebendige Geschichtsdarstellung* ('Napoleonic Association – for European Culture and History and Living History') that was founded in 1988. Mr D. was a founding member and the association's president until 1995. He is still a guiding force for the group today. Growing up in Osnabrück, Mr D. encountered local memorials during his school days in the mid-1950s and the 1960s during the 'French period.' In contrast to the Civil War enthusiasts among our West German interviewees, Mr D.'s interest in reenactment grew out of direct encounters with his own local history. This interest in history did not, however, like the actors / interviewees in the GDR, lead to him directly also reenacting history at home. Mr D. became familiar with this performative form of historically oriented culture abroad. Following an invitation from Great Britain in 1984, he came to participate in an event commemorating the Texas Revolution of 1835–36. Mr D. was also active in the Western scene – in the Osnabrück-based *Bocanora County Club*, whose events Mr A. and Mr B. also attended. By all accounts, the idea to found the UCR can be traced back to the common initiative of Mr B. and Mr D.[23] Mr D. was also an active participant in the Baumholder reenactment and served as the vice-president of the newly formed UCR.[24]

While public reenactments in the GDR were already drawing large audiences in the early 1980s, it was the middle of the decade before the hobby had any perceptible public recognition in the FRG. That it was Civil War reenactors who were the first to

21 The *Freundeskreis* was founded on February 10, 1985 (the date the articles of association were submitted) and officially entered into the register of association at the district court in Frankfurt am Main on January 30, 1986 (Amtsgericht Frankfurt am Main, Vereinsregister, Auszug, VR8607).

22 Email correspondence with Mr C., May 2021.

23 This information comes from an autobiographical sketch composed on August 6, 2021, that Mr D. sent us by mail on August 12, 2021.

24 Amtsgericht Wiesbaden, Vereinsregister, Auszug, VR2381.

organize a reenactment in West Germany might be explained by the fact that the historical Central European battlefields were easier for reenactors to reach. Travelling to an international reenactment of a Napoleonic battle took relatively little effort. Attending a reenactment of the Battle of Waterloo was certainly in the realm of the doable, while the German Civil War reenactors would have faced a disparately large investment of time and money to travel to a reenactment at one of the historical sites in the United States.

4.2 Views of History and an Educational Mission – a Hobby Caught Between Self-awareness and External Perception

Views of history that, at first glance, seemed politically uncontroversial had considerable potential as common identity points around which the reenactors could rally. 'Europe' was emphasized from the very beginning in the West German Napoleonic scene; as a concept, an idea and occasionally even as a lived reality of international understanding. Mr D. referred to this more than once in his account to us. Europe, in this sense, is not only a geographical and historical region in which the events of the Napoleonic wars of liberation took place but also, at the same time, a cipher loaded with rivalling interpretations of meaning.

Mr D. sees reenactment as "a different kind of peace movement," that hortatively brings to life the battles of earlier centuries – from before European unification and the establishment of European institutions. "In the process," Mr D. continued, there developed "international friendships [. . .], that [serve] understanding and cooperation between former enemies." This corresponds to the self-reported portrayals provided by the West German Civil War reenactors/interviewees, who also understand their activities to be antiwar interventions.

Superficially at least, the German actors differed here in their self-justification from those in other countries, especially in the United States. American reenactors, according to Dora Apel (2013: 246), knowing that their hobby is not exactly seen in a positive light by historians and wider society, find justification for what they do in that it teaches the public about history and/or is meant to honor the soldiers of bygone eras.

In the Napoleonic scene, the idea of international understanding blended with a sometimes very blatant pride in the accomplishments of 'Europe.' The process of unification following the Second World War and, on another level, the peaceful coexistence of countries that had also been at war with each other in the early 19th century, allows for a *leftist* reading of Europe as an open, multiethnic and multinational society, as well as for a different understanding that, already in the 1980s, was successfully spreading within New Right circles. 'Europe' was used in the latter as a code for a white 'occident' in the Spenglerian tradition, which carried with it a racially justified exclusion of 'others' of different ethnicities or nationalities (Conze

2005: 28). Both strands are also invariably present in European realpolitik, thus, a broad spectrum of comrades-in-arms could potentially feel addressed.

Our interview partners' understanding of history seems to be predicated by a 19th-century *bildungsbürgerlich* ('petty bourgeoisie') impetus. That reenactment in the German context was also connected with a certain educational mission came up in in Mr D.'s interview:

> By travelling to and participating in the events, the members of the NG [Napoleonic Association] and [others in] the scene have the opportunity to get up close and personal at the most historical destinations and locations of the Napoleonic era, and to visit the museums there [. . .]. In my opinion every one of these is an educational trip.

The pedagogical claim here is derived from a supposedly deficient school education. As Mr D. criticized, "In school lessons, there are hardly lessons anymore about this era [the early 19th century]. Which strengthens us in our notion to bring people back to history through the presentation of living history." A more precise consideration is still needed as to what extent contemporary debates about the culture of memory and history may have shaped the actors' self-perception.[25] Their proximity to the efforts of Hilmar Hoffmann (1979) is, nonetheless, immediately obvious. Hoffmann was an influential politician for cultural affairs who worked rather tirelessly to drive forward the democratization of West German cultural institutions and, to put it succinctly, to make 'cultural education' accessible to all members of society.

The fact that the first documented reenactment in West Germany was held near Baumholder on a military training ground used by American troops was ultimately due to pragmatic considerations.[26] The gathering was slated for a long weekend because the participants worked during the week, and this arrangement allowed them more time to get to know each other and their roles. Additionally, a location had to be found that the participants could reach with minimal travel time and expense. The military training ground in Rhineland-Palatinate, which Mr B. was able to reserve through personal contacts, also guaranteed the isolation desired, as the reenactors wanted their first gathering to serve as a kind of "test firing" (Mr B.) and, so, did not want to attract any public attention. Because, according to Mr D.: "Others' perception of the hobby was quite varied. Some found the demonstrations very good and informative. Others opposed them, for whatever reasons." One contemporary newspaper article in the *Wetterauer Zeitung* (1988: 10) exemplifies such an instance of publicly expressed incomprehension of the hobby. Under the headline "400 Soldiers 'Played' Civil War," the paper published a report critical of the reenactment organized by Mr B.

25 Such as the "dig where you stand" slogan from Lindqvist (1979).

26 No roles were played by any US soldiers stationed in Baumholder. Our initial hypothesis that the actors could have possibly been Americans who were using the reenactment to try to recreate a bit of home for themselves, proved untenable as soon as we first spoke to Mr A. on the telephone.

The local mayor made his displeasure known and urged that such events should not be allowed in the future. The sometimes tendentious reporting in the contemporary West German press represented a significant contrast to the media response to the first reenactments in the GDR. As both Mr A. and Mr B. pointed out in their interviews, the West German reporting must be seen in its historical context. At the same time the Civil War reenactors were planning their first gathering, the terrorist acts carried out by members of the right-wing extremist group *Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann* were getting a lot of media attention due to the ongoing trial of the group's leader, Karl-Heinz Hoffman, from September 1984 to the summer of 1986. The *Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann* was known for performing armed military manoeuvres in uniform. The parallels to the reenactment hobbyists were at least superficially plausible and the public discreditation of reenactment as a glorification of war was, from an outsider's perspective at least, understandable. In the American context, James O. Farmer (2005) found that some reenactment groups openly flaunt 'white supremacist' ideologies. As Mr B. expounded upon in his interview, the reenactment scene in West Germany also attracted a right-wing following in part, from which they wanted to clearly distance themselves, whether by excluding conspicuous individuals or entire groups. How such lines were actually drawn in practice and to what extent they were successful in sanctioning extremist thinking in the scene is, so far, still unknown to us. Further interviews with participants are necessary to find out more.

5. Summary and Research Desiderata

We are aware that, based on our empirical material, there are no far-reaching conclusions we can draw. However, our first approach regarding individual cases can show that there were significant differences in terms of the structural development of the reenactment hobby and the actors' self-perception between the GDR and the FRG. If the touch points with concrete local, regional and national history in the West German reenactment scene were rather few, the preoccupation with local history was central to the reenactment of historic military operations in the GDR from the very beginning. While the first reenactment in the FRG near the city of Baumholder in 1985 was inspired by an episode in the American Civil War, skirmishes from the 1813 Battle of Leipzig had been reenacted at historic sites in Leipzig since 1979. The reenactment scene in the GDR focused on regional and local history, enjoyed growing popularity and was barely – at least at first glance – restricted politically. The interviewees in the FRG, on the other hand, felt themselves pressured to prove their legitimacy, which was called into question by a public discourse that assumed the scene to be adjacent to anti-democratic thought.

We could make note of many further aspects of the reenactment associations' founding histories, but we cannot delve further into them here. This arises primarily out of our choice to take an actor-centered approach that relies on what active participants

are willing to share of their memories, perceptions and reflections of the events. These perspectives are inevitably subjective and affected in the present by the interview situation. The meaningfulness regarding any wider context is therefore limited. Generalizing statements must be made carefully and with the necessary sound judgement. The limits of the approach chosen, using subjective insights into past events, bring, by implication, the research desiderata from this field into view that much more clearly.

To sum up, we will, therefore, mention desiderata that should most urgently receive the attention of future scholarship. It has already become clear that a basic historical classification of the reenactment phenomenon in the greater cultural and sociopolitical contexts of the 1970s and 1980s in both German states is still due. In the case of the GDR, the necessary viewing and evaluation of archive materials would have to be concentrated on the 'Foundation Archives of the Political Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR in the Federal Archives' in Berlin, as well as on source materials in the Saxony State Archive in Leipzig, and the materials – apparently not yet catalogued – in the State Archive in Rudolstadt. Again, in the case of the GDR, future research projects will also have to deal on a much deeper level with the internal structures of the associations in question, and the surveillance of the activities conducted by the Ministry for State Security.

An account and analysis of the processes by which the actors from the East and West came together over the course of the immediate post-reunification period and during the 1990s would be a further research desideratum. References to this period of upheaval and new beginnings appear only marginally in our material so far. This is in allusion to the statement from Mr A., who only actively first encountered the Napoleonic scene during this period of political upheaval, but, nonetheless, remembers this time fondly. He did not take any notice of conflicts between East and West. With their many years of experience, the reenactors from the new (i.e. former East) German states had more knowledge at their command. According to Mr A., it was only with the opening up to the West and access to the necessary infrastructure that it became possible to obtain historically accurate equipment and thus to be able to do 'proper' reenactments.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 indisputably signified an awakening for the German reenactment groups. It was now easier for those from either side of the former Iron Curtain to visit the other side, which was taken advantage of in the Napoleonik scene. While there had, indeed, been sporadic contact previously between the reenactors from the GDR and the FRG, the necessity of jumping through bureaucratic and political hoops for the necessary entry clearance had set very rigid limits on this kind of exchange.[27] According to the statements made by the interviewees, after the

27 Mr D. referred to two times he participated "in the Battle of Leipzig, when it was still the GDR" or "in the time before the fall of the Berlin Wall," for which he was required to secure permission from the topmost political authorities.

travel restrictions had been lifted – at the latest, with reunification in October 1990 – the West and East German scene mixed and met for the first time. The actors recounted unanimously the curiosity that fueled them to become acquainted with the other groups and sites. However, it was not an entirely harmonious exchange that was fostered. The meeting of East and West in the period directly following the fall of the Berlin Wall brought divergent worldviews to the reenactors' awareness. In addition to that, as implied by our interviewees, there were problems in the 1990s in identifying the shared organizational structures that could have helped the West and East German reenactment scenes integrate. How the reenactors ultimately experienced the reunification of the two German states, and to what extent the lifeworlds of the East and West German reenactment scenes found their way together during that time remains a research desideratum.

The assessment of a reenactor from Thuringia that was documented during a short interview in the field in May 2021 could be of interest to future scholarship. He was of the opinion that "reunification [...] has worked especially well for the hobby. The reenactment scene was not well liked in the West and only really blossomed after 1989. The people in the West had better contacts abroad. The joining of both worlds led to a real boom." Whether this appraisal from the spring of 2021 is indeed to be read as the capstone of the unification process in the German reenactment scene remains to be determined. An open question here is what discussions in the 1990s specifically led to this point, and which aspects were negotiated by the actors from the East and West. It is not only about the organizational convergence of the different scenes. The negotiation process between East and West regarding the various imparted views of history and interpretations of the past should also be taken into consideration.

The ways in which transnational networks further impacted the development of the reenactment scene in Germany in the 1970s and 80s as well as in the years thereafter remains largely unexplored terrain. Networks determined and defined the realms of possibility in which reenactments could be conceived, especially regarding their public image. An active, globally networked reenactment scene emerged over the course of these decades and those that followed. The field of reenactment research remains wide open, with countless questions to investigate and challenges to face.

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