
Conflicts of Memory: Red Army Graffiti in the Reichstag 1945-2015

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Abstract

The inscriptions left on the walls of the Reichstag by Red Army soldiers in May 1945 have played a pivotal role in the development of a deeply divided cultural memory, not only between the Soviet Union and post-war Germany (West and East), but also in post-Soviet times and in a reunited Germany.

This article follows the changing attitudes towards those graffiti as part of a painful and traumatic past: they serve as a means to revive a heroic part of history on the Soviet side (if only through publication of photographic images in the 1960s); they have suffered from a strong tendency toward social amnesia in post-war West Berlin (cleansing the walls of Red Army graffiti and covering them with panelling); they have triggered a highly contested debate in the Bundestag about their conservation or elimination that was caused by their unexpected resurfacing during the 1990's reconstruction of the Reichstag; and finally, they form the center of a debate about transforming the leftover graffiti from a site of memory into a site of reconciliation.

The recent construction of a replica of the Reichstag in Moscow, in 2015 – including the graffiti – shows yet another aspect of memory politics – this time in support of a rise in patriotism.