Edited by
Birgit Dahlke Dennis Tate Roger Woods

German Life Writing in the Twentieth Century

Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

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Birgit Dahlke, Dennis Tate, and Roger Woods

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Introduction: The Purposes and Problems of German Life Writing in the Twentieth Century

Roger Woods

The Appeal of Life Writing

THIS VOLUME OF ESSAYS examines life writing after major turning points in Germany's history in the twentieth century: the First World War, the Nazi era and beyond, the collapse of the GDR, and German unification. German life writing in the twentieth century in the form of autobiography has often attracted considerable public attention, perhaps because a personal account captures the mood or a mood of the time. Erich Maria Remarque's semi-autobiographical account of a soldier's experiences in the First World War, *Im Westen nichts Neues* (All Quiet on the Western Front, 1929), sold 1.2 million copies by 1933.[1] Autobiography may also gain a large audience because of the prominence of the author. Some nine million copies of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), a mixture of autobiography and political treatise, published in two parts in 1925 and 1926, were sold or distributed by 1940. Its significance today tends to be located in its contribution to the debate about what Germans could have known about the long-term intentions of the Nazis, even if there is reason to suppose that many people who owned a copy of *Mein Kampf* had not actually read it.

A prominent author making dramatic personal disclosures will also capture the public's attention: Günter Grass's 2006 autobiography, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (Peeling the Onion), created a sensation with its revelation that he was a member of the Waffen-SS towards the end of the Second World War.

Life writing has received much attention from academic researchers. Dagmar Günther registers historians' growing interest in autobiographies as source material,[2] and academics themselves have contributed to the production of life writing. The West German historian Lutz Niethammer and a team of researchers worked with some 150 East Germans shortly before the collapse of the GDR to produce "lebensgeschichtliche Interviews" (life history interviews).[3] *"Opa war kein Nazi"* (Grandpa

Was No Nazi, 2002) is based on a series of forty family discussions and 142 interviews with individuals from three generations, conducted in the late 1990s and designed to elicit what "normal Germans" remembered of the Nazi period. The study contrasts historical knowledge with collective family memories and feelings about the past, created from the accounts handed down by family members who experienced National Socialism directly.[4]

For their collection of forty interviews, *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany; An Oral History*, Eric Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reuband interviewed two hundred Jewish and non-Jewish Germans and received three thousand written responses to their survey "about their experiences and their level of understanding and knowledge about the mundane as well as historic events they lived through" during the Nazi years.[5] Their thesis: now that most Germans who lived through the Third Reich have either died or are nearing the end of their lives, far more people are willing to say what they really knew back then about the Holocaust (xvii). Their conclusion is that between one third and one half of the German population "had become relatively well informed about the mass murder of the Jews during the Second World War" (397).

The historian Gabriele Jancke sets out the broad reasons for academic researchers' growing interest in life writing when she describes how reading autobiographical texts changed her view of history. After looking at many hundreds of personal accounts, she concluded that the variety of perspectives in autobiographical texts undermined generalizations by demonstrating how different groups — minorities and majorities, intellectuals and people with little education, women and men — experienced society in different ways.[6] Jancke presents autobiographical texts by named individuals as a challenge to the process of generalization that is at the heart of much academic writing, and she suggests that these texts will tell us something fundamental about any given society. These claims are a useful starting point for a discussion of how to approach the complexities of life writing.

Definitions

The examples above give an indication of the range of sources covered by the term "life writing." At first glance it might seem appropriate to adopt the term "autobiography" as an ordering concept for this book, since these turning points generated a vast number of autobiographies, and many of the essays in this collection concern themselves with autobiographical material. Yet the term is restrictive. One of the earliest researchers on autobiography, Philippe Lejeune, defined it as "the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his

individual life, in particular the story of his personality." Lejeune expressly excluded from his definition memoirs, biographies, personal novels, autobiographical poems, journals, diaries, self-portraits, and essays.[7] In a further restriction that one can still encounter today, some observers tend to assume that autobiography means literary autobiography.[8]

The early studies of autobiography have been overtaken recently by a discussion of the wealth of new forms and forums for presenting the self, including video diaries, docudramas, and the Internet.[9] Researchers have proposed more inclusive terms such as "ego documents" (sometimes translated into German as *Selbstzeugnisse*), which embrace letters, chronicles, family histories, travel writing, and diplomats' reports.[10] "Life writing" is perhaps the most inclusive term, and it has gained in popularity for this reason, as well as because extending the range of material considered also means hearing hitherto unheard voices. Laura Marcus points out that the concentration of research on narrowly defined autobiographical writing has served to exclude the forms often adopted by women and those outside mainstream literary culture.[11] Advocates of the term "life writing" see it as a concept that embraces the "self-constructions of the illiterate and otherwise disenfranchised."[12]

Donald Winslow traces the term life writing back as far as the eighteenth century, presenting it as a more inclusive term than biography,[13] and although Paul Eakin uses the term as if it were synonymous with autobiography in his discussion of the "end of autobiography," he also finds "life writing" useful as a description of the hybrid forms of autobiography that in turn arise from discussion of autonomous versus relational concepts of identity.[14] James Olney finds the term useful for its "*in*definition and lack of generic rigor, its comfortably loose fit and generous adaptability."[15]

Life writing is adopted for the present study because it includes all the above text types, including biography (which is sometimes excluded from the definition of ego documents for not being written in the first-person singular).[16]

Life Writing and the Truth

Any study of life writing has to tackle the question of its relationship with the truth. Lejeune locates the potential significance of biographical and autobiographical texts in their closeness to the truth: these texts, he argues, are "referential," meaning that, unlike all forms of fiction, they claim to convey a verifiable truth external to the text.[17] Yet Lejeune is also aware that telling the truth about the self is "a fantasy."[18]

The East German writer Günter de Bruyn sees one major strand of autobiography from Goethe to Fontane as "Selbstauseinandersetzung, [. . .] Selbsterforschung und Selbsterklärung" (debate with oneself, [. . .]

researching oneself and explaining oneself), and he describes his own autobiographical writing as "der Versuch, mich über mich selbst aufzuklären, Grundlinien meines Lebens zu finden, mir auf die Frage zu antworten, wer eigentlich ich sei" (the attempt to provide myself with an explanation of me, to discover the basic features of my life and to give myself an answer to the question of who I actually am).[19] This ambitious statement of purpose means for de Bruyn that autobiography at its best aims to convey a higher truth, even though it may only be telling part of the story. Referring to Goethe's autobiography, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (From My Life: Poetry and Truth), he writes that

> der Begriff Dichtung nicht Erfindung bedeutet, sondern daß er als Verdichten des Geschehenen, als Konzentrieren des Vielfältigen und Zufälligen oder auch als gedankliches Durchdringen oder Deuten zu verstehen ist. Dichtung im autobiographischen Schreiben ist die Fähigkeit, das Vergangene gegenwärtig zu machen, Wesentliches in Sein und Werden zu zeigen, Teilwahrheiten zusammenzufassen zu dem Versuch der ganzen Wahrheit über das schreibende und beschriebene Ich. (*EI* 31–32)

> [the concept poetry does not mean invention. Rather, one should see it as condensing what has happened, as concentrating what is disparate and random, or as reflectively penetrating or interpreting. Poetry in autobiographical writing means the ability to make the past present, to show the essential things about what one is and how one has developed, to assemble partial truths into the attempt to convey the whole truth about the self that is describing and being described.]

Yet de Bruyn balances this high ambition of grasping a profound poetic truth against his work on his own autobiography, which he describes as going against the grain for a writer: "Der berufsmäßige Lügner übt, die Wahrheit zu sagen" (The professional liar practices telling the truth).[20]

It is a common claim among authors of life writing that their version of their lives or their times is the true version. This claim can be expressed in the title of a work, as for example with Victor Klemperer's "testimony," *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen* (I Wish to Testify), his diaries from 1942 in which he tells of his experience as a Jew in Nazi Germany.[21] Walter Janka, head of the GDR's Aufbau Verlag from 1952, sentenced to five years imprisonment for counterrevolutionary activity, and eventually rehabilitated by the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) in 1990, wrote an account of his arrest and trial in order to put the record straight, not least about the GDR's first Minister of Culture, Johannes Becher, whom Janka accuses of failing to speak out against injustice after the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU. Janka quotes from Becher's diary and points out what he calls demonstrable distortions,[22] and he encourages the reader to see his account as a true record by relating much of his

experience in the third person, as if it were an objective report. In his last book, *Moabiter Notizen* (Notes from Moabit), written in Berlin-Moabit prison in 1992 while awaiting trial for the shoot-to-kill policy at the Berlin Wall, Erich Honecker, former East German head of state and leader of its ruling SED (Socialist Unity Party) declared that if his text were ever published it would be for people who are serious about analyzing the past and not for those who are intent on mastering history and who are solely interested in antisocialist campaigns. For his part, he was not interested in presenting differences of opinion but rather the truth.[23] Bald assertions of truthfulness like Honecker's are a familiar feature of accounts by individuals whose record is under public scrutiny.

Fundamental challenges to the claim that life writing conveys the truth are contained in the concepts "active memory" and "partial truth": the writer's view of his or her past is colored by the time and circumstances in which the text is written, and what is remembered will be selective. The writer's motives for producing an account of the past are in the writer's present, and the writer will have a particular readership in mind. This is apparent in accounts written after major turning points in German history. Military memoirs that appeared after the First World War were a response in part to antiwar texts and sought to give meaning to the massive loss of life and to justify the decisions of the authors.[24] Post-1945 and post-1989 memoirs often stressed opposition to the regime of the day combined with powerlessness to effect change.

Whereas Johnson and Reuband see the chances of getting closer to the truth increasing with the passage of time, researchers more frequently argue that the passage of time takes life writing ever further away from the truth, either because memories fade or because they are suppressed. Yet one can detect problems with the truthfulness of contemporary accounts. Lutz Niethammer has described having second thoughts about publishing the results of his research team's interviews with East Germans since they were conducted shortly before the Wall came down, and publication would only happen after German unification. He was aware that the GDR authorities had carefully selected the individuals for his team to interview, and in the new circumstances he thought all East Germans would be free to speak their minds openly. But Niethammer soon found that matters were more complicated: The end of the GDR neither brought an end to constraints nor did it create a situation in which people might offer a more truthful account of their lives. Rather, the new political and social context of post-unification Germany caused people to embark upon a new and different process of suppressing memories.[25] This was confirmed in another report based on follow-up sessions with twenty of the original interviewees after the fall of the Wall. Dorothee Wierling describes how the people she interviewed for a second time took the opportunity to reinterpret their lives, especially their roles in the official system. They

did not alter the facts, but they explained their motives differently: They wished to help the disadvantaged, or to push through Christian and conservative policies. Not being in a state enterprise became an expression of resistance to communism, and if they were active in the old political system, this was because it secretly helped them to achieve their noncommunist aims.[26]

Although its complex relationship with truth raises a basic question about the usefulness of life writing, it does not mark this material off from other historical sources. Mary Fulbrook describes the presentation of archive material from the GDR as a continuing stream of selective and partial revelations, often reflecting the interests of the present more than the realities of the past: "Memories challenge reconstructions; personal experience queries documentary evidence; the sands on which any new interpretation is to be constructed are constantly shifting, as the archival remnants of the dictatorship are denounced as distortions, the memoirs as cover-ups, analyses as politically motivated and one-sided."[27]

How the Life Is Written, How the Life Is Read

If the truth of life writing does not reside in what the author presents as fact, it may emerge from a more complex and critical reading of a life. Dagmar Günther contends that historians have made use of autobiographical writings in a very old-fashioned way, as if these writings were "providers of facts" that can be deployed in a simplistic, literal, and highly selective way in order to confirm a theory (*AN* 38–45). Günther remarks on the habit of using autobiographical texts to illustrate what she calls "vorgewusste Sachverhalte" (facts known from before; *AN* 39).[28]

Those who have become wary about reading life writing for the facts often go to the other extreme and stress its fictional dimension.[29] More subtly, Günther focuses on autobiographies as "biographische Sinnkonstruktionen" (biographical constructions of meaning) and she insists that they cannot be analyzed within a simple framework of fact or fiction, authenticity or distortion (*AN* 59), and Gabriele Jancke argues that categorizing life writing as true or false, complete or incomplete, does not make full use of the material.[30]

Researchers may come to see the limited truthfulness of life writing as its virtue, with its significance located not in its closeness to the truth but in the writer's construction of a life at a particular time and in a particular social context. The outcome of this construction process is summed up as "subjective truth."[31] In this sense, the retrospective family portraits recounted in the *"Opa war kein Nazi"* project may not offer a true account of the families' past, but they do tell us something significant about the political culture in which they took shape.

The value of life writing thus often lies less in its referential content than in its function as a "communicative act" (*AN* 49), and Günther poses the questions that follow from this view:

> Wie wird etwa die Individualgeschichte verortet, wird sie als Ich-Geschichte, Wir-Geschichte, oder als Geschichte anderer erzählt? Wie wird der Lebenslauf gedeutet: als Ich-Leistung, als Fremdbestimmung durch "Umstände," oder als Schicksal? In welchem Verhältnis steht die Ich-Geschichte zur historischen Zeit? Wie werden private Lebensgeschichten und öffentliche Ereignisse miteinander verknüpft? Welche Deutungsmuster integrieren die erzählte Lebensgeschichte? (*AN* 51)[32]
>
> [How, for example, is the individual story located, is it presented as the story of the self, of the self and others, or as the story of others? How is the course of the life interpreted: as an individual's achievement, or as a life determined by the external forces of "circumstance," or as fate? How does the individual's story relate to the historical period? How are private life stories and public events connected? What interpretative frameworks lend coherence to the life story being told?]

Günther's examples of how a life might be written — as self-assertion or as a life determined by circumstance or fate — seem particularly relevant to the context of twentieth-century Germany. Walter Jens and Hans Thiersch argue that the history of autobiography is a European history, and that is the history of the emancipation of the individual from political and religious bonds, of the growing consciousness of the individual,[33] and in saying this they are restating a major theoretical position in research on the subject. Yet much twentieth-century German autobiography is an account of the absence of freedom.

The image of the individual subjected to historical forces beyond his or her control occurs in much German life writing as a framework within which to construct meaning. For example, the East German economic historian Jürgen Kuczynski describes himself as a "Kind der Stalinzeit" (child of the Stalin era) and thus places himself at one end of the spectrum that extends from self-assertion to being the object of external forces. In Kuczynski's second volume of memoirs, written after the collapse of the GDR as a supposed remorseful reversal of his thinking, this notion of external forces persists when he discusses the issue of personal responsibility:

> Meine wichtigsten Fehler und Dummheiten sind zeitbedingt oder, vielleicht richtiger noch, umständebedingt. Dazu gehören zum Beispiel alle "stalinistischen" Fehler sowie Fehler, die ich aus falscher, aber ehrlicher "Parteitreue" gemacht habe. Die kann man

> nicht ungeschehen machen wollen, ohne die Umstände ungeschehen machen zu wollen. Und das letztere ist Unsinn. Kein einzelner ist verantwortlich für die Zeit, in der er lebt.[34]
>
> [My greatest mistakes and acts of stupidity are determined by the times or, perhaps more properly, by the circumstances in which I lived. Examples are all "Stalinist" mistakes and mistakes I made because of wrong-headed but sincere "party loyalty." One cannot wish that they had never happened without wishing too that the circumstances had never arisen. And that makes no sense at all. No individual is responsible for the times he lives in.]

This construction of a life dominated by circumstance meshes with one set of historical characterizations of the GDR. It has been suggested, for example, that the GDR was primarily a product of political interests and only secondarily a "social entity": East German society, it has been argued, was totally controlled by a state that was not willing to grant autonomy to any area of society.[35] If this is true, there seems little point in delving into East Germany's social history, let alone individuals' life stories. Yet interpretative models of the GDR based on a simple division into perpetrators and victims or on total control do not do justice to a more complex reality. Wolfgang Engler argues that terms such as "unjust state" and "command economy" are as incapable of explaining the East German experience as the grand terms "totalitarianism," "rule of violence," and "dictatorship."[36] Empirical research into milieus in East Germany, in fact, tends to undermine the image of a monolithic GDR in which people either supported or opposed the system. Political culture and everyday life in the GDR were clearly complex and varied, and this research confirms the need for an understanding that takes into account how individuals lived their lives.[37]

Wolfgang Engler implicitly proposes a further argument in favor of life writing when he applies the concept of individuation to Eastern European societies. In the case of Western societies, the concept suggests that individuals are enabled or required to construct and arrange their lives for themselves.[38] Although the whole structure of a society based on state socialism may appear to demonstrate the impossibility and the irrelevance of individuation, Engler traces an emancipation from dictated ways of behaving and a cultural liberation of people, even in state socialism.[39] In the Eastern European context, individuation refers to the liberation from life patterns that are fixed by authoritarian systems, and Engler summarizes the situation of many GDR citizens: "Die Verhaltensweisen der Menschen, ihr interpersoneller wie institutioneller Austausch, gehörten stets zwei Logiken zugleich an — der Logik einer herrschaftlichen Verfügung über die Menschen *und* der Logik selbstentworfener Biographien" (The way people behaved in their dealings with each other and

with institutions could always be traced back to two types of logic: the logic of power that controlled people *and* the logic of people shaping their own lives).[40] Engler gives an example of what this looked like in the GDR when he describes how, in the late 1980s, many young people had largely withdrawn from the state's orbit and found their place in subcultures. This is where readings, exhibitions, concerts, discussions, and all kinds of other events happened without any official involvement. Engler sees the emergence of the individual as a defining feature of GDR culture of the seventies and eighties.[41]

These reflections on the scope for the individual to construct his or her own life in the GDR suggest that there is something to be gained from looking at individuals, and they lead us back to the view of autobiography as the history of the emancipation of the individual from political and religious bonds. Yet they do so in a complex way: Dagmar Günther's sets of opposites between which people construct their life stories reflect some of the key tensions in German life writing in the twentieth century. A complex reading of life writing reveals a profound unease in many writers' minds about where to place themselves between the poles of self-assertion and subjection to external forces.

The Habitus (singular) of Groups

As life writing attracts more academic attention, researchers have started to ask how it can be put to use within any broader study of a period. Just as Jancke became distrustful of generalizations as a result of her encounters with multiple individual perspectives, Lutz Niethammer describes how his team's meetings, shortly before the Berlin Wall came down, with their GDR "minders," SED members and interviewees, swept away their fantasies about the monolithic, ideological character of the party and gave them a subtler appreciation of what was possible within the party.[42]

This potential in life writing for the particular dismantling the general prompts the hard question what constructive contribution it has to make to our broader understanding of societies in transition. Researchers concede that there is no ready answer to the question of whether one can derive patterns and processes from individual accounts and draw conclusions that transcend the individual case,[43] yet is has rightly been argued that autobiography is never about the self as an isolated project, but about a self known through and embedded within the network of social relations that confer identity and meaning.[44] Jancke and Ulbrich argue that research needs to move away from the notion that autobiography is bound up with the birth of the individual and towards an understanding of relational selves, that is to say, the individual located and characterized by social relationships. In this reading, autobiography is a form of social history.[45]

The renowned autobiography scholar Paul Eakin explores how models of self and of life stories function and evolve in a culture, and he refers to Lejeune's argument that "whereas traditional autobiography is largely predicated on a belief in the autonomous self, the fully constituted subject who preexists the language into which he casts his story, this individualist ideology blinds us to the fact that both self and life story are culturally determined constructs. The private speech of the individual engaged in the autobiographical act is, accordingly, derived from a public discourse structured by class, code, and convention." Lejeune observes that the documentary status of popular autobiographical texts does not consist in the deliberate creation of a faithful copy of the real but rather in the unwitting imitation of common narrative forms that constitute the lingua franca of verisimilitude at a given moment in the life of a culture.[46] As Smith and Watson put it, "people tell stories of their lives through the cultural scripts available to them."[47] The form of the text acquires a representative significance that may outweigh its referential significance.

Researchers have acted upon these theoretical positions by examining series of texts produced by individuals in similar circumstances. What emerges from such an analysis is the "habitus" of the group, defined as its shared beliefs and dispositions.[48] Lejeune establishes "consistencies of discourse" in nineteenth-century French autobiographies,[49] and in the German context Dagmar Günther gives the example of bankers' autobiographies in which members of the profession portray themselves as having a strong commitment to their work. Günther takes this image as a reflection of the ethic defining maleness that was dominant at the time the autobiographies were written, but she warns that the image may not be true. She suggests a more subtle use for such accounts: they should be analyzed not for their factual content but as "retrospective self-portraits" (*AN* 37–38).

A further set of retrospective self-portraits emerges from a series of interviews conducted after the collapse of the GDR with members of the old ruling elite. Across a whole range of former Politburo members, ministers, senior economists, and newspaper editors, the ritualized self-presentation repeats itself: They had certain privileges, but they worked hard, taking paperwork home and rarely making full use of their annual leave entitlement. They were democrats with very little actual power, and they did their best in difficult circumstances. Party discipline and a sense of duty and responsibility were the reasons they did not resign.[50] The motives behind such self-presentation in the early 1990s when some of the old GDR elite were on trial are not hard to discern, and, in line with Günther's proposed alternative reading of autobiographical material in general, the interviews are better seen as an illustration of this elite's collective self-defense after unification rather than as an insight into its working habits up to 1989. The same habitus is revealed in the memoirs of

individual Politburo members such as Günter Mittag, who was expelled from the SED in November 1989. Mittag's description of how he saw an opportunity to push through the economic reforms he had wanted for thirty years when Egon Krenz became general secretary of the SED is revealing mainly for its dogged adherence to his belief in economic effectiveness as the key to reform and his failure to address the more radical agenda of 1989. Mittag's account of his inability to influence events because he had no power and was unaware of the real state of the GDR until shortly before its demise is also significant because it is echoed from one Politburo member's memoir to the next.[51]

The Habitus (plural) of Groups

If freedom and compulsion turn out to be two of the most significant recurrent themes of German life writing in the twentieth century, one must subject the concept of habitus to closer examination. Although the concept is useful for capturing the behavior patterns and attitudes of groups, one can also see in life writing striking examples of divergent behavior and attitudes among people who were socialized in similar circumstances. And, to complete the thought, one can look more closely still at individuals' accounts and see that contradictory habitus (plural) may reside within the individual.

One example of divergent behavior and attitudes within a group is offered by Olaf Georg Klein in his interviews with East Germans shortly after unification.[52] Klein reworks his interview material into autobiographical sketches, related in the first person, but he makes use of intertextual context to enable the reader to see beyond the self-image of the narrator. Many interviewees in the collection describe their conformist behavior in the GDR in natural terms or in terms that suggest inevitability: "Natürlich habe ich auch in der FDJ mitgemacht" (Of course I was in the Free German Youth, 229); "Natürlich bin ich Pionier gewesen" (Of course I was a Pioneer, 191). This easy consensus is undermined, however, by the country priest who states: "Den Volkskammerwahlen sind wir selbstverständlich immer ferngeblieben. Meine Frau und ich und auch die Kinder" (Of course we always stayed away from the elections to the People's Chamber. My wife and I, and our children, 64). Similarly, Beate G did not join the Young Pioneers or the FDJ. Beate wants to study psychology but has no chance of doing so because of her low marks, the fact that she does not try to fit in, and her lack of political engagement (151). Klein presents figures who conformed in order to gain whatever advantages the system could offer, and others who conformed out of fear and later regret what they come to see as their lack of courage. At first glance, Klein's series of mini-autobiographies seems to present a standardized habitus, but he also presents nonconformists whose accounts

interact with and even undercut those of the conformists by using similar language to explain opposite behaviors. Together, Klein's figures convey a picture of the GDR in which a wide range of responses to authoritarian rule was possible. The individuation posited by Engler is here presented as the lived experience of East German citizens.

Divergent behavior and attitudes among people with similar life experiences are a striking feature of German life writing in the twentieth century. Freedom and compulsion assert themselves time and again as the opposite ends of a spectrum on which writers place themselves. The same is true for the opposites of knowledge and ignorance. After German unification, the East German author Annett Gröschner interviewed East Berliners about, among other things, their experience of having witnessed the Nazis rounding up Jews in Berlin.[53] Gröschner points out that in 1925 there were 20,419 Jews living in Berlin, in 1939 only 9,577, and in 1945 around one hundred (*J* 18). Against the background of these stark facts, her interviewees give very different accounts of what they knew of the fate of the Jews during the Nazi period. One interviewee recalls how she accompanied a Jewish woman to the transport lorry and was told by the guard to go away unless she wanted to be taken too. This same woman says that "we" did not know the Jews were being murdered until the war was over. Another interviewee, Wera, knew a Jewish family that was taken away, and she comments: "Viele glaubten nicht an das, was man prognostizierte, daß es zu solcher Ausrottung kommen würde" (Many people did not believe what was being predicted, that it would end in such extermination, *J* 169). Yet another interviewee, Anna, wonders why the Jews did not leave Germany since they could see what was coming. She had been told of how the lorries that take the Jews away pump gas into the back until everyone is dead. Her account indicates contemporary knowledge rather than later discovery:

> Und es dauerte nicht lange, vielleicht vierzehn Tage, da sah ich so ein Ding fahren, an der Jerusalemer Kirche. Und da wurde mir kalt, und da habe ich gewußt, was läuft. Vorher habe ich es mir nicht so ganz vorstellen können, aber da konnte ich es mir vorstellen. Es war eigentlich unterschwellig überall bekannt, daß irgendwas nicht stimmt. Vor allen Dingen für Leute wie uns, die mit jüdischen Firmen gearbeitet haben, und plötzlich gibt es die alle nicht mehr. Meine jüdischen Schulfreundinnen waren plötzlich alle verschwunden. Also, ich wußte, was da läuft und daß alle die, die keinen arischen Nachweis hatten, gefährdet waren. (*J* 253)

> [And it wasn't long, maybe fourteen days, before I saw one of these things driving by the Jerusalem Church. And I felt cold, and I knew then what was going on. Up until then I hadn't been able to picture it properly, but now I could. In fact there was a widespread feeling

> that something was not right. Especially people like us knew, people who worked with Jewish firms, and suddenly they were no longer there. All my Jewish school friends had suddenly disappeared. So I knew what was going on, and I knew that people who could not prove they were Aryan were in danger.]

Gröschner's life interviews with East Berliners who were between fourteen and thirty years old in 1945 also illustrate how memory can be selective by focusing on particular periods of a life. Throughout the collection there is a clear tendency to dwell on the years of Nazi rule. Hilde, born in 1925, tells of the physical deprivations in the later years of the war: obtaining food and water to live on was a major preoccupation (*J* 32–42). Another interviewee, Inge, explains how she was automatically made a member of the Nazi Party at a certain age as a result of being in the BDM (*J* 191; the *Bund deutscher Mädel* was the female branch of the party's youth movement). Another interviewee tells of the order for children to leave Berlin during the war and how she did not wish to be parted from her family (*J* 52), and she attributes her family's survival to the fact that their mother helped everybody — cooking for children and the elderly (*J* 64).

Dwelling on the Nazi period is a pattern that repeats itself from one account to the next. While this preoccupation with what is likely to have been the most emotionally intense period of the lives portrayed may be in itself no more than what one would expect, the portrayals are often punctuated with reminders (through frequent references to parents) that the people telling the stories of their lives were children at the time. If it is not clear from these examples whether this is a conscious strategy for self-exoneration, it does become clear that the image of childhood is frequently invoked with this effect. In this respect, the image is a partner to the vocabulary of compulsion: Günter de Bruyn writes about the years of Nazi rule as an intellectually comfortable period since the compulsion he lived under meant that he did not need to have a bad conscience for not making any decisions or taking any actions.[54]

A comparison of life-writing texts produced by individuals in similar circumstances thus reveals not only the patterns that add up to a habitus but also the divergent attitudes and behaviors that show that these patterns have their limits. Kuczynski's view of himself as a child of the Stalin era is strikingly at odds with accounts by such critical thinkers as Walter Janka. Janka has been presented as the model of the partisan figure whose formative experiences and memories are the First World War, the struggle for a socialist German republic, defeat, the Nazi dictatorship, internment in concentration camps or prison, and resistance or exile. Engler quotes from Janka's autobiography that he always took full responsibility for his own independent actions: "Ich handelte immer 'auf eigene Verantwortung,'"[55] and Janka's life and his description of it

pose a fundamental challenge to Kuczynski's deterministic version of life during and after the Stalin years.

These few examples of diametrically opposed uses of the vocabulary and imagery of childhood and adulthood, of choice and compulsion in German life writing suggest that it can illustrate not only patterns of similar attitudes, but also patterns of different attitudes among individuals in similar circumstances. Taken together, the written lives provide an implicit intertextual commentary on each other and challenge each other on the most significant issues of the period in which the lives unfold.

The Habitus (plural) of the Individual

Taking the theme of difference one step further, life writing's focus on a given individual can draw out tensions and discrepancies within the mind of that individual. Difference, in this case expressed as contradiction, ambiguity, uncertainty, and inner turmoil, is not intertextual but intratextual.

One example is the German life writing that emerged from the First World War. Cultural, military, and political historians have in the past maintained that First World War memoirs and diaries published in the Weimar years fell into one of two categories: either they showed the war as a heroic event or as a senseless torture. In nationalist writings, war was said to be a test of manhood and heroism, whereas in pacifist writings it was the collapse of humanity,[56] and the war diaries of Ernst Jünger were often taken to represent the nationalist position. Yet Jünger's personal memories of the war and those of the nationalists to whom he gave intellectual leadership are more complex and ambiguous than most critics have allowed. Jünger describes not only the enthusiasm with which he greeted the news of the outbreak of war, but also his disillusionment: instead of encountering the dangers he and his fellow volunteers had hoped for, they find filth, hard work, and sleepless nights.[57] Jünger rapidly comes to realize that traditional chivalry, glory, and heroism have little place in a modern warfare dominated by an impersonal form of battle that consumes men as it does munitions (*St* v), and he is uncomfortably aware of the pacifist argument that in modern warfare technical progress results in meaningless slaughter and suffering.[58]

While this perspective marks Jünger's war off from the war as retold in the more rigid form of the military memoir, it establishes close links with the antiwar authors of the Weimar years. The possibility of meeting a meaningless death in fact runs through both Jünger's work and that of antiwar writers such as Erich Maria Remarque, for whom the emphasis in *Im Westen nichts Neues* is also on mere chance, which decides whether one will live or die.[59]

Put in the most general terms, Jünger's firsthand accounts convey not only a sense of the war's meaning, but also of its futility, not only a

sense of community in war, but also a sense of isolation. They portray war not merely as a splendid adventure in which heroic young men can prove themselves, but also as a profoundly disturbing event because in war pure chance governs one's fate: a soldier may stay alive by the grace of "kleine Umstände" (small circumstances) or "Zufall" (chance, *St* 63, 119), and he may die from a wound inflicted by "ein sinnloses Stück Blei" (a meaningless piece of lead, *St* 133). The wounds of a dead soldier are "sinnlos," (meaningless).[60] Contemplation of the chaos of war can result in a laming mood of melancholy (*St* 67). And the war, which had promised to bring the mental relief of total commitment within a community of men, could also bring "ein unbeschreibliches Gefühl der Einsamkeit" (an indescribable feeling of loneliness).[61] In his autobiographical novel *Sturm*, Jünger describes how, when death hung over the trenches like a storm cloud, each man was on his own; surrounded by howling and crashing shells, dazzled by flashes of light, he felt nothing within himself but isolation beyond measure.[62]

Life writing in the form of such highly personal war diaries is a significant source because it gives an insight into the inner turmoil of the author. The subsequent development of Jünger's war writings is one of a systematic suppression of thoughts of the futility of war and the retrospective imposition of patterns of meaning on his experiences at the front line. Analysis of the original turmoil and its suppression helps us to understand how his nationalistic habitus grew out of a desperate need to find meaning in what he could also see as meaningless slaughter.

East German autobiography also offers many examples of life writing as the location of contradictory habitus. Günter de Bruyn describes in *Vierzig Jahre* (Forty Years) how he trained as a librarian in East Berlin after the war and wrote essays that followed the party line on books he had not even read. He justifies this approach to his studies by saying he was defeating those in power with their own weapons, and that it seems to him "kam mir das vor" that he was preserving his own intellectual freedom in the process. His choice of verb indicates uncertainty, however, and this is confirmed when he goes on to write of his teacher that she may have seen through his show of conformism, but this will not have bothered her greatly since even the appearance of conformism was a sign of real subjugation (*VJ* 16).

De Bruyn's autobiographical account of his life in the GDR is characterized by a complex ambiguity. At one point he refers with obvious distaste to the Schriftstellerverband (Writers' Union) as "die ideologiegeladene Autorenzentrale" (ideology-bound headquarters for authors, *VJ* 90), but later actually joins the Union, "auch der sozialen Vergünstigungen wegen" (not least for the social benefits, *VJ* 122). His vocabulary is chosen at one level to indicate compulsion, passivity, and lack of choice: "man ließ mich PEN-Mitglied werden" (they had me made a member of

PEN); his Western counterparts appreciate that he has to be careful what he says in the West since they understand his "Zwangsunterwerfung" (enforced subjugation); he describes "die DDR-Literaturszene, in die ich mich nun widerwillig hineinziehen ließ" (the literary scene in the GDR, into which I was drawn against my will, *VJ* 124, 102, 112).

Yet *Vierzig Jahre* is also shot through with self-doubt and self-criticism. De Bruyn becomes increasingly uneasy about the ambiguity of his stance, and he calls his life a "fragwürdige Existenz" (questionable existence, *VJ* 127). He decides that he wants clarity and that an event at which he is giving a reading will be an evening of clear front lines (*VJ* 220). He wants no more compromises, but when he speaks out in favor of the unofficial peace movement and there is no official rebuke, he worries that being left alone is tantamount to being embraced by the system (*VJ* 250–51). His drive for clarity takes a further blow when he is informed in the summer of 1989 that he is to be awarded the National Prize, First Class. In de Bruyn's autobiography we see the idea of preserving one's integrity while appearing to conform tested to destruction.

This is a common East German dilemma, and one starts to see a consensus from one writer to the next. Rita Kuczynski's *Mauerblume* (Wallflower) probes her own questionable existence, in the course of which she married into a privileged political family — she was the daughter-in-law of Jürgen Kuczynski — and worked at the Institute of Philosophy in East Berlin. For many years she regarded her research on philosophical theory as her real life, as opposed to her false life, which was made up of the political hoops she had to jump through in order to preserve the purity of that research. Yet she was only able to maintain this perspective by blocking out the knowledge of the other purposes of the Institute, which had its research projects defined directly by the Central Committee of the SED. She reflects that she did not wish to know that the institute was one of the most important centers for legitimizing SED policies,[63] and she sets out her moral dilemma:

> Die Frage, die sich mir von Jahr zu Jahr konzentrierter stellte, war: Wie viele Zugeständnisse waren der "reinen Theorie" willen notwendig. Wieviel mußte gelogen werden, wieviel inszeniert, um den kleinen Spielraum abzusichern, in dem die sogenannte reine Forschung jenseits von allem ideologischen Gebimmel möglich wurde? Ich spielte also das Spiel: Sich anpassen, sich nicht anpassen, sich im Nicht-Anpassen anpassen, um mir Freiräume zu schaffen und alles belassen zu können, wie es war. Scheinaktivitäten inszenieren, um den Eindruck eines politischen Interesses zu hinterlassen. [. . .] Bis ich aber begriff, daß ich kräftig dabei war, mich durch die taktischen Spiele und Kompromisse zu verbrauchen und meine Kreativität zu ersticken, vergingen Jahre.[64]