On the Sidelines. Silenced Legacies and Challenges of Cultural Memory in the Founding of the Museum of European Cultures in Berlin

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ABSTRACT: *The founding of the Museum of European Cultures (*Museum Europäischer Kulturen, *MEK) is the product of a complex process of fusion and transformation. In 1992, in the aftermath of German unification, the state folklore museums of East and West Berlin — Museum für Volkskunde *and* Museum für Deutsche Volkskunde *respectively — were merged to form a united Museum of Folklore (*Museum für Volkskunde*). In 1999, the latter merged with the European Department of the Museum of Ethnology (*Abteilung Europa des Museums für Völkerkunde*) and was named the Museum of European Cultures. This article addresses the tension between the continuous marginalization of the MEK with its »difficult heritage« (Macdonald 2009) in the shadow of the German Historical Museum (*Deutsches Historisches Museum*) and the Humboldt Forum, and the political history of its founding process after 1989. Looking at the history of this museum's transformation in light of Michael Rothberg's (2021 [2009]) multidirectional memory-political dynamics, it becomes clear how different vectors of memory have overlapped and influenced each other in the process, including memories of the Second World War, East-West division of Germany, and the country's subsequent unification. At the same time, a fundamental change in museum practice can be observed in the course of the museum's ›European‹ transformation, which is inscribed in the memory-cultural dynamics of a (post)migrant society.*

KEYWORDS: *difficult heritage, German memory culture, multidirectional memory, Museum of European Cultures, (post)migrant society*

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T he Museum of European Cultures — National Museums in Berlin (*Museum Europäischer Kulturen — Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*, MEK) has a turbulent past that is closely linked to Germany's political history.[1] Since the end of the 19th century, the MEK's predecessors were significantly involved in the construction of national identities. The National Collection of German Folklore (*Museum für deutsche Volkstrachten und Erzeugnisse des Hausgewerbes, [Königliche] Sammlung für deutsche Volkskunde*), founded in 1889, received its autonomous status as a state museum in 1935, under National Socialism, becoming the Museum of German Folklore (*Museum für Deutsche Volkskunde*, 1935—1953). The
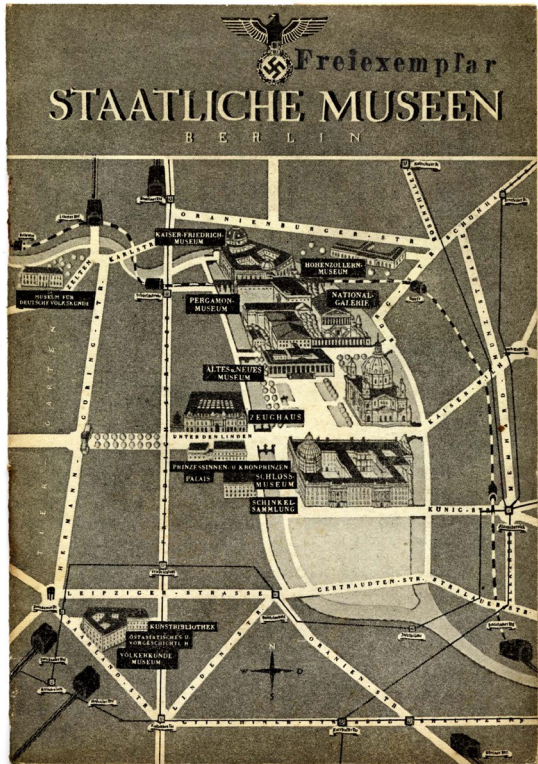
Fig. 1: Title page of a museum guide from 1936. It shows the National Museum of German Folklore (*Staatliches Museum für Deutsche Volkskunde*) at its temporary location in the Bellevue Palace.

cooperation with the Nazi regime made the museum's temporary move (1935 — 1938) to the Bellevue Palace in the Berlin city center possible (Saalmann 2014, 214).

During the Second World War, around 80 per cent of the German Folklore Museum's collections were lost. Following the war, the museum authorities of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) decided to found separate museums for folklore in East Berlin (*Museum für Volkskunde*) and West Berlin (*Museum für Deutsche Volkskunde*). In 1992, in the course of German unification, the two museums merged at the site of the former West Berlin museum in Berlin's neighborhood of Dahlem, now under the name of the Museum of Folklore (*Museum für Volkskunde*). In 1999, this museum was merged with the European Department of the Museum of Ethnology (*Abteilung Europa des Museums für Völkerkunde*) to become the Museum of European Cultures. The MEK was created as one of the National Museums in Berlin, part of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (*Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, SPK[2]).

To date, the founding of the MEK has been researched mainly as a symptom and expression of Europeanization processes, as part of the emergence of *museums of Europe* since the late 1990s (see Kaiser et al. 2012; Mazé 2014; de Cesari 2017). However, this research only partly explains the transformation of the folklore museums in Berlin. My study shows that developments in museum and memory politics in the 1990s as well as the genius loci of Berlin were of decisive importance here. The Museum of Folklore's transformation, starting with its renaming as the MEK and the reorganization of its collections and museum work, can be described as a *turn to Europe*. In what follows, I argue that this turn can also be understood as a form of dealing with the museum's »difficult heritage« (Macdonald 2009). The term, introduced by Sharon Macdonald, refers to a particular form of public engagement with a past whose significance is acknowledged in the present, but which is at the same time publicly contested because it troubles affirmative collective identities. With regard to

the Berlin folklore museums' transformation, the ›burden‹ of this heritage can be seen in the fact that it points beyond the institutional context to overarching political and »social divisions« (Macdonald 2009, 1) as a result of ideological entanglements of the predecessor institutions during the Second World War and the political division of the country, which continue to have an impact to the present day.

A Public Museum on the Sidelines?

The reunified city and, with it, the National Museums in Berlin, became a stage for power and a national representation space. Compared to national museums in the fields of ethnology, fine arts, or archaeology, since the early 21st century, the MEK has been marginalized both spatially and in terms of museum policy. After the departure of the Ethnological Museum (*Ethnologisches Museum*) and the Museum of Asian Art (*Museum für Asiatische Kunst*) to the Humboldt Forum in 2017, the MEK is the only national museum that remains in Dahlem. Accompanied by a massive decline in visitors after the reunification of the city, Dahlem — one of the three important museum sites in West Berlin — had come to be widely regarded as the periphery of Berlin's museum landscape (Früh 2022, 199).
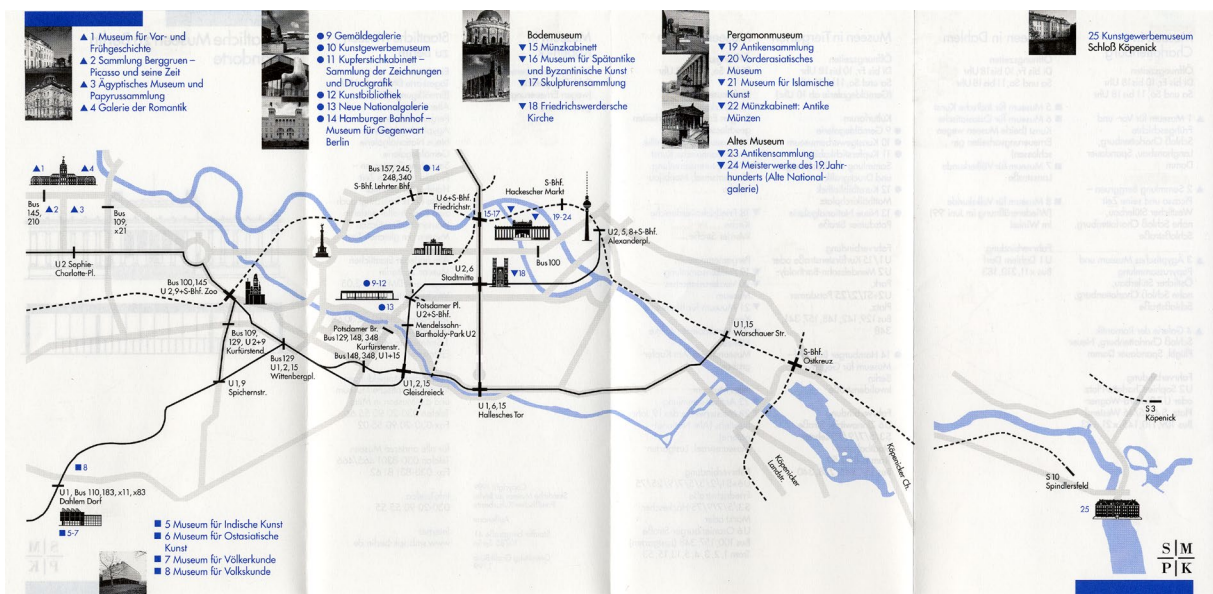

Fig. 2: Map of the National Museums in Berlin, SPK, Berlin 1999.

The hierarchical structure between these various Berlin National Museums manifests a distinction between ›high‹ and ›low‹ (or ›everyday‹) culture that is not unique and can also be observed in France and other West European countries.[3] I argue, however, that in the case of the MEK, a form of museum-political marginalization is emerging that also points to historical and memory-political challenges in dealing with the museum's difficult legacy and ultimately to the specificity of its reorganization. In contrast to the political attention and mass media coverage of the debates with regard to the founding of the German Historical Museum (*Deutsches Historisches Museum*, DHM) at the end of the 1980s or of the Humboldt Forum with the Ethnological Museum collections exhibited there since 2021,

Fig. 3: Renaming of the Museum of Folklore into the Museum of European Cultures.

the founding of the MEK took place on the periphery of Berlin's museum landscape. There was no comparable public debate about the MEK's creation. Moreover, there is no (public) founding document for this state museum. The founding act was completed with the opening exhibition on June 24, 1999.

Overall, little is known about the decision-making process behind the renaming of the Museum of Folklore as part of the wider reorganization process of the Dahlem museum complex.[4] How this museum came to be seen as relatively marginal requires explanation. If we understand urban space as a medium of cultural memory in a constant process of de- and reconstruction, »the power to assign names and narratives — that is, meanings — to urban spaces contributes decisively to their appropriation and use«[5] (Binder 2013, 101f.). It is therefore instructive to look at the historical narratives mobilized in the context of the MEK's founding on the periphery of Berlin, in relation to museums in the capital's center, especially the DHM and the Ethnological Museum at the Humboldt Forum.

In the following, I address two aspects of the MEK's intuitional and collection history that were *difficult* for the decision makers and curators in the process of its transformation. The first aspect refers to how the (collection) history of the Museum of German Folklore, the MEK's predecessor from the National Socialist era, was handled in terms of museum and history politics. The second aspect has to do with the challenges resulting from the merger of the East and West Berlin folklore museums in the course of German unification.

Avoiding a Founding Debate

According to Wolf-Dieter Dube (1934 — 2015), the then director of the National Museums in Berlin, West Berlin's Museum of German Folklore no longer fitted into the museum landscape of the reunified Berlin in 1990. This was because its name indicated continuity with

the National Socialist era and its collection concept focused on German-speaking areas.[6] Dube's aim was to avoid a founding debate similar to the one around the creation of the German Historical Museum (DHM). The thematic complex *Nazi period* and in particular the criticism of the trivialization and relativization of the crimes under the Nazi regime were the key topics of that debate. Part of the identity and history-political discussions surrounding the conception of the DHM related to the question of the historical representational space of the *German-speaking territories*, which had sparked fierce debates at the national and international levels (Brait 2011, 374−377). In 1986 and 1987, the orientation of the (West Berlin) folklore museum's collection policy led to heated criticisms by local media.[7] At the time of the reorganization of the Berlin National Museums in the course of German unification, these issues were also of great political importance with regard to the recognition of the Oder-Neisse border and the foreign policy fears of the unified Germany's ambition to become a powerful nation.[8]

It is not possible to say exactly whether and how Dube's decision was influenced by academic research on the museum's NS history. But it can be assumed that Dube knew about a dissertation entitled *Heimatmuseum* by the scholar of culture Martin Roth (1990). Roth brings up connections between the Nazi ideology and the Museum of German Folklore. Even though the latter is not the main focus, it is described as one of the folklore museums that served the Nazi state (Roth 1987, 196). The dissertation, submitted in 1987, coincided with the time when representatives of the academic field of folklore in the FRG were also dealing with the discipline's history of the Nazi era (Gerndt 1987), and with the time of the *Historikerstreit*.

Heimatmuseum was published in 1990, the same year that Dube's idea of transforming the Berlin folklore museums into a ›European‹ museum became public as part of his concept for the reorganization of the Berlin National Museums in the course of Germany's unification. Dube's aim for the planned museum was that it would distance itself »from the exaggerated nationalism of the past century« and make a »specific contribution to European culture« (Dube/Schade 1990, 60).[9] Dube wanted to convey to the addressees of his concept, in particular to the Board of the SPK, that as the representative of the National Museums, he sought to avoid a debate similar to the one that had accompanied the founding of the DHM. This debate became increasingly heated in the course of the *Historikerstreit* (Brait 2011, 384). Moreover, there was a direct connection between the highest representative of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation and the founding of the DHM: the SPK's then president, Werner Knopp, was the chairman of the expert commission that developed the concept for the planned DHM. In his function as the moderator of several public debates, Knopp directly experienced the controversies surrounding the founding of the DHM (Stölzl 1988, 518, 609). At the same time, he was Dube's superior. In short, in the decision-making process for setting up the MEK, the discussion of dominant themes of the *Historikerstreit* and the founding debate of the DHM were continued, but not made public.

Furthermore, the example of the position taken by Günter Schade, the (East German) deputy director of the National Museums in Berlin, clearly shows the leading influence of these West German memory culture developments on the decision-making process: Schade could not comprehend the aforementioned problems that Dube saw (Interview with Günter Schade on 21.2.2013). He called for preserving the link to (German) folklore in the unified museum's name instead of renaming it as the MEK, as advocated by Dube. Schade's view had no effect.

Another »Difficult Heritage«: The Unification of Countries – and their Museums

The social and political dimensions of the merger of East and West Berlin's folklore museums were hardly ever brought up by the actors interviewed in the course of my research. Even decades after German unification, they remain a *difficult* topic, pointing to the political power imbalance inherent in the process of museum reunification.

The dynamics and power relations of the political unification process are also visible in the national museum policy: the merger of the national museums from the eastern and western parts of Berlin was defined in the Unification Treaty in accordance with the law establishing the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Früh 2022, 71—78). Thus, the Foundation's ownership claims and competences were extended to the ›Prussian heritage‹ that had been located in the former GDR. Through the SPK's leadership, the decision-making power of its president and the directors of the National Museums in Berlin dominated. Thus, the reorganization was driven and shaped by the National Museums' director Wolf-Dieter Dube. The West Berlin national museums had already planned the merger of the Museum of German Folklore and the European Department of the Museum of Ethnology in 1988. Under the changed conditions of German unification as well as the European conjuncture at the end of the 1980s — beginning of the 1990s, these plans were pursued further by integrating East Berlin's Museum of Folklore as well. The former director of the West Berlin museum was in fact appointed to the director post at the united Museum of Folklore, while the former director of the East Berlin museum was given the deputy position, following the official regulations of the National Museums in Berlin, SPK. This exemplifies asymmetries that prevailed in the mergers of the national museums across the board. The widespread thesis of the GDR's ›takeover‹ by the FRG in a phase of accelerated transition seems, therefore, to apply here in macrostructural terms (see Kowalczuk 2019; see also Flitsch/Noack 2019; Hegner 2020). Nevertheless, this broad framing of the reproduction of the existing Western museum policy structures fails to recognize the contribution of East German curators to the process of the museums' transformation. This reorganization was strongly marked by continuities in personnel, particularly in the case of East Berlin's Museum of Folklore. From 2000 to 2017, four of the seven curators at the Museum of European Cultures had previously worked at that museum. As a result, the MEK possesses expert and experiential knowledge as well as collections on ›everyday culture‹ in the GDR. However, these collections have neither been fully inventoried nor received much public or academic attention (Früh 2022, 126—159).

In this respect, the MEK embodies a culture of memory of the GDR which has been relatively hidden in the shadow of the official memory politics and federally funded museums such as the German Historical Museum. The weight of state funding has been given to the memory of the surveillance and border regime, while aspects of everyday life as well as social and economic history have been assigned a marginal status (Benz 2011, 1007; Gaubert 2019, 84). This development is part of the historical-political process of negotiating collective memories divided into ›East‹ and ›West‹ with regard to the museum representation of everyday GDR history. These tensions tend to be described in two opposing ways. On the one hand, according to the ›master narratives‹ of national historical museums, the history of the FRG is presented as a success story compared to that of the GDR. On the other one, GDR history is depicted as representing community-building forms of »self-reflection« of privately run local or regional GDR museums (Ludwig 2012; Langwagen 2016, 150).

»An Archive for Our Own Past«: The MEK's Museum-Political Location on a Quiet Periphery

Although the FRG has been internationally regarded as a pioneer in coming to terms with the history of Natoinal Socialism (Macdonald 2009, 2016), the case of the MEK's founding and work (2000−2010) demonstrates, rather, tendencies towards »containment« (Macdonald 2016, 7) and a radical distancing from its difficult legacy through a ›European‹ reorientation. The relatively late and selective reappraisal of the difficult chapters in the history of the MEK can be interpreted as a consequence of Berlin's divided history and the German capital's new political representative status, combined with special national and international attention. As the example of the Humboldt Forum's conception made clear, narratives that are meant to create unity and overcome political division have prevailed in Berlin (Binder 2009; Lehmann 2016 [2001], 253; von Bose 2016). The decision-makers chose the narrative of Prussian reform policy as well as the humanist and scientific heritage of the Humboldt brothers.[10] However, with its cultural biography shaped by the political history of Germany, in which the division of the country is also materialized, the MEK did not fit into this narrative.

Academics and journalists criticize the fact that the MEK has not been given a place in the large and centrally located cultural policy project of the Humboldt Forum (Kilb 2011; Macdonald 2019, 361; Groschwitz 2015). They made themselves advocates of the MEK in the question of urban location, protested against the juxtaposition of supposedly ›European‹ and ›non-European‹ cultures, and called for more historical reflexivity. Arguably, even the ›European‹ label of the MEK was not compatible with the concept of the Humboldt Forum. The writers of the Humboldt Forum's concept assigned a special symbolic and cultural-political significance to the colonial history collections of the Ethnological Museum, which had been declared ›non-European‹. In addition, they associated the collections of fine arts and archaeology on the Museum Island with ›European‹ culture. The spatial proximity of the Forum to these collections was intended to symbolically express the »equal dialogue of cultures« as a sign of the »cosmopolitan« (Parzinger 2011, 219) metropolis of Berlin and Germany (von Bose 2016, 109). One effect of this interpretation should be that the debate about the reconstruction of the Berlin Palace could be defused in terms of memory politics and freed from the reputation of revisionism. This meant that the difficult chapters of 20th century German history had been left out (Morat 2019, 142, 144).

However, Michael Eissenhauer, the director of the National Museums in Berlin in 2008−2022, associated the MEK with German history. He argued that the preservation of its collections was meaningful and important »as an archive for our own past« (interview with Michael Eissenhauer on 19.2.2013). Eissenhauer counted the administration of this heritage among the essential tasks of the MEK. Furthermore, he saw the MEK as a cultural history museum. From his point of view, the German Historical Museum had already fulfilled the cultural-political mission on which his predecessor Dube had based the MEK (Interviews with Michael Eissenhauer on 19.2.2013, 12.10.2021). Eissenhauer claimed that no critical reassessment of the MEK's collections had been undertaken, whereas the historical museums had taken on this task. Indeed, during many years of research, I could not find any evidence that the National Museums in Berlin or representatives of the academic field of folklore/cultural anthropology specifically pushed for such a critical reassessment of the MEK. Nevertheless, there has been selective research and publication activity — including at the museum — on the museum's National Socialist collection history since the 2000s.[11] As a case in point, Elisabeth Tietmeyer (Tietmeyer 2001; Tietmeyer/Vanja 2013) brought up

a topic that became virulent in museum policy at the federal level and beyond: the question of provenance and restitution of art and cultural objects looted by the National Socialists (Thiemeyer 2019b, 982).[12] Tietmeyer, who — as the former head of the Museum of Ethnology's European Department — came in 1993 ›from the outside‹,[13] actively helped shape the museum transformation process.

With a view to these difficult memory-political issues that have had an impact on the process of founding the MEK, I understand multidirectional remembering in the sense of Michael Rothberg, as an approach which offers the possibility of counteracting exclusions motivated by memory politics (Axster/König 2021, 374). At the same time, this perspective facilitates the diversification of memory culture. From this angle, a fundamental change in museum practice can be observed in the course of the ›European‹ transformation of the former Berlin Folklore Museum, which has been inscribed in the memory-cultural dynamics of a (post)migrant society since the 2000s. This is explored in more detail below.

The Museum of ›European Cultures‹: A »Platform of Intercultural Dialogue«

The MEK's official ›European‹ mission was not clearly specified at the outset in terms of collecting policy or exhibition content. However, decision makers agreed that it should involve a comparative, cross-border perspective as well as the topic of migration (Kaschuba 1995, 133; Dube 1999; Karasek/Tietmeyer 1999, 13; Vanja 1999b, 120). How did the curators translate the new ›European‹ mission into practice? What challenges did they face?

Like most other ethnographic museums since the late 20th century, the MEK was confronted with the challenge of its loss of legitimacy as a scientific institution, a consequence of the crisis of representation, the postcolonial critique, and the political as well as economic valorization of culture and cultural heritage (Förster 2013; Pagani 2013; Macdonald 2015, 15f.).[14] Aware of these challenges and in search of social legitimacy, many ethnographic museums are striving to play an active role in civil society (Thiemeyer 2019a, 26). They are becoming socio-political places of social integration and recognition of previously marginalized cultures (Pagani 2013, 167).

This trend is also apparent in the MEK's founding process. The MEK's curators saw the ›European‹ mission in creating a »platform of intercultural dialogue« (Tietmeyer 2006; Vanja/Tietmeyer 2009) and engaging with the topic of migration. This interpretation of the museum's political mission dominated the self-portrayal of the museum's work in the 2000s. Various exhibitions, an extensive program of events, and the MEK's participation in two EU projects — *Migration, Work and Identity. A European History Told in Museums* (2000−2003) and *Entrepreneurial Cultures in European Cities* (2008−2010) — contributed to establishing this new thematic focus in the work of the MEK.[15]

Museums from six European countries participated in the MEK's first EU project, *Migration, Work and Identity*, with the aim of developing a common perspective on the topic of migration. One MEK curator describes this project as »a field of learning and experimentation« (Neuland-Kitzerow 2005, 57). *Migration(s) History(s) in Berlin* is the title of one of the exhibitions that the MEK showed from July 2003 to February 2004 as part of this EU project. Because the MEK had only a few objects and materials in its collections as well as few contacts to address questions of contemporary migration processes, cooperation with the Institute for European Ethnology (IfEE) at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin was important. The curators organized two seminars at the IfEE as part of the project. The MEK acquired everyday life objects from people with migrant experience and their descendants:

tea and coffee sets, implements for making and selling kebabs, equipment for house altars or games (Tietmeyer 2008). The exhibition was intended to convey knowledge about migration processes in Berlin from the last third of the 19th century to the present. The exhibition was accompanied by a broad mediation program that included, for instance, events with eyewitness talks, readings, and a presentation of migrant organizations. In the words of one curator, the MEK thus became a place of discussion of »individual and collective migration experiences«, which was »a very expanded task« compared with its predecessor's roles (Neuland-Kitzerow 2005, 58).

In this way, the MEK also took on integration and socio-political functions, thus acquiring a new legitimacy. Various events (such as the European Cultural Days) or EU projects were explicitly associated by the curators with the claim to »contribute to better integration« (Tietmeyer 2006, 277; Kistemaker/Tietmeyer 2010, 107). This new orientation in the museum's work is an example of a learning process of the museum's curators since its foundation. It is also symptomatic of social learning processes since the late 1990s as well as of Germany presenting itself as a country of immigration and a »postmigrant society«[16] (Foroutan 2019).

The political recognition of being a country of immigration had not been self-evident in either the FRG or the GDR until the 1980s (Foroutan 2019, 37). As observed by Naika Foroutan, it was only at the beginning of the 2000s — the decade immediately after the founding of the MEK — that a fundamental change in this direction had taken place. The turning point, Foroutan suggests, came with the 2001 Immigration Act.[17] This brought a new legal and legitimizing basis for people with a migration experience (Foroutan 2016, 239). Thus, political and social demands to reduce gaps in the representation of migrants were recognized as democratically legitimate (Foroutan 2019, 38). By including people with a migration history in the MEK's projects, curators sought to address a perceived gap in the cultural memory (Neuland-Kitzerow 2005, 54) and, in the process, made migration into a central theme of the museum's representation of German society in the present.

In 2008, the MEK was represented at a working meeting on *Integration and the Museum,* organized by the Institute for Museum Research of the National Museums in Berlin (*Institut für Museumsforschung der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin*) and ICOM Germany to discuss the extent to which the goals of the Integration Summit convened by the Federal Chancellor in 2006 had been implemented in the museum field. In her report on the 2008 working meeting, the then vice-director of the MEK, Elisabeth Tietmeyer, problematized the lack of continuous and sustainable effects: visitors with migration experience still had not become regular visitors but only came to events of the specific exhibitions in which they had been involved. Tietmeyer also called for more financial and human resources as well as dedicated political support for such integration work, including the implementation and »institutionalization« of integration policy goals (Tietmeyer 2008).

If we assume, as Foroutan does, that the perspective of a postmigrant society is linked to the central demand to overcome the established binary of »natives« and »immigrants« (Foroutan 2019, 224), the description of the museum's work does not align with this perspective in every case. The MEK curators in the 2000s were ambivalent on this front. On the one hand, they recognized migration as a fundamental component of society and saw this as exemplified in Berlin, with the city's history of migration. On the other hand, the museum's profile as a »platform of intercultural dialogue« and cultural mediator precisely implied a distinction between ›natives‹ and ›immigrants‹.

One of the greatest challenges for the MEK curators in terms of memory politics and museum practice has been the discrepancy between the legacy of its institutional predeces-

sors and the new mandate to orient the museum towards Europe. Specific to the founding of the MEK are strong continuities with its institutional predecessors at the levels of staff, collections, and museum location.

Challenges of the MEK's Memory Work in the 2000s

One consequence of the continuity in personnel was that the museum's work in the 1990s and 2000s was characterized less by a reflexive approach to *difficult* parts of the respective predecessor institution's heritage and more by the protection and rescue of this heritage. One example here is the handling of the collections of the former West Berlin Museum of German Folklore (1963—1992) that were oriented towards German-speaking areas.

On the one hand, we can observe a form of *containment* here, too. The MEK communicated little to the public about how its work related to the collections of the German-speaking regions of East-Central and South-Eastern Europe (Bauer 2013, 41f.).[18] This observation is an emerging result of my research, which needs to be further explored. It can be assumed that for some curators formerly employed at the (West Berlin) Museum of German Folklore, the protection of this museum's heritage was a priority (Früh 2022, 384—426).[19] Let us recall that Dube cited the focus of this museum's collections on German-speaking regions as a major problem in his justification of the transformation and thus the (nominal) end of this museum.

On the other hand, dealing with this heritage was linked to the change in Germany's federal policy concerning displaced persons in the 2000s. With the end of the Cold War, German unification, and the EU's eastward expansion, intergovernmental relations in the area of promoting German cultural traditions according to Section 96 of the Law on the Affairs of Displaced Persons and Refugees (*Bundesvertriebenengesetz*, BVFG) in Eastern Europe changed fundamentally.[20] The new policy essentially aimed at professionalization, scientification, internationalization, and modernization, as well as at a stronger connection to public sponsorship. Diverse activities of Konrad Vanja, the MEK's director in 2000—2012, followed on from the new federal policy on displaced persons. As a case in point, in 2004, Vanja advocated the creation at the MEK of a new position funded by state project funds: the Coordination of East-Central and South-Eastern Europe (*Koordinierung Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa,* KOMSOE) (Früh 2022, 393—397). Furthermore, he took a leading role in the ›European‹ reorientation of the *Ostdeutschen Landesmuseen*[21] through his work on numerous scientific advisory boards. His aim was to overcome earlier ethnocentric narratives through »Europeanization« and work on a »common heritage« (Vanja 2009, 681; Früh 2022, 388f.). Particularly through exhibitions curated by and under Vanja, the MEK promoted itself as a cultural diplomatic actor in the German-Polish relations (Vanja 2017; Früh 2022, 374—383). Several touring exhibitions were shown in the 2000s in over 30 locations in Germany, Poland, and France, especially in the German-Polish border region. This underscores how the museum's political mission and profile as a »platform of intercultural dialogue« tied in with Germany's national cultural diplomatic and European policy interests. This policy was oriented towards normalizing Germany's relations with its eastern neighbors in the course of the EU's eastward expansion.

Conclusion

To date, most of the existing museum and memory research on the MEK has been interested in it from the perspective of its ›Europeanization‹. My findings indicate that this perspective does not account for all of the reasons behind the MEK's inception. In particular, the transition of its predecessor, the Museum of Folklore (*Museum für Volkskunde*), to a ›European‹ focus also served as a means to address and navigate the complex and difficult legacy left in the wake of German unification. The museum's formation process and collection journey intertwine deeply with Germany's scholarly folklore pursuits and its multifaceted political history.

The transformation of the folklore museums from East and West Berlin into the Museum of European Cultures in the 1990s was a response to the challenge of German memory politics. Wolf-Dieter Dube, the then-director of the National Museums in Berlin, wanted to distance the MEK from its predecessor's Nazi-era legacy. Dube aimed to avoid a contentious founding debate (like the one that happened around the German Historical Museum) and instead focused on a European orientation for the MEK.

This strategic decision resulted in a failure to address not only the museum's Nazi past, but also its GDR history. The MEK contains a culture of memory of the GDR that has remained relatively hidden in the shadows of the official memory politics and state-sponsored museums. Despite Germany's reputation for coming to terms with National Socialism, the founding and subsequent work of the MEK displayed tendencies of *containment* and distancing from these *difficult heritages* through a ›European‹ reorientation. While there have been occasional mentions of Nazi history in the museum's publications, the topic remains a blind spot in much of the museum's research, resulting in a late — beginning only in the 2020s — start of comprehensive provenance research.

German unification also shaped the MEK's memory politics. Given the close connection between political unification and museum fusion and transformation in the 1990s, as well as the personnel continuities with the predecessor museums in East and West Berlin, the museum staff went through a complicated merger and learning process. This is symptomatic of the social learning process in the course of the political changes after 1989 with regard to power symmetries: despite the MEK's strong ongoing personnel continuity with the East Berlin Museum of Folklore, the power dynamics in museum policy favored the Federal German side. Even more than 20 years after the MEK's founding, it remains difficult for some curators to talk about the subject.

The MEK's European mission, colored by the Federal German politics of memory, aimed at overcoming national borders. This meant that it did not explicitly address the issue of German unification and questions of how to deal with the legacy of the former museums, which were implicit in the transformation process. Rothberg's multidimensional approach is helpful to understand and broaden the view of these politics of memory, the thrust of his argument being »to reject the reductionism of the nation-centered, real-estate development model in favor of a more open-ended sense of the possibilities of memory and countermemory that might allow the ›revisiting‹ and rewriting of hegemonic sites of memory« (Rothberg 2009, 309f.). Handling the MEK's historical collections in terms of museum politics, as described in this article, shows an ambivalent response to the challenge of dealing with the museum's *difficult heritage*. In terms of spatial location and museum policy, these collections are marginalized and thus hardly visible, but they are nevertheless preserved and available to interested visitors and researchers.

Specifically, in my contribution, I plead for these *difficult* and archived topics of »our own past« to be thought about more closely in relation to the museum's new European focus. In particular, this ›Europeanization‹ brought an emphasis on migration and permitted the MEK to profile itself as a »platform of intercultural dialogue.« As well as paralleling Germany's wider social learning process with regard to itself as a *postmigrant society*, this emphasis enabled the museum to gain visibility and new legitimacy by aligning with integration policy discourses and governmental cultural diplomacy. This perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of museum transformation, throwing new light upon the position and role of the MEK in Germany's memory politics. It also raises new questions (inspired by postsocialist and postcolonial theories) for museum research and work about formerly sidelined questions of social difference and recognition, as well as questions of political and historical responsibility (Rothberg 2009, 310).

Notes

1 The content of this article is based on the findings of my dissertation (Früh 2022). I would like to thank Irene Hilden, Sharon Macdonald, and Andrei Zavadski for the interest in my research, the inspiring exchange, and all the constructive comments. I thank Elisabeth Haas, Elisabeth Tietmeyer, Franka Schneider, and Claire Bullen for their helpful comments, and especially Andrei, Claire, and Cyril Künzle for their help in revising the English text. I would also like to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation for funding my research in Berlin, Marseille, and Paris.

2 The Allies had dissolved the State of Prussia in February 1947. In order to regulate the responsibility for its holdings, the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation was established by a FRG federal law in July 1957. The institution started its work in West Berlin in 1961.

3 Deviations from this tendency can be seen in Scandinavian countries such as Norway, whose national identity is more strongly associated with traditional folk culture than with ›high‹ culture (Rogan 2017, 158).

4 See Zentralarchiv der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (ZA): SMB-ZA, II NA 13819, Status 2013, Protocol of the Directors' Conference of 15.12.1999. The plans of the National Museums in Berlin — SPK for the renovation and expansion of the West Berlin museum complex in Dahlem in 1988 aimed to create »a first-class center of non-European culture and art.« This was to unite the collections of the Museums of Ethnology, Indian Art, East Asian Art, and Islamic Art. In addition, these plans included the merger of the European Department of the Museum of Ethnology and the Museum of German Folklore as well as the departure of the »European art museums« located here. For more detail on this aspect, see Früh 2022, 161.

5 All of the quotations from German have been translated by me.

6 See Archiv MEK, Abteilung Europa MEK (1990—1998), Status 2012: Dube, Wolf-Dieter, et al.: Ergebnisprotokoll der Besprechung vom 1.7.1991, Berlin. There was also personnel continuity between the West Berlin Museum of German Folklore and the Nazi regime. The professional rise of the museum director (1959—1974) Lothar Pretzell took place within the Nazi cultural system. Pretzell had joined the SA in 1933 and the NSDAP in 1937. However, the first academic publications on the topic appeared only in 2018 (see Barth 2018; Plasser 2018).

7 Interview with Konrad Vanja on 3.11.2021; Interview with Wolf-Dieter Dube on 22.2.2013.

8 See ZA: VA 12617, MVK; SMPK, Status 2018: Hansen, Hans Jürgen: Interview mit dem Generaldirektor der SMPK, Wolf-Dieter Dube. In: Sammler-Journal 9, 9/1990.

9 For more details on the ›European‹ orientation of the MEK's planning in terms of museum politics, see Früh 2022, 160—201.

10 For more information on the status of Berlin as a political representative of Germany and the Humboldt Forum as a symbol of the wish to overcome division, see von Bose 2016, 56; Früh 2022, 435—443.

11 On aspects of the National Socialist history of the Berlin Folklore Museum, see Roth 1990; Gorgus 1999; Tietmeyer/Vanja 2013; Saalmann 2014; Schneider 2017; Barth 2018; Buchczyk 2023.

12 In 2023, the MEK planned to begin provenance research on its collection of approximately 2.500 objects that the photojournalist Gustav Adolf Küppers (1894—1978) had acquired in the countries

of Southeast Europe between 1935 and 1939 for the Eurasia Department of the *Museum für Völker-kunde*. The work of the department as well as Küppers's contribution were ideologically influenced by the *Lebensraum* and race concept of National Socialism (Tietmeyer/Vanja 2013, 402f.). More-over, the collections of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, on display at the Humboldt Forum, led to a heated debate in the 2010s with regard to the appropriate treatment of cultural objects from the colonial era (Thiemeyer 2019b). The following provenance research project at the MEK follows on from this trend: The *Sámi Collection at MEK. A Multiperspective Approach of Provenance Research* 1.12.2022−30.11.2024, (see https://www.smb.museum/museen-einrichtun-gen/museum-europaeischer-kulturen/sammeln-forschen/forschung/samische-sammlung-am-mu-seum-europaeischer-kulturen/, accessed on 30.6.2023).

13 This corresponds with Sharon Macdonald's observation that such impulses are often articulated by actors who come »from outside« certain institutional or other collective boundaries (see Macdonald 2009, 3). Tietmeyer was trained more in ethnology and sociology and less in folklore.

14 The loss of academic legitimacy in the specific case of the MEK is strongly connected to the mu-seum and academic history of folklore in Berlin and Germany. I discuss this point in detail in my dissertation (Früh 2022, 232−304).

15 This shows the overarching trend in the process of reorganizing the Berlin Museum of Folklore into the MEK and the Paris Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires into the Marseille Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée: instead of the figure of the peasant or the work-er, the figure of the migrant is now receiving greater attention in museum work (see Homo-Lechner 2005; Macdonald 2008; Mazé 2014).

16 In the German-speaking academic community, social scientists use the term to promote a new, explorative actor- and socio-analytical perspective on migration. It also stands for a positive social change that seeks full participation of all members of society (Foroutan 2016, 230, 232).

17 *Gesetz zur Steuerung und Begrenzung der Zuwanderung und zur Regelung des Aufenthalts und der Integration von Unionsbürgern und Ausländern (Zuwanderungsgesetz).* It entered into force in 2004/2005. The entire law on foreigners and asylum was newly regulated, and the promotion of the integration of immigrants and their descendants was established as a state task. One of this law's goals is to regulate the right of residence with regard to economic and labor market policy interests.

18 In contrast, the German Historical Museum acted as the official forum for these debates, as deter-mined by the federal government. Since the 2000s, the topic has been part of important debates on memory politics at federal and international levels (Weber 2018, 356).

19 Konrad Vanja was the last chief curator of the West Berlin Museum of German Folklore (1963−1992) who participated in the process of the museum's transformation. As the director of the MEK (2000−2012) and the last representative of the West Berlin museum, he also took on the role of a »custodian of [its] heritage« (Früh 2022, 297; see Vanja 1999a; Vanja 2012).

20 The BVFG was enacted in 1953 to regulate the framework conditions for integrating displaced per-sons, refugees, and repatriates into the FRG society after the Second World War. It refers to those regions of East-Central and South-Eastern Europe in which Germans lived before 1945 or still live. The law was aimed at resuming or continuing the promotion of culture and research on the historical eastern territories.

21 These museums are dedicated to the heritage of the former German state and settlement areas in Central and Eastern Europe.

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