INTRODUCTION

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The emotional resonance of history is burgeoning today: national and international commemorative calendars crystallise the past around iconic events and personalities, in order to provide emotional – but also political, social and economic – capital for contemporary society. The oft-cited ‘memory boom’ of recent decades – which references a global growth of controversies over historical legacies as well as scholarly interest in the social and cultural phenomenon of memory[[1]](#endnote-1) – is perpetuated significantly by anniversary activity. Despite speculation that this boom could soon be fading,[[2]](#endnote-2) recent years have demonstrated an unabated interest in marking historical milestones, as seen with the centenary of the First World War, 100 years of female suffrage, 200 years of Marx’s birth, 500 years of the Reformation and the fiftieth anniversary of 1968, to name but a few. Such occasions have seen a deluge of new publications, documentaries and exhibitions, the digitisation of historical documents and memorabilia, the inauguration of monuments and renovation of heritage sites, not to speak of commemorative tourist packages, such as centenary battlefield tours or anniversary Berlin Wall tourist trips.[[3]](#endnote-3) Some anniversary products have taken more unusual form: in the run up to 2017, for instance, the new Luther Playmobil figure made record sales (32,000 figurines sold in the first 72 hours, over a million by June 2017 – see Williams’ article), while 2018 witnessed the installation of Karl Marx pedestrian traffic lights in the philosopher’s home town of Trier. Anniversary practices appear to be as varied as their subjects, yet what is their value? What, in the terms of this special number, is their ‘capital’, and how has this evolved in recent decades?

In contrast to numerous contemporary studies that have used anniversaries as prisms through which to interrogate the political and cultural memory of specific events,[[4]](#endnote-4) this special number of *German Life and Letters* examines the value of anniversaries by bringing together a variety of historical subjects and methodological approaches. Through six research-led articles, one practice-based article and one creative piece, the aim is to reflect more broadly on the value – as well as the challenges and deficits – of anniversary activity in recent German history. By employing the notion of ‘anniversary capital’, this collection suggests that investment in anniversaries has the potential – if successful – to reap multiple returns in contemporary times. While the potential for economic return has long been observed,[[5]](#endnote-5) the capital of anniversaries is clearly also highly symbolic. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notions of cultural and social capital, it is thus helpful to understand the mnemonic activities that constitute anniversary practices as symbolic investment in community education, civic relations, institutional reputation and political influence. The political capital for those investing in anniversaries is likely to be particularly strong, as the individuals or groups investing relevant time, energy and resource aim to achieve greater influence (for themselves or their cause) within their community – accumulating a form of credit which can then be used to further other goals. If such investment does not result in attention, however, there is little likelihood of success. Indeed, attention capital is another key form of capital relevant to contemporary anniversary activity, for in a world of social media, which fosters an abundance of information yet a scarcity of attention, anniversaries aim above all to focus public attention.

As the above discussion demonstrates, the observance of anniversaries necessitates symbolic investment in numerous different types of capital: cultural, social, political and attention – alongside, of course, monetary investment. As the contributions in this special number suggest, ‘anniversary capital’ embodies elements of all of these – to varying degrees – which is leveraged by agents (whether governments, political parties, educational establishments, specific interest groups or even individuals) to accumulate social and political influence, respect and – ultimately – power. The hallmark of anniversary capital is, of course, its time-sensitive nature, as it can only be accumulated at specific points in the annual or decennial calendar, thus making it a relatively scarce – yet potentially powerful – type of currency. As this collection demonstrates – and as is typical of all economies – the success of mnemonic activities one year may not bring returns in another; they are highly contingent upon numerous external influences.

While this special number focuses on anniversary capital in the twentieth and twenty-first century, it is worth remembering that the observance of anniversaries is nothing new. Roland Quinault and William Johnston both date the European ‘cult of the centenary’ and the ‘cult of anniversaries’ back to the nineteenth century, yet Johnston also points towards the longer evolution of anniversary traditions, originating first with the French Revolution and second with courtly traditions.[[6]](#endnote-6) Others observe a much more fundamental human need associated with the phenomenon of the anniversary. Thomas Schmidt, for instance, traces its origins right back to early humanity, where the rhythm of the seasons provided a regular cycle around which rituals were built: ‘[d]as Leben wurde zkylisch erfahren’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Eviatar Zerubavel also highlights the human need for regularity, with ‘homo rhythmicus’ being the creator of the weekly cycle.[[8]](#endnote-8) The calendar thus ‘plays a major role in our mnemonic socialization’, with anniversaries ensuring that we ‘periodically “revisit” our collective past’.[[9]](#endnote-9) While such regularity is reassuring, and offers a sense of continuity and tradition, it is also highly constructed; as Zerubavel claims, ‘[t]here is absolutely nothing natural […] about annual anniversaries’; indeed, some cultures use other cycles to mark significant moments, and it is simply social convention that ties us to the annual revolution.[[10]](#endnote-10) Historical studies of anniversaries thus foreground two central notions: first, that anniversaries are highly constructed and second, that they have become an organising principle in western society.

As structural pillars around which the ‘sociomental topography of the past’ is organised,[[11]](#endnote-11) it logically follows that anniversaries can be employed as powerful tools. As Schmidt claims, ‘[d]ie Geschichte des Kalenders ist eine Geschichte der Macht’.[[12]](#endnote-12) Traditionally this meant the legitimising of power through the memory of historical grandeur, military might or cultural dominance, and while the cause of anniversary celebration today is significantly more diverse, it is still a device employed in the service of nations and states, as well as related political, cultural or religious organisations. Yet we have experienced significant change in recent decades, and it is difficult to support William Johnston’s claim in 1991, for instance, that anniversary commemorations provide ‘the most convenient and least controversial device to coordinate such identity-building endeavours’.[[13]](#endnote-13) Recent years have cast an increasingly critical shadow on such activity and, as demonstrated in a number of the contributions in this special number, anniversaries have become fiercely contested social and political spaces. In this way, traditional ‘master narratives’ are often contested through counter-narratives, or re-appropriated by populist groups seeking to frame narratives for their own agenda. In contrast, critics view the commodification of identity through anniversaries as little more than gimmicky opportunism, with the ‘disneyfication’ of history teaching us little about the meaning and relevance of past narratives.

In many ways, it is the contested nature of anniversaries that raises their profile and potentially provokes deeper engagement with the past in question. Following Chantal Mouffe’s concept of ‘agonistic public spaces’, in which ‘the public space is the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation’,[[14]](#endnote-14) one could argue that an entirely uncontroversial anniversary today fails to expand the democratic arena. Indeed, as Rosalyn Deutsche states, ‘conflict, far from the ruin of democratic public space, is the condition of its existence’.[[15]](#endnote-15) As several articles in this collection demonstrate, the contemporary capital of anniversaries may, thus, lie precisely in their contested nature.

Contemporary anniversaries are also shaped by the rapid technological advances of recent times, which further complicate and diversify narratives. In a special issue of *War and Society* focused on the centenary of the First World War, for example, the editors highlight the emergence of democratisation and decentralisation as key themes across different remembering nations.[[16]](#endnote-16) This has resulted from the growth of local and family histories, as well as the use of social media and the web for commemorative purposes; as Jay Winter states in his contribution with reference to the quantity of centenary activity, ‘the commemorative period since 2014 has been marked by the work of those who believe that small is beautiful’.[[17]](#endnote-17) Several contributions in the current special number also highlight the decentralisation of commemorative activity, in which diversity is promoted. This diversity may relate to physical locations, historical narratives, commemorative practices and forms, or indeed types of audiences. The oft-noted democratisation of memory has thus had a tangible impact on anniversary activity, which appears set to continue. However, as Winter reminds us, ‘commemoration is a very pliable art’; we cannot predict with any certainty how this will develop in generations to come.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Although the future cannot be predicted, the contributions in this special number all point towards ways in which past and present anniversary practices contribute to shaping those of the future. Building on Jeffrey Olick’s notion of ‘genre memory’, which highlights that ‘commemorative processes […] are always fundamentally dialogical’ and exist in part as path-dependent products of earlier commemorations,[[19]](#endnote-19) they show how the passage of time leads to new and different layers in a complex palimpsest of intersecting practices. As the constantly evolving narratives attached to anniversaries confirm, contest, modify or repurpose past iterations, they also pre-empt and influence future narratives. In the context of contemporary right-wing populism, for instance, Hilary Potter’s contribution in this special number addresses the notion of ‘future foreboding’ through the appropriation of memories of Weimar Germany and National Socialism in commemorative speeches marking the Rosenstraße protest of 1943. As she argues, the populist right has been shaping memory culture for a number of years in Germany, yet this has often gone unrecognised, thus presenting an unseen danger in contemporary times. In contrast, Catherine Smale’s reading of Berta Lask’s 1925 drama *Thomas Münzer* (staged as part of the 400th anniversary of the German Peasants’ War) shows how the latent revolutionary potential of the Peasants’ War was called on in the 1920s to construct a vision of revolutionary heritage and thus political legitimacy for the KPD. Lask did so, however, by exposing the failures of the Peasants’ War in order to foreground the shortcomings of present and future revolutionary activity. In both cases, we thus see how anniversaries can be strategically employed to influence future political narratives.

Given the increasingly multi-vocal landscape in which anniversary activity is now taking place, complex negotiations between multiple agents, instances of counter-commemoration and the re-appropriation of forgotten memories become increasingly common. Such interventions may challenge notions of the ‘canon’ and ‘archive’ in commemorative terms, with some dates or figures emerging from the shadows, while others disappear or remain ‘archived’ for possible future excavation. This is particularly apparent in two contributions in this special number. First, David Zell shows how the figure of artist Käthe Kollwitz was variously used in the GDR to suit the political trajectory of the state, at times overlooking some significant elements of her life and work. While she became a much-lauded figure in the GDR, adopting the role of ‘Kämpferin für das Proletariat’, it is notable that she was targeted by an official campaign in 1951 that sought to counter formalism in art and literature – and was thus initially excluded from the ‘canon’. Second, Richard Millington demonstrates how commemoration of the uprisings of 17 June 1953 has moved in and out of favour during the history of West Germany and in post-unification years, depending on the political exigencies of the time and the parties in power. Significantly in recent years, however, he shows how the technology-led ubiquity of the media has driven narratives and commemorations of 17 June. As both these articles highlight, anniversary practices are shaped by the needs of the present; past moments may offer convenient messages, but also uncomfortable truths, leading to their suppression or celebration at different moments in time. Just as anniversaries are cyclical, so too may be their subjects.

Another significant theme to emerge in this special number relates to the capital of place-based memories in anniversary activity. While the digital age offers multiple opportunities to remember past events and personalities via online platforms, social media, virtual worlds and even holograms, it seems that the rootedness and tangibility of place remains a constant in many anniversary events. Not only this, but place can also become an essential element in the recovery of collective memories and, potentially, in the remaking of communities. As Stephan Petzold shows with reference to the bombing of Dresden in February 1945, for instance, the development of a ritual of ‘stilles Gedenken’ in the city became unexpectedly controversial once it also attracted right-wing extremists. In consequence, local civil society activists in Dresden have been active in resurrecting ‘forgotten’ memories in the city, often via localised practices of remembrance across diverse commemorative spaces. In contrast, Anna Saunders shows how the development of different physical sites of memory in Berlin has helped to shape a more decentralised memory narrative relating to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the peaceful revolution. The focus on the regional here has, however, also been accompanied by a growing internationalisation of narratives, in which local and national concerns are influenced by global trends and universal values; at a time when right-wing populism and concerns over growing nationalist tendencies abound, the focus on the local and the global is perhaps no surprise.

Criss-crossing all of the above themes is the notion that remembrance is, of course, performative. As Winter states, ‘the performance of memory is both a mnemonic device and a way in which individual memories are relived, revived, and refashioned’.[[20]](#endnote-20) Anniversary activities thus both inscribe the past as well as describe it. This inscription takes multiple forms: written, spoken, graphic, corporeal, to name but a few. The six research-led studies in this special number draw on a variety of ways in which the past is performed, and analyse commemorative speeches, political performances, national and regional rituals, literary and filmic engagement with anniversaries, as well as re-enactment. Despite their methodological and thematic diversity, however, it is notable that the performance of memory across these examples is strongly bound by two tropes. First, it is evident across all six studies that extremism and revolutionary activity prove to be recurrent themes in the German anniversary calendar. While anniversary activity is clearly always likely to mark the exceptional moments in history, it is notable that, from the 1920s to the present-day, moments of instability puncture the regularity of the calendar. This serves, perhaps, as a stark reminder of the very reason why society invests considerable time and resources in the commemoration of such moments: to invest in the utopia of a stable future through learning from the past. Second, it is notable that all contributions highlight – in some shape or form – the significance of Germany’s communist and socialist legacies. While Smale’s evaluation of a 1925 drama commissioned by the KPD and Zell’s analysis of Käthe Kollwitz in the GDR both underline the cultural heritage of left-wing activity, the other four contributions explore commemorative rituals that continue today, but which all have their (historical or commemorative) roots in the GDR. Contrary to assumptions that the GDR would become little more than a ‘footnote in history’,[[21]](#endnote-21) the current collection demonstrates how the former East German state continues to influence anniversary activity in contemporary Germany, whether through significant historical events (e.g. 17 June 1953 and 9 November 1989) or the shaping of anniversary narratives (e.g. the rituals associated with the bombing of Dresden or the Rosenstraße protest).

The special number concludes with two contributions that reflect on the question of anniversary capital from a practice-based perspective. At the same time, however, they highlight a number of tropes discussed above, from the democratisation of memory to the notion of ‘canon’ and ‘archive’. First, in a joint-authored article, Seán Williams, Stefan Manz and Henrike Lähnemann discuss the relationship between anniversaries and ‘impact capital’ from the perspective of researchers who have instigated successful public engagement activities. They thus reflect on the practical benefits and pitfalls of using anniversaries as a hook for research activity, highlighting the significance of cross-collaboration and the importance of adapting to non-academic contexts. The final contribution by acclaimed author and film director Alexander Kluge draws together many of the strands in the volume in a creative piece, selected and recorded specifically for the annual conference of the Association for German Studies in Great Britain and Ireland (AGS) in 2018, the theme of which was ‘anniversary capital’ (and which provided inspiration for this special number). In his contribution, Kluge reflects on the unknown events of 31 December 1799, and interrogates the ethics of poetry, asking whether a poet should report on the moments about which he knows nothing. In linking 1799 to the eve of the millennium, Kluge also draws our attention towards the capricious nature of anniversary activity. This narrative is accompanied by an interview with Kluge, conducted by Sarah Pogoda in the summer of 2018, on the topic of anniversaries, and which can be viewed on the AGS website.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Together, the contributions in this special number demonstrate the challenges of anniversary practices, yet also the significant capital of anniversaries today. While much may have changed over the past century, one element highlighted by the notion of capital remains constant: that anniversary activity remains allied to power – whether economic, political, social, cultural or emotional (or, most likely, a combination of these). The diversification, democratisation and decentralisation of memory noted by several contributors is, of course, a direct result of centralised narratives – and associated narratives of power – being increasingly challenged. As also highlighted, however, such challenges come from across the political spectrum, and the anniversary capital of the past is being increasingly harnessed by right-wing populist and nationalist movements. How exactly the future capital of anniversaries will be appropriated remains to be seen, but they will doubtless continue to function as significant drivers in society. Above all, as this collection attests, the study of anniversary activity remains valuable, for commemorative practices themselves shape anniversary narratives and their subsequent iterations.

1. See David Berliner, ‘The Abuses of Memory: Reflections on the Memory Boom in Anthropology’, *Anthropology Quarterly* 78/1 (2005), 197-211; Kerwin Lee Klein, ‘On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse’, *Representations*, 69 (2000), 127-50; Jay Winter, ‘The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the “Memory Boom” in Contemporary Historical Studies’ *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, 27/3 (2000), 69-92; David W. Blight, ‘The Memory Boom: Why and Why Now?’, in *Memory in Mind and Culture*,ed. Pascal Boyer and James V. Wertsch, Cambridge 2012, pp. 238-51. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, ‘A Looming Crash or a Soft Landing? Forecasting the Future of the Memory “Industry”’, *Journal of Modern History*, 81 (2009), 122-58. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. E.g. Trisha Andres, ‘The 10 best First World War battlefield tours’, *The Telegraph*, 31 July 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/tours/best-first-world-war-battlefield-tours/>; Context travel, ‘Berlin Wall 30-Year Anniversary Package’, <https://www.contexttravel.com/cities/berlin/tours/fall-of-the-berlin-wall-30-year-anniversary-tour>; Leger holidays, ‘The Fall of the Berlin Wall – 30th Anniversary’, <https://www.leger.co.uk/battlefields/tours/the-fall-of-the-berlin-wall-30th-anniversary> (all three links accessed 7 January 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Demonstrated most recently, for example, by the wealth of scholarship on the First World War centenary, including (amongst many others) Shanti Sumartojo and Benn Wellings (eds), *Nation, Memory and Great War Commemoration. Mobilizing the Past in Europe, Australia and New Zealand*,Bern 2014; Bart Ziino, *Remembering the First World War*, London; New York 2015; Laura Clouting, *A Century of Remembrance*, London 2018; Helen B. McCartney and David G. Morgan-Owen (eds), Special Issue of *War & Society*, ‘Commemorating the Centenary of the First World War: National and Trans-National Perspectives’, 36/4 (2017); Larabee, Mark D. (ed.), ‘The Great War: Centenary Perspectives’ Special Issue of *Space Between: Literature and Culture, 1914-1945*, 10 (2014); Special Issue of *Cultural Trends*, 27/2 (2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. William Johnston observed already in 1991 that ‘the observance of cultural anniversaries has become both a cult and an industry’. William M. Johnston, *Celebrations. The Cult of Anniversaries in Europe and the United States Today*, New Brunswick 1991, p. 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ronald Quinault, ‘The Cult of the Centenary, c. 1784-1914’, *Historical Research*, 71/176 (1998), 303-23 (303); Johnston, *Celebrations* (note 5), p. 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Thomas Schmidt, *Kalender und Gedächtnis. Erinnern im Rhythmus der Zeit*, Göttingen 2000, p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Seven Day Circle. The History and Meaning of the Week*, Chicago 1985, p. 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps. Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*,Chicago 2003, p. 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*., p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Schmidt, *Kalender und Gedächtnis* (note 7),p. 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Johnston, *Celebrations* (note 5), p. 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Chantal Mouffe, ‘Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces’, *Art & Research*, 1/2 (2007), 1-5 (3). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions. Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge MA 1996, p. xiii. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Helen B. McCartney and David G. Morgan-Owen, ‘Commemorating the Centenary of the First World War: National and Trans-National Perspectives’, *War & Society*, 36 (2017) 235-38 (236). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Jay Winter, ‘Commemorating Catastrophe: 100 Years On’, *War & Society*, 36 (2017) 239-55 (242). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid.*, 253. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Jeffrey K. Olick, ‘Genre Memories and Memory Genres: A Dialogical Analysis of May 8, 1945 Commemorations in the Federal Republic of Germany’, *American Sociological Review*, 64 (1999), 381-402 (400). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Jay Winter, ‘The Performance of the Past: Memory, History, Identity’, in *Performing the Past. Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe*, ed. Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree and Jay Winter, Amsterdam 2010, pp. 11-23 (p. 12). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. As famously claimed by Stefan Heym in March 1990. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. ‘AGS keynote address’, <http://www.ags.ac.uk/?page_id=76> (accessed 12 August 2019). In particular, my thanks go to Sarah Pogoda for suggesting Alexander Kluge as President’s Guest, for recording the interview, and organising a memorable keynote address. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)