

**Museums of Divided Memory: The German Internal Border as a Space of Cultural
Innovation, Interculturality and Creative Industries**

**Museus da Memória Dividida: A Fronteira Interna Alemã como Espaço de Inovação Cultural,
Interculturalidade e Indústrias Criativas**

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ABSTRACT: After the Second World War, the division of Germany into the FRG and the GDR created deep political, social and cultural rifts, symbolised by the Berlin Wall. Today, museums dedicated to this period not only preserve historical memory, but also act as spaces for intercultural mediation and cultural innovation, where different narratives confront and dialogue with each other. As part of the cultural and creative industries, these museums also contribute to memory tourism and cultural and urban development. The article analyses how these institutions transform a divided past into a cultural resource, promoting dialogue between fragmented memories and diverse audiences.

KEYWORDS: German internal border, Border Museums, Historical memory; Memory tourism

RESUMO: Após a Segunda Guerra Mundial, a divisão da Alemanha em RFA e RDA gerou profundas fraturas políticas, sociais e culturais, simbolizadas pelo Muro de Berlim. Hoje, museus dedicados a esse período não apenas preservam a memória histórica, mas atuam como espaços de mediação intercultural e de inovação cultural, onde narrativas distintas se confrontam e dialogam. Inseridos nas indústrias culturais e criativas, estes museus contribuem também para o turismo de memória e o desenvolvimento cultural e urbano. O artigo analisa como essas instituições transformam um passado dividido em recurso cultural, promovendo o diálogo entre memórias fragmentadas e públicos diversos.

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Fronteiras Internas Alemãs, Museus da fronteira, Memória histórica, Turismo de memória

Introduction

Historical memory plays a central role in the construction of cultural and social identity, as it contributes to the formation, preservation and transmission of shared norms, values and meanings, and provides cognitive tools for social integration and consolidation (Bietti, 2018, pp.136-138).

In the German context, the division between the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), from 1945 to 1990, left a legacy marked by deep political, ideological and cultural divisions (Ponzi, 2019, p. 202). Memorial museums, especially those located along Germany's former internal border, play an essential role in the preservation and interpretation of the past, serving as spaces that connect historical memory and cultural identity.

This article analyses these museums as spaces of interculturality and as elements of the contemporary cultural and creative industries. The German internal border is understood not only as a physical division, but as a symbol of ideological and cultural separation. The study seeks to understand how these museums function as sites of cultural innovation, mediate divergent historical narratives, promote intercultural dialogue, and insert themselves into the cultural economy, reconciling critical preservation of memory and tourist appeal.

1. Memory and the Construction of the Past

Memory is the foundation of both past and history. It constitutes the link between individual identity and lived experience, while collective memory shapes the historical consciousness and identity of a society. The reconstruction of the past depends on the preservation of records within both individual and collective memory. As a dynamic and evolving concept, memory and the value attributed to it has varied across cultures and historical periods (Tognoli, 2009, p. 124).

It was primarily during the 20th century that studies based on different epistemological perspectives began to explain memory processes, such as memories, perceptions and representations, in a more systematic way. Among the leading authors in this field is Maurice Halbwachs, whose work *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925) conceives memory as a process of reconstruction conditioned by social contexts. His contributions inaugurate sociological approaches to everyday life and offer theoretical foundations for the analysis of autobiographical and memorialistic texts (Tognoli, 2009, p. 126).

Jan Assmann further developed this theoretical framework by distinguishing between communicative and cultural memory. The former is based on interpersonal, everyday transmission:

For us the concept of ‘communicative memory’ includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications. These varieties, which M. Halbwachs gathered and analyzed under the concept of collective memory, constitute the field of oral history. Everyday communication is characterized by a high degree of non-specialization, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganization. (Assmann, 1995, p. 126)

The latter – cultural memory - describes institutionalised forms of memory that are effective across generations – such as monuments or rituals. Assmann (1995, p. 129) explains: “Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance). We call these ‘figures of memory’”. Hence, cultural memory creates identity by highlighting certain elements of the past and integrating them into a society's symbolic memory space.

A key concept in memory theory is Pierre Nora’s *lieu de mémoire*, understood as material or symbolic spaces where collective memory is crystallised, such as monuments, archives, or national symbols. These sites arise from the tension between history - as scholarly reconstruction - and memory - as a socially embedded, affective relation to the past. In modern societies, they emerge when memory ceases to be lived spontaneously and requires institutionalisation and representation. They exist both in past and present: train carriages transformed in Holocaust memorials, cemeteries honoring soldiers, or museums presenting historical narratives. By linking past events to contemporary social conversations, these sites anchor identity and make history tangible (Nora, 1989, pp. 12-24).

2. Museums and Memory at the German Border

The division of Germany into two separate countries and its internal border constitute a rich symbolic field for the study of memory. Museums dealing with the former German internal border are not only places of historical memory, but also places of symbolic production, narrative and cultural practice, promoting cultural innovation in the ways the past is interpreted and communicated. This approach reflects a broader shift in how knowledge is understood in modern times, in which “knowledge is now structured through a three-dimensional and holistic experience, defined by its relationship with people” (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p. 214). Thus, the meaning of the past is not fixed, but depends on human experiences and the way in which people interpret what they see in museums.

When intercultural dialogue is understood as a process involving open and respectful exchange between individuals, groups, and organisations with different cultural backgrounds or worldviews (Boda, 2009, p. 6), these museums function as spaces for interculturality, where, on the one hand,

different versions of the German experience confront and dialogue with each other and, on the other hand, act as institutions of the cultural industry.

After losing the war in 1945, Germany was divided into occupied zones, and in 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, West) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East) were born. The internal border — often called in German *die Grenze* or *die innerdeutsche Grenze* — evolved from a symbolic line to a heavily fortified border, described as “a continuous line of high metal fences and walls, rounds and rounds of barbed wire, various sensor and alarm mechanisms, anti-vehicle ditches, manned watchtowers, automatic booby traps and minefields” (Chalermphao, 2016, p. 45). Consequently, the border between East and West Germany became one of the most heavily fortified borders worldwide (Ivanovic, 2025, p. 38).

Forty years later the Berlin wall falls on 9 November 1989 but “the joyous days of November 1989 were followed by less happy months of disillusion and wrangling, and [...] the first rapture as the Wall fell gave way to sobering realities” (Tusa, 1996, p. 2). A process of political and institutional reunification began, but economic and social boundaries persisted for years.

After 1989, many of these spaces were converted into memorials, museums, and tourist routes. More than 300 memorials, museums and monuments along the former inner-German border and the Berlin Wall commemorate the division of Germany and its victims. They document forced resettlements, fatal escape attempts across the Iron Curtain, and - through numerous public markers - the Peaceful Revolution and the opening of the border in autumn 1989 (Kaminsky, 2018, p. 76).

3. Case Studies of German Border Museums

For this article, three case studies were selected: The Borderland Museum Eichsfeld (in German: *Grenzlandmuseum Eichsfeld*), the Schiffersgrund Border Museum (in German: *Grenzlandmuseum Schiffersgrund*), and the Museum Mödlareuth (in German: *Deutsch-Deutsches Museum Mödlareuth*), since they represent complementary approaches to preserving and interpreting the legacy of the inner-German border. Together, they provide, on one hand, different dimensions of border heritage: political history, material remains, and lived experience and, on the other hand, a representative overview of how the memory of the German division is commemorated and communicated to contemporary audiences.

The Borderland Museum Eichsfeld is one of the best-known spaces and illustrates the conversion of a former border checkpoint into a museum dedicated to the political, social, and human consequences of German division. It defines itself as “a modern and multimedia place of learning, inviting you to dive into recent history and actively explore it through its different exhibitions and along the Borderland Trail, a circular hiking path with originally preserved border fortifications

(<https://www.grenzlandmuseum.de>).” This museum was established under the ‘Basic Treaty’ between the two Germanys on 21 December 1972, when four new border crossing points were created for ‘local border traffic’, including one in Eichsfeld. With the Peaceful Revolution and the large wave of departures from East Germany, the crossing points were opened on 9 November 1989. In the case of the Eichsfeld crossing point, it was opened in the early hours of 10 November, at 00:35, due to pressure from the crowds. The last border inspections officially ended on 30 June 1990, and Germany was formally reunited on 3 October of the same year. On 11 November 1995, the Eichsfeld Border Museum was opened in the administrative and inspection building of the Worbis border crossing, and was later expanded with exhibitions in other preserved buildings (<https://www.grenzlandmuseum.de>).

Nearby is another museum, the Schiffersgrund Open-Air Museum with original border fortifications and historical exhibition. Located on the border between Hesse and Thuringia, it has a history marked by significant events in Germany and Europe. On 19 September 1945, the area passed from the American to the Soviet occupation zone, becoming a border region. From 1952 onwards, the site was surrounded by GDR border installations, starting with barbed wire and, in the 1970s, replaced by metal fences with concrete posts, along with trenches, patrol paths and high lighting. After the fall of the border the site was preserved as a historical testimony. The museum was inaugurated on 3 October 1991 and since 2021, the museum has been undergoing a process of modernisation and renovation of its exhibitions (<https://www.grenzmuseum.de>).

A very curious case is that of the Museum Mödlareuth, which is a small German village that became a symbol of the division of Germany during the Cold War. Cut in half by the Tannbach stream, the village was separated for 37 years, with no legal passage between the two sides. Like Berlin, it had a wall, barbed wire and armed surveillance — which is why it came to be called ‘Little Berlin’. In 1945, Germany was divided into occupation zones, and the stream separated the American zone from the Soviet zone. In 1949, with the creation of the FRG and the GDR, Mödlareuth was officially divided between two states with opposing political systems. From 1952 onwards, the border was completely closed. The GDR created restricted zones, imposed strict surveillance and began forced deportations of residents living near the border. Houses and farms were destroyed, and families separated. In Mödlareuth, wooden fences, barbed wire and, later, concrete walls were erected over the years. In 1966, a concrete wall 700 metres long and 3.30 metres high was built, guarded day and night. The village remained rigidly divided until 1989. On 9 December of that year, one month after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the crossing in Mödlareuth was finally opened. After German reunification, the idea arose to turn the site into a memorial. Thus, was born the German-German Museum in Mödlareuth, which preserves original parts of the wall, fences and watchtowers. The museum documents the division of Germany, the repression of the GDR dictatorship, escape attempts and the impact of the

border on everyday life. Today, Mödlareuth remains a curiosity, as it is divided between two German states: half of the village is in Bavaria and the other half in Thuringia. The museum serves as an important place of remembrance, historical education, and tribute to the victims of German division (<https://www.moedlareuth.de>).

4. Museums as Spaces of Memory, Intercultural Dialogue and Cultural Industry

The museums mentioned above preserve the past, but also function as intercultural spaces, acting as mediators between the past and the present and between different social and cultural groups. They all offer educational programs for different groups (children, adults, schools, etc.) and exhibitions, thus promoting dialogue about common and divergent historical experiences. This is particularly evident in school workshops that address the history of the division and the border regime, allowing students from different regions and backgrounds to collectively reflect on issues of separation, freedom, and democracy. Moreover, multilingual exhibitions – which all three have – and the use of digital resources increase accessibility for international visitors and also for people with disabilities (Brischetto, 2023, pp. 32-34), placing the German experience of the division within a broader European and global context and encouraging intercultural understanding. In this sense, these institutions also operate as spaces of cultural innovation, as they actively develop new interpretive practices, educational strategies, and forms of engagement with historical memory (Dalle Nogare / Murzyn-Kupisz, 2021, p. 672).

Another key element is the use of oral testimonies and personal narratives, which allow visitors to engage with history as a lived experience rather than abstract information, creating emotional and empathetic connections with the past. In this way, museums act as interpreters-mediators, as highlighted by Delgado, who notes that “[i]n playing their role as interpreter-mediators, museums can recognise cultural difference through a range of activities (including workshops, conferences, concerts and events) [...] (Delgado, 2009, p. 9)”. Through these practices, border museums not only commemorate historical trauma, but also actively contribute to intercultural dialogue, critical reflection and social cohesion. Interculturality in museums located along the former German border promotes sensitive historical education, capable of addressing the past from multiple perspectives and recognising different experiences of division. By encouraging a critical understanding of history and its long-term consequences, these institutions help visitors reflect on the social, political and human impact of separation and repression. At the same time, they promote cultural integration by transforming individual and collective memories into shared learning processes and intercultural experiences. Furthermore, these community-based tourism models strengthen the role of border museums by involving the local population in sharing and promoting their heritage, helping to create

stories together and interact with visitors. So, museums do not merely preserve history; they actively build cultural bridges, transforming former sites of division into spaces for encounter, dialogue and mutual understanding.

At the same time, museums are increasingly understood not only as national heritage, but also as participants in cultural and tourism economies, in which the presentation of history is driven not only by educational and memorial concerns, but also by the visitor experience and tourists who are more and more interested in immersing themselves in local culture (Pulido-Fernández, 2021, p. 3). Museum visits are one of the main components of cultural tourism, attracting audiences through their exhibitions, architecture, and interpretation of historical narratives, and are integrated into local and global strategies for economic and cultural development (Zárate Martín/García Ferrero, 2017, p. 3). Therefore, museums located on the former border between East and West Germany, in addition to their educational, memorial, and intercultural role, are significantly embedded in the contemporary logic of the cultural industry, functioning simultaneously as institutions of historical preservation and as cultural and tourist products.

However, the integration of museums into the cultural industry is not without its problems. Several authors (Macdonald, 2013, p. 209; Light, 2017, pp. 278-279; Preda, 2026, p. 2) warn of the risk of trivialization or simplification of history when complex narratives are adapted to meet the expectations of the tourism market and the logic of entertainment. According to Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996, p. 62), the commodification of memory can lead to the selection of more ‘attractive’ themes at the expense of deeper critical analyses. This concern also arises in German studies on the culture of memory (*Erinnerungskultur* in German), which highlight the challenge of balancing economic profitability (Welzer, 2010, p. 22) and historical responsibility: “the culture of memory must go beyond the narration of facts and must contribute to a responsible and moral historical understanding²” (Welzer, 2010, p. 16).

Despite these issues, museums located along the former German border demonstrate that it is possible to articulate historical memory, interculturality, and economic integration in a relatively balanced way. By preserving the material vestiges of the German division and promoting narratives that stimulate intercultural dialogue, these museums maintain their social and political relevance today. They function simultaneously as spaces for critical reflection on the past, places of historical learning, and cultural products integrated into the contemporary tourism market. In this way, the memory of the German border is transformed into a significant cultural experience, in which education, culture, and

² Author’s translation from the original German.

economy intertwine, highlighting the complex and comprehensive role of museums as agents of the cultural industry.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as discussed throughout this article and as Richards (2018, p. 12) highlights in his study on cultural tourism and the creative economy, contemporary museums do not merely transmit knowledge. They also provide symbolic experiences that possess economic value in the global cultural market. This is particularly evident in museums dedicated to the post-World War II period, when the division of Germany into West Germany and East Germany created profound political, social, and cultural ruptures, symbolized by the Berlin Wall. Today, these museums not only preserve historical memory but also function as spaces for intercultural mediation, within the context of the German internal border as a space of cultural innovation, where different narratives confront, coexist, and dialogue. As part of the cultural and creative industries, they contribute to memory tourism and broader processes of cultural and urban development. By transforming the past into a cultural resource, these institutions play a crucial role in promoting dialogue between fragmented memories and increasingly diverse audiences.

It is thought that future studies on this subject could deepen our understanding of how visitors interpret and value the old museums located in Germany's border regions. It would be interesting to understand how visitors' experiences, ages and social backgrounds influence their perception of the history and memory associated with the division of the country. In particular, it might be interesting to analyse how younger generations, who did not live through that period, relate to this past in comparison with the generations who witnessed the events of the Cold War. Furthermore, conducting comparative studies with other former Cold War border regions could provide new perspectives on the preservation of historical memory, as these would help to identify similarities and differences in the strategies used by museums to present complex events, whilst also encouraging critical reflection among visitors. In this way, it would be possible to better understand the contribution of museums to the preservation of cultural heritage, to historical education and to the strengthening of intercultural dialogue between different communities and generations.

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