

<b>Institution: Nottingham Trent University</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: D30 History</b>
<b>Title of case study: Buchenwald Child: exposing national myths</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact:</b> Bill Niven is a public history practitioner, and an acknowledged expert on war and post-war Germany. The Buchenwald Child was a particularly well-known national story. It was based on wartime events but written up in the post 1945 period, where it was used by the socialist <b>Deutsche Demokratische Republik (GDR)</b> to demonstrate its antifascist roots and prove its sympathy towards Holocaust victims. Niven's study revealed that this much lauded story was largely founded on myth shaped by the exigencies of the Cold War (i.e. the need to prove that the GDR was the 'better' Germany). His work started a major re-evaluation that stretched, as was always intended, beyond the boundaries of academia into the public domains of national identity formation within the context of reconciling the present with Germany's National Socialist and post 1945 divided pasts. This reassessment has taken the form of public discussion in the German media (newspapers, radio, TV), including a one-hour TV documentary film based largely on the book and including interviews with the Buchenwald Child himself, Niven and the director of Buchenwald Memorial Site. A paperback version of Niven's book was produced and distributed by Germany's <b>Federal Centre for Political Education</b>. It has since triggered discussion within organisations representing veteran survivors of the camp.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research:</b> Niven has long advocated the need to bridge the gap between the academy and a wider public (for example, see section 5.6 <a href="http://onthepast.blog.co.uk/">http://onthepast.blog.co.uk/</a>). His earlier work was all conducted in an inclusive cross-disciplinary environment that sought to engage readily with external media outlets, and third sector and state agencies. Such work included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• his research into memory of the Holocaust and the need for Germans to come to terms with their past (<i>Facing the Nazi Past</i> (Routledge, 2002)), now a staple of many undergraduate university courses (see, for instance, <a href="http://www.mml.cam.ac.uk/german/courses/ugrad/ge12.html">http://www.mml.cam.ac.uk/german/courses/ugrad/ge12.html</a>; <a href="http://www.ucl.ac.uk/selcs/prospective-students/postgraduate/ma-modules/elcsg002-legacies-of-the-holocaust-in-europe">http://www.ucl.ac.uk/selcs/prospective-students/postgraduate/ma-modules/elcsg002-legacies-of-the-holocaust-in-europe</a>; <a href="http://history.berkeley.edu/courses/undergraduate/2013/fall/103b003">http://history.berkeley.edu/courses/undergraduate/2013/fall/103b003</a>)</li> <li>• his critical readings of popular cultural representations of the Nazi and the post-Nazi era through media such as feature film ('The Reception of Steven Spielberg's "Schindler's List" in the German Media', <i>Journal of European Studies</i> (1995)), and literature (Bernhard Schlink's "'Der Vorleser" and the Problem of Shame', <i>Modern Language Review</i>, (2003)).</li> <li>• his work on the recent interest in Germany in German wartime suffering, leading to the seminal edition <i>Germans as Victims</i> (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).</li> </ul> <p>Niven's work on memory studies and forms of memorialisation has continued this cross-disciplinary focus (e.g. 'War Memorials at the Intersection of Politics, Culture and Memory', <i>Journal of War and Culture Studies</i> (2008); 'Today's Germany and the Nazi past', <i>Deutsch Lehren und Lernen</i> (2008)). He was also instrumental in establishing the Department's MA programme in Public History, now embedded centrally in its History MA programme, and more recently its MA by research in Holocaust and Genocide studies.</p> <p>Niven conducted several years of funded archival research (2002-2006) into the life story of the Jewish Buchenwald prisoner Stefan Jerzy Zweig (known as the Buchenwald child, for he was only three at the time of his imprisonment), who was rescued in part by communist prisoners at the camp. He examined particularly the GDR 'state' history of this rescue in historiography, commemoration, literature and film, paying specific attention to the political circumstances under which the novel about the child's rescue, <i>Naked among Wolves</i>, and the film based on this novel, were produced ('The Genesis of Bruno Apitz's "Nackt unter Wölfen"', 2005).</p> <p>Niven concluded that the various forms and genres of reception essentially constituted a mutually</p>

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reinforcing system of mythologisation ('The GDR, "Weimar Classicism and Resistance at Buchenwald', 2009). In order to glorify the role of the communists in rescuing Stefan, the GDR *inter alia* ignored the part played by Stefan's own father and circumnavigated the fact that Stefan's life was saved at least once when communist prisoners engineered the substituting of his name on a transport list. It overlooked, too, the reprehensible treatment meted out to other prisoners by communist inmates. He was also able to show that, after 1990, a united Germany under a west German memory regime ensured that the story of Stefan's rescue was turned into the opposite of what it had been in the GDR. By focusing on the 'victim swap' (substituting Stefan on a transport list), it became evidence of the 'preferential treatment' accorded by communist camp functionaries to those prisoners of whom they approved.

In the broader context of 'antifascism studies', i.e. research into the practice, cult, memory and politicisation of antifascism, and into its equally politicised deconstruction since 1990, Jeffrey Herf demonstrated in *Divided Memory* that memory of antifascism led to a marginalisation of memory of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism in the GDR. Niven's research, by contrast, has shown that, at least in the case of this one important narrative, memory of antifascism was entwined with memory of anti-Semitism, indeed helped to highlight it – but at the cost of truth and in the interests of memory of communism. Niven's monograph, *The Buchenwald Child: Truth, Fiction and Propaganda*, achieved substantial popular critical acclaim: see Peter Graves *Times Literary Supplement* (26 October 2007). It was also nominated in 2008 for the Sophie Brody Medal, an award presented by the American Library Association **'to the author of the most distinguished contribution to Jewish literature (fiction or non-fiction) for adults published in the United States in the preceding year.'** It will shortly be translated into Hebrew by Penn Publishing Ltd.

### 3. References to the research

- 1) *The Buchenwald Child: Truth, Fiction and Propaganda*, translated into German (at the expense of the German publisher Mitteldeutscher Verlag) as *Das Buchenwaldkind: Wahrheit, Fiktion und Propaganda*. It was presented at the Leipzig book fair in 2009. For positive reviews, see D. Augustine, *Central European History* 41 (2008), 167-9; C. Dejung, *Journal of Contemporary History* 43 (2008), 705-6; D Pinfeld, *Journal of European Studies*, 38 (2008), 89-91. Following its publication, Niven was invited to give lectures at Harvard and Brandeis Universities in 2007.
- 2) 'The GDR, Weimar Classicism and Resistance at Buchenwald', *Témoigner entre histoire et mémoire*, 104 (2009), 175-190 (pub.by La Fondation Auschwitz et la Mémoire d'Auschwitz ASB).
- 3) "'Der Not gehorchend, nicht dem eignen triebe, ich tu's der Werbung nur zuliebe!" - The Genesis of Bruno Apitz's "Nackt unter Wölfen"', *German Studies Review* 28 (2005), 265-283.
- 4) *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich* (Routledge, 2002). For positive reviews see G. Rosenfeld, *German Studies Review* 26 (2003), 237-9; C. Paver, *Modern Language Review* 98 (2003), 250-2.
- 5) British Academy Small Research Grant (£3,644; 2002-2003), to support archival research costs in Germany.
- 6) AHRC-supported research leave (£13,153; 2004-2005) to enable writing up.

**4. Details of the impact:** The importance of the impact links directly to the centrality of the Buchenwald story to the GDR's post-war identity, created through the aggressive marketing by the state from the mid-Fifties onwards of the communist resistance fighters' own heroism at the expense of non-communist survivors of Buchenwald. Two key mechanisms for this were the film *Naked Among Wolves* (dir., Frank Beyer, 1963), and the book of the same name authored by Bruno Apitz (1958). Apitz was a founding member of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, which dominated post-war politics in the GDR. His novel was translated into over 30 languages and sold an estimated 2 million copies. It was mandatory reading in East German schools. The film was watched by over 2.5 million East Germans in cinemas, in addition to being

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distributed world-wide and reshown on East German television 6 six times during the 1960s and 1970s. It has also been regularly screened on German television since unification in 1990. Zweig also achieved national celebrity. As Niven notes, 'the collective memory of Buchenwald's communist prisoners was transformed into the official memory of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany', and incorporated into the country's 'anti-Fascist legitimisation myth.'

Publicly contradicting this construct was a central part of Niven's scholarship, its initial objective and to the impact claimed. There was wide response to Niven's book in Germany, particularly in the former GDR, even prior to the publication of the translation. Thus, promoted by his publisher, Niven was invited to Berlin in November 2008 to be interviewed by German media (radio, press and television). Further interviews and reports on the book followed on its publication in April 2009. Following a presentation by Niven of his book at the Berlin Office of the government of Saxony-Anhalt (to an audience consisting largely of journalists), the **Die Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (bpb)** (Federal Centre for Political Education) bought the rights to produce upwards of 3,000 paperback copies of the book. The centre focuses on promoting an awareness of democracy and participation in politics, taking up topical and historical subjects by issuing publications, by organising seminars, events, exhibitions, etc (see section 5.3). Its adoption, therefore, of Niven's text, and its subsequent financial and organisational support for his public seminars and lectures, carries weight and significance, as does the incorporation of his material in teaching packs for younger students (see section 5.7).

One measure of the subsequent impact resulting from the book launch and its reception, and its subsequent dissemination by centres such as the **bpb**, was that it stimulated further media production. The filmmaker Ute Gebhardt moved to make a documentary film about the Buchenwald child which, as she freely admitted, was based largely on Niven's book (and included an interview with him). The film, **Das Buchenwaldkind oder Was vom Antifaschismus bleibt** (*The Buchenwald Child or What Remains of Antifascism*) was shown on the state-funded Central German Television (Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk) on 12 April 2010 (see section 5.1). More public dissemination events followed: e.g. the public readings and lectures which Niven was invited to give in Magdeburg, Erfurt and Berlin (organised in part by regional branches of the **bpb**). In all these ways, Niven's work was continually disseminated to the German public.

The primary impact is the project's contribution within Germany to the 'deconstruction of the myth of antifascism', particularly as it developed around events at Buchenwald. Several of the press reports emphasised this aspect of Niven's book, believing it to have helped to clear away the distortions of history upon which East German communism had based its self-image (see section 5.4). For this reason, the book proved controversial. While it received much praise (the film director Eberhard Görner, for instance, compared it to a Shakespeare tragedy), it also prompted much anger, especially among former communist prisoners of Buchenwald, who felt that it unjustifiably set out to discredit the courage of former German communists. The Lagergemeinschaft Buchenwald-Dora (League of Former Prisoners of Buchenwald-Dora), also angered by the press reporting, published a critique in its quarterly publication *Die Glocke vom Ettersberg* (*The Bell of Ettersberg*). But the editor of the quarterly, in an attempt, as he put it, 'to bring a measure of objectivity to the debate', allowed Niven to reply to the criticisms in the same edition – an indication that not all in the Lagergemeinschaft were in agreement as to the book's merits or demerits (see section 5.2). The book thus demonstrably helped to trigger debate within the former prisoners' organisation.

Niven's book also had considerable impact outside of Germany, establishing Niven as a public authority of Buchenwald, leading to his participation in a Radio 3 programme on Buchenwald (*Goethe's Oak*, 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00swg96>), contributions to articles published in *The Observer* in 2009 (<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/jan/18/winslet-reader>) and 2012 (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/18/mystery-boy-who-survived-buchenwald>), and interviews for the Discovery Channel series, *The Rise and Fall of the Nazis* (forthcoming, 2014).

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**5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

- 1) Email from the Director of *The Buchenwald Child or What Remains of Antifascism* confirming the importance of Niven's book for the making of her film.
- 2) *The Bell of Ettersberg* quarterly edition containing comments on the impact of Niven's book, as well as a review, and Niven's response (*Die Glocke von Ettersberg* 195 (2009)).
- 3) Website page of the Federal Centre for Political Education (bpb) proclaiming the book's importance in deconstructing antifascism. See:  
<http://www.bpb.de/shop/buecher/schriftenreihe/35709/das-buchenwaldkind>
- 4) Review by Harry Stein of the Buchenwald Memorial Site confirming the importance of the book and acknowledging its impact. Stein writes of Niven's personal engagement with Holocaust survivors and stresses the 'great sympathy' shown towards his book in Germany as a result (Harry Stein, 'Ein Mythos der nationalen Geschichtspolitik und Erinnerungsbildungen', *Einsicht 05: Bulletin des Fritz Bauer Instituts* (Spring 2011), pp. 86-86). See: [http://www.fritz-bauer-institut.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/uploadsFBI/einsicht/Einsicht-05.pdf](http://www.fritz-bauer-institut.de/fileadmin/user_upload/uploadsFBI/einsicht/Einsicht-05.pdf)
- 5) Press coverage as impact: e.g. Peter Kirschey, 'Die Helden sind rar geworden' (Heroes have become a Rare Thing), *Neues Deutschland*, 20/21 December 2008, p. 3 (whole page); Constanze Matthes, 'Ein Mythos wird enthüllt' (A Myth is Exposed), *Naumburger Tageblatt*, 28 March 2009, p. 2; Karim Saab, 'Die Realitaet hinter dem Mythos' (The Reality behind the Myth), Interview with B. Niven, *Maerkische Allgemeine Zeitung* (Weekend Supplement), 4/5 April 2009, p. 3.
- 6) Niven's Blog as an example of his continuing engagement as a public historian with external, non-academic audiences (using as one example, keyword search Buchenwald):  
<http://onthepast.blog.co.uk/search/Buchenwald/AND/>
- 7) Teaching literature for younger German audiences, produced by the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, supported by the German government, which uses the *Buchenwald Child* as a media case-study (pp. 3,6, 18) <http://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/w/files/pdfs/film-dvd-fuer-internet.pdf>.