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Nils Oskamp's *Drei Steine* (2016) and the Void in Germany's *Erinnerungskultur*

Abstract: Originally produced with a grant from the German Family Affairs Ministry, Nils Oskamp's graphic novel *Drei Steine* (2016) describes the young Oskamp's conflict with Holocaust-denying Neo-Nazis in his Dortmund *Realschule* in 1983. The comic thus consciously conforms to Germany's official *Erinnerungskultur*. However, like that *Erinnerungskultur* itself, and due in part to the institutional contexts of its production, *Drei Steine* is hampered not only by the relative absence of Jews – the primary historical victims – in the daily lives of both its protagonist and of its contemporary young readers, but also by its appropriation of Jewish suffering as a vehicle for the non-Jewish protagonist's character development. Against a background of increasing racism and antisemitism both within Germany and in Europe more broadly, however, the graphic novel's conception as part of a broader pedagogical strategy to dissuade young people from accepting extremist propaganda provides some scope to mitigate these problems.

I

Nils Oskamp's comic *Drei Steine* (2016), designated in German as a *Graphic Novel* despite its autobiographical basis,¹ recounts Oskamp's teenage years in 1983 Dortmund-Dorstfeld (North Rhine-Westphalia), where he comes into conflict with a local Neo-Nazi group recruiting among his schoolmates. After mocking their antisemitism and standing up to them, he endures several beatings and an attempted shooting. He receives no support from his family, who are distracted by other problems and do not believe he is in any danger; his school, where one of the teachers is an unrepentant Nazi; or the police, who dismiss his concerns. Aided only by Tom, a friend of his older brother Jonas, young Nils tries to fight back, but following a near-fatal beating he forsakes violence and takes several assailants to court. After lengthy proceedings they are acquitted or receive minor penalties, but they are deterred from further attacks. At the story's end, Nils finishes *Realschule* and throws his schoolbooks into the river. These events, told in pictures dominated by cold blue-grey – with bright red

¹ The publisher's website, for example, describes the book as a "Ergreifende Graphic Novel gegen rechte Gewalt mit autobiografischen Zügen" ("Drei Steine," at Panini's website).

splashes whenever blood flows (*Drei Steine* 90–91, 105–108) – are set within a framing story toned in warm sepia and set in 2011 (*Drei Steine* 6–9, 56–58, 116–118): the older Oskamp, working on the graphic novel, tries to explain the period to his young son Tom, named after Oskamp’s school friend. The book’s title is inspired by the stones of remembrance or ‘visitation stones’ traditionally left by visitors at Jewish graves (*Drei Steine* 121–122). The young Nils takes three of these stones from a grave in Dorstfeld’s neglected Jewish cemetery, and they structure the plot: he throws the first stone at an attacker (*Drei Steine* 66); almost fatally strikes his main antagonist with another, but thinks better of it and only frightens him by striking the ground instead (*Drei Steine* 90–93); and ultimately, three decades later, places the third at the Pillar of Heroism, the monument to resistance fighters at Yad Vashem (*Drei Steine* 120). Oskamp himself glosses this development: “Der erste Stein wird zur Waffe, der zweite Stein zum Symbol dafür, nicht zu töten, und der dritte Stein verweist dann wieder zurück auf das Gedenken” (*Drei Steine* 121). Despite its suspenseful story and social relevance, *Drei Steine* took almost a decade to produce, during which its publication often seemed unlikely. Its eventual appearance was enabled by the confluence of several social-institutional contexts; these same contexts, however, also affected the comic’s final form. In their anthology *Was war, ist, wird Comicforschung – für uns?* Christina Meyer, Vanessa Ossa and Lukas R.A. Wilde describe the interdependence between comics and the contexts of their production:

Verstanden als heuristischer Überbegriff für gezeichnete populäre Standbilder existieren Comics daher nicht außerhalb von medialen Kontexten; sie sind maßgeblich in Medienökologien, sozialsystemische Institutionen und partizipative Netzwerke eingebunden, in denen sie einerseits unentwegt von Akteur:innen, Technologien und Institutionen in gesellschaftlichen Spannungsfeldern ‘formatiert’ werden und andererseits selbst an den Ausgestaltungen und Transformationen dieser Kommunikationsgemeinschaften beteiligt sind. (Meyer et al. 6; emphasis added)

The following describes several institutional contexts of *Drei Steine*, including the media-ecological context of the contemporary German comics industry; the broader social-systemic context of the *Erinnerungskultur* or “culture of remembrance” developed in Germany as a continuance of (or, as Peter Kuras would claim, a replacement for) *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*²; and the participatory networks of active political education. As will be argued below, at least some of the perceived weaknesses of *Erinnerungskultur* are reflected in Oskamp’s graphic novel, despite its good intentions. However, its service in the necessary project of resisting growing tendencies toward an openly chauvinistic nationalism also counteracts some of these problematic tensions.

2 As Kuras argues: “Only, in other words, when the generation who lived through World War II began to die out did talk of the culture of memory begin.”

II

Throughout *Drei Steine*, the young protagonist's main weapon against flourishing Neo-Nazi graffiti in his school is his artistic talent: he disarms their messages by turning swastikas into little square houses (24) and supplements the command “Deutschland erwache” with “Frühstück ist fertig” (38; Fig. 1). These scenes are revisited in the present-day scene of Oskamp drawing the comic itself (56), demonstrating that the younger Nils' weapon has become the adult artist's career and main vehicle of expression.

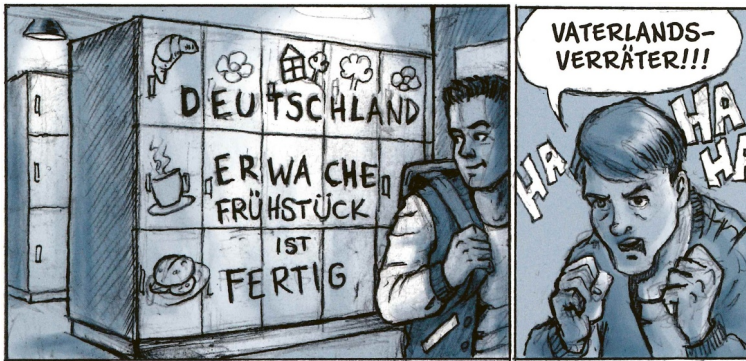


Fig. 1: Nils uses his artistic skills to defuse Nazi graffiti, to the chagrin of one of the Neo-Nazis and the laughter of their unseen classmates (*Drei Steine* 38).

After finishing *Realschule*, Nils Oskamp studied graphic design at the Ruhrakademie in Schwerte (North Rhine-Westphalia) and animation at the Animation School Hamburg. Oskamp began his career in illustration and advertising, and his work appeared in mass-market magazines, including *Der Spiegel*, *Auto-Bild* and *Hörzu* (Ihme 110). He also sought to process his childhood experiences and as a visual artist and comics fan (his lifelong love of René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo's *Astérix* is alluded to twice in *Drei Steine*: 11–12, 57–58), he chose to do so in comic form. Knowing the time required for such a project – in his own words, “An einer Graphic Novel arbeitet man circa zwei Jahre, und in dieser Zeit muss der Lebensunterhalt gesichert sein” (Neubauer 35) – he began applying for funding in 2007. Over subsequent years, Oskamp collected over forty rejection letters from various funding agencies (Ihme 107).

In 2014, however, provocateur Siegfried Borchardt, known as “SS-Siggi,” was elected to Dortmund's city council as a member of the party *Die Rechte*, and the

media began to focus on the city's far-right milieu.³ As a result, Oskamp finally received a grant from the Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women and Youth (Ihme 107; Neubauer 35), officially recognizing the project as a contribution to *Erinnerungskultur*; but the grant was time-limited, and so the work was rushed (Neubauer 35). *Drei Steine* was first published in 2016 as a 96-page softcover album, with a print run of 5,000 copies (see the companion website, Oskamp, *Drei Steine: Graphic Novel gegen rechts*, www.dreisteine.com). This edition was given away at schools as a *Leseprobe* by the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, founded in 1998 by East Berlin teacher Anetta Kahane and devoted to strengthening democratic civil society and combatting far-right extremism.⁴

In fostering *Drei Steine*, the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung followed an established tradition: as Ralf Palandt notes, “politisch motivierte Sachcomics” in Germany date back to the late 1970s (Palandt 32).⁵ Through the 1980s and '90s, independent and underground comics criticized both historical and resurgent Nazism via original comics anthologies and unauthorized pastiches of *Astérix*, *Lucky Luke* and *Donald Duck* facing off against racist skinheads (Palandt 32–34). Moreover, as Christine Gundermann argues, the 1989 publication in German of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (originally published in 1986) marked a turning point and laid “die diskursive Grundlage [. . .] für ein intensives Nachdenken über den Einsatz von Comics und Graphic Novels im Geschichtsunterricht” (Gundermann 152).

In the early 1990s, a wave of far-right violence against foreigners in reunified Germany – including the murder of Amadeu Antonio – inspired state governments and non-governmental organizations to publish comics aimed at preventing the radicalization of young people: in 1993, for example, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania's Interior Ministry published the funny-animal comic *Leo mischt mit*, whose protagonist becomes entangled with Neo-Nazi violence against his will (Palandt 35).⁶

3 Borchardt had also been one of Oskamp's attackers three decades previously. He appears in *Drei Steine* as “SS-Michi” (Oskamp 99).

4 The foundation is named after Amadeu Antonio, an Angolan who had come to the former German Democratic Republic as a contract worker in 1987. Antonio became an early victim of right-wing violence following German reunification when he was murdered by Neo-Nazis in Eberswalde (Brandenburg) in November 1990 (“Die Amadeu Antonio Stiftung”).

5 The first such comics were imports from abroad, such as Eduardo “Rius” del Rio Garcia's *Marx für Anfänger* (Rowohlt, 1979), which inspired further such comics from Rowohlt Verlag and other publishers (Dolle-Weinkauff 303–305). In 1983, for example, Rowohlt's political “Quer-Comics”-series published Wolfgang Wimmer and Gabriel “Tschap” Nemeth's *Sklaven*, describing German firms' exploitation of concentration camp prisoners under the Nazi regime (Palandt 32).

6 Klaus Wilinski's studio published several *Leo* comics during the 1990s in the service of state or municipal governments.

Palandt describes *Andi*, published by North Rhine-Westphalia's Interior Ministry between 2005 and 2009, as the best-known of these pedagogical comics. Each of *Andi*'s three issues, drawn in naive style by Peter Schaaff, shows Andi's multicultural group of schoolmates confronting a different extremist ideology: first Neo-Nazism, then radical Islam, then left-wing *Autonome*. The *Andi* comics are still updated and available online from the state ministry's website. Palandt criticizes the series, however, for not showing the characteristically violent aspects of far-right groups in the initial issue, while depicting the left movement as violent vandals in the third issue – a portrayal that prompted vehement rebuttals from some left-wing organizations, who responded with unofficial *Andi* comics rewriting the offending issue, or showing Andi confronted with police violence against the left (Palandt 38–40).⁷

Because the *Andi* series deals with contemporary radicalism in the same province, North Rhine-Westphalia, rather than historical Nazism or the Holocaust, it serves as a useful point of comparison with *Drei Steine*. In its didactic instrumentalization, *Andi* is a precursor to the later graphic novel. *Drei Steine* explicitly portrays Neo-Nazism as intrinsically violent and takes as its starting point the centrality of antisemitism and Holocaust denial to far-right ideology, whereas *Andi* depicts its Neo-Nazis simply as obnoxious, broadly racist nationalists – antisemitism is mentioned only in the supporting textual material (32–33, 35, 37).⁸

Moreover, while *Andi* was disseminated non-commercially as a public service by the North Rhine-Westphalia government, *Drei Steine* also came out in a longer hardcover commercial edition of 144 pages by Panini Verlag (the publisher who had also printed the Antonio Stiftung version without the publisher's logo on the cover). Thanks to a scheduling error, however, the two versions appeared simultaneously in the spring of 2016. Although the Panini edition was published amid the publicity of the biannual International Comic Salon in Erlangen – which put even more pressure on Oskamp to finish the book (Neubauer 35) – the free edition undercut the sales of the longer version, at least in the short term.

If, on the one hand, the themes of *Drei Steine* corresponded with the mission of the non-profit Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, then on the other, they were also suited to the commercial publishing program of Panini Verlag. The tiny German-language comics publishing market is dominated by a mixture of older foreign-owned multinationals, primarily focused on foreign licenses (Carlsen Verlag and

⁷ For a defense of *Andi* against left-wing criticism (though one that ignores Palandt's specific objection), see Grumke 188; Grumke was the series' author (Palandt 39).

⁸ Antisemitism plays a larger role in *Andi*'s second issue, whose topic is radical Islam: antisemitic ideas are uttered by characters in the plot as well as explicitly criticized in the supplementary material (*Andi* 2 22).

Egmont Ehapa Verlag, for example, both founded in the 1950s as offshoots of Danish firms); and smaller, younger, local firms in Germany and Switzerland, specializing in avant-garde or counterculture comics foreign and homegrown, such as Berlin's Avant-Verlag and Reprodukt, or Edition Moderne in Zurich (Malone 21–24). The Italian firm Panini is an outlier: old, large and global, but a relative latecomer to comics publishing. Originally founded in 1961 as Edizioni Panini Modena to manufacture collectible football stickers, Panini was briefly owned by the American Marvel Entertainment Group in the 1990s, entering the comics market throughout Europe and Latin America. Reacquired by its Italian management, by 2001 its German branch distributed such popular American licenses as the Marvel and DC superheroes, *Star Wars* and *The Simpsons*, as well as many popular Japanese manga. These foreign comics were lucrative enough that in its initial decade on the German-language market, unlike its competitors, Panini was the only firm that did not publish works by German-language creators.⁹

In the last decade, however, Panini has focussed on socially relevant non-fiction themes for its German-language projects: if Panini's imported superheroes, popular culture tie-ins and manga are its cash cows, its non-fiction "graphic novels" are hardcover prestige products.¹⁰ As Panini Deutschland editor Steffen Volkmer said in 2015, "Graphic Novels sind im Moment DER Wachstumsmarkt" (emphasis in original), attracting new readers and entering bookstores rather than selling at kiosks (Marquardt), and reflecting what Gundermann had two years earlier called "ein starker Trend zum Sachcomic und zur Comic-Biografie" (Gundermann 154).

More specifically, before *Drei Steine*, Panini had published several graphic novels on related Jewish or Israeli themes, such as Sarah Glidden's *Israel verstehen – In 60 Tagen oder weniger* (2011), Luca Enoch and Claudio Stassi's *Die Stern-Bande* (2014), and Boaz Yakin and Nick Bertozzi's *Jerusalem: Ein Familienporträt* (2015).¹¹ Oskamp's *Drei Steine* thus fit well with Panini's programming at the time,

⁹ Panini Deutschland editor Steffen Volkmer admitted as late as 2015 that although the firm was Germany's leading comics publisher with forty titles every month, "Die Anzahl deutscher Künstlerinnen und Künstler ist bei uns im Vergleich zur Anzahl amerikanischer Künstler verschwindend gering" (Marquardt).

¹⁰ For instance, Christian Hardinghaus and Markus Frieze's *Großväterland* (2016) collects eyewitness accounts of Second World War horrors; Stefan Dinter and Adrian Richter's *Crystal.Klar* (2020; based on Dominik Forster's 2015 autobiographical novel), concerns meth addiction; and Daniela Schreiter's *Schattenspringer: Wie es ist, anders zu sein* (2014) and its sequels *Schattenspringer 2: Per Anhalter durch die Pubertät* (2015) and *Schattenspringer 3: Spektralfarben* (2018) detail the author's life with Asperger's syndrome. Only Schreiter's books remain in print.

¹¹ These were originally the American *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less* (DC/Vertigo, 2010); the Spanish *Banda Stern* (Norma, 2013); and the American *Jerusalem: A Family Portrait*

at least superficially due to its ostensibly Jewish reference point. It was at least as well suited to Panini as it was to Reprodukt, for example, arguably the German-language publishing specialist in both autobiographical and political comics (Ditschke 272). At the end of 2016, *Drei Steine* won the Rudolph Dirks Award for best biography at Dortmund's German Comic Con, and with the comic in its fifth edition as of late 2024, Oskamp's work must also be considered a commercial success (Ihme 108).¹²

III

Despite this accolade and success, however, and despite Stephan Ditschke's observation in 2009 that "die feuilletonistische Kulturkritik" was paying increasing attention to comics (265), most of the press coverage of *Drei Steine* – some of which is available through the "Medienspiegel" section of Oskamp's website – is reportage, rather than aesthetic or cultural criticism. While laudatory regarding the comic's pedagogical mission (for example, Sterk; Betzholz), the media coverage remains blandly descriptive or totally silent about its aesthetic qualities.¹³ Even the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's* comics expert, Andreas Platthaus, whom Ditschke singles out for an exemplary focus on "das genuine narrative Mittel des Comics [. . .], die Panelstruktur" (273), confined his reaction to a terse plot synopsis, stressing that the story would hardly be believable if Oskamp "nicht mit so großer Verve für die Authentizität der von ihm erzählten Geschichte eintreten [würde]."¹⁴

Among the few reports that mentioned formal qualities, Götz Piesbergen of *Splashcomics* approved of the realistic drawing style as most appropriate to the comic's message, and especially commended the coloring (Piesbergen), which in-

(First Second, 2013). All three are out of print from Panini; Glidden's *Israel verstehen* was reissued by Reprodukt in 2018.

¹² The Rudolph Dirks Award was a jury-adjudicated prize awarded in over thirty categories to comics creators from around the world; although the German Comic Con (now the German Film Comic Con) has returned after being interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Dirks Award has not been given out since 2020.

¹³ Had *Drei Steine* been published by Reprodukt or Carlsen, rather than superhero-oriented Panini, it might have been received differently.

¹⁴ Platthaus's "review" appeared not in the *FAZ* itself, but rather in one of its several blogs. Some of the *FAZ* blogs – inaccessible from the newspaper's main web page – were integrated as columns into the main website in summer 2023. Others have lain dormant since 2018. There is no way to search older blog posts (*Fazblog* – *Blogs der FAZ*).

deed effectively both separates the story's time periods and creates a fitting atmosphere for each.

In general, the most negative reactions were those that saw the comic's aesthetic problems as obstacles to its didactic efficacy. An anonymous reviewer in the *Antifaschistisches Infoblatt*, however, declared, "Auf der ästhetischen Ebene verbleibt der Comic auf einem niedrigen Niveau." Nonetheless, the review concluded, "In Hinblick auf die Thematisierung rechter Gewalt im Schulunterricht ist der Comic jedoch eine gute Möglichkeit Schüler*innen zu sensibilisieren" ("Rezensionen: Drei Steine").

Moritz Honert granted no such concession in the *Tagesspiegel*, where he found many plot turns unresolved or illogical, while Nils' utter isolation from school, state and family "wirkt auf Dauer nicht ergreifend, sondern unglaublich und ermüdend" (Honert). In terms of aesthetics, Honert criticized inconsistencies in the drawing style, with raw, unfinished panels appearing next to smooth, apparently digitally polished images. Honert's negative review later became a point of discussion in Oskamp's interview with Frank Neubauer for *Zack*, another specialist magazine for comics readers. In *Zack*, Oskamp defended his work as autobiographical and described in detail his working out a plot structure through interactions with Cédric Fortier, Paul Derouet, Reinhard Kleist and Uli Oesterle as testimony to the degree of artistic intervention that even a "rein autobiografisch [er]" text can undergo.¹⁵ In fact, the pedagogical *Begleitmaterial* on Oskamp's website describes the graphic novel's plot structure in terms of the well-known "Hero's Journey" attributed to Joseph Campbell ("Begleitmaterial" 3–6). Yet even the more sympathetic Neubauer agreed with some of Honert's criticisms, likewise describing the art as inconsistent and declaring that the recruitment of Thomas by Neo-Nazis did not seem convincing to him.¹⁶

Among personal blogs, reactions similarly focussed on *Drei Steine*'s message rather than its form. In the blog *Litterae Artesque*, for example, Uwe Rennicke praised the book's coloring but described the drawing style only as "sehr genau gezeichnet." Against the background of rising extremism and *Fremdenfeindlich-*

¹⁵ Cédric Fortier (1980–) is a French comics artist; Paul Derouet (1947–) is a French comics translator and talent agent headquartered in Hamburg; Reinhard Kleist (1970–) and Uli Oesterle (1966–) are German comics writers/artists known for their biographical or autobiographical works (e.g., Oesterle's *Vatermilch*, in two volumes; Carlsen Verlag, 2020–2023; Kleist's biographical comics are mentioned above).

¹⁶ The Neo-Nazis' attempt to recruit Tom is in fact explained in the graphic novel – they admire his fighting spirit and mistake him for a nationalist despite his aiding Nils – to which Oskamp's further statements to Neubauer add little (*Drei Steine* 70; Neubauer 35–36).

keit, he considered the comic “ein interessantes Unterrichtsmittel für deutsche Geschichte bzw. die politische Bildung an Schulen” (“Dresdner Bücherjunge”). Vanessa Nagel, in the librarian-oriented blog *LibTips*, focused briefly on the narrative, which she found lacking in depth, yet concluded that Oskamp nevertheless succeeds in telling a story of “Hoffnung und Umbruch” (“v”). Frank Lang lamented in his blog *Der Büchernarr* that “mit dem Erstarken der rechten Szene in Deutschland wird [das Buch] leider wieder sehr aktuell,” but also declared the character design to be lacking, making it difficult to differentiate between characters and thus to interpret what was happening.¹⁷

While many of these observations are subjective, the quality of the artwork was certainly affected by the rush to finish the project. For example, not only some of the minor characters, but also Nils and Tom are often difficult to tell apart, other than their differing haircuts. The size of characters' heads relative to their bodies also varies from panel to panel, making the protagonists magically appear a few years older or younger than their putative age of thirteen. Keeping characters on-model generally proves to be a challenge: the antagonistic teacher Frau Kunz, for instance, first appears as a realistic if stereotypical “old maid” (*Drei Steine* 12), but sixteen pages later she is an outright witch, with a sharper nose and chin and completely different hairdo (*Drei Steine* 28–29).¹⁸ This portrayal seems more to conform with the depictions of the other antagonistic figures – the elderly teacher who glorifies Stalingrad (*Drei Steine* 48–55), or “der alte Fritz,” a former SS-officer who now recruits young hooligans (*Drei Steine* 59–60, 72–75) – whose features are more clearly caricatured than the other characters, to a degree that does not always seem well integrated with the otherwise realistic style throughout.

Many of Oskamp's action scenes also seem stiffly posed (for example, the extended battle on pages 39–42), and even scenes of normal conversation occasionally show characters gesticulating almost comically (such as Nils's outraged father's speech, 35).

¹⁷ Personal blogs often take longer to react to publications than commercial press organs. Rennie's post is from August 2016, shortly after *Drei Steine*'s publication, but Nagel's is over three years later (November 2019) and Lang's is almost exactly four years later.

¹⁸ Nils's mother is the only other female character who speaks, incidentally, with a total of three utterances (*Drei Steine* 22, 32–33). Nils's few female Pantheon characters, and the Nazi Fritz's wife is clearly forbidden to speak (*Drei Steine* 73, 75). This is a stark contrast with the active female figures in *Andi* (set in the “present” of the early 2000s), where Andi is romantically interested in his assertive hijabi friend Ayshe, and even the ardent Neo-Nazi student Magda bristles at her mentor figure Müller's condescending sexism (Grumke and Schaaf 19).

However, there are also many well-drawn, expressive panels, particularly closeups, demonstrating Oskamp's talent as an artist, and it seems unlikely in any case that the comic's young target audience is invested in artistic virtuosity at the expense of a gripping story.

There are indeed narrative gaps as well: for example, while the neglect shown by Nils's parents is partly justified by the father's academic job in distant Kiel and the mother's grief at her own father's death (*Drei Steine* 33–35), Nils's brother Jonas disappears completely after only two pages (*Drei Steine* 30–31), with no explanation for the contempt he shows not only Nils, but also his own friend Tom (who simply becomes Nils' friend instead).¹⁹ This situation also leads to the comic's most awkward piece of dialogue, when Tom interrupts a gang of Neo-Nazis about to beat Nils with a few swift blows and the line: "Keiner schlägt hier den Bruder meines Kumpels" (*Drei Steine* 40), snarled like a *bon mot* from an action movie. Notably, none of Oskamp's family members or teachers appear after the halfway point of the plot, making the young protagonist seem isolated to the point of active abuse and raising serious questions about the Oskamp family dynamic – including the question of whence Nils derives a moral certitude and uprightness that nobody else in his family demonstrates.²⁰ Again, however, the narrative's swift pace is engaging enough that these instances are no obstacle to enjoying the suspense, and it may well be that some teenage readers sympathize even more strongly with Nils' feelings of isolation and with the touch of melodrama in the dialogue.

IV

A controversial aspect of the graphic novel is its appropriation of Jewish suffering as a vehicle for the non-Jewish protagonist's character development – which it does in a manner fully consonant with the prevailing German *Erinnerungskultur*.

If the inciting plot incident of *Drei Steine* – in terms of the "Hero's Journey" and the "Ruf des Abenteuers" ("Begleitmaterial" 5) – is Nils' classmate Andreas dismissing a lesson on the Holocaust as "eine reine Propagandalüge der Besatzungsmächte, um deren eigene Kriegsverbrechen zu vertuschen!" (*Drei Steine* 13),

¹⁹ Oskamp was later able to reconcile with his father, who died just as *Drei Steine* was about to be published (Neubauer 36); however, Oskamp is estranged from his brother, who repeatedly attempted to stop the graphic novel's publication while relativizing the Holocaust and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, embracing conspiracy theories (Ihme 111).

²⁰ The instructor who teaches the lesson on the Holocaust that sets off the plot, and who at least seems to take his job seriously (Oskamp 13), also never appears again.

followed by Nils's ridicule of him – "Massenmörder verehren. Du bist doch bekloppt!" (*Drei Steine* 14), then its first plot point, marking the point of no return for Nils, comes at the end of that day. After using judo to fend off another classmate's attack, Nils rides his bicycle home past a Jewish cemetery (which he seems to have never previously noticed), dismounting to find it vandalized, with toppled headstones and antisemitic graffiti. Here he sees the eponymous three stones on one of the headstones, and muses, "Es gibt keine Gräber nach 1938 . . . Wenn es hier seit 45 Jahren kein jüdisches Leben mehr gibt, . . . wie kann man dann behaupten, dass es den Holocaust nie gegeben hat?" (*Drei Steine* 20), as he puts the stones in his pocket and leaves (Fig. 2). With this gesture, Nils takes up the burden of remembrance and appropriates the act of Jewish mourning, riding his bicycle toward the distant horizon.²¹

Nils' experience here is believable: in 1980, only three years before the events of *Drei Steine*, American academic Lisa Kahn, fearing "dass der Holocaust so gut wie vergessen ist in Deutschland – trotz Fernsehsendung" (Kahn),²² travelled to Unterbalbach (Baden-Württemberg), about 350 km southeast of Dortmund, to visit a Jewish cemetery. Once she located both the graveyard and a reluctant, deaf caretaker with its keys, she found it neglected (though not vandalized). With similar thoughts to those Oskamp describes in his younger self, Kahn expresses reflections on this experience as follows:

Die letzten drei Steine,²³ groß, fast prächtig, die Schrift wohlerhalten, müssen für angesehene Bürger gewesen sein, zumindest für wohlhabende. Sie datieren vom 17. Dezember 1937, 4. Februar 1938, 12. März 1938. Gingen zu diesen letzten Begräbnissen noch viele mit? Gab es nach dem 12. März 1938 keine Alten, keine Gebrechlichen mehr, die man in ihrer Heimat hätte sterben lassen können? Wurden sie alle, alle abtransportiert? (Kahn)

The particular grave that Kahn sought is never named; she could not find it on the overgrown grounds: "Es ist doch her stürzend [sic], daß im Land des Wirtschaftswunders –, und die Wohlhabenheit der Bürger schaut doch aus all ihren Knopflöchern heraus! – immer noch jüdische Friedhöfe völlig verwildern, sei es aus Mangel an Teilnahme, an bewilligten Mitteln oder beidem" (Kahn). If Kahn's

²¹ In his own *Begleitmaterial*, Oskamp places the cemetery visit between "Aufbruch, Schritt über die Schwelle" and "Prüfung, Verbündete und Feinde" stations of the "Hero's Journey" ("Begleitmaterial" 5–6).

²² This refers to the West German broadcast of the 1978 American television miniseries *Holocaust*, directed by Marvin J. Chomsky. The German-dubbed version was transmitted on WDR and in ARD's *Drittes Fernsehprogramm* in January 1979, leading to intense public discussion of German historical responsibility for National Socialist atrocities.

²³ The *Steine* here are simply *Grabsteine*; visitation stones are not mentioned.



Fig. 2: Nils encounters the three stones in the Jewish cemetery (*Drei Steine 20*).

experience in Unterballbach only increased her anxiety that the Holocaust was being forgotten, however, Nils Oskamp leaves the cemetery further convinced that it should be remembered; and yet, after this scene, the words *Jude, jüdisch*

and *Holocaust* are never mentioned again within the comic proper (as opposed to the prose afterword that explains the significance of the three stones, and the lengthy documentary account of Neo-Nazism in Dortmund by Alice Lanzke that serves as the comic's appendix; 121–122, 125–139).²⁴

Again, the absence of Jews is plausible in the historical context and certainly reflects Oskamp's real-life experience: Dortmund's tiny Jewish population numbered 351 in 1970 and only 337 in 1989 ("Dortmund") of a total population of around 600,000.²⁵ The Jewish population of Westphalia as a whole, including Lippe, was only 2,049 in 1987 (Aschoff 44), and thus half the size of the Jewish community in Dortmund alone in 1933: 4,108 – though by the dates on the last gravestones in 1938, that number had shrunk to 2,600 ("Dortmund"). It is thus unsurprising that Nils has no Jewish schoolmates in the 1980s, and that not a single living Jewish person appears in the story.²⁶ This is consistent with the experience of many German students between that era and the present who, like their American and British counterparts, have experienced decades of Holocaust education and yet still have little or no direct contact with Jewish fellow citizens – to the extent that in 2020, the *Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland* established a "Meet a Jew" program to enable non-Jewish Germans to encounter Jews face to face (Horn; Solomon).²⁷

This absence of lived Jewish experience has also been observed in other visual media, such as the cinema. In *Framed Visions*, Gerd Gemünden says of the avant-garde filmmaker Herbert Achternbusch, who often used fantasy images of Native Americans in his films:

. . . in [Achternbusch's] Indian fantasies the Jew is everywhere, not as a physical reality but as an absence that demands recollection . . . They are virtually extinct in Germany, and, according to Achternbusch, contemporary Germany has made no effort to preserve those traces of Jewish life the Nazis had not managed to eradicate, thus continuing the politics of the final solution. In his films real Jews are as absent as real Native Americans; for Achtern-

24 The one exception is a mention of "die jüdische Weltverschwörung" as the Neo-Nazi ring tries to recruit Tom (*Drei Steine* 74).

25 Dortmund's population shrank from 639,000 in 1970 to 591,000 in 1989 ("Dortmund, Germany"), likely due to the economic downturn that Oskamp depicts as background to the rise of far-right movements (*Drei Steine* 22).

26 In Düsseldorf in the early 2000s, the eponymous hero of the *Andi* comics likewise has no Jewish schoolmates, although his best friends are Muslim and he has one Asian friend (*Andi* 1 18).

27 Even in 2021, one of the interviewees speaking with Solomon reports, the most common question asked was "There are still Jews in Germany?" – not much better than the American students who ask, as one Texas teacher told Horn, "Are any Jews still alive today?" (Solomon; Horn).

busch both are imaginary people who can be represented only by the void they have left in our cultures and whose remembrance is therefore an act of mourning. (Gemünden 125)²⁸

In Oskamp's *Drei Steine*, Jews are likewise only represented by a void ("Wenn es hier seit 45 Jahren kein jüdisches Leben mehr gibt"), at best metonymically by the gravestones in a few panels, and in fact their absence is taken as the guarantee that the Holocaust really happened (*Drei Steine* 20). This is not the story of defending those Jews – for that it is too late – but nor do any living Jews enter the picture. Rather, the absent Holocaust victims symbolize in their very absence the humanistic and democratic values that must be defended from resurgent Nazism. The fact that the *drei Steine* are specifically part of a funerary tradition, representing the void the dead have left, thus gives the title a macabre resonance.

V

If the inaction of the authority figures in *Drei Steine* seems implausible to today's reader, that is a sign of progress: The plot takes place at the beginning of Helmut Kohl's chancellorship (1982–1998), which started with attempts to distance the West German state from the original Nazi regime's crimes, claiming – falsely, as *Drei Steine* bears witness – that the lessons of history had been learned. Over the course of the long Kohl era, however, the tide turned toward acknowledging the Holocaust's long shadow. As Jacob Eder puts it in a critical overview of the inconsistencies of German *Erinnerungspolitik*:

Stieß Kohl also in den 1980er Jahren mit "Schlussstrich"-Projekten wie der Versöhnungszeremonie mit Ronald Reagan auf dem Soldatenfriedhof in Bitburg oder seinen Plänen für eine zentrale Gedenkstätte in Bonn, die nicht genauer zwischen Opfern der Deutschen und deutschen Opfern differenzieren sollte, auf heftige Gegenwehr innerhalb der deutschen Gesellschaft, so sprach er zum Ende seiner Regierungszeit mit großer Selbstverständlichkeit vom Holocaust als "Kern unseres Selbstverständnisses als Nation." Ohne Zweifel spielte politisches Kalkül hier eine Rolle, was jedoch einen genuine Gesinnungswandel und langfristige Lernprozesse nicht ausschließt. (Eder)

Adam Sutcliffe claims that this increasing emphasis on the Holocaust as a defining factor of German identity coincided with the rise throughout the West of "a new, non-ideological, emotionally resonant, and hopeful framework for learning from the past," a framework "largely met by enshrining empathy with Holocaust

²⁸ Gemünden consistently uses the term "Indian" in the context of "Indian fantasies": "Indians" are fictionalized representations of Native Americans, not the real people.

victims as the locus classicus of morally improving engagement with the horror of history” (Sutcliffe 223).

In recent years, however, Germany's *Erinnerungskultur* has become increasingly contested (see, for example, Kuras; Buck; Cronin). According to political scientist Dirk Moses, this has resulted in a focus on the Holocaust as a uniquely evil event that beggars comparison with, for example, the massacres of African natives under German colonialism, or the Nazi regime's attempts to exterminate other ethnic or social groups – and also obligates unquestioning German support for Israel and condemnation of anti-Zionism. Moses controversially labelled this relationship to the Holocaust “Der Katechismus der Deutschen,” claiming that it had led to an “erlösender Philosemitismus” meant to negate the National Socialist mindset, but in practice allowing non-Jewish Germans to police the opinions of migrants, foreigners and even Jews and Israelis critical of current governments in Israel (Moses).

At the same time, this *Erinnerungskultur* did not displace other aspects of German identity. When William Noah Glucroft asked in 2020 why German state media, funded by fees incumbent on all households, allotted time for broadcasting Christian church services, he “was told that Christianity is part of Germany's *Selbstverständnis* . . . and therefore a key component of their public service mission.” Glucroft points out that ever more Germans are in fact becoming non-believers, but the state's public embrace of Christianity “sends a powerful signal about who is, and is not, considered part of the nation” (Glucroft). In practice,

When Jews, Muslims, and other groups fall victim to far-right violence, the German response is couched in the language of tolerance, not acceptance. State protection is afforded on the basis of human rights, not German rights, because these groups are considered outsiders *even though in many cases they are not*. (Glucroft; emphasis added)

By failing to displace the German *Selbstverständnis* as a Christian culture, the rise of a *Selbstverständnis* based on *Erinnerungskultur* has done little to prevent a growing antisemitism threatening contemporary German Jews, as rising attacks on synagogues and Jewish individuals demonstrate (nor has it countered increasing Islamophobia or secured Muslim Germans' safety). Rather, it has only turned Moses's “erlösender Philosemitismus” into what Sutcliffe reframes as “redemptive anti-antisemitism” that

draws its underlying emotional power, as did redemptive antisemitism for the Nazis, from the fact that it rests on a largely unspoken messianic conception of history, which rests in turn on deep-seated connections in Western thinking between Jewish suffering and world-historical transformation. (Sutcliffe 233)

And indeed, against this background, *Drei Steine* is the story of young Nils' personal development through "redemptive anti-antisemitism," as he forsakes responding to the Neo-Nazis' violence with violence of his own. This process begins when he hesitates to bring the second of the three stones down on his antagonist Andreas's head, thinking: "Du sollst nicht töten. Das hatte ich noch einige Zeit vorher von meinem Pastor im Konfirmandenunterricht gehört" (91; Fig. 3).²⁹



Fig. 3: Nils thinks better of using the second stone to kill his adversary (*Drei Steine* 91).

Nils' development continues when the tables are turned and Nils is badly beaten by the Neo-Nazi gang under SS-Michi's direction: Nils lies in a bright red pool of his own blood, with his school folder bearing a picture of James Dean, captioned ". . . denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun" (*Drei Steine* 106–107; Fig. 4).

²⁹ In terms of the "Hero's Journey," Oskamp sees this as "Der Weg zurück" ("Begleitmaterial" 5–6).



Fig. 4: Nils, beaten almost to death, juxtaposed with James Dean (*Drei Steine* 107).

The cinematic iris-in effect that frames the unconscious Nils within a growing black circle recapitulates the earlier subjective shot of Nils's violent revenge fantasy, where the black circle represents Nils' focus.³⁰ Likewise, the first Biblical reference (to the Old Testament's Ten Commandments) is echoed in a quotation from the New Testament, specifically from Christ's passion – here in the form of a film poster: . . . *denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun* is the German title of the 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause* (released in West Germany in March 1956). Nils, whose letterman jacket or *Collegejacke*, here juxtaposed with Nils' red blood, recalls the iconic red jacket worn by Dean's character Jim Stark, is a rebel *with* a cause, and he now turns that cause away from violence.³¹

³⁰ The significance of these two events is marked by their departure from an otherwise conventional and functional panel layout throughout.

³¹ *Rebel Without a Cause* was retitled with a Biblical quotation in Germany because Dean's previous film, *East of Eden* (1955), had been a hit under the title *Jenseits von Eden*. On the two occa-

Lying in his hospital bed, Nils tells Tom that he no longer wants to fight the Neo-Nazis in the streets: “Nein, ich will das nicht, wenn wir jetzt nicht damit aufhören, wird noch jemand sterben” (*Drei Steine* 113), turning to the legal system for recourse instead despite his skepticism – which turns out to be justified. In the “Hero’s Journey” schema, this recovery and renunciation form the “Wiederauferstehung” (“Begleitmaterial” 5–6). And Nils’ process of redemption concludes thirty years later in Yad Vashem, when he once more turns the final stone into a visitation stone at the resistance fighters’ memorial (*Drei Steine* 120).³² Oskamp labels this action “Rückkehr mit dem Elixir” (“Begleitmaterial” 5–6), indicating both the hero’s completed resurrection/purification and the healing of his land.

In the summer of 2016, as *Drei Steine* had just been published, Oskamp was interviewed by Ralf Hutter for the newspaper *Neues Deutschland* and remarked on the topic of victimhood:

“Es gibt sonst keine Geschichte aus Opfersicht,” begründet der Autor die Wichtigkeit seines Buches. Trotz der immensen Nazi-Gewalt der letzten Jahrzehnte kennt Oskamp als Zeugnis aus Opfersicht nur das 2013 erschienene Buch von Semiya Şimşek, der Tochter des vom Nationalsozialistischen Untergrund (NSU) 2000 in Nürnberg ermordeten Enver Şimşek. (Hutter)

Although the graphic novel’s entire plot is initiated by contradicting a schoolmate’s Holocaust denial, the *Opfer* of whom Oskamp speaks are not the Jews murdered by the Nazis – to say that there are no accounts from this viewpoint, even among comics alone, would clearly be false – but rather the victims of modern Neo-Nazism. The suffering of those who died in the Shoah plays no part in the story of Oskamp’s own *via dolorosa* at the hands of a new generation of perpetrators. Dennis Betzholtz, writing in *Welt am Sonntag* three months after Hutter’s article, clearly recognizes this when he writes of Oskamp, “Dabei liegt *das Martyrium, das er erlebt hat*, 33 Jahre zurück” (Betzholz 3; emphasis added).³³ Oskamp himself revealed to Frank Neubauer that the theological aspect of his story had only become clear to him in the last stage of working on the story and that at that

sions that I have taught *Drei Steine* in a graduate-level course, however, none of the German native-speaker graduate students – admittedly a very small sample – recognized the Biblical reference, though they knew the film.

³² Jewish tradition recommends that visitation stones be placed with the left hand, but the photograph shows Oskamp holding and laying this final stone with his right hand. This is doubly curious because on the facing page with the book’s *Nachwort*, he draws a Biblical-era Jew laying a stone on a grave with his left hand (121); and at several points throughout *Drei Steine*, we see that Nils is himself left-handed (*Drei Steine* 24, 38, 56). Various sources indicate, however, that laying stones is an informal, relatively recent tradition, neither codified nor uniformly observed.

³³ The visual reference to James Dean, who, like many short-lived celebrities, is seen as a kind of martyr (Springer 25, 35), further reinforces this sense of sacrifice.

point a circle had closed for him. With regard to the historical perpetrators, he stated: “Ob ich den Tätern von damals vergeben kann, wird wohl eine meiner nächsten Prüfungen sein” (Neubauer 35).

The displacement of the historical Jewish victims into the void to make room for Oskamp and others in the present is required by the structures of redemptive anti-antisemitism, as Sutcliffe points out:

Like the caged canary whose death indicates that the mine must be evacuated because lethally poisonous gas is present, Jewish suffering from the gas of racist hatred provides an early warning that others must take action so that they do not meet the same fate . . . The instrumentalist and Christological sacrificial logic of this metaphor highlights redemptive anti-antisemitism's deep theological resonance. (Sutcliffe 229–230)

As Dara Horn says, however, “using dead Jews as symbols isn’t helping living ones”; and placing a stone from a Jewish German’s grave at Yad Vashem’s Pillar of Heroism, though it may be purifying for the protagonist, is hardly “returning the elixir” if it does nothing to heal Germany.

VI

None of these objections should be taken to impugn Oskamp’s sincerity or disparage his efforts. As mentioned above, he works within the existing context of the social and media structures at hand – it would be even more difficult to obtain financial support if he did not. He has also faced ongoing threats of retaliation from Neo-Nazi groups, including twenty death threats, since *Drei Steine* was published; all the more because his wife Maria Zarada, a photographer whom he met in 2013, is a Sicilian of Sinti background whose own family was decimated under the Nazis in the 1940s. The couple is forced to keep secret their address in Hamburg, and Zarada has nonetheless faced physical assault on the street (Ihme 110). Illustration jobs have tailed off – not only for Oskamp, but in general – and he makes his living mainly as a political educator touring schools (Ihme 110), facilitated through frameworks such as the Projekt ClearNetworking, supported by the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (“Mit Comics gegen rechts!”), and the *Landeszentrale für politische Bildung* of North Rhine-Westphalia (“Drei Steine: Publikationen”).

However valid some of the criticisms of *Drei Steine* as a standalone work may be, its intended function within a broader and more interactive pedagogical strategy serves to mitigate many of the comic’s weaknesses. This strategy, elucidated on Oskamp’s website (dreisteine.com), involves interactive readings and multimedia presentations at schools by the author, which also serve to advertise both *Drei*

Steine – increasing the graphic novel’s commercial viability – and Oskamp’s forthcoming projects. In the context of this participatory pedagogy, many of *Drei Steine*’s apparent weaknesses become teaching opportunities: for example, one question to be workshopped with students asks who did or did not help Nils (“Pädagogisches Begleitmaterial”). Supplementary materials detail the historical development and features of far-right groups and the form of their arguments, as well as provide online information resources (“Begleitmaterial” 11). They even explain how to lay charges against extremists and follow the court process (“Pädagogisches Begleitmaterial”). Some of the materials Oskamp uses are still supplied by the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung (Ihme 108), in line with its mission to promote “bundesweit Projekte, die sich für eine demokratische Zivilgesellschaft stark machen. Besonders im ländlichen Raum” (“Amadeu Antonio Stiftung”). These materials facilitate various creative projects, including street art, filmmaking, poster making and, of course, making comics (“Begleitprogramm”).³⁴ As he tells Ihme, Oskamp has so far spoken to about 150,000 young people during over 370 readings and more than 250 workshops, despite the interruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent funding cuts in the field of political education (Ihme 108).

One result of the focus on Holocaust education in Western Europe and North America, however, has been an increasing weight of evidence that Holocaust education, as it has been carried out, does little to eradicate antisemitism (e.g., Pearce, Foster and Pettigrew; Hänel; Solomon; Horn). Against this background, Sutcliffe describes the tensions caused by rising criticism of Israel’s actions in Gaza in 2009: “The widespread perception of Israeli responsibility for Palestinian suffering clashed jarringly with the paradigm of redemptive anti-antisemitism, which associated Holocaust remembrance and Jewish history with drawing morally elevating lessons from victimhood” (Sutcliffe 235). These tensions have only become more extreme, in Germany and elsewhere, since the Hamas invasion of Israel in October 2023 and Israel’s reprisal, with unforeseeable consequences for the maintenance of Germany’s already-embattled *Erinnerungskultur* or for Oskamp’s pedagogical project, which is heavily intertwined with that culture and apparently entirely uncritical of it.

Despite such uncertainty, *Drei Steine* is being expanded for an even longer, redrawn international edition in both German and English. Meanwhile, Oskamp and Zarada have traveled through Europe to produce a photographic book, *Memorial Sites of Nazi Terror in Europe*, whose production will form the basis of his

34 Many of the pedagogical strategies used with *Drei Steine* had already been used with the *Andi* comics, among others; see Grumke’s and Schaaff’s contributions to the Palandt anthology.

next graphic novel, *Die Halbierung* – titled in part after the many friends and family members who disowned Oskamp as a result of his activities (Ihme 110). Although the projects were supposed to be published to coincide with the eightieth anniversary of the concentration camps' liberation in 2025, Oskamp had already begun collecting rejection letters from funding agencies in early 2024 (Ihme 107), and no forthcoming formal publication had been announced as of early 2025. Nonetheless, Oskamp remains as impassioned as he was in a 2017 interview: "Wenn eine jugendliche Person eine Neonazigruppierung an ihrer Schule hat und sich aufgrund der Geschichte überlegt, den Blödsinn nicht mitzumachen, hat sich die ganze Arbeit schon gelohnt" ("Ruben" 28).

The comics medium, as Véronique Sina writes in 2023, "hat sich . . . [d]ank seiner Darstellungsvielfalt und seines erzählerischen Potenzials als wertvoller Teil der Erinnerungskultur etabliert" (Sina 7).³⁵ With far-right chauvinist parties such as the *Alternative für Deutschland* (*AfD*) encroaching ever more on mainstream politics and emboldening even more extreme groups, Oskamp's work and his activity in political education remain an important counterbalance despite the weaknesses of Germany's *Erinnerungskultur*. Given Oskamp's difficulties in acquiring financial support in the last decade and a half, however, it might become yet more challenging to apply for funding under either a federal or state government that includes the *AfD* in a coalition, or even in opposition. In either case, Oskamp's future career as an artist and educator will be worth examining for further developments.

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³⁵ Note, however, that Sina's frame of reference is "die internationale Comiclandschaft," with a particular focus on Spiegelman's *Maus* (Sina 8–14) and other directly Holocaust-related comics. None of the other works she discusses briefly are of German origin, although several have been published in German translation.

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