

# Subjective History in the Wartime Diary *Notabene 45* by Erich Kästner

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**Abstract** The diary *Notabene 45* (1961) by the German writer Erich Kästner (1909-1974) is a unique historical and literary document that provides a profound insight into the human experience at the end of the Second World War and in the first post-war period. Kästner uses personal observation and introspection to capture both the public mood and individual emotions as Germany undergoes dramatic change. This diary serves as a historical record in which a person's daily life and experiences are closely linked to historical events. The writer not only documents the chaos of war and post-war life, but also offers an in-depth look at the inner world, identity and existential dilemmas of man.

Based on the theory of cultural memory, which considers memory as a selective system of information transmission, the study reveals the importance of the Kästner's fixed sense of time and space in the context of war. This subjective experience allows one to better understand how a person interprets and adapts to extreme circumstances, and how these processes influence the formation of his identity. Kästner's diary highlights not only historical events, but also the mental state of humans, manifested in the contradictory struggle between survival and the attempt to preserve one's humanity. The phenomenological approach allows one to explore how individual experience shapes subjective history, focusing on three significant categories of the artistic world: space, time and the human.

This paper analyses how time and space are treated as important shapers of human experience and identity in Kästner's diary, and how his reflections on historical events influence the collective memory and cultural understanding. Kästner's diary (as a transformation of subjective experience and perception into an existential document) not only adds to the understanding of historical events, but also deepens comprehension of how a human being experiences his existence under extreme conditions, revealing the interplay between the categories of space, time and human.

**Keywords** cultural memory; subjective experience; phenomenology; historical reflection; war experiences

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## Introduction

Autobiographical diaries as a representation and interpretation of experience are based on subjective perception and stream of consciousness. Traditional history often focuses on major events, political decisions and collective processes, while subjective history pays attention to how these events affected individuals. During war, people experience intense emotional and psychological trauma that traditional history may not reflect. The study of subjective history allows us to delve into the inner world of the individual, understanding the fears, hopes, moral dilemmas and other emotional nuances shaping the experience of war. The wartime experience is often fraught with complex moral and ethical issues that only emerge in subjective narratives. The individual stories of wartime writers thus help to shape a broader collective memory of the war. These stories complement the official narratives, providing a more diverse picture of historical events. They also help to understand how the war experience is perceived and remembered across generations. Subjective history offers a deeper and more human perspective on the war experience, adding personal and emotional layers to the understanding of history that often remain outside the boundaries of traditional history. This approach allows us to understand history from a personal perspective, which is often more nuanced and emotionally richer than official historical narratives.

Phenomenology, as a philosophical approach, explores how people witness and perceive the world from their personal perspective, focusing on the subjective aspects of experience. The phenomenology of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), which focuses on the analysis of existence, existential experience and the relationship between time and a being, offers a deeply rooted existential philosophical

perspective on human life. His approach emphasizes individual experience as a key source for understanding how people form relationships with the world and themselves. Existence or *Dasein* (being-in-the-world) is the central concept describing the existential state of man: man is not a mere observer but an active participant in the world. Applying Heidegger's approach to existential perception is essential for the analysis of Kästner's diary. In this context, the phenomenological approach is used to analyze how Kästner's diary *Notabene 45* records his personal experience and how this experience has become a significant historical testimony. Kästner's diary offers a personal perspective on the events of the final months of the Second World War and the immediate post-war period from the perspective of a civilian who is also an intellectual observer. It is the perspective of a man witnessing and documenting the daily chaos and collapse.

The aim of this paper is to analyze how a human being experiences his existence in extreme conditions, discovering the categories of space, time and human. The phenomenological approach helps reveal how subjective experience is formed and memories are reflected in the individual historical document.

### **Erich Kästner and the Content and Structural Framework of the Diary *Notabene 45***

Erich Kästner (1899-1974) is a German writer who became famous mainly due to his children's books (*Emil and the Detectives* (1929), *Lisa and Lottie* (1931), *Dot and Anton* (1949)). With his stories, he transformed the world of children's literature, combining serious themes with humour. As Spichiger notes, "In the 1930s, Erich Kästner modernized children's and young adult literature. Until then, it was common to portray children as docile heroes" (Spichiger). In his stories, he gave children an active role, allowing them to be self-sufficient, clever and able to solve adult problems. His view of childhood was realistic, with a subtle knowledge of children's inner world and a rejection of traditional didactic teachings. *Fabian* (1931) is the only novel he addressed to adult readers, which is why it is also referred to as an "adult novel" in the research literature; the novel is also mentioned in the diary *Notabene 45* (Kästner 93).

In 1933, when the National Socialists came to power in Germany, Kästner's publications were placed on a list of so-called "undesirable works" as part of a wider campaign against intellectuals and writers whose output did not conform to Nazi ideology. As Marcel Reich-Ranicki pointed out, Kästner "was not a political poet. He was against all ideologies. He was basically an apolitical writer. However, he wrote a number of poems criticizing the era, which were already approaching

the political ones. Although he did not really want to achieve that” (Reich-Ranicki, 36). Consequently, Kästner’s works were also banned—his poetry had made him undesirable among the National Socialists. Unlike many of his fellow writers, Kästner did not emigrate during the Nazi period and, by coincidence, he was present at the burning of his works (Weidermann 172-173). He continued writing under a pseudonym. He was only able to publish his novels *Three Men in Snow* (1934) and *George and Incidents* (1938) abroad. After the war Kästner published other works, including children’s books. He received several literature awards and remained a significant name within German literature. He died in 1974.

In early 1945 Kästner escaped from Berlin, first to Bavaria, then to Mayrhofen in Tyrol. He captured this period of the war (from February to August, 1945) in his diary *Notabene 45* (first published as a book in 1961). At the time, he recorded it as shorthand notes in the last months of the Third Reich.

Today, Erich Kästner’s diary *Notabene 45* tells the story of the last months of the Second World War, with a time frame from February 7, 1945 to August 2, 1945. The diary raises several topics in the context of the war. The destruction of war and its impact on everyday life is the central theme of the diary. The chronological sequence of events describes daily life between air raids in German cities, the destruction of buildings and infrastructure, and people’s fear and despair. The core of the diary is the author’s escape to Tyrol with a film crew and his personal emotions concerning his parents, who stayed in Dresden at a time when there were regular air raids on the city and civilians. As a banned writer, he was not allowed to leave the country: without a pass he would be sent back to his hometown or arrested. Therefore, a friend obtained a fake pass for him and took him along with a film crew to Mayrhofen.

Kästner describes the atmosphere among the people after the war’s end, at least in large parts of Germany. He describes the difficulties of the immediate post-war period, the adjustment to a new life and the first attempts to build a new society. He captures how the population was sometimes misinformed by fake news, how propaganda was carried out by the incoming power, and how soldiers from warring countries treated each other. These descriptions illustrate the extent of the material and emotional devastation. The discussion of guilt and responsibility runs like a continuous thread through the diary entries. Kästner reflects intensely on the end of the Nazi regime and questions the guilt of the German people. He criticizes opportunism, repression and the collective responsibility of those who supported or at least tolerated the regime. Alongside the major political events, Kästner also describes the details of everyday survival in the last months of the war. Topics such as

food insecurity, power cuts and the uncertainties of everyday life give an authentic insight into the living conditions of the time. As the war ends, the focus turns to the first steps of reconstruction and the question of what and how should happen next in Germany.

The diary entries are arranged in chronological order, covering a specific period of time (on average less than seven months). The diary is structurally divided into chapters, each chapter beginning with the place and time period of the event (e.g., Berlin, February 7 to March 9; Mayerhofen, March 22 to May 3, etc.). This structure creates a timeframe that reflects the events and atmosphere in the last months of the war, up to the immediate post-war period. In addition, at the beginning of each chapter, the writer creates a historical chronicle of that particular episode, giving the date and events (e.g., May 15—Prague Uprising, bloody riots against the Germans; May 23—The German government is captured near Flensburg and Himmler is arrested and poisons himself; May 31—the Norwegian government returns to Oslo from London, etc.) (Kästner 64). The specific structure of the diary is a kind of transition from wartime to the post-war period. The entries are clearly dated, which makes it easier to place the events and ideas described in the timeline, but they are irregular. When describing events, the entries are made irregularly. There are daily entries, the longest lasting ones with a one-day break being March 1-9, May 1-10 and June 18-22, but there are gaps of up to a week or more: from March 10 to 21 or June 6 to 14. There are only a few days' entries for July and August. The irregularity shows that Kästner did not stick to making daily notes. Entries are often omitted, but there are periods when the author was clearly motivated to write more frequently about the events and emotions relating to the end of the war, perhaps because those experiences and emotions were more intense and he felt compelled to document them. Kästner's diary forms an authentic and immediate narrative that gives its reader the feeling of witnessing events in real time.

### **Description of the Method**

According to its author, "The diary portrays the present. Not as an inventory, but in snapshots. Not in an overview, but through insights. The diary contains illustrative material, amateur photos in the note format, randomly arranged scenes, snapshots of the past when it was still called the present" (Kästner 12). Although a diary as a genre is classified among autobiographical texts such as letters, memoirs, autobiographical poems and novels, it cannot be completely merged into the same category of autobiography, as their functions and approaches to documenting life differ. "These genres are distinguished by the fact that they describe the life of 'I' in

the long-term perspective, while a diary usually covers recent events” (Barniškiene 66.). The analysis of the concept of autobiography points to common elements in the concept of autobiography: “memory,” “personal life,” “history,” “personality.” It involves a linear, more-or-less chronological presentation of a life story from birth to the present moment of the narrative. This understanding of autobiography revolves around the notion of identity, assuming that it reflects the process of individual identity formation until a person accepts and realizes his social role, i.e., successfully integrates into society, shaping his/her life story as part of a broader history (Wagner-Egelhaaf 50-51).

Theoretically, diaries can be linked to autobiography, but they cannot be completely merged into the same category, as their functions and approaches to documenting life differ due to the specificities of the genres:

- While an autobiography is a retrospective reconstruction of the author’s life story in which he/she often reflects on past events, experiences and self-development, a diary is a more intimate, direct and less edited format in which the author documents events and feelings almost in real-time.
- While an autobiography may contain a broader narrative structure, attempting to create a coherent and cohesive life story, frequently adding philosophical and artistic reflections, a diary is not for the public but more for self-reflection, self-expression and thoughts, which are often spontaneous and without a broader editorial purpose.
- While autobiography is reader-oriented and the text is often designed to convey a particular message or offer a particular interpretation of the author’s life, a diary lacks the retrospective awareness of developments that characterize autobiography because it depicts thoughts and emotions at the moment of their expression.

Both wartime diaries and autobiographies reveal the phenomenon of memory, but they do so from different perspectives. Diaries offer a snapshot, where events are recorded immediately after they have occurred, reflecting emotions and reactions at the time. Autobiographies, on the other hand, provide a retrospective reflection in which the past is contemplated from a temporal distance, allowing the author to revisit and rework emotional pain. As autobiographical texts, the diaries of wartime writers reveal the phenomenon of memory, providing unique insights into individual experiences. “In literary studies, the terms ‘memory’ and ‘remembrance’ are not used uniformly and consistently. However, it is appropriate to use the term ‘memory’

when referring to the act in which the autobiographical ‘I’ recalls the events of his life. ‘Memory’ is also the result of this act of recollection: a constructed image of the past that can be portrayed and described” (Wagner-Egelhaaf 193).

Literature in this context becomes a powerful tool that captures memories and transmits the experience of otherness, especially in conditions that change over time and space. The narrative of a diary not only allows the transcendence of temporal and spatial boundaries but also facilitates the transformation of individual memories into collective memories, which are further preserved in cultural memory. Texts, especially wartime testimonies, are an essential part of the overall cultural repository, helping to preserve era-specific experiences that might otherwise disappear with the passing of generations. In addition, social and political upheavals can significantly affect and reshape cultural memory, giving testimonies even greater significance. As Wagner-Egelhaaf points out, “Although the time of the event seems important, especially in terms of historical phenomena, the psychology of memory suggests that time is less structuring in autobiographical memory. The time of the event is often forgotten, but the event itself persists if it was unique, unexpected, important or emotionally charged” (Wagner-Egelhaaf 194).

While autobiographies reconstruct memories, creating a deeper understanding of past events in which the significance and emotional content of events become more important than the flow of time, wartime diaries document memory during the event, allowing the reader to directly experience the author’s self-identity at the time and the changes brought about by extreme circumstances.

“Autobiography analyses time both as a narrative moment and as a chronology of events. A writer can play with different time periods, for example, using flashbacks, chronological or fragmented narratives to create different narrative tones and purposes. The manipulation of time can highlight how past and present experiences influence a writer’s identity and life journey” (Smith and Watson 18).

Both genres, as subjective self-reflection, document an analysis of writers’ life, but their structure differs. Diaries, like individual memory recorded in literature, provide a current perspective on events, while autobiographies create an opportunity for a deeper reassessment of the past, thus also ensuring the passage of collective memory into cultural memory.

Memory is a consequence of human existence and its relationship to time—past, present and future. In his phenomenology, Heidegger focuses on how a person exists and forms his perception of the world through experiences that are subject to time and closely linked to memory. He stresses the individual’s essential experience of “being-in-the-world,” in which memory plays an important role in the context of



human existence. Individual memory is the way in which a person re-experiences his past, making connections with his present existence. Heidegger refers to “existence in time” (*Sein und Zeit*), where a person is constantly constructing the meaning of his being by interacting with his past and future possibilities. Historical existence (*Geschichtlichkeit*) marks human existence and shapes cultural understanding of the world. Memory helps individuals to understand themselves and the context of their lives.

Cultural memory, which includes historical events, traditions and myths, is an important aspect of how people make sense of their identity and history. Cultural memory is the way societies inherit meanings and structures that affect their present and future existence. Phenomenology here helps to understand how cultural memories relate to historical situations and how they are interpreted or reformulated at different times (Heidegger 27-39). Thus, Heidegger’s phenomenological approach allows us to understand Kästner’s subjective history not as a static collection of facts but as an existential experience in which the individual constantly interacts with the past and the present in order to make sense of himself and the world.

### **A Phenomenological Approach to the Study of Kästner’s Diary**

The diary *Notabene 45* by Erich Kästner is his reflection on the Second World War and the situation in post-war Germany. Through personal experiences, he reveals how these historical events and the post-war situation appear in human consciousness and how they are felt from within. The preservation of historical space and time in the diary entries creates cultural-historical phenomena. According to the writer, the diary is preserved in its original form, including the errors, misinformation and misjudgements that occurred to him while writing it. He explains that it was impossible to know everything correctly at that time, because people often drew wrong conclusions from incorrect assumptions. He makes it clear that he has deliberately refrained from changing or “whitewashing” the content of the diary later, because it had to be honest, even with its mistakes. Trying to turn it into a work of art or afterwards idealizing it would destroy its true meaning and authenticity:

I did not write down everything I was experiencing at the time. It goes without saying. But I experienced everything that I wrote down at the time. These are the observations from the perspective of a thinking ant. And they are notes that sometimes consist only of keywords, half-sentences and allusions. That was enough, because the notes were only intended for me, only to be fuel for my



own memory. (Kästner 10)

**Time.** As he analyses everyday life and human emotions in these wartime conditions, Kästner reflects on historical events, and these reflections become part of his personal and collective memory. Lotman explains that memory in culture functions as “a system for storing and transmitting information, linking the past with the present and the future” (Lotman 133-137). He also points out “that cultural memory is selective: it not only preserves certain elements of the past, but also interprets them from a contemporary perspective, thereby influencing a society’s identity and perception of the world” (Lotman 133-137). Kästner’s perception of time is not only a linear sequence of past, present and future, it is also an existential category that shapes man’s relationship to his own existence, preserving the “Past as an inhabitant of the Present” (Lotman 135). In Kästner’s diary, the changes caused by the war and its aftermath create a sense of the lost and the unpredictable. The sense of time is distorted and each day becomes an existential value:

This past, the unresolved one, is like a restless ghost that wanders through our days and dreams and, according to ancient spiritual custom, waits for us to look at it, speak to it and listen to it. It does not help that we, scared to death, pull a sleep cap over our eyes and ears. It is the wrong method. It helps neither the ghost nor us. We have to look it in the face and say: “Speak!” The past must speak and we must listen. Before that, neither we nor it will find peace. (Kästner 12)

Kästner uses everyday details to illustrate larger historical contexts. Describing everyday situations, he creates a space of the era, and the details help to keep memory alive and make subjective experience comprehensible to a reader.

Today is Election Day in England. It is expected that the Labour Party will win and that Attlee will form the new government. In any case, Churchill will attend the Potsdam Conference on July 10th. Truman, Stalin and the Big Three will also be in Berlin. They will be looking “at the ruins of a slave town,” as the Innsbruck newspaper, run by the American military government, likes to say (Kästner 108).

Time in Kästner’s diary thus becomes the creator of subjective experience, in which each moment reflects not only a historical situation, but also an inner feeling of the

world. *Notabene 45* captures not only the experience of wartime but also a feeling of time and the individual's perception of it. By reflecting on the experience of war, the writer creates his own identity and his memories become part of the culture of collective memory.

**Space.** As an autobiographical text that uses space as a reflection of identity, a diary displays various forms of self-representation where, as in autobiography, “a writer positions himself socially, geographically and ideologically. Narrators can use different places (e.g. cities, houses, foreign countries) as vehicles of identity, linking themselves to specific geographical or cultural locations, e.g., in an ecobiography. The text also analyzes space as a border area where interaction between a person and others takes place across social, gender, ethnic and national boundaries” (Smith and Watson 17).

The space Kästner presents is not only a physical place but also an existential environment in which people live, act and feel their presence. Space becomes a metaphor for the reality affected by war, where the familiar environment of peacetime is distorted and dehumanized. In his notes of May 8, 1945, Kästner describes the post-war space and time as “*Niemandsländ*” and “*Niemandszeit*” (Kästner 83)—as a transitional period between the end of the old order and the beginning of the new order. Uncertainty and disorientation prevail in this state, as the old rules are no longer in force and the new ones have not yet entered into force. The only thing that is valid in this phase is a “higher power,” i.e., external, uncontrollable forces that determine the situation.

People walk through the streets in a daze. The short break in history lessons makes them nervous. The gap between the “no longer” and the “not yet” irritates them. The stage is bright, but empty. Where are the actors? Is the play not going on? The stores are closed. There are signs and notices in the shop windows and on the doors: “Sold out!” (Kästner 74).

Kästner shows the apparent chaos and contradictions of life at the end of the war. He depicts the contrasts of everyday life—the beauty of nature and the brutality of war, simple moments and ominous events that seem random and disjointed. But like a kaleidoscope, where apparent chaos creates certain patterns, the confusion of events in life creates a certain illusion of meaning (Kästner 52).

**Human.** Kästner writes the diary not only as a record of political or historical events, but also as research into human nature and existence during the war. Phenomenology focuses on how individuals become aware of and interpret their experi-

ences, and Kästner's diary is an example of how a person subjectively perceives and experiences the conditions of war. It gives insight into his thoughts, fears, hopes and reflections, which are typical study objects of the phenomenological approach.

From the very first entry in the diary, the wartime human is presented in a contradictory manner, caught between the brutal reality of war and the desperate clinging to a normal life. The writer captures the contrasts: "While the war rages on in the immediate vicinity, Russian tanks are on the Oder and lines of refugees are heading into the unknown, people celebrate, dance, drink and play poker. They ignore the danger for a while and concentrate on enjoying the moment" (Kästner 16-17).

In the aftermath of the collapse of the war, people are confused—depression and hopelessness turn into irritation and mutual recriminations. There is distrust in society; people shirk their responsibilities, try to adapt to new circumstances, but they do so only to avoid more trouble (Kästner 68-69).

The diary captures the existential dilemmas of a man at war—identity crisis, guilt, survival and morality. These experiences reveal how human nature and existential reality are transformed by war. The account creates the image of a person involved in the absurd and chaotic reality of war, where everyday activities and duties are carried out in spite of the obvious danger and futility. In the entry for May 5, 1945, the story of the *Feldwebel* (non-commissioned officer) presents a prime example of this absurdity—the meticulous duty-doer registering goods eight times, even though the enemy is already on the doorstep and he knows the goods will soon be destroyed. The story shows the tendency of a human puppet to stick to the rules even in extreme circumstances which calls into question the sense of this action (Kästner 72). *Notabene 45* criticizes society, especially intellectuals and leaders, for their role in causing and perpetuating the war, as well as for their lack of responsibility. This critique analyzes the "hidden" structures of reality and their reflection in human actions and social processes.

## Conclusion

The diary *Notabene 45* by Erich Kästner is a valuable document on the social turmoil in Germany at the end of the Second World War. It documents how the writer, who lived in "inner exile" for a prolonged period, experiences and processes external circumstances. His observations are often accompanied by skepticism and disappointment, and they offer a critical perspective on new beginnings. In his reflections on responsibility and guilt for the war and Nazi atrocities, he makes a self-reflexive examination that sheds light on the moral and intellectual state of

people at that time. To process the events on a subjective level, Kästner uses irony and sarcasm as a defense mechanism against the brutality of reality and his inner expression of the documented events, highlighting the absurdity of war and the contradictions of the post-war period.

It is a profound reflection on the human experience during war, combining both personal and collective dimensions of memory. He depicts not only the course of historical events but also the existential dilemmas that people face in the chaos and uncertainty of everyday life. Time in Kästner's diary becomes the creator of subjective experience, where each day carries historical significance and shapes personal existential reflections. His writing reveals the contrast between the brutality of war and people's attempts to preserve everyday life, even under the harshest conditions. Space becomes a symbolic border area between the old order and the new uncertainty, where one feels disoriented and unable to control events. Life is contradictory and individuals become involved in an absurd reality where rules are observed and duties fulfilled even as the system is on the verge of collapse. In war, human nature is transformed and survival instincts are exposed. Kästner criticizes society, denounces the instigators of war and their lack of responsibility, and develops a sharp analysis of social structures and the role of the individual within them. In conclusion, Kästner's diary not only records the historical processes that took place during the war but also deepens our understanding of the existential reality of humanity. His experience and reflections show how the war distorts the perception of time and space, and how it influences human identity and collective memory.

The study of subjective history, especially the experience of war, helps develop historical empathy—the ability to understand and empathize with people who lived in different times and circumstances. This approach is relevant from today's perspective because it presents readers not only with dry facts but with a sense of the depth of human experience behind the historical events. All in all, Erich Kästner's diary, *Notabene 45*, is a unique literary and historical document that goes beyond recording the events of the time, providing a deep insight into the human condition during times of war.

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