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Department of Russian and East European Studies

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**Making moments of history: how the
comparison between the 1953 uprising and
the 1989 revolution is contributing to a new
German story.**

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Abstrakt

Od znovusjednocení v roce 1990 se Německo snaží o vývoj své identity reprezentující lidi z obou bývalých německých států a na začátku dvacátého prvního století stále čelí ojedinělé výzvě tím, jak se pokouší uvést do souladu historii svých dvou předchůdců, kapitalistického a komunistického Německa. Tato práce pak s ohledem na výše řečené zkoumá roli historického narativu vztahujícího se k budování státnosti v německém kontextu. Sleduje zejména způsob, jímž bylo do dějin sjednoceného Německa integrováno východoněmecké povstání z roku 1953 a jakým způsobem toto povstání bylo využito k utváření příběhu roku 1989. Konečně pak práce reflektuje význam takového srovnání pro čistě událostní historiografii.

Abstract

Since reunifying in 1990, Germany has been working to develop an identity that represents the people of the two former German states. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the country still faced unique challenges as it reconciles the stories of the former capitalist and communist states. First, this study investigates the role of nation-building historical narratives and how they developed in the German context. I then looks at the introduction of the 1953 East German uprising into the national history of unified Germany and how this event has been used to shape the narrative around the 1989 revolution. Finally, it reflects on the significance of such a comparison for the historiography of the events.

Klíčová slova

Východní Německo, Německo, 1953, povstání, interpretace, unifikace, 1989, nacionalismus

Keywords

East Germany, Germany, 1953, uprising, interpretation, unification, 1989, nationalism

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1. This statement is to confirm that this paper is a product of my own work and also to confirm that I used the listed sources in producing it.
2. I agree that the paper can be checked for research and studying purposes.

Prague, 20 May 2011

Donna Boniface

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Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 GERMAN IDENTITY AND REUNIFICATION	1
1.2 NEW SYMBOLS FOR A NEW GERMANY	2
2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE UNIFICATION, DIVISION, AND REUNIFICATION OF GERMANY	4
3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	5
3.1 INTERPRETIVISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY	6
3.2 THE ROLE OF NATIONAL HISTORICAL NARRATIVES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN NATIONS	8
4. CONSTRUCTING A GERMAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE EVOLUTION OF GERMAN HISTORIOGRAPHY	10
4.1 HOW GERMANS TOLD THE STORY OF THEIR NATION FROM 1871 TO 1989	10
4.2 HOW HISTORY WAS WRITTEN AFTER THE FALL OF THE WALL 1989 – 2003	19
5. THE UPRISING OF JUNE 1953 AND THE REVOLUTION OF 1989	29
5.1 THE UPRISING IN 1953	29
5.2 THE REVOLUTION OF 1989	32
6. REVOLT VERSUS REVOLUTION; COMPARING THE 1953 UPRISING AND THE 1989 REVOLUTION	36
6.1 WEST GERMANY AND ITS ALLIES	38
6.1.1 <i>The attitude of West Germany and its allies to the 1953 uprising</i>	38
6.1.2 <i>The attitude of West Germany and its allies to the 1989 revolution</i>	44
6.1.3 <i>The comparison; what do the Western responses tell us?</i>	49
6.2 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SOVIET UNION AND THE SED LEADERSHIP	50
6.2.1 <i>Ulbricht and the Soviet leadership in 1953</i>	50
6.2.2 <i>Honecker and Gorbachev in 1989</i>	52
6.2.3 <i>Unpopular men and their role in the history of the protests</i>	53
6.3 THE SITUATION WITHIN THE EASTERN BLOC	54
6.3.1 <i>Issues facing the Soviet leadership in 1953</i>	54
6.3.2 <i>Issues facing the Soviet leadership in 1989</i>	57
6.4 ALL ABOUT THE MONEY; THE IMPACT OF ECONOMICS	60
6.4.1 <i>The economic situation of East Germany in 1953</i>	60
6.4.2 <i>The economic situation of East Germany in 1989</i>	63
6.4.3 <i>Who knew? Economics and the people</i>	65
6.5 WE ARE THE PEOPLE! THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE 1953 UPRISING AND 1989 REVOLUTION	66
6.5.1 <i>The people of 1953</i>	67
6.5.2 <i>The people of 1989</i>	72
6.5.3 <i>Comparing Volk with Volk; what the comparison tells us</i>	74
7. CONCLUSIONS	75
7.1 THE LESSONS OF COMPARISON; WHAT WE SEE IN 1953 AND 1989	75
7.2 THE IMPACT ON THE GERMAN STORY	78
BIBLIOGRAPHY	81

1. Introduction

By 2003 reunification nationalism in Germany had reached an impasse. Thirteen years after the triumphant political reunification, reunification was still a highly political issue. There was resentment in the former West Germany over the huge amounts of annual aid given to the former East German states and disillusionment in the former East over high unemployment and related social problems. Rather than growing together into a unified, integrated nation-state Germany still seemed to be a nation divided by the past. Two German societies were still telling separate stories about their past without looking towards a common future. As a national-state Germany needed to reconsider national symbols which demonstrated that reunification was both right and just. The uprising of 1953 which 'im Gedächtnis der Deutschen bisher kaum einen Platz gefunden [hat]' provided just such a symbol.¹ In 2003, the fiftieth anniversary of the uprising was celebrated with a 'memorial marathon' and it was placed alongside the 1989 revolution in books, speeches and newspaper articles. This essay will consider how the 1953 uprising has been used by politicians and academics to rehabilitate the 1989 revolution and build national identity and assess why linking these two events is so vital for the building of a new identity for reunified Germany.

1.1 German identity and reunification

In the years after reunification, citizens of the former East developed the perception that 'unification was done on the terms of the west'² and their disillusionment was

¹ Gerhard A. Ritter 'Der "17. Juni 1953"; Eine historische Ortsbestimmungen' in Roger Engelmann & Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk (eds.) *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat: eine Bestandsaufnahme zum 17. Juni 1953* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005) pp 16 – 44. p. 16

² Caroline Wyatt 'Ten years on, disillusionment', *BBC*, November 4, 1999
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special_report/1999/09/99/iron_curtain/503214.stm [accessed 23 May 2011]

evidenced in the phenomenon of 'Ostalgie' which came to the attention of the world in the wake of the success of the film *Goodbye Lenin*. Since the inception of the idea of the modern German nation, even before the original unification in 1871 historians played an important role in shaping a German national identity. Unlike other European nations where the media has come to play a more prominent role than academia, historians in West Germany remained important voices in the discourse shaping national identity. In the unified Germany historians have also been instrumental in directing the discussion about the legacy of the East German state and the forging of a post-reunification identity in Germany. National identities require stories and symbols to unify the imagined community of the nation. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the East German regime, the events surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 served as a cornerstone of the new all-German identity.

1.2 New symbols for a new Germany

This study posits that as the euphoria of 1989 turned to disillusionment, some authors began portraying East Germans as economic opportunists, who had wanted reunification primarily to access the wealth of West Germany. In his 2002 work *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic*, Feiwel Kupferberg posits economic causes for the crisis in East Germany;

[T]he obvious superiority of the West German economy gradually eroded popular support for the regime which, until its collapse had survived mainly because of the antifascist credentials and accompanying mythologies of its communist leaders, who claimed to represent a better Germany.³

³ Feiwel Kupferberg, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic*, (Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick and London 2002). p. 6

Such analyses posed a danger to the cause of building a national identity based on the idea of a German nation which belonged together as a natural primordial whole, which was separated as a result of Germany's defeat in the Second World War, and which was brought back together as the world entered a new era. By using 1953 as a new symbol of German unification, the events of 1989 were given a pedigree, and the story of East Germany became one of a long struggle for freedom, bookended by popular uprisings.

The political impetus to incorporate the events of 1953 into the national collective memory of the reunified German nation seem unusually transparent. As one Associated Press report from the 2003 anniversary celebrations commented:

...historians and politicians are making the biggest attempt yet to pay tribute to the 1953 protesters, instil pride about their cause and place it in line with other anti-communist uprisings like the 1968 Prague Spring in then-Czechoslovakia.⁴

The uprising in June 1953 has been introduced to the cannon of anti-communist protest entirely within the context of the revolution in autumn 1989. One example is given by Christian Ostermann who, in his comprehensive study of declassified government sources, opined that 1953 'foreshadowed the deep crisis of legitimacy that would finally overtake the GDR'.⁵ Ostermann's statement is representative of historical scholarship linking the two events.

⁴ Tony Czuczka, 'Germans seek place in history for 1953 East German revolt', *Associated Press Worldstream*, June 15 2003

⁵ Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). p. xv

2. A brief history of the unification, division, and reunification of Germany

After three short wars waged under the command of Otto von Bismark, the German Empire was declared at Versailles in 1871. After defeat in the First World War, Germany lost territory to France, Poland, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, and Lithuania. In 1945 when the Second World War came to an end, Germany was occupied by France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union. In the east, Germany lost all territories east of the Oder and Neisse rivers to Poland and the Soviet Union and up to 14 million *Reichsdeutsche* (German nationals) and *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) were expelled from these territories and other countries.

The German Democratic Republic (GDR or East Germany) was established in October 1949 in the zone of Germany that had been occupied by the Army of the Soviet Union since the defeat of Germany in 1945. The GDR was ruled by the Communist Socialist Unity Party (SED) which was formed in 1946 through the merger of the communist and socialist parties in the Soviet Zone of occupied Germany. The United States, the United Kingdom, and France had merged the zones which they occupied into the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG or West Germany) in May 1949. The FRG was a multi-party democracy headed from 1949 to 1963 by Konrad Adenauer of the Christian Democratic Union.

From 1949 until 1969 the West German administration did everything within its power to isolate the GDR. Under the Hallstein Doctrine, any country that gave diplomatic recognition to East Germany (other than the USSR) was excluded from diplomatic

relations with West Germany.⁶ In the mid-1960s, one FRG Foreign Ministry Official acknowledged; 'We judge almost every foreign event primarily from the standpoint of whether it increases or diminishes the isolation of the [East German] Zone'.⁷ In 1969 Willy Brandt became Chancellor and initiated the policy of Ostpolitik which led to the conclusion of the Basic Treaty between East and West Germany in 1972. This treaty freed West Germany's allies from their dilemma over whether or not to recognise East Germany as part of the wider Entente.⁸ The two German states spent the next seventeen years under an official policy of 'peaceful coexistence'.⁹

After the overthrow of the SED government in East Germany and the removal of border restrictions in late 1989, German reunification officially took place on 3 October 1990, when the lands of the former GDR were incorporated into the Federal Republic. These events will be covered in much greater detail in later sections.

3. Theoretical framework

Before embarking on an investigation of the role of the 1953 uprisings and the 1989 revolution in the construction of German national identity, it is first necessary to establish how I view national identity. In the tradition of Benedict Anderson and Ernst Gellner, I take national identity and the rise of the nation state to be a product of modernity and therefore constructed, not primordial. Primordialists believe that

⁶ William Glenn Gray, *Germany's Cold War; The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany 1949 – 1969*, (The University of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill and London, 2003). p. 31

⁷ Ibid p. 3

⁸ Ekkehart Krippendorff & Volker Rittberger eds., *German Political Studies Volume 4, The Foreign Policy of West Germany; Formation and Content*, (Sage Publications London and Beverly Hills 1980). p. 123

⁹ Matthew Stibbe, 'The Fischer Controversy over German War Aims in the First World War and Its Reception by East German Historians, 1961-1989', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Sep., 2003), pp. 649-668. p. 660

nationality is a 'natural' phenomenon and that nations have always existed as coherent, ethnically demarcated groups. Although some theorists such as Anthony Smith still espouse a kind of primordialism through theories such as ethno-symbolism, primordialism has been discredited by the majority of social scientists. This study will use the theories of those social scientists who have identified national identity with the emergence of large scale societies demanding mass participation.

3.1 Interpretivism and national identity

Taking the idea of constructed identity as its base, this study of post-reunification national identity in Germany will use an interpretivist ontology. Interpretivism is an ontology based on a constructionist epistemology which holds that meaning is constructed by humans through human interaction with the natural world.¹⁰ Constructionism claims that nothing has an innate meaning, but that each thing is imbued with meaning by humans who interact with them. The concept of 'nation' or the concept of 'German' are constructed through the lived experience of those interacting with these terms. But constructionism is an objective, not a subjective epistemology – it posits that meaning is not *created* but *constructed* with reference to the natural world and that meaning does 'exist', it just needs to be understood in context. Interpretivists claim that meaning is constructed by actors living in societies; and therefore meaning cannot be fixed but changes as societies change. Thus, meaning is always dependant on the historical and cultural context in which it is used.¹¹ Interpretivism emerged in the nineteenth century as a criticism of the prevailing positivist ontology with philosophers such as William Dilthey, who identified meaning as the category that is peculiar to life

¹⁰ Michael Crotty, 'Interpretivism: for and against culture' and 'Interpretivism: the way of hermeneutics' in his *The Foundations of Social Research*. (London: Sage 1998). p. 42

¹¹ Ibid. p. 67

and the historical world¹², and Max Weber, often seen as the founder of interpretivism, who distinguished between the social science concern with *Verstehen* (understanding) and natural scientific concern with *Erklären* (explanation).

It is no coincidence that interpretivist theory emerged during the great age of nation building. Nationalist histories are ideal subjects for consideration by interpretivist historians. Interpretivism not only gives the historian tools to challenge the discourse of primordialism and immutability which nation-building narratives rely upon, but also allows the practitioner to recognise the interaction between these narratives and the nations which they are intended to shape. Thus, from an interpretivist standpoint, stating that meaning is constructed and alterable in no way implies that this meaning is not 'real' and does not have a real impact on the functioning of society. In his article 'Constructing primordialism; old histories for new nations' Suny discusses the constructed nature of nationalist identity, examining the process by which national identity was constructed in Armenia and Kazakhstan after the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹³ This article clearly illustrates the impact of constructed identities on the life-world of members of those societies. In this article Suny demonstrates how the ethno-nationalist rhetoric which emerged in post-communist Armenia has affected government policy, the economy and the ethnic make-up of the country. He contrasts this with neighbouring Kazakhstan which has attempted to construct a civic nationalism, and shows the tangible impacts of these policies on the two countries. If it is understood that national identities are constructed, it is then necessary to understand *why*

¹² Hajo Holborn, 'Wilhelm Dilthey and the Critique of Historical Reason' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Jan., 1950, pp. 93-118 p. 108

¹³ Ronald Grigor Suny, 'Constructing primordialism: old histories for new nations', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 73, , 2001, pp. 862-896

identification with a national group came about. Following a brief investigation of the origins of national identification, I will then look at the particular German case, and why German national identity still requires the writing of new histories to support identity.

3.2 The role of national historical narratives in the development of the modern nation

The development of the modern nation required that two essential conditions were met: the acceptance of the theory of popular sovereignty, and the development of a national consciousness.¹⁴ A national consciousness required that the members of a nation be aware that they were members of that nation and that they identified themselves as members. These requirements necessitated the weakening of regional identities and the acceptance of national characteristics by huge swathes of the population. In order for this to be achieved, regional histories and mythologies needed to be incorporated into wider national narratives. There also needed to be a reason for political change as demand for national self-determination and the creation of national states would not exist without an impetus for radical social upheaval. The driver for the development of nationalism was the beginning of the modern, industrial era.¹⁵ Modern states have huge, far reaching infrastructure that require the support and loyalty of their people; this infrastructure developed in response to the challenges of industrialisation. For example, industrial societies required transferable, standardised knowledge to be available throughout the political and economic territory – this necessitated the development of standardised education systems.¹⁶ Standardised education systems allowed governments to train young people to identify themselves as members of a national society by raising

¹⁴ Walker Connor, 'When is a nation?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1990 p. 211

¹⁵ Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996)

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 37

them to believe the newly minted official history of their nation. Education standardised language and slowly eliminated diverse regional identities through either incorporating some aspects of regional culture, or through leading young people to identify with the dominant groups. The process of national education made these new nationalised societies seem ‘natural’ and ‘justified’ and led to a sense of inevitability which helped quash potential challenges to the state.¹⁷ National consciousness which engendered a primordial concept of the state was essential to this process because it allowed the population to feel a sense of continuity with the past at a time of huge social change.

The early nation states of Western Europe, around which so much nationalism theory is based, clearly shaped their national identities to suit political needs. In these nations, the manipulation of identity was in the interest of the state which enhanced, shaped and protected ethnic identity.¹⁸ Yet it was vitally important for the population of each of these nations to understand their nation as a primordial, essential entity. The power of nationalism is in its ability to command ultimate loyalty from all members of the nation, and for this loyalty to supplant local or even familial loyalties the nation must be supreme and ancient. In his article ‘Constructing primordialism; old histories for new nations’ Suny defines nations as:

...those political communities made up of people who believe they share characteristics (perhaps origins, values, historical experiences, language, territory, or many other elements) that give them the right to self determination...¹⁹

¹⁷ George Schöpflin, ‘Civil society, ethnicity and the state’ in his *Nations, Identity, Power*. (London: Hurst 2000) p. 41

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 41

¹⁹ Ronald Grigor Suny, ‘Constructing primordialism: old histories for new nations’, *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 73, , 2001, pp. 862-896, p.866

The idea of the nation as a primordial category was furthered by romantic thinkers such as Herder who asserted that the 'proper foundation for a sense of political identity is not the acceptance of a common sovereign power, but the sharing of a common culture'.²⁰ The idea that national and political identity ought to be linked and based upon a shared culture is still seen as legitimate despite the cultural and ethnic diversification of many societies. Germany's quest to reforge a common culture in the aftermath of reunification must be seen in the context of the historic search for a German national culture, and the efforts of East and West Germany to develop separate identities from 1945 until 1989.

4. The construction of a German national identity and the evolution of German historiography

4.1 How Germans told the story of their nation from 1871 to 1989

The first histories of Germany as the modern nation state were written before the Bismarkian unification to support the idea of 'Germaness' as a primordial category and to prepare the people for the advent of the nation-state. Berger asserts that 'Treitschke, Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann, Max Duncker, Johann Gustav Droysen and Heinrich von Sybel all wrote history not for history's sake but to allow the Germans to develop national identity'.²¹ The First World War did not lead to a widespread revision of ideas of the German national character as was seen after the Second World War – in fact, it strengthened the nationalist bent of historiography. The First World War was not seen by the German people or those who wrote their history as a German inspired war, and the guilt placed on Germany at Versailles was therefore rejected and resented. This

²⁰ F. M. Barnard, (ed.) *J. G. Herder on Social and Political Culture*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1969).

²¹ Stefan Berger, 'Historians and Nation-Building in Germany after Reunification', *Past & Present*, No. 148 (Aug., 1995), pp. 187-222 p. 188

resentment was exploited by the national socialists. The extreme nationalism of the National Socialist era allowed the myth of the 'dolchstoss' (stab in the back) to flourish and thus historians were able to maintain a triumphalist attitude to the history of the First World War.²² The 'dolchstoss' myth propagated the idea that Germany's defeat in the First World War was due to the German war effort being betrayed from within; an idea perceived tenable because no foreign troops set foot on German soil before the 1918 armistice. The history of an honourable armistice disrespected by the dishonourable allied powers held potent nationalist possibilities for the Nazi writing of history.²³ German history writing can be seen largely as a continuum 'imbued with German triumphalism' from 1870 to 1945 with much in common with other European national histories of the era. However perhaps due to Germany's late unification as a nation-state the German academics traditionally had a close relationship with the state as they were self-consciously enrolled by the establishment to write a history to unify the emerging nation. In 1995 Berger commented that;

British historians ... are often puzzled by the fact that their German colleagues feel a seemingly irresistible urge to make frequent pronouncements on public debates and issues and, what is more, command a good deal of attention for doing so.²⁴

This continuing relationship makes the study of German historical opinion vital to an understanding of the evolution of German national identity.

After 1945 German history inevitably took an extreme turn and was divided – as were the territory and the people – between competing ideologies on either side of a static

²² Spencer Tucker, Laura Matysek Wood, Justin D. Murphy *The European Powers in the First World War: an Encyclopedia*, (Taylor & Francis 1996) p. 658

²³ Lars-Broder Keil & Sven Felix Kellerhoff, *Deutsche Legenden: vom "Dolchstoss" und anderen Mythen der Geschichte*, (Ch. Links Verlag, 2002), p. 33

²⁴ Stefan Berger, 'Historians and Nation-Building in Germany after Reunification', *Past & Present*, No. 148 (Aug., 1995), pp. 187-222 p. 188

conflict. History writing from 1945 to 1989 developed largely separately, but it must be acknowledged that there was some impact of one on the other as the two Germany states developed identities and historiographical traditions in tandem and opposition.

East Germany portrayed itself as antifascist in nature due to its communist ideology and saw no relation between the East German state and the Nazi past. According to the official party line, the promotion of communists to positions of power in the East assured a break with the Nazi administration – in contrast with West Germany where many former Nazis were involved in the administration.²⁵ Under National Socialism communists had been persecuted so after the war years they saw themselves as natural heirs to the resistance.²⁶ Indeed, in the years immediately following the Second World War the perceived antifascist nature of communism attracted Germans to the Soviet Zone.²⁷ There was a brief period in these early years in which the SED leadership called for 'cathartic shame and immediate embracing of socialist values' as the only means for the German nation to rebuild itself.²⁸ But after the 1949 founding of the GDR the party resolved that there was no need for this 'misery history' and that the East German people ought to celebrate their position as the Sieger der Geschichte (victors of history) for having emerged triumphantly from capitalism and fascism. In her 2001 book *Ambiguous Memory: the Nazi Past and German National Identity* Kattago outlines the hegemonic narrative:

²⁵ Albrecht, Clemens, *Die Intellektuelle Gründung der Bundesrepublik*, (Campus Verlag, 1999) p. 568

²⁶ Jeffrey K. Olick, 'What does it Mean to Normalize the Past?: Official Memory in German Politics since 1989', pp. 259 - 288 in Jeffrey K. Olick, *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, (Duke University Press, 2003) p. 270

²⁷ Andrew Beattie, *Playing Politics with History: the Bundestag inquiries into East Germany*, (Berghahn Books, 2008). p. 166

²⁸ Siobhan Kattago, *Ambiguous Memory: the Nazi Past and German National Identity*, (Greenwood Publishing Group 2001) p. 84

In East German historiography, Hitler's appointment as chancellor on January 30, 1933, was viewed as a culmination of the historical process of monopoly capitalism and the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Fascism was interpreted as a phenomenon of the late phase of capitalism...²⁹

The primary relationship explored by East German historians therefore became not a relationship with the Nazi past, but with the wider German capitalist past. This relationship developed a positive Marxist East German nationalist tradition, which Berger described as 'no less reliant on historical myths, albeit different ones from those dominant in West Germany.'³⁰ The most important foundational myth in East German identity was undoubtedly that of the antifascist nature of the state. The communist regime legitimised itself through the creation of a dichotomy between capitalist West Germany where former Nazis remained in positions of power, and East Germany which had purified itself of fascist elements.

In West Germany virulent anti-communism led to a re-writing of the story of the German resistance, beginning immediately after the war as the West German state attempted to establish itself as the heir to Germany. In an effort to write the communist resistance out of the history of the Second World War, the attempted putsch against Hitler in 1944 became the centre piece of an attempt at absolution and expiation for the German elite. Berger states that this claim to a tradition of resistance was popularised to the extent that 'looking at academic historical text production in West Germany, one could have been forgiven for assuming that only a conservative national opposition to

²⁹ Siobhan Kattago, *Ambiguous Memory: the Nazi Past and German National Identity*, (Greenwood Publishing Group 2001) . p. 87

³⁰ Stefan Berger, 'A Return to the National Paradigm? National History Writing in Germany, Italy, France, and Britain from 1945 to the Present', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (September 2005), pp. 629-678 p. 637

Hitler had existed.³¹ Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s there was active resistance from historical societies to the publication of any analysis that attempted to claim National Socialism as the result of any German national or nationalist tradition. This changed with the publication of Fritz Fischer's 1961 analysis of the First World War *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegzielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–1918* in which he argued that there was continuity in Germany's foreign policy from 1900 through to the Third Reich. Fischer's views challenged West German foundational narrative which asserted that 'Hitler had been an aberration in an otherwise respectable and proud national tradition'.³² John Moses later credited Fischer's work with changing the way West Germany engaged with its history;

The radically improved intellectual-political climate in [West] Germany, in which hysteria over reunification has dramatically subsided to enable a new Ostpolitik, is intimately bound up with the changes in historical consciousness brought about ... by the Fischer controversy.³³

Although written in a traditionalist political history style, the challenge presented to orthodoxy by the Fischer controversy marked the end of the hegemony of the post-war writers and the beginning of a more innovative and interrogative writing of history. This was the beginning of the West German process of '*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*' – a process of 'dealing with', 'working through', or 'mastering' the past – which began in the 1960s.³⁴ Fischer was not the only one calling for a more critical view of the German

³¹ Stefan Berger, 'A Return to the National Paradigm? National History Writing in Germany, Italy, France, and Britain from 1945 to the Present', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (September 2005), pp. 629-678 p. 636

³² Matthew Stibbe, 'The Fischer Controversy over German War Aims in the First World War and Its Reception by East German Historians, 1961-1989', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Sep., 2003), pp. 649-668 p. 636

³³ Moses, John Anthony *The Politics of Illusion the Fischer Controversy in German Historiography*, (Barnes & Noble, London 1975) p. 130

³⁴ Jeffrey. K. Olick, 'What does it Mean to Normalize the Past?: Official Memory in German Politics since 1989', pp. 259 - 288 in Jeffrey K. Olick, *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, (Duke University Press, 2003) p. 260

past. Olick begins his 1998 paper on official memory in post-1989 Germany by discussing a lecture given by Theodor Adorno in 1959;

According to his diagnosis, the Federal Republic was more concerned with getting beyond the past, with avoiding difficult memory through what Adorno calls "an unconscious and not-so-unconscious defense against guilt," than with the genuine working through that would be required to "break its spell." The ... defensive unwillingness in the Federal Republic to confront the past-at both the personal and official levels-indicated not the persistence of fascist tendencies against democracy (e.g., neo-Nazi groups) but of fascist tendencies within democracy.

In the 1960s in West Germany the state was forced to deal with the Nazi past through events such as the Auschwitz Trials of 1963 - 1966, and the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel in 1961. It was a time of generational change, and the new generation were willing to confront the past. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was a torturous process which required a fundamental reconsideration of what it meant to be German. The new generation of historians attacked the traditionally close relationship between German historians and state nationalism; this era marked West Germany's break with historiographical nationalism.³⁵ After 1989 West Germans would contrast this painful, cathartic process with the state prescribed anti-fascism of East Germany, but at the time there was criticism from the conservative historical establishment who claimed that *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* quickly became 'not a self-critical reexamination of the national paradigm but rather a wide-reaching national apology'.³⁶ This view, however, failed to dominate the historical discourse. Divorced, for the first time, from the service of building national narratives, West German historians looked to new forms of history

³⁵ Axel Schneider & Daniel Woolf, *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 5: Historical Writing Since 1945*, (Oxford University Press 2001) p. 240

³⁶ Edgar Wolfrum, in Stefan Berger, 'A Return to the National Paradigm? National History Writing in Germany, Italy, France, and Britain from 1945 to the Present', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (September 2005), pp. 629-678 p. 637

writing – histories from below, women's histories, and micro-histories – and in eschewing nationalist history they focussed on pan-European and cosmopolitan concepts of identity.

Fischer's work also had an impact on East German historians and their relationship with the international historiographical community. Historians from East Germany saw little novelty in Fischer's ideas but welcomed his findings as 'a valuable contribution by a non-Marxist to the role of monopoly capitalists in the outbreak of war'.³⁷ East German historians felt vindicated by this apparent agreement on the causes of war, and found that for the first time since the 1950s, their scholarship began to be recognised in international historical debates. In the 1970s 'Ostpolitik'; the recognition of East Germany, and the resulting East German policy of 'peaceful coexistence' led to both German states developing separate national traditions based on their capitalist and socialist ideologies.³⁸ In 1967 the seventh party conference of the SED had declared the development of all sciences as its goal, and the historical sciences had seized the chance to move beyond propaganda exercises.³⁹ The GDR continued to focus on writing national Marxist histories of Germany, but the 1970s also saw the broadening of the focus of GDR history writing and a shift to the study of national ideas and traditions which were not directly linked to socialism and or proving socialist ideas. Historians began to focus on classes other than the historical working classes and were able to rehabilitate and study historical figures previously denigrated by the party line. Long a

³⁷ Matthew Stibbe, 'The Fischer Controversy over German War Aims in the First World War and Its Reception by East German Historians, 1961-1989', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Sep., 2003), pp. 649-668 p. 652

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 660

³⁹ Axel Schneider & Daniel Woolf, *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 5: Historical Writing Since 1945*, (Oxford University Press 2001) p. 237

topic of study in West Germany, those territories formerly dominated by ethnic Germans East of the Oder also became a new topic of GDR research.⁴⁰

From the mid 1970s and into the 1980s, as many countries in Europe saw a renewed interest in national identities, politicians in West Germany 'called for a “normalisation” of the past'.⁴¹ This clearly demonstrates the symbiotic relationship in the FRG between social scientists and political powers. There was recognition of how strongly the public understanding and collective imaginings of the past influenced contemporary politics. There was also institutional recognition of the social reality that 'constellations of interests ...produce new images of the past, [and] new images of the past ...allow new power positions'.⁴² This attempt to “normalise” Germany's Nazi past led to what is known as the 'historikerstreit' (the historians dispute) of 1985 to 1986. Brockman claimed that this 'seeming debate about the history of the German Reich was in fact about current West German politics'.⁴³ And the conservative historian Michal Stürmer, advisor to West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl seemed to concur with his statement that 'the future belongs to those who fill memory, coin concepts, and interpret the past'.⁴⁴

The two main interlocutors in the advent of the *historikerstreit* were left wing sociologist Jürgen Habermas and neoconservative historian Ernst Nolte.⁴⁵ Nolte argued

⁴⁰ Axel Schneider & Daniel Woolf, *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 5: Historical Writing Since 1945*, (Oxford University Press 2001) p. 236

⁴¹ Jeffrey. K. Olick, 'What does it Mean to Normalize the Past?: Official Memory in German Politics since 1989', pp. 259 - 288 in Jeffrey K. Olick, *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, (Duke University Press, 2003) p. 260

⁴² Ibid. p. 261

⁴³ Stephen Brockmann, 'The Politics of German History', *History and Theory*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (May, 1990), pp. 179-189. p. 180

⁴⁴ Jeffrey. K. Olick, 'What does it Mean to Normalize the Past?: Official Memory in German Politics since 1989', pp. 259 - 288 in Jeffrey K. Olick, *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 261

⁴⁵ Axel Schneider & Daniel Woolf, *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 5: Historical Writing Since 1945*, (Oxford University Press 2001) p. 6

that the history of the Nazi era was not being allowed to 'become history', that it was so present in every facet of German academic and social life that it could not be treated with academic objectivity. He claimed that there were certain (unspecified) interests keeping the Nazi past alive as a historical tool. Controversially, Nolte called for debate over whether Nazism had been a response to Bolshevism – imitating the latter in the level of 'mass murder, deportation, torture, and death camps with the only new element being... the “technical process of gassing”'.⁴⁶ For the National Socialist past to be normalised, Nolte argued, it needed to be possible for historians to interrogate it from every angle. This equation of communism and National Socialism during *historikerstreit* was to have repercussions in the later writing of German history after 1989.

Interestingly, in the wake of the *historikerstreit*, the move by GDR historians to broaden their study of the German past and culture in their writing of an SED-legitimising nationalist history, found sympathy among those in West Germany who were advocating a return to a positive national history which would not be 'forever in the shadow of Hitler'.⁴⁷ The aforementioned Kohl advisor, Michal Stürmer recommended following the lead of the GDR when he wrote: '[t]he GDR can adapt Prussia's history and national history for its needs, and we should take up this challenge productively'.⁴⁸ The late 1980s was a period of dialogue between the historiographies of the two German states. At a conference in March 1987 historians from the GDR and the FRG debated their interpretations of the German past. While this cooperation benefited both

⁴⁶ Stephen Brockmann, 'The Politics of German History', *History and Theory*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (May, 1990), pp. 179-189. p. 180-181

⁴⁷ Full title; Knowlton, J. & Cates, T. (1993) *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust* Atlantic Highlands, NJ.

⁴⁸ Stefan Berger, 'A Return to the National Paradigm? National History Writing in Germany, Italy, France, and Britain from 1945 to the Present', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (September 2005), pp. 629-678 p. 652

sides, it also threatened the historiographical traditions of GDR historians.⁴⁹ The unexpected and speedy reunification of Germany saw GDR historical traditions become history themselves; relevant only for their impact on West German historiography. Schneider bemoaned the speedy obfuscation of East German learning and academics:

East German historiography did not survive the move to a unified Germany. After 1990 the opportunity to undertake a comprehensive reform of all German universities was missed, and the West German system was introduced across East Germany.⁵⁰

4.2 How history was written after the fall of the wall 1989 - 2003

In 1990 the Federal Republic of Germany achieved what the Hallstein doctrine of 1956 so brazenly pursued: the status of the sole representative of the German nation-state.⁵¹

After this controversial pronouncement in his 1999 work on German integration, in a chapter entitled 'United Germany: West Germany Writ Large?', Bach goes on to explain why it was politically expedient for West Germany to appear to be quickly and quietly absorbing the former East. There was opposition to reunification on several fronts; from the Soviet Union who feared it could compromise their security, from Britain and France who summoned the spectre of German militarism, and from the European community who feared that West Germany would sacrifice its commitment to European integration for national unity. Only thus, according to Bach, would German unity avoid interfering with the path West Germany had chosen:

⁴⁹ Axel Schneider & Daniel Woolf, *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 5: Historical Writing Since 1945*, (Oxford University Press 2001) p. 238

⁵⁰ Axel Schneider & Daniel Woolf, *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 5: Historical Writing Since 1945*, (Oxford University Press 2001). p. 239

⁵¹ Jonathan P. G. Bach, *Between Sovereignty and Integration: German foreign policy and national identity after 1989*, Freie Universität Berlin, Arbeitsstelle Transatlantische Aussen- und Sicherheitspolitik (Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).

To view united Germany as West Germany writ large maintains the continuity of the West European integration narrative of progress and prosperity. Postwar West Germany, in the absence of a positive national identity, had largely made this narrative its own.⁵²

This may not seem like a complicated or controversial process. The people of East Germany had clearly demonstrated their desire for change and the government elected in free and fair elections in the GDR had voted for unity. The systems that had supported the East German state were unsustainable and maintained only through state terror in the form of the Stasi. East Germans, it was logical to conclude, had rejected East Germany. But what must be elucidated is, whether they believed they were rejecting it in favour of West Germany, or the idea of 'Germany' as a national concept. Officially, Germany was reunifying, coming back together. Reunification was no simple matter of political integration – even the terminology had potential pitfalls; Germans had to seriously contemplate the question of whether 'Germany [was] unifying or reunifying?' this is no question of trivial semantics as Olick elucidates: 'without the sense of the nation naturally belonging together (and thus of *reunification*), the whole enterprise might have seemed at risk.'⁵³

Politically and structurally, the East was to be incorporated into the West. The two states would become one by shedding the dysfunctional socialist system and applying the successful capitalist one. Culturally however, the country needed to believe that it was truly creating a unified identity. To do this, the legacy of the communist era needed

⁵² Jonathan P. G. Bach, *Between Sovereignty and Integration: German foreign policy and national identity after 1989*, Freie Universität Berlin, Arbeitsstelle Transatlantische Aussen- und Sicherheitspolitik (Palgrave Macmillan, 1999). p. 15

⁵³ Jeffrey. K. Olick, 'What does it Mean to Normalize the Past?: Official Memory in German Politics since 1989', pp. 259 - 288 in Jeffrey K. Olick, *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 268

to be addressed and a new history needed to be written. For the writing of the new history of the unified German nation, the speedy application of the West German tradition to the consideration of the GDR had important consequences. Olick explained the process thus:

Germany had a model for “mastering the past” (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*), as it had come to be called. Collective memory – and mythology – about denazification was quite strong in West German political culture, so the second “mastering of the past” was frequently brought into relation to the first.⁵⁴

West Germans felt that the pain of addressing the questions of guilt and complicity in Nazi crimes had been cathartic for the nation. In comparing the Nazi era to the GDR in the flourishing field of totalitarianism studies, there was an implicit expectation that the people of the former GDR ought to address their complicity in maintaining the SED state. However, there were discrepancies of distance, time-scale, and relativism; all of which have a strong impact on the development of identity. Let us deal with each of these issues separately.

By “distance”, I mean distance in time, perhaps “detachment” would also serve, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in West Germany began up to twenty years after the Nazi atrocities. As painful as the reopening of old wounds may have been, this process posed less of a threat to West German society than cauterising immediately after defeat would have. West Germany dealt with the Nazi past from a position of social stability, and confidence, the same cannot be said for the position which the German people found themselves in when they began the process of dealing with the history of the GDR.

⁵⁴ Jeffrey. K. Olick, 'What does it Mean to Normalize the Past?: Official Memory in German Politics since 1989', pp. 259 - 288 in Jeffrey K. Olick, *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, (Duke University Press, 2003), . p. 269

Next, consider differences in time-scale; the Nazi period lasted twelve years; which means that it was possible for even those who had been complicit with the Nazis to reconstruct their lives based on their pre-Nazi experiences after publicly performing the appropriate penance. The GDR was in existence for forty years and in that time it developed a sense of identity separate from that of the FRG – admittedly an identity based on the erroneous belief of its superior claim to anti-fascism and its supposedly superior socialist ideology – but the only identity that several generations could lay claim to. Walter Schmidt, a former director of the history section of the East German Academy of Science expressed his anguish at how the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* undermined his identity and sense of self;

For those who have worked in the GDR, identity will not be created by blanket condemnation of the work and the achievement of more than forty years. The GDR belongs to my identity. I cannot be understood without the hopes and disappointments, the achievements and failures, the expectations and disillusionment of this country.⁵⁵

Finally, relativism, by which I mean the consequences of the comparison of the GDR to the Third Reich. The idea of comparing socialism to fascism was not new. Nolte, as we have seen, argued that fascism developed as a response to socialism; Siedler took the argument further and used the theory of totalitarianism to favourably compare the National Socialist regime to the SED, he asserted that the Nazis had created 'an authoritarian regime, even if it included substantial criminal energy' but the communists had built 'a really totalitarian regime'.⁵⁶ West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl had

⁵⁵ Quoted in Stefan Berger, 'Historians and Nation-Building in Germany after Reunification', *Past & Present*, No. 148 (Aug., 1995), pp. 187-222 p. 206

⁵⁶ Quoted in Stefan Berger, 'Historians and Nation-Building in Germany after Reunification', *Past & Present*, No. 148 (Aug., 1995), pp. 187-222 p. 211

equated the systems before 1989 by referring to 'communist concentration camps, and in a ceremony at Buchenwald in 1991 he referred not to the victims of National Socialism, but to 'all the victims of oppression.'⁵⁷ Olick posits that the comparison between Nazi era Germany and the GDR was a 'potent normaliser' for Germany. If Nazism could be equated with Communism, then Germany became just one of many countries trying to deal with the legacy of its past and '*Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ...', like the Nazi past, lost its specificity.⁵⁸ This could be the chance that conservative historians had looked for to 'normalise' the past, but it might come at the expense of a chance at creating a unified German identity.

The process of dealing with the East German past began before reunification. One of the first acts of the freely elected East German government was to acknowledge guilt for the Nazi past and commit to reparations along the lines of those made by the FRG to Israel in the 1950s. This was a significant move as the GDR had always claimed that as a socialist state it bore no responsibility for the deeds of its capitalist-fascist predecessor.⁵⁹ Then, in 1992 and 1993, came the trials of the SED leadership which took place in West Germany, under West German law. Before the trials there were suggestions and discussions of somehow submitting the former East German leaders to the East German people for trial, but this was judged to be impractical. As the first leader of the reunified Germany, Kohl was anxious that these did not become political trials – and equally anxious that it did not appear as though West German mores were being imposed on

⁵⁷ Quoted in Jeffrey K. Olick, 'What does it Mean to Normalize the Past?: Official Memory in German Politics since 1989', pp. 259 - 288 in Jeffrey K. Olick, *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 269

⁵⁸ Jeffrey K. Olick, 'What does it Mean to Normalize the Past?: Official Memory in German Politics since 1989', pp. 259 - 288 in Jeffrey K. Olick, *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 269

⁵⁹ Ibid.

East Germany. The trials were thus carried out under the basic law of Germany and not under the exceptional conditions which applied to trials for Nazi war crimes. Presiding judge Josef Hoch, while upholding the charges against SED leaders such as Honecker for the killings at the Berlin wall argued that 'the court has to consider that fact that they are prisoners of German history like all of us.'⁶⁰ Despite the best efforts of the legislators involved and support from the citizens of the former GDR for the former SED leadership to be held accountable, there was still a sense that these trials represented 'victors justice' and contributed to the continued cultural division in Germany.

Another step in addressing the continued sense of division, so that the way could be clear for the building of a unified German history freed from lingering bitterness over GDR complicity, was an enquiry into the GDR by the unified German government. Originally, the Bundestag Enquires into East Germany were an East German initiative led by politicians concerned that the discourse about the GDR 'should not be reduced to scandalous revelations about the East German secret police and spy agency, the Stasi.'⁶¹

Beattie writes that:

Everyone agreed that public deliberation of the past was necessary and that a parliamentary commission might participate in, foster and lead such deliberation (...). Considerable symbolic value attached to the simple fact that the Bundestag considered the East German past worthy of its continuing attention, which indicated that the GDR's legacy was a national and not just an eastern problem.⁶²

⁶⁰ Silke Arnold-de Simine, *Memory traces: 1989 and the question of German cultural identity*, (Peter Lang, 2005)

⁶¹ Andrew Beattie, *Playing Politics with History: the Bundestag inquiries into East Germany*, (Berghahn Books, 2008). p. 24

⁶² Ibid. p. 25

It must be noted that although the inquiry was supposed to investigate the GDR in order to build a foundation for a unified identity, no quarter was given to those who wished to use the inquiry to reflect on the development of FRG identity. A demonstration of the failure of the inquiry to investigate West Germany's relationship with the fascist/communist dichotomy came when the deputy chairman of the inquiry, SPD representative Margot von Renesse dared to ask 'how denouncing someone as a fascist in the GDR differed from labelling someone a communist in the early years of the FRG' and her concerns were pointedly ignored.⁶³

As well as investigating the practicalities of SED rule, the commission also committed a great deal of time to the methods by which the communist regime had achieved cultural legitimacy. This resulted in an attack on the myth of the innate anti-fascist nature of the SED state. The question on whether the prescribed anti-fascism in the GDR negated the anti-fascist ideals held by individuals was hotly debated. By condemning all anti-fascism in East Germany as instrumentalised by the SED, the anti-fascism of the GDR opposition parties who had emerged in the last stages of the GDR were also besmirched. The opposition parties argued that simply because anti-fascism was official party doctrine, did not mean that anti-fascist beliefs were any less genuinely held by individuals who grew up in the GDR system. As proof of this they defended the anti-fascist ideals of the round-table draft constitution of 1990. The inference that the GDR had been antifascist only by decree from above, whereas the FRG had gone through a more tortured, complex, and authentic process of facing up to its Nazi demons, did not sit well with a people who had built their identity on the ideal of sacrifices in the name

⁶³ Andrew Beattie, *Playing Politics with History: the Bundestag inquiries into East Germany*, (Berghahn Books, 2008). p. 167

of anti-fascism. The belief that the GDR had suffered more in the post war years because of its refusal to allow teachers, doctors, lawyers, and many other professionals from holding positions because of their complicity with the Nazi regime was deeply held. It is an issue which has continued to incite the passion of citizens of the former GDR.⁶⁴ As the euphoria of reunification wore off and the economy collapsed, East Germans found themselves unable to reconcile their past with the German future. In 1997, in her work on the role of post-colonial discourse on ideas of East and West identities, Anke Pinkert described the continuing contradiction in East West relationships:

Although East and West Germany have been unified since 1990, complete social and psychological integration of the two German populations has still not taken place. Given the euphoria surrounding the reunification in 1990 (even now only 15% of the former East Germans regret the merger of the two German states), how should we understand the relationship between East and West Germans, when it is often described and constructed as hostile, bordering on hateful and oppressive?⁶⁵

Ten years after reunification, there was bitterness in both the old and the new German states as the former West saw the former East as the source of their economic decline and social problems, and those in the former East were disillusioned with the unfulfilled promises of capitalism. Commentaries began to emerge which rejected the new national story of triumphant unification brought about by a yearning for democracy and freedom on the part of the East German people. Let us contrast two narratives of reunification

⁶⁴ See articles such as; Bruni de la Motte, 'East Germany did face up to its Nazi past', *The Guardian*, Thursday 29 March 2007 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/mar/29/comment.secondworldwar> [Accessed 26 May 2011]

⁶⁵ Anke Pinkert, "'Postcolonial Legacies': The Rhetoric of Race in the East/West German National Identity Debate of the Late 1990s", *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (Autumn, 2002), pp. 13-32 . p. 13

from the first years of the twenty first century. First, Feiwel Kupferberg, the historian quoted in the introduction to this study:

What is interesting is that the national cultures of Nazi Germany and the GDR changed mainly because of the impact of outside forces. In the first case it was ... the defeat of Nazi Germany. In the second case, the obvious superiority of the West German economy gradually eroded popular support for the regime which, until its collapse had survived mainly because of the antifascist credentials and accompanying mythologies of its communist leaders, who claimed to represent a better Germany.⁶⁶

And then a more sympathetic treatment of the East German populace by economists Burda and Hunt from their 2001 analysis of the East German labour market:

It is difficult to find a more dramatic episode of economic dislocation in peacetime during the twentieth century than that associated with the reunification of Germany. It is a sad irony of history that the plucky East Germans who toppled the dictatorship of the proletariat in the bloodless revolution of 1989 were rewarded with an economic blood letting on such a vast scale.⁶⁷

Although these two perspectives cast East Germany in drastically different roles – that of the economic villain versus that of the hapless eternal victim, what they both illustrate is that East Germany remained 'the other'. Integration as an imagined community had not been a success.

Meanwhile, a new kind of imagining was underway in the East. Finding themselves unable to join the imagined community of Germany, East Germans were looking for identity in an idealised imagining of the past. Ostalgie represented the failure of a whole

⁶⁶ Feiwel Kupferberg, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic*, (Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick and London 2002), p. 6

⁶⁷ Michael C. Burda & Jennifer Hunt, 'From Reunification to Economic Integration: Productivity and the Labor Market in Eastern Germany', *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, Vol. 2001, No. 2, pp. 1-71 p. 1

German identity to supplant a deep seated Eastern identity. As well as a longing for innocence it was a longing for belonging.⁶⁸ As a discourse of West German colonialism began to emerge in the East, it became clear that a German identity must embrace some aspects of East Germany. But what events in East German history could serve as symbolic identifiers? Any such event would have to be; peculiarly East German and not shared with the other nations of the former Soviet Bloc, attributable to the East German people and not to the SED rulers, recognisable and understandable to the people of West Germany. The 1989 revolution is obviously ideal, but 1989 had become a focal point for the bitterness of reunification disappointment. The 1953 uprising also fit the bill and had the added advantage of being relatively unknown in the West, and the subject of a blatant SED misinformation campaign in the East. By reviving interest in the 1953 uprisings and linking them to the 1989 revolution in the collective conscious, historians and politicians could be seen to be interested in incorporating GDR history into the wider narrative of German history, could establish a tradition of democracy focussed dissidence in East Germany to replace the discredited anti-fascist identity base, and could reinvigorate 1989 as the culmination of Germany's fight to exorcise its historical demons.

There are obvious parallels between the events of 1953 and 1989; both were popular movements which took place at a time of turmoil and change within the Eastern Bloc, both were in reaction to expected changes triggered by external events, both took place when relations between the Soviet leadership and the SED leaders were exceptionally strained, and both were indigenous movements largely unaided by external actors who

⁶⁸ Paul Cooke & Stuart Taberner, *German Culture, Politics, and Literature into the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Normalization*, (Camden House, 2006) p. 101

had publicly called for the overthrow of the SED. In the sudden burst of literature about the 1953 uprisings which was published in 2003 for the 50th anniversary of the events, there are frequent references to the 1989 revolution finishing the work which 1953 had begun. In many ways 1953 was the beginning of the East German state in that it was the impetus for the creation of the state security apparatus, the Stasi, and it was the point at which the Soviet Union were forced to commit to the survival of the GDR. The neat bookending of the GDR with anti-communist uprisings provides a strong framework for the construction of a victim identity. To test the viability of this construct, we must ask, how comparable are the events of 1989 to those of 1953? It is, as suggested by the title of Lämmel's 2003 work 'ein (un)möglicher Vergleich?'⁶⁹ Before examining the viability of a comparison between the two events and the impact that such a comparison has had on the development of post reunification nationalism, I will briefly describe the events.

5. The Uprising of June 1953 and the Revolution of 1989

5.1 The uprising in 1953

The same day that Hitler committed suicide, Walter Ulbricht was flown from Moscow to Germany to help establish a communist regime in Germany. Ulbricht had been a communist party member since 1919, and as such, was elected to the Reichstag in 1928. He went in to exile when the Nazi party came to power, fought in the Spanish civil war, and then survived Stalin's purges of the German communist elite in Moscow.⁷⁰ When the GDR was founded in 1949, Ulbricht was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and soon became the driving force in GDR politics. Despite the formal founding of the GDR, Soviet policy precluded full satellitization as a 'peoples' democracy' until 1952. In April

⁶⁹ Roy Lämmel, *Der 17. Juni und der Herbst 1989 – ein (un)möglicher Vergleich?*, (GRIN Verlag 2003)

⁷⁰ Donald. S. Detwiler, *Germany: a short history*, (Southern Illinois University Press 1999) p. 211

of that year Stalin demanded that the demarcation between East and West Germany, which until that point had remained relatively open, become a defended border. Stalin also sanctioned progress towards the socialization of industry and agriculture in the GDR, but warned the SED to undertake reforms slowly.⁷¹ This last piece of advice seems to have been ignored. In July 1952 the SED Party Convention announced the 'Construction of Socialism' and began a programme of agricultural collectivisation, prohibitive taxes against private trade and industry, and persecution of the churches. Churches were singled out for persecution; especially the Protestant Church whose youth organisation was seen as a rival to the Communist Free German Youth. Business owners and their children were no longer issued ration cards and were forced to purchase food at elevated prices from state-run stores. Farmers who refused to join production cooperatives were subject to prohibitive state delivery quotas, any farmer who failed to meet the quota was suspected of trading on the black market or being a 'saboteur'.⁷² Despite the failure of the harvest in 1952, quotas were raised again in early 1953. These measures led to severe food shortages and increasing numbers fleeing to the FRG:

In 1951, 165,648 East German refugees were registered in the West. In 1952 the figure rose to 182,393 of whom 52.6% were under 25. In 1953 the number leapt to 331,390.⁷³

The Construction of Socialism in the GDR was supported by the Soviet Union until the death of Stalin on the 5th of March 1953 sent shockwaves throughout the Soviet Union and led to a fierce power struggle within the new Soviet leadership. Childs states that

⁷¹ Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). p. 2

⁷² Steiner, André, *The Plans That Failed: An Economic History of the GDR*, (Berghahn Books 2010). p. 56

⁷³ David Childs, *The GDR: Moscow's German Ally*, (George Allen & Unwin, 1983). p. 29

the new leadership 'displayed considerable flexibility in the foreign policy arena, raising hopes for a relaxation of cold war tensions' in order to 'give an impression of continued strength and unity'.⁷⁴ This so called 'Peace Offensive' of the new leadership was at odds with Ulbricht's repressive programme, and the Soviet Council of Ministers passed a resolution calling for many of Ulbricht's measures to be repealed. The SED leaders were called to Moscow and offered aid and reparation reductions in exchange for accepting responsibility for the failures of the Construction of Socialism. On the 9th of June 1953 the SED announced the 'New Course' which ended discrimination against farmers, craftsmen, the intelligentsia, and their children who had been penalised under the Construction of Socialism. The New Course also offered to restore property to those who had left the GDR illegally if they returned; withdrew price increases on consumer goods; and promised to stop pressuring teachers to proclaim their adherence to Marxist-Leninism. A few days later, on the 14th of June, it was announced that 4000 political prisoners would be released and a further 1500 would be released at a later date.⁷⁵ However, crucially, the New Course did not rescind the higher 'norms' for industrial output that had been imposed under the Construction of Socialism. These higher norms meant workers were expected to produce up to 10 percent more, for the same pay and under the same conditions.

On the 16th of June 300 workers from Stalinallee downed their tools and began demonstrating, demanding industrial output norms be lowered. They were soon joined by thousands of workers from other building sites and marched to the headquarters of the SED-controlled trade unions. No officials would meet the striking workers. The

⁷⁴ David Childs, *The GDR: Moscow's German Ally*, (George Allen & Unwin, 1983). p. 31

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 31

following day, the 17th of June, there were strikes in over 270 locations in the GDR, involving between 300,000 and 372,000 workers.⁷⁶ By 9:00 P.M. three Soviet divisions, comprised of some 600 tanks, had restored order in the Soviet sector of Berlin and closed the border with the Western sectors of Berlin.⁷⁷ According to contemporary Soviet estimates, 209 people were 'killed and wounded' [sic] in the riots and 3,351 were detained. In the note prefacing the Situation Report dispatched to Moscow which contains these statistics, Ostermann states that 'research now indicates at least 125 people were killed in the riots'.⁷⁸ Seven demonstrators, from Berlin, Magdeburg, Jena, and Görlitz were sentenced to death and their execution reported to Moscow on the 18th of June.⁷⁹ Protests continued in centres away from Berlin for several days.

5.2 The revolution of 1989

It is not possible to describe the events which took place in East Germany in 1989 without giving some background on the wider events in the Eastern Bloc at this time. After coming to power in 1985, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced programmes of *perestroika* (reform) and *glasnost* (openness, or transparency) which brought widespread changes not only within the Soviet Union, but in all the satellite states. *perestroika* fundamentally changed the relationship between the Kremlin and the satellites by giving these states more autonomy. Satellite states gradually came to realise that autonomy meant more freedom to set their own policies without fear of the Soviet

⁷⁶ David Childs, *The GDR: Moscow's German Ally*, (George Allen & Unwin, 1983). p. 31.

⁷⁷ Situation Report from Andrei Grechko and A. Tarasov to Nikolai Bulganin, 17 June 1953; as of 11:00 p.m. Moscow time (9:00p.m. CET) in Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001), pp. 196 – 197. p. 196

⁷⁸ Situation Report from Andrei Grechko and A. Tarasov to Nikolai Bulganin, 18 June 1953, as of 8:00 a.m. Moscow time (6:00a.m. CET) in Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001), pp. 214 – 215. p. 214

⁷⁹ Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). p. 214

military intervening as they had in Prague in 1968 or Hungary in 1956, *and* that they would not be able to rely on Soviet military intervention to support unpopular policies, as the SED had in 1953. *perestroika* was a boon for reformers, but posed danger to those repressive regimes which relied on the threat of Soviet force. East German leader Erich Honecker was second only to Romanian dictator Ceausescu in his resistance to *perestroika* reforms. When the Chinese military massacred hundreds of civilians protesting in Tiananmen Square in June 1989, Honecker expressed his approval and chillingly proclaimed 'we took power in order to keep it forever'.⁸⁰ But such was the integration of the eastern European Socialist states, that East Germany could not isolate itself; reforms in one country quickly impacted upon neighbouring states. On the second of May 1989, in a move that would have dramatic consequences for the GDR, Hungarian Prime Minister Nemeth informed Gorbachev that Hungary would dismantle the fortifications along its border with Austria. Gorbachev responded that the Soviet Union was also planning to make its borders 'more open' tacitly approving the Hungarian plan.⁸¹ On the 17th of May 1989, East Germany held municipal elections and reported that the officially nominated candidates received 98.85% support.⁸² In the new era of *glasnost*, and the Solidarity landslide in Poland, the East German people were outraged by this unrealistic and clearly fraudulent result. Thousands took to the streets to protest and despite swift police action, vowed to continue protesting every month.⁸³

⁸⁰ Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, (Hill and Wang, New York 2007) p. 430

⁸¹ 'Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Miklos Németh, March 3 1989', Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton, & Vladislav Zubok (eds.), *Masterpieces of history: the peaceful end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, 1989*, (Central European University Press, 2010) p. 412

⁸² Donald S. Detwiler, *Germany: a short history*, (Southern Illinois University Press 1999) p. 276

⁸³ Richard A. Leiby, *The Unification of Germany, 1989-1990; a Greenwood Press Guides to Historic Events of the Twentieth Century*, (Greenwood Press 1999). p. 12

By July 1989, hundreds of East Germans had sought asylum in West German embassies in East Berlin, Prague and Budapest. When Hungary officially opened the border on the 11th of September, tens of thousands of East Germans took the opportunity to flee to West Germany through Austria. That same month, peaceful demonstrations advocating reforms began in Leipzig. In early October, the SED regime banned visa free travel to Czechoslovakia, to stop the mass efflux of East Germans to the West Germany through Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

In October 1989 Gorbachev begrudgingly attended the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of the GDR. It was obvious at the demonstrations that the SED leaders were deeply unpopular, and the public adulation with which Gorbachev was received embarrassed both the Soviet leader and SED officials. While in East Germany, Gorbachev made clear his dissatisfaction with Honecker and his disappointment at the SED failure to implement reforms. Without Soviet support, it was obvious to the East German Politburo that Honecker's support for a Chinese solution was not a tenable position for the party.

A demonstration in Leipzig was planned for the 16th of October and soon-to-be leader Egon Krenz persuaded a 'very reluctant' Honecker to order forces in Leipzig not to use firearms under any circumstances and to act only to forestall violence.⁸⁴ On the 18th of October it was announced that Honecker had retired due to ill health and had been succeeded by Krenz. However, Honecker's retirement was in reality far from voluntary. On the 17th of October at a weekly Politburo meeting, Prime Minister Stoph proposed Honecker be 'released from his function' and, unable to find support within the Politburo

⁸⁴ Donald. S. Detwiler, *Germany: a short history*, (Southern Illinois University Press 1999) p. 226

for his continued leadership, Honecker acquiesced.⁸⁵ One of the first acts of the politburo under Krenz was an amnesty for those who had defected from the GDR – Republikflucht (fleeing from the Republic) had been a felony and those who left illegally were declared guilty in absentia.⁸⁶ According to Detweiler, soon after taking over the leadership, Krenz learnt that the GDR was at the 'the point of bankruptcy' and 'in order to meet current obligations... the standard of living would have to be reduced in 1990 by 25 to 30 percent.'⁸⁷ Krenz knew reforms had to be made but also that without substantial foreign aid, the country was in no position to make such reforms, considering the volatile social and political atmosphere. Krenz flew to Moscow at the beginning of November for a conference with Gorbachev, where it was made clear that Soviet troops could not be used to maintain SED control. On the 3rd of November Krenz appealed to the people of the GDR on television and radio, promising reforms of the court system and the military service requirement and asking citizens not to abandon the GDR, but to stay and trust the programme of reform. However, he emphasised that no restrictions would be placed on citizens who applied for the right to leave. This appeal was too little, too late; the next day half a million East German citizens protested in Berlin. On the 7th of November Stoph and his cabinet resigned and reform orientated communist, Dr Hans Modrow was appointed prime minister.

The events of the 9th of November provided some of the most memorable images of the end of the cold war and need little introduction. In a meeting held that day, Krenz and his colleagues decided to end the SED monopoly of power, to allow free elections and to allow East Germans to travel more freely. An unclear note announcing the new

⁸⁵ Donald. S. Detwiler, *Germany: a short history*, (Southern Illinois University Press 1999) p. 226

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 227

⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 227

regulations was handed to Berlin party boss Günther Schabowski during a televised press conference and he implied that travel restrictions would be removed immediately. Thousands of East Berliners travelled to the wall to test the announced travel freedoms and confused border guards let them pass. The most potent symbol of the Cold War division of Europe was destroyed.

Aftermath

On the 17th of November Modrow proposed that East Germany enter a 'contractual community' with West Germany. When Krenz and all the members of the Politburo and the Central Committee resigned in December, Modrow became the head of government. Free elections which were held in East German on the 18th of May 1990 returned a President and Prime Minister from the East German branch of Helmut Kohl's Christian Democratic Union (CDU). The two German states then entered into an agreement which established a monetary, economic and social union which came into effect on the 1st of July 1990. A treaty for reunification was signed on the 31st of August and the two states officially unified on the 3rd of October 1990. The 3rd of October became a national holiday, known as the Tag der deutschen Einheit (Day of German Unity), and replaced the holiday previously known as the Tag der deutschen Einheit which had been celebrated on the 17th of June, commemorating the 1953 uprisings.

6 Revolt versus revolution; a comparison between the 1953 uprising and the 1989 revolution

As discussed earlier, every national identity needs symbols and myths to sustain itself.

One concept that is often overlooked in the discussion of national identifiers, is the

constellation of these symbols and myths. Taken in isolation the 1953 uprising was a failure and was quickly forgotten. In the words of the German President Johannes Rau 'Let's be honest: For one reason or another, June 17 had become a nuisance to many of us.'⁸⁸ But when discussed in the context of later anti-communist uprisings such as the Hungarian revolution of 1956 or the Prague Spring of 1968, the 1953 uprising becomes the first in a line of heroic acts of resistance to communist rule. When discussed in the context of the 1989 revolution, the significance of the 1953 uprisings becomes more nuanced. Not only is it the first act of defiance towards a communist regime after 1945, but it is proof that people of East Germany would take advantage of the uncertain times to attempt to change their circumstances. By drawing parallels between 1953 and 1989, and showing the similarities between the circumstances it appears as though the people of East Germany spent almost forty years waiting for their chance to challenge the SED again. This is a powerful narrative for building a reunified national identity because it exonerates the majority those who lived in East Germany from complicity with the regime.

The next section will consider points of comparison between the uprising in June 1953 and the revolution in autumn 1989 to test the veracity of the comparison of the historical contexts. Specifically it will address:

- ✦ the attitudes and actions of West Germany and its allies;
- ✦ the relationship between the Soviet Union and the SED leadership in East Germany;
- ✦ the situation within the Eastern Bloc and issues facing the Soviet leadership;

⁸⁸ Czuczka, Tony, 'Germans commemorate forgotten 1953 uprising, seeking east-west bond', *Associated Press Worldstream*, June 17 2003

- ✦ the economic situation of East Germany at the time of the unrest; and
- ✦ the make up and motives of the participants, and church and political groups involved.

6.1 West Germany and its allies

6.1.1 The attitude of West Germany and its allies to the 1953 uprising

In the aftermath of the 1953 uprising in East Germany the failure of the West German government to support the protesters caused disillusionment in the GDR and embarrassment in Bonn. Although unification was written into the foundational policy of the FRG, in reality it had become less of a priority than the integration of West Germany into the European Defence Community (EDC) which was agreed to by the Bundestag on the 19th of March 1953. Although a sovereign state since 1949, the foreign affairs of the FRG were still heavily influenced by its former occupiers. The close relationship of the Adenauer government with the Eisenhower administration in the United States guided the West German response to the uprising. In 1953 the only possible forum for discussions about the reunification of East and West Germany would have been at talks between the four powers who occupied Germany after World War II.

The attitudes and policies of the FRG and her allies in the West towards East Germany were in turmoil after the death of Stalin on the 5th of March 1953. The new leadership in the Soviet Union seemed determined to establish a new foreign policy based on dialogue rather than defensive paranoia. The collective leadership launched a 'peace offensive' with Premier Malenkov announcing in mid March that there was 'no litigious or unsolved question which could not be settled by peaceful means on the basis of

mutual agreement of the countries concerned... including the United States of America.⁸⁹ While it led to progress on some fronts – most notably the signing of a cease-fire in the Korean war, the peace offensive was met with scepticism. The Western Powers had already shown themselves resistant to re-litigating the issue of German reunification when Stalin had proposed a unified but neutral Germany in 1952. Stalin's proposal was interpreted by the United States as an attempt to stall West Germany's progress towards membership of the EDC – and it was feared that any discussion with the new Soviet leadership about German unification could have the same effect. However, Winston Churchill was more optimistic about the possibilities of dealing with the new leaders and on the 11th of May 1953 he called for a four-party Great Power summit on the German problem. FRG Chancellor Konrad Adenauer was alarmed by the prospect of such a meeting, and also that Churchill's proposal could lead to France rescinding their ratification of the EDC treaty. As he was facing elections in September of that year, Adenauer could not afford to express public opposition to any possibility of unification, privately he expressed concerns and looked for US support in delaying such talks.⁹⁰ When the Soviet tanks rolled in to East German cities on the afternoon on the 17th of June any chance that the Soviets could earnestly propose a neutral Germany at four power talks was nullified. The events in June effectively put an end to reunification rhetoric from either side while providing the Adenauer government with an ideal propaganda opportunity.

⁸⁹ New York Times, 17 March 1953, p. A6. Reproduced in Christian F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001) p. 4

⁹⁰ Christian F. Ostermann, "'Keeping the Pot Simmering": The United States and the East German Uprising of 1953', *German Studies Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Feb. 1996, 61-89. p. 66

Despite the open border between the sectors of Berlin and active intelligence links with the Eastern zones of the city, both West Germany and the United States were taken by surprise by the uprisings. That they were not involved in either organisation or orchestration is obvious from the initial belief by American intelligence agencies that the protests were organised by the SED, a Psychological Strategy Board (PSB) memorandum from the 17th of June reported;

It is understood, although not definitely known of course, that the Soviets staged yesterday's demonstrations against increased productivity quotas in order to react to them by cutting back quotas.⁹¹

The western powers soon accepted that the uprisings were spontaneous and genuine but when the CIA chief in Berlin proposed smuggling in weapons for the protesters, he was instructed to offer 'sympathy, asylum, but no arms.'⁹² Transcripts of National Security Council (NSC) show that in the United States there was some support for arming the protesters, but the President dismissed the idea as foolish stating that if the US were to 'fan the flames of discontent' heads would roll and those 'heads would be the heads of our friends' and that 'while he wanted to cause the enemy every difficulty possible, he did not want to kill our friends.'⁹³ During these meetings Eisenhower reiterated the primacy of the integration of West Germany into the EDC stating that he would "do almost anything to help the German Chancellor [Adenauer]' and the goal of integration must not be compromised.⁹⁴ Thus, despite Eisenhower's election platform of Soviet 'roll

⁹¹ Psychological Board Memorandum from John M. Anspacher to George A. Morgan, 17 June 1953 in Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). pp 210 – 212. p. 212

⁹² Christian F. Ostermann, "'Keeping the Pot Simmering": The United States and the East German Uprising of 1953', *German Studies Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Feb. 1996, 61-89. p. 66

⁹³ 'Minutes of Discussion at the 150th Meeting of the National Security Council on 18 June 1953, 19 June 1953', in Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). pp 225 – 231. p. 227

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 229

back' and Adenauer's public commitment to the reunification of Germany, Western response to the June uprisings was muted almost to the point of obfuscation.

East Germany was quick to place blame on the West for instigating the uprising, using a speech made by West German MP Jakob Kaiser as evidence of a Western plot.⁹⁵ On the 23rd of June the SED issued a communique explaining that the entire uprising had been orchestrated by West Germany with American support.⁹⁶ Although the historical record shows that this was clearly nonsense, West Germany found it politically expedient to downplay what little they and their allies *had* done to support the uprising. Narratives of the June events from West Germany fail to mention the role of RIAS (the Radio In the American Sector) in spreading the news of the strikes beyond Berlin, although there is little doubt that news of it could have spread any other way.⁹⁷ Hutchinson shows that this involvement was, in fact, vital to the dissemination of news on the 16th of June:

...the amazing point was that it was known throughout the rest of the country that evening, despite the fact that the Eastern radio stations made no reference whatsoever to the troubles. The responsibility for this lies chiefly with the West Berlin radio station RIAS...⁹⁸

In his article *Volksaufstand und Herbst Revolution: Die Rolle der West-Medien 1953 und 1989 im Vergleich*, Hertle places more emphasis on the role played by RIAS from earlier in the development of the protests. He points to the RIAS broadcast on the 11th of

⁹⁵ In a speech apparently made on 10 June 1953, Kaiser, who was Bundesminister für gesamtdeutsche Fragen, had stated: 'Es liegt im Bereich der Möglichkeit, daß der Tag X rascher kommt ... es ist unsere Aufgabe für alle Probleme bestmöglich vorbereitet zu sein. Der Generalstabsplan ist so gut wie fertig.' Quoted in Hutchinson 370

⁹⁶ Peter Hutchinson, 'History and Political Literature: The Interpretation of the "Day of German Unity" in the Literature of East and West' *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Apr., 1981), pp. 367-382. p. 370

⁹⁷ Ibid. 371

⁹⁸ Peter Hutchinson, 'History and Political Literature: The Interpretation of the "Day of German Unity" in the Literature of East and West' *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Apr., 1981), pp. 367-382. p. 369

June which interpreted the New Course as 'even by careful estimates, an extraordinary chance for the people [which] should not be allowed to pass by unused.'⁹⁹ Allinson's assessment, on the other hand, is that;

[A] clear awareness of potential problems in the leadership of both the USSR and the GDR almost certainly, **if subconsciously**, encouraged a sense that active opposition to the SED's hardline attempts during 1952-53 to construct socialism at any cost might bear some fruit in a period when communist rule seemed less secure.¹⁰⁰ [my emphasis]

This seems a far less likely proposition than that put forward by Hertle; that the people of the GDR, encouraged by the popular RIAS broadcasts, believed there was a real chance that reunification would be politically supported.

The involvement of RIAS also led East Germans to expect some help from the West, and contributed to the disillusionment when none was forthcoming. By omitting this small role from the official western narratives, West Germany was able to maximise the popular foundations of what was, in reality, a blue-collar protest in which neither the East German intelligentsia or the farmers played a large role. An example of a West German statement about the uprising is the following, which comes from a booklet published in English by the Federal Ministry for All-German Affairs in 1953:

The Uprising in the Soviet zone proves that the resistance of the population against the despotic power of the SED is not broken despite years of systematic terror. The sole

⁹⁹ Hans-Hermann Hertle 'Volksaufstand und Herbst Revolution: Die Rolle der West-Medien 1953 und 1989 im Vergleich' in Henrik Bispinck, Jürgen Danyel, Hans-Hermann Hertle, & Hermann Wentker, *Aufstände im Ostblock. Zur Krisengeschichte des realen Sozialismus*, (Ch. Links Verlag 2004) pp 163 – 194 p. 167. Original quote: ...auch bei vorsichtiger Einschätzung eine ungewöhnliche Chance für die Bevölkerung. Sie darf nicht ungenutzt bleiben.

¹⁰⁰ Mark Allinson, *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany 1945 – 68*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York 2000). p. 53

backing of the “Government of the Democratic German Republic” is the bayonets and tanks of Soviet troops. [...] The people in the Soviet zone have shown themselves in this June uprising to be the best of democrats.¹⁰¹

On the 23rd of June 1953 when the SED published their communique blaming the West for the uprisings, it was clear that there was no chance for reunification of the two German states, or of any reconciliation under the 'peace offensive'. With the threat to West German integration into the EDC annulled, Adenauer was able to declare his unconditional commitment to the reunification. His statement of the 23rd reads:

We will not rest – this oath I take for the whole German nation – until the eighteen millions in the Soviet Zone again live in freedom, until all Germany is once more united in peace and freedom.¹⁰²

Jakob Kaiser echoed this statement declaring:

Since the June uprising it has become clear to all that the German nation in thought and will has remained one whole. There are no two Germanies of which one is turned to freedom and the other infected with communism. There is only one, a Germany whose thoughts are of freedom!¹⁰³

Building on such rhetoric, the West German government declared the 17th of June as a national holiday somewhat ironically named the 'Tag der deutschen Einheit' (day of German unity). In 1981 Hutchinson wrote that:

Although this day is no longer taken seriously in the Federal Republic, it was a decisive date in the fifties and early sixties, when countless speeches in schools and town halls

¹⁰¹ Revolt in June. Documents and Reports on the People's Uprising in East Berlin and in the Soviet Zone of Germany. (Publ. by the Federal Ministry for All-German Affairs). (Bonn: Bundes-Verl. [ca. 1953]). 64 S., Abb. quer-8° [Umschlagt.] p. 49

¹⁰² Ibid. p. 60

¹⁰³ Ibid.

throughout West Germany reinforced the view which had been quickly adopted in the days immediately after the uprising.¹⁰⁴

In the late 1960s attitudes towards this anniversary became more ambivalent as German attitudes to reunification became less fervent – it became an embarrassing reminder of a missed opportunity – an opportunity that the West German people would have doubts about supporting should it come to present itself again.

6.1.2 The attitude of West Germany and her allies to the 1989 revolution

In 1989 West Germany was no longer a recovering country dependant on the political patronage of its 'great power' allies, it was the central pillar of the European Community. The idea of German unity had long been absent from serious political debate in West Germany and since the inception of Ostpolitik the two German states had normalised their relations. In terms of the media, the two German states had also grown closer together and each had a much greater understanding of the internal events of the other; Hertle wrote that long before there was a prospect of political unification, the people of Germany had already integrated as a 'television nation'.¹⁰⁵ The role of the Western media in 1989 reflected this greater integration. From the time that East Germans started escaping en-masse through the 'Hungary hole' the West German media reported extensively on the arrivals. East German viewers could tune in every night and see jubilant images of East Germans crossing into West Germany and being provided

¹⁰⁴ Peter Hutchinson, 'History and Political Literature: The Interpretation of the "Day of German Unity" in the Literature of East and West' *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Apr., 1981), pp. 367-382. p. 371

¹⁰⁵ Hans-Hermann Hertle 'Volksaufstand und Herbst Revolution: Die Rolle der West-Medien 1953 und 1989 im Vergleich' in Henrik Bispinck, Jürgen Danyel, Hans-Hermann Hertle, & Hermann Wentker, *Aufstände im Ostblock. Zur Krisengeschichte des realen Sozialismus*, (Ch. Links Verlag 2004) pp 163 – 194 p. 173. Original quote; Als ein staatliche Einheit noch nicht zu denken war, waren die Deutschen als Fernsehnation schon zusammengewachsen.

with food, shelter and 'welcome money' in the same way that West Germany had provided for those few who had risked escape from East Germany previously.¹⁰⁶ When West Germany's resources became strained from the huge influx of refugees from the East, Kohl was forced to publicly request that East German citizens stay at home. However, his pleas had little effect. The Western media reporting encouraged more East Germans to desert the GDR based on the welcome they expected in West Germany.

Just as East Germans in 1989 had a much clearer idea of the potential and attitudes of their capitalist twin state, leaders in the West had clear ideas of the position and potential reactions of the Soviet Union in the unfolding crisis. Gorbachev had opened lines of communication to an unprecedented degree. He had committed to integrating the Eastern Bloc into Europe and with this goal in mind he consulted with Western leaders over the future of Germany. From records of communications between Gorbachev and the leaders of Germany, France and the United Kingdom, we can see how responses from the West Germany and the Western powers evolved throughout 1989.

One figure towers over all others in the story of German Reunification – and that is the figure of Helmut Kohl, the last Chancellor of West Germany and the first Chancellor of the reunified Germany. Kohl's political memoir is entitled *Ich wollte Deutschland's Einheit* (I wanted Germany's unity). However, the role that West Germany played before the fall of the Berlin wall and the resignation of the SED politburo was minimal. The West German Chancellor had developed a working relationship with Gorbachev

¹⁰⁶ Richard A. Leiby, *The Unification of Germany, 1989-1990; a Greenwood Press Guides to Historic Events of the Twentieth Century*, (Greenwood Press 1999). p. 11.

and the understanding between these two leaders was crucial to the peaceful transition. Before demonstrations in the GDR seemed to seriously threaten the SED leadership, Kohl and Gorbachev developed an understanding that West Germany would not do anything to exacerbate the instability which was beginning to manifest. During Gorbachev's visit to West Germany in June 1989 he had frank discussions with Kohl about the situation in the Eastern Bloc countries and the progress of reforms. Kohl reiterated that West German 'policy toward the socialist countries, toward the Soviet Union, ... [remained] on a clear course of non-interference in their internal affairs'.¹⁰⁷ However, non-interference no longer meant the isolation of the communist states; the two leaders also discussed West German financial support for Poland, of which Gorbachev approved.¹⁰⁸ It is clear from the records of these conversations that Gorbachev was pursuing his goal of European integration in earnest. Gorbachev also had assurances that other Western powers would not interfere with reforms in the Eastern Bloc. Margaret Thatcher offered assurances on this score when she visited Moscow in late September 1989;

... we are in favour of those processes remaining strictly internal; we will not interfere in them and spur the decommunization of Eastern Europe. I can tell you this is also the position of the U.S. President.¹⁰⁹

However, Thatcher was unambiguous about her position on the reunification of Germany. She did not allow her conversation to be officially recorded, but in a report written directly after the meeting she is quoted 'We do not want the unification of

¹⁰⁷ 'Document Number 67: Record of Third Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl' in Savranskaya, Svetlana, Thomas Blanton, & Vladislav Zubok (eds.), *Masterpieces of history: the peaceful end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, 1989*, (Central European University Press, 2010), pp. 476 – 478. p. 478

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 477

¹⁰⁹ 'Document Number 85: Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher' in Savranskaya, Svetlana, Thomas Blanton, & Vladislav Zubok (eds.), *Masterpieces of history: the peaceful end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, 1989*, (Central European University Press, 2010), pp. 530 – 532. p. 532

Germany...such a development would undermine the stability of the entire international situation'.¹¹⁰

While Thatcher could speak for the United States on the issue of Western interference in the process of reforms in the Eastern Bloc in general, when it came to the reunification of Germany her position was drastically different from that of President Bush. As early as September 1989 Bush publicly supported the idea of German reunification. Alarmed that Bush might jeopardise the relationship with Gorbachev, his advisers recommended he speak of 'reconciliation' rather than 'reunification'. But the President was steadfast in his push for German unity and American support proved vital in the negotiations for reunification. The cause of German reunification had captured the American imagination ever since President Kennedy's famous 'Ich bin ein Berliner' speech in 1963. Once the American administration decided to offer its 'uneingeschränkte' (unlimited) support to unification, the political balance began to change rapidly.¹¹¹ Almost four decades after abandoning the 'rollback' policy in the wake of the 1953 uprising, the concern for the United States was still the same – although committed to the cause of Germany unity, the United States administration was worried that a neutral Germany would leave a power vacuum in the centre of Europe. The Bush administration made it clear that they were not willing to sacrifice Germany NATO membership for German unity, but through clever dealing the two German states were quickly able to gain both unity and absorption Western Europe. A conversation between

¹¹⁰ 'Document Number 85: Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher' in Savranskaya, Svetlana, Thomas Blanton, & Vladislav Zubok (eds.), *Masterpieces of history: the peaceful end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, 1989*, (Central European University Press, 2010), pp. 530 – 532, p. 532

¹¹¹ Heinrich Bortfeld 'Die Vereingten Staaten und die deutsche Einheit; Amerikanische Sondierungen im Herbst 1989' in Klaus Larres & Torsten Oppelland, *Deutschland und die USA im 20. Jahrhundert; Geschichte der politischen Beziehungen*, (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), pp256 – 276. p. 261

President Bush and Chancellor Kohl on the 23rd of October 1989 reveals the commitment of both leaders to maintaining integrated Germany's membership in NATO and the Western European economic community. Kohl is recorded as having said;

[T]he media in New York, the coast, London, the Hague, and Paris [...] holds that the Germans are now committed to Ostpolitik and discussions about reunification and that they are less interested in the EC and the West. This is absolute nonsense! [...] Without a strong NATO, without the necessary developments in the EC, none of these developments in the Warsaw treaty would have occurred. [...] Progress in disarmament and changes in the east are only possible if we stand together.¹¹²

In response President Bush expressed his belief in the West German commitment to the European community and urged

We are seeing a spate of stories about German reunification resulting in a neutralist Germany and a threat to Western security. We do not believe that. We are trying to react very cautiously to the change of leadership in the GDR.¹¹³

When the biggest of the demonstrations began taking place in Leipzig, the United States were still concerned that the Soviet Union might intervene militarily – an option which had not been unambiguously ruled out. Washington could simply not believe that the Soviet Union would let East Germany go without a fight.¹¹⁴ Until the day the wall fell, the USA were deeply concerned about the maintenance of authority in the GDR. While supporting reunification in the long term, the USA definitely favoured a slow and

¹¹² 'Document Number 94: Record of Telephone Conversation between George H. W. Bush and Helmut Kohl, October 23, 1989' in Savranskaya, Svetlana, Thomas Blanton, & Vladislav Zubok (eds.), *Masterpieces of history: the peaceful end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, 1989*, (Central European University Press, 2010), pp. 558 – 560. p. 599

¹¹³ Ibid. p. 599

¹¹⁴ Heinrich Bortfeld 'Die Vereingten Staaten und die deutsche Einheit; Amerikanische Sondierungen im Herbst 1989' in Klaus Larres & Torsten Oppelland, *Deutschland und die USA im 20. Jahrhundert; Geschichte der politischen Beziehungen*, (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), pp. 256 – 276. p. 257

orderly transition from two states to one. Understanding the scepticism with which France and Britain viewed the prospect of a strong NATO-affiliated Germany, and concerned that if Bonn pushed the reunification agenda it could be construed as dangerous German nationalism, Bush took up the cause of persuading his NATO allies. On the 4th of December 1989 at the NATO summit in Brussels, Bush called for a reunified Germany to be given membership of NATO and integrated into the European Community.

Standing in the way of German reunification were not only Britain and France, but also the Soviet Union and the 380,000 Soviet troops who were still stationed in East Germany. Bortfeldt believes that the French and British sceptics would not have been won over so easily, had Gorbachev and his foreign minister Schwarznadse not been so cooperative. Bortfeldt calls the negotiations for German reunification a “Sternstunde” (star hour) of the relationship between Germany and the USA; it does seem that with American support and Soviet pliability the stars were aligned for German reunification. American goals had not changed between 1953 and 1989, but in the 1950s the idea of unification was rejected because the Western powers were in no position to negotiate unification on terms which would be advantageous to them and detrimental to Soviet power.

6.1.3 The comparison; what do the Western responses tell us?

The goals of the Western powers remained consistent throughout the period of the GDR's existence – reunification was desirable but not at the expense of the stability and alliances of West Germany. The cautious responses from West Germany and its allies in

June of 1953 and in the autumn of 1989 are useful for the implementation of an understanding of the events of 1953 and 1989 as bookends to the East German story. Revolt and revolution taking place without the encouragement of outside powers give agency and dignity to the actors – to the people of the GDR who took the streets or left their homes and moved to the West in the hope of freedom. Had there been a more aggressive Western response to either of these popular movements, the narrative could not be one of a valiant struggle for freedom against the odds. No matter how disappointing it may have been to the East Germans at the time, the lacklustre response from the West gave their stories of struggle a heroism they would not otherwise have achieved.

6.2 *The relationship between the Soviet Union and the SED leadership in East Germany*

Ulbricht and Honecker dominated the politics of East Germany leading for almost the entire period of its forty year existence. During the tumultuous times of 1953 and 1989, both were deeply out of favour with the leadership of the Soviet Union because of their hard-line approach and their resistance to change. This next section will look at how the relationship of these uncompromising leaders contributed to the protests in the GDR.

6.2.1 Ulbricht and the Soviet leadership in 1953

The lack of confidence in Ulbricht by the new Soviet leadership in 1953 is evidenced by a strange series of articles which appeared in the official SED newspaper *Neues Deutschland*. On the 28th of May the SED had publicised the raised work norms which were to be enforced by the 30th of June. After Ulbricht's sojourn in Moscow, the GDR politburo was obliged to publish details of the New Course in *Neues Deutschland* on the

11th of June. Confusingly, three days later, the paper carried an article criticising the introduction of the new norms and the lack of consultation with workers over their introduction; this caused 'considerable surprise among workers, who interpreted it as an indication that the norms were to be rescinded'.¹¹⁵ Adding to the confusion was a 16 June article in the official workers newspaper restating the norms and the deadline for their application. The *Neues Deutschland* article, it later emerged, was a Soviet attempt to discredit Ulbricht and the 16 June article was written at his behest.¹¹⁶ These contradictory articles caused confusion among party and union leaders. Hutchinson believes that 'It was largely this state of confusion - and a justified lack of confidence in their leadership - which prompted the first strikes.'¹¹⁷ The Soviet displeasure with Ulbricht may have contributed directly to the uprising; but Ulbricht managed to turn his position of weakness into one of much-begrudged strength.

After 1953, Soviet support for Ulbricht had led to the creation of one of the most hard-line communist regimes in Eastern Europe. The East German government resisted de-Stalinization and condemned reforms in other socialist countries. In 1956 Ulbricht avidly supported the invasion of Hungary and in 1968 spoke out against the Czechoslovak reforms eventually banning the sale of Czechoslovakian newspapers. In 1980 Honecker recognised Solidarity as a threat to communism and advocated a 1953-style solution; implicitly invoking the idea of military intervention.¹¹⁸ When Gorbachev began advocating *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the late 1980s, Honecker saw this as yet

¹¹⁵ Peter Hutchinson, 'History and Political Literature: The Interpretation of the "Day of German Unity" in the Literature of East and West' *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Apr., 1981), pp. 367-382. p. 368

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 368

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 368

¹¹⁸ Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). p. 420

another threat to socialism in the GDR. He banned the sale of Soviet publications in an attempt to isolate East Germany from the changing socialist community.

6.2.2 Honecker and Gorbachev in 1989

Gorbachev's frustration with Honecker was obvious. In a conversation with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl in June 1989, Gorbachev revealed that he saw Honecker as a major obstacle to reform in East Germany.¹¹⁹ Then, while attending the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of the GDR, Gorbachev made a rare pronouncement on the internal issues of the GDR in a meeting with the East German Politburo on the 7th of October 1989. He warned against resisting reform, arguing that *perestroika* was about 'the necessity of building not only a material but also a socio-spiritual atmosphere for the development of society... Life itself will punish us if we are late.'¹²⁰ At this meeting Gorbachev also brazenly advocated the replacement of Honecker, by telling a story about leaders in the Ukrainian city of Donetsk who could not 'pull the cart any more, but we don't dare replace them... [while] the problems grow and become more painful'.¹²¹ Thus the rupture between Honecker and the Soviet leadership was well known in the SED. Despite his thinly veiled opinions on the course which the SED ought to take, Gorbachev reiterated that the Soviet Union would not intervene in East German affairs.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton, & Vladislav Zubok (eds.), *Masterpieces of history: the peaceful end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, 1989*, (Central European University Press, 2010) p. 33

¹²⁰ 'Document Number 88: Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Members of the CC SED Politburo, October 7, 1989', in Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton, & Vladislav Zubok (eds.), *Masterpieces of history: the peaceful end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, 1989*, (Central European University Press, 2010) pp. 544 – 546 p. 545

¹²¹ Ibid. p. 546

¹²² Donald. S. Detwiler, *Germany: a short history*, (Southern Illinois University Press 1999) p. 277

6.2.3 Unpopular men and their role in the history of the protests

The unpopularity of these leaders with the dominant power in their region was significant to both the 1953 uprising and the 1989 revolution – and it is significant for the comparison of the two and their incorporation as a 'set' into the catalogue of nation-building symbols. The confusion created by East Germany being ideologically isolated gave the protests and the protesters an autonomy that other anti-communist protests did not have. This separates both the 1953 uprising and the 1989 revolution from other significant Cold War movements such as the 1956 Hungarian uprising or the Prague Spring of 1968. That the East German protests took place outside the auspices of the ruling party is significant for their usefulness as symbols for a unified Germany. Had these events been in support of reforms instigated by the SED, as was the case in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, there would be little relevance for them in the symbol lexicon of a Germany unified against the background of SED tyranny.

It is easy to draw a parallel between Ulbricht and Honecker who between them led East Germany for all but a few weeks of its existence. They were both hard-line leaders who fell out of favour with Moscow because of their resistance to reform; yet one was supported with tanks and the other was quietly deposed. To understand this difference we will now investigate what had changed in the relationship between East Germany and the Soviet Union between 1953 and 1989.

6.3 The situation within the Eastern Bloc

6.3.1 Issues facing the Soviet leadership in 1953

Ostermann, one of the leading authorities on the 1953 uprising, states that Soviet support for Ulbricht was far from inevitable, and remains inexplicable: 'On the height of the crisis in East Berlin, for reasons that are not yet entirely clear, the Soviet leadership committed itself to the political survival of Ulbricht and his East German state.'¹²³ In order to understand the similarities and differences between the events of 1953 and 1989, it is vital that we further investigate the relationship between the Soviet Union and the contemporaneous GDR leaders. The most important aspect of this relationship was not the GDR leaders themselves, but the situation in the Soviet Union. The fact that the uprisings came so soon after the death of Stalin was perhaps the most important contributing factor in the Soviet decision to commit to what seemed like a drastic change in direction. Before 1953 Soviet consensus appears to have been moving towards complete withdrawal from Germany. Historians are divided on whether this policy, as set out in the Stalin note, was serious or just a tactic to stall the integration of FRG into the Western Bloc; but recently released documents show that this policy was being seriously considered. Whether or not the Stalin note of 1952 was to be taken seriously, and how four party talks on the the subject of Germany would have played out can never be known, but while the leadership in the Soviet Union was unstable, so was its policy towards Germany.

Stalin's death in 1953 brought a great opportunity for change – just as the 1985 accession of Gorbachev would, after the deaths of a succession of old and out of touch

¹²³ Christian F. Ostermann, "“This Is Not A Politburo, But A Madhouse”": The Post-Stalin Succession Struggle, Soviet Deutschlandpolitik and the SED: New Evidence from Russian, German, and Hungarian Archives' *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 10 (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C. March 1998) pp. 61 – 110. p. 61

communist leaders. Beginning with calls for change at Stalin's funeral, the politburo elite, led by the troika of Beria, Malenkov, and Molotov, lost no time in implementing new policies both within the Soviet Union and in the satellite states. Unrest and instability in Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary after Stalin's death led the new leadership to develop the New Course which made radical changes to Stalinist policies. The satellite states were given no choice about how and when the reforms were to be implemented. The new leadership had no qualms about demoting the Hungarian Stalinist leader Rákosi when he 'embraced the New Course less enthusiastically than expected'.¹²⁴ It seems likely that if the issue of German unification had not become caught up in the power struggle in the Soviet politburo, the same treatment might have been in store for Ulbricht; considering the media campaign to discredit him it seems plans for his downfall were already in place. Fortunately for Ulbricht, and unfortunately for the cause of German reunification, former Secret Police chief Beria had become the champion of the Stalin note solution. He advocated German unity as a neutral, capitalist state. Beria's brutality in his previous career had made him unpopular and his ambition was feared by the other members of the politburo. In late June 1953 Khrushchev led a campaign to have him tried and executed. Beria's downfall meant that measures which had received his support were blacklisted along with him – and the two-state German solution became official policy for almost four decades. Of course, considering the attitudes of West Germany and her allies, and all the other facets of the situation in Germany, there is no way of knowing how crucial Beria's downfall was to the abandonment of unification discussions, but had the uprising in East Germany come at a

¹²⁴ Christian F. Ostermann, "This Is Not A Politburo, But A Madhouse": The Post-Stalin Succession Struggle, Soviet Deutschlandpolitik and the SED: New Evidence from Russian, German, and Hungarian Archives' *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 10 (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C. March 1998) pp. 61 – 110. p. 61

time of stability in the leadership of the Soviet Union, it is likely that it would have had very different consequences for the East German leadership.

The speed at which the Soviet Union demanded the reforms of 1953 be implemented also had a dramatic effect on their reception by the German populace. Ulbricht, Grotewohl and Oelssner were summoned to Moscow and arrived on the 2nd of June. They returned to Berlin on the 6th of June with orders to announce the New Course immediately. In his work *The East German Leadership 1946 – 1973; Conflict and Crisis*, Grieder reports that the new policies were to prepare the GDR to become part of a 'united democratic and peace-loving Germany' and that the policies were met with enthusiasm from some members of the Volkskammer, but with dismay by those close to Ulbricht.¹²⁵ However, even those who supported the measures were worried about announcing them so soon after the cessation of propaganda for the Construction of Socialism. When SED Politburo member Herrstadt pleaded with the Soviet representative in Berlin for two weeks to prepare the people for the drastic changes which the New Course entailed, he was rebuffed and ordered to publish the policies. Just as Herrstadt had feared, the dramatic announcement was seen as SED back-peddalling and misinterpreted by the populace as evidence of Western, not Eastern, pressure. Ostermann quotes an internal SED document which stated that "broad segments of the population did ... not understand the Party's New Course, viewed it as a sign of weakness or even as a victory by the Americans or the Church.' and a local SED account from Seehausen which reported that 'the entire village is in the bar drinking to

¹²⁵ Peter Grieder, *The East German Leadership 1946 – 1973; Conflict and Crisis*, (Manchester University Press; Manchester and New York, 1999)

the health of Adenauer.¹²⁶ It is clear how the pace of Soviet reforms, driven by events within the Soviet Union, contributed to the uprisings in June 1953. As discussed in the section on the involvement of West Germany and her allies, RIAS were able to capitalise on the confusion and encourage the East Germans to push for greater reform. The support for Ulbricht subsequent to the uprisings may be partly explained in the short term through the Soviet leadership's desire not to appear as though they had bowed to popular pressure to depose him, and in the long term through the blacklisting of Beria's plans.

6.3.2 Issues facing the Soviet leadership in 1989

1989 was also a time of great change, when the people of East Germany, encouraged by the news of reforms, demanded more radical changes than their government were prepared to make. But there were a number of important differences in the impetus and sources of reform, the relationship between the Soviet Union and the East German leadership and the situation within the Soviet Union. In 1989, Gorbachev had been in power for four years and had been implementing his reforms for almost as long. As in 1953, these reforms were in part a solution to unrest in the satellite states – to accommodate, for example, the Solidarity movement in Poland – but these reforms were also the cause of unrest in East-Central Europe as Gorbachev left it up to individual states to implement reforms (or not to, in the case of Romania, the Czech Republic and the GDR). So one way in which we can see that the relationship between the Soviet Union and the GDR had changed from 1953 to 1989 was in the level of autonomy that the SED had from the Soviet leadership. In 1953 reforms were foisted onto an unwilling

¹²⁶ Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). p. 20

Ulbricht who had no choice but to implement those reforms in the time frame and manner dictated to him by Moscow, and the clumsy and confusing manner of the implementation fed directly into the unrest. In 1989, the people of East Germany had a much clearer idea of what reform could achieve because they had seen the developments in Poland and Hungary.

The key difference in the outcome of the 1989 revolution was due to Gorbachev and his determination to eschew military intervention on behalf of any of the regimes in the socialist satellite states. Gorbachev spent a great deal of time encouraging the dramatic changes that he hoped would prevent violent uprisings. Gorbachev was a new generation of Soviet leader and came to power after the deaths in office of three Soviet leaders. The first Soviet leaders born after the 1917 revolution, Gorbachev was a committed communist, but the extensive overseas travel that his high standing within the party allowed him had caused him to question the superiority of the 'social democratic' system. When Gorbachev was called to Moscow by Brezhnev and appointed to the Politburo in 1978, he was around 25 years younger than his average colleague.¹²⁷ US President Ronald Reagan, who was virulently anti-communist and perceived the Soviet Union as a clear and present danger at the time of his election, was impressed by the Gorbachev's energy and passion for change. Regan, who had seen three Soviet leaders pass away, described his relationship with Gorbachev as 'something very close to a friendship' and recalled;

[H]e was different from the Communists who had preceded him to the top of the Kremlin hierarchy.... [H]e was the first not to push Soviet expansionism, the first to

¹²⁷ Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, (Hill and Wang, New York 2007) pp. 366 – 371.

agree to destroy nuclear weapons, the first to suggest a free market and to support open elections and freedom of expression.¹²⁸

Perhaps the most significant difference between Gorbachev and his predecessors was that he saw the biggest threat to the Soviet Union not as external attack, but internal disintegration. He did not set about his programmes of reform with the aim of breaking the hold of communism on the Eastern Bloc, but as reforms developed he did nothing to stop them. He did not have the inclination to support hard-line regimes by force and he knew that even if he did, he would not have the means to maintain such support. Gorbachev knew that there was no way the Soviet Union would be able to keep up in an arms race with the United States who he thought were simply 'waiting for us to drown'.¹²⁹ Gorbachev's determination that his country would not be intimidated led to an unprecedented level of contact and bargaining, and ultimately to the end of the Breznev doctrine.

The leadership of the Soviet Union had an impact on the development of the uprising and the revolution as Gorbachev's openness inspired the masses to revolt, and the confusion created by Moscow's indecision fomented unrest. It also had an obvious impact on the outcomes. However, the impact on our interpretation is dependant on the next subject of investigation – the economic situation of the GDR and the Soviet Union.

¹²⁸ Barbara Farnham 'Reagan and the Gorbachev Revolution: Perceiving the End of Threat', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 116, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), pp. 225-252. p. 240

¹²⁹ Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, (Hill and Wang, New York 2007) p. 375

6.4 All about the money; the impact of economics

6.4.1 The economic situation of East Germany in 1953

When Germany was divided among the United Kingdom, the United States, France, and the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War, each occupying power had the right to extract reparations from within their zone (although according to the Potsdam agreement some reparations were also to be paid from other zones). Reparations exacted by the Soviet occupiers were in the form of the dismantling or sequestering of factories, railway lines and many other industrial installations.¹³⁰ This significantly diminished the economic capacity of the Soviet Zone which already had the disadvantage of being a poorer area and importer of raw materials before the war. In the autumn of 1947 the SED began planning a Soviet style economy. The massive impending inflation caused by the Nazi issuing of notes to finance the war meant that currency reforms were vital, the reforms designed by the SED under Soviet leadership favoured state institutions and concentrated resources in their hands.¹³¹ But plan for the institution of a planned economy were thwarted by constant Soviet shifts in their demands for reparations, the inefficiencies in SED attempts to placate workers by reintroducing piecework wages at the same time as fixing targets, and the institution of quotas for agriculture with concessions for the free sale of surplus crops which warped market prices. The SED concentrated its funds on the heavy industrial sectors which led to other sectors being unable to maintain their capacity. Into this inefficient situation came the 1952 Construction of Socialism intended to speed up collectivisation and the nationalisation of private trade and industry. The Construction of Socialism quickly wreaked further havoc on an economy already hard hit by the mass migration of skilled and able

¹³⁰ Mark Allinson, *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany 1945 – 68*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York 2000). p

¹³¹ Steiner, André, *The Plans That Failed: An Economic History of the GDR*, (Berghahn Books 2010). p. 44

workers. The forced collectivisation of agriculture combined with the failure of the harvest led to huge food shortages and the unmaintained infrastructure led to power and heating outages which caused suffering in the population and further problems for industry.¹³²

By the end of 1952, the East German economy was near collapse and Ulbricht appealed to the Soviet Union for aid in both currency and raw materials. His appeals went unanswered and repeated appeals in March and April of 1953 were met with refusal and advice to adopt a gentler approach. Ulbricht ignored this advice and on the 9th of May issued an order for ration cards to be withdrawn from a further two million East Germans who had not fallen in line with the Construction of Socialism measures.¹³³ Grider claims that by early 1953 'the GDR was approaching a state of civil war' as fifteen to twenty thousand people fled every month and Ulbricht pushed through his social and economic reforms.¹³⁴ When a delegation of SED officials was called to Moscow in June 1953 the GDR was in what Grieder terms an 'existential crisis'.

The Soviet Union had become increasingly alarmed by the refugee crisis in East Germany and the unpopularity of the SED and its harsh measures. A memorandum from key members of the Soviet Foreign Ministry in April 1953 outlines radical changes to the relationship between the Soviet Union and the GDR which, it was hoped, might alleviate tensions within the state and prepare the GDR for existence within a unified, neutral Germany. These involved the transfer of 33 industrial enterprises held by the

¹³² Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). p. 3

¹³³ Peter Grieder, *The East German Leadership 1946 – 1973; Conflict and Crisis*, (Manchester University Press; Manchester and New York, 1999) p. 61

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 60

Soviet Union to the government of the GDR, the promise of scientific and technical assistance and the implementation of the policies which were involved in the 'New Course'.¹³⁵ A short time later more financial concession such as the halving of reparations, and compensation 'on favourable terms' to the SED government for Soviet enterprise on GDR territory were recommended.¹³⁶ When Ulbricht and his comrades arrived in Moscow they found they were offered this aid in return for taking responsibility for the failure of the Construction of Socialism plan, and the implementation of the Soviet-directed New Course. The confusion created by the speedy implementation of the New Course and Ulbricht's failure to publicly admit the failings of the previous programme, and the role this confusion played in the June uprising have already been discussed. The important factor to note is that the Soviet Union had taken drastic steps to fiscally support the GDR in its time of crisis and would continue to do so for many subsequent years. When the protests began on the 15th and 16th of June they were industrial protests against raised work norms – financially rather than socially motivated protests – and had the Soviet New Course been carried out to the letter, the raised work norms would have been lowered. However, after the SED failed to immediately capitulate the protests offered the frustrated population of the GDR a chance to show their antipathy to the regime that had pushed them into such severe circumstances. The dire economic conditions in the GDR in 1953 and the rapid decline of the preceding years were a vital precipitating factor in the 1953 uprisings.

¹³⁵ 'Document Number 6: Memorandum on the German Question, from Georgii Pushkin and Mikhail Gribanov to Vyacheslav Molotov, 18 April 1953', in Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). pp. 67 – 70, p. 69.

¹³⁶ 'Document Number 7: Soviet Foreign Ministry Memorandum "Regarding Further Measures of the Soviet Government on the German Question," 28 April 1953' in Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). pp. 71 – 73, p. 73

The new leadership in the Soviet Union had attempted, too late, to pull the GDR back from the brink of collapse.

6.4.2 The economic situation of East Germany in 1989

Leffler described the financial situation of the GDR in 1989 as 'ghastly' and indeed the ensuing financial impact of the reunification of East and West Germany has frequently been described in such terms. In one of his first undertakings as leader, Krenz ordered a thorough review of East Germany's financial situation – a process which had been proscribed by Honecker. As mentioned earlier, he discovered that the current obligations of the GDR were of such magnitude, that in order to meet them without increasing foreign debt, the standard of living in East Germany would have to drop by between 25 and 30 percent.¹³⁷ Leffler estimates that '[b]y the end of 1989 the East German government would owe \$26.5 billion to the West; its current annual payments deficit was more than \$12 billion.'¹³⁸ Gorbachev was reportedly 'taken aback' by the enormity of the financial problems of what had been one of the strongest economies in the Eastern Bloc. It seems that the parlous state of the economy was indeed little known. As recently as February 1989 a report produced by the CPSU international department had concluded that 'the GDR can be distinguished from other socialist countries by the better state of its economy and standard of living'.¹³⁹ That the Soviet leadership did not know the levels of East German debt, and that such an amount was owed to capitalist creditors, show how far the Eastern Bloc had decentralised since the mass refusal of the

¹³⁷ Donald S. Detwiler, *Germany: a short history*, (Southern Illinois University Press 1999) p. 227

¹³⁸ Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, (Hill and Wang, New York 2007) p. 433

¹³⁹ 'Document Number 41: Memorandum from CC CPSU International Department, "On a Strategy for Relations with the European Socialist Countries; February 1989' in Savranskaya, Svetlana, Thomas Blanton, & Vladislav Zubok (eds.), *Masterpieces of history: the peaceful end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, 1989*, (Central European University Press, 2010), pp.353 – 364 p. 356

Marshall plan. Gorbachev counselled Krenz to seek financial aide from West Germany but to be 'wary of making too many concessions'.¹⁴⁰ In conversation with Krenz Gorbachev seemed less shocked than commentators have described. In a record of a conversation with Krenz on the 1st of December 1989 Gorbachev stated; 'We knew about your situation, about your economic and financial ties with the FRG and we understood how it could all turn out.'¹⁴¹

In this same conversation, Gorbachev touched on the financial problems facing the Soviet Union, comparing Krenz's shock at discovering the indebtedness of the GDR to his own upon first enquiring after the Soviet budget;

Some time ago when I was already a politburo member, I basically did not know our budget. Once when we were working... on some request of Andropov's that had to do about budgetary issues we naturally decided that we should learn about them. But Yuri V Andropov said: Do not go there, it is not your business. Now we know why he said so. It was not a budget, but the devil knows what.

The autonomy which Gorbachev had awarded to the Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe and his unwillingness to prop up unpopular regimes were undoubtedly laudable moves towards a more democratic future, but they must be seen in the pragmatic light of the economic situation of the Soviet Union. Since the 1970s the Soviet Union had been propping up the economies of their sphere of influence by providing gas and oil at lower than world market levels.¹⁴² But when prices dropped four-fold in 1986 the Soviet

¹⁴⁰ Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, (Hill and Wang, New York 2007) p. 433

¹⁴¹ 'Document Number 97: Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Egon Krenz; November 1 1989' in Savranskaya, Svetlana, Thomas Blanton, & Vladislav Zubok (eds.), *Masterpieces of history: the peaceful end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, 1989*, (Central European University Press, 2010), pp. 569 – 573. p. 570

¹⁴² 'Introduction', Savranskaya, Svetlana, Thomas Blanton, & Vladislav Zubok (eds.), *Masterpieces of history: the peaceful end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, 1989*, (Central European University Press, 2010), p15

leadership came to realise that the CMEA (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, the Eastern Bloc trading organisation) was unsustainable. In 1988 Gorbachev made it clear that the people of the Soviet Union were his first priority, even if this meant being tougher in dealings with members of the CMEA and accepting broad contacts with the West.¹⁴³ Unlike in 1953 when the Soviet Union was at the zenith of its power, in 1989 there was no possibility of financial support for East Germany from the East. Forced to look West for financial help and facing massive political protest the SED opened the border crossings in the Berlin wall and the East-West division was abrogated.

6.4.3 Who knew? Economics and the people

The parlous state of the East German economy has been thoroughly investigated in the years since reunification and the hardships visited on both East and West have been a major stumbling block on the road to a unified national identity. The economic situation of the GDR at the time of reunification is often pointed to as an impetus for the protests. However this seems to be an application of the benefit of hindsight. It is true that East Germans were relatively far worse off than those in the West, and while it is true that through the expansion of television this discrepancy was more evident to a greater proportion of the population than ever before, the GDR was financing itself through debt rather than experiencing a drastic decline. If the new General Secretary of the SED was shocked at the state of the economy, it is unlikely that many East Germans had any inkling of how dramatically their living standards would have to drop if the state continued to be independent. Although the economics of the situation greatly impacted

¹⁴³ 'Document Number 19: Notes of CPSU Politburo Session, March 10 1988', in Savranskaya, Svetlana, Thomas Blanton, & Vladislav Zubok (eds.), *Masterpieces of history: the peaceful end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, 1989*, (Central European University Press, 2010), pp. 265 - 268

the relationship between the GDR and the Soviet Union, economic betterment was not the chief ambition of the protesters in 1989. In contrast, the 1953 uprising had a stronger economic motive than the 1989 protests that led to the revolution. The uprising in June 1953 began as a workers protest where the workers were protesting at being forced to take a 10 percent pay cut. The brevity of the uprising and the speedy development of reunification rhetoric as it spread, and the hagiographic West German tradition of praising the uprising at the annual 'Tag der Deutschen Einheit' celebrations helped obscure its mercantile origins. Only eight years after the close of the Second World War both German states were still recovering in 1953. Although the Construction of Socialism and the forced collectivisation and heavy industrial burden it entailed meant that in 1953 East Germany was also in worse shape than the West, the relative position of the two states was far less significant than it was in 1989.

Economic factors had a huge impact on the evolution and outcomes of the 1953 uprising and the 1989 revolution, but I posit that in the subsequent literature this impact has frequently been muddled with the motivation and aims of the protesters. From a survey of the discourse around the two events, one could get the impression that the 1953 uprising was inspired solely by a yearning for reunification and the 1989 revolution inspired by pecuniary jealousy. This curious inversion will be further explored after an investigation of the protesters, those who inspired them, and an attempt to elucidate what they believed they were fighting for.

6.5 We are the people! The participants in the 1953 uprising and 1989 revolution

Perhaps the most obvious difference between the events of 1953 and the events of 1989 (apart from the outcome) was the duration of the protests and the level of participation by members of the public, church groups, and political forces. It may seem unhelpful to compare the level of participation in a protest movement that lasted months to one that lasted a few weeks and was defeated after a few days. But as Lämmel muses in the introduction to his work *Der 17. Juni und der Herbst 1989 – ein (un)möglicher Vergleich?*, 'schließlich bedeutet Vergleich nicht Gleichsetzen.'¹⁴⁴ and the motivations and aims of the two movements have consistently been considered in tandem in the literature. I suggested at the end of the last section that the motives of the 1953 uprising were potentially more pecuniary in nature whereas the protest movement that led to the 1989 revolution was more focussed on political rights. But from reading the bitter commentaries in newspapers reports and from authors such as Kupferberg it seems that events subsequent to the 1989 revolution have focussed unwarranted attention on the East German demand for Western material goods and have reverse engineered a financial motive. On the other hand, 1953 had spent so long out of the public discussion, that there are few preconceptions about the events – it is therefore ripe for mythologising. This next section will look at the social shape of the 1953 uprising and the 1989 revolution.

¹⁴⁴ Roy Lämmel, *Der 17. Juni und der Herbst 1989 – ein (un)möglicher Vergleich?*, (GRIN Verlag 2003) p. 3 in translation this quote is 'In the end, to compare is not to equate'.

6.5.1 The people of 1953

Ostermann estimates that more than 500,000 people took part in the protests in more than 560 locations across East Germany from the 16th to the 21st of June.¹⁴⁵ In his 2005 article 'Der "17. Juni 1953"; Eine historische Ortsbestimmungen' Ritter adds to this the second wave of protests that took place in July and states that during the June-July period there were incidents in 701 of the 5585 communities in East Germany which involved up to one million people over the course of the Uprising.¹⁴⁶ Many studies have called the uprising of 1953 an 'Arbeiteraufstand' or 'workers uprising' but Ritter argues that the uprising developed out of workers strikes and into a movement that involved people of all classes and backgrounds.¹⁴⁷

In the days leading up to the major protests there were several small-scale industrial strikes. The majority of the protests were stop-work or strike action within the workplace, but some took their message to the streets. The 12th of June, the day after the 'New Course' was announced, came the first such protest where six transport company workers held a demonstration in front of Brandenburg prison and were joined within an hour by a gathering of 5000 people. In their seminal work *Untergang Auf Raten* Mitter and Wolle cite this as evidence that the seething dissatisfaction of the population needed only an excuse to erupt.¹⁴⁸ On the 15th of June party meetings were convened at construction sites in Berlin, officially to thank the party for raising the work norms.

¹⁴⁵ Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). p. 165

¹⁴⁶ Gerhard A. Ritter 'Der "17. Juni 1953"; Eine historische Ortsbestimmungen' in Roger Engelmann & Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk (eds.) *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat: eine Bestandsaufnahme zum 17. Juni 1953* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005) pp 16 – 44. p. 16

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 16

¹⁴⁸ Armin Mitter & Stefan Wolle, *Untergang auf Raten: unbekanntes Kapitel der DDR-Geschichte*, (Bertelsmann, 1995) p. 77. Original quote: Die Geschehnisse vor der Haftanstalt in Brandenburg am 12. Juni machen deutlich, daß es nur eine Anlasses bedurfte, um die angestaute Unzufriedenheit der Bevölkerung zum Ausbruch zu bringen.

Unsurprisingly, the workers themselves expressed opinions that were not in line with this official purpose and the meetings were dominated by protests about the standards.¹⁴⁹ The workers on the construction site at Stalinallee Block 40 decided to send a petition to Grotewohl calling for the higher quotas to be rescinded. Grotewohl's aides advised him not to meet with the delegation and the workers were further frustrated by this apparent show of indifference. On the 16th of June an article in the union newspaper restating the need for the raising of the work norms led some 300 construction workers in Berlin to march on the SED headquarters. The banners they carried indicated that the protest had already broadened to political issues as the workers demanded a real political voice. Protesters on the 16th demanded to speak to Ulbricht and Grotewohl but only minor SED officials would meet with them. They called for a general strike the next day and dispersed. On the 17th of June, groups of workers travelled to main centres to join the protests. 25,000 people had gathered in front of the House of Ministries in Berlin by 9:00 a.m. Shortly after noon the uprising in Berlin was crushed by Soviet tanks. Other cities also had major protests brought down by the military. In Görlitz, for example, a crowd of 30,000 was dispersed by a reinforced armour battalion.¹⁵⁰ It must be noted that these were not peaceful uprisings. The workers resorted to violence in many centres, a small number of party representatives were lynched and infrastructure was destroyed. The violent nature of the uprising is seldom discussed when 1953 is evoked as the predecessor for 1989.

¹⁴⁹ Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). p. 163

¹⁵⁰ 'Document Number 28: Radio Telegram from Vladimir Semyonov Providing Situation Report to Vyacheslav Molotov and Nikolai Bulganin 17 June 1953, as of 2:00 p.m. CET' in Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). pp. 186 - 187

Thus far the workers were directing and instigating the protests but there were women, students and farmers joining the movement as well. The protests that continued through the month of June and into July after the Soviet intervention moved to smaller centres and had a higher proportion of agricultural workers involved.¹⁵¹ These later protests have received less attention in the literature about the 1953 uprisings because they appear to have had a lesser impact on the evolution of GDR policy and response of the SED to the crisis. Although the politburo denounced the uprising as a fascist coup attempt as early as the 18th of July in an article in *Neues Deutschland*, the politburo recognised the seriousness of the situation. A communique from the 21st of June states 'when the masses of workers do not understand the party, then the party is guilty, not the workers.'¹⁵² Ostermann concludes that the lasting impacts of the uprising on the SED state were the expansion of the state security mechanism in the GDR, the SED becoming fearful of the people, and an 'implicit agreement between the regime and labour' which ultimately contributed to the stability of the SED state and the stagnancy of the economy.¹⁵³

Civil society groups and the 1953 uprising

Another interesting line of inquiry is looking at who *wasn't* involved in the 1953 uprisings. When preparing for a comparison to the events of 1989 in which emerging civic groups and church organisations played a visible role we must ask why they played no apparent role in 1953. Analysing an absence may seem like a foolish task, but

¹⁵¹ Gerhard A. Ritter 'Der "17. Juni 1953"; Eine historische Ortsbestimmungen' in Roger Engelmann & Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk (eds.) *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat: eine Bestandsaufnahme zum 17. Juni 1953* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005) pp 16 – 44. p. 28

¹⁵² Peter Grieder, *The East German Leadership 1946 – 1973; Conflict and Crisis*, (Manchester University Press; Manchester and New York, 1999) p. 72

¹⁵³ Christian. F. Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, (Central European University Press, Budapest and New York 2001). p. 416

in the case of the protestant church – which had been singled out for persecution under the Construction of Socialism – the uprisings could have been an opportunity for the church to air its grievances., given that the precedent existed – the persecution of the protestant churches under the Construction of Socialism was not on ideological grounds – the churches had strongly protested the falsified election results in 1950.¹⁵⁴ Afraid of the appeal of religion and the community support the churches received, the church was attacked as a part of the old fascist system, accused of complicity with the National Socialists. Theological students and theologians were thrown in jail as spies, children of religious families refused education, and bishops and other important figures were harassed and kept under surveillance. The SED 'Kirchenkampf' (church war) equated the church to the Nazis.¹⁵⁵ Then, on the 10th of June 1953, Grotewohl announced to a shocked church hierarchy that the persecution was to cease and the state was willing to enter into dialogue. The church had no time to react to this sudden about-face before the June uprising began. The church was unable to meet to decide how it would respond to the uprising and, wary of losing their new-found freedom from persecution, some, such as the bishop of Thüringen, went to great lengths to distance themselves from the protests. However, on the 24th of June, a gathering of church leaders submitted a letter to Semyonov calling for clemency.¹⁵⁶ The reactions of the church show an organisation on the back foot, but their confusion may have worked in their favour in the long run – they could be neither accused of fomenting unrest by the authorities, nor of abandoning the people. As the only major non-governmental civil society group to have survived in the GDR the actions and reactions of the church are representative of how the relative

¹⁵⁴ Bernd Eisenfeld, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, & Ehrhart Neubert, *Die verdrängte Revolution: der Platz des 17. Juni 1953 in der deutschen Geschichte*, (Edition Temmen, 2004) p. 118 - 119

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 118 - 119

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 121

brevity of the 1953 uprising and its brutal suppression and speedy disappearance from public discussion give it huge potential as a historical symbol. Although the proportion of the population involved and the support from the non-governmental groups do not compare with 1989 the limited time-scale repercussions create space for speculation about what could have happened had circumstances been different.

6.5.2 The people of the 1989 revolution

The roots of 1953 are usually traced back to the beginning of the Construction of Socialism. The beginnings of 1989 are harder to pin point. News of Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* initiatives are generally accepted to be the impetus, but it is difficult to know when this news began filtering into the GDR. Maier traces the earliest rumblings of dissent back to January 1988 when the SED began censoring Soviet publications, the disappearance of *Sputnik* magazine from kiosks signalled to the population that the SED was not planning on emulating any of the Soviet reforms.¹⁵⁷ In January of 1989, the first protest in Leipzig – which became an important protest centre – called for the release of prisoners and the demanded that *Sputnik* be reissued.¹⁵⁸ Another factor discussed earlier was the awareness of the population of their situation relative to those in the West through the spread of television in the GDR. The people of Leipzig realised that this medium could also offer an opportunity to press their government for reforms. In March 1989 when the international trade fair was held in Leipzig hundreds of demonstrators called for travel rights in front of Western television cameras and the police were filmed 'roughing up' and arresting demonstrators who fled

¹⁵⁷ Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 121-122

¹⁵⁸ Carol Mueller 'Claim "Radicalization?" The 1989 Protest Cycle in the GDR' *Social Problems*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (Nov., 1999), pp. 528-547, p. 528

into the church.¹⁵⁹ From this time, the Monday night peace prayers at the Nikolaikirche became more crowded and the church resisted state demands to cancel the services. After the disputed elections on the 7th of May the prayer meetings became a recognised centre of protest and the police began menacing attendees with their presence. It is difficult to calculate the proportion of the population involved in the protests in the autumn of 1989. In her paper Mueller instead focuses on the exponential growth of the size of protests during the course of 1989 as they swelled from small peace prayers to a peak of one million in Alexanderplatz in November – at the same time that demonstrations were being held in more and more small provincial centres. There is little doubt that there was broad based support for the protests of 1989; Maier writes that the 'momentum for liberalization was intense'.¹⁶⁰

Civil society in 1989

One key difference between 1953 and 1989 is the development of a political opposition to the SED. This would not have been possible over the short period in which the 1953 uprisings took place; indeed the protestant church did not have a chance to decide upon a unified position before the climax of the uprising had passed. But during 1989 there was the time, the determination and the cultural resources to create ideas about a new future. Maier considers those who were protesting in Leipzig in the earlier months of 1989 to be of two groups;

¹⁵⁹ Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton University Press, 1999. p. 135

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 134

earnest prayer participants motivated by human rights, peace and other public issues [and] the old working classes of the metropolitan area distressed by the region's declining industrial base, decaying housing and inadequate transportation...¹⁶¹

The involvement of the church was less expected, perhaps, than in 1953. From the end of the 1950s the SED had established a state church and protestant religion formed an uneasy truce with the government. However, when the opportunity arose, the church council decided that this time they would be on the side of the people.¹⁶² From a confluence of these two groups came the founding of the New Forum which called for broad based political dialogue. The relationship between the New Forum and the street protests was not direct, with the New Forum distancing itself from the actual demonstrations, but the endorsements that it received from church members, human rights activists, and even pop and rock performers shows the broad public appeal of such an organisation. The fact that the civic movement in East Germany was a movement which called for reform rather than reunification was disregarded in the euphoria following the fall of the Berlin wall. Intellectuals who had supported the protest movement were disappointed by what they saw as the sacrifice of democracy for consumerism. The leaders of civic groups were alarmed by the nationalistic expressions of the people and the press and hoped that reform would win over reunification.¹⁶³ These voices have yet to be reconciled with the creation of a new national story for a Germany that belongs together and exercises its right to be so.

¹⁶¹ Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton University Press, 1999) p. 135

¹⁶² Bernd Eisenfeld, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, & Ehrhart Neubert, *Die verdrängte Revolution: der Platz des 17. Juni 1953 in der deutschen Geschichte*, (Edition Temmen, 2004) p. 126

¹⁶³ Steven Pfaff, *Exit-voice dynamics and the collapse of East Germany: the crisis of Leninism and the revolution of 1989* (Duke University Press, 2006) 196-197

6.5.3 Comparing Volk with Volk; what the comparison tells us

From the distance of over half a century the people of 1953 have crystallised into types.

There are those who worked for the state and there are the common people. Amongst the common people we can see two types, those who participated in the uprising, and those who didn't. Those who did not participate have no place in the history of that time. The historical proximity of the revolution of 1989 makes it more difficult to paint in broad strokes – there is still too much memory, too many mixed opinions, too many counter narratives. But comparison always involves simplification; in order to compare two situations we must find factors which compare or contrast in roughly equal proportions. Thus in comparing a year of peaceful protest culminating in revolution to a brief and violent uprising, we will stretch out some factors and shrink others so they will fit within the framework of the comparison. But even if we accept that in comparing the aims and motivations of the protesters in 1953 and 1989 we are comparing movements that took place on a very different time-scale, there are few points of convergence which can be found. For the purposes of creating a narrative which legitimises reunification by demonstrating that the people of East Germany were always looking for an opportunity to free themselves from SED oppression, only one thing matters – that in both 1953 and 1989 the people called for free and fair all-German elections. But as we can see from the development of the two movements this was never the sole – or even the most important – aim of the people.

7. Conclusions

7.1 The lessons of comparison; the parallels and differences between 1953 and 1989

A recap of the salient points from the comparison between the events of 1953 and 1989 and what can be made of these similarities and differences.

- ♣ The first point examined was the attitudes and actions of West Germany and its Western allies to the 1953 uprising and the 1989 revolution. It was concluded that there was little change in the goals of the west between 1953 and 1989 – West Germany's chief ally, the United States, was willing to support unification but not at the expense of West German involvement in NATO and integration into Western Europe. West Germany had undergone huge changes by 1989. In 1953, a mere eight years after the end of the Second World War the FRG was afraid of being overrun by the Red Army and paranoid about communist revolution from within. In 1989 West Germany was a secure, sovereign state and from its position of strength, West Germany was more able to support the goal of reunification, but it still played no major role in the development of the revolution. The consistency of the Western approach to the protest movements in the GDR both gives and relevant point of comparison and their subdued reaction contributes to the narrative of a people standing against their unjust and unpopular government.
- ♣ Next the similarities between the unpopular leadership of Ulbricht in 1953 and the unpopular leadership of Honecker in 1989 were examined. It is significant for the national story of a reunified Germany that both the major protest movements were movements against the communist leadership and not, as was the case in the Hungarian Uprising and the Prague Spring, movements from

within the party seeking to reform against the wishes of the Soviet Union. Had either of these protest movements been directed against the Soviet Union rather than against the SED state, they would lose much of their potency as evidence that the people of East Germany were seeking freedom and democracy through unification and not through the reform of their own state.

- ✦ It seems strange when we think of the anti-communist protests which have become iconic in the West – the aforementioned Prague Spring and 1956 Hungarian Uprising – that in contrast both of the East German events we have been examining were inspired by Soviet-instigated liberalisations. However, this can be seen as tying back in to the unpopularity of the contemporary leadership. The people of the GDR saw the potential for change from examples within the eastern block when the SED was unable to offer it. This point is more relevant for the 1989 revolution than the 1953 uprising. While the population in 1953 was confused about the new course, in 1989 the people of the GDR rose up when they were denied *glasnost* and *perestroika*. However, in both cases, the protests quickly became calls for free elections. In 1989 there were also voices calling for reform within the GDR but in the comparison these voices fade away.
- ✦ The economic situation in East Germany in both 1953 and 1989 was dire and therefore it is easy to draw a parallel between the situations – but to what end? The state of the East German economy and the size of its debt to West Germany at the time of reunification are probably subjects that historians comparing 1953 and 1989 would like to avoid, such is the residual resentment from both sides of the old divide about the impact of reunification on the German economy. But the economic situation was in both cases part and parcel of the need to reform,

which was recognised by the Soviet masters and picked up by the people of the GDR.

- ✦ Finally this essay considered the comparison in terms of the people involved. This is perhaps the least comparable aspect of the two and the comparison is therefore the most dangerous. By equating the multifarious drawn out protest movement preceding the revolution of 1989 with the short, explosive expression of anger that was the 1953 uprising, the complexity of the 1989 story is lost and the story of 1953 is confused. The disappointment and disillusionment felt by some at the disappearance of their state has no place in that narrative of national unity. So the comparison of 1953 and 1989 becomes a dichotomy, the first failed in the face of military might and this was bad for the people of the GDR, the second succeeded because circumstances were in favour of change and this was good for the people. But if 1953 and 1989 are comparable in their historical circumstances, and not in the aims and desires of their participants surely this should cast significant doubt on the wisdom of the exercise.

The comparison between 1953 and 1989 appears to be *ein möglicher Vergleich* in terms of economic and political circumstances, but *ein unmöglicher Vergleich* in terms of the people and their hope and aims. Despite half a century of social history demonstrating the importance of understanding the lived reality of the common people, the comparison between 1953 and 1989 demonstrates that when politics and history intersect the emotive, triumphant narrative wins out over the complexity of experience.

7.2 The impact on the German story

In the post-Ostalgie world where the discussion of life in the GDR has stopped being presented entirely in the negative, new narratives about East Germany are emerging which are at a sharp variance to the nation building narrative. For example Mark Allinson based his work *Politics and popular opinion in East Germany 1945 – 68* on the assumption that for most of its history the GDR was a stable state. He based this assumption 'on the general absence of popular uprisings and political adventurism, the only notable exception being the events surrounding 17 June 1953.'¹⁶⁴ Allinson's assertion that:

[a] situation of overwhelming active or passive support of the system existed for over forty years is a historical fact, however uncomfortable that might have appeared after 1989 in either eastern or western Germany.¹⁶⁵

contains accusations of complicity that cannot coexist with the narrative of the heroic East German people who took every opportunity to free themselves from oppression. In the face of such challenges the comparison between 1953 and 1989 provides a simple narrative which shows the people of East Germany to have been German patriot-in-waiting for the entire existence of the separate state.

To pose the title of this essay as a question; how is the comparison between the 1953 uprising and the 1989 revolution contributing to a new German story? As a history written to serve a nation-building political narrative, the comparison between 1953 and 1989 has been weighted heavily on the side of *Gleichsetzung* (equation) rather than *Vergleich* (comparison) which does justice to neither the people of 1953 nor of 1989. As

¹⁶⁴ Mark Allinson, *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany 1945 – 68*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York 2000). p. 3

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 4

a historical tool, comparison is useful to elucidate changing social reality, but as a tool of politico-national history writing it must be used with caution. National identity relies on emotive responses from the national group. The 1953 'memory marathon' was not an appeal for the events of 1953 in themselves to be remembered, rather it was an appeal for the German people to identify 1953 as a moment in their history which could be remembered with pride. Through the comparative lens this was also a call for pride in 1989. Through building a new national narrative around the triumph of the German people over unpopular regimes, the unified Germany is reinventing itself in more ways than it seems. The narrative of 1953 and 1989 is not just one which aims to include the people of the former GDR in the national story. Lauding the achievements of the peaceful revolution of 1989 and the courage of the protesters of 1953, is a step back towards a traditional national history. In June of 2003, President Rau told a special session of parliament in Berlin; 'There are so many days in our history associated with defeats or mistakes, June 17 is one of the proud days in German history.'¹⁶⁶ Rau was not calling for the people of Germany to be proud that the frustrated people of East Germany turned to violent protest in 1953, he was appealing to a tradition created in the service of political ideals.

¹⁶⁶ Czuczka, Tony, 'Germans commemorate forgotten 1953 uprising, seeking east-west bond', *Associated Press Worldstream*, June 17 2003

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