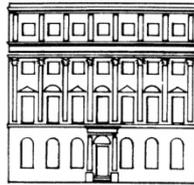


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Martin Sabrow:

A Myth of Unity? German Unification as a Challenge in Contemporary History

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*A MYTH OF UNITY?
GERMAN UNIFICATION AS A CHALLENGE IN
CONTEMPORARY HISTORY*

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At first glance, the title of this article seems slightly inappropriate, since myth and historiography are not really compatible. In everyday language, myth means ‘a distortion of reality, a deformed, false image of a historical process or person, a bloated balloon of legends to be pierced by the historian’s scalpel’.¹ Such a ‘bloated balloon’ also contradicts Germany’s extremely sober and down-to-earth political culture that is perfectly embodied by its chancellor, Angela Merkel, and best described by the term ‘without alternative’. In his recent book on German myths, the well-known political scientist Herfried Münkler described the country as a largely myth-free zone compared with its European neighbours and the United States. Consequently, his study only briefly touches on the Bonn republic and it completely ignores the Berlin republic. Instead, it is mostly dedicated to master narratives of bygone times such as Luther’s ‘Here I stand, I can do no other’, the Miracle of the House of Brandenburg, and the Day of Potsdam.

Indeed, if we follow Münkler in understanding myths as historical master narratives which ‘express the self-confidence of a political entity’, generate ‘trust and courage’, and lay the foundations for a shared national identity,² then despite all attempts by the media and other ‘memorial entrepreneurs’, not even the peaceful revolution of 1989–90 ever acquired the power of a pride-engendering myth, although it undoubtedly possessed the potential to do so. Neither the courageous conductor Kurt Masur, who helped to diffuse the explosive situation on 9 October 1989 by calling on the citizens of Leipzig to adhere to non-violent forms of protest, nor the two Stasi officers

This article is based on a lecture delivered at the German Embassy London, Belgrave Square, on 16 Sept. 2015. Trans. Jane Rafferty (GHIL).

¹ Matthias Waechter, ‘Mythos’, Version: 1.0, *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 11 Feb. 2010, <<https://docupedia.de/zg/Mythos>>, accessed 26 Aug. 2015.

² Herfried Münkler, *Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen* (Berlin, 2009), 9–10.

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Edwin Görnitz and Harald Jäger, who decided on their own to open the barrier at the border crossing point at Bornholmer Straße only one month later, nor the brave pastor of Leipzig's St Nicholas church, Christian Führer, who had been holding prayers for peace since 1987 that later became the pivotal point for the Monday mass demonstrations against the regime – none of these brave people have ever been considered heroic figures who could populate a mythical narrative of German unification.

Finally, empirical evidence also belies the mythical qualities of any account of the unity of the two Germanys. Twenty years after *Spiegel* magazine asked 'Has German unity become just a myth?', the question can be answered unambiguously. Regarded as a distant utopia or political delusion for about twenty years, it simply became a fact. In the year of its twenty-fifth anniversary, the level of unity and integration may still raise many questions, but certainly not the mere political act of reuniting the two countries on 3 October 1990.

Will this article founder on the problem that German unity is not a myth but a reality? Perhaps the very fact that it is so readily accepted as a historical fact should make us suspicious. The power of historical myths has always rested on the belief that their advocates and contemporaries consider them not as a delusion but as a reality, as a fact that cannot be questioned. This assessment should cast doubt on whether the German present really is a largely myth-free zone. Thus the question continues to be: German unity – a myth or not?

The Teleological Transition from Contingency to Continuity

In a review of Tom Holland's *Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic*, Michael Sommer recently defended the British author's proposition that spontaneous, irrational, and often hazardous behaviour by individuals can dramatically change history. Sommer called it a 'truth that historians do not like to face', noting that 'they painstakingly search for sense and system in something that often stubbornly defies systematization; blocking out contingency is the historian's "vocational disease"'.³

³ Michael Sommer, 'Caesar als Aufmischer der Geschichte', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 25 Aug. 2015.

The unification of 1990 represents precisely such a transition from contingency to continuity. When the socialist experiment suddenly ended and the GDR dissolved into Western society, those who did not share the 'blessings of the late born' were ripped out of their familiar mental landscape in a way they had not anticipated. The unopposed erosion of the SED regime in 1989–90 and the development towards German unity both happened at a breath-taking pace, and were unforeseen by any politician. Both processes exceeded all political expectations and strategies, went beyond the public imagination, and also gave the lie to the prognostic abilities of German social and political scientists. A statement by Hans-Otto Bräutigam, the Federal Republic's permanent representative in East Berlin, perfectly demonstrates everybody's cluelessness. As late as January 1989 he stated: 'I cannot see that the GDR is under any external pressure to reform.' Even after a change in leadership and generation, he went on, there would be no change in policy. The GDR was not a country for dramatic change. Democratization as understood by the West was virtually unimaginable.⁴

Erich Honecker was also profoundly convinced of the GDR's stability when he declared at a conference held on 19 January 1989 to mark the five hundredth anniversary of Thomas Münzer's birth: 'The wall [Berlin Wall] will still be standing in fifty and even a hundred years if the reasons for it have not been removed.'⁵ Western experts on the GDR thought along the same lines and Gert-Joachim Glaeßner encapsulated them when he stated in 1988: 'In the fifteen years of the Honecker era, the GDR has gained international standing and inner stability.' Even one year later, in 1989, he was still able to maintain his analysis without any criticism. According to him, what was important was for the GDR to 'consolidate its achievements and to set the points for a crisis-free development of GDR society up to the turn of the century. Not without good reason, the GDR is able confidently to take stock of the Honecker era.'⁶ As with scholars, so with politicians:

⁴ Quoted from <http://www.2plus4.de/chronik.php3?date_value=02.01.89&sort=000-000>, accessed 24 Sept. 2015.

⁵ *Neues Deutschland*, 20 Jan. 1989, quoted from <http://www.2plus4.de/chronik.php3?date_value=07.07.89&sort=000-000>, accessed 2 Aug. 2016.

⁶ Joachim Glaeßner, *Die DDR in der Ära Honecker: Politik – Kultur – Gesellschaft* (Opladen, 1988), 11; id., *Die andere deutsche Republik: Gesellschaft und Politik in der DDR* (Opladen, 1989), 73.

in 1989, Zbigniew Brzezinski, summing up the 'failed communist experiment', called the GDR the only Eastern bloc state with relative stability and the potential for economic development.⁷

After 1989, German historians quickly agreed to regard this failure with a shake of the head and to explain why contemporary analysts did not see the end of the GDR coming in terms of regrettable moral indifference or professional blindness. The upheaval of 1989–90 was a dramatic turning point that radically transformed the thoughts and actions of contemporaries and gave them a new benchmark that no historiography could ever have anticipated. It gave way to a ground-breaking new perspective, and 1989 became the end point of a historical development that challenged people to reorganize their understanding of the world. It absorbed its own historicity to such an extent that any counter-factual view became pointless. The irresistible power of this turning point steers the retrospective reorganization of historical knowledge. It has opened up new intellectual horizons that the discipline cannot cope with and has transformed what was once considered impossible into something that, in retrospect, was inevitable, thereby making previously popular studies on the German question irrelevant. The power of the factual rapidly replaced the old paradigm with a new one, and historians reacted by making helpless attempts at an explanation while desperately trying to find an answer to the question of why they had not seen it coming. Exaggerating polemically, Klaus von Beyme once described 9 November 1989 as the Black Friday of the social sciences.⁸ The self-conception of historiography as a scholarly discipline, however, has remained intact; it has, indeed, redoubled its efforts to restructure its diachronic orientation towards the epochal turning point of 1989.

Only in retrospect do the many hidden omens of the approaching fall of the Eastern bloc come together to form a recognizable and meaningful pattern. Today it all seems so obvious to us. We can only imagine the last general secretaries of the various Soviet satellite states as anachronistic gerontocrats who, at some point, lost touch

⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Das gescheiterte Experiment: Der Untergang der kommunistischen Systeme* (Vienna, 1989), 239.

⁸ Jens Hacker, *Deutsche Irrtümer: Schönfärber und Helfershelfer der SED-Diktatur im Westen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1993); Klaus von Beyme, *Systemwechsel in Osteuropa* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), 36. Most recently see also Eckhard Jesse, 'Das Ende der DDR: Essay', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 33/34 (2015), 18–25.

with reality and were simply overtaken by events. Not without reason did the saying 'He who comes late is punished by life' become the swan song of state socialism, with the picture of Gorbachev showing Honecker his watch as its iconic symbol. Regardless of its actual historical relevance, the caesura of 1989 has acquired a power that is still actively shaping not only historiography but also our 'world of meaning'.⁹ It thus discredits any possible alternative historical developments that can barely be imagined. The path to German unity has become a sacrosanct master narrative of the twentieth century that it is now one of the key components of Western identity – and this is exactly what gives it a mythical significance.

The Teleological Ordering Power of the Unity Narrative

This master narrative turned 3 October 1990 into the endpoint of a long and arduous path that finally resulted in Germany's reunification. Although Francis Fukuyama's overstatement that the end of the Cold War equalled the end of history was a triumphant prophecy that was quickly abandoned,¹⁰ the years 1989–90 are still seen as a historical benchmark on which all political acting was concentrated. In the introduction of the German Unification Treaty we read:

The Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic,
 Resolved to achieve in free self-determination the unity of Germany
 in peace and freedom as an equal partner in the community of nations
 . . .
 In grateful respect to those who peacefully helped freedom prevail
 and who have unwaveringly adhered to the task of establishing
 German unity and are achieving it . . .
 Have agreed to conclude a Treaty on the Establishment of German
 Unity.¹¹

⁹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY, 1966), 59–61.

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London, 1992).

¹¹ <http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=78>, accessed 1 July 2016.

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These words perfectly demonstrate the great power of this teleological hindsight as a leading paradigm that has absorbed not only all historical alternatives, but also the former validity of Germany's division and the existence of two German states as a benchmark of contemporary history.

The mythical quality of this narrative presents a challenge to contemporary history. After 1990 the policy of détente was subjected to intense criticism because it was no longer asked whether it had made German-German co-existence easier, but whether it had held fast to the aim of German unity. Egon Bahr, for instance, who died in 2015, was accused of wheeling and dealing enthusiastically with those in power while giving the cold shoulder to the powerless in the GDR opposition. Questioned by a Federal Commission of Enquiry in 1994, Bahr tried in vain to claim that the SPD's German policy had aimed to stabilize the GDR while simultaneously working towards unification. This is what he said: 'Destabilizing goals could not be reached without stabilizing factors. Kennedy put it this way: you have to recognize the status quo if you want to change it.'¹² Former GDR civil rights lawyer Gerd Poppe responded with the crucial counter-question of whether this was not a final example of hindsight? 'If you already saw it that way at the time, and if the aim was supposed to be destabilization, why were some oppositional groups still accused in 1989 of having a destabilizing and therefore destructive influence; some even called it an influence that threatened the peace.'¹³ At the same meeting, the Commission's chairman, Rainer Eppelmann, speaking for the opposition in the GDR, also subjected himself to the master narrative of 'unity' when he self-critically admitted: 'For the time being, we understood the talks about "German Unity", which happened earlier in the East and then later in the West as well, as a weapon in the struggle. As a short-term political goal German unity was not an issue for us.'¹⁴

The teleological power of the unity myth of a lasting and predestined unity of the two Germanys is most strongly expressed when it

¹² *Enquete-Kommission Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland*, vol. v, pt. 1 (Baden-Baden, 1995), minutes of the 52nd session, 3 Nov. 1993, p. 756.

¹³ *Ibid.* 794–5.

¹⁴ Minutes of the 52nd session, 3 Nov. 1993, 737.

silences opposing options. For example, the dream of a Third Way, of a democratically revived GDR, which was once widespread amongst the West German left and the GDR opposition is barely remembered. The revolutionary upheaval of 1989–90 has not established itself as a site of memory that represents people’s hopes for a democratic form of socialism that could reconcile capitalism with the benefits of the GDR’s planned economy. Instead, it represents, in present public memory, a movement for national freedom and unity that culminated in the end of the forty-year division of Germany. Public memory is dominated by a narrative that sees the opening of the border on 9 November 1989 from the point of view of German unification on 3 October 1990.¹⁵ From a perspective that interprets the peaceful revolution as a linear chain of events that led from freedom to unity,¹⁶ contemporary ideas and scenarios of a socialist and democratic GDR are marginalized and seen as the weird fantasies of outsiders who had lost all contact with the people and political options in the given situation.

However, this is a retrospective distortion of what really happened. Contemporary accounts teach us just how strongly the idea of unity of 3 October 1990 overshadowed the hope for freedom of 9 November 1989. In the autumn of 1989, many observers of the radical changes in East Germany and the mood of rebellion they unleashed were quite understandably convinced that the overall consensus among the people of the GDR was in favour of turning their country

¹⁵ Gerhard A. Ritter, *Wir sind das Volk! Wir sind ein Volk! Geschichte der deutschen Einigung* (Munich, 2009), stands for an interpretation that sees the peaceful revolution primarily from the point of view of German unification.

¹⁶ One example among many: ‘Für die Deutschen ist sie schon deshalb etwas Einzigartiges, da es die erste Revolution war, die erfolgreich die Ideen von Freiheit und Nation miteinander verband. Unmittelbar und ohne Umwege ging aus ihr die Bundesrepublik als ein geeinter Nationalstaat hervor. Schon deswegen ist sie “unsere Revolution”. Aber auch weil sie sich im Zusammenhandeln und –wirken von West und Ost vollzog und vollendete.’ (For the Germans it was unique because it was the first revolution that successfully linked the idea of freedom with that of nation. The Federal Republic emerged from it as a unified nation-state directly, without detours. For that reason alone it is ‘our revolution’. But also because it took place and was completed as a result of East and West acting and working together.) Ehrhart Neubert, *Unsere Revolution: Die Geschichte der Jahre 1989/90* (Munich, 2008), 13.

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into a 'socialist-inspired alternative to the consumer society of the FRG',¹⁷ one that tried to leave behind both Stalinism and Thatcherism.¹⁸ This interpretation dovetails with numerous statements published by opposition groups founded around 1989: 'It is not about reforms that do away with socialism, but about reforms that will continue to make it possible in this country', declared an artists' resolution of 18 September 1989, revealing what the majority of the political opposition was thinking and hoping for during the SED regime's final crisis.¹⁹ 'No one ever demanded the end of socialism, no one ever thought of the end of socialism.'²⁰ Even if individual opposition groups were pursuing very different ideas of a Third Way, there can be no doubt that the movement was generally oriented towards 'an alternative socialism', not 'an alternative to socialism'.²¹

¹⁷ This is Hubertus Knabe's view of the common viewpoint taken by the texts critical of the regime that he edited in an anthology published in Dec. 1989. Hubertus Knabe, 'Die deutsche Oktoberrevolution', in id. (ed.), *Aufbruch in eine andere DDR: Reformer und Oppositionelle zur Zukunft ihres Landes* (Reinbek, 1989), 9–20, at 19.

¹⁸ 'In East Germany, New Forum and other groups are beginning to polarise along new lines. Some seek to influence the reform wing of the ruling Communist Party in a more social democratic direction. Others want to fight for a distinctive third camp, socialism based on new forms of popular democratic planning, and on social and co-operative ownership—equally opposed to Stalinism and East European-style neo-Thatcherism.' John Palmer, 'Eastern Bloc in Search of a Third Way', *Guardian*, 22 Nov. 1989, 23.

¹⁹ Quoted from Christoph Geisel, *Auf der Suche nach einem dritten Weg: Das politische Selbstverständnis der DDR-Opposition in den achtziger Jahren* (Berlin, 2005), 68–9.

²⁰ Frank Eigenfeld, 'Bürgerrechtsbewegungen 1988–1990 in der DDR', in Andrea Pabst, Catharina Schultheiß, and Peter Bohley (eds.), *Wir sind das Volk? Ostdeutsche Bürgerrechtsbewegungen und die Wende* (Tübingen, 2001), 65–78, at 68.

²¹ Sung-Wan Choi, *Von der Dissidenz zur Opposition: Die politisch alternativen Gruppen in der DDR von 1978 bis 1989* (Cologne, 1999), 116. As an example of the research literature that cites a great deal of empirical evidence to demonstrate that the socialist opposition's goals were teleologically watered down see also Dirk Rohtus, *Zwischen Realität und Utopie: Das Konzept des 'dritten Weges' in der DDR 1989/90* (Leipzig, 1999), 201 ff.; Geisel, *Auf der Suche nach einem dritten Weg*, 55 ff.; Thomas Klein, 'Frieden und Gerechtigkeit!': *Die Politisierung der Unabhängigen Friedensbewegung in Ost-Berlin während der 80er Jahre* (Cologne, 2007), 512 ff.

How incompatible this idea of a Third Way was with the aims and interests of the protesting masses became clear in the first weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall when the number of GDR citizens in favour of 'a path towards a better, reformed socialism' dropped from 86 per cent to 56 per cent of the population, while those in favour of unification rose from 48 per cent to 79 per cent within only four months.²² At the same time, the leading opposition group Neues Forum proclaimed as its goal 'that something like a GDR identity should emerge which, after forty years of decrees from above, might now have the opportunity to grow from below'.²³ In the period that followed the hope for an improved form of socialism in the GDR became the irrelevant opinion of a tiny minority that did not play any significant part in the first free elections for the People's Chamber on 18 March 1990. At the same time, the ever louder calls for unity in East Germany started to put pressure on politicians not only in Bonn and Berlin, but also in Moscow, London, and Paris, who had been hesitant so far.

It is true that the power of teleological narratives and the challenging task facing historians of dealing with contingency have given German unification some features of a myth of contemporary history. To some degree this relativizes the initial proposition that Germany is a largely myth-free zone. Yet there is no doubt that the efficacy of this myth can hardly be compared with other national myths of unity, such as the Italian Risorgimento or the Polish rebirth of 1918, at least not yet, and it has nowhere near the status of the unification of the German empire in 1870–1. But the question is why?

Challenges of Unification

A first and fairly obvious reason for the low appeal of any mythological account of German unity is, of course, that over the past quarter of a century political unity has not led to any real, heartfelt unity in society. To the present day, the project of unification has proved to be a political rather than a societal success story, and the controver-

²² Peter Förster and Günter Roski, *DDR zwischen Wende und Wahl: Meinungsforscher analysieren den Umbruch* (Berlin, 1990), 53, 56.

²³ *Mitteilungsblatt des Neuen Forum*, no. 5, 14 Nov. 1989, quoted from Geisel, *Auf der Suche nach einem dritten Weg*, 148.

sial Day of German Unity on 3 October is seen more as a holiday when the state celebrates itself than one celebrated by the people, as recent surveys have unanimously shown.²⁴ In particular, the often traumatic experiences resulting from biographical breaks caused by the transition have barely penetrated public consciousness. It took twenty years for the self-proclaimed Third Generation East, a group of people who were children or teenagers in 1989, to insist on addressing these experiences. And it was only in 2015, twenty-five years later, that an exhibition at the German National Museum of History entitled 'Alltag Einheit' focused on East Germans' experience of having to adjust rapidly to an entirely different system. The daily lives of East Germans changed dramatically in the wake of reunification. Three years after the GDR adopted the German Basic Law, fewer than one in three workers still had their old jobs.

It is only with the benefit of hindsight that it becomes clear how bumpy the path to inner unity has been, and how often it has led to a dead end. Shortly afterwards, however, West Germany was also subjected to far-reaching changes as the result of globalization, medicalization, and digitization. To a certain extent, therefore, it is legitimate to speak of intertwined changes in a doubly divided history, in which the neoliberal reconstruction of the socialist society after 1990 eventually led to analogous 'co-transformations' in the West.²⁵ It was only in East Germany, however, that language, values, and certainties changed drastically and, along with them, people's work lives, their overall outlook, and familiar hierarchies and concepts. In a historically unprecedented way, the unification of Germany not only seized the future of most East Germans, but also took hold of their past.

After 1989 'memory mania', a strong desire to come to terms with the past, quickly replaced the partial consensus on keeping silent about the burdened past after 1945. It prevented any professional continuity of the old GDR elite with an inexorable harshness that contrasted strongly with the resolute reintegration of German post-war society. It is no coincidence that nothing undermined the repu-

²⁴ Vera Caroline Simon, 'Tag der Deutschen Einheit: Festakt und Live-Übertragung im Wandel', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 33-34 (2015), 11-17, at 12.

²⁵ Frank Bösch, 'Geteilte Geschichte: Plädoyer für eine deutsch-deutsche Perspektive auf die deutsche Zeitgeschichte', *Zeithistorische Forschungen*, 12/1 (2015), 98-114; Philipp Ther, *Die neue Ordnung auf dem alten Kontinent: Eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europa* (Frankfurt am Main, 2014), 97.

tation of the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former GDR as much as the fact that among almost 2,000 people employed by his agency, forty-seven former Stasi employees were still in their jobs as drivers or doormen in 2009.

From a socio-political and economic point of view, the result of the German unification project is ambivalent, as is the scholarly verdict. Today, the infrastructure of Eastern Germany is generally assessed as good. But its financial power is still lower and its unemployment rate higher than that of West Germany; in 2015 the East had an unemployment rate of 9 per cent while in the West it was 5.7 per cent. And as far as the economy is concerned, companies tend to use the five new federal states mainly as production sites and sales territories while keeping their headquarters in the West.

The delegitimization of the SED dictatorship, the debate about whether the GDR was an unjust state, a rogue state, and the public equation of the Nazi regime with the SED regime were additional factors that sustained cultural differences between East and West—and probably even intensified them. Twenty-six years after the peaceful revolution of 1989, many East Germans still feel like ‘second-class citizens’.²⁶

Yet over the last ten years, conflicts about German unity have become noticeably less intense. On earlier anniversaries, the public and media discourse was dominated by the theme of how unification had actually divided the country and failed. In the 1990s the key term was *Vereinigungskrise* or ‘unification crisis’. On the fifteenth and twentieth anniversaries, it was all about how the *Treuhand* had failed and how the once promised ‘flourishing landscapes’ had become abandoned landscapes: the emphasis was on division rather than on unity, and unification was generally discussed as a burden and a nuisance. These times are apparently over. Unification has lost its pathos, but also its potential to enrage. In 2015 we witnessed an increasingly pragmatic approach with the public discourse tending more and more to accept a continuing ‘diversity in unity’. Scholars would call this the ‘simultaneity of convergence and difference . . . in the political and social culture’ of present-day Germany.²⁷ Euphoria

²⁶ Richard Schröder, ‘Versöhnung—mit wem? Warum die Linke nicht ausgegrenzt ist’, *Der Spiegel*, 9 Nov. 2009.

²⁷ Everhard Holtmann and Tobias Jaeck, ‘Was denkt und meint das Volk?

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and disappointment team up in a pragmatic arrangement while the term ‘unification crisis’ is viewed as an anachronism.²⁸ In East Germany, trust in institutions and the overall acceptance of the political system still clearly lag behind West German levels, but the former gap in identification with the German system has become smaller and smaller. In autumn 2014 ‘democracy as we find it in Germany’ had the support of 90 per cent of the population of Western Germany, and 72 per cent of that of Eastern Germany, that is, 31 per cent more than in 1991.²⁹ Today in both East and West, four out of five Germans think that the advantages of German unification ‘all in all . . . outweigh’ the disadvantages, and a vast majority of the East German population confirms that they have personally benefited from unification.³⁰

Talking about the End while Facing a New Beginning

There is a third factor that detracts from the power of the myth of German unity, and this is the historical burden that the history of German unification bore. The conflict in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation brings us back to the question of whether or not the West promised Moscow that NATO would not expand eastwards during German unification and the Two Plus Four talks. The Greek crisis has revived concerns about Germany becoming too strong again within Europe – the same concerns that in 1990 turned Margaret Thatcher, François Mitterand, and Giulio Andreotti into firm but ultimately powerless opponents of German unification. The radicalization of the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland) is largely attributable to strong East German support for a political leader from Saxony who took over the party in the early summer of 2015, forcing the former spokesman from the West to step down. In addition, the xenophobic

Deutschland im dritten Jahrzehnt der Einheit’, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 33–34 (2015), 35–45, at 36.

²⁸ Jesse, ‘Ende’, 23.

²⁹ Holtmann and Jaeck, ‘Was denkt und meint das Volk?’, 37.

³⁰ The corresponding figures are 77 per cent of the East Germans against 62 per cent of the West Germans; *ibid.* 42.

Pegida movement (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident), although it is an all-German phenomenon, is largely supported by those in East Germany who are disappointed by German unification. The movement does not stand for a cohesive right-wing extremist ideology, but addresses diffuse feelings among the lower middle classes—and they mostly attract people from the rural regions of eastern Germany.

Frank Richter, director of the Saxon Regional Centre for Political Education, has conveyed this diffuse feeling of always losing: ‘They are dancing at the opera ball in Dresden. The wolves howl in the Lausitz. Now we are going to the demo.’³¹ This gives expression to a dissatisfaction specific to those East Germans who have still not come to terms with the politically liberal state of things that assailed them during German unification and made them feel emotionally alienated. Two hundred and fifteen out of a total of 359 attacks on refugees and their homes took place in the East; and although only 17 per cent of recent acts of violence in Germany were xenophobic in nature, 60 per cent of these occurred in the East.³² ‘Dark Germany’ (to quote an expression coined by the later Federal President Joachim Gauck) rears its ugly head mainly in those places where people could not express themselves freely in the public sphere before 1989, and where life was not dominated by the culture of a civil society as it had developed in the West. This came to the fore more assertively than anywhere else in the context of the refugee wave in the summer of 2015, when cries such as ‘We are the vermin’ in the ‘valley of the susceptible’ could be heard in southern Saxony. The hateful graffiti daubed on refugee accommodation and the arson attacks from Berlin to Dresden to Usedom cannot be understood without looking at the history of the division and re-unification of the two Germanys. Every day it becomes more apparent that German reunification has not been the crowning finale but rather the sinister beginning of a story that is still unfolding, as the tragedy of the refugees stranded at the edge of fortress Europe has taught us. ‘Strange as it may seem, the fall of the

³¹ Frank Richter, ‘Der Pegida-Komplex und die politische Kultur des Landes’, <https://www.slpb.de/fileadmin/media/OnlineWissen/Texte/DH123_Richter.pdf>, accessed 1 Sept. 2016.

³² Quoted from Florian Flade, Michael Ginsburg, and Karsten Kammholz, ‘Osten wehrt sich gegen Nazi-Image’, *Welt am Sonntag*, 30 Aug. 2015.

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Berlin Wall was not the beginning of unlimited freedom for Europe, but introduced an era of fences', as *Der Tagesspiegel* recently put it.³³

Positive and Negative Memory

The last and most deeply rooted reason for the limited power of the unity myth lies in the nature of German historical culture. The German dominant culture of remembrance places less emphasis on obligations arising from tradition than on the liberating break with it. The German dialogue with the past has become cathartic and not mimetic. Nowadays it thrives primarily on dissociation and overcoming, not on traditional obligations and the longing for continuity. The lines involved are clearly drawn: they distinguish between the Western culture of distancing oneself from the past and a culture of affirmation as seen, for example, in Russia or Turkey. There commissions have been created to defend the imperialistic perception of history before Stalin, a fifty-six metre high bronze statue of Peter the Great has been erected on the banks of the Moskva river, and criticism of the Armenian genocide or former complicity in the persecution of the Jews is considered an attack on national honour.

This way of dealing with the past, as critical as it is obsessive, reveals a certain mindset: the more unpleasant the memory is, the less it evokes pride in the past. The more intensely German memory culture holds on to it, the more it generates shame and pain. Therefore it is not the heroes who are at the centre of our present historical culture, but the victims. Our time is characterized not by proud narratives about unity and freedom, but by historical traumas suffered by some and inflicted by others. The paradigm shift from historical heroization to historical victimization is not, of course, only a German trend, but more generally an Occidental one. It is most understandable in the way that the Holocaust has become the key reference point in Western self-understanding, at least since the famous Holocaust conference in Stockholm. More than forty European countries took part in this conference, which laid the foundations for the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and for a pioneering declaration which reads as follows: 'The Holocaust (Shoah) funda-

³³ Silviu Mihai, 'Mauert sich Europa ein?', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 30 Aug. 2015.

mentally challenged the foundations of civilization. The unprecedented character of the Holocaust will always hold universal meaning.³⁴

Today's predominantly victim-centred commemorative culture has replaced the evocation of glory by dealing with historical guilt. The associated shift from a mimetic culture of pride to a cathartic culture of coming to terms with the past makes it much more difficult for the symbols of a glorious past than those of a dark past to come to the fore in the public sphere. 'Is it possible to exhibit freedom?' asks the Rastatt Memorial Centre, one of Germany's key memory sites 'for the freedom movements in German history', which was founded with reference to the 1848 revolution.³⁵ It is no coincidence that the planned 'monument to freedom and unity' that is to be erected at Berlin's Schlossfreiheit already has a very troubled history. After an unsuccessful first attempt, the Bundestag decided in 2007 that the monument would be inaugurated in 2014, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Peaceful Revolution. It could not be completed on that symbolic date, however, for reasons that were more historical-political than structural in nature.

The monument to unity, which resembles a giant see-saw (and is known colloquially as the *Einheitswippe*), is mocked in public as 'the elephant of the nation'. It has been likened to a toy 'that was desired for a long time, but seen up close just in time'. The malice displayed by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* towards this 'public entertainment installation' symbolized the difficulty of strengthening public awareness of the value of positive memory: 'It does not rock, it does not work.'³⁶ The inauguration of the monument was therefore first postponed until the twenty-fifth anniversary of German unity in 2015, and then obviously skipped again, as has become apparent.³⁷

³⁴ Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust <<https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/about-us/stockholm-declaration>>, accessed 1 Sept. 2016.

³⁵ <http://www.bundesarchiv.de/imperia/md/content/dienstorte/rastatt/lerngang_freiheit.pdf>, accessed 10 Apr. 2015.

³⁶ Andreas Kilb, 'Der Elefant der Nation: Das Einheitsdenkmal wird endgültig zur Farce', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 July 2014.

³⁷ 'It is still unclear when the planned monument to freedom and unity in Berlin will be inaugurated. This was announced by the Senate Administration

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'The see-saw is hanging in the balance', taunted the same newspaper again and suggested a radical solution: 'It will be expensive, it gives the wrong impression, and it has no facilities for wheelchair-users. Would it not be better to stop the construction of the monument to unity in Berlin?'³⁸

As this example shows, the main reason for the weakness, even failure, of a new German myth of unity and national pride is not the critical objection of historiography, but the culture of commemoration of our post-national German nation. In an age of ever increasing individualization and transnationalization, this has come to distrust all collective symbols and no longer believes in the power of principles such as 'Volk' and 'unity'. This scepticism goes hand in hand with the state's cautious approach to the anniversary of German unification in the first years after 1990, caused by clear concerns about a new and perhaps somewhat gloating patriotism. With this in mind, Federal President Roman Herzog warned his fellow countrymen in 1994 'not to our keep love for our country secret for a moment, but to express it very quietly'.³⁹ The leading German daily newspapers' doubtful comments about the planned monument to unity point in the same direction: 'Big bowls, especially if one can read on them "We are *one* people" or "We are *the* people" [the people par excellence, one could ask?], can evoke unpleasant memories of the fire bowls at the Nazi Party's rallies in Nuremberg.'⁴⁰

The concept of a monument to unity has, in the meantime, been cancelled. But even if it had been erected, it would not have testified to the power of the unity myth; rather, its statement would have turned into its opposite, as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* had already predicted during the debate about its plausibility: 'There may be a certain truth for particular periods included involuntarily in the monument. At the same time, the whole monument with its church congress-like anti-individualism shows the people up there

on Thursday.' 'Verzögerungen im Bau: Berliner Einheitsdenkmal kommt später', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 29 May 2015.

³⁸ Niklas Maak, 'Berliner Einheitsdenkmal: Die Wippe auf der Kippe', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24 Aug. 2015.

³⁹ Quoted from Simon, 'Tag der deutschen Einheit', 12.

⁴⁰ Niklas Maak, 'Berliner Einheitsdenkmal: Die Wippe auf der Kippe', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24 Aug. 2015.

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that they can only stand there because the mass is carrying them from underneath. This is perhaps a realistic picture of the desperate aesthetic and political state of things in the Berlin republic.⁴¹ This kind of carping may sound ironic, but it exposes the core of our present historical culture, which has bowed out of the idea of the nation, and is now laying the foundations for future historical myths. These will be shaped by the idea of having to come to terms with even the most painful past, rather than by trying to glorify just parts of it.

⁴¹ Simon, 'Tag der deutschen Einheit', 12.

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