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## THE LEGACY OF TWO DICTATORSHIPS AND DEMOCRATIC CULTURE IN UNITED GERMANY

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### I

The political culture of a democracy stands in stark contrast to that of a dictatorship, hence the great importance in Germany of coming to grips with the history and consequences of the dictatorship of the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands – Socialist Unity Party of Germany). With this in mind, the German Bundestag has created an inquiry commission to analyse the “totalitarian power structure of the GDR dictatorship”, “do historical justice to the victims”, “contribute to the inner unification of the Germans” and “ensure a basic democratic consensus in united Germany”. These goals are also served by numerous other investigations, publications of documents, biographical memoirs and the evaluation of the Stasi files on individuals. The focus here is frequently placed on a personalization of the system’s features and a judging of individual behaviour in moral categories. Yet the system of informers, the blackmail and the calculating opportunism are not the causes, but the effects of the SED dictatorship. Moral judgements must bear in mind the context within which people acted, and this was determined by features of the GDR’s political, economic and social order. An analysis of the system’s characteristics and their impact on people’s way of life and their self-perception provides insights into the functioning of an undemocratic order, but does not help understand a democratic system.

The need to come to grips with the SED dictatorship is of great, albeit asymmetrical importance in creating a political culture for all of Germany. At issue is a system of rule that constituted a “shell of obedience” for those who lived under it. But that accounts for only 20% of the population of united Germany. East Germans may be interested in knowing how the system functioned under which they lived but only understood imperfectly. It is important for them to learn about the technique of rule which held sway over them and which was kept “secret” by the SED as far as possible. They need to think critically about the ideology of the GDR, in which they were systematically socialized. It may prove helpful for them to recognize the structural foundation

for the extent of their own conformity, which at times may be felt as a burden. The shortages, the restrictions on the individual's freedom of action and the ritualized appeals for obedience were easy to perceive. The underlying problem of dictatorships resides in the cognitive imprint of categories for experiencing reality and for forming one's opinion, even if this was not always clear to the individual. Ideology and everyday experiences in the GDR gave rise to order and judgement criteria that affected everyone, even those who had not developed any emotional or normative ties to the GDR system.

The SED dictatorship defined and controlled the political culture more rigorously than it did everyday life. Rejection of the political system in the Federal Republic went hand in hand with a tolerating of elements of everyday Western culture, which found their way into the GDR through the media. Clothing fashion, popular music, consumer standards and films were well known in the GDR. But Western political culture remained alien, and what television from the Federal Republic exposed was virtually meaningless, abstract and incomprehensible. Only a small minority of synod members of the Protestant Church was familiar with the procedures by which in a democracy opinions were formed and decisions taken; many of the civil rights advocates of the first hour who were in a position to negotiate at the "round tables" came from within their midst.

What makes the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic political culture so difficult is that the values of a political culture are relatively abstract and their institutionalization in pluralistic organizations complex. The celebrated remark of Bärbel Bohley – "We demanded justice and got a State based on the rule of law" ("Wir haben Gerechtigkeit gefordert und den Rechtsstaat bekommen") graphically illustrates the transition difficulties that even those in the GDR opposition experienced. In the beginning of the former Federal Republic, it was equally common to say that it was a democracy without democrats, which is not to suggest that the population was against democracy, but that a political culture gradually developed that was consistent with the values and workings of a democracy.

The coming to grips and the reevaluation of the GDR part is imperative for the East Germans, but for the West Germans it remains without existential components or normative consequences, they can learn little from this discussion of GDR and SED history. The West Germans always knew that the GDR was economically inefficient, was lacking as a democracy, restricted civil rights and tolerated no public opinion. That was plain to see whenever they crossed the border, even if they were just going to or coming from West Berlin. Nothing essential is added to this basic perception by historical research and structural analysis. A better comprehension of the conditions under which

East Germans had to live could, however, make for a greater understanding for East German biographies and susceptibilities. But this will not dispel the “coldness” and “distance” of the West Germans that the East Germans often criticize, and no doubt with justification. The West Germans lack the actual personal involvement, the experience of having one’s life steered by the party and State structure and the existential reflection of this experience in one’s own past, its construction and reconstruction. The East Germans certainly have a right to be shown interest and even compassion, but only as individuals. On the other hand, their collective experience and concerns, which are inseparable from the GDR system, can “teach” West Germans nothing of any use for the political culture in united Germany. Wolfgang Thierse (in Klaus Sühl, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, p. 30 f.) is right when he says that coming to grips with the past is a form of “political and moral self-education and self-renewal”, in which West Germans must also take part. But an analysis of the GDR dictatorship offers no constructive arguments, examples or model systems for the “readiness to change something in the status quo of the old Federal Republic” that he calls for. The self-criticism of the Federal Republic follows other criteria. Thus, as we have already said, a coming to grips with the GDR dictatorship is of asymmetrical relevance for the political culture of united Germany. At most, it strengthens a special East German consciousness and accentuates the difference between East and West Germans, rather than bringing them together.

## II

German history is complicated, fragmented and repeatedly interrupted. The Germans are the only people in Europe to have actively taken part in both great twentieth century movements against parliamentary democracy and the project for a civil society, Fascism and Communism. That at the end of the century we Germans are nevertheless again united in the world of civil rights, institutions for conflict settlement, human rights protection and law is not of our own doing. It would not have been possible without America. The self-destructive collapse of Europe in the First World War cast the foundation for the American Century. The determination and inner strength of the United States beat back the assaults upon the “Western spirit”. To that extent our history is also the history of the survival of democracy in America, Western and Northern Europe.

Of course, the democratic culture in Germany also has German roots, but this minority in the Empire and in Weimar was persecuted and destroyed under National Socialism and was not brought back to life in the GDR. The last joint

historical events shared by the two post-war German States were National Socialism, the Second World War and the Occupation. It was therefore logical for the two Germanies to regard themselves as responses to National Socialism: the GDR as an anti-fascist renewal and the Federal Republic as a return to democracy in the continuity of German history. Formally speaking, both German States were “post-fascist”, but in their substance they came to quite different conclusions.

From the communist perspective, Fascism was the necessary result of capitalism, whose crisis led to “open class struggle” in the form of a nationalistic mobilization of the masses and an imperialistic dictatorship. The lesson drawn was that the type of society needed to be changed – the leap from capitalism to socialism and the belief in an evolving communist society. Fascism was to be structurally and fundamentally overcome by abolishing private ownership of the means of production. This was the early history of the GDR. Remembrance of the victims served to glorify the communist movement and the sacrifices of its combatants. The new dictatorship used the old as its justification, and the system of rule remained undemocratic, authoritarian and bound to the Soviet model.

For the Federal Republic, National Socialism was the result of the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the inner weakness of democracy during the Great Depression. A new institutional system and the creation of democratic values and behavioural patterns were to give rise to a community that was in keeping with the model of Western civil society and that had learned the lessons of National Socialism. National Socialism and political dictatorship, war and the holocaust were the legacy which West German society had to address.

The reference to the last shared historical period of the two post-war German States, to National Socialism, a legacy that concerned both, had dissimilar consequences. With the dictatorship of the proletariat under the leadership of the Marxist-Leninist party, the GDR regarded itself as having completed its “coming to grips with the past”. For the Federal Republic, National Socialism and its consequences remained the criterion of reference for an ongoing operational assessment of democracy, the constitutional State and the social system. The second German dictatorship can only serve West Germans as a renewed confirmation of democratic values, it is no longer the foundation of those values. For the East Germans, the reverse is true: for them, the second dictatorship is the legacy that defines their values and how they see themselves. For them, National Socialism is too long ago, and what is more, it was interpreted in the GDR in a special way and used in a selective fashion to justify the GDR’s existence.

To my mind, one cannot assume that a shared basis of experience can be created for a democratic political culture for East and West Germans unless the two dictatorships are placed in functional equivalence. Yet a comparison of the two dictatorships cannot be undertaken directly. Too many features are different in the values, identity, institutional system and, in particular, criminal content of the two regimes. A comparison is only possible with the help of a comparative criterion that enables the features of the two dictatorships to be recorded without immediately being brought to fall because of their differences. This comparative yardstick is democracy, with reference to which the two dictatorships can be analysed and their similar and dissimilar features identified. The two then show themselves to be particular negations of the principles of democracy, the State based on the rule of law, civil rights and public opinion; they are expressly directed against the postulates of the programme of civil society. The collapse of National Socialism after 12 years through outside defeat and of Communism after 70 years through internal disintegration has meant that both systems have lost their claim to and belief in their legitimacy. But democracy cannot derive positive confirmation from these dictatorships. We can only grasp what the consequences of undemocratic, totalitarian systems can entail if we see the two dictatorships, as different and in part opposing as they may have been, as explicit negations of a democratic system. The legacy of the two German dictatorships for the democratic culture in united Germany is a more rigorous perception of, and conscious respect for, the principles of a democratic political and social order.

### III

Democracy is based on decisions on values that receive an institutional frame and determine organizational forms and behavioural patterns. The ideas of democracy take on active relevance through processes and through the acceptance of forms for resolving conflicting interests. The belief in the legitimacy of a system must be tested in the confrontation of interests, and it is confirmed through the manner in which conflicts are settled, compromises reached and public debate conducted.

At the beginning of the old Federal Republic, the replacement of political institutions was accepted, given the expectation of a material and moral renewal after the collapse of National Socialism. It took years before a majority of the population grew confident in the system and democratic behavioural patterns emerged. As late as the 1960s, doubts persisted about how well democracy was anchored in the political culture, and it was common to speak of a "fair-



weather democracy" which might not be able to withstand great stress. East Germany likewise began with a sudden and radical replacement of institutions, but this included the economic system as well. It would be unhistoric and sociologically unjustified to expect East Germany to overcome a 40-year lag in the transition to democracy or to develop a political culture on a par with West Germany's in just a few short years. The transition of 1990, the accession to the rule of the Basic Law, was accompanied by enormous material and spiritual expectations that were much greater than in West Germany in 1948–49. The starting-point was completely different – then the existential emergency situation in the war and immediately thereafter now the situation of chronic shortages in a socialist welfare State. There were other criteria for the expectations, for the willingness to post pone the satisfaction of needs and to bring demands into line with the performance capacity of the new order. Thus, the pressure of expectations was greater in East Germany, and it grew even more in 1990 because of the way in which the currency reform was carried out, and owing to mistaken ideas about how long economic reconstruction would take.

The transfer of institutions is facing an enormously difficult test in East Germany. It must not only result in the expected improvement in the living conditions, but also fulfil the normative claim of civil equality, ensure "the uniformity of living standards in the Federal territory" (Art. 106, para. 3, subpara. 2, of the German Constitution). Facing these expectations are the experiences of unaccustomed unemployment, the collapse of industrial production and the new system of property ownership. As long as the vivid memory of the political restrictions and shortages in the GDR remain the standard of comparison, it can be assumed that the population will show sufficient flexibility in the course of the transfer of institutions. But the more this standard of comparison recedes or comparisons are selectively applied to individual areas of life, for example the absence of unemployment in the past or the more comprehensive child care, the more disappointment is likely to grow rather than decline, even though the situation on the whole has improved. The criteria with which the new system must prove its effectiveness are much more stringent than in 1949.

Asked in March 1992, April 1993 and September 1994 whether, "all in all", their situation had improved or worsened since the opening of the Wall in 1989, East Germans gave similar answers each time: improved – 54%; worsened – 18% (survey by: "Forschungsgruppe Wahlen", Politbarometer 09/93 and 09/94). The East Germans assessed the overall economic picture very differently from their own personal economic situation. Questioned in the summer months of each year, they said that

the overall economic situation was:

	1992	1993	1994	1995
bad	60%	60%	41%	33%
good	2%	2%	5%	14%

their personal economic situation was:

	1992	1993	1994	1995
bad	14%	13%	13%	8%
good	30%	36%	39%	55%

(Survey by: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, Politbarometer 09/92, 09/93, 09/94, 09/95)

Even when the personal economic situation had stabilized and was judged good by a growing number, the overall situation was considered very critical.

Questioned on how well the standard of living in East Germany had been brought into line with that of West Germany, the respondents were:

	Nov. 1992	June 1993	Sept. 1994	July 1995
satisfied	26%	33%	39%	46%
dissatisfied	74%	67%	61%	52%

(Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, Politbarometer 11/93, 07/95)

An assessment of the survey's findings reveal a picture of a slowly improving positive judgment of the new system, but expectations cannot be regarded as fulfilled. The more the conditions in the GDR fade from memory or are remembered only selectively, the more the yardstick of the situation in West Germany and the continuing considerable disparities will take on importance. This gives rise not so much to a personal as to a collective sense of being underprivileged. The enormous pressure to adapt, which has weighed upon and continues to weigh upon the East Germans following the sudden radical transfer of institutions, seems to have relaxed on the technical level in connection with mastering the important rules needed for everyday life. But the institutional system seems artificial, monopolized by West Germans (perhaps to their disadvantage) and not always convincing in its workings. Despite the considerable improvement in standard of living and infrastructure, the freedom to travel and the freedom of speech, the transfer of purchasing power of some 150 thousand million marks annually, dissatisfaction persists. This has activated a



collective East German identity, a withdrawal into homogenous social circles and a detached view of the political and economic system of the Federal Republic, and has found expression in the low voter turnout for the regional parliamentary elections in 1994 (which did not coincide with the national Bundestag elections) – 54.9% in Saxony-Anhalt, 56.2% in Brandenburg and 58.4% in Saxony. Few persons are prepared to be active in parties, citizens' groups or the community. An inferiority complex of sorts has developed towards the West Germans. There are many good reasons for this. In the context of this paper, one factor may be that the East Germans think they have less chance to participate and assert themselves in united Germany's public-opinion and decision-making structures, which they feel are unfair and discriminatory.

That is not a favourable situation for building a common democratic political culture in united Germany. An institutional system requires both support for its values and satisfaction with the way it works. Daily experience, the fulfilling of expectations and acceptance that interests may go unmet eventually builds confidence in the system, and that is the expression of a shared political culture. This confidence grows slowly and through repeated, corroborated daily experiences. However, they differ greatly in the ongoing transformation process and lead again and again to new cognitive dissonance. The disintegration of the stability of the past way of life – the State guarantee of employment, occupational planning, allocation of living quarters and far-reaching child care – forced an extraordinary mobility, readiness to adapt and abandonment of familiar ways of life, and instead of building confidence in the system caused a feeling of uncertainty. The result is a growing alienation from the West German political system and an indifference to the values of the democratic system.

The GDR developed a public political culture that contained none of the features of a democratic system. Neither from the GDR itself nor from its institutions can anything be transferred to united Germany. The GDR was neither a democracy nor a State based on the rule of law. The latter does not mean that there are legal norms and courts, but that the executive and the judiciary must obey the law, that their actions are subject to legal review and that legislation is subject to the constitutional order (Art. 20, German Constitution). The GDR had no independent intermediary institutions, no free organization of interests, no public opinion. Consequently, experience with the workings of democracy and its requirements is lacking. For this reason, the criticism that the East Germans level against the new system is based in part on the old political culture, which set up a paternalistic welfare State to meet expectations, and used allotment techniques that were neither market-oriented nor affected by rival interests. The infrastructure for the defence of

interests is only now being created. That applies both to State bodies (municipal and district reforms were not completed until 1993/1994, and the courts are only now becoming fully operational) and to associations and organizations (local party structures, trade unions, welfare agencies). Given the conditions in which this change has been taking place, the initial expectations and the disappointment that followed, it will not be easy to build confidence in the system. More time is needed; the sooner the system is able to convince East Germans of its efficiency, the sooner the transition will be completed.

#### IV

In times of economic structural crises and limited growth or even of shrinking of the national income, conflicts of distribution increase and it becomes more difficult to reach agreement on equitable sharing. This also holds for West Germany, which for East Germany is wealthy but whose wealth is by no means equally available to all private households, businesses and public budgets. From that point of view, the political culture of the Federal Republic is also under heightened pressure to prove a success. The situation is characterized by weariness with politics, falling voter turnouts and increasing distribution conflicts. Yet notwithstanding all criticism, loyalty to the democratic system is unbroken. If we look at West Germany only for the 1994 Bundestag elections, voter turnout was 80.6%, or 2% higher than in 1990. The percentages of the vote obtained by the parties are relatively stable (the fluctuations remain between 2% and 3%), and all splinter parties and groups, including the Republicans (far right) and the PDS (ex-SED), together totalled 4.9%. Despite considerable unemployment and structural and budgetary problems, the political system, as reflected in its leading bodies, the parties, is stable. Democracy in West Germany is clearly not a "fair-weather" democracy, it can withstand considerable stress.

A democratic system and its principles require the recognition of those who live under that system. The process of constant confirmation of that legitimacy is always a delicate matter and can only succeed if there is confidence in the system and, above and beyond that, loyalty to it as well. Confidence in the system is not identical with loyalty to it. Loyalty is based on an approval of the values of the political system that is not only the result of a cost-effectiveness calculation in the distribution struggle. These values subscribe to individual civil rights and their realization in the framework of a sharing of the burden and compulsory general legal norms. Loyalty to the democratic system cannot be compensated for and certainly not replaced by ideas of a collective "common

destiny". In the name of the collectivity and the "typical" values and features ascribed to it in each particular instance, individual rights are always accorded lesser importance and can be restricted, suppressed or abolished. Hence, a democratic political culture cannot base itself on the idea of nation, race or class, because in so doing it would endanger, and in principle already betray, its own values.

Consequently, all calls for a new German national consciousness are not strengthening democracy. Yet united Germany has not given birth to a new national entity that requires changes in the political institutions and political culture of the old Federal Republic, where these institutions proved their worth. As a result of the division, the two German post-war States were "post-national" entities and did not define themselves as the keepers of a "national substance", but as the embodiment of civil rights, on the one hand, and as the realization of Communism on the other. The unification of East Germany with West Germany has not created a new nation. What Germany needs is not a "confident nation" but a confident democracy. A political strategy that believes that German domestic integration can be heightened and German properties dramatized by propagating a new national consciousness will not settle any conflicts, but will avoid them and create new ones. The more abstract and undefined the value system used to integrate differing interests and conflicting aspirations, the more the democratic potential for conflict settlement will be devalued, integration through compromise made more difficult and a direct and, as experience shows, uncontrollable imposing of values presented as a political ideal. Democracies do not need any additional national interpretation that elevates itself above the democratic process.

The downfall of the Weimar Republic took place in circumstances of a deep economic crisis but also in the context of an absence of loyalty to the democratic system. The willingness by the majority to recognize political rule in the name of the nation and the opposing belief by a minority in political rule in the name of a class brought about the State crisis. This situation was not the necessary result of the economic crisis, which it predated. The legacy of German history for the democratic culture of united Germany is that the values of the democratic system must be constantly protected and reaffirmed.

This means the following:

1. United Germany is a civil society of its own choosing and approval.
2. The unification did not give rise to a new national quality that must be added to or replace democratic legitimacy.
3. For the domestic order, individual rights are constituent norms that cannot be made subject to collective interests.

4. Functional clarity and procedural strictness are inseparable from the content of the political process. Democracy is based on the legitimacy of governance through procedural rules (formal rationality) and on the goals attained through these rules, the balance of interests, the perceived effectiveness of the political process (material rationality).
5. Participation in the formation of opinion and the decision-making process, guided by experience, may not be restricted, even if in so doing the dissemination of opinion and the taking of decisions become more difficult. Considerations of efficiency may not detract from basic freedoms; the forced uniformization of interests only detracts from innovative strength and openness to change.
6. United Germany is part of the European Union and as such is restricted in its sovereignty: neither the increased population nor the changed situation in Europe after the collapse of Communism alters that fact in the slightest. The unification has not created a qualitatively different Germany in the European process of unification, other than that its responsibility for that goal has grown.

The two dictatorships were similar in that they both assaulted the democratic constitutional State in the name of two different ideologies. Both these ideologies are rooted in German mentalities that joined forces against the Weimar Republic and contributed to its collapse. These German mentalities chose authoritarian rule instead of institutional processes for conflict settlement, an order based on abstract principles instead of acknowledgement of the ambivalence of values, a strong executive instead of a readiness to seek compromise, a standardizing of interests instead of pluralism, the collectivity of the nation or class against the rights of the individual. In a word: they decided against the idea of Western civil society. The memory of the two German dictatorships can capture the consequences of these choices and the cognitive thought structures and judgments on which they were based, and it can reaffirm again and again the winning over of the post-war German majority for the Western democratic constitutional State. The model events for democracy in Germany were not the storming of the Bastille, the war of independence or the glorious revolution, but democracy's defeats. They cannot serve for creating a myth, but for obtaining sober recognition for the values of the political system chosen by the Germans in the framework of a European peace order.

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