

Chasing specters after the Cold war: anti-communist continuities and the discourse on German national identity after 1989

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The article explores the revival of anti-communism in united Germany after the fall of the GDR and the end of the Cold war. It argues that the specific way of remembering communism and its role in the XX century, that unfolded in the 1990s, has sparked a new wave of anti-communist resentment, which had a lasting impact on political discourse and praxis. The author critiques the tendency of anti-totalitarian theories to equate communism with fascism and underscores the ongoing battle over historical narratives and their importance for symbolic power. Ultimately, the article argues that modern anti-communism continues to affect Germany's political culture and national identity to this day.

Keywords: Communism, Anti-communism, Cold war, Memory, Totalitarianism.

Parole chiave: Comunismo, Anti-comunismo, Guerra fredda, Memoria, Totalitarismo.

Preface: the end of history

As the specter of communism was haunting Europe in the middle of the XIX century, it caused great turmoil. So much so that the ruling classes at the time, «Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French radicals and German police spies»¹, made great efforts in trying to exorcise it. At the end of the XX century, it was the defeat of this very specter and the events of 1989-90 that brought lasting change to Europe and the world once again: the fall of the Berlin wall and the Iron curtain, the end of state socialism marked a turning point with global repercussions. With the end of communism, it seemed that not only the Cold war had come to an end, but also history itself². Anything that still adhered to the idea of communism or revolutionary politics in general was fought even more strongly, was socially stigmatized and existed only as a historical vestige. communism was, quite literally, history. As a «real movement which abolishes the present state of things»³, communism was barely discernible towards the end of the century, which it had shaped so profoundly. The Soviet state order was as much a thing of the past as communism as an organized political force in “western” societies. For the left there, the disappearance of actually existing socialism meant the loss of an ideological point of reference for their own politics and a shock from which they still have not yet recovered. Not because Soviet socialism

¹ K. Marx, F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, v. 1, Marx/Engels Selected Works, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1969, pp. 98-137.

² Cfr. F. Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man*, Free Press, New York 1992.

³ K. Marx, *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, in *The German Ideology*, Prometheus Books, New York 1998, p. 57.

was a desirable model for a socialist society or because communism there had already been able to realize the potential of a more humane world based on solidarity – on the contrary. Communist criticism of Soviet state socialism and its rejection had been part of left communist debates since the Russian Revolution of 1917. But the final failure of this revolution also meant the departure of communism from the political and cultural sphere. With communism, the horizon of an alternative future and the possibility of its realization seemed to have disappeared altogether. Communism and its history, the entire Marxist tradition and left-wing ideals as a whole were questioned by both outspoken anti-communists and disillusioned leftists. The specter of communism, it seemed, had become an undead.

At the end of the XX century, communism as a social force that could at least theoretically still demand universal emancipation, seemed to be dead for good. To this day, the communist movement has been permanently weakened and discredited by the collapse of authoritarian socialism in Europe and the legacy of Stalinism that subsequently came to light. Therefore, all that is more relevant is the occurrence of an «upsurge of anti-communism after the end of the communist systems»⁴, and a «new anti-communist wave»⁵. This was not only driven by a review of real socialist history in the course of the opening of the archives in Eastern Europe but also by the attitude of capitalist societies that believed themselves to be historical victors. This was particularly evident in Germany, where dealing with the GDR and the German «doppelte Vergangenheit»⁶ was part of a newly initiated process of nation building.

The question I want to pursue in this essay is the role of anti-communism in the discourses of historiographical interpretation, of German political culture, and also in practices of public remembrance and commemoration. What anti-communist continuities can be found in dealing with the history of socialism in the XX century? What changes did the various anti-communisms⁷ undergo after the end of the

⁴ B. Faulenbach, *Erscheinungsformen des «Antikommunismus». Zur Problematik eines vieldeutigen Begriffs*, in «Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung», 2011, pp. 1-14, here p. 12 [transl. by the author].

⁵ E. Traverso, *Der neue Antikommunismus. Nolte, Furet und Courtois interpretieren die Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, in *Zeitgeschichte, Wissenschaft und Politik. Der «Historikerstreit»-20 Jahre danach*, hrsg. von V. Kroeninger, VS, Wiesbaden 2008, pp. 67-87, here p. 67 [transl. by the author].

⁶ «double past», i.e. the notion that Germany had to suffer two German dictatorships (national socialism and the GDR), both of which have now been overcome and resolved in democracy and reunification.

⁷ Although anti-communism is usually theoretically conceived as an ideological reaction to communism in the narrower sense, empirically it is never aimed solely at explicitly communist actors, but always also at those who are made such by anti-communists, or who are suspected of sympathising with communism in some way or being complicit. A universally valid definition therefore seems impossible, which is why I speak of «anti-communisms» in the plural or «various ideologies of anti-communism». The various anti-communisms could be roughly differentiated along political spectrums that emphasise different aspects more or less strongly. To give just two brief examples: Liberal anti-communism not only opposes communism where it openly appears as such, it also sees the danger of communism in the actions and ideas of other political actors if they advocate for a minimum wage or certain economic state regulations that would restrict and patronise the free individual in the market. Conservatism, on the other hand, is sometimes opposed to the egalitarian aspects of liberalism, but is not fundamentally hostile to it. Conservative anti-communism is therefore characterised above all by the image of some sort of uniform egalitarianism and the decline of social order, morality, etc. which is embodied in communism.

Cold war and the GDR? And how did these debates influence the further development of the Federal Republic of Germany? I will argue that the political debate surrounding the interpretation of 1989 and its remembrance had a significant influence on the national identity of a united Germany and is still part of its founding myth today. In the course of this, anti-communist tropes from the Cold war were not only perpetuated but integrated into the discursive reconfiguration of the neoliberal transformation that began at the same time. I will illustrate my argument by referring to state and civil society practices of commemoration and remembrance.

Cold war triumphalism: from socialism to neoliberalism

Before taking a closer look at the relevant discourses after 1989, I want to briefly draw attention to the social and political-economic conditions in the 1990s. In the course of the territorial and administrative transformation process, a profound change in the socio-economic relations of power took place, which was also asserted on a symbolic level. Narratives such as that of «the end of history»⁸ or the attitude of «Cold war triumphalism»⁹ that came with it functioned as discursive means of power to bury socialism once and for all and to indulge in the now all the more vigorously propagated neoliberal ideology of the free market. The capitalist democracies of the West not only saw themselves as victors in the systemic conflict of the Cold war, but also considered the collapse of socialism as proof of their own superiority. History had shown that market economy and liberal democracy were the only rational, realistic and, moreover, the only desirable alternatives.

Towards the end of the GDR, a diverse protest movement had emerged, which in part also had a reformist socialist orientation. A significant fraction advocated a possible alternative to the Western capitalist model, with a vision that sought to overcome the bureaucratic and authoritarian structures of the socialist establishment, but not necessarily socialism itself. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, these socialist-reformist processes have been overshadowed by preparations for a system change. This transformation towards national unity under capitalist conditions was to be made irreversible: The «framework conditions of a socialist attempt were declared a failure and the West German model was offered as the only way out»¹⁰. Instead, the social, political and economic structures had to be reorganized in the interest of market economy and the «freiheitlich demokratische Grundordnung»¹¹.

⁸ F. Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man*, Free Press, New York 1992.

⁹ *Cold war Triumphalism. The Politics of American History After the Fall of Communism*, ed. E. Schrecker, New Press, New York 2004.

¹⁰ S. Bollinger, *Die Vielschichtigkeit eines Systemwechsels-Anmerkungen zum Elitenwechsel nach der Wende 1989/90*, in *Deutsche Einheit und Elitenwechsel in Ostdeutschland*, hrsg. von S. Bollinger, U. van der Heyden, Trafo, Berlin 2002, pp. 15-101, here p. 44 [transl. by the author].

¹¹ «Liberal democratic basic order» is a term in German constitutional law that tries to capture the core substance of the German constitution. Historically, it has mostly been defined ex negativo, in contrast to «totalitarian», «extremist» or «anti-democratic» forces that can be defined differently depending on political interests.

The discourse surrounding «the end of history» and the supposedly historically evident superiority of capitalist democracies accelerated the congruence of the new material and symbolic power relations and the aura of their inevitability.

In this situation, an increasingly dominant neoliberalism gained a strong influence on socio-political discourses not only in the new German federal states, which were now experiencing the rapid transformation from socialism into capitalism, but for Germany as a whole. With the demise of the socialist superpower, a capitalist “outside” that had previously acted as a counterweight for many Western European societies, had disappeared. The end of communism in power historically coincided with the triumph of the neoliberal project. Thus, the fall of its socialist adversary freed the economic theory of liberalism from the remnants of Keynesian-influenced welfare state regulations that had still existed. Neoliberalism as not only an economic but also a socio-political agenda had been on the rise since the 1970s and was already government doctrine in some countries. So with the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification, neoliberal policies were able to gain greater influence in Germany. Until the end of the GDR and the Cold war, the confrontation with non-capitalist forms of society was an integral part of political and cultural debates in West Germany in one form or another, and concepts such as socialism and the workers’ movement were often part of official politics. After 1990, these discourses changed dramatically, for example in relation to socio-political issues, with noticeable consequences for the political field. The notion of the welfare state as the legacy of the workers’ movement, which was so important in the West, had become increasingly obsolete. The concept of the “social”, as it is conceived in the idea of the welfare state or mechanisms of social security, had lost its critical significance and could now be used even more as an instrument of governance. The welfare state functioned more and more like a company, people became its customers, and social policy measures increasingly became the means of a broad political and economic reorganisation. In this sense, the neoliberal transformation of capitalism also meant a «neosocial»¹² form of government, which gained significance, given the historical developments: Not only did the neoliberal project abandon any notion of collective social actors or social solidarity in favour of fragmented individuality, it also benefited from the historical situation in which social alternatives were generally discredited and the mere idea that capitalist societies are class societies had lost its legitimacy.

Additionally, this was accompanied by a devaluation of the political left and its ideas. The defeat of real socialism offered the opportunity to reject not only Eastern European state socialism as a given, but also socialism as an utopia and an idea. This was also a response to the left-wing potential in former West Germany, which had previously opposed the neoliberal-conservative advance. From then on, it was expected from the left, regardless of whether it saw itself as communist, socialist or social democratic, that they would abide by the rules of the game in the name of reason

¹² S. Lessenich, *Soziale Subjektivität. Die neue Regierung der Gesellschaft*, in «Mittelweg», n. 4, 2003, pp. 80-93, here p. 91 [transl. by the author].

and in view of historical experience. It should act constructively within the existing order in the interests of the common good – beyond ideologies or utopian fantasies¹³. This shift can be seen as the final objective of state driven anti-communism and its function of domination: «To undo the Left is, in that sense, to empty the expression «social progress» of all political meaning, which, I take it, was the aim of official anticommunism from the outset»¹⁴. Left-wing movements, progressive politics and radical criticism of social conditions could thus be dismissed either as an expression of immaturity or naivety, or simply as communist, because the simplistic logic of the Cold war continued to exist. Now, the focus was no longer on the achievements of social struggles, such as social mobility or the modern welfare state, but on an abstract neoliberal discourse of freedom that seemed to have been realized in the course of history. Since neoliberal discourse on freedom has always been based on the ideological adversary against socialism (which was identified with the fundamental evils of society)¹⁵, freedom here primarily meant economic deregulation. The equation of socialism = more state became the guiding principle, at least where the removal of obstacles to the valorization of capital, the dismantling of labor law standards or welfare state redistributions were concerned. Instead, an individualistic market society, in which any kind of «collectivism is seen as a guarantee of lack of freedom, violence, coercion, incompatible with liberal democracy»¹⁶, was enforced.

The *Wende*¹⁷ that occurred in 1989-90 was therefore both a political as well as an economic change. Not only was the former socialism in East Germany to be transformed into the Western model of a capitalist democracy, but a united Germany as a whole was to be reshaped according to the principles of neoliberal capitalism. The government of Chancellor Helmut Kohl played a leading role in this process, which was particularly evident in the way the East German economy was handled and in the measures of the *Treuhand*¹⁸ that aimed at reorganizing the economic structures according to the Western capitalist model. This double turning point¹⁹ brought with it a number of social conflicts and upheavals, which now lacked political articulation. The radical actions of the *Treuhand*, the rise in unemployment and the lack of future prospects suddenly confronted the East German population with the harsh reality of capitalism. As Christoph Kleßman states: «The euphoria of 1989 gave way to a certain skepticism as early as 1990. However, this then turned into widespread fear

¹³ M.E. Brown, *The Historiography Of Communism*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2009, p. 2.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 6.

¹⁵ S. Audier, J. Reinhoudt, *Neoliberalismus. Wie alles anfang. Das Walter Lippmann Colloquium*, Kursbuch Edition, Hamburg 2019, pp. 24 ff.; T. Biebricher, *Neoliberalismus zur Einführung*, Junius, Hamburg 2012, pp. 32 ff.

¹⁶ R. Ptak, *Grundlagen des Neoliberalismus*, in *Kritik des Neoliberalismus*, hrsg. von C. Butterwegge, B. Lösch, R. Ptak, Springer VS, Wiesbaden 2017, p. 23 [transl. by the author].

¹⁷ Generally meaning “turning point”. In the German historical context, it refers specifically to the transformation process beginning in 1989.

¹⁸ An agency established to reprivatise East German enterprises that oversaw the sale and reorganisation of previously state-owned companies.

¹⁹ Cfr. the notion of «doppelte Wende» by S. Bollinger, *Die Vielschichtigkeit eines Systemwechsels*, in *Deutsche Einheit und Elitenwechsel in Ostdeutschland*, hrsg. von S. Bollinger, U. van der Heyden, cit., p. 71.

and resignation with the actual start of the unification process in 1991. The reasons for this were simple: the serious problems only came to light from 1991 onwards, when the brief economic unification boom faded, the structural breaks in the former GDR economy became fully visible and unemployment figures rose rapidly»²⁰.

This situation intensified, as the former GDR turned into a field of experimentation for the national economy, the termination of collective wage agreements, market-oriented rationalization of the public sector, privatization etc. unfolded. In the new profit-oriented private economy, there was no longer any place for companies as collaborative institutions, let alone as solidary organizations. The fall of communism therefore represented a double turning point for Germany – towards a united Germany and towards neoliberal capitalism²¹.

Contested memory

Considering this double transformation, the need for a unifying narrative, capable of holding the new nation together, was all the more urgent. It also posed the question of how exactly 1989-90 should be interpreted. The significance of this event for Germany and the world was the subject of much controversy and debate. This included a whole series of questions relating to the politics of remembrance, which were not only about the appropriate characterization of this historical event, but also about the question of who could legitimately interpret the collapse of the GDR and state socialism, German unity and the end of the Cold war. Following sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this question could also be posed as: Who had the appropriate symbolic capital to have the «final say» in this matter²²? Historian Martin Sabrow argued that the events of 1989 and what followed ultimately belonged to a variety of actors, emphasizing the history of its reception: the writers, the filmmakers, the biographers, the journalists, the state commemoration, science – basically all who shaped the discourses after the fall of socialism²³. And yet, the dominant political form of remembrance would be primarily driven by the former civil rights movement, that understood 1989 as a peaceful revolution against a state of injustice. «The revolutionary memory that dominates the public historical discourse», Sabrow thus concluded 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, «is affirmative in nature and emphasizes the triumph of the successful freedom and unity movement»²⁴.

²⁰ C. Kleßmann, *Deutschland einig Vaterland? Politische und gesellschaftliche Verwerfungen im Prozess der deutschen Vereinigung*, in «Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History», n. 6, 2009, pp. 85-104, here pp. 95 ff. [transl. by the author].

²¹ S. Bollinger, *Die Vielschichtigkeit eines Systemwechsels*, in *Deutsche Einheit und Elitenwechsel in Ostdeutschland*, hrsg. von S. Bollinger, U. van der Heyden, cit.

²² P. Bourdieu, *Über den Staat. Vorlesungen am Collège de France 1989-1992*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2014, p. 575.

²³ M. Sabrow, *Wem gehört «1989»?», in *Bewältigte Diktaturvergangenheit? 20 Jahre DDR-Aufarbeitung*, Akademische Verlagsanstalt, Leipzig 2010, pp. 14 ff..*

²⁴ M. Sabrow, *Wem gehört «1989»?», cit., p. 18 [transl. by the author].*

The way in which communism and the events of 1989 were historicized in Germany, the place they were assigned within the history of the XX century in general and in German history in particular, was in fact shaped to a significant extent by anti-communist continuities since the Cold war. This can be seen especially in the symbolic struggles to legitimately interpret the history of the former GDR and the national identity of the unified Germany, as this is where the course was set for the future of the new republic. Debates around the historical and political remembrance of the GDR and German-German history under the banner of *Aufarbeitung*²⁵ began immediately after the events of fall 1989. In the first two years after German unification, mainly civil society initiatives, mostly from the civil rights movement, drove this reappraisal forward and thus significantly shaped the image of the GDR and socialism at an early stage. During this time, the state initially limited itself to political immediate measures, like the dismantling of socialist monuments and symbols, the re-naming of streets, the introduction of 3 October as the «Day of German Unity» and the abolition of GDR holidays, or the purge of the East German academic and administrative élite²⁶.

One general characteristic of historical and revolutionary transformations is the construction of founding myths with which new national identities and political narratives can be created. This can also be observed in the narrative of German «reunification». For instance, the uprising of 17 June 1953 in the GDR was reinterpreted as a precursor of 9 November 1989, drawing a direct line to the «peaceful revolution», which thus seemed inevitable in retrospect. Similarly, the fall of 1989 was immediately interpreted as a crucial point in the formation of a movement that was essentially aimed at national unity and western integration from the beginning and had been successfully fought for by a peaceful resistance movement. These discourses and the cultivation of the early founding myths must be considered as part of the nation building of the Federal Republic of Germany, as they corresponded to the government's desire for the fastest possible integration of East Germans, while abandoning all references to the GDR past and its historical images²⁷. In this sense, the political discourses on remembrance served as part of a state practice of discrediting socialist world views in the political and academic fields.

However, the debate about the past quickly came to a stop in the first years, which can also be attributed to its highly emotionalized and moralizing form in the media and politics²⁸. The constant stream of new revelations and scandals staged by the media, particularly in connection with the Stasi²⁹, coincided with disillusionment that set in shortly after the nationalist frenzy. The stagnating public reflection on the past was taken up primarily by conservative views of history, giving new

²⁵ «Reappraisal of the past».

²⁶ C. Rudnick, *Die andere Hälfte der Erinnerung. Die DDR in der deutschen Geschichtspolitik nach 1989*, transcript Verlag, Bielefeld 2011, p. 35.

²⁷ Ivi, pp. 35 ff.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 37.

²⁹ Short for «Ministerium für Staatssicherheit», the former Ministry for State Security of the GDR.

impetus to the theory of totalitarianism and drawing analogies to national socialism. At the same time, the PDS (as a successor to the former ruling SED³⁰ in the GDR) partly pursued a revisionist history policy, which attempted to whitewash the GDR and Stalinism. In the face of the politically charged and often one-sided debates on remembrance, the government apparently felt compelled to launch a state policy on remembrance and history. Consequently, 1992 marked the beginning of the endless battle over the interpretation of 1989 at the federal level³¹. Such a state policy of remembrance was particularly beneficial to the federal government's desire for an all-German national identity. The aim was not only to assess the GDR and its political system, but also to develop a new national identity and to answer questions about how to deal with German history in the XX century and the reorientation of Germany as a state. After 1990, increased efforts were made to create new constructions of belonging, which were primarily intended to shape the acceptance of former GDR citizens towards the Federal Republic.

As the most important element of the new state policy on history and remembrance, the government under Chancellor Helmut Kohl set up two commissions of inquiry of the German Bundestag (1992-1994 and 1995-1998). The first of the two, titled Enquete Commission in the German Bundestag on the History and Consequences of the SED Dictatorship in Germany, focused on repression, opposition and resistance and also on politics concerning the conflict between the two German states. The second, titled «Overcoming the Consequences of the SED Dictatorship in the Process of German Unity» subsequently dealt more with aspects of remembrance policy and adhered to the definition of the GDR as a regime of injustice or a dictatorship developed in the first commission. Both rejected «any form of totalitarian ideologies, programs, parties and movements, which also included the complete delegitimization of GDR anti-fascism»³². The overarching aim of the commissions was to advise the German Bundestag regarding legislative measures and the handling of political initiatives, to «consolidate democratic awareness, a liberal sense of justice and the anti-totalitarian consensus in Germany» and to «contribute to the reconciliation of society and the appreciation of the victims»³³.

Politics of remembrance and history are always linked to questions of power, and so the emphatically rational and neutral academic objectives of the Comissions were soon joined by open party-political interests. All parties represented in the Enquete Commissions were concerned with fending off criticism of their own actions and their policies during the Cold war, especially regarding the German-German conflict³⁴. In general, the work of the Enquete Commissions and the debates surrounding it were characterized by an enormous degree of politicization,

³⁰ «Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands», Socialist Unity Party.

³¹ C. Rudnick, *Die andere Hälfte der Erinnerung*, cit., p. 39.

³² Ivi, p. 64 [transl. by the author].

³³ Ivi, p. 65 [transl. by the author].

³⁴ Ivi, p. 54.

all parties without exception tried to play politics with history³⁵. After the end of communism and the end of the Cold war, which had shaped the global political order for decades, the interpretation of the past and its cultural treatment were the subject of particular and public controversy. In addition to the factual investigation of what had happened, this usually also involved «debates about guilt, reckoning, punishment, amnesty and amnesia»³⁶. The highly politicized nature of the discourse illustrates the importance of history and its interpretation in general and in relation to the GDR in particular. Some members of the former GDR opposition, who wanted to rescue socialism and its historical legacy, were just as invested in these debates as those who wanted to be remembered as resistance fighters in a «peaceful revolution» against a dictatorship. If we follow Bourdieu in his conception of the political as a struggle to «change the world by changing ideas about the world»³⁷, then the specific idea of the GDR, of communism and its role in German history is relevant insofar as the respective interpretation provided the necessary symbolic capital for the actors to be able to act according to their interests. The question of «whether, what and how to remember»³⁸ was therefore a crucial part of building a new national identity around a certain view of the past.

The renaissance of totalitarianism

The particular view of the German past that prevailed in the 1990s was strongly influenced by a resurgence of a specific notion of totalitarianism, which had noticeable impact on the state's policy of remembrance, not just with regard to socialism. With the end of communism, for instance, the concept of fascism increasingly disappeared from the public and scientific memory in Germany and was discredited «as a dogma of the historical school of the GDR»³⁹, as ideologically contaminated. The same applies to the radical rejection of the concept of anti-fascism, which was understood as a mere ideological term of political power play and a tool of socialist totalitarian rule. At least in this field, this shows, the influence of anti-communist premises is clearly recognizable. It also shows how the struggle for a certain interpretation of the past is always a struggle for words, concepts and symbols as well, because history is always affected by the language in which it is told. According to a member of the first commission, Ulrich Schneider, the conservative principle of their historical-political approach was the “liquidation” of the concept of anti-fascism and the enforcement of the “anti-totalitarian

³⁵ P. Bock, *Vergangenheitspolitik in der Revolution von 1989*, in *Umkämpfte Vergangenheit. Geschichtsbilder, Erinnerung und Vergangenheitspolitik im internationalen Vergleich*, hrsg. von P. Bock, E. Wolfrum, Vandenboeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen 1995, pp. 82-100.

³⁶ *Umkämpfte Vergangenheit*, hrsg. von P. Bock, E. Wolfrum, cit., p. 7 [transl. by the author].

³⁷ P. Bourdieu, *Meditationen. Zur Kritik der scholastischen Vernunft*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2001, p. 243 [transl. by the author].

³⁸ C. Rudnick, *Die andere Hälfte der Erinnerung*, cit., p. 732 [transl. by the author].

³⁹ E. Traverso, *Gebrauchsanweisungen für die Vergangenheit*, Unrast, Münster 2007, p. 90 [transl. by the author].

consensus” based on anti-communism – by defaming any anti-fascist approach (in research and politics)»⁴⁰. The work of the Enquete commissions was influenced by their diverse constellation and the different interests that were represented in it. The left and parts of the social democrats were interested in saving some of the socialist legacy. However, the result and its reception was a devastating verdict for communism and left-wing ideas about society in general, which was not so much directed against the GDR or the East Germans, but was also intended to send a clear signal to the West German left⁴¹.

These positions should by no means be considered an anomaly or just the radical end of a political pluralism, since there was a conservative majority in government until 1998. The ruling Party CDU of Chancellor Kohl was especially popular in the East and in the milieu of the former civil rights movement. This made it possible to perpetuate traditional anti-communist and anti-totalitarianism tropes that had developed in the political discourse during the Cold war. In particular, the discussions of the first Enquete Commission show continuities with the 1980s. The arguments put forward by Ernst Nolte just a few years earlier in the «Historikerstreit»⁴², which had not gained broader acceptance at the time, were even radicalized in the course of the reappraisal of the GDR. Unlike then, the anti-totalitarian anti-communism it expressed, now became the hegemonic way of looking at the history of the XX century and was able to establish itself in public opinion without any significant resistance. The conservative view of history was linked to a form of anti-communism to such an extent that it can only be understood as a form of historical revisionism. For example: As historian Carola Rudnick shows in her empirical study on the political reappraisal of the GDR past, the number of fatalities in Bautzen⁴³ was said to be many times higher than it actually was, the central detention center of the Stasi was labelled the «Dachau of communism», and communism as whole was considered the «red Holocaust». And due to its ubiquity, the Stasi was even portrayed as being far more monstrous than the Gestapo⁴⁴.

The symbolic juxtaposition of freedom and oppression, of individualism and collectivism, which was represented in the systemic conflict between capitalism and communism, had already been a common theme in the West since the founding years of the old Federal Republic. The political culture that developed during the peaks of the Cold war had become «a matter of political morality»⁴⁵, trying to convey western values that were identified «with a moral anti-totalitarianism and a decided “anti-communism”»⁴⁶. This made a significant contribution to placing the

⁴⁰ C. Rudnick, *Die andere Hälfte der Erinnerung*, cit., p. 58 [transl. by the author].

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Referring to the “historians’ disput” of the 1980s in West Germany.

⁴³ In Bautzen, the Ministry for State Security (“Stasi”) operated a special prison, which was expanded into a high-security facility that could hold up to 200 people that were detained as special political prisoners.

⁴⁴ C. Rudnick, *Die andere Hälfte der Erinnerung*, cit., p. 735 [transl. by the author].

⁴⁵ W. Hofmann, *Stalinismus und Antikommunismus. Zur Soziologie des Ost-West-Konflikts*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1967, p. 146 [transl. by the author].

⁴⁶ B. Faulenbach, *Erscheinungsformen des «Antikommunismus»*, cit., p. 8 [transl. by the author].

anti-communist consensus of early West Germany on a broader basis, as it managed to also committing social democratic, left-liberal and independent politicians and intellectuals to decidedly Western positions. By identifying communism with fascism, the concept of totalitarianism still serves as a term of political struggle today. It was a matter of legitimacy of political means and ends, and the legitimate view of the world. What is labeled as totalitarian is not only defined arbitrarily, but also places any social, political or cultural protagonist outside the legitimate social framework. After the second world war, a specific understanding of totalitarianism prevailed that focused primarily on communism. The view shifted from the nazi regime to the GDR and made it possible to exonerate the former nazi élite or even to integrate their knowledge in matters of anti-communist persecution⁴⁷. Instead of confronting national socialism and the conditions under which it was made possible, the focus shifted to the new enemy in the East, resulting in the suppression of questions of guilt, responsibility or an anti-fascist reorganization of society in the early days of the West German Republic.

The anti-totalitarian consensus after the war had become deeply inscribed in the political structures of West Germany. The use of anti-communist politics after the fall of the GDR therefore comes as no surprise. Its goal was to fundamentally discredit all forms of left-wing politics, regardless of how radical or tame its programs actually were, and which could be achieved with the use of a specific interpretation of history. The new and old anti-communists were able to use the reference to the failure of state socialism as a symbolic weapon, now more than ever. In the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a conservative view of the past dominated, which aimed to relentlessly delegitimize the GDR and left-wing ideologies altogether. History and its depressing outcome seemed to prove the conservative view of the world right. After the end of the Cold war, the reference to history and the remembrance of its victims «increasingly became a resource for politics»⁴⁸. For the theory of totalitarianism in general, and the establishing of anti-communism «as a key to the interpretation of the XX century»⁴⁹, the Enquete Commissions of the German Bundestag made a significant contribution. The totalitarian image of communism became a hegemonic ideology, because it gained parliamentary and state approval, and thereby obtained access to the political and ideological centers of power.

⁴⁷ S. Schulz, *Traditionell illiberal und antikommunistisch: Die wehrhafte Demokratie*, in «Z. Zeitschrift für marxistische Erneuerung», December 2020, p. 21

⁴⁸ C. Goschler, *Deutsche Erinnerungspolitik nach dem Ende des Kalten Krieges. Nationalsozialismus, DDR und Kolonialismus zwischen Identitätsfiktionen und Ambiguitätstoleranz*, in *Vergangenheitskonstruktionen. Erinnerungspolitik im Zeichen von Ambiguitätstoleranz*, hrsg. von E. Gardei, H.-G. Soeffner, B. Zabel, Wallstein, Göttingen 2023, pp. 193-208, here p. 195 [transl. by the author].

⁴⁹ E. Traverso, *Der neue Antikommunismus*, in *Zeitgeschichte, Wissenschaft und Politik*, hrsg. von V. Kronenberg, cit., p. 67 [transl. by the author].

Anti-communist continuities in German politics of remembrance

As I already pointed out, many of the anti-communist continuities throughout German history merge in the remembrance policy of the 1990s and in the work of the Enquete commissions, such as the moral Manichaeism, the trivialization of fascism compared to communism or the notion of the left being ideological and deceitful. A distinguishing feature here is the debate about the German «double past». After 1990, two major threads of discourse came together in a way that cannot be found in any other country and thus also influenced the construction of the new national identity in an unparalleled way. On the one hand, there are continuities and renewals of classic western anti-communist tropes, which experienced a renaissance after the end of communism, which was particularly expressed in all the more eager neoliberal apologetics of the free market. On the other hand, the post-socialist societies of Eastern Europe and Asia have since been engaged in efforts to reinterpret and reappropriate their national history after the end of communism, which had often been understood as an occupying force from outside.

The western discourse developed in the anti-communist climate of the post-war period with its National Socialist legacy. The anti-totalitarian consensus of the German constitution and the excessive anti-communism of the era of chancellor Konrad Adenauer produced a discursive order during the Cold war which deeply anchored anti-communist positions in the mental and institutional structures of West Germany. It played a key role for the identity of post-fascist society and its political culture. Not only did the new Federal Republic take the role as an anti-communist frontline state in the Cold war, due to its geopolitical position and its national division. Also, as the group experiments of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research after the war showed, the repression of the feeling of guilt among Germans promoted stereotypes and schematism in their thinking⁵⁰, which contributed to the ubiquitous anti-communism of the founding period. Therefore, the constitution wanted to guarantee anti-totalitarianism by the state and anchor it firmly in its institutions, as large parts of German society saw itself as a victim of such totalitarianism: First, it had been seduced by Hitler and a small élite of nazis, only to lose parts of the country to the tyranny of the Soviets. In order to prevent another tragedy, it was therefore necessary to take appropriate measures, which were to materialize in a specific architecture of state and democracy as well as an anti-totalitarian attitude. Furthermore, this way of thinking not only served as a relief and projection surface for Germany's fascist legacy, but also provided the justification for an anti-totalitarian anti-communism, which materialized in the repressive anti-communist domestic and foreign policy of the early Federal Republic.

It is therefore no surprise that with the end of the GDR and its rapid integration into the Federal Republic of Germany, anti-communism was also a central

⁵⁰ M. Becker, D. Braunstein, F. Link, *Postnazistisches Sprechen. Einführung in Peter von Haselbergs Beitrag zum Gruppenexperiment*, in *Schuldgefühle. Postnazistische Mentalitäten in der frühen Bundesrepublik. Eine Studie aus dem Gruppenexperiment am Institut für Sozialforschung*, hrsg. von idd., Campus, Frankfurt-New York 2020.

element of the new order. Not only had the Cold war been “won” in the Western narrative, but there was now also the possibility of giving liberal capitalism new legitimacy and an aura of inevitability as the best possible form of society. In fact, the fall of communism completed a phase of capitalist restoration that the Cold war had ironically introduced⁵¹. The hegemony of a globalizing neoliberalism, which began in the early 1990s at the latest, benefited from the demise of real socialism and allowed capitalism to reinvent itself. In the shadow of the events of 1989-90, neoliberal capitalism was able to assert itself for a while as the only reasonable and feasible form of society; it was enough to refer to history, the failed socialist attempts and the suffering they brought with them.

The post-socialist discourse in the “East” on the other hand was of course not the continuation of a long ideological tradition. Rather, it was characterized by the emergence of new national awareness and an attempt to reconstruct a cultural heritage. For many people in the former Soviet satellite states, the collapse of communism in 1989-90 meant the actual liberation that 1945 had already brought to the Western states in Europe. The end of a historical phase that was predominantly characterized by heteronomy and oppression. For some, the reference to Stalin and the Soviet Union functioned as a myth of national strength and greatness that is still alive today, even though it has been cleared of actual communist elements. In most countries, however, a kind of detachment from the communist past and a reinvention of the respective national and cultural identity prevailed, often in the form of a return to older national myths and traditions. The anti-communism, which had been censored and suppressed until then, now erupted and blended with efforts to reinvent national history.

The unique aspect of the German situation is that, after the end of socialist rule, Eastern Germany was not simply another post-socialist society in which the same developments took place as in other countries of the former Soviet power bloc. The fact that the GDR was to a certain extent more or less integrated into the state and the society of Western Germany had significant consequences for the development of Germany as a whole. Although it would be too simple to understand the integration of the GDR into former West Germany as a mere process of annexation, German unification clearly followed Western standards and aimed to adapt to West German structures. The East German population was to be educated in democracy, and previous officials and decision-makers in administration, politics and in higher education were considered ideologically corrupt and unsuitable for further employment. A spirit of reeducation prevailed, not unlike after the second world war. While the western discourse was the dominant one, a revaluation and negotiation of a new national identity took place, but now within Germany as a single nation. Here, the two threads of discourse are condensed into a specific situation in which the experiences of a post-socialist society were being processed, while the old anti-communisms of the Cold war were both continued and updated. Together they merged in the new founding narrative of the united, democratic Germany, the new Federal Republic.

⁵¹ E. Hobsbawn, *Wie man die Welt verändert. Über Marx und den Marxismus*, Hanser, München 2012, pp. 361 ff.

Over the years, the one-sided perspective of remembrance presented in the 1990s has been changing repeatedly. For example, the turn of the century brought an end to the dominance of conservative politics of history and a massive institutionalization of remembrance by the state⁵². During the government of the social democratic-green coalition since 1998, undifferentiated anti-totalitarianism and one-sided representations of history were toned down and a more nuanced picture has been introduced into the discourse. Since the grand coalition under Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2005, the debate on remembrance policy has shifted back in a more conservative direction. Remembrance and commemoration of the GDR was once again elevated compared to that of national socialism and was classified as equally important. Images of history based on the theory of totalitarianism returned once again. Also, the implementation of new national symbols such as a unity memorial in Berlin was pushed through⁵³. We can see here that German politics of remembrance after the end of the Cold war have become more dynamic over the years and cannot be considered entirely anti-communist. The concrete design of memorials or the political discourses on remembrance are always dependent on political constellations, the general political climate or historical events that determine the view of the past. This is due to the fact that the present is always connected to the past in some way or another, as a «symbiotic link»⁵⁴ or as Susan Buck-Morss puts it: «The past is not translated into the present but vice versa, the present into the past»⁵⁵. At the same time, however, it remains evident that the anti-communist interpretation of the past and the continuation of many perspectives of the Cold war after its end were crucial for the nation building of a united Germany after 1989. The discourse conducted by civil society and the state in the 1990s, particularly surrounding the two Enquete Commissions, had a considerable impact. The Cold war triumphalism of the early post-Cold war era and the totalitarianist version of history have a firm place in school textbooks, in memorials, in political education and the way in which the history of 1989 and the founding of the united Germany is being told in the present.

The process of dealing with the past in the 1990s also resulted in institutions and programs that are still active today and represent important elements of German remembrance. The most important would be the Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur⁵⁶, which operates a number of websites, organizes events, publishes academic work, runs an archive and more. The foundation supports memorial sites, citizens' initiatives, academia and schools and aims to promote the transfer of knowledge and the process of dealing with the German past by organizing events such as panel discussions, workshops and conversations with historical witnesses. To this day, it is one of the central protagonists of political education and is regarded

⁵² C. Rudnick, *Die andere Hälfte der Erinnerung*, cit., p. 104.

⁵³ Ivi, p. 105.

⁵⁴ E. Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia. Marxism, History, And Memory*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016, p. 7.

⁵⁵ S. Buck-Morss, *Year 1. A Philosophical Recounting*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2021, p. 236.

⁵⁶ «Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship».

as the legitimate authority for understanding the history of the XX century, particularly with regard to the division and unification of Germany. It does so with a certain plurality. If you take a closer look at their work, however, the anti-communist spirit is obvious and the numerous publications and events paint a clear picture that contains many aspects of the onesided debates of the 1990s.

To name just a few recent examples: The foundation organized a panel on «Dealing with communism in a united Germany». While the announcement text already suggested that the state and society were not recognizing the dangers from the left, the introduction then praised the controversial Black Book of communism⁵⁷ and suggested that the left in Germany under communism was being improperly trivialized. In his podcast «What was communism?», that is featured on a webpage run by the foundation, historian Jörg Baberowski regularly talks about communism, the Soviet Union and the GDR from an academic perspective⁵⁸. Throughout, he frequently takes up talking points that claim an intrinsic connection between Marxist ideology, terror and violence, as anti-communists have done repeatedly throughout history. The extent to which these positions are not just a characteristic of neoliberal or right-wing actors is also evident in the way official government statements, for example in speeches by the head of state, are expressed. Repeatedly, national socialism and communism are mentioned in the same breath, as an expression of a common rejection of democratic values⁵⁹ or as equivalent examples of tyranny⁶⁰.

The remembrance policy of the 1990s and the work of the two Enquete commissions encapsulate various anti-communist continuities in German history. The special historical situation in Germany, resulting in a unique blend of discourses, profoundly influenced the construction of a new national identity in the post-reunification era. Subsequently, a complex interplay of western anti-communist tropes and post-socialist discourses unfolded. Despite various shifts in the overall political climate, the legacy of Cold war anti-communism has continued to shape German remembrance policies, while the legacy of the GDR made it necessary not to trivialize the crimes of communism. Not least due to the strong standing of victims' associations and former civil rights activists, official commemoration policy continued to take a strong anti-communist stance, which managed to depict the victims of communism and national socialism as equal.

⁵⁷ *Le livre noir du communisme. Crimes, terreur, répression*, eds. S. Courtois et al., Robert Laffont, Paris 1997.

⁵⁸ *Kommunismus und Demokratie-Was war der Kommunismus? Wir fragen Jörg Baberowski*, in *Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung*, <https://www.bundesstiftung-aufarbeitung.de/de/recherche/mediathek/kommunismus-und-demokratie-was-war-der-kommunismus-wir-fragen-joerg-baberowski> [accessed on 10 May 2024].

⁵⁹ J. Gauck, *Commemorative event "A European Century"*, in *Der Bundespräsident*, 27 June 2014, https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/JoachimGauck/Reden/2014/140627-Gedenkveranstaltung-1914-2014.html?cms_submit=Search&cms_templateQueryString=communism [accessed on 10 May 2024].

⁶⁰ F.-W. Steinmeier, *Speech at a ceremony marking the 30th anniversary of the Peaceful Revolution at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig on 9 October 2019*, in *Der Bundespräsident*, 9 October 2019, https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2019/10/191009-Leipzig-Friedliche-Revolution-Englisch.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2 [accessed on 10 May 2024].

What remains? Anti-communism as a double founding narrative

As shown, the historical-political implications resulting from the respective interpretation of the events of 1989-90 and the characterization of the GDR, state socialism and Stalinism are of central importance for building the state and the national identity of unified Germany. Not only do they function as a means of creating collective memory and identity, but also of creating, changing or stabilizing relations of power and domination. In the course of a system change such as that of 1989-90 in particular, politics with the past become highly relevant, also because it is here that it is decided who will be part of the new system in the future and in what position, and who will not. They can be used to legitimize economic conditions, justify political action or forms of governing. How exactly these discourses play out and how they translate to political practice is a question of power and of the various interests that are being pursued in the given political field. It can therefore be assumed that in times of a political shift to the right, the traditional anti-communist patterns will regain legitimacy and be accompanied by corresponding consequences for political and state action and their conditions.

The «victory» over communism has become a fundamental part of a narrative, which is particularly apparent in Germany. The historical experience with the GDR, with a “divided” and ultimately “reunited” Germany, is central to the founding narrative of modern day Germany. Any positive reference whatsoever to socialism or communism in this country quickly raises the suspicion of mocking the victims of Stalinism or trivializing the GDR regime – no matter how critical a position is taken on its history. To a certain extent, the German success story, in which Germany had survived the “two dictatorships” of national socialism and communism, as well as the tragedy of its violent division, only to arrive united and free in democracy, functions as a negative history of the GDR.

The end of the GDR also marked the end of one of the most visible legacies of national socialism and the second world war, as a result of which the two Germanys had coexisted for 40 years. Even though there were extensive debates about alternative concepts of society in the course of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the GDR, (such as a “third way” or a reformed, democratic socialism), the various processes surrounding the system change were excluded from the official narrative. German unification and the narrative of a «peaceful revolution from below», became not just a victory against an authoritarian regime, but also a deliberate decision against socialism and in favor of the market economy. This not only shaped the view of the past, but also set the course for the future. communism here is not seen as an often contradictory and dynamic process, as a permanent struggle, but as just another symbol of an era full of violence and totalitarianism. As a result, the present seems to have no alternatives: «History itself appears as a landscape of ruins, a living legacy of pain»⁶¹. This is particularly evident in Germany, which «has become a

⁶¹ E. Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, cit., p. 7.

privileged realm for this metamorphosis of historical consciousness»⁶². Here, «the memory of the Holocaust has symbolically replaced that of antifascism in the public space. The official memory of the GDR has been erased. The monuments of the regime as well as the statues of the founders of communism have been destroyed»⁶³.

Additionally, the attempt to paint the picture of the GDR as a society akin to German fascism, to delegitimize communism as a political movement in general and to relativize national socialism while doing so, to portray the Germans as multiple victims who had suffered under two dictatorships and war for half a century and can now finally live together again in freedom – all this must be understood as a struggle for the newly constituted global order at that time. At stake was the place that East and West Germany, the Soviet Union and fascism were to have in history and what future role a unified Germany would play in neoliberal capitalism as a nation that claims to have been redeemed of its nazi crimes. In this way, anti-communism functions as a kind of double founding narrative of Germany. Not only did it significantly influence the constitution and the political culture of the founding years and during the Cold war in West Germany, it was also modernized and once again anchored in the political institutions of the new unified nation of 1990. Today, this anti-communism can consider itself not only to be morally justified but also historically, whilst also being able to assert itself – without having to deal with actually existing socialism anymore. To this day, the chain of associations that usually manifests itself as a political equivalence series – «communism-Soviet Union-Stalinism-collapse»⁶⁴ – or as a deterministic line of continuity – «if Lenin, then Stalin; if revolution, then gulag; if party, then purges»⁶⁵ is still remarkably effective. As discussions about the socialization of housing in Berlin⁶⁶ show, any politics in Germany that try to change the basic principles of capitalist society can easily be dismissed as totalitarian and rejected with reference to the GDR. And to this day, the emotions and affective structures of the Cold war have been preserved in the nationalism and the democracy of post-Cold war Germany.

To avoid misunderstandings: it is essential to condemn and come to terms with Stalinism and its terror, to ask to what extent this historical development may be inherent in the theory of communism or not. But contemporary politics of remembrance and their inherent anti-communism cannot do justice to this task as they remain committed to the concept of totalitarianism – for it is unable to grasp the radical difference between communism and fascism: «While Marxism and communism have, despite everything, continued the legacy of the Enlightenment and humanist rationalism, fascism and nazism are the extreme result of the Counter-

⁶² Ivi, p. 57.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ J. Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, Verso, London-New York 2018, p. 32.

⁶⁵ Ivi, pp. 34 ff.

⁶⁶ Cfr. the initiative *Deutsche Wohnen&Co. enteignen*, which has been campaigning for the expropriation and socialization of private housing companies since 2018. In September 2021, it achieved a successful referendum, which has not yet been implemented.

Enlightenment, a global movement with the aim of destroying the universal idea of humanity that the Enlightenment designed. [...] Any theory of totalitarianism that is unable to recognize this fundamental difference condemns itself to misunderstanding the 20th century»⁶⁷.

The historically established and especially in Germany cultivated fear of communism was able to survive in the wake of neoliberal hegemony in order to portray the present as the only reasonable and realistic possibility of society. Thus, a new anti-communism replaced the old one: The anti-communism of the Cold war, which had become obsolete, still determines the new anti-communism without communists. 1989 brought the end of communist rule in Germany, but anti-communism kept shaping the political culture of unified Germany and continues to do so to this day.

⁶⁷ E. Traverso, *Der neue Antikommunismus*, in *Zeitgeschichte, Wissenschaft und Politik*, hrsg. von V. Kronenberg, cit., pp. 86 ff. [transl. by the author].