

REVOLUTION WITHOUT REVOLUTIONARIES? ON THE DEBATE ABOUT THE NATURE OF THE UPHEAV- AL IN 1989-90 IN THE GDR AND ITS PROTAGONISTS AS SEEN IN THE CONTEXT OF ITS 20TH ANNIVERSARY

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Abstract: There is no doubt about the particular importance of the revolution of 1989 in the present German memory culture. The historical research is reaching an agreement on the question concerning the various factors bringing birth to the East-German uprising 20 years after this incident: the economical crisis, the mass emigration, the civil right movement, the mass protest movement, the reform movement in the grass roots of the SED and the strict refusal of any reforms in the SED leadership. But there are still controversial debates about the historical evaluation of the separate factors. Especially the actual role of the civil rights movement is considered an open-ended question. In this context former civil rights activists are arguing against its marginalisation and the national narrative of “1989”, which is dominated by the German unification.

The article will focus on the present themes and forms of memory of the East-German revolution of 1989.

Keywords: culture of memory, Germany, East-German uprising, the civil rights movements, exhibition

The *annus mirabilis* of 1989–90 is one of the best researched events in recent German history. As early as 2003 a bibliography, published by *Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur*, a foundation for researching and documenting the SED-dictatorship, listed as many as 82 publications on the East-German revolution and another 119 on the German reunification.¹ According to Hermann Wentker, there were three factors which influenced the historic reappraisal: firstly, many events of that time took place in public and could thus quickly be documented by the media; secondly, many people involved were willing to share their views in interviews or autobiographical accounts; thirdly, there was nearly unlimited access to the archived heritage of the GDR for post-1990 research.² The 20th anniversary was once more a reason for a

¹ Rainer EPELMANN, Bernd FAULENBACH, Ulrich MÄHLERT, *Bilanz und Perspektiven der DDR-Forschung*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003, pp. 478–482, pp. 525–530.

² Review of Hermann WENTKER, *Friedliche Revolution und Wiedervereinigung in neuer Perspektive? Neuerscheinungen zum Umbruch in Deutschland* (A new perspective over the peaceful Revolution and reunification? New findings on the upheaval in Germany), in *Sehepunkte*, 2009, vol. 9, no. 10, <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2009/10/15852.html> (accessed October 15th, 2009).

large number of new publications which – mostly – were designed to be complete views by their authors.³ Comparing the interpretations and descriptions of the GDR upheaval in 1989–90 which have been done in Germany over the last two decades, three major narratives can be identified all competing with each other:

1. The narrative of the “revolution” currently dominating the public discourse; this narrative is based on the memories of political activists in opposition to the regime and most strongly supported by historical politics.
2. The narrative of the “*Wende*” (turning point), which usually links the political upheaval with individual fates. This narrative is mostly effective in family memories and reminiscent literature.
3. The narrative of the “*Anschluss*” (accession), which more or less assumes a colonisation or annexation of the GDR by West Germany. This narrative is popular with old, disempowered elites and functionaries of the regime and with people advocating a “third way” for the GDR.

A revolution describes fast and radical (usually violent) changes of political, social or economic conditions. Political revolutions usually try to depose the present political leaders and to establish fundamentally new institutions, something which goes hand in hand with a change in political power and leadership. Their aim is to use a political new start in order to replace hitherto existing problems and power structures by radically new elements, for example, new power structures, new elites, new forms of property distribution or new constitutional laws etc.⁴ If we regard the development since 1989–90 in the light of this definition, then no doubt a revolution did indeed take place in the GDR. However, simultaneously other popular terms have been used in the public discourse such as “breakdown”, “collapse”, “upheaval”, “revolutionary overthrow”, “turning point” or “integration”; this is a phenomenon that can only be explained by stating that there are perceptions and experiences of this epochal upheaval which differ widely, and which are disconnected from both the real historic events and the macro-historical categorisation suggested

³ Among the most important ones are: Jens SCHÖNE, *Die Friedliche Revolution. Berlin 1989/90. – Der Weg zur deutschen Einheit*, Berlin: Berlin Story, 2008; Wolfgang SCHULLER, *Die deutsche Revolution 1989*, Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag, 2009; Klaus-Dietmar HENKE (ed.), *Revolution und Vereinigung 1989/90. Als in Deutschland die Realität die Phantasie überholte*, Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2009; Michael RICHTER, *Die friedliche Revolution. Aufbruch zur Demokratie in Sachsen 1989/90*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009; Ehrhart NEUBERT, *Unsere Revolution. Die Geschichte der Jahre 1989/90*, Munich/Zurich: Piper Verlag, 2008; Ilko-Sascha KOWALCZUK, *Endspiel. Die Revolution von 1989 in der DDR*, Munich: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2009; Gerhard A. RITTER, *Wir sind das Volk! Wir sind ein Volk! Geschichte der deutschen Einigung*, Munich: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2009; Andreas RÖDDER, *Deutschland einig Vaterland. Die Geschichte der Wiedervereinigung*, Munich: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2009.

⁴ Cf. the entry on “revolution”, in Klaus SCHUBER/Martina KLEIN, *Das Politlexikon*, Bonn: Dietz, 2006.

above. Closely linked to these multiple perceptions is the question which role is ascribed to the “revolutionaries” of that time? Because it strikes as odd that even the “revolution narratives” hardly ever used the very word “revolutionaries”. Instead, they talk about “protagonists of the civic movement” who initiated a “revolutionary” take-off.

This essay wants to offer a critical contribution to the debate so far, looking at the nature of the upheaval and its protagonists in East Germany. Additionally, it will present selected key moments of German commemoration of the revolution and – in its last part – discuss which place the former GDR civil rights activists are currently given in the historical reappraisal of 1989.

INTERPRETATIONS FOUGHT OVER: REVOLUTION VERSUS WENDE

The immediate impact of the events of 1989-90 soon led to a large number of neologisms. Immediately after the GDR ceased to exist, the upheaval was labelled as follows: the “October revolution” (Fred Oldenberg), the “people-owned revolution” (Karl-Dieter Opp/Peter Voß), the “candle-lit revolution” (Rolf Schneider), the “protestant revolution” (Erhart Neubert), the “democratic revolution” (Bernd Lindner), the “peaceful revolution” (Richard Schröder), and, lastly, the “catching-up revolution” (Jürgen Habermas).⁵ “Catching up” means to catch up with a development that has been politically and economically more successful in the Western part of Germany, something from which the East had been separated for four decades, as German philosopher Jürgen Habermas put it in 1990.⁶ The term *Wende* was used in another best-seller, namely the *Chronik der Wende* (the chronicles of the turning point) published by Christoph Links in Berlin in 1999; and the Federal Office of Political Education (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*) published Gerhard Maier’s “Die Wende in der DDR” as soon as 1991 in its series of controversial debates.⁷

Wende, loosely translated as “turning point”, reminds one of turn-taking on a sailing boat where the course is changed, but the crew is not. GDR-writer

⁵ Fred OLDENBURG, *Die Implosion des SED-Regimes. Ursachen und Entwicklungsprozesse*, Cologne: Bundesinstitut für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien, 1991; Karl-Dieter OPP, Peter VOSS, *Die volkseigene Revolution*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1993; Rolf SCHNEIDER, „Die Kerzen-Revolution“, in *Deutschland Archiv*, 1990, no. 6, p. 869f; Erhart NEUBERT, *Eine protestantische Revolution*, Berlin: Kontext Verlag, 1990; Bernd LINDNER, *Die demokratische Revolution in der DDR 1989/90*, Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 1998; Jürgen HABERMAS, *Die nachholende Revolution. Kleine Politische Schriften VII*, Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990.

⁶ Jürgen HABERMAS, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

⁷ Hannes BAHRMANN, Christoph LINKS, *Chronik der Wende. Vol. 1: Die DDR zwischen 7. Oktober und 18. Dezember 1989*, Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1994; *Chronik der Wende. Vol. 2: Stationen der Einheit. Die letzten Monate der DDR*, Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1995; Gerhard MAIER, *Die Wende in der DDR*, “Kontrovers” Series, Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1991.

Christa Wolf polemicalised that the term *Wende* gave the impression that those “at the top” simply had to adjust their behaviour because of the movement stirred by those “at the bottom”. Instead, she favoured the term “revolutionary renewal” at the beginning of the 1990s.⁸ However, the most important reason for rejecting the term *Wende* was the fact that it had been used by the newly elected head of state and SED-party leader Egon Krenz who succeeded Erich Honecker on 18th October 1989.

Likewise, the German term *Umbruch*, meaning upheaval or fundamental change, was also rejected by historians as an analytical category to describe the events of autumn 1989: for example, Ludger Kühnhardt argued that it would embellish the fall of communist totalitarianism in retrospect.⁹ Similar to that, social scientists and sociologists refused to use terms such as “implosion” or “collapse”. Both terms, they argued, would leave aside the responsible protagonists, and the impact which the political actions of people had on the end of the regime would be regarded as too low. Furthermore, the impression would be created that there had been no alternative options during the course of autumn 1989, i.e. that the events had been inevitable.¹⁰ Another argument against the idea of a “collapse” was that the crisis year of 1989 had not been limited to only one or two countries, as had been the case in 1953, 1956, 1968 or 1980–81, but had rolled out over the entire Eastern bloc.

Most authors decided early to use the term “revolution” even though they specified their definitions with certain attributes, as it became clear that the different processes and characteristic traits of the events in Eastern Europe would require a differentiation of terms and even an own terminology. First of all, it seemed as if the overall peaceful course of events would contradict the definition of a revolution as such: that, contrary to the great revolutions in history, no blood was shed, was a fact many contemporaries found quite confusing. But this view was rightly countered by the fact that the people’s movement not only overturned the political leadership within a very short time, but also achieved a fundamental change of the economic, social, constitutional and ideological system. Analysing the events in Leipzig, the Leipzig historian Hartmut Zwahr insisted early and fiercely on using the term revolution. For him, a three-fold revolution did take place: a political one where sovereign rule was enforced (“We are the people!”), a socio-economic one where the production conditions were changed, and a democratic-national one where the two German states were reunited.¹¹

⁸ Siegfried PROKOP, *Unternehmen “Chinese Wall”. Die DDR im Zwielicht der Mauer*, Frankfurt/M: Fischer Verlag, 1992, p. 55.

⁹ Ludger KÜHNHARDT, “Umbruch – Wende – Revolution. Deutungsmuster des deutschen Herbstes 1989”, in *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 1997, vol. 40–41, pp. 12–18.

¹⁰ Jan WIEGOHLS, Marianne SHULZ, “Die revolutionäre Krise am Ende der achtziger Jahre und die Formierung der Opposition”, in Deutscher Bundestag (ed.), *Materialien der Enquete-Kommission Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland*, 1995, vol. VII, no. 2, Baden-Baden and Frankfurt/M.: Nomos-Suhrkamp Verlag, pp. 1950–1994.

¹¹ Bernward BAULE, “Andenken an eine friedliche Revolution. Erste Tagung des Hannah-

In his widely perceived book from 1993, “In Europe’s Name: Germany and the Divided Continent”, the British historian Timothy Garton Ash analysed the situation in Poland and Hungary and found that there “refolutions” had taken place, in other words, a mixture of revolutions and reforms.¹² In the previous year a study by the US-American economist Albert O. Hirschman initiated a discussion to what extent the revolution in the GDR had rather been an “exit revolution” instead of a “voice revolution”. Exit here means the flight of people, whereas voice defines people’s resistance.¹³ The debate was based on the question whether the number of people leaving the GDR had to be given more weight when researching the cause of the events. The formula “exitus by exit”, however, was soon rejected as being too colloquial. Still researchers such as the Frankfurt sociologist and historian Detlef Pollack managed to integrate both strands into his model, only as outbalanced factors which more or less went hand in hand.¹⁴ The numerous attributes already mentioned, which were used to define the term “revolution”, are still evidence of how difficult it still is to define a typology. Even in 2000 the historian Konrad H. Jarausch claimed a more precise definition than before, as this had been a novel type of civic revolution.¹⁵

When looking at my own work on 1989, the ambiguity described is reflected there, too: in my titles I used both *Wende* and revolution. In a study on the situation of autumn 1989 in the Cottbus district I had deliberately used *Wende*, not only because all the people I talked to – all former activists of the local civic movement – had used this phrase, but also to underline the specific dynamics – or rather, the lack of dynamics – in this area.¹⁶ For example, there had been no oppositional groups or activities prior to 1989, and the first demonstrations only set off after they had become quite normal in other parts of the country. This lack of dynamics can be illustrated by a rumour that had been spread in autumn 1989: it was said that car drivers with a Cottbus license plate were refused petrol for their cars across the country as nothing happened in their district. So the impression prevailed that the 1989 revolution had come over Cottbus, and it had turned the Cottbus people around, towards change. On the other hand, the situation in Potsdam was quite a different one, Potsdam being a district that today – like Cottbus and Frankfurt/Oder – belongs to the Brandenburg state. Even though often

Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung”, in *Deutschland Archiv*, 1995, no. 5, pp. 547–550, 550.

¹² Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe’s Name – Germany and the Divided Continent*, London: Random House 1993, p. 344f.

¹³ Albert O. HIRSCHMAN, “Exit, Voice and the Fate of the German Democratic Republic: An Essay in Conceptual History”, in *World Politics*, January 1993, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 173–202.

¹⁴ Detlef POLLACK, “Bedingungsfaktoren der friedlichen Revolution 1989/90”, in Rainer EPELMANN, Bernd FAULENBACH, Ulrich MÄHLERT, *op. cit.*, pp. 188–195.

¹⁵ Konrad H. JARAUSCH, “Etiketten mit Eigenleben: Wende, Zusammenbruch, friedliche Bürgerrevolution”, in *Das Parlament*, 2000, no. 35/36, p. 3.

¹⁶ Peter Ulrich WEISS, “Bürgerbewegung und Provinz. Eigenheiten der ‘Wende’ und des Neuen Forums im Bezirk Cottbus 1989/90”, in *Deutschland Archiv*, 2002, no. 2, pp. 220–230.

left aside in complete reviews of the events, the Brandenburg state shows that several of its cities and towns, spearheaded by Potsdam, Brandenburg and Neuruppin, featured a distinctive oppositional scene very early, a scene that played a crucial part in forming the regional mass protest movement. In order to emphasise the active parts of both the opposition and the population the term “revolution” was used, meaning here “revolutionary”.¹⁷ The main reason why I used different terms for Cottbus and Potsdam was the fact that the emphasis of my studies was the role of group or collective dynamics in the opposition in autumn 1989. Because Cottbus was still a part of the GDR, where a fundamental change took place in the society from 1989-90 onwards, i.e. a revolution. And other historians, such as Günther Heydemann for example, used both terms simultaneously, too.¹⁸ This difficult discussion is fuelled further by the debate – which began in the 1980s – how to define and categorise resistance, opposition and antagonism and which heuristic value these would have. This debate originally developed when discussing the history of national socialism in Germany; later, it was extended to include the GDR after its fall in order to compare the history of the first German dictatorship with that of the second one.¹⁹

By now, however, the discussion of the right terminology for the end of the GDR has become quite obsolete among historians: current publications are dominated by the word revolution.²⁰ The typological attributes have been replaced by emotionalising appositions: the revolution is now “unhoped-for” (Heinrich August Winkler), “successful” (*Die ZEIT*), “surprising” (Christoph Kleßmann / Peter Ulrich Weiß) or simply “our revolution” (Erhard Neubert); it is described as a “miracle” (Jan Schönfelder) or an “endgame” (Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk).²¹ The latest debate among historians worth mentioning about

¹⁷ Peter Ulrich WEISS, “Die den Stein ins Rollen brachten. Zum Beginn der friedlichen Revolution 1989 in Potsdam”, in Kulturland Brandenburg (ed.), *Bürgerland Brandenburg. Demokratie und Demokratiebewegungen zwischen Elbe und Oder*, Potsdam: Köhler und Amelang, 2009, pp. 58–65.

¹⁸ Günther HEYDEMANN, Thomas SCHARSCHMIDT, “Innenpolitische Voraussetzungen und Etappen der ‘Wende’ in der DDR”, in Alexander FISCHER, Günther HEYEMANN (eds.), *Die politische “Wende” 1989/90 in Sachsen: Rückblick und Zwischenbilanz*, Weimar/Köln/Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1995, pp. 45–70; Günther HEYEMANN, Günther MAI, Werner MÜLLER (eds.), *Revolution und Transformation in der DDR 1989/90*, Berlin: Dunker & Humboldt, 1999.

¹⁹ Christoph KLESSMANN, “Opposition und Resistenz in zwei Diktaturen in Deutschland”, in *Historische Zeitschrift*, 1996, no. 262, pp. 453–479; Rainer ECKERT, “Widerstand und Opposition: Umstrittene Begriffe der deutschen Diktaturgeschichte”, in Ehrhart NEUBERT/Bernd EISENFELD (eds.), *Macht – Ohnmacht – Gegenmacht. Grundfragen zur politischen Gegnerschaft*, Bremen: Temmen, 2001, pp. 27–36.

²⁰ See footnote 3.

²¹ Heinrich August WINKLER, “1989/90: Die unverhoffte Einheit”, in Carola STERN, Heinrich August WINKLER (eds.), *Wendepunkte deutscher Geschichte 1848-1990*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer Verlag, 2001, pp. 193–226; *Die Zeit*, Themenheft Geschichte, 1989. Die gegläuckte Revolution, 2009, no. 2; Christoph KLESSMANN, Peter Ulrich WEISS, “Die überraschende Revolution in der DDR 1989/90”, in Rainer ROTHER, Ulrike SCHMIEGELT (eds.), *Wir*

the question how to historically correctly label the collapse of the SED-state occurred in 2007. In a study the Dresden historian Michael Richter found that in autumn 1989 the term *Wende* had increasingly been used to describe changes overturning the system.²² Contradicting this view Rainer Eckert, of the Forum for Contemporary History in Leipzig (*Zeitgeschichtliches Forum*), polemicalised that, for any historiography seeing its purpose in education and clarification, it would be totally unacceptable to allow people to use a term such as *Wende*.²³ In his plea for using the term “peaceful revolution” he urges that those who have the opportunity to shape the public opinion with their respective means would also be responsible for reinforcing a democratic awareness of history. That would especially be important due to the memories of the revolution suppressed or forgotten by the mass of the East-Germans.²⁴ Richter protested in his response saying that such considerations would totally annihilate any distinction between science and memory culture: as a historian he would be obliged to historic facts, less to educational aspects,²⁵ he distinctly announced. Joining the debate, Martin Sabrow – of the Centre for Research of Contemporary History in Potsdam (*Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung*) – commented that this controversial debate could be seen as an example of how tools and arguments of historical politics were used to shape history as will and representation; and, on the other hand, how historical science tried to counteract this idea of shaping history.²⁶ *Beyond* any doubt this debate was a controversial discussion fuelled less by historic truth than political correctness, something that does reflect a certain trend of our time: currently we are, as Sabrow points out, at a stage where we focus less on the matter-of-fact discourse but more on public memory culture.²⁷ We deal less with the interpretation of events but with their cultural and historical acquisition or disposal. Sabrow tracks down why “1989” remains to be a battlefield in this constellation mainly to three causes:²⁸

waren so frei... Momentaufnahmen 1989/90, Berlin: Deutsche Kinematek-Museum für Film und Fernsehen Berlin, 2009, pp. 12–25; Ehrhart NEUBERT, *Unsere Revolution*, *op. cit.*; Jan SCHÖNFELDER (ed.), *Das Wunder der Friedlichen Revolution, Prominente Stimmen zum Herbst 1989*, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2009; Ilko-Sascha KOWALCZUK, *op. cit.*

²² Michael RICHTER, “Die Wende. Plädoyer für eine umgangssprachliche Benutzung des Begriffs”, in *Deutschland Archiv*, 2007, no. 5, pp. 861–868, 865.

²³ Rainer ECKERT, “Gegen die Wende-Demagogie – für den Revolutionsbegriff”, in *Deutschland Archiv*, 2007, no. 5, pp. 1084–1086, 1085; Michael RICHTER, “Ebenfalls gegen die Wende-Demagogie und für den Revolutionsbegriff”, in *Deutschland Archiv*, 2007, no. 5, p. 1087.

²⁴ Rainer ECKERT, *Gegen die Wende-Demagogie*, *op. cit.*, p. 1085f.

²⁵ Michael RICHTER, *Ebenfalls gegen die Wende-Demagogie*, *op. cit.*, p. 1087.

²⁶ Martin SABROW, “Wende” oder “Revolution”? Der Herbstumbruch 1989 und die Geschichtswissenschaft, presentation at the conference “Umbruch 1989–1991. Zentrum und Peripherie”, Potsdam, 02.04.2009, p. 2. The paper can be downloaded from: http://www.politische-bildung-brandenburg.de/links/wende_oder_revolution_sabrow.pdf (accessed September 20th, 2010)

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 4ff.

Firstly, the ambiguity of the real historic events: for example, the fall of the SED-state was less brought upon by its opponents' strength, but by its own weakness leading to a breakup on the inside. There was not the one big overthrow movement by the people, but many individual counter-movements such as the civil rights movement, the mass protest movement, people leaving and fleeing the GDR as well as the reform works of the SED-party itself: all of these acted quite independently of each other for a while. Later on the first final point of this development, the German reunification, had only little in common with the original goals of the civil rights activists. Additionally, a top-level functionary of the SED had been in power until 18th March 1990, namely Hans Modrow; after that, the former GDR-block party CDU led East Germany into the reunification.

Secondly, there are the different GDR memories: the place of the GDR is recognised by the communicative memory, but not by the cultural memory. In correspondence to that, the memories of "1989" are quite fragmented. Politically dominating is the "memory of the revolution" which sees the GDR as an *Unrechtsstaat* (a state of injustice) overturned by the events of autumn 1989. At the same time, there are two environments of memory which nurture a critical memory of the reunification.

Thirdly, the lack of a hero narrative required for national history: it is difficult to relate the events to those of other German traditions of freedom, for example the revolutions of 1848 or 1918. The official attribute of "peaceful" somehow provides a semantic paradox to "revolution". The impetus of a heroic victory of good over evil is outweighed by the idea of pacifism and dialogue. This is a paradox which is not only confirmed by the shyness of the Germans when it comes myths and hero worship, but also by a lack of memorials for 1989 and any official honouring of the civil rights activists, something which is still missing in most towns and communities of the former GDR.

However, the dispute of the right term would not last that long if the term *Wende* was not used that commonly in everyday German and thus in wide parts of the population. One may get upset about this, nevertheless, we have to acknowledge that the term *Wende* may reflect the sphere of experience and actions of the large and rather passive majority of the GDR population much more precisely than the term revolution. The communicative and immediate memory of the society when remembering 1989 is rather determined by the role of a witness to history without a high amount of reflection. And this leads to the problem that "1989" as place of memory, or rather, the interpreting historic-political imperative of the "peaceful revolution", is overshadowed by memories and values that come from the following years of transformation which have been difficult for the majority of East Germans.

The public festivities of commemorating its 20th anniversary demonstrated once more that the term peaceful revolution has become the established one – at least in the official discourse. This use is as striking as the fact that the anniversary has been perceived as a mega-event of memory culture in both East

and West Germany as well as worldwide (a development that was not seen in such intensity in 1999).

THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL AS A GERMAN REMEMBRANCE DAY

The public commemoration in autumn 2009 was highlighted by two landmarks: the *Lichtfest* (festival of lights) in Leipzig on 9th October – to remember the Monday demonstrations there – and the Berlin commemoration festivities on the fall of the Berlin wall on 9th November. Of course, the weekly prayers for peace and protest demonstrations in Leipzig 20 years ago were generally well known as a founding act of the GDR-wide mass protest movement, as these prayers were taken out of *Nikolaikirche* to the streets of Leipzig from 4th September 1989 onwards; a special role is played by the Monday demonstration of 9th October (“the crucial day”) with its 70,000 participants which remained to be peaceful; however, this event became a part of the official festivity calendar only in 2009. Both Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Horst Köhler attended the ceremony in Leipzig’s *Gewandhaus*, and about 150,000 people once more walked the way of the Monday demonstration around the city ring and celebrated a moving festival of lights. A series of film documentaries and biographical books took care not only that the general public learned of the full drama of the 9th October, but also that individuals who had been a part of the opposition for many years were recognised with all due respect.²⁹ People learned, for example, that beside Christian Führer, parson of *Nikolaikirche* and often exalted by the media as the “father of the revolution”, there had been many other people active in the opposition – but less known – and being subject of extreme repression for years, to name but few, Jochen Läßig, Michael Arnold, Brigitte Moritz or Rolf Michael Turek.

The media also paid attention to Christoph Wonneberger, a former parson of Leipzig, who had been reviving the tradition of the peace devotions since the mid-1980s, something for which he had been reprimanded and even temporarily suspended by the church authorities – yet he was not to be intimidated. In this context it shows that the history of the Leipzig peace prayers, quite surprisingly, were more than the political emancipation of critical citizens from the SED. This movement was preceded by the emancipation of Leipzig Christians from the church authorities, as Martin Jankowski points out, a former protagonist and expert of the oppositional scene in Leipzig.³⁰ Thus

²⁹ *Das Wunder von Leipzig*, film directed by S. DEHNARDT/ M. SCHMIDT, MDR, 2009; *Auf Messers Schneide*, film directed by M. SPORN, ZDF 2009; *Wir sind das Volk! Leipzig – Wege zur Freiheit*, film directed by G. HOFMANN, RTL 2009; Christian FÜHRER, *Und wir sind dabei gewesen. Die Revolution, die aus der Kirche kam*, Berlin, 2009; Thomas MAYER, *Helden der Revolution. 18 Portraits von Wegbereitern aus Leipzig*, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2009.

³⁰ Martin JANKOWSKI, “Mythos 1989. Öffentliches Erinnern an die Europäische Revolution von 1989”, in *Deutschland Archiv*, 2010, nr. 2, pp. 307–314, 310.

Jankowski opposes all exaggerations in which an overall spearhead function of the protestant church in general, and the priests and parsons in particular, is maintained. Nevertheless, the pivotal role the churches did play as focal points of opposition and later mass protests cannot be denied. The festivities remembering 9th October were a most impressive commemoration among the (mainly East German) public of the long commitment full of privations that the GDR-opposition had to endure, even though “the people” took centre stage as the main protagonist here, too.

What can be observed here is that a shift of interpretation is cemented at the protagonist level: even though the members of the GDR-opposition are not denied their merit of resistance during the pre-revolutionary period, their importance is increasingly devalued in favour of “the people”.

It can be noticed that the majority of the latest total overviews of 1989–90 do not only underline the revolutionary character, but explicitly mark “the people” as the most important protagonist in the upheaval: “it was carried by the people at all levels” (Wolfgang Schuller); “the prime mover...the people, the big bugger” (Erhart Neubert); “the people of the GDR, the crucial driver in the process of revolution and reunification” (Gerhard A. Ritter). Even Michael Richter wrote his two volumes about the Saxons to appreciate the population as “the central group of protagonists”.³¹ On the other hand, writers shy from calling people “revolutionary” or using the word “revolutionaries”. Obviously these terms do seem to be unsuitable, not only to the protagonists and their contemporary statements, but also to the analysts. The processes were “revolutionary”, but hardly the protagonists. If the attribute “revolutionary” is awarded, then most often to people of the opposition who qualified as fit for revolution due to their long-standing commitment and who took the “revolutionary” initiative. No person is marked as “revolutionary” in the context of the political developments from 1990 onwards. Nobody would seriously take up the idea to put Lothar de Maizière, the GDR’s first freely elected prime minister, on a revolutionary pedestal. The colourful mix of people is shown by the rather conservative newspaper *Märkische Allgemeine Zeitung*, once the former organ of the SED-district government in Potsdam (then known as *Märkische Volksstimme*), which published a special edition on autumn 89 on 2nd/3rd October 2009.³² Under the headline “Gesichter der Wende” (faces of the turning point, *Wende* here without inverted commas) pictures show the founders of the *Neues Forum*, Bärbel Bohley and Jens Reich, but also Dresden’s SED Lord Mayor Wolfgang Berghofer and Sabine Bergmann-Pohl of the CDU block party, who was the last president of the GDR-parliament, the *Volkskammer*; we can see the Leipzig parson Christian Führer and conductor Kurt Masur, but also the last head of state and SED-

³¹ Wolfgang SCHULLER, *op. cit.*, p. 300f; Ehrhart NEUBERT, *Unsere Revolution, op. cit.*, p. 429; Gerhard A. RITTER, *op. cit.*, p. 10; Michael RICHTER, *Die friedliche Revolution, op. cit.*, p. 20.

³² *Märkische Allgemeinen Zeitung*, 02–03.10.2009, Beilage “Herbst 89”.

party leader Egon Krenz and Günter Schabowski, member of the politburo; more pictures show the co-founders of the East-German social democratic party and the *Demokratischer Aufbruch* (democratic rise), Steffen Reiche and Rainer Eppelmann, but also the SPD-leader Ibrahim Böhme, later revealed to be a Stasi-informer, and the last minister of interior affairs in the GDR, Peter-Michael Diestel. What is shown here is not a hall of fame of revolutionaries, but a potpourri of public people of 1989–90.

If 9th October had proven to be a day of public remembrance, it was outshone by the festivities of 9th November regarding efforts and public perception – it can be stated that 9th November has established itself the emotional national holiday.³³ The October dates seem to focus too much on the formal aspects of the German unity – highlighting the peaceful Monday demonstration in Leipzig and the role played by the opposition (9th October 1989) on the one hand, and the enforcement of the reunification treaty (3rd October 1990) on the other; contrary to that, 9th November 1989 offers most points of contact when it comes to symbolism and real history and thus allows a common remembrance for both East and West Germans. This role is owed to the combination of two factors, the extraordinary historical importance this day has and the rich symbolic load which is manifest in the Berlin wall representing the border within Germany. The Berlin wall also serves as a metaphor of a divided Germany, Europe and the world as such during the Cold War era, and the fall of the Berlin wall represents the overturn of the Cold War: “166 kilometres of concrete wall now penetrable have come to represent the collapse of a world order.”³⁴ The images of those days do not only feed on the joyful and stunned GDR citizens who rejoicingly crossed the border in Berlin, but also on the enthusiastic welcome of the inhabitants of West Berlin. This autumn, for the first time, the members of parliament in Bonn rose from their seats when they heard the news of the fall of the Berlin wall and began to sing the national anthem. In addition to that it has to be noted that 9th November is a day that represents the fragmented history of Germany in the 20th century like no other: in 1918 the Weimar Republic was proclaimed on that day; Hitler tried for a coup in 1923; in 1938 the anti-Jewish pogroms were enforced by the Nazis, and the Berlin wall came down in 1989: all of these events are tied in with that date.³⁵ And, finally, German politicians actively promoted this day in Germany and abroad: for example, Chancellor Merkel, in her speech at the two houses of US-Congress on 3rd November 1989, named both days – 9th November 1938 and 9th November 1989 – in one breath.

Top-level celebrities of international politics attended the *Fest der Freiheit* (festival of freedom) in Berlin centred around the Brandenburg Gate, among them Gordon Brown, Nicolas Sarkozy, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama

³³ Sebastian R ICHTER, “Die Erinnerung an 1989 und die Geschichtspolitik von 2009”, in *Deutschland Archiv*, 2010, no. 1, pp. 109–116, 110.

³⁴ Martin JANKOWSKI, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

³⁵ Peter STEINBACH, “Der 9. November in der Erinnerung der Bundesrepublik”, in *Deutschland Archiv*, 2008, nr. 5, pp. 877–882.

(via video message), and also Mikhail Gorbachev and Dmitry Medvedev: this presence shows that there is no other day which is currently perceived abroad as *the German day*. That Germany did not only thank the Allied Forces, but also its eastern neighbours, was expressed by the people-high dominos which were erected across Berlin and which were tipped to fall by Lech Wałęsa, the former Polish Solidarność-leader, and Miklós Németh, the former Prime Minister of Hungary. The staging focused strongly on entertainment and media coverage: giant string puppets crossed the former city border, the excess domino game was taking place, there were a light show, fireworks and musical performance of both techno and rock music (hosted by the German TV star Thomas Gottschalk) and similar acts watched by 250,000. This focus had a divided response: Thomas Moser, representing not only many former GDR civil rights activists, called this an “inappropriate privatisation and tabloidisation” of the revolution where history was reduced to a background illustration of a stylish commemoration event designed for the average television audience.³⁶ On the other hand, Jankowski requested more easy-going and tolerance, as, formally speaking, popularity was hardly ever elite high culture. [...] To invite John and Jane Doe and to please people by offering some entertainment during the commemoration did not need to be a bad idea even though some things could have been improved. Remembrance could take various shapes.³⁷ This relaxedness is also shown in the way the Germans deal with their own identity of a one-nation state and its symbols, latest since the Football World Cup was hosted by Germany in 2006. Only few people smell excessive German nationalism when German flags are waved or the German reunification is welcomed.

At the same time criticism of marketing history as a media event competing for viewing figures ceased to be heard. The event-like character and the relaxed response to it can both be seen as significant elements of a memory culture in the post-political era after 1989.

9th November was especially used to commemorate the unity of the German people and less the East-German revolution and its revolutionaries. GDR civil rights activists did not appear in programme of the Berlin festivities. As, matter-of-factly, it had been the statement by Günther Schabowski, member of the SED *politburo*, at the daily press conference in the evening of 9th November 1989 of all things which led to the run on the Berlin border posts and finally to their opening³⁸, the civil rights activists had to take the backseat at this arguably most spectacular event of autumn 1989. This position, as history reveals, is reinforced by the distanced or even openly hostile comments of leading members of the opposition in East-Berlin who regarded

³⁶ Thomas MOSER, “Domino und andere Spiele. Von der Boulevardisierung und Privatisierung einer Revolution”, in *Deutschland Archiv* 2010, no. 1, pp. 117–122.

³⁷ Martin JANKOWSKI, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

³⁸ See also: Hans-Hermann HERTLE, *Der Fall der Mauer. Die unbeabsichtigte Selbstauflösung des SED-Staates*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996; Hans-Hermann HERTLE, *Schabowskis Zettel - Oder der Fall der Berliner Mauer*, Berlin: Ch. Links, 2009.

the fall of the Berlin wall as a threat to their project of a reformed GDR. Instead, it was now former members of the state apparatus who claimed their merits for the opening of the border. For example, Egon Krenz, the last SED secretary general, said in the *Sächsische Zeitung* that any blood shed could only be avoided because the GDR border patrols gave in and did not respond with violence.³⁹

Yet even the slogan of the Berlin commemoration (Festival of Freedom) is rather owed to contemporary interpretations than to historical reference, as the mass demonstrations prior to the fall of the Berlin wall were less defined by the claim for more freedom, but by that for more democracy and co-determination as well as reforms of the society.

GDR-CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS AND THEIR REGIONAL IMPORTANCE

It was Detlef Pollack who introduced the idea that the opposition groups had not generated the mass protests, and that the latter had even emerged independently of those. During September 1989 the alternative groups had been occupied with programmatic and organisational aspects such as founding groups of civil rights (*Neues Forum*, *Demokratie Jetzt* etc.) instead of enforcing the willingness to demonstrate. The masses, on the other hand, had mostly been mobilised by the flood of people leaving the GDR.⁴⁰ Pollack finds detailed evidence for this when sketching the events in Leipzig – the city of heroes, analysing the oppositional scene there (however, he fails to sufficiently consider sources and empirical evidence of the mass protest movement; neither does he clarify the origin and the status of the thousands of Monday demonstrators who travelled to Leipzig from all across the GDR). Pollack's arguing is a difficult one as he generalises the results of his – quite prominent – case study to represent the situation all over the GDR. Because in the more provincial regions, outside hot spots such as Leipzig, Dresden or Berlin, local protests would have not become possible without the commitment of individuals or groups.

This pattern is evidenced by a large number of scientific and non-scientific publications on regional and local history of 1989.⁴¹ One example of this is the situation in Potsdam, which is quite representative for the developments

³⁹ *Sächsische Zeitung*, 26.10.2009.

⁴⁰ Detlef POLLACK, *Politischer Protest: politisch alternative Gruppen in der DDR*, Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 2000, pp. 209ff, 213, 217.

⁴¹ For example: Bernd SCHMIDTBAUER, "Im Prinzip Hoffnung". *Die ostdeutschen Bürgerbewegungen und ihr Beitrag zum Umbruch 1989/90. Das Beispiel Rostock*, Frankfurt/M: Peter Lang, 1996; Heinz PETRIC, Peter Ulrich WEISS, *Neues Forum und Deutsche Forumpartei im Bezirk Cottbus 1989/90*, Potsdam: Brandenburgische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2001; Karin URICH, *Die Bürgerbewegung in Dresden 1989/90*, Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2001; Maria NOOKE, *Für Umweltverantwortung und Demokratisierung. Die Forster Oppositionsgruppe in der Auseinandersetzung mit Stasi und Kirche*, Berlin: Ch. Links, 2008.

outside Leipzig or Dresden: In the evening of 4th October, about 3,000–4,000 people gathered in Potsdam for a kick-off information meeting of the civic movement *Neues Forum* (still illegal at that time) in the *Friedrichskirche* at the *Weberplatz* in Babelsberg. This number exceeded the expectations of the organisers by ten times. Three days later, on the 40th anniversary of the foundation of the GDR, around 2,000 Potsdam people gathered for a demonstration march on *Brandenburger Straße* in order to protest against the hostility shown by the silent, old SED-leadership towards any reforms. A general reference to people's – or the population's – dissatisfaction is hardly sufficient to explain why these two events did trigger the autumn revolution in Potsdam that early. The district town with its 140,000 inhabitants had always been seen as an SED-stronghold because Potsdam accommodated the *Akademie für Staat und Recht* (Academy of State and Law), the *Pädagogische Hochschule*, which was an elite training centre for teachers, the law college of the *MfS* (the Stasi) and a high number of head offices for border and security authorities. More than 10,000 people were working for the military, the Stasi, the police, administration, the SED apparatus and several mass organisations in Potsdam. Additionally, the town was a base for 20,000 members of the Soviet army.⁴² That the local mass protest movements could take off was mainly due to the already existing opposition and the courageous and determined commitment of individual civil rights activists.

If one takes a closer look at the level of local protagonists, a small but established scene of critical groups is revealed that had partly been active for years and whose protagonists became involved at a wider level across groups from September 1989 onwards, getting active in the *Neues Forum* and its aims and giving impetus to the further development of the upheaval in the city.

As early as 10th June 1989, the day of the first festival *Potsdamer Pfingstbergfest*, the two political alternative groups organising this, i.e. the urban-ecological and environmental activist group ARGUS and the community of interest *Pfingstberg*, managed to attract more than 3,000 visitors. The fact that environmental groups, alternative bands and subversive artists were allowed to perform was seen by many as the beginning of a *perestroika*, and some of the protagonists of that time today see this festival as the begin of the *Wende* in Potsdam.⁴³

The profiles and types of groups included system-critical and self-centred ones, the prevailing issues were peace work, human and civil rights and urban development and ecology. Some groups had a clear focus, such as *tierra unida*, committed to third world issues, the women's circle of the *Friedrichskirche* parish, the working group for environmental protection and urban development, the project group AG Pfingstberg and the anti-skinhead league fighting

⁴² Peter Michael HAHN, *Geschichte Brandenburgs*, Munich: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2009, p. 114.

⁴³ Wieland ESCHENBURG, "Warum haben wir nicht früher begonnen? Die Rettung des Pfingstberges", in Sigrid GRABNER, Hendrik RÖDER, Thomas WERNICE (eds.), *Potsdam 1945–1989: Zwischen Anpassung und Aufbegehren*, Potsdam: Brandenburgische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1999, pp. 115–121, 120.

neo-Nazism. A number of circles for discussion and events were organised by church groups (e.g. the peace circle of the church district Potsdam, the *Arche* or the working group solidary church at the protestant educational academy for parish education in Potsdam); here, the focus lay on debating critical views of society in relation to issues of faith. Other forums offered for discussion and exchange of information under a church roof were the *Schmiede*, *Hauskreis Hugler* and *Kontakte*.⁴⁴ Additionally, Potsdam featured a rich scene of youth culture and arts. Nevertheless, this variety should not conceal that the alternative oppositional scene in Potsdam continued to be overshadowed by the much larger and more diversified and active scene in East-Berlin.⁴⁵ Likewise, the intellectual competence and opposition power was lower than that in Berlin. Activists such as Rudolf Tschäpe were still an exception, no people that could really be defined as dissidents did live in Potsdam. But still like a burning glass, the alternative opposition scene in Potsdam did reflect the range of organised resistance behaviour across the GDR. In the course of 1989, the initially small number of opposition groups had firstly come to be focal points of the rise, then catalytic agents of the mobilising process, and lastly the guarantors of the promise to overturn the SED-dictatorship: the latter was achieved when members of the opposition took over posts in the structure of dual government, e.g. the council of people control, the round table organised by the municipality of Potsdam, the citizens' committee for closing down the state security, and finally the round table of the district Potsdam together with its working group on safety and security, and thus accomplishing a peaceful transfer to a democratic form of government.⁴⁶

However, Potsdam does not play a key role in the general mapping of revolutionary hot spots in the GDR in autumn 1989 nor in the respective literature: it is lined up with other "dead" towns of the Brandenburg region. Likewise, the general public is not aware of the commitment to resistance by the political alternative groups in the 1980s: this does not seem to be a moment of shaping identity for Potsdam today. For a long time this commitment had been more or less forgotten even though one representative of those new forces, the social democrats, have been in power since 1990 non-stop and Matthias Platzeck, a former Potsdam civil rights activist, has progressed to top-level political office

⁴⁴ Peter WEISS, *Die den Stein ins Rollen brachten*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁴⁵ Cf. Thomas KLEIN, *"Frieden und Gerechtigkeit". Die Politisierung der unabhängigen Friedensbewegung in Ost-Berlin während der 80er Jahre*, Cologne: Böhlau, 2007.

⁴⁶ Cf. Reinhard MEINEL, Thomas WERNICKE (eds.), *Mit tschechistischem Gruss. Berichte der Bezirksverwaltung für Staatssicherheit Potsdam 1989*, Potsdam 1990; Sigrid GRABNER, Hendrik RÖDER, Thomas WERNICKE (eds.), *op. cit.*; Gabriele SCHNELL, *Ende und Anfang. Chronik der Potsdamer Sozialdemokratie 1945/46–1989/90*, Potsdam: Weber, 1999; Gerlinde GRAHN, "Wir bleiben hier, gestalten wollen wir". *Der Runde Tisch im Bezirk Potsdam 1989/90 – Forum des gesellschaftlichen Dialogs*, Schkeuditz 2006; Gisela RÜDIGER, Gudrun ROGALL, *Die 111 Tage des Potsdamer Bürgerkomitees "Rat der Volkskontrolle" 1989/90*, Potsdam: Brandenburgische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung 2009, Peter WEISS, *Die den Stein ins Rollen brachten*, *op. cit.*

from mayor to prime minister.⁴⁷ Only the local activities on commemoration and remembrance of the 2009 anniversary managed to put the early political alternative groups back into the limelight of public interest.

Looking at how the civic movement deals with the culture of memory, two tendencies can be spotted: firstly, whereas the written accounts of the peaceful revolution tend to diminish the acknowledged role of the GDR civic movement, this loss in meaning is countered by an increasing presence in platforms of public remembrance whose number is growing too, be that exhibitions, internet portals⁴⁸, media features, memorial work or similar.⁴⁹ As the people responsible for those tend to pursue a personified and exemplary approach, i.e. linking the general history of repression and resistance with life stories, their works tend to focus on members of the opposition known at local or even regional and national level.

Secondly (and paradoxically), the importance of individual members of the opposition and of the civic movement for the take-off and the progress of the peaceful revolution is now perceived more strongly by the public in the provincial regions – which did not feature that much resistance movement – than in the former centres of opposition such as Berlin and Leipzig. In matters of opposition and revolution the environments of small and medium-sized towns tend to have a less fragmented communicative memory than the big cities where a large and highly diversified opposition scene – regarding contents and organisation – also featured a high number of charismatic individuals. In adjusted, manageable and less anonymous environments oppositional behaviour was more easily identified, and it became much clearer which people were active in which initiatives organising protests and demonstrations in autumn 1989. Especially at regional level the stability of the SED was still

⁴⁷ Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, Brandenburg's Prime Minister Matthias Platzeck and Joachim Gauck, who ran for the office of President on 30th June 2010, all are former members of the GDR-civic movement and taking centre stage today in Germany's politics. In 1989, Merkel was a member of the *Demokratischer Aufbruch* in East Berlin, Platzeck a member of the urban-ecological and environmental activist group ARGUS and the Green League in Potsdam, and Gauck a member of the *Neues Forum* in Rostock. Nevertheless, neither Platzeck nor Merkel underlined their active role in opposing the SED in the past as a special merit of their life; likewise, when campaigning for elections or during the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the peaceful revolution, they did not use that past to justify their own actions or current roles. Instead, their political careers are praised as examples of a successful reunification of Germany as a nation, and they also helped to rebut any reproach that a West-German elite had occupied East Germany.

⁴⁸ For example: www.friedlicherevolution.de, www.chronikder-mauer.de, www.zeitzeugenportal8990.de, www.unsere-deutsche-einheit.de, www.freiheit-und-einheit.de, www.chronikderwende.de, www.mein-herbst-89.de und www.deinegeschichte.de.

⁴⁹ For an overview of the numerous initiatives and platforms of remembering see also: Jens HÜTTMANN, "20 Jahre Friedliche Revolution und Deutsche Einheit. Ein Überblick über Projekte und Initiativen der Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur", in *Deutschland Archiv*, 2008, no. 6, pp. 1067–1072; Rainer ECKERT, "Das 'Erinnerungsjahr' 2009. 60 Jahre Bundesrepublik und 20 Jahre Friedliche Revolution. Ein Zwischenbericht", in *Deutschland Archiv*, 2009, no. 6, pp. 1069–1078.

quite obvious – demanding explanations – and the pre-revolutionary potential particularly low. Even those parts of the population who slowly left behind their long-standing passivity to actively take part in the demonstrations – at least for a while – are much more hesitant when it comes to proclaiming themselves, that is, “the people”, to be the protagonist of the revolution. There is good reason why so many people living in Potsdam remember the great moment which took place during the autumn demonstration in Potsdam at *Luisenplatz* on 4th November 1989: ten thousands of participants formed a guard of honour and applauded to show their respect to some well-known members of the opposition.⁵⁰

In January 2010 the Potsdam Memorial for the Victims of Political Violence in the 20th Century (*Gedenkstätte für die Opfer politischer Gewalt im 20. Jahrhundert*) opened an exhibition called *Demokratie – jetzt oder nie! Die friedliche Revolution in Potsdam 1989/90* (Democracy – it’s now or never! The peaceful revolution in Potsdam in 1989–90). This exhibition is a cooperation of the Center of Contemporary History Potsdam and the Potsdam museum. Its content focuses on the presentation of oppositional groups and their activities in Potsdam in 1989–90. Those took over the so-called *Lindenhotel* in January 1990, a building located in the city centre that used to be the court building of a prison block which had hitherto been used for interrogations of the Stasi district office. The *Lindenhotel* was then turned into a House of Democracy. The opposition had its first offices here until summer 1990, and these offices became also contact points for similar groups in the district surrounding Potsdam.⁵¹

When displaying activities of the Potsdam opposition in a museum, quite a lot of challenges and problems arose – not to mention the lack of financial support by the municipality. For example, the display required a high amount of research as the events in the province had hardly researched up to then, if at all. As a result, the sources available proved to be very heterogeneous. The dominant force, except the appeals or concepts written by the members of the opposition themselves, were the documents of the MfS secret service and of the SED-apparatus, which harboured the risk of providing a one-sided perspective and biased information when writing the history of the opposition. There hardly exist any autobiographical accounts or reflexions written by civil rights activists in the region. Although interviews with witnesses to history partly helped to solve that problem, these statements were of only limited value as they were done twenty years or more after the events. Similarly, only little visual material does exist of the period before autumn 1989, as photography was not popular among the members of the opposition due to the surveillance generally assumed. On the other hand, the Stasi themselves destroyed most of the pictures they had taken during their phase of closing down in

⁵⁰ Carsten LINKE, interview by Peter Weiss, 24.06.2009, author’s personal archive.

⁵¹ More information on the exhibition and the memorial can be found at: www.gedenkstaette-lindenstrasse.de.

1989. Despite the trouble with the limited amount of material, the exhibition team was confronted with a group of highly sensitive former opposition protagonists who were very suspicious regarding the work of the “unknown curators” and who still claimed the sovereignty of interpretation of the past events to be theirs. This constellation led to a little scandal in one point that may not be comprehensible for people outside this debate: after the curators had decided to label the topic of the Stasi close-down “Actions of visiting and controlling the MfS offices” – which precisely reflected the nature of what was going on in Potsdam at that time – some civil rights activists protested, demanded that this should be rewritten as an “occupation of the Stasi offices”, and the curators were publicly accused of trivialising history. This fierce response to a rather small semantic discrepancy shows how intense the reappraisal of recent history can be in the provincial regions, where the witnesses to history often see themselves as the legitimate guardians of history.⁵²

It will not be denied that the upheaval in the GDR cannot sufficiently be explained by the protagonist theory as such; instead we have to recur to the general socio-political situation which is essential for the analysis. Nevertheless, it is important that the root causes for the collapse of the SED-regime and the mobilisation process of mass protests are to be transferred to the situation in the provincial region and to weigh them accordingly; this is also true vice versa, i.e. the situation in the regions has to be integrated more strongly into the overall picture of a peaceful revolution. It is not by chance that there is the claim to reappraise the high protest potential in other towns and regions, for example Plauen or the former Karl-Marx-Stadt district.⁵³ Moreover it is necessary to place more emphasis on regional civic movements and to revalue the local forces of opposition when writing the history of the GDR opposition movement, as this history still tends to be dominated by the renowned representatives of the big opposition centres and the course they had set on. The whole civic movement suffered from the failure of the third way, a vision now forgotten, in other words, that of a reformed GDR⁵⁴, and also from the subsequent discreditation of their supporters as being close to the SED, elitist and undemocratic.⁵⁵ As a consequence, many civil rights activists in the regions (but not only there) feel ashamed looking at their utopian ideas⁵⁶, and

⁵² In 2008–2009 the author was part of a team responsible for the concept and the implementation of the exhibition and the experiences described here date back to that period.

⁵³ Wolfgang SCHULLER, *op. cit.*; Christian HALBROCK, “Protestzentrum Karl-Marx-Stadt?”, in *Horch und Guck* 2009, no. 3, pp. 64–67.

⁵⁴ Martin SABROW, “Der vergessene ‘Dritte Weg’”, in *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* vol. 11/2010, pp. 6–13.

⁵⁵ Cf. Martin JANDER, *Formierung und Krise der DDR-Opposition. Die Initiative für unabhängige Gewerkschaften – Dissidenten zwischen Demokratie und Romantik*, Berlin:FUB, 1996, and Bernd Gehrke’s response, “Aufbruch und Abbruch der Initiative für unabhängige Gewerkschaften in der ‘Wende’-DDR 1989/90” or Martin Jander’s “Abwicklung der DDR-Opposition”, in *Telegraph*, 1996, no. 7/8, 9, 10 and 1997, 1, 2.

⁵⁶ Bernd GEHRE, “1989 und keine Alternative:”, in Bernd GEHRE, Wolfgang RÜDDENKLAU, *...das war doch nicht unsere Alternative. DDR-Oppositionelle zehn Jahre nach*

they play down their activities and their meaning more and more. They seem to understand less and less that it was their individual commitment that had contributed so much to such a “great” history. But it was especially at regional level where the civic movement had the biggest track record: for example, contrary to the results of general elections of 18th March (*Volkskammer*) and 3rd December (*Bundestag*) 1990, the candidates of the new forces – including the SPD – gained a lot of votes at local and regional elections. Many former members of the civic movement took high and highest offices in local politics and shaped the way structures of democracy and market economy were established in the regions.

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