

The Divided Nation  
A History of Germany 1918-1990

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## Twelve

### Diverging Cultures and National Identities?

The question of 'national identity' has been a particularly problematic one for modern Germany and has indeed been so at least since the beginnings of modern nationalism and nation-states in the late eighteenth century. It was obviously particularly difficult after 1949, in a severed nation. Not only did the two German states have to deal with the complex problem of defining a partial, legitimizing identity while dealing with the wider issue of attitudes to division and reunification; they also had to deal with the problem of their relationship with the immediate past, the Nazi era and its legacy. But apart from the (rather major) problem of coming to terms with the Hitler period, the division of Germany in 1949 might have represented simply a reversion to an older 'German' pattern; that of a multiplicity of German-speaking states in central Europe, with regional variants in culture and identity. Switzerland and Austria are illustrations of this pattern, of greater or lesser historical longevity in their present state forms. <sup>1</sup> Particularly after the 'normalization' of relations between the two Germanies at the beginning of the 1970s, concerted efforts were made to establish separate 'national identities' at least in the GDR or to define or come to terms with a difficult historical legacy and problem of identity, as it was seen in the Federal Republic. There is also a wider question connected with these issues: that of the extent to which, given the physical separation, conscious efforts on the parts of the regimes and the multiple influences of different social experiences were combining to produce diverging profiles of culture (and particularly political culture) in the two states.

## Aspects of Cultural Life

The conditions for cultural life in the two Germanies differed in predictable ways. There were obvious political constraints on publishing in East Germany, although the degree and severity of these constraints varied at different times in the GDR's history. In the West, the main constraints were those of a capitalist society: the need to be profitable, and the danger of certain proprietors gaining a major share of the market (particularly in the case of newspapers). Commercial success is not always the primary criterion for either quality or truthfulness. Apart from these obvious differences, literature and culture developed in interestingly divergent ways in the two Germanies from 1945 to 1989. These differences were both conditioned by and reflected the different socio-political systems of the two states.

The East German regime's policies towards literature, and the concerns of writers, changed markedly in the period up to 1989. The late 1940s and early 1950s saw the return of a number of committed left-wing writers from their enforced exile during the Nazi period. They had high hopes for the foundation of the first truly socialist state on German soil – hopes and expectations which were not always fulfilled. These writers returning from exile included Anna Seghers and Johannes Becher, both of whom in one way or another became East German establishment figures, as well as the less orthodox Bertolt Brecht. Brecht came to occupy an ambiguous position: his work was partly lauded by the regime, and partly suppressed. Brecht's Berlin theatre was restricted in the performances it could offer, and students and the general public were restricted in the range of Brecht's works which were made available for them to read. Nor was Brecht himself entirely enamoured of Ulbricht's interpretation of communism. Brecht's comments on the GDR had a critical edge, as in

his poem relating to the 1953 uprising which ended with the comment that, if the people did not like the government, it would be simplest to dissolve the people and elect another one. Official literary policy at this time was one of socialist realism. There was a failure to come to terms in any genuine sense with the past: accounts of the Nazi period, with communist resistance figures

fighting lone battles, were over-simplistic and unconvincing; and major efforts were devoted instead to the contemporary tasks connected with the building of socialism. It was later generally recognized, by regime as well as readers, that this literature neither had great intrinsic merit nor any measurable success in transforming the attitudes of the post-Nazi East Germans. (In the later 1960s, in fact, it dawned on the regime that television might be a more appropriate medium for influencing public opinion, and attempts to use imaginative literature to this end were demoted.) Although there was a brief thaw after the death of Stalin in 1953, this did not last very long or go very far.

In 1959 there was a conference at Bitterfeld, emphasizing the importance of relating intellectual and practical work to each other. Workers were urged to 'grasp the pen', while writers were encouraged to gain practical experience of manual labour and life in the factory. One notable novel to come out of this period was Christa Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel* (1964), which, although not entirely convincing to a western reader in certain respects (such as the final preference of the heroine for life in the East rather than following her boyfriend to the West), was certainly a work of some literary merit. As a rising female writer committed to socialism, Christa Wolf gained a place as a candidate member of the Central Committee of the SED; however, she lost this position with the publication of the rather pessimistic *Nachdenken über Christa T.* in 1967. Wolf remained a critical but important figure in East Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, in some ways symbolizing the development of GDR culture while making her own unique, and internationally recognized, contribution.

Honecker started his period of office with the promising statement that 'if one proceeds from the firm position of socialism there can . . . be no taboos'.<sup>3</sup> For a brief period in the early 1970S there was indeed

a certain latitude for experimentation, with the publication of such works as Ulrich Plenzdorfs *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.*, portraying a youth whose blue jeans, colloquial language, and general attitudes were hardly those models upheld officially. The increased consumer orientation of the Honecker regime was reflected in a greater willingness also to tolerate certain forms of popular culture and

music, and a greater variety of entertainments. Emphasis was laid, in the *post-Ostpolitik* period, on a GDR-specific culture separate from the class-biased culture of capitalist West Germany. The new atmosphere encouraged an enhanced feeling of freedom among many writers, and certain self-imposed restraints began to dissolve. Difficulties in writing appeared to relate more to the inherent problems of the subject-matter. In 1976 Christa Wolfs superb exploration of the normality of the Nazi past, its impact on the formation of personality and its legacy for the present, in *Kindheitsmuster*, was published. This complex, semi-autobiographical novel is also an exploration of the nature of memory, of modes of retrieving and reconstructing the past, and a reflection on the creative process of writing itself.

1976 was however also a turning point in official cultural policy: the singer and guitarist Wolf Biermann was involuntarily exiled while on a concert tour in the West late in 1975, evidence of a new harder line on the part of the authorities. Although many writers protested and suffered penalties, often including the loss of party membership, as a result the protests neither helped Biermann nor changed the course of cultural policy. The later 1970s saw increasing repression, and new constraints on writers attempting to publish their work in the West (who could now be prosecuted for tax offences even if they evaded censorship regulations.) Many writers were either forced or chose to leave the GDR for the West, including Jurek Becker, Günter Kunert, and Sarah Kirsh. Others, with major reputations in the West and partially critical of their own regime, chose to stay such as Stefan Heym, author of *Fünf Tage im Funi*, which was originally banned and only later published in the GDR, and of more recent works such as *Collin*, also semi-critical. As some commentators pointed out, a major theme in the late 1970s and 1980s was that of 'keeping silent'.<sup>4</sup> There

was also a heightened interest in and reflection on authentic personal experience, and the relationships between individual personality development and social circumstances. Particularly interesting for western observers attempting to gain some understanding of life in the GDR was the so-called protocol literature: attempts to capture authentic accounts of experience by means of tape-recorded



interviews, as in Gabriele Eckart's *So sehe Ick die Sache: Protokolle aus derDDR*.<sup>5</sup> Much East German women's writing in the 1970s and 1980s was devoted to reconstructing personal experience in what was still in many ways a male-dominated society.

Most western observers were aware of a considerable pressure on GDR writers in the 1980s, with a degree of self-constraint and self-censorship as well as actual censorship. The official line as late as 1988 was that, in a period of Soviet-inspired *Glasnost*, constraint and restriction was minimal.<sup>6</sup> Problems of accessibility (or lack of it!) of certain works allegedly had more to do with mechanical production problems than with any officially determined restrictions on the reading matter available to the general public. But when pressed by a British audience, even the apparently genial and urbane Klaus Höpcke, GDR Deputy Minister of Culture, became agitated on the topic of alternative cultural productions on the part of some more dissident GDR citizens. In his view, there was plenty of scope for experimentation for young poets, writers, singers and painters in the GDR; but certain contributions (such as the songs of Stefan Krawczyk before his arrest and exile at the beginning of 1988) had 'nothing to do with culture' according to the official definition, of course. It was evident that whatever the regime's formal pronouncements, there were still considerable limits to freedom of cultural production in the GDR.

In contrast to other eastern bloc countries, the East German cultural intelligentsia did not however lay claim to spearheading opposition to the regime. Prominent writers, however critical they might be of aspects of life in the GDR, nevertheless occupied a privileged position, with considerable freedom of travel to the West and the opportunity to earn enough western currency to secure a comfortable life-style, as well as gaining an international reputation. Most major

writers saw it as their task to contribute to the transformation of consciousness and the gradual development of a better society than to make any claims for political power. In this respect, they did not unduly trouble the regime, while not being as supportive as the politicians might have liked. Anyone who transgressed certain limits could relatively easily be exported to the West, by permission, persuasion or pressure.

For straightforward transmission of official ideology and propaganda, however, the regime had plenty of available channels. Newspapers ranged from the official daily *Neues Deutschland* through the variants oriented towards different readerships, such as *Funge Welt* for youth, to the various technical periodicals for different professional groups. East German television was also officially controlled and generally recognized to be for the most part so profoundly boring as to be ignored by the vast majority of East Germans in favour of watching West German television (which transmitted such masterpieces of American culture as *Dynasty* and *Dallas* as well as more serious news and current affairs programmes rendering East Germans exceptionally well-informed among East European populations). Music in the GDR ranged from the highly serious performance of classical music in good German bourgeois tradition to a more subversive interest in pop and rock music among youth, under the considerable influence of the West.

Cultural production in West Germany was distinctive in a number of respects. As mentioned above, the constraints were less directly political than commercial. Enormous criticisms have been directed by left-wingers against the Axel Springer press, for example, with its control and alleged distortion of the news in papers such as the mass circulation daily *Bild-Zeitung*. On the other hand, considerable subventions from a number of sources permitted the development of many experimental forms, such as in the West German film industry, which produced films rarely possible in Hollywood. Moreover, there was a wide diversity in what could be published and marketed in West Germany, with a flourishing 'alternative scene' in addition to mainstream market-oriented production. At the same time, there was a continued interest in 'high culture' and serious theatrical and musical productions, with many small towns boasting their own flourishing

theatres and opera houses. The West Germans remained a nation of culture-lovers, with wide middle-class interest in art exhibitions and the like. West German cultural life was far more regionally based and decentralized than that of countries like France and Britain where capital cities had

long been dominant. Given such diversity, only a few features of the development of culture in West Germany can be selected for brief mention here. 7

There was arguably an earlier serious confrontation in the West than the East with at least some of the problems posed by the Nazi past. After the Americans banned the left-wing journal *Der Rufin* 1947, a group founded by Alfred Andersch and Hans Werner Richter formed the so-called *Gruppe 47*. There were concerted attempts to purify the German language from the taint of Nazism and, as the writers saw it, to make 'clearings in the jungle' (using notions such as *Kahlschlag*), evidenced in such works as Borchert's *Draussen vor der Tür*. While the 1950s saw the prolific production of what has been dismissed as *Trivialliteratur*, by the end of the decade four very promising writers had emerged. In 1959 and 1960 works were published by Heinrich Böll, Günter Grass, Uwe Johnson and Martin Walser which aroused international interest and suggested the potential for a serious West German literature that was not merely a pale shadow of that of the Weimar period.

In the 1960s, there was a continuing confrontation with the Nazi period, evidenced in new forms and in relation to new topics, such as Rolf Hochhuth's play challenging the role of Catholics in the Third Reich, *The Representative*. Increasingly critical views of the bourgeois, materialist, affluent present also appeared. Narrative was widely regarded as a vehicle for critique. While it is generally accepted that Heinrich Böll's greatest literary achievements were in the short story form, such as in the *collection Ansichten eines Clowns* (1963), his longer works provide an insight into the developing problems of West German society-ranging from the critique of the consequences of investigative journalism and media methods in *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (1974) to the observations on

society's response to terrorism in *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* (1979). Günter Grass produced works which have achieved an immense international reputation such as the *Blechtrommel* of 1959 and *Der Butt* (1977). Works such as *Katharina Blum* and *Blechtrommel* were turned into widely successful films. The 1970s and 1980s also witnessed increased interest in investigative reportage, such as Günter Wallraff's

*Ganz Unten* (exploring the work experiences of *Gastarbeiter*), as well as an explosion of alternative, experimental, and feminist writing. There is not space here to mention the many West German writers who achieved greater or lesser international reputations. It must suffice merely to point out that, while they did not have the parlous status of East German writers, in some ways their work was of less acute interest to many of their readers: literature did not play the same role in the relatively open society of West Germany, with its diverse channels for discussion and debate, as it did in the communist East, where the impact on readers' sensibilities and perceptions was more immediate and the interest in potential often only thinly veiled criticisms of society more intense. On the other hand, West German writers did tend to play a critical role in public debate that was less evident in, for example, Britain.

West German newspapers and magazines also illustrated the diversity of West German cultural life. Unlike Britain, West Germany produced no major national daily (of the sort represented by the *Independent*, *The Times*, or the *Guardian*). If any paper fulfils this role, it is the (Frankfurt-based) *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, a leading serious paper widely read across Germany. Most readers however will read their local or provincial newspaper: in Bavaria, the most important regional paper would be the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, while many readers might also or instead buy their local town newspaper (such as the *Pfaffenhofener Kurier*, a paper which would not aspire to wide circulation outside the immediate vicinity of Pfaffenhofen). Important national weeklies include the newspaper *Die Zeit* and the news magazine *Der Spiegel*. There is a similar mixture of national and regional communication channels in radio and television broadcasting. Interestingly, academic debates on matters of considerable general interest such as the controversy over interpretations of the Holocaust

in the so-called *Historikerstreit*, which raged before and after the election campaign of 1987 were carried out in the press in West Germany, in some contrast to Britain in the 1980s where the voices of academics tended to gain less of a popular audience in general.



It is clear that there was a considerable divergence in cultural life in the two Germanies, although they had certain themes to contend with in common. This is particularly the case with questions such as the confrontation with the Nazi past, and with the more general issue of building new national identities and political cultures in two very different parts of a divided nation. It is to these broader questions that we now turn.

### The Divided Nation: National Identities and Historical Consciousness in the Two Germanies\*

The German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany, formally founded in 1949 as cold war images of their respective occupying powers, faced several key problems in the attempts to develop new national identities. There was that of being a partial state, a severed limb of a defeated and divided nation, with a political regime in the main imposed by the will of the occupying powers and not representing an indigenous development from the people. There was that of coping with the horrific legacy of the Third Reich, where racialist doctrines had led to the bureaucratically organized mass murder of over six million Jews and of others deemed unfit to live. There was that, finally, of attempting to impose drastically new forms of regime—communism and liberal democracy—on populations lacking, by and large, appropriate political values and attitudes. It should be remembered that, whatever their rather wayward actual effects, the denazification and re-education programmes of both the western and eastern occupying powers did not succeed in producing a majority of convinced democrats or communists, respectively. (If anything, they succeeded in creating a certain sense of national community where Hitler had failed: a so-called *Sympathiegemeinschaft* of aggrieved Germans, carping and

grumbling about the injustices being meted out to them

\*A slightly different version of this and the following sections of this chapter has been published in *Historical Research*, vol. 62, no. 148 (June 1989), pp. 193-213.

by the occupation authorities.) It has frequently been said that the Weimer Republic failed in part because it was a 'Republic without Republicans'. If there was any truth in that analysis, then the prospects for the two Germanies could hardly be said to have been much better: in the West, a democracy with precious few democrats in the immediate post-war era; in the East, a communist state with a minority of communists. Over time, it can be argued that political culture in the two Germanies became more appropriate to the divergent political forms even if it was not entirely what the earlier occupying powers or the later respective German governments would necessarily have desired. There were shifts and changes in official interpretations of national identity; there were changing historiographical fashions and evaluations of the place of the present in relation to the past; and there were also some notable transformations of popular political culture in each state, arguably arising less from official attempts to build new national identities than from other features of the socio-political environment.

It should be noted that history was of vital importance in East Germany in attempts to represent (and hence legitimize) the present as the inevitable culmination of the past, the goal towards which all of German history had been tending. East Germany after *Ostpolitik* developed, moreover, a class theory of nation which suggested that while there were now two German nations (as well as two German states), it was the East German nation which was historically the more progressive, according to the Marxist view of historical progress. There were, during the course of the GDR's development, various official views and periodizations both of the GDR's history and of the long sweep of German history. The major shift came with the change from the Ulbricht regime to that of Erich Honecker. In the 1970s and 1980s, the GDR no longer conceived of itself as being in a brief

transitional phase in which undesired elements simply represented hangovers from the past. Rather, 'actually existing socialism' would last a long time, and contained its own intrinsic contradictions and difficulties, which had to be recognized, analysed, and dealt with, rather than dismissed as the debris of past history which would eventually wither away. In

terms of conceptions of national identity in relation to German history, what is of note is the two-fold development in the 1970s and 1980s of an emphasis, both on a specific GDR national identity part of the policy of cultural *Abgrenzung* (demarcation) following the lowering of real barriers after *Ostpolitik* and, almost paradoxically, the simultaneous revival of interest in certain previously suppressed aspects of the German past. This can be seen in a number of areas.

In the field of architecture, attention began to be paid to the rehabilitation of old houses in city centres, the renovation of churches and other notable public buildings, the restoration of historically significant areas and their upkeep as being of national importance. This stood in some contrast to earlier policies of permitting the crumbling and dilapidation of such buildings while throwing up new housing estates on the outskirts of cities and favouring Soviet-style architecture or cheap concrete prefabricated flats which of course had the laudable utilitarian aim of ensuring rapid adequate housing provision but did little to preserve the German architectural and cultural heritage. Not only old houses but also old heroes were resurrected, symbolically and sometimes also physically. Frederick II (Frederick the Great) was to ride his horse again on his statue re-erected on East Berlin's Unter den Linden; Luther was rehabilitated in the history books as a figure of major importance in East German history. Anniversaries and historical exhibitions flourished, although not quite on the scale afforded by the Federal Republic; in 1987 East Berlin mounted its own Berlin 750-year anniversary bonanza. 8

The academic writing of history which was of course somewhat circumscribed by the official line, although at times a wider latitude of interpretation was evident partly reflected these changes. Without analysing specific works in detail, it may be noted here that there were some remarkable general changes between the mid 1970s and the late

1980s. Marxist history writing is generally characterized by a focus on the succession of modes of production, the progressive role of the exploited and oppressed classes, and the importance of revolutions in the transition from one stage to the next. While these broad emphases remained, new features emerged. There was a new

focus on the historic role of individuals, such as Bismarck and Frederick the Great. Certain traditional German themes, for a long time taboo, made their reappearance, such as militarism, the Army, and the legacy of Prussia (now more positively evaluated and laid claim to). The development of a certain idealism was notable, as for example in the reinterpretation of the Lutheran Reformation as the 'essential ideological precondition' for the German Peasants' War, held up since Engels as Germany's 'early bourgeois revolution' with its hero Thomas Münzer. To outside observers, this looked like a return to non-Marxist modes of history writing in the GDR, alongside continuing materialist currents. The one area which saw little serious change, at least as officially presented, was that of the recent Nazi past: the Nazi-Soviet pact was glossed over, and the working people of Germany were represented as having simply been 'liberated' from Nazi oppression, rooted in monopoly capitalism, by the Red Army. This was evident both in such official publications as the 1985 pamphlets commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war and in the kinds of historical exhibition shown in former Nazi concentration camps such as Buchenwald. However, it was now acknowledged that there were forms of resistance other than, and in addition to, that of communists. The 20 July Plotters, for example, were accorded some belated respect. On a more general level, it has been suggested that East German historiography from the 1970s onwards broadened its scope, laying claim to the *whole* of German history, rather than selected highlights, while at the same time maintaining a distinction between *Tradition* and *Erbe*, the aspects of tradition and legacy which were or were not to be used as sources of inspiration for the present. 9

What impact did official representations of history have on the population of East Germany? There is some evidence to suggest that

the younger generation did begin to think in terms of 'GDR citizenship', 'GDR culture' and so on, rather than the notion of 'German' which appeared more natural to the older generation. In this respect, it was simply part of the passage of time which made what was once new and strange into the taken-for-granted. It also seems that East Germans assented



to the respect for the German national heritage which was in evidence in the 1970s and 1980s. The state co-opted Luther not only as a religious hero but also as a national hero, thereby successfully averting a symbolic confrontation between, on the one hand, people, religion and nation, and, on the other, alien imposed atheist state, as had happened in Poland, the example of which was not lost on the East German leadership at the time of Solidarity's birth in 1980. On the other hand, East Germans retained an intense interest in the West German state, watching West German television and cultivating links with West German relatives and friends. Effective imprisonment behind the Wall also made East Germans perpetually aware of the consequences of war and division, which remained a continuing source of pain. Moreover, it will be argued below that there were other, more important influences on the formation of political culture in East Germany than the officially promoted views of the past and of GDR national identity.

Views of the past were much more diverse in West Germany. About the only valid generalization is that history was extremely controversial, with major national arguments raging not only over obviously contentious topics, such as the Holocaust, but also over ways of teaching history in schools, and representing history to the public in museums and exhibitions. These debates were carried out not only in academic journals, but also with considerable acrimony in the national press, on the radio and on television. History was a highly political matter in the Federal Republic.

In the 1950s there was a certain repression of the immediate past, a 'collective amnesia', while at the same time many prominent figures were cashing in on a ready market with the publication of their memoirs. Utilitarian rationalizations were employed to justify a certain obliteration – often physical and literal – of the less pleasant

aspects of the Nazi period, as in the destruction of Nazi concentration camps to 'avert the spread of disease', or the demolition of the former Gestapo headquarters in Prinz-Albrechtstrasse, Berlin. (The reconstruction of certain sites, such as an exemplary block in the 'Garden of Remembrance' which is what Flossenbürg

concentration camp was turned into, hardly give an adequate picture of their former horrific nature; the sites in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland are infinitely more compelling in atmosphere.) The acknowledged general political apathy of the 1950s was supplemented by the official unease with any form of German nationalism, and a desire to seek new forms of political identity, such as absorption into wider European economic and political organizations. Both these orientations underwent changes over time.

By the 1980s, a new desire and willingness to confront the past had developed symbolized, for example, by the popularity of films such as *Heimat*, which sought to reappropriate and 'normalize' twentieth-century German history. In a more sombre vein, the cellars of the Gestapo building in Berlin, surprisingly uncovered, were used for part of a historical exhibition on resistance. (Even this, however, and the future use of the area, became the subjects of heated public controversy.)<sup>10</sup> At the same time, there was a renewed willingness in conservative circles to revive nationalist themes, to speak more openly and frequently of the 'fatherland', and to call for renewed pride in the German nation and an end to feeling guilt and shame for being German.<sup>11</sup> All these trends were controversial: there was much public debate, both over specific issues such as whether to redevelop significant sites or retain them intact as memorials (for example, the Jewish quarter in Frankfurt), and over general issues such as renascent German nationalism. The issues did not divide simply along party-political lines: left-wing anti-Americanism, environmentalism, and right-wing nationalism had many elements in common, despite the disavowals of some commentators that left-wing anti-American and anti-nuclear, neutralist sentiments had anything to do with nationalism.<sup>12</sup>

The range of views expressed in public debate was found also in

academic history-writing in West Germany. The conservative orthodoxy of the 1950s was shattered by the publication in 1961 of Fritz Fischer's controversial reinterpretation of German responsibility for unleashing the First World War, provoking a long-running debate which renewed focus on domestic social tensions in Wilhelmine Germany. In the later 1960s and 1970s,

new forms of social and societal history began to gain ground, with the rise to prominence of such historians as Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka. While the approach of the 'Bielefeld School' (where several such historians worked) was becoming an established trend if only among a minority of the still largely conservative West German historical profession it was being challenged by a fresh wave of younger historians in the 1970s and 1980s, seeking to open up 'history from below'. By the late 1980s, there was a profusion of approaches to history, including the rapid spread of amateur involvement in history workshops, the proliferation of regional and local studies and exploration of the history of everyday life, the expansion of feminist history and the pursuit of other previously neglected areas and themes, often by people marginal to the academic world. While the mainstream of the West German historical profession might have retained its institutional predominance, there was certainly an enhanced liveliness in German historical debates.

The so-called *Historikerstreit* (historians' controversy) of 1986/7 about the uniqueness and comparability of the Holocaust was also indicative, less of disputes about facts, than of new modes of attempting to assimilate the past to present political consciousness. The attempt by largely conservative historians to pose certain questions (often rhetorical, particularly in the case of Nolte, and implying unsubstantiated answers) about Hitler's Germany in a wider perspective was geared towards a general desire to reassert a modicum of pride in being German again. On this view, Stalin's crimes both predated and may in some (never very clearly specified or documented) way have actually helped to cause Hitler's crimes. Those who sympathize with victims of the Holocaust, or who profess empathy with the underdogs of history, should also feel sorry for the millions of Germans expelled from their homelands in the eastern

territories after the war, or with the brave German soldiers fighting on the eastern front and so on. The debate was characterized by a high degree of acrimony, mud-slinging, misrepresentation and misquotation, and participants frequently resorted less to rational argument about the facts than to

ill-founded assertions about opponents' political positions. In the end, the debate largely subsided as a public issue, being overtaken by the more immediate questions posed by the East German events of 1989. It ultimately served more to illustrate the contentious, problematic, and political nature of perceptions of history in the Federal Republic than to shed any new light on the genuinely difficult questions of the past. 13

What impact did perceptions of the past have on popular political consciousness in West Germany among those not directly contributing to the reappropriation of history? For all the West German agonizing over *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past), certain studies and incidents revealed a startling ignorance of, or set of misapprehensions about, the past on the part of many, particularly younger, West Germans. One study, for example, in which schoolchildren were asked to write an essay on what they knew about Hitler, revealed the most extraordinary range of confusion and simple lack of factual knowledge. The showing of the rather sentimental and simplistic American film *Holocaust* in Germany aroused passions and debates which illustrated, if nothing else, the previous relatively dormant nature of any engagement with the topic. Similarly, in 1985 the misjudged visit of America's President Reagan to Bitburg Cemetery with its SS graves at the last minute counterbalanced by a hastily arranged visit to Belsen concentration camp further provoked much heated debate on issues which had lain somewhat suppressed in earlier years. The later 1970s and 1980s were characterized by vigorous public interest in German history, as evidenced in the enormous number and range of historical exhibitions that were mounted in West Germany. These included not only the major representations of German history in the Reichstag building in West Berlin, the massive Prussia exhibition, and the diverse exhibitions

forming part of Berlin's 750th anniversary celebrations, but also a host of regional and local exhibitions and new museums reflecting a widespread intense popular interest in reinterpreting often forgotten aspects of the German past and representing them in new ways.



However, it can be argued for West Germany as for the East that perceptions of the past, and official views on national identity, were not the key factors affecting the transformation of political culture; to some extent, indeed, they rather reflected changes originating elsewhere. As far as national identity goes, the simple passage of time made the Federal Republic look more and more like the 'natural' political entity to young West Germans, who for the most part had barely a passing interest in the relatively unknown and easily ignored country on the other side of the Iron Curtain dividing the familiar homeland from the drab and easily dismissed GDR. Personal links with the GDR-memories and nostalgia for lost eastern territories were inevitably dying out. Even in the 1950s, when Adenauer firmly set his face towards the West, material concerns in the age of the economic miracle were more important to many Germans than any prospect of reunification. This was quite evidently the case in the period of *Ostpolitik*, when in the 1972 election which largely revolved on the issue of support for Brandt's policies effectively conceding the likely permanence of division there was an extremely high turnout with the SPD for the first time winning more votes than the CDU/CSU. By the later 1980s, few would have questioned the territorial boundaries or fundamental legitimacy of the West German state. In this aspect, there was a key asymmetry between West and East German views of their part of a divided nation: it was relatively easy for westerners to ignore the East (which hardly constituted a tempting tourist destination), in contrast to the great desire to travel to (and experience the consumer delights of) the West felt by many East Germans.

Finally, we may ask the question why both Germanies were developing fundamentally new relationships with their past in the 1970s and 1980s. The answer must of course in part have to do with the consequences of *Ostpolitik* and mutual recognition: despite West

Germany's formally continuing commitment to eventual reunification (enshrined in the Basic Law, West Germany's 'temporary' constitution of 1949), both states now appeared to be permanent and would continue to diverge for the foreseeable future. But the answer, perhaps more

importantly, has to do with the changed internal characters of the regimes and of the two societies which, having passed through a highly painful transitional stage, had become to a considerable degree established. Rather than representing a *precondition* for the development of domestic stability, the new explorations of national identity were rather *predicated on* the prior transformation and stabilization of the two Germanies, which could now afford, from a distance, to reflect more freely on their past.

### Changing Patterns of Political Culture

What then of changing political cultures in the two Germanies? Attempts to define and characterize 'political culture' are highly problematic; so problematic that one commentator has likened the task to attempting to nail a milk pudding to the wall. Questions arise concerning what is meant by the concept, in terms of values, attitudes, behaviour; what levels it can be related to ('whole society', region, class or social group); how far it can be used as an explanatory, independent variable, or how far it is the result of other factors, and if so, which. Such debates cannot be entered into in detail here, but a few general points may be made. Of course there are certain inherited patterns of political values, attitudes, and modes of behaviour, which are passed on through socialization and change only slowly over time (although expressions of opinion over specific issues may change very rapidly). But it can be argued that certain sorts of political organization, and certain features of state-society relationships, tend to produce distinctive profiles of political orientation among the populace. 14

It was suggested, above, that the interventionist nature of the Nazi state, in which 'total' claims were made on the lives of citizens, tended to produce a widespread 'inner emigration', as people learned to lead a

double life, conforming in public and reserving their authentic feelings for private spaces and private lives. This phenomenon, frequently termed a *Nischengesellschaft* (niche society), has been widely observed in a number of East

European societies which in different ways also tended to make total claims on their citizens. For the GDR the 'niche society' was well described by Günter Gaus, West Germany's former representative in the GDR, in his book *Wo Deutschland liegt*.<sup>15</sup> In Communist East Germany, people participated in their work brigades, their local branches of the SED and FDGB, they belonged to the appropriate youth, sporting, or cultural associations, and the like. They mouthed the appropriate sentiments and slogans at the appropriate times. Yet at weekends they fled to their allotments, with their brightly painted habitable garden sheds (to dignify these with the term 'country cottages' would be an overstatement), where they assiduously cultivated plots blossoming with flowers and fruit. It is true that allotments and gardening have a long tradition in central Europe and that gardening is a British national pastime, too, under rather different political circumstances and it is not suggested here that a flight to the land at weekends is of itself something significant and new. What is to be noted, however, is the psychological aspect of the East German pattern: the investment of enthusiasm, the sense of self-expression and free development of individual personality, without the constraints of internal or external censorship. This could of course be found in other private environments in the family, in church discussion groups, in certain forms of music and literature (which had a heightened political significance) and elsewhere not only in allotments. The latter was merely a physical symbol of a mode of life: a life characterized by what some East Germans called *Zweigleisigkeit*, living on two tracks, moving between two languages, public conformity and private authenticity. This was not simply an inherited cultural tradition, an aspect of 'traditional' German 'apoliticism'; rather, it was a mode of adapting to life under a particular regime. Nor is it to be equated with a form of 'dissent' or 'opposition'. If anything, it was a safety valve from the point of view of the authorities, and was at times actively

encouraged as a stabilizing factor.

The equivalent of this phenomenon in West Germany was simply political passivity. It is quite easy just to ignore politics

there is no need for active retreat - if the state is not particularly intrusive or demanding on an individual's behaviour. The separation of 'public' and 'private' takes place rather differently. In the occupation period and the 1950s a comparable form of retreatism could be observed in West Germany, partly representing a hangover from the Third Reich, partly arising as a distrustful response to the possibilities of an apparently impermanent political present, in which fear of future reprisals in yet another political climate played some role. Slowly this climate of retreat into the private sphere dissipated, particularly with a process of generational change and the realization that the temporary division of Germany was likely to be long-lasting. After climactic changes in the 1960s, with the development of political activism in some quarters, the 1970s and 1980s saw the possibility for political quiescence and passivity, rather than the retreatism of a double life, on the part of the majority of non-active citizens in the West. From the point of view of the West German political elites, this political passivity was just as contributory to regime stability as would be a more active and explicit assent to official political ideologies - and possibly even more so, since happy but passive citizens make few difficult demands, unlike activists, however supportive the latter may be of the regime's official values. Clearly West German economic performance also played a major role in this set of developments.

Another set of differences has to do with patterns of dissent and opposition in the two Germanies, as related to degrees of toleration and the treatment of dissent in each state. A more tolerant state, in which a wide range of views are permissible, will by definition perceive less 'dissent' from official views than will a state in which orthodoxy is more narrowly defined. Hence in the GDR, anyone not subscribing to Marxism-Leninism as officially defined would inevitably be at least classifiable as a dissenter, a position which was

of course rather different to that of the wider spectrum of opinions permissible in West Germany-although even there limits were placed on non-democratic views. However, beyond this rather obvious, even banal, point, there is a more interesting and highly important question to do



with the ways in which dissent, however defined, is treated. A curve of sorts may be identified here. If dissent is treated relatively leniently, it may in some ways actually represent a stabilizing factor for the regime, in that discontent which can be expressed can be to some extent defused. If on the other hand it is treated more harshly, it may either be provoked and politicized into active anti-system opposition-which is obviously potentially much more of a problem for regime stability-or it may, if the state is sufficiently draconian, be effectively repressed. There are interesting and subtle dialectics in the oscillations between supportive dissent and destabilizing opposition. The point to be made here is simply this: different state definitions and treatments of dissent, and different political structures, produced notably different patterns of dissent and opposition in the two Germanies, as we have seen in Chapter Ten above. These differences cannot be held to be the result of the inheritance of particular forms of political culture or of different patterns of socialization. The implications of dissent and opposition depend also-crucially-on a wider international context and on the vulnerability of the regime at any particular time, as we shall see in the next chapter.

What about more diffuse modes of orientation towards political activity in general? According to one very widespread and undifferentiated view, 'the Germans' have traditionally been held to have a tendency towards authoritarianism and political conformity: obedience to authority, and lack of civil courage or a sense of democracy. When such a view is predicated on a notion of an enduring 'national character', it is clearly untenable; but some quite sophisticated writers have adopted variants which are initially more appealing. Certain authors perceived a continuity of authoritarian tendencies as a legacy of the Nazi era: Christa Wolf, for instance, suggested that the Nazi heritage for the psyche in East Germany

needed to be brought to greater awareness. However, against even the more sensitive of such approaches, it may be argued that tendencies towards conformity were actively fostered by contemporary organizational features of life in the GDR. To take the example of the education system: while the GDR system of 'comprehensive polytechnical education'

was structurally far more egalitarian than the predominantly tripartite, hierarchical system in the Federal Republic, with a greater (although by no means complete) equality of opportunity with respect to social background, political conformity was nevertheless as much a prerequisite here for career advancement as was academic proficiency. Moreover, the mode of teaching discouraged independent thought and critical argument, in favour of the exegesis of sacred texts and received viewpoints. Conversely, despite the more hierarchical structure of the West German education system, there was, particularly following the criticisms of the 1960s and the educational reforms of the 1970s, a tendency to attempt to encourage more democratic debate and independent thinking, at least for the privileged minority who were in a position to benefit from it.

Comparable comments could be made about the question of individualism versus collective identities and solidarity. This is a rather complex area, covering a number of fields, but a few remarks may be made about certain avenues worthy of exploration.

It was suggested above that the collective mentalities of the subcultural milieux of Imperial Germany, which continued in changed forms in the Weimar Republic, were to some considerable extent broken down in the Third Reich. In the occupation period, the western occupying powers in particular found it difficult to reintroduce collective notions associated with trade unionism, particularly among younger Germans with no direct experience of independent trade unions. There were similar difficulties for the inculcation of the principle that political parties represent sectional, rather than general, interests, sections which could amicably agree to differ. It is clear that over the decades a new balance of individualism and collectivism, associated with new organizational forms, developed in West Germany. The balance developed rather differently in the East. Most

of an East German's working life and organized leisure time fostered a sense of being part of a collective: the work brigades, the work branch of the SED or FDGB, the women's organization, or youth or sporting organization. There is also some evidence that even conscious party attempts to introduce

a form of individualist work ethic in East German enterprises were not entirely successful. Despite the assertion of the GDR specialist P.C. Ludz that a career-oriented achievement society was developing in the 1960s, there is evidence to suggest that one of the problems involved in the introduction of the New Economic System at that time was the failure of profit incentives at the individual level. The evidence of East Germans who came to live in the West corroborates the view that they had difficulties learning to act independently, and had become used to collective forms of organization. Many East Germans also took a more total view of society than did West Germans, seeing more clearly the drawbacks of a market economy in combining unemployment and poverty for some with affluence for others, whereas West Germans took a more individualist view of merit and mobility.

Let us turn finally to some aspects of the changing group bases of political culture. There are many possible relevant aspects, including such topics as the importance of regionalism; here, we shall consider only two: class and religion.

There was a radical divergence in the class structure of the two Germanies in a variety of respects, as we have seen above. In relation to East German political culture, of key importance was the early abolition of the old Prussian Junker class, with the Soviet land reform of 1945, and of capitalist industrialists and financiers. While differences of status and privilege were still noticeable in East Germany-based usually on political criteria one consequence of a general levelling of class structure was the development of what has been classified as a predominantly petty bourgeois (*kleinbürgerlich*) class culture. (As Gaus calls it, the 'society of the small man'.) The class structure of West Germany changed in rather different ways. Despite the assertions of some western analysts that West Germany

was developing a more classless society than Britain (with accents continuing to reflect region rather than class) great social and class-cultural differences could still be observed in the Federal Republic. These differences frequently overrode generational divisions and generation has been a very strong factor in the differentiation of German political cultures. Among the

young, for example, the under-educated, unskilled, and under-employed disproportionately favoured right-wing extremism, while the better-educated tended to hold left-wing radical political views. West German differences in class culture were complicated further by still important regional differences: for instance, right-wing Catholic rural Bavaria was a very different sort of place from industrial North-Rhine Westphalia or from liberal Protestant urban Hamburg, for all the much-vaunted homogenization of German society. Regional differentiation in East Germany was less marked, perhaps as a result of its smaller size, previous relative homogeneity (predominantly Protestant, for example), and, most importantly, its more centralized political system.

Certain relevant points about the political culture of East German Protestantism have been made above, in connection with the discussion of dissent. German Lutheranism has frequently been declared a major culprit in preparing the path to Hitler, with fingers pointed at the doctrine of obedience to secular authority. The experience of the churches in the Third Reich, from complicity and compliance to courageous opposition, indicates the greater complexity of Christian responses to politics. The political orientation of churches and congregations diverged quite considerably in the two Germanies, largely as a result of the different political locations of religious institutions in the two states. While in West Germany churches as *organizations* still had considerable influence and important formal roles in decision-making processes, there was a noticeable decline in the salience of religious frameworks for individual political orientations, evidenced for example in the decreasing correlations between religion and party preferences. In East Germany a reverse process took place. With the heightened political importance of at least the Protestant Church as a relatively independent institution and

discussion partner with the state, as well as increasing space for open discussion, Christianity achieved a new importance for many members of the population. It provided a location for the development of new political views and modes of behaviour, and a variegated set of dissenting political cultures. This salience derived from the structural position of the church in the East



German political system, and not solely from any intrinsic aspects of Protestantism as a belief system.

### German National Identities and Political Cultures: Conclusions

The discussion in this chapter has focused less on the consequences of different types of political culture on which the emphasis in much historical and political science writing is placed but rather on the structural determinants and bases of political orientation. There is undoubtedly an interplay between different levels, with the state responding to particular pressures as well as shaping popular perceptions and patterns of action. However, certain general arguments can be put forward here in relation to the material presented above.

First, a simple materialist view as characterized some of the GDR's early policies and aspirations must be qualified. Altering the ownership of the means of production does not produce a changed class-consciousness automatically. In a sense, Max Weber is vindicated over Karl Marx, in the emphasis he laid on the issue of the bureaucratization and growth of the state in would be socialist societies. Secondly, however, a simple idealist view which curiously was also present in Ulbricht's GDR, and which forms part of the ambiguity of political Marxism must also be discounted. The official story about a society's place in history does not of itself greatly affect people's political orientations. Thirdly, a focus on an inherited 'national character' or more 'scientifically' on the presumed existence of a 'national political culture' as an 'independent variable' transmitted across generations by some process of socialization must also be subject to qualification.

Rather, the view may be proposed that political cultures represent modes of adapting to diverse aspects of current experience refracted

through perceptions and frameworks which are to some degree inherited. It is not only a question of what sort of work is done, but also of how workers are organized, how they relate to work-processes, to decision-making processes, to

managers and employers; it is not only a question of what a particular religious ideology potentially entails, but also of what forms of religious organization are present, and of the structural relationships between the latter and the state; it is not only a question of (debatable) biologically determined differences between the sexes, but also of social policies and environmental circumstances affecting gender roles in different forms of society. This list could be elaborated at length, but perhaps enough has been said to demonstrate that, however similar given patterns of political culture may look to their predecessors, their similarity and survival has been to a large extent determined by the existence of certain structural arrangements which foster precisely these patterns and not others. So, for example, what appeared to many observers to be a curiously 'traditional' pattern of political culture in the GDR (retreatism, authoritarianism, a widespread lack of democratic notions) was actually produced or shaped by authoritarian features of the SED regime, rather than simply inherited from a rather differently authoritarian past. It must of course be added that this structural conditioning does not mean that actual political cultures are necessarily those desired by political elites: modes of adaptation may be quite subversive, and, despite certain elite theories of history, elites have by and large proved to be notoriously bad at social engineering.

Can one in fact speak at all of national political cultures? In loose parlance, both scholars and others frequently do particularly when the concept is used as an independent causal factor. However, I would suggest that the answer must in fact be in the negative: there are too many subcultural variations with different bases. What one can attempt to describe is a rather more complex picture of combinations of salient subgroups and varieties of political orientation which make up a rather more differentiated national profile. These profiles do not

exactly redescribe social or political structure, since there are mediations of response and cross-cutting foci of identification. We must finally ask about the relationships between such patterns of political culture and changing conceptions and official promotions of national identity.

It is clear that there are no simple and straightforward relationships between changing official conceptions of national identity and changing patterns of political culture. More importantly, perhaps, the amount of energy devoted by political elites to promoting particular versions of national identity may be partly misplaced. Arguably, individuals respond more to particular pressures and constraints in their daily lives, which produce particular modes of behaviour and political attitude, than they do to more ethereal conceptions concerning their society's place in the long sweep of historical development.

Thus, the quest for national identity, while intrinsically fascinating, may be a search not only for something which is perpetually shifting and never to be identified with finality artefact as it is of contemporary politics but also for something which does not, in the end, have the importance ascribed to it in relation to national political cultures. The two simply do not neatly correspond.

In any event, the degree to which the two Germanies had diverged became, in the autumn of 1989, what is conventionally known as an 'academic question'. For within a few months, a revolutionary process erupted and snowballed, such that by the beginning of 1990 the division of Germany and the very existence of *two* Germanies was for the first time in four decades seriously under question. To many observers, as the revolutions broke out across Eastern Europe, and the Iron Curtain was pulled down, the post-war era appeared to be coming to an end. It is to this radical transformation that we now turn.