The GDR and the German nation: sole heir or socialist sibling?

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In his report on the State of the Nation delivered before the Bundestag on 23 June 1983, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl addressed the question of the future of the German nation, and stated:

> There are two states in Germany, but there is only one German nation. Its existence is not contingent upon governmental or majority decisions. It is a product of history, a part of the Christian and European cultures, and shaped by its location at the heart of the continent. The German nation's existence preceded the formation of a national state and has outlived it. This is important for our future.[1]

Kohl's statement not only reflected his personal convictions, but also confirmed a fundamental continuity in the official West German view of the German nation. Throughout the postwar period, West German statesmen have clung to the concept of a single German nation and the FRG remains legally committed to an eventual reunification of Germany, a commitment anchored in its Basic Law or Constitution.[2] Shortly after Kohl's speech in the West, East German Party leader and head of state Erich Honecker articulated the official East German view of the subject. When asked in an interview with the French communist weekly *Révolution* if a revival of German national consciousness was taking place today, he brusquely dismissed any discussion of German reunification, saying:

> Two independent states with different social systems have arisen on German soil, the socialist GDR and the capitalist FRG, [states] that belong to different alliance systems. One can unite them just as little as one can unite fire and water.[3]

For the Federal Republic, therefore, a single unitary German nation continues to exist and the 'German question' remains open, despite over three decades of partition and no prospects of any changes in the status quo in the near future. Richard von Weizsäcker, President of the FRG, eloquently summed up West German expectations when he stated: 'Experience teaches [us] that a question does not cease to exist simply because one does not have an answer for it, particularly when the nature

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1. For the full text of Kohl's Bundestag address see Helmut Kohl's, *Für eine Politik der Erneuerung* (Bonn: Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, October 1983).

2. According to the Preamble of the West German Basic Law or Constitution, 'the entire German people are called upon to achieve in self-determination the unity and freedom of Germany'. See *The Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany* (Bonn: Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, 1979), p. 13. The Federal Republic's commitment to reunification is also clearly stated in the so-called Letter of German Unity attached to both the Moscow Treaty of August 1970 and the Basic Treaty between the FRG and the GDR of December 1972; finally, this commitment was also reconfirmed by the July 1973 decision of the West German Federal Constitution Court in Karlsruhe on the constitutionality of the Basic Treaty. See *Auskünfte zur Deutschlandpolitik A–Z* (Bonn: Bundesministerium für innerdeutsche Beziehungen, 1983).

3. See Honecker's interview in *Révolution*, 6 Jan. 1984.

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of the issue is such that the question returns again and again.'[4] For the GDR, on the other hand, the German question has officially long been put to rest, solved not only by the creation of two German states from the rubble of Hitler's Third Reich but also by the development of two separate German nations, the 'socialist' German nation in the GDR and the 'capitalist' nation in the FRG. Yet the East German government's constant shrill urgings that the FRG recognize these alleged 'realities' of history are hardly a solid testimony to its own self-assurance in this sphere. Behind the party's current 'two nation theory' lies a far more complex chapter in the GDR's history. The GDR was, of course, officially founded as a temporary structure to last only until Germany could be reunited under the banner of socialism. Indeed, the vociferousness with which the Ulbricht regime voiced its national aspirations at times suggested that the GDR aspired to play the role of a German Piedmont, catalysing reunification under socialist auspices,[5] despite the fact that the prospects for such a development were then and remain now practically nil.

In response to the West German *Ostpolitik* of the early 1970s the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) finally dropped its pan-German aspirations, or so it would seem, and party spokesmen have since attempted to present the founding of the GDR, along with the development of a separate 'socialist' German nation, as inevitable and the logical culmination of the German historical process. In backing up such assertions, East German historians have undertaken major revisions in the official views of previously reviled German historical personalities such as Martin Luther and Frederick the Great, among others, and now paint them in a much more positive light as proof of the GDR's deep and widely spread roots in the German historical past. The evolution of official views on the German nation and its history has of course been influenced not only by political developments in the Federal Republic but also by evolving attitudes within East German society and the regime's attempts to foster a sense of separate state and national identity. With theories of proletarian internationalism having proved too schematic, and the traditions of the German labour movement insufficient as an effective historical basis of regime legitimacy, the SED has been forced to resort to a new strategy tracing the GDR's roots deep into the German historical past and presenting the GDR as the continuation of all progressive German historical traditions. All the variations on the theme of the German nation, its past as well as its future, which have been offered by East German theorists over the years, however, should be seen in a single context, namely the elusive attempt on the part of a chronically insecure political leadership to legitimate its own existence.

The early years

The leaders of the German Communist Party (KPD—Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands) recognized the tactical utility of the theme of German national unity immediately upon their arrival in the Soviet occupation zone in the spring of 1945. The KPD's emphasis on national unity along with its initial stress on the inapplicability of the Soviet model for postwar Germany must be viewed in the context of Soviet hopes to control a unified Germany and the necessity to enhance

4. See Richard von Weizsäcker's article 'Only cooperation can create peace', *Die Zeit*, 30 Sept. 1983.
5. See Melvin Croan, 'New country, old nationality', *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1979–80, No. 37, p. 145.

the party's domestic appeal.[6] Such considerations undoubtedly lay behind the KPD's adoption of the thesis of a special 'German road to socialism' penned by CC member Anton Ackermann in early 1946 during the final push for a merger of the KPD and the German Social Democratic Party (SPD—Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) in the Soviet occupation zone, a process that reached its institutional culmination with the formation of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in April of that year.[7] At its first official congress the SED dedicated itself to the goal of German national unity, calling upon all 'anti-fascist democratic parties' to work for the 'establishment of German unity in the form of an anti-fascist democratic parliamentary republic'. At its second congress in 1947 the struggle for the unity of the German nation was elevated to the party's 'main task'.[8]

By autumn 1948 the SED had officially abandoned the notion of a special 'German road to socialism', deeming it a nationalist deviation and a tool against the Soviet Union and the people's democracies.[9] The emerging conflict with Tito had made any further discussion of special paths to socialism not only dangerous but in many ways superfluous, since the GDR was already being turned into a People's Democracy to be run by a 'party of a new type', a process which would leave painfully little room for any deviation from Soviet norms.[10] The commitment to the goal of a unified socialist Germany, however, remained a key component in the SED's programme; it is often forgotten that Stalin himself marked the official founding of the GDR in October 1949 with a resounding appeal to German nationalism.[11] Indeed, coming a mere four weeks after the first West German government under Konrad Adenauer had taken office, the timing of this move was clearly planned to demonstrate who bore the real responsibility for the division of Germany.[12] The goal of reunification was also firmly embedded in the first East German constitution which, like its West German counterpart, laid a claim to representing all Germans and adopted pan-German terminology, referring to a single German *Volk* and a single German citizenship.[13] The German bourgeoisie, the SED maintained, had led the German nation into two disastrous world wars, thereby forfeiting its right to national leadership; it was time for the German working class to take up the national mission.

6. For two personal accounts of the KPD's tactics in this period see Carola Stern, *Ulbricht: a political biography*, (New York: Praeger, 1965) and Wolfgang Leonhardt, *Die Revolution entlässt ihre Kinder* (Cologne, Berlin: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1955); See also Wilhelm Bleek, 'Unity Party and the National question', in *Der X Parteitag der SED: 35 Jahre SED Politik Versuch einer Bilanz* (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1981), pp. 87–91. For Soviet policy see Hans Peter Schwarz, *Vom Reich zur Bundesrepublik* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1980), pp. 201–69, and, for the official Soviet view, V. N. Belezki, *Die Politik der Soviet Union in den deutschen Angelegenheiten in der Nachkriegszeit 1945–1976* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, 1977), pp. 11–106.

7. For excerpts of Ackermann's original article entitled 'Is there a special German road to socialism?', published in the first issue of the SED theoretical journal *Einheit* in 1946, see Hermann Weber, ed., *Der Deutsche Kommunismus, Dokumente* (Berlin: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1963), pp. 513–18.

8. See the SED's official *Geschichte der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Marxistische Blätter, 1978), pp. 159–65.

9. The theory of a 'special German road to socialism' was officially dropped in mid-September 1948; in a resolution passed by the party leadership it was stated that such an attempt signified a total disregard of the great historical experience of the Soviet Union as well as a total renouncement of the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism on the question of achieving the victory of socialism. Ackermann himself recanted in an article in *Neues Deutschland* on 24 September. See Hermann Weber, *Kleine Geschichte der DDR* (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1980), p. 45.

10. See Weber, *Kleine Geschichte*, pp. 45–6.

11. See Croan, 'New country', and Gerhard Wetting, 'The Soviet Note on Germany of March 10, 1952', *Deutschland Archiv*, 1982, No. 2, p. 136.

12. See Hans Peter Schwarz, *Die Ära Adenauer 1949–1957* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1981), p. 61.

13. Carl Christoph Schweitzer, ed., *Die Deutsche Nation: Aussagen von Bismarck bis Honecker* (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1976), p. 503.

East German attacks on West German 'separatism' and the 'McCloy Republic', its accusations of national treason, and its passionate appeals against West German rearmament or European integration and for national unity in the early 1950s were all strictly in keeping with Stalin's efforts to hinder Adenauer's policy of Western integration and to keep Germany neutral. Adenauer's policies and the increasingly likely prospect of a rearmed West German state participating in a collective Western defence effort prompted Stalin to address a series of official proposals to the Western allies which, at least on paper, called for a unified, peace-loving democratic German state. This campaign culminated in Stalin's famous March note of 1952 in which he called for negotiations among the four occupying powers that would lead to a peace treaty with and unification of Germany, the withdrawal of occupation troops, and, what was new, a *rearmed* unified German state pledged to neutrality. The GDR also played a role in such campaigns, contributing its *'Deutsche an einen Tisch'* proposals and other determined attempts to initiate formal discussions with the FRG over Germany's future. Nothing came out of these initiatives, however, since neither the Western allies nor Adenauer were willing to abandon the visible progress of the FRG's Western integration in return for another endless round of negotiations to find out what Stalin really meant. Whether Stalin actually might have been prepared to sacrifice the GDR to prevent West German rearmament has of course been a subject of considerable academic debate.[14] The die was probably cast in any case shortly afterwards, since the Soviet Union clearly committed itself to the Ulbricht regime by intervening in the June 1953 uprising.[15]

The two state theory

The West German entry into NATO in May 1955 signified that Soviet attempts to prevent the emergence of a rearmed West German state had failed. This led to a revision in Soviet policy on Germany in so far as Moscow then adopted the 'two state theory', emphasizing that the German question could be solved no longer by a unified federal German state but rather by a pan-German confederation of two autonomous states. In May 1954 the Soviet Union ostensibly granted the GDR full sovereignty and Moscow now boldly insisted that reunification had become a matter for the two German states to resolve between themselves, a tactic designed to draw the FRG into negotiations with the GDR, thus breaking the latter's international isolation. In 1957, undoubtedly at Soviet prompting, the SED began yet another campaign in which it again took up the idea of a German confederation in a document entitled *The road of the German nation in ensuring peace and reuniting Germany.* The proposal envisaged the creation of an All-German Council to discuss gradual cooperation between the two German states, their withdrawal from their respective alliances, and increased economic cooperation leading eventually to confederation based on a treaty grounded in international law. The seriousness, or lack thereof, of this proposal,

14. See Wetting, 'The Soviet Note', pp. 130–47; and Hans Peter Schwarz, *Die Legende von der verpassten Gelegenheit: die Stalin Note vom 10. März 1952* (Zürich, Stuttgart: Belser, 1982).

15. There remains the fascinating account of rumours circulating in East Berlin shortly before the uprising that the Soviet Union had ordered major correctives in its German policy which might have opened the way for the reunification of Germany; see the personal account of former SED functionary Heinz Brandt, *Ein Traum der nicht entführbar ist* (Munich: Paul List, 1967), pp. 217–40. Excerpts of Brandt's account are also published in the excellent collection of contributions in Ilse Spittmann and Karl Wilhelm Fricke, eds, *17 Juni 1953: Arbeiteraufstand in der DDR* (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1982).

however, was underlined by a series of preconditions that would have amounted to a *de facto* Bolshevization of West German society. That the SED still clung to its goal of German reunification was nevertheless confirmed in a statement delivered by the former East German President Otto Grotewohl who, in defending the initiative, stated:

> In making this proposal, therefore, the government of the GDR is motivated by a profound sense of national responsibility. It has never considered—and still does not consider—coming to terms with the existence of two German states. It joins forces with all German patriots in their unflagging efforts to achieve the exalted aim of Germany's reunification.[16]

The final concrete step in the brutal partition of Germany, the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, had little effect upon the SED's attitude about the unity of the German nation. The party's so-called National Document of 1962 once again attempted to place the onus of Germany's partition on 'West German imperialists aided by Western powers'. The SED's party programme of 1963 also contained a seemingly unequivocal commitment to reunification and a confirmation of the SED's self-chosen 'national mission'.[17] In May 1965 Ulbricht added a slight clarification to the SED position on the future of the German nation when he stated that a process of 'democratization' and resistance against imperialism and 'monopoly capitalism' would have to take place in the FRG before a rapprochement between the two German states could take place.[18] The prospects of this must have appeared fairly dim to most East Germans, given the remarkable economic recovery and political stability demonstrated by the West German political system at the time. Yet, the reunification goal was again confirmed at the SED's seventh congress in April 1967 and codified in the GDR's 1968 constitution which defined the GDR as a 'socialist state of the German nation' and described it as being 'burdened with the responsibility of showing the entire German people the way to a future of peace and socialism'.

Yet again signs of change were becoming evident. Whereas the first constitution of 1949 had spoken of a single German people, of a *Volk,* the 1968 version referred to the 'people of the GDR'.[19] In April 1967 Ulbricht had added another new twist to the party line. In a speech delivered shortly after the introduction of a separate East German citizenship, the 'Iron Saxon' claimed that the 'single German nation' had existed only in 'theory' at the end of the Second World War and that the German nation consisted essentially of two independent national groups (*Staatsvölker*). He reassured the party faithful that the goal of reunifying Germany under the leadership of the working class was being pursued 'with great fervour'.[20] Although there is no doubt that Ulbricht remained committed to this goal, signs of creeping ambivalence became evident in party documents in the late 1960s that referred, on the one hand, to a single German nation, yet, on the other hand, to its division into two parts. The first edition of the *Kleines Politisches Wörterbuch,* published in 1967, for example, spoke of 'two types of nations', the socialist and the capitalist; a formulation that

16. As quoted in J. K. Skowden, *The German question 1945–1973, continuity in change* (New York: St Martin's, 1975), p. 187.

17. See Karl Wilhelm Fricke, ed., *Programm und Statut der SED* (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1976), pp. 14–17.

18. As quoted in Schweitzer, *Die Deutsche Nation*, pp. 558–61.

19. Schweitzer, *Die Deutsche Nation*, p. 504.

20. Schweitzer, *Die Deutsche Nation*, p. 575.

proved to be the harbinger of major changes in the SED's concept of the nation in the 1970s.

The challenge of *Ostpolitik*

In the 1970s the official East German concept of the German nation underwent a fundamental change, largely as a result of the ideological challenge posed by Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* formulated under the aegis of the Social Democratic–Free Democratic (SPD–FDP) coalition. The reorientation of West German policy under Brandt, incorporated in the vision of *Wandel durch Annäherung,*[21] underlined the SED's need for a more cohesive 'national' policy to stabilize the regime and to guard against potential ideological contamination. In his first State of the Nation address in January 1970, Brandt modified the official West German view of the German nation by speaking of 'two states in one German nation' while recognizing the 'special relationship' between them. The SED promptly responded to this implicit challenge, and on 19 January 1970 Ulbricht stated: 'This is the historic reality: the German Democratic Republic is a socialist German national state and the West German Federal Republic is a capitalist NATO state with limited national sovereignty.' Ulbricht and the SED, however, continued to find themselves on the defensive. With the successful conclusion of negotiations for the Berlin, Warsaw, and Moscow treaties, along with the tremendous appeal that Brandt evidently enjoyed among East Germans (as demonstrated, for example, by his reception in Erfurt in March 1970), it became increasingly difficult for the SED to uphold its commitment to the existence of a single German nation; shortly thereafter Ulbricht went a step further in proclaiming that:

> the GDR is the socialist German national state. Within it, *the evolution of a socialist nation is proceeding* [emphasis added]. The FRG is an imperialist NATO state and embodies the remnants of the old bourgeois German nation under a state monopolistic ruling system.[22]

Ulbricht's inability or unwillingness to accommodate himself to Soviet detente policy at this time, along with his increasing testiness in challenging Soviet views and his attempts to present the GDR as a model for 'the developed system of socialism', all contributed to his forced and unexpected 'retirement' in May 1971 and his replacement by his former protégé Erich Honecker. In his report to the eighth SED congress in June 1971 Honecker rejected all discussion about a single unitary German nation as 'twaddle' and officially codified the SED's new official view on the nation by proclaiming the formation of a 'new type of nation' in the GDR: the 'socialist German nation'. Attempting to refute Brandt's insistence on the existence of a single German nation despite two German states, Honecker maintained that the differences and contradictions in the socioeconomic systems prevailing in the FRG and the GDR had led to an inevitable process of 'delimitation' (*Abgrenzung*), a catchword that has dominated the SED's *Deutschlandpolitik* ever since.[23]

21. The phrase *Wandel durch Annäherung*, or change through rapprochement, was originally coined by Egon Bahr in the early 1960s. The degree to which it actually served as a policy guide of Social Democratic *Ostpolitik* of the early 1970s is debatable. On the other hand, it is clear that many West German Social Democrats, both then and now, were and are motivated by a vision of West German policy creating the preconditions for and if possible assisting a process of social change in the GDR that would help render Germany's partition anachronistic. For excerpts of Bahr's speech, delivered in the West German town of Tutzing in July 1963, see *Lesebuch zur Deutschen Geschichte, Vol. III* (Dortmund: Chronik Verlag, 1984), pp. 247–50.

22. See *Neues Deutschland*, 14 Jan. 1971.

23. For Honecker's comments at the eighth party congress see Erich Honecker, *Bericht des Zentralkomitees an den VIII Parteitag der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands, 15–19 Juni 1971* (Berlin: Dietz, 1971).

In July 1972 Politburo member and party theoretician Albert Norden, previously a leading advocate of German unity, delivered a key speech at the SED's Karl Marx Party College, 'clarifying' the new party line. Adopting Ulbricht's characteristic distinction between the 'Krupps' in the West and the 'Krausses' in the East, Norden claimed:

> There is no bond between them because a nation based on the law of the exploitation of man, and a nation free of such exploitation cannot be held together by any so-called national links. The one nation develops as a part of the world socialist system, whereas the FRG belongs to the imperialist world, a world with which we do not and cannot have anything in common. There are not two states in one nation but rather two nations in states with differing social systems.[24]

Norden went on to deny the existence of any elements in common, either in territorial or economic terms, or in terms of moral and psychological attributes. The SED Politburo also sought to diminish the significance of the common German language, claiming:

> The Russian-speaking worker in Moscow, the English-speaking miner in Scotland, the French-speaking employees of Renault, and the Italian-speaking farmers are all a thousand times closer to us than the German-speaking Messrs Siemens, Abs, and Krupp.

At a theoretical conference for the district party leaderships in June 1973, Politburo member Hermann Axen also clarified the new party line. He conceded that the goal of reuniting Germany under socialist auspices had been unachievable due to the unfavourable 'correlation of forces' in both the international and the national context. At the same time he spoke of the genesis and formation of a socialist German nation in the GDR as a result of the socialist revolution, the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat, and the building of socialism in all spheres of life.[25]

That a certain amount of uncertainty remained within the party leadership on how best to handle this issue, however, was reflected in a renaming process of various official organizations and institutions, a process that some West German newspapers referred to as the *Entdeutschung* ('de-Germanizing') of the GDR. With the exception of the party's title and its publication *Neues Deutschland,* the apparently offensive words 'German' and 'Germany' were eliminated and replaced by the abbreviation 'DDR'.[26] Even the GDR's national anthem fell victim to the censor's pen. Undoubtedly with the best communist intentions, Johannes Becker, while in Moscow in 1943, had written a text including the passage: 'Arisen out of the ruins and headed for the future, let us serve Germany, our united fatherland.' The last three words no longer corresponded to the spirit of the times and East German schoolchildren were subsequently taught to hum their national anthem. As SED historian Stefan

24. As quoted in Schweitzer, *Die Deutsche Nation*, pp. 505–6.

25. See Axen's speech entitled 'On the development of the nation in the GDR' in Hermann Axen, *Ausgewählte Reden und Aufsätze* (Berlin: Dietz, 1976), pp. 275–312.

26. Thus, the former German Radio was renamed Voice of the GDR, the German Union of Journalists received the title Union of Journalists of the GDR, and the German Academy of Sciences was rechristened the Academy of Sciences of the GDR. The letter 'D' for 'Deutsch' also disappeared from numerous abbreviations, and, after the Hotel Deutschland in Leipzig was renamed Hotel on the Ring, a local newspaper managed to come up with the following sentence: 'The Hotel on the Ring will in the future be called the Hotel on the Ring' *(Frankfurter Rundschau*, 1 Oct. 1979).

Dronberg put it: 'Sentimentalizing about being German is an old trick in certain circles in the FRG for covering up imperialist class interests.'[27]

Despite—or precisely because of—the multitude of inter-German arrangements being hammered out in East–West German negotiations, the SED agitprop apparatus continued to remind the party and the public that they were German citizens of German nationality. There were Germans of the FRG and Germans of the GDR, but there was no longer a Germany. The FRG was a 'foreign country', Honecker stated, 'and an imperialist foreign country at that'.[28] At the 13th CC plenum in December 1974 the SED Secretary General coined an apt phrase that summarized the SED's new policy: 'Citizenship: GDR; Nationality: German.' The new approach was codified in several revised documents such as the new GDR constitution of 1974. Whereas a preamble to the 1968 version referred to the GDR as a 'socialist state of the German nation', the 1974 version adopted the phraseology of the Soviet constitution and stated blandly in Article 1 that the country was 'a socialist state of workers and farmers'. The 1968 reference to 'the vital interests of the nation' was also dropped and replaced by the assertion that 'the people of the German Democratic Republic . . . have realized their right to socioeconomic, political, and national self-determination'.[29] Similarly, the new SED programme of May 1976 dropped the 1963 version's unequivocal commitment to national unity and merely asserted that, by taking power, 'the German working class had created the necessary preconditions for the construction of the socialist nation'. Moreover, relations with the FRG were characterized as subject to a lawlike process of 'delimitation'; the 'blossoming' of the socialist German nation was to occur in conjunction with the GDR's rapprochement with other socialist states.[30]

Nation versus nationality

Throughout the early 1970s a certain ambivalence persisted in official East German proclamations on the concept of the nation, an indication perhaps that the party leadership itself was not yet quite clear on its new line and that, in any case, there were difficulties in explaining it both to the *apparat* and to society at large. Above all it remained unclear whether the 'socialist nation' in the GDR already existed or whether it was still developing and, if it was still developing, when this development had commenced and when it would be completed. In attempting to answer this question, two leading East German theorists in this area wrote in early 1975 in *Neues Deutschland*: 'The formation of the socialist nation in the GDR does not result from a decree or a "stroke of the pen", but rather as an inevitable consequence of the objective social transformation leading from capitalism to socialism.'[31] In other words, while rejecting the unity of the German nation *per se*, the SED insisted that the substance of the nation had been preserved and was incorporated in the German working class and its representatives, that is to say, the SED, and that the German nation had now reached a higher, more progressive stage than its West German

27. As quoted in Norman N. Naimark, 'Is it true what they are saying about East Germany?', *Orbis*, Fall 1979, p. 536.

28. *Neues Deutschland*, 7 Jan. 1972.

29. See *The Constitution of the German Democratic Republic* (Dresden: Staatsverlag der DDR und Verlag Zeit und Bild, 1974), p. 9 and the Preamble p. 8.

30. See Fricke, *Programm und Statut der SED*, p. 15.

31. See the article by Alfred Kosing and Walter Schmidt in *Neues Deutschland*, 15–16 Feb. 1975.

'bourgeois' counterpart. In contrast to Brandt's vision of a pan-German *Kulturnation,* the SED posited that nations could not be based upon criteria such as national will, character, or a common language, but rather that they had to be differentiated in the first place according to the character of the national economy and the political organization, and only secondarily by such characteristics as customs, tradition, and mentality, the last, of course, being constantly subject to a dynamic process of social change.[32] Further dialectical acrobatics attempted to differentiate between 'nation' and 'nationality', with the latter defined as 'the totality of ethnic attributes, features, and ties within the population and the classes, groups, and individuals that are its components', and the former as 'a dialectical unit containing economic, political, social, and ideological relations of a class nature'. Such theoretical pirouettes provided the basis for the following conclusion:

> In the FRG the old capitalist nation survived. In the GDR, on the other hand, socialism produced its own form of national development adequate to its needs, the needs of the socialist German nation. [The socialist nation] differs in its economic, social, political, and ideological principles, in its essential content and features from the capitalist nation in the FRG and inevitably demarcates itself from it, while simultaneously further moulding its new socialist quality. In terms of its sociohistoric type, the nation in the GDR is socialist and in terms of its nationality, German; whereas the nation in the FRG is capitalist in its sociohistoric type and in its nationality likewise German.[33]

A nation, however, cannot be created or dismissed by unilateral decree. At least, if one is to attempt such a manoeuvre, one must of course simultaneously create a history for it. It is from this vantage point that one must view the SED's increasing interest in and broader treatment of the German historical past which has been evident in recent years. Since the SED's ninth party congress in 1976 there has been greater consistency in the party line on the socialist nation, a factor which does not of course necessarily make the theory itself any more plausible. Equally important, however, there have also been 'intensified' efforts to create a broader and more comprehensive historical framework to explain the development of the 'socialist German nation', indeed, to trace its origins back into the depths of German history itself. The resulting historical revisions have at times been nothing less than remarkable.

The rewriting of history

Viewed in broad terms, the SED's attitudes towards the German historical past have been consistent in so far as the party has always claimed that the GDR had incorporated all that is 'progressive' in German history and successfully broken with all that is deemed 'reactionary'. The variable that has been changing, however, has been the increasingly elastic definition of what is 'progressive' as opposed to 'reactionary'. Since the ninth party congress in 1976 the SED has openly called for a broadening of the GDR's historical framework to meet the demands of a sharpening

32. For perhaps the definitive East German work on the nation see Alfred Kosing, *Nation in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Berlin: Dietz, 1976).

33. See Alfred Kosing and Walter Schmidt, 'Birth and growth of the socialist German nation', *Einheit*, 1979, No. 9/10, pp. 1073–4.

class struggle with West German bourgeois historians.[34] Such appeals for historical revisionism have been taken up with vigour in so far as the spectrum of historical figures to which the SED now lays claim has been systematically broadened and East German citizens have discovered that there is far more that is 'progressive' in the German past than they had previously been led to believe. One of the more astonishing periods of German history which has been chosen for rehabilitation has been that of the state of Prussia, large portions of which, of course, are now East German territory. Although certain 'enlightened' Prussian generals, such as Scharnhorst, Gniesenau and Clausewitz, had in the past been singled out by the SED for praise, any direct association with Prussia—the most militaristic state in German history—would have been inconceivable in years past. Now East German historians plead for a more 'differentiated' view of the Prussian historical legacy in all its 'complexities', with the change in official attitudes symbolized by the reappearance of Rauch's equestrian statue of Frederick the Great on Unter den Linden in autumn 1980.

The 'Prussian renaissance' propagated by the SED sparked off considerable interest not only in the West, but also among some of the GDR's Eastern neighbours familiar with certain of the less 'progressive' aspects of Prussian rule.[35] There has also been speculation concerning differences within the party leadership on exactly how to deal with such controversial historical themes.[36] Perhaps the leading academic figure in the Prussian renaissance in the GDR has been Dr Ingrid Mittenzwei, head of the Department of German History 1648–1789 of the GDR Academy of Sciences and author of a recent biography of Frederick II.[37] Mittenzwei's contention is that Prussia was not simply a reactionary and militaristic state, but that its ruling classes also contributed to progressive social developments. While clearly serving the interests of the Junker class, government policy also spurred on industrial development and helped create the conditions for the political and social maturation of the German working class. Mittenzwei and others continue of course to criticize many aspects of the Prussian legacy and emphasize that their writings are not meant as an apologia. While conceding that past official views on Prussia were coloured by polemics, Mittenzwei, for example, insists that a more open confrontation with the Prussian past is absolutely necessary if East Germans are to understand better their own history, as well as providing an antidote to attempts of 'flexible bourgeois historians' in the West allegedly trying to manipulate the Prussian legacy to 'justify the current imperialist system in the FRG'.[38]

34. See, for example, the article by CC member and Deputy Director of the SED's Institute for Marxism–Leninism Ernst Diehl, 'Tasks of the historical sciences of the GDR since the Ninth Party Congress', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 1977, No. 3.

35. See Wolf Oschlies, 'Prussia, "Red Prussia", and Poland', *Deutschland Archiv*, 1982, No. 2, pp. 152–7.

36. That not all SED party leaders are equally enthusiastic about the GDR's Prussian renaissance is hinted at by an interesting comment attributed to Kurt Hager, SED Politburo member in charge of ideology and culture. 'When asked his opinion about Mittenzwei's book on Frederick II, Hager replied sarcastically 'Mrs Mittenzwei is not yet a member of the Politburo'. As quoted in Klaus Bölling, *Die fernen Nachbarn* (Hamburg: Stern Buch, 1983), p. 129.

37. See Ingrid Mittenzwei, *Friedrich II von Preussen* (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1980).

38. As quoted by the West German historian Michael Stürmer in his article 'To whom does German history belong?' in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 22 May 1982. See also Horst Bartel and Ingrid Mittenzwei, 'Prussia and German History', *Einheit*, 1979, No. 6. According to Bartel and Mittenzwei: 'Our attitude to Prussia was coloured by polemics which were made necessary by the struggle of the revolutionary labour movement of the 19th and 20th centuries against the reactionary Prussian spirit . . . The conflict with Prussia, above all with such a phenomenon as militarism of the Prussian type, was absolutely necessary following the catastrophe of the Second World War. Today these matters can be viewed in more differentiated terms. Even more, such distinctions have proven to be particularly important at the present time.'

Equally sensational, and furnishing another example of the SED's changing views on German history, were the celebrations in the GDR in 1983 commemorating the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther. Having been denounced for years as the 'princes' lackey' and 'betrayer of the peasants', Luther's official image has undergone a major refurbishing and the Great Reformer is now considered a major German revolutionary, 'one of the greatest sons of the German people', and even a philosophical trailblazer of Karl Marx. The elevation of Luther into the socialist pantheon is a fascinating story in itself.[39] It should be stressed, however, that although it is the celebrations of such controversial figures as Luther or Frederick II which occasionally dominate Western headlines, it is the SED's views on German history in its entirety—or what the party refers to as the 'socialist understanding of heritage'—which has been changing. In 1982 it was Goethe, in 1983 Luther, for 1984 Schiller, and for 1985 it is Bach, Händel and Schütz who have been predestined for the socialist Valhalla. In other words, the entire span of German history from the genesis of the German *Volk* to the present is being reevaluated, with East German historians ferreting out various 'progressive' traditions to create a new national history designed to strengthen the foundations of SED rule. In the words of Horst Bartel, director of the Central Institute of History at the GDR's Academy of Sciences: 'Socialism is the legitimate heir to everything revolutionary, progressive, and humanistic in all of German history.'[40]

East German historians are quite candid about laying claim to previously untapped historical traditions. Under the rubric of developing the 'national history of the GDR' they speak of a three-dimensional expansion of the GDR's historical legacy—chronological, territorial, and sociostructural. Chronologically, the national history of the GDR is not to be limited to the genesis and development of the East German state but rather is to include the entirety of German history 'since the appearance of the German people as an ethnic unit'. In other words, the history of 'the first complete break with the reactionary past on German soil', as the GDR is referred to, is to be traced back to prehistoric times. The genealogy of socialism on German soil should include not only the 150-year struggle of the German working class but also the efforts and aspirations of the progressive bourgeoisie and the democratic, lower middle class in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the Reformation and the peasants' war in the sixteenth century; and the peasant uprisings, plebeian revolts, and antifeudal heretic movements of the Middle Ages.

Territorially, the GDR's historic claims are by no means limited to those parts of Germany that currently constitute the GDR. Although the history of these areas receives priority, the historical heritage of the GDR is to include both the revolts in southwestern Germany and Thuringia in 1525, the efforts of the south German Jacobins after the French Revolution, and the Mainz Republic of 1793, as well as a variety of strikes, uprisings, and revolts that took places in Silesia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Finally, from what East German historians refer to as the sociostructural vantage point, the GDR has embarked upon an examination of the historic accomplishments of all classes and social strata in German history, including the 'exploiting' classes, in an attempt to ferret out 'progressive positive elements that must be included in our store of traditions'. Historians are interested not only in the Hohenzollern dynasty but also in a larger historical spectrum that

39. See Ronald D. Asmus, 'The GDR and Martin Luther', *Survey*, Summer 1984, Vol. 28, No. 2.
40. See Horst Bartel, 'Historical heritage and tradition', *Einheit*, 1981, No. 3, p. 272.

includes medieval German emperors and kings, representatives of the nineteenth-century liberal aristocracy, and even 'representatives of the monopolistic bourgeoisie who were not only imperialists but also great scientists, such as Abbé Siemens'.[41]

The third category is clearly the most elastic, as it opens the gates to countless new interpretations. It is in this category that SED historians place recent 'differentiated' revisions of controversial figures such as Luther or Frederick the Great. More recently, there have been attempts to come to grips with the weighty historical legacy of Otto von Bismarck. In February 1983 the official East German youth newspaper *Junge Welt* published an interview on Bismarck under the title 'A statesman of high rank'.[42] Although Bismarck 'was certainly not the patriotic heroic figure and infallible master of the art of statesmanship' he is often made out to be, one could not, the paper claimed, make him 'personally responsible' for the disastrous course of German history that ensued. In December 1983, Kurt Hager, an SED Politburo member and CC Secretary for Ideology and Cultural Affairs, also took up the subject of Bismarck, labelling him not only a 'reactionary' but also a 'realist', above all in the sphere of foreign affairs, where his 'sober' calculations and advocacy of good relations with Russia in the 1880s deserved praise. Moreover, Hager claimed that the ability of a conservative figure such as Bismarck to think in realistic terms had to be emphasized at a time when 'certain circles' in the West were pursuing an adventurist course of confrontation. Indeed, the SED Politburo member implicitly pointed to Bismarck as a model (perhaps for the FRG?) as he called on Western statesmen to note Bismarck's realism and not to allow themselves to be coopted into joining the 'adventurist' course being pursued by the Reagan administration.[43]

A new socialist national history

The SED has clearly set itself ambitious goals, indeed, nothing less than the creation of a new national history. Although plan goals on the writing of history are constantly reported as having been fulfilled, plenty of work remains to be done as no 'gaps' are to remain unfilled. The SED is rapidly moving towards a claim of sole representation or *Alleinvertretungsanspruch* for, in the words of Honecker, 'all that is good in German history'. The explicit purpose is to present the GDR as the embodiment and keeper of all progressive traditions in German history and as the inevitable culmination and highpoint of the German historical process. German history is no longer viewed as 'The erroneous path of a nation', to quote the title of Alexander Abusch's 1947 book which so aptly captured the ambivalent attitudes of many early German communist leaders in the postwar period towards the German historical mantle, but rather as a source of political and historical legitimacy. The goals are threefold. First, the creation of a set of traditions with which East German youth, now constituting over 60 per cent of the total population, can identify, thereby stabilizing (or perhaps creating) not only a separate state, but also a separate socialist national consciousness. Secondly, to supply a historical justification spanning centuries for the founding of

41. See Walter Schmidt, 'The past is never finished—what must provide the basis for a national history of the GDR?', *Sonntag*, 1981, No. 27; see also the excerpts from Schmidt's speech delivered at the Seventh Historians' Congress of the GDR, reprinted under the title 'Socialist nation and German history', *Sonntag*, 1983, No. 7.

42. See the interview with the East German historian Heinz Wolter in *Junge Welt*, 10 Feb. 1983.

43. See Hager's speech entitled 'The historical laws of our epoch: the driving forces and values of socialism', delivered at a party conference on the task of the social sciences in the 1980s held in December 1983. *Neues Deutschland*, 16 Dec. 1983.

the GDR not as a historical 'accident' but rather as the invariable outcome of German history. Finally, the cultivation of history and of patriotism for the socialist 'fatherland' is not only to secure a sense of national identity, but also to serve as an ideological booster at a time of economic austerity and international tension. 'Delimitation' or *Abgrenzung* in the political ties with the Federal Republic is to be complemented by demarcation in the competition over the mantle of German history.

The prescriptive as opposed to descriptive writing of history is by no means unprecedented in Eastern Europe; all the Eastern bloc regimes have at one time or another attempted to wrap themselves in a national cloak to secure their positions of power.[44] The GDR, however, was from the outset in a unique situation. First, it had to share or compete over the German historical legacy with an economically more potent and politically attractive West German state whose very existence posed a fundamental challenge to the regime's legitimacy. Second, the nature of German history itself and its often catastrophic course often seemed to demand more apology than salutation, especially in the early postwar period, and thus did not necessarily appear as a potential political asset. The GDR itself was founded not only as a legal but also as a spiritual break with the Third Reich and Imperial Germany. Consequently, early official histories concentrated on selected aspects of the German historical past, above all the GDR's socialist and communist precursors and so-called radical-democratic and revolutionary traditions. In justifying some of their more creative historical interpretations of recent years and the significant broadening of the historical framework, East German historians argue that the question of power has long been settled, that society has become sufficiently 'ripe' or mature with the pillars of socialist power secure enough to afford a more open confrontation with the German past, including that of the imperialist ruling classes. Moreover, in the words of one historian, 'the same history does not have the same meaning if it is considered and accepted by different people living under different social and national conditions'.[45]

The lengths to which East German historians will be allowed to go in the future in redefining German history remains a question of speculation. One fact is clear, however; namely, that the official discussion in the GDR over history is really a surrogate debate about the German nation, its past as well as its future. The SED, of course, claims that there is nothing to discuss: the German question has long been solved through the creation of two separate German states and the development of separate 'socialist' and 'capitalist' German nations. West German claims to the contrary are dismissed as revanchist rhetoric and a disguise for imperialist aims. A certain ambivalence has nevertheless remained evident, above all over the question of what is to happen when the Federal Republic undergoes its 'inevitable' revolution and socialist transformation. If and when the 'capitalist' German nation in the Federal Republic also reaches its 'socialist' stage, would there exist one or two German 'socialist' nations? Although the performance of the DKP in the most recent West German Federal election in March 1983, where it received a mere 0·2 per cent of the vote, should serve as a sober reminder of the theoretical nature of the question, the

44. Undoubtedly the most extreme case of the rewriting of national history to suit the purposes of a communist regime has been Ceauşescu's Romania. See Vlad Georgescu, *Politica si Storie cazul Communistilor Romani 1944–1977* (Munich: Jon Dimitru, 1981); and Michael J. Rura, *Reinterpretation of history as a method of furthering communism in Romania: a study in comparative historiography* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1961).

45. Walter Schmidt, 'German history as national history of the GDR', *Geschichtsunterricht und Staatsbürgerkunde*, 1983, No. 25, p. 302; quoted in Karl-Ernst Jeismann, 'The unity of the German nation in GDR historiography', *Das Parlament, Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 13 Aug. 1983, pp. 3–16.

point remains that the SED has never definitely excluded the possibility of reunification under socialism. Writing in 1976, Dr Alfred Kosing, the leading East German theorist on the nation, wrote that the question of what would happen to the nation following a socialist revolution in the Federal Republic could 'under the current circumstances be answered neither negatively nor positively'.[46] Yet the fact that old visions die hard was demonstrated by a remarkable statement by Honecker himself on reunification in February 1981, ironically at a time when Günter Gauss, the FRG's permanent representative to the GDR, had questioned the utility of retaining the concept of the nation:

> And when certain people in the West nowadays harp upon greater German dictums and act as if the reunification of both German states were closer to their hearts than to their pocketbooks, then we would like to say to them: Be careful! One day socialism will come knocking at your door; and when that day comes when the working class in the Federal Republic proceeds with the socialist transformation of the Federal Republic of Germany, then the question of the reunification of the two German states will appear in an entirely new light. And no one should have any doubts about how we will then decide.[47]

Finally, it has also not escaped the attention of Western observers that the SED struck a few pan-German chords during the Warsaw Pact 'peace offensive' designed to hinder INF deployment in the FRG; for example, Honecker appealed in 'the name of the German people' for a halt to deployment plans in October 1983.[48]

Change and continuity

The SED, as this article has tried to demonstrate, was founded in 1946 as a party for which national and proletarian unity in Germany were inseparable. The GDR was not to be merely another German state, but rather the nucleus for a reunified socialist Germany. For more than the first two decades of the existence of 'the first socialist state on German soil' the SED passionately clung to the concept of a single unitary German nation. Whether this ostensible commitment to reunification really was reflective of pan-German aspirations, or rather an attempt to legitimize the GDR's existence by placing the burden of partition on West German shoulders, remains a question of historical debate. Tactical considerations have always been a key component of SED policy and an official commitment to German reunification in the early years clearly served the dual purpose of trying to lure the FRG into negotiations over Germany's future, thus breaking the GDR's international isolation, and of reminding the world that another Germany did indeed exist. Domestically, the pledge to reunification was also clearly an attempt to gain a modicum of legitimacy by appealing to national aspirations, aspirations which were undoubtedly quite strong.

Following the inauguration of Social Democratic *Ostpolitik* and the first serious attempt to establish some sort of working relationship with the GDR, the SED was put on the defensive. The question of the nation now threatened to become a destabilizing factor as opposed to one which might enhance the regime's standing. Although the SED had for some time attempted to foster a separate sense of state

46. Kosing, *Nation in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, p. 106.
47. As quoted in *Neues Deutschland*, 16 Feb. 1981.
48. For the text of Honecker's letter to Kohl see *Neues Deutschland*, 10 Oct. 1983.

consciousness and loyalty, the dropping of the concept of a single unitary German nation in the early 1970s marked a watershed in the regime's endeavours to mould the theme of the nation to fit its operational needs. Since then we have witnessed a conscious attempt by party ideologues and historians to recast past official interpretations of German history and to construct a more 'differentiated' national history for the 'socialist' German nation. Although the GDR has always asserted that it is the more 'progressive' German state, there is now a conscious attempt to portray the GDR as more 'German' and as the true spiritual heir not only of selective traditions from the German labour movement, but all that is worthy of acclaim in German history as opposed to a rootless, 'Americanized' West Germany.

It must not be forgotten, however, that the discussion over the German nation and its history in the GDR takes place exclusively on the official level and within parameters carefully set by party ideologues. The degree to which the SED's views reflect or correspond to those of society is of course difficult to determine.[49] Although it has become quite common and fashionable for Western journalists and visitors to the GDR to note, either to their delight or dismay, that there exists a quiet conservatism and awareness of past German traditions in many small towns in the GDR that one does not find in the Federal Republic, it remains to be seen whether such nuances of cultural distinctiveness and parochialism can be nourished into something more sturdy like a separate national consciousness of the type desired by the SED. Of course, the frequency with which the party has been forced to modify its views on the nation over the past three decades is hardly a solid testimony to success and one wonders whether the two nation theory will prove to be of longer duration.

Two factors are likely to have a decisive influence on official East German attitudes on the nation in the future. The first will undoubtedly be the resonance which the creative historical interpretations on the part of East German historians and the occasional ideological pirouette necessary by party ideologues to clarify the new line will evoke within society itself. Will the average East German *Bürger* come away from the historical jubileums and exhibitions currently sponsored by the SED convinced that the 'socialist' nation and the GDR represent the continuation of all progressive German historical traditions, as the party clearly hopes, or is he more likely to be reminded of the common historical ties which bind Germans in the East and West and conclude that the phrase contained in the 1968 constitution and since dropped was indeed correct, namely that 'the GDR is a socialist state of *the German nation*' [emphasis added]?

This question is as unanswerable as it is tantalizing. There has been speculation in the Federal Republic that the new official interest in German history in the GDR could backfire, leading to ideas and notions which by no means correspond to those of the SED. In the words of one commentator, East German citizens might 'digest the materials, relics, and memorabilia of history in the same fashion with which they have read the priceless German classics—without reading the SED's summaries and

49. Perhaps the two best attempts to deal with the question of societal attitudes in the GDR towards the national question have been Peter Christian Ludz, *Die DDR zwischen Ost und West: von 1961 bis 1976* (Munich: Beck, 1977), pp. 221–61; and Gebhard Ludwig Schweigler, *National consciousness in divided Germany*, Vol. 15, Sage Library of Social Research (Beverly Hills, London: Sage, 1975). Ludz cites private sources according to which over two thirds of East Germans in 1975 did not view the FRG as a foreign country (Ausland). As Schweigler points out, however, the amount of hard data on the state of East German national attitudes and consciousness is limited and any conclusions must remain tentative if not tenuous. Although the SED is known to have conducted its own public opinion research, the results have never been published.

conclusions as ideological guides'.[50] Such a speculation was recently rejected as 'built on sand' by Kurt Hager; yet the fact that it was deemed necessary to respond to such conjecture at this level indicates that the party leadership is aware of the risks inherent in its current approach. Finally, official East German attitudes have in the past and will undoubtedly in the future be influenced by developments in the Federal Republic. Ulbricht was able to cling to his claim to represent the entire German nation only until actively challenged by Brandt's *Ostpolitik*. The changes in the SED's views on German history which have been evident in recent years have certainly aroused both interest and amusement in the Federal Republic, but thus far few people appear to have taken the GDR's claims on German history all that seriously.

50. See the editorial by Hans Schuster entitled 'A picture gallery for the SED state', Süddeutsche Zeitung, 11 Jan. 1983.