

# Editorial

From September 30th to October 3rd, 2008, the 47th German Congress of Historians, which was officially opened by Federal President Horst Köhler and the Prime Minister of Saxony, Stanislaw Tillich, in the ceremonial environment of the Semperoper, invited historians from Germany and other countries to Dresden. This time the motto was “Inequalities”. The Institute of History at the Technical University of Dresden was the host of Europe’s biggest humanities congress, organizers were the Association of German Historians and the Association of German History Teachers. By 58 sections and more than 300 lectures, historians presented their most recent research results to an audience of more than 3,100 participants in in the modern lecture hall centre.

The Hannah Arendt Institute for the Research on Totalitarianism at the TU Dresden contributed by a panel under the title “Inequalities of the East German Transition Process 1989/90”. The fundamental change connected to the system change and the end of the GDR as a state were connected to a variety of conflicts. Inequalities among actors, their goals, interests and enforcement strategies are obvious and were the decisive factor for the decision to deal with this topical focus. For this, both young junior scientists and proven experts were wilfully won over. Their contributions form the topical focus of this publication.

As Mark R. Thompson and Mathias Damm state, even almost twenty years later the debate on the nature of the events of autumn 1989 is still in full flow. For them, the fact that rather the term “Wende” (fundamental change) than “Peaceful Revolution” seems to have pushed through, for the fall of the SED dictatorship is due to the common understanding of a revolution as a violent event, an image which is not appropriate to what happened in the GDR. However, they state that if we look at the end of European communism from a comparative point of view, it is difficult not to use the attribute “revolutionary” for the events. What makes the situation special is that this fundamental change represents a new type, that is a democratic revolution, for which – also due to its political goals (the free democratic state of law) – non-violence is typical. For the authors it is astonishing against this background that for the time being the non-violent nature of this democratic revolution has hardly been discussed. They believe it to be necessary to explain in more detail why the regime did not opt for a “Chinese solution” and why on the side of the demonstrators there was hardly any violence. They say that against the background of what we know about revolutions this is not at all a matter of course. Accordingly, a look at the events shows that in some situations an escalation was imminent, for example during the “Battle for Dresden Main Station” at the beginning of October, 1989. Their main thesis is: it was the actors’ in the streets correct way of acting what prevented escalations. For them, the way in which the demonstrators dealt with the highly armed regime is similar to the Japanese fighting technique of Jiu-Jitsu, by help of which

the enemy's attacks come to nothing or are turned back against the attacker. Accordingly, it is one of the most astonishing results that the actors of the demonstration movement were acting strategically but nevertheless spontaneously. After all, they consider the spontaneity of the "peaceful revolution" the essential key to success.

Michael Richter by his contribution analyzes unequal goals of masses and elites during the transition process. According to him, these differences were an essential feature of the Peaceful Revolution, in the context of which the population enforced its goals against actual or potential leading groups of the GDR and thus determined the course and events of the process. Whereas still in 1990 the SED and its successors supported a kind of democratic socialism in an independent GDR, also among the citizens movements there were strong forces striving for a socialist or grass-roots democratic renewal of the GDR. Until December, 1989, also the leaderships of the Block Parties stuck to socialist goals and only under the influence of Federal German partners developed free democratic programmes. Until November, on the other hand, the main demands of the people were democracy, freedom and increased quality of life. After the fall of the Berlin Wall these demands more and more turned into the collective demand for German unity. These demands were only partly taken up by potential leading elites in the GDR and were often judged on negatively. In this situation the population of the GDR rather oriented at the Federal Government's offer to support the unity of the two states. In Bonn, one faced the task developing from this. Already during the period of transition the Federal Government became the essential control centre for a transition process which was oriented towards the unity of the two states. From this time on, the Federal German functional elites became the essential points of orientation of the GDR population. From now on the leading groups of the GDR played a role only as partners of Federal German actors.

Against the background of the differences between the people and possible future functional elites, a look at the Round Tables is interesting, which formed everywhere in the GDR from the second half of November 1989 on. There, particularly representatives of different political parties and groups were meeting, less speakers of the demonstrators. Nevertheless, Francesca Weil attributes successful working during the transition process to the sometimes highly unequal Round Tables of the districts. They prevented chaos and violence, but also also accepted that the SED rulers of the regions and their bureaucracies were not (completely) deprived of their power. Most of all the differences between the fifteen Round Tables of the districts show in how far the intensity of their work and their effectfulness were decisively dependent on the respective goals, regional situations, local power structures and acting individuals at the place. These differences are first of all due to the modes of cooperation between individual Round Tables and the state's district institutions. At the district level, many actors understood the Round Tables to be counselling and controlling institutions to-

wards the district parliaments and councils. For the implementation of central state orders the so called representative bodies of the people and their executive institutions (Councils), which actually set the SED line for the district parliaments, felt themselves compelled to include representatives of the new political groups acting at the Round Tables into their work. On the one hand, the cooperation of the Round Tables with the district parliaments and councils was characterized by the extent of readiness of the respective district authorities to allow for contribution and on the other hand by the actual demands or capabilities to contribute of the members of Round Tables. The range of cooperation reached from exchanging information among councils or district parliaments by way of creating grass-roots democratic factions or to the work of the councils by way of installing members without a portfolio, in the context of which there were also special cases. On the whole, these conditions resulted in unequal chances for the Round Tables as far as their influence on the development in the districts was concerned.

Gunnar Peters deals with the democratically elected "Volkskammer" (People's Chamber) of the year 1990. He compares the unequal parliaments of the "Volkskammer" and the "Bundestag" to each other. Between 1949 and 1989, in divided Germany there was only one parliament which deserved this name: the German Bundestag in Bonn. In the GDR, parliamentarism of the Western kind was considered a "bourgeois" relic, the Volkskammer understood itself to be a socialist representative body. Actually it was an almost meaningless institution which was under the tutelage of the SED leadership. On the other hand, in Germany in 1990 for half a year there existed two democratically legitimated parliaments: on the one hand the Bundestag in its 11<sup>th</sup> election period (since 1987), on the other hand the 10<sup>th</sup> Volkskammer which was elected by the first free and secret elections in the GDR from March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1990, and dissolved itself on the eve of October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1990. Peters lists the common grounds and differences of both institutions. When in April, 1990, the Volkskammer constituted itself, it faced a new beginning of parliamentarism. In contrast to this, the Bundestag was a parliament which had been operating well for decades. Different levels are compared, the members of parliament, the applied rules of proceeding as well as the infrastructure to which MPs could reach back. Light is shed also on the cooperation of both parliaments. For Peters, at the same time the 10<sup>th</sup> election period of the Volkskammer represents the second phase of the Peaceful Revolution, in the course of which the German unity was prepared and constitutionally realized. That is why he is interested in the question of which role Bundestag and Volkskammer were playing during this political process and how much they could influence on essential decisions in respect of the reunification.

Günther Heydemann in his contribution is interested in inequalities in respect of the development after the Peaceful Revolution. He relates Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl's keyword "flourishing landscape" to East Germany's new economic and social realities. According to his conviction, the expectations

expressed by the term were real and not at all meant in a populist-tactical sense, as indeed the majority of the Federal German elites of politics and economy were initially convinced that in a comparatively short span of time it would be possible to quickly modernize the economy of the new federal states and to thus quickly realize an equality of living conditions. Despite the undeniable, often underestimated success of the economic catching-up process in East Germany since 1989/90, still today grave problems cannot be overlooked. Even in booming regions such as Dresden, Leipzig, Jena, Potsdam or the “Speckgürtel” (Bacon Belt) of suburbs around Berlin, the rate of unemployment is still double as high as in the old federal states. It is higher still in the East German provinces, particularly in the regions bordering Poland. Due to a decline in the birth rate, unemployment and emigration, these regions are under the threat of becoming “empty districts” or regions of “poverty and dementia”. Endangered by this are for example Ostprignitz, Altmark, Uckermark, Nearer Pomerania and Lausitz. From the overall German point of view, the reunited nation is increasingly divided into winner and loser regions. Whereas the South German federal states of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria are at the top of the ranking of the federal states, the East German federal states bring up the rear. Even Saxony, which as a new federal state partly shows higher growth rates than some West German federal states, only occupies the third last position ahead of Berlin and Saxony-Anhalt. Against this background, Heydemann attempts to trace down the complex causes of this development since the Peaceful Revolution of 1989/90. Particularly the demographic development in the “old” Federal Republic and in the GDR before the reunification are compared to each other and related to the diametrically different economic development of both German states since the beginning of the 1960s. In this context it becomes obvious that the inner-German migration from the new to the old federal states which started in the course of the reunification process causes big problems both for the still incomplete process of economic modernization and the development of society in East Germany which can only partially be solved by social-political state intervention.

Outside the topical focus, Riccardo Bavaj deals with the reaction of liberal university teachers to the students’ revolt of “1968”, with the effects which the anti-liberal actions of those days had on a middle class which considered itself liberal. For university professors such as Ernst Fraenkel and Richard Löwenthal, “1968” was a traumatic experience: an experience of extreme emotional intensity, which overtaxed their possibilities of coping with it and lastingly shook their ways of understanding themselves. By “1968” they saw the success of their mission of a consensus-liberal democratization of West Germany seriously endangered. Again, “the shadows of Weimar” seemed to threaten the Federal Republic. For them, “1968” was the most recent chapter of the apparent medical history of an anti-Western, German special path. Beyond the Rhine, where in May, 1968, the fights on the barricades were raging, Raymond Aron tried to cope with the shocking “events” by interpreting them as a theatrical re-staging of

the February revolution of 1848. But also this national-historical narrativization was hardly able to alleviate the traumatic effect of “1968”. Like hardly anyone else, Odo Marquart has again and again criticized the “rejection of middle class values” by the 1968 movement and their leaders. He finds the philosophy-historical reasons for their rebellion against an apparently late-capitalist system in Marxism having become the predominant philosophical doctrine also in the Federal Republic.<sup>1</sup> Here the wheel turns full circle and we have again reached the Peaceful Revolution which Jürgen Habermas, being an early progressive thinker of the generation of 1968, has now interpreted in a positive sense as re-connecting to the middle class society.<sup>2</sup>

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1 See a. o. Odo Marquard, *Apologie der Bürgerlichkeit*. In: ders., *Philosophie des Stattendessen*, Stuttgart 2001, p. 94–107.

2 Jürgen Habermas, *Die nachholende Revolution*, Frankfurt a. M. 1990.