Chapter 1

The Concept of 'Normalisation' and the GDR in Comparative Perspective

Mary Fulbrook

—⟨≋⟩—

The German Democratic Republic was a forcibly imposed state, founded in the context of a divided post-war society. And it was founded in not just any post-war society: it was founded on the ruins of Hitler's Third Reich, among a people who had, in their millions, supported Hitler's crusade against Bolshevism. The battles between Nazis and Communists of preceding decades continued, in altered forms, in the mutual dislike and distrust between 'ordinary Germans' and the new Communist regime. Only a small minority of Germans crawling out of hiding, being released from Nazi concentration camps, or returning to the Soviet zone from exile abroad, were genuinely committed supporters of the new and allegedly 'better' Germany that was to be built in East Germany. And they had good reason, rooted in recent bitter and murderous experience, to be highly suspicious of their fellow Germans. There were few good grounds for placing much trust in the 'democratic will of the people' in these circumstances. Meanwhile, Germans who had earlier enthusiastically supported Hitler conveniently recast themselves in the roles of 'victims', whether of air-raids, expulsion, flight, hunger, loss of homes, family members, and friends—and now also as victims of a new 'totalitarian' regime in communist colours. An implicit form of continuing civil war between the opposing political groupings and ideologies of preceding decades was thus built into the very foundations of the GDR, transmogrified into new forms under the conditions of defeat, Soviet-backed communist domination, and radical restructuring of politics and society. For nearly half a century thereafter, until the collapse of communist rule

in the GDR and the more general implosion of the Soviet bloc in 1989–90, force was an ever-present factor in East German politics; visibly manifest in the highly fortified inner-German border holding East Germans effectively prisoners within their state, less visibly but no less inhumanely in the ubiquitous surveillance measures and malign interventions on the part of the State Security Service or *Staatssicherheitsdienst*, widely known as the *Stasi*. Until the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, around three million citizens took the opportunity to flee to what they hoped would be a better life in the west; and once the Iron Curtain began to crumble in the summer of 1989, mass exodus precipitated the final challenge to communist rule in the GDR.

How then, in this context, could one possibly want to apply any concept of 'normalisation' to the history of the GDR?

In this chapter, I shall first outline the way in which this highly contested concept has in fact been widely deployed to analyse periods variously designated by ruling elites and/or by members of the population as a 'return to normal' after periods of crisis, with respect both to post-war western European democratic states (notably West Germany in the 1950s) and eastern European communist states following the forcible suppression of challenges to Soviet domination (notably Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia). I shall then go on to propose a more abstract notion of normalisation as a theoretical concept or 'ideal type', which can in principle be applied widely across historical periods and places, and which serves to link the levels of structure, action, subjective experience, and perceptions framed within the discourses of the time. Finally, I shall seek to place the history of the GDR within the broader comparative framework of both eastern and western Europe in the light of this conceptual approach.

The Contested Concept of 'Normalisation': Contrasting Usages in Cold War Europe

There is in many quarters an almost immediate reaction of outrage when the word 'normalisation' comes anywhere near the term 'GDR'. How could an artificially created rump state, lacking any kind of either national or democratic legitimacy, sustained by Soviet occupation and the threat or use of indigenous force, with a supposedly terrified population watched over by the *Stasi* and imprisoned by the infamous Wall, be in any way referred to in the same breath as the word 'normal'—unless, of course, by some unreconstructed apologist blinded by ideological brainwashing and communist propaganda? Conveniently forgetting that there is no such thing as a 'normal'

state—the notion of the modern democratic nation state which implicitly underlies this reaction of outrage is itself, we have to remember, a fragile and recent invention and in a tiny minority in any kind of world-historical comparison—such gut reactions allow personal political preferences to preclude the possibility of scholarly analysis of historical experiences. 'Normal' is, on this view, essentially 'A Good Thing'; and the GDR, clearly 'abnormal' by the standards of a democratic nation state, should not be considered in relation to any such concept.[1] Such reactions fail, however, to appreciate the anthropological, historical, and political scope of the term as an analytic concept, caught as they are in their own implicit assumptions and normative prejudices about what constitutes 'normality'. It is necessary, therefore, to look more explicitly at the varied meanings and usages of the term.

'Normalisation' is an intrinsically relational, comparative term, with an element of movement or time frame involved: returning to, or making conform to, or aspiring to, some conception of 'normality'. Within the very word itself are built in notions of what would constitute 'deviance from' or challenges to some state of presumed 'normality', conceived as a 'healthy' state; or, put differently, notions of 'normalisation' inevitably entail also assumptions about what would constitute 'abnormality'. This close entanglement with potentially invidious comparisons, intrinsic to the term itself, renders the notion of normalisation problematic as a theoretical concept to be applied in historical research. This is particularly the case when the concept is lifted, un-problematised, from everyday usages of the term—and even more so if those everyday usages are those only of particular political actors, with their own, contested, views of what would be a desirable or 'normal' state of affairs.

Scholarly approaches, in consequence, differ quite remarkably on the usages of the term 'normalisation', on occasion using it relatively unthinkingly as though what is meant is self-evident, at other times more explicitly as a concept perhaps derived from the usages of contemporaries, but raised to attention as in some sense problematic. There is an additional twist relating to its application to the GDR. The history of the GDR is located in—or, frequently, is lost between—the 'double' comparative context of the histories of both its western twin, the increasingly affluent democratic Federal Republic of Germany, and of the other Eastern European states with which the GDR shared the fate of being under Soviet domination and influence. Curiously, the concept of 'normalisation' has been applied to both these spheres, yet with widely different meanings in each case. While analysts of

---

1. This is an extremely common reaction among lay members of audiences during discussions following the delivery of any lecture referring to normalisation in the GDR.

West German history have picked up on the notion of normalisation as a 'bottom up' concept widely deployed by ordinary people to refer to continual improvements in their private lives in the 1950s, Eastern European specialists have focussed rather on the use of the term to refer to top-down Soviet policies of repression following challenges to communist rule from the 1950s to the 1980s. On both sides, there have been varying degrees of awareness of the intrinsically loaded and normative character of any usage by contemporaries, whether from 'above' or 'below'; the loaded character tends to be somewhat more evident to scholars discussing Eastern Europe, given the evident dissonance between official claims to 'normalisation' and what should be seen as an entirely 'abnormal' deployment of force. The contrast between the two usages appears at first glance to be significant: bottom-up versus top-down, experienced reality of improvements in everyday life versus the claimed restoration of repressive rule against the express will of the people. On closer inspection, however, wide variations in substantive usage may be rooted in similar underlying theoretical issues, as will be explored further in a moment. First, a brief survey of the current range of usage will be helpful.

'Normalisation' is, for historians of Western Europe, particularly associated with the relative peace and growing prosperity of the 1950s, after decades of instability and violence in the preceding 'Thirty Years War' from 1914 to 1945, and most particularly after the horrors of the Second World War and genocide. Across Western Europe, as Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann comment:

> One of the most striking characteristics of the period that followed the 'decade of violence' was its relative peacefulness, stability and conservatism—not only in terms of politics but also in terms of social and cultural life. If the 1940s may described as the 'decade of violence', the 1950s arguably may be described as the 'decade of normality'—a decade in which one saw an apparent 'normalization' and stabilisation of political, social, and cultural relationships . . . However, the normality of the 1950s—coming as it did after the greatest outpouring of violence in human history—was anything but normal. It was, both collectively and individually, life after death.[2]

The 'return to normality', in terms of the (re-)building of shattered private lives, the reunions of families, and the reconstructions of the physical

---

2. Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann, 'Introduction: Violence, Normality and the Construction of Post-war Europe', in R. Bessel and D. Schumann, eds., *Life after Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 12.

infrastructure under peace-time conditions, had common elements across post-war Western Europe.

West Germany, shattered as it was in some areas by massive bombing raids, and subjected to the further constraints of defeat and occupation, shared these wider elements of physical rebuilding, economic recovery, and the associated construction of what was perceived as 'normal life' in the 'private sphere'. It was massively helped in this by the influx of both political and economic aid under the auspices of the Marshall Plan, from which it was the greatest beneficiary. But in Germany, the term had an extra, if largely suppressed (and hence all the more sinister) twist. Among contemporaries, conceptions of a supposed 'return to normality' in the Federal Republic of the 1950s referred to improvements in their private lives, with increasing affluence, job security, stable family lives, better living conditions, and enhanced leisure activities in the course of the 'economic miracle'—accompanied in many quarters by a degree of silence about the recent past. The term should thus not be taken entirely at face value, or lifted un-problematically from the usage of contemporaries, as Hanna Schissler points out:

> 'Normality' and 'normalization' were code words of the 1950s. They were part of the collective symbolism of the time. . . . Germans had lived through the rigors of war, including Allied bombardments. Millions had been displaced from their homes; hunger had become a common experience. The revelations of Germany's genocidal policies had shocked them. Now people were longing for a return to 'normality' . . . The frequent and matter-of-fact use of the terms 'normality' and 'normalization" in everyday life during the 1950s renders the project of 'normalization' highly suspicious and demands explanation. 'Normality' and 'normalization' are loaded ideological terms . . . Because 'normality' supposedly does not need explanation or justification, the normativity that was attached to the normalization project was (at least partly) veiled . . . [This] is precisely what made it such a powerful tool in the social and ideological reality of the 1950s.[3]

Lutz Niethammer similarly points out that normalisation is a term that has to be treated with care in a longer-term historical perspective:

> The need for liberating experience beyond certain ideological guiding concepts is easily recognizable in the catchword of the 1950s: 'normalization'. It is one of the most important code words used in both self-understandings

---

3. Hanna Schissler, '"Normalization" as project: Some thoughts on gender relations in West Germany during the 1950s', in Hanna Schissler, ed., *The Miracle Years. A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949–1968* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2001), pp. 359–75; here, pp. 359–60.

and contemporary historical characterizations of that decade. It is even recognized in economic-historical debates on the reconstruction period as a major subconscious category. But what does it actually express? Does its definition of 'normal' extend only to the fact that at this time people were crawling out the cellars and no longer ate out of tin dishes? Doesn't it label in fact as 'normal' the entire dramatic change in German society—at least in the West—after World War II? . . . According to which operative norms did the 1950s 'return to normal'?[4]

For the working class Germans in the Ruhr area on whose experiences Niethammer's observations were based, such conceptions actually have as an implicit reference point the 'silent years' or 'good years' of a return to full employment under Hitler in the peace-time years of the 1930s, and not the 'normality' of poverty, or of political and economic chaos that formed the widespread experience of the 1920s in this area.

From another perspective, such conceptions among large numbers of Germans in the 1950s display an extraordinary (and indeed by their indifference arguably callous) self-centredness and disregard for the millions of victims of the Nazi regime. The physical rebuilding from the ruins could never make life 'normal' again for those who would never return to their former homes and homeland, whether because they had been murdered in the Holocaust or had managed to flee abroad to try to make new lives in foreign places; nor could life within post-Holocaust Germany ever be the same again, or develop in patterns expected before the Nazi takeover, for the often deeply traumatised survivors and friends. Post-war relationships with fellow (but non-Jewish) Germans could 'never again be normalised', as one close friend of a woman murdered in Auschwitz later explicitly reflected; 'it was not made good again' was her acerbic comment on the supposed restitution or 'Wiedergutmachung' trumpeted by Adenauer's Germany.[5] 'Normalisation' for many post-war West Germans, as essentially a good experience, was thus predicated not merely on the earlier exploitation, exclusion, and murder of millions of those considered to be 'racially inferior', but also on varying degrees of post-war silence or repression of any prior knowledge of or complicity in these crimes and their long-lasting consequences. The desire to be 'normal' was hence not merely a desire to pick up again on strands of family life that had been disrupted by war, flight, and hunger, but

---

4. Lutz Niethammer, '"Normalization" in the West: Traces of memory leading back into the 1950s', in Hanna Schissler, ed., *The Miracle Years. A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949–1968* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2001), pp. 237–65; here, p. 238.

5. Martin Doerry, *'Mein verwundetes Herz'. Das Leben der Lilli Jahn 1900–1944* (Stuttgart and Munich; Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, and Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2004), p. 338.

also, if less consciously expressed at the time, the desire not to have been associated with the horrendous experiences and actions of the Nazi era; to pick up the pieces as if nothing had happened. It was thus predicated on a silent non-recognition of the fact that Germans were now inhabiting a society which had been successfully 'purged' of distinctive groups among its prewar population (and very significant percentages of the population in cities such as Frankfurt and Berlin), representing also a dramatic shift in Germany's social, intellectual, and cultural profile. At intervals, nevertheless, tensions erupted as challenges rooted in the realities of the past disturbed the comfortable materialism and affluent superficiality of the present.

Aspirations for some form of 'normality' with respect to the Nazi past were never completely submerged in public discourse over the years, as any even cursory glance at West Germany's 'policies with respect to the past' (*Vergangenheitspolitik*) will readily reveal. From Adenauer's gestures towards 'restitution' and proclamations of public shame without personal responsibility in the 1950s, through the debates on the war crimes trials and the issue of limitations on liability to prosecution for murder in the 1960s, to the widespread discussion of recapitulations of the Nazi past in films, documentaries, and historical analyses from the later 1960s onward, the notion of being a 'normal' nation persistently dogged West German discourses over 'German identity' both past and present.[6] This was, in Ernst Nolte's infamous phrase, the 'past that would not pass away' (*die Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will*). Thus, the concept of 'normalisation' returned explicitly as a term of public debate in the Helmut Kohl era of mid 1980s West Germany. Conservative historians and philosophers—Andreas Hillgruber, Michael Stürmer, Ernst Nolte—called for a 'normalisation' of the treatment of the Third Reich, arguing that it was time for Germany to be a 'normal nation' again, understood as a nation with a past in which Germans could take some pride, just as other nations allegedly could take pride in the deeds and achievements of their own respective forefathers. This proposed relativisation of the crimes of the Holocaust provoked widespread outrage on the part of Jürgen Habermas and many others, reaching its peak in the notorious 'historians' dispute' or *Historikerstreit* of 1986–87.[7]

---

6. There is a huge literature in this area. See for example Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1996); Ralph Giordano, *Die zweite Schuld, oder, Von der Last Deutscher zu sein* (Hamburg: Rasch and Röhrig, 1987); for my own brief summary of relevant developments in both East and West Germany, see Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999).

7. The original literature is well-known and does not need to be rehearsed again here; for a recent discussion from a later perspective, see the discussion contributions in 'The *Historikerstreit* Twenty Years On', *German History*, vol. 24 (Oct. 2006): 587–607. For the use of the term 'normalisation' in this context, see for example Heide Gerstenberger and Dorothea Schmidt, eds., *Normalität oder Normalisierung?* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot Verlag, 1987).

While the focus in this debate was on whether German history itself could in any way be treated as a 'normal' past rather than as a subject for constant shame and outrage, a somewhat different focus was to be found in the debate between Saul Friedländer and Martin Broszat over the proposed 'historicisation' of approaches to the Third Reich. The key issue in that debate was over whether historians could or should adopt 'normal' historical methods and approaches to a period that was, on both sides of this debate, recognised as 'abnormal' on any measure of the scale of the crimes committed.

So, for West Germany, issues of 'normalisation' revolved around the early development of the materialistic, affluent society, with appeals regarding the alleged 'return to normality' of everyday life—at least for 'Aryan' survivors, including not only those who had personally remained at a distance (both politically and geographically) from complicity in Nazi crimes, but also many former perpetrators and accomplices in Nazi policies of genocide—and also around later appeals for there to be, finally, a 'line drawn' (*Schlußstrich*) under this unsavoury 'episode' of an otherwise entirely 'normal' national history. A trivial footnote, perhaps, to the tale of 'normalisation' in the West lies in the extraordinarily late revelation, in an autobiography published in the summer of 2006, on the part of the renowned writer and generally acclaimed 'moral voice of the nation', Günter Grass, that he had himself not merely been a member of the Waffen-SS as a teenager at the end of the war, but that he only now, half a century later, felt able to reveal this fact—despite having made a career of castigating others for their repression and denial of complicity in the Nazi system.

On the other hand, scholars of Eastern Europe have used the concept of 'normalisation' in an entirely different sense: to analyse the top-down politics and policies employed by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and its local representatives in its 'satellite states', in order to suppress attempts at liberalisation and reform and restore Soviet control following the political upheavals in Hungary in 1956, Poland in 1956 and 1980–81, and Czechoslovakia following Dubček's 'Prague Spring' of 1968. Usage of this concept with respect to Eastern European states derives very directly from the Soviet Union's own official terminology and distinctive conceptions of 'normality'. As Kieran Williams points out, earlier uses of the term (with reference to 'orthographical and metallurgical standardization' from the 1860s, or to the standardisation of relations between two states from the 1930s onward), were, for scholars of communist states, displaced by the Soviet use of the term:

> In Russian *normalizatsiia* has two meanings: the process of 'making normal'; and the adaptation of an object to conform to a norm. After the 1956 crises it entered Soviet parlance as a euphemism for the restoration of communist control, the return to a 'normal' Soviet-type system, or, to use its second Russian

gloss, the re-calibration of the local system to match the norm represented by the Soviet model.[8]

And as Zdenek Mlynar comments,

> [T]he term 'normalization of the situation' is in fact designed to obscure the reality of the forced restoration of a Soviet-type socio-political system in a situation where the individual national communities have clearly rejected such a system (in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Poland in 1980–81) and have made an attempt to bring about its qualitative change. 'Normalization of the situation' means the restoration of a system rejected by a majority of society, at a point when it can be saved solely by the use of large-scale military and police repression.[9]

Moreover, 'the Soviet leadership considers "normal" only a very specific internal political situation. Such a normal situation means there must be a centre of absolute power (in the form of the Politburo of the given Communist Party), willing and able to enforce Soviet interests in the event of a contradiction between Soviet interests and the will of a national society.'[10] Similarly, Kusin argues that:

> 'Normalisation' in Czechoslovakia can be defined as restoration of authoritarianism in conditions of a post-interventionist lack of indigenous legitimacy, carried out under the close supervision of a dominant foreign power which retains the prerogative of supreme arbitration and interpretation but which prefers to work through its domestic agents. It had two principal aims: to remove reformism as a political force, and to legitimate a new regime resting on old pre-reformist principles . . . Towards its attainment, two simultaneous processes were pursued with determination. The population at large was intimidated into acceptance of imposed rules, and both real and potential opposition was pushed out from positions of influence, authority and control.[11]

As indicated, both coercion and a degree of cooption of the subjugated population were key elements in such processes. Thus, in academic usage,

---

8. Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 39–40.

9. Zdenek Mylnar, 'Introduction', in W. Brus, P. Kende, and Z. Mlynar, *'Normalization' Processes in Soviet-dominated Central Europe: Hungary Czechoslovakia Poland* (N.P: Research Project: Crises in Soviet-type systems, Study No. 1 © Z. Mlynar, 1982), p. 3.

10. Zdenek Mlynar, 'Normalization in Czechoslovakia after 1968' in W. Brus, P. Kende, Z. Mlynar, *'Normalization' Processes* (pp. 15–36), p. 16.

11. Vladimir Kusin, *From Dubček to Charter 77: A study of 'normalisation' in Czechoslovakia 1968–1978* (Edinburgh: Q Press, 1978), p. 145.

the term has become rather more complex and multi-facetted than in the original Soviet version.

The concept of normalisation is used in slightly varying ways by specialists in this area: sometimes to refer to Soviet intentions and repressive responses to political challenge; sometimes to refer to domestic policies introduced or imposed by local Communists under Soviet hegemony in the medium term; and sometimes to the whole bundle of features including the changing roles of functionaries and the adaptations of behaviour and attitude among intellectuals, workers, and peasants over a longer period of time.[12] In an attempted systematic comparison among selected Eastern European states, Peter Hübner has sought to apply the concept rather narrowly to a particular time period, focussing on policy changes in the Soviet block in the early 1970s, and restricting the concept to what he calls '*Normalisierungspolitik*', or 'policies of normalisation', with specific reference to post–1970 East European economics reversals in the GDR, CSSR, and Poland after the reform attempts of the 1960s.[13] This approach is of course doubly limited by seeking to restrict the term not only to the substantive usage by a dominant political actor, but also to a particular set of policies at a specific point in time. Other scholars apply the term in a broader sense, ranging fairly widely across the three principal cases and exploring relations between rulers, functionary classes, and the ruled, over extended periods of time.[14] While commentators have differed slightly in the way in which the term is applied, and the extent to which the original Soviet use of it is treated with a degree of distance, the term has gained widespread currency as a substantive appellation for processes of 'social pacification' through a combination of the stick of forcible repression and the carrot of consumerism in these three states.

The injuries and deaths involved in forcible suppression of mass demonstrations, the subsequent prison sentences, executions, exclusions from office and professional life, and other longer-term consequences of radical political upheavals and reinstatement of communist control, were frequently accompanied by attempts at social pacification through improved working conditions, enhanced supplies of consumer goods, and higher living

---

12. See for example the wide-ranging analysis by Milan Simecka, *The Restoration of Order: The Normalization of Czechoslovakia*, trans. A.G. Brain (London: Verso, 1984).

13. Peter Hübner, 'Norm, Normalität, Normalisierung: Quellen und Ziele eines gesellschaftlichen Paradigmenweschsels im sowjetischen Block um 1970', *Potsdamer Bulletin* Nr 28/29, Jan. 2003: 24–40.

14. On the 'paradigm case' of Czechoslovakia see also, for example, H. Gordon Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Fred Eidlin, *The Logic of 'Normalization': The Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia of 21 August 1968 and the Czechoslovak Response* (New York: Columbia University Press and Boulder, 1980).

standards for a now resigned and politically passive population. Social peace was, in short, bought at a high price, particularly for the victims of the initial wave of repression and restructuring. On this view, 'normalisation' has generally been considered, both by most contemporaries (with of course the exception of the political forces imposing such policies) and by subsequent scholarly observers, in contrast to the use of the term when applied to western post-war developments, to be utterly abhorrent. Almost without exception, from the point of view of historians of Eastern Europe the term has been treated as a loaded concept, an unacceptable euphemism, posing for some scholars a serious obstacle in wanting to adopt a term derived from the political discourse of repressive rulers as an analytical term in academic discourse.

Academic analyses of normalisation as a top-down policy of social pacification in Eastern European states have, with a few exceptions, largely tended to leave the GDR out of the comparison. Perhaps the 1953 June Uprising in the GDR came just too early for scholars of Communist states to explore it under a conceptual heading that became common currency in the Soviet bloc only after 1956; perhaps the degree of Soviet intervention and control in the GDR was different in ways which did not lend themselves to a similar use of the term; perhaps any 'normalisation' after 1953 had a delayed inception only after the renewed trauma and use of force with the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Perhaps, too, there has subconsciously reigned among Eastern European specialists an implicit assumption that GDR history does not 'really' belong to the history of the repeatedly subjugated states of Eastern Europe, rooted as the GDR was in the very different war-time history of the German aggressor state. Similarly, few scholars have thought to apply to the GDR the concept of normalisation in the western sense of 'bottom-up experiences', of a 'return to normality' after the war and post-war periods of violence and deprivation, given the continuation of uncertainties, radical social restructuring, political repression, economic miseries, and extended rationing in the GDR through the 1950s. Observers of the affluent, materialistic, capitalist democratic West Germany have generally felt that any notion of normalisation would be in principle inapplicable to the condition of East Germans eking out what was, by western standards, a miserable existence behind the 'Iron Curtain'.

Altogether the GDR has tended to escape embedding itself in the wider historical narratives of post-war Europe. While before German unification in 1990 many western scholars tended to write the history of Germany as moving seamlessly from the Third Reich to the Federal Republic, with the GDR as a mere appendage to be mentioned in passing, primarily in the context of initial division and subsequent West German *Ostpolitik*, specialists

in Eastern Europe also did not really consider it as central to their scholarly stamping ground. Only after the opening of the East German archives in the 1990s did the GDR become an object of extensive analysis on its own right, with an explosion of research projects on its domestic political and social history; but even by the early twenty-first century, cries were still being heard, calling for it to be treated as part of a broader European history, rather than merely a 'footnote' of interest only to a select band of academic specialists, and to a variegated mixture of romantic 'Ostalgics' harbouring rose-tinted views of the world they had lost, or former political victims trying to come to terms with their wounds. Such calls for the broader contextualisation of GDR history fit in with the wider recognition that, to adapt a phrase, 'no state is an island complete of itself', which was accompanied more generally by pleas for the 'trans-nationalisation' of historical approaches.

Moreover, the history of the GDR itself has been written with an eye largely to its beginnings and endings, with a widespread tendency to skim rapidly over the middle decades. Particularly in the first decade after the opening of the archives, historians tended to concentrate primarily on the early years of the establishment and development of the new structures of the dictatorship, up to the building of the Wall in 1961, and on the closing years of economic decline, political destabilisation, and the growth of oppositional movements leading up to the collapse of communist rule and the end of the GDR in 1989–90. With the exception of certain areas—church/state relations, the *Stasi*, relations between the two German states in the era of *Ostpolitik*—relatively little attention was initially paid to underlying developments in political structure and related patterns of social and behavioural change during the more stable years of the 1960s and 1970s. These were years of détente characterised by some limited optimism for a degree of apparent liberalisation, improvements in social and economic conditions, and hopes for a better future in this world rather than the next; despite the constraints of the Wall, utopia appeared to be giving way to pragmatism, and meeting the needs of the people appeared to be taking priority over ideological zeal. This was a period characterised many years ago by Peter Christian Ludz as one of 'consultative authoritarianism'; and a period which even those theorists clinging to the 'totalitarian' model had difficulty in conceptualising, with variants on 'post-totalitarian' and 'late totalitarian' being devised in an attempt to accommodate recognition of difference within a conceptual framework which did not quite fit. While this situation has been changing in the scholarship of the twenty-first century, with the proliferation of specialist studies and monographs on a range of particular topics, the question of the parameters and character of relative stabilisation in the middle period of the GDR is one that has remained relatively under-theorised. Here, we believe

an investigation in the light of the concept of normalisation may be fruitful; first, however, it is important to clarify the ways in which this term is being applied as a theoretical rather than a descriptive or normative concept.

Normalisation as an Ideal Type

Given the wide range of usage by both contemporaries within and analysts of Eastern and Western Europe, how may the contested concept of normalisation be of more general use? It is important to make it very clear from the outset that this concept is used here not as a descriptive label for a particular period, nor as a term borrowed from the usage of contemporaries, but rather as a heuristic tool for further analysis of a range of processes in different areas. The outcomes of such an investigation are by no means predetermined.

The notion of normalisation is best deployed as an ideal type, in the Weberian sense, against which particular processes and developments can be measured and set in broader comparative context. The concept is thus deployed here *not* as a descriptive phrase (let alone a political evaluation), but rather as an analytic tool of potentially wider significance and applicability. The claim is *not*, then, that the GDR in the 1960s and 1970s can be substantively characterised in this way; but rather, that for comparative and interpretive purposes, it is fruitful for this period of the GDR's history to explore questions concerning the relative stabilisation of domestic political structures and processes, the degrees of routinisation and predictability of everyday practices, and to examine, with an anthropological sensitivity, patterns and variations in widespread conceptions of what is held to be 'normal'.

In deploying the concept of normalisation in this way, it is not a matter of simply inventing a new term from thin air, but (as with other historical concepts such as 'dictatorship' or 'democracy') necessarily at the same time picking up from and relating to the usage of both contemporaries and other scholars. Historians can, after all, not talk purely in terms of entities comparable to the Table of the Elements prevalent in the natural sciences, and the complex overlay of meanings (or 'double hermeneutic') in historical analysis is accordingly often highly problematic.[15] The meaning of 'normal' in some contexts is simple: for physiological organisms, there is a 'normal range' of body temperatures or blood sugar levels, for example, beyond which—at

---

15. For fuller discussion of my approach to the theoretical issues involved in concept formation and value neutrality in history, see my book on *Historical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2002).

either extreme—life is fatally threatened. For collective social and political entities, such as states, societies, and communities (at whatever level), the situation is very different, with widely varying cultural constructions of what might be meant by a 'return to normality'. Yet the concept of normalisation has seemed, in practice, to be of considerable relevance in different quarters. It may also, if we consider the prospect of developing it more explicitly as an analytic construct for heuristic purposes, prove to be of far wider applicability than the particular cases considered in this context. We need then to return to the construction of the term as a more abstract ideal type, a usable concept in the social and historical field.

The varied applications sketched in above—whether referring to West Germany in the 1950s, or to Eastern European states from the 1950s through the 1980s—at first glance appear very different in their definitions. Interestingly, however, for all their obvious differences they nevertheless share certain intrinsic features. They pick up on the usage of contemporaries to point to the ways in which key collective actors sought to define a particular set of changes as being a 'return' to the 'way things were', understood not necessarily as how they 'actually' were, but certainly conforming to some conception of how they 'ought to be': a curious mixture of reference both to a construction of the past, and to aspirations for the future. In the West, the relevant collective actors consisted, at different times, of significant numbers of 'ordinary Germans', as well as sections of the political and cultural elites; and it is precisely because of the relatively broad area of consensus between post-war elites and the population that the term appeared unproblematic to all but a few. In the Eastern European cases, by contrast, the politically loaded character of the term lies precisely in the fact that the claims and aspirations of a repressive Soviet power and its local post-reformist leaderships were not shared by significant sections of the population, including ousted intellectuals and vocal oppositionalists. The Soviet conception was a definition of 'normality' that many explicitly felt to be utterly unacceptable, and an active minority were even prepared to risk (or actively sacrifice, as in the case of the self-immolation of Jan Pallach) their lives to demonstrate against it. Yet the widespread tendency to find the western notion intrinsically less problematic should not disguise the fact that both versions of what constitutes 'normality' are—as the etymology of the word itself proclaims—intrinsically normative and loaded.

The issue of shared norms, and of associated social constructions of 'normality', is important, alongside the implicit or explicit claim on the part of one or another group (whether dominant or subordinate) that this is the way things 'should' be. Built into any notion of 'normalisation' also is explicit reference to a process of change over time, to the ways in which an 'abnormal' situation is—or should be—turning into a 'normal' one, as defined by key

collective actors. Over the course of this period of time, which may be quite extended and strongly contested, processes of political, economic, and social change take place in which people's changing experiences affect their attitudes and patterns of behaviour; they adapt to new circumstances and seek to realise their interests in changing socio-political environments, in the process also changing their own conceptions of 'normality'. Conflicting norms are negotiated as new definitions of the situation are worked through, and new dominant patterns of behaviour and interaction emerge, or people learn to adapt to uncomfortable conditions in an effort to make tolerable lives within (or despite) less than ideal circumstances.

Important too, therefore, is the question of significant periods of stabilisation (however impermanent in any longer-term historical perspective), and the associated possible routinisation of institutional structures and regular patterns of behaviour. As the 'new' eventually becomes experienced as 'routine', expectations settle down: people begin to assume that tomorrow will be pretty much like today (no longer existentially threatened), and that the rules themselves will not change very much, so that it is worth learning to play by the rules in order to achieve personal ends. 'Private lives' are no longer radically disrupted by the course of 'collective history'; ruptures are rooted rather in what are perceived as individual life crises (work problems, illness, divorce, death) and not in the collective impact of major external events, the chaos of the economic system or the demands of politics or warfare. 'Life plans' become possible in the light of now familiar parameters, in the context of which it is possible to act today in ways which will produce predictable results in the medium and longer-term future—including the choice of taking risks in not conforming, with the knowledge of the likely penalties weighed up against personal moral and political considerations. It is important to note explicitly that predictability of consequences does not necessarily entail or imply belief in or conformity to the rules. Normalisation is not the same thing as legitimisation. After a longer or shorter period of time, following a period of upheaval and rapid change, new norms may be successfully internalised, inculcated into the minds of rising generations—or may not, as the case may be. One can, then, begin to explore empirically the extent to which people are aware of and take into account the new 'rules', both explicit and implicit, of the circumstances in which they make their lives; the extent to which they choose to challenge, to ignore, to confront, or to play by these rules while retaining a sense of inner distance; or the extent to which they have, perhaps entirely unconsciously, internalised certain aspects of the new norms and rules, assuming that their lives are in some unexamined sense 'perfectly normal'.

It is in this way possible to reconsider processes of 'normalisation' in a rather more abstract, multi-facetted and comprehensive manner, rather than

simply taking over, with a greater or lesser degree of scholarly distancing and disapproval, a substantive concept derived from the usage of contemporaries. The concept, when used in this more abstract fashion, is an 'ideal type' (in Max Weber's theoretical sense rather than the normative meaning of the term!), which could in principle be applied to any historical case and period: it is an empirical question to explore the extent to which any of these aspects might obtain at any particular time among selected social groups. The concept can, then, be applied just as fruitfully to the German states in the later seventeenth century, after decades of turmoil and warfare in the Thirty Years War, to Londoners after the Blitz in the Second World War, to New Yorkers and Londoners after the terrorist attacks of '9/11' and '7/7', or to the people of Iraq after the removal of Saddam Hussein and the occupation of armed forces under American hegemony, as it can to the experiences of people in the GDR; in all of these cases, a moment's thought will readily reveal both the extent to which such a notion is problematic, and the ways in which it can be a useful tool for investigating the links between wider historical changes and people's experiences and perceptions on the ground, as they believe that a situation is 'returning to normal'. The concept of normalisation thus in itself presupposes nothing about how any situation following a period of existential crisis is 'actually' experienced and theorised by different groups among contemporaries living through periods of upheaval and change; rather, it poses the question of the relations between rapid change and the emergence of possible perceptions, in different quarters, of a 'return to normal'—with all the attendant issues of constructions of 'normality' as a reference point in a mythologised past, as an ideal and as a future aspiration, referred to above. Thus, if treated in this way, the concept of normalisation as a theoretical tool or ideal type can provide a very useful means of exploring the links between 'structural' changes (in political, economic, and social structure), on the one hand, and changes in mentalities, patterns of behaviour, and discourse, on the other; and it serves to raise questions about the 'degrees of fit' between the demands of the external world and the perceptions and experiences of the inner life among people in different social and generational groups, in those longer, slower, 'less memorable' times following periods of major upheaval and historical turmoil that have visible implications for people's experiences and perceptions of their 'private lives'.

Normalisation in the GDR in Comparative Perspective

When the history of the GDR is revisited in this broader theoretical and comparative context, some interesting patterns begin to emerge. Economic, international, political, and social factors all combine in different ways to

suggest the conditions under which any aspect of the bundle of processes of 'normalisation' might be observed.

The material basis for a tolerable physical existence is certainly a crucial precondition for any sense of normalisation. The American election campaign headquarters reminder slogan, 'the economy, stupid', seems to hold good across systems of whatever political colour. In the West, widespread popular claims to 'normalisation' were clearly predicated on the long period of post-war economic growth. In West Germany, a sense of 'normalisation' set in with the Marshall Plan and currency reform in 1948; in the course of the 1950s, support for democracy in principle rose alongside per capita income, in a context of sustained economic growth and moves towards western European economic integration. The 'post-war period' in the GDR in terms of economic shortages, political uncertainties, and continued upheavals lasted far longer than in West Germany: there was no Marshall Aid to speed up recovery, and war-time damage was compounded by reparations to the Soviet Union and the consequences of radical socioeconomic restructuring in both industry and agriculture as early as 1945–46, as well as by the separation from western economic links and later integration into the system of the less well-developed economies of eastern Europe in Comecon. Yet by the early 1960s, with the end of rationing and the emergence of improvements in living and working conditions, life began at least to appear more 'normal' with respect to many everyday needs, in contrast, for those old enough to remember, with the dire conditions of the very early post-war years.

What becomes clear in the Eastern European cases more generally is that, despite the very different economic system and conditions obtaining under communism, a modicum of material well-being plays an important role in the longer-term question of whether a politically unstable situation can be successfully 'normalised' after the shock waves of a revolt. In Hungary following the upheavals of 1956, in the context of general post-war economic recovery and growth, a policy of 'mixed capitalism' fostered a fairly productive economy. 'Kadarism'—the politics of pragmatic materialism pursued by Hungary's new leader Janos Kadar—thus played an important role in stabilising the system in the years following the brutal and bloody suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising. In different ways, there was sufficient leeway in the system for consumerist measures in Czechoslovakia in the post-Dubček era of the early 1970s. The same strategies could, however, not be repeated by General Jaruzelski in Poland after taking over in face of the challenges from the Solidarity movement in 1980–81, in the new context of oil crises, world economic recession, and renewed Cold War pressures for rising military expenditure in the 1980s. This general economic and political context formed the backdrop too, to the change in policies

under Mikhail Gorbachev in the USSR in the later 1980s, and ultimately to the revolutionary challenges that swept away communist rule in the Soviet bloc in 1989–90.

The GDR's early political shock, the June Uprising of 1953, was followed by (somewhat short-lived) consumer concessions; but the still somewhat open border with the West, while the loophole of escape remained through Berlin, meant that a constant haemorrhage of skilled labour continually drained the economy, leaving any successful policy of 'Kadarism' less available in the SED's arsenal of potential responses at this time. East Germans realised very early on the disadvantages of their system in comparison to the rapidly improving conditions in the West, and material dissatisfaction was expressed in the high rates of flight to the Federal Republic during the 1950s. It was only after the building of the Wall in 1961 that the East German labour supply was at last stabilised, with some degree of certainty that the work force in any given enterprise or institution would be the same from one day to the next. In 1963, the New Economic System introduced a range of reforms in the organisation of industrial production, with a limited degree of decentralisation of economic decision-making, while the waves of enforced collectivisation of agriculture in 1959–60 inaugurated a more predictable, stabilised agrarian sector. While the East German economy was never able to keep pace with (let alone overtake, as Ulbricht had optimistically proclaimed) the productivity of the West, for close on two decades, East Germans in the 1960s and 1970s were able to enjoy an increasingly comfortable if always modest standard of living, with a shorter working week, growing leisure time, and ownership of concomitant consumer goods such as television sets. Such modest improvements were of course marred both by constant shortages in particular goods, replacement parts, and 'exotic' fresh fruit, as well as continued comparisons with the more affluent West, and the construction of domestic idylls filled with the material products of modern design was continually hampered by problems with adequate provision of housing; but, particularly in the context of Honecker's proclaimed 'unity of economic and social policy' in the early 1970s, there were widespread expectations for continued improvements in the foreseeable future. It was not until the later 1970s and particularly from the early 1980s, in the context of oil crises and world recession, that the adverse consequences in the GDR of Honecker's generous social subsidies began to be evident in a visibly deteriorating environmental and economic system. Thus, for nearly two decades in the GDR, the basic economic preconditions for a degree of 'normalisation' were present, even if constantly under the situation of adverse comparisons with the West, in ways which will be analysed in greater detail in a number of chapters below.

Normalisation is of course intrinsically related to questions of political stabilisation and domestic challenges to any given regime in a broader international context. Germany's first experiment at democracy in the Weimar Republic was repeatedly challenged from both the Left and the Right; in conditions of rising unemployment and the economic depression of the early 1930s, the right-wing elites' resort to the demagogic NSDAP in the hope of harnessing popular unrest in support of conservative autocracy was a wild gamble that eventuated in the Hitler state. Experiences of a 'return to normality' among those Germans untouched by the political terror and racism of the 1930s, and glad to gain employment and a degree of security, was a chimera, with the 'Hitler myth' blinding many Germans to the spiral of radical state-sponsored violence and further fatal destabilisation of an already unstable interwar political situation in central Europe. The effect of Hitler's war of aggression—a World War, and not 'merely' the revisionist war that might in any event have been fought—was to bring the two new superpowers into Europe, with the USA and the Soviet Union dominating European history for the better part of the following half century. It is only in the context of the fragile stability and changing flashpoints of the Cold War context that the histories of the post-war European states—most obviously in the East, in less visible ways in the West—can be understood. And domestic challenges to Communist rule within the Soviet bloc states—1953, 1956, 1968, 1980–81—came at different times within the broader context of the Cold War as it affected Europe, and within their own histories as 'satellite states'.

The ruling communist Socialist Unity Party in the GDR, the SED, experienced only one major challenge to its domination that was comparable to the events of 1956, 1968, and 1980–81 in its Eastern European neighbours: the uprising of June 1953, the first serious shudder to run through the new area of Soviet domination in eastern Europe. But this was not an event comparable to the later upheavals in terms of immediate processes of 'normalisation'—perhaps another reason why this term has rarely if ever been applied to the GDR—for a number of reasons. The June 1953 Uprising was not merely a 'workers' uprising', as sometimes portrayed, in part because the general strike of 17 June was initially sparked by a protest against raised work norms on the part of building workers in East Berlin's Stalinallee, which subsequently snowballed into a more general demonstration and general strike on 17 June; by the time political demands for the downfall of the Ulbricht regime and reunification with the West had been raised, the demonstrations involved a much wider cross-section of the population. Yet, despite a degree of factionalism and difference within the SED at this time, the 1953 Uprising neither arose out of nor significantly involved ideas

of reform from within on the part of factions within the ruling communist party along the lines of debates in Hungary, Czechoslovakia or Poland. Nor did the demonstrations on the streets on 17 June involve significant numbers of the East German intelligentsia—a term that is, in any event, perhaps somewhat anachronistic when applied to this early stage of GDR history. Although there were notable exceptions, members of those professional and social groups who would eventually be termed the socialist 'intelligentsia' tended to remain in the wings in 1953, on the whole '*abwartend*' or 'waiting to see how things would develop', to use the standard language of contemporary reports. In the course of the 1950s, disproportionate numbers of these groups would take the opportunity to flee to the West, where there were far better career prospects as well as opportunities for the education of the children of the previously privileged classes. And, unlike the change of leadership that took place in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, the 1953 challenge to communist rule in the GDR was followed by the consolidation of Ulbricht in power, rather than his replacement. Although there was a significant purge of party membership, there was at this very early stage in GDR history no serious transformation of the landscape of functional and intellectual elites, as took place after 1968 in Czechoslovakia.

In many respects, in the early 1950s the transformation of East German social and political structure was still at such a formative stage that the violent repression of the 1953 uprising was essentially an early 'foundational' shock, rather than a rude reminder that subordinate communist states could not, at least not before the changes in the Soviet Union at the very end of the 1980s, contemplate trying to do things 'their way' (to use Soviet spokesman Gennady Gerasimov's adoption of the 'Sinatra doctrine'). And although the events of 1953 were, as in the other later Eastern European cases, followed by very widespread resignation on the part of a significant percentage of the population, there was for several years thereafter still the escape hatch of an alternative version of living one's life in a German state after Hitler, namely the option of flight to the West. We have perhaps to remind ourselves that, with the benefit of hindsight, we know there were no real prospects for reunification after, at the very latest, the first Stalin note of 1952; but this was not the perception of many contemporaries, who in the 1950s lived between constant fear of a Third World War and the hope for reunification. There can be little talk about predictability, routinisation, and stabilisation, when the very state in which the 'rules' are supposed to apply might cease to exist from one day to the next. The future, in the 1950s, appeared far more uncertain in the GDR than it did in West Germany at the same time, or in the other Eastern European states which did not share the curious situation of having a western

alternative sharing a common language and in which one had automatic citizenship rights. Issues of national legitimacy were, therefore, in the other cases rather different. In the case of Poland in 1980–81, for example, national identity was focussed in very different ways around an opposition between atheist Communist domination and the Catholic Church as an enduring symbol of the Polish people, rooted in experiences of invasion and occupation over the centuries, and particularly powerful at a time when there was a Polish Pope in Rome. Arguably, then, for reasons of the GDR's uncertain status and future as a state at all, until the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, there could be no real talk of 'normalisation' in the tenuous, continually uncertain conditions of what was still widely referred to as 'the Zone'.

'Lessons' were certainly learned on the part of participants in all of the cases of repressed uprisings. Pierre Kende has indeed argued, for the case of Hungary, that Hungary's normalisation 'began with the nation's complete defeat' in 1956. The experience of suppression of hopes for reform was, according to Kende, worse in Hungary than in Czechoslovakia in 1968 because:

> [I]n Hungary awareness of defeat had been immediate and total while in Czechoslovakia it was attenuated by the hopes temporarily entertained by the routed team. Nor did Poland—even after 13 December 1981—ever know this feeling of complete and irremediable defeat which stole over the Hungarians in late autumn 1956 . . . Hungarian public opinion firmly thought they were finished as a nation.

> Paradoxically, this despair was to be one of the assets in the hands of the normalizers. Since Hungary had reached the fathoms of despair, anything that it could be offered that was less horrible than the worst . . . was likely to be considered as an unhoped-for gift.[16]

Awareness not merely of defeat, but also abandonment by the West, was certainly a key feature in the experiences of those involved in the 1953 Uprising in the GDR. The echoes of '17.6.53' reverberated right through the subsequent history of the GDR, affecting both ordinary workers who felt another challenge would be pointless in the absence of any practical support from the West, as well as Party apparatchiks seeking to retain their hold on power, demonstrated even in *Stasi* chief Erich Mielke's

---

16. Pierre Kende, 'The post–1956 Hungarian normalization', in W. Brus, P. Kende, and Z. Mlynar, *'Normalization' Processes* (pp. 5–13), here, p. 6.

remarks—'is this another 17.6'?—more than a third of a century later, in the autumn of 1989.

There were major developments over the longer term in terms of both strategies of the use of power and responses on the ground. These can perhaps best be summarised in terms of an almost paradoxical concomitant growth of both the apparatus of coercion, and its simultaneous displacement by relationships embodying practices of authority. This development too is characteristic of processes of normalisation.

The use of physical force and visible violence was at its most brutal in the period of the Soviet occupation and the very early years of the newly founded GDR. Whether in terms of the hundreds of thousands of deaths from starvation, maltreatment, and disease in post-war internment centres, or in terms of the political abuse of the system of legal 'justice' in show trials, or in terms of the constraints on political activities, any real or imagined opposition to the new system was brutally crushed, including among the victims not only of former Nazis and contemporary political competitors and opponents across the whole spectrum, but also entirely innocent youngsters caught up in the chaotic post-war system of brutality. Yet over time the deployment of visible, naked force gradually gave way to the growth of a less visible apparatus of repression through the *Stasi*. Caught relatively unawares in 1953, the State Security Service grew steadily larger through the later 1950s and 1960s. Ironically, it was in the period of greater openness and apparent semi-liberalisation following Ostpolitik that the *Stasi* experienced its greatest expansion, however, mushrooming in the Honecker period to become proportionately (per head of population) probably the largest security service in the twentieth-century world.[17]

The apparatus of power, defined in Max Weber's terms as 'the capacity to exert one's will against the will of others', and the growth of the state in terms of its 'monopoly of the legitimate use of force within given territorial boundaries' is thus beyond question. But this should not blind us to a concomitant and as yet less well-explored aspect of the ways in which the East German state changed during this period: the simultaneous, and perhaps paradoxical growth of 'legitimate authority', in the Weberian sense of the willingness of the ruler's staffs or functionary classes to act as though they believed in the legitimacy of the ruler's claims to power, and 'the likelihood that orders will be obeyed', for whatever combination of reasons. '*Macht*' was accompanied by a growth of '*Herrschaft*', in a more complex manner than has generally been represented.

---

17. See particularly Jens Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern. Die Geschichte der Stasi 1945–1990* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001).

One key element in this situation is that of the roles of functionaries, whose role certainly requires more detailed investigation. In the context of normalisation processes in other Eastern European states, functionaries in a phase of normalisation are generally regarded as apparatchiks of the Moscow-dominated ruling elite, often displacing previous functionary groups who had supported indigenous attempts at reform or the development of 'socialism with a human face'. On this view, functionaries are essentially top-down policy transmitters, alienated from the grassroots. Thus in the Czechoslovakian case, according to Kieran Williams:

> Ultimately, of course, normalization took place because Moscow demanded it. . . . The Soviets, however, communicated only a general set of expectations and left the actual detail of normalization to local cadres . . . [A]ny factionalism within ruling communist parties had to be concealed and decision-making restricted to the innermost circle of party functionaries. The duty of any functionary or institution outside the inner circle, especially the media, was to relay and execute, not debate, official policy. The army and security police had to be operational, either for war or surveillance and riot control.[18]

While the general gist of this also holds true, of course, for the case of the GDR, particularly with respect to the roles of the army and security police, there are significant differences in the East German case. During the 1950s, the SED experienced great difficulty in building up a stable system of functionaries in the GDR, a situation perhaps exacerbated by the uncertainty over the future of the state. But in the course of the 1960s and 1970s, with the stabilisation of the economy and the international political situation and the coming to maturity of new generations, we can see the growth of what I have elsewhere termed the 'societal state', or 'honeycomb state'.[19] Despite and alongside the growth in the apparatus of power, there was a simultaneous growth in the less malign aspects of the East German state. Increasing numbers of GDR citizens came to take on positions as paid or honorary functionaries in a very wide range of positions: in the 'people's own' economic enterprises, in the trade union organisation (FDGB), as cultural functionaries, volunteers in youth work, and so on. Increasingly, the 'state' was carried by its citizens: large numbers of people became simply part of the way the regime functioned. Many of the chapters that follow explore the changing patterns of interrelationships between low-level and medium-ranking functionaries and their immediate local 'constituents', as

---

18. Williams, *Prague Spring and its Aftermath,* p. 59.
19. Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2005).

well as the relations between the latter and higher levels of the state apparatus. This contributes, too, to the realisation that traditional dichotomous approaches with their sharp separation of 'state' and 'society' are very difficult to apply in practice with respect to the way in which the 'societalised state' operated in the GDR.

Only a minority, of course—even if a fairly substantial minority—became actively involved in the state apparatus as functionaries. What about changing patterns of behaviour and opinion among the wider population? Different domestic institutional structures, inherited and reinterpreted patterns of political culture and 'repertoire', and the constraints and opportunities of the wider international situation affected the extent to which, and the ways in which, people adapted to the changing demands of their environment. Again, we can see differences across the Eastern European cases, although in all cases 'normalisation' presupposes some measure of adaptation, even if only grudging and grumbling, to conditions which people feel they can no longer challenge or seek to change. In Williams' discussion of 'patterns of conformity and resistance in society' in the Czechoslovak case, he suggests that:

> The broader normalization of society, like many forms of authoritarian control, required not an unrelenting terror but the retransformation of autonomous interest groups into monopolistic structures of mobilization which . . . help to thwart opposition to dictatorship by channelling most citizens' energies into activities (often ritualized or diversionary) staged by official associations for youth, workers, professionals, women, national minorities, and intellectuals. Through these [organizations], time is consumed, ideology is transmitted, rewards are bestowed, an illusion of participation is created, and material dependency on the state is imposed.[20]

The assumption built into this assertion is that there is a sharp differentiation between the 'regime' and 'people'—even if there is some exploration of how people resign themselves and 'adapt'—and that the latter participate in a way that is acknowledged to be merely a matter of lip service or ritual obedience, in some sense essentially inauthentic.

Yet with respect both to the roles of functionaries and the involvement of the people, the situation in the GDR was arguably different from that in Poland or Czechoslovakia. In the GDR, as many of the chapters in this collection make clear, functionaries appeared in the course of the 1970s to have developed somewhat more leeway and room for a limited degree of partially

---

20. Williams, *Prague Spring and its Aftermath,* p. 249.

autonomous action within the local sphere; and, by the later 1970s and early 1980s, local and lower level functionaries frequently appeared as representatives not only of those above, but also of those whose interests they professed to serve, occupying an increasingly difficult position characterised by rising frustration, as spokespeople on behalf of those 'below' as well as at the behest of those 'above'. This appears to have been particularly the case by the later 1970s and early 1980s, when functionaries voiced increasing frustration with the shortcomings of the system. And it was precisely these relatively loyal servants of the regime who became increasingly critical of the failures of the Honecker government in the 1980s even to acknowledge, let alone deal adequately with, the mounting crises and failures to deliver the goods in a situation of economic decline heading towards ultimate collapse.

The consequences of this phenomenon for attitudes and behaviour patterns of the majority of East Germans are also subjected to closer examination in many of the chapters which follow. One interesting feature to emerge is the way in which many East Germans felt able to articulate their grievances and interests with at least some limited hope of redress or input into future policy. Thus, they were, if only to a limited degree and within certain boundaries (not least the physical boundaries of the East German state itself as a geographical entity), able to 'work the system' for their own ends. Many felt simultaneously committed to and critical of the system within which they lived and worked. This highlights the fact that it is not sufficient simply to talk about '*Eigen-Sinn*' in terms of a defence of a person's 'own interests' and the bestowal of his or her 'own meanings', important though such a stance also is in some contexts. The notion of '*Eigen-Sinn*' presupposes still some distance between an individual's 'own' and 'society's' interests and norms. What is interesting—in addition—in the GDR is the as yet insufficiently explored question of the extent of overlap and merging of these two areas. The notion of normalisation allows us to explore the extent to which certain norms were shared, or internalised, to such a degree that the sense of '*Eigen-Sinn*' becomes almost irrelevant.

This approach also has implications for wider debates about the roles of 'conformity and consent', or 'repression and opposition' in dictatorships (a debate frequently re-run with respect to the Third Reich). No serious historian would suggest that there was anything like the degree of popular enthusiasm for the GDR as there was for the preceding Hitler regime. But there were probably more areas of consent and consensus than historians have generally been prepared to acknowledge (commitment to greater social equality, or to a comprehensive health system in principle, while critiquing shortcomings in the GDR in practice, are probably good examples). To resolve such questions empirically, we need to look at lived experiences and

degrees of internalisation of new norms; popular attitudes in the GDR cannot be described or summed up purely in terms of an assumed long-term general mood of gloomy resignation. Widespread popular opposition had clearly been present in the 1950s, and grew again in new ways (particularly under the protective umbrella of the Protestant Churches) in the 1980s. But the GDR population did not consist, after 1953, of repressed and muted oppositionalists; members of any kind of intellectual opposition were in only a tiny minority in the 1960s and 1970s, and there was no evidence, before 1989, of the kinds of alliance between workers and intellectuals evident in Poland.

Thus arguably normalisation in the GDR was rather more successful than in the neighbouring Eastern European states, even if the fact of being a divided nation, with a far more affluent western twin, meant that the East German status quo was never as unthinkingly accepted as a 'return to normal' as experienced in post-war West Germany. Yet East Germans did come to terms with and develop new ways of living in their changing state. In comparison to Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, the greater apparent stability of the GDR over two decades or so was predicated on a combination of having a stronger economy, perhaps an increasingly widespread willingness to act as functionaries, greater ease of isolation (or export to the West) of articulate opposition among the intelligentsia over a long period of time, and the relatively late emergence of the Protestant Churches as a focus for opposition in the late 1970s and 1980s. The character of the intellectual opposition, the words and works of the East German intelligentsia in the literary and creative arena, the roles of pastors, environmentalists, human rights activists, and others in the environs of the Protestant Churches, have long been the focus of discussion and debate, not least in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Wall and the reunification with—or takeover by—the West, which many prominent voices from within the GDR had argued against. Similarly, the character and development of the ruling communist party, and the structures of power and repression in the *Stasi*, have been the subject of intensive analysis. But the ways in which the system was carried and sustained from within, by lower-level functionaries and ordinary people, has to date received less attention than they arguably deserve. These, too, were key elements in the 'normalisation of rule' in the middle decades of the GDR's history; and the erosion of this system was a significant factor in the de-legitimisation that preceded the more dramatic events of 1989.

Overview and Preview

A journalist, researching for an article on the complex political situation in Northern Ireland, was in a pub in a war-torn area of Belfast. One of

his potential informants leaned over his pint of Guinness and suspiciously cross-examined the journalist: 'Are you a Catholic or a Protestant?' the Irishman asked. 'Neither,' replied the journalist, 'I'm an atheist'. The Irishman, not content with this answer, put a further question: 'Ah, but are you a Catholic atheist or a Protestant atheist?'

There is a similar complexity and ambiguity about commitment to the GDR, if focussed around a rather more secular political religion. Large numbers of East Germans may have refused to believe in the official gods of the SED regime, yet they were irrevocably involved in the institutions, activities, and organisations that sustained this state. Over time, these activities, and the values and attitudes that underpinned them, became 'second nature' to increasing numbers of GDR citizens, particularly those of younger generations who had never consciously experienced life under any other political or geographical boundaries. Arguably, a process of 'normalisation' set in, in which people both learnt the written and unwritten rules of the game, and operated according to the relevant norms. Those who transgressed were subjected to a wide range of penalties, from the most severe (incarceration and brutal maltreatment in a *Stasi* prison, even at times death) through to the quite informal (a friendly warning by an avuncular head teacher or police officer, ostracism by a work brigade, critical support from a neighbour or colleague). People learned to live within and generally abided by the visible and invisible boundaries of the regime; or they knew what consequences were likely to follow from any decision to transgress the boundaries. And within these boundaries, many developed ways of seeking to lead fulfilled and satisfying lives, in which they could pursue self-defined projects and personal goals. Patterns of conflict resolution became predictable, routinised.

To point to processes of normalisation in this sense is not to suggest that the GDR was a legitimate or a stable state: its very existence as a separate state was predicated on forcibly restraining the population behind a fortified border; and its economic foundations were far too fragile, the equation of mounting debt and generous social policy subsidies was entirely unrealistic, particularly in the altered international situation of the oil crises and arms race of the 1980s. People increasingly challenged and pushed the boundaries, particularly in the later 1980s once the signal had been given by the new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. For, as the official slogans in the GDR had always proclaimed, 'to learn from the Soviet Union is to learn to be victorious' (*von der Sowjetunion lernen heißt siegen lernen*). A lengthy period in which it is possible to discern processes of normalisation, if constantly contested, gave way to a period of economic decline and associated political destabilisation, opening the way for revolutionary change once the outer conditions were altered.

All of this is not to suggest that the GDR was a state that was at any time carried on a wave of popular enthusiasm, or that active commitment and popular support played a similar role in the GDR as did faith in the Führer in the Third Reich. But while the latter was at times carried on a tidal wave of popular support among significant numbers of the 'Volksgemeinschaft', levels of popular support which the GDR could never hope to achieve, the Third Reich was in essence intensely dynamic, inherently unstable, in ways in which the successor state built on its ruins in the Soviet zone was not. And the stabilisation of the GDR was built on more than merely force. We need, then, to develop more complex and nuanced ways of interpreting the relatively stable middle decades of the GDR, of understanding the changing character of East German society, and of representing the people who were formed by and lived through the distinctive socio-political structures of the 'societal state'. They did not, as some historians would have it, live constantly in a state of real or latent civil war. Nor was 1989 a simple continuation of 1953. In very large measure, 1989 was born out of a growing frustration with a system that had gone into visible economic decline in a period of heightened international instability; and 1989 was carried by those who were largely products of this system, had participated in its structures, and played a significant role in making it work. For a couple of decades, the GDR had—even while the *Stasi* was invisibly mushrooming—essentially (also) operated in large measure on a quite extended basis of 'legitimate authority' in Weber's sense: that is, authority in the sense of the willingness of functionaries to uphold the system, and the willingness of large numbers of people to obey (from whatever combination of motives), to play by the rules, whether or not they were in private agreement with these rules. What is extraordinary about the later months of 1989 is the fact that, even as the system was challenged and then crumbled, the loss of legitimacy in this purely functional sense also rendered the use of naked power impossible.

The fact that the GDR was born out of violence, was imposed by violence, yet collapsed with what has been termed the 'gentle revolution', should give us some pause for thought. So too should the high post-unification levels of 'Ostalgia' for an East Germany that had passed away: without mourning in any way the end of the SED regime, East Germans still appeared to feel some nostalgia for distinctive styles of life and patterns of social relationships. We need of course to focus on the key moments of crisis, of repression, dissent, and opposition: but this should not make us lose from sight the wide swathes of time, and the significant numbers of people who at the same time participated in and sustained the structures and processes that also made up the history of the GDR. It is to this end that the concept of normalisation may be of some use. The extent to which this concept proves fruitful in

practice, in detailed and specific areas of inquiry, can only be judged in its application.

The chapters that follow are roughly divided into two major sections. In Part One, the focus is particularly on the conditions for stabilisation and routinisation of domestic political processes, understood broadly to range from exploration of the external conditions of détente at the international level (Merrilyn Thomas), through the transformation and routinisation of economic structures and processes in industry (Jeannette Madarász) and agriculture (George Last), to contestations over popular music and sport (Daniel Wilton), culture for the masses (Esther von Richthofen), and *Heimat* activitivists (Jan Palmowski). In many of these chapters, there is a strong focus on the intermediary roles of mid-level functionaries, who may have begun by seeking to represent 'the state' to 'the people', but who often ended by speaking on behalf of their own 'constituencies'. Although contributors differ quite markedly in their willingness to deploy or critique the notion of normalisation, all of these essays serve in effect to underline the significance of the roles of functionaries in the socio-political system of the GDR in the middle decades. Whatever their separate individual motives, and varying degrees of frustration or willingness to cooperate with central authorities, intermediate functionaries played a key role in negotiating what it was or was not possible to achieve in the pursuit of meaningful lives, and in social, economic, and cultural practices, for ordinary citizens in the GDR. And there is a history to be told, which varied according to area in rhythm, pace, and trajectory, of the degrees of stabilisation of structures and routinisation of practices, which had been more or less rapidly introduced in the post-war decade and a half or so of radical transformation and '*Aufbau'*.

Part Two turns to the question of subjective perceptions and norms— whether these are evidenced by way of internalisation, outward behavioural conformity, sporadic or continual contestation. While Alf Lüdtke empha- sises the need to adopt an approach which starts from the acting individual and is sensitive to the complexity of inner perceptions, the simultaneity of apparently contradictory behaviours, and the active construction of individ- ual life projects, Ina Merkel reminds us of the transnational, pan-European character of both the challenges of different phases of 'modernisation' and of cultural transfers across the Wall. The different experiences, patterns of behaviour, and inter-relations of succeeding generations are explored by Dorothee Wierling, while Angela Brock explores the character and impact of an education system determined to produce the 'socialist personality'. Mark Allinson identifies key tensions and common themes in 1977: a year in which, at first glance, ' nothing out of the ordinary' happened; and yet in which the 'abnormalities' or less than desirable features of life in the

GDR—division, frustrations, shortages, constraints—had become entirely expected, indeed, paradoxically, a more or less 'normal' state of affairs. Finally, Mary Fulbrook discusses the results of a survey carried out in 2005, fifteen years after unification, in which East Germans reflect on their lives and experiences during, after, and in the case of older respondents, also before the existence of the GDR. These subjective perceptions serve to highlight very different patterns of experience and memory, and underline the significance of notions of regularity, predictability, and ways of coping.

Overall, the volume seeks to engage with a range of aspects of life in the middle decades of the GDR's history, using the notion of normalisation as a heuristic device in the light of which systematic comparisons can be made. It does not seek to provide any kind of comprehensive characterisation, or to impose any artificial uniformity of interpretation, but rather to raise key issues for discussion and set out lines for further inquiry, proposing a more complex approach to the parameters and processes of 'rule' within a post-crisis period.

Even within Western societies, multiple paths to such differentiation existed, and beyond the West, analysts must grapple with a wide variety of encounters between the secular and the sacred. This article was published in volume 8 of the Hedgehog Review (Spring/Summer 2006). View Publication. Download PDF. Print PDF. Facebook. Twitter. Instagram.