

Our memory repeats to us what we haven't understood. Repetition is addressed to incomprehension. — Paul Valéry, "Commentaires de Charmes"

We have come to recognize that our present will inevitably have an impact on what and how we remember. It is important to understand that process, not to regret it in the mistaken belief that some ultimately pure, complete, and transcendent memory is possible. — Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories* (1995)

History as Trauma

Sometime during the night of November 9, 1989, at a moment which cannot be pinpointed with any accuracy, the Berlin Wall collapsed, and the East German state began to wither away. Sudden and unexpected, yet steady and inexorable, this implosion was completed on October 3, 1990. Now, several years after the "event," political observers and cultural critics are discovering an unsettling phenomenon: the rise of nostalgia for the German Democratic Republic, or *Ostalgie*. Symptoms of *Ostalgie* were observed earlier among former East Germans: a longing for a system that had guaranteed a basic level of social security,¹ endless, yet understandable complaints about the radical transformation of the most mundane aspects of everyday life. But now the phenomenon has materialized in shops with names like "Back to the Future," which sell goods made exclusively in the territory of the former GDR and packaged just as they were before 1989; bestselling reprints of socialist realist classics long considered "cultural corpses" and reissued recordings by East German rock bands;² regular meetings of Trabi owners; exhibits about life in the GDR with everything from the socialist realist art of High Stalinism to the furniture in Honecker's office. These exhibitions and their representation of the GDR range from "real existing *Horrorkabinett*" to ironic display of a form of everyday life that suddenly disappeared. One recent exhibit was entitled "Rarities, Kitsch, and Curiosities from the GDR."³

According to Michael Rutschky, we are witnessing the coming-into-being of an *imaginary* GDR.⁴ What seems to be reflected in this phenomenon is the experience of a still barely known and uncertain present, of rapid, massive change in all realms of life, and of a turn toward a past whose meaning has been equally disrupted, as evinced by the title of the exhibit on GDR curiosa: "There's No Time Left to Bid Farewell." Barbara Köhler,

an East German author, has formulated this loss of the past as “the country’s contours” vanishing “in the rearview mirror”: “Before us a plain, the past, which is our past. DO YOU KNOW THE COUNTRY WHERE—where did we live. Did we live.”⁵

To understand the aftereffects of this tremendous change, and the transformation itself, it is apparently necessary to first recreate the past. History, so it seems, is once again trauma. What I mean by *history as trauma* is the need to comprehend what has happened as the result of a specific structure of experience in which an overwhelming event has not been assimilated or fully experienced at the time of its occurrence but only belatedly, as it repeatedly “possesses” those who lived through it. Trauma, as we recall, is characterized by a “delay or incompleteness in knowing.” History as trauma means that those who have lived through momentous changes “carry an impossible history within them,” a history which they cannot assimilate.⁶ It is as if an unassimilable historical moment, in this case the recent past of the GDR’s dissolution, is now approached from the vantage point of the not-so-recent past because that past, although it too has lost its contours, is still more familiar than the present.

There is an alternative reading of 1989 as an experience of “sublime enthusiasm” about a unique moment of openness—the brief moment in which the symbolic order itself collapsed. Writing in 1993 about the transformation of Eastern Europe as a whole, Slavoj Žižek observed:

The most sublime image that emerged in the political upheavals of the last years—and the term “sublime” is to be conceived here in the strictest Kantian sense—was undoubtedly the unique picture from the time of the violent overthrow of Ceausescu in Romania: the rebels waving the national flag with the red star, the Communist symbol, cut out, so that instead of the symbol standing for the organizing principle of the national life, there was nothing but a hole in its center. It is difficult to imagine a more salient index of the “open” character of a historical situation “in its becoming” . . . of that intermediate phase when the former Master-Signifier, although it has already lost the hegemonical power, has not yet been replaced by the new one. . . . [T]he masses who poured into the streets of Bucharest “experienced” the situation as “open,” . . . they participated in the unique intermediate state of passage from one discourse (social link) to another, when, for a brief, passing moment, the hole in the big Other, the symbolic order, became visible.⁷

The events of the fall of 1989, especially the mass rallies in East Germany’s major cities, certainly expressed this euphoria over the “hole” in the social-

symbolic order. But these events also constituted an experience of trauma, if we understand trauma in this sense of being overwhelmed by an event that can only be understood belatedly. Nothing conveyed this striking inability to comprehend what was happening better than the word “nonsense,” that terrifyingly meaningless utterance articulated over and over again as thousands of East Germans poured through the hastily opened breaches in the Berlin Wall during the night of November 9th.⁸

In certain respects, the historical moment of 1989 resembled the situation after 1945, when Germans experienced the utter destruction of Nazi Germany and its social disorganization as a loss of social structures and social identity: “We do not have a society anymore.”⁹ In one of the dominant genres of the immediate postwar years, journalism, this experience was captured in a series of metaphors, such as “vacuum,” “waiting room,” and “no-man’s-land.”¹⁰ But in claiming that the experience of 1989 was, like that of the end of the Third Reich, traumatic, I am not equating the GDR and Nazi Germany along the lines of the totalitarianism theories of the 1950s; neither do I want to diminish the suffering of the Nazi regime’s victims by comparing their traumatization to the decidedly less traumatic experiences of collaborators, perpetrators, and bystanders.¹¹ Rather, I am using “trauma” in its most abstract sense, without qualifying the sources, the extent, or the moral implications of the events which produce this particular effect of noncomprehension. Undoubtedly, the revelations about the criminal nature of the Nazi regime in 1945 produced a level of shock against which the post-1989 revelations pale in comparison. As Christa Wolf put it, “For me the postwar period was a shock, when I learned and had to accept as factual what *we* had done, we Germans. I was in a state of deep despair for months, even years, and I did not know how to continue living with this knowledge.”¹² Such deep feelings of horror and guilt resulting from the traumatic collapse of the symbolic system of National Socialism and the discovery of its crimes were certainly not universal but confined to a small, influential minority. For the majority of Germans, who continued to believe in an eventual victory right up to the very end of the war, the experience of a transitional moment outside of history probably had very little of the euphoria described by Žižek.

There was, however, as we have seen, a certain enthusiasm on the part of the returning members of the KPD, who quickly set out to fill—and hegemonize—the “hole” left by the disappearance of National Socialism.¹³ As in 1989, the attempt to construct a new national identity in the face of a situa-

tion that even the Communists experienced as traumatic—as the result of a defeat in the face of National Socialism—involved a turn toward the past. In this book, I have traced the enduring power of one of East Germany’s master-signifiers, the antifascist hero constructed to “fill” this “hole.” In its different incarnations—as a variation on the figure of Thälmann heroically fighting the Nazis or as Brosowski, the Communist under torture—the image of the antifascist father functioned as the most visible icon of the GDR’s legitimacy discourse of antifascism. There is no question that this was the last of the founding Communist discourses to lose its hegemonic power. Thus, for instance, in the aforementioned petition “Für unser Land” (For Our Country) signed by Wolf and other leading East German intellectuals in the fall of 1989, the GDR’s antifascist tradition was again invoked as a basis for a “socialist alternative to the Federal Republic”: “We still have time to recover the antifascist and humanist ideals from which we once started.”¹⁴ This should not be too surprising since the Federal Republic’s identity also rested on its opposition to Nazi Germany. Significantly, the continuing process of constructing German national identity after 1989 has come to rely more heavily on ceremonies to commemorate the Holocaust and on grandiose monuments to its victims.¹⁵ Yet what my study has uncovered is both the enduring power and effectivity *and* the fundamental instability of this discourse and its central image, for in the GDR’s foundational narratives, the place of the father ultimately remained empty. And the Red Flag, which in these narratives was passed from father to son/daughter and which stood metonymically for the Communist Party, proved to be a fetish, a signifier of defeat. In the second generation, the Red Flag bore the dark shadow of the swastika. The work of Wolf, the author who chose to explore this founding past through a focus on individual history, is characterized by the tensions surrounding the fantasies of purity that developed against the backdrop of this dark shadow.¹⁶ Without an approach that combined traditional strategies of ideology critique with a psychoanalytic reading of the fantasies that operate within history, it would have been impossible to uncover the instabilities and blank spots in the founding discourse of the GDR’s post-fascist hegemonic formation. And more importantly, it would have been impossible to detect the very depth of influence this founding discourse had on the post-fascist fantasies of a sizable and influential minority.

What this study of the production of ideology in the realm of literature

ultimately shows is that the notion of totalitarianism is misleading if we use it in the sense of an externally imposed system of thought beneath which we find an untouched identity ready to emerge as soon as that system collapses. The foundations of the East German socialist project had a strong moral appeal.¹⁷ But most importantly, these foundational narratives were cast in a form which bridged the histories of subject and country. Antifascism is more than a political discourse of legitimation in these narratives; it is the presence of the past in the psyche of the post-fascist subject. And the body is the object around which unconscious fantasies about the past crystallize. As Žižek's writings on the sublime Communist body demonstrate, this ideological fantasy is not limited to the GDR. Being a Communist means having a Communist body, a body which is more than a material support (or, recalling Erik Neutsch, a body which harbors the Party inside). Yet in the context of East Germany's history, this shared fantasy took on a specific form: the material part of the Communist's transcendent body was fantasized as nonsexual. The post-fascist body was based on a dichotomy involving sexuality, not on an opposition between sickness and health.

As we saw in chapter 1, the armored body of the antifascist fighter—this iconic figure incarnating the military vanguard and precariously occupying the place of the Stalinist father—was created in an effort to establish firm boundaries against feminine sexuality (representing castration, i.e., weakness). The emergence of the post-fascist body with the GDR's *Aufbau-generation* introduced that generation's own problematic: the sexual body, no longer a signifier of weakness, now signifies an "impure" past, with the dichotomy of strength versus weakness replaced by that of purity versus impurity. Modeled on the father's armored body, the nonsexual body of fantasy represents that generation's desire to break with its National Socialist past; yet it also reveals the deep fascination with the ideal of purity that characterized its Nazi upbringing. In the case of Christa Wolf, we uncovered an intricate network of fantasies woven around this notion of purity involving not only the post-fascist body but also its "pure" post-fascist voice. Enlisted as a method for reading unconscious fantasies, psychoanalysis helped to reconceptualize Wolf's notion of "authentic subjectivity." More broadly, it helped to highlight a specific level of historical continuity between the National Socialist past and the post-fascist present, a continuity on the level of the body and the fantasies formed around it. For the body is indeed more than a material support; it is the site of fantasies, of a whole

fantasmatic history that is both social and individual.¹⁸ And it is that specific power of ideology—to draw on those fantasies, to mobilize them for a political project—that was involved in the Communists' attempt to occupy the empty locus of power.

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- 79 Sayre and Löwy understand *Kassandra* as a climactic moment in Wolf's work, the result of a "whole process of maturation of the combined feminist and utopian Romantic worldview" (ibid., 125). Their assertion that it was only during the period of *Moskauer Novelle* and her contacts with the Stasi that Wolf was "still strongly swayed by an inferiority complex in relation to the anti-fascist aura of the regime's leaders" is simply wrong (ibid., 133).
- 80 Moi, "Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Politics," 936. What a psychoanalytically oriented feminism can contribute is precisely a demonstration of the ways in which feminine subjectivity resists *and* complies with the structures of the symbolic. Any denial of that complicity—of the unconscious and its fantasies—has disastrously simplifying results. On this issue, see "An Interview with Jacqueline Rose," in Jacqueline Rose, *Why War?* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 238ff.
- 81 Christa Wolf, *Kein Ort, nirgends* (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand Verlag, 1981 [1979]), 5–6.

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- 1 An extensive, well-researched literature has accumulated on the effects of Unification, especially its devastating impact on the economic conditions of women. See, for instance, Barbara Einhorn's *Cinderella Goes to Market*; and "Women in the Federal States after the *Wende*: The Impact of Unification on Women's Employment Opportunities," in *Women and the Wende: Social Effects and Cultural Reflections of the German Unification Process*, ed. Elizabeth Boa and Janet Wharton (Amsterdam and Atlanta, Ga.: Rodopi, 1994), 18–29. See also Frigga Haug, "Ökonomie der Zeit, darin löst sich schliesslich alle Ökonomie auf. Neue Herausforderungen an einen sozialistischen Feminismus," *Das Argument* 184 (1990): 879–94; and Irene Dölling, "Between Hope and Helplessness: Women in the GDR after the Turning Point," *Feminist Review* 39 (1991): 3–15.
- 2 For instance, Harry Thürk's antiwar novel *Die Stunde der toten Augen* (The Hour of the Dead Eyes) has been reissued, and the third volume of Erwin Strittmatter's *Der Wundertäter* (The Miracle Worker) trilogy, *Der Laden* (The Store), was published in 1992. On East German rock bands, see Anke Westphal, "Mein wunderbarer Plattenbau. Hoppla, wir leben noch: Ob Puhdys, Oktoberclub, Ernst Busch, Franke-Echo-Quintett oder Theo Schumann-Combo—das Ostlied wird wieder nachgefragt. Alles nur gestaut? Oder kommen jetzt die Liebhaber und Historiker?" *Die Tageszeitung*, August 25, 1995, 15–16.
- 3 *Der Spiegel* 27 (1995): 56. In 1993, plans were discussed to turn Eisenhüttenstadt (formerly, Stalinstadt) into an outdoor museum of socialism (see *Die Tageszeitung*, August 31, 1993). The Museum Berliner Arbeiterleben organized an exhibit called "Ewig blühe: Erinnerungen an die Republik der Lobetrotter" (May It Bloom Forever: Memories of the Republic of the Lobetrotter), subtitled "Requisiten aus einem Stück deutscher Geschichte zwischen 1946 und 1989" (Props

- from a Play on German History between 1946 and 1989); see *Kurzwort: Ewig blühe: Erinnerungen an die Republik der Lobetrotter*, ed. Tobias Böhm (Berlin: Westermann-Kommunikation, 1992). In 1995, the same museum mounted an exhibit of *Brigadetagebücher* (brigade diaries).
- 4 Rutschky sees this “new” GDR identity as emerging from a specific “community of experience and narrating.” This was impossible before 1989: “In the GDR, culture in this specific sense could not arise; for this to happen, free exchange and communication are needed”; Michael Rutschky, “Wie erst jetzt die DDR entsteht,” *Merkur* 9/10 (Sept./Oct. 1995): 858, 856.
 - 5 Barbara Köhler, “A la recherche de la révolution perdue,” *German Monitor*, No. 31 (1994): 2. This is an allusion to a question which a former concentration camp inmate asks the narrator’s mother at the end of the war in Christa Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster/Patterns of Childhood*: “Where on earth have you all been living?” (431/332). It is also an allusion to Brecht’s poem about socialism’s “Mühen der Ebenen,” that is, the effort required once the basic structures of socialism are in place (see *Die Gedichte von Bertolt Brecht*, 960).
 - 6 Caruth, “Introduction,” in *Trauma*, 5. I am well aware of the problems inherent to using categories developed in the context of the Holocaust and its survivors for a description of German events.
 - 7 Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 1.
 - 8 Ina Merkel describes a more specific shock: the assault of images celebrating the Western world of commodities—and its femininity. For this “campaign of images, symbols, and fetishes of consumption ready to take a damaged worldview by storm” also introduced a new image of woman which appealed to East German women to change, to become “real women” (. . . *und Du, Frau an der Werkbank*, 7).
 - 9 Quoted in Klaus Scherpe, “Erzwungener Alltag: Wahrgenommene und gedachte Wirklichkeit in der Reportageliteratur der Nachkriegszeit,” in *Nachkriegsliteratur in Westdeutschland 1945–49*, ed. Jost Hermand, Helmut Peitsch, and Klaus Scherpe (Berlin: Argument Verlag, 1982), 45. As Scherpe points out, this statement also resonates with the shock of the loss of authority after the defeat of Nazism.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, 45. Scherpe talks about two “nodal points of the formation of ideology”: on the one hand, a “do-it-yourself mentality” and, on the other, a sense of the postwar life-world “as lacking both a social order and classes” (47). The frequently used trope of Robinson Crusoe and the quaint but racist designation of the occupied zones as *Trizonesien* were part of this ideological formation.
 - 11 Most importantly, the GDR was not characterized by a resolution of social conflict through war, sustained government racial persecution, or mass murder. Although I would not compare the depth and extent of the trauma experienced by National Socialism’s victims with that of its perpetrators or even its bystanders, the structure of trauma as the inability to understand what was happening nevertheless applies to such non-victims as well.

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- 12 Wolf then recalled that she went through an intense religious phase (“Auf mir bestehen,” 243–44).
- 13 An enthusiasm quickly tempered by the realization of the extent of destruction to both the country and its people. Anna Seghers’s statement that the destruction inside of people’s heads was much greater than the destruction of Germany’s cities is typical in this respect; see Anna Seghers, “Neue literarisch-künstlerische Probleme. Rede auf dem II. Deutschen Schriftstellerkongress 1950,” in *Die Macht der Worte: Reden–Schriften–Briefe* (Leipzig and Weimar: Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1979), 221. This is testimony to the isolation of exiles from events inside of Germany; nor was there much enthusiasm at first on the part of political prisoners liberated from the concentration camps.
- 14 Wolf, “Für unser Land,” in *Im Dialog*, 170.
- 15 On the emerging memorial landscape of Berlin, see Caroline Wiedmer’s excellent article “Designing Memories,” in *Fascism and Its Ghosts*, a special issue of *Alphabet City* 4/5 (December 1995): 6–22.
- 16 Two years before the publication of *Kassandra*, the last volume of another historical epic appeared, Peter Weiss’s *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (The Aesthetics of Resistance) (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986 [1975–81]). Written outside of East Germany, this monumental novel provided an incisive radical critique of Stalinist antifascism. Its writing forced its author (very much against his own inclinations, I believe) into a radical gesture, namely, to leave the place of power empty, refusing to (re-)construct yet another mythical figure of the heroic fighter. I am referring to the celebrated final paragraph of Weiss’s novel, the moment when its protagonist imagines returning to the Pergamon altar in Berlin sometime after 1945, at the end of his engagement with Europe’s antifascist movement. Standing in his imagination before the relief, the narrator again reads the altar as an allegory of class struggle, but this time with respect to the period after 1945 rather than with respect to 1937. He would, he imagines, reencounter his parents. He also hallucinates the presence of his friends Coppi and Heilmann, who were executed for their participation in the clandestine anti-Nazi activities of the Rote Kapelle. As his gaze runs over the freeze, it comes to a stop at the lion’s paw. Where the image of Heracles (who in this novel comes to represent the party of the oppressed, their “leader”) should appear, he now sees an empty spot (3: 267–68). In Weiss’s novel, the structure of the proletarian family narrative plays an important organizing role. It is one of the elements through which the novel is linked to the GDR’s antifascist discourse. On this topic, see my “Rosa oder die Sehnsucht nach einer Geschichte ohne Stalin: Zur vergeschlechtlichten Textproduktion in Peter Weiss’ *Ästhetik des Widerstands*,” *Peter Weiss Jahrbuch* (forthcoming).
- 17 This appeal was indeed partly justified by the Communists’ resistance under the Nazis—but only partly because the Communists did not play the leading role that the SED later claimed and because the Stalinist character of this resistance makes it a deeply problematic legacy. This legacy is still operative, rendering neofascism a most opaque and complex phenomenon. An interview with

a former model GDR schoolgirl-turned-neo-Nazi demonstrates with startling clarity that beneath her neofascist identity lies an identification with the FDJ (Free German Youth) as a military vanguard in the style of the old KPD: "Our flag," Hanna says, "was always red"; see Robin Ostow, "'Ne Art Bürgerwehr in Form von Skins': Young Germans on the Streets in the Eastern and Western States of the Federal Republic," *New German Critique* 64 (Winter 1995): 94–96. All of Hanna's neo-Nazi friends are former FDJ members. The right-wing rock group Radikahl calls on its listeners to "raise the red flag with the swastika"; quoted in George Steinmetz, "Fordism and the (Im)moral Economy of Right-Wing Violence in Contemporary Germany," *Research on Democracy and Society* 2 (1994): 305, 304.

- 18 In many interviews conducted after 1989, East Germans have thematized sexuality in specific ways: in comparing their own supposed prudishness and backwardness to the sophistication of their Western counterparts, for example, they reproduce the dominant dichotomy of premodernity/modernity on the level of their bodies (see, e.g., *Ohne uns ist kein Staat zu machen: DDR-Frauen nach der Wende* [Cologne: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1990], 37).