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The *Preußenrenaissance* Revisited: German-German Entanglements, the Media and the Politics of History in the late German Democratic Republic*

André Keil

I. Introduction

As a significant body of scholarship has convincingly demonstrated, conceptions of history and public representations of collective identity were closely entangled phenomena in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from its very foundation.¹ The notion of an independent East German nation, concepts of socialist statehood and ideas about citizenship were negotiated with reference to historical narratives that were based on often mythical conceptions of the past.² The GDR's politics of history (*Geschichtspolitik*) involved a constant reworking of these myths according to their perceived utility for the creation of political legitimacy.³ The particularities of this process

* I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers and the editors for their very insightful comments and suggestions that helped to improve this piece. Furthermore, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Daniel Laqua (Northumbria University) for his helpful advice and comments.

¹ I. Kowalczyk, *Legitimation eines neuen Staates: Parteiarbeiter an der historischen Front. Geschichtswissenschaft in der SBZ/DDR 1945-1961* (Berlin, 1997), pp. 37-47; Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteienherrschaft: Zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR* (Frankfurt/Main, 1993), pp. 22-24; See also for a more comprehensive account of the early GDR: G. Prichard, *The Making of the GDR, 1945-1953* (Manchester, 2004); D. Orlow, 'The GDR's Failed Search for a National Identity, 1945-1989', *German Studies Review*, 29, 3 (2006), pp. 537-558; M. Myers Feinstein, *State Symbols: The Quest for Legitimacy in the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, 1949-1959* (Boston and Leiden, 2001); B. Giesen, *Intellectuals and the German Nation: Collective Identity in a German Axial Age* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 142-164; J. Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945-1990* (Cambridge, 2009); G. Knischewski, 'Post-War National Identity in Germany' in B. Jenkins and S. A. Sofos (eds), *Nation and Identity in Contemporary Europe* (Abingdon, 1996), pp. 118-144. For a discussion of the *longue durée* of the relationship between historiography and the construction of national identities in Germany, see S. Berger, *The Search for Normality: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Germany since 1800* (New York and Oxford, 2003), esp. pp. 21-110.

² R. Zimmering, *Mythen in der Politik der DDR. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung politischer Mythen* (Leverkusen, 2000); A. Nothnagle, 'From Buchenwald to Bismarck: Historical Myth-Building in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989', *Central European History*, 26, 1 (1993), pp. 91-113; idem, *Building the East German Myth: Historical Mythology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1999).

³ M. Fulbrook, 'DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft und Geschichtspolitik', in G. Iggers et al. (eds), *Die DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft als Forschungsproblem*, *Historische Zeitschrift Beihefte* 27 (Munich, 1997), pp. 419-429; M. Sabrow (ed.), *Verwaltete Vergangenheit: Geschichtskultur und Herrschaftslegitimation in der DDR* (Leipzig, 1997).

reveal how ambiguous and contradictory the construction of historical collective identities can be.

The leadership of the ruling Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED) was under constant pressure to legitimize its regime and put significant efforts into propaganda campaigns that sought to enhance public acceptance.⁴ The negotiation of rupture and continuity was a constant feature of the official historical discourse, which emphasized the unique character of the GDR as the sole state that was both truly German and socialist.⁵ This phenomenon was clearly illustrated by the representations of Prussian history in the GDR. Throughout its existence, Prussia was used as a reference point – both positive and negative – for the politics of identity of the East German state.

During the early years, until approximately 1953, the idea of antifascist reconstruction – that is to say, a complete break with the fateful Prussian past and the building of a socialist ‘New Germany’ – dominated the propaganda of the SED and its affiliated organizations.⁶ Immediately after the Second World War, intellectuals such as the formerly exiled communist and later GDR Minister of Culture, Alexander Abusch, but also liberal historians such as the West German Friedrich Meinecke, drew a direct line from the authoritarianism and militarism that seemed to have run like a common thread through Prussian history to the German catastrophe of fascism and total defeat.⁷ This view was epitomized by the land reform campaigns of 1945 and 1948, which primarily targeted the East Elbian large landowners. With anti-Prussian slogans such as ‘Junker’s land in peasants’ hands’ (*Junkerland in Bauernhand*), the SED promoted and carried out the redistribution of land as a means of disempowering the *Junker* class, which

⁴ Kowalczyk, *Legitimation eines neuen Staates*, pp. 24-30; M. Allinson, *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany, 1945-68* (Manchester, 2000), esp. pp. 12-66.

⁵ On changing conceptions of the German nation and German nationality in the GDR, see M. Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 130-134 and 189-191; see also M. Lemke, ‘Nationalismus und Patriotismus in den frühen Jahren der DDR’, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 50 (2000), pp. 11-19.

⁶ J. Danyel, ‘Die Opfer- und Verfolgtenperspektive als Gründungskonsens? Zum Umgang mit der Widerstandstradition und Schuldfrage in der DDR’, in *ibid.* (ed.), *Die geteilte Vergangenheit. Zum Umgang mit Nationalsozialismus und Widerstand in beiden deutschen Staaten* (Berlin, 1995), pp. 31-46; A. Leo and P. Reif-Spiek (eds), *Helden, Täter und Verräter: Studien zum DDR-Antifaschismus* (Berlin, 1999); M. Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, CT, 2005), pp. 21-48.

⁷ A. Abusch, *Der Irrweg einer Nation. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis deutscher Geschichte* (Berlin, 1946); F. Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe. Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* (Wiesbaden, 1946). See also E. Wolfrum, *Geschichte als Waffe: Vom Kaiserreich bis zur Wiedervereinigung* (Göttingen, 2001), pp. 62-69.

they saw as the embodiment of Prussianism, militarism and fascism.⁸ This condemnation of Prussia was also enshrined in the Allied Control Council Law No. 46, which stated that it had been ‘from its early days [...] a bearer of militarism and reaction in Germany’.⁹

Later, the most apparent symbols of Prussian history and dominance, including the Berlin city castle and the equestrian statue of Frederick II on the boulevard *Unter den Linden* in Berlin, were either destroyed or removed from the architectural heart of the now socialist capital. Another manifestation of this apparent break with the Prussian past was the re-opening of the *Neue Wache* building in the city centre of Berlin and its explicit re-dedication as a memorial for the ‘victims of fascism and militarism’ in 1960. The policy of the symbolic destruction of the reactionary Prussian past continued until 1968 when the Garrison Church (*Garnisonkirche*) in Potsdam was demolished. These measures were supposed to demonstrate that the socialist leadership was serious about their proclaimed break with the Prussian past. According to its self-conception, the new socialist German state was the antithesis to Prussia and all that it stood for. This early version of the official GDR identity combined a rejection of Prussian with an affirmation of progressive traditions in German history such as the revolution of 1848, the history of the German labour movement and the antifascist resistance against Hitler, particularly emphasizing the communist sacrifices.

Against this backdrop, observers reacted with astonishment when, in the late 1970s, Prussia re-emerged as a key historical reference point for the GDR.¹⁰ Contemporaries in the West characterized this phenomenon as a veritable ‘Prussia Renaissance’ (*Preußenrenaissance*), which had started around 1979. Although the equation of the GDR with Prussia was not entirely new in western discourse, it now became a commonplace to refer to it as the ‘Red Prussia’.¹¹ Historians have recognized

⁸ A. Bauerkämper, ‘Die Bodenreform in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone in vergleichender und beziehungs geschichtlicher Perspektive: Einleitung, in Idem (ed.), *Junkerland in Bauernhand? Durchführung, Auswirkungen und Stellenwert der Bodenreform in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone* (Stuttgart, 1996), pp. 7-20; H. Reif, ‘Die Junker’, in E. Francois and H. Schulze (eds), *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte, Vol. 1* (Munich, 2001), pp. 520-535.

⁹ ‘Allied Control Council Law No. 46’, quoted in E. R. Huber (ed.), *Quellen zum Staatsrecht der Neuzeit. Vol. 2: Deutsche Verfassungsdokumente der Gegenwart 1919-1951* (Tübingen, 1951), p. 648.

¹⁰ For examples from English-speaking newspapers, see E. Lentz, ‘Interest in Prussia Reviving’, *The New York Times* (18 December 1978); B. Graham, ‘East and West Recall Discipline, Liberty of Prussia’, *The Washington Post* (2 November 1981); P. Clough, ‘The Prussian Revolution on both Sides of the Wall’, *The Times* (15 August 1981), p. 10.

¹¹ A 1977 book by *The Guardian*’s GDR correspondent Jonathan Steele offers an excellent example. Its cover image features a Prussian-style spiked helmet decorated with hammer and sickle: J. Steele, *Socialism with a German Face: The State that Came from the Cold* (London,

the significance of this shift and interpreted it as a move towards more conservative notions of national history and identity.¹² Yet, they have primarily discussed the involvement of academic historians in creating and disseminating the new image of the Prussian past.¹³ In contrast, the promotion of this new ideological course through the mass media and the responses by the East German population remain understudied.

This article critically examines the *Preußenrenaissance* whilst demonstrating how this shift was negotiated within the SED and intellectual circles. In addition, it explores an underestimated aspect of this ‘Prussian turn’ in GDR historiography, namely its entanglement with similar developments in West Germany. Indeed, the re-emergence of Prussianism in the GDR of the 1980s cannot be solely understood as a top-down process: it was a complex phenomenon in which many self-willed actors became involved. A consideration of the productions of the East German state television *Fernsehen der DDR* (GDR TV) and their viewers’ reactions sheds light on this chequered process. As a whole, an examination of the discourse about Prussia reveals the inner dynamics and contradictions of the GDR’s politics of history during the last decade or so of the regime’s existence.

II. Economic stagnation, political crisis and the rise of ‘tradition and heritage’ as contexts for the *Preußenrenaissance*

The re-emergence of Prussia as a part of the GDR’s official conception of history was connected to broader changes in the official politics of collective identity during the 1970s. Conventionally, this has been associated with a new discourse on tradition and heritage (*Tradition und Erbe*).¹⁴ Within this ‘tradition and heritage’ paradigm, the GDR

1977). In West Germany, the right-of-centre author Wolfgang Venohr promoted the view of the GDR as the ‘Red Prussia’. See for example W. Venohr, ‘Die roten Preußen der Volksarmee’, *Die Zeit* (15 March 1963), p. 4; Idem, *Die roten Preußen: Vom wundersamen Aufstieg der DDR in Deutschland* (Erlangen, 1989).

¹² H. Schultz, ‘Die DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft in der Mitte der siebziger Jahre: Paradigmenwechsel oder konservative Wende?’, in G. Iggers et al. (eds), *Die DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft als Forschungsproblem*, pp. 227-240.

¹³ J. H. Brinks, *Die DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft auf dem Weg zur deutschen Einheit: Luther, Friedrich II und Bismarck als Paradigmen politischen Wandels* (New York, 1992); H. A. Krauß and D. Stievermann, *Die Rolle Preußens in der DDR-Historiographie. Zur Thematisierung und Interpretation der preußischen Geschichte durch die ostdeutsche Geschichtswissenschaft* (Frankfurt/Main, 1992).

¹⁴ M. Ackermann, ‘Phasen und Zäsuren im Erbeverständnis der DDR’, in: Deutscher Bundestag (ed.), *Materialien der Enquetekommission ‘Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland’*, vol 3/2 (Baden Baden, 1995), pp. 768–795;

emphasized its role as the custodian of the entire heritage of the German people, having already claimed many of its progressive traditions.¹⁵ The adaption of *Tradition und Erbe* ostensibly allowed the integration of large parts of German national history, which had hitherto been seen as reactionary, into the concept of East German socialist identity.¹⁶ However, maintaining a notion of distinct working-class traditions also facilitated an image of the past in which the GDR remained a ‘workers’ and peasants’ state’, rooted in the history of class struggle. This also implied an increased emphasis on aspects of German history that had hitherto been neglected by historians in the GDR. The re-classification of large swathes of German national history as legitimate historical ‘heritage’ thus allowed them to engage with topics outside the established Marxist-Leninist approach to the past. As a result of this new conception of history, nationhood as a category increasingly superseded class as the main theme of historiography in the GDR. The *Preußenrenaissance* exemplified this fundamental re-interpretation of German history within the new theoretical framework of *Tradition und Erbe*. Prussia was transformed from an initially negative reference point into, firstly, an accepted part of the historical heritage, and then into a positively connoted tradition.

The rise of the *Tradition und Erbe* conception of national history needs to be understood as a historical-political reaction to the GDR’s looming economic and societal crisis in the late 1970s.¹⁷ After a period of relative stability in the 1960s and early 1970s, increasing economic problems and the emergence of oppositional groups posed a significant challenge to authority of the SED regime.¹⁸ As Sigrid Meuschel has shown,

H. Meier and W. Schmidt (eds), *Erbe und Tradition in der DDR: Die Debatte der Historiker* (Berlin, 1988).

¹⁵ H. Bartel, ‘Historisches Erbe und Tradition’, *Einheit*, 3 (1981), pp. 272-278.

¹⁶ Regarding the ‘two-strands’ paradigm of history in the GDR, see Brinks, *DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft*, pp. 91-185; Kowalczyk, *Legitimation eines neuen Staates*, pp. 319–341.

¹⁷ M. Allinson, ‘More from Less: Ideological Gambling with the Unity of Economic and Social Policy in Honecker’s GDR’, *Central European History*, 45, 1 (2012), pp. 102-127; For a comprehensive economic history of the GDR see J. Kopstein, *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany 1945-1989* (Chapel Hill and London, 1997), esp. pp. 173-194; H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte 1949-1990: Bundesrepublik Deutschland und DDR* (Munich, 2008), pp. 98-107; C. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), pp. 59-72.

¹⁸ The fragile stability in the GDR that emerged after the construction of the Berlin Wall (1961) and particularly after the change of power from SED general secretary Walter Ulbricht to his disciple Erich Honecker (1971) has been widely discussed in the literature. The scholarly interpretations range from seeing this stability as the result of an ‘inner emigration’ to understanding it as a general ‘normalization of rule’. See, for example, M. Fulbrook (ed.), *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979. The ‘Normalisation of Rule’?* (New York, 2009).

these developments triggered a significant loss of utopian ideals (*Utopieverlust*) amongst broad swathes of the East German population, causing a crisis of legitimacy for the SED.¹⁹ By the end of the 1970s, the old hegemonic narratives of social progress and socialism that had dominated the earlier period of stability appeared to contradict the obvious social reality of many East Germans. Furthermore, from 1980–1 onwards, the escalating political tensions in Poland created anxieties amongst the ruling elites about the possibility of similar developments in the GDR.²⁰ It was therefore no coincidence that, in the face of stagnation and eventual crisis, a different official version of collective identity came to the fore. Germanness and nationalism now became dominant features of the popular representation of the official collective identity of the GDR.

Within this context, the reference to Prussia had two major dimensions: on the one hand, the GDR was in most parts situated on the former core territories of the Prussian state, and it was thus possible to integrate aspects of Prussian history into the now spatially defined identity of the GDR.²¹ On the other hand, the symbolic integration of Prussia into the historical canon underpinned a growing emphasis on discipline, stability and loyalty in the GDR propaganda of the 1980s. This development was illustrated by the newly found appreciation for Prussia's efficient bureaucracy and the stereotypical 'Prussian virtues'.²²

A consideration of the *Preußenrenaissance*'s main actors reveals another aspect of this ideological volte-face, however. Many of artists, journalists and academics who were involved in this process belonged to the age cohort born between the years 1928 and 1930. Mary Fulbrook has described the '1929er' generation – which had primarily been socialized during the Third Reich and the heyday of Stalinism in the GDR – as the 'loyal

¹⁹ S. Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft. Zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR* (Frankfurt/Main, 1993), pp. 227 ff; see also Maier, *Dissolution*, pp. 3-58.

²⁰ B. Olschowsky, 'Polen und die DDR in den achtziger Jahren', in H. Timmermann (ed.), *Die DDR in Europa – zwischen Isolation und Öffnung* (Münster, 2005), pp. 47-56; E. Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR 1949-1989* (Berlin, 1998), pp. 384-388.

²¹ K. Blaschke, 'Die "marxistische" Regionalgeschichte. Ideologischer Zwang und Wirklichkeitsferne', in Iggers et al., *DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft als Forschungsproblem*, pp. 341-368;

²² For a contemporary discussion of the significance and 'symbolic order' of Prussian history, see H. Pross, 'Signale der Gewalt: Anmerkungen zum Preußenjahr', *Die Zeit* (26 June 1981), p. 40.

carriers, critical supporters, and practical sustainers of the GDR regime'.²³ Their allegiance, however, was often more dedicated to the GDR as the state that had offered them career opportunities and upward mobility, rather than to socialism as a progressive ideology.²⁴ Moreover, their experiences made them more available for cultural mobilization than members of other age cohorts.²⁵ It appears that many GDR citizens of this generation were better equipped to reconcile the ideological contradictions between the ideals of socialism and Prussianism than those belonging to other age cohorts. Their socialization as well as their roles in GDR society meant that stability and the maintenance of the status quo were in their interest. The now positively framed image of Prussia offered a model for identification with the state in the face of the apparent final crisis of the GDR. Yet, this specific generational aspect also explains why the appeal of this pattern of legitimization was mostly limited to one generation and why it failed to integrate other parts of the GDR society.

III. An entangled history: debates about Prussia in East and West Germany in the late 1970s and early 1980s

The re-emergence of Prussianism in the GDR included an entangled German-German dimension that also tends to be overlooked. A consideration of the interplay between the politics of history in East and West Germany opens up interesting perspectives: even though the official revision of the image of Prussia derived from the GDR's changing politics of collective identity, the actual trigger for the media campaign came, somewhat counter-intuitively, from West Germany.

In June 1977 – and hence at the same time as the GDR's debates on tradition and heritage – the mayor of West Berlin, Dietrich Stobbe, proposed a major exhibition on Prussian history in the then empty building of the Reichstag.²⁶ Stobbe argued that the highly successful Stauffer exhibition, hosted by the Württemberg State Museum in Stuttgart the same year, had demonstrated the Germans' wish to know more about their pre-1933 history and that it was necessary to recognize Prussia as a part of this history.

²³ M. Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence Through the German Dictatorships* (Oxford, 2011), p. 251.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

²⁶ 'Stobbe will Preußisches im Reichstag sehen', *Die Welt* (29 June 1977).

Aleida Assmann has emphasized the significance of the Stauffer exhibition as a turning point in the politics of history in West Germany.²⁷ With over 671,000 visitors, it was one of the largest cultural events in the FRG during the 1970s. The exhibition was a cornerstone in the celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the unification of Baden and Württemberg. As such, it was supposed to contribute to the collective identity of the state.²⁸ Yet, the Stauffer exhibition also provided an attractive model for other federal states: in 1980, for example, an exhibition about the Bavarian Wittelsbach dynasty was opened in Munich, attracting significant interest.²⁹ The proposed Prussia exhibition in Berlin followed this model of the historical *Landesausstellungen* (state exhibitions), and Stobbe certainly saw it as a chance to promote a sense of regional identity in West Berlin. The fact, however, that the former Prussian state had covered the best part of what was now the GDR also indicates a more subtle attempt to emphasise the unity of the German nation. This had a particular significance at a time when the GDR still sought to dissociate itself from the idea of a German past shared with the West. Stobbe's initiative therefore challenged the GDR's claim to solely represent the whole of German history in the context of its new *Tradition und Erbe* paradigm.

The official occasion for Stobbe's plans was the celebration of the 200th birthday of Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841), who had been responsible for some of Berlin's most iconic buildings. The connection between Prussia's architectural genius and Berlin's famous historic sites was supposed to provide the background for the planned exhibition. Eventually, the downright flood of publications, TV broadcasts and events in connection with the Prussia exhibition in Berlin made 1981 an almost semi-official 'Prussia Year' in West Berlin.³⁰ Yet, the Prussia presented in 1981 was mainly that of the classic 'Frederician' era of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The more problematic aspects of Prussia's history – for instance the violent suppression of the 1848 revolution and the repression of the Social Democracy under the Socialist Laws – were not denied

²⁷ A. Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis: Von der individuellen Erfahrung zur öffentlichen Inszenierung* (Munich, 2007), pp. 137-141; Idem, 'Die Konstruktion von Geschichte im Museum', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 49 (2007), pp. 6-13.

²⁸ For a comprehensive discussion of the Stauffer-exhibition in Stuttgart 1977, see M. Große Burlage, *Große historische Ausstellungen in der Bundesrepublik 1960-2000* (Münster, 2005), pp. 21-91.

²⁹ Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis*, pp. 138-139.

³⁰ K.-H. Janßen, 'Vorbild, Mythos, Prägestock', *Die Zeit* (10 April 1981), p. 89; see also G. D. Rosenfeld, 'A Mastered Past? Prussia in Postwar German Memory', *German History*, 22, 4 (2004), pp. 505-535, esp. pp. 505-516.

but clearly far removed from the spotlight.³¹ This selective perception of the Prussian past set the tone for the subsequent debates in East and West. Yet, it should be noted that during the 1970s, a debate about history and national identity had also taken place in West Germany. The West German shift towards Prussia can be understood as a conservative response to the search for the allegedly ‘lost identity’ of the FRG, which had ensued since the mid-1970s.³² It is therefore not surprising that Stobbe’s idea received an overwhelmingly positive feedback.³³ The then chairman of the Christian Democrats (CDU) and later chancellor Helmut Kohl welcomed the proposal publicly, as did the leaders of the Christian Social Union (CSU), Franz-Josef Strauß, and the Social Democrats (SPD), Willy Brandt.³⁴ The overwhelmingly positive response to Stobbe’s idea from all political sides triggered a wave of newspaper articles about Prussia’s significance for the national identity of the West German state.

The only fundamental critique of Stobbe’s proposal came initially from the Berlin SPD newspaper *Berliner Stimme*. In this periodical, Brigitte Seebacher, later the wife of Willy Brandt, warned that a one-sided appraisal of Prussian history would neglect the harsh repression of socialism and democracy that had occurred in the name of Prussian virtues and reasons of state.³⁵ Her comments reflected the traditionally negative image of Prussia among the German left. However, responding in the nation-wide SPD newspaper *Vorwärts* shortly afterwards, the political commentator Peter Bender argued that the leftist aversion to Prussia needed to be overcome.³⁶ He described the anti-Prussian reflex of the German left as understandable, given the shock of 1945, but stressed that a more differentiated view of Prussia was needed. He continued by stating that ‘Prussia is too

³¹ Idem, ‘Weder Tempel noch Gerichtssaal. Die Ausstellung im Gropius-Bau als moralische Aufrüstung Berlins’, *Die Zeit* (2 January 1981), p. 3.

³² E. Wolfrum, ‘Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1949-1989: Phasen und Kontroversen’, in Idem and P. Bock (eds), *Umkämpfte Vergangenheit: Geschichtsbilder, Erinnerung und Vergangenheitspolitik im internationalen Vergleich* (Göttingen, 1999), pp. 55-81, esp. pp. 65-76. For a contemporary discussion of the Prussia discourse in West Germany see H.-U. Wehler, *Preußen ist wieder chic... Politik und Polemik in zwanzig Essays* (Frankfurt/Main, 1983).

³³ See e.g. a commentary by the *Bild* newspaper’s then editor-in-chief: H. Kremp, ‘Preuße sein ist besser’, *Bild am Sonntag* (10 July 1977).

³⁴ ‘Die “Preußen”-Schau in Berlin findet Fürsprecher’, *Die Welt* (29 June 1977).

³⁵ B. Seebacher, ‘Die Preußen sind längst da’, *Berliner Stimme* (30 July 1977).

³⁶ P. Bender, ‘Nur Schwarzes aus Preußen?’, *Vorwärts* (11 August 1977) [translation by the author]; Peter Bender (1923-2008), classicist, historian and political commentator, belonged to the circle of political advisors of the Brandt administration that paved the way for the *Ostpolitik* the early 1970s.

important to be left to the Springer press and the SED. One does not need to be right-wing in the sense of being authoritarian to respect the Prussian virtues, or even more, to feel bound to them.³⁷ Shortly later, a similar line of argument would also be used by the SED to justify its ideological volte-face towards Prussia.

The discourse about Prussian history, which ensued in the wake of the ‘Prussia Year 1981’, highlights how significant the topic had become in West Germany. Eminent historians such as Reinhard Koselleck, Wolfgang Mommsen, Theodor Schieder, Karl-Dietrich Erdmann and Hagen Schulze contributed to this debate.³⁸ Edgar Wolfrum has noted two major reasons for this heightened interest in Prussian history in the West: the first, more inward-looking aspect reflected the renewed debates about the historical identity of the FRG after the crisis of the ‘German Autumn’ in 1977. In this context, the debate about Prussia can also be understood as a symbolic struggle for the character of the West German state. Whereas West Germany’s public history discourse in the late 1960s had emphasized the libertarian and democratic traditions in Germany’s past, a sense of crisis raised the appeal of conservative notions of national history. The Western discourse about Prussian history thus preceded chancellor Helmut Kohl’s proclaimed ‘spiritual and moral turn’ (*geistig-moralische Wende*) in the 1980s.³⁹ Secondly, the engagement with the Prussian past in the West also highlights the increased attempts to find a common historical ground with the almost simultaneous developments in the GDR.⁴⁰

Yet, the West German resurrection of Prussia was initially eyed critically in the East. In a broadcast on the GDR’s international station *Stimme der DDR* in May 1978, historian Siegfried Thomas condemned the West German excitement about Prussia as an attempt to rehabilitate reactionary Prussianism in order to reintroduce Prussian virtues

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ It is noteworthy that the main platform of this academic debate was the journal *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* (GWU), whose main audience were history teachers. See for example K. D. Erdmann, ‘Preußen – von der Bundesrepublik Deutschland her gesehen’, *GWU*, 31, 6 (1980), pp. 335-353; H. Schulze, ‘Preußen: Bilanz eines Versuchs’, *GWU*, 32, 11 (1981), pp. 649-663; R. Koselleck, ‘Lernen aus der Geschichte Preußens?’, *GWU*, 35, 12 (1984), pp. 822-836.

³⁹ See, inter alia, R. Seuthe, *Geistig-Moralische Wende? Der politische Umgang mit der NS-Vergangenheit in der Ära Kohl am Beispiel von Gedenktagen, Museums- und Denkmalprojekten* (Frankfurt/Main, 2001).

⁴⁰ E. Wolfrum, ‘Die Preußen-Renaissance: Geschichtspolitik im deutsch-deutschen Konflikt’, in M. Sabrow (ed.), *Verwaltete Vergangenheit: Geschichtskultur und Herrschaftslegitimation in der DDR* (Leipzig, 1997), pp. 145-166, esp. pp. 155-159.

such as the alleged ‘absolute discipline, subordination under the state, absolute performance of duty, subservient spirit’.⁴¹ This opinion reflected the negative official image of Prussia that predominated in the GDR until 1979. Here, the originally pejoratively intended terms *Preußenrenaissance* and ‘Prussia Wave’ (*Preußenwelle*) were used by GDR commentators as polemical references to describe the West German developments. It is nonetheless remarkable how quick this position changed. From late 1978, the official image of Prussia in the GDR was systematically revised and modified – firstly in official SED publications and academic journals and later in the state-controlled mass media. Historians were crucial to this process. They did not invent a completely new conception of Prussian history. What was new, however, was the heightened attention paid by the state media to the subject previously contained within academia.

A first sign of this shift was an article by historian Ingrid Mittenzwei in the Free German Youth’s (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*) main journal *Forum*, entitled ‘The Two Faces of Prussia’ (‘Die zwei Gesichter Preußens’) published in September 1978.⁴² Mittenzwei argued that it would be wrong for German socialists ‘to look for ruling classes only on the other side of the barricade’. The progressive periods in Prussia’s history had to be seen as integral parts of the GDR’s historical heritage. Certainly, so Mittenzwei argued, socialist forefathers such as Marx, Engels, Karl Liebknecht and Franz Mehring had been forced to combat their contemporary Prussia as an existing political enemy. But now, under the circumstances of the established socialism in the GDR, the time was ripe to recognise the progressive aspects of Prussian history too. The article read like a copy of Peter Bender’s earlier essay in the *Vorwärts*. Mittenzwei clearly signalled that the traditional theory of two disparate streams of development in German history – one progressive, the other reactionary – should be replaced by a more inclusive approach.

The GDR’s turn towards Prussia was intensively scrutinized in the West, mirroring the previous attacks from the East regarding the proposed Prussia exhibition in Berlin. Whilst some conservative commentators saw it as a chance to revive the sense of

⁴¹ ‘Stimme der DDR, ‘Zyklus “Preußen – Personen, Prinzipien, Legenden“’, Bd. 31, 00.00; Protokoll des Mitschnitts, in Presse- und Informationsamt des Landes Berlin (ed.): *Berlin 1981*, vol. I (Berlin, 1981).

⁴² I. Mittenzwei, ‘Die zwei Gesichter Preußens’, *Forum*, 19 (1978), pp. 8-9.

a shared common history and nationhood, others were more critical.⁴³ The church newspaper *Sonntagsblatt* for example asked whether the re-emergence of Prussianism in the GDR was a mere coincidence at a time when the state was increasingly embarrassed by its citizens' calls for more freedom. It also posed the question whether references to the Prussian virtues of obedience and subordination were attempts to silence these demands.⁴⁴ Another Christian newspaper was convinced that the East's reappraisal of Prussian virtues was nothing less than an attempt to justify austerity in a period of economic crisis.⁴⁵ The attacks of these Christian newspapers were certainly influenced by the growing tensions between oppositional church groups and the GDR since the mid-1970s.⁴⁶ Yet, these comments were largely representative of the critical views of the developments in the GDR in the West.

These comments reveal the changing East and West German roles within the emerging public discourse about Prussia. When the Prussia exhibition eventually opened in West Berlin in 1981 — not in the Reichstag but in the Martin-Gropius-Bau — the central executive committee of the SED (*Zentralkomitee*) was clearly interested. Repeatedly, otherwise rare permissions for visits in West Berlin were issued to high-ranking members of the Institute of History of the Academy of Social Sciences (*Akademie für Gesellschaftswissenschaften*) and employees of the *Zentralkomitee*, allowing them to visit the exhibition.⁴⁷ The close monitoring of the Western developments continued until 1987, when both parts of the nation celebrated Berlin's 750th anniversary. As Prussia became an established part of the historical narratives of both states, the two German states entered into a competition for the claim to be the legitimate representative of Prussian heritage.⁴⁸ The simultaneity of developments did, however, not necessarily imply a rapprochement between academics in both states. Despite the fact that — for the first time in almost 30 years — three delegates from the GDR participated in the

⁴³ See e.g. P. Prager, 'Die DDR entdeckt "zwei Gesichter Preußens"', *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (18 October 1978); G. Zehm, 'Auf der Suche nach Preußen', *Die Welt* (21 October 1978).

⁴⁴ C. Menzel, 'Öffnung nach rückwärts', *Sonntagsblatt* (5 November 1979).

⁴⁵ H. Budde, 'Preußens Gloria im Dienst der Partei', *Deutsche Zeitung Christ und Welt* (17 November 1978).

⁴⁶ Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition*, pp. 248-323.

⁴⁷ SAPMO DY 30/J IV 2/3/3254, *minutes of the central executive committee of the SED*, August 1981; SAPMO DY 30/J IV 2/3/3260, *minutes of the central executive committee of the SED*, August 1981.

⁴⁸ K. Thijs, *Drei Geschichten, eine Stadt: Die Berliner Stadtjubiläen 1937 und 1987* (Köln, 2008), pp. 95-278, esp. pp. 127-147.

Historikertag in Mannheim in 1980, there were no signs of an official dialogue about the shared Prussian past between the East and West German historians. In the GDR, the West German publications about Prussia were either ignored by the official side, or interpreted as mere perpetuations of the reactionary Prussia myth. In West Germany, the works of at least two historians from the GDR, Ingrid Mittenzwei and Ernst Engelberg, attracted some interest. Engelberg, who conducted extensive research on Bismarck in West Germany, maintained a number of contacts with West German historians such as Werner Conze.⁴⁹ When in March 1987, historians from East and West convened at a conference organized by the historical commission of the SPD in Bonn, however, Prussian history did not feature prominently in the discussions.⁵⁰

Although the entangled debates about Prussian history must be regarded as triggers for the re-emergence of Prussia in the GDR, the *Preußenrenaissance* soon became a process with its own internal dynamics. As early as November 1978, GDR TV broadcasted a five-part miniseries dedicated to the Prussian military reformer Scharnhorst.⁵¹ Originally conceived as a broader period drama about the anti-Napoleonic Wars of Liberation, entitled *The Main Offensive* (Der Generalangriff), *Scharnhorst* was the first in an extensive line of film productions and documentaries about all possible aspects of Prussian history on East German state television. The shift of the production's focus – from the people's war against Napoleon to the famous Prussian general – had considerable symbolic significance. The main SED newspaper *Neues Deutschland* promoted the series as a contribution to the public understanding of one of the 'most significant eras of our history'.⁵² And the West German news magazine *Der Spiegel* noted that GDR officials had apparently recovered a piece of formerly 'scorched earth of German history' in an obvious abandonment of its prior condemnation of Prussia as a

⁴⁹ In the FRG, Mittenzwei's Frederick biography went through four editions between 1980 and 1986. In 1985, Engelberg's study of Bismarck was published in the West by the Siedler Verlag. Its owner, Jost Siedler, had been in contact with Engelberg from 1980, following a whole-hearted endorsement of Engelberg's work by the eminent West German historian Werner Conze; Cf. J. E. Dunkhase, *Werner Conze: Ein deutscher Historiker im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2011), pp. 206-207.

⁵⁰ S. Miller and M. Ristau (eds), *Erben deutscher Geschichte. DDR-BRD: Protokolle einer historischen Begegnung* (Hamburg, 1988).

⁵¹ Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv, *Sendeunterlagen 'Scharnhorst'*, 1978.

⁵² W. Müller, 'Vom Bauernsohn zum bürgerlichen Reformier', *Neues Deutschland* (1 November 1978).

‘hotbed of militarism and fascism’.⁵³ The next significant step towards Prussia’s public rehabilitation in the GDR came in early 1979 with a major article in the SED’s main Marxist theory journal *Einheit*, written by the leading historians Walter Schmidt, Horst Bartel and, again, Ingrid Mittenzwei.⁵⁴ The article provided a more elaborate explanation of the new turn towards Prussian history but broadly followed the line developed in Mittenzwei’s earlier *Forum* article. Thus, the significance of the *Einheit* article resided less in its actual contents than in the fact that it was published in one of the main party organs. This had particular implications within a system that required officials and other figures close to the state to read between the lines of official statements to trace the designs of the party leadership. The publication of such an article could only be interpreted as the assent of the Politburo to the new ideological line.

Almost simultaneously, Mittenzwei published the first edition of her – in many ways ground-breaking – biography of Frederick the Great.⁵⁵ In a perspective that was unusual for Marxist-Leninist historians, she offered an individualistic and psychological portrayal of Frederick’s life, focusing on the weaknesses, shortcomings but also the ambitions and achievements of the Prussian king. Overall, Mittenzwei emphasized Frederick’s positive impact on the course of German history. In her view, the king was not an exponent of the reactionary Prussianism, as most classical Marxists had asserted, but an enlightened ruler who contributed to Germany’s progressive heritage.⁵⁶ Without explicitly stating it, Mittenzwei abandoned nearly all hitherto established verdicts about the Prussian past. Nevertheless, her work was not entirely unprecedented within East German academic historiography. Prussia and the anti-Napoleonic Wars of Liberation had already been a matter of intellectual debate during the 1950s.⁵⁷ The downright

⁵³ ‘Einheit mit Scharnhorst’, *Der Spiegel*, 45 (6 November 1978), p. 18.

⁵⁴ W. Schmidt et al., ‘Preußen und die deutsche Geschichte’, *Einheit*, 6 (1979), pp. 637-646.

⁵⁵ I. Mittenzwei, *Friedrich II. von Preußen. Eine Biographie* (1st edn, Berlin, 1979).

⁵⁶ For a comprehensive account of the East German debate about Frederick II, see P.-M. Hahn, *Friedrich der Große und die deutsche Nation* (Stuttgart, 2007), pp.188-211.

⁵⁷ See for instance the dispute between the two historians Alfred Meusel and Ernst Engelberg about the significance of Napoleon and the Wars of Liberation for the Socialist traditions, printed in the Kulturbund newspaper *Sonntag* during the mid-1950s. Following the Marxist tradition, Meusel emphasised Napoleon’s historic function as a bourgeois moderniser, who helped to destroy the feudal barriers for a capitalistic development in Germany. Engelberg, by contrast, argued that the national insurrection and its historical impact on the formation of a German national conscience were far more important; A. Meusel, ‘Napoleon – Soldat und Reformator’, *Sonntag* (23 December 1956); E. Engelberg, ‘Napoleon – Wohltäter der deutschen Nation?’, *Sonntag* (24 March 1957).

negative image of Prussia within GDR academia had been partially revised during the 1960s. Now, however, these rather isolated debates became part of the official legitimizing narrative of the East German state. In July 1980, comments by state leader Erich Honecker highlighted this development. In an interview with the British newspaper proprietor Robert Maxwell, he declared that Mittenzwei's biography of Frederick the Great was not to be viewed as an innovative break-through but rather as a natural expression of the long-established relation of the GDR to its historic heritage.⁵⁸ With this statement, Honecker clearly sought to downplay the fundamental character of the changes in the official politics of history. Yet, the pace with which the academically revised image of Prussian history was translated into symbolic policies is remarkable.

The GDR's *Preußenrenaissance* reached its first peak in 1980 when the equestrian statue of Frederick the Great was returned to its original place on the boulevard *Unter den Linden*. As a symbolic act, this measure was on a par with the demolition of the architectural remainders of Prussianism in the 1950s and 1960s. The resurrection of 'Old Fritz' in direct sight of the Palace of the Republic and the State Council building was a clear hint of the direction in which the ruling nomenclature was now facing. It is therefore not surprising that the considerable costs of one million GDR Marks for the re-erection of the equestrian statue were covered without major discussions.⁵⁹

Between 1980 and 1987, the new conception of history was extended to other periods and formerly neglected personalities. With the looming 'Martin Luther Year' marking the reformer's 500th birthday in 1983, preparations for the celebrations became another priority for the SED.⁶⁰ This anniversary provided the occasion to integrate Luther into the canon of relevant historical reference points. Traditionally, Marxist historians had favoured the radical movements of the Reformation era over the socially conservative Luther. Figures such as the reformer Thomas Müntzer and the uprisings of the German Peasants' War in the sixteenth century had their fixed place in the traditional socialist narratives of German history.⁶¹ These, however, were increasingly pushed into the

⁵⁸ Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv [henceforth DRA] J IV 678 p. 37, *transcript of an interview by Robert Maxwell with Erich Honecker*, 4 July 1980; see also: Zimmering, *Mythen in der Politik der DDR*, p. 340.

⁵⁹ SAPMO DY 30/18838, *Günther Mittag to Kurt Hager*, 4 July 1980.

⁶⁰ Cf. Brinks, *DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft*, pp. 149 ff.; Zimmering, *Mythen in der Politik*, pp. 169 ff.

⁶¹ See L. Müller, 'Revolutionary Moment: Interpreting the Peasant's War in the Third Reich and in the German Democratic Republic', *Central European History*, 40 (2007), pp. 193-

background, making way for an uncritical celebration of Luther. Another unlikely historical personality who received increased public attention was Otto von Bismarck. In 1985 the doyen of East German academic historiography, Ernst Engelberg, published his Bismarck biography with the suggestive sub-title *Arch-Prussian and Founder of the Empire* (Urpreuße und Reichsgründer). In his book, Engelberg presented a rather positive image of his subject.⁶² He emphasized Bismarck's roots in Prussian traditions and virtues as a prerequisite for his main historical achievement – the creation of the German Empire. Despite being a lifelong communist, Engelberg performed an ideological volte-face with regards to Bismarck. Traditional socialist and communist historians had presented the 'Iron Chancellor' as the archetypical exponent of Prussian Junkerism and reactionary politics.⁶³ Now, it seemed that the GDR even tried to integrate the initiator of the infamous Socialist Laws into its heritage.⁶⁴

It would, however, oversimplify the problem if we interpreted these developments as a straightforward process steered entirely from above. Ernst Engelberg, for example, insisted that 'no one, not even the central executive committee of the SED' had influenced his academic engagement with Bismarck.⁶⁵ During a public lecture at the Academy of Sciences in East Berlin in 1984, he went even further by expressing his delight about Mittenzwei's reference to his own 'Prussian initiative'. He dismissed the idea that there was a 'political command central' in East Berlin, which would have initiated the turn towards Prussia in the GDR. For him 'ordinary historians were the first to acknowledge that we could not avoid the engagement with researching and writing Prussian history.'⁶⁶ This was clearly an understatement as Engelberg and most of the other academic actors of the *Preußenrenaissance* were not merely 'ordinary historians' but high-ranking academics either at the Institute of History at the Academy of Sciences or employed at the highly esteemed Humboldt University in Berlin. Moreover, many historians involved

218; R. Walinski-Kiehl, 'History, Politics, and East German Film: The Thomas Müntzer (1956) Socialist Epic', *Central European History*, 39 (2006), pp. 30-55.

⁶² E. Engelberg, *Bismarck. Urpreuße und Reichsgründer* (Berlin, 1985).

⁶³ See e.g. F. Mehring, *Historische Aufsätze zur Preussisch-Deutschen Geschichte* (Berlin, 1952), pp. 75 ff.

⁶⁴ Engelberg's Bismarck biography received overwhelmingly positive reviews in the West-German press. See e.g. H. von Kuenheim, 'Hat Otto da gelogen?', *Die Zeit* (30 August 1985), p. 67.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

in the reappraisal of Prussian history, including Mittenzwei, were former disciples or colleagues of Engelberg. It is therefore not surprising that East Berlin became, at least in the academic context, the hub for the Prussia revival in the GDR.

Outside Berlin, historians did not universally embrace the new image of Prussia. One contrasting case was a monograph about the Prussian king Frederick William I by the Halle-based historian Heinz Kathe.⁶⁷ Its first edition, published in 1976 largely adopted the traditionally negative Marxist judgement about Frederick William I and the Prussian state in general. Frederick I was presented as the founding father of Prussian militarism and despotism. In his conclusion, Kathe stated that the ‘uncompromising ideological fight’ of the communists against Prussianism could rely on the established judgements of the Marxist classics about the fateful role of the *Junkers* and the bourgeoisie as arch-enemies of the people in German history.⁶⁸ This view remained unchanged in all subsequent editions of the book throughout the 1980s, reflecting none of the ideological oscillations about Prussia that occurred in this period. Kathe’s persistence was certainly representative of traditionalist Marxists who did not support the rehabilitation of Prussia. Open criticism of the party, however, was out of question for this group. Thus, their maintenance of the traditional views was a tacit form of criticism.

Others were more open in their questioning of the official politics of history. In his 1981 play *The Prussians Are Coming* (*Die Preußen kommen*), the author Claus Hammel openly ridiculed the manufacturing of a new historical identity for the GDR.⁶⁹ Taking the return of the statue of Frederick II to *Unter den Linden* in 1980 as his starting point, Hammel questioned the official roles of the historical figures who had now been allowed to return from their former exile in the ‘historical hinterland’. In the play, the two main figures in this process, Martin Luther and Frederick II, are put before a tribunal composed of historians, officials and workers who are to decide whether the two can be integrated into the stock of the GDR’s official historical traditions. A female history professor on the committee repeatedly tries to curb the enthusiasm of the other panel members by putting Frederick and Luther into an academic perspective. However, officials and workers barely listen to her and turn into out-and-out fans of the two

⁶⁷ H. Kathe, *Der Soldatenkönig. Friedrich Wilhelm I., 1688-1740. König in Preußen – Eine Biographie* (1st edn, Berlin, 1976).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁶⁹ C. Hammel, *Die Preußen kommen. Komödie* (Berlin, 1982).

historical personalities. Although not necessarily an attack on the renewed interest in Prussian history in the GDR itself, the play was clearly a satire of the attempts to utilise it for the SED's purposes. An unequivocal publicity stunt at the *Hans Otto Theatre* in Potsdam illustrates this: during the first 15 performances of the play, two actors, wearing the uniform of the Potsdam Giant Guards Regiment (*Lange Kerls* or 'Long Lads'), sang a parody of the unofficial Prussian anthem *Üb' immer Treu und Redlichkeit* with a slightly altered verse: 'Always be faithful and true/ until your dying day/ Do not stray a fingerbreadth/ from Erich's given way'.⁷⁰ The *Prussians are Coming* was staged between 1981 and 1983 in Berlin's Maxim Gorki Theatre, the Hans Otto Theatre in Potsdam, and the City Theatre in Rostock. The play's popularity became evident in 1983 when the GDR state television broadcasted it as part of its primetime programme.⁷¹

The openness with which Hammel criticized the SED's new take on Prussian history is remarkable. Strikingly, there were apparently no serious attempts to curb him. On the contrary, the fact that GDR TV broadcasted the play suggests a certain level of sympathy among the responsible officials. As media and cultural life were more or less tightly controlled by the party, the broadcast highlights the ambiguous and at times contradictory character of the *Preußenrenaissance* in the GDR. A possible explanation for this inconsistency can be found in the fact that the new conception of Prussian history was not fully embraced by everyone in the SED's rank and file. This could have been the case either because they adhered to the older views on Prussia, or simply because the new historical narrative was far from clear or coherent. Yet, the almost simultaneous promotion and open criticism of the new course certainly reveals some of the problems of enforcing the new conception of Prussian history. The complex structures of media control in the GDR might have been a contributing factor. In order to avoid accusations of open censorship, the SED often delegated the responsibility to conform with the official line to journalists, artists and producers themselves, thus creating a system of self-censorship. The party indirectly steered this process by setting out a framework of ideological guidelines and informal mechanisms of control.⁷² Yet, this also gave

⁷⁰ German original: 'Üb immer Treu und Redlichkeit/ bis an dein kühles Grab/ und weiche keinen Fingerbreit/ von Erich's Wegen ab.' [translation by the author]; See M. Menge, 'Der Alte Fritz macht Freude', *Die Zeit* (27 May 1983), p. 50.

⁷¹ DRA E083-01-04 TSig. 0002, *Sendeunterlagen Die Preußen Kommen*, 1983.

⁷² L. Bradley, 'GDR Theatre Censorship: A System in Denial', *German Life and Letters*, 59, 1 (2006), pp. 151-162; Idem, *Cooperation and Conflict: GDR Theatre Censorship, 1961-1989* (Oxford, 2010); S. Lokatis, 'Lesen in der Diktatur: Konturen einer Zensurwirkungsforschung', in Idem and I. Sonntag (eds), *Heimliche Leser: Kontrolle und*

individual actors a certain leeway for their own interpretations of the official line. The room for these individual interpretations was greater the more diffuse the official guidelines were. This seems to have been the case with the new view of Prussian history. These circumstances help explain why both the promotion and criticism of the new historical identity were mainly the product of individual initiatives rather than a centrally steered project.

The cases that have been described thus far mostly involved intellectuals and officials. In order to reconstruct popular reactions and to assess the success and failure of the *Preußenrenaissance* as a legitimizing strategy, it is necessary to broaden the scope of the enquiry. For this purpose, an analysis of the representations of Prussia in television and film and the reactions of the viewers offers important insights.

IV. Televising the new image: media representations of Prussia and their reception

Before 1978, Prussia as a subject was barely covered by the East German television. Until this point, merely six productions dedicated to Prussia had been aired on GDR TV. Furthermore, when chosen as a subject, many productions adhered to the established negative framework of Prussian history. The 1970 production *The Spirit of Potsdam* (*Der Geist von Potsdam*) exemplified these traditionalist representations of Prussian history.⁷³ The script combined narrative and historiographical elements to promote the notion of the GDR as being the socialist conqueror of Prussianism. For this purpose, it told the parallel stories of a poor peasant family named Pagel and their feudal landlords, the von Arnims. Whereas the von Arnims dominated in the era of servitude and rural poverty in Prussian times, the fortunes of the two families changed with the socialist takeover after 1945. Now, the peasant family ruled over the land of their former masters in the workers' and peasants' state of the GDR. The Prussia epitomized by the *Spirit of Potsdam* was again a cipher for Junkerism and militarism.⁷⁴

Verbreitung unerlaubter Literatur in der DDR (Berlin, 2008), pp. 11-25; S. Barck et al. 'The Fettered Media: Controlling Public Debate', in K. Jarausch (ed.), *Dictatorship as Experience. Towards a Social-Cultural History of the GDR* (Providence et al., 1999), pp. 213-240, pp. 213-214; M. Keßler and T. Klein, 'Repression and Tolerance as Methods of Rule', in *ibid.*, pp. 109-124; see also R. Darnton, 'Censorship, a comparative view: France, 1789 – East Germany, 1989', *Representations*, 49 (1995), pp. 40-60.

⁷³ DRA E004-02-01/0010, *Der Geist von Potsdam*, 1970.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, Artikel für den Fernsehdienst *Der Geist von Potsdam*, 23 February 1970.

Other productions presented some positive aspects even before the *Preußenrenaissance*. Of the six pre-1978 productions, three dealt with military traditions and the National People's Army (*Nationale Volksarmee*, NVA). The NVA and its predecessors maintained Prussian military traditions to a high degree and this was reflected in these productions.⁷⁵ Broadcasts such as *Soldat and Tradition* (Soldat und Tradition) of 1962 or *A City and its Soldiers* (Eine Stadt und ihre Soldaten) of 1965 embodied this ambiguous approach to Prussian military traditions.⁷⁶ Even the highest military decorations of the GDR were named after the Prussian generals of the Wars of Liberation, Scharnhorst and Blücher. A distinction was made, however, between the maintenance of Prussian military traditions and the ideological commitment to socialism. In the military context, references to Prussian traditions helped to reinforce notions of an allegedly historic brotherhood-in-arms with the Russians. They were also used to distinguish the NVA from the West German *Bundeswehr*, emphasizing the former's rootedness in national history.

Although Prussian history was selectively adapted to substantiate ideological statements, the subject did not attract significant attention before the end of the 1970s. From 1978 onwards, however, GDR TV accompanied the official revision of the image of Prussia with a multitude of productions. In November 1978, the aforementioned five-part series *Scharnhorst* marked the starting point. This was followed by a drama about the military reformer and philosopher of war, *Clausewitz* in 1980 and reached its peak with the expensive and extravagant film production *Saxony's Splendour and Prussia's Glory* (Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria), broadcast between 1985 and 1987. Prussia now emerged as the subject of dramatic adaptations, whereas documentaries were pushed to the background. This format put historical personalities in the spotlight and, to a certain extent, allowed the viewers to identify with the protagonists. These productions approached the past from the perspective of those great men in high ranks that Marxist historians had explicitly rejected. With kings, ministers, and generals taking centre stage, the representation of 'ordinary' people became an issue of secondary importance. This, however, does not necessarily indicate a general reversal of the ideological convictions

⁷⁵ P. Heider, 'Ideologische Indoktrination und Traditionspflege in der Nationalen Volksarmee', in H. Ehlert and M. Rogg (eds.), *Militär, Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR. Forschungsfelder, Ergebnisse, Perspektiven* (Berlin, 2004), pp. 303-322.

⁷⁶ DRA E065-02-03/0003 TSig.: 006, *Soldat und Tradition*, 1962; DRA E065-02-03/0003 TSig.: 36, *Eine Stadt und ihre Soldaten*, 1965.

of officials responsible for TV productions. The initiatives and ideas for historical topics often came from other sources. For instance, the creator of the *Scharnhorst* series, Wolf-Dieter Panse, admitted that his rather positive views on Prussian history had been formed during his youth and that he had never identified with the negative image of Prussia in the early GDR.⁷⁷ This statement is significant with regards to the aforementioned generational aspects of the *Preußenrenaissance*. Panse had been born in 1930 and thus formed part of the aforementioned ‘1929er’ generation, for whom the positive portrayal of Prussia exercised a particular appeal. According to Panse, there was no direct meddling in the production process.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, the content and implicit message of the production featured a high degree of consistency with the new line on Prussia, as proclaimed in journals and books at the time. The available sources contain no evidence that this course was steered or coordinated by a central agency within party or state.

It seems that the positive popular reception of the rather traditional productions *Scharnhorst* and *Clausewitz* encouraged GDR TV to pursue more ambitious projects. The most significant example was the production of *Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria*. This film series was a cinematic adaptation of Jozef Ignacy Kraszewski’s novel *From Saxon Times* (*Aus der Sachsenzeit*). It was commissioned in late 1980; the actual filming started in 1982.⁷⁹ A key element of the film series was the era of the Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, August I (‘the Strong’), and the reign of Prussia’s Frederick II. According to an interview from 1995, screenwriter Albrecht Börner and director Hans-Joachim Kasprzik found their inspiration for the film series in the football grounds of the GDR and the frequent displays of regional, particularly Saxon, identities.⁸⁰ Like Wolf-Dieter Panse, Börner (born in 1929) and Kasprzik (born in 1928) were members of the ‘1929er’ generation. Their take on the Saxon and Prussian past was apparently less influenced by the older, negative Marxist tradition and much more flexible in its appreciation for the great historical figures. It was therefore not surprising that the idea for the project already developed before the official revision of the official conception of Prussian history. Yet, the emerging discourse about *Tradition und Erbe* may have encouraged Börner and

⁷⁷ U. Becher, ‘“Scharnhorst”. Interview mit Wolf-Dieter Panse’, in: *Der Wandel des Preußenbildes in den DDR-Medien* (Bonn, 1996), pp. 36-49, p. 38.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁷⁹ DRA, *Sendeunterlagen Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria*, 1987.

⁸⁰ D. Jungnickel, ‘Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria. Werkstattgespräch’, in Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung (ed.), *Der Wandel des Preußenbildes in den DDR-Medien* (Bonn, 1996), pp. 19-35, p. 19.

Kasprzik to pursue their project. Börner had started working on the script for a film adaptation of the novel in the mid-1970s but could not convince officials to provide funds for the production.⁸¹ Matters had changed by 1980. The same script now received approval from the GDR TV management without major complications. A panel of renowned historians advised Börner during the further development of the script and afterwards assessed its revised version. In this instance, professional historians served as intermediaries between the new conception of history and its popular depiction. One of the historical consultants was, for example, Günter Vogler of the Humboldt University, a renowned expert of Prussian history and lead author of an authoritative textbook on the topic.⁸²

Nonetheless, the project also faced opposition from within the SED. When the script was first presented at a conference of cultural officials in Dresden, the script was almost completely rejected for its ‘petty bourgeois presentation of history’. The discussion involved accusations of a falsification of history and criticism about the absence of ‘ordinary’ people. Questions were raised as to whether the project was compatible with the Marxist-Leninist conception of history.⁸³ Börner’s explanation that this was conceived as a contribution to the understanding of local history and the deeper understanding of tradition and heritage did not convince the officials at this meeting. At any other time, such a verdict would have meant the end for such an ambitious project. In 1980, however, the interest in the project led to a second chance for Börner. In order to invalidate the objections, an expert opinion by the Leipzig-based historian Karl Czok was commissioned by the head dramaturge of the production Erika Emuth. Czok’s assessment of the script was extraordinarily positive.⁸⁴ Additionally, producers and the responsible editors at GDR TV submitted upbeat projections of viewer numbers and anticipated public perceptions of the series.⁸⁵ This intervention finally led to the

⁸¹ A first outline for the production was circulated within GDR TV in 1978, followed by a commission to produce scripts for six films. DRA, *Sendunterlagen Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria, Vertiefende Ideenskizze für Fabel ‘Aus der Sachsenzeit’*, 12 May 1978.

⁸² K. Vetter and G. Vogler, *Preußen. Von den Anfängen bis zur Reichsgründung* (Berlin, 1970).

⁸³ Jungnickel, ‘Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria’, p. 25.

⁸⁴ DRA, *Sendunterlagen Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria, Gutachten Prof. Karl Czok*, 28 December 1982.

⁸⁵ DRA, *Sendunterlagen Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria, minutes test screening*, 27 June 1984; *ibid.*, *Änderungsauflagen*, 3 July 1985.

production, between 1982 and 1985, of those four parts of the original six-part series between that dealt with Prussian history. The originally planned first two parts that focused on Saxony and August the Strong were postponed to a later date when additional funding would be available. This suggests that the SED's primary interest focused on the popular depiction of Prussia and Frederick II.⁸⁶

New problems arose shortly after the actual shooting. Director Kasprzik and screenwriter Börner sought to avoid allegations of whitewashing Prussian history by incorporating some more controversial scenes into the film. This included the graphic depiction of a Prussian soldier running the gauntlet and a scene in which Frederick orders the pillaging of the castle of his Saxon adversary Count Brühl. These two scenes caused concern during a test screening for SED officials in 1984. They argued that such a portrayal of the Prussian king was inappropriate in light of the new circumstances.⁸⁷ One official stated that it was crucial to point out 'how good the king was and not how bad'.⁸⁸ After this intervention, the scenes were cut out from the final version of the film. The broadcast of the first four parts during the Christmas holidays of 1985 proved massively successful with critics and TV audiences in the GDR. Over 30% of all East German households watched each part of the series on GDR TV.⁸⁹ The costume drama genre and the multiple threads of the story appealed to a mass audience beyond the GDR: the West German ARD channel had bought the West German rights for the series in 1985 and broadcast it in 1987 as its official contribution to the celebrations of Berlin's 750th anniversary. It achieved similar success rates with approximately 20% of all households watching.⁹⁰

The positive reception of the Prussia-centred parts of the series led to the production of the earlier parts, focusing on Saxon history under August the Strong and his mistress, the Countess Cosel. These two parts, however, could only be produced with help of the licence fees paid by the West German state public television ARD. Though attempts were made to cut costs wherever possible, the production of the last two parts

⁸⁶ SAPMO DR 117/7508, *Konzeptionelle Überlegungen*, 1982.

⁸⁷ Jungnickel, 'Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria', p. 19.

⁸⁸ SAPMO DR/117/29137, *minutes of test screening*, 18/19 October 1984.

⁸⁹ Jungnickel, 'Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria', p. 33.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

amounted to 9.7 million DDR Marks, costing nearly as much as the first four films (11.8 million DDR Marks) combined.⁹¹

Besides the TV-specific considerations that led to the production of these parts, the production also sought to counter-balance the emphasis on Prussian history. The two parts that dealt with Saxon history were broadcasted on Christmas 1987, achieving equally high viewer number as their Prussian counterparts. *Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria* marked the peak of public representations of Prussia in the state media. What followed were less costly documentaries about Prussian history with titles such as *Prussia's Best Men* (*Die besten Männer Preußens*)⁹² and a feature about Frederick II titled *The Horseman Unter den Linden* (*Der Reiter Unter den Linden*) in 1986.⁹³ The almost panegyric celebration of Frederick in the latter exemplified his mystification as a patron of the late GDR.

Scholarship of the *Preußenrenaissance* has hitherto neglected the impact on the general GDR public of the propagated new conceptions of history. The question of how the 'Prussian turn' in German history was perceived and whether it actually enhanced the state's legitimacy is indeed rather difficult to answer. By and large, it can be argued that the new approach was received favourably by the GDR public. High visitor numbers at dedicated exhibitions such as the one held in 1986 in Potsdam's *Neues Palais* castle testify to the increased public interest in Prussian history. The 1980s also saw the emergence of a number of military re-enactment groups dedicated to Prussia and to the era of the Wars of Liberation. The 170th anniversary of the Battle of Nations in Leipzig in 1983 triggered a surge in the number of such groups in the GDR.

The viewers' letters that reached GDR TV provide a more nuanced image. The reactions expressed in the surviving letters range from emphatically positive appraisals to criticism and confusion. In a viewers' letter from May 1980, for example, an elderly women from Jena expressed her firm belief that figures such as 'Scharnhorst, Gneisenau, York, Blücher, [...] Moltke, Roon, Hötzendorf, Hindenburg, Mackensen' would provide great role models for the youth of the GDR. Yet, she also lamented that the historical films of GDR TV 'are met with little interest from today's young people.'⁹⁴ This

⁹¹ SAPMO DR/117/29137, *Kostenplan/Kalkulation 'Sachsen Glanz und Preußens Gloria'*, 10 December 1985; SAPMO DR 117/25410, *Kostenplan*, 1986/87.

⁹² DRA E028-00-09/0064, *Sendeunterlagen 'Die besten Männer Preußens'*, 1986.

⁹³ DRA E028-00-09/0124, *Sendeunterlagen Der Reiter unter den Linden'*, 1986.

⁹⁴ DRA Sendeunterlagen Clausewitz – Ein Lebensbild, *viewer's letter*, 29 May 1980.

observation seems to underline argument that the impact of the new historical narrative was mainly limited to certain generations and lacked attraction for younger audiences. Another viewers' letter from 1988 suggests an increasingly critical perception of the *Preußenrenaissance* in the GDR. On the one hand, the letter emphasised that Prussian history was an ambiguous but nevertheless interesting matter for most GDR citizens. Yet, it ended with the critical remark that 'its depiction, however, needs to be objective and truthful'.⁹⁵ A comment that could be understood as a veiled criticism of the TV productions. Other viewers expressed their irritation about the new course and the positive depiction of Prussia more openly. An anonymous letter from 1986 that reacted to the broadcast of *The Horseman Unter den Linden* exemplifies such sentiments:

I want to speak out about the exhibition about the Prussian king Frederick II. I am almost 70 years old, miner by profession. I want to point out that in the years 1950–1960 people spoke differently about this king, and that radio and television reported completely different. They called him sabre-rattler, a man who exploited ordinary people and soldiers. And how do people speak now — 30 years later — of him? I want to conceal my name but these are facts and many elderly people think in the same way.⁹⁶

This exemplary statement suggests that some viewers were aware of the profound turns in the GDR's politics of history. These changes were seemingly not as comprehensible and consistent as those responsible might have hoped for. Moreover, it is unclear whether Prussia was indeed accepted as a specific historical tradition of the GDR, or whether it rather appealed to a sense of German unity and thus ran counter to the party's intentions. While the self-contradictory character reduced the appeal of the new identity policy, it did not necessarily diminish the popularity of the films. By and large, the viewers' letters suggest that many people were able to enjoy the opulent productions without buying into the more or less subliminal ideological messages.

V. Conclusion

The re-emergence of Prussian history in the GDR of the 1980s has to be interpreted in the light the SED's changing policies on identity and legitimacy. Following Sigrid

⁹⁵ DRA E028/00/09/0038, *viewer's letter*, 8 July 1988.

⁹⁶ DRA E028/00/09/0124, *anonymous viewer's letter*, 14 October 1986.

Meuschel's subdivision of these policies into three main stages, the emphasis on Prussian heritage has to be seen as an expression of a growing nationalistic element in official propaganda during the final crisis (*Finalitätskrise*) of the GDR.⁹⁷ By this point, the formerly dominant socialist and antifascist narratives of legitimacy that characterized the early phases of the GDR had apparently lost their appeal. Within these narratives the traditional socialist conception of Prussian history had regularly been utilized as a complementary, and often negative, narrative of the German past in order to underline notions of progress and rupture. From the end of the 1970s, however, positive interpretations of Prussian history played an increasingly prominent role in the official representations of collective identity in the GDR. Now, *Tradition und Erbe* became the dominant categories of the history discourse and the Prussian past came to be incorporated into representations of the 'socialist German nation'. The 1980s eventually saw the integration of formerly rejected historical figures and eras into the canon of historical references for the East German state. Established Marxist-Leninist judgments of the past were in many cases creatively circumvented to integrate formerly controversial figures such as Martin Luther, Frederick II and Bismarck into the official historical heritage. Yet, in order to understand the reasons for this ideological volte-face and some of its inner dynamics, a number of factors have to be taken into account.

Firstly, the entanglements with the politics of history in the Federal Republic played a crucial role in triggering publications and broadcasts on Prussian history in East Germany. After plans for a major exhibition in the Reichstag in West Berlin became public in 1977, the SED leadership was overanxious to strengthen its claims to being the legitimate custodian of German national history as a whole and therefore of genuine Germanness. The revival of Prussian history in West Germany appeared in a time when discourses about the 'lost identity' of the FRG facilitated a re-emergence of nationalistic motives in the public history discourse. Yet, whilst the rediscovered appreciation for medieval South-West German or Bavarian history in the West had mainly regional implications, the history of Prussia possessed – because of its geographical shape – an inherent German-German dimension. In addition to the inward-looking aspects of the *Preußenrenaissance* in both German states, the representations of Prussian history became a historical-political battleground for the claim to represent the German nation as a whole. Nonetheless, whereas the extraordinary public excitement about Prussian history

⁹⁷ Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft*, esp. pp. 221-240, pp. 273-290.

in West Germany – with the exception of West Berlin – slowly petered out after the exhibition in 1981, it continued in the GDR until at least 1987. To a degree, the revision of Prussian history in the GDR was driven by the events in the West. Yet, it soon developed an inner dynamics that cannot be solely explained by the entangled German dimension of the *Preußenrenaissance*.

A second explanation for Prussia's emergence as a central part of the politics of history in the GDR lies in generational shifts. Those involved in the creation and propaganda of the new conception of Prussian history in academia and state media – with the notable exception of Ernst Engelberg (born in 1909) – almost entirely belonged to the '1929er' generation. The author of the ground-breaking biography of Frederick II, Ingrid Mittenzwei, was born in 1929. The producers of the most important period dramas about Prussian history, Wolf-Dieter Panse, Hans-Joachim Kasprzik and Albrecht Börner were all born between 1928 and 1930. As Panse's statements indicated, their views of Prussian history may have been shaped less by the traditionally negative Marxist-Leninist interpretations but more by Prussia's positive depiction in the Third Reich.⁹⁸ Moreover, Prussia – in the way they popularized it – embodied a symbolism in which stability and strong leadership were presented as means of historical progress. The reference to this positive version of Prussian history seems to have provided them with a coherent historical narrative of collective identity in the face of the GDR's crisis.

Although the individual reasons for the engagement with Prussian history were certainly complex, the emergence of the new ideological framework of *Tradition und Erbe* from the mid-1970s allowed historians and cultural workers to openly articulate their own positive views on Prussian history. Against this backdrop, the claim of historians and cultural workers that they did not receive instructions to launch this process seems credible. The ideas and projects that shaped the *Preußenrenaissance* in the GDR were often rooted in individual initiatives. The statements of Engelberg, Panse, Börner and Kasprzik confirm this interpretation. A certain notion of self-assertion (*Eigensinn*) of many actors came to the fore in this context. Yet, these individual initiatives could only be realized because the SED leadership apparently recognized their potential for its own politics of history and therefore supported them. This party patronage then encouraged

⁹⁸ For a discussion of the representations of Prussia in the Third Reich see K.-H. Schoeps, *Literature and Film in the Third Reich* (Elisabethtown, NY, 2004), pp. 138-142; L. Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich: Illusions of Wholeness in Nazi Cinema* (Durham, NC, 1996), pp. 92-125.

others to pursue similar projects, which resulted in academic conferences, public exhibitions, TV productions and further publications on Prussian history in the 1980s. Whilst these dynamics might reflect a certain wide-spread opportunism within academia and culture, others reacted more critically, as the examples of Claus Hammel's play *The Prussians are Coming* and the work of the historian Heinz Kathe indicate. Nonetheless, the fact that the promotion and more or less open criticism of the new conception of Prussian history occurred almost simultaneously suggests that the politics of history in the late GDR cannot be understood in terms of authoritarian rule alone. Instead of directly ordering and controlling the SED sought to set out a framework of ideological guidelines that was then filled by the various actors according to their own interpretations of the new course. This framework was in many ways incoherent and equivocal as the older views of Marxist historians on Prussia were never officially renounced by the SED. This also explains the frictions and at times contradictory actions among rank-and-file party members as the reactions to *Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria* demonstrate.

Finally, the public reception of the new course was an ambiguous matter, too. Although most of the historical publications and broadcasts met with an altogether positive response, they widely failed to create new patterns of identity and legitimacy for the SED. The inconsistency of the public representations of Prussian history certainly contributed to this fact. Yet, another explanation for the failure of the *Preußenrenaissance* as a legitimizing historical narrative might be found its aforementioned generational dimension. It was in many respects a narrative of the '1929er' generation and it seems to have mainly appealed to members of this generation. Those born earlier seem to have persisted in the negative views of Prussian history, or were at least more aware of the ideological contradictions between earlier Marxist interpretations and the new image. On the other hand, the relevance of Prussian history for those born after 1945, the so-called '1949er' generation, was probably very small.⁹⁹ For them Prussia was a matter of the past without a direct connection to their own lives. They might have enjoyed the opulent TV dramas and publications on the topic, yet without necessarily identifying with the implicit political message. Nevertheless, in order to reconstruct the effects of the *Preußenrenaissance* on the political consciousness of GDR citizens and its longer-lasting impact on their collective identities, more case studies are needed. Moreover, a

⁹⁹ For the '1949er' generation, see D. Wierling, *Geboren im Jahr Eins: Der Jahrgang 1949 in der DDR. Versuch einer Kollektivbiographie* (Berlin, 2002); Idem, 'How do the 1929ers and the 1949ers differ?', in M. Fulbrook (ed.), *Power and Society in the GDR*, pp. 204-219.

transnational comparison of the turn towards national history as a legitimizing narrative in the 1970s and 1980s within other state-socialist countries and with similar developments in other Western countries could help to put this phenomenon into a broader perspective.

Abstract

The ‘Renaissance of Prussianism’ (*Preußenrenaissance*), which began in the late-1970s and continued throughout the 1980s in the German Democratic Republic, has received considerable scholarly attention. In this context, mainly the involvement of academic historians in the revision of the official conception of history of the socialist East German state has been discussed. This article offers, however, new perspectives on hitherto neglected aspects of the *Preußenrenaissance*. It explores the German-German entanglements of this phenomenon by linking it with almost simultaneous events in West Germany. By the mid-1980s both German states had embraced Prussia as a part of their redefined collective identities and had entered into a competition for representing its historical heritage. Yet, this piece also looks at the ways by which the new conception of German national history was transmitted and popularised in the GDR media. From 1978, the state television promoted a positive view of Prussian history with opulent productions such as *Sachsens Glanz and Preußens Gloria*. An analysis of viewers’ letters offers some insight into the popular perception of the new course. Against this backdrop, this article also highlights that the ideological volte-face regarding Prussia’s history was not unanimously supported within the rank-and-file of the ruling Socialist Unity Party. In fact, the *Preußenrenaissance* in the late GDR proved to be a chequered and often contradictory process which was shaped by the many self-willed actors. The article

concludes with a brief consideration of the interplay between these various actors involved in the *Preußenrenaissance* and their specific motivations.

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