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Gebauer, Ronald

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The Peaceful Revolution and its Aftermath: Collective Memory and the Victims of Communism in East Germany

Ronald Gebauer [*]

Abstract: *»Die friedliche Revolution und ihre Folgen: Die Opfer der SED-Diktatur in der kollektiven Erinnerung der Ostdeutschen«*. More than twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, East and West Germans share equal civil rights. However, among East Germans, certain aspects of the communist system are still remembered positively. Shortcomings and injustices of communist hegemony are thereby blocked out. In contrast, victims of communist repression cannot forget the suffering inflicted upon them. The contribution focuses on both the rehabilitation and compensation of victims *and* the acceptance of this process. In 2007 the Jena Center of Empirical Social and Cultural Research (JEZE) collected a survey of more than 300 interviews with applicants on rehabilitation and additionally conducted oral history interviews with affected people in Thuringia. The results of the analysis of these data show that younger and older generations of victims are especially disadvantaged in their social and health situation in comparison to the Thuringian population that was not victimized in the past. Despite of these drawbacks, victims try to integrate and to participate in public life. Yet, how does the public perceive the victims of the communist past today? In order to find out more about the acceptance of the process of rehabilitation and compensation within Thuringia's population results of the applicants' study will be confronted with an analysis of a telephone survey of 'ordinary' Thuringian citizens.

Keywords: Post-communism, GDR, Thuringia, survey, victims, rehabilitation, compensation, dictatorship, collective memory.

1. Introduction

Germany's collective memory is still divided. West Germany's collective memory was shaped and is up to now predominantly determined by the struggle of the 1968 generation for a 'retrieving' denazification (cf. Jarausch 2006). East Germans, however, faced a politics of memory enforced by the ruling communists that is best described as 'enacted anti-fascism' ("verordneter Antifaschismus", cf. McLellan 2004). While West Germany's student movement accomplished to break the silence of the National Socialist past, in the German

[*] Address all communications to: Ronald Gebauer; Friedrich Schiller University of Jena, Institute of Sociology, Carl-Zeiss-Str. 2, 07743 Jena, Germany;
e-mail: ronald.gebauer@uni-jena.de.

Democratic Republic ideological requirements determined the perception of the first German dictatorship and dealing with former NSDAP members or war criminals (cf. Leide 2005, Best / Salheiser 2006).

Since the downfall of the SED regime and the reunification, however, the consequences of the second German dictatorship have finally gained heightened political, judicial and scientific attention. The political and legal processing of these consequences has been guided by the principle of the 'rule of law'. This process, in turn, shows ambivalent results in coming to terms with East Germany's communist past. While many East Germans have adopted an attitude of *Ostalgie* as a reflex to keep their collective identity, and thereby impeding a growing (self-) awareness of the shadows of the communist past, West Germans are predominantly absorbed by their own established memory culture. A closer look at the political arena unveils an even more complicated situation. Although a cross-party agreement about the perception of the two German dictatorships was achieved in the early 1990's, this consensus weakened during the first years of the new millennium, partly due to charges that were raised against victims of the socialist regime which were accused of having been actively involved in Nazi war crimes (see box 1, cf. Kaminsky 2006). This is, of course, especially painful for victims of communist repression that were not involved in German war crimes, but are now under general suspicion.

Box 1: Cross-party consensus achieved in the early 1990's

- The foundation of viewing both dictatorships is an anti-totalitarian consensus, which is based on the recognition and acceptance of human and civil rights.
- When dealing with and depicting both dictatorships, the order of cause and effect must be retrieved and revealed.
- The memory of NS victims must not lead to a trivialisation of the post-war injustices. Neither must a reference to post-war crimes result in the trivialisation of National Socialist crimes.

2. Rehabilitation and Compensation in Thuringia – Empirical Studies

Two years ago, an interdisciplinary research team at the Jena Center for Empirical Social and Cultural Research conducted three empirical studies – firstly, to analyze the current social and health situation of victims of communist repression by a) collecting data of applicants for rehabilitation that were victimized under the communist regime in the former districts (*Bezirke*) of the current federal state (*Bundesland*) of Thuringia (questionnaire) and by b) oral history interviews with affected people and, secondly, to explore the acceptance of the process of rehabilitation and compensation within Thuringia's population by

gathering information through a telephone survey. Additionally, a legal interpretation of the current legal framework and the legal practice concerning rehabilitation and compensation was prepared. Box 2 gives a rough overview of the different studies.

Box 2: Overview of sub-studies of the report

1) Sample of Applicants to Rehabilitation and Compensation (collected by questionnaire letter, N=334)
2) Face-to-face-interviews with victims (N=12) and experts (N=10)
3) Telephone Survey (Acceptance of rehabilitation and compensation within Thuringia's population, N=988)
4) Legal interpretation

This article confines itself to the first three sub-studies (for the legal interpretation, cf. Gröschner/Lembcke 2008, Lembcke 2009). Introductory, some short remarks on the legal framework of the rehabilitation process: Estimates indicate that more than 200,000 East Germans were imprisoned for political reasons (cf. Schröder / Wilke 1998). This is only the tip of the iceberg because far more people were disadvantaged and demoralized by the repressive forces of the system. Victimized people still suffer from the consequences of these past events. Even though they can apply for rehabilitation and compensation – according to three rehabilitation acts – their social, mental and physical impairments are not or only partly compensated (see box 3).

Box 3: Overview of the legal framework of rehabilitation and compensation

- *StrRehaG* (Strafrechtliches Rehabilitierungsgesetz): Rehabilitation and compensation of prosecution contrary to the rule of law
- *BerRehaG* (Berufliches Rehabilitierungsgesetz): Rehabilitation and compensation of occupational discrimination
- *VerwRehaG* (Verwaltungsrechtliches Rehabilitierungsgesetz): Abrogation of administrative acts contrary to the rule law and subsequent claims

3. The Social and Health Consequences of Communist Repression

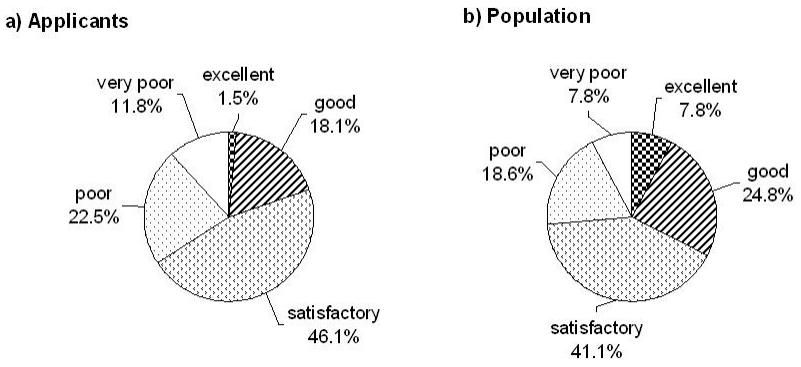
What are the most important results of the studies? The oral history interviews revealed that victims of political persecution were targeted by the repressive apparatus even before adulthood – frequently, their only offence was trying to escape to West Germany (*Republikflucht,* cf. Arp et al 2008).

This finding might not be a surprise for the victims themselves but this fact is hardly ever communicated in the social sciences or in public. By this rather early collision with the political power and, from the modern view, the draco-

nian penalties, victimized persons were pushed aside in their schooling and in their vocational education and career. Despite this, many of them tried hard to gain ground and to establish a livelihood either in the Federal Republic of Germany, if "redeemed' successfully, or in the GDR, by pursuing low paid blue-collar jobs with the support of family and friends.

The social and health consequences of GDR injustices are emerging two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall and are more obvious today than ever before. Through comparison with the data of the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (GSOEP) our evidence shows that older and younger generations of victims still have to bear the consequences of the injustice forced upon them: e.g. the overall health of victims is much worse than that of Thuringia's general population. Especially in the case of former political prisoners, the effects on health are alarming (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Health situation of applicants (only political prisoners) compared to the general Thuringian population (in %)



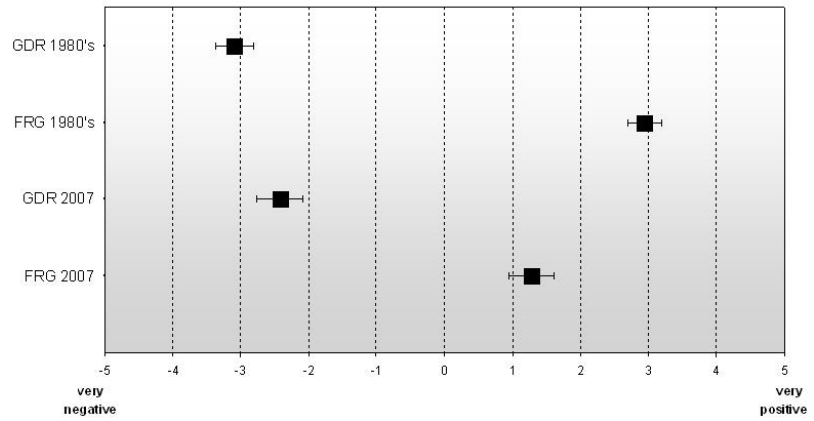
Source: Thuringian Sample of Applicants for Rehabilitation and Compensation [TSARC] 2007, GSOEP 2006, author's calculation.

Less than 20 % of former political prisoners (subsample of TSARC-data) describe their current health as good or excellent. This percentage is particularly low when compared to the more than 32 % of Thuringia's population who describe their health as good or excellent. Instead, poor or very poor health conditions (34.4 % vs. 26.4 %) prevail among former political prisoners. However, the victims do not despair. On the contrary, already a short time after their release from imprisonment, many victims became active in their local communities and the majority appreciated and supported the peaceful revolution of 1989 and the reunification in 1990. For many of them their newly-won freedom was a starting point which they used to get involved in society and, for exam-

ple, to become members of associations and, to a lesser extent, also of political parties.

But how do the victims remember the GDR? Applicants for rehabilitation and compensation were asked to rate both their current and retrospective general attitude towards the GDR on a scale from -5 (very negative) to +5 (very positive) (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Applicant's average current and retrospective attitudes towards the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany

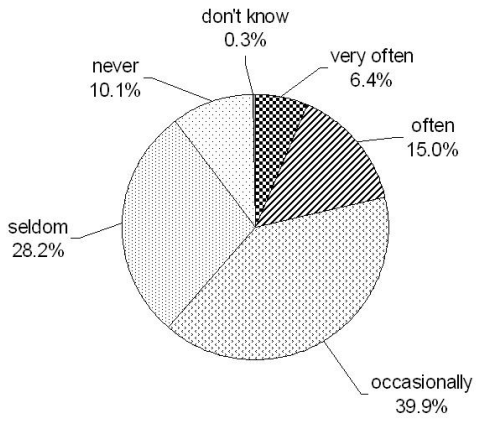


Source: TSARC 2007, author's calculation.

First and foremost, the attitude towards the repressive communist system is still negative (-2.43 on average compared to -3.09 retrospective), as shown in the cases of applicants for rehabilitation and compensation. The positive retrospective attitude towards the FRG (+2.94 on average) has substantially lost ground (currently rated +1.28 on average). Unsurprisingly, here the analysis mirrors disappointed expectations.

One reason for the slightly better current evaluation of the GDR might be that victims have made up to some extent. However, persecution and discrimination are still remembered painfully. In particular, politically persecuted people were forbidden to talk about the time of their imprisonment when released before 1989. It was not until reunification that they could finally break the silence, even though this has been a rather difficult process for many (see Fig. 3).

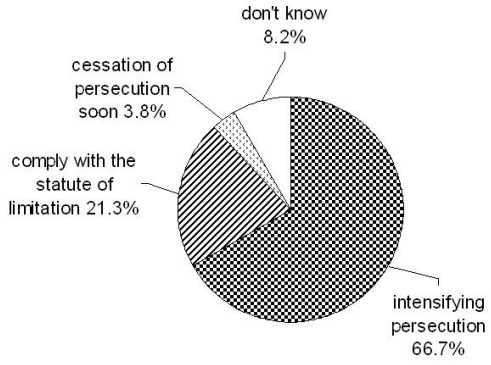
Figure 3: Breaking the silence, talking about the painful past



Source: TSARC 2007, author's calculation.

After all, 38 % of applicants still do not or hardly ever talk about the events that happened to them in the past. Moreover, the victims' desire to bring perpetrators to justice has not been satisfied, as described in the following quote by the former dissident and civil rights activist, Bärbel Bohley: "We wanted justice (*Gerechtigkeit* – R.G.) but we got the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat* – R.G.) instead". Two-thirds of all applicants for rehabilitation and compensation expressed that they still favor the persecution of former perpetrators (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4: Bringing perpetrators to justice



Source: TSARC 2007, author's calculation

4. Acceptance of Rehabilitation and Compensation of Victims

The fate of the victims of communist repression is staggering. However, a majority of people was not affected quite as severely by the regime. Thus, two questions arise: How is the GDR remembered by Thuringia's 'ordinary' citizens? And moreover: How is the fate of the once repressed people and their desire for rehabilitation and compensation echoed by the population?

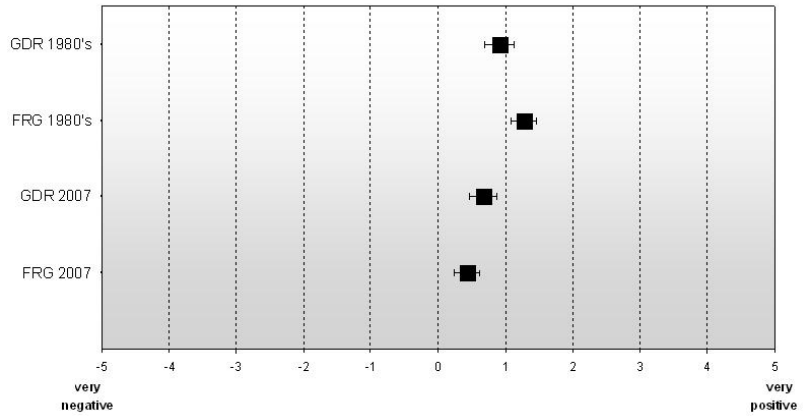
There are no simple answers to these issues. On the one hand, a popular feeling of GDR nostalgia (*Ostalgie*) exists. On the other hand, an analysis of the telephone survey indicates that the GDR is not seen as positive as could be expected from the prevailing feeling of *Ostalgie* (cf. Ritter / Beuermann 2008). In general, on a scale from -5 to + 5 the GDR is currently rated 0.92 on average by non-affected people (see Fig. 5).

This rather neutral view of Thuringians towards the GDR even turns negative, when stimulated by various GDR-relevant topics, such as freedom of speech, state of infrastructure (houses, hospitals, streets), the distribution of goods as well as size, contents and furniture of flats. Depending on the asked question (general or specific) telephone interview partners also agreed that they noted acts of state arbitrariness and discrimination.

45 % of the interviewees noted arbitrary acts incompatible with the civil rights. When being asked about specific types of discrimination (e.g. prohibition of exits, expropriation of assets, educational/vocational discrimination) even 85 % of the interviewees confirmed that they had noted at least one of such injustices. Furthermore, there is a general acceptance of the process of rehabilitation and compensation. Almost 60 % of the respondents agree with the extension of the deadline for applications. Additionally, a majority is in favor of a partial or full compensation of victims. Nevertheless, 3.6 % of all telephone interviewees rejected compensation altogether (see Fig. 6).

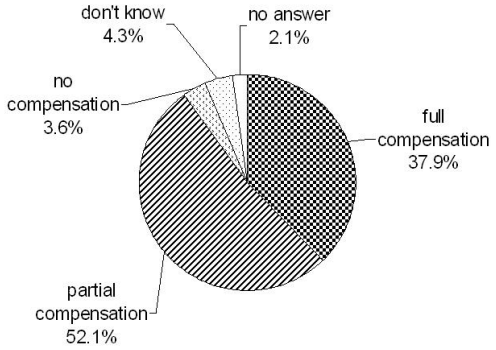
There is some doubt about whether interviewees answered faithfully, when they stated to be in favor of a *partial* compensation. In this respect, it is necessary to take the answers of proponents and opponents of an extension of the application deadline into account again. The result is that more than 80 % of the proponents are in favor of full compensation, but only a half of the opponents. This indicates that the acceptance of the process of rehabilitation and compensation is accompanied by some people's desire for a final stroke (*Schlussstrich*).

Figure 5: Average current and retrospective attitude towards the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany within Thuringia's population



Source: Thuringian Population Sample on the Acceptance of Rehabilitation and Compensation [TPSARC] 2007, Ritter/Beuermann 2008.

Figure 6: Acceptance of compensation of victims of communist repression



Source: TPSARC 2007, Ritter/Beuermann 2008.

5. Conclusion

Germany's culture of memory is still divided. This also applies to East Germany's culture of memory of the victims of communism. The social and especially the health situation of victims are much worse than that of 'ordinary' citizens. Still more than one third of victims cannot talk about past events and, of course, cannot forget the crimes which were committed against them. Therefore, they strongly favor a persecution of the perpetrators. At least there is

some light at the end of the tunnel, if one considers all the victims' efforts to integrate and participate in a reunited Germany. The good news is that there may be some further hope. A majority of 'ordinary' citizens have not forgotten about the committed injustices and do not idealize the GDR. They are not *opposed* to the process of rehabilitation and compensation within Thuringia's population. Of course this attitude can be criticized because it does not necessarily indicate *proactive* support. A growing awareness of East Germany's shadows of the past may help in this respect. This, however, will already be a challenge for the young generation of *Mauerfall-Kinder*.

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