

### Dealing with the Past – Memory and Reconciliation after Regime Changes in the late 20th Century

**Veranstalter:** The Federal Government Commissioner for the New Federal States, Federal Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Eastern Germany

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**Bericht von:** Iris Johanna Bauer, Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur

Debates on the culture of remembrance have been attracting increasing interest among the international public. There have been, however, several new developments taking place in these discussions: notably, a global view on memory and the process of coming to terms with the past, as well as questions concerning colonialism's role within the culture of remembrance in various countries. In this context, the central questions of this international conference appear more topical than ever: What is the significance of political system upheavals after dictatorship or colonial rule in a global history of the 20th century? How did these upheavals unfold in different regions of the world, and what effects did they have on the societies concerned? How do different states around the world deal with their dictatorial, authoritarian, and violent pasts? What cultures of remembrance have developed, and what is the future of dealing with the past?

In her introduction, ANNA KAMINSKY (Berlin) emphasized the high expectations placed on the processes of transitional justice. In addition to the claims that victims of dictatorship and tyranny have to justice and recognition of the suffering they have endured, affected societies also have a particular interest in determining how to handle the perpetrators – the implications of which especially affect the legitimacy of new (democratic) power. Additionally, social reconciliation as a central goal serves to achieve a communal way forward, a kind of „peaceful coexistence“. Important prerequisites for transitional justice are, on the one hand, social openness to confronting issues that are often painful and, on the other hand, strong support

from the political arena. There are many ways of dealing with the past all over the world, and the aim of this conference was to exchange insights from these different experiences.

Transitional justice is always preceded by regime change. JAN ECKEL (Tübingen) outlined the prominent role that such systemic changes play in historical thinking about the 20th century. He argued, however, that this concept must be questioned: The year 1945, for example, could be used to show how historical upheavals have different meanings in various national and social contexts. Viewed from the perspective of systemic upheavals, the year 1945 was not a uniform, but rather a multifaceted break that affected various regions in different and even opposite ways. So where does the focus on systemic upheavals in the periodization of the 20th century come from? Eckel considers it to be a „historical product of the 20th century“. This becomes particularly evident in widely received historical accounts, such as Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* (1992) or Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Extremes* (1994). Both authors interpreted the Cold War, according to Eckel, as the key determinant of the international history of the 20th century and its end as a radical break. Recent research, however, has revealed an alternative view. The rise of the USA as an influential global power or the end of colonial rule are examples of how the 20th century can be more adequately understood in terms of phases of formative transitions rather than from political systemic breaks. Nevertheless, regime changes were not meaningless in the 20th century. Whether an individual lived in a dictatorial or a democratic system was, undeniably, decisive for their way of life. Regime changes established momentous conditions, but these were embedded in broader developments. The perspective of systemic upheavals acts as a corrective guarding against overly determined historical interpretations – a perspective that gives prominence to the role of contingency and at the same time to the importance of human agency.

Regime changes affected almost all regions of the world in the 20th century, but they differed greatly in their course and took place under different circumstances. In most cases,

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developments within society were the most important prerequisite, but global contexts formed important framework conditions. For example, as CAROLA LENTZ (Mainz) explained, negotiations with former colonial powers often played a central role in decolonization processes on the African continent, such as in Madagascar, which became independent from France in 1960 „in friendship“ – at least, according to the narrative. Lentz also emphasized the important influence of global interconnections and networks of political actors. The end of the Cold War not only provoked upheavals in Eastern Europe, but also promoted the „third wave“ of democratization in Latin America. Between the mid-1970s and the 1990s, all countries in the latter region, aside from Cuba and Mexico, formally became democratic. According to SABINE KURTENBACH (Hamburg), these were negotiated political transitions that were accompanied by strong elite continuity and persistent social inequality. For these reasons, she argued that the region was and still is vulnerable to „democratic backsliding“.

AUREL CROISSANT (Heidelberg) outlined how systemic upheavals in the Asian region progressed in different ways. Between the mid-1980s and the 1990s, the end of the Cold War created „structures of opportunity“ that facilitated a shift from authoritarian to more or less democratic forms of government. However, it was not possible to establish stable democracies everywhere. For example, the systems in South Asia – in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan – are characterized by strong structural inequality and weak statehood, making them susceptible to anti-democratic movements. Another similarity between the Asian and Latin American regions, according to Kurtenbach and Croissant, is that the systemic conflict of the Cold War continues into the present. Because of socialist Cuba, even today various political actors in the region are forced to position themselves either pro-Cuba or pro-US. This polarization has been exacerbated by developments in Venezuela, preventing change that would be essential to the work of human rights actors. In Asia, according to Croissant, the confrontation of the Cold War has turned into a new form of systemic conflict: Liberal democracies face the state capitalism

and authoritarian regime of China. China, according to Croissant, is not actively undermining democracies in the region, but it is supporting existing authoritarian systems.

The panellists agreed that there is no magic formula for a successful transition to democratic systems. GWENDOLYN SASSE (Berlin) emphasized that the case of Belarus shows which factors can prevent a regime change: For a systemic change to occur, it is crucial that key elites from politics, the military, and the security apparatus accept the uncertainty of a transformation. However, if they remain loyal to the regime, then the transition is prevented. Several factors were highlighted as prerequisites for transitional justice: a time gap (a closer look at the past often only occurs after a generational change, as the example of Namibia shows) and stable democratic power structures. The process of coming to terms with the past can only take place step by step and is never complete.

Regime changes have an impact on societies and biographies. ULRIKE CAPDEPÓN (Constance) emphasized that in Spain there is still no uniform historical narrative. She asserted that due to the 1977 amnesty law, there has been no condemnation of the Francoist crimes. The negotiated „transición“ furthermore never led to an ousting of elites. Thus, a continuity of authoritarian structures and mentalities within Spanish society is still evident today. In contrast, a broad public commemoration emerged in Germany after the end of the communist dictatorship. However, according to STEFFEN MAU (Berlin), this bypassed parts of the East German population. East Germans prioritize their own personal histories, which are often not congruent with the public remembrance conveyed by the media and politics. Mau raised the question of whether there should not be other forums for confronting these people with issues of coming to terms with the past.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa did not reach all parts of society either, demonstrated KHULU MBATHA (Pretoria). In principle, it succeeded in bringing perpetrators and victims into an exchange, but several people refused to accept this initiative. According to Mbatha, the African National Congress, after taking power, did not

succeed in creating social justice. Large parts of the black population still lived in poor conditions, while the white population was able to continue living their lives just as before the system change in 1994. This resulted in the population's dissatisfaction with democracy and prevented reconciliation within society.

Steffen Mau also emphasized the great influence of economics and social justice on the course of transformation phases: The transformation in former socialist countries was characterized by a strong marketization, which had a disruptive effect on local structures and the identities of the people. MARINA FRENK (Berlin) stated that this was also true for Moldova, which, like many other small states that emerged from the Soviet Union, had been destabilized by neoliberalism. Frenk stressed that systems are so firmly anchored in people's psyches and minds that they can be passed on to subsequent generations. Personal remembrance is often characterized by nostalgia, she said. Nostalgic remembering, however, is always incomplete.

In his keynote, RAINER HUHLE (Nuremberg) spoke about the difficulties encountered in the past with approaches to an international exchange on transitional justice. For example, the „Dialogue Human Rights without Justice?“ (1991) failed due to many misunderstandings stemming from the differences between dictatorships in Latin America and Europe. Nevertheless, an international discourse on transitional justice had emerged in the early 1990s. According to Huhle, an important cornerstone was the „right to truth“, which encompasses the right to personal truths about crimes, perpetrators, repressive structures, and political responsibilities and is the origin of the truth commissions. Furthermore, Huhle argued that the least developed element of transitional justice is „guarantees of non-recurrence“, and these are very difficult to realize. They should be more generalized and should be combined with the demand for a solid anchoring in basic human rights guarantees. Looking back at the past is not enough; social reform processes must also be initiated.

Various country examples around the world show how differently people deal with their own pasts. In Portugal and Argentina,

years of silence about the past hindered the process of coming to terms with history. ROSARIO FIGARI LAYÚS (Giessen) described how in Argentina 250 sentences were passed between 2006 and 2021 against perpetrators of the military dictatorship, which had ended decades earlier. In Portugal, however, there has still been no break with the past – neither with the colonial nor with the dictatorial past, as LUÍS FARINHA (Lisbon) explained. Almost 50 years after the end of the „Estado Novo“, it is doubtful whether transitional justice can still take place, for example in the form of a truth commission. In the last ten years, the Portuguese state has nevertheless erected several memorials and established many museums.

State influence on transitional justice issues varies from country to country. AXEL KLAUSMEIER (Berlin) emphasized that the process of coming to terms with the two German dictatorships is firmly anchored in politics in Germany. In Estonia, expounded MEE-LIS MARIPUU (Tallinn), initiatives that deal with the past are financed by the state but organized under civil law. The situation in Russia is quite different, where, according to NIKITA VASILYEVICH PETROV (Moscow), the issue is primarily in the hands of non-governmental organizations, with the state increasingly restricting archive access. JHYWEY SHIEH (Berlin) explained that in Taiwan access to the party archives of the Kuomintang – a key demand in the process of transitional justice – is still being prevented today because the party has remained influential, thereby allowing it to continue to refuse the opening of the archives.

The rise of populist parties in Portugal and Eastern European countries poses a challenge for historical-political education. To counteract this development and to sensitize young people to the differences between dictatorship and democracy, RADKA DENEMARKOVÁ (Prague) asserted that literature is particularly suitable in this regard because of its emotionalizing effect, which can reach large parts of the population. MARKUS MECKEL (Berlin), using the example of the interwar period in Europe, highlighted that the social question also plays an important role in securing democracy. BARTHOLOMÄUS GRILL

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(Cape Town) underlined that social inequality between former victims and perpetrators of apartheid was a factor that led to widespread dissatisfaction in South Africa 25 years after the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. When we are dealing with the past, we must not only search for truth, but also, according to Grill, seek justice.

Another major issue that has not yet been adequately addressed in many countries is how to deal with the colonial past. The younger generations in Africa are demanding this from the former colonial powers. According to Markus Meckel, this topic requires further international exchange. The act of looking beyond one's own borders is important, bringing with it the potential for a „culture of remembrance that is built on dialogue“ – a culture that is prepared not only to speak its own truths, but also to listen to the experiences of other countries.

### Conference Overview

#### *Welcome Address and Introduction*

Anna Kaminsky (Federal Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Eastern Germany, Berlin)

#### *Keynote and Discussion*

Moderation: Harald Asel (rbb Inforadio, Berlin)

Jan Eckel (University of Tübingen): Systemic Change and Global Order in the 20th Century

#### *Panel I: Times of Upheaval: Regime Changes in an International Perspective*

Moderation: Harald Asel

Aurel Croissant (Heidelberg University), Sabine Kurtenbach (GIGA Institute for Latin American Studies, Hamburg), Carola Lentz (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz), Gwendolyn Sasse (Centre for East European and International Studies, Berlin)

#### *Panel II: Broken System—Broken Society? International Perspectives on Experiences of Transformation*

Moderation: Michaela Kufner (Deutsche Welle, Berlin)

Ulrike Capdepón (University of Konstanz), Marina Frenk (Author, Berlin), Steffen Mau (Humboldt University of Berlin), Khulu Mbattha (Special Advisor to the President of South

Africa, Pretoria)

#### *Keynote and Discussion*

Moderation: Tamina Kutscher (dekoder.org, Hamburg)

Rainer Huhle (Nuremberg Human Rights Center): After the Systemic Break: Approaches to Dealing with the Past

#### *Panel III: From the Shadow of the Past into the Light of Reappraisal*

Moderation: Tamina Kutscher (dekoder.org, Hamburg)

Rosario Figari Layús (Justus Liebig University of Giessen), Axel Klausmeier (Berlin Wall Foundation), Nikita Vasilyevich Petrov (International Memorial, Moscow), Jhy-Wey Shieh (Representative of Taiwan in Germany)

#### *Panel IV: No Ending in Dealing with the Past? Or: the Future of Dealing with the Past*

Moderation: Dr Jacqueline Boysen (Journalist and author, Berlin)

Radka Denemarková (Author, Prague), Luís Farinha (Aljube Museum Resistance and Freedom, Lisbon), Bartholomäus Grill (Journalist and author, Cape Town), Markus Meckel (Federal Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Eastern Germany, Berlin), Meelis Maripuu (Estonian Institute of Historical Memory, Tallinn)

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