

Learning Democracy – Democratization in Eastern Germany, 1989-1994

On 3 October 1990, eastern Germany joined the Federal Republic of Germany. Less than a year after the Fall of the Berlin Wall, east Germans had moved from living in a centralist dictatorship to a federal, democratic political system where the exercise of 'voice' was guaranteed by the rule of law. How did citizens in Eastern Germany adjust to the new political system as voters, as campaigners, and as (aspiring) political leaders? How did they learn to use democracy to maximize their own desires and wishes, at a time of dramatic economic and social transformation – and loss? And how did they relate to West German political actors nationally and locally, actors well versed in political practices east Germans had yet to master? This project will examine the democratization of eastern Germany to investigate not only a critical aspect of German contemporary history, but also to relate wider questions asked by political scientists—about processes of democratization, notably the relationship of particular social, cultural and economic conditions to distinctive political outcomes—to historical enquiry. It will add to the rich literature on democratization in the political sciences an important micro-historical perspective of how political actors in local communities learnt democracy.

This project will examine the democratization of eastern Germany in two parts. The first will examine the formation of political parties in the GDR up until unification on 3 October 1990. It will examine how civic actors formulated their political ideals, how these were shaped into political programmes, and how these, in turn, were moulded into party political demands between 1989 and 1990. The second part will examine the period between late 1990 and 1994, to cover the first two federal elections of post-Unification Germany, and the first two regional and local elections. Through the lens of micro-history, the project will examine two mid-size towns and two state capitals: Eisenach and Erfurt (Thuringia), and Naumburg and Halle (Saxony-Anhalt). There are rich archives in these towns containing pamphlets, records of meetings, speeches and photographs and posters relating to the events of 1989/90. This will be complemented by reports in a thriving local newspaper press, and official political party documents from state and party archives. Finally, the study will benefit from oral history interviews with political actors, to provide added contours to the motivations, experiences and challenges around the democratization of eastern Germany.

Whilst the past twenty years have seen a remarkable output of scholarship on the history of the FRG and of the GDR, the process of unification in 1989-90 and beyond has scarcely been analysed by historians. And yet, contemporary debates prevailing during the 1990s about the shortcomings of unification are at odds with current assessments that the bringing together of two very different economies, polities, and societies has been a remarkable achievement; this project will be central to any understanding not just of contemporary German history, but also to wider assessments of the success of unification itself.

The thesis will be supervised by Prof. Jan Palmowski, Pro Vice-Chancellor at the University of Warwick, whose latest monograph on 'Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Every-Day Life in the GDR, 1945-1990' was published by Cambridge University Press in 2009. It will be co-supervised by Prof. Corey Ross, Head of School of History and Cultures at the University of Birmingham, who has published widely on the media, popular culture, and consumption in modern German and European history, and published two books on the GDR.