

The background of the entire cover is a photograph of the Berlin Wall. The wall is covered in vibrant, multi-colored graffiti in shades of red, blue, yellow, and orange. A person with short blonde hair, wearing a dark jacket and pants, stands with their back to the camera in the lower-left foreground, looking at the wall. The sky is a pale, overcast grey.

**ILKO-SASCHA KOWALCZUK**

# **FREEDOM SHOCK**

**A DIFFERENT HISTORY OF EAST GERMANY  
FROM 1989 TO TODAY**

Ukrainian Voices, vol. 93

*ibidem*

Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk

## **Freedom Shock**

A Different History of East Germany from 1989 to Today

# UKRAINIAN VOICES

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ISBN 978-3-8382-2177-9

The book series "Ukrainian Voices" publishes English- and German-language monographs, edited volumes, document collections, and anthologies of articles authored and composed by Ukrainian politicians, intellectuals, activists, officials, researchers, and diplomats. The series' aim is to introduce Western and other audiences to Ukrainian explorations, deliberations and interpretations of historic and current, domestic, and international affairs. The purpose of these books is to make non-Ukrainian readers familiar with how some prominent Ukrainians approach, view and assess their country's development and position in the world. The series was founded, and the volumes are collected by Andreas Umland, Dr. phil. (FU Berlin), Ph. D. (Cambridge), Associate Professor of Politics at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and an Analyst in the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk

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Verlag

## Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

### Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover picture: ID 288782309 © Iglwch | Dreamstime.com

Translated from German into English by Jessica Haunschild.

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-2069-7

ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-8069-1

© *ibidem*-Verlag, Hannover • Stuttgart 2026

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30457 Hannover  
Germany / Deutschland  
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Printed in the EU

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## Dedication

I dedicate this book to my friend Gerd »Poppoff« Poppe. Born on the Baltic coast in the middle of the Second World War, he studied physics, and from 1968 onward was one of the key figures in the anticommunist opposition to the Socialist Unity Party (SED) dictatorship. His life's enduring theme was FREEDOM. He was one of the founders of the »Initiative for Peace and Human Rights« (IFM) in 1985–86. The principle of this most prominent East Berlin opposition group was that those who could not guarantee internal peace could not guarantee external peace—the two belonged together. A look at Russia shows just how urgent this is. Despite years of travel bans and intensive surveillance by the Ministry for State Security (Stasi/MfS), Poppoff's opposition work always crossed borders, and he maintained contacts with politicians and human rights activists in West Germany and Western Europe as well as with opposition activists and dissidents in Central and Eastern Europe. He was one of the pioneers of the freedom revolution of 1989, during which time he was active in many places—for example as an IFM representative at the Central Round Table from December 1989 or as a minister without portfolio in the Modrow government (the transitional GDR government, November 1989–March 1990) from February 1990. On March 18, 1990, he won a mandate for the IFM with Bündnis 90 in the first democratically elected German Democratic Republic (GDR) parliament. One of his lifelong dreams came true: free and democratic elections—something he had fought for all his life like few others. From 1990 to 1998, he was a member of the German Bundestag and foreign policy spokesman for the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen group and parliamentary group. He was committed to human rights worldwide and was active in countries with former or current dictatorships. He was also committed to coming to terms with the history of the SED dictatorship. From 1992 to 1998, he was chairman of the two commissions of inquiry that

dealt with the history and consequences of the SED dictatorship in the German Bundestag. From 1998 to 2021, Poppoff was an honorary member of the board of the Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship. After leaving the Bundestag, he was the federal government's first Commissioner for Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid, based at the Federal Foreign Office, from 1998 to 2003. This closed a circle of life that always had human rights and freedom at its center.

Gerd »Poppoff« Poppe has not only always been a freedom fighter. For me, he was and still is a role model and inspirer, critic and guide—and one of my most important, if not my most important advisor for decades. He lived freely during the dictatorship and made a decisive contribution to the fall of the communist dictatorship. I am proud to call him my friend. Being able to dedicate my freedom book to him at all is due not least to his fight for freedom.

Postscript: On March 29, 2025, my friend Gerd »Poppoff« Poppe passed away in Berlin. His life and work were honored at a memorial event organized by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, where I gave the keynote speech.<sup>a</sup>

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a [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCdli\\_ZkWXk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCdli_ZkWXk)

# Prologue

## The Human Dilemma of Freedom?

»1 They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. 2 And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them: ›Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.«

(Exodus 16:1–3, Luther 2017)

Willi Kufalt is in prison. When he is released, he wants to turn his life around. He fails. At the end of Hans Fallada’s novel *Wer einmal aus dem Blechnapf frißt* (*Once a Jailbird*, 1934), he ends up back in prison: »The first exciting day, with its back and forth, with the presentation, the dressing, the allocation, is over, the lock-up is over, and Kufalt sits alone on the bed in his cell 207«.

The usual, familiar evening noises still echo through the prison: a bed thumps on the floor, someone whistles to himself in his cell, his neighbor protests with a roar, two people talk from window to window one floor below, a bucket lid rattles, and a guard dog howls in the yard.

»Kufalt is all right, Kufalt is happy. He’s got a nice cell, all the materials are impeccable, the brushes are as good as new ... At the start, you can’t let your guard down, with time you learn where you can take risks ... But it’s better here than outside ... Kufalt has pulled the blanket nice and high over his shoulders, it’s nice and quiet in the den, he’ll sleep great.

It’s nice to be back home like this. No more worries. Almost like when you used to come home with your father to your mother.

Almost?

Even better, actually. Here you have peace and quiet. Nobody talks at you here. You don’t have to decide anything here, you don’t have to pull yourself together like that.

Nice, such order. Really at home.

And Willi Kufalt falls asleep gently, smiling peacefully.«<sup>1</sup>

The story also exists in reverse in the famous film *The Shawshank Redemption* by Frank Darabont, starring Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. In the 1994 prison drama, there is an old man sentenced to a long prison term who is released from prison. He takes a job as an assistant in a supermarket. His assigned room could hardly be more dreary. He is lonely, no longer understands the world, longs for the familiar prison walls and the regular, albeit arduous and not always nonviolent everyday life, cannot cope with his freedom and kills himself after six months.

This book argues that a considerable part of East German society suffered a »freedom shock« in the fall of 1989. Freedom means getting involved in one's own affairs and claiming the right to have a say, to help shape and decide. Freedom is not a prerequisite for living a liberal life. You can also live freely – often with corresponding consequences – in a lack of freedom. However, living in freedom requires a state structure which provides the framework conditions for this. This book is about tracing why so many East Germans (and not only they) have so many problems seeing freedom and an open society not just as an imposition, but as an opportunity that offers them the chance to develop. In fact, a large proportion of East Germans suffered a »freedom shock« when it came to taking the reins and shaping their own paths. Most East Germans were not used to it and were not prepared for it. Nobody explained to them how to do it. They even believed they could do it themselves. In fact, most of them confused affluence with freedom – a connection that many claim does not actually exist in an open society, as Karl Raimund Popper conceived it in exile in New Zealand in 1945. Material prosperity makes many things easier, but it neither makes people freer nor is it a prerequisite for freedom. The »freedom shock« of many East Germans stemmed from seeing freedom as a consequence of material prosperity, democracy and the rule of law.

The »ideas of 1989« were ideas of freedom—such ideas were too rarely capable of winning a majority in history. Freedom is not something that once given exists forever. Every generation has to relearn how to deal with it, provided it is given the framework conditions to live in freedom and democracy. Many East Germans did not experience or feel the leap into freedom as liberation. I call this »freedom shock«.



# 1. Why I Wrote This Book

Freedom versus unfreedom. Democracy versus dictatorship. The struggles of our time are about nothing less. This book is about nothing less. For me, »East Germany« has long since become a shorthand for this struggle. Yes, it is a struggle that threatens to tip over into violence. The Russian Federation's campaign of destruction against the free Ukraine is about freedom and democracy, which the Kremlin fears because they run counter to its dictatorial and imperial desires. Alexei Navalny died in custody: many observers hold the Putin regime responsible, because it rightly saw him as a symbol of freedom and resistance to dictatorship. Ukraine does not want to incorporate the Kremlin dictatorship for any of these reasons: not because of threats from the West, which Moscow does not really believe in either. Not because of NATO's eastward expansion, which the Kremlin accepted for years. Not because of dangers for Russians in Ukraine, which Moscow is also unable to substantiate. Not because of »fascists« in Ukraine, who have no greater influence there than in many Western European countries – or in Russia itself. No, Ukraine is to be finished off because of its drive for freedom and democracy.

In »East Germany«, all the controversies and disputes are taking place on a small scale that can be observed on a large scale in Germany, Europe and throughout the world. This fight for freedom is still »only« a war between the largest country in the world in terms of area, Russia, and the largest country in Europe in terms of area, Ukraine. Many people are not even aware of what is at stake. In East Germany in particular, many do not realize that it is their life in freedom and democracy that makes their constant criticism, rejection and protest possible in the first place. Many believe they are living in a new dictatorship while at the same time registering the realities of a genuine dictatorship, such as the one that has long existed again in Russia or the one that existed in the GDR.

A battle of interpretation is raging in Germany about democracy, dictatorship, war and peace. New figures and new survey results are presented and discussed almost daily. The public sphere is dominated by them—opinion polling is an economic factor. Hardly anyone dares to ask what the deeper meaning of all these surveys might actually be, surveys with results that rarely stay current longer than the daily newspaper. And far more elaborate scientific surveys and evaluations, such as those presented by social scientists or political scientists, often have the charm of yesterday. The much-discussed and elaborate Leipzig Authoritarianism Studies or the bestseller *Triggerpunkte* (Trigger Points) are always behind the times. They represent interesting snapshots whose figures are highly interesting for historians at the time of publication, but are used less by them and more by journalists, politicians and other social scientists as analyses of the present.<sup>2</sup> What they almost always have in common is that they have enormous reassurance potential and are received accordingly. Strangely enough, they contrast with everyday experiences up and down the country. Science does not have the task of confirming everyday experiences. However, there may be some unease given that election predictions, which have been so accurate for decades, have not always been reflected in the election results recently. In addition, after the financial crisis in 2008, the migration crisis in 2015–16, the coronavirus crisis in 2020–22 and the extended war waged by the Russian Federation against free Ukraine since 2022, society is in a permanent state of agitation that no longer allows for any reliable forecasts. The tendency of most politicians to base their decisions on opinion polls not only undermines democracy, but is also short-sighted. After all, how credible is such a policy really? »Credibility« and »trust« are essential pillars of democratic politics, but they are not measured by the whims of the day, but by the future. In recent years, the political system has come under increasing pressure because a section of society has become visibly radicalized and increasingly turned its back on the previous »Federal Republic model«. Currently, two-

thirds of people in East Germany can imagine voting for a party that is against the Basic Law<sup>b</sup> and against German democracy. Many would say, no, not against the Basic Law, but against the actual practice: they do not feel heard, not taken seriously, have no influence on politics, most politicians are aloof and not familiar with the actual problems. That has to change. Strangely enough, these two-thirds (the number of people who think this way is also growing in the West) believe that their specific life situation and, above all, German democracy could be improved if extremely authoritarian forces that rely on a strong state came to power. And this applies to both the left and the right.

These trends cannot be explained by figures and surveys alone. Of course, long-term comparisons can be made and significant changes can be identified (or not). There are plenty of such attempts. In the debates about German reunification since 1990, figures have been constantly cited by both sides. For three decades, the positions remained cemented – always backed up by figures. It was not until a few years ago, when the view broadened and social-historical, sociological and cultural perspectives were increasingly included alongside the statistical ones that the public began to realize that German unification and its consequences were not just a financial, economic and infrastructural problem. The current debates about the division of society, the so-called »middle of society« and the radicalization of large sections of society are also not debates that can be conducted with figures and surveys alone. They explain what has happened too little or not at all. My essay therefore is meant as an invitation to go beyond current figures that are difficult to understand and are also partly based on a problematic, outdated method (which is, of course, fiercely denied by all those who work with it – I'll just give one example: telephone surveys in the digital age), to ask whether the division of society in East Germany is a new phenomenon at all and what reasons there might be

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b *Grundgesetz*, the German constitution

for phenomena such as anti-Americanism, closeness to the Kremlin, to Wagenknecht, to the »Alternative für Deutschland« (AfD, »Alternative for Germany«) or the unbridled hatred on social media and at demonstrations. All of this is about freedom and democracy, and why they are so controversial. My focus is on East Germany, because it is here that the threat to democracy is particularly evident and always emerges a little earlier than in the rest of Germany.

This book explores the question of why this is actually the case. Why are freedom and democracy viewed with such disdain, and why are dictatorships such as that in Russia so glorified? Of course, most of those who think this way immediately reply that there is no freedom or democracy in Germany. They themselves would stand up for the »true«, the »real« democracy, for »real« freedom. Right-wing extremists in particular argue this way and have a resonance in East Germany. They claim that once German society is »pure« and »cleansed« again, strengthened ethnically through »remigration« and the »left-green woke base« is contained, freedom and democracy will once again be fully possible. This is why the word »freedom« is part of the basic reservoir of right-wing extremists, fascists and their political arm in the parliaments, the AfD.<sup>3</sup> I, for one, am not prepared to give them this term and even less the content. For me, there is nothing more important than freedom. Without freedom, everything else is worth nothing. There is no peace without freedom.

But left-wing extremists also argue, albeit under different guises, that they are striving for »true« and »genuine« democracy and freedom. Unlike right-wing extremists, they can rely on theoretical works and some classics of revolt to support them in their assumption that only social justice, possibly even social equality, guarantees »real« democracy, participation for all and thus »real« freedom. The left's idealization of the promise of social equality and justice always threatens to tip over into extremist assumptions and demands—and in historical reality, it has certainly done so wher-

ever communists came to power (and never relinquished it democratically, i.e., through free elections). Leftists don't like to talk about freedom without relativizing it.<sup>4</sup>

Historical reality speaks against the left-wing and right-wing extremists wherever they came to power: Their total concepts of state and society regularly led to totalitarian systems in which, in terms of systemic logic, there was no room for those who were unwilling to submit to the prevailing dogma or who were declared enemies for »objective« reasons (origin) and were accordingly eradicated, expelled, oppressed.

Therefore, the defense of freedom must always be directed against those who try to instrumentalize freedom for their totalitarian and extremist goals. In this essay, I will not engage in an extensive debate about the concepts of freedom and democracy. Both are defined in the Basic Law. They are never final states, but ideal states that can never be achieved in their conceivable perfection. But states that are committed to these principles, as laid down in the Basic Law, guarantee a framework in which freedom and democracy can be developed further in theory and practice and at the same time defended in their reality. But of course, I cannot avoid outlining what I mean by freedom at the outset.

This is followed by a brief outline of the East German path from dictatorship to unity with a view to the subject of the book. This sketch is based on the fundamental idea that German unity has not only long since been achieved, it has also become a success story. It's just that this has not yet been recognized. Why is that? That is exactly what this book is about. Freedom is a matter that can only work if the individual moves and gets involved in their own affairs. In a dictatorship, this is precisely what is taken from you by all means, trained away, brutally taken away. The dictatorship hates the individual and strives to merge everything into the collective. The longer a dictatorship lasts, the less its occupants are aware of this because, as part of the machine room, they increasingly lose sight of the whole. This is also a dictatorship goal. In a dictatorship,

it takes not only courage but also considerable effort to rise above the whole and recognize the inhumanity and brutality. Added to this is the enormous amount of energy required once the dictatorship has fallen in order to recognize what was. No dictatorship falls in the course of a revolution in which a majority would have participated. Revolutions are matters of minorities — including the one in 1989! — that oppose the dictatorship. The masses, the vast majority, wait, and then, drunk with victory, side with the victors. This has been the case in every revolution so far and will continue to be the case in the future. So far, so banal. The after-effects are more problematic, especially when, as in the case of communist dictatorships, they are also ideological systems (this is not the case with every dictatorship). The communists have channeled enormous resources into ideological education. From the cradle to the grave, not only was everything to be tightly organized and uniformed. No, not only the being, but also the consciousness of the subjects was to be directed and uniformly aligned according to military-like standards. Apart from a few hundred thousand particularly staunch fanatics of the state party SED, everyone else rejected these eternal political training sessions and this omnipresent ideology bombardment in every place and on every corner (except on church grounds) and made fun of it, but were forced to take part because no professional qualification, no degree, no doctorate, no position of relevance was possible without at least a formal commitment to antihuman Marxism-Leninism (the emphasis is on the latter) with the associated training and examinations. Everyone had to endure this. Most people still believe today that it didn't bother them, that nothing would have stuck with them. What a huge mistake! Why is that? You don't need to be a psychologist to know that decades of constant propaganda naturally have consequences — in all possible forms, not least these: I don't even believe the weather report!

Communist ideology made many people incapable of discourse, incapable of discussion, and led them to a dichotomous perception not only of the world, but of everything and everyone. Of

course, you can get rid of the consequences of the omnipresent constant bombardment from the cradle to the grave, but not just through passivity, through silence, through ignorance. No, this only works if each individual makes an effort to become aware of the ideological indoctrination and actively works against it. In other words, overcoming this requires hard individual work. Of course, I know that only a few people are willing and able to do this. It not only takes time, but also courage, as this kind of memory work also makes you question yourself: What, I believed this nonsense, didn't I contradict it? What, it's not what I've assumed for twenty, thirty, sixty years? Oh, this term has this meaning, this history? In principle, it is about recognizing that one's own perception, that of one's own group and one's own milieu, is neither irrefutable nor unquestionable. It is about questioning the uniqueness of one's own worldview and the assumption that it is logical, and above all, completely correct. Yes, it is about questioning the dichotomy as a matter of course and dissolving it in favor of a lived plurality, a possibility that, according to current and historical knowledge, is only possible within the framework of state and social democracy and freedom.

With the exception of the general overview of the revolution toward unity, this book is made up of smaller, concisely formulated chapters that build on one another. They do not offer a complete, but rather a problem-oriented history of East Germany since 1989 and are in many ways a supplement to my book *Die Übernahme* (The Takeover, 2019). The basic theme is the struggle for freedom and why it was able to get this far. How far? We are at a crossroads. This book is a wake-up call. If we don't act now, resistance fighters in the underground will have to admit it later: *Our time* was the time when democracy and freedom were surrendered, when an ever-growing group no longer knew how to resolve their dissatisfaction, their quite understandable and in-part justified dissatisfaction, other than to sacrifice democracy and freedom in favor of authori-

tarian, dictatorial, antidemocratic, unfreedom, and ultimately anti-human ideas of state and society. The situation is far more serious than it looks and is portrayed by some.<sup>5</sup> In any case, a poem by Bertolt Brecht is very close to me as a warning in these times.

*March of the Calves (Bertolt Brecht, 1942)*

Behind the drum  
Trot the calves  
The hide for the drum  
They deliver it themselves.

The butcher calls. Eyes firmly closed  
The calf marches with a steady step.  
The calves, whose blood has already flowed in the slaughterhouse  
They follow in spirit in his ranks.

They raise their hands  
They show them here  
They are already stained with blood  
And are still empty.

The butcher calls out. Eyes firmly closed  
The calf marches with calm firm tread.  
The calves, whose blood has already flowed in the slaughterhouse  
They march in spirit in his ranks.

They carry a cross in front  
On blood-red flags  
That has a big catch for the poor man  
A big catch.

The butcher calls out. Eyes firmly closed  
The calf marches with calm firm tread.  
The calves, whose blood has already flowed in the slaughterhouse  
They march along in spirit in his ranks.<sup>6</sup>

My book is, of course, pointless. Those who should understand it do not pick it up. And those who do pick it up know everything I write. Because everything has already been said. Nevertheless, it was important for me to repeat it. Because I am angry, damn angry. Just as you shouldn't go shopping when you're hungry, you shouldn't write a book when you're angry. I don't care about these

principles any more than many others. If I had always stuck to »the rules«, I might be more content, happier, and more addicted to harmony today than I am. I would probably also be where I always wanted to be professionally. But it also needs the canal workers; they contribute to the big picture, to the functioning. It's only when they stop working that everyone else realizes how necessary, how cleansing their work was, which makes them angry again and again.

But I'm not angry enough to top the last bestseller by a Leipzig literature professor who until then had strictly avoided East German topics. He channeled his anger into a platform, claiming that all East Germans were as angry as he was. Well, that wasn't true because he belonged to a very small elite in the East who were able to make an astonishing career out of radically denying their East German identity. Neither the Rostock shipyard worker nor the potash miners in Bischofferode – site of the famous 1993 hunger strikes against mine closures – nor the NARVA<sup>c</sup> employee in Berlin-Friedrichshain nor the engineer in Riesa had this privilege, which Dirk Oschmann had earned for himself. But even a historian like me, who has been dealing with contemporary history since 1990, could not afford such a luxury of denial. Living with the lie is only possible in luxury. But it must have been a very uncomfortable life. Because the anger that Oschmann programmatically spewed out was obviously directed at himself to a great extent. He seems to have been dissatisfied with the way he »sold« himself, or in his words, »ingratiated« himself. It is honorable to want to revise this. But is it also honorable to declare an entire society (East Germany) as an object incapable of action and to attribute everything that happened to an ominous enemy called the »West«?<sup>7</sup> In this book, I would like to show that Oschmann's basic thesis that the West did what it liked

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c NARVA was one of the GDR's most prominent brands, employing thousands. Its fate exemplified deindustrialization. The name means nothing to English readers without identification. Add a brief explanation here like »the major East German lightbulb manufacturer, later privatized«.

with the East is too simple and can hardly be reconciled with historical realities. In doing so, I am of course also referring to my own book »Die Übernahme« (»The Takeover«), which, according to Oschmann, was a kind of eye-opener for him alongside Steffen Mau's book *Lütten Klein*<sup>8</sup>. Oschmann deliberately makes of East Germany what he accuses the West of being: a soulless and will-less object incapable of acting.

Oschmann's book harmonizes with a book by the East German historian Katja Hoyer, which the publisher boldly announced as offering completely new perspectives. Here, too, all the experts rubbed their eyes in amazement. Nothing was new. This kind of historiography has been flourishing for over three decades in the SED/PDS/Left Party milieu and in the old Stasi militias. The author's empirical source work turned out to be manageable, the perception of the research literature appeared eclectic.<sup>9</sup> Not a single expert who reviewed it was able to do anything with the book. The softening of the SED dictatorship has reached a new level. And this is mainly because Oschmann and Hoyer dominated bestseller lists and debates for months.

This raises the question of what unites these two strange books, both of which have historical-political intentions and both of which do not even begin to conceal their anger at previous debates and views of history, and why they met with such an overwhelmingly positive response in East Germany. I believe that this question will occupy future researchers even more than it does now. My thesis on this is: because the problem of freedom does not appear at all in either book or is recorded in such a way that the history of the GDR is increasingly accepted as a completely normal state history, whose dictatorial and oppressive foundation is increasingly only one aspect among many others, for example, Pittiplatsch (a beloved East German children's TV puppet character) or Halloren-Kugeln (traditional chocolate confections from Halle, a GDR nostalgia symbol).

Unfortunately, these are not marginal phenomena in German academia. In Thuringia, a dissertation has been celebrated and printed in Cambridge that unceremoniously »reconstructs« an official human rights discourse in the GDR, actually labeling the GDR a »human rights dictatorship« in all seriousness.<sup>10</sup> This is all happening in an academic environment in which the GDR has long since been declared a »normality«, a dictatorship in which a »completely normal life« was possible.<sup>11</sup> No, nobody needs to have lived in a dictatorship themselves to understand that everyday life – yes, especially everyday life! – is shaped by the dictatorship, and that people’s behavior is also decisively influenced by it. Strangely enough, this knowledge of the GDR seems to be on the decline. Perhaps the oral history method doesn’t really help here either, because as is well known, memories change and say little about the past, but a great deal about perception in the present.

However, it is not really about knowledge, but about assumptions that are theoretically and practically based. It is about: Freedom versus lack of freedom. Democracy versus dictatorship. These are and remain the great opposites. The battle is being fought more fiercely than was even remotely usual in Europe and Germany after 1989–1991. But for some years now, war has been raging in the real sense (Russia is acting brutally and with totalitarian intent both internally and externally) and in the battle of opinions in the figurative sense in Germany too. The AfD and Sahra Wagenknecht’s alliance represent political movements that want to abolish the principles of the Basic Law. In the midst of these inner-German battles, it is always about the GDR and East Germany. The farther the GDR recedes into the past, the cozier, warmer, and more harmonious this murderous, wall-building totalitarian state appears in memory. In February 2024, a book was shortlisted for the Leipzig Book Fair’s (Germany’s major literary prize) non-fiction prize, which is also universally acclaimed and was even named »German Non-Fiction Book« of the year. The question of why comes to mind. Because the

book is so grandiose and convincing or because it blurs the boundaries between dictatorship and democracy, freedom and lack of freedom and even declares the people from the GDR to be the better democrats in the end? The book does not come from an academic outsider, but from the first (and only) East German to be awarded a chair in contemporary history in Germany (Bielefeld), who has rapidly moved up into every reasonably important committee and editorial collective in German historical scholarship and has now been offered the codirectorship of one of the most important institutes for contemporary history, the Leibniz Center for Contemporary History Potsdam. Christina Morina is a highly committed historian who has by no means worked quietly on her career in an ivory tower. She occasionally speaks out in public, never with a strong thesis or even questioning her academic milieu in the slightest—she knows what she can and cannot do in order to make a point, but she is always stimulating. She has also written great books on the memory of »Stalingrad« in Germany and on the »invention of Marxism«<sup>12</sup>. In her new book, she manages to bring democracy and dictatorship, freedom and lack of freedom in Germany into one concept: »stories of democratic claims« are the GDR and the Federal Republic. She seems to have missed the fact that the SED did not have this claim. As a »new type of party«, it commanded the »dictatorship of the proletariat« according to the principles of »democratic centralism«.<sup>13</sup> Not even the SED itself concealed the dictatorial character of its regime. Scholars should be able to deconstruct the fact that it spoke of a higher form of democracy and tried to teach this to all inmates with its omnipresent ideological constant bombardment. Christina Morina fails to do this and adopts an inaccurate self-portrayal of the regime. Instead, she parallels the Federal Republic, the GDR and a united Germany and levels out the difference between petitions in the GDR, citizens' letters in the GDR in 1989–1990 and letters from German citizens to the Federal President before and after 1989. So what should we make of a book that deals with democracy vs. dictatorship, freedom

vs. lack of freedom (the author does not use such terms), and in which both systems are simultaneously subsumed under the term »stories of democratic claims«<sup>14?</sup>

There really are enough reasons to despair. Books like those by Oschmann, Hoyer, or Morina are the least of them. But that's my world: books and science. That's why I disagree. Polemically, sharply, uncompromisingly. Freedom is not a compromise formula, nothing that can be relativized. All or nothing. Democracy, on the other hand, is an arena for negotiation, but that does not mean that consensus is the key to every solution. Not at all in science. This book is uncompromising in that I neither relativize nor diminish freedom, but place it at the center around which everything revolves. I am certainly looking for compromises, but not at any price. Does our society possibly have a problem with this? I believe that society needs to relearn how to deal with and resolve conflicts. We don't need a consensus society, we need a society built on compromise – that is the essence of democracy and freedom.

If I were to write as angrily as Oschmann about the West, half of the East would accuse me of »betrayal« and »lack of objectivity«, as they so often do. There are corners of the East that no Westerner knows, no matter how long they have lived in the East. Every criticism of the East, of the GDR, of individual figures is rejected, full of hatred, as if at a milestone birthday party among the closest family members, the jubilee had been accused of doing something indecent years ago. And it gets worse from year to year. Day after day, hundreds of thousands of people on Facebook celebrate a GDR that never existed and that is getting better and better. It's frustrating to watch.

To many of these GDR nostalgists, I am of course a traitor. I have no idea what I'm supposed to have betrayed. At least not me. I'm somehow an East German, but I don't feel that way. I didn't feel like a GDR person either. To this day, I don't know what they mean when they talk about solidarity in everyday life and all these other