WHAT’S IN THIS FOOTNOTE? WORLD HISTORY!
COMMENT ON DONNA HARSCH’S LECTURE, WASHINGTON DC, NOVEMBER 12, 2009

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Since comments are meant to enhance a discussion rather than confirm unanimity, I have to confess that Professor Harsch’s excellent overview on some of the seminal issues of GDR history is not easy for me to comment on. I fundamentally agree with her views on the significance of the GDR for German, Communist, and Gender history, and its outstanding suitability as a test case for historical study of modern societies.

Nevertheless, when confronted with the task of countering as sweeping an argument as the one recently proposed by Hans-Ulrich Wehler, I see points of divergence. I fully share Donna Harsch’s sincere respect and veneration for this pioneer in the practice of history as a social science. I would not stand here if it were not for his books on the Kaiserreich, published 30 years ago, which were powerful both as path-breaking challenges to the dominance of positivist political history and as politically engaged statements provoking the criticism of younger generations of historians. In the concluding volume of his monumental Gesellschaftsgeschichte, Wehler’s insights and arguments are once again poignant, brilliant, but sometimes very one-sided, thus provoking criticism and partial rejection anew. I thank Hans-Ulrich Wehler for another refreshing intervention and for his well-known, almost athletic sense for the exchange of critical arguments.

But how should one criticize Wehler in this case? Like Professor Harsch, I too reject the footnote-of-world-history verdict on the GDR. I would like to do so, however, not only by claiming that the GDR is a rewarding object of social and cultural history research, but on slightly different grounds as well. Whether the GDR should be considered merely a footnote in world history is not just a matter to be debated by academic experts of German history. Wehler also speaks and writes as an engaged citizen; he is a political mind, and one should not fail to answer him on this ground as well.

But first allow me a little digression that I cannot suppress when it comes to Hans-Ulrich Wehler and the subject of footnotes, which are so dear to our craft as historians. Let’s examine what is meant
when qualifying something as “just a footnote.” Paradoxically, it is Wehler himself who by his own practice strongly undermines his claim. In the first chapter of his recent book about postwar Germany footnote number 13, for instance, which is printed as an endnote, begins at the end of page 451, then continues over two entire pages and ends in the upper third of page 454. Two and a half pages for one footnote—and this is by no means exceptional for Wehler. His footnotes are legendary; they replace whole bibliographies. They are often spiced with sarcastic, and sometimes quite unfair comments on other historians’ work. In fact, many people regard Wehler’s works as indispensable on their bookshelves just for the sake of these abundantly rich footnotes. Therefore a footnote in this Wehlerian sense is not “nothing.” It can be very substantial, and it certainly can be essential to the main text. Nevertheless, one thing is clear: In the conventional understanding, footnotes only support the main text, they are not part of it. According to Wehler, then, the GDR should not figure in the main text of world history; it is sufficient to refer to it in the margins, as a provider of supporting information and collateral polemics.

I consider this assessment to be incorrect. It reflects a specific position in recent history itself, about which Wehler is quite explicit. It is a deliberately Western, or, more precisely—and now am speaking as someone who grew up in the Western half of divided Berlin—a West German view. The telos of Wehler’s account of postwar history is the coming of age of the old Federal Republic. For him, neither unification nor the events leading up to it, including the GDR and its demise, were part of this process of maturation. In this narrative, there was and is no conception of the GDR and the Federal Republic as the two parts of a divided country. This unwillingness to integrate the openness of the German question into a retrospective narrative is by no means accidental.

Let us remember: For the old, pre-1989 Federal Republic, the existence and the nature of the East German state was always difficult to handle. For a long time, until the beginning of Ostpolitik and détente, the Federal Republic sought to deny the GDR statehood, trying to prevent its recognition by third-party states, according to the so-called Hallstein doctrine. In public communication, this denial of acknowledgment was signified symbolically by always putting the term “DDR” in quotation marks, or by avoiding the term altogether, replacing it with Ostzone, die Zone, or to speak of it as

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1 Wehler, Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte, 5: 24, 451-454.
something “over there” (drüben), a phenomenon, even a Gebilde. In West German eyes, the GDR was the epitome of Uneigentlichkeit, an unreal existence: it was not sovereign, it was obviously predicated on the presence and the warranties of the Soviet Union, it was not accepted by its citizens, and it was an artificial construct.

I think that in order to understand Wehler’s verdict, this excursion into the history the political culture of West Germany is necessary. Of course, with détente and the fundamental liberalization of the Federal Republic, it increasingly became a matter of political correctness not to refer to the DDR as Zone or to place the qualifier sogenannte (so-called) in front of it. But this shift did not indicate a recognition on the part of West Germans of the role the GDR played in co-determining the development of Federal Republic. On the contrary, for a large part of the West German population interest in the GDR decreased to the point of indifference and blatant ignorance. This indifference was reflected by the political elites who, in 1989/90 simply did not know what to do with the unexpected mass of new co-citizens in the East, even as others immediately perceived a new political “market” opening up. Interestingly, it was Social Democrats such as the Oskar Lafontaine, from the far West of the Republic and a key member of the critical intelligentsia, who grossly underestimated the emotional reserves that could still be mobilized by addressing feelings of national unity and togetherness.

It is this perception of an ephemeral, precarious existence of the GDR which does not really fit the teleology of what was expected for the further development of the Federal Republic, which, I think, invites and motivates a posthumous “footnoting” of the GDR. This freak of world history on the other side of the Zonengrenze is denied the critical importance and weight that would have been necessary to make a difference to the old Bundesrepublik and its development.

To counter this refusal of historical recognition by merely enumerating the merits of the GDR as a model case for historical inquiry is not enough. Legitimizing the place of the GDR in world history through its relevance for understanding modern history among academic historians may, on the contrary, even turn out to be a way to actually make it a footnote in the end. Someday, the GDR might be a subspecialty of specialists for German history, and nothing else.

In his critical review of the recently published anthology Erinnerungs-orte der DDR (Memory Sites of the GDR), Klaus-Dietmar Henke

raises the question of why the GDR should be remembered at all, and what aspects of it are particularly worthy of recollection. He is skeptical about the very sense of what he sees happening in this collection of short, sometimes very impressionistic essays initiated by the leading expert of East German memory culture, Martin Sabrow, from the Potsdam Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung. A canon of GDR memorabilia is created in which not only Bautzen, Die Mauer, and Die Partei, but also Die Kinderkrippe, and Die Puhdys, Das Sandmännchen, Der Trabant, and Die Platte are discussed as candidates for becoming lieux de memoire allegedly contributing to Germany’s sense of identity. (Ironically the essays of those authors who deny the suitability of their respective object for functioning as a future Erinnerungsort der DDR figure among the best of the collection.) All of these related GDR reminiscences, so Henke’s contention, will not serve as national memory sites:

The dictatorial socialism of Ulbricht and Honecker and their dysfunctional state will remain stored in the national memory of Germany in the first place because the people inhabiting it shook it off so courageously in the end. By doing so they proved that mass movements in Germany can be not only democratic, but also successful. They cleared the path to unification and thereby reconciled the nation with itself. 3

I think this remark points the way. The most important thing to remember about the GDR, which should earn it a place in the main text of world history, is the circumstances under which it ended. While listening to Professor Harsch’s presentation, I asked myself why the term “revolution” did not appear a single time (except for a reference to the Russian Revolution of 1917, which, however, is now considered an ordinary coup d’etat by the majority of experts of Soviet history)—and this in this very year, 2009, in which public debates are replete with references to the miraculous sequence of events that culminated in what have been called “revolutions” in several ways: a “peaceful” one in Germany, an even more peaceful one, namely the “Velvet Revolution” in Czechoslovakia, and a tragically bloody one—costing more than one thousand lives—in Romania.

To make a case for a respectable place for the GDR in world history, we must go beyond Henke’s remark. Not only was this the first time Germans were able to carry a democratic revolution to a successful

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end, reversing a century-old tradition of failed democratic revolu-
tions, but their actions simultaneously contributed to closing the
chapter of the history of modern dictatorships in Europe, hopefully
for the last time. Earlier German revolutions were marked by their
propensity to turn nationalist or imperialist; thus the Nazis’ rise to
power was the ultimate perversion of “revolution” in modernity. The
German revolution of 1989, by contrast, was part of a larger project
of revolutionary changes **uniting**, and not dividing the continent.
Starting as a mass revolt in Poland in the early 1980s, the revolution
was carried on as reform within the system in Hungary, and—with
being supported by **glasnost** and **perestroika** in the Soviet Union—
reached its definite point of no return with mass mobilization in
the GDR and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

To conclude, and to put this in a wider, world historical context, let me
quote the Oxford historian Timothy Garton Ash. He recently argued
that, “1989 was the best moment in European history.” But he also
added: “For it was probably the last time, at which Europe was at the
center of history. […] The **Weltgeist** is elsewhere,” namely in Asia.⁴

One may conclude: Now that the continent is more unified then ever,
and the Cold War has been overcome, Europe will lose its weight
as the center stage for international power relations and for mass
mobilizations which once ended in mass murder and destruction,
but which also brought down whole empires. Of course, this will
not make Europe a footnote in world history; rather, it will become
a highly relevant province of global history, and East Germany and
its GDR legacy will remain right at its very center.⁵ We specialists
of German contemporary history should focus on inscribing the
making of the GDR, as well as its revolutionary unmaking, into
this most recent contemporary history of Europe—and not just of
Germany.⁶ Only then it will not be so easy to dismiss the GDR as a
footnote of world history.

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⁴ Timothy Garton Ash during a debate at the Vienna Burghtheater, February 22,
2009, sponsored by the Institut für die Wissenschaft des Menschen (IWM), quoted
in Christopher Anderson, “The Best Moment in History,” iwmpost 100 (January-

⁵ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, * Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and

⁶ See Thomas Lindenber-
ger and Martin Sabrow,
“Das Findelkind der Zeitge-
schichte: Zwischen Verin-
selung und Europäisierung:
Die Zukunft der DDR-
Geschichte,” *Deutschland-