6

Between Political Coercion and Popular Expectations: Contemporary History on the Radio in the German Democratic Republic

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From today's viewpoint it might not seem an obvious choice to include an essay on East German radio in a volume on popular historiography. There is currently a boom in history, and contemporary history in particular, on TV, in museums and exhibitions and lately on the internet. If we take this as a starting point, then we can assume it to be a phenomenon of the last thirty years. That means, of course, that the German Democratic Republic (GDR), or East Germany as it is also known, was only touched by this boom in its last decade. Even more important is the fact that this boom seems to be linked to two other phenomena in particular: on the one hand, evolving consumer culture after 1945, including the media; and on the other, the transition to what is often called second modernity or postmodernity – the leaving behind of classic industrial society and its telos of modernization and ever-increasing growth. The current high visibility of history seems to be due to contemporary media which has led to an increase in individualization, pluralization and denormalization and, consequently, resulted in a sense of an insecure future; this phenomenon in turn makes people demand an increasing amount of orientation and assurance, which they seek in history (Rödder 2004). As we all know, the socialist leadership of the GDR had difficulty with consumer culture as well as the farewell to classic modernity, and on an abstract level it could be assumed that the end of the GDR might have been a result of its inability to adapt to these developments.

In the case of radio, these matters seem no less complex. Undoubtedly radio has had its share in the media saturation of the twentieth century; likewise, the medium is still much in use today and hence very popular. Yet with the rise of television and the widespread availability of records and tapes since the 1960s, the use of radio has changed fundamentally. Radio has become a casual back-

ground medium that accompanies our daily life and supplies us mainly with music, interrupted by brief snippets of news and service features presented in specific journals (Jenke 1999). But it hardly plays a role when it comes to conveying history, not even in a popular form.[1] If radio does focus on history, it is only on some non-commercial stations addressing target audiences of low numbers of listeners.

Thus it seems sensible to focus on that period in which radio was the dominant medium in the GDR; that is, the period from the end of the Second World War to the mid 1960s when TV began to take over. In the 1970s and 1980s even GDR radio increasingly developed towards the up-to-date medium we know today and, consequently, lost its political impact (Geserick 2004). As a result, history became only a marginal topic on radio programmes and was mostly left to cinema and television to address it (Beutelschmidt and Steinlein 2004; Schwab 2007).

That, however, does not answer the question of whether or not it makes sense to analyse a particular form of popular culture in the GDR. If one compares this to the major part of academic literature on media in the GDR, this question could clearly be answered negatively: there the mass media are mainly described as instruments of political propaganda that were supposed to cement the claim to power of the dictatorship. Concessions to the audience's taste were merely owed as a response to competing Western media.[2] Nevertheless there can be no doubt that references to history, and contemporary history in particular, had their impact on the East Germany's culture of history. In fact history – and not only on the radio – was so omnipresent that one might be tempted to talk about an obsession with it. This obsession obviously had little to do with the phenomena mentioned above: a second modernity – followed by an increasing demand for direction – did not emerge in the Germany of the 1950s and 1960s, nor did the GDR show any commercial structures that might have served such a demand. Thus there seems to have been a different form of popular history whose character will now be analysed.

I would like to begin with some remarks that will provide a context for radio as a medium and the general impact of entertainment and popular culture in the GDR against the background of the cold war. In the second part of the chapter I will draw upon examples from typical historical features presented on East German radio. Finally, I would like to formulate some general remarks on the relationship between acquiring and popularizing history in East Germany under the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) and how society responded to this.

Radio and Popular Culture in the GDR

In 1950, a point in time when the cold war had reached its first high, the editor-in-chief of *Neues Deutschland* explained that his paper was not meant 'to entertain people' or 'to make money'; rather, the *Neues Deutschland* was

published to lead a political struggle. He saw the paper as a 'political institution that appeared to be a paper for reasons of expedience instead of being a paper that dealt with politics for reasons of expedience'.[3] This quote describes very well what kind of press was supposed to emerge in the newly created GDR; namely, one defined by its sole and unconditioned obligation to the political aims of the Communist Party. To a certain extent this was the reversal of Marshall McLuhan's famous saying (see McLuhan and Fiore 1967): for the *Neues Deutschland* the message was the medium.

What *Neues Deutschland*'s editor Herrnstadt said about his paper could be said about radio of that period. The age of high Stalinism was characterized by a media concept which saw radio foremost as an instrument of implementing the claim to political power and reformation. This was linked to a devaluation of its entertainment function (Classen 2005). The devaluation was not a newly emerging process in 1950, but had already gone parallel to the process of socialization according to Georg Simmel – that is, the growing involvement of ever-increasing parts of the population in political processes and social discourse. The social elites, who had refused to accept anything popular since the nineteenth century, were however confronted – starting at the same time – by the fast-growing range and efficiency of exactly such offers (Stein 1984: 244–46). An increase in literacy among the population and improved methods of printing and distribution had contributed to a rapid growth in the supply of and demand for entertainment literature and theatre. This trend of extending the offer of popular forms of entertainment against the background of commercializing the public continued with the arrival of new audio-visual media in the twentieth century and gained additional momentum.

Thus, after its initially military use, radio soon developed into a public medium addressing a mass audience after the First World War. Moreover, its increased availability and the improved quality of transmission led to the development of audience preferences between the wars: beside information, entertainment caught on (Dussel 2002: 153–64). Admittedly, programme makers in Germany, where broadcasting was under state control yet masked by a façade of private enterprise, hardly gave in to this demand. Because of conservative fears of a culture dominated by the masses, radio programming in the Weimar Republic mainly focused on high culture and education (Berking 1984).

Only during the era of National Socialism did the people responsible give in to demands for easily consumable forms of more or less apolitical entertainment, though this did not only happen in broadcasting (Pater 1998; Dussel 2002: 176–243). Of course, this trend was linked with the pursuit of conveying the right politics and ideology to the body of the German people, be that subliminally or openly by broadcasting copious speeches, commentaries, newsreels and special messages. Parallel to this, in its need to legitimize itself the regime took care, especially during the Second Word Ward, that even in a state-controlled medium like radio the claim to high culture – as had been the case in

the Weimar Republic – was almost totally abandoned in favour of programmes structured to meet the demand for entertainment of the majority of the population. Entertainment, as propaganda minister Goebbels put it, was important for the war 'as it offered recreation and relief of front and home'.[4] Thus the point of departure in 1945 may be sketched as follows: whereas traditional bourgeois resentment against popular, mass culture in Germany continued to exist, a practice had emerged in the meantime that met the demand for this kind of output. This popularization first happened in the privately run media due to commercial interests; later, under the Nazis, state-controlled broadcasting also followed suit mainly for reasons of legitimizing the government.

Regarding the requests listeners had concerning radio as a medium, the end of the war and the fall of Germany in 1945 were only a partial rupture. Facing living conditions full of want and austerity, the desire for popular formats of entertainment that allowed people to leave the hardship of everyday life behind – at least for a while – had not lost its intensity.

The listeners' preferences described above, which had emerged with the rise of the medium in the 1920s, were in obvious contrast to the concept of the SED leadership cited above, a concept which primarily saw all mass media – according to Lenin's classic axiom – primarily as an instrument of political reformation. Here the media were regarded as an 'organ of democratic education of the masses' that should take into account the 'fast-growing awareness of the masses' by an 'in-depth conveying of ideological problems'. 'Work, work – education, educating oneself and educating the people' was the role of all journalists, as Hermann Axen, the member of the Central Committee in charge of the media, announced at a congress in May 1950.[5] Moreover, popular formats and preferences became generally suspicious in the GDR's attempt to distinguish itself from West Germany. Typically, anything popular was identified with America and thus with an apparently soulless non-culture. A similar interpretation could already be found in the 1920s and 1930s when – during the crisis of the Weimar Republic – America became associated with the negative impact of modernity and a field onto which were projected relevant fears; this happened even in the workers' movement (Peukert 1989: 187–89; Saldern 1996: 213–45; Maase 1997: 163–65). In the GDR of the 1950s, the traditional rejection of popular culture and outdated cultural chauvinism quite often coalesced with the increasing importance of the Soviet Union as a role model, including in the field of cultural politics, and the revolutionary pathos of socialist revolution to a very peculiar melange.[6] Only after the regime had nearly been overturned in June 1953 did it change its attitude to popular entertainment. This change could be seen in changed attitudes toward the function of radio. The observation made in the West, however, was that the new measures had been introduced in order to stabilize the system, and this held a certain truth. Nevertheless the stronger orientation towards entertainment and Western-style programmes in broadcasting remained a controversial subject in the years to come (Agde 2000).

The GDR and History

What then led to the obsession with history I mentioned above, an obsession that dominated state-sanctioned culture in the GDR over its forty years of existence? In order to understand this it is necessary to return once more to the nineteenth century and the process of socialization already referred to, a process that resulted – amongst others things – in the emergence of new dynamic public spheres and an intensification of strategies of persuasion and legitimization. This went hand in hand with a radically changed interpretation of history as a category that had already begun with the French Revolution and which was itself a result of the Enlightenment (Koselleck 1989). In fact there had been, as Assmann informs us, memory cultures in the Middle Ages and early modern era which were able to create identities and which had a stately superstructure (Assmann 1997), but only now could history become an ontological category that would include not only the past but its reflexive interpretation as well (Koselleck 1997: 89–90). In modernity, given the divergence of the 'horizon of experience and expectations' (ibid.), history became a universal leitmotif in which experience and expectations, past and future, could merge; that is, which was characterized by its dimension of historical philosophy which distinguished it from previous interpretations. History itself now gained the status of an omnipotent transcendental power; or, to use Foucault's words, history constituted its own discourse.

The adoption of an affirmative historical philosophy, of the idea of a process that can be traced back to apparently clear laws, can already be found in Kant, Hegel and Fichte, on whose writings, as is commonly known, Marx and Engels based their historical materialism. Therefore Marx's and Engels's break from the idealistic tradition does not lie in a fundamental understanding of history as an ontological process that follows fixed laws. On the contrary: what has been exchanged are merely the principles which seem to push the process of history forwards. Instead of ideas or the 'spirit' of the world – as Hegel has it – now economic conditions become the driving forces of law-bound historic processes. The dialectics of the struggle of distributing material resources, the class struggle, seem to abolish the drivers of history: 'The history of all societies so far is the history of class struggle' (Marx and Engels 1959: 462). Here we might add the dialectic relation of the lawful course of history on the one hand and contingency on the other: even though the development of history requires several stages of development to lead from an original society to a classless communist one, actual actors are needed in order to actively promote this process. According to Marxism-Leninism, the communists will become the carriers of an objective historic process. What becomes obvious here is the transition from an affirmative historical philosophy to a political agenda, something that is characteristic of communism.

It stands to reason that the idea of history as a law-bound category defining the past as well as the future cannot emerge without processes of secularization

and an increasing awareness of the contingency within modernity. Thus history gained the function of compensating for a loss of metaphysical assurance due to an ideology that saw itself to be rationally scientific but also atheist. This function leads to a particular way of interpreting history: 'By knowing the orderly course and destination of history, the conscience is able to reassure the reason of the world. The pathos of historical philosophy lies particularly in the fact that it can oppose the current awareness of not being reconciled, of a world marked by powerlessness and suffering' (Angehrn 1991: 106). Looking at the social upheavals of the nineteenth century and the disastrous experience of the twentieth century, the attractiveness of an interpretation of the world that allows one to reduce complexity, to establish reason and to provide direction seems to be quite obvious.

It stood to reason, then, that even the communists in the GDR relied on the explanatory model of historical materialism, a historical philosophy that had been phrased by Marx and Engels and sharpened by Lenin for the purpose of action: in the end it provided a key element of communist ideology. Yet at the same time, the case of the GDR is a special one as the 'partial' state founded in 1949 had to fight for its legitimacy from the very beginning. Firstly, there was the problem of being a partial state; indeed, the unpopular division of Germany into two states – East and West –was a problem for both Germanies. Secondly, the SED regime owed its origins to the very unpopular Soviet victors of the war rather than a proletarian revolution. Thirdly, the head of state produced massive resistance through an initially enforced course of radical social restructuring which did not take into account the social interest and condition of the majority of the population.

Against this background political instability, the effort to anchor the young state in history – that is, to give it a line of historic continuity in the sense of an 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992) – was a matter of great importance from the foundation of the state onward. Thus in the 1950s a master narrative was coined that served the purpose of establishing a myth of foundation that was interpreted by the GDR as a (preliminary) end to class struggle, one might say a communist version of the eschatological narrative of the end of history. By establishing the first socialist state on German soil and following the transfer of the means of production into the hands of the proletariat, Germany – like the Soviet Union – enjoyed the chance of becoming a society devoid of contradictions and for the first time humankind could look forward to thoroughly harmonious and happy future . Of course, here, too, the rule applied that the lawful victory of socialism was not in itself a reason to lay back and leave the future course of history to its own devices. Not only did it become important to overcome the residues of the old order in one's own country, especially the quite persistent reactionary conscience found among some, for the struggle was only half won: the Western world – and especially the western part of Germany, the Federal Republic – was, from this point of view, still stuck in a social order of bourgeois capitalism from which it had to be liberated.

From the beginning, therefore, history in the GDR was not only influenced by communist historical philosophy; to a large extent it was directly claimed by the SED regime as part of Soviet hegemony. Thus it was in large part subject to political influences and needs that did not always serve the purpose of affecting the general public.

Contemporary History on the Radio

A special emphasis of radio history programmes broadcast on the radio in the GDR was the recent past, particularly the era of the Nazi regime and fights between communists and Nazis preceding that era. Indeed these fights were understood as a dramatic culmination of class struggle, a fight for life and death, in which communism came to be victorious in the end, though there were many casualties. In the first two decades following the Second World War nearly the whole German population suffered from the dramatic impact the war had on their lives and could still vividly remember those who had played an important role. This existential experience of war shaped people's memories and perception of the then present, especially as many issues – such as prisoners of war – remained pertinent in both parts of Germany for a long time. Undoubtedly the recent past was a most suitable subject for radio programming, and tapped into a wellspring of emotion.

Quite a few radio programmes on the political situation were thus related to the experience of war and tried to utilize this collective context of experience for a productive reinterpretation of the present. One of the focal points of memory and myth was the Battle of Stalingrad and the fall of the German Sixth Army at the beginning of 1943. This battle had already been stylized by Nazi propaganda as an event of great importance, especially in the shape of myths of heroes and victims.[7] After the war Stalingrad managed to maintain its mythical status but had now became a symbol of the lost war in general. The misery of the closed-in soldiers, weakened by cold and hunger and deserted by their own leaders, intensified the German self-perception of themselves as victims of war and the Nazi regime (Kumpfmüller 1995). What additionally made Stalingrad an emotive issue was the fact that many people were personally affected: many families mourned relatives who had fallen in the battle for the city, yet due to the high number of soldiers missing in action and prisoners of war many families still hoped for a return of their relatives – a hope, however, that only rarely materialized.[8] In the post-war era the myth of Stalingrad amalgamated the collective, national tale of suffering and doom with individual mourning of the dead or uncertainty concerning the fate of missing people.

In the early years of the GDR the Battle of Stalingrad marked a mythical rupture of huge impact. There was constant reference to this mighty myth up to at least the 1960s.[9] However, the focus lay less on the German victims than on an interpretation of Stalingrad as not only the turning point of the war but also

the beginning of a new era in history, proving socialism's superiority over capitalism (Fischer 2001). This attitude can be demonstrated with the example of a feature broadcast in 1950 on the seventh anniversary of the Sixth Army's capitulation. Here the speaker, a former army doctor, reveals himself to be a member of the German community united by fate, and he tells of the moment when he himself was captured: his arrest, he told his audience, took place in 'one of the numerous bombed out basements' that were 'filled with wounded, exhausted soldiers, starved and frozen to death'.[10] Going on from this, however, he reverses this national tale of doom and sacrifice and represents it as a 'victory' which 'demonstrated the military, political and moral superiority of the Soviet people'.[11] In order to explain this change of perspective, the narrator styles his moment of capture and first encounter with a Soviet soldier as a moment of individual epiphany that initiated a process of recognition and change. Walking into Soviet imprisonment was described as a 'path into life' and as a moment of 'wonderful encouragement and power'.[12] Here we are faced with an attempt to replace the German myth of Stalingrad – one of doom and sacrifice – by a Soviet version, the national victory in the Great Fatherland War. The narrative of sacrifice becomes one of victory. Thus, the motif of individual change in the broadcast is also typical of public debate concerning the war in the first two decades of the GDR (Heimann 2000). The medium of individual biography – focusing on a personal change – served the purpose of resolving the contradictions between past and present in a harmonious manner.

Nevertheless, considerable doubt remains regarding the question of how many listeners were able to identify with this interpretation, which meant the adoption of the Soviet narrative of Stalingrad. To do so would have meant an upheaval in previous perceptions and interpretations in Germany: the defeat of Stalingrad had to be seen as a victory; the former enemies, the Soviets, would have to be seen as saviours and friends; and listeners would have had to accept the narrator's representation of his experiences. In this spirit the way into Soviet prison camps was described as a 'path into life' and as a moment of a 'wonderful encouragement and power' which 'even though it might sound rather strange ... even caught us, the beaten, defeated and totally demoralised remnants of soldiers'.[13] This kind of interpretation did not meet with a kind reception in the general public since the deep anti-Slavic and anti-communist resentments of the German population were not overcome by the end of the war. Soldiers returning from Soviet prison camps must have been largely alienated by the view painted in this broadcast.

Similar to the way in which Stalingrad became a cipher for the war and the suffering of front-line soldiers, the experience of the air battle in the GDR became condensed around the bombing of Dresden in February 1945. As with the case of Stalingrad, Dresden mainly represented the German victims: '40,000 people' had been 'murdered', '180,000 flats [were] destroyed' and '47 hospitals [and] 21 churches over 12 square kilometres had been razed to the ground'. This was the wording in a radio feature on the ninth anniversary of the bombardment in 1954.[14] The portrayal of 'meaningless and helpless victims' seemed to be self-evidently true given a city crowded by refugees and the dubious military worth of the attack 'at a point in time when the outcome of World War II had already been decided'.[15] The outstanding role Dresden played in public memory when compared to other bombed-out cities was due to the factors mentioned, but also to the city's image as the town 'of art and culture of the Baroque age', an image that was also mythically enhanced: 'The *Frauenkirche* no longer stood, no *Hofkirche* and no *Zwinger*, Dresden and its centuries of culture seemed to have been wiped out'.[16] What cannot be ignored is the nationalist undertone that more or less directly emphasized the cultural superiority of Germany.

The presumed connection between inhumanity and lack of culture among the 'Anglo-American' enemies – enemies both during and after the war – became an oft-used representation, and one which was repeated with each anniversary. This representation used old-fashioned anti-American stereotypes from the period between the wars and from the Nazi era and transferred them to the post-war American leadership of the capitalist West (Saldern 1996; Gassert 1997). The chauvinist argument about a 'lack of culture' among the 'American occupation forces' that revealed itself in murder and terror as well as in cultural ignorance seamlessly fits into the explicitly nationalist campaigns with which the SED attempted to underline its claim to the whole of Germany and to get rid of its image as a 'Russian party' (Lemke 2000). If one were to believe the propaganda of the time, the Americans did not shy away from defiling national symbols and were even prepared to blow up the rock of the *Loreley*: 'People all over the world have only one enemy: the Anglo-American war parties and their agents. They threaten our fatherland, they destroy our beautiful nature, they annihilate the soil that is our home', the deputy general manager of the *Deutschlandsender* announced on the radio in 1950.[17] Facing such appeals to patriotic feeling, Dresden functioned as a key symbol in narratives about the deliberate destruction of German cultural values and, eventually, about the anti-German politics of the West. Meanwhile, the GDR was stylized as a guarantor of universal peace in a world yet to come.

At the time the attempt to use emotionally charged myths such as Stalingrad or Dresden was not limited to the medium of radio but could also be found in the press. Due to the high degree of state control and the political norms set, especially for political features, the topics discussed and the modes of addressing them resembled each other quite strongly across different media. What was a particular feature of radio, however, was the fact that it could (seemingly) give a mode of individual address: the speaker's or writer's person could be experienced in a more sensual way because of their voice provided a higher degree of immediacy than would be possible in a written and printed text. Not only could the speaker communicate feelings by directly talking to their audience, they were less pushed into the background by the text and its content. This could lead to a certain suggestive potential, something that the Nazis, for example, attempted to utilize in their emotional enactments of a people's community and the *Führer* (Marßoleck 2001).

Many writers met the potential of the medium of radio by enriching their features with personal experiences and memories. Thus they did not only legitimate themselves as members of the German community of sacrifice and suffering, but also tried to give their accounts a special degree of credibility and validity. For example, on one anniversary of Dresden bombing one editor impressively describes how she herself experienced the bombing: searching for 'my relatives, I encountered children crying for their mothers; mothers searching for their children and fathers who, fatigued and with grimy faces ... carried away the charcoaled bodies on stretchers'.[18] The woman was not only able to deliver a credible description of things ten years after the bombing; besides her account carried particular veracity because the event was part of her biography. Similar to today's TV documentaries, historical argumentation was used for present purposes and autobiographical evidence had a special credence in history programming on the radio. It granted the speaker authority and invited the listener to identify with the victims of the events described (and with the speaker themselves). It brought the past vividly into the present.

Despite the use of such stylistic devices as autobiographical evidence that utilized the potential of the radio medium, there remain considerable doubts about how effective the interpretations of history put forward were on the audience. A reason for their failure could be the political overdetermination of mass media communication: this made it necessary to constantly align popular patterns of interpretation and myths of the immediate past to current political issues, even if such a link was not possible without ruptures or reversals of commonly held views.

In the end this resulted in a 'historical presentism'; that is, a connection of past and future in which the past is always interpreted and cited regarding its usefulness for the current political situation (Sabrow 2001: 410). The omnipresence of historic references – what I earlier referred to as the obsession with history – went hand in hand with the near total devaluation of history as something belonging to an era in its own right, something we might expect as this is already immanent in the teleology of historical materialism. The recourse to collectively shared experience, however, restricted the usefulness of revisionist or innovative interpretations of history. Sometimes it was simply not possible to weave narratives and interpretations that would serve relevant political situations.

Additionally it was mostly current issues – sometimes only current on that very day – which tended to dominate the use of historical references and analogies. This can be seen in the campaign against President Theodor Heuss when he ran for office a second time in 1954. Not only was Heuss's approval of the so-called *Ermächtigungsgesetz* ('enabling act') while a member of parliament in 1933 brought up,[19] Heuss himself was branded a new version of Hindenburg – a part of the bourgeois façade fascism had needed as camouflage from the beginning.[20] Likewise, as soon as he had won the election in 1948, the French president Charles de Gaulle was dubbed a 'fascist dictator' and an American *Gauleiter* (Nazi governor).[21] Consequently the practice of military intervention in the so-called proxy wars offered numerous reasons to accuse the 'motherland of capitalism', the West, of fascist tendencies. In 1952, for example, one broadcast claimed that 'American imperialism is adapting all features of fascism – from manipulating and terrorizing elections and the extermination of prisoners of war and inhabitants in occupied countries like Korea to establishing a kind of Gestapo and concentration camps'.[22] Quite noticeably the historical analogies drawn and the labels employed both follow the bipolar logic of the cold war.

The epithets were not only quite arbitrary, they could also change quite rapidly depending on the state of things. This was particularly the case for authors who worked on radio dramas rather than journalistic features, who suffered because it was not easy to rewrite a play at short notice so as to take into account the day's political events. Radio plays, along with musical programmes, were very popular and occupied a cultural space similar to that of the dramas, soaps and series shown on contemporary television: they offered opportunities for emotional identification with others without listeners having to leave their homes (something they had to do when going to the cinema). This was also true of historical topics: radio plays allowed for the re-witnessing of history, and radio plays with historical topics were immensely popular during the heyday of radio between the 1930s and the 1950s. However, those in charge of radio programming in the GDR were unsympathetic to the genre, and they saw drama departments as residues of bourgeois unprogressiveness because of the difficulty of aligning artistic production to political requirements at short notice. Consequently the people working in such departments were not treated with kid gloves (Wagner 1997: 41–42). Vice versa, history – and in particular contemporary history – was regarded by most authors as a political minefield due to the copious uncertainties it entailed. Indeed the archives are full of programmes that were shelved for political reasons. As a result, the GDR did not succeed in producing interesting and popular historical radio plays for a long time despite the fact that the genre enjoyed a high popularity.

Conclusion: Four Theses about the Impact of Radio in the GDR

I want to conclude by making the following four observations. Firstly, in the GDR contemporary history was a highly politicized field in which, to adopt a modern term, politically correct representations were possible. But what was broadcast was shaped less by social moods than political themes: these included the idea of the Soviet Union as the German's big friend, the rise and superiority of socialism, and such like. The content of these broadcasts could be called abstract counter-narratives that were hardly aligned with traditional and popular interpretations and narratives. In other words: the political over-determination prevented that any conveyance could be easily achieved between real-life

experience and traditional interpretation on the one hand and the new interpretations on the other.

Secondly, these new interpretations were closely related to the fact that the culture of time in the early years of the GDR was highly oriented to the future. References to history primarily served the purpose of confirming the teleological narrative of the progress of historical materialism. History was brought up time and again, but always fulfilled a functional relation to the present. As Walter Ulbricht said in 1955, without any hint of irony, 'Our historians are still far too infatuated with the past' (cited in Sabrow 2000: 227). The master narrative in the GDR up to the mid 1960s was that of the end of history, of the salvation of humankind by socialism and the GDR. As a result, the past had to be disposable, and interpretations of the past were continually adjusted to fit current political requirements. Nevertheless, this meaningful and teleological connection of past and present – a historical philosophy – bore the potential of identifying with the state.

Thirdly, it seems that those in charge lacked sensitivity and understanding of radio as a medium. In the post-war period of austerity, radio faced demands mostly for entertainment and relaxation. Listeners' letters that have been archived clearly show that the majority were not fond of political indoctrination and verbose programmes. However, according to those responsible for radio programming, that was exactly the task of the mass media: to educate and to overcome so-called 'unprogressive conscience'. Even the most popular form of historical programme, the radio play, suffered from the political climate, and it was often impossible to combine writers' creative potential and a successful narrative structure with the expectations of politics. Thus, the crucial suggestive potential radio had in the field of history - enabling listeners to re-witness historical situations by offering them exciting dramatic adaptations – was often undermined.

Fourthly, contemporary history can, following Hans Rothfels's classic definition, be seen as the epoch of contemporaries (see Rothfels 1953). That means that it is much less negotiable than, say, medieval history. People nowadays did not live through that epoch, and so it is not part of their experience. Therefore this period of time is open for multiple interpretations and diverse appropriations. The case of contemporary history is a different one: it is, to use Jan Assmann's terminology, a part of 'communicative memory' (Assmann 1997: 50–51); it remains of a time which society permanently debates and discusses because nearly everyone has their own personal memories and subjective view of things. Correspondingly it becomes very difficult to establish canonical interpretations of that time. In the controlled public sphere of the GDR, however, official and canonical narratives of history ruled in order to certify the meaningfulness of the political order.

Notes

1. Some radio stations are trying to participate in the history boom, typically by broadcasting short features on anniversaries of important events of contemporary history or on the birthdays of important people of more recent history.
2. For a similar argument, see Holzweißig (2002).
3. 'Unsere Presse – die schärfste Waffe der Partei. Referate und Diskussionsreden auf der Pressekonferenz des Parteivorstandes der SED vom 9.–10. Februar 1950 in Berlin', cited in Herrmann (1963: 39).
4. Directive on restructuring the broadcasting programme, dated 15 February 1942, cited in Klingler (1983: 70).
5. Minutes of the Broadcasting Congress held on the fifth anniversary of the founding of German Democratic Broadcasting at the press office in Berlin, 11–12 May 1950; German Broadcasting Archive Potsdam (DRA), Historisches Archiv, Bestand Schriftgut Hörfunk 1945–1952, F 201-00–00/0001: 440.
6. For the so-called debate on formalism at the fifth plenary of the Central Committee, see Jäger (1994: 34–36).
7. For example Hermann Göring, in his speech on the tenth anniversary of the capture of the German military command on 30 January 1943, made the comparison between the closed-in soldiers and heroes of Germanic mythology.
8. On the prisoners of war – of whom only 6,000 out of a total 90,000 survived – see Lehmann (1992).
9. For example, every anniversary of the capitulation (2 February) Stalingrad was a topic on the radio until the mid 1960s; whether things changed after that cannot be said as archivists mostly stopped filing programme scripts in the German Broadcasting Archive after that time.
10. Programme script for 'Tageskommentar' (author: Dr Rudolf Pallas), Berliner Rundfunk, 1 February 1950; DRA Potsdam, Historisches Archiv, Bestand Hörfunk, B 204–02–01/0511. Pallas became a prisoner of war of the Soviets in 1943 and became a member of the communist organization Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland (NKFD). In 1949 he was manager of youth radio with the Mitteldeutsche Rundfunk, Leipzig; later he held the same post Berliner Rundfunk.
11. Programme script, 'Tageskommentar' (see n.10).
12. Programme script, 'Tageskommentar'
13. Programme script 'Tageskommentar' (see n.10).
14. Programme script, 'Mit dem Stadtreporter unterwegs' (author: Susanne Drechsler), Deutschlandsender, 13 February 1954; DRA Potsdam, Historisches Archiv, Bestand Hörfunk, DS 54/231.
15. Programme script, 'Kommentar des Tages' (author: Manfred Klein), Berliner Rundfunk und Radio DDR, 13 February 1956; DRA Potsdam, Historisches Archiv, Bestand Hörfunk, BR 56/122.
16. Programme script, 'Mit dem Stadtreporter unterwegs' (see n.15).
17. Programme script, 'Kommentar des Deutschlandsenders' (author: Hermann Zilles), Deutschlandsender, 25 June 1950; DRA Potsdam, Historisches Archiv, Bestand Hörfunk, B 204-02-01/0005.
18. Programme script, 'Mit dem Stadtreporter unterwegs' (see n.15).
19. Programme script, 'Aus Deutschlands Hauptstadt' (author: Alois Landherr),

Deutschlandsender, 17 July 1954; DRA Potsdam, Historisches Archiv, Bestand Hörfunk, DS 54/1469.

20. Programme script, 'Tageskommentar' (author: Erich Selbmann), Deutschlandsender, 17 July 1954; DRA Potsdam, Historisches Archiv, Bestand Hörfunk DS 54/1472. For a similar argument, see Holzweißig (1996: S.75–106).
21. Programme script, 'Kommentar: Frisierte Demokratie' (author: Hans Hagen), Berliner Rundfunk, 10 November 1948; DRA Potsdam, Historisches Archiv, Bestand Hörfunk, B 204-02-02/0165.
22. Programme script 'Kommentar des Tages' (author: Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler), Berlin I, II und III, 8 October 1952; DRA Potsdam, Historisches Archiv, Bestand Hörfunk, B 095-00-01/0112.