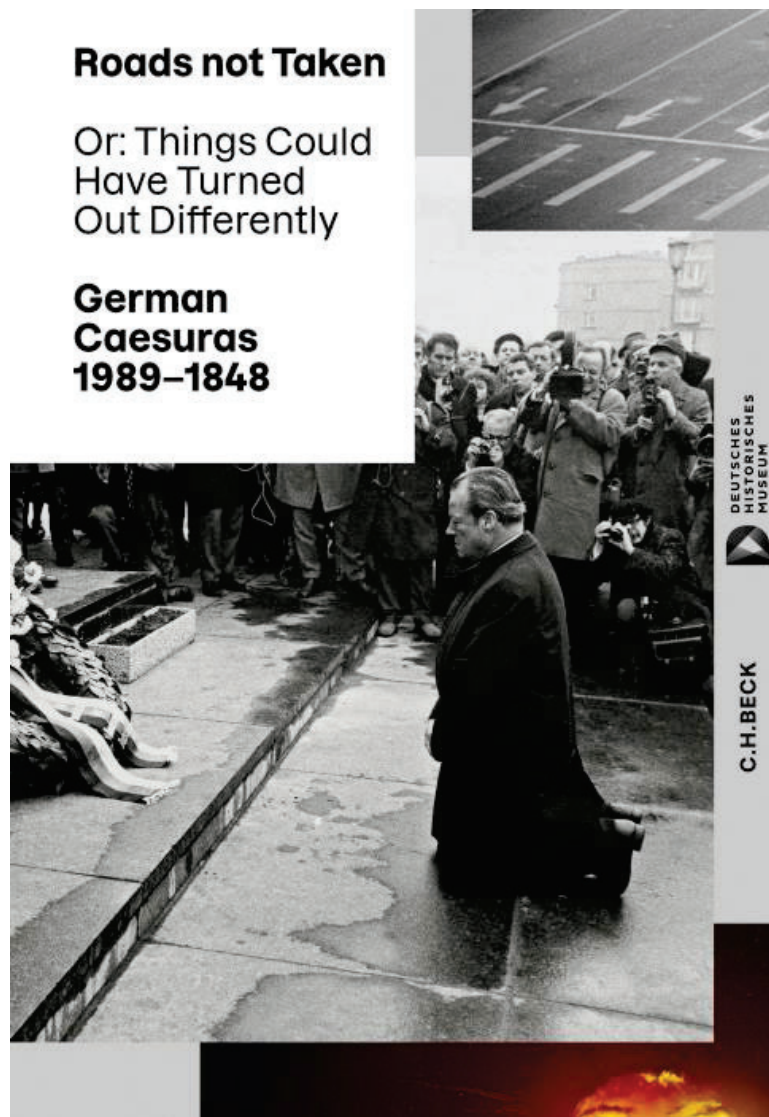


Unverkäufliche Leseprobe



Fritz Backhaus, Dan Diner et.al. Roads not Taken

Or: Things Could Have Turned Out Differently

2023. 286 S., with approx. 90 colourful illustrations
ISBN 978-3-406-80095-5

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Roads not Taken

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Or: Things Could
Have Turned
Out Differently

**German
Caesuras
1989–1848**

Edited by
Fritz Backhaus, Dan Diner,
Julia Franke, Raphael Gross,
Stefan Paul-Jacobs
and Lili Reyels

Translated by
Adam Blauhut, Brad Hagen
and Patricia Newman



DEUTSCHES
HISTORISCHES
MUSEUM

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Preface

We can safely assume that people will remember 24 February 2022 as an important date for a long time to come. If we ask what Europe, or Germany, could have done to prevent us from having to remember 24 February 2022, we are raising a question that is at the heart of our exhibition *Roads not Taken. Oder: Es hätte auch anders kommen können* and of this companion volume. When were different options available to us? At what point did an act or a failure to act lead to a critical turning point in history?

In Angela Merkel's last speech as chancellor in 2021, she addressed the fateful events of 1989 and made a point of saying that things could have turned out differently. It is precisely this idea that interests us in the exhibition. And it interests us in the same way that it did the chancellor: at certain points in history, there were other options on the table.

Raphael Gross

Indeed, many people observing the protests in East Germany in October 1989 were surprised not to see a military crackdown. After all, China had provided a historical precedent for that response just a few months earlier, and the GDR's leaders had officially expressed support for it. These expectations of a violent end to the protests are documented by an object from our collection, a sign carried during a demonstration at Alexanderplatz on 4 November 1989. Addressed to the GDR's head of state, Egon Krenz, it reads "Attention! Krenz [,] this is Heavenly Peace". Things turned out differently than expected, however.

Both the exhibition and this companion volume invite you to recall fourteen moments from nineteenth- and twentieth-century German history and ask: "Why was this particular road taken and not another?" In adopting this approach, we chose to present the public with the kinds of questions that have always occupied historians when they sit at their desks and contemplate the past. The fact that things could have turned out differently but did not is what fascinates us as historians; it is part of the essence of history.

In history books, however, little attention is paid to what could have been. And history exhibitions are certainly no better, as they typically confine themselves to what ultimately happened. We are taking a different approach, one that dares to experiment. We are showing the moments that in retrospect cause you to wonder, "Was it decisions, actions, or accidents that shaped this event? Where was the *agency*?"

This approach highlights the options that existed in particular situations. While this does make the exhibition very experimental, it also presents a way of thinking that perfectly reflects the mission of the DHM: we want people to visit the museum and think about history, and in particular, we want to help them hone their ability to judge history and form their own opinions about historical events.

When we say that there were other options on the table, what we mean is not a counterfactual retelling of history. We are interested in the moments for which we as a history museum have sources. These sources are particularly compelling when they involve materialized visions of a future that never came to pass: coins minted to commemorate events that did not happen (the crowning of an emperor, for example), or drafts of unsent documents and undelivered speeches that were created in anticipation of a possible event (the dropping of an atomic bomb, for instance).

Every visitor will experience the exhibition differently and will hopefully question the historical possibilities that we present. This is equally true, we hope, of the readers of this companion volume. It may seem paradoxical, but we want there to be discussions about other possible turning points that we have “neglected”, conversations about alternative paths and developments other than the ones we have documented. It was important to us, first of all, to select a collection of events that still have a role to play in Germany’s collective memory and that we consider relevant for the twentieth century and our present reality. To some degree, the telling of history is always subjective, and this also applies to our selection of events, which was made largely in consultation with the historian Dan Diner.

This subjective element is revealed at the very latest when we ask how an option, taken or missed, is assessed. And this assessment of options reveals the many different ways we wish that history had taken a different course. But these fantasies are not the focus of the exhibition. We are interested in history, in better understanding what actually happened – and we arrive at this understanding by looking at history against the backdrop of options that were not taken.

Our thanks go first and foremost to Dan Diner, who developed the exhibition concept and worked very closely with the team of curators who implemented it. That team, led by Fritz Backhaus, consisted of Julia Franke, Stefan Paul-Jacobs, and Lili Reyels. They were supported in their efforts to realize this unusual vision by the project assistant Dijon Menchén. At times, the team was joined by the interns Maximilian Auth and intern Tom Tschepe. I would like to thank all of our colleagues at the DHM who worked with unflagging energy to make *Roads not Taken* happen. Special thanks go to the Education and Communication Department,

headed by Stefan Bresky and staffed by Cornelius de Fallois, Marvin Keitel, Tillman Müller-Kuckelberg, Daniel Sauer, and Andreas Ziepa. The department was actively involved in the project from the beginning, developing inclusive interactive stations, creating a digital guide, and preparing an accompanying educational history booklet. Registrars Anna Gogonjan and Nina Bätzing were responsible for organizing loans. Wanda Löwe edited the contributions to this catalogue as well as the exhibition texts. An expert advisory council consisting of Moritz Epple, Jan Gerchow, Martin Schulze Wessel, and Monika Wienfort provided helpful guidance on historical matters.

We are especially grateful to the creators of the game station “Autumn 89 – On the Streets of Leipzig”. Niels Hölmer, Ulrike Kuschel, and Thabea Lintzmeyer worked under the direction of Elisabeth Breilkopf-Bruckschen and Fritz Backhaus to design and develop this interactive graphic novel about the peaceful protests of 9 October 1989.

The exhibition design was developed by chezweitz GmbH, a Berlin-based company specializing in designs for exhibitions and urban spaces. Detlef Weitz and his team succeeded in creating an engaging visual and spatial representation of a historical argument.

Nike Thurn developed the programme of events for the exhibition. Lastly, we would like to thank all of our lenders, the authors of this publication, Stefanie Hölscher of the publishing house C.H.Beck, Ilka Linz for all of her work in getting this volume ready for publication, and Joanna Katte and Torsten Köchlin for their excellent book design.

Special thanks go to the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media, Ms Claudia Roth, for her support of our institution, and to the Alfred Landecker Foundation for its financial sponsorship of this project.

Roads not Taken

Or: Things Could Have Turned Out Differently

A Talk with Dan Diner on the Exhibition Concept

Fritz Backhaus: Mr Diner, the exhibition *Roads not Taken. Oder: Es hätte auch anders kommen können* is based on a concept you developed and implemented together with the curatorial team of the Deutsches Historisches Museum. Raphael Gross, the president of the DHM, approached you with the idea of taking a closer look at the museum's central theme – German history, especially modern German history – and reflecting on ways to develop a new perspective, one that focuses on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For this purpose, you created a concept that starts at the endpoint of 1989 and moves back in time to 1848/49 in order to highlight selected breaks and turning points in German history. Hence my question at the very start: what distinguishes the representation of German history developed for this exhibition from other representations?

Dan Diner: The exhibition essentially presents an argument. And this argument is basically about the historical-philosophical question of contingency – culminating in the question of whether what happened ultimately had to happen. Was there a kind of compelling inevitability at work in German history, an inexorable force driving the country to catastrophe, from the founding of the German Empire in 1871 at the latest to 1945? And, conversely, is there a uniformly convincing explanation for the period starting in 1945 or 1949, a history – at least in West Germany – that, when viewed against the backdrop of a grim past, must be seen as exceedingly positive, as having developed favourably? A history that in 1989 extended into a unified German history?

What also motivated me was the question of whether it is enough for us today to present a past reality solely the way it happened. Wouldn't it be more illuminating and broaden our

perspective if we examined the German past – or more precisely, its historical ruptures – and asked whether the events that actually occurred were necessary and without alternative, or whether, to varying degrees there were other possibilities in each situation. Assuming there were, to what extent were contemporaries, especially those responsible for events, aware of them? The goal here is not to engage in speculative history, but to highlight those historical moments in which seeds were sown for a different outcome. This understanding and representation of history is of course beholden to the reality that was. We hold on to this reality as we would to a railing, a parapet, leaning over to peer at the realm of possibilities below – a realm that was by no means unlikely in the actual past, but never materialized. History as it actually occurred continues to provide support and keeps us from narrating a counterfactual history. In our adopted historical view of the past, we thus walk a fine line between reality, possibility, and different degrees of probability. We conjure up a historical space composed of their overlaps that becomes the actual subject of the exhibition. The purpose of this venture is to raise awareness of historical judgment, of questions relating to responsibility, the weighing of alternatives, and the conflictual decisions made in favour of one alternative over the other. Our aim is to foster the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, moral and immoral, the important and the less important. This ability ultimately enables us to judge. Our focus is thus on the virtues of judgment.

FB: Honing the ability to judge history is key here. It's the theme of the overall programme of the Deutsches Historisches Museum. In this connection, the exhibition offers a special way to reflect on history. You've selected fourteen breaks, fourteen turning points, for this reflection process. But what characterizes a turning point? And to connect this question to the present: after Russia's attack on Ukraine, Chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke of a *Zeitenwende* – loosely translated, a paradigm shift. Would you say, and this is admittedly a speculative question, that this *Zeitenwende* represents a break?

DD: Absolutely. And let's apply that thought to the past: how did people in their respective eras perceive a turning point that subsequently proved historic? People who were not looking at things in hindsight like historians, who were not required, like historians, to reconstruct events in order to determine whether something happened that was perhaps hardly noticed by contemporaries

but that turned out to be of great significance. February 24, 2022, is undoubtedly perceived as a turning point in present consciousness because something happened on that day that shook and deeply unsettled people with respect to their long-held expectations, projections, and plans for the future. That's how we define "break" today: all our life designs are upended, and our sense of certainty is undermined. It's precisely at the edge of the abyss – speaking figuratively – that the central question of the exhibition is raised: what occurred that has the characteristics of a turning point? And beyond that: what possible developments, other than those that actually occurred, lie hidden at such crossroads? Our goal is to make these hidden possibilities visible and use the tension we perceive between what actually occurred and what ultimately didn't occur as a fertile ground for exploring historical consciousness. The tension between possibility and reality is dramaturgically staged – that is, staged by means of an exhibition – to challenge the visitors' historical consciousness. Everyone visits the exhibition with some preliminary knowledge, with ideas about history that are variously complex. But the exhibition defamiliarizes the historical knowledge visitors bring with them. It's defamiliarized simply because reversing the historical space visitors traverse – the chronological sequence of events considered known – makes this knowledge seem unusual and surprising. The exhibition has been designed in reverse chronological order to make the things we expect to know seem unfamiliar, until we recognize them as familiar once again. This disorienting effect contributes to a new questioning of what is known.

FB: You mentioned the year 1989. Your exhibition concept and the exhibition itself present fourteen breaks and turning points, organized according to the possibilities hidden in past realities. Why did you choose these turning points in particular, and why does the exhibition begin with the events of 1989 and end with 1848/49?

DD: This approach is based on a classification system known as periodization – the division of history into time periods whose beginnings and ends are marked by breaks thought to possess the characteristics of turning points. If we start with 1989 and take German unification as the exhibition's starting point, the core historical content becomes visible, namely, freedom and democracy. And if we go back in time and look for a corresponding beginning, an analogous past rupture, a historical counterpoint, as it were, then 1848/49 comes to mind – the years of the failed bourgeois-democratic revolution in Germany and in German-speaking central Europe more broadly, as well as areas further to the east. Seen in this light, the start and the end of

the exhibition – 1989 and 1848/49 – enter into a kind of dialogue revolving around freedom and democracy in Germany.

FB: Exploring alternative possibilities almost automatically leads to a new view of what actually happened.

DD: Definitely. We're always caught between several possibilities, or at least between two projected possibilities. We always face a choice, whether as individuals in everyday matters or in higher spheres. Thinking in terms of possibilities is an anthropological constant for human beings. Every man and woman faces choices in life. Every human being knows what a conflicting situation means, whether on a large scale or small. Feeling one's way into historical decisions between two possibilities is thus an understandable and generally accessible approach. In this regard, the central question of the exhibition is universal, yet it's a question that German history raises in a particularly pointed way. After all, German history is considered especially catastrophic. Asking whether things had to turn out the way they did is of course not an exclusively German question, but it's certainly a very German one.

FB: The claim that things could have turned out differently leaves us with two possibilities: either a positively viewed alternative that never materialized, or a negative alternative that was avoided. You've linked the failed revolution of 1848/49 to the successful, peaceful revolution of 1989. Is German history driven by a hidden telos, a predetermined course seemingly chosen by fate? Or does the exhibition challenge this idea?

DD: The exhibition is designed to question precisely this sort of teleological idea. To use what is perhaps a lofty term for the phenomenon, which I mentioned at the very beginning of our conversation, it focuses on contingency, the unexpected, the suddenly occurring event – in other words, the opposite of what is meant by telos. It argues against the idea of the necessary occurrence of specific turning points in the course of history. German history can be divided into two major but very different phases, even if such a classification brings a slightly teleological interpretation back into the equation: the mostly negative phase of the German past that ended in 1945, and a positive phase that continued from then to the present. Our hope for the present is that it will continue in the same way, even though the turning point of 24 February 2022 heralded what was at least an interruption, if not a break.

In the current context, I'd like to offer a brief explanation, in part to provide some background on the exhibition. The events of the Russian war in and against Ukraine take us back in time – as if guided by an invisible hand – to the patterns of the first half of the twentieth century, even to those of the second half of the nineteenth century. All the categories, concepts, and analogies raised in connection with this war, including empire, nation-state, border, territory, and geopolitics, surfaced at the dawn of the twenty-first century with the disintegration of Yugoslavia. At that time, there was renewed talk of the Balkans, of a historical region, with all the related associations pointing back to the nineteenth century, pointing all the way back to Sarajevo, the trigger of the Great War, later known as the First World War. The Ukraine war in turn evokes the military geography of the Crimean War between 1853 and 1856, the world war of the nineteenth century. Thus, a turning point in the present pulls us back to a past that we long considered overcome (though only by disregarding the fundamental, revolutionary invention of the twentieth century – nuclear weapons). None of this is about repetition. It's about the return of categories, images, and interpretive contexts rooted in military geography, geopolitics, and ethnopolitics. It's about perceptual and interpretive patterns of reality that extend far beyond an individual's lifetime. While this is only a secondary focus of the exhibition, it's an important one nonetheless: strengthening a historical consciousness that will allow us to better understand our current social environment so we can act appropriately, both on an individual and a collective level. In this respect, the exhibition, which deals with German history, implicitly offers a highly topical historical view of the present and the future as well.

FB: You mention the concept of contingency, which is crucial for the exhibition – contingency, chance, the occurrence of the unexpected. In their accounts, historians generally tend to narrate history as if what ultimately happened had to happen. In contrast, you tend to emphasize contingency. How would you describe the role of contingency in long-term developments? I'm thinking of larger social, economic, and particularly ecological developments. Do you think that the idea of inexorability is overemphasized in the historical representation of structure? How are we to understand its relationship with specific events and thus with the history of events?

DD: At least in hindsight, people tend to see the moment, the suddenly occurring event, in terms of necessity, even of inevitability, out of a need for predictability and plannability. A kind of mental gravitation is at work. People are inclined to extract a deeper meaning from the coincidental, even from the trivial. And this sought-after meaning can acquire the patina of pre-determination. In this way, contingency is converted into telos. The many dots that represent various events come to form a line. This has to do with anthropology. People seek an all-encompassing explanation, which in turn provides support and orientation for the future. In German history – or more precisely, in recent German historiography – there has been a tendency to focus on structure instead of decisions – for example, in the field of social history. As a result, the historical narrative acquires a teleological twist, with an overemphasis on circumstances that are difficult for actors to navigate. Individual responsibility, especially that of leading political figures, recedes from view. In this way, actors become the agents of structures, which in turn become the historical subjects. The exhibition attempts to correct this view by emphasizing chance, contingency, and the responsibility of both individual and collective actors.

Which brings us back to the question of judgment and the power of judgment. The exhibition is designed to examine the point when an alternative appears, however likely or unlikely it may be. It places this alternative under a microscope, as it were, to examine its fine tissue and make others aware of it too. By focusing particularly on what is existential, the exhibition reintroduces the political and the conflictual into the study of history. It breathes new life into a historiographical tradition that has largely been neglected for decades.

FB: You chair the Alfred Landecker Foundation, which, against the backdrop of the catastrophe of the Holocaust, is committed to the culture of history and remembrance, the defence and strengthening of democracy, and the fight against group hatred, particularly in the digital age. For the museum, the exhibition is an important educational example of how democratic responsibility, informed judgment, and consciousness of what is existential can be presented to a broader audience. Drawing on one or two turning points as examples, can you explain such general statements?

DD: I'd like to take two examples from the entire complex. One is the appointment of Hitler as chancellor on 30 January 1933 by Reich President Paul von Hindenburg. Hindenburg's decision came as something of a surprise to the public. Not only had the aged president ruled out such an appointment, but the Nazi movement had been on the wane since the November elections in 1932. It was evident to experts at the time that the worst of the economic crisis was over, and it became clear to the broader public in the spring. Given the growing difficulties facing the Nazi movement, the Nazi press described Hitler's appointment as chancellor as a longed-for but unexpected "miracle". One alternative that never came to pass but was talked about at the time was the possibility that the armed forces would intervene. In that case, Germany would have faced two alternatives: the Führer state that ultimately came to be, or a temporary military dictatorship or authoritarian state. The choice wouldn't have been between democracy and dictatorship, but between dictatorship and dictatorship. Those judging history in retrospect will decide which was preferable.

Here's a second example: if there is such a thing as a collective unconscious, the possibility of an atomic bomb being dropped on Germany has become part of it. If the war had dragged on much longer, the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan could very well have fallen on Germany. The devastating bombs struck Japan alone because the Trinity test – the first detonation of an atomic bomb by the United States – did not take place until July 1945. The Germans had surrendered in May, so at this point the war in Europe was already over. That the war in Europe ended sooner than the Allies had pessimistically assumed probably spared Germany the bomb. And this was probably due in no small part to events such as the failed attempt by the Wehrmacht to demolish Remagen Bridge in the west, which, contrary to Allied expectations, had remained intact. As a result, from 7 March to the bridge's collapse, the US Army was able to cross the Rhine unchallenged and enter the Ruhr region – the German heartland – on 7 March. If the situation on the battlefield had developed differently, if the Battle of the Bulge in the winter of 1944/45 had been temporarily successful for the Germans, the war might have dragged on and Ludwigshafen might have become the target of a nuclear attack. None of this happened, in part because of the pressure applied by the advancing Red Army in the east. But what has remained is a fear of nuclear war that is much stronger in Germany than in other European nations. It seems to reflect something that has entered the collective unconscious as an inkling or trace of a possible yet unrealized alternative.

FB: I'd like to ask a question about another image [i.e. section of the exhibition]. The portrayal of the assassination attempt of

20 July 1944, unlike the other images, deliberately refrains from exploring different possibilities. This reflects the conceptual decision to connect the failed assassination attempt, which has all the characteristics of a coincidence, to another event – to what the Nazis called the “Final Solution” and what later became known as the “Holocaust”. What role does the Holocaust play in your reflections, and why doesn’t our exhibition show a possibility space for 20 July 1944?

DD: Yes, 20 July is an image that doesn’t explore different possibilities, and this requires explanation. After all, there is hardly any other event in the Second World War that is as closely tied to the question of “what if” as the attempt on Hitler’s life – at least from the German perspective. It’s highly likely that the conspirators of 20 July, had they been successful, would have ended the war immediately. In any case, there is much to suggest this. For Germany at the time, or more precisely, for Germans, this would have been the best possible outcome, especially considering that an unusually large number of Wehrmacht soldiers and civilians died between July 1944 and May 1945. But here we confront the limitations of historically guided moral judgment: how are we to evaluate 20 July in view of the Holocaust as an event? By the time of the attempted assassination, the series of events collectively known as the Holocaust had essentially been carried out in their entirety, and the “Final Solution” had been halted in Hungary on 7 July. After July 1944, there were certainly events, obviously part of the Holocaust, we recognize as horrific, but the genocide of European Jews had by and large already been completed. As a result, 20 July remains a distinctly German date – “German” in the sense in which the Nazis understood the term. Now, it was impossible for the exhibition organizers to refrain from assigning an image to the Holocaust. The event is too important, not only in German history and memory. But to assign it a separate image was impossible. Given the radical implementation of this past reality, what alternative event, what possibility, would have presented itself? For reasons of historical ethics and morality, then, we were obliged to connect the assassination attempt on 20 July to the Holocaust.

FB: One follow-up question for clarity: is there no single event that could be used as an example of a decision for or against the Holocaust?

DD: We could have chosen the Wannsee Conference of 20 January 1942 as a negative iconic event, but that would have reflected a false understanding of the meeting, as nothing was decided there that wasn't already underway. The Holocaust was not set in motion by a concrete political or bureaucratic decision on a specific day at a specific time, as such administrative acts are often imagined. It was part of a dynamic that gradually intensified and culminated in total industrial annihilation.

FB: In your explanations you often use the term "image", which we also work with in the exhibition. What role do you think iconic images play in historical thinking, and how do they shape historical memory?

DD: Our imagination is primarily image-based. Key events always evoke specific images. These images become iconically fixed in consciousness and cause an entire field of ideas to form around them. It's ultimately an image that acquires a meaningful character that points beyond itself. I'm not referring to images in a purely illustrative sense, of course, but to dense iconic images. This also applies to images in the form of signs, such as years, which stand for an entire field of events. Let's take the year 1933. An entire field of events has formed around it, a cluster of events that everyone has probably heard about or seen something about in the past. Visitors always bring a piece or fragment of preliminary knowledge with them without necessarily having accounted for it or having understood it themselves. They rediscover such traces of memory when viewing the images on display. These are the grains of insight around which ideas become knowledge. And something like this happens in all visitors no matter what prior information they bring with them.

FB: This brings us to the next question: to what extent will the approach taken by the exhibition provoke criticism? To what extent do you think our exhibition will spark discussion – and what will those discussions be about?

DD: I believe the answer to this question is multi-layered. One layer is that all the events presented in the exhibition, with perhaps just two exceptions, are somehow familiar – I would describe them as everyday knowledge. Some preliminary knowledge or awareness, of whatever depth, can always be assumed. Certainly, only a few people are familiar with the image of the atomic bomb, but as I've already stated, it exists in everyone as nuclear fear.

All the other images are somehow familiar and have also always caused controversy. In this regard, they run in the existing

grooves of historical consciousness and historical knowledge. The shift we see in the exhibition from reality to the margins of a factually unrealized possibility will surely offend some people. At the same time, historical thinking always explores a realm of possibility, sometimes consciously, sometimes less so. It is only from this space that a past reality can be historiographically constructed. No other approach exists. Here in the exhibition, though, the process is exposed, which brings the past reality to life in a much more dramatic fashion.

This was also a factor when selecting the historical images iconized in the exhibition. Take the image of the occupation of the Rhineland by the Wehrmacht in March 1936. This seemed far more important for the goals of the exhibition organizers than the attack on the Soviet Union, a major event that doesn't come up. As with most of the other images, the objective here was to depict the proximity of a past reality to the other possible realities that can be made out in the field of events. For example, Hitler himself described the occupation of the Rhineland as an enormous risk. If France had responded to this treaty violation by mobilizing its troops, the entire occupation would have collapsed like a house of cards. That probably would have prompted the Wehrmacht to take action against Hitler – the kind of action that had been planned in response to the Sudeten crisis of 1938 but not carried out because of Hitler's success in Munich and the British distrust of the German/Prussian military. All of this took place in the realm of possibility without becoming real itself.

FB: What's important is that the possibilities explored in the exhibition are part of a past reality. You used the evocative image of leaning over a railing to describe the process of drawing ever closer to different possibilities. In what way does this differ from counterfactual historiography, which certainly has its justification and can also be successful?

DD: "Counterfactual" means taking history in a different direction than the one that actually occurred, a direction that is then fully imagined. But the exhibition doesn't intend to narrate a different history. On the contrary, its purpose is to more clearly reveal the past by uncovering the parts and residues of other, never materialized possibilities. With this understanding of the many different possibilities that didn't occur, we confront the reality that occurred in a different way. Hence the image of the railing. The railing represents the reality that occurred, which is what we hold on to. The railing protects us from falling into nothingness and from taking a path in the wrong direction. It prevents a false interpretation of the past, a deviation from the material-

ized reality. To develop the appropriate perspective, we lean over the railing. Holding on to the reality that was and leaning into the possibility that wasn't creates the historical tension that is the goal of the exhibition.

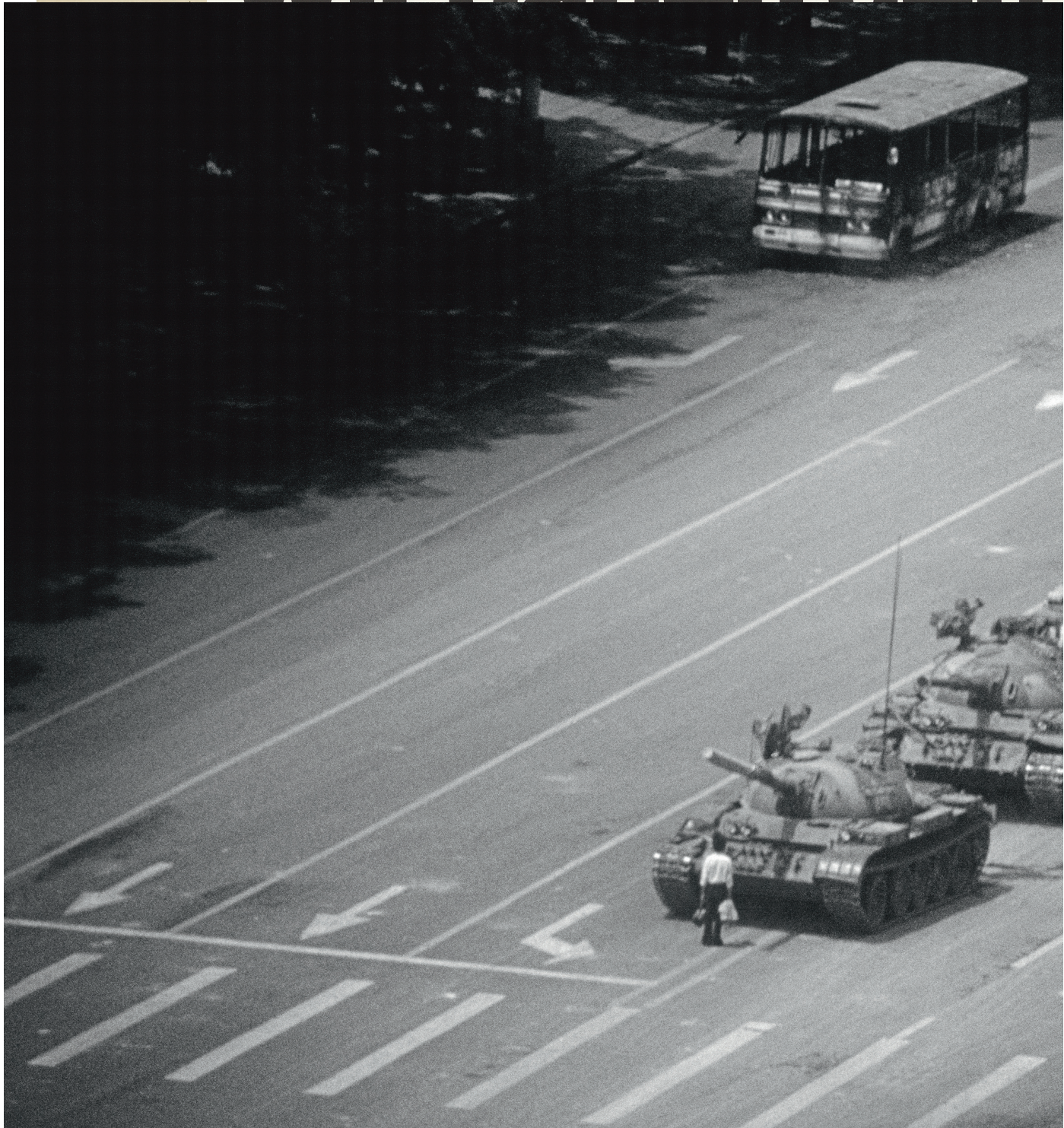
FB: Finally, a question that takes us back to the start of our conversation: why is the exhibition particularly relevant today?

DD: There are two reasons. First, we currently find ourselves on the edge of the imponderable, a position we couldn't have foreseen two years ago when we began planning the exhibition. What seemed unquestionably valid just a year ago is no longer so today. Furthermore, we are denied a view of the future, even the near, immediate future. This causes tension and uneasiness among visitors. The widespread sheltered feeling of living in a real present that will continue linearly into the future is no more. In any case, the future holds nothing known. Although this is always somehow true of the future, the number of sure things we know about it is shrinking. That's the situation in which we find ourselves today. At the same time, it has become shamefully clear that careless judgments have been made about the past, which should encourage us to approach history with a certain humility, now and always. They should put us on our guard against lightly made judgments. This is yet another realization that comes from the virtues of effective historical education.

FB: Thank you very much.

The interview was conducted by Fritz Backhaus.

Wir bauen den



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Fortschritt



1986

DEUTSCHES FRIEDENSKOMITEE



**“It’s only with persistence
and a tough stance
that we can safeguard
socialism in the GDR.”**

**Erich Mielke, Minister for State Security
and member of the National Defence
Council (quoted in *Parteiinformation der SED*,
29 September 1989)**

Stroke of Luck – Revolution What If: The Protests and Demonstrations Are Brutally Crushed

Julia Franke

In the summer of 1989, the world looked on in dismay at events in Beijing. On 3 and 4 June, the Chinese People's Liberation Army brutally dispersed the thousands of students who had been gathering for weeks in Tiananmen Square to demonstrate for freedom and democracy. Protestors, most of them students, had begun to occupy the centre of Beijing in May, demanding that the Chinese Communist Party introduce political reforms like those in the Soviet Union, Poland, and Hungary.¹ In the following weeks, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in other Chinese cities as well and were soon joined by other social groups. Attempts to resolve the conflict through dialogue failed. On 20 May, the party leadership declared martial law, and on 3 June, it ordered the military to clear Tiananmen Square – the Square of “Heavenly

Peace” – by force. Hundreds of demonstrators were killed in the crackdown, and thousands were injured.²

Could a similar scenario have played out a short time later in East Berlin, Leipzig, and other cities in the German Democratic Republic?

Shows of solidarity with the Chinese Communist Party

Unlike many other countries, which strongly condemned the massacre and in some cases imposed economic sanctions on China, the leadership of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the GDR repeatedly defended the actions of the Chinese state. On 20 April 1989, the East German nightly news programme *Aktuelle Kamera* began to sporadically cover the protests from the perspective of the Chinese leadership. On 4 June 1989, it reported on the clearing of Tiananmen Square, offering the interpretation that “counterrevolutionaries intended to overthrow the socialist order.” It did not show the now iconic footage of Tank Man, the protestor who blocked a column of tanks.

Four days later, on 8 June, the People's Chamber, the GDR's unicameral legislature and highest constitutional body, declared its support for the actions of the Chinese authorities in Tiananmen Square. SED deputy Ernst Timm announced that the Chinese state had been “forced to restore order and security with the help of armed forces.”³ Four days later, the foreign ministers of both countries met in East Berlin, and on behalf of the GDR, Oskar

Fischer expressed solidarity with the People's Republic of China and the Chinese *Brudervolk* ("brother people") in a statement to his Chinese counterpart Qian Qichen.

The events in China and the SED government's official position on them are reflected in a speech given by Margot Honecker, Minister of National Education, at the opening of the 9th Pedagogical Congress in Berlin in mid-June 1989. In her address she sent a clear message to the country's youth, demanding that they fight for socialism, even by radical means if necessary: "It's not yet time to sit back and relax. It's a time of struggle, and we need young people who can fight, who can stand up for and strengthen socialism, who can defend it in word and deed and with a weapon in their hands if necessary."⁴

The crisis/es of real existing socialism

Like the Chinese leadership, the SED was critical of the reform course set by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and opposed it to every extent possible. After being elected general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985, Gorbachev introduced economic and social reforms. The unifying element between the parties in East Berlin and Beijing was their rejection of his policies of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring), which were meant to show that state socialism could be reformed.

At the same time, in the states bordering the GDR, the communist systems had begun to disintegrate in a process that soon gripped all of East Central Europe. In the space of a few months, several state socialist regimes collapsed under the pressure of mass demonstrations and strikes. In Poland, for example, representatives of Solidarność – a trade union that was founded in 1980, subsequently banned, and was now operating underground – were invited to round table talks by the Polish government.

In the midst of these events, the crisis in the GDR came to a head. After local elections on 7 May 1989, members of the opposition succeeded for the first time in proving that the SED had committed electoral fraud. The party's already damaged reputation continued to deteriorate. Civil rights groups came together throughout the country with demands for political and social reforms. Many SED leaders were aware of the depth of the social crisis and thus of their own crisis of legitimacy. They realized that the increasingly vehement demands for democratic renewal, together with the growing number of exit applications and people fleeing the country, were a threat to the system. During the "Pan-European Picnic" at the Austrian-Hungarian border on 19 August 1989, 661 East German citizens fled across the border to Austria. During 1989 alone, around 344,000 refugees and emigrants⁵ left for the Federal Republic of Germany⁶ – even more than at the peak of the German-German refugee crisis in the 1950s.⁷ Many were young and well educated.



“Protest against the massacre in Beijing / China is not far!” Leaflet announcing a demonstration of solidarity | East Berlin, June 1989 | Print on paper; 19.6 × 28 cm | Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft/ EP09

“China is not far!”

The SED's numerous declarations of solidarity with the Chinese state and party leadership were seen as a warning, even as a direct threat, by many East Germans. It seemed entirely plausible to them that Politburo members would support military action against demonstrators in their own country. Marianne Birthler, a child and youth worker at the Protestant Church, described the tension at the time as follows: “We understood that a message was being sent in our general direction – don't take things too far! ... We were certain that something would change, but starting in June, we also knew that they might crack down hard.”⁸

Members of the opposition organized various solidarity events with the Chinese democracy movement, with whom they identified. “China is not far!”⁹ warned a leaflet announcing a protest rally against the massacre in Beijing. In several East German churches, opposition activists demonstrated against the suppression of the Chinese democracy movement – and thus against the SED's China policy – by staging a multiday drumming event. This noisy form of protest was intended not only to express



Martin Jehnichen | Demonstration on the sidelines of the Protestant Church Congress Leipzig, 9 July 1989 | Photograph | Archiv Bürgerbewegung Leipzig e. V.

grief over the victims in Beijing, but also to highlight the protesters' determination not to be cowed or silenced by the media or parliament. Those attending the events of the Protestant Church Congress in Leipzig also showed their solidarity with the Chinese democracy movement under the protection of the church. When a rock band named Herbst in Peking called on audience members to observe a moment of silence at a concert in Brandenburg an der Havel in June, it was subsequently banned from future performances.

In the summer and early autumn of 1989, it was not yet entirely clear whether the process later described as the "Peaceful Revolution" would end peacefully at all. As late as 29 September 1989, Erich Mielke, Minister for State Security and member of the National Defence Council, was convinced: "It is only with persistence and a tough stance that we can safeguard socialism in the GDR." In the same statement he acknowledged the "explosiveness" of the situation. In autumn 1989, SED leaders once again allied themselves with their Chinese comrades: in late

September, after earlier trips by Hans Modrow and Günter Schabowski, a delegation headed by Egon Krenz, deputy chairman of the State Council, flew to Beijing to attend celebrations marking the 40th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. Krenz once again assured his Chinese counterparts of the SED's solidarity and support.

The 40th anniversary of the founding of the GDR

On 7 October 1989, a few days after the celebrations in China, state and party leaders in East Germany observed the 40th anniversary of the country's founding. Because protests were expected, a security plan was put into operation after prior approval by Erich Honecker and Erich Mielke.¹⁰ As an extra precautionary measure, the National People's Army (NVA) was placed on "heightened alert" for the period of 6–9 October. In speeches at the celebrations and at the NVA parade on Karl-Marx-Allee, state leaders proclaimed the superiority of the socialist system, although in reality the country was on the verge of economic collapse.

In fact, many people in East Berlin, especially the youth, used the anniversary to demonstrate against the state. Their protest march soon swelled to several thousand people. Security forces brutally attacked both demonstrators and innocent bystanders.¹¹ Around 1,200 people were arrested and many were mistreated in custody, including local residents and members of the SED not directly involved in the protests. The West German press had come in large numbers to cover the anniversary, and their reporting gave credibility to the accounts of the released detainees. That same day, protests took place in many other East German cities as well, including Plauen, Potsdam, and Dresden. According to the historian Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, the demonstrations represented the "tipping point at which a social crisis became a crisis of dictatorial rule".¹² The political system had begun to collapse, and open revolution had broken out against the SED regime. The following day Erich Mielke demanded the systematic suppression of "hostile, oppositional, and otherwise hostile-negative rowdy forces". He also called for the Stasi to be put on "full alert": "Stasi officers permitted to bear arms must carry their service weapons with them at all times in view of the current circumstances."¹³

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