

Generational Discontinuities and the Memory of Traumatic Events: the Case of Eastern Europe with a Special Focus on Germany

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In certain contingencies, traumatic events intervene in breaking the continuity of the life of social communities or whole societies. Such events include natural catastrophes but also wars or revolutions. This article looks in particular at recollections of the Second World War.

In certain contingencies, traumatic events intervene in breaking the continuity of the life of social communities or whole societies. In the past few years I was engaged in research in several Italian communities that were hit by natural catastrophes, such as earthquakes or floods.¹ These events, some anticipated and others unexpected, can be studied as a series of processes, some short-term (emergency, help supply, temporary recovery) and others medium- or long-term (reconstruction, normalization, processing memory and communication of the disaster). In disaster communities, these processes can be studied ‘in micro’, as in a kind of laboratory. Similar processes also take place in whole societies after major discontinuities, such as wars or revolutions.

There are, of course, significant differences that should not be disregarded: ‘natural’ catastrophes are often – but not always – single events. By contrast, wars are sets of events placed in time between a beginning and an end, sometimes lasting many years. In the past, wars almost never came to an end, societies lived in a state of permanent warfare: the war between France and Britain was called the ‘Hundred Years’ War’ and lasted over a century, while the ‘Thirty Years’ War’ lasted almost one-third of a century. The First World War, following the assassination at Sarajevo, engaged armies and civilian populations for four long years. The Second World War was initiated by Hitler as a *blitzkrieg*, but lasted more than five years. The

1. For a short summary of the main findings of this project, see Cavalli (2008).

age cohorts born at the end of the nineteenth century spent a large part of their life in wartimes. Today, for probably the first time in history, 90% of the population of some European nation-states live in peace without ever having been directly involved in any war. The earthquakes and other natural disasters I investigated are more clear-cut, since these events are more or less easily and clearly located in time.

I am engaged at present in a new research endeavour which has to do with the memory of the Second World War. I am concerned with the fact that the only surviving generation of people having personal recollections of that period are those, like myself, who were children at the time and are now older men and women gradually exiting the scene.

The transition in Eastern Europe from a 'socialist' regime to capitalism and democracy was not a single event; however, a single event can be interpreted symbolically as a crucial turning point, distinguishing between a time before and a time after, like the fall of the Berlin Wall. Processes can culminate in a single event, or in a couple of events, the first marking the beginning and the second the closure, the end. In either case, processes include periods of preparation and follow-up. Traumatic events break the continuity, and my aim is to deal with discontinuity, even if one should never forget that '*historia non facit saltus*' and elements of continuity are always at work.

One important variable is the duration of the different phases of the process. A second crucial variable in memory construction seems to be the age of the individuals involved at the time the various phases of the process occurred. Childhood, adolescence, youth, early adulthood, maturity and old age are more or less clearly defined phases in the life course. In any case, it makes a difference in which phase of the life course the traumatic events occur; they have a lasting effect on the people who lived through them, but these effects vary according to the phase in the life's trajectory.

The memory of the event depends on a mixture of personal experiences, on the experience and narratives of relevant persons (parents, grandparents, older siblings, teachers and peers), and on narratives of the event by the media. Memories of traumas are social constructs. However, there is never a single memory but always a set of sometimes conflicting memories.

However defined, turning points in the history of human communities interrupt the normal course of everyday life, and as such become cornerstones of one's personal biography. In normal times personal biographies are constructed around personal events: the first day of school, a serious illness, the death of a relevant person, the promotion after taking a school course, the first date with a future spouse, the wedding, the day one was hired for the first job, or the day one was fired, the birth of a son or daughter, and so on. Sometimes, however, social events hitting one's community break through everyday life and leave a lasting mark in the biography of the people involved.

Studies on political culture suggest that when crucial political events strike during one's adolescence or youth (approximately in the life span between the ages of 12 and 18), political generations are formed, since it is in this phase that political attitudes take shape. In historical economic sociology some classical

studies have observed the effects of coming of age, of becoming an adult, in periods of severe unemployment.²

As far as I know there is not much research on the impact of social traumatic events on childhood; the topic has attracted the interest more of psychologists and psychiatrists than of historians or social scientists.

I would suggest that one should study how exposure to these events impinges upon the emotional and cognitive development of kids. This kind of exposure should be looked upon as a crucial factor in forming one's personality.

Traumas produce different effects on children's emotional life according to the degree of immediateness and/or mediation, through the emotions of relevant figures, specifically parents, and particularly mothers. Let us look a little closer at what happens in the case of earthquakes and start with very little children who were born no more than two to three years before the traumatic event. They normally don't have any memory of the period preceding the event. They probably do, however, remember some aspects of the event itself, because something happened abruptly that impacted the emotional life of the surrounding persons, producing physical damages on the bodies (including perhaps one's own) of the people present in the immediate environment, on the buildings and the landscape, disrupting everyday activities. Almost their entire childhood will be marked by a condition of permanent emergency without the possibility to distinguish at the cognitive level between normality and emergency. Children at this age become used to living in a very peculiar situation in which what surrounding people categorize as exceptional is regarded as 'normal' or 'natural'.

Conducting research in the Belice Valley in Sicily in the early 1990s, I remember having met young adults born immediately before or after the earthquake of December 1969 who had spent their entire childhood and adolescence in temporary lodgings waiting for the reconstruction of permanent dwellings. It is hard to imagine what kind of time and space conceptions these human beings could develop and what implications this experience may have had in the course of their lives. Comparing their experience with that of children born just a few years before, one can expect to find significant differences, since older children are able to remember what their life was like before the break caused by the traumatic event.

Each age cohort has a particular biographical experience in the face of discontinuities caused by external occurrences. Schooling and education may be interrupted for shorter or longer periods with consequences for future developments that are hard to estimate. Career choice and transition to working life are surely affected by unconventional trajectories due to the dramatic turbulences of the historical environment.

Traumas have a different impact at each stage of the life-cycle. In adult life they may, for example, condition decisions about having children or about if, when and where to migrate. In the case of communities involved in earthquakes, part of the population is in most cases tempted to leave its birthplace if displacement in a distant

2. The classical example is the study of the impact of the great depression on those who were later to become adults and enter the labour market: see [Elder \(1998 \[1974\]\)](#).

or near location has occurred and hopes for a decent recovery are fading. Calamities are threats to the very existence of communities and societies; how these are able to respond depends, in principle, on external and internal forces, the help and support they can get from the outside and the quality of the local leadership. In the cases studied by our research team there are instances where the traumatic event was used as an opportunity not only to recover but also to redirect the life of the community in new and innovative directions. By contrast, we also found cases where the elites complained about their adverse destiny and could only wait for and rely upon external relief of their sufferings. Sometimes fatalistic attitudes prevail, and sometimes unpredictable energies are activated. Cultural factors affecting the attitudes of the elite are here the crucial variables.

As mentioned above, at present I am collecting a series of tales of childhood memories of the Second World War of people born in the late 1930s. Some remember having assisted as kids in shootings where partisans on the one side or fascists on the other side were executed in a public square. They are able to describe in detail the scenes they have witnessed, while others talk about how their mother protected them from immediate exposure to these kinds of violent acts. Still others depict the fears in the eyes of their mothers or fathers, and some relate that they perceived that their parents tried to conceal their emotions, specifically emotions of fear, in order not to impress children with negative feelings and to protect their innocence. What I am collecting now are memories of memories, second-degree memories. Recalling something which happened a long time ago during one's childhood is certainly a 'present' act, a construction where all life experiences have left some traces. However, I find the collected tales worthwhile to work on, and in any case it would be regrettable if these memories were lost together with those holding them.

Sometimes adult people think that kids three to five years old are too immature to understand the traumatic events surrounding them. This may be true on a purely cognitive level, however it is certainly not true at the emotional level. Parents may try to protect their offspring from the ugly faces of the events occurring in their surroundings. Yet whether they try to hide their own emotions or express them freely, kids are sensitive to what happens around them. There is no way to protect children completely – what happens in the emotional environment will leave permanent, even if modifiable, traces. Children growing up in emergency situations may in later life have some difficulties distinguishing between what is normal and what is exceptional; from a subjective viewpoint, emergency is a state of mind and soul where people are in danger and tend to be alert to abrupt changes in the immediate environment. The problem is that in later life they can either take as normal what in fact is not, or on the contrary be too anxious when there are no objective reasons for anxiety. What kind of traces events leave depends, of course, on the social setting of the person's everyday life, the presence of younger or older siblings, of peers and of other relevant figures such as relatives or neighbours. In memory construction, what happens to me is almost as important as what happens to those in my inner circle. However, traumatic events disrupt, or at least heavily modify, the structures of everyday life, interrupt links and establish new solidarities, which may soon

disappear or last permanently. This is what I mean when I say that traumatic historical events intervene in shaping personal biographies. The distinction between cognition and emotion is of course problematic. However, it is very likely that childhood emotional experiences also have an enduring impact on shaping the development of cognitive categories.

I now turn to how more recent transitions are remembered in eastern European countries. If we take the fall of the Berlin Wall as the symbolic high point of a transition, I would suggest that one should not forget to ask the very trivial question: How old were you when this happened? How were you emotionally involved in what happened, in that period, in front of your eyes? Age, I underline it again and again, is a crucial variable when studying the impact of history on the emotional and cognitive development of human beings.

Western social sciences (with the obvious exception of German sociology and a few other cases) have spent little time on trying to interpret one most peculiar, extraordinary and large-scale attempt in recent European history to produce intentional social change: the incorporation of eastern German society into western German society. There are of course several studies of the collapse of 'real' socialist or communist regimes in countries which, after the war, fell into the sphere of the Soviet empire and their eventual transition to a market economy and some kind of democratic government. I have in mind, to give only one example, the contributions of Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan.³ Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, but also Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and the countries of the Caucasian area are all cases of a more or less successful and peaceful 'transition' in a rather short time span into something 'new'. Once the transition was accomplished, these countries went through different phases and processes. Some joined the European Union, but others did or could not. Some were able to speed up their economic development, while others followed at a slower pace. Some experienced interferences by old and new outside powers, and some went through periods of social disturbances and political instability. I will here focus on the case of the former GDR, since it is the case I am a little more familiar with. I cannot pretend to be in any meaningful sense an expert on East Germany. However, in the course of the last 25 years I have followed what happens in Germany because I am puzzled by cases of 'territorial dualism' when I compare them with the Italian 'Mezzogiorno'.⁴

The case of the ex-GDR differs from those of the other Eastern European countries. Here the transition had a very different meaning. It was not only a matter of redesigning social, economic and political institutions within the framework of a society already existing in the form of a nation-state, but of creating a new society by extinguishing a previous state and incorporating it into an already existing state, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).

3. I am referring to the works of Juan Linz. After having studied the transition from the Franco regime to a parliamentary democracy he turned to the study of the East European cases (Linz and Stepan 1996).

4. An outline of the research project is in Cavalli (2013).

Some commentators talk about an *Anschluss*, using this term in symbolic reference to Hitler's conquest of Austria just before the Second World War (Giacché 2014). They may not be completely wrong. However, in the eyes of many Europeans, both western and eastern, the German case appears to be a 'lucky' instance of a successful transition. Poles, Hungarians, Romanians and all other eastern peoples did not have a rich neighbour willing, without much resistance, to support a large part of the transition costs and to assume the future burden of a substantial transfer programme. Yet, only the citizens of the former GDR can say if this was good or bad luck. The latest opinion surveys show complex and clearly articulated attitudes. Those willing to turn the clock back and return to the time before 1989 are definitely a tiny minority. However, those who think the old regime also had some positive features are a slight majority, and almost two thirds of the eastern German population think that after more than 25 years there are still massive differences between the old and new *Länder*. No doubt, however, that most people in the East feel that they are now much better off than before.

Change was certainly quick and massive. Discontinuities prevailed over continuities. It was the type of change capable of producing substantial discrepancies between generations. Since the end of the war (1945) and the time of the transition (1990) lay more than 40 years, and a clear majority of the ex-GDR adult population consisted of people who did not have any direct personal experience of the Weimar Republic, National Socialism or the Second World War. They were born and lived their entire existence until the *Wende* under the communist regime, saw its positive and negative aspects, and were exposed to its ideological influence, being largely kept isolated from ideas and ways of life of western culture. For western European citizens it is hard to realize how big and rapid the 'turn' (*die Wende*) or the 'rupture' (*der Bruch*) was (Kollmorgen *et al.* 2011).

In synthesis, let us look at the different dimensions of this 'turn/rupture'.

One. The ruling class (not only the political class) was almost completely, or at least to a large extent, replaced. In the ex-GDR there was a very strong osmotic unity between the party (SED), the state administration, the management of the economic activities and other sectors of social organizations. One might say that it was a regime where pluralism was at best 'limited' and concealed within the boundaries of the structure of the party's branches. With the *Wende* an accelerated process of 'elite circulation' took place. The 'turn' produced a substantial replacement of the elites, probably at a much higher rate than in the other ex-communist countries. There are two reasons that may explain the magnitude of this replacement. First, an opposition's ruling class grew only partially and rather weakly during the regime (unlike, for example, in Poland with the rise of *Solidarnosc*). Potential opponents were either under severe control and/or had already migrated to the West. Second, there was no small share of Western managers, intellectuals, academics as well as civil servants willing to transfer themselves and their families temporarily or permanently to the East. It is difficult to assess how large this share was (there is very likely research data of which I am unaware), but it was certainly quite remarkable if one thinks of the

amount of the East German refugee population who had migrated to the West previously and was now willing to go back to their region of origin. The 'turn' certainly opened up opportunities for social mobility of which several members of the Western upper and upper-middle classes could profit. Very likely some members of the old GDR's ruling elites managed to recycle themselves in leading positions in the new situation. Continuity was probably higher in local governments. Still, the removal of the old elites was very widespread, probably more extensive than after the fall of the Nazi regime in both Germanies or with the fall of other authoritarian and totalitarian regimes (for example, Italy after Fascist rule).

In academia, the removal was to a large extent limited to historians, social scientists and philosophers. Some teachers lost their job or were transferred to less visible positions, perhaps in some remote villages, whereas in the natural and technical sciences most teachers kept their posts and salaries. We can easily understand the rationale of this differential treatment: the social sciences and the humanities were used quite heavily as tools to expand on and spread the Marxist ideology, and there was no longer any need for their services.

There may also have been occasions where some (in the West and the East) could profit, legally or not, from the chances opened up by the transition, especially in business enterprises, as we shall see presently.

Two. Almost all industrial and commercial companies which were state, public or collective property, were privatized or dismantled. The transformation of 12,000 public enterprises was entrusted to a single agency, the *Treuhandanstalt*, which within four years, from 1990 to 1994, proceeded either to the privatization (the majority of cases, 60%), the final closure (25%), the restitution to the old owners (12%) or in very few cases (3%) the assignment to local authorities. The new owners were for the most part Western citizens, willing to invest their capital to make profit but also to contribute to the development of the new territories.

The policies, activities and procedures of the *Treuhandanstalt* have been subject to intense scrutiny and debate (Behling 2015). There is a large literature on the subject that we cannot consider here. The overall effect was a sharp increase in unemployment between 1990 and 1994. The enterprises handled by the *Treuhandanstalt* lost 2.6 million jobs, and some sources say even more.

In the West and in market economies we are used to rates of unemployment which, following the alternate phases of growth and recession, are thought of as physiological or pathological. In the East German economy of the GDR, unemployment was officially non-existent and even the word was banned. Not only was the communist ideology grounded on the principle that everybody should have the right to work, but the East German economy suffered from an endemic shortage of workers in industry as well agriculture, due to the demographic decline and the strong emigration of young people to the West. The almost unexpected loss of jobs for quite a large percentage of the population (albeit balanced by welfare subsidies) fed sentiments of insecurity, displacement and fear of the future, and of unknown further developments. This also explains why there was a new wave of migration to the

West during the years immediately following the 'turn'. All waves of migration followed the political conditions of the time: very large before the building of the Wall (1961), it slowed down if not completely stopped during the following 38 years and increased again significantly after reunification until a few years ago. The latest data even show a reverse movement: migrants from western to eastern Germany outnumber those leaving the eastern regions heading west or abroad. These are, on the one hand, older people who having reached retirement age returning home or are attracted by cheaper and healthier living conditions in the less populated areas of the East, or, on the other hand, young people studying in the quite prestigious universities of Dresden, Leipzig, Halle and, of course, Berlin.

Three. In the former GDR, job security was granted not only to the male population. The consensus among observers is that gender equality in terms of access to jobs was rather highly developed. After reunification, unemployment hit both men and women, and probably more the latter than the former. On top of this, provisions for childbearing and childcare were reduced in the FRG compared with the GDR. This explains at least partially why birth rates of the East German population, already at a low level during the previous phase, dropped even further and are now among the lowest of past and present human societies.

Four. For a presumably limited share of the East German population the feelings of insecurity were further increased by housing displacement due to the fact that a number of old houses in public ownership were returned to their former owners who had left their hometown because they migrated to the West.

Five. The breakdown of the institutional framework which channelled organized social life should not be overlooked in order to understand the emotional climate following the *Wende*. The party-state (GDR-SED) cared about the everyday life of its citizens by placing them into a series of associations/organizations that it would be wrong to call 'voluntary' but that were not completely forced or compulsory either. This network was clearly designed with the aim of controlling people (the informants of the secret police, Stasi, were present in every corner of social life), but also served to meet the needs of sociability, which could not be satisfied only in the private sphere. Some of these organizations were designed for young people: all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes 'care' for their youth, both male and female, since they represent the 'new human beings whose destiny is to inhabit the future'. Some other organizations were built around the workplace, with both a semi trade union character and the aim of filling people's leisure-time. Between the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the state (the 'party-state') there was nothing comparable with what in the Western tradition we call 'civil society'. There was, however, a space of authentic sociability, an opportunity for friendships, for meetings which, next to the ritualized and bureaucratized aspects, opened up spaces for the development of forms of genuine micro-solidarity. This complex institutional architecture collapsed all at once, leaving a void which could be filled only in the course of time by forms and ways of sociability that were less imposed from above.

Six. East Germany did not deal with the country's National-Socialist past the way West Germany did. The official narrative of the communist regime interpreted fascism as one of the faces of capitalism. In this view, the Soviet Union, together with the workers' internal resistance movement, defeated fascism, whereas in the western part of Germany – that occupied by what later was called the Atlantic alliance – capitalism, and therefore also the seeds of fascism, not only managed to survive, but became more and more prosperous on the shoulders of the working class. The *Schuldfrage*, the question of the guilt for the Shoah and Auschwitz, which in the post-war period occupied many young people, intellectuals and 'normal' citizens in the West, was completely ignored or bypassed in the East. Even anti-Semitism could find a way to survive, due to the widespread belief in the intimate connections between Hebraism and capitalism.

Seven. The year 1989 not only saw the collapse of a political regime, of a planned economy, of a form of social organization built from above, it also witnessed the collapse of an ideology that allowed its believers to interpret the world and to feel they were on the 'right side' of history, on the side which would ultimately prove to be victorious. One can argue that the large majority of East Germans cannot have been supporters of the official ideology of the regime. This is probably true, but difficult to verify. It is nevertheless undeniable that the regime did enjoy mass silent support, even if the true supporters were a minority. Again, the German story is in some respects different from the story of the other Eastern countries. Berlin's workers revolted on 17 March 1953, but this cannot be compared to the Budapest uprising in 1956, the Prague Spring in 1968, or the Polish *Solidarnosc* movement a few years later. In East Germany, those opposed to the regime had the opportunity or at least the hope to go to the West (before the construction of the Berlin Wall). Among the communist satellite regimes of the Soviet Union, the East German regime was the 'less illegitimate'. Internal opposition became massive and visible only when the regime lost the protection of the Soviet Union. At that point the regime collapsed.

Some Conclusions

We can now turn to the starting question about the impact of these traits of German reunification on forming generations. We have to go back in time in order to identify in which life span and at which point in the historical development the events marking a discontinuity occurred. I am not aware of historical, sociological or political researches on this topic in Germany or elsewhere using a generational approach. It is very likely that these researches exist. It is my fault if I have not found them yet as my own research is only in the early stages. I will, however, try to formulate a hypothesis about the historical 'location' of different generations in terms of the specific experience of discontinuity in Germany.

Young people under 30 years of age, who were born after the historic turning point of 1989, don't have any direct experience of the *Wende*. What they know and feel was mediated by previous generations and the consequences, positive

and/or negative, they experienced. Very different is the experience of those who lived their childhood and early adolescence in the GDR, who were born approximately between 1975 and 1985 and are now (November 2019) aged between 34 and 44 years. This generation does have memories of experiences lived in a still immature stage of their life, but they are able to perceive clear differences between ‘now’ and ‘then’.

A third generation comprises adults born during or after the Second World War, approximately between 1945 and 1975, who are now aged between 44 and 74. These men and women lived their childhood, adolescence and early adult years entirely under the East German regime. It is the generation most heavily exposed to the events leading to the ‘turn’. To them, joining the Federal Republic has meant either coming to the ‘promised land’ from which the Eastern part of the country was forcefully kept separate for almost half a century, or the ‘fall’ into the vortex of capitalist competition.

The last living generation comprises people aged 74 or older. They have a childhood memory of the Nazi period, and the older (close to the age of 90 and more) even have some memory of what the Weimar Republic was like. The life of this segment of what may be called the ‘war generation’ is divided into three phases and three ‘transitions’, from Weimar to National Socialism, from National Socialism to communism, and from the GDR version of communism to the democracy of the Federal Republic.

These four generation are living together today, but the distance between them is in fact very great. They belong to different historical phases marked by severe traumatic events. Men and women of West Germany lived through the same historical time, but their lives were marked by a different sequence of traumatic events (Bode 2006). They ‘missed’ the trauma of 45 years of communist dictatorship; their historical consciousness faced the task of working through different experiences and different traumas. When West Germans were involved in the challenge of constructing the European Union after the trauma of the world war, East Germans, like all other East Europeans, had to face the ‘fate’ of being a satellite of the Soviet Union.

To bridge the gap between East and West in Germany it should not be overlooked that the generational cleavages in the two parts of the country will for some time to come remain quite remarkable. History is not ‘equal’ for everybody, it leaves deep traces in the experience of different generations.⁵

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5. After writing these lines I came across a (for me) new research project which I was however unable for various reasons to utilize in the final version of this paper. See Koschkar *et al.* (2016).

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