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# Political Taboos in the German Democratic Republic

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In 1971, shortly after coming into power as head of party and government in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Erich Honecker announced a new cultural policy:

> As long as one proceeds from the firm position of socialism, there can in my opinion be no taboos in the field of art and literature. This applies to questions of content as well as of style, in short to those questions which constitute what one calls artistic mastery.[1]

It would be misleading to take Honecker's famous dictum as a renunciation of the practice of tabooing. In his programmatic statement at the Fourth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei; SED) in December 1971, Honecker also made clear that a core of the taboo was to remain unchanged—all violations of the fundaments of socialism were to be tabooed in the future too. Only the periphery was open for discussion. During the following years there was thus a sweeping extension of the 'speakable'. Creative works that had been stashed in drawers were taken out again; some authors and filmmakers turned to new subjects.[2] The so-called 'golden years' of the GDR, which brought liberalization, more diversity and creativity, and public discussion, lasted for five years.[3] With the expatriation in autumn 1976 of Wolf Biermann, whose disrespectful songs had stirred the SED leader's wrath, quite a few artists came into conflict with the party. Several who had touched upon the limits of tolerance were censored, suppressed and intimidated. Some left the country desperately disappointed. Here was evidence of the continued existence of the core taboo, which had survived various transgressions.

The episode reveals much about the complexity of the regulation of language by communicative taboos in a communist dictatorship and indicates the need for a more holistic concept of political taboo that does not understand taboo as mere silencing. Taking Honecker at his word opens up a new perspective for the study of these forbidden zones. The following discussion outlines a new framework for the study of communicative taboos in repressive political regimes such as the GDR.

The cosmic metaphor of the black hole helps illustrate the 'force field' of communicative taboos. The first real image of a black hole, published in 2017, shows vortices and halos around the core.[4] Similarly, around the silenced core of the taboo, we can

[1] Erich Honecker, 4. Tagung des Zentralkomitees der SED, 17 Dec. 1971, quoted in W. Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR* (3rd edn, Berlin, 2007), p. 247.

[2] For example, Ulrich Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* (1972), and Volker Braun's *Unendliche Geschichte* (1975).

[3] It was the time of detente in Europe, of international recognition of the GDR, with highlights such as the Basic Treaty between the two German states in 1972, membership in the United Nations in 1973 and the signing of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe final accord in Helsinki in 1975.

[4] The Event Horizon Telescope Collaboration, 'First M87 Event Horizon Telescope Results: I. The Shadow of the Supermassive Black Hole', *Astrophysical Journal Letters*, 875, 1 (2019), pp. 1–17.

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observe a multifarious discourse on the thorny issue. As the following discussion demonstrates, communication in the periphery is heavily influenced by the core, and vice versa. Hence I consider it expedient to see the two as one entity and to conceive of the communicative taboo as divided into *core* and *periphery*.[5]

In a similar fashion, Foucault considers silence and speech as elements of the same discursive mechanism. In his discussion of sexuality, he describes a discursive explosion around sex and asks whether the coercive mechanisms that are required to communicate the topic indicate the comprehensive impact of a fundamental ban. Against scholars who consider the forbidden zone as outside the discourse, Foucault maintains that the ban is both constituted through the discourse and acts as an engine for the discourse.[6]

My conceptualization of the taboo as a discursive sphere that consists of core and periphery is also in accord with contemporary research on communicative taboos. Hartmut Schröder, for instance, distinguishes three kinds of communicative taboos: non-topics (topics that must not be addressed), forbidden words (words which must not be used) and labelled topics (topics that can be communicated only in a certain way).[7] While the first two constitute the core, the last corresponds to the periphery of the taboo.

With its all-pervading communist ideology promoted by the ruling SED, the GDR presents itself as a prime example for the study of taboos.[8] Eagerly defended by party officials, censors, policemen, teachers, nurses and more, politically motivated taboo topics abounded in this small country east of the Iron Curtain.[9] Unlike legally codified prohibitions, the interdiction which constitutes the taboo was often ambiguously formulated. A taboo had thus to be discerned through social interaction.

The political taboos of the GDR are different from anthropological taboos analysed by scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[10] As opposed to tabooed actions such as incest or cannibalism, political taboos have been predominantly communicative taboos. The following study is thus mainly an analysis of the contours of the unspeakable and the speakable. The main objective in silencing unwanted facts is to strengthen the dogma (one might say in analogy to anthropological research, to

[5] From a structural point of view, the dualism of core and periphery closely resembles Louis Althusser's distinction between repressive and ideological state apparatuses. Overtly repressive censorship, which is executed only as a last resort, is the equivalent of the core, and 'subconscious habituated forms of conditioning', what he calls 'ideology', corresponds to the periphery; see M. Bunn, 'Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After', *History and Theory*, 54, 1 (2015), pp. 25–44, here p. 35.

[6] M. Foucault, *Der Wille zum Wissen*: vol. 1, *Sexualität und Wahrheit* (8th edn, Frankfurt/Main, 1995), pp. 27, 40. The difference between Foucault's approach and mine is that he follows the discourse affirmatively (for him, it is most important that there is a productive discourse and this, to some extent, relativizes the 'repression thesis'), whereas I approach the taboo discourse at an angle.

[7] H. Schröder, 'Zur Kulturspezifik von Tabus: Tabus und Euphemismen in interkulturellen Kontaktsituationen', in C. Benthien and O. Gutjahr (eds), *TABU: Interkulturalität und Gender* (Munich, 2008), pp. 51–70, here p. 58.

[8] J. Kocka, 'Eine durchherrschte Gesellschaft', in H. Kaelble, J. Kocka and H. Zwahr (eds), *Sozialgeschichte der DDR* (Stuttgart, 1991), pp. 547–53.

[9] D. Boyer, 'Censorship as a Vocation: The Institutions, Practices, and Cultural Logic of Media Control in the German Democratic Republic', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 45, 3 (2003), pp. 511–45, here p. 527.

[10] For a concise summary: M. Lambek, 'Taboo', *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 24 (2nd edn, 2001), 15429–31.

increase its 'mana', that is, its supernatural power), which provides the regime with legitimacy.[11]

During the last two decades, I have studied several taboo topics, and this study boils down various case studies to an essence. I develop my ideas here with reference to three political taboos: official discourse on the betrayal of members of communist resistance groups during the Third Reich, the expulsions of up to 14 million Germans at the end of the Second World War and the uprising of 17 June 1953 in the GDR.

## I. A New Framework for the Study of Political Taboos

I am not the first to encounter the complex reality of political taboos in the GDR. Richard Millington, for instance, was confronted with paradoxical views when he interviewed East Germans about the uprising of 1953. Many interviewees remembered that the uprising was always mentioned at school but insisted that it was a taboo subject.[12] Similarly, Bill Niven came across several contemporary witnesses who claimed that the German mass flight from eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War was a taboo, and yet the topic was displayed in many East German films and novels.

Both historians have analysed how these problematic topics are represented. Millington notes that 'the short, sharp, discussion-free manner in which the subject of the uprising was officially communicated to citizens of the GDR contributed to their perception that the matter was something that ought not to be discussed further'.[13] On the one hand, Niven argues that the traumatic experience of bombing, deaths of loved ones and loss of homeland became part of official memory in the GDR. The popular TV production 'Wege übers Land' is a case in point. When broadcast for the first time in 1968, the series received great attention. It was shown at prime time and gained an astonishing viewing figure of 78 per cent.[14] In light of this exposure, it is fair to say that the topic of flight 'found a degree of expression in GDR culture'.[15] On the other hand, Niven also shows that all films and novels were subject to narrow restrictions. The representation of the expulsion was highly selective: whereas the first phase of flight was mentioned in all films discussed in his study, the second phase of ethnic cleansing was not. Moreover, the plot of 'Wege übers Land' reversed historical events: it presented the protagonist's flight as a return to the homeland, showed how the protagonist brought in

[11] H. Kraft, *Die Lust am Tabubruch* (Göttingen, 2015), p. 39. One might expect taboos to have been discussed with reference to secular religion, but as far as I can see, such has not been the case. E. Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen* (3rd edn, Munich, 1993; 1st edn, 1938); P. Burrin, 'Political Religion. The Relevance of a Concept', *History and Memory*, 9, 1–2 (1997), pp. 321–49. Some scholars note that in order to maintain a dogma, some words could not be used; see, for example, M. Kula, 'Communism as Religion', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6, 3 (2005), pp. 371–81. But a focus on discursive regimes or individual experience is lacking.

[12] R. Millington, *State, Society and Memories of the Uprising of 17 June 1953 in the GDR* (Basingstoke, 2014), p. 123.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 123–4.

[14] R. Rosenberg, I. Münz-Koenen, P. Boden and G. Gast, *Der Geist der Unruhe: 1968 im Vergleich. Wissenschaft, Literatur, Medien* (Berlin, 2000), pp. 261–2.

[15] B. Niven, 'On a Supposed Taboo: Flight and Refugees from the East in GDR Film and Television', *German Life and Letters*, 65, 2 (2012), pp. 216–36, here p. 218. For this article, I have not used Niven's book where he develops a similar line of argumentation: B. Niven, *Representations of Flight and Expulsion in East German Prose Works* (Woodbridge, 2014).

more children (instead of the frequent loss of children during the flight) and displayed life-saving Soviet soldiers (in place of rape and violence).

Niven emphasized that taboo topics could be addressed in order to debunk the supposed 'total cultural suppression' claimed elsewhere.[16] But to declare the taboo to be more or less non-existent fails to fully acknowledge that political taboos have not only tangible silencing effects but also effects within the discourse. These deflections and contortions indicate avoidance of sensitive topics.[17] The many distorted representations do not destroy the taboo; they confirm its existence.[18] By assuming that the subject was only a 'supposed taboo', Niven provides an antithesis where a synthesis is needed.

In order to acknowledge the complexity of politically motivated communicative taboos, we need a more holistic concept of 'taboo'. Therefore, this study outlines a new framework for the study of communicative taboos, particularly in repressive political regimes. Conceiving of a political taboo as a core with a periphery allows for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the social meaning of taboos. The framework I develop in this essay consists of the following elements:

1. Topography of the taboo (core, periphery)
2. Performed taboo (transgressions: what? how? who?)
3. Temporality of the taboo (changing boundaries)
4. Perception of the taboo (subjective experience).

A number of insights are to be gained from examination of the topography of taboos. Distinguishing elements that could be addressed (even indirectly) from those that could not allows for sifting out where the borderline of the forbidden zone was situated. Within the core of the taboo on the postwar expulsions was the fact that violence and law-breaking had been carried out by the Red Army of the Soviet Union, supposedly the GDR's best friend. Similarly, in the uprising of 1953, the workers had turned against the communist state that aspired to represent them.[19] Equally uncomfortable for the Party was that former members of communist resistance groups were suspected of collusion with the Gestapo.

[16] See B. Kerski, 'Die Beziehungen zwischen der DDR und Polen: Versuch einer Bilanz', in B. Kerski, A. Kotula and K. Woycicki (eds), *Zwangsverordnete Freundschaft? Die Beziehungen zwischen der DDR und Polen 1949–1990* (Osnabrück, 2003), pp. 9–25, here p. 15, mentioning the tabooing of expulsions in the GDR; H. Schultz, 'Geschichtsbilder in der deutsch-polnischen Grenzregion', *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae*, 27 (2009), pp. 319–26. P. Ther, *Deutsche und polnische Vertriebene: Gesellschaft und Vertriebenenpolitik in der SBZ/DDR und in Polen 1945–1956* (Göttingen, 1998), p. 50, considers Christa Wolf's novel *Kindheitsmuster* as the only significant breaking of the taboo. See also E. Hahn and H. H. Hahn, *Die Vertreibung im deutschen Erinnern: Legenden, Mythos, Geschichte* (Paderborn, 2010).

[17] Similar observations can be made for GDR literature. As Louis Helbig has shown, literary works that addressed flight and expulsion often imputed to expellees a 'false consciousness'; L. F. Helbig, 'Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede in Darstellungen von Flucht, Vertreibung und Eingliederung in der westlichen und östlichen Literatur Deutschlands', in M. Wille (ed.), *50 Jahre Flucht und Vertreibung* (Magdeburg, 1997), pp. 69–88, here p. 72.

[18] It is fair to say that the TV series 'Wege übers Land' aroused so much attention in the GDR not least because it touched upon a topic that was sensitive and risky, and by no means did it overcome the taboo.

[19] One might say, with reference to anthropologist Edmund Leach, that workers who rose up against the communists were tabooed because they were considered to be in an intermediate category between 'us' and 'not us'. Leach differentiates between 'tame', 'wild' and, as an intermediate category, 'game'. See E. Leach, 'Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse', *Anthrozöos*, 2, 3 (1989), pp. 151–65, here p. 159.

Analysis of the variety of communicative activities performed in the surroundings of forbidden topics and of the degree to which speech was distorted allows us to recognize the 'gravitational effects' of the core of the taboo. The manifold forms of distorted speech in the vicinity of the taboo demonstrate that bans can have productive effects on language even in regimes with tight ideological control, proscriptions and efforts at containment.[20] The great efforts to render taboo topics bearable and presentable indicate the complex fabric of official discourse even in communist dictatorships. As I will show, a plethora of linguistic devices and semantic shifts are at work in the periphery of the taboo. Moreover, the contours of the core are not static. A political taboo has a lifespan. It is established by the ruling party, becomes consolidated, can change its scope over time and may collapse at some point.

Meticulous analysis of the performed taboo and its changing appearance from a bird's-eye perspective does not suffice, however, to capture the experience of taboos. There is often a discrepancy between the catalogue of expressions and transgressions compiled by historians and the contemporary experience of the taboo. The GDR ideologues' distorted interpretations and formulations imbued the official 'public' discourse but were rarely adopted by the population.[21] The subjective perception might be distorted or exaggerated, but it needs to be taken seriously as it indicates the effects of the 'gravitational field' of the taboo.

Many scholars approach repression of free speech under the rubric of 'censorship', and predominantly analyse institutions and actors involved in bureaucratic processes.[22] Censorship in the GDR was the result of a 'clandestine play of force' (*verborgenes Kräftespiel*).[23] It was rarely a direct top-down intervention by authorities in the classical sense but instead an everyday practice of social control. An omnipresent, complex system of permanent controls 'deeply anchored in social structures' was in place.[24] This indicates the 'modern' character of institutions and practices of censorship in the GDR.[25]

[20] The same can be said about the censorship. Even in authoritarian regimes, censorship is not always and not only a procedure of repression, for it also has a creative, productive side. Matthew Bunn notes, 'The central insight of New Censorship Theory has been to recast censorship from a negative, repressive force, concerned only with prohibiting, silencing, and erasing, to a productive force that creates new forms of discourse, new forms of communication, and new genres of speech' (Bunn, 'Reimagining Repression', p. 26).

[21] Millington provides a vivid example. From fifty-seven letters written from workplace libraries and workers' reading groups to the Free German Trade Union Federation's literature and arts prize committee, only two use the official phrase 'attempted fascist-counterrevolutionary putsch'. See R. Millington, 'The Limits of Control: The "Public Discourse" about the Uprising of 17 June 1953 in Novels and Films in the German Democratic Republic', *German History*, 31, 1 (2013), pp. 42–60, here p. 57.

[22] Most of Siegfried Lokatis's publications focus on procedures rather than content. See, for example, S. Lokatis, *Verantwortliche Redaktion: Zensurwerkstätten der DDR* (Stuttgart, 2019). To some extent, this approach is also true of R. Darnton, *Die Zensoren: wie staatliche Kontrolle die Literatur beeinflusst hat. Vom vorrevolutionären Frankreich bis zur DDR* (Munich, 2016).

[23] Lokatis, *Verantwortliche Redaktion*, p. 19.

[24] S. Klötzer and S. Lokatis, 'Criticism and Censorship: Negotiating Cabaret Performance and Book Production', in K. H. Jarausch (ed.), *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York, 1999), pp. 241–63, here p. 260. It would be interesting to explore parallels to early modern societies. Cf. R. Burt, '(Un) Censoring in Detail: The Fetish of Censorship in the Early Modern Past and the Postmodern Present', in R. C. Post (ed.), *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation* (Los Angeles, 1998), pp. 17–41.

[25] S. Barck, C. Classen and T. Heimann, 'The Fettered Media: Controlling Public Debate', in Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience*, pp. 213–39.

Most studies on censorship touch upon taboo subjects but take the existence of taboos as a given, sometimes tending to consider them arbitrary or even ludicrous.[26] Often the censored content is either treated as a secondary phenomenon to censorship institutions and practice or (and this is the grievance that motivates this study) taboos are too narrowly conceived.[27] In view of these shortcomings, this study approaches censorship from a new angle. My taboo-centred approach complements and nuances the institutionalist approach, which seeks to uncover the organizing principles of censorship but often does not explore the forbidden zone thoroughly.[28]

Complementing the focus of many scholars of bureaucratic processes (*who*, *when* and *how*), this study asks not only *what* was censored and *why*, but also how contemporary witnesses perceived the taboo. I consider this approach a useful corrective as taboos are pivotal to censorship: they are both the basis and the result of it. Without a thorough examination of the potential threat of the censored content, there is a risk that censorship procedures appear as an abstract practice.

## II. Silence in the Core

At the core of tabooing there is silencing. Therefore the first question to be asked here concerns what exactly was silenced in GDR films, books and other publications such as academic journals and newspaper articles.

Let us begin with the example of traitors within the communist resistance to Nazism. Mention of former members of communist resistance groups who had betrayed their comrades during the Third Reich and had collaborated with the Gestapo threatened to undermine the 'founding myth' of the GDR, the official doctrine of heroic anti-fascism. Some historical facts were therefore completely removed from public discourse in the GDR.[29] Expungement was practised particularly in the case of the biographies of important communist leaders. The dark family secret of Horst Sindermann, head of the Volkskammer, the GDR's mock parliament, was completely silenced. The desperate attempts of Sindermann's brother Kurt to play a double game with the Gestapo—with fatal consequences, as the Nazis executed him shortly before the end of the war—remained

[26] Siegfried Lokatis writes of 'absurd' historical taboos which contradict memory ('die absurden, jeder erinnerten Erfahrung widersprechenden Tabus für den Umgang mit der unmittelbaren Vorgeschichte der DDR'), S. Lokatis, 'Entdeckungsreisen ins Leseland', in S. Lokatis, T. Rost and G. Steuer (eds), *Vom Autor zur Zensurakte: Abenteuer im Leseland DDR* (Halle, 2014), pp. 11–16, here p. 13.

[27] Reichardt discusses the content of censorship extensively, but she focuses on the ideological norm (the equivalent of 'mana') rather than on the taboo. A.-K. Reichardt, 'Die Zensur belletristischer Literatur in der DDR', in I. Bock (ed.), *Scharf überwachte Kommunikation: Zensursysteme in Ost(mittel)europa (1960er–1980er Jahre)* (Münster, 2011), pp. 363–446.

[28] As a result of the downward delegation of censorship, tabooing became an almost daily routine in the GDR. Therefore, proposes Dominic Boyer, 'the actual practice of censorship in the GDR looked a great deal like the endless minute queries of professional editing than summary interdiction' (Boyer, 'Censorship', p. 537). That superficial view is only possible in my view if the perceived taboo is disregarded.

[29] Here Douglas's anthropological insight that the goal of tabooing is to contain dangerous 'dirt' can be adjusted to the dictatorial context. M. Douglas, 'Concepts. Taboo', *New Society* (12 Mar. 1964), pp. 24–5. 'Dirt is essentially disorder', states the anthropologist Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger* [London, 1966], p. 2). There is clearly a communist obsession with purges. With anthropological research in mind, we can ask, what kind of dirt threatened the purity of communist ideology?

top secret in the GDR.[30] Even Kurt Sindermann's name was taboo. Although a radio documentary by the West Berlin radio station RIAS broadcast on 2 March 1970 provoked a secret investigation by the Stasi, this mention of Kurt Sindermann in the West remained an isolated incident of transgression and did not damage the taboo within the GDR.[31] Likewise, the tragic story of Theodor Winter, son-in-law of the GDR's first president, Wilhelm Pieck, who was dropped from a Soviet plane on a subversive mission but failed in that mission and succumbed to Gestapo pressure, was kept secret.[32] Instead, official SED historiography presented Winter as an unfaltering hero.[33]

The most prominent example of silencing concerns Ernst Thälmann, who had become head of the Communist Party of Germany in 1925.[34] In order that he might be presented as an infallible and far-sighted politician, his reputation had to remain untarnished. Schoolbooks, films and academic texts emphasized that Thälmann resolutely withstood the Nazis' invitation to become a traitor.[35] This detail unintentionally indicated that other communists were less heroic. One such example is Thälmann's close friend and member of the Politburo Wilhelm Hein. As a result of his treacherous collaboration with the police, Hein was excluded from the Communist Party of Germany in 1934.[36] In the GDR, the former leading communist literally vanished from sight: he was airbrushed out of a photograph showing him alongside Thälmann at a rally a few days before Hitler came to power.[37] In a similar way, mention of Thälmann's former secretary Alfred Kattner, who had worked as a Gestapo informant and was killed by a communist in 1934, was avoided in public.[38] Not only Kattner's name but also the

[30] C. Voigt, 'Kurt Sindermann; als kommunistischer V-Mann in den Fängen der Dresdner Gestapo', in C. Pieper, M. Schmeitzner and G. Naser (eds), *Braune Karrieren: Dresdner Täter und Akteure im Nationalsozialismus* (Dresden, 2012), pp. 94–8, here p. 97.

[31] Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (MfS), Hauptabteilung IX, Information, 10.6.1970 (Bundesarchiv Stasi-Unterlagen, MfS, HA IX, no. 22375, fol. 69–74).

[32] P. Erler, 'Militärische Kommandounternehmen: deutsche Polit-Emigranten als sowjetische Fallschirmagenten und Partisanen 1941 bis 1945', *Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat*, 8 (2000), pp. 79–101, here p. 95.

[33] 'Theodor Winter', *Deutsche Widerstandskämpfer 1933–1945: Biographien und Briefe*, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1970), pp. 424–6, here p. 426; E. Döhler, 'Theodor Winter', in K. H. Jahnke (ed.), *In einer Front: junge Deutsche an der Seite der Sowjetunion im Großen Vaterländischen Krieg* (Berlin 1986), pp. 206–29.

[34] Although Thälmann was not able to contribute significantly to the resistance against the Nazis because he was arrested in March 1933 and kept in solitary confinement until his execution in 1944, the SED made him a symbolic figure of the anti-fascist resistance movement. The cult of Thälmann became part of the historical myth purporting that the Communist Party was the only German party that had provided organized opposition to Hitler's fascism from start to finish. See A. Leo, 'Thälmann-Kult kontra Antifaschismus', in J. Danyel (ed.), *Die geteilte Vergangenheit* (Berlin, 1995), pp. 205–11.

[35] R. Börrnert, 'Ernst Thälmann als Leitfigur der kommunistischen Erziehung in der DDR' (PhD Thesis, Technische Universität Brauschweig, 2002).

[36] A. Herbst, '"Ich bin mir keiner parteifeindlichen Handlung bewusst …" Anmerkungen zur Biografie des KPD Spitzenfunktionärs Wilhelm Hein', *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* (2016), pp. 1–18.

[37] T. Gabelmann [Egon Grübel], *Thälmann ist niemals gefallen? Eine Legende stirbt* (Berlin 1996), p. 71. Another traitor, Herbert Lübbers, a paid Gestapo informant who was in on the secret operation to free Thälmann from prison, was not mentioned at all in the GDR. Not even the fact that Lübbers had accused Thälmann's daughter Irma of having revealed the names of communists involved in the planned liberation (in order to obfuscate that it was he who betrayed them) provoked a reaction in East Germany; this slander was simply ignored. See Gabelmann, *Thälmann*, pp. 177–81.

[38] One exception: *Neues Deutschland*, the official party newspaper, printed an interview with West German social democrat and former communist Herbert Wehner, who mentioned Kattner's name (but not his assassination). H. Wehner, 'Nazis waren mit Hindenburgs Hilfe an die Macht gekommen', *Neues Deutschland* (31 Jan. 1983), p. 5.

name of his murderer, Hans Schwarz, remained a secret in the GDR.[39] There were multiple reasons for silencing Kattner's murder. While the communists rejected 'individual terror' officially, knowledge of the assassination could have raised suspicions that communists had implemented it in secret. Thälmann's reputation was also at stake. Among the documents kept strictly confidential was a secret message from the communist leader that could be read as encouraging Kattner's elimination.[40]

On the taboo topic of the postwar expulsions, there were also several unwanted historical truths. The ruling communists of the GDR almost completely silenced issues such as the violence and mass rape conducted by Soviet soldiers, atrocities committed by Czech and Polish militias, and the controversial 'Beneš decrees', which cast doubt on the friendship of the GDR with Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.[41]

In order to avoid any allusion to the questionable legal basis for the expulsions, the expellees in GDR films—unlike expellees in reality—never voiced a wish to return. This is a striking example of denial. Many expellees wanted to return to the lost territories. In the early 1950s in particular, a large number of refugees did not accept the territorial loss in the East.[42] Unofficial networks operated and mass gatherings took place.[43] The well-organized and powerful protest on 17 June 1953 in Görlitz, a town on the Polish border, was to a great extent organized and supported by a large faction of expellees.[44] Where East German films addressed the expellees' loss of home, they quasi-neutered their homesickness through the apodictic prohibition on questioning the status quo.

Realities of the 1953 uprising that could not be mentioned included that the SED's New Course, secretly ordered by Moscow communists, had created a state of uncertainty and confusion in the days before the uprising; the uprising began as a spontaneous workers' revolt; construction workers in Berlin went on strike on 16 June because the government had ignored their economic demands; strikes and demonstrations on 17 June took place not only in Berlin but in 700 towns and villages; most of the protesters were neither fascists nor Western agents; the power of the SED could only be restored with Soviet tanks; and Western powers and the West German government were taken by surprise and had temporized and attempted to de-escalate the situation, contrary to communist propaganda that declared that 17 June had been welcomed as the long awaited 'Day X' of a capitalist takeover.

[39] The memoirs of Heinrich Fomferra indicate that this omission was intentional. While Fomferra mentions Schwarz in the unpublished manuscript, in the published version he points out only once that he had a companion-in-arms, without further explanation. Cf. H. Fomferra, 'Wie ich Politkommissar einer slowakischen Partisaneneinheit wurde', in H. Voßke (ed.), *Im Kampf bewährt: Erinnerungen deutscher Genossen an den antifaschistischen Widerstand von 1933 bis 1945* (Berlin, 1969), pp. 601–14; Heinrich Fomferra, Erinnerungen, II. Teil, 22.8.1962 (Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv Berlin [henceforth SAPMO-BArch], SgY 30/1275/1, fol. 58–180, see 84).

[40] Gabelmann, *Thälmann*, p. 97.

[41] Soviet soldiers raped some 1.9 million German women between December 1944 and December 1945; see B. Johr, 'Die Ereignisse in Zahlen', in H. Sander and B. Johr (eds), *BeFreier und BeFreite: Krieg, Vergewaltigung, Kinder* (Frankfurt/Main, 2005), pp. 46–73.

[42] See the opinion polls cited in Ther, *Deutsche und polnische Vertriebene*, p. 246.

[43] Most notably in the zoo at Halle (Saale) in 1951 and 1953, with 2,000 participants respectively; see A. Kossert, *Kalte Heimat: die Geschichte der deutschen Vertriebenen nach 1945* (Munich, 2008), pp. 220, 222.

[44] M. Lammert, *Die Stadt der Vertriebenen, Görlitz 1945–1953* (Görlitz, 2012).

All of these facts were embarrassing truths for the 'Workers' and Peasants' State' of the GDR and they were therefore mostly silenced. Moreover, we also find 'naming taboos', a classic phenomenon in linguistic taboo research: thus the date 17 June 1953 was deliberately not used in *Neues Deutschland*, the official newspaper of the SED, a practice also adopted by some authors.

## III. Discursive Strategies at the Periphery

Despite the many examples of the truth being withheld, the silencing of taboo topics was far from complete. A plethora of speech acts are evident, even though the taboo topic could only be raised in a distorted, restricted and controlled way. Various linguistic effects can be observed. The following list contains the principal communicative strategies used to neutralize the dangerous issue of betrayal in communist resistance groups during the Third Reich. It sketches a spectrum of effects on speech used to adumbrate taboo topics in the periphery.[45]

*Negative Stereotypes.* Communist informants for the Gestapo were called 'Dreigroschenjungs' (literally: Three-Penny-Boys, alleging that they betrayed their comrades for money) or 'Werkzeuge' (literally: tools, suggesting a lack of own will). We find such language in the fictional TV series 'Hans Beimler, Kamerad' (1969), which portrays the alcohol-dependent, mercenary traitor Henschel.[46] Such negative clichés were widely used in official publications.

*Insinuation.* Instead of naming traitors and addressing the details, the seminal book on the Leipzig-based Schumann-Engert-Kresse resistance group merely alluded to an 'extensive spy network' (*umfangreicher Spitzelapparat*).[47]

*Pars pro toto.* Gestapo informant Ernst Rambow was no doubt guilty of having betrayed the large resistance network under the leadership of Anton Saefkow, Franz Jacob and Bernhard Bästlein in Berlin to the Gestapo in 1944. However, the accusations raised against Rambow after the war exaggerated his guilt. As Regina Scheer has noted, at least two other Gestapo informants were involved, and confessions forced from arrested members of the resistance group also contributed to the Gestapo's investigative work.[48]

*Reframing.* In 1959, in a study of the communist resistance network in Hamburg that appeared in a monograph series edited by the leading historiographical institution of

[45] Scholars of contemporary communicative taboos have identified a range of rhetorical devices used to communicate taboos in Western societies that are not easily transferred to a dictatorial context. This set of rhetorical strategies includes silence, ellipsis, abbreviation, euphemism, clichés, vagueness, insinuation, circumlocution, metaphor, conversion and remodelling.

[46] L. Skrowronski, 'Die politische Struktur der fiktionalen Geschichtssendung am Beispiel von "Hans Beimler, Kamerad"', in U. Schwab (ed.), *Fiktionale Geschichtssendungen im DDR-Fernsehen: Einblicke in eine Forschungsgebiet* (Leipzig, 2007), pp. 67–106, here p. 75.

[47] I. Krause, *Die Schumann-Engert-Kresse-Gruppe* (Berlin, 1960), p. 69.

[48] R. Scheer, 'Rambow: Spuren von Verfolgung und Verrat', *Dachauer Hefte*, 10, 10 (1994), pp. 191–213.

the GDR, the Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, author Ursula Hochmuth spoke of the 'Bästlein-Jacob-Abshagen group'.[49] Bernhard Bästlein and Franz Jacob were certainly the leading figures of that organization, but Robert Abshagen was only temporarily involved, with another communist, Oskar Reinke, more significant. The fact that the East German publication focused on Abshagen instead of Reinke (unlike a West German study by Hans-Robert Buck) can be explained by Reinke's extensive confessions to the Gestapo and suspicions that he had betrayed many comrades.[50]

*Externalization.* Many studies by East German historians described betrayal in terms of infiltration by the Gestapo and claimed that traitors came into the party from outside.[51] A prominent example is a publication by Walter Ulbricht from 1955 that attributed the tragic failure of three communist resistance groups to betrayal that was akin to denunciation, without mentioning that the traitors were in most cases former communists.[52] The same strategy of detaching traitors from their communist background was used for Ernst Rambow, who had betrayed the leaders of the Saefkow group in Berlin. The SED claimed that the Gestapo had used him as a tool to infiltrate the party and concealed his long-term membership of the Communist Party since 1920, as well as the fact that it was his reputation as a 'cunning old bird', gained over two decades of communist struggle, which had made him eligible to be security staff for the illegal group.[53]

The strategy of externalization most likely played a role in the SED's decisions on whether to discuss betrayal in public. The prominent role of Gestapo informant Alfred Sitter in Erich Haberlandt's memoirs, published in 1981, might have been emphasized because Sitter had lived in West Germany since 1956 as a police officer.[54] Likewise, Ursula Hochmuth (alias Puls) did not fail to mention in her study on communist resistance in Hamburg that all Gestapo informants 'nowadays live as blameless citizens in the Federal Republic of Germany'.[55]

*Whitewashing.* Although accusations and condemnation dominated the communist discourse on betrayal, whitewashing also occurred, particularly in fiction publications.

[49] U. Puls, *Die Bästlein-Jacob-Abshagen-Gruppe: Bericht über den antifaschistischen Widerstandskampf in Hamburg und an der Wasserkante während des zweiten Weltkrieges* (Berlin, 1959). The author was West German communist Ursula Hochmuth, who studied and lived in the GDR temporarily, and used the alias Ursula Puls for this publication. K. Jacob, *Widerstand war mir nicht in die Wiege gelegt* (Hamburg, 2000), p. 258.

[50] H.-R. Buck, *Der kommunistische Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus in Hamburg, 1933 bis 1945* (Munich, 1969), pp. 1–2.

[51] K. Kühn, *Die letzte Runde* (Berlin and Potsdam, 1949), p. 33; E. Köhn, 'Der Weg zur Gründung des Nationalkomitees "Freies Deutschland" in Leipzig: das Ringen der Kommunisten um die Durchsetzung der Strategie und Taktik der KPD in der Leipziger Widerstandsorganisation, 1939–1944', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 13, 1 (1965), pp. 18–35, here p. 18.

[52] W. Ulbricht, *Zur Geschichte der neuesten Zeit: die Niederlage Hitlerdeutschlands und die Schaffung der antifaschistisch-demokratischen Ordnung*, vol. 1.1 (Berlin, 1955), pp. 24, 29.

[53] Grete Schöneck, Aussage zum Fall Hermann Rambo[w], Berlin, 30.7.1945 (Bundesarchiv [BArch], NY 4072/143, Bl. 91); Für Genossen Dahlem, 14.9.1946 (SAPMO–BArch, DY 30/IV 2/11/v. 3126).

[54] W. Mensing, 'Alfred S.: eine Nachrichtendienstkarriere zwischen KPD, Gestapo und Staatssicherheit', *Zeitgeschichte*, 40, 6 (2013), pp. 358–69.

[55] Puls, *Die Bästlein-Jacob-Abshagen-Gruppe*, pp. 98–102.

Rambow's betrayal is part of Emil Greulich's novel *Keiner wird als Held geboren* (No One Is Born a Hero). In the book, the product of an initiative by the Free German Youth and promoted by the state, the traitor 'Gerhard' performs an act of contrition and commits suicide when the Gestapo arrests Saefkow and his comrades.[56]

*Replacement*. The assassination of Alfred Kattner provides a striking example of replacement, with his murder concealed by a focus on another incident that took place the same day. On the evening of 1 February 1934, the Gestapo carted away four arrested communists, John Schehr, Eugen Schönhaar, Erich Steinfurth and Rudolf Schwarz, from its Berlin headquarters to a forest between Berlin and Potsdam, where the four men were executed. In the GDR, this murder was one of the best-known episodes of communist suffering under the Nazi regime. Erich Weinert's poem 'John Schehr und Genossen' (John Schehr and Comrades) became part of the school curriculum. Pupils had to learn it by heart and write essays on its topic. Proletarian-revolutionary author Weinert, who had written this poem shortly after the assassination, adopted a black-and-white scheme: here were the nameless fascist murderers, and there were the clear-sighted but powerless communists. The nightmarish tableau does not explain why the communists were killed and attributes the murder only to the arbitrary brutality of the Nazi regime. It was one of the best-kept secrets in the GDR, however, that the assassination was in fact an act of retaliation: on the morning of the same day, the communist Hans Schwarz had killed Kattner.

It was not only East German school pupils who were left with a half-truth. The official party historiography presented two other motives in order to obscure the real cause. It argued that John Schehr was shot because he failed to buckle under Nazi pressure while imprisoned. It also misleadingly speculated that the murder of the four leading communists was a reprisal for the outcome of the Reichstag fire trial, which had ended with the acquittal of all the communist defendants.[57] This striking example highlights the close link between silencing and ideology, which can be understood as equivalents of 'taboo' and 'mana'. Silencing and propaganda acted in unison. With the promotion of Weinert's poem, the SED staged a deceptive performance around the killings that endured right up to the end of the GDR, with only occasional transgressions.[58]

The list clearly shows that there was a vivid discourse on the periphery of the taboo. And this discourse was not always marginal. Some incidents of betrayal within the Communist Party during the phase of heroic resistance in Nazi Germany were directly addressed in textbooks. One such example is Wilhelm Knöchel's collaboration with the Gestapo. Knöchel had been sent to the Third Reich in 1942 to re-establish the German Communist Party within the country. After his arrest he proposed a questionable arrangement with the Gestapo, offering to serve as an agent provocateur in

[56] E. R. Greulich, *Keiner wird als Held geboren* (Berlin, 1961), pp. 434–5.

[57] Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim Zentralkomitee der SED (ed.), *Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 5 (Berlin, 1966), p. 30; O. Winzer, *Zwölf Jahre Kampf gegen Faschismus und Krieg: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands, 1933 bis 1945* (Berlin, 1955), p. 55; E. Kücklich, 'Mitarbeiter und Kampfgefährte Ernst Thälmanns. John Schehr', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung*, 16, 2 (1974), pp. 290–7.

[58] Kattner is mentioned, for instance (with the wrong first name), in R. Engel, *Feinde und Freunde* (Berlin, 1984), pp. 53–4, 57–9.

order to identify communists in the Dutch underground, presumably with a hidden agenda of enabling his escape. That proposal, even though never realized, was a clear violation of party discipline. The SED leadership explicitly endorsed the condemnation of Knöchel (and another comrade who caved in to the Gestapo) in the official history of the working class.[59] The odd traitor even surfaced in schoolbooks, most notably Ernst Torgler, former head of the communist faction in the Reichstag who later collaborated with Goebbels's propaganda ministry.[60] Another striking example is the abovementioned book by Ursula Hochmuth (alias Puls) on the large communist resistance network in Hamburg during the Second World War—the slim book names a number of traitors and Gestapo informants such as Heinrich Wiatrek, Walter Gollmik, Georg Pannek, Karl Köhler and Herbert Lübbers.

Comparing betrayals by members of communist resistance groups with the other two taboo subjects under study here generates a number of parallels. Linguistic devices and semantic shifts used by East German authors and filmmakers in order to communicate the taboo subjects of the postwar expulsions and the 1953 uprising are not identical with the above findings, but they cover a very similar spectrum.

*Euphemisms.* Regarding the refugees, the term *Vertriebener* (expellee), which was widely used in West Germany, was like a red rag to a bull in East Germany, and the SED coined a new word in order to camouflage the violent and disputed process of expulsion. The euphemism *Umsiedler* (literally: resettler) became the official term for German refugees from eastern Europe in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the GDR.[61] Other terms such as *Neubürger* (new citizen) and *Flüchtling* (refugee) were sometimes used as well, but the West German term *Vertriebener* was understood as tantamount to 'revanchist'.[62] Notably, the restrictive language regime coincided with a general ban on any kind of expellee organization in the GDR.

*Indirect Allusion.* Some authors referred to 17 June 1953 only vaguely—Eduard Claudius wrote of 'that morning when strikes broke out in the fields' and Christoph Hein of 'that day when the tanks came'. However, as Richard Millington shows, many other authors did mention the date explicitly, and even Claudius and Hein combined their vague allusions with hard facts in the form of mention of strikes and tanks.[63] Indirect allusions can also be found in films on expulsions. As Bill Niven has noted, in one film the depiction of the rape of an *Umsiedler* by 'wrapping it in speculation or imprecise allusion' did not obscure the episode entirely.[64]

[59] K. Mammach and G. Nitzsche, 'Zum antifaschistischen Kampf der KPD in den Jahren von 1939 bis 1941', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, 13, 6 (1971), pp. 911–35, here pp. 931–2; Autorenkollektiv unter Leitung von Wolfgang Schumann und Karl Drechsler (eds), *Deutschland im zweiten Weltkrieg*, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1976), p. 563.

[60] *Geschichte. Lehrbuch für Klasse 9* (2nd edn, Berlin, 1970), p. 162.

[61] Ther, *Deutsche und polnische Vertriebene*, pp. 91–2.

[62] In Burridge's classification, this is the linguistic strategy of analogy, a 'semantic shift of existing words'; see K. Burridge, 'Taboo Words', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Word* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 270–283, here pp. 275, 283.

[63] Millington, 'Limits of Control', pp. 49–50.

[64] Niven, 'On a Supposed Taboo', p. 234.

*Part-for-whole Substitutions.* While a number of GDR films showed the mass flight at the end of the war, they did not depict the expulsions that followed.[65] As a result, only one half of the complex historical process of flight and expulsion was referred to in East German films. Such substitutions of the whole by one part can be considered signs of a taboo.[66] Similarly, the misinterpretation that suggested the uprising of 17 June 1953 was instigated by fascists or Western provocateurs allowed a peripheral and inconsequential aspect to stand for the whole, as the uprising was mainly organized by East German workers. In the days after the uprising, the SED press presented either supposed fascists such as Erna Dorn or Westernized youth as the ringleaders of the revolt, but in reality these groups did not contribute significantly to the protest.[67]

*Reframing.* Efforts to reinterpret the historical situations of both 1945 and 1953 reached as far as outright denial of the truth. In reframing the 1953 uprising as a fascist putsch, the SED endeavoured to conceal the true motivations of the protesters and the dynamics of the unrest. They were successful to a considerable degree. A number of writers courageously dared to address the uprising that took place in June 1953, but almost all of them bowed to the official line that it was a fascist, or at least counter-revolutionary, coup attempt. Nobody in the GDR used the historically more appropriate notions of an 'uprising' by 'the workers' or 'the people'.

The SED also linked flight and expulsion to the Nazi past. The mass flight was justified as a consequence of the war the Third Reich had provoked and then conducted with previously unseen barbarity. Although this position was valid, partly because the flight had been ordered and forced in many cases by Nazi officials, the subsequent expulsions followed their own dynamics. Adequate discussion of these events would have required mentioning Soviet, Polish and Czech chicaneries and atrocities, which was neither desirable nor possible for East Germany, a 'model pupil' of the Soviet bloc.

*Externalization.* In a process similar to reframing, the SED deployed externalization as a strategy, particularly in regards to the events of 1953. Instead of acknowledging its own failures and the East German workers as the driving force, the SED accused the West of having instigated the uprising.

*Whitewashing.* The treatment of flight and expulsion provides a vivid example of this form of misrepresentation. Hundreds of thousands of Germans were maltreated and raped by Soviet soldiers at the end of the war. The mass rape could be addressed in GDR films and novels only indirectly, so by implication, or as an unsubstantiated rumour. Authors who mentioned it directly were censored.[68] Soviet soldiers were always

[65] The same is true for GDR literature; see K. Hartleb, *Flucht und Vertreibung: ein Tabuthema in der DDR-Literatur?* (Marburg, 2011), p. 126.

[66] K. Burridge, 'Euphemism and Language Change: The Sixth and Seventh Ages', *Lexis: Journal in English Lexicology*, 7 (2012), issue title: 'Euphemism as a Word-Formation Process', https://doi.org/10.4000/lexis.355, p. 73.

[67] The accusation that the uprising was driven by a fascist agenda delivered a knock-out blow as East German authors wanted by no means to appear to be supporting fascists. See Millington, 'Limits of Control', p. 48.

[68] We can take as an example the draft of the third volume of Erwin Strittmatter's novel *Der Wundertäter* (1980), where he mentions the rape of a 17-year-old girl by three Soviet soldiers, as a result of which the girl dies; see

portrayed as kind-hearted and helpful, particularly in connection with the flight, to the point of outright manipulation of the facts.[69]

*Replacement.* A few unrealistic narratives, such as those of a fascist (or counter-revolutionary) putsch in 1953 and of suffering refugees supported by friendly Soviet soldiers, and the dominant portrayal of expellees as well-integrated citizens of the GDR can be considered strategies of replacement, used to conceal unwanted truths and to protect the core of the taboo.

To sum up, various language effects highlight that as a result of the censoring power of the 'black hole', thorny issues could be approached only vaguely, if at all.[70] Therefore, the crucial issue is not *that* these facts were exposed to some degree but *how* they were mentioned. Some effects involved linguistic modifications (changes of language), others comprised semantic shifts (changes of meaning).[71] Linguistic effects mainly influenced forms of expression, such as strategies of polite language, including euphemism and remodelling, but the few instances were of minor importance when it came to taboo communication in the GDR. By contrast, most of the effects observed were semantic alterations, which did not merely modify the wording but changed the meaning significantly. More important than the linguistic device itself was the final outcome. In both cases, the resulting narrative was a grossly distorted representation of the past, with tangible effects on the population, as one of Millington's interviewees remembered: the uprising of 1953 'was always presented as an attempted fascist putsch, and everyone knew that that wasn't true. Because of that, we did not talk about it in public'.[72]

## IV. Temporality: The Performed Taboo

Taboos are deliberately created and perpetuated by political interests. They are established incrementally, enter a plateau phase, and can be weakened later on. Their shape, with core and periphery, can change over time. Taboos need to be performed, and during this performance they can be modified. Let us take as an example the taboo on rape committed by Soviet soldiers at the end of the Second World War. Despite

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Lokatis, *Verantwortliche Redaktion*, p. 199. Or chapter seventeen of Christa Wolf's novel *Kindheitsmuster* (1976), where rape is referred to only indirectly; see B. Dahlke, '"Frau komm!" Vergewaltigungen 1945—zur Geschichte eines Diskurses', in B. Dahlke, M. Langermann and T. Taterka (eds), *LiteraturGesellschaft DDR: Kanonkämpfe und ihre Geschichte(n)* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 2000), pp. 275–311, here p. 306.

[69] According to Dahlke, the silencing of the experience of rape was at the centre of collective memory in the GDR, as Christoph Hein's short story 'Die Vergewaltigung' encapsulates; see Dahlke, '"Frau komm!"', pp. 280, 304. The taboo on the cruelty of Soviet soldiers and the rape of German women at the end of the war existed in the Soviet Union too; see I. Bock, '"Unser ganzes System ideologischer Arbeit muss wie ein gut eingespieltes Orchester agieren": Zensur in der UdSSR und der CSSR', in Bock, *Scharf überwachte Kommunikation*, pp. 31–207, here p. 169.

[70] This is presumably what Bunn had in mind when he mentioned the role of censors in 'advancing a novel vocabulary designed to control the dangers posed by language' (Bunn, 'Reimagining Repression', p. 42).

[71] For a discussion of taboo language see K. Allan and K. Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (Cambridge and New York, 2006), chap. 1.

[72] Millington, *State, Society and Memories*, p. 124.

official denial, the fact of the rape was given expression in semi-public fora in 1948, but even then, party officials denied the suffering of thousands of women and belittled their rape.[73] Ten years later, the banning of the second volume of Boris Djacenko's novel *Herz und Asche* (Heart and Ash) signalled the full implementation of the taboo. During the Honecker era, authors such as Christa Wolf, Erwin Strittmatter and Werner Heiduczek tested the boundaries of the taboo.[74]

The uprising of 1953 remained a focus for the press in the GDR under Ulbricht (even though the historical events as such slipped out of sight). Only during the Honecker era did mention of even the date in official newspapers become a taboo.[75] Similarly, the reach of the taboo on expulsions changed over time. A strict ban came into being during the Stalinization of the GDR up to 1953 and existed until the mid-1970s.[76] During the Honecker era, however, expulsions became a frequent topic in GDR literature.[77]

These observations regarding the dynamic interrelationship of core and periphery corroborate my assertion that silence in the core and discourse in the periphery are closely intertwined and therefore complementary parts of the communicative taboo. The boundary between core and periphery is a matter for negotiation. While being performed, taboos change their shape and reach.

These changes over time are not entirely compatible with the cosmic analogy. While the matter swallowed by the cosmic black hole disappears, the core of the taboo swallows a great deal but still preserves the forbidden words, ideas and facts.[78] Tabooing does not make the problematic matter disappear, and banned ideas and expressions can reappear in a new historical context.[79]

## V. The Perceived Taboo

Meticulous research can spot the details of this dynamic performance of taboos and reveals much about the temporality of taboos. But historical analysis is not always

[73] A functionary downplayed mass rape as (a) exceptional incidents, (b) a result of the initiative of women and (c) the lesser evil (making children as opposed to killing children); see S. Satjukow and R. Gries, '*Bankerte!*' *Besatzungskinder in Deutschland nach 1945* (Frankfurt/Main and New York, 2015), p. 327.

[74] Dahlke, '"Frau komm!"', pp. 281, 287, 300.

[75] B. Eisenfeld, I.-S. Kowalczuk and E. Neubert, *Die verdrängte Revolution: der Platz des 17. Juni 1953 in der deutschen Geschichte* (Bremen, 2004), pp. 313–14.

[76] Ther, *Deutsche und polnische Vertriebene*, p. 251.

[77] Hartleb, *Flucht und Vertreibung*, pp. 39–41. Ursula Höntsch-Harendt's novel *Wir Flüchtlingskinder* (1985) was a particular caesura; see Helbig, 'Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede', pp. 83–4; Kossert, *Kalte Heimat*, pp. 290–300. Another significant breaking of the taboo was the publication of interviews with expellees in 1988; see T. Grimm (ed.), 'Umsiedler 45', *Temperamente—Blätter für junge Literatur*, 3 (1988), pp. 41–55.

[78] As opposed to the understanding of taboos as absolute bans. For example, Simona Popescu recorded, 'Censorship in Romania possessed all the mystery of the black holes in outer space. The deep, troubled waters of cultural bureaucracy could swallow any book, leaving no trace of it at all', cited in L. Vianu (ed.), *Censorship in Romania* (Budapest, 1998), pp. 225–8, here p. 225.

[79] A. Hahn, 'Kanonisierungsstile', in A. and J. Assmann (eds), *Kanon und Zensur: Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation II* (Munich, 1987), pp. 28–37, here p. 29: 'Grundsätzlich erwächst daraus auch stets die Chance, auf bereits Verurteiltes in neuen Situationen wieder zurückzukommen'. The focus of Hahn's essay is, however, canonization, not tabooing.

congruent with the experience of contemporary witnesses.[80] Millington has shown that several East German writers moved beyond the official party line on the geographical scale of the uprising of 1953 by mentioning huge protests beyond Berlin. Others qualified the SED's claim that the instigators of the strikes were only fascists or Western agents and alluded to the fact that workers had their own reasons for joining the demonstrations.[81] But despite these efforts, Millington found that 'although it was certainly taboo to mention details that contradicted the Party's official account, citizens were apparently under the misapprehension that the entire subject, including the official version, was taboo'.[82]

In my view, the discrepancy between the performed taboo and the way it was experienced is crucial. Recognizing an exaggerated perception of a taboo as a 'misapprehension' does not take us to the underlying cause of this discrepancy. Such exaggerated perception is indicative of the repressive climate in a dictatorship that gives 'apparently harmless measures such as a traffic check or face-to-face criticism sessions with a superior their true intimidating effects'.[83] A taboo can be felt when something is persistently mentioned only indirectly or alluded to, when people avoid a topic and practise self-censorship or react in a disproportionate way.

The following episode reported by East German historian Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk illustrates this possible effect. At the end of his time at school, Kowalczuk remembers, pupils from several schools planned a bonfire at the Müggelsee, a lake in south-east Berlin. They wanted to burn their school folders and party. Although the plan was kept secret for some time, a head teacher got wind of it and interrogated several pupils, among them Kowalczuk. His greatest fear was that he could be asked about possible sympathies for the book burning carried out by the Nazis, but instead the only question asked again and again was why they had chosen this date. It turned out that the Friday selected was, by chance, 17 June, and the thirtieth anniversary of the uprising. The pupils had unintentionally touched upon a political taboo, triggering a commotion.[84]

The anecdote suggests that manifold investigations of the 'performed taboo', with more or less isolated transgressions, do not suffice to understand the effect of the taboo on human beings. The perceived taboo, as vague and unreasonable as it may be, is a historical reality. Several testimonies by East German expellees corroborate that a taboo could exist because it was thought to exist.[85] The perceived taboo reveals a great deal about the general atmosphere of the dictatorship.[86] Take, for example,

[80] Sometimes it is: see as an example the testimonies of women cited in I. von Münch, *'Frau, komm!' Die Massenvergewaltigungen deutscher Frauen und Mädchen 1944/45* (Graz, 2009), p. 61.

[81] The same is true for a few fictional texts on flight and expulsion such as Erik Neutsch's short story 'Der Hirt' (1970). He depicted the bombing of German refugees by the Russians and did not use party language (*Russians* instead of *Soviets*); see Hartleb, *Flucht und Vertreibung*, p. 121. But in many other regards, he avoids transgressions.

[82] Millington, 'Limits of Control', p. 45, see also p. 58.

[83] H. Knabe, 'Die feinen Waffen der SED: nicht strafrechtliche Formen politischer Viktimisierung in der DDR', in U. Baumann and H. Kury (eds), *Politisch motivierte Verfolgung: Opfer von SED-Unrecht* (Freiburg i. Br., 1998), pp. 303–29, here pp. 308–9.

[84] Eisenfeld, Kowalczuk and Neubert, *Die verdrängte Revolution*, pp. 12–14.

[85] See quoted testimony in U. Schmidt, *Flucht—Vertreibung—Deportation—Internierung: Erfahrung von Frauen in der Bundesrepublik und der früheren DDR*, Arbeitspapier des Forschungsverbunds SED-Staat 37 (2007), p. 116.

[86] The avoidance of the taboo is also depicted in a small number of works of fiction, such as Günter de Bruyn's short story 'Herr Müller, diesseits und jenseits der Oder' (1980). Here, de Bruyn describes a village where all inhabitants eschew discussion of the uneasy topic of the expulsions; see Hartleb, *Flucht und Vertreibung*, p. 119.

former SED functionary Hans Modrow, born in Pomerania, who remembered that the SED leaders never addressed their eastern European origins, even though several leading communists came from lost territories in the East, most notably Oskar Fischer, Hermann Matern and Egon Krenz. Their silence is indicative of avoidance practices in the GDR and justifies Modrow's statement that the topic 'was a taboo'.[87]

It is insufficient to separate contemporary perceptions and the 'real existing taboo', denying the felt sense of taboo as false consciousness. The subjective perception of a politically repressive regime and the extraordinary emotional effects are a substantial part of taboo communication and deserve to be taken seriously.[88]

## VI. Censorship as Guesswork

Ironically, censorship was not only a practice but also a taboo itself in the GDR. The denial of the existence of censorship (the core) was surrounded by a range of euphemisms and, as Laura Bradley aptly put it, 'complemented by the discourse of responsibility, which promoted and described self-censorship'.[89] Presumably as a consequence, in the GDR—unlike in other communist dictatorships such as the Soviet Union or Poland—no 'black book' was at hand for censoring literature, theatre or film. Only East German journalists regularly received long and detailed lists of taboo topics. Censors of literature and films had to guess where the boundaries between the speakable and the unspeakable lay.[90] The perceived taboo was therefore not just a reality for authors and readers. For bureaucrats involved in censorship of books, films, music and theatre, it was of crucial importance too.[91]

More often than not, censors had to guess what was acceptable and what was not in the respective historical moment. One East German censor from the Ministry of Culture, Christine Horn, recalled that she 'had learned to identify certain "allergies" of the Central Committee members'.[92] She did not receive any written guidelines, but she felt her experience meant she knew the sensitive topics well. Walter Cikan, head of the Youth Music Department (Abteilung Jugendmusik) at GDR Radio Broadcasting (Rundfunk der DDR), who was in charge of censoring lyrics of East German rock and

[87] Niven, 'On a Supposed Taboo', p. 217.

[88] Recent scientific experiments such as electrodermal monitoring confirm that there is a huge emotional energy linked with taboos. Measurement of the participants' galvanic skin responses to taboo words resulted in the consistent finding that 'taboo words are more stimulating than non-taboo words and are stored differently in memory' (Burridge, 'Taboo Words', p. 279). Scientists even found that when senile dementia sets in and people lose the ability to speak normally, they 'do readily recall and utter taboo words' (K. Allan, 'Taboo Words and Language: An Overview', in *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language*, ed. K. Allan [Oxford, 2018], pp. 1–29, here p. 2).

[89] L. Bradley, *Cooperation and Conflict: GDR Theatre Censorship, 1961–1989* (Oxford, 2010), p. 14.

[90] G. Holzweißig, *Zensur ohne Zensor: die SED-Informationsdiktatur* (Bonn, 1997). The well-defined, clearly articulated taboo themes imposed on journalists in the GDR were an exception, and even here there was leeway, as some chief editors considered them merely guidelines. Cf. Boyer, 'Censorship', pp. 527–9.

[91] These empirical findings seem to be in accord with Judith Butler's concept of 'implicit censorship'; see J. Butler, 'Ruled Out: Vocabularies of the Censor', in Post, *Censorship and Silencing*, pp. 247–59. For Butler, all speakers (including censors) operate based on 'a constituting norm by which the speakable is differentiated from the unspeakable' (she uses the term 'foreclosure', p. 255), and 'censorship is at once the condition for agency and its necessary limit' (p. 257).

[92] R. Darnton, 'Censorship, a Comparative View: France, 1789—East Germany, 1989', in S. Greenblatt, I. Rév and R. Starn (eds), 'Identifying Histories: Eastern Europe before and after 1989', special issue, *Representations*, 49 (1995), pp. 40–60. For a list of these sensitive topics, see C. Horn, 'Staatliche Literaturaufsicht, Themenplan und Druckgenehmigungsverfahren', in Lokatis, Rost and Steuer, *Vom Autor zur Zensurakte*, pp. 17–32, at p. 29.

pop bands in the 1980s, likewise remembered that guesswork was required in order to identify the taboo: 'There was indeed no catalogue of topics that were taboo but we all thought we knew what topics had better not be touched, and we decided accordingly'.[93]

The enforcement of taboos became a feedback mechanism based on the perception of taboos. As Simone Barck, Christoph Classen and Thomas Heimann report, 'journalists, artists and politicians … became in the process both rulers and the ruled, integrated as they were within the apparatus of power and simultaneously faced with the representations of social reality they encountered on a daily basis'.[94] Most journalists, Dominic Boyer has written, 'reported an intuitive and disciplined respect for the hermeneutic power exercised by their superiors in the GDR's culture industry' and simultaneously renegotiated the contours of taboos.[95]

The many inconsistencies are frequently highlighted in studies on censorship. While some authors were forced to obey taboos, others were permitted transgressions. Who were these privileged authors? In the case of betrayal, most of those who were allowed to speak about this topic belonged to the privileged group of survivors of Nazi prisons and concentration camps.[96] It was no coincidence that cautious modifications to the Thälmann myth came from former leading members of the communist resistance movement. Hermann Dünow, head of the illegal party's intelligence, the 'AM-Apparat', until the end of 1933, was permitted to reveal details about Thälmann's denunciation and arrest in *Neues Deutschland* in 1966.[97] Similarly, in his autobiographical account, Karl Mewis, leader of the communist exile organization in Sweden during the war, wrote extensively about the supposed traitor Herbert Wehner.[98] Two communist veterans, Franz Dahlem and Rudolf Engel, named Thälmann's secretary Kattner in their memoirs, although without even hinting at his assassination.[99] The most prominent East German communist to touch upon the taboo of betrayal was Erich Honecker, who mentioned in his official memoirs that one of his brothers changed sides and joined the Nazi Party.[100]

Notably, privileged discourse was not limited to high ranks but also open to local functionaries. One example is a communist from Dessau, Richard Krauthause, who was able to publish his account of communist traitors in local communist groups.[101] Another transgression of the taboo was a book written by Wolfgang Weiß, who during

[93] 'Es gab zwar keinen Katalog von Themen, die tabu waren, aber wir meinten alle zu wissen, woran besser nicht gerührt wurde, und haben dann eben entsprechend entschieden'; interview in P. Wicke and L. Müller, *Rockmusik und Politik—Analysen, Interviews und Dokumente* (Berlin, 1996), pp. 81–8, here p. 82.

[94] Barck, Classen and Heimann, 'The Fettered Media', p. 214.

[95] Boyer, 'Censorship', p. 530.

[96] There was a certain animosity between communists who had remained in the Third Reich and those who had emigrated to Moscow. Using the privilege of expanding taboos might have given the veterans of the communist resistance a touch of satisfaction.

[97] H. Dünow, 'Wie Ernst Thälmann verhaftet wurde. Ein schweres Verbrechen an der Arbeiterklasse', *Neues Deutschland* (16 Apr. 1966), p. 3.

[98] K. Mewis, *Im Auftrag der Partei: Erlebnisse im Kampf gegen die faschistische Diktatur* (2nd edn, Berlin, 1972), p. 315.

[99] F. Dahlem, *Am Vorabend des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, vol. 1 (3rd edn, Berlin, 1980), p. 185; Engel, *Feinde und Freunde*, pp. 57–9.

[100] E. Honecker, *Aus meinem Leben* (Berlin, 1980), p. 7.

[101] R. Krauthause, 'Erinnerung eines Illegalen', in H. Engelmann (ed.), *'Sie blieben standhaft': der antifaschistische Widerstandskampf in Dessau unter Führung der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands*' (new edn, Dessau 1983), pp. 81–9. And published in the GDR as late as July 1990: H. Crüger, *Verschwiegene Zeiten: vom geheimen Apparat der KPD ins Gefängnis der Staatssicherheit* (Berlin, 1990), pp. 65–7.

the Third Reich had unsuccessfully attempted to save the life of a fellow student. In his memoirs, he described in great detail the betrayal of Gestapo informant Fritz Brüderlein.[102]

There was apparently a certain sense of entitlement among communist veterans. An internal discussion that took place in 1955 in the Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin-Institut, the leading historical institution of the GDR, illustrates this perception. The aim of the discussion was to make the young historian Werner Plesse follow the party line. Betrayal was only one topic among others, but notably only former resistance fighters dared mention it.[103]

In part, those who brought up taboo subjects were driven by a wish to personalize guilt, to have someone to blame for their own suffering; in part, blaming traitors served as a way to clear themselves. Arrested communists had often been forced by the Gestapo to make confessions, and therefore many had something to conceal. Heinrich Starck, for instance, who was believed to have exaggerated the casualty figures from Ernst Rambow's betrayal, might have done so in order to clear himself of suspicion of collaboration with the Gestapo.[104] Additionally, as Regina Scheer noted in her discussion of the Gestapo informant Rambow, communists took advantage of supposed evil traitors who had sent dozens to their fate in order to preserve the ideal image of the unfaltering communist hero.[105]

In some instances those whose experiences had been traumatic appear to have been eager to speak about their painful past. We see this readiness in the case of former members of communist resistance groups who spent many years in prisons and concentration camps as a result of a comrade's breach of trust, such as Dünow, who was betrayed by Kattner. It is also evident for many of the writers and filmmakers mentioned in Niven's analysis.[106]

A privileged transgressive discourse also existed for fictionalized accounts of the uprising of 1953. Of twenty-one authors and filmmakers identified by Millington as having mentioned 17 June 1953, only four placed it at the centre of their works of fiction, and all four were 'old communists'.[107] His prestige and political influence were the main reasons why Hermann Kant was able to publish his novel *Das Impressum* without the amendments demanded by the censors for his depiction of 17 June 1953.[108]

In addition to *what* could or could not be said with reference to taboo subjects and *how* certain aspects of the topic could be expressed, *who* could address taboo topics in the GDR must evidently also be taken into account.

[102] W. Weiß, *Vom Tagebuch bis zum Todesurteil* (Berlin, 1988), pp. 204–7, 232–3, 248.
[103] S. Barck, *Antifa-Geschichte(n): eine literarische Spurensuche in der DDR der 1950er und 1960er Jahre* (Cologne, 2003), p. 147.
[104] Scheer, 'Rambow', p. 204.
[105] *Ibid.*, p. 210.
[106] Niven, 'On a Supposed Taboo', p. 224.
[107] Millington, 'Limits of Control', p. 49, see also p. 44.
[108] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

## VII. Conclusion

As we have seen, various communicative practices were used in the GDR in encounters with sensitive issues. Neither expulsion, nor the uprising of 1953, nor collaboration with the Gestapo was a completely forbidden topic, which is all the more remarkable as all three topics carried a high risk of undermining essential facets of the state's legitimacy. One might wonder why the SED did not silence taboo topics completely. Why was there such a multifaceted discourse?

The main reason appears to be that the raising of these topics was inevitable.[109] All three topics were just too massive to conceal.[110] The extensive research on communist resistance during the Third Reich was an integral part of the GDR's attempt to gain legitimacy on the basis of an anti-fascist legacy. In this context, it was impossible to avoid explaining the tragic failure of almost all communist resistance organizations—which in most cases involved communist traitors. With up to one million participants in 700 cities, small towns and villages, the uprising of 17 June 1953 was such a huge event that it could not be concealed, all the more so as the day became a national holiday in the Federal Republic of Germany. Every year, West German politicians reminded the SED of the traumatic event anew. Likewise, almost four million of the 18 million East Germans had experienced the expulsions at the end of the Second World War. Such a severe experience could not be silenced completely, particularly when, mostly as a result of mass rape, tens of thousands of children with Russian fathers grew up in the GDR.[111] The weight of these historical events, as well as regular stimuli from the West, prevented these topics from falling into oblivion.

While all three topics were too massive to be hushed up, the taboo took on a complex shape. As we have seen, these topics were partly silenced and partly present in the official discourse. Apparently, taboos are much more than mere don'ts. And they do not disappear if they are raised. These observations underline the need for a complex and dynamic concept of taboo.

The present study is an invitation to tap the full potential of the notion of taboo, particularly for a deep understanding of communication in regimes where freedom of speech is openly denied. As a result of its crucial implications for the stability of the regime, the violation of political taboos is often taken extremely seriously in dictatorships and can have severe repercussions.[112] Fear and avoidance prevail. Scandals are rare.[113] A restricted language predominates, which is experienced not only as insufficient for the expression of social problems but also as a limitation on the ability to act.[114] Many

[109] Niven, 'On a Supposed Taboo', p. 216.

[110] Writer Stefan Heym used the term *Diskretion* in his parody of the SED and its difficulty in speaking about unwanted historical facts. S. Heym, *König David Bericht* (Berlin, 1973), p. 96.

[111] The exact number of children born after rape is unknown. Johr quotes the number of 292,000 but mentions that in Berlin, 90% of the women pregnant after rape had an abortion; see Johr, 'Die Ereignisse in Zahlen', p. 58.

[112] Take as an example the sixty-four East Germans who went to prison for telling political jokes. See Bodo Müller, *Lachen gegen die Ohnmacht: DDR-Witze im Visier der Stasi* (Berlin, 2016).

[113] M. Aumüller, 'Skandalisierung und Autorschaft in der DDR', in A. Bartl and M. Kraus (eds), *Skandalautoren: zu repräsentativen Mustern literarischer Provokation und Aufsehen erregender Autorinszenierung* (Würzburg, 2014), pp. 9–27.

[114] U. Fix, 'Was hindert die Bürger am freien Sprechen? Die Ordnung des Diskurses in der DDR', in U. Fix, *Sprache, Sprachgebrauch und Diskurse in der DDR: ausgewählte Aufsätze* (Berlin, 2014), pp. 61–81, here p. 66.

established facts cannot be communicated at all and may even be denied.[115] One extreme consequence is that taboos make certain thoughts almost unthinkable in the long term.[116] Thus, for example, the uprising of 17 June 1953 was not a point of reference for the opposition movement during the 1989 revolution in the GDR.[117]

The concept developed here, however, goes beyond the somewhat reductive understanding of political taboos as mere silencing. The discursive sphere in the periphery, characterized by corrupted speech, and the silence in the core are complementary elements of the taboo. A precise conception of the general appearance of communicative taboos, including the distinguishing of core and periphery, comprehensive analysis of the gamut of linguistic and semantic distortions, study of privileged speakers able to transgress taboos, and attention to the perceived taboo, should be an ideal starting point for the historical study of tabooing, including its modifications and transformations.[118] As several examples illustrate, the ways in which the gravitational centre of a communicative taboo bends or perverts speech in the periphery differ from case to case. But the approach developed in this essay can also provide a number of general insights into the functioning of taboos in a communist regime. Many features are specifically related to the communist ideology propagandized in the GDR, with its central elements of anti-fascism and devotion to the Soviet Union. The SED's anti-fascist doctrine interpreted expulsions and territorial losses by Germany as just punishment for the atrocities committed by the Nazis in eastern Europe. Discussion of the suffering of women and children would have compromised such a simplistic correlation. Moreover, the SED promoted an unconditional friendship with the Soviet Union, and any critique of the 'big brother' became a taboo. Public knowledge of the mass rape and murder committed by Soviet soldiers, as well as by Czech and Polish militia, would have sabotaged these efforts by the SED.

East German historiography portrayed the resistance of the German communists against the Nazi regime as unswerving, self-sacrificing and consistently coordinated by communist leaders-in-exile in Moscow. To acknowledge disengagement, defection and betrayal in the inner circle of the Communist Party would have gravely undermined the heroic anti-fascist narrative. The SED therefore in particular silenced discussion of those traitors in the vicinity of communist leaders. Likewise, a realistic discussion of the role of the workers during the uprising of 17 June 1953 would have undermined the legitimacy of the 'workers' and peasants' state'.

These restrictions have been discussed largely under the rubric of 'censorship', with a focus on institutions, authors and filmmakers and their negotiations. My approach advocates a content-centred perspective that goes beyond the administration of taboos by examining their shape and the ways they are experienced. It aims at refining our understanding of discursive regimes in dictatorial regimes where one dominant ideology has become deeply ingrained in most aspects of society.[119]

[115] For instance, East German censors claimed that the suggestion that German women had been raped by Soviet soldiers was not only morally disgusting but also untrue. Dahlke, '"Frau komm!"', p. 293. For a comparable practice of 'faktologische Zensur' (factual censorship) in the Soviet Union, see P. Roisko, *Gralshüter eines untergehenden Systems: Zensur der Massenmedien in der UdSSR 1981–1991* (Cologne, 2015), pp. 191–9.

[116] Bunn, 'Reimagining Repression', p. 36.

[117] Eisenfeld, Kowalczuk and Neubert, *Die verdrängte Revolution*, p. 11.

[118] Vianu, *Censorship in Romania*.

[119] J. Piekalkiewicz and A. W. Penn, *The Politics of Ideocracy* (Albany, 1995); U. Backes and S. Kailitz (eds), *Ideocracies in Comparison: Legitimation—Cooptation—Repression* (Abingdon and New York, 2015).

## Abstract

The article outlines a new framework for the study of communicative taboos in repressive political regimes such as the GDR. The concept goes beyond the somewhat reductive position that understands political taboos as mere silencing. The approach developed here aims at refining our understanding of discursive regimes in dictatorial regimes, where one dominant ideology has become deeply ingrained in most aspects of society. It starts with the observation that the discursive sphere in the periphery of the taboo, characterized by corrupted speech, and the silence in its core are complementary elements of the taboo. I develop my concept with reference to three political taboos: the official discourse on betrayal of members of communist resistance groups during the Third Reich, expulsions after the Second World War, and the uprising of 17 June 1953. The discussion shows that a precise conception of the general appearance of communicative taboos—including distinguishing between core and periphery, comprehensive analysis of the gamut of linguistic and semantic distortions, study of privileged speakers able to transgress taboos, and paying attention to the perceived taboo—provides a promising starting point for the historical study of tabooing, including its modifications and transformations.

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