Chapter 2
Germany 1945: A Country in Ruins

What would become of us all if we were to let the space in our memory be unlocked to see what remains (Christa Wolf, 1990).\(^1\)

Material and Social Trauma

The Second World War ended in the spring of 1945. With larger and larger areas of Germany being occupied by the Allies, the German army surrendered unconditionally at the beginning of May. Initially, Thuringia was occupied by the Americans, but on June 30, 1945, the American occupying powers exchanged it for an area of Berlin which up till then had been under Russian control. From that moment on, Thuringia became part of the Soviet Occupied Zone [Soviet Occupied Zone, further SBZ], just like Brandenburg, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Officially, these five federal entities only formed a separate state on October 7, 1949, but they were administered as a separate entity from the beginning of July 1945. Power was executed by the Soviet Military Administration of Germany, working together with members of the German Communist Party and the Social-Democratic Party Germany.

In many ways the end of the war did not bring closure for the inhabitants of the eastern part of Germany, for there was more continuity between the final years of the war and the years thereafter than the word peace suggests. According to German ethnologist Ina Merkel, “chaos, collapse and misery” reigned, and “the end of war acts did not bring an end to violence and destruction.”\(^2\) The country’s ruinous economic situation deteriorated even further after the war, causing tensions, mistrust and animosity to flare up amongst the population. Even without the macro-political separation, Germany would have been a deeply divided country in 1945.\(^3\)
Figure 2.1 – Berlin, 1945, clearing the ruins

Figure 2.2 – Berlin, 1945, refugees
Source: Getty Images.
The war begun by Germany had cost nearly fifty-six million lives, of which about six million on the German side. Bombs had flattened large parts of the country, and whatever faith still survived in the national socialist doctrine and national socialist world view was certainly shattered when all the details of Nazi war crimes were made public. Forty percent of the German population had lost everything. Some cities, like Dresden, were completely destroyed, and of the eighteen million dwellings in what would later be the GDR, about five million had been demolished. After the war, large parts of Germany were divided up between Czechoslovakia and Poland. By the autumn of 1945, twenty-five million Germans were fugitives or being driven from what had been their homes. The country was split into one part occupied by the Soviet Union and another part occupied by the Western allies. In the months after Germany’s defeat, the area that would become the GDR housed 3.6 million refugees.

For most ordinary Germans, the end of the war meant further decline. The country’s industry was nearly on its knees, and the supply of foodstuffs and raw materials from the occupied areas had come to an abrupt halt. The agricultural land was barren due to years of neglect. In the years after the war, starvation reigned, and people fought over a crust of bread.

In one family, consisting of a father, mother and three schoolchildren, a parcel arrived in the spring of 1947, the first CARE package from America. The father, utterly starving due to the freezing cold winter and permanent food shortages, secretly smuggled the package down to the cellar and ate the contents himself in a matter of days.4

Unlike the inhabitants of the later FRG, the people in what would subsequently become the GDR received no Marshall Aid. They had to come up with about fourteen billion dollars in reparations for the Soviet Union in the first eight years after the war.5 That amount was paid mostly in kind: the Soviet occupiers dismantled everything they could lay their hands on, which was consequently transported to the Soviet Union.6 Estimates show that 45 percent of East Germany’s production capacity had been destroyed during the war and afterwards a further total of 3,147 East German companies were dismantled and shipped to the Soviet Union.7 Because huge sections of the East German railway network (sleepers, rails, etc.) disappeared to the Soviet Union as well, whatever production could still be achieved was further hampered by the impossibility to deliver materials and finished products.

In the first years after the war, one and a half times as many inhabitants of East Germany died as during the final years of the war.8 The ration cards for food,
sarcastically nicknamed “Friedhofkarte” [graveyard cards], were wholly inadequate. Half of Leipzig’s population, for instance, had so little food in 1946 that it was almost impossible to survive. And despite the fact that the city had to take in relatively few refugees, compared for instance to Rudolstadt, even there the atmosphere was dominated by people’s “Futterneid [envy of food]... People’s physical and mental strength deteriorated due to the chronic malnutrition: they were not just apathetic and lethargic at work...but the ‘mental depression’ spread to all parts of man’s existence.”

Everyone was hungry, permanently hungry. “Wo es nach Essen roch, war die Mitte der Welt [Where you could smell food, that was the center of the world].” This was the time when life was ruled to such an extent by “der Traum vom Sattwerden [the dream of becoming satiated],” that a girl even killed her grandmother with an axe in order to steal her food and clothes. German historian Reiner Gries rigorously dismissed as fairytales the later memories, cherished by many, that this period had brought about a form of solidarity and a form of “unity in time of great need.”

Germany was broken, and not just materially. The visible ruins were an adequate symbol of the country’s general situation. The organic Volksgemeinschaft [people’s community] which the Nazis had promised to forge for the people of Germany was shattered. When Swedish journalist Stig Dagerman travelled across Germany in 1946, he gave his impressions under headings such as: “Ruins,” “The forests of the hanging,” “Unwelcoming,” “The rivals,” “A lost generation.” His descriptions leave little to the imagination:

In the entrances to the cold, overcrowded houses, the local kids play war games with refugee children from the eastern zone or Sudetenland dressed in rags...If you show them a picture book, they immediately start talking about the best way to kill the people or animals in the book. Two little boys blasted out of their homes by bombs have not yet learned to speak, yet their pronunciation of the term “totschlagen [beat to death]” is disturbingly perfect.

The houses that had to accommodate the never-ending stream of fugitives were “infected...with the hate, jealousy and hunger of those living in too cramped conditions.” This description seems to capture quite well the general situation in post-war Germany, where scarcity and famine inflected envy, while jealousy and hate reigned.

The situation in Thuringia was no different: its territory housed about two million Umsiedler [migrants], of whom 700,000 had to be taken in permanently –
and thus provided with some sort of shelter and food. The area in and around Rudolstadt probably had to cope with 30,000 new inhabitants. Several refugee camps were set up near the town. The camps were overcrowded: barracks built to take a maximum of 420 people sometimes housed more than a thousand children. Tuberculosis spread, epidemics broke out, and when people died or their misery drove them to commit suicide, the lack of coffins forced the survivors to press four or five corpses into each coffin. If the fugitives were offered shelter in people’s homes, this also meant that people had to share the scarce food with them, which was a further cause for tension and anguish. “Wir haben ja nichts gehabt, man hat uns als Bettler angesehen, es gab viele Spannungen und Reibereien [We had nothing then, people saw us as beggars. There was a lot of tension and friction],” one of the former new inhabitants told me. The hunger in the Rudolstadt area was so great that of the 24,000 children living there in 1947, about 23,000 were suffering from malnutrition.

Although the city had survived the war relatively unscathed from a material point of view, here too the damage was considerable: one church, five porcelain factories, and 103 dwellings had been entirely destroyed by the bombardments, and 62 houses partially. More than 300 families had become homeless, many had lost everything, and 117 people lost their lives during the bombing. Forty people were killed before and during the American occupation (on April 12 and 13, 1945). All in all, the war had caused the deaths of more than a thousand of Rudolstadt’s inhabitants. That figure does not include the many hundreds of prisoners of war and convicts put in camps around the town during the war, an unknown number of whom did not survive. Also not included in these figures are the prisoners from the concentration camp Buchenwald located twenty-five miles away, who dropped dead or were executed in the streets of Rudolstadt during the infamous death march of April 1945. Their numbers “hat keine Statistik erfaßt [were not included in any statistics].”

In general, the situation in Rudolstadt seems to have been similar to that in the rest of the country: the material damage was as bad as the famine. Consequently, and intensified by the reversal of power, the social climate was disastrous. “What at first sight may look like unity, is in fact covered with diagonal, vertical and horizontal cracks.” The disastrous social climate deteriorated further in the eastern part of the country due to the communist takeover. The rigorous social, economic and political transformations that were implemented intensified the struggle for survival.

Although western historians have long regarded the post-war Soviet occupation of the eastern part of Germany as the start of the unavoidable Soviet annexe-
tion, this representation appears to be wrong. During the first years after the war, the Soviet Union had no prepared plans for the part of Germany it occupied, and there was still plenty of scope for local policies. This had a devastating impact on the social climate in Eastern Germany, for a significant part of the politics decreed by the SMAD was carried out by local politicians (KPD and SPD members).¹⁸

That applied for example to the redistribution of modes of production, which began in October 1945 after SMAD order no.124, “Über die Beschlagnahme und provisorische Übernahme einiger Eigentumskategorien in Deutschland [on the seizure and provisional attribution of some ownership categories in Germany],” and no.126, “Konfisierung des Vermögens des NSDAP [Confiscation of NSDAP capital],” were carried out. These orders announced the expropriation of former Nazis. From that moment on, everything that had belonged to the national socialist state or one of its associations was now owned by the new powers. The same applied to the possessions of certain categories (vaguely defined) of individual members of the NSDAP. Lengthy lists stated which objects in the Rudolstadt area should be expropriated as Wehrmacht und Reichsvermögen [military and state-owned properties]. The items included barracks, drill sites, command posts, schools, banks and buildings formerly belonging to one of the many mass organizations linked to the NSDAP. For all these objects, the new powers had to allocate a new use, and the same applied to the possessions of individual NSDAP members. In the minutes of a meeting held in Weimar on January 4, 1946, where further instructions were given to those responsible for the execution of the orders in the Weimar and Rudolstadt area, the expropriation was substantiated as follows:

Our most important task concerns the problem of feeding and clothing the German people and providing them with accommodation…Through order numbers 124 and 126, the Soviet Union is offering us the opportunity to settle the debts of the war criminals, stripping them of their economic role. Everything taken charge of, which will be expropriated later, is to be used for our reconstruction.¹⁹

No matter how reasonable and conceivable the argument may be, the expropriation resulted in further escalation of the existing tensions. And because certain sections of the population had been harshly excluded from the German Volksgemeinschaft [national community] by the Nazis in favor of the consenting majority, it is hardly surprising that the post-war reallocation of power with its accompanying reallocation of possessions was seized by many to settle old scores.

Rudolstadt’s Landratsamt [district administration] archives contain an extensive exchange of letters that demonstrate how the announced expropriation
caused huge internal strife at the local level. There are letters from people fiercely opposing the confiscation that is about to happen to them. There are letters from others justifying the planned confiscation from their fellow citizens by pointing out their political crimes. And there are letters from people trying to seize the confiscated goods of others by submitting a request for the possessions which were to be shared. Clearly, there is extensive correspondence on people’s losing, acquiring and reallocating possessions. “I was neither a war criminal nor an activist, have never had a role in the party, was not a member of the SS or the SA, and never worked for the security police or the Gestapo,” wrote a man on September 5, 1946, to Landespräsident [district president] Prof. Dr. Paul, adding that he had not had any benefit from the war. According to his account, he was old, ill (Gelenkrheumatismus, Schlagaderverkalkung [rheumatism, arteriosclerosis]), and physically and mentally worn out. His son had been missing for a long time, a year ago he had lost his wife and had to evacuate his house, “and now – just because I was a member of the party long before 1933 – my possessions are being confiscated.” It is too harsh, the man’s letter concludes. His correspondence had another letter stapled to it from Rudolstadt’s mayor, in which he dryly remarked that the author wore the golden party medal Alter Kämpfer [veteran] and had been a member of the NSDAP since 1929. The mayor also stated that he could not imagine that the man in question, who had joined the party so early on, was a member in name only – as he claimed in his letter. Then he would never have been given a gold party medal.

There are many letters like these. Some of them helped people who were trying to keep their material possessions by making clear that they were not as bad as they seemed. There are messages from couples who fled to live in the British occupation zone when the Red Army arrived, and afterwards sent their children to claim the confiscated goods on behalf of their mother: she had not been a party member, so surely there was no reason to disown her just on account of her husband’s party membership?

In other letters people attempt to describe that they were victims of the Nazis and for that reason claimed a right to a share of the confiscated Nazi possessions. A letter from the mayor for example recommends that a certain man be recognized as Opfer des Faschismus [victim of fascism]. The man in question had been jailed as a political prisoner from 1939 till 1945, and because he was interested in the shop owned by SA-Sturmführer [paramilitary rank of the NSDAP] B. in Königsee (a little village in the vicinity of Rudolstadt), he could make good use of the title.

People were not just trying to keep or get back their former possessions or acquire new ones, they also did not hesitate to betray each other in order to get
someone's things. One correspondent even told of couple X who had deliberately got divorced after the war so that the “divorcee,” who was not a member of the NSDAP, had a chance of getting back the confiscated goods, while meanwhile secretly living together with her divorced husband in American-occupied Bavaria. There are accounts of people reporting each other to the new powers so that they themselves could take possession of the other’s furniture or company. Petty crimes were revealed in order to discredit others: “These gentlemen had hidden the items so carefully in their private villa that they could only be found after a meticulous house search.” And they accused each other of betrayal. One woman accused her former daughter-in-law, who had been telling tales about her ex-husband (the correspondent’s son) to the new powers in order to get revenge for the divorce while she herself, her former mother-in-law wrote, “was having it off with Russian soldiers” – which was the equivalent of a crime.

Although the Rudolstadt archives do not contain much on the period directly after the war, the little material there is conjures up a picture of a society ripped apart by mutual envy and strife. People fought fiercely with each other over the scarce possessions that were available. These struggles were at least partly the result of the reversal of power and the accompanying reallocation of possessions. In retrospect, it is evident that the transition was used by both the state and individual citizens to get even with former opponents. The KPD’s call to every “honest German” to help “trace Nazi leaders, Gestapo agents and SS villains who were in hiding,” issued on June 11, 1945, may sound impartial, but it gave rise to a climate in which anonymous accusations and betrayal could become rampant. Joachim Gauck, the East German church minister who was given the task of managing the Stasi archives after the Wende of 1989, remembers vividly that his father was suddenly gone:

In broad daylight, in the middle of the summer...my father was ‘taken away...an apparition that had developed in the Nazi era. I was eleven years old...My mother and my grandmother went to see Pieck, Grotewohl, and Ulbricht (East German politicians, mv), and they even went to the Russians in Berlin-Karlshorst, but they were always given the same information: ‘We do not know this person.’ My father was simply gone, he had become a nobody, without even a gravestone to remember him by. After two and a half years of complete uncertainty, we received the first sign of life from my father – a card, just like prisoners of war sent, telling us in tiny letters that he was alive and asking about the children.
According to the official accounts alone, 157,000 people were deported between 1945 and 1950, to end up in so-called Speziallager (special camps, including the concentration camp Buchenwald). As the calculation of the figures does not take bureaucratic errors and propaganda into account, the total number of deportees is probably considerably higher. Of the 157,000 officially accounted for, at least 44,000 died. It goes without saying that this was a carefully kept secret at the time; officially, Buchenwald was no longer used after the Nazis were defeated.

The Thüringisches Hauptstaatsarchiv [main state archives] has some of the correspondence between the local rulers at that time and citizens who tried to get information about members of their family who had suddenly disappeared. Many of those taken away without formal charges or stated reasons were former Nazis. Sometimes the neighbours were able to report that the person concerned had been taken away by Soviet soldiers. But it frequently happened that those left behind did not have the faintest clue as to what had happened to their husband, father or son, because nobody dared to speak out, for fear of being the next to disappear. Family members often did not receive word about the deported person’s whereabouts till much later, and often they did not hear anything at all. Many people never returned. Only after the Wende of 1989 was it officially announced what many already knew, suspected or feared, namely that in the first post-war years, not only Nazis were deported, but also people who were completely innocent – including many social democrats who supported a different party line than the SED. Investigations into this part of East German history had only just started when historian Hermann Weber remarked that many of the internees were “randomly chosen persons.”

The letters I studied clearly showed that many of those who disappeared had been betrayed to the new powers by their fellow citizens. The reason for their internment often seems to have had nothing to do with the Nazi past. There is, for example, a letter from a woman whose 72-year-old husband was taken away although he had never been a member of the NSDAP. On the contrary, the Nazis had even punished him for his criticism of national socialist politics:

In 1933 my husband exchanged harsh words with the formal leader of the local (party) branch because he was against the council’s decisions. He was punished by being transferred to Munich in Westphalia; at the age of sixty, and within five days he had to leave his Heimat. After that he was no longer promoted. Because he was not a party member, although he was a high-ranking civil servant, we had to fight an ongoing struggle to survive…My husband was not a political person, he lived a philosophically
academic life [sic]…he was a great handyman and he enjoyed hunting. We had a peaceful life together, and inwardly he was a very honest, good, and strong…person. We had a happy marriage, my husband was everything to me. Without him my life is shattered.\textsuperscript{32}

The letter revealed that the man had possessed shotguns, which he had buried when the Americans were approaching Rudolstadt at the end of March. When the Russians found them, they had him deported for that reason. His wife never received a reply to her letter. Another man was deported in 1949, because as a SPD member he had refused to join the SED. He spent seven years in various Russian prisons. His wife suspected that he had been betrayed by others.\textsuperscript{33} In a volume about the history of Rudolstadt published in 1992, historian Peter Langhof describes that the internments were carried out completely randomly and mostly initiated by accusations. In this way, he concluded, “many thousands of SPD, LDP, CDU, yes even KPD followers, as well as many non-party citizens were rendered politically harmless and often physically destroyed.”\textsuperscript{34}

In the first years after the war, the slightest provocation was enough to be reported as an enemy of the new regime. In this way, old scores were settled. The atmosphere of suspicion and climate of fear must have been terrible.\textsuperscript{35} Daily life was dominated by distrust, jealousy and the insight that one man’s death was the other man’s bread. The well-known photographs of the ruins in Berlin and Dresden are a painfully appropriate illustration of the general situation in Eastern Germany. Besides the personal and material losses people had to endure during the war, a long famine ensued after 1945. Partly due to this and strengthened by the reversal of power, the social climate was one of strife and fear of mutual denunciation and betrayal. “The fault line which ran through German society…was of enormous significance, not just at Zero Hour, but in the months and years to come.”\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{In Search of a Hold}

The question is how the population in the eastern part of Germany reacted to the traumatic experience, when all the remains of solidarity, mutual trust and cohesion had disintegrated, making way for a raw form of distrust and betrayal. How could people believe that things would ever return to normal? Where were they going to look for something new to hold onto and restore faith in the future?

These questions are extensively dealt with in the literature on the western part of Germany, illustrating that most people’s reaction was a combination of “pre-
serving silence and industriously devoting themselves to the *Wirtschaftswunder* [economic miracle].” 37 Below I will further describe and analyze this combination, which has been portrayed in detail for the western part of the country. There is, however, reason to generalize the western response. East German author Christa Wolf, writing about the eastern part of the country, made clear that: “nowhere was there such infinite silence as in German families.” And historian Mary Fulbrook also concludes that in those days, the only thing that united the German population was silence; there was a “community of silence” in both parts of the country. American anthropologist John Borneman draws the same conclusion. He points out that most West Germans’ secondary response to the traumatic situation they were confronted with (that is: industriously trying to rebuild the material remains of their society as quickly as possible) also applied to the eastern part of the country. 38

Even in 1945, eyewitnesses were amazed when they saw how Germans reacted to their completely devastated lives. The country was in ruins, but that was hardly discussed. People seemed to want nothing else than to rebuild their material world and move on.

> People here are running back and forth between the ruins, like ants on a destroyed hill…excited with a mad fervor…The devastation does not depress them, but acts as an intense motivation to work…People show…me certain residential blocks, pointing out: that was a bombardment, there too…And that is all. No more announcements are made…People are getting on with the work. 39

The urge to rebuild their material existence played a major role in the restoration of the country, which took off so quickly that it is generally referred to as a miracle: the *Wirtschaftswunder*. The book *The Interpellation* describes that miracle, of which its author (Christian Geissler), is extremely critical, like most contemporary commentators.

He describes a country bathing in “flashing neon lights,” where vivid colors and billboards “lit with a thousand watts” brighten up the streets. Its residents look up, expecting to see sailing boats and sports cars fall from the sky. They are not in the mood for reflection but merely “live for the day…and the world smiles optimistically at them” because “no one can be bothered with people’s problems.” Set in the optimistic period when the *Wirtschaftswunder* began to yield its fruits, the author’s conclusions are definitely gloomy. According to him, the cheerfulness, optimism and energy as well as the material prosperity which started to re-emerge in West Germany were merely a desperate attempt not to sink into “the void.” For
him post-war West Germany’s fascination with material possessions was simply an endeavor to forget about the war and “stand firm even in this void.”

Geissler was not the only one to make a connection between Germans’ productivity and preoccupation with material things on the one hand, and the trauma of the Second World War on the other. Many reporters agreed that the *Wirtschaftswunder* was not just enabled by the American Marshall Aid, but especially by the urge to remove the pain of the past. The necessity to rebuild the country seemed to form a kind of screen, behind which people hid experiences that were so painful that confronting them had to be avoided at all cost.

Regarding what exactly was to be swept aside, Geissler refers to the Void being hidden from view by the country’s blinding material recovery. Other reporters are more specific, but they all describe the unbearable burden of the past in moral terms; they speak of guilt, shame, pain and despondency, all linked to the post-war West German obsession with material progress. West Germany’s fast recuperation, from a land in rack and ruin to one of the most prosperous countries in the world, has even been interpreted as an avoidance tactic to distract people’s attention from the unforgiveable crimes committed in Germany’s name. In their famous and often quoted account of the situation in post-war West Germany, the Mitscherlichs also posited a direct relationship between the country’s fast economic recovery on the one hand and Germans’ untenable shame and guilt about the Second World War and Auschwitz on the other. Or as one of Geissler’s characters scorns his countrymen: “[T]hey build houses…[but] as long as nothing is right yet, neither in the cellar, nor in the loft, the lovely spaces full of flowers in between are no more than ammunition rooms…Whenever the past is simply reduced to ashes, the present glows so hot that you rush to the future as if it were a cool place in the shadows.”

The disapproving, moral undertone appears to be based on the premise that the German population was (or should be) suffering terribly from the burden of the past. Reporters were amazed at the (apparent) lack of feelings of pain, guilt, and shame, and at the energy displayed in their place. “It will be much easier for them to rebuild their cities than to induce them to perceive what they have experienced or let them understand how it came about.” Such accusations stem from the assumption that the German people should have been able – directly after the war – to confront their own involvement and responsibility for the disastrous recent past. The German nation’s obsession with reviving their existence and the fanaticism displayed in restoring their country after 1945 were thought to have been inspired by an attempt to deny or repress the collective feelings of guilt about Auschwitz. The material reconstruction which gave people something to hold on
to would be absolutely vital in order to ward off a deep moral crisis brought about by oblivious feelings of guilt.

Although the argument sounds convincing and is indisputably true in individual cases, I do not find it a satisfactory explanation for the reactions displayed so generally by German people after 1945. I find it too moralistic and therefore unbelievable. It seems implausible that, after finding out what atrocities had been committed in their name, people would suddenly be overwhelmed by feelings of guilt towards those for whom they had previously harbored scarcely any feelings of solidarity or involvement. That moral standard simply seems too high. According to me, Germans’ post-war reticence and their fanatic removal of the material ruins should be explained in a less altruistic manner. Furthermore, I also find it unsatisfactory to interpret the collective reaction to social trauma as the sum of many individual responses, in this case pertaining to guilt. Whenever there is communal silence, it seems sociologically more relevant to trace which communal interests were being served instead of interpreting the silence in terms of individual psychology.

In this context it is telling that silence, dedication and throwing one’s self fanatically into rebuilding the future are well known reactions to internal societal crises. Not only the perpetrators but also the victims of terror are reported to present such reactions. Dutch sociologist Jolande Withuis, for instance, showed that many children in Israel have also grown up in silence, “with the knowledge of a secret.” There, too, the most frequent reaction to the trauma of war was an enormous drive to rebuild the future by working very hard. And Japanese women affected by radiation from the atom bomb during the Second World War presented a comparable reaction. They, too, initially kept their mouths shut about their suffering, only breaking the silence to argue the case for their experiences more than twenty years later.

Such reactions are not only linked to the uncommunicativeness of the experiences endured, but also to the social climate that then characterizes a society. When war, famine or other large-scale disasters strike a people who have lived together for a long time without animosity, they are confronted with the fact that the community which up until then they had assumed as self-evident was actually founded on a rather shaky basis. When the violence, hunger or hardship has been caused by one’s neighbours, distrust comes to dominate society. One of the hardest problems facing people at such times is to find experiences or other connecting factors which, despite the social tensions defining communal life at that moment, are able to restore the suggestion of community. One way to veil the borderlines in a community which is split between perpetrators and victims is, for example,
the collective choice of victimization. By stressing a joint role (even fictitious), one can rebuild a collective relationship with the past, thus restoring at least the illusion of community.

The most striking reactions the inhabitants of Germany displayed after 1945 (silence, dedication and striving for material reconstruction) should also be seen in relation to the country’s social climate at that time. Hardly any feelings of community existed in Germany after 1945. Social life was dominated by deep and widespread mutual distrust, and fear was all around. In this context, silence and material reconstruction had two important social functions.

Apart from the fact that clearing the ruins in a country flattened by bombs and overrun by refugees was an absolute necessity, reconstructing the material world is also an extremely effective way to psychologically process other things. When the outside world that people unquestionably felt part of suddenly manifests itself as fundamentally untrustworthy and threatening, they find solace in distancing themselves, focusing on the material reconstruction of their personal lives. Rebuilding a house is a good way to exclude mutual distrust, also because the house will provide a safe haven from which people can start, slowly but surely, to explore the outside world again. Furthermore, building houses and streets is also a concrete and symbolic form of working for the community and its future. While clearing up the debris and building a new neighborhood, people literally structure the foundations of the future community. The ruins and suspicions from the past are removed, to be replaced by new houses – as a symbol of new trust in living and building a future together. Building up the collapsed world brick by brick with one’s own bare hands is therefore an excellent way to (re)gain control of one’s life. And later on, the building process, as a shared experience, will appear to have functioned as a foundation for future community experiences and spirit.

It is known that this strategy worked well in the western part of the country; the restoration of houses, factories and roads, the gradual removal of ruins and debris actually succeeded in establishing new faith in society and the future. West Germans’ loyalty towards the new nation developed thanks to the stable material basis the Bundesrepublik would soon become. The economic growth and improved standard of living created not only consumers, but also loyal West Germans.

Obviously the West German Wirtschaftswunder did not just appear out of the blue. Apart from the West German fervor, it was to a considerable extent the result of the Marshall Aid offered by the United States. The Treaty of Versailles had taught the Allies not to leave defeated Germany to its fate for the second time – after 1918 this had laid the foundation for the kind of resentment in which Hitler’s national socialism thrived so well. The Allies were determined not to make that
mistake again. Another, equally important reason for America’s post-war generosity towards West Germany was that it directly served an American goal. The country to be restored was an ideal place to market American products and services, and once developed as a prosperous capitalist society, it could be a significant trading partner for the United States.\textsuperscript{50} International capitalist collaboration and the global spread of America’s model of consumer citizenship were the explicit aims of America’s post-war aid to defeated Germany.

The famous West German \textit{Wirtschaftswunder} thus came about because it best served the three major parties’ interests: it enabled the population to disguise the Void; if successful, it would help legitimize the new state; and it would provide the western allies with another loyal partner (politically and economically) in the short and long term.

Little is known about the situation in the eastern part of the country. How did those in power deal with people’s needs and wants? Did a form of collaboration exist between occupiers, state and residents? To what extent was the new East German state able to adapt to people’s desires to keep quiet about the recent past and mutual suspicion, and instead put all their efforts into rebuilding their existence? In what way did the East German state accommodate the traumatic experience of what Geissler described as the Void?

Analyses of East Germany’s history are usually quite critical: the repressive state is generally described as having had no consideration whatsoever for the needs of its population. And the overriding representation is that the country’s material reconstruction lagged behind developments in West Germany right from the very start. Although it is certainly true that the new socialist powers did not enjoy the full support of the people, I think it is worthwhile looking further than the obvious divergences between what the state was offering and the people’s needs and wants. The socialist ideology, which the new state used to justify itself, did in some ways accommodate the silent, materialist way the German people were attempting to delete their recent past.

The next chapter delves deeper into the similarities between state ideology and the needs of the people. Although insufficient to justify the new state in the eyes of its residents, these similarities did play an important role in accomplishing the East German state’s hegemony. By promising the people a socialist utopia which would be accomplished in an explicitly materialist way, the East German state was nourishing a materialist politics of identity. This would indirectly provide a breeding ground for the collective fantasies of material wealth as a source of redemption that reached their dramatic peak in the autumn of 1989.