

Coping with the Present - West German Elites and the Search for State, Society, and Self

Following German unification in 1990, East and West Germans discovered just how much the political cultures of the Federal Republic and the GDR had grown apart in forty years of separation. Since the beginning of Cold War confrontations in the immediate post-war years, social elites in East and West had devised competing patterns of identification, which stylised the respective ideological beliefs as the “better system”. Based on cultural and political magazines, verdicts of the Constitutional Court, party programmes, speeches of leading politicians, and publications of extra-parliamentary groups, this study examines elite debates on the reconfiguration of West German patterns of identifications and key-concepts such as nation, state, society, heimat, and patriotism. While West Germans constantly called for a solution for the “German question” in light of national division, West German elites quickly focused on the Federal Republic as a viable system. In elite debates, legal, social, and political concepts such as “freiheitliche-demokratische Grundordnung”, “streitbare Demokratie”, “soziale Marktwirtschaft” as well as ideas of “Verfassungspatriotismus” and “mündiger Bürger” defined a West German political culture beyond National Socialism. These concepts were devised to describe the domestic character of the Federal Republic. Meanwhile, legal understandings of the German nation and citizenship openly attacked the legality and legitimacy of the GDR. Only in a process of constant debate and social conflict could West German elites finally depart from legal claims on the former territory of the German Reich and move towards a framework of the two German states. Instead of basing West German patterns of identification on abstract legal claims aiming at the reinstatement of the German Reich, debates on the role of the citizen in society now resulted in a redefinition of the core political system and German-German relations. While the free expression of the political will of the individual guided ideas of West German society, German-German confrontation was supposed to be resolved by exercising the right of self-determination of peoples in a free all-German vote on the future of Germany. This study thus demonstrates how social elites and extra-parliamentary activists established a West German political culture in their attempt to strive for hegemonic definitions of the legal, political, and social nature of the Federal Republic. I argue that the shifts from traditional patterns of identification, which stemmed from the 19th and early 20th century, to a genuinely West German political culture can only be fully understood in their German-German and Cold War contexts.

Research Interests

- Contemporary History/German History since 1945
- Media, Research on Public Opinion
- International Student Movements of the 1960s
- European Left-wing terrorism of the 1970s
- History of "State Identities"
- History of "Generations"
- Analysis of Political/Historical Discourses