Katharina Neef

Patterns of Decline in German Organised Freethought in the Twentieth Century

Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century, Germany developed into two separate and, in some regards, even antagonistic states. After the end of World War Two, the Western sectors that had been administered by French, British and American forces, developed into the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) with a decentralised federal political system, a social market economy, and a religion-friendly policy of state-church partnership and privileges. By contrast, the Eastern sector under Soviet administration became the German Democratic Republic (GDR) with a centralised one-party system, a planned economy, and a strictly laicist policy. These different situations formed complementary political, cultural, and social frameworks in which non-religious milieus and agents had to position themselves and their institutions. Consequently, the German example offers a comparative case of how the state and the non-religious interacted, how they developed patterns of action under certain conditions, and how they tried to adapt to concrete political conditions.

Neither of the post-war German states developed strong organisations of freethinkers, secularists, humanists, or the like.[1] While such groups existed and remained marginal in the FRG, they did not even organise in the GDR. Their disappearance in the GDR might be especially surprising as the socialist countries of the twentieth century are generally presented as critical or even hostile towards religions. Consequently, these states are common examples when pro-

1 I use the terms 'freethought'/'freethinker' and 'secularism'/'secularist' as synonyms in this chapter. While the former is the most common emic term in that period, the latter is an analytical research term. For a longer evaluation of the research debate concerning the terms, see Carolin Kosuch, "Freethinkers in Modern Europe's Secularities: Introduction," in *Freethinkers in Europe: National and Transnational Secularities, 1789–1920s*, edited by Carolin Kosuch (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2020). See further: Rebekka Habermas, "Secularism in the Long Nineteenth Century between the Global and the Local," in *Negotiating the Secular and the Religious in the German Empire: Transnational Approaches*, edited by Rebecca Habermas (Oxford/New York: Berghahn Books, 2019).

Note: Thanks to Sebastian Schüler, Bernadett Bigalke, Viktoria Vitanova-Kerber, Maria Papenfuss and Miriam Hamburger who commented on an earlier draft of this chapter.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111337982-017

cesses of (forced) secularisation or secular phenomena are addressed.[2] This connection of socialism and non-religion is not entirely without reason: countries like Estonia, the Czech Republic or the parts of Germany that formed the GDR still have widely secularised populations today, i.e. church membership is significantly low and religious literacy is not common.[3]

The marginality of organised freethought in German post-war societies is even more surprising as Germany has a long tradition of secularist organisations and there are direct continuities from the pre-war situation of organised freethought to the remnants of these associations in the post-war societies and their functionaries (albeit the years between 1933 and 1945 meant significant ruptures also in that milieu). Therefore, a broader historical setting of freethought in the preceding decades, leading to challenging situations in both states, is necessary. The history of organised freethought in the early twentieth century is key, as it shaped the conditions (or rather the non-conditions) for organised freethought in the GDR and the FRG. Consequently, the chapter will focus on structural dimensions, i.e. the conditions that shape (and respectively minimise) the field for freethought organisations and their agents in the early separated German states. After this historisation, questions of how and why organised freethought dissolved in the early East-German socialist years in a developing laicist or secularist state as well as in the Adenauer-republic under a religion-friendly regime will be addressed. The comparative frame serves both as contrasting example and as methodological tool.[4] Obviously, both states started from the same roots and ruins, thus their different developments extrapolate the differences of the two states regarding the relation between religion and non-religion. They also shed light on different patterns of action within the secularist milieu that turned out to be unadaptable to changing societal conditions.

2 Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "'Forced' Secularity? On the Appropriation of Repressive Secularization," *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* 4, no. 1 (2011): 63–77; Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, Thomas Schmidt-Lux, and Uta Karstein, "Secularization as Conflict," *Social Compass* 55, no. 2 (2008): 127–139.

3 On the history of (non-)religion in East Germany, see Esther Peperkamp and Małgorzata Rajtar, *Religion and the Secular in Eastern Germany, 1945 to the Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). The concept of religious literacy has been developed by Steven Prothero to denote fundamental religion-related knowledge and skills; Steven Prothero, *Religious Literacy. What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007).

4 On the potentials and limits of comparison as a method, see Oliver Freiberger, *Considering Comparison. A Method for Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Organised Secularism in Germany Prior to 1945

The starting point of freethought as a social phenomenon in Germany is the introduction of the personal statute law in 1875, which made it possible to be a dissident, i.e. to cancel one's affiliation with any religious community and become a non-religious person in a formal sense.[5] Originally introduced to solve administrative problems, the statute turned out to be used as an instrument to grant a negative freedom of religion. Consequently, it became a prominent field of freethought action to incite fellow citizens to take this step and leave the churches, and thus become secular in this civic sense. The statute and these actions created a small but measurable stratum of non-religious persons, which formed the basis for the developments of the twentieth century.

This exodus movement grew in the years after 1906 for different reasons, such as changes in the church taxation system and propagandist campaigns, which especially led workers and their families to quit their church membership.[6] Dissidence, however, still remained a marginal phenomenon during monarchist times. In public discourse and medial representation, secularism was a bourgeois phenomenon. Although the masses were explicitly addressed to leave the churches and workers indeed formed a large proportion of those quitting, it was academic protagonists who led the debate and functioned as representatives of German secularism. The most renowned functionaries of freethought were successful natural scientists such as the physician Ludwig Büchner, the zoologist Ernst Haeckel, and the chemist and Nobel laureate Wilhelm Ostwald.[7]

This changed significantly in 1919: as the end of World War One also brought the end of monarchy and the state-church system, the number of church exits sharply increased and the protestant churches lost two million members between

5 There are earlier – intellectual and social – incentives: the publication of key works, that animated debates on scientific worldviews and the critique of religion, and the foundation of free-religious communities since 1844. Classical publications are: David Friedrich Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*; Ludwig Feuerbachs *Das Wesen des Christentums*; Ludwig Büchners *Kraft und Stoff*. The free-religious communities started as liberal communities and secularised substantially until the end of the nineteenth century. See Claus Spenninger, *Stoff für Konflikt. Fortschrittsdenken und Religionskritik im naturwissenschaftlichen Materialismus des 19. Jahrhunderts, 1847–1881* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021).

6 See Katharina Neef, "Politicizing a (Non)Religious Act. The Secularist Church Exit Propaganda of the Komitee Konfessionslos (1908–1914)," in *Freethinkers in Europe: National and Transnational Secularities, 1789–1920s*, edited by Carolin Kosuch (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2020).

7 Even the second row of these societies' activists consisted of natural scientists, physicians, philosophers, lawyers or public officers. Academically trained men provided the large majority of secularist voices of the Wilhelmine era.

1919 and 1923. Those numbers dropped but still remained much higher than the Wilhelmine average until the end of the republic.[8]

Thus, in the Weimar Republic, a considerable reservoir of potential freethinkers was formed. Furthermore, although this discourse had been mainly middle class before 1914, the numbers of proletarian freethinker associations now surged, and the public appearance of the milieu shifted to the working class and the labour movement. Dissidence became a politicised class issue as church exit was presented as a measure for weakening the conservative state and the ruling classes. Having left the church became a common descriptor of socialist or communist identities.[9] But being secular regarding one's personal status did not mean engaging in organised secularism.[10] Although the Weimar Republic saw the presence of secularist mass organisations in the social democrat and communist milieu, they did not succeed in organising the majority of those Germans who had terminated their church membership. Moreover, even though there were mass organisations, they still remained marginal, as German people were still widely confessionalised by the end of the World War Two.[11] Ninety percent of the

8 Lucian Hölscher, *Datenatlas zur religiösen Geographie im protestantischen Deutschland. Von der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg, 4 volumes* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2001).

9 In a general sense, this is also true for the Wilhelmine era, as the Wilhelmine church exit movement also engaged the argument of church membership as a stabilisation of the exploitative system (see Neef, "Politicizing," 316). But the case is more complex. Although the official party policy was very clear and declared religion to be a private matter (1890), there also was a strong secularist current in the early socialist and social democrat movement establishing dissidence as one marker of social democrat identification and belonging. In the Weimar years, the positions polarised. While the Majority SPD mitigated its opposition towards religion, the Communist Party openly turned secularist. See Sebastian Prüfer, *Sozialismus statt Religion. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vor der religiösen Frage, 1863–1890* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002); and Fritz Bolle, "Darwinismus und Zeitgeist," in *Zeitgeist im Wandel. Das Wilhelminische Zeitalter*, edited by Hans Joachim Schoeps (Stuttgart: Klett, 1967). This question is also discussed by Todd Weir in *Red Secularism. Socialism and Secularist Culture in Germany 1890 to 1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2024), 18–20.

10 The numerical gap between the non-religious in the civic sense and the members of the secularist milieu has been and still is an object of discussion. Especially functionaries of the organisations repeatedly claimed and claim to represent a large part of the non-confessionals. Terms as 'sympathisers' or 'partially like-minded' make them implicitly humanist. See Frieder Otto Wolf, "Wer sind heute die Humanistinnen und Humanisten? Und wie können wir abschätzen, wie viele wir sind?," 11 February 2014, https://saekulare-gruene.de/frieder-otto-wolf-wer-sind-heute-die-humanistinnen-und-humanisten-und-koennen-wir-abschaetzen-wie-viele-wir-sind/ [the text is a statement of the president of the *Humanistischer Verband Deutschland* (German Humanist Association) to the secularist working group of the party *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*].

11 Todd Weir argues that, on the contrary, *Red Secularism* formed an integral part of Weimar culture, both for the activists who reached politically and culturally influent positions in those

German population still defined themselves as christians and were official church members.

However, there was a non-religious minority that assembled in distinct historical structures and set agendas in several working fields. These conditions shaped the situation of 1945, when the secularists reassembled after the war. They were likewise shaped by the years after 1933, when the national socialist regime immediately prohibited their organisations and destroyed their social networks.

Again, the most important change from Wilhelmine to Weimar freethought organisations was their shift in membership from the bourgeoisie, or new middle class, to the working class. Turning from a white-collar to a blue-collar phenomenon, freethought became a mass movement. While the *Deutscher Monistenbund* (German Monist League), one of the leading bourgeois freethought associations prior to 1914, never gathered more than 6,000 members and free-religious congregations numbered 50,000 'souls',[12] the socialist *Verband für Freidenkertum und Feuerbestattung* (Association for Freethought and Cremation – VfFF) had nearly 600,000 paying members in 1928.[13] Originally an association offering a burial (or rather, cremation insurance), the VfFF developed into a full-fledged *Vorfeldorganisation.*[14] Altogether, freethought had been successfully integrated into the Ger-

years and for their (conservative) opponents who identified secularism as a core issue of menacing socialism. See Weir, *Red Secularism,* 21.

12 The religiously connotated 'souls' included every member of the household. The sources stress this difference of membership, as all other associations only referred to formal, paying members. Thus, the freethought almanack of 1914 qualifies that 50,000 souls correlate to nearly 18,000 members, according to Gustav Tschirn, "Das Freigemeindetum," in *Handbuch der freigeistigen Bewegung Deutschlands, Österreichs und der Schweiz*, edited by Max Henning (Frankfurt am Main: Neuer Frankfurter Verlag, 1914 [second edition]), 123. The social structure of both free-religious congregations and freethought associations parallels this distinction: families were rather interested in the social life of congregations, while the associations with their programmatic approach and their public policy were more interesting for either younger bachelors or men pursuing a hobby or a mission without their wives or children. On the persistence of this dual structure in the secularist milieu, see Stefan Schröder, "Humanist Organizations and Secularization in Germany," *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* 10, no. 1 (2017): 21–34.

13 Todd Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-century Germany. The Rise of the Fourth Confession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 279–281. The association grew out of the proletarian *Verein der Freidenker für Feuerbestattung* (Association of Freethinkers for Cremation), founded in 1905, and changed its name to *Deutscher Freidenker-Verband* (German Freethinker Association) in 1930. It should not be confused with the bourgeois *Deutscher Freidenkerbund* (German Freethinker Federation), founded in 1881 by Ludwig Büchner.

14 The term originated in research on the labour movement and refers to types of activist organisations that are intensely entangled with socialist or communist parties but are still completely autonomous from the parties' structures. Autonomy is maintained by keeping separate local groups, holding regular member meetings, publishing journals, issuing membership cards, and

man socialist culture in the 1920s – which at the same time meant its alienation and disintegration from the non-socialist or non-working-class strata.

This also meant severe discursive and cultural changes. For example, the publications of the Monist League in the 1920s show a clear move to the left. Their publishing series, the *Monistische Flugschriften*, contained introductory scientific or naturalist literature, or classical critiques of religion from the beginning,[15] but, increasingly, the texts actively adopted a marxist perspective and vocabulary.[16] This rapprochement mirrors two developments: first, the aforementioned shift of the Monist League towards socialist and communist circles, which took place through both a withdrawal of elder and rather conservative actors and, second, a generational shift to a second generation of monists gaining functionary posts in the League and its local groups. This new generation consisted far less of successful academics stressing their state-supportive habitus but, rather, of (mostly young) academics who lacked job opportunities due to their familial background, their political involvement and/or their lack of prospective social networks. The second development is closely connected to that socio-structural datum: the labour movement of the 1920s provided such academics with job opportunities in the professionalising field of public education (e.g. in *Volkshochschulen*, mainly communally run adult education centres offering basic and extended education courses, as well as programmes heavily informed by the emergent field of Marxist science). Consequently, monists maintained their intellectualist habitus but transferred it from bourgeois, mainly academic circles to a broader public –, e.g. by the professional popularisation of scientific knowledge.[17]

---

the control of an autonomous budget. By embracing more issues than strict politics, they embedded their members in broader facets of daily life and ideology structure. Classical examples of such organisations are unions, women's and youth chapters, and worker's sports clubs.

15 To give some examples by quoting some title key words of the brochures: monism and religion, monism and clericalism, the development of the earth, mankind and cosmic space, human anatomy as proof of his descent, origins of faith and the pagan fundaments of christianity, miracle and worldview, religious epidemies. The series *Monistische Bibliothek. Kleine Flugschriften des DMB* (Monist Library. Small pamphlets of the German Monist League) published 47 volumes between 1920 and 1930 in Hamburg.

16 The most obvious works are: August Cyliax, *Gedanken eines Arbeiters über den Monismus und die Hamburger Richtlinien* 22 (1921); Adolf Franck, *Monismus und Sozialismus. Die Kultur der Gesellschaft* 26 (1922); Max von der Porten, *Konsequenter Materialismus* 35 (1924); and Theodor Hartwig, *Historischer Monismus. Sinn und Bedeutung der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung* 37/37a (1925).

17 The interference of public education and social democracy started before 1914 and became massive in the 1920s – not only in Germany, but also in Austria and the Czech Republic. For public education, see Dieter Langewiesche, "Freizeit und ‚Massenbildung'. Zur Ideologie und Praxis der sozialdemokratisch-gewerkschaftlichen Volksbildung in der Weimarer Republik," in *‚Neue*

Another context for the change to a mass phenomenon is education. While the confessional school and compulsory religious education were harshly contested but nevertheless remained nearly untouched in the Wilhelmine period, the situation in the Weimar Republic reached a pacifying compromise: public schools remained confessional, i.e. state schools were run communally and provided one kind of confessional religious education, which virtually all children attended. Generally, the communes could also establish *Simultanschulen*, *Gemeinschaftsschulen* or *Sammelschulen*, schools providing more than one kind of confessional education by organising classes along confessions or by separating the pupils for religious education lessons.[18] These schools were, however, contested in the Weimar years, and in most German regions, clear confessional identities prevailed, meaning that the educational pillarisation[19] of religious milieus was often defended (except for religiously mixed regions as metropole regions). Furthermore, the compromise allowed the children of dissidents to be more easily exempted from confessional religious education. They could either attend *Lebenskunde*, a

Erziehung' – ‚Neue Menschen'. Ansätze zur Erziehungs- und Bildungsreform in Deutschland zwischen Kaiserreich und Diktatur, edited by Ulrich Herrmann (Weinheim/Basel: Beltz, 1987). For Vienna, see Mitchell G. Ash and Christian Stifter, *Wissenschaft, Politik und Öffentlichkeit. Von der Wiener Moderne bis zur Gegenwart* (Vienna: Wiener Universitätsverlag, 2002).

18 All three terms stress different perspectives on these schools: *Simultan* ('simultaneous') refers to an ecclesiastical context, i.e. the (historically rare) joint use of churches by Catholics and Protestants likewise; *Gemeinschaft* ('community') refers to the pedagogical idea of integrated learning; and *Sammel* ('collect') refers to the practical dimension that these schools simply gathered children from religious minorities. Generally speaking, the issue of co-educating religiously diverse children was highly contested, as churches, as well as parent's initiatives, agitated in favour of separated schools. See Franz Walter, "Der Bund der freien Schulgesellschaften," in *Religiöse Sozialisten und Freidenker in der Weimarer Republik*, edited by Siegfried Heimann and Franz Walter (Bonn: Dietz Nachfolger, 1993), 306 –312.

19 The concept of pillarisation (*verzuiling*), has been derived for phenomena of the Dutch modern society, i.e. the arrangement of public life according to (non-)confessional boundaries and thus the formation of enclosed social milieus with only scarce points of contact. Consequently, the Dutch society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries consisted of a catholic, a protestant and a secular *zuil* ('pillar'), with some scholars dividing the secular pillar into a socialist and a liberal one. Speaking of Germany, this milieu closing process never happened to be that successful, but respective confessional secularist or socialist identities gained relevance in the German society of that time; see Olaf Blaschke, "Das 19. Jahrhundert: Ein Zweites Konfessionelles Zeitalter?" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 26, no. 1 (2000): 38–75. In this context, the insistence of parents to produce and maintain mono-confessional schools resembles the logics of a pillarised society – the social reality may not have been enclosed milieus, but the endeavour and perception of this ideal connects this German case to the Dutch model.

newly established school subject conveying secular moral education, or join a *Bekenntnisfreie Schule*, one of the few newly established secular schools.[20]

Additionally, the youth chapters of the diverse freethought associations expanded and professionalised, and thus developed into a proper youth milieu, which was often closely connected to social democrat or communist organisations. A product of this growth is the increasing visibility and normality of public *Jugendweihe* celebrations for parts of the urban proletarian youth.[21]

With this background of political affinity, the freethought associations and their activities were abolished as early as 1933 (with a prelude in 1932, when communist freethought associations had already been dissolved). Openly social democrat and communist associations were part of the first wave of bans but later, the smaller, non-political ones were also prohibited. As with most milieus, freethought spanned a broad spectrum and a small fraction welcomed the new political wind blowing through Germany. Conservative freethinkers who had been marginalised in the Weimar years now stressed their potential overlaps with national socialism and embraced the new regime. For example, Heinrich Schmidt, who had been Ernst Haeckel's assistant and president of the Monist League in 1919/1920, zealously strived for the public recognition of Haeckel. After 1933, he overtly conflated monism with national socialist ideology when he stressed the biological character of Haeckel's research and directly related it to racist or eugenic positions.[22] Yet this path of adaption was viable only for a comparably small part of the broader movement, namely for the marginalised middle class milieus and especially for academics with a background in the natural sciences.[23] Apart from that, attempts to comply freethought with national socialism failed miserably, as all sorts of organi-

20 The term denotes a school without any confessional predefinition, i.e. a school with no religious education at all. See Horst Groschopp, "Hundert Jahre ‚weltliche Schule' und ‚Lebenskunde'," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 62, no. 2 (2020): 31–42; and Susanne Enders, *Moralunterricht und Lebenskunde* (Bad Heilbrunn: Julius Klinkhardt, 2002).

21 *Jugendweihe* denotes a complex phenomenon in German history: originally introduced as free-religious alternative to the protestant rite of confirmation, it diffused into the workers' movement as *rite de passage* with graduation. In the GDR, it became a publicly organised ritual 'integrating the youth into the socialist society'. Even after reunification, *Jugendweihe* has persisted as a *rite de passage* in large parts of Eastern Germany.

22 Uwe Hoßfeld, "Haeckels ‚Eckermann': Heinrich Schmidt (1874–1935)," in *‚Klassische Universität' und ‚akademische Provinz': Die Universität Jena von der Mitte des 19. bis in die 30er Jahre des 20. Jahrhunderts*, edited by Matthias Steinbach and Stefan Gerber (Jena/Quedlinburg: Dr. Bussert & Stadeler, 2005).

23 Other protagonists were Ludwig Plate (Haeckel's successor as chair of biology in Jena), Wilhelm Schallmeyer (also a disciple of Haeckel and known eugenicist), or Alfred Ploetz (founding member of the Monist League and leading German eugenicist around 1910).

sations remained prohibited and the protagonists of the earlier decennia were not recognised as honourable predecessors of the national socialist movement.[24]

Organised German Freethought Post-1945

After 1945, the starting conditions for organised freethought were not ideal. There was a small but certain stratum of dissidents among the German population. The remainders of formerly prohibited freethought associations also existed, together with their former members who had been persecuted for 12 years – often rather for their related political identities as communists or social democrats than for their freethought activities. Nevertheless, there were still former active members who now formed different patterns of action in re-establishing their organisations. These patterns reacted to different starting conditions which are illustrated here in a four-field matrix (Figure 1) integrating geographical (or rather block) locations and class locations.

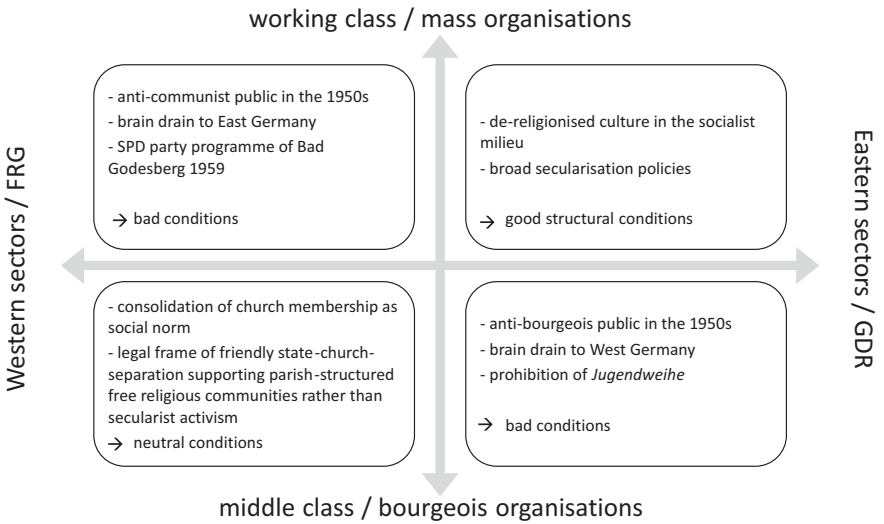

Figure 1: The secularist field in Germany after 1945.

24 The American historian Daniel Gasman made this conjunction and declared Ernst Haeckel and the Monist League to be the origin of national socialism. See Daniel Gasman, *Haeckel's Monism and the Birth of Fascist Ideology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

As described above, class is just one dimension of this classification. The organisations can also be presented generationally. The bourgeois formations date from the 1880s to 1910, while the working-class groups originated rather after 1900. Both can also be presented according to their organisational structures – the former had a quite small membership with a rather intellectual horizon of activities, while the latter became mass organisations in the 1920s, with a rather politicised and mobilising portfolio of activities. As a result, they constitute two different social formations, that developed differently under the emerging conditions of two different political systems in Germany after 1945. These different models will be discussed separately and in more detail in the following sections.

Conditions in the Western Sectors and the FRG

Starting with the upper portion of the diagram's left side, it is obvious that the late 1940s and 1950s provided bad starting conditions for socialist or communist freethinkers. They had lost members through the Nazi persecution and now, they were again potential suspects in the formative years of the Cold War. Moreover, these milieus suffered from a brain drain. As the Eastern sector, and later the GDR, developed a socialist system, a good deal of this milieu left for good.[25] Another vital point was the internal development of the German Social Democrat Party, which, in 1959, adopted a new programme in Bad Godesberg that dropped marxism and class struggle as the means and aim of the party.[26] Its most important effect in this context was its enforcement of the party position towards religion. Religion was declared to be a private matter (as had been done in earlier party programmes), but now the party explicitly embraced christian workers in its attempt to open up to the broader middle classes. This policy fundamentally

25 This point cannot be overstressed. The brain drain from East to West in the formative years of the FRG and GDR is normally described as one-way. There was, however, also a flow of individuals from West to East, although it was generally fewer and affected less neuralgic professionals. Nevertheless, their loss was significant for this movement and its associations.

26 On the SPD and its programme, see Michael Klein, *Westdeutscher Protestantismus und politische Parteien: Anti-Parteien-Mentalität und parteipolitisches Engagement von 1945 bis 1963* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); and Karim Fertikh, *L'Invention de la Social-Démocratie Allemande. Une Histoire Sociale du Programme Bad Godesberg*, (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2020). Pamela Camerra-Rowe stresses the eminence of the programme as a party myth and point of reference by quoting the then-chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) who called *Agenda 2010* a grave socio-political reform, and a "second Godesberg" (Pamela Camerra-Rowe, "Agenda 2010: Redefining German Social Democracy," *German Politics & Society* 22, no. 1 (2004), 4). See also Weir, *Red Secularism.*

weakened those groups that had intensely entangled secularism with class struggle, which had been the main reason for the successful enlargement of the abovementioned proletarian associations in the 1920s. With the new policy, those groups completely lost their fundament and never recovered their numbers.[27]

The classical freethought associations such as the Monist League or the Freethinkers' Association also survived national socialist rule. Their personal losses were, however, more of a generational kind, as the functionaries of the Weimar period were already older and were now retired or dead. The Monist League's membership figures had already declined to 3,000 members in the 1920s, and reorganised in 1946, with only 600 members. Ten years later, there were only 300 members left.[28]

The same is true for the free-religious communities. These communities and associations essentially continued their pre-war activities in the following decades, that is, they identified either as parishes or as pressure groups. As they had been granted a corporative status, in 1919, as *Weltanschauungsgemeinschaft* ('worldview community'), a status in parallel with the privileged religious communities, they mainly focused on parish work, i.e. inner-communal activities and youth education. But numerically, they melted down to local congregations recruiting their members almost exclusively from their own ranks. In 1998, Steffen Rink, called them (together with the old catholics and the unitarians) "fossils of the history of religion", as they represented a historical momentum for the development of new religious communities in the nineteenth century that started as dynamic groups, but "petrified" in the twentieth century, forming quite static, small organisations.[29]

Those organisations engaged with a public agenda did not succeed either in producing or upholding a broad societal visibility of secularist stances: they published, albeit on a small scale, or focused on legal activism by campaigning for the legal equality of non-religious citizens. For example, they demanded secular

27 There is still a small, quite encapsulated sub-milieu of secularist social democrats, mainly in West German cities. Interestingly, these circles seem to function as carriers of a West German *Jugendweihe*-tradition, e.g. in Hamburg and Braunschweig (information by Thilo Rother). 'Encapsulated' really refers to the fact that these associations and networks form part of a family tradition.

28 Weir, *Secularism*, 281. Arnher E. Lenz and Ortrun E. Lenz, "Der Deutsche Monistenbund nach 1945," in *Darwin, Haeckel und die Folgen. Monismus in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, edited by Arnher E. Lenz and Volker Mueller (Neustadt am Rübenberge: Angelika Lenz, 2006).

29 REMID, *Die Alten unter den Neuen – ‚Fossilien der Religionsgeschichte'* (Marburg: REMID, 1998). Today, four federal countries are still acknowledging free-religious communities as corporative religious bodies: Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Hesse, and Lower Saxony. These regions also mark their historical strongholds mainly in Southwestern Germany.

substitute subjects for religious education or sued against labour laws that gave advantages to churches as employers.

A third and special case is the Unitarian Community, as it developed very differently in West Germany than it did in the rest of the world. While internationally unitarianism is rather liberal, free-religious, and non-denominational, the German branch developed through the influence of disillusioned German Christians in strongly conservative directions, therefore withdrawing themselves from mainstream discourses and public attention. This seclusion went hand in hand with a stronger focus on internal communication and community works, individual (and mystical) religiosity and *völkisch* theorising.[30]

Thus, to sum up the situation in the Western sectors and the FRG, there was a resumption process, though on a small scale. This marginal position also resulted from a highly conservative societal climate in the Adenauer years that have long been described as an era of restoration and re-christianisation.[31] There has been some growth of freethought activism since the late 1960s, but secularist organisations, as well as the non-religious as a societal stratum remained marginal.[32] Church membership continued to remain the norm, cooperation of German administrative institutions and church representatives represented the post-1949 idea of a friendly or cooperative separation of church and state.[33] This dominance was unbroken until reunification, when the East German population weighed in a highly non-religious societal stratum.[34]

30 Ulrich Nanko, "Religiöse Gruppenbildungen vormaliger 'Deutschgläubiger' nach 1945," in *Antisemitismus, Paganismus, Völkische Religion*, edited by Hubert Cancik and Uwe Puschner (München: Saur, 2004).

31 See Thomas Großbölting, *Der verlorene Himmel. Glaube in Deutschland seit 1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 93f. He presents a plausible argument, but also denotes it a chimaera, as the effects of this re-christianisation were short-lived and the churches were unable to reanimate closed religious milieus.

32 A similar growth can be witnessed in the British humanist movement. It is connected to the student movement: humanism could establish itself as a representative of a liberal, progressive lifestyle and recruited new members. See Callum Brown, David Nash and Charlie Lynch, *The Humanist Movement in Modern Britain. A History of Ethicists, Rationalists and Humanists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023). The same is true for West Germany, though on a small scale.

33 The most famous manifestation of that concept is Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde's dilemma that democratic states rest on preconditions that they cannot guarantee – and his solution that these can only be provided by institutionalised religion. See Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, "Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation," in *Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit. Studien zur Staatstheorie und zum Verfassungsrecht*, edited by Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), 60.

34 In 2022, demography marked a significant point: after decades of slow decline, the membership rate of the public churches in Germany sank below 50 percent (not that the other 50 percent

Conditions in the Eastern Sector and the GDR

The broad secularisation of the East German population is often mentioned as one of the outcomes of 40 years of socialist politics. It also corresponds to the aforementioned notions of socialist policies as being anti-religious. Indeed, GDR officials established and enforced a broad range of secularist policies. While granting the individual freedom of religion, the GDR saw itself as a laicist state and curtailed conditions for religious institutions. Subsidies to religious communities were rigorously cut. Scientism and scientistic approaches were broadly implemented in the educational system in the school reforms of the 1950s, through the massive expansion of public education facilities, and by banning religious education from public schools (it still could take place in the parishes but without any financial or structural support).

All these policies were deeply rooted in socialist cultures, which were also already widely de-religionised or secularist through the influence of the freethought mass organisations of the 1920s.[35] Many functionaries had biographical ties to the pre-war or interbellum freethought organisations. They had family ties to the free-religious congregations, as these had been alternative sociability forums during Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Laws (such as sports clubs or choirs), they had their *Jugendweihe* either in one of these congregations or in the proletarian freethinker organisations of the 1920s, or they had been socialised in party milieus where freethought had just been habitual. These functionaries also narrated typical deconversion biographies, i.e. stories about their liberation and move to socialism entailed accounts of emancipation from a conservative, bourgeois or rural, but often religiously connotated milieu.[36] Secularists could thus seriously expect to find sympathy and support from them.

---

are non-religious, as there is also a wide array of religious minorities). See *Deutsche Welle*, "Record numbers leaving Germany's churches," 28 June 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/germany-record-numbers-leaving-churches/a-62286684.

35 But the process of dereligionisation is older than the twentieth century. Lucian Hölschers *Datenatlas* shows clearly that those protestant regions that were to become the GDR after 1945 were already more alienated from the church than comparable Southern or Western German regions. Church attendance was already surprisingly low in cities like Berlin or Leipzig: only one-sixth of the parish members attended Sunday services at least once a year (Hölscher, *Datenatlas*, vol. 2, 420 and 549).

36 To give one example: Walter Ulbricht (1893–1973) had his *Jugendweihe* in the free-religious community in Leipzig in 1907. He was, together with "some other children in his class, whose fathers were members of the SPD", exempted from religious education. For that, they were suspects. Carola Stern, *Ulbricht. Eine politische Biographie* (Cologne/Berlin: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1964), 21. See also Weir, *Red Secularism*, 139–141.

More practically, it became more difficult to re-establish freethought associations in the Eastern sector than in the Western sectors. Middle-class organisations (freethinkers or free-religious) met with an anti-bourgeois political climate that fundamentally suspected them of being counterrevolutionaries; they encountered the same prejudice as their working-class fellows in the Western sector, even though they could quite easily testify to not having benefited from the national socialist regime, as they were forbidden since 1933. On the individual level, this proof was much more difficult for the middle-class associations: as their members were recruited from technical, administrative, and free professions, they were generally more likely to have been related to governmental or professional institutions that had been organised according to the regime. Consequently, uncorrupted members and potential functionaries were structurally harder to find than in working-class organisations. This barrier fundamentally handicapped the reorganisation of middle-class freethought. Unsurprisingly, for political, economic or personal reasons, the former members of these associations left East Germany as part of the brain drain of trained professionals to the Western sectors. A last incentive for this clientele may have been the official prohibition of the *Jugendweihe*-celebrations for free-religious communities in the GDR in 1950.

As these barriers did not exist for the former working-class organisations in the Eastern sector, the circumstances were more beneficial and the path seemed wide and open for a revival of the disbanded secularist mass associations as socialist recruitment or activist organisations. Yet it came differently and the stagnated growth or sterility was not only due to policies and structures inside the GDR alone. Rather, difficulties confronting secularist reorganisation were also caused by the hegemonic power of the region, the Soviet Union.

To begin with, the official Soviet position towards religion and the formation of the critique of religion had significantly changed during World War Two: Stalin had restored the state's relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church in 1943, and the secularist movement, especially the League of the Militant Godless, had declined. Consequently, it could not serve as a role model in Germany anymore. But the state's focus on religion changed again in the early 1950s – to individual criminalisation, persecution and direct political agency against religious communities. Jewish institutions had been disbanded since the late 1940s, and 1953 saw the doctors' plot affair, a series of show trials against physicians, among them jews, that verbalised the whole spectrum of anti-semitic prejudices. Also, in 1954, the Soviet state started a reinforced propaganda campaign against both religious

institutions and individual believers.[37] In contrast to the anti-religious campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s, which depicted religious beliefs and believers as outdated and ridiculous, this new campaign put more effort into glorifying the technological, secular age that socialism and communism were about to bring. Ridiculing religion may still have been a subject, but questions of religious vs. secular worldviews were marginalised in favour of the promises of science. In short, the Soviet Union did not provide role models for freethought or secularist sociability anymore. Rather, the state turned its attention away from the negative critique of concrete religions and to the positive pronouncement of a distinct technological and scientific worldview.

The German freethought associations had also been busy popularising scientific knowledge and worldviews through their public lectures and pamphlets, and successfully addressed an interested audience. Now, the (mainly secular) socialists in the GDR had access to the whole society in multiple pathways – and they used these opportunities by professionalising this work. The content was pedagogically revised and rearranged; structurally, it was centralised and tied closer to state institutions, e.g. the Ministry of Education. A main instrument to accomplish this strategy was to re-establish and foster the *Urania*, an older, Berlin-based public education forum in the milieu of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ethische Kultur* (German Society for Ethical Culture) centred around an observatory.[38] *Urania* was re-founded in 1954, as an institutional hybrid, it was officially autonomous but in fact entangled with state institutions. Together with the boards for the organisation of the newly established state-related *Jugendweihe*-celebrations, *Urania* became the central diffusor of the scientific worldview in the East German context. The organisation arranged lecture series and exhibitions, published magazines and books and edited *Weltall, Erde, Mensch* ('Space, Earth, Man'), the book presented at *Jugendweihe*-celebrations until 1974.[39] Freethought associations dou-

37 Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty. A History of Societ Atheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Jeffrey *Veidlinger,* "Was the Doctors' Plot a Blood Libel?," in *Ritual Murder in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Beyond: New Histories of an Old Accusation,* edited by Eugene M. Avrutin, Jonathan Dekel-Chen and Robert weinberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); and Richard Madsen*,* "Religion under Communism," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism,* edited by Stephen A. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 589.

38 On the *Urania*, see Thomas Schmidt-Lux, *Wissenschaft als Religion. Szientismus im ostdeutschen Säkularisierungsprozess* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2008); and Thomas Schmidt-Lux, "Das helle Licht der Wissenschaft. Die Urania, der organisierte Szientismus und die ostdeutsche Säkularisierung," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 34, no. 1 (2008): 41–72. On the German Ethical Movement, see Weir, *Secularism*, 133; and Enders, *Moralunterricht*, 55–83.

39 The book circulated in millions of copies and spanned three central dimensions of the scientific worldview: cosmological, geological and anthropological/historical knowledge.

bling the official scientification efforts simply did not fit in this pattern of centralised and state-entangled public education.

Moreover, with a potential focus on community work (which may have been inherited from their free-religious predecessors), organised freethinkers did not fit into the pattern for the development of a full-fledged socialist society. Sociability was either clustered in the sphere of workspaces, i.e. in a *Brigade* or a *Kollektiv*,[40] or in the sphere of civil activities. Here, non-religion and the critique of religion were no longer deemed important measures for the transformation of society. Although there were still churches and religions in the GDR, they were not tackled as targets of public agitation anymore. Their relative acceptance in GDR society is due to ideological and empirical reasons. Ideologically, the party functionaries expected the establishment of a socialist state on German soil to be such a fundamental societal transformation that questions of religion were simply expected to become obsolete in the new system. Empirically, the early years of the GDR saw confrontations with religious institutions – most notably the introduction of the aforementioned *Jugendweihe* celebrations as an institutionalised *rite de passage* to adulthood. Not only were the free-religious communities not allowed to celebrate *Jugendweihe* anymore and the rite was re-branded as festive introduction into the 'socialist workers' collective', it also came to rival the protestant rite of confirmation, which traditionally accompanied ceremonies when graduating from elementary school. Originally planned as an additional offer, the churches opposed it, demanding that their members to boycott the public festivity. But within a few years, more families participated in *Jugendweihe* than in confirmation. By the 1980s, more than 90 percent of each cohort participated in the socialist rite. The churches had sought to confront the *Jugendweihe* and had lost.[41] This left the impression amongst the state officials that religion was a force to be furthermore neglected and freethought agitation was not needed.[42]

A final reason for the rupture in freethought traditions in the GDR lies in a historical burden. Lenin's criticism of positivism (and also of Wilhelm Ostwald as a protagonist of this philosophical approach) in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* from 1909 brought a lasting verdict on the philosophical work of the scholar and

40 Both refer to groups of colleagues in a company: while the former refers to the totality of all colleagues in a certain working unit, the latter were optional groups dedicated to certain issues or hobbies, e.g. music, dramatic play, or amicable relations to colleagues in the Soviet Union.

41 Uta Karstein, *Konflikt um die symbolische Ordnung. Genese, Struktur und Eigensinn des religiös-weltanschaulichen Feldes* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2013), 128–133.

42 But finally, an Association of Freethinkers in the GDR, the *Verband der Freidenker der DDR*, was established in 1989. On this process, see Eva Guigo-Patzelt's chapter in this volume.

on his freethought activism.[43] This met with the confrontational reception of a bifurcated freethought milieu with a bourgeois and a proletarian camp. Consequently, critics of religion in the GDR referring to Ernst Haeckel or Wilhelm Ostwald were easily suspected of being revisionists, i.e. subjects with a bourgeois mindset, keeping themselves busy with the wrong persons, the wrong questions and the wrong perspectives. When the East German historian of science, Friedrich Herneck, published a compilation of essays on the critique of religion by Ostwald in 1960,[44] he explicitly stressed Ostwald was a chemist, Nobel Prize laureate and generally a reliable scientist. Although Ostwald's arguments are mostly conventional arguments that were by their content absolutely valid in the socialist context of the critique of religion, Herneck was nonetheless suspected of rehabilitating another bourgeois, basically wrong-minded thinker and for corrupting the proper socialist scientific worldview as it was constructed and popularised by public education.[45]

Not only was the freethought milieu unable to re-organise under the conditions of a secularist state, it was also difficult to take up intellectual traditions of freethought and the critique of religion in the public sphere without being suspected of being revisionist and not supportive of the state. GDR secularism was therefore not only secularist in the sense of an anti-religionist agenda or hostility towards organised religion; it was also hostile towards organised forms of worldview secularism.

43 Lenin called Ostwald a "very important chemist and very confused philosopher"; see Naum Rodnyj and Jurij Solovjev, *Wilhelm Ostwald* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1977), 7. Ostwald was president of the Monist League from 1911 to 1915 and a productive publisher of the critique of religion.

44 Wilhelm Ostwald, *Wissenschaft contra Gottesglaube. Aus den atheistischen Schriften des großen Chemikers*, edited by Friedrich Herneck (Berlin: Urania, 1960); Friedrich Herneck, *Der Chemiker Wilhelm Ostwald und sein Kampf um die Verbreitung eines naturwissenschaftlich begründeten Weltbildes: Ein dokumentarischer Beitrag zur Geschichte der Naturwissenschaft und ihrer atheistischen Traditionen* (Habilitation, University of Berlin [East], 1961). While the former was published by the *Urania* and thus approached the issue in a quite popularised manner, the latter was Herneck's postdoctoral qualification.

45 As a historian of science, Herneck lost his teaching permission in 1958 for revisionism: he had worked on the philosopher Ernst Mach (who had been Lenin's main target in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*). See Christoffer Leber, *Arbeit am Welträtsel. Religion und Säkularität in der Monismusbewegung um 1900* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 2020), 9; and Dieter Hoffmann, "Herneck, Friedrich," in *Wer war wer in der DDR? Ein Lexikon ostdeutscher Biographien* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2010 [fifth edition]).

Conclusion

Turning back to the analytical question of the interconnections of the non-religious and their respective state contexts, the case of German organised freethought after 1945 shows that concrete historical non-religious formations depend directly on social, cultural, and political frameworks and spheres of action. The two German states provided diametrical conditions for the (re)formation of freethought associations – fundamentally disadvantaging one stratum, while giving a structural advantage to another. That is, both states could have served as a harbour for divergent but substantial parts of the freethought milieu of the early twentieth century. Both groups, however, failed to continue previous traditions and use historical resources. In the FRG, this disruption was heavily connected to the negative standing of freethought and the critique of religion in a religion-friendly political system and a conservative, religionised public discourse – at least until the late 1960s. In contrast, in the GDR, freethought and the critique of religion were unable to establish themselves as a substantial dimension of the new socialist order: the historical tradition of German freethought was widely delegitimised and religion itself was deemed so marginal and unproductive that discussing it critically would have brought unnecessary attention to the issue. Religion was silenced, and non-religion no less so. In conclusion, the secularist policy of the GDR not only targeted (organised) religion but also (organised) non-religion – judging from its historical traditions, the socialist system perceived organised freethought as an integral part of the religious field, rather than as a non-religious sphere of its own.

Though located in different settings and bound to different frameworks of societal activity, the result was the same: organised freethought was marginalised in both German states in the twentieth century.