

From Spoils of War to Gifts of State. Chinese ‘Boxer Flags’ and German Conceptions of History, 1900 to 1955

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Abstract: Using the example of state gifts, the article investigates various interpretations of objects in the context of political historical conception: during his first state visit to the People’s Republic of China in 1955, GDR Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl presented ten banners which had been captured by the East Asian Expeditionary Corps in the Boxer Uprising of 1900/01, as well as three plundered volumes of an encyclopedia.

While Imperial Germany had made a distinction between legal spoils of war and questionable plunder, socialist politicians and historians after the World War II increasingly labelled both alike as stolen property. This generalization and criminalization served to demarcate Germany’s ‘fatal’ past from which the GDR, founded in 1949, was trying to distance itself. The GDR established a historical narrative based on Marxist-Leninist ideas. Anti-Fascism, anti-imperialism and anti-militarism were central aspects of its national identity. With these state gifts in 1955, the young GDR sought to distinguish itself symbolically both from Imperial Germany, which bore negative connotations, as well as from the competing Federal Republic of Germany, which it accused of continuing Germany’s militarist tradition. The ‘Boxers’ were a key positive point of reference in the historical conception of the Chinese Communist Party, particularly during the Cultural Revolution.

The GDR’s state-run media gave a great deal of publicity to the presentation of these gifts and to the friendship between Germany and China which they demonstrated. The extent to which the East German regime was focused on its self-staging and considering how little it cared about the historical objects themselves is demonstrated by the fact that among the ten banners there were only two which can actually be traced back to the Boxers.

Keywords: Culture of remembrance; collective view of history; imperialism; GDR; Boxer Uprising

On 11th December 1955, the GDR’s Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl presented several gifts of state to Premier and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai during his first state visit to the People’s Republic of China: three volumes of an old Chinese encyclopedia and ten flags – items that had been brought to Imperial Germany as booty after the suppression of the Boxer

Uprising some 50 years earlier.¹ Now they were to be signs of East German-Chinese friendship.

The press of the GDR drew public attention especially to the so-called ‘Boxer flags’ being handed over in Beijing. This was done not least because of

1 The term ‘Boxer’ is a Western term, popularized by the media and historiography. It labeled a complex religious, social and political movement in late 19th and early 20th-century China. The term derived from a secret society which called itself ‘Yihéquán’ (Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fist). The group practiced a certain kind of boxing and other physical exercises in the belief that this made them invulnerable. It was later named League of Harmony and Justice. For further information, see Paul A. Cohen: *History in Three Keys. The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*, New York 1997, 59-210.

its historical and symbolic significance: flags were and are distinctive signals, their colors and signs are intended to create community. The GDR, like all socialist states, paid homage to a cult of flags, yet exclusively flags of socialist and communist movements.² The flags conquered in China by Imperial Germany, once proudly presented trophies, were seen under the new auspices as the epitome of imperialism and militarism, which the GDR claimed to combat.³

In recent years, the handover of these flags has attracted the interest of researchers on several occasions.⁴ More appropriate than the term ‘restitution’, which was used already before the term was shaped, is to speak of ‘gifts of state’, or more precisely of ‘socialist gifts of state’ in the form of historical objects. Since their backgrounds have hardly been considered so far, the objects and actors as well as their motives and contexts for action will be examined below.⁵ As a ‘distant mirror’ the event prefigures the present debate on restitution.⁶ But the return of the flags was neither related to a restitution request by the country of origin, nor was it linked to postcolonial narratives and the idea of decolonizing museums. At the same time, this case is an example of the attributions of meaning borne by self-conceptions and conceptions of history, which not only changed in 20th-century Germany, but also sharply opposed each other.

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- 2 Cf. Klaus-Peter Merta: *Flatternde Zeichen – Fahnenkult in der DDR*, in: Dieter Vorsteher (ed.): *Parteiauftrag: Ein neues Deutschland. Bilder, Rituale und Symbole der frühen DDR*, Munich / Berlin 1996, 187-192; Jean-Yves Bajan: *Les années Mao. Une histoire de la Chine en affiches (1949-1979)*, Paris 2001.
- 3 Cf. Uwe Backes: *Antifaschismus. Anmerkungen zu Begriff und Geschichte*, in: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (ed.): *Der Antifaschismus als Staatsdoktrin der DDR*, Sankt Augustin et al. 2009, 7-15, here: 7.
- 4 Cf. Heike Hartmann: *Andererseits – Zum Umgang mit Objekten in der Ausstellung „Deutscher Kolonialismus. Fragmente seiner Geschichte und Gegenwart“*, in: Larissa Förster et al. (eds.): *Provenienzforschung zu ethnographischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit. Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte*, Berlin 2018, 249-264, here: 259, 262; Lars Müller: *Returns of Cultural Artefacts and Human Remains in a (Post)colonial Context. Mapping Claims between the Mid-19th Century and the 1970s* (Working Papers Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste), Magdeburg 2021, 43-44, https://perspectivia.net/receive/pnet_mods_00004508, <05.22.2022>.
- 5 I thank the following people for their suggestions and information: Ricarda Brosch (Victoria and Albert Museum), Paul Cornish (London), Prof. Dr. Hans-Martin Hinz (Berlin), Christopher Jütte (Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin), Cordula Reuß (Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig), Jörg Rudolph (Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin).
- 6 Cf. Thomas Sandkühler et al. (eds.): *Geschichtskultur durch Restitution? Ein Kunst-Historikerstreit*, Vienna et al. 2021.

The Spoils of War of the East Asian Expeditionary Corps

On 25th September 1900, a battle between Boxer units and soldiers of the German ‘Seebataillon’ (Sea Battalion) took place near the Chinese village of Tai Ting. In the course of it, the Boxers attacked a German position “with waving flags”, where it came to fierce hand-to-hand combat.⁷ “It was here where Lieutenant Poland shot a Boxer leader in a scuffle and captured his flag.”⁸ This scene exemplifies what happened hundreds of times during the Boxer Uprising: the capturing of enemy flags. To take colors and standards, drums and bugles – and thus communications equipment – from the enemy, as well as all kinds of weapons, was a centuries-old part of international martial law.⁹ It struck at the morale of those losing such symbolic items while simultaneously bolstering that of the trophy-takers.

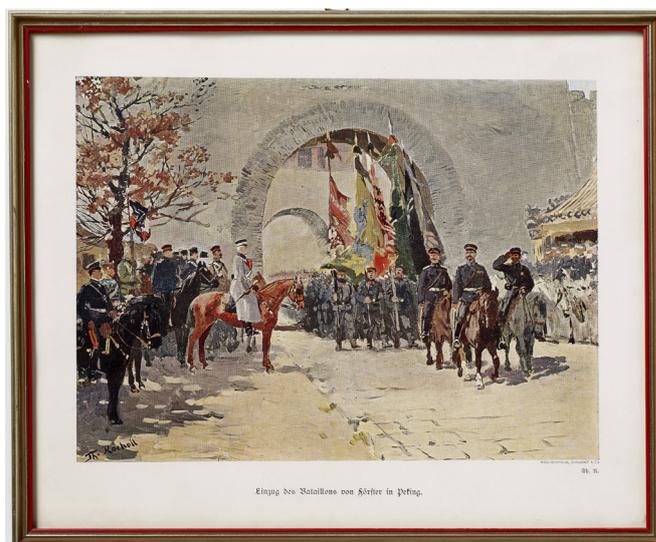


Fig. 1: Theodor Rocholl, *Entry of Förster's battalion into Beijing, 1901*, paper, lithograph, 23 x 28 cm, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv.-No. MGr 2015/1.

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- 7 *Deutschland in China 1900-1901*. Bearbeitet von Teilnehmern an der Expedition, Düsseldorf 1902, 66.
- 8 *Deutschland in China 1902* (see FN 7), 66.
- 9 Cf. Paul Cornish: “Just a Boyish Habit”...? *British and Commonwealth War Trophies in the First World War*, in: Nicholas J. Saunders / Paul Cornish (eds.): *Contested Objects. Material Memories of the Great War*, London / New York 2009, 11-26; Thomas Weißbrich: *Aux drapeaux! Trophées militaires français et allemands entre 1870 et 1920*, in: Jean-François Chanet et al. (eds.): *D'une guerre à l'autre. Que reste-t-il de 1870-1871 en 1914?*, Paris 2016, 237-256.

Ever since the China became the target of imperialist interests in the 19th century – first those of Great Britain and France, then those of the United States of America, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Japan, and Russia – resistance against these influences had been stirring in the country. At the head of the resistance was not the ruling Qing Dynasty, but the paramilitary Boxers, a secret organization that called itself ‘Yihétuán Yùndòng’ (League of Harmony and Justice). Their followers, mostly youths from the rural population, cultivated traditional Chinese martial arts and called for battle against the ‘foreign devils’. The movement essentially pursued conservative goals.

Their violent, initially mainly anti-Christian riots claimed an estimated 32.000 victims, mainly converted Chinese, but also a few European missionaries.¹⁰ In the summer of 1900, the Boxer Uprising took place which also targeted foreigners.¹¹ In June, the Boxers, by now supported by the imperial government, laid siege to the diplomatic quarter in Beijing.¹² In mid-June 1900, Western and Japanese naval forces attacked the Dagu Forts and captured them after a battle against regular troops of the Imperial Chinese Army. On June 21st, the Imperial House issued several edicts proclaiming a state of war.¹³ They committed the Chinese Army to join the Boxers in their fight against the foreign powers. The Eight-Nation Alliance initially intervened militarily with about 20.000 troops and put down the uprising to protect their nationals and secure their economic interests.¹⁴ It was Russia and Japan, neighboring countries of China, who supplied the largest forces to the Allied contingent.

The conflict was never formally declared as a war, neither by the Imperial Chinese Court nor by the Governments of the Allies.¹⁵

For the intervention, the German Emperor Wilhelm II had raised the East Asian Expeditionary Corps, a volunteer unit of 2.500 men, in June 1900.¹⁶ It doubled the forces already stationed in China.¹⁷ In his so-called ‘Hun Speech’ of July 27th, delivered on the occasion of the farewell of some of the troops in Bremerhaven, the Emperor called on the soldiers to give “no quarter” in light of the murder of Ambassador Clemens von Ketteler.¹⁸ By the time the Expeditionary Corps arrived in China in late September, however, the siege of the Beijing diplomatic quarters had already been ended by international troops already on the ground. After the fighting, the victorious soldiers plundered the capital, including the Summer Palace, and looted countless art and cultural objects in the process, an event from which Germans also profited.¹⁹

The East Asian Expeditionary Corps participated in smaller military operations, so-called ‘punitive expeditions’, which in turn resulted in looting and killing of Chinese.²⁰ Like the other intervention forces, the Corps fought against the Imperial Chinese Army, which had been partially modernized since the end of the 19th century with the help

10 Cf. Iwo Amelung: Gegen die ausländischen Barbaren. Die „Boxer“ und ihr Mythos, in: Hans-Martin Hinz / Christoph Lind (eds.): Tsingtau. Ein Kapitel deutscher Kolonialgeschichte in China 1897-1914, Berlin 1998, 165-172, here: 169.

11 On the current state of research on the Boxer Uprising, see Thoralf Klein: Introduction, in: Thoralf Klein (ed.): The Boxer War. Media and Memory of an Imperialist Intervention, Kiel 2020, 9-20.

12 Cf. Peter Harrington: Beijing 1900. The Boxer Rebellion, Oxford 2001.

13 Cf. Thoralf Klein: The Boxer War – The Boxer Uprising, 2008, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/boxer-war-boxer-uprising.html>, <27.08.2022>

14 Cf. Philip S. Jowett: Imperial Chinese Armies 1840-1911, Oxford 2016, 9. Differing figures for the total number of men deployed are offered in various publications. For a listing of the units of the Allied Armies which took part in the fighting during the Boxer Uprising, see Lynn E. Bodin: The Boxer Rebellion, London 1982, 27-30.

15 Cf. Klein 2008 (see FN 13).

16 Cf. Eckard Michels: Das „Ostasiatische Expeditionskorps“ des Deutschen Reiches in China 1900/01, in: Tanja Bühner et al. (eds.): Imperialkriege von 1500 bis heute. Strukturen – Akteure – Lernprozesse, Paderborn et al. 2011, 401-416.

17 The German units in China were, namely, a Sea Battalion, a battery of Marine Horse Artillery, the Staff Detachment, and sailors from the warships of the East Asian Squadron. They participated in the early military operations, e.g. the Seymour expedition, the failed attempt of the Eight-Nation Alliance to relieve the diplomatic quarter in Beijing, and the battle of the Dagu Forts, see Bodin 1982 (see FN 14), 28.

18 This exhortation infringed the Hague Conventions, signed by Wilhelm II in 1899 and again in 1907. But, as mentioned above, the conflict between China and the Eight-Nation Alliance was never formally declared as a war. For further information on the ‘Hun Speech’, see Thoralf Klein: Die Hunnenrede (1900), in: Jürgen Zimmerer (ed.): Kein Platz an der Sonne. Erinnerungsorte der deutschen Kolonialgeschichte, Frankfurt / New York 2013, 164-176.

19 Cf. James L. Hevia: Ein „Volksfest“. Die Plünderung Pekings und ihre Folgen, in: Mechthild Leutner / Klaus Mühlhahn (eds.): Kolonialkrieg in China. Die Niederschlagung der Boxerbewegung 1900-1901, Berlin 2007, 147-152; Till Spurny: Plünderung von Kulturgütern in Peking 1900/1901, Berlin 2008.

20 Cf. Amelung 1998 (see FN 10), 171; Susanne Kuß: German Colonial Wars and the Context of Military Violence. Translated by Andrew Smith, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2017.

of Western, including Prussian, advisors.²¹ It had modern weapons, including German Krupp guns. Integrated into this army in the summer of 1900, the Boxers, on the other hand, deliberately fought with traditional cutting, striking, and stabbing weapons and considered themselves invulnerable because of a spiritual ritual.²²

By December 1900, international troops had largely put down the Boxer Uprising. The 'Boxer Protocol' of 7th September 1901, concluded between the imperial court and the Eight-Nation Alliance, ended the conflict, demanding heavy compensation from China. The German Empire also demanded that a member of the Chinese imperial family go on an 'Expiatory Mission' to the court of Wilhelm II.²³ At the end of the year, the Expeditionary Corps returned to Germany and was disbanded.²⁴

The spoils of war transferred by the High Command after the operation arrived in Berlin in November 1901. Since the soldiers of the volunteer unit came from different states of the German Empire, the Emperor ordered the distribution of the booty between the four kingdoms. Flags, guns, weapons and equipment captured by Prussian units went to the Royal Prussian Armory in Berlin, which served as an army museum, while the Saxony, Württemberg and Bavarian booty went to the respective army museums in Dresden, Stuttgart and Munich.²⁵

From the beginning, the identification of the objects was fraught with certain difficulties. During the weeks of shipment, several slips of paper with specific information about the flags were lost. The

translation of the Chinese inscriptions was entrusted to Professor Carl Arendt who worked at the Seminar for Oriental Languages at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. Despite his expertise, some writings could not be deciphered and "flags with mysterious or illegible characters" remained.²⁶

Among the 350 or so Chinese gun barrels were those of German Krupp guns and Chinese domestically produced artillery captured in the battle for Dagu Fort and Shanhaiguan Fort, as well as valuable historic cannons taken from the looted Beijing arsenal.²⁷ About 60 of them were selected, the remaining pieces, for which there was no museum use, were melted down and their metal was used to make the 'China Medal' designed and donated by Kaiser Wilhelm II.²⁸

The German Emperor was aware of the booty's symbolic significance: In 1902, he gave four old Chinese guns each to the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph I and the Italian King Victor Emmanuel III.²⁹ They were gifts of friendship, but also proof of the German army's proficiency, emphasizing its value as an alliance partner.

The 236 captured Chinese flags were also sorted: distinctions had to be drawn between flags of the imperial army for infantry and artillery, flags of militia units, command and signal flags, and finally flags of the Boxers.³⁰ The 28 so-called 'Boxer flags' made up the smallest part of the booty, as will be discussed below.³¹ The flags had been captured in combat against the Chinese army, for example during the capture of the coastal Beitang Fort in September 1900, or in the battle for the border fortifications of Zijinguan in late October.

By ostentatiously presenting spoils of war, the victor always demonstrates its power. In this case, however, this was intended to obscure the fact that

21 Cf. Jowett 2016 (see FN 14), 18. The role of the Imperial Chinese Army changed in the course of the conflict, depending on the politics of the Imperial Court. In a first phase, the court ordered the army to fight the Boxers. In a second phase, the Imperial Chinese Army was turned against the forces of the Eight-Nation Alliance, as they attacked strategically important locations, e.g. the Dagu Forts.

22 Cf. Bodin 1982 (see FN 14), 4, 32; Heike Frick: Die Boxer und die kaiserlichen Armeen der Qing-Regierung, in: Mechthild Leutner / Klaus Mühlhahn (eds.): Kolonialkrieg in China. Die Niederschlagung der Boxerbewegung 1900-1901, Berlin 2007, 92-99.

23 Cf. Herbert Butz: Kniefall und Geschenke. Die Sühnemission des Prinzen Chun in Deutschland, in: Hans-Martin Hinz / Christoph Lind (eds.): Tsingtau. Ein Kapitel deutscher Kolonialgeschichte in China 1897-1914, Berlin 1998, 173-180.

24 Parts of the Expeditionary Corps stayed in China and formed the East Asian Occupation Brigade, raised in May 1901.

25 Anonymous: Bestimmungen für die Rückführung und Auflösung des Armee-Oberkommandos in Ostasien und des Ostasiatischen Expeditionskorps sowie Gliederung der Ostasiatischen Besatzungs-Brigade. Rückführungsbestimmungen, n.p. n.y., 49-50.

26 Militär-Wochenblatt 38 (1902), 1055; Militär-Wochenblatt 40 (1902), 1105.

27 Cf. Königliche Zeughaus-Verwaltung (ed.): Das Königliche Zeughaus. Führer durch die Ruhmeshalle und die Sammlungen, Berlin 1907, 141-142; Heinrich Müller: Das Berliner Zeughaus. Vom Arsenal zum Museum, Berlin 1994, 189.

28 Cf. Jörg Nimmergut: Deutsche Orden und Ehrenzeichen bis 1945, vol. 4, Munich 2001, 1815-1821.

29 Cf. Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, Hausarchiv, Rep. Z. 606, Entry No. 26/02.

30 Cf. Militär-Wochenblatt 18 (1902), 473-478; Militär-Wochenblatt 38 (1902), 1052-1055; Militär-Wochenblatt 40 (1902), 1099-1106.

31 Cf. Königliche Zeughaus-Verwaltung 1907 (see FN 27), 100-103.

the military intervention, measured in terms of its lofty goals, was a failure. The German Expeditionary Corps had arrived too late to participate at all in the intended relief of the Beijing diplomatic quarter.

Imperial propaganda, of course, portrayed it differently: the many official and semi-official portrayals told of successes. The victory over the Boxers was seen as a victory of Christian civilized and modern powers over backward-unenlightened, xenophobic and superstitious forces.³² Finally, the emphasis on German success on the global stage was intended to establish the German Empire as a new power alongside the old colonial powers such as Great Britain and France.

The Status of the Spoils of War: Fought for or Plundered?

The so-called “China booty” shipped to Berlin triggered political controversy in the capital.³³ In a parliamentary debate, for example, the Social Democrats recognized the Krupp guns from the forts as “perfectly legitimate spoils of war” because they were serviceable weapons of war, but sharply criticized the taking of historic bronze cannons from the imperial arsenal in Beijing.³⁴ These were technically obsolete, but of cultural and historical significance, i.e. they had been ‘looted’. This debate, conducted in the Reichstag and in the press, did not mention the flags, though it can be assumed that this part of the booty was considered legitimate because of its actual use in battle.

While the guns, untouched by the Social Democrats’ public criticism, were integrated into the historic weapons collection of the Armory, the flags were placed on the courtyard’s four sides beneath the glass dome where they had a decorative effect.³⁵ The printed museum guide identifies each of them, but visitors are unlikely to have been able to tell the flags apart as they were hanging closely together, several feet above their heads.

32 Cf. Amelung 1998 (see FN 10), 165.

33 Anonymous: Neue Chinabeute, in: Vorwärts. Berliner Volksblatt. Centralorgan der socialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, No. 258, 3rd November 1901, 2; cf. Anonymous: Reichstag. 156. Sitzung vom Montag, den 3. März 1902, in: Vorwärts. Centralorgan der socialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, No. 53, 4th March 1902, 6-7.

34 Cf. Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, Hausarchiv, Rep. Z. 606, Entry No. 1272/01.

35 Cf. Königliche Zeughaus-Verwaltung 1907 (see FN 27), 141-142.



Fig. 2: Armory – Berlin, 1905, paper, print, 14 x 8,9 cm, Private Collection.

At the latest with the start of World War I in August 1914, attention turned to new spoils. British, French and Russian guns were on display in the Armory’s courtyard, and captured enemy flags in the Field Marshals’ Hall.³⁶ With its defeat in World War I, Germany lost all its colonies and was obliged to pay huge reparations. While the Treaty of Versailles demanded the return of war booty from World War I and the Franco-Prussian War to France, Article 131 on the Chinese booty only required the return of five astronomical instruments that had also been looted from the Imperial Observatory in Beijing in 1900.³⁷

A return of further Chinese booty was in the offing about ten years later – outside the political

36 Cf. Thomas Weißbrich: Trophäen und Tribut. Das Königliche Zeughaus zu Berlin während des Ersten Weltkriegs, in: Christina Kott / Bénédicte Savoy (eds.): Mars und Museum. Europäische Museen im Ersten Weltkrieg, Cologne et al. 2016, 53-68, here: 55-60.

37 Cf. Amelung 1998 (see FN 10), 172.

sphere. Since the early 1930s, the National Library in Beijing had endeavored to locate and reunite the volumes of the famous Yongle Encyclopedia that were scattered during the looting of the summer of 1900. Completed in the early 15th century and compiled by countless scholars, it is considered the most comprehensive encyclopedia of the Chinese imperial period. Of the original more than 11.000 folio volumes, about 800 were still preserved before the looting. In November 1931, the library director asked the management of the Leipzig University Library for copies of the three volumes in their possession. The German library had acquired them several years earlier from a former officer of the East Asian Expeditionary Corps. The Leipzig authorities were even prepared to return the originals instead of the requested copies, since these were “of only minor significance for the purposes of university operations and since, furthermore, the manner of acquisition may well have been legal, but perhaps not entirely ethically, impeccable”.³⁸ However, the planned return never took place. It has not yet been possible to explain why the project ultimately failed.

Under the National Socialist regime, museum commemoration of the Boxer Uprising lost its importance. During the 1936 expansion of the World War exhibition at the Berlin Armory, the Chinese flags were most likely removed and placed in storage, the courtyard then serving as a venue for events in the ensuing years.³⁹ Meanwhile, some Expeditionary Corps veterans felt an affinity for the flags. One of them, the retired Major Otto Eiser-Eichelsheim, inquired in March 1935 with the museum directorate whether “the Chinese flags from the Boxer Uprising were available for purchase” – which of course was not the case.⁴⁰

After World War II, former belligerents of all sides identified Prussian and German militarism as one of the causes for National Socialism, war and crime. Thus, denazification was accompanied by demilitarization. Consequently, in October 1945, the Allied Command of the City of Berlin dissolved the Army Museum at the Zeughaus, which

had been heavily damaged by aerial bombardment and artillery fire, as a “symbol of German militarism”.⁴¹ Although the exhibits had been taken out of the building during the war and salvaged elsewhere, a considerable number of them had been lost through destruction or had become the booty of Soviet and Polish soldiers.⁴²

The GDR and the People's Republic of China: New States, New Histories

For the GDR, founded in October 1949 and controlled by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED), the creation of its own historical image was of particular importance, since it was necessary to historically establish the not democratically legitimized first German “workers’ and peasants’ state”.⁴³ Politicians and historians therefore looked for points of contact in the German past and found positive ingredients in what they called the progressive traditions of the Peasants’ War of 1525, the Revolution of 1848, the November Revolution of 1918, and the anti-Fascist resistance. At the same time, they distanced themselves in the strongest possible terms from the negatively connoted imperialist and militarist traditions of Imperial Germany and the Nazi regime.

In order to give expression and visualization to the socialist image of history, the SED founded the ‘Museum of German History’ by resolution of its Central Committee in 1950.⁴⁴ In the ensuing years it moved into the gradually rebuilt Armory, which had now been reinterpreted accordingly. An early self-portrayal stated:

41 Cf. Müller 1994 (see FN 27), 230.

42 Cf. Gerhard Quaas / André König: Verluste aus den Sammlungen des Berliner Zeughauses während und nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg, Berlin 2011.

43 Cf. Gert-Joachim Glaeßner: Selbstinszenierung von Partei und Staat, in: Dieter Vorsteher (ed.): Parteiauftrag: Ein neues Deutschland. Bilder, Rituale und Symbole der frühen DDR, Berlin 1996, 20-39; Ralf Thomas Baus: Die „antifaschistisch-demokratische Umwälzung“ in der sowjetisch besetzten Zone 1945-1949, in: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (ed.): Der Antifaschismus als Staatsdoktrin der DDR, Sankt Augustin / Berlin 2009, 17-30; Herfried Münkler: Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen, Berlin 2009, 421-453.

44 Cf. Mary-Elizabeth Andrews: History Museums and Socialist Museology in the GDR. The role of the Museum for German History in national and international discourse, in: Lukas Cladders / Kristina Kratz-Kessemeier (eds.): Museen in der DDR. Akteure – Orte – Politik, Vienna / Cologne 2022, 149-159.

38 Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig, Altregistratur 759, Folder 1, Entry No. B 99/32.

39 Cf. Paul Post: Das Zeughaus. Kurzer Gesamtführer, Berlin 1936, 33-34.

40 Cf. Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, Hausarchiv, Rep. Z. 606, Entry No. Z 383/35.



Fig. 3: The future is ours, 1946, paper, lithograph, 80 x 60 cm, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv.-No. P 94/1875.

“The bankruptcy of German imperialism and militarism in the Second World War also drew museums into its vortex. The old Armory, the showcase of Prussian-German militarism, was particularly affected. That building, where trophies were once shown and where wars were glorified, had as a ruin become a reminder of a new beginning on a peaceful and democratic basis. [...] In the German Democratic Republic imperialism and militarism have been eliminated. [...] Symbolic of this social upheaval, the Museum of German History was built on the site of the old Armory.”⁴⁵

The structure of the museum collection corresponded to the ideological guidelines: it focused on labor and on the socialist and communist parties. Interest in the preserved Armory collections was therefore relatively low. The pieces were scattered in various places due to their removal from storage, and only a few employees tried to locate

45 Museum für Deutsche Geschichte (ed.): *Waffen und Uniformen in der Geschichte*, Berlin (East) 1957, 5-6.



Fig. 4: Construction of the ‘Museum of German History’, 1951, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv.-No. F 54/717.

and reassemble them. In 1951, the remains could be provisionally inventoried. Almost all of the core exhibits of the collection, such as the souvenirs of the German Emperors Wilhelm I and Frederick III, the uniforms of Imperial Chancellor Otto von Bismarck or King Frederick II of Prussia, were either lost or had found their way into the Moscow Historical Museum as booty.⁴⁶ The GDR government did not dare to ask its ‘Big Brother’ to have the Soviet Trophy Commission return this war booty, which consisted of many culturally valuable

46 Cf. Quaas / König 2011 (see FN 42).

medieval and early modern objects.⁴⁷ Officially, it was said that the pieces had been saved from destruction by the Red Army.⁴⁸ Their loss did not seem to be a drawback for the museum either. According to the socialist view of history, such objects had a fundamentally different meaning than before. They were no longer embodied splendor and glory, but could at best be tolerated as testimonies of the imperialism and militarism that had been overcome. As luck would have it, ten of the Chinese flags were among the pieces preserved in Berlin.

At the same time, the Chinese Communist Party was also trying to construct a national history. Here, after years of civil war, the communists under Mao Zedong came to power in 1949, proclaiming the People's Republic. They quickly began to underpin and historically legitimize the new state with an appropriate historical image. An expression of this was the 'National History Museum', founded in the same year, whose highlights include the flag that Mao Zedong raised on Tiananmen Square on the occasion of the proclamation of the People's Republic on 1st October 1949.⁴⁹

The attention of contemporary Chinese historians was focused on the Boxers. They saw in them a movement that had resisted feudal as well as imperialist rule. In their eyes, the Boxer's uprising failed because they had been without purposeful leadership and had been betrayed by the Qing Dynasty.

This interpretation of the Boxer Uprising was strikingly similar to that of the German Peasants' War of 1525 in the GDR.⁵⁰ Both interpretations followed the Marxist-Leninist historical image of the mutual struggle of progressive and reactionary forces leading 'lawfully', and inevitably, to the victory of socialism and communism.

Historians stylized the Boxer Uprising as the 'great anti-imperialist struggle' and the 'revolutionary movement of the Chinese people'.⁵¹ Of course, this was only possible through simplification. Thus, the spiritual dimension of the movement – especially its initiation rites and the Boxers' belief in invulnerability – received little attention.⁵² The mass murder of Chinese Christians was either not mentioned or explained sympathetically.

In order for the Boxers to appear all the more heroic and admirable, their opponents had to be described not only as overpowering but also as particularly cruel. In this vein, a popular historical account of the time stated:

“The allied troops of the imperialists use the superiority of their firearms for rampant murder and manslaughter; the villages along the route of their march went up in flames and the population was relentlessly massacred. Like a host of murderers and bandits, they entered Beijing in August 1900 and made all the wealth of the capital their booty of war. The pillaging, robberies, bloodthirsty murders, and rapes which this intervention army of brutes was guilty of constituted crimes unparalleled in the history of mankind.”⁵³

Though there had been abuses and shootings of actual or alleged Boxers, looting, and burning of villages during the 'punitive expeditions' of the international troops, there is an unmistakable ideological component to this account.⁵⁴ The Chinese history book uses vocabulary that is as political

47 Part of the Soviet war booty from the Berlin Armory was handed over by the USSR to the Museum für Deutsche Geschichte (Museum for German History) in 1958, a part of unknown extent is still in Russian museums. Cf. Natalia Volkert: Beutekunst in der Sowjetunion – Die Restitutionsproblematik, in: AKMB-news. Informationen zu Kunst, Museum und Bibliothek 9 (2003), No. 3, 3-5. The USSR handed over looted art and cultural assets also to East German museums in 1955 and in 1958, among them in the Sistine Madonna and the Pergamon Altar, see Petra Winter: „In die Bauten gehören aber auch Kunstwerke“. Die Schlüsselrolle der Berliner Museen bei der Rückführung von Beutekunst aus der Sowjetunion in die DDR 1955/58, in: Lukas Cladders / Kristina Kratz-Kessemeier (eds.): Museen in der DDR. Akteure – Orte – Politik, Vienna / Cologne 2022, 75-94, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/32978471.pdf>, <22.05.2022>.

48 Cf. Museum für Deutsche Geschichte (ed.): Museum für Deutsche Geschichte, Berlin (East) 1987, 30.

49 http://en.chnmuseum.cn/collections_577/collection_highlights_608/objects_of_chinese_modern_history_611/20191121_172657.html, <12.04.2022>. The 'National History Museum' drew on the 'National Museum' founded in 1912, the most important cultural and political project of the Republic of China (1912-1949), whose exhibition was revised in line with the new image of history. In 1959, the name was changed to 'Museum of Chinese History' and in 2003 to the 'National Museum of China', see Deng Lu: Collection of Architectural Design of the National Museum of China, n.p. n.y. (Beijing 2012).

50 Cf. Raina Zimmering: Mythen in der Politik der DDR. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung politischer Mythen, Opladen 2000, 169-299, particularly 218-222.

51 Djiän Be-Dsan / Schao Hsün-Dscheng / Hu Hua: Kurzer Abriss der chinesischen Geschichte, Beijing 1958, 158, 160.

52 Cf. Cohen 1997 (see FN 1), 96-208.

53 Be-Dsan / Hsün-Dscheng / Hua 1958 (see FN 51), 160.

54 Cf. Susanne Kuß: Deutsche Strafexpeditionen im Boxerkrieg, in: Mechthild Leutner / Klaus Mühlhahn (eds.): Kolonialkrieg in China: Die Niederschlagung der Boxerbewegung 1900-1901, Berlin 2007, 135-146.

and ideological as it is empathetic and emotional, the goal of which was to provoke outrage and to criminalize and delegitimize the opponent.

In this sense, a decisive reinterpretation of the spoils of war took place, which then became prevalent. Characteristically, there was no longer any distinction between customarily legitimate military booty and questionable looting; everything was designated as 'looted property' on ideological terms.

Socialist Gifts of State: Under the Sign of Friendship

While the governments in East Berlin and Beijing worked on conceptions of history supportive of the state, the GDR, as the new German state, also sought recognition abroad. Due to the successful Hallstein Doctrine of the Federal Republic of Germany, according to which only the latter was the legitimate representation of the German people, this proved to be a difficult undertaking. Apart from the Soviet Union, recognition was initially only achieved by the socialist states in Eastern Europe. Among the first non-European countries to establish diplomatic relations with the GDR was the People's Republic of China in October 1949.

When Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai visited the capital of the GDR for three days in July 1954 while passing through, it was a major event for the government and the media. The SED regime promised itself support from the People's Republic of China in its efforts to reunify Germany under socialist auspices. China offered a model for this, since the political division of the country had been overcome by the victory of the communists under Mao Zedong in the civil war – once his opponent Chiang Kai-shek had retreated to Taiwan in 1949 after the defeat.

Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai and Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl publicly invoked Sino-German friendship. The Humboldt University awarded Zhou Enlai an honorary doctorate. At first, however, there were just ephemeral acts; friendship did not materialize. This was to change in December 1955, when Grotewohl made a return visit to Beijing.

Gifts played a special role during state visits.⁵⁵ They were carefully selected and matched to the individual occasions and concerns. They could be decorative art objects such as a tapestry or a sculpture, but also comprised of historical objects. One example for this is provided by two valuable manuscripts that are significant in terms of cultural history. In 1951, during his state visit to Prague on October 23rd, the President of the GDR Wilhelm Pieck presented his Czechoslovak counterpart Klement Gottwald with the so-called 'Jena Codex', a manuscript on the Hussite Wars written in Bohemia around 1500, "as a token of friendship and respect of the German people towards the Czechoslovak people," as the SED newspaper *Neues Deutschland* explained.⁵⁶ In return, Pieck received a fragment of the Heliand, an epic Old Saxon Poem written around 830.⁵⁷

When Otto Grotewohl visited the People's Republic of China in December 1955, he also had gifts in his luggage. After Zhou Enlai presented him with the red, gold-embroidered 'Banner of Friendship' at a major event in the Beijing Sports Palace on December 11th, Grotewohl gave him ten flags from the Boxer Uprising and three volumes of the *Yongle Encyclopedia*.⁵⁸

It has not yet been possible to determine who selected these gifts of state. Since the GDR embassy in Beijing was criticized for its inadequate preparation of the state visit, the initiative probably lay in East Berlin government circles.⁵⁹ In the archives of the institutions concerned, the Berlin 'Museum für Deutsche Geschichte' and the Leipzig University Library, the process of removing the gifts from the

55 Cf. Andreas Michaelis: DDR Souvenirs, Cologne 1994.

56 Anonymous: Präsident Pieck bei Präsident Gottwald, in: *Neues Deutschland*, 25th October 1951, 1. In the Marxist-Leninist view of history, the Hussites were not primarily a religious movement, but a 'revolutionary' social and political movement, and the Hussite Wars (1419-1436) were therefore a class struggle, see Museum für Deutsche Geschichte (ed.): *Die revolutionäre Hussitenbewegung. Ausstellung des Nationalmuseums in Prag*, Berlin (East) 1958.

57 Wilhelm Pieck gave the Heliand fragment to the 'Museum of German History' in February 1952. Cf. *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, Berlin, Sign. R 56/2537.

58 Deutsche Demokratische Republik (ed.): *Freundschaftsbesuch einer Delegation der Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik in der Volksrepublik China, in der Koreanischen Volksdemokratischen Republik und in der Mongolischen Volksrepublik vom 8. bis 28. Dezember 1955*, Berlin (East) 1956, 35.

59 Cf. Bundesarchiv, Politisches Archiv, Auswärtiges Amt, PA AA M 1-A.

collections is not documented. It also remains unclear on what legal basis this was done. In the case of the highly symbolic flags from the Berlin Armory, there is also the question of who had knowledge of their existence at the time; the objects had only been provisionally inventoried and the inventory records of the old Royal Prussian Armory no longer existed.⁶⁰

In a way, the donation of the three encyclopedia volumes continued the aforementioned project from 1931, although the library exchange now became a political act. Whether this had originally been an idea of the GDR government is thus quite questionable. The 64 volumes of the encyclopedia that the People's Republic of China received from the Soviet Union in 1954 probably also provided impetus.⁶¹

Interpretations of History: The 'fatal' Past

The symbolic act of gift-exchange was accompanied by the interpretation of the gifts. Otto Grotewohl explained:

*“Among the ten flags that came into our hands after the Soviet army destroyed German fascism are the glorious flags of the Zijingguan Mountain Fortress and the Kuang Chiang-kuen Militia Command. There is the banner of the ‘Militia of the Patriotic Association of Tien Hsien-kung at Shi Mon-tschen’ and other standards of the Chinese freedom fighters.”*⁶²

The ceremonial donation was closely followed by German media representatives. In particular, they recorded the handing over of the black flag with white appliqués of the “Militia of the Patriotic Association of Tien Hsien-kung at Shi Mon-tschen”.

The Prime Minister had presented a gift that, knowingly or not, he partially mislabeled. In fact, only two of the ten flags can be ascribed to the Boxers. The first mentioned “glorious flags of the Zijingguan Mountain Fortress” do not pertain to these: two of these flags were captured by the East Asian Expeditionary Corps from the Chinese



Fig. 5: Otto Grotewohl gives Zhou Enlai a ‘Boxer flag’, Beijing Sports Palace, 11th December 1955, Private Collection.

Army during the taking of a border fortification in late October 1900.⁶³ Strictly speaking, only the flags of the two militia units can be called ‘Boxer flags’. While the origin of one of these can no longer be determined, the other was picked up from the battlefield after the battle at Guanchang. The other flags, which are no longer named, are “standards of the Chinese freedom fighters” at most in a figurative sense. Two of them originate from the Imperial Chinese Army and were captured during the fighting for the Beitang Fort; the other four cannot be specifically identified due to their poor preservation, but are likely to belong to the regular Chinese army rather than to the Boxers.

In his speech, Grotewohl took up the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the Boxer Uprising, accentuating the German part: “But the imperialists from all over the world sent troops to China to smother the people’s legitimate demands in blood. German militarists stole numerous freedom flags of the Chinese insurgents in this raid and dragged them to Germany as trophies of victory.”⁶⁴

According to Grotewohl, the East Asian Expeditionary Corps consisted solely of “imperialist robbers and plunderers.”⁶⁵ With this sweeping criminalization, the politician, a member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD) for decades until the founding of the SED, fell far short of the capacity for differentiation shown by his former party comrades, who distinguished between legitimate military booty and the looting of cultural

60 Cf. Königliche Zeughaus-Verwaltung 1907 (see FN 27), 100-103.

61 Cf. Müller 2021 (see FN 4), 44. As in the case of the GDR, this was a symbolic distancing from the history of Tsarist Russia and a sign of the new, socialist community.

62 Deutsche Demokratische Republik 1956 (see FN 58), 42.

63 Cf. Deutschland in China 1902 (see FN 7), 132-139.

64 Deutsche Demokratische Republik 1956 (see FN 58), 42.

65 Deutsche Demokratische Republik 1956 (see FN 58), 42.

assets. The depiction of a despicable German past, however, provided the necessary backdrop against which the GDR's reparations could be made:

*“German militarists, blood-thirsty and profit-hungry enemies of the Chinese people, stole these flags. German socialists, the grandsons of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, loyal friends and comrades-in-arms of the Chinese people, bring them back to you and place them in your hands.”*⁶⁶

Grotewohl spoke not only of the past, but also of the present and the future in the spirit of friendship:

*“May the handing over of the flags by the first workers' and peasants' state in the history of Germany consolidate and deepen the friendship between our peoples. May it help to make our alliance of struggle against imperialist incitement of nations and threat of war even closer and stronger.”*⁶⁷

After the handover, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai expressed his gratitude for the gifts. In his speech, he drew a line from the Chinese as victims of “imperialist aggression” against which the Boxer Uprising had fought back to the present: to this day, Chinese artifacts “are held back in the museums of Western countries”, he said.⁶⁸ This referred to the spoils made by other troops of the Eight-Nation Alliance. With the exception of the Soviet Union, which had emerged from the Russian Tsarist Empire, no gifts of friendship were to be expected from these states, the United States of America, Great Britain, France, Italy, Austria and Japan, since basically all of them stood in the Western camp during the Cold War. Zhou Enlai referred to the Imperial Art Treasure, gathered over many centuries, which had been evacuated from Beijing in 1933 out of fear of a Japanese attack. It was located in Taipei, the capital of Taiwan, after the Chinese Civil War, a fact that seemed intolerable to the communist government.

Zhou Enlai gave a topical twist to the theme of imperialism: the island of Taiwan is “occupied by imperialists”, he said.⁶⁹ Here, after the Chinese Civil War,

from which the Communists emerged victorious, the Republic of China was founded in 1949. Head of state Chiang Kai-shek, Mao Zedong's old rival and opponent, laid claim to all of China, but had to fear a Communist invasion from the mainland. To protect against this, the Republic of China had entered into a defense alliance with the United States of America in December 1954. The troops stationed on Taiwan were ‘American aggressors’ in the view of the People's Republic of China and the GDR.⁷⁰

The link between imperialism and the looting of art and culture was also established by the students of the History Department of the Peking Pedagogical College, who wrote Otto Grotewohl a letter of thanks on 12th December 1955. They dignified the flags and books as “historic cultural assets” – which may apply more to the valuable manuscripts than to the military items:

*“However, we know that the imperialists looted large quantities of cultural objects from our country and exhibited them in museums as victory prizes. We can never forget that the imperialists occupy part of our territory. We firmly believe that under the leadership of the CP [Communist Party] and Chairman Mao Zedong, we have the determination and strength to recover this part of our territory, and that the imperialists will have to return to us the cultural objects they have stolen. That the German people gave us back these historic cultural assets has not only strengthened the fraternal friendship between our peoples, but also spurred our confidence to keep the peace and liberate Taiwan.”*⁷¹

A group of visiting German students from Beijing Normal University also took part in the big event in the Sports Palace as spectators. In January 1956, they presented President Wilhelm Pieck with an elaborate photo album of their activities as a birthday gift. They promised to “tirelessly deepen our knowledge and learn from the great revolutionary traditions of our brothers, the Chinese people.”⁷² The three volumes of the encyclopedia were handed over by the Chinese Ministry of Culture to the

66 Deutsche Demokratische Republik 1956 (see FN 58), 43.

67 Deutsche Demokratische Republik 1956 (see FN 58), 43.

68 Anonymous: China hütet die Freundschaft zur DDR, in: Neues Deutschland, 13th December 1955, 5.

69 Anonymous 1955 (see FN 68).

70 Werner Meißner (ed.): Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990. Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung, Berlin 1995, 82.

71 Bundesarchiv, Politisches Archiv, Auswärtiges Amt, PA AA M 1-A/6618 000132 and 000132a.

72 Photo album of a group of German students and aspirants in Beijing, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, Inv.-No. SI 90/2037.

National Library for safekeeping, while the ten flags became part of the collection of the National Museum.⁷³ As extremely rare objects, the two actual Boxer flags fit into the Communist historical narrative.

As a successful outcome of the state visit in December 1955, the GDR government was able to achieve the ‘Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation’ with the People’s Republic of China which promised cooperation in political, economic, scientific and cultural areas.⁷⁴

Otto Grotewohl visited the People’s Republic of China a second time in January 1959. In Beijing, he received another ‘Banner of Friendship’. Its inscription wished “even greater victories to the heroic people of the German Democratic Republic in the building of socialism, in the struggle for a unified nation and for a peace-loving democratic state, and in the struggle to secure European and world peace.”



Fig. 6: Banner of Friendship, 1959, silk, metal, 130 x 90 cm, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv.-No. Fa 77/69.

73 Cf. Meißner 1995 (see FN 70), 308.

74 Cf. Meißner 1995 (see FN 70), 80-81.

The relationship between the two states had already begun to sour when Mao embarked on a new Communist Party path in 1958 with the ‘Great Leap Forward’.⁷⁵ This new course displeased the Soviet Communists so much that it led to a break with the Soviet Union in 1960. Because the GDR was dependent on and loyal to the Soviet Union, tensions inevitably arose in its relationship with the People’s Republic of China. The open break occurred at the Sixth Party Congress of the SED in January 1963.

Meanwhile, in Mao’s China, the Boxers became a myth.⁷⁶ Since August 1966, they formed a historical reference point for the Cultural Revolution: the ‘Red Guards’, who terrorized society, murdered alleged and real opponents, and destroyed countless historical, artistic and cultural properties, saw themselves as linked to the Boxers.⁷⁷ These offered a positive identification, while the ‘exploiters’ and ‘revisionists’ to be fought were seen as apparitions of the Christians and foreigners from the time of the Boxer Uprising.

A rapprochement between the People’s Republic of China and the GDR took place some 20 years after the dissent. The criticism of Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev’s reform course had a unifying effect. In 1989, the old friendship resumed, and the GDR finally proved to be a friend in need from the Chinese Communists’ point of view:⁷⁸ The GDR regime, led by Erich Honecker, was one of the few states in the world to support, without any restrictions, the suppression of the democratic movement in Beijing on 4th June 1989, which became known as the Tiananmen Massacre.

‘Winners of History’: Anti-Imperialism and Anti-Militarism in the GDR

Prime Minister Grotewohl’s gifts of state were to have a propagandistic effect not only in the People’s Republic of China, but also in the GDR whose state-controlled press dealt with them extensively. On 13th December 1955, articles about the major event in Beijing appeared in several East German

75 Cf. Meißner 1995 (see FN 70), 101-139.

76 Cf. Cohen 1997 (see FN 1), 211-288.

77 Cf. Daniel Leese: *Die chinesische Kulturrevolution 1966-1976*, Munich 2016, 49-51; Jisheng Yang: *The World Turned Upside Down. A History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, New York 2021.

78 Cf. Meißner 1995 (see FN 70), 391-425.

daily newspapers.⁷⁹ Three days later, *Neues Deutschland* – the central organ of the SED – published the report on “The Flags of the Boxer Uprising” which provided historical background information.⁸⁰ The article focused on the symbolically important flags, “glorious signs of the Chinese people’s struggle against colonial oppression”. By contrast, the manuscripts, which are truly significant in terms of cultural history, were not even mentioned.

The subtitle of the article *A debt of German militarism erased* is revealing with respect to the GDR government’s historical thinking. Leaving aside the question of how a symbolic act in the form of a donation can redeem historical guilt, it was not a matter of guilt on the part of the SED regime but, if anything, of guilt on the part of the German Empire. However, distancing oneself from this past, which was regarded as ‘fatal’, did not lead to dealing with it in the long term. To the contrary, it was considered alien and thus repressed.⁸¹

The article in *Neues Deutschland* went into detail about the Boxer Uprising. It narrowed the complex events down to the German part, again emphasizing its cruelty:

“At the head of the forces to defeat the great Chinese liberation movement was German imperialism. Supported by an overdeveloped military machine, it now believed the favorable opportunity had come to enrich itself in China through particularly cruel action and to achieve special advantages. [...] In accordance with this mission, German militarism committed atrocities on an unheard-of scale in China. Tianjin and Beijing were plundered after the capture by imperialist troops. In the temples, German, English

and French officers competed to outdo each other in robbery. The marauding soldiery also completely devastated the Imperial Summer Palace in Beijing. Precious works of art were smashed under army boots.”⁸²

The so-called ‘Hun letters’, in which German soldiers reported on the punitive expeditions, were used as evidence. The Boxer Protocol had been an extortion, and in “humiliating the Chinese people, the German militarists did particularly well.”⁸³ This negative narrative was followed by the positive counter-narrative. August Bebel, chairman of the SPD, and the Social Democrat’s parliamentary group in the Reichstag had repeatedly denounced the atrocities committed in China. The GDR presented itself as standing in this anti-militarist tradition, boasting to have eliminated militarism and to have established friendship with China.

The detailed narration of the ‘fatal’ imperial past ultimately served to make the GDR shine. Its self-conception and view of history included the opinion that the founding of the GDR in 1949 was a turning point in German history. This was associated with a firm belief in the ‘superiority of socialism’ that would prove itself in the future.⁸⁴

79 Cf. Anonymous: *Gemeinsamer Kampf um Frieden*, in: *Neue Zeit*, 13th December 1955, 1; Anonymous: *Delegation zu Gast bei Mao Tse-Tung*, in: *Berliner Zeitung*, 13th December 1955, 2; Anonymous: *Bündnis China-DDR wird noch fester*, in: *Neues Deutschland*, 13th December 1955, 5; Anonymous: *China hütet die Freundschaft zur DDR*, in: *Neues Deutschland*, 13th December 1955, 5; Heinrich Toeplitz: *Bei den Freunden im Fernen Osten*, in: *Neue Zeit*, 10th March 1956, 3. In addition to the daily press, contemporary film coverage also picked up on the state visit and the presentation of gifts, such as the newsreel series *Der Augenzeuge* (The Eyewitness) (1955/12). Directed by Bruno Kleberg, the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films produced ‘Strong Friends in the Far East’ (*Starke Freunde im Fernen Osten*) (29 minutes) in 1956. Cf. <https://www.defa-stiftung.de/filme/filme-suchen/starke-freunde-im-fernen-osten/>, <05.05.2022>.

80 Anonymous: *Die Fahnen des Boxeraufstandes*, in: *Neues Deutschland*, 16th December 1955, 4.

81 Cf. Münkler 2009 (see FN 43), 35-37.

82 Anonymous 1955 (see FN 80).

83 Anonymous 1955 (see FN 80).

84 Backes 2009 (see FN 3), 12.



Fig. 7: Exhibition of visiting German students at the Beijing Normal University on the sixth anniversary of the founding of the GDR in 1955, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv.-No. SI 90/2037.

While the GDR public could read about the successful overcoming of imperialism and militarism in the newspapers, it was at the same time common practice to accuse the West German Federal Republic of continuing these ‘fatal’ traditions. The foundation of the Bundeswehr, the West German armed forces, in November 1955 provided the impetus for this. Thus, on the occasion of the (re)introduction of compulsory military service, it was said that “Nazi officers were back in uniform”.⁸⁵ Rearmament was referred to as ‘remilitarization’, suggesting its closeness to militarism, and public talk by the GDR regime was also not of the Federal Ministry of Defense but, alluding to the Nazi “Reich War Ministry”, of the “Bonn War Ministry.”

A conspiracy theory offered the explanation for modern West German militarism: National Socialists were at work in all areas of the Federal Republic, especially in the army, but also in politics, the judiciary and the economy.⁸⁶ It said that the Bundeswehr was led by “Hitler’s generals” and that it was not a defensive army either, but an “instrument of attack and assault.”⁸⁷ The militarism of the Federal Republic would have its roots in National Socialism, which in turn would stem from Prussian-German militarism. The East German National People’s Army, founded in March 1956 in response to the Bundeswehr, distinguished itself from the latter by allegedly invoking the so-called “progressive and revolutionary traditions of German history”, which it wanted to continue and perfect.⁸⁸

GDR officials saw themselves as anti-militaristic, because “German militarism (had) been eradicated at the root by depriving its traditional supporters, the Junkers and war industrialists, of the economic basis of their existence.”⁸⁹ This was put into practice by the ‘Land Reform’ (Bodenreform), the 10th anniversary of which was celebrated in 1955. Likewise, the SED regime posed as anti-imperialist. The brochure *Bonn bereitet Revanchekrieg vor* (Bonn prepares for revanchist war), published in 1954, was programmatic:



Fig. 8: Eberhard Herzog, *The Devilish Traditions of German Militarism*, Berlin (East) 1959, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv.-No. 59/2345.

rieg vor (Bonn prepares for revanchist war), published in 1954, was programmatic:

“The German Democratic Republic does not tolerate the propagation of ideas [‘living space’, ‘greater area’, ‘colonial possession’, et cetera] that serve the conquest of positions of economic, political, and military power on foreign territory. The German Democratic Republic rejects any aspiration to colonies as imperialistic and dangerous to peace.”⁹⁰

Under the auspices of state-supported anti-imperialism and anti-militarism, the gifting of the ten ‘Boxer flags’ was remembered for over 30 years. This trail begins in 1959 with the chapter *Von der ‘Hunnenrede’ zu den ‘Hunnenbriefen’ – ein Kapitel imperialistischer Kolonialpolitik* (From the ‘Hun’s Speech’ to the ‘Hun’s Letters’ – a chapter of imperialist colonial policy) of the book *Die teuflischen*

85 Anonymous: 1956. Wehrpflicht in Westdeutschland, in: Neues Deutschland, 25th December 1955, 1.

86 Cf. Helmut R. Hammerich / Rudolf J. Schlaffer (eds.): *Militärische Aufbaugeneration der Bundeswehr 1955 bis 1970. Ausgewählte Biographien*, Munich 2011.

87 Anonymous: Was ist der westdeutsche Militarismus?, in: Neues Deutschland, 26th January 1959, 1-2, here: 1.

88 Cf. Edgar Doehler / Rudolf Falkenberg: *Militärische Traditionen der DDR und der NVA*, Berlin (East) 1979.

89 Ausschuss für Deutsche Einheit (ed.): *Bonn bereitet Revanchekrieg vor*, n.p. 1954, 124.

90 Ausschuss für Deutsche Einheit 1954 (see FN 89), 124.

Traditionen des deutschen Militarismus (The Devilish Traditions of German Militarism) by Eberhard Herzog.⁹¹ It ends in 1987 with the account of *Der 'Hunnenkrieg' Kaiser Wilhelms II* (The 'Hun's War' of Kaiser Wilhelm II) by Roland Felber and Horst Rostek, who saw in the Boxer Uprising an "anti-imperialist popular resistance" that was accompanied by the "revolutionary German working class" in solidarity and ultimately led to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.⁹² The gift of the 'Boxer flags' had become part of the GDR's self-portrayal and self-conception. With the fall of the SED regime in the fall of 1989, this memory was lost.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Berlin Armory had been the starting point of the eventful history of the military spoils of the East Asian Expeditionary Corps. In a fateful connection, it was precisely the Armory where at the end of the century a cultural and historical exhibition cast new light on the Boxer War. In October 1987, the 'German Historical Museum' (Deutsches Historisches Museum) was founded in West Berlin as a Federal Republic counterpart to the one-sided presentation of history by the 'Museum of German History'.⁹³ Taking advantage of the fall of the GDR regime, it had taken over the striking historic building and the collections of its former counterpart in East Berlin in September 1990. The museum fulfilled its mission of showing German history in an international context after the Reunification with the special exhibition 'Tsingtau: A Chapter of German Colonial History in China 1897-1914' for the colonial period in 1998.⁹⁴ Here, the Boxer Uprising appeared far removed from mainstream ideological narratives. The curators shed light on the historical motivations and behaviors of the Imperial German and Imperial Chinese sides, as well as those of the insurgent Boxers.

In the People's Republic of China, where the Communist Party saved itself from the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and successfully transformed

itself in recent years, the memory of the 'Boxer flags' has recently been revived. In 2019, the flag, made famous by photos of Grotewohl's presentation of the gift, was on display along with the three volumes of the Yongle Encyclopedia at a special exhibition organized by the Ministry of Culture at Beijing's National Museum entitled 'The Road of Return'. On the occasion of the Communist Party's 70th anniversary, it showed examples of cultural assets returned or recovered through government efforts.⁹⁵ Here, the objects were given their (so far) last interpretation, which revolves around the relatively constant theme: according to the text above the display case, the 'Boxer flags' bear the memory of the uprising of the Chinese people, who resisted the aggression of foreign powers more than a hundred years ago.

Conclusion

The Chinese 'Boxer flags' are prime examples of changes in the interpretation of objects. Over the course of 50 years, they went from proudly presented spoils of war to criminally looted goods, from trophies captured in battle to gifts of state and tokens of friendship. These contrasting interpretations were tied to political views of history, one of which was based on the rejection of the other. After World War II, there was a break with the culture of remembrance in Germany. In order to legitimize itself, the GDR created a conception of history based on the demarcation of a certain part of the German past. The blueprint for this was provided by the Soviet Union, which was admired as a role model and had imposed its communist view of history accordingly in the 1920s.

The gifting of the captured flags seems like an attempt of the GDR to liberate or redeem itself from German imperialism and militarism.⁹⁶ Just as the relics of the Nazi regime had been liquidated in the course of denazification, so too were the remnants of Imperial Germany that were perceived as disturbing, for example the Berlin Palace (Berliner Schloss) in 1950. The GDR government's handling of its own losses of historical and cultural property of military origin suffered in World War II as a re-

91 Cf. Eberhard Herzog: *Die teuflischen Traditionen des deutschen Militarismus*, Berlin (East) 1959, 9-12.

92 Cf. Roland Felber / Horst Rostek: *Der „Hunnenkrieg“ Kaiser Wilhelms II. Imperialistische Intervention in China 1900/01*, Berlin (East) 1987, 42-43.

93 Cf. Christoph Stözl (ed.): *Deutsches Historisches Museum. Ideen – Kontroversen – Perspektiven*, Frankfurt et al. 1988.

94 Cf. Hans-Martin Hinz / Christoph Lind (eds.): *Tsingtau. Ein Kapitel deutscher Kolonialgeschichte in China 1897-1914*, Berlin 1998.

95 <http://www.chnmuseum.cn/portals/0/web/zt/20190917hgzl/<22.04.2022>>.

96 Cf. Glaesner 1996 (see FN 43), 28.

sult of the Soviet Trophy Commission's looting was therefore correspondingly restrained.

With its gifts of state, the GDR regime demonstratively distanced itself from the past of Imperial Germany and the traditions anchored in it. This distancing not only served purposes of historical positioning, it also had a contemporary dimension. The existence of the GDR confirmed its 'opposition movement', its anti-imperialism and anti-militarism.⁹⁷ The Federal Republic was repeatedly accused of continuing these traditions, which allegedly culminated in National Socialism. The SED regime saw the founding of the GDR as a turning point in German history and proclaimed itself the "victor of history".⁹⁸ Apart from the Soviet Union, which was linked to the GDR by ideology and the Marxist-Leninist view of history, there were no efforts in any other country of the former Eight-Nation Alliance during the Cold War to return war booty from the Boxer Uprising to the People's Republic of China.

As a symbolic act, Otto Grotewohl's state visit compensated for the Chinese mission of atonement demanded by Kaiser Wilhelm II in the Boxer Protocol. His gift-giving, meanwhile, was not only a kind of reparation, but also constructed a 'good' German history that had always been there by invoking Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Given the importance attached to gifts of state, it is rather embarrassing that of the ten 'Boxer flags' only two can actually be attributed to Boxers. But this is again characteristic for the handling of objects. They had to be subjugated to the current political goal. The symbolic gesture was decisive. In this case, it could not be too meager in terms of quantity.

The way of dealing with art and cultural objects as set pieces in the depiction of history and for the self-imaging of the GDR that emerges here shows superficial similarities with the current discourse on restitution of museum objects. The mixing, practiced by GDR officials and media for ideological reasons, of war booty that was legitimate under martial law and the questionable looting of art and cultural assets is still striking today.

For centuries, it was a customary law, accepted by the warring parties, to take prestigious objects from

the enemy and to preserve them as trophies in sacred places or special collections, a pattern not only common in Europe.⁹⁹ Objects such as flags and weapons therefore have a different status than works of art and cultural assets, which were taken without combat.¹⁰⁰ Military trophies were won incidentally, while other artefacts since at least the 19th century were occasionally acquired on a targeted basis.¹⁰¹ The legality of the seizure was and still is a cause of debate.¹⁰² Things get complicated when military trophies were regarded as cultural assets.

The currently established terms 'looted property' and 'looted art', the latter strongly influenced by the restitution of Jewish property looted during the Nazi era, continue this generalization. A recent university research project in Germany is devoted to objects in museums that are sweepingly classified as "looted goods from the Boxer War".¹⁰³ Here and in other areas, differentiation would be desirable and helpful.

The socialist gifting foreshadows the present debate on restitution, particularly on the thousands of artefacts brought from Africa to Europe during the colonial period. The gifting of the 'Boxer flags' by the GDR to the People's Republic of China and the reciprocal gift of the 'Banner of Friendship' was the socialist version of a centuries-old act:¹⁰⁴ the exchange of gifts between sovereigns, to give and to receive symbolized recognition, friendship and solidarity. Furthermore, gifting played an important role in the propaganda of the GDR.¹⁰⁵

97 Backes 2009 (see FN Note 3), 7.

98 Cf. Herfried Münkler: Antifaschismus als Gründungsmythos der DDR. Abgrenzungsinstrument nach Westen und Herrschaftsmittel nach innen, in: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (ed.): Der Antifaschismus als Staatsdoktrin der DDR, Sankt Augustin / Berlin 2009, 31-49, here: 36-37, 42.

99 Cf. Ian Knight: *The Anatomy of the Zulu Army from Shaka to Cetshwayo 1818-1875*, London 1995, 242; Cornish 2009 (see FN 9); Weißbrich 2016 (see FN 9).

100 Cf. Barbro Bursell (ed.): *Krigsbyte. War-booty*, Stockholm 2007; Horst Carl / Hans-Jürgen Bömelburg: Einleitung. Beutepraktiken – Historische und systematische Dimensionen des Themas „Beute“, in: Horst Carl / Hans-Jürgen Bömelburg (eds.): *Lohn der Gewalt. Beutepraktiken von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit*, Paderborn et al. 2011, 11-30.

101 Cf. Bénédicte Savoy: *Kunstraub. Napoleons Konfiszierungen in Deutschland und die europäischen Folgen*, Vienna et al. 2010.

102 For a juridical perspective see Hannes Hartung: *Kunstraub in Krieg und Verfolgung. Die Restitution der Beute- und Raubkunst im Kollisions- und Völkerrecht*, Berlin 2005, 66.

103 <https://www.smb.museum/museen-einrichtungen/museum-fuer-asiatische-kunst/sammeln-forschen/forschung/spuren-des-boxerkrieges/>, <12.04.2022>.

104 Cf. Marcel Mauss: *Gift. The Form and Reason of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, New York 1990.

105 Cf. Rainer Gries / Cordula Günther: „Jeder Tag ein neues Geschenk“. Gedanken zum Geschenkgestus in der DDR, in: Dieter Vorsteher (ed.): *Parteiauftrag: Ein neues Deutschland. Bilder, Rituale und Symbole der frühen DDR*, Berlin 1996, 241-253.

Recent restitutions are based on requests by representatives of African countries and initiatives of activists and researchers in Europe.¹⁰⁶ The background is set by a postcolonial view on history, interests of identity politics and cultural heritage. They emphasize the negative effects of colonial rule. Restitutions such as the Benin Bronzes should therefore ensure social and “historical justice”.¹⁰⁷ In the public communication the multilayered colonial network of relationships between Africans and Europeans is often reduced to a victim-perpetrator’s story, told with a moralized undertone.¹⁰⁸

The media staging of the handover also continues to be of great importance. But sometimes there is ambiguity about restituted objects, as shown by an example from 2019: a saber attributed to the commander El Hadj Omar (1796-1864) was returned to Senegal by France.¹⁰⁹ El Hadj Omar is a historical figure transfigured into a Senegalese resistance fighter against French colonization. The weapon is a classic military trophy, like the sword of Emperor Napoleon captured in the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 by Prussian troops, though the French government probably did not think of submitting a restitution request for it to the German government. The story of the saber from Senegal, which is of French manufacture, raises several as yet unanswered questions. It is not clear how El Hadj Omar came into its possession, nor is it clear how the weapon returned into French hands. In this case, the postcolonial and identity politics narrative is obviously crucial. The saber has been in Dakar since 2019 in the newly established Musée des Civilisations Noires, a museum whose construction has been financed by the People’s Republic of China, which, the times change, is developing certain neo-imperialist activities in Africa.¹¹⁰

106 Cf. Felwine Sarr / Bénédicte Savoy: Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelles, Paris 2018.

107 Moritz Holfelder: Unser Raubgut. Eine Streitschrift zur kolonialen Debatte, Berlin 2019, 183.

108 Cf. Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin: Provenienzforschung zwischen politisierter Wahrheitsfindung und systemischem Ablenkungsmanöver, in: Thomas Sandkühler et al. (eds.): Geschichtskultur durch Restitution? Ein Kunsthistoriker-Streit, Vienna et al. 2021, 55-78.

109 Cf. Bertrand Goy: Le “sabre d’El Hadj Oumar”, une restitution peu exemplaire, in: Clémentine Bories (ed.): Les restitutions des collections muséales. Aspects politiques et juridiques, Le Kremlin Bicêtre 2022, 135-147.

110 Cf. David Signer: China und Afrika – eine hoffnungsvolle, aber gefährliche Liaison, in: Neue Züricher Zeitung, 8th September 2018, <https://www.nzz.ch/wirtschaft/eine-hoffnungsvolle-aber-gefaehrliche-liaison-ld.1418336>, <12.04.2022>.

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Fig. 1: Theodor Rocholl, *Entry of Förster’s battalion into Beijing*, 1901, paper, lithograph, 23 x 28 cm, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv.-No. MGr 2015/1.

Fig. 2: *Armory – Berlin*, 1905, paper, print, 14 x 8,9 cm, Private Collection.

Fig. 3: *The future is ours*, 1946, paper, lithograph, 80 x 60 cm, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv.-No. P 94/1875.

Fig. 4: Construction of the ‘Museum of German History’, 1951, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv.-No. F 54/717.

Fig. 5: Otto Grotewohl gives Zhou Enlai a ‘Boxer flag’, Beijing Sports Palace, 11th December 1955, Private Collection.

Fig. 6: *Banner of Friendship*, 1959, silk, metal, 130 x 90 cm, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv.-No. Fa 77/69.

Fig. 7: Exhibition of visiting German students at the Beijing Normal University on the sixth anniversary of the founding of the GDR in 1955, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv.-No. SI 90/2037.

Fig. 8: Eberhard Herzog, *The Devilish Traditions of German Militarism*, Berlin (East) 1959, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv.-No. 59/2345.

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Thomas Weißbrich: From Spoils of War to Gifts of State. Chinese ‘Boxer Flags’ and German Conceptions of History, 1900 to 1955, in: *transfer – Zeitschrift für Provenienzforschung und Sammlungsgeschichte / Journal for Provenance Research and the History of Collection* 1 (2022), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48640/tf.2022.1.91514>, 67-83.