

Press Information

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Roads not Taken.

Oder: Es hätte auch anders kommen können

An exhibition of the Deutsches Historisches Museum
in cooperation with the Alfred Landecker Foundation

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Whether the fall of the Berlin Wall, the failed vote of no confidence against Willy Brandt, or the confrontation of Soviet and American tanks at Checkpoint Charlie – these events could have taken a different turn. From this unusual perspective, the Deutsches Historisches Museum dares to undertake an exhibition experiment and to show history in an unaccustomed way: „Roads not Taken. Oder: Es hätte auch anders kommen können“ focuses on key dates in German history leading from 1989 back to 1848, when the events of these decisive turning points could have set off in different directions. This view opens new historical possibilities: the alternative outcomes are different in their degree of probability – but they all have in common that the actual course of history prevented them from occurring.



Along 14 distinctive caesurae in the German history of the 19th and 20th centuries, the historian Dan Diner explores the potentials of unrealised history – prevented by accidents, averted by misfires or the weight of personal shortcomings: this is what is known in the philosophy of history as contingency. It is not the intention of the exhibition to spread alternative truths or to contrive a counterfeit historical narrative. Instead, it is about **proposing an argumentation**: how likely is it that a development inherent to the occurrence could have sent it off in a different direction? This perspective, unusual for a history museum, should make it possible to **see well-known facts in a new light and to encourage an understanding of the principal open-endedness of history** as a result of various constellations and decisions, actions and omissions – in order to learn how to better understand the historical events that actually happened.



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ALFRED LANDECKER
FOUNDATION

Deutsches Historisches Museum

Presse- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit
Daniela Lange
Unter den Linden 2
10117 Berlin

T +49 30 20304-410
presse@dhm.de

www.dhm.de

Raphael Gross, President of the Stiftung Deutsches Historisches Museum:

"I hope that the exhibition will encourage people – particularly in the discussion about the caesurae and how they are aligned – to reflect on the German history of the 19th and 20th centuries and on history in general. It is an exhibition that does exactly what historians always do: they try to project themselves into a historical situation and to ask why it turned out just as it did."

Dan Diner, historian and chair of the Alfred Landecker Foundation: "For us it is not a matter of telling a different story or presenting a fictional version of history. Instead, by means of a perspective on courses of history that were then inherently possible, we are able to take a sharper look at what really happened. In short, the perception of potential possibilities allows us to better understand the reality of the past."

The succession of these caesurae begins in 1989 with the Peaceful Revolution in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and ends in the year 1848, when Germany first dared to attempt a democratic awakening. **In reverse chronological order, the exhibition examines such decisive tipping points as Brandt's "Ostpolitik", the building of the Wall, the Cold War, the Second World War and the Holocaust, the assumption of power by Hitler, or the First World War and the Austro-Prussian War** – in order to show how close these events came to turning out in a different way. In this way, milestones such as the Stalin Notes of 1952, the Korean War in 1950 combined with the Berlin Airlift of 1948/49, the failed detonation of the bridge near Remagen in 1945, the assassination attempt on Hitler in 1944, the occupation of the Rhineland in 1936, the deposal of Chancellor Brüning in 1932, the revolution of 1918, the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, or the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, appear in a new light.

For the exhibition, innovative ideas were developed not only on the level of the curated content, but also in the design of the exhibition itself. On 1000 square metres of display surface, the exhibition illustrates the fact that history did not necessarily have to unfold exactly as it did – but is rather as a series of more or less likely constellations. This is illustrated in artistically staged "scenes" by the Berlin-based scenography office *chezweitz*, that offer a look at inherently possible scenarios that might have – but did not – come about. These are contrasted with the actual historical event, displayed in a "reality room", which led to the occurrence that then burned itself into the common historical memory as a decisive caesura.

The unexpected turning point of the year 1989 is a classic example of the **charged relationship between historical reality and unrealised opportunities**. Most

people experienced the **fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989** as a stroke of luck. The people dancing on the Wall presented an iconic image of a Peaceful Revolution without the exercise of state-inflicted violence. But this outcome was not necessarily expected. The GDR had been the first country to officially state its approval to the violent actions of the Chinese leadership against protesters at the Square of Heavenly Peace in June 1989. A military crackdown against an uprising of the population had also seemed possible in East Germany, and was even believed to be likely.

Roads that were not taken therefore make up the central motif of the exhibition – they shed light on different historical scenarios from near or afar without attempting to rewrite the actual history. In the best case, visitors will learn something about the dilemmas of the decision-makers and about historical responsibility and guilt. Hovering above all this, and that makes up the problem's topicality, is the **question of the individual latitude for taking action**: decisions by individual persons can change the course of history. And not least of all, the exhibition invites visitors to experience what **historical judgement** really means – though it might only be formed in retrospect.

The final part of the exhibition leads to the **game station "Autumn '89 – On the streets of Leipzig"**. In this interactive "graphic novel", which is also available in an [online version](#), the museum guests can slip into the role of one of seven different characters and pass through the peaceful protests on 9 October 1989 in Leipzig from the perspective of that character. Here they have to make concrete decisions and thus influence the further course of the historical events.

With some 500 paintings, drawings, graphic prints, sculptures, documents, coins, photographs, publications, posters, quotes, film clips, audio recordings, and interactive stations, the image of a fortunate course of the past history of the reunited Federal Republic of Germany unfolds in reversed chronological order, a course that was by no means inevitable, but instead marked by many different forks in the road.

The **inclusive and barrier-free exhibition** was curated under the project leadership of Fritz Backhaus by Julia Franke, Stefan Paul-Jacobs and Dr Lili Reyels and came about **in cooperation with the Alfred Landecker Foundation**.

From January 2023, an extensive **accompanying programme** and a **film series** will delve deeper into the main aspects of the exhibition. A **publication** on the exhibition will be published in April 2023 by the publishers C.H. Beck. The **DHM's digital format More Story** introduces the exhibition in German and English and offers extensive background interviews.