Like the other East European countries under Soviet domination after 1945, East Germany also witnessed the establishment of a series of practices for the symbolical legitimation of the new ideological order. Soon after the delineation of the Soviet zone within German territories, the new authorities sought to introduce ritual forms to educate and mobilize the people to comply with the new regime – many of them transferred directly from the Soviet Union, bearing emphasized secular content, and targeting the establishment of new political and public identities along ideological and atheistic lines. The variety of such public occasions was enormous – including monument building and commemorative meetings dedicated to the memory of individuals particularly linked with the ideology, political rituals aimed at the reshaping the public calendar, and educational activities geared toward creating citizens of a new socialist society. Despite their diversity in terms of particular purpose and context of performance, the public ritual activities introduced in East Germany during the first post-war decade shared many common features, including strong politicized overtones (ranging from an anti-militarist spirit in the late 1940s to enhanced warlike overtones in defence of communist ideology in the 1950s), the combination of elements such as those related to propaganda, social change, and educational instruction, and shared ritualistic content (involving political speeches, bowing in memory of fallen comrades, solemn oaths, etc.). It is particularly remarkable that two parallel and systematically pursued tendencies marked the different occasions of public rituals from the late 1940s – one of ensuring commemorative attention to the memory of individuals particularly linked with the ideology, and the other of purging the ritual acts from religious references and of carrying out ritual activities in emphasized secular overtones. The present article will reflect upon the relationship
between these two tracks and will interpret them as being interdependent in the general context of the post-war developments in East Germany.

The goal of the text is to trace the main aspects of this secularization process, as carried out in the public rituals and political commemoration in the first post-war decade in East Germany. It is not the intention of the article to explore in depth the orchestration and setting of different commemorative occasions – as, despite their occurrence in East German setting, they did not differ substantially from the practices and commemoration policies of the other countries under Soviet rule at the time. Its intention is instead to provide an overview of the context in which these forms of ideological activity evolved after 1945, and to explore their relevance to the particular configuration of religion and the secular in post-war East Germany. The major foci of attention in the text will thus be: the political and social circumstances in the first decade after 1945 and the role of commemorations in establishing ideological legitimacy; the changes in the system of education and the use of public rituals as tools to indoctrinate the youth; the anti-religious and atheist propaganda and the ideological policies for introducing secular rituals in the public and private spheres; and, lastly, the relationship of commemorative activities to major points in the post-war interpretations of history. Aside from their impact on memory processes after 1945, all these will be brought forth to highlight how political rituals were a key tool in the secularization processes of the time, and how the gradual consolidation of the public activities around the communist doctrine laid the grounds for a secular ‘religiosity’ that the communist regime pursued in the decades to follow.

East Germany in the first postwar decade: contextualizing remarks

The exploration of such issues in the context of East Germany is particularly shaped by the unique course that the country followed in post-war political developments, and it is namely this aspect, and not the character of commemorative activities *per se*, that is worth emphasizing from the start. The case of Germany as a defeated nation, as a divided state, and an object of ‘normalization’ on the part of the Allies led to this unique course in its post-war developments that had few parallels elsewhere. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of East Germany into