

Introduction

When the Berlin Wall fell on 9 November 1989, the physical division of East and West Germany came to an end. Huge changes followed this pivotal moment. The two countries were officially stitched back together a year later, and—on paper at least—German unity was achieved. Though the Wall had been knocked down and the debris tidied away, getting to the point at which Germany is one country again has been a much more protracted process. For East Germans, whose communist-run country was amalgamated into capitalist West Germany through the reunification process, the changes were particularly dramatic. The whole fabric of their daily lives changed, from the way they voted, to the brand of butter they bought, to the newspapers they read.¹ And yet in spite of these external changes, East Germans understandably continued to think and act in ways that were informed by their socialist past. Different mentalities continued to divide East and West Germans to the point that Germans on both sides could be said to be still living with *Die Mauer im Kopf* (the Wall in their heads) years after reunification.²

New divides have also emerged among East Germans about how they remember their old lives in the German Democratic Republic (GDR).³ For some, it is the restrictions of living in a dictatorship that loom large in their recollections: the lack of free elections, the absence of freedom of speech, and the inability to travel

paternalistic state provided for all. Views of the GDR therefore range from being a 'Stasiland'⁵ at one extreme to a benevolent welfare state on the other. These polarized depictions of life in the GDR have been reinforced by two popular films: *Goodbye, Lenin!* (2003) and *The Lives of Others* (2006). *Goodbye, Lenin!* is nostalgic for the best elements of life in the GDR, which is shown as a protective yet benign (and at times ridiculous) state looking after its citizens, in contrast to the relentless and often difficult reality of reunification. *The Lives of Others* suggests that East Germany was a Stasi-state, since two of the main characters, a couple, feel constantly vulnerable and afraid. Crucially, although the GDR is often characterized in terms of this dichotomy, many East Germans' experiences lie somewhere between. *Born in the GDR* offers a more variegated picture and aims to deepen our understanding of how the transition from communism to capitalism affected the daily lives of 'ordinary people'—individuals who would otherwise remain anonymous in the historical record.⁶ This in turn will help to explain the longer-term legacies of the GDR.

Let us briefly consider the backstory. How was it that Germany came to be separated into two countries, divided by a Wall and then reunited? At the end of the Second World War Germany was defeated and physically occupied by the four Allied powers: the US, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. Each of the four was in charge of a zone of Germany, as well as a sector of Berlin, which was situated within the Soviet zone. However, even as the post-war peace settlements were being decided at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945, relations were already becoming strained between the Soviet Union and the other Allied powers. Relations broke down irretrievably from June 1948, when the Soviets blocked access to Berlin by road and rail, allegedly for 'construction purposes'—an action which the Western Allies called the Berlin Blockade. In response the Western Allies flew in key supplies for the Berliners in their sectors in what became known as the Berlin

in May 1949, when it became clear that the Western Allies were able to convey more supplies by air than they had delivered by land, but nonetheless the blockade paved the way for the formation of two separate German states later that year: West Germany officially became the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) with Bonn as its capital on 23 May 1949 and East Germany officially became the German Democratic Republic (GDR) with East Berlin as its capital on 7 October 1949. Berlin, in particular, had a special position in these developments. Although located deep in the GDR, it remained divided into a Western sector and an Eastern sector. Those living in West Berlin were officially citizens of the FRG but stayed under occupation by the Western Allies until 1990. When this territorial division was completed, East Germany occupied less than one-third of German soil and was home to around a quarter of the population of post-war Germany.⁷

Over the next twelve years, the equivalent of a town's worth of people per year moved from living in East Germany, which was rapidly transformed into a socialist society and state, to West Germany, where capitalism was being restored, because the living standards and job opportunities were seen to be better.⁸ This was a problem for the GDR authorities, but it was not just the number of people leaving that was a cause for concern. Those leaving included some of the brightest and best from East Germany, in particular highly qualified young people whose education had been paid for by the East German state. In the competitive Cold War climate between East and West this state of affairs troubled the communist leaders: East Germans were voting with their feet and if they continued to leave at the same rate, soon there would be no one left in the East. Their solution was a wall.

On Saturday 12 August Berliners went to bed being able to move freely between the eastern and western parts of the city. When they woke up this was no longer possible, because overnight the GDR authorities had erected a temporary security fence guarded by

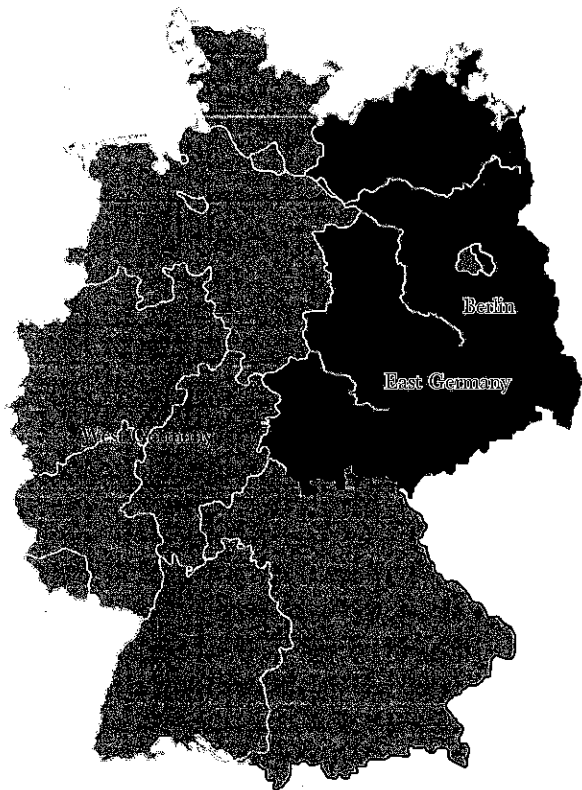


FIGURE 1 Divided Germany, 1949–1989.

fact, the little boy (on the book's cover) who became separated from his family on 13 August due to the ever-expanding barbed wire border was only reunited with them when an East German border guard disobeyed strict orders not to let anyone pass, and helped the child to cross back to the East. Over time, however, this fence became permanent. In many ways, the Berlin Wall appeared to be the nail in the coffin for any prospect of German unity, but in reality Germany had been divided since 1949, and from 1952 the tightening of the border between East and West Germany had

the twenty-eight years following the Wall's appearance, Germans living in East Berlin or the wider GDR were literally walled in and were only allowed to travel to other communist countries within the Eastern bloc such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary.¹⁰ GDR citizens could apply for short-term visas to visit relatives in the West, but whether these would be granted was entirely at the whim of the authorities. Those who asked to leave the GDR for good were marked down as politically unreliable, subject to career blocks, and often put under surveillance by the Stasi, the East German secret police.

All this ended in November 1989. Just over forty years after the GDR had been founded in 1949 and thirty-seven after Germany had been physically divided in 1952, the Berlin Wall was torn down in a dramatic turn of events. A combination of longer- and shorter-term factors played their part, including the thawing of relations between East and West Germany, which was instigated by the fourth West German Chancellor Willy Brandt in the 1970s. In that era of so-called *Ostpolitik*, Germans on both sides of the Wall were allowed a greater number of visits across the border (though it was much easier for West Germans to travel to the GDR than the other way around). These visits underlined to East Germans just how poor the quality of their consumer goods was in comparison to that of their Western neighbours.

Even for those who had not stepped outside the Eastern bloc, it was at this time that the cracks in the economic policies of the socialist countries became particularly apparent. In the GDR and elsewhere in the Eastern bloc food was heavily subsidized and basic necessities were sold at very low prices. In fact bread reputedly cost so little that people fed it to their pigs. People with allotments were forced to sell a share of their crops to the government in order to ensure a minimal supply of fruit and vegetables throughout the GDR. This sometimes had ludicrous consequences, for example a man selling the cherries he had produced to the state, only to buy

for.¹¹ It was this fundamental disconnect in the GDR's economic policy that became increasingly apparent in the mid-1980s. The country was going bankrupt, as its overall earnings did not cover the cost of the extensive subsidies, and ordinary people found it increasingly difficult to get hold of basic household items.¹² This fundamentally challenged the unspoken social contract between GDR citizens and their government, whereby the government delivered security and welfare in exchange for conformity to the regime's dictates, and it ultimately contributed to the instability of the regime in the autumn of 1989.¹³

Added to this sense of dissatisfaction with the East German government (run by the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED, the Socialist Unity Party) was the advent of a new reforming General Secretary of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. Taking power on 11 March 1985, he appeared to offer radical reform and the relaxation of strict ideology, especially with his policies of *glasnost*, which referred to openness and transparency in government institutions, and *perestroika*, which referred to the easing and restructuring of socialist rule. Gorbachev changed Soviet policy, based on suggestions from a new team of experts who had been studying Soviet–East European relations for some time. They told Gorbachev that Eastern Europe was no longer a strategic necessity for Soviet security and was in fact an expensive drain on resources. Gorbachev's new policies meant that the Soviet Union was not committed to preserving the status quo as it had been in the past. This made it difficult for communist leaders in the Eastern bloc to continue to block reform, as they could no longer rely on the pretext of Soviet disapproval to justify their actions.¹⁴ Gorbachev's policies promised a more relaxed style of communist rule in the Soviet Union, and this in turn gave hope to ordinary people in the Eastern bloc that there would be improvements to their own daily lives. His new policy of non-interference in the Soviet satellite states also effectively freed reformers within the ruling

to change their own political institutions, without fear of Soviet intervention.¹⁵ And all of this significantly widened the potential for change in the region.

In Poland, opposition to the regime had been brewing amongst workers since the start of the 1980s, with the establishment of Solidarity as a national organization of opposition headed by electrician Lech Wałęsa. Though Solidarity operated underground for most of the decade, it attracted more and more support in its mission to reform communist rule in Poland.¹⁶ And with further industrial unrest breaking out in August 1988, the government finally agreed to open negotiations with the opposition. Between February and April 1989, round-table discussions took place between them. One of the outcomes of this discussion was that Solidarity was legalized. The biggest decision, though, was to allow non-communist parties to stand in the next election. Ultimately, this led to free elections in June 1989, when Solidarity won a landslide victory and the communists were ousted from power. These developments in the Soviet Union and in Poland certainly encouraged unrest elsewhere.¹⁷

In Hungary, too, popular acceptance of the communist regime waned dramatically in the 1980s. When the Communist Party leader János Kádár responded to the intensifying economic crisis by introducing harsh austerity measures rather than a change in course, opposition to the regime became more vocal as the notion that the state was protecting workers' interests became increasingly undermined.¹⁸ Under mounting pressure, Kádár was removed as leader after nearly thirty-two years in May 1988. In a climate of radical reformism, the half-hearted efforts of Kádár's replacement, Károly Grósz, were soon dismissed as inadequate.

Leading the reformist wing in the Hungarian Communist Party was Imre Pozsgay, who argued that the Party's future could only be assured by working with sections of the cultural and technical intelligentsia. Under his influence, and in response to mounting external pressure, the Hungarian Communist Party agreed to join

Polish model, these talks lasted until September 1989, and it was agreed that Hungary would become a multi-party political system operated through free elections which were set up for spring 1990.¹⁹

From May 1989, the reforms in Hungary had a knock-on effect in East Germany, when a group of Hungarian soldiers, at the direction of both the Hungarian and Austrian governments, began to remove the barbed wire which had previously closed the border between Hungary and Austria as part of the Iron Curtain. This led to an exodus of 130,000 East Germans, who used this border crossing to flee to West Germany between May and November. The sheer scale of departures served to erode the GDR's authority substantially.²⁰

Buoyed by developments in the Soviet Union, Poland, and Hungary, thousands of GDR citizens took to the streets campaigning for reform. The so-called Monday Demonstrations in Leipzig in September 1989 drew more and more supporters campaigning for freedom of speech, a relaxation of the travel restrictions, better care of the environment, and peace. In Dresden, Jena, and East Berlin, demonstrators met in the shelter of churches and discussed their demands for reform. Gorbachev's visit to East Berlin to celebrate the forty-year anniversary of the GDR on 3 October added further momentum to proceedings. He was greeted like a pop star by large crowds which chanted 'Gorbi! Gorbi!' and 'Help us!' In a speech that day Gorbachev gave demonstrators further hope, declaring that 'life punishes those who come too late'—a clear message to the East German government that it should implement reforms or risk the consequences.²¹ At this stage, the desire for change among ordinary East Germans was clear. It was not until 9 November, however, that matters really came to a head. On that day, just before a press conference, Günter Schabowski, a spokesperson for the SED Politburo, was handed a note saying that East Germans would be able to cross the border with proper permission. Since the note had no further details, Schabowski had to

specific details about the new travel arrangements, East Berliners were filled with optimism and flocked in huge numbers to the border crossing points across the city, where confused guards allowed them to pass through. Soon after, the entire Iron Curtain collapsed.²² Few, if any, of the East German protesters had bargained for the reunification of Germany, but that is what transpired over the following year.

The opening of the Wall was met with euphoria across both Germanys. West Berliners greeted East Berliners with glasses of champagne as they crossed the border, most of them for the first time in their lives. In the excitement, strangers embraced, overwhelmed by the enormity of what they were witnessing. The party atmosphere continued all night in downtown Berlin. In other parts of the city, Germans awoke the following morning to hear the news on the radio or from neighbours rapping on the door, eager to tell them what had happened. At this stage, the collapse of the GDR was in no way inevitable and many East Germans expected the border to be resealed. However in the months that followed, with more and more Easterners flocking westwards, it became clear that there was no going back.

In stark contrast to the other countries in the Eastern bloc, the GDR—the so-called 'jewel in the USSR's Eastern European Empire'²³—had a prosperous Western counterpart, which had the wherewithal to subsidize East Germany's transition into an operational democratic system.²⁴ In March 1990, there were free elections in East Germany for the first time since 1933. Rather than voting based on Party allegiances, East Germans voted to choose their preferred vision and timetable for reunification. Helmut Kohl's party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) offered reunification as quickly as possible, the idea being that the GDR would be divided into states (*Länder*) that could then apply to join the West German Federation of States (*Bundesländer*). The Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or SPD) argued

create a new Germany. Other parties, such as Alliance '90/The Greens (*Bündis 90/Die Grünen*), which represented East German dissident movements, and the Party of Democratic Socialism (*Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus* or PDS), which was the successor to the SED Party, were more sceptical about reunification and offered alternative programmes instead. In March 1990, East Germans voted overwhelmingly in favour of the quickest available option. Though the decision to unite was clear from the election results, putting reunification into practice was far from straightforward. Each country had its own flag, its own national anthem, its own armed forces, and critically its own military allegiances, with the GDR committed to the Warsaw Pact and the FRG to NATO. There were other problematic differences too, such as a different legal code, a different educational system, a different approach to health care, and a different method of taxation. Deciding how to deal with this was logistically very difficult.²⁵

Replacement, it seems, was the theme of the *Wende* (the name given to the political changes prompted by the fall of the Wall). Whatever one might think about whether an alternative approach was feasible, in many respects reunification ended up being a wholesale takeover by the West, much to the disappointment of many of the dissidents who had first taken to the streets of East Germany in 1989. Once the protests became a mass movement the original protestors, who had sought a more democratic form of socialism through reform from within, were drowned out by growing calls for the end of the GDR *per se*.²⁶ This, perhaps, accounts for why the celebrations of reunification in October 1990 were far more muted than the festivities in November 1989.

After forty years of division, East and West Germany had evolved into very distinct societies. That the differences were so marked surprised Germans from both sides, and presented enormous challenges to feeling a genuine sense of unification as one nation. In 1980, for example, only 6 per cent of West Germans

nearly 25 per cent of East Germans.²⁷ The GDR was grounded in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, and therefore committed to eradicating class differences, while the West was a capitalist consumer society. The overall standard of living was higher in the West, but so too was the difference between rich and poor. All of this meant that at the moment the Wall was torn down, East and West Germans looked, thought, and behaved very differently.²⁸ Perhaps even more challenging than adapting to new systems for employment and welfare, was the apparent need for East Germans to shed a set of behaviours that had been developed subconsciously by living in a socialist state.²⁹ As many East Germans found, including those who were keen to blend in with West Germans as quickly as possible, it simply was not that easy to erase the experiences of forty years and start from scratch.³⁰

When the structures, organizations, leisure activities, shops, and customs of the GDR effectively disappeared and were replaced by West German ways over the course of the transition, many East Germans experienced a loss of their sense of self, of their sense of identity.³¹ Identity can be shaped by a variety of factors including ideology, belief, or allegiance, but it is also rooted in everyday behaviour: the newspapers people read, the food they eat, the buildings that surround them, the travel choices that are available. A sense of identity relates to where a person is from and this certainly colours where that person is going. It is also linked to expectations.³² Decades of living under the GDR undoubtedly informed the attitudes and mindsets of ordinary East Germans. The vast majority of citizens there participated in the communist system and through that involvement they were themselves changed. The extent to which they had internalized the values of the system was far greater than many had thought. The fall of the Wall and comparison with their Western compatriots brought into stark relief how much they had been part of that system.³³ And with rapid reunification, suddenly East Germans were confronted with the

had developed unconsciously, were at odds with the way West Germans behaved. West Germans were foreigners to East Germans, they just happened to speak the same language. And in this context East Germans could not simply shrug off their past or the fact that they were, in many senses, products of the circumstances they had been living in.³⁴

'I didn't move a metre but I suddenly lived in a new world', observed one East German.³⁵ How acutely individuals felt the loss of their old GDR world was undoubtedly related to how successful a transition they made into living in the new reunited Germany. East Germans could simultaneously feel both freer and frustrated.³⁶ Those former East Germans who continue to buy familiar Eastern products may well simply be seeking out the comfort of the familiar from their old lives as GDR citizens. Overall, their feelings of disorientation were captured by the East German journalist and writer Andreas Lehmann, who wrote in 1993 that 'they [politicians leading the reunification process] are asking us for a complete renunciation of the old and a cheerful subordination to the culture of the West, which above all does not translate into the surrender of some "ideals" (political or otherwise), but, worse, into a total loss of one's own biography'.³⁷

Essentially, after the end of the GDR, East Germans continued to exist as East Germans but in an environment that had seen fundamental changes. The stories that follow look at how, despite the end of a state and the failure of an ideology, the values and mindsets that these produced, in both conformist and oppositional variants, lived on. All of this helps to explain why in the initial period of transition, and indeed in the years that followed, 'Germany was no longer two nations, but it certainly was not yet one'.³⁸

The changes wrought by German reunification reached far into the daily lives of all East Germans.³⁹ Yet the different ages and stages of life which people were at when the Wall fell meant that East Germans were affected unevenly by the changes. Adults

since it was not obvious to Western employers how their skills could be put to good use in rapidly modernizing and labour-saving industries. Some, decades into building a career, had to retrain to fit in with the modern, capital-intensive modes of production, often taking a pay cut and a drop in professional standing to do so. Others, of course, were successful, building new businesses in the wake of reunification. But whether successful or otherwise, reunification brought huge changes to the day-to-day. And many had to cope with this transition while also caring and providing for a family in a markedly more expensive world.⁴⁰ In this context, it would be easy to assume that young people, who had spent the least time building their lives under socialist rule, would adapt much more easily to the new state of affairs than their older counterparts. The world was already changing and getting bigger for adolescents anyway, so in many respects the *Wende* was just another layer of change.⁴¹ Certainly this group, who had most or all of their adult lives ahead of them, was best placed to profit from the new educational freedoms which allowed individuals far greater choice about what they studied and pursued as a career—choices that were based on ability and interests rather than political conformity. At the same time, however, these children and young people had been born into the GDR, and had no experience of another system. And just as they were about to launch themselves into the real world as adults, the rules of the game changed drastically. Older East Germans certainly struggled to adjust to life in unified Germany, with all of the attendant changes to daily life. But younger people, who had been subject to SED propaganda their entire lives, also had a lot of readjusting to do, as they tried to work out what they themselves thought as the system they had grown up in was discredited and displaced by its once-reviled Western rival.⁴²

This book will focus on the experiences of East Germans who were born into the GDR after the Berlin Wall was built.

up in communist East Germany. To understand what young East Germans went through following German reunification, it is essential to look back on their experiences under the SED. Just as the Nazi dictatorship had tried to indoctrinate young people with their way of thinking in the Hitler Youth, so too had the GDR through its equivalent youth groups—the Young Pioneers, the Thälmann Pioneers, and the Free German Youth—which occupied much of the free time of youths aged between 6 and 25. Young people represented the future of socialism in the eyes of the SED leadership and it was therefore a top priority to turn them into socialist personalities. What did this entail? Above all, it meant belief in the socialist world view, and a commitment as a collective to working towards a better society. In 1958, Erich Honecker's predecessor as East German leader of the SED, Walter Ulbricht, tried to encapsulate the essence of the ideal socialist man by penning the 'Ten Commandments for the New Socialist Human'. These commandments were phrased like the Ten Commandments in the Bible and formed an established part of the SED Party Programme between 1963 and 1979. They give a flavour of what was expected of citizens, both young and old, in the GDR:

1. You shall always campaign for the international solidarity of the working class and all working people and for the unbreakable bond of all socialist countries.
2. You shall love your fatherland and always be ready to deploy all your strength and capabilities for the defence of the workers' and farmers' power.
3. You shall help to abolish exploitation of man by man.
4. You shall do good deeds for socialism, because socialism leads to a better life for all working people.
5. You shall act in the spirit of mutual help and comradely cooperation while building up socialism, and also respect the

6. You shall protect and enhance state-owned property.
7. You shall always strive to improve your performance, be frugal, and strengthen socialist discipline at work.
8. You shall raise your children in the spirit of peace and socialism to be well educated, highly principled, and physically hardened people.
9. You shall live purely and fairly and respect your family.
10. You shall show solidarity with those who fight for their national liberation and those who defend their national independence.

So how did the regime aim to imbue young people with these socialist values? There was a strong ideological element to belonging to the Young Pioneers. There was a set of commandments, for example, that each 6-year-old had to recite on joining the organization:

Commandments of the Young Pioneers

We Young Pioneers love our German Democratic Republic.

We Young Pioneers love our parents.

We Young Pioneers love peace.

We Young Pioneers are friends with children of the Soviet Union and of all countries.

We Young Pioneers learn diligently, are orderly and disciplined.

We Young Pioneers respect all working people and lend a hand everywhere.

We Young Pioneers are good friends and help each other.

We Young Pioneers like singing and dancing, playing and doing handicrafts.

We Young Pioneers play sports and keep our body clean and healthy.

We Young Pioneers proudly wear the blue neckerchief.

We Young Pioneers prepare to become good Thälmann pioneers.

There was also a uniform, including the blue hat and the blue neckerchief mentioned in the commandments. The three tips of

knot symbolized their unity.⁴³ All of this gave children a sense of importance at a young age.

Alongside the SED's youth movement, schools were of primary importance for inculcating the socialist world view. In fact, the youth movement was integrated into each school's activities, with time set aside for this on a weekly basis. Furthermore, a high point in the formation of the 'socialist personality' was the *Jugendweihe*, the socialist rite of passage for 14-year-olds akin to Christian confirmation. The ceremony involved a procession, a speech, a proclamation of vows, and a presentation, and was yet another chance for the SED to prepare young people to become active participants in the socialist state.⁴⁴

Though the SED was extremely focused on getting young people 'on side', its efforts were more successful at securing outward conformity than active enthusiasm. Some children enjoyed the sense of belonging and the outdoor activities arranged by the youth groups, but many disliked having their free time organized and found the emphasis on ideology boring, participating only to avoid the educational and career blocks which stymied the careers of the uncooperative.⁴⁵ Watching Western television to some extent immunized young East Germans against SED propaganda. And Western TV, along with Intershops which sold Western goods in the GDR at extortionate prices, showcased the allure of the brighter, freer, and materially superior West Germany. Also, in the specific context of the 1980s young people in the GDR had raised expectations of reform in light of Gorbachev's pioneering liberalization policies of glasnost and perestroika. All of these factors help to explain why GDR youth policies did not meet with widespread enthusiasm from young people.⁴⁶

What follows explores what young East Germans made of the merging of East and West Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Many of them had been involved in the demonstrations in the autumn of 1989, indicating that in some sense the East German

of young people. But once these young people had unfettered access to the Western consumer world—the delights of Levi's jeans, Coca-Cola, and Milka chocolate—what did they make of the regime change in the years that followed? Had living under socialism actually influenced their outlooks more than they realized?⁴⁷ After 1989, many young East Germans initially appear to have been happy to adopt a more materialistic, consumer-oriented outlook. Jana Hensel, who was 13 years old when the Wall fell, describes how life changed for her in her memoir:

At some point in late '89 or early '90—here, too, I can't remember exactly when—we stopped going to all those state-run extra-curricular events. Saturdays had previously been reserved for community activities, but now most of us preferred to drive across the border to West Germany with our parents... And Wednesdays changed, too. As a pre-teen in the GDR, I used to put on my scarf and pointy cap every Wednesday afternoon at 4 p.m. and head off to meetings of the *Junge Pioniere*, our version of the Scouts, but with a heavy Socialist slant... Seemingly overnight, the endless appointments that had filled our childhood were cancelled... Gone, too, were the Spartacus Track and Field Competitions... Competitive sports were out... Now we rushed home as soon as school was over and parked ourselves in front of the TV... Our interests had moved on... We now collected the free toy surprises that came with McDonald's Happy Meals.⁴⁸

However, despite young people's dissatisfaction with life in the GDR, and their converse attraction to all things Western, after reunification many seemed to miss aspects of life in the former East Germany. Reunification represented a huge change. And, over time, young people felt the social dislocation prompted by the political change a lot more keenly: they developed a more nuanced view than straightforward delight at being able to drink real Coca-Cola. In most cases, political socialization in the GDR had influenced East Germans' values and attitudes, and these prin-

cut themselves off from the government's influence by living in niches among like-minded people, but as West German diplomat Günther Gaus pointed out in 1983, 'Niches are not external [to the socialist system], on the contrary they are niches inside GDR socialism... Over the decades more facts, beliefs, and standards of really existing socialism have made themselves at home in private corners than niche dwellers are always aware of.'⁵⁰ If, as Gaus suggests, East Germans young and old were far more shaped by life under socialist rule than they had realized, when familiar socialist structures were swept away with reunification, many experienced a deep and unexpected sense of loss. The stories that follow deepen our qualitative understanding of this experience.⁵¹

In 1990, Leipzig psychologist Walter Friedrich declared that the youth of the GDR was in 'psychological chaos'.⁵² Over the space of a few months,

pupils were confronted with textbooks lauding the praises of the West German state, which only months before had been portrayed as an Imperialist repressor. Normality had been turned on its head. Their country had disappeared and had been replaced by an unfamiliar one, which left them feeling as if they had a black hole in their biographies.⁵³

How then, should we try to understand this black hole? First-hand accounts are the starting point for this book which explores contrasting experiences of living across the historical caesura of 1989 and situates each individual's response within the wider context of social, political, and economic developments at the time. From a wider collection of testimony gathered from thirty East Germans who were born from 1961 onwards, eight particularly striking stories have been selected⁵⁴—a large enough number to showcase the multiple and varied experiences of the transition, while equally allowing each story to be explored fully within the confines of a single volume.

To find participants from a combination of urban and rural

supermarkets in former East Germany, pushed leaflets through doors in the Eastern neighbourhoods of Berlin, and advertised on a variety of mailing lists, including the GDR museum in Berlin, the *Dritte Generation Ost* organization (a forum for those East Germans who had not yet reached adulthood when the Wall fell), the academic research centre in Potsdam, the *Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung*, the former Stasi prison at Hohenschönhausen, and the *Zeitzeugenbüro*—an eyewitness database of individuals from all over Germany willing to talk about their experiences. The interviewees, too, helped to find new participants in the project, asking among their friends and relatives for willing volunteers.

Each interviewee was sent the same set of questions before the interview. The questions were carefully worded to be as open and neutrally phrased as possible, and they were divided into three sections: life in the GDR, the fall of the Wall and the period of transition between 1989 and 1990, and life since reunification. At the start of each interview, the author explained that she was writing a book about East German experiences of life before, during, and after reunification, with the hope of revealing a variety of responses going beyond the often polarized characterizations of the GDR, cast either as a 'Stasiland' or as a benign paternalistic state. All interviewees answered the same set of questions, as well as further individual questions prompted by their responses. The author used the questions to open up various themes but then let the interviewees speak freely even if they veered away from the question asked, the logic being that this would allow each one to recount things that he or she thought were significant. Alongside these personal testimonies, the book draws on school reports, school work, photographs, reports compiled by the Stasi, and contemporary diaries. This study emphatically does not aim to be representative of what all East Germans went through, but it certainly promises to offer a variety of personal insights into this dramatic time, each of the eight chapters representing one evocation of life

these disparate accounts bring us closer to understanding what young East Germans went through before, during, and after unification.

Though memory is fickle and uncontrollable in nature, the historian can nonetheless reap great rewards by teasing out and analysing unwieldy memories of the past. One of the great advantages of researching the relatively recent past is being able to talk to the participants at first hand. When a historian reads the diaries or letters of people who are dead, there is no opportunity to ask the author further questions or seek clarifications. Using paper sources in the archive, the historian can easily forget that it is real people's lives that they are reading about. Interviews by contrast, unmistakably reinforce this reality. The interviewee becomes much more the subject of history than the object of it.⁵⁵ When working with live witnesses and actively producing original historical sources through interviews, there is a valuable and unique opportunity for dialogue.⁵⁶ Since all researchers have their own 'baggage', meaning that they cannot help but read sources through the prisms of their own experiences and values, it is surely extremely helpful to meet the protagonists of the story, so that any false impressions which may have been formed from their answers can be corrected. Above all, oral historians can decide which questions to ask of their real, living historical sources, as opposed to historians using paper records, whose questions are inevitably in part dictated by the content of the material they are looking at. And hearing eyewitnesses describe what they went through in their own words has a compelling immediacy which brings the past to life in a way like nothing else.⁵⁷

Certainly, as with many types of evidence, the interview testimonies offer only a partial account.⁵⁸ Subconsciously as well as consciously, individuals will have established narratives and explanations of how they have made sense of their recent experiences. And these narratives, these memories, may well discard or exclude

ings. This is the reality. But it does not stop what they do remember from being valuable.⁵⁹ Each individual will differ in how they decide to prioritize remembering their various experiences. People remember things differently and people had contrasting experiences, both of which help to explain why some accounts contradict as much as they corroborate each other. This does not mean that one account is necessarily more correct or valid than another. One experience might be more typical of the broader experience, but it does not make it more 'right'. The simple fact is that there is more than one historical truth. Each of the life stories told here blends elements of the typical and the exceptional.

Historians interpreting memories must be aware that individual memories evolve as they are slotted into wider narratives that develop long after the event. In the immediate aftermath of reunification, for example, the word *Wendehals* (reunification turncoat) was coined, to describe people who had supported the SED in the GDR but hastily rewrote their own histories to put distance between themselves and the old regime. Since reunification there have certainly been broad shifts in the prevailing memory cultures relating to the SED. Initially, while hopes for a brighter future in a reunited Germany remained high, East Germans appeared happy enough to characterize themselves as victims of an oppressive state, dominated by the Stasi, because emphasizing the repressive nature of the SED helped to justify their conformist behaviour. But as time passed, and disillusion with the reunification process became more widespread, many East Germans began to mourn the loss of their collective past, somehow forgetting or marginalizing the Stasi's activities from their memories in the process. And yet for those who were political dissidents in the GDR, the pervasiveness of *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for the former East Germany), with its attendant rosy memories of the secure and simple life, is understandably a source of great anger, as it conveniently forgets the very real repressive elements of SED rule and emphasizes a cosy past over

There are a number of important factors to be aware of when using oral testimony. Firstly, there is no one, monolithic version of events which captures the experiences of all the protagonists. Secondly, the way individuals remember the past may change over time with retelling. Indeed, each individual will likely not have just one version of events that remains static throughout his or her life. This is partly because the way one sees the world at 20 years old is likely to be different to the way one sees the world at 40, and partly to do with the changing context and the prevailing values of the society in which we live.⁶⁰ Thirdly, interviewees may well present the past in a way which they believe shows them in the most favourable light. And finally, years after the event interviewees have the benefit of hindsight and, with this, often a fuller understanding of events than was available at the time. Yet in spite of these causes for caution, recollections are usually accurate enough to mean that retrospective interviewing can bring huge rewards. And in some ways memories are *more* authentic than other sources, since they combine an individual's first-hand experience of events with how they have made sense of events subsequently.⁶¹ In fact, it is extremely informative to look at how people have made sense of what they went through.⁶²

Individual eyewitnesses may have an axe to grind in the way they recount their experiences, but presenting a collection of accounts helps to reveal the disparate agendas that individuals may have and in so doing illuminates the dichotomized memory culture about the GDR. Indeed, when employing memories as key historical sources for understanding East German perspectives on the transition of 1989, it is helpful to think of the existence of two GDRs: the GDR as it was at the time, and the GDR as we understand it now, which is based on memories of it. Neither historians nor ordinary East Germans will ever recapture the actual GDR that East Germans lived in, because we no longer have access to it. If we accept that the *memory* of the GDR is now what we mean by

memory of this past. Instead, there are competing and often contradictory versions, which often try to exclude each other. It is therefore important to capture multiple accounts of this past so as not to privilege particular perspectives.⁶³

If the GDR as we understand it, is based on disparate accounts of it, this should give no cause for concern. In contrast to historians of the Middle Ages who have relatively few sources from which to tease out readings and rereadings of the past, contemporary historians face the opposite challenge. Instead of having one set of correspondence to tell us about the wider social context of an era, contemporary historians have more information to choose from than they could ever possibly look at. And by doing interviews, historians can learn things that it would not have been possible to discover otherwise. Surely this is a fortunate position to be in, rather than a problem?

Let us briefly consider the cast of characters that form the eight case studies in this book.⁶⁴ In the opening chapter we hear from Petra, a 25-year-old Berlin-based PhD student who found herself propelled into high politics after the Wall fell. Petra had been an ardent socialist from her student days in the 1980s but in the transition of 1989/90 she occupied a central position in discussions about how to make reunification happen in practice. Once this was done, Petra was one of only seventeen communist MPs elected to the German parliament in 1990. This chapter explains Petra's continued loyalty to the SED's values in the wake of unification. Unlike Petra, Carola from Eisenach began questioning the regime during her schooldays. She escaped to West Germany when she was 21 years old, mere months before the Wall fell. Chapter 2 focuses on her story and how she felt totally isolated amongst friends who did not seem to mind that SED propaganda was so different from the reality. Carola was angry at the GDR's wanton destruction of the environment and was part of an environmental movement intent on exposing damage the government was keen to

GDR, recounts her escape, and includes her reflections on life since reunification.

In Chapter 3 we learn about Lisa, a schoolteacher, who was happy with life in communist East Germany and remains happy with life since the transition of 1989. We hear about her experience of daily life behind the Iron Curtain in Pankow and gain a contented, relatively apolitical perspective on how things changed for the 22-year-old once the Berlin Wall fell. Chapter 4 provides a sharp contrast with Lisa's story: we hear from Mario, a waiter from East Berlin, who was shot at and imprisoned for trying to leave East Germany when he was 20. We learn why Mario was so desperate to leave the GDR, and we hear about his experiences as a political prisoner at the hands of the Stasi, gaining insights into the long-term impact of his persecution. The subject of Chapter 5, 28 year-old Katharina from Brandenburg, was, like Mario, strongly opposed to the socialist set-up in the GDR, but for very different reasons. She was the daughter of a Protestant pastor, and accordingly suffered taunting and other disadvantages at school, and later at work, because of upholding her faith in an increasingly secular society. Katharina married a man who had been imprisoned by the Stasi for disseminating oppositional pamphlets, and as a result, their lives were carefully monitored by the Stasi.

From the oppositional stance of Katharina's family in Chapter 5, in Chapter 6 we move to the Party-loyal family of Robert, who remains a defender of socialist ideals to this day. Robert, who was a 15-year-old schoolboy when the Wall fell, was absolutely content in the GDR system. He felt no envy of West Germans, whom he had learned suffered from high crime and unemployment rates. After the Wall fell, he felt anger at the way everything from East Germany was dismissed as inferior. He believes the West would do well to learn from the policies used in the GDR. Chapter 8's subject, Mirko, was, like Robert, born into a so-called 'Red' (socialist supporter) family. Indeed, Mirko's father was a Stasi informer. For

son, taking on ever-more exalted positions in the government-led youth movement. By his mid-teens however, he had had enough. From the age of 15, he was no longer prepared to toe the Party line and conform in his views and appearance to the state's dictates. Luckily this period of rebellion coincided with the end of the regime, and Mirko faced no serious consequences. As a result of his anti-communist epiphany, he now works with young people to show how damaging the impact of extreme politics can be. In Chapter 8 we learn about Peggy from Frankfurt Oder, who was a 10-year-old schoolgirl when the Wall fell. She had a wonderfully happy childhood in communist East Germany, and remains nostalgic for many aspects of her old life that were simply swept away with reunification. Life was safe and secure in the GDR in contrast to reunited Germany where she has far more worries about money, work, and housing.

Born in the GDR straddles the historical caesura of 1989, focusing on how young East Germans fared in 1989 as their familiar world was all but erased and replaced by a capitalist society. There was extreme and rapid external change to life in East Germany in the days, weeks, months, and years after the Wall fell. What follows asks whether these changes were mirrored internally within these young East Germans? Did they experience a 'revolution of the mind' as they left behind the distinctive GDR culture built up over four decades of socialism or were the values with which they grew up not so easily cast aside?⁶⁵ The complex legacy of Germany's second dictatorship comes under the spotlight in the stories that follow, weighing continuity versus change, unity versus division, and loss versus gain.