Willkommen Zuhause Lenin: The Implications of the Nostalgia of Cold War Identities in the former East Germany

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Introduction:

From the creation of the state in 1949, to the collapse of the communist government and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany in 1990, the government and the Socialist Unity Party of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) dominated all aspects of life for its citizens, monitoring its citizen through the surveillance apparatus of the Stasi. For the duration of the state’s existence, the government of the GDR, under the direction of Moscow, took strides to create and develop a distinct East German culture and identity separate and distant from the identity of the western-backed Federal Republic of Germany and of the previous Third Reich and Weimar Republic. This resulted in an identity that was influenced by socialist ideology, propaganda, limited interactions with Western states, and the political climate of the Cold War. This identity would continue to develop throughout East Germany’s existence until the collapse of the Berlin Wall. However, this East German identity has not ceased to exist with the reunification of Germany. Instead, it was revived among some former residents of East Germany within roughly ten years of reunification in a nostalgic and cultural revival movement that has come to be known as ‘Ostalgie’ (a portmanteau of the German ‘Ost’, or East, and ‘Nostalgie’ or Nostalgia).

I argue that this modern trend and nostalgia for this distinct East German identity made a resurgence in the last decade due to the residual indoctrination on the part of the East German government among many of its former citizens, the economic divides and prejudice of the East German identity, and the novelty of East German culture as a result of
the passing of time. This has occurred despite efforts to integrate into the modern united Germany. So what does this mean for contemporary German society? The importance of an issue such as Ostalgie, and remaining complaints with the integration is that this shows to a moderate extent the limitations of Germany’s work to integrate the former East Germany and East Germans into a unified Germany with a market-based economy. This represents an unfinished task on the part of the contemporary German government in integration. This paper will be divided into four sections, beginning first with a history of the development of the East German identity and continuing to show its evolution throughout the rule communist regime and the collapse of the government. This will be followed with an analysis of the modern trend of ‘Ostalgie’, and will conclude with an analysis of the resulting impact this has on our understanding of the integration process of the formerly-communist East Germany into the unified state and market-based economy of Germany.

**Development of the East German Identity:**

The development of the East German identity began almost in earnest with end of the Second World War and the division of Germany into zones of allied occupation. The Soviet Union took control of the occupation zone in the north east of the country, and began work establishing a Soviet-friendly administration. At the beginning of the occupation by the Allies, German towns and cities were in absolute ruin, with cities such as Dresden and Berlin completely reduced to rubble. To complicate matters, by 1946 there were nearly three and a half million refugees that had arrived in the Soviet zone. Many of these were ethnic Germans from the Baltic States, Russian territories, and from former German lands that had been ceded to Poland. In addition to these people were many Socialists, Communists, and ‘fellow-travellers’ who had been living in Moscow, and whom the Soviets had brought back to form the new German government. As a result of both Soviet demands for war reparations and the lack of initial assistance provided, a series of food shortages and rationing were widespread. These would last until the 1960s when rationing was eventually lifted by the East German government. In 1946, under the auspices of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) merged into the Socialist Unity Party (SED), which would maintain control over the


state for the next forty years. During their time in power, the SED would seek to develop German society into a ‘society of workers and peasants’, working to develop the East German identity through propaganda, youth programs, the reconstruction of German cities, and control of media. This control and identity would be maintained through the construction of the Berlin wall and the Inner German Border (IGB).

Among the farthest reaching of the programs initiated by the East German government were the social programs regarding the ‘youth’ and the life of East German families. From the beginning of East Germany, the SED sought to create the ‘socialist personality’, officially described as “an all-round, well-developed personality, who has a comprehensive command of political, specialist and general knowledge, possesses a firm class outlook rooted in the Marxist-Leninist world view…”3. This was enshrined in the major youth organisations of the Free German Youth (FDJ) and the Pioneers, which existed throughout the years of East Germany’s existence. In addition, legislation and new ideology were introduced to direct the role of the nuclear family in society. Under the East German government, the family was interpreted in socialist terms as an integral cell in the ‘collective socialist whole’4. Legislation was introduced by the East German government to control and ‘liberate’ the family. This included a secularization of the concept of marriage and easier access to divorce for couples. One of the adverse effects of this was a divorce rate higher than that of the west, with 38% of new marriages ending in divorce5.

In the years following the creation of the East German state, reconstruction and the return of many socialists from abroad to Germany would work to create the more visible forms of a distinctive East German identity, such as the arts, architecture, and media. In regards to architecture, the destruction of major German cities such as Berlin gave many architects the ability to “cast off the shackles of the past and create a new city”6. Such reconstruction projects in East Germany included the construction of new apartment buildings in socialist architecture, such as those along the Karl-Marx-Allee (formerly Stalinallee), the Alexanderplatz, and the Fernsehturm tower in Berlin. In the case of media, the state-owned film company DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) was established under Soviet auspices shortly after the beginning of the Soviet occupation. Used mainly as a

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3 Fulbrook. The People’s State. 115
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
tool to further both the ideas of socialism and as a propaganda tool, with early propaganda films such as *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (“The Murderers Are Among Us”), films were made both prolific and cheaply. The DEFA head, Hans Rodenberg, remarked in 1945 that “too many people would not read newspapers, never mind books, but would certainly go to cinema”. To this end, East German cinema and television was the main form of media consumed by people within the country, with more East Germans on average going to the cinema than West Germans (average at 4.5 times a year for East Germans in the 1980s).

One of the greatest factors that influenced the development of a separate East German identity was the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and the border defences along the IGB for the purpose of curbing the exodus, or ‘brain-drain’, of skilled East Germans to West Germany that had been occurring in the country since the mid-1950s. The Berlin Wall not only served to physically separate the East Germans from western media, but also served in of itself as a symbol of East German identity. In both a geographical and cultural sense, the wall served to eliminate the previously ‘neutral’ and blended boundaries that had existed between the occupied zones of Germany. This was soon replaced with a fixed border between East and West. The wall also meant that, with the exception of West German radio signals picked up in the majority of the country, East Germany was essentially cut off from much of the influences and resources of the west. One of the other results of the construction of the Berlin Wall on the East German identity was a brief economic boom. This manifested in the diversity of consumer goods that became available to East Germans, as there was no longer the opportunity to purchase West German goods. This boom would carry through 1960s, with East Germany even being ranked among the world’s ten most prolific industrial producers in 1965. The eventual wind-down and stagnation of the economy in the 1970s and 1980s would bring an end to the boom of consumer goods. The disparity between the East and West Germanies was becoming more visible. Even the Secretary of the SED Walter Ulbricht remarked early in the boom that “The booming economy in West Germany, which is visible to every citizen in the GDR, is the main reason that over ten years about two million people have left our

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8 Berghahn, *Hollywood Behind the Wall*. 32
10 Betts. “The Twilight of Idols”. 747
Republic. This economic stagnation, accompanied by the mass exodus of East Germans in 1989 with the opening of the Hungarian border, would eventually spur the collapse of the SED and East German government and the fall of the Berlin Wall that same year. In addition, not only was the construction of the Wall influential in creating the East German identity, but its fall in the revolution in 1989 and dismemberment in the following years would prove crucial in creating a new sense of the East German identity. This would be characterised by the modern trend of 'Ostalgie', or nostalgia for life in the former East Germany.

The Emergence of Ostalgie:

The modern trend of 'Ostalgie' began to emerge after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the re-unification of Germany (die Wende) in October 1990. With the unification of Germany, the former inhabitants of East Germany were granted the right to travel, right to job opportunities and to goods previously unavailable in the East. The members of the former East German secret police, the Stasi, were put on trial and their files made available to the public. As with the period of de-nazification after the Second World War, many of the monuments and streets in cities across East Germany to heroes of the regime such as Lenin, Ernst Thälmann, Wilhelm Pieck, and Otto Grotewohl were taken down and renamed for the purposes of erasing the “Stalinist legacy of the GDR regime.” In the re-integration of the population and economy of the former East Germany into the unified Federal Republic of Germany, it was desired and hoped by many East Germans to be fully integrated as equals to the West Germans. The hope that many expressed was for this new Germany to be “a socialist utopia with a western face”, in which the social services of the East Germany would still be provided, while having the opportunities previously only available in the West. However, as can be shown in a popular post-Wende joke, the reality of this integration was far from the idealism. Many formerly East Germans were not seen as being equal to their formerly West German counterparts economically or socially. In terms of economics, some of the

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11 Ibid.
initial problems came from the difficult task of economically incorporating the formerly planned economy of East Germany into the market-economy of West Germany. On the eve of reunification, East Germany’s Gross National Product was at roughly ten percent of that of West Germany, labour productivity was at roughly thirty to thirty-five percent of that of West Germany, and the state had a debt of almost sixteen and a quarter billion US dollars.\(^{15}\) One strategy that was implemented was to raise the wages in the former East Germany to those of their Western counterparts. However, this created a new issue of reducing the overall hiring rate of many of the formerly East Germans, and left many of them unemployed.\(^{16}\) Furthermore, as a result of emigration of a population of mostly low-skilled workers, many of the formerly East Germans fell into various economic traps, making economic integration difficult for the state.

Socially, many of the formerly East Germans were regarded negatively in the western parts of the newly unified Germany. When the state reunified and East Germans were able to move freely within Germany, a sense of a lack of ‘cultural fluency’ and awkwardness began to mark many East Germans as ‘Ossis’ (of the East).\(^{18}\) Some examples of this are described with regards to initial everyday interactions Eastern and Western Germans, where the difference was described as: “Whereas West Germans could refer to certain products by their brand names…East Germans would describe their function”\(^{19}\). In a negative light, the former East Germans were often “projected as ignorant and foolish by western German discourses for being seduced by the fancy packaging of western goods”\(^{20}\). The resulting differences and mistrust between the East and West Germans resulted in an outcome of neither group feeling greatly connected to each other. As one German author writing at the time described it, “It will take us longer to tear down the Wall in our heads than any wrecking company will need for the Wall we can see”.\(^{21}\) It is into the midst of this economic and social adjustment that the trend known as ‘Ostalgie’, the nostalgia for things familiar from the former East Germany, begins to take shape.


\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Berdahl. Where the World Ended. 1999

\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.

For the most part since the mid to late 1990s, Ostalgie has taken to being more of a popular fashion and consumer trend, rather than a direct political desire to re-create the state apparatus of the German Democratic Republic. Ironically, this trend had its foundation in consumer capitalism rather than in socialism. The main feature of the Ostalgie has been the revival of iconic East German mementos, such as brands & products (Ostprodukte), but also in more recent developments such as themed events and themed venues. The majority of these Ostprodukte are food and very simple luxury items such as coffee, cigarettes, cola, and alcohol, of which the majority of these brands were revived at the end of the 1990s. Other examples include the fading symbols of East Germany, such as the hat-wearing traffic light figure known as the Ampelmännchen, and the nationally produced car, the Trabant. In this sense, this nostalgia is less so for the life that many people once had within East Germany, and more so is a ‘modernist nostalgia’ or a "longing for the fantasies and desires that were once possible in that past".\(^{22}\) In the case of many of these brands and products, they had previously disappeared during the re-unification as a result of the nationalisation and closing of these businesses.

Strangely enough, and despite the original state-owned nature of these brands and symbols, their revival can also be put down to the nature of the new market-economy of Germany, not just to the nostalgic desires of former East Germans. For example, the campaign in Berlin that was responsible for the survival of the Ampelmännchen at many of the traffic stops in East Berlin consisted of mostly citizens of West Berlin, who use the icon as the basis of their Ostalgie product line\(^ {23}\). This shows that though the Ostalgie trend is targeted mainly at former East Germans, it is a trend that ultimately encompasses both Germanies. In addition, Ostalgie served to change the concept of what is ‘écht’ (real), and ‘ersatz’ (substitute) for East Germans. During the existence of East Germany, the term ‘écht’ was used to describe the products of West Germany, which were considered by the East Germans to be the ‘real’ product\(^ {24}\). However, shortly after reunification, the definitions of ‘écht’ and ‘ersatz’ began to change as a result of the introduction of “unscrupulous salespersons, scams, and the planned obsolescence of glitzy products” from West Germany\(^ {25}\).

\(^{22}\) Bach. ‘The Taste Remains’. 547
\(^{24}\) Bach. ‘The Taste Remains’. 550
\(^{25}\) Ibid.
In a broader narrative, working with this idea of a modernist nostalgia, the idea of Ostalgie, rather than re-creating the world of East Germany, creates a romanticized version of the life in East Germany. It serves as a response to the dramatic situation faced by many of the formerly East Germans after the reunification in the 1990s, with many seeking the familiarity of what once was, and pacifying and changing perceptions of some of the palatable aspects of East Germany. In the popularisation of these products, they have taken on a new meaning when used the second time around in a consumer capitalist society, becoming stripped of their original context of an economy of scarcity or an oppressive regime, recalling a fictitious East Germany. Examples of this include events that take place in the former East Germany called ‘Ostalgie parties’. These parties are themed with a nostalgic interpretation of the former East Germany, with many dressing in clothes reminiscent of the GDR such as old soldier uniforms, featuring of East German products, and in the case of one ‘Ostalgie Party’ a look-alike of Erich Honecker. The forty-year rule of the SED, the surveillance by the Stasi, the imprisonment of anyone guilty of dissent or attempting to leave the country, and economic stagnation that marked the darker side of East Germany, are put aside for this new romanticized look on life in East Germany.

The Implications of Ostalgie in a Contemporary Germany:

So what does this trend of Ostalgie mean in the broader context of German politics and society post-Cold war? In one respect, the trend of Ostalgie represents the flaws and shortcomings the new unified German government has had in socially integrating the former East Germany into a unified German society. As had been discussed earlier in the paper, when the country unified in 1990 and many Germans travelled across the IGB for the first time, the initial social differences and mentalities were shown to be much greater than had been initially anticipated. In the years post-unification, the East and West Germans began to think of each other as almost different peoples, with different social behaviours. Some West Germans thought of the East Germans as being “lazy and ungrateful,” describing them by the stereotype of “pale faces, oily hair, poor dental work, washed out-formless jeans, grey shoes, and acrylic shopping bags.” Some East Germans thought of the West

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28 Katharina Gerstenberger and Jana E. Braziel. After the Berlin Wall. 85
29 Berdahl. Where the World Ended. 1999
Germans as being “miserly, arrogant, and self-assured. They always ‘think they know better’”\(^{30}\). They often felt that they were treated as second-class citizens under the system. As one politician described the situation, “*We might be the first country which has, by unifying, created two peoples*”\(^{31}\). This shortcoming in integration has served to create a certain amount of dissatisfaction among former East Germans in German society, and has resulted in many of former East Germans looking back with a fanaticized and romanticized view of East German life.

Conversely, the trend of Ostalgie represents the flaws in the economic integration of East Germany into a reunified Germany. Despite the nearly twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the IGB, the boundaries of East and West Germany still remain in terms of wage and labour gap. In 2006, nearly seventeen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the average male worker in the former East Germany only earned roughly 69% of what a West German male would earn, with women only earning about 19%\(^{32}\). According to an article published by the German news agency Deutsche Welle in 2014, the wage gap between East and West still strongly exists nearly eight years later, with 26.5% of Eastern German workers being paid less than minimum wage ($8.50/hour), compared to the 14.6% Western German workers\(^{33}\). As a result of the great economic differences that exist between East and West, many former East Germans have taken to looking back towards this idealised East Germany, as a time before the integration of the state and as a sort of ‘golden era’.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the development of the East German identity, and later the ‘Ostalgie’ have been able to make a resurgence in the last decade. This has emerged as a result of the indoctrination on the part of the East German government, the economic divides and prejudice of the East German identity, and the novelty of East German culture as a result of the passing of time. For nearly forty years the East German government was able to control most of the media inside the country, particularly after the construction of the Berlin Wall and IGB. Through the control and management of the youth and family, they were able to

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\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) Katharina Gerstenberger and Jana E. Braziel. *After the Berlin Wall*. B6


establish a separate East German mindset, separate from that of West Germany. In the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the reunification of Germany, the East German identity persisted among many former East Germans. This came as a result of the poorer economic conditions, such as high unemployment-rates and low wages, and as a result of the prejudice that existed among many West Germans towards those from the former East Germany. The resulting novelty and romanticized memories that came from many of the brands and symbols from East Germany resulted in the rise of the trend of ‘Ostalgie’ in much of the former East Germany, though the trend is not directly political. The implications of the rise of ‘Ostalgie’ and the resurgence of the East German identity for contemporary and future Germany are that they have shown that there have still been many shortcomings in the integration of East Germany into a unified German state. Though the physical walls came down nearly two decades ago, high unemployment, an aging population, low wages, and the remaining negative opinions of those from the former East Germany demonstrate that complete integration still remains unfinished.
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