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## Eastern Germany in Search of Itself

E. WAYNE MERRY

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of Germany’s formal reunification. Last year, the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall produced considerable nostalgia and good feeling about 1989, a truly extraordinary year in European history. These anniversaries also have served as reminders, however, that the Berlin Wall’s difficult legacy endures. This is especially true in eastern Germany—which, even after a generation of “transition,” remains a society apart.

Eastern Germany for two decades has received vast infusions of money from western Germany, and western institutions have been deeply involved in the development of the east. Nonetheless, the political culture of what for 40 years was the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany) is still quite distinct from that of western Germany and the rest of post-cold war Europe.

In many ways, eastern Germany remains alienated from the processes of modernity and integration that define contemporary Europe. For example, opinion studies show greater hostility toward the United States in eastern Germany than anywhere else in Europe (Turkey excepted).

These attitudes are unlikely to change dramatically any time soon. Consider the challenges facing German Chancellor Angela Merkel. To the outside world, Merkel is the great personal success story of eastern Germany. Raised in the countryside north of Berlin, she advanced quickly from obscurity to the top of the western- and male-dominated German political system. Merkel in many respects represents the enormous human potential of the old GDR.

Yet her very success is often held against her in the east. The chancellor is accused of abandoning

her roots (not true) and of embracing uncritically western institutions and mores (true). Merkel in this sense is similar to Barack Obama, who has occasionally been characterized in the African-American community as “not black enough.” When it comes to disgruntled Osis (easterners), she is in a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don’t situation.

Like previous German chancellors initially identified with their home regions, Merkel has assumed an all-German demeanor. Given the country’s current economic difficulties, the need to restore the export-driven economy—which is based largely in the west—has taken priority over the long-term development problems of the east. In addition, Merkel’s new coalition partners, the Free Democrats, have relatively little strength in the east and maintain an atlanticist and pan-European orientation.

Thus, even in a capital city located in the east, the politics of Merkel’s second term is largely driven by the economic fears of the populace in the west, leaving the Osis’ grievances to fester.

### IDENTITY CRISIS

The roots of the east’s continuing alienation lie in the enforced, prolonged isolation that its society endured during most of the cold war. That experience left the population with only a vestigial sense of collective identity. It produced a society ill prepared to address the demands of a modern, Western political culture. Indeed, eastern Germany has been a society adrift since it was divided from the west after the Second World War.

Why is this issue of the east’s political culture worth examining now? First, the conventional wisdom about eastern Germany has been wrong in the past and may be wrong again. Two decades ago the world was astonished when socialist Europe’s most radical changes occurred in the country that most analysts believed would be the

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*E. Wayne Merry, a former US State Department and Pentagon official, is a senior associate at the American Foreign Policy Council.*

very last in the Soviet bloc to change. Also confounding expectations, the transformation came not from the top, as happened in the Soviet Union, but rather emerged from the streets in a true outpouring of “people power.”

Even more to the point, the consequences of “otherness” in eastern Germany are not trivial. In fact, this otherness is the underlying cause of the fragmentation that the German political party system is currently experiencing. Politics in western Germany has lost the cohesion it displayed during the cold war years, but it is the east’s alienated political culture that has weakened the political center at the national level.

In particular, the Left Party would not be able to distort electoral affairs as it has done if it had not been based on the Party of Democratic Socialism (the successor to the GDR’s Socialist Unity Party). The Left Party draws almost four times as much support in the east as it does in the west, and all of its constituency seats in the Bundestag were won in the east. Voting patterns in the western and eastern parts of the country, and even in the restored capital city of Berlin, reveal electorates with strikingly divergent notions of social justice, the proper role of the state, the morality of a market economy, and the legitimacy of a democratic political system.

Former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt has characterized his eastern cousins as consumed by whining. To be sure, a culture of victimization exists, flowing from the largely unfulfilled (and unrealistic) expectations that accompanied unification. However, the underlying problem in the east is its weak social and political identity, which comes from long-term cultural isolation.

The GDR, beginning at its founding in 1949, was isolated both physically and psychologically, and remained so for almost two generations. Although diplomatic relations with Western countries were opened in the mid-1970s, the political claustrophobia remained—and was reinforced by official Western reluctance to engage a country that it often viewed in stereotypes appropriate to a bad spy novel.

For example, according to the view of the GDR that prevailed in Washington almost to the end, East Germany was “the Zone”—a place more Soviet than the Soviet Union itself, and Germanic

only in negative ways. Washington perceived the GDR either through West German official perspectives, which were often ill informed and condescending, or as an obedient junior partner of the Soviet empire. Rarely was East Germany seen as a society in its own right.

US officials, when it came to Poland or Hungary, routinely distinguished regime from populace, yet they conflated the political system of the GDR with the country’s inhabitants. Few in Washington could credit East Germany with the sort of underlying social dynamism that over a matter of weeks in late 1989 would alter the map of Europe. US officials were joined in this perspective by their counterparts in London, Paris, and even Bonn.

### THE VIEW FROM THE MIDDLE

A contrasting and more nuanced view came from the small but active US embassy in East Berlin. I was fortunate to be, in the 1970s, among the first American diplomats to serve in the GDR. There I discovered a fascinating and surprisingly attractive society in which acquaintance often turned into deep friendship. The GDR was a remarkably open, easy place for an American diplomat to explore, and I returned often in later years.

In conversations with people from all walks of life, I found that issues of identity—“Who and what are we, anyway?”—were raised regularly. To begin with, most people in the GDR had difficulty with the notion that they were “eastern.” In their view, they were Middle Germany (*Mitteldeutschland*). Eastern Germany lay in the lost territories of Prussia and Silesia, beyond the Oder and Neisse Rivers.

Most German refugees from what became post-war Poland had settled in West Germany, yet these former German territories, due to their proximity and bitter history, tugged on the imaginations of people in the GDR, much as a lost limb can still be felt by an amputee. While few in the GDR were revanchist (except, perhaps, in private), it seemed unreal to East Germans that these historic German locales could lie beyond a recently drawn frontier.

People in the GDR considered themselves the inheritors of the culture and traditions of *Mitteldeutschland*, and reveled in such resonant historical place names as Wittenberg, the Wartburg castle, and Weimar; in the great art collections of

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Dresden; and in the musical and publishing institutions of Leipzig. In popular perception, Luther and Bach often seemed more present than did the gray, predictable personalities of the Politburo. (It should be noted, however, that this heritage was almost entirely continental, associated with *Mittleuropa*. The GDR remained divorced from the maritime, francophile, and atlanticist orientations that did so much to make West Germany an open and cosmopolitan society.)

East Germans not only were separated from the West by the inner-German border and the Berlin Wall; they were also largely isolated from their socialist neighbors. Travel opportunities within the Warsaw Pact countries were quite limited and often controlled. There was a facade of organized youth exchanges, but in fact young people from the GDR often saw less of the Black Sea coast or the glories of Prague and Budapest than did their western cousins.

In addition, East Germans traveling in the bloc often experienced both hostility on account of their Germanness (memories of the war were still fresh) and condescension because they lacked West German hard currency. The “fraternal” relations so often proclaimed among socialist countries did not result in warm welcomes for East Germans. Thus, people in the GDR lived—and expected to spend their lives—within a physical domain roughly the size of Ohio.

That modest space nonetheless contained sharply contrasting local and regional identities—which never quite melded. Germany is famous for its many regional dialects and cultures, which often remain at arm’s length from one another. This was particularly true in the GDR, in part because the zone that the Soviets occupied after the war comprised territories with little previous unity. Saxony in the south is a justifiably proud region, though one with deep resentment of the Prussia that once centered on Berlin. Mecklenburg in the north has long been economically backward due to its poor soil, but it has a fierce sense of Baltic identity. (Many I encountered in that region quoted with actual pride Bismarck’s quip that, when the world came to an end, he would go to Mecklenburg because everything happens there a hundred years late.)

East Berlin stood apart from the hinterlands, and by the 1980s was bitterly resented in the provinces as a costly showcase for the GDR’s achievements. In the early postwar years, however, the GDR leadership had been dominated by Saxons

who gave priority for reconstruction resources to Dresden, Leipzig, and Chemnitz—at the expense of East Berlin, which remained a war-ravaged eyesore until the 1970s.

This regional discrimination led Berliners to refer to the GDR as “Saxony’s revenge on Prussia.” Dresden residents in turn resented that their city had not been chosen as the capital, and also resented the greater prominence given in GDR historiography to Frederick the Great over their own beloved August the Strong. The distinctness of the Saxon accent—as well as the GDR practice of manning the Berlin Wall with Saxons, because they came from a region without access to western television broadcasts—meant that casual encounters in a train or café between Berliners and Saxons could sometimes result in untoward remarks or worse.

## LUTHER OVER HONECKER

In schools and through propaganda, the regime promulgated a “GDR nationality” and officially denied that anyone, anywhere, was simply German anymore. The prescribed national character of the GDR was an amalgam of socialism, loyalty to a Soviet-led economic and military bloc (in which the GDR’s armed forces were among the best), and a constant nurturing of traditions with roots on GDR territory—Luther and Bach, Goethe and Schiller—but with politically incorrect precedents avoided. For example, the Peasants’ War of the sixteenth century was praised as proto-socialist, while Friedrich Nietzsche was ignored—although he was born on and buried in what would become GDR soil.

Obviously, GDR nationality gained no traction in the wider world. There, “German” meant West German while someone from the GDR was, willingly or not, classified as East German. (This was as true in the socialist states as it was in the West.)

Indeed, GDR nationality was never really accepted even at home. The construction was inherently clumsy—and the doctrine was on occasion punctured by official actions. For example, when a GDR cosmonaut joined a Soviet space mission, the headline in the official party newspaper *Neues Deutschland* proclaimed, “The First German in Space: a Citizen of the GDR!” This moment of vanity deflated years of school lessons in which broader German identity had been denied. The effect of official doctrine on nationality was that East Germans, unlike Poles, Hungarians, or Romanians, had no nation that they could defini-

tively call their own. Their national sense of self was both divided and artificial.

In the absence of a viable national identity, people's self-perceptions in this intensely inward-looking society often reverted to the regional and local. What linked these provincial identities, in a country officially made socialist and new, was a determined adherence to traditional German ways of doing things. The GDR was often described by foreign visitors as a veritable museum of old-fashioned German social phenomena.

In effect, people who could not travel abroad chose to travel backwards out of nostalgia for the imagined Germany of their grandparents. Social courtesies that eroded in the more hectic west endured in the unhurried east. Attitudes could be strikingly reactionary. For example, a young man in coastal Rostock told me quite heatedly how much he resented the authorities in East Berlin for imposing on his community what he considered alien cultural artifacts—blue jeans and jazz. He wanted dress and music to remain resolutely Baltic.

Reflective East Germans spoke of “inner emigration,” the rejection of the official party and state line through an absorption in family, friends, and self. Although personal trust was extended only with great caution

because of the omnipresence of the security police, the Stasi, this trust once given became the basis for intense interpersonal ties. The only viable organ of civil society in postwar eastern Germany was the church, which was remarkably active and independent in a society with no other alternatives to the party-state monopoly.

Today, older eastern Germans remember GDR society as one more concerned with human relationships, and speak of it fondly. They are correct in their characterization, though they do not always acknowledge the context. In any case, such norms of social behavior—while appropriate in a GDR that seemed likely to endure indefinitely—were poor preparation for the demands of post-cold war life or for integration into broader German and European society.

## CHANGING THE WALLPAPER

In the state's final years, East Germans juxtaposed two conflicting views of their country—the GDR as the eastern wing of the German nation and

as the western salient of the socialist bloc. Both of these roles fostered people's increasing dissatisfaction with their lot. If they were German, why should they not enjoy more of what their western cousins could enjoy, including international travel? And if theirs was the westernmost and by far the most advanced economy in the socialist bloc, why should it trade largely within the ruble zone? These dissatisfactions were amplified by access to western German television, plus increasing annoyance with the smug complacency of the GDR's aging leaders—leaders who were manifestly out of touch with the new thinking in Moscow under Mikhail Gorbachev.

A turning point was the Socialist Unity Party congress in mid-1986, at which it was made clear there would be no *glasnost* in the GDR. A snide remark by Politburo member Kurt Hager—“You don't change your wallpaper just because your neighbor does”—confirmed to the populace that the rigidities of their system were not imposed from Moscow, but chosen in East Berlin. As East Germans watched long-overdue change taking place in Poland, Hungary, and even the Soviet Union, they measured their own grim prospects.

Two policies adopted by the leadership in the mid-1980s compounded the crisis. First, Erich Honecker (who led the GDR from 1971 until 1989) approved a significant easing of individual travel to the West, hoping that one-time visits would assuage people's hunger for travel and dampen their fascination with the forbidden fruit beyond the Berlin Wall. The opposite occurred. Applications for emigration soared, both among those who had traveled and those who had not. The pressure to find ways out—through Hungary, or by seeking refuge in West German embassies in Prague or Warsaw—added to the surge of interest in leaving, especially among young families.

Second, the East German economy was pushed toward achieving unrealistic levels of output, leading to a rapid deterioration of the capital stock and significant worsening of the country's already dreadful pollution of air, water, and soil. Some forests and even inhabited areas experienced ecocide, and many parents feared to raise their children in such a poisonous environment.

In the fall of 1989 the pressure cooker exploded. But even as it did, the vast crowds of protest-

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ers in Leipzig, Berlin, and other cities maintained extraordinary self-control. They were all too aware of the Tiananmen Square massacre, which had occurred only weeks before and which had been reported with conspicuous approval in *Neues Deutschland*. No socialist society, not even Poland, achieved so dramatic a transformation in such an atmosphere of self-restraint and in the absence of violence. To be sure, some members of the leadership (including Honecker) were prepared to use force, but wiser figures intervened to prevent bloodshed.

The peacefulness with which party and state power were overturned in the GDR was even more impressive than the overturning itself, and this set the stage for the Velvet Revolution in Prague just days later. Thus East Germany, the country in the socialist bloc that many supposed to be the most rigid, had in fact proved the bellwether in a transformation that was swift, decisive, and nonviolent.

## WELCOME TO THE FUTURE

The collapse of the Berlin Wall and of the system behind it exposed realities previously understood by very few East Germans. Above all, their vaunted economy was largely a sham. Always brittle and reliant on antiquated infrastructure, the economy was approaching systemic failure in the mid-1980s. Indeed, the collapse of the GDR was as much an economic as a social or political phenomenon.

East German technology was often the best in the socialist bloc, but it was entirely dependent on Soviet energy and raw materials provided at artificial prices, and in any case was far less competitive than people imagined. Many GDR firms, once they were exposed to Western standards and to real-world prices, faced collapse in their markets, production systems, and ability to provide employment.

As the fantasy of economic and technical prowess died, another illusion ran aground on reality: that East Germany could stand by itself rather than be absorbed into West Germany. Many of the East Germans who most supported openness and reform also opposed unification, hoping to create a viable, separate German state based on different social norms—in essence a democratic but socialist Germany.

The implosion of the economy at the end of the 1980s led to the decision in Bonn to incorporate the east directly into the Federal Republic. This violated at least the spirit of the 1949 German

Basic Law, which specified that reunification should take place via a constitutional assembly representing both German states. Inevitably, therefore, reunification on October 3, 1990, felt to many in the east more like *anschluss*.

Making things worse, the West German takeover of the former GDR was marred by widespread and fundamental ignorance (most West Germans had never set foot there); a pervasive condescension, including a refusal to acknowledge the real achievements of the east; and more than a little exploitation and personal empire building. A bitter witticism from the early 1990s had it that East Germany's tragedy was to be occupied twice, but never by the Americans.

The enduring ill will that Ossis feel against their *Wessi* (westerner) overlords is rightly equated with the legacy of Reconstruction in the American South. Meanwhile, western Germans feel with some justification that their considerable generosity is not appreciated by their eastern cousins, who seem never able (or willing) to fend for themselves.

In many respects, unification was too easy for the Ossis. Too much was given to them without either consultation or obligation. For example, they never had to qualify for membership in the European Union, as their post-socialist neighbors did; their membership in the EU came automatically with reunification. In consequence, the EU is often seen in the east as just another pot of Western money rather than a process involving shared sovereignty and the forging of a broader European identity.

Although eastern Germans have experienced many difficulties in adjusting to their new reality, the society as a whole has never enjoyed the sense of shared achievement common among Poles, Czechs, and others. The new eastern Germany never got to stand up on its own feet. Because it depended so entirely on Soviet and then West German subsidies, it never could have done so.

## JOBLESS AND CHILDLESS?

The government in Bonn, in forcing the pace of unification, made two economic mistakes that carried long-term consequences: exchanging east marks for west marks at a wildly unrealistic rate; and failing quickly to settle property claims in the east so as to attract commercial investment (much of which went to other countries formerly in the socialist bloc where the status of property was more settled).

These errors in combination guaranteed that the short-term economic bubble that unification produced—which was driven by massive construction and renovation of infrastructure, plus a boom in personal consumption—would be followed by an extended downturn. Eastern Germany today has some of the finest public infrastructure in Europe, but productive enterprise remains inadequate and is in many cases sustained only with the continuance of “solidarity” funds from the west, which are scheduled to expire in 2019.

Although some parts of Saxony and Thuringia are doing fairly well economically, most of the east is still marked by lack of opportunity, by artificial employment schemes, and by the permanent loss of vibrant young people. The hideous air and water pollution that blighted the GDR is largely a thing of the past, but industrial plants in many cases now employ one-tenth of their former (admittedly excessive) workforce. Unemployment in the east remains at almost twice the western level, and in some regions is significantly worse—even without accounting for large-scale early retirements and out-migration.

Economic output per capita in the east has risen from 43 percent of the west’s level in 1991 to 71 percent today—but improvement has leveled off. All in all, efforts to catch up with the west have stagnated, and the two regions may even be diverging. Living standards are still artificially maintained by high welfare transfers, but there is little prospect for the kind of investment that could result in dramatic increases in productivity.

Worse than the economics are the demographics. Over the past two decades, population in eastern Germany has declined by 12 percent, with the losses especially heavy among talented youth. Many cities and towns have lost one-third of their former inhabitants to a combination of migration and suburbanization. A collapse of the birth rate in the early 1990s is now producing a diminished generation of potential new parents. On the other hand, life expectancy in eastern Germany, which was eight years behind the west’s when the Berlin Wall fell, has now achieved parity (and indeed, exceeds US life expectancy by one year).

The shock of the reunification transition was hardest, predictably, for middle-aged people.

In political terms, many responded by voting almost blindly against the new order. This gave the old ruling party a new lease on life as the Party of Democratic Socialism. Former citizens of the GDR had brought little sense of national identity to the unification process, and they brought even less understanding of competitive politics in a modern European parliamentary system. Overnight they had become citizens and voters in the German Federal Republic, and they lacked understanding of institutions and issues and a commitment to broad, all-German needs and obligations. Eastern Germans today are still in many cases single-issue voters, with a frame of reference in the imagined past instead of the European present.

### THE ANTI-LIBERAL MINDSET

Unfortunately, political attitudes and voting patterns such as these have proved remarkably stable across generations. Even among younger people with little or no personal memory of the GDR, a pervasive victimization mentality and a culture of envy perpetuate a negative, anti-liberal mindset.

Most ominous are the xenophobic and antidemocratic tendencies among some chronically unemployed and alienated younger males—skinheads. This

problem is reinforced by the legacy of “GDR nationality,” which assigned the opprobrium of the Nazi period to the west and claimed that GDR citizens bore neither responsibility for nor moral scars from that period. (The GDR asserted that the historical burden of the Third Reich fell not on the “first workers’ and peasants’ state on German soil,” but entirely on the Federal Republic.)

Many young people in the east accepted this convenient doctrine. To illustrate, in 1988 a German-language tour guide in Warsaw told me of the West and East German student groups she escorted. Asked if they wanted to visit the site of the Warsaw ghetto, the young West Germans always affirmed their need to see such places, but their eastern cousins invariably refused, saying “That has nothing to do with us.”

When young Ossis chanted “We are one people” after the fall of the Berlin Wall, they did not anticipate that a common German identity would also require acceptance of the burden of recent German history. Such acceptance had required decades of

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effort in West Germany, but this responsibility was thrust onto East Germans almost overnight—and in direct contradiction with what they had always been taught. Some rejected the new burden and lapsed into the kind of extreme politics that West Germany had managed largely to extirpate. Thus, the former socialist state is now the center of active German fascism.

To be fair, it was not just East German expectations that were unrealistic; so too were expectations in West Germany and beyond. Many outsiders believed unification would be rapid and fairly painless, even though the process required adjustment to political and social standards that in West Germany had evolved over decades and with considerable outside tutelage. In reality, the experience of life in East Germany made true unification the work of generations. And the process has required adjustment on both sides.

When reunification came in 1990, the American embassy in Bonn confidently predicted that the new Germany would be the same as the old, only larger. The soon-to-be-closed embassy in East Berlin was wiser. It said that not just the German Democratic Republic, but also the German Federal Republic as we had known it, were coming to an end. Indeed, the current fragmentation of Germany's national politics results from the country's center of gravity shifting toward the east. This is true not only in geographic terms but also in terms of social and political mentality. Now some commentators see the west adopting attitudes from the east.

## THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Fortunately, eastern Germany is today irrevocably integrated into Germany's democracy and market economy, as well as into the web of international obligations and institutions by which Germany and Europe guarantee peace with each other. Unfortunately, eastern Germans think they are worse off than they actually are.

Eastern Germans see themselves as always having gotten the short end of the stick—before, during, and after the cold war—and this fuels resentment against modernity and globalization, things so sharply at odds with their prior experience. This dislike of the new and the global explains their special hostility toward the United States, for America is the cynosure of the moder-

nity that they did not choose or make but that nevertheless pervades their lives.

Given my personal experience of eastern Germany over three decades, I am more optimistic about the region's prospects than the above catalog might suggest. Realistically, for the foreseeable future, eastern Germany will retain and even treasure its distinctness from western German society. The people there actually prefer to be different from their western cousins. But this is not, in all ways, such a bad thing. Lifestyles in the east may be less stressful than in the west, and may place greater emphasis on the human dimensions of people's lives. Several other European regions—Scotland, the Basque country, and Sicily, for example—remain distinct or even alienated from the main culture, and in some cases lag behind economically.

Most young people in eastern Germany are certainly not skinheads. They are being shaped by the new as much as the old. They still display some regional prejudices, but so do their counterparts in western Germany. They know that opportunities for education and employment are better in the west, and that is where many still go, though some will return in time.

Many of the things that made the GDR much worse than today's eastern Germany are more or less unknown to young people because these things no longer exist: omnipresent militarization, with 22 Soviet and 6 GDR army divisions stationed on East German soil; the pervasive grit and stink of an economy fueled by brown coal; the endemic suspicion inherent in a true police state; and the mental claustrophobia of a society that for decades could not achieve acceptance from neighbors west or east.

Eastern Germany today is like a grumpy old man nattering on about the good old days, forgetting how bad they actually were. A famous Ossi refrain is: "We dreamed of paradise but woke up in North Rhine-Westphalia." But if the dream was based on envy, it was false to begin with. What Osis must do is find satisfaction with their own identities as Germans and as Europeans. This must be based on acceptance of a post-cold war fate that is, paradoxically, the envy of many of their neighbors. These are the good old days in Mitteldeutschland—for those who will recognize them. ■