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## New Research on East Germany

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## NEW RESEARCH ON EAST GERMANY: AN INTRODUCTION

MARC SILBERMAN

Over a quarter century has elapsed since the end of the Cold War and the unification of Germany, enough time for writers, artists, scholars, and the general public to have both remembered their pre-1990 experience and witnessed a series of controversies in the retelling or rewriting of that past. Now we are in the process of a generational shift, not only in the sense of a young adult generation with few of their own memories of divided Germany but also of a younger generation of scholars whose knowledge about the two Germanys has been mediated by their older mentors. I am one of those older mentors and suspect that the next-generation scholars are developing new approaches, sources, and methodologies for research on the German past and present. I have repeatedly considered and reconsidered my own scholarly trajectory vis-à-vis East Germany both before and after unification.<sup>1</sup> But I am convinced that our younger colleagues, who—for reasons of their own—are drawn to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and what since unification is known as eastern Germany as an object of interest and even fascination, have important things to communicate.

As co-chair with Janet Ward (University of Oklahoma) of the Interdisciplinary Committee of the German Studies Association (GSA), I was in a position to help develop focused networks of scholars within the organization. In 2014 I took advantage of the position to establish a GSA Network on German Socialisms that would explore “GDR studies”—GDR-specific memory studies, close readings of “texts” from the GDR including literature, cinema, art, music—and the broader context of socialist traditions and resistances in Germany from its 19th-century roots to its 20th-century thinkers such as the left libertarian Rosa Luxemburg or the Frankfurt School intellectuals. The idea was to create not only in-

terdisciplinary collaborations but also synergies that go beyond a single state or geopolitical focus. The three coordinators—art historian April Eisman (Iowa State University), literary scholar Benjamin Robinson (Indiana University), and historian Eli Rubin (Michigan State University), all members of that younger generation and all represented in this issue with contributions—went to work immediately and developed a series of linked panels for each annual fall GSA conference since then. I was impressed with the breadth of participation as I monitored these successful panels and decided to organize a small workshop at my home institution, the University of Wisconsin in Madison, to provide a forum for the next generation of GDR scholars, specifically those not in Germany, to discuss their experiences and their own new research from the outsider position of being once-removed.<sup>2</sup> This yielded the idea for the current issue of *Imaginations*.

Without stealing thunder from the contributions featured here, let me briefly summarize some of the trends that I introduced as a point of departure for the workshop and others that emerged in the course of our intense discussion and the subsequent process of revising the essays for publication. First, East Germany has become a historical entity, and GDR studies has acquired a history of its own, one that has bifurcated into German and non-German (especially Anglophone) scholars, with somewhat different objects of interest and critical approaches, mediated not only by distance but also by our respective scholarly cultures.<sup>3</sup> Let me detour slightly into my own history as a scholar of GDR culture. My first real encounter with East Germany was in summer 1967 when I arrived as a 19-year-old undergraduate student for a year's study at the Free University in West Berlin. East Germany for me was a vague place behind the

Wall, a tantalizing but risky attraction concealed by the Iron Curtain. In retrospect I recall that my studies in German up until this point in the mid-1960s had never introduced literature from East Germany or even mentioned much more than the fact of Germany's postwar division. Indeed, I'm not sure I had read anything in German that had been written after 1933 except texts by those Germans who had been exiled during the Third Reich, something I soon discovered I had in common with fellow students at the Free University. Moreover, until the early 1970s West German and American literary scholars tended to see GDR literature exclusively as political propaganda produced by state scribes.

This began to change for a number of reasons, and in the course of the 1970s attention turned increasingly toward literary production in East Germany owing to lack of access to other kinds of information or encounters with the "other Germany." Literature was regarded as an accessible document, a reflection of or window on social reality. One reason for the shift was that postwar literature more generally became an object of interest with the passage of time. If my own education in the 1960s had focused exclusively on pre-1933 developments, by the 1970s both scholarship and the teaching of contemporary West German literature was on the agenda, and the interest in contemporary West German literature opened the door for a comparative glance at postwar developments in the GDR as well. Moreover, the New Left culture initiated by the student movements in West Berlin,

Paris, Milan, Berkeley, and New York provided the seed for alternative approaches to cultural life, including that of East Germany. Finally, in 1972 the politics of détente or Ostpolitik led to the mutual recognition of East and West Germany as sovereign states, followed by the international community of Western countries opening diplomatic relations with the GDR. This recognition, together with the regime change in East Germany in 1971, sparked considerable interest in the West about GDR culture and politics in general, even among political scientists and sociologists. This interest in fact grew and continued more or less unbroken through the collapse of the East German regime in 1989 with West German and Anglophone scholars sharing similar perspectives in fairly regular give-and-take.<sup>4</sup>

The dissolution of the GDR in 1990 changed the dynamics of the discourse about this state and its culture and, in a curious sense, made the discourse more real(istic) as the process of figuring out *was bleibt* (what remains) sharpened our investigation of how it became what it was and why it failed. Furthermore, because the GDR as a state configuration no longer existed, social-science interest migrated into historical scholarship. Nothing illustrates better this dynamic process of narrativization than the consequences for German historiography and the politics of memory after the fall of the Wall. History and memory are distinct but related concepts, both based on narratives and subject to change as time passes and attention shifts. After decades of division

and Cold War competition, something like a German identity was on the agenda. German unification was suddenly postulated not only on the level of political affiliation but also as a shared identity: for the first time since the end of the Second World War being German emerged as a national mission. There were attempts to rewrite the literary history of both East and West Germany; political theories of modernization and totalitarian governance were reconsidered; a wave of *Ostalgie* (the sentiment of nostalgia for the loss of East Germany) and sometimes even *Westalgie* (the counter-sentiment for the loss of a distinct West Germany) washed over the cultural discourse; and perhaps most significantly the vanishing point of 20<sup>th</sup>-century German history began to shift from 1933 to 1989, with normalization and united Germany's integration into a larger European Union now the guarantee that *nie wieder Auschwitz* (never again Auschwitz) would endure. I have also worked on Holocaust memory in Germany, which has taught me first that how Germans remember their past is an object of deep scrutiny, and second that the process of remembering is more important than the product, with competing views about the past rarely yielding satisfying results. I suspect a similar vigor may emerge for research on Cold War Germany.

For GDR scholars, a second significant change in approach concerns access to information and people. First and foremost I am referring to archives. Although it has taken years to sort things out, the GDR was a bureaucratic state in the

German tradition, which means that written documents were produced in multiple copies, filed away, and saved for posterity. Beyond the issues of data protection, privacy, and of course the files of the secret police or Stasi, this has produced a mountain of documentation that gradually became accessible after 1990 and provided insight into the often contradictory processes of decision-making that characterized all cultural (not to say political) activity. As a result, the negotiations that had distinguished East German life in all domains become ever clearer: straining against the National Socialist past, against the capitalist other of the omnipresent West closed off by the reinforced border, and against an increasingly ineffective party-state. Indeed, we found in our workshop discussions that we often returned to the concept of *Eigensinn* (literally “obstinacy,” but referencing the exercise of soft power by the regime that sought the consent of its subjects, who were *eigensinnig* or insistent about their autonomy), a concept popularized by historian Alf Lüdtke (1991) but also one that we saw as uncritically framing every discussion about the GDR within the confines of power politics and accommodation.<sup>5</sup> The fetish of power in GDR historiography—especially that surfacing among colleagues in Germany, who tend to ignore non-German-language scholarship—clamors for a different conceptual space with its own temporality to grasp the reality of life experience between ideals and reality or between centre and margins.

The fall of the Wall and the dissolution of the intra-German border brought not only mobility in both directions but also the possibility of spontaneous face-to-face communication with East Germans; for scholars, this means access to potential informants and witnesses. With the end of the Cold War

and what we call the Ossi/Wessi-mentality and its ensuing identity competition, a new kind of privilege emerged for the non-German scholar. Suddenly we, as outsiders, were interrogators and conversational partners whom the East Germans often preferred precisely because we were not West Germans—possibly because we were seen as less prejudicial toward them, or perhaps because we had a different sense of fairness and respect. On the other hand, some of us also encountered more recently the opposite: members of the older East German generation who resist sharing their knowledge and insights possibly out of fear that they are being exploited because of their identity as GDR witnesses—in other words a circle-the-wagons defensiveness to protect the memory of “our GDR.”

Access to archives and to individual citizens of the GDR has produced to some degree the bifurcation of German and Anglophone scholarship mentioned above, a third insight that concerned us in the workshop. The essays gathered here share an interest in everyday life that emerges both from careful examination of primary source material and from encounters with those who experienced life in East Germany. Oral-history interviews, visual archives, or ethnographic excursions aim at retrieving the notion of autonomous agency from the claws of totalitarianism. While post-Wall historiography in Germany—including in the fields of literary, cultural, cinematic, and art history—has been dominated by a focus on totalitarian control, power differentials among elites, and dissidence, this new research by a group of outsiders registers a commitment to pursuing questions about the microstructures of accommodation, East-West exchanges, and quotidian behavior below the level of official media

and political claims. By examining the ambiguities and complexities of everyday life, these contributions enrich the concept of *Eigensinn* and explore instances of how people in the GDR—real, fictional, cinematic—engaged in everyday life through solidarity and indifference, participation and opposition. A shared goal among these contributors is to expose traces of this life experience: accumulations and remnants of the past, aesthetic structures of layering and re-inscription, and cultural practices that became habits. This endeavor also points to an issue that may characterize future work on the GDR, that is, the need to attend to variant temporalities that typified East German experience: the desire to rule over time, the need to escape from (present) time, the function of temporal nonsynchronicity (Ernst Bloch’s concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*). Less obvious but equally distinctive: we GDR researchers are also teachers outside of Germany, and conveying our ideas to students who have little or absolutely no knowledge of Germany as well as to colleagues from other fields who are not German studies specialists forces and invites us to develop a less provincial and more international approach to the material we study.

A final consideration, one that did not dominate our workshop discussions but that strikes me as a *sine qua non* for the direction of future research: globalization and migration have led to a shift in social structures and historical consciousness. Germany is now an in-migration nation, and hyphenated Germans can no longer be pressed into a once unquestioned national category. The plurality in the means of access to the GDR past are going to undermine any attempt to establish a master narrative of the Cold War and East and West Germany’s role therein. A national approach

to German unification that sees it as an exclusively German issue—which dominated the discourse of the 1990s and still to a large extent today—ignores the European and global practices of power politics, economics, and culture. There are obviously national differences in the reconstruction of the past, but we will be encountering increasingly parallel and overlapping accounts, which may bring about a paradigm change in the way we construct the postwar German narrative. GDR culture was not an island unto itself, and certainly since the end of the Second World War the idea of autonomous national cultures has been on the retreat. While the GDR may seem to be an exception, with its boundaries having materialized into fences and the concrete of the Berlin Wall, it too was subject to dialogue, exchange, and competition both internally and externally.

Shifting attention from the national suggests a counterstrategy to the epistemology that established and has sustained GDR scholarship since the 1970s. Tied to concepts of the nation, national culture, and national identity, discussions in both the East and the West have focused on defining the qualities and distinctiveness of East Germany, its difference being variously qualified as produced by postwar, socialist, and/or Cold War policies. While we cannot ignore the national dimension, I insist that national specificity is a dialectical reference point for the larger international or transnational context. The very founding of the GDR, for example, harks back to the Soviet Union and the Comintern, and tension between national ambitions and international commitments surfaced both in politics and culture. Moreover, the GDR always struggled with the issue of whether it was committed to a modern, internationalist form of socialism

or whether it was the true inheritor of a humanistic German tradition. Of course, this had a special resonance because of Germany's history of nationalism and racism as well as its status as one of the birthplaces of socialism. Thus, the perspective from the outside on the part of younger researchers such as those contributing to this issue looks at the West as well, transforming the GDR into a refraction lens or mirror for comparative East-West studies. This is how we need to reposition East Germany and to identify blind spots of past approaches that have failed to contextualize it beyond the boundaries and temporality of the GDR.

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### Notes

1 For details on my trajectory as a GDR scholar, see Silberman, "Too Near, Too Far."

2 The workshop "New Research on East Germany" took place on April 1, 2016, at the Pyle Conference Center on the University of Wisconsin campus in Madison. I wish to thank the Center for German and European Studies (and Director Pamela Potter), the Center for European Studies (and Director Nils Ringe), and the Department of German (and Chair Jolanda Vanderwal Taylor) for their financial support.

3 Andrew Port has characterized three phases of GDR historiography since unification in 1990: a first phase focused on the totalitarian institutions and structures of power, a second phase of social history beginning in the mid-1990s interested in various social groups, and a third phase of cultural history setting in after the turn of the millennium that has focused on subjective experiences of ordinary East Germans (Port, "The Banalities of East German Historiography" 1-2).

4 For an extended discussion of how this development proceeded in North America, see Silberman, "Readings and Misreadings?"

5 See Rubin's references to Lüdtke in this issue, especially his endnotes 5 and 7.