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BEYOND DOMINATION: SOCIALISM, EVERYDAY LIFE IN EAST GERMAN HOUSING SETTLEMENTS, AND NEW DIRECTIONS IN GDR HISTORIOGRAPHY

ELI RUBIN



Abstract | Communist societies in Eastern Europe have left behind massive prefabricated housing settlements within and outside cities as perhaps their most visible legacy, often assumed to be a negative legacy. Yet this assumption is a superficial judgment, one indicative of a larger trend in the history of Eastern Europe, especially that of East Germany, which only operates within a framework of power and state versus society. What happens when we examine everyday life in socialism without taking as our starting point a search for state power as the goal of the research? Removing this solipsistic framework, we see a different, more balanced picture, not one that necessarily whitewashes or ignores the presence of the state, but one that clearly tells the story of a kind of socialism that was experienced by ordinary people as a tight-knit community rather than a form of top-down control. Such an analysis points the way forward to a reassessment of Eastern European communist society.

Résumé | Beaucoup des grandes ensembles préfabriqués survivent dans les villes des sociétés communistes. Ils sont l'héritage le plus visible de communisme, lieux de mémoire d'un monde profané. Mais ce jugement est superficiel, et c'est partie d'une tendance plus grande dans l'histoire de l'Europe de l'Est, notamment de l'histoire de RDA. Cette tendance perçoit seulement le système de pouvoir. Je vois l'histoire quotidienne dans les ensembles. Cette perspective révèle une société qui a bon fonctionné et commence une réévaluation de la socio-histoire des pays communistes dans l'Europe de l'Est.

Title Image (Figure 1): Children in Marzahn. Courtesy Bezirksmuseum Marzahn-Hellersdorf, e.V.

If there is one particular type of urban space that is associated with Eastern European communism, it is the massive blocks of prefabricated housing, found both within older cities and on the outskirts of cities from East Berlin to Siberia. Prefabricated, mass-produced apartments, particularly those built in clusters or settlements, were not uniquely Eastern European or socialist. The technology of prefabrication came from the West, and western nations built them in postwar France, Britain, and West Germany, but because they were built to such a massive extent in the socialist Bloc, they were and remain among the most visible, immediate, and phenomenological links to the communist past. Nothing says “this was once a communist land” like seeing the rows of nearly identical housing blocks, sometimes symmetrical, sometimes folded inward as semi-closed polygons, separated by green spaces, rising along the outskirts of cities. From earlier settlements such as Halle-Neustadt in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) built in the 1950s and 1960s to later settlements such as Przymorze in Gdansk and Ujplata in Budapest built in the 1970s and 1980s, this architectural and urban form remains as a spatial and visual element of the communist past that cannot be erased from the phenomenological field of urban space. Long after the statues of Lenin and the giant hammers and sickles have been removed, the outdated and polluted factories either dismantled or completely modernized, and idiosyncratically “Eastern” signs and slogans replaced with western corporate advertising, these apartments remain.

To western visitors, the sight of these prefabricated blocks—called *Plattenbau* in German, *Panelaky* in Czech, and *Khrushchovyvka* in Russian—immediately conjures up neg-

ative associations, that is, when visitors from the West see them at all. Most western visitors in Prague, for example, never take the metro line out of the historic district to see the immense housing settlements at the end of the line in Stodulky, nor do visitors to Berlin venture beyond the central historic and trendy districts immediately east and north of the city centre; thus they do not see the massive settlements of Marzahn, Hohenschönhausen, and Lichtenberg. If anything, it is commonplace for westerners to assume that these housing settlements signify the failure of the communist regime; in this, their shared modernist heritage with the ill-fated housing projects of the 1940s to 1960s in the United States further taints them to western eyes. Indeed, many of these housing settlements have suffered after the fall of communism, becoming in some countries ghettos or bastions of right-wing extremism (see Sammartino; Urban, “Tower and Slab”). A symbol of failure might be what these spaces *look like* to westerners but, as always, there is a wide gap between the surface and the interior. What was life *really like* in these spaces?

For a long time, scholarship has ignored life within the *Plattenbau*. The central theorist of what has become known as the “spatial turn,” Henri Lefebvre, dismissed them as “undifferentiated space” (Lefebvre 54). Historians of Eastern Europe, and especially of the GDR, have largely ignored them except to suggest that they were artificial communities created by the state and the party (Palmowski 191). Much of the work done by urban and architectural historians has focused on the prestige or neo-historical projects that took place largely in city centres, such as East Berlin’s Palace of the Republic or Television Tower (Pugh; Urban, “Neohistor-

ical”). This is beginning to change, with a spate of studies on mass-produced housing in communist countries that attends to everyday life within these new apartment blocks.¹ However, much more needs to be done, especially considering that this form of life was so prevalent and defined everyday life in socialism in its final decades.

This essay is based on my attempt to research and write a history of everyday life in the largest East German *Plattenbausiedlung* (*Plattenbau* settlement): a vast, mass-produced district on the northeast edge of East Berlin known as Marzahn. This project borrowed from the idea of a Geertzian “thick description” by paying close attention to the habits, experiences, and relationships of ordinary people, and not necessarily leading political or cultural figures. It sought to understand everyday life as it was lived within the space defined by the mass-produced buildings—the *Plattenbauten*—that came to define East German and Eastern European socialist architecture. In attempting to construct such a thick description, this study employs a wide range of sources. I carried out interviews with former East Germans who lived in Marzahn, read published interviews and memoirs of former Marzahnners, often available only locally, and examined printed and archival sources. Originally, I was expecting to find evidence that the ruling SED (Socialist Unity Party) had been able to transform the consciousness of ordinary East Germans by transforming the spaces that defined their everyday lives. In so doing, I was following one of the dominant tropes of GDR historiography over the past two and half decades: I was looking for the traces of what many historians refer to as *Herrschaft*, loosely translated as “domination” or “soft power,” described below. Instead, what I found

was that in Marzahn everyday life was defined by a lived and experienced a kind of socialism that was not a form of domination or *Herrschaft*, and can perhaps be best described as a mostly self-organized socialism built around the local community that developed in these spaces—what one might call a “communitarian” socialism. In the spaces of Marzahn, people did not live under the yoke of the ruling party. Yet their community could only be described as a form of socialism, one that functioned well. In the case of this qualitative oral history project, I did not use questionnaires or surveys. I met Marzahners, spent time with them in their homes and their familiar spaces, talked with them, listened to them tell the story of their lives and their family histories, looked through their photo albums and documented their prized possessions, furniture, mementos, and read their letters and unpublished novels and poems. Lives are lived in spaces, and spaces intertwine with lives to create topographies of memory. Some of my informants were inclined to view the topographies of their lives in Marzahn through the rose-colored glasses of *Ostalgie* (a German neologism referring to nostalgia for the bygone days of East Germany). As described below, many of those who moved to Marzahn did so because they were privileged by the system—acquiring an apartment in Marzahn was in certain ways connected to belonging to important state or party institutions and organizations.

Yet even if we allow for some ideological bias in the respondents and archives, the narrative that emerged for me from listening to East Germans recount their lives on their own terms stood in stark contrast to the narrative that surrounds prefabricated, mass-produced communist housing blocs and, more broadly, the narrative of top-down power that

has defined the historiography and popular discourse on the GDR. Since the collapse of East Germany in 1989-90, often called the *Wende* (“turning point”), a focus on studying the power of the state and the ruling Communist party profoundly overshadowed and framed GDR historiography in Germany. Books, dissertations, articles, funded institutional research projects, publication series, museum exhibitions, conference papers, etc. abound with terms like *Macht* (“power”), *Diktatur* (“dictatorship”), and *Herrschaft*, as well as the related terms *Widerstand* (“resistance”) and *Opposition*.² Public pressure from well-organized and politically connected former East German dissidents ensured that topics such as the oppression by the secret police (Stasi) and other security organs, the Berlin Wall, and the failed uprising against the party and state on June 17, 1953 have been thoroughly researched and have dominated the historical literature on East Germany.³ As a result, numerous research institutes, archives, museums, and subsidized publications have appeared in Germany, all dedicated to the *Aufarbeitung* (the “working-through”) of the legacy of the GDR, many of which are supported with state funds or other political sources of capital. Many of these, such as the *Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur* (Federal Foundation for the Working-Through of the SED Dictatorship) and the *Bürgerbüro* (Citizens’ Office) are led by former dissidents and vehement anti-communists who are fiercely opposed to any interpretation or representation of the GDR that does not centre state repression and its victims and resisters.⁴

Even German scholars who have conducted more nuanced scholarship and discourse on everyday life in the GDR define their work largely by a need to understand the extent to

which the state and the party controlled that everyday life. Specifically, many scholars have made significant use the concept of *Herrschaft*—a concept introduced by Max Weber and later became associated with Alf Lüdtke—to explain how those who hold power often depend on the consent of those they rule. These analyses of East Germany focus on the more subtle and cultural ways in which the party “dictatorship” exercised “soft power”⁵—the framing for a large number of works done on the GDR in Britain and North America. Many studies in this vein looked, for example, at consumer culture, sports, gender, domesticity, private life, etc.⁶ However, the general purpose was ultimately to uncover the extent of party *Herrschaft* over East German society. To a degree, the reason that the term *Herrschaft* became so ubiquitous was its conceptual flexibility—it could accommodate a more nuanced, even Gramscian, or Foucauldian interpretation of power, or it could mean power more generally or colloquially.⁷

By the early 2000s the scholarship on the GDR, particularly in history, had become so profoundly shaped by the search for *Herrschaft* that it seemed as if there were no other way to think about studying the GDR. Nearly every study, in both English and German, began with the paradigm of the GDR as a state and party as well as a society, and essentially tried to document the extent of the imposition of the former onto the latter. Most of this scholarship, as valuable as it was, bordered on question-begging, containing much of the conclusion within its premise. It began with the notion that there was a state on the one hand and a society on the other, that there was interpenetration, and ended with the conclusion that, in fact, the state/party penetrated into

the society. The only real point of contention in this scholarship was the degree to which that penetration happened and how to characterize it. The focus on “power” from the beginning was self-reinforcing because, as Michel Foucault argues, power, especially in its subtler or more diffuse forms (such as *Herrschaft*), is everywhere, in every society, and not just dictatorships. That there was *Herrschaft* in the GDR is not, in the end, what is most important. Instead, I argue that one of the aspects of East German society and everyday life that tends to be de-emphasized in the literature is the reality of *socialism* itself, as both an ideology and a system of organizing everyday life. That is, the impression emerges from much of the literature that the “socialist” part of East German everyday life was merely epiphenomenal—almost as if it were incidental whether East Germany was socialist, or fascist, or whatever—and that what really matters when studying the GDR is gaining an understanding of how power-in-general works. Yet East Germany was unique not because of *Herrschaft* but because it was socialist. This was a core of its existence, not an epiphenomenon.

Indeed, the experience of former East Germans highlights this discrepancy between the politics of academic discourse on the GDR and the actual lived experience in the GDR. In interview after interview, East Germans in Marzahn painted the same kind of picture of their life in the *Plattenbausiedlung*—a new beginning, a progressive community, a major upgrade into the long awaited socialist good life, and most of all, a real and authentic everyday lived experience of socialism—not ideological socialism, not the socialism of the party line, but a true communitarian socialism that worked even where and when the system did not function. They at-

tributed little importance to their belonging to the SED or the presence of that official system, but rather described a lived experience that was, in fact, socialism. Furthermore, what many complained about, and what many East Germans in general have found hardest to understand in the years since 1989, is that their experience in the GDR seems to have been grossly misunderstood by westerners, especially historians.⁸ The narrative below depicts a very different reality than much of the German and English scholarship on the GDR.

The importance of this disconnect goes beyond the milieu of former East Germans. Quite apart from the politics of GDR historiography, there has been a transatlantic explosion of interest in East German everyday life and material culture.⁹ While this interest is perhaps easy to explain away as *Ostalgie* among former East Germans, it is much harder to understand its transatlantic and international appeal. The well-known GDR Museum located in the heart of the most touristy area of Berlin—just off Unter den Linden, between several museums and monuments—is not large but it is heavily visited, almost exclusively by foreign tourists. Shops selling former East German consumer goods, marketed as “communist kitsch” have appeared in hip, trendy neighbourhoods, especially in Berlin, where many foreigners or young people with no memory or connection to the GDR live. The largest existing museum devoted to the material culture and everyday life culture of East Germany now exists in California. Known as the Wende Museum, it houses an impressive array of objects, visual art, film, clothing, and printed sources (including Margot Honecker’s papers).¹⁰ The Wende Museum has demonstrated that, amazingly, in Los Angeles

there is a strong interest in East Germany—the museum’s success has led it to recently move to a new, larger building, and it managed to stage an impressive spectacle (even for Hollywood’s standards) for the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Wall, shutting down Wilshire Boulevard with segments of the Berlin Wall placed across it, the Mayor of Los Angeles and the Governor of California in attendance. Indeed, interest in East German everyday life and material culture is found throughout the world.

One might argue that in a neoliberal era this interest signifies a strong yearning for “something else” (Rubin, “Future,” 2). Indeed, East Germany represented an alternative modernity—not just any alternative, but a distinctively *non-capitalist* modernity. As such, the suggestion here is that the GDR holds a strange and uncanny fascination for westerners. This is especially true of the younger generation, which is apt to be both attracted to and condescendingly amused by the phenomenological world left behind by a highly developed, modern socialist society. One of the enduring slogans of the Occupy movement is “Another World is Possible.” Among the political left in the United States and throughout the millennial generation, there is a radically new openness to considering alternatives to capitalism itself. This has been made clear by the success of Bernie Sanders—a self-avowed socialist—in nearly gaining the nomination of the Democratic Party, as well as by a recent Harvard study revealing that just over half of all millennials do not support capitalism and one-third support socialism (Ehrenfreund). Yet in the suddenly flourishing discourse to be found, for example, in magazines and blogs such as *Jacobin*, *Dissent*, and *The Baffler*, there is little to no mention of what life was actually

like in a modern socialist society that existed in recent memory. Beginning to understand everyday lived socialism on its own terms a first step in filling in the blind spots regarding what “other worlds” are possible and what they actually look like. What follows is an attempt to write a history of everyday life in socialist East Germany beyond *Herrschaft*.

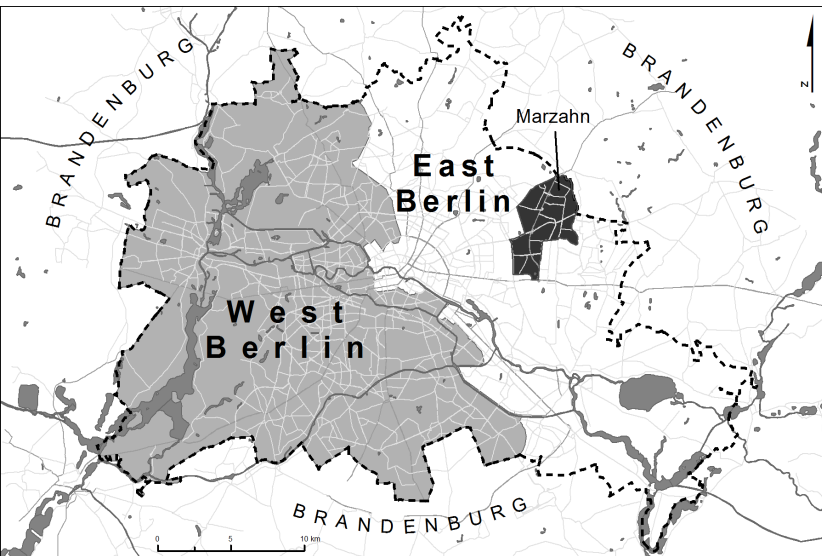


Figure 2: Map of Berlin-Marzahn. Courtesy of Jason Glatz, Western Michigan University Mapping Services.

In 1982, Gabriele Franik and her husband drove from central East Berlin to the vast *Plattenbau* construction site in Marzahn, a rural district on the northeast edge of Berlin. They were hoping to see their new apartment in what had become the single largest housing settlement in all of Europe. Eight months pregnant with twins, Gabriele had been



Figure 3: Sebastian and Daniel Diehl in front of their new WBS 70 building, Allee der Kosmonauten, Marzahn, 1984. Courtesy of Barbara Diehl.

on prescribed bed rest, but was so excited to see this new world and the place in it for her and her family that she could not resist. She recalled the experience of entering this completely new world, a world still in the process of becoming: “[My husband] drove and drove. We emerged into a giant construction site: our way was lined with construction cranes. Newly begun *Plattenbauten* stood everywhere. There were no streets to be seen anywhere. Mountains of sand towered, a gigantic wasteland of mud; nowhere was there a tree, or even a shrub” (Franik, 80). When she got to their apartment, on the second floor of a WBS-70/11 model pre-

fabricated apartment block on Ludwig-Renn-Strasse 43, her enormous stomach making it difficult to walk, the socialist future suddenly became a real, material space:

My heart was in my throat with excitement; my knees shook as I left the car and we walked up to the second floor together, the building still smelling of cement and paint. My husband opened the door to our new apartment and [...] a giant empire appeared, with enough room for five family members. Central heating, warm water from the wall, and a six-meter-long balcony! This is what happiness looks like. We fell into each other’s arms, euphorically. (79-80)

The Franiks were among over 400,000 East Germans who would come to live in Marzahn and the connected *Plattenbausiedlungen* of Lichtenberg, Hohenschönhausen, and Hellersdorf between 1977 and 1990. Marzahn was built as the centerpiece of a larger campaign by the East German state, the Housing Program (*Wohnungsbauprogramm*), which aimed to build or renovate three million modern dwellings for East Germans by 1990 to eliminate the persistent shortage of adequate housing that had afflicted East Germans, the German working class in general, and Berliners in particular since the 19th century. By the time the GDR collapsed, its Housing Program had built two million apartments and renovated another one million, and almost five million East Germans (28 percent of the population) lived in prefabricated housing settlements such as Marzahn (Rubin, *Amnesiopolis* 29-31). Most of these—650 to be exact—were built on the outskirts of cities, ranging from a few thousand residents to 90,000 residents; examples include

the Fritz-Heckert settlement outside Karl-Marx-City, the Grünau settlement outside Leipzig, and the Nordwest settlement outside Rostock (Rubin, *Ammesiopolis* 160-63).

These settlements were mostly identical apartment blocks, repeated in rows in varying patterns, which were constructed using prefabricated, steel-reinforced concrete panels assembled on site by three-shift assembly lines of workers. However, they were not intended by the East German state and its ruling party to be mere housing. The Housing Program was itself the central pillar of the most important legacy of East German leader Erich Honecker's regime, which lasted from 1971 until 1989, officially called the "Unity of Economic and Social Policy." Often referred to in shorthand as "real existing socialism," it was a massive effort to bring the "good life" to socialist citizens (see Steiner; Bouvier). Until Honecker took power in 1971 from aging leader Walter Ulbricht, life in socialist East Germany had mostly consisted of promises of a deferred utopia. "As we work today, so we will live tomorrow" was a favorite slogan of the party in the 1950s and 1960s (Merkel 121). While the regime focused on building up its heavy industry, collectivizing farms, and investing in prestige projects such as Alexanderplatz, the TV tower, and the Palace of the Republic in East Berlin, it ignored the needs of ordinary citizens in the realm of consumer goods and social needs such as childcare, infrastructure, and, above all, housing.

As of 1971 most East Germans lived in dwellings that were inadequate, with two-thirds built before 1918 and the majority of those from the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. One-third had no running water, which increased to two-thirds in

smaller towns; only one-third had an indoor toilet. In Berlin the problem was especially acute; since the rapid expansion of Berlin after the unification of Germany after 1871, it had become infamous for its slum apartments, called "rental barracks," which were cramped, dark, and expensive. Tens of thousands could find no affordable housing at all, instead living on the streets and in shantytowns outside the city. Because of economic depression, the war, and the low priority of housing policy during the 1950s and 1960s, East Berlin continued to resemble the "misery quarters" of the 19th century. In other words, in terms of lived everyday experience, little had changed for workers, even though the GDR was supposed to be the "Workers' and Peasants' State." Yet by the 1970s a new generation was coming of age, born after the war, hoping to start a new life and yet unable to find adequate housing, making inadequate and unavailable housing by far *the* leading topic of citizen *Eingaben* (complaint letters) addressed to the government. By 1970, the state estimated that 90,000 people in East Berlin were unable to find housing at all, often young married couples still sharing a small living space with their families (Peters and Seifert 17). Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev first called for his Soviet comrades—and the leadership of other communist nations—to pay attention to the completely inadequate housing in communist countries, especially in light of the postwar boom of mostly suburban housing in the US and various modern housing developments in Western European cities, such as the *Villes Nouvelles* ("new towns") in France, the "New Towns" in Britain, and prefabricated housing settlements in West Germany such as Gropiusstadt, Märkisches Viertel, or Neu Perlach. Specifically, he wanted communist nations to build housing "better, cheaper, and faster" (Khrushchev),

leading to a boom in prefabricated housing settlements across the Soviet Bloc, from Nizhny Novgorod in the USSR to New Belgrade in Yugoslavia, Nowa Huta outside Krakow, or Ujplata outside Budapest.

Yet the problem facing the GDR was not simply that citizens lived in inadequate circumstances while the promise of a socialist utopia had raised their expectations; it was that the history of capitalism—and fascism, as the rise of Nazism had played out in these streets—was inscribed into the very physical spaces that made up these old neighborhoods. They were, literally, the product of capitalist logic—East German officials even referred to the old slum neighborhoods as "the capitalist legacy" (*das kapitalistische Erbe*). They could be renovated, but because they were built to cram in as many residents as possible, the only way to make them conform to a baseline of adequacy and modernity—an *Existenzminimum*—would be to *reduce* the total available living units in order to increase the average living space within each unit. This meant that the housing crisis was *built into* the city structures by the system that built the city—capitalism. To solve the housing crisis, and thus to finally break free of the capitalist legacy, socialism would have to build a new physical space, not just new housing but a new city, from scratch. The plan for Marzahn, developed in 1974-75 at the behest of the SED's Politburo, under the leadership of Günter Mittag,¹¹ was not only to build housing but to build an entire, self-contained city, with every conceivable need in life mapped out, rationally, in advance: not only apartments, but schools, shopping centers, athletic and recreation facilities, communal spaces, health clinics, public transportation, etc.

These guidelines were enshrined into East German law a year later in 1976 (Gesetzblatt Sonderdruck 195).

The plan for Marzahn was to create an entirely new socialist city, a monument to “real existing socialism” in concrete. The plan borrowed heavily from modernist urban planning concepts—especially those of Le Corbusier—that emphasized apartment towers separated by large swaths of green space and oriented to allow maximum sunlight and fresh air for residents while also reducing the intermixing of pedestrian and automobile traffic. No school or nursery/preschool (called *Kindergarten-Kinderkrippenkombinat* or “KiKo”), health clinic, sports/recreation center, or public transit stop could be more than 600 metres from any residence. The new town contained fourteen large and thirteen small school gymnasiums (*Schulturnhallen*) and eleven school sports facilities, which included tracks, soccer fields, volleyball areas, and smaller athletic fields. Another eleven sports recreation facilities were to be built for adults. One of these was to be a central stadium with 5,000 seats. Other planned social facilities included a home for troubled youths (*Heim für Jugendhilfe*), which also had to be no more than 600 metres from a polytechnic high school (Magistrat Berlin 30-32); three pharmacies; up to nine retirement homes/hospices, each seven stories (Peters 107); a central supply depot for gardeners; a music school with a rehearsal studio; an open-air theatre

with enough capacity to hold large festivals, including the appropriate facilities for food and drink; and a youth hostel (Magistrat Berlin 30-33). Later, the Politburo mandated that four churches (Catholic and Lutheran) be added to the plan, all from prefabricated concrete, with a starkly modern and minimalist design (Bezirksmuseum Marzahn 126-30).

Each district had restaurants, milk bars, cafes, dance halls, pubs, service shops (*Dienstleistungen*, denoting repairs, auto mechanics, etc.), a cinema, a public swimming pool and sauna, and so on. There were even plans to make a bobsled run (*Rödelbahn*) and bunny ski hill out of the artificial mountains created by the enormous amount of earth—two million cubic metres (Peters 103)—displaced by the construction of this entirely new city (“Vorflut Kanal” 2-3). There were also senior living centers, youth hostels, and a youth group home. In short, it was what planners described as a *heile Welt*—a holistically planned and self-contained world. On paper, Marzahn looked like the Utopia that socialism had longed promised. It was also a world fully detached from the old spaces defined by the bygone fascist and capitalist eras, at least in terms of how it appeared to the senses.

However, once people began to inhabit this new space, it was no longer just a blueprint or a space, but rather a “socio-spatial dialectic” (Soja 76-94). The crucial point is not just what Marzahn looked like, but what life was *actually* like there. For many, it was obviously a significant material upgrade in living standards, which remained little better than they had been in the 19th century. This was true, for example, for Elisabeth Albrecht, a librarian who lived in a crumbling and damp one-room apartment in Berlin’s old tenement district of Friedrichshain, where the ventilation was so bad she and her nine-year-old son Steffen suffered from high levels of carbon monoxide fumes, a situation so common in East



Figure 4: View from the Diehls new apartment, Allee der Kosmonauten, 1983. Courtesy of Barbara Diehl.

Berlin it was known to many simply as “Berlin conditions” (Marin 81). For Albrecht, moving to a two-bedroom, fully modern apartment in a WBS 70/11 block with a ninth floor, gorgeous view of the Brandenburg plains stretching out to the east was obviously a significant upgrade. It was also the case for Barbara Diehl, who lived in a cramped and dark one-room “rental barrack” apartment in Friedrichshain with her husband Rolf and young son Dieter, with no warm water or heating. For them, moving to a three-bedroom apartment in 1980 on the Allee der Kosmonauten (“Cosmonaut Street”), in time for their second son, Sebastian, to be born was a serious upgrade in material living standards (Diehl), as it was for almost everyone who moved to Marzahn.



Figure 5: Marquardt family on first day of school, 1982, Marzahn. Courtesy of Evelyn Marquardt.

The move meant a new beginning for themselves and their families. For Diehl, it meant being able to have a marriage again—Dieter and Sebastian could have their own rooms and she and her husband some privacy. Not only that, but Dieter, who had had problems making friends and being ostracized at his old school in Friedrichshain, seemed to be more accepted in his new school, where none of the kids knew each other previously and his mother could see his school yard from her balcony, watching him slowly begin to make friends during outdoor recess (Diehl). Albrecht, like other residents, helped plant trees along the outside of her building, and for her both the new tree she planted and the new apartment she and her son now occupied, represented literally and figuratively putting down new roots in new soil. She even learned to measure the passage of time in terms of both the tree—as it reached close to her balcony—and her growing son, who graduated from high school and moved away: “but in the meantime, the poplar that I planted during those days [when he was a child] has reached all the way to me, almost growing into my window. It is now 21 years old” (36).

The move to Marzahn also meant a chance to create a new community. Most buildings in Marzahn and in the GDR had a communal building association (*Hausgemeinschaft*, HG), usually run by a five-person leadership committee (*Hausgemeinschaftsleitung*, HGL) elected by the building residents. Marzahnners recall their HGLs as having organized a good deal of the buildings’ social life: summer parties outside on the greenways with grills and beer (Wormbs 18); Carnival (*Fasching*) parties every February in the communal rooms included in the WBS 70 buildings (Wormbs 18); festivals on

International Children’s Day (Albrecht 38); and Advent celebrations for the senior citizens (Weber 41). *Namensgebung* and *Jugendweihe*—secular ceremonies intended to replace baptism and confirmation, respectively, widespread in the earlier working-class left-wing milieu and commonplace in the GDR—were frequent occasions (Wohnbezirksausschüss 103-4), as Marzahn had the highest concentration of children of any other single district in the entire country (Niederländer 2). So too were coming home ceremonies for young men completing their mandatory military service (Ladwig 78) or charity events coordinated with quasi-state charitable organizations such as the *Volkssolidarität* (Bezirksmuseum Marzahn 121) and the Society for German-Soviet Friendship. Sometimes, the HGL would throw parties just for fun and everyone was invited, even those who had been shirking their volunteer commitments, as Jasper Oelze recalled: “The vibe was great, and we had lots of fun” at these events (Bezirksmuseum Marzahn 121). Jutta and Joachim Kretzschmar agreed: “When it came to communal festivals, it didn’t matter if you had helped clean the stairwell or not, every doorbell was rung. There were a few people who organized it all [...] we had a cook in the building, as well as the director of the shopping mart, and that was reason enough to throw a party” (Verein Kids & Co. 54). Karin Hinkel remembered the residents of the twentieth floor where she lived having spontaneous parties:

Overall, we partied a lot. Never planned it, just did it. We’d meet up in the hallway on the twentieth floor, and that’s how it would start. Everyone brought a chair, and with the kids we’d do something for Carnival (Fasching), or we’d organize dance parties for the older kids (jugend-

liche Diskos). Or, right in front on the greenway, there would be kids' parties, sometimes in conjunction with the school nearby. And there would be a lot of baked treats. There was a real sense of togetherness and sociability (*geselliges Zusammensein*) in the building. (Bezirksmuseum Marzahn 121)

The HGL also was the main conduit for larger programs, such as *Mach Mit!* ("Join In!"). This nationwide program, run by the National Front, encouraged residents to beautify and landscape their buildings' communal areas and neighborhoods. This work was part of the 25 annual hours of communal service (*volkswirtschaftliche Masseninitiativen*—VMI) required of all East Germans (Betts 145). In Marzahn, residents participated in *Mach Mit!* by helping to landscape the grounds around their buildings, which were mostly still mud and dirt churned up and packed down by the tens of thousands of construction workers who had just recently moved on to the next building in the row. For many Marzahners, participating in *Mach Mit!* was one of their foundational experiences of moving to the *Plattenbau*. Torsten Preußing recalled that one of his earliest memories of moving into Marzahn was seeing a placard posted by his building's communal association in the lobby: "Tomorrow topsoil is coming. All men outside, with shovels in hand!" "It worked," Preußing remembered. "We stood there [the next day], and we spread out the topsoil. And we designed the garden in front of our building ourselves. It was a time which can be described with a phrase that was often thrown around back then: 'From 'I' to 'we'" (17-18). Klaus Hölgermann recalled the *Mach Mit!* days as a kind of foundational myth, with honest labour yielding a well-deserved reward:

The residents were ready to join in. One didn't need a lot of convincing. The tasks were organized here, in the building. On this or that day, for example in May, it would be announced: "In fourteen days we're getting bushes and trees delivered. You are to see to it that they are planted." And it worked. We got started at eight in the morning, and we worked straight through to 11:30am. And when we finished something, we went and grabbed a case of seltzer, or two, and also perhaps a crate of beer. It was all work, sweat, and beer! (Bezirksmuseum Marzahn 119)

Through these shared experiences, residents of the *Plattenbausiedlung* experienced a strong sense of communal trust and community. Ingeborg Hämmerling described her memory of the community in Marzahn:

The renters were blue-collar and white-collar workers, and intellectuals, although these intellectuals had come originally from the working class, taking advantage of the many educational opportunities they had, as I had in earning my degree in economics. So, there was no division into social classes. And we residents took over responsibility for maintaining the building and the landscaping, and for upholding order and security in the building, including observing the fire code. [...] With us, the professor lived next to the cleaning woman, and we all used the informal form of address (*Du*). [...]

The residents absolutely supported their duty to take care of the living area. We maintained the apartment, the building, the landscaping in the front, and we made sure

all the kids in the building were respectful of the property. Because all the residents were employed, including women and young adults, the communities in these buildings were not environments where petty criminality, drug addiction, vandalism, or a seedy atmosphere could take root. Outside of a few cellar break-ins, I don't recall any criminality at all. (3)

This was not just a case of viewing the past with rose-coloured glasses. In the 1980s, Loni Niederländer of the Humboldt University's Institute for Marxist-Leninist Sociology found that most families in Marzahn had close relationships with between three and five other families, with only 14 percent of the residents having no close relationships with any other residents. Two-thirds of the residents reported that they would leave their key with at least one neighbor, and in the five-story WBS buildings the atmosphere was even more trusting—95 percent reported they trusted their neighbors enough to leave a key with them (28). Marzahners, like East Germans in general, tend to feel that this sense of communalism and collective trust has been severely eroded since 1989. As Marzahner Wilfried Klenner put it, "this us-feeling is gone today. Now, there are borders, which didn't used to be there" (38).

It was true that these Marzahners lived within an environment that had definite traces of the influence of the state's security policies and forces. For one, there were a number of families in which one or both parents worked either for the armed forces, the SED, the police, or the Stasi (though there was a separate *Plattenbausiedlung* a little further to the west, in Lichtenberg, where most Stasi families were settled).



Figure 6: WBS 70 buildings in Marzahn, 1984. Courtesy of Bezirksmuseum Marzahn-Hellersdorf, e.V.

One of the amenities of the new WBS 70 buildings was a central antenna, with a control box in the basement making it difficult to receive West German TV signals (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, Gemeinschaftsantennenanlagen 1); in any event, the tall concrete buildings often interfered with the airborne signals (Domnitz 42). The Stasi had an interest in Marzahn, in part because there were so many well-connected people there (and thus people with access to sensitive information, for example) but they were especially interested in learning how prefabricated buildings were built so as to maximize their ability to observe residents (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, Dokumentation; Rubin, *Amnesiopolis* 139-45).

These were undeniable facets of life in the GDR. Yet the reality of life in this new socialist city presented a paradox of sorts. On the one hand, residents built a close-knit community based in almost every conceivable way on socialist principles, or at least a kind of socialist communalism. There was a strong sense of trust, social cohesion, and a collective and egalitarian identity. Marzahnners, and East Germans in general, were joiners—they frequently belonged to organizations, whether the state labor union (FDGB), *Volks-solidarität* (“Peoples’ Solidarity,” a state-supported national charity organization), the National Front’s local committees, HGLs, parent committees (*Elternaktiven*), committees or “brigades” at their workplaces, and so on. In many ways, these conformed to the ideology of the state, for example, the widespread adoption of *Jugendweihe* instead of Christian confirmation.

On the other hand, most Marzahnners seemed to have little allegiance to the higher organs of the state. Many were SED party members and showed little hesitation to admit this membership, or even the fact that they were truly committed ideologically. Yet when it came to the memories that shaped the narratives of their lives in Marzahn, interaction with the national SED played little role. Although many of them participated in communal activities supported by the state—many of the HGs received their budget from the National Front—they did not particularly dwell on that relationship. For example, those buildings that did the best *Mach Mit!* work were awarded a cash prize and an official plaque, the “Golden House Number,” which was could be affixed to the front of the building entrance; many winning buildings took only the cash and discarded the plaque, as Wilfried Klenner recalls (37). Similarly, according to Niederländer’s study, 72 percent of Marzahnners had no idea who their National Front *Volkskammer* representative was, and 50 percent responded that whoever they were, they were totally useless. At the same time, a large majority of Marzahnners had a strong interest in the activities of the communal association, with 84 percent reporting interest in helping with celebrations and festivals and 67 percent reporting interest in helping with VMI labour (such as *Mach Mit!*) (Niederländer 27).

If we approach this history in search of how power or *Herrschaft* functioned, we do indeed find ample cases of power. After all, the initial impetus for my research in Marzahn was to examine how spaces created by the state were used to subtly control citizens. Nostalgia presents an undeniable bias for some former East Germans who contrast the present unfavorably with the past. Yet there is substantial

bias the other way, in terms of the overall framing of GDR research that precedes the formulation of research questions and problematics. Trying to understand any historical era or experience on its own terms is also highly fraught and problematic. Indeed, historians over a century ago saw their task as understanding the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* (as it actually was)—an uncritical acceptance of objectivity, scientific thought, and positivism that over 30 years of post-structuralist critique has deconstructed. This essay is not suggesting a return to uncritical positivism in researching the GDR. Instead it is suggesting an attention to the gaps and contradictions between the memories and experiences of historical subjects and the discourses of historians and their institutions and texts. It is especially arguing for a critical reflection on the political and meta-historiographical dynamics and conditions that created these gaps. Doing so can open up new spaces for new questions and new debates. Above all, we should move away from an endless and tautological search for *Herrschaft* in studying the GDR.

What would moving away from search for state power in everyday life entail? This essay has suggested that such a shift might begin with taking the functioning of socialism in everyday life on its own terms, rather than a reflection of some kind of power dynamic. Perhaps in a political-economic climate in which alternatives to neoliberal capitalism are actively being discussed, in which there is a real yearning for a nebulous “other world,” the lived experience of socialism in East German *Plattenbausiedlungen* can help fill in what that alternative might look like. Furthermore, perhaps moving away from *Herrschaft* and into a study of East German socialism as a form of everyday life on its own terms may

lead to other directions of research. Until we leave behind the tendency to weigh every facet of life in East Germany on the scale of *Herrschaft*, we will not be able to open up spaces for new questions and debates.

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Endnotes

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Image Notes

Title Image (Figure 1): Children in Marzahn. Courtesy Bezirksmuseum Marzahn-Hellersdorf, e.V.

Figure 2: Map of Berlin-Marzahn. Courtesy of Jason Glatz, Western Michigan University Mapping Services.

Figure 3: Sebastian and Daniel Diehl in front of their new WBS 70 building, Allee der Kosmonauten, Marzahn, 1984. Courtesy of Barbara Diehl.

Figure 4: View from the Diehls new apartment, Allee der Kosmonauten, 1983. Courtesy of Barbara Diehl.

Figure 5: Marquardt family on first day of school, 1982, Marzahn. Courtesy of Evelyn Marquardt.

Figure 6. WBS 70 buildings in Marzahn, 1984. Courtesy of Bezirksmuseum Marzahn-Hellersdorf, e.V.

1 In addition to works already mentioned, see also: on the USSR, Mark Smith, *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev* (Northern Illinois UP, 2010), Steven Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life After Stalin* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2013), and Christine Vargas-Harris, *Stories of House and Home: Soviet Apartment Life during the Khrushchev Years* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2015); on Poland, Katherine Lebow, *Unfinished Utopia: Nowa Huta, Stalinism and Polish Society, 1949-56* (Cornell UP, 2013); on Hungary (as well as East Germany), Virág Molnár, *Building the State: Architecture, Politics and State Formation in Postwar Central Europe* (Routledge, 2013); on Yugoslavia, Brigitte Le Normand, *Designing Tito's Capital: Urban Planning, Modernism and Socialism in Belgrade* (U of Pittsburgh P, 2014).

2 For a small sampling, see: Lothar Mertens, editor, *Unter dem Deckel der Diktatur: Soziale und kulturelle Aspekte des DDR-Alltags* (Duncker & Humblot, 2003); Ulrich Weissgerber, *Giftige Worte der SED-Diktatur: Sprache als Instrument von Machtausübung und Ausgrenzung in der SBZ und der DDR* (Lit, 2010); Dorothea and Michael Parak, editors, *Opfer und Täter der SED-Herrschaft: Lebenswege in einer Diktatur* (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2005); Gary Bruce, *Resistance with the People: Repression and Resistance in Eastern Germany, 1945-1955* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); on dictatorship, Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic* (U of North Carolina P, 2008); Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (Arnold, 2002); Mary Fulbrook, editor, *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The 'Normalisation of Rule'?* (Berghahn, 2009).

3 A catalogue search in Germany will turn up more than 150 titles on the 1953 uprising alone, with hundreds more studies to be found in other places. A small sampling: Roger Engelmann and Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, editors, *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat: Eine Bestandsaufnahme zum 17. Juni 1953* (Ch. Links, 1996); Kowalczyk, *17. Juni 1953, Volksaufstand in der DDR: Ursachen, Abläufe, Folgen* (Timmermann, 2003); Hubertus Knabe, *17. Juni 1953: ein deutscher Aufstand* (Propyläen, 2003).

4 A good introduction to this topic is Martin Sabrow et. al., editors, *Wohin treibt die DDR-Erinnerung? Dokumentation einer Debatte* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007). This publication is a documentation of the “Sabrow Commission,” tasked in 2005-06 by the federal government with reporting on and creating recommendations for how best to fund and manage the official memory of the GDR. It caused a firestorm of controversy for recommending that more attention be paid to the everyday life history of ordinary East Germans along with the continued spotlight on the repression and dictatorial nature of the GDR. For examples of those vehemently opposed to any nuanced consideration of everyday life in the GDR, see Hubertus Knabe, *Die Täter sind unter uns: über das Schönreden der SED-Diktatur* (Propyläen, 2007); Manfred Agethen, Eckhard Jesse, and Ehrhart Neubert, editors, *Der missbrauchte Antifaschismus: DDR-Staatsdoktrin und Lebenslüge der deutschen Linken* (Herder, 2002); Vera Lengsfeld, “Das DDR-Bild der westlichen Linken: Eine Polemik,” *Ostalgie International: Erinnerungen an die DDR von Nicaragua bis Vietnam*, edited by Thomas Kunze and Thomas Vogel (Ch. Links, 2010), pp. 211-19.

5 For example, see Thomas Lindenberger, editor, *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur: Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Böhlau, 1999), especially his introduction entitled “Diktatur der Grenzen”; for a more recent work, see “SED-Herrschaft als soziale Praxis, Herrschaft und ‘Eigen-Sinn:’ Problemstellung und Begriffe,” *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft: Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag der DDR*, edited by Jens Gieseke (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), pp. 23-47, and his *Volkspolizei, Herrschaftspraxis und öffentliche Ordnung im SED-Staat 1952-1968* (Böhlau, 2003). For a small sampling of works with *Herrschaft* as their primary framing, see Martin Sabrow, *Geschichte als Herrschaftsdiskurs* (Böhlau, 1999); Stefan Wolle, *Die Heile Welt der Diktatur: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1971-1989* (Ch. Links, 1998); Alf Lütke and Peter Becker, editors, *Akten. Eingaben. Schaufenster. Die DDR und ihre Texte. Erkundungen zu Herrschaft und Alltag* (Akademie, 1997); Patrice Poutrus, *Die Erfindung des Goldbroilers: Über den Zusammenhang zwischen Herrschaftssicherung und Konsumententwicklung in der DDR* (Böhlau, 2002); Heiner Timmermann, editor, *Das war die DDR: DDR-Forschung im Fadenkreuz von Herrschaft, Aussenbeziehungen, Kultur und Souveränität* (Lit, 2004). On the earlier work done by Lütke on *Herrschaft*, see Lütke’s introduction to his edited volume *Herrschaft als soziale Praxis* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991) and his introduction to his edited volume “Sicherheit” und “Wohlfahrt”: *Polizei, Gesellschaft und Herrschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Suhrkamp, 1992).

6 Some examples: Andreas Ludwig, editor, *Fortschritt, Norm und Eigensinn: Erkundungen im Alltag der DDR* (Ch. Links, 1999); Ludwig with Katja Böhme, editors, *Alles aus Plaste. Versprechen*

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7 This ability of the term *Herrschaft* to encompass different viewpoints became clear early in the development of GDR historiography. See Lütke, “‘Helden der Arbeit’—Mühen beim Arbeiten. Zur mißmutigen Loyalität von Industriearbeitern in der DDR,” *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, edited by Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka, and Hartmut Zwahr (Stuttgart, 1994), pp. 188-216, as well as Kocka’s contribution to that volume, “Eine durchherrschte Gesellschaft,” pp. 547-54. Both of these are among the most cited and referenced essays in the field of GDR history, although they represent different viewpoints.

8 Lutz Niethammer (who pioneered the field of everyday life history and oral history and was one of the few western historians

to be allowed to work in East Germany before 1989) also makes this point in an interview with the *tageszeitung*, May 12, 2006, cited here in Sabrow, *Wohin treibt die DDR-Erinnerung*, 208-9 [see note 4].

9 There has been important scholarship done on this phenomenon of official and unofficial memory of GDR everyday life, more so in English than in German. In English see Jonathan Bach, “Collecting Communism: Private Museums of Everyday Life under Socialism in the Former East Germany,” *German Politics and Society* 114, vol. 33 no. 1-2, Spring/Summer 2015, pp. 135-45, and Bach, *What Remains: Everyday Encounters with the Socialist Past in Germany* (Columbia UP, forthcoming 2017); in German see Thalia Gigerenzer, *Gedächtnislabore: Wie Heimatmuseen in Ostdeutschland an die DDR erinnern*, translated by Christa Krüger (Be.Bra, 2013).

10 See www.wendemuseum.org and its recent major publication: Justinian Jampol, editor, *Jenseits der Mauer / Beyond the Wall* (Taschen, 2014).

11 Mittag’s role was extensive in creating the Housing Program and specifically the Marzahn project. See Bundesarchiv (BArch) Stiftung Archiv Parteien und Massenorganisationen (SAPMO) DY 2838 (Büro Günter Mittag), “Wohnungsbau in Berlin, Bd 4, 1972-73,” pp. 345-47, “Entwicklung des komplexen Wohnungsbaues in der Hauptstadt der DDR, Berlin, für die Jahre 1976-1980.”