

Life Behind the Wall

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On the night of August 12-13, 1961, unbeknownst to Western governments and to the citizens of the city, large numbers of army units, militiamen, and People's Police set up wire and posts in an effort to seal East from West Berlin. These forces also destroyed roads leading to the wall and shut down the use of underground railway trains (Tulloch). The wires and posts would be only temporary measures, however. Upon its completion, the Berlin Wall stood 3.6 meters high, topped with barbed wire. It spanned the entire length of the border between East and West Berlin. From this point on, the number of immigrants from East to West Germany would be reduced dramatically. The only major corridor through which Germans could travel freely between East and West Germany was now walled off and guarded by men with rifles.

This marked the beginning of true isolation in East Germany. The Berlin Wall stood as both an iconic symbol of the cold war and a somber reminder to the citizens of East Berlin of their detachment from West Germany and the Western world. How did forced isolation change the people of the German Democratic Republic? Did they learn to adapt? In what ways did forced isolation affect the psyche of the East German citizen? How did the communist government manage to stave off a major revolt for as long as they did? This paper attempts to answer these questions through an examination of everyday life, governmental oppression, and popular culture in East Germany. It looks at life at home, in the workplace, and as a consumer in a one-party state. In this way, the paper highlights the ways in which citizens were transformed by the ever-present awareness of surveillance and governmental control.

This research is done with the goal of better understanding the way in

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which the feeling of isolation pervaded East German society. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, a great deal of scholarly attention has been focused on the repressive measures taken by the East German government to prevent dissension within the regime. Consequently, the voice of the ordinary citizen has often gone unheard. But the effects of the Wall on ordinary citizens had a significance that lasted beyond the collapse of the East German government. The erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 created a system of isolation in which the vast majority of East German citizens were forced to participate. Through their participation, East Germans themselves were changed, creating a wall beyond the Wall that had significant consequences for the subsequent reunification of Germany.

Life Before the Wall

Germany was in a deplorable state immediately following the Second World War. The defeated nation was characterized by “poor transport and communications, a totally inadequate food supply and real threat of famine, the prevalence of a wide range of virulent diseases complicated by malnutrition, and an acute shortage of habitable housing” (Fulbrook 33). In May of 1945, Germany, as well as its capital city of Berlin, was divided into four militarily occupied zones, with the Allied powers — the United States, France, Great Britain and the Soviet Union — each claiming control over one of its sections.

The early years after the war were quite wrenching for those living in the zone of Soviet Occupation (SBZ). Bomb damage hit East Germany’s major urban centers particularly hard and the Soviet Union, which the SBZ obviously relied on for economic assistance, was more concerned with paying war reparations than they were in rebuilding. In spite of this, it was clear that the Soviets had every intention of indoctrinating the German people in the ways of communism. Soon after the end of the war, the Soviets supported the creation of the communist party (KPD) in their zone, and in 1946 they oversaw the forced merger of the socialists (SPD) and the communists into the party that would rule over the East German state for the next forty-three years, the Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED)) (Kaiser 688).

The Soviets and the East German communists felt that the transformation to communism had to be a “dictatorship of the proletariat,” since the attempts of the oppressed classes to overthrow an unequal and

unjust society would inevitably provoke protest and opposition from those at risk of being ousted from their positions of privilege (Fulbrook 5). Within a little over a year after the end of the war, the Soviets and the SED undertook massive interventions in the ownership of land, industry, and finance (Grimes 62). Farms over a certain size or belonging to former Nazis were expropriated without compensation. Large areas of industrial production and finance were either nationalized or taken directly into Soviet control. The only social institutions not affected by radical socio-economic change were the churches, and even they experienced increasing control and constraint over their various activities (Fulbrook 34). The Soviets had two reasons for enacting such policies. First, they hoped to transform the occupied territory into a communist-style state. Second, they were anxious to exact the maximum amount of war reparations from the German people in order to help rebuild their depleted economy (Grimes 62).

Not surprisingly, those most adversely affected by the radical changes were quite unhappy with their newfound situation. Moreover, many Germans in the SBZ were well aware that they were being used as tools in the rebuilding of the Soviet economy. Together, these factors led to a flow of emigration to the West. It became obvious to the Soviets that if they hoped to prevent this emigration, they would have to focus less on exacting war reparations and more on improving the quality of life in their occupied territory. However, this would be easier said than done. In 1948, the United States and Great Britain extended the Marshall Plan to their territories in western Germany, thus providing them with a tremendous amount of economic assistance.

The Soviets were enraged by the use of the Marshall Plan as a means of economic support. They contended that the Western move was illegal, since it violated the post-WWII Potsdam agreements, which stated that all occupied zones would be treated equally. The Soviets feared the strategic implications of a wealthier, more industrialized western Germany (Harrison 2). On June 18, 1948, the Soviet security forces in Germany, with substantial help from East German police units, stopped *all* land access to West Berlin from the western zones (Bruce 82). The Blockade threatened to starve and freeze the 2.3 million citizens living in the western zones of Berlin, since the West Berliners' only access to vital supplies such as food and coal was via the transit routes from the British, American

and French zones (Harrison 3).

Although their measures were harsh, the Soviets were within their rights to prevent ground transportation into Berlin. The Western Allies had no written agreements with the Soviet Union guaranteeing land access to Berlin from their zones of Germany. They did, however, have a written agreement guaranteeing three air corridors (Bruce 82). So the resilient western Allies, not wanting to succumb to the bullying of the Soviets, did the only thing they could do: use the corridors and use them often. In order to deliver the millions of pounds of supplies per day necessary to sustain the population of western Berlin, a plane landed in Berlin roughly every thirty seconds. The airlift lasted through the inclement winter of 1948 until May, when Stalin had the Blockade lifted, realizing that there was no point to further it, since the population would easily survive the upcoming summer and subsequent winters (Bruce 82).

The hard-line tactics employed by the Soviets during the Blockade were altogether damaging to the Soviet cause. First, they showed the French that the Soviet threat was greater than that posed by the Germans. Consequently, the French agreed to unite their zone with those controlled by the Americans and British. On May 24, 1949, in close ties with the Western Alliance, the West German state, known as the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), was born. An East German state, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), was created by the communists shortly thereafter on October 7, 1949 (Harrison 3). For the next forty years, Germany would remain a nation divided. While Berlin remained a separate entity, it too was divided along political lines between the East and the West.

The Cold War continued to escalate in the years following the official division of Germany. In the West, the economy and thus the overall standard of living was ever-improving. In the East, there were mixed feelings towards the new regime. For many people who had suffered for years under the threats, brutality, and hatred of the National Socialists, the new "antifascist-democratic" order was not completely unwelcome (Bessel 197). On the other hand, the fact remained that the ongoing social revolution was not a popular uprising from below but an imposition from above by a relatively small Communist party. As much as the SED claimed legitimate rule, it was evident that their ability to maintain order and compliance undoubtedly hinged upon the coercion and isolation of

the East German people. Returning to normality after the war was slowed by the exacting of war reparations and the lack of concern among the occupation authorities about the living conditions of ordinary Germans. Though the Soviets and the SED came to realize the importance of improving the quality of life in East Germany, their inability to compete economically with a flourishing West would continue to haunt them throughout the duration of their rule. In the decade leading up to the construction of the wall, the SED became increasingly wary of their neighbors to the West.

The 1950s can be characterized as a period of population decline in East Germany. To combat this, the East Germans closed the border between East and West Germany in 1952. Starting in May and continuing on for several months, the Soviets and East Germans established a five-kilometer no-man's land along the border, sealing it with wire and mines. They also closed off most of the border connecting East Germany with West Berlin (Harrison 3). These measures did not much help the emigration problem, however, since East Germans still had the option of leaving via West Berlin. In the months leading up to the building of the Berlin Wall in August of 1961, emigrants continued to flee the German Democratic Republic. Since the late 1940s, some 2.5 million citizens left East Germany (Tulloch). These staggering numbers not only took away a large part of the work force; they also showed that the communists were losing their battle against capitalism. Thus, after having repeatedly threatened to end Western rights to West Berlin, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev and the East German leader Walter Ulbricht took drastic measures (Coleman). Just after midnight on August 13, 1961, Soviet and East German troops sealed the border between East and West Berlin. The building of the Wall began a new chapter in the lives of those living in East Germany. With a newfound grasp over the population, the East German government worked to create normality in the East while at the same expanding their network of surveillance and oppression. Though firmly in control of East Germany, the SED was extremely wary of political opponents.

Oppression in East Germany

It is impossible to talk about East Germany during the Cold War without mentioning the massive constraints that the East German government placed on its inhabitants. For more than forty years following

the defeat of Nazi Germany, the eastern half of Germany was under the control of the communist-run SED. During this time, the SED hoped to indoctrinate the German people in the ideology of communism. The building of the Berlin Wall illustrated, however, that if the SED hoped to achieve its goals they would have to do so forcefully. Prior to the building of the Berlin Wall, it was hardly possible for the regime to apply its political authority effectively, since people could escape from its grasp at will (Madarasz 45).

The Wall itself stood as a tangible symbol of oppression. Four days after its construction, in a letter to the USSR, the United States called the building of the Berlin Wall “a flagrant, and particularly serious, violation of the quadripartite status of Berlin,” further stating that “[f]reedom of movement with respect to Berlin was reaffirmed by the quadripartite agreement of New York of May 4, 1949, and by the decision taken at Paris on June 20, 1949, by the Council of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Four Powers” (“USA and USSR: Exchange of Notes” 397). To this claim the Soviets responded: “The Soviet Government fully understands and supports the actions of the Government of the German Democratic Republic which established effective control on the border with West Berlin in order to bar the way for subversive activity from West Berlin against the GDR and other countries of the socialist community. . . .” (“USA and USSR: Exchange of Notes” 398). To the people of East Germany, however, the Wall was not a necessary action but rather an imposed mechanism of governmental control.

Stories such as this one, reported on November 6, 1961 in *The New York Times*, became quite common: “Thirty East Germans attempted to break through the barbed wire to reach West Berlin today. The fire of an East German Border Guard disrupted the mass flight and only nine managed to reach the West” (“Gunfire Halts 21”). In spite of strenuous East German attempts to shift the blame to the Federal Republic, the ugly scar across the urban landscape turned into a major embarrassment for the SED regime, because it demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that the government had to use force to keep in its own people. In 1962, the SED issued an “Order to Fire” that stated: “The use of a firearm should in principle be announced with ‘Stop! Border guard! Hands up!’ If the order is not followed, a warning shot should be issued. If this warning remains unheeded, aimed fire should be taken” (Pollman 246).

Despite the danger of attempting to escape, a great number of East Germans felt it was worth the risk to do so. In 1962 alone, 5,761 escapees found their way into West Germany (Hertle, Jarausch, and Klessmann 310-314). During the 28 years in which the Wall stood, roughly 40,000 East German citizens managed to slip their way through the border fortifications. While numbers are unclear, it is known that several hundred, if not thousands, were killed attempting to cross.

Immediately following the erection of the Berlin Wall, people were noticeably unhappy with their situation in East Germany. The years of 1962 and 1963 saw the highest recorded rates of suicide for both men and women (Fulbrook 107). Young people were particularly disillusioned by the building of the wall. In 1962 as many as 406 men aged fifteen to twenty-five took their own lives; while in 1963, 185 women of the same age did the same (Fulbrook 107). Perhaps more telling was the fact that the lowest rates of suicide for both men *and* women was in 1989, the year in which the Wall came down.

The Stasi

Beyond being forcefully isolated from the West, the East German people were also subject to a vast network of surveillance. Much of the growing unhappiness and distrust within East Germany was caused by the awareness of the now infamously repressive secret police force known as the Ministry for State Security (*Ministerium für Staatsicherheit* (MfS)), commonly referred to as the Stasi.

It's no secret that underground police forces are common to dictatorial governments. In Nazi Germany there was the Gestapo, and in the Soviet Union there was the KGB. Governments use the secret police as a weapon to enforce their claim of absolute supremacy. What was unique to the Stasi, however, was its enormity. The Stasi had 91,015 full-time employees, and an additional 174,000 unofficial workers known as *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (IMs), to oversee a nation of roughly 16.5 million people. In their web of information, they kept personal files on six million individuals — using forty million index cards, one million pictures and negatives, and thousands of glass jars with the scent of various individuals (Epstein 322). In comparison, the Gestapo in Nazi Germany had roughly 40,000 full-time agents watching a country of 80 million, and the Soviet Union's KGB had 480,000 full-time agents to oversee a nation of 280 million people.

Those numbers amount to one agent for every 5,830 citizens in the Soviet Union, one for every 2,000 citizens in Nazi Germany, and one for every 166 citizens in the GDR. If we include the large number of unofficial, part-time informants in the GDR, the number rises to one informer per 6.5 citizens (Koehler 9).

The Stasi penetrated all sects of East German life. Katherine Epstein breaks down the Stasi as follows. At least two departments spied on the East German Army and police forces. One focused on dissident and church groups, the other on postal and telephone surveillance. Another section controlled the fulfillment of economic plans. The Stasi also maintained its own prison system, guards unit, academy, medical service, bank branch, and professional sports league. In effect, the Stasi was like a state within a state (Epstein 324).

Nothing was too sacred for surveillance in the eyes of the Stasi. They tapped church confessionals and they monitored, via special video cameras, the activity of their suspects through tiny holes in the walls of hotel rooms and apartments. Full-time agents were present in all major industrial plants, apartment buildings, schools, universities, and hospitals. There were Stasi agents who worked round the clock tapping telephone lines. They checked three percent of all mail, a daunting task in itself (Flam 35). Amongst unofficial informants were doctors, lawyers, journalists, writers, actors, sports figures, and hotel personnel. The Stasi recruited IMs of all ages; in fact, roughly 10,000 IMs, six percent of the total, were under the age of 18 (Koehler 8). Such large numbers indicate popular complicity with governmental oppression. Thus, one must ask why so many chose to comply with the Stasi and even act as unofficial informants.

A number of factors explain the large number of East German citizens who acted as unofficial informants while living under Communist rule. First, some people acted as informants as a way of inflicting revenge on people wronged them wrong in some way. Second, privileges were few and far between in a state marred by oppression and a lack of material goods. Thus citizens attempted to help themselves by acting as unofficial informants. They hoped that their compliance would gain them favor in the eyes of the communist government. Finally, some acted as unofficial informants because they feared what would happen to them if they took no action upon learning about a friend, family member or neighbor's insubordination. In the words of Catherine Epstein, "IMs had placed

fellow citizens at the mercy of a strong, repressive state. They had made possible the regime's assault on privacy, honesty, and truth. And they betrayed the elemental trust that allows meaningful human interaction" (334).

The relative stabilization of the population following the erection of the Berlin Wall allowed for the subsequent stabilization and expansion of the MfS. The MfS expanded as the Communist government saw the threat of revolt throughout the Eastern bloc. Statistics indicate that the bulk of MfS expansion took place between 1968, the year of the Prague Spring, and 1982, when Brezhnev died (Epstein 324). While one of the SED's favorite slogans was: "*arbeite mit, plane mit, regiere mit*" (Fulbrook 257) ("work together, plan together and govern together!"), the people of East Germany knew not to overstep their limits. They further knew that for those who did speak a little too candidly against the regime, there was severe and unyielding punishment. One case in which this was particularly evident was that of Josef Kneifel.

Kneifel began protesting the politicization of the workplace and other instances of communist oppression in the early 1960s. Although he did not want to be arrested, he said: "To live in this state called the DDR was not possible and just to plod along like a dazed animal was against my nature" (qtd. in Koehler 116). Kneifel was very skilled as a welder and lathe operator, and thus the functionaries were initially somewhat lenient in their punishment of his actions, only giving him warnings. Eventually, the party grew intolerant of his dissent, and in 1975 he was sentenced to 10 months in prison for proclaiming to his coworkers that Josef Stalin had committed gruesome crimes against humanity, and for saying that the SED and its affiliated parties had "prostituted themselves to become vassals of Moscow." While serving ten months of hard labor, Kneifel was beaten and dehumanized by Stasi prison wardens. Upon his release, his regular identity card was replaced with the Stasi PM-12, a temporary document that had to be renewed every twelve months (Koehler 117). PM-12 papers were issued only to convicted criminals, known political opponents, or persons with mental problems. PM-12 papers served as branding of sorts, and even those sympathetic to Kneifel would not dare to hire him. For the next four years Kneifel would work odd jobs that would provide bare minimum subsistence for him and his family. He became enraged at what he perceived to be outward communist aggression

in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. As a means of protest, Kneifel made a homemade bomb which he used to blow up a monument of a Soviet tank. Kneifel was sure that he would be caught, but to his surprise he escaped safely. The SED imposed a blackout on coverage of the event, but word of the bombing spread throughout the GDR by mouth.

Kneifel managed to avoid persecution for five months until he made the grave mistake of confiding in his pastor and other church friends about the incident. Shortly thereafter, he was arrested as he entered the plant where he worked. The secret trial of Kneifel began March 9, 1981 at a heavily guarded courthouse. Kneifel was determined to “boycott the farcical proceedings,” and when he refused to accept a sentence from an all-communist jury and judge, he was thrown out of court without ever hearing that he would be sentenced to life in prison.

Kneifel faced very hard times while in prison. He was initially put in an unheated cell measuring no more than six feet square. He was beaten countless times and he was often dragged outside and drenched with cold water in the dead of winter. He served a year in dank, dark solitary confinement. He was later put in a cell with a murderer, and with a violent child molester who was notorious for twisting other inmate’s arms out of their sockets. Such pairings were common practice in Stasi prisons, designed to subject political prisoners to increased psychological trauma. Kneifel protested such attempts to “criminalize” political prisoners and thus began his first of many hunger strikes. Throughout his time in prison, Kneifel continued to find ways to protest even as his punishment grew more and more severe. He would cut himself and draw caricatures mocking the prison wards and communism on his cell walls, and he would write “political prisoner” down the leg of his pants. Kneifel was finally released from prison and sent to live with his wife in West Germany on July 13, 1987. The release of Kneifel was an “act of mercy” by Erich Honecker, the leader of East Germany, as a political ploy to improve relations with West Germany prior to his state visit two months later.

Kneifel’s story is a brash example of the ruthlessness exercised by the regime. Though uncharacteristic of the average East German citizen’s experience with the Stasi, his story illustrates that the Stasi saw no limit in their use of torture. Upon the release of his Stasi file in 1992, Kneifel was shocked to discover that he had been denounced by several former ministers and family friends: “I realized then that the DDR was even a

greater cesspool than anyone could have imagined” (qtd. in Koehler 124). In such a vast system of surveillance, one really doesn’t know who to trust, as anyone could be an informer. Although not everyone faced persecution, everyone was within the reach of oppression. Living in the GDR meant living under the constant threat of ideological or political persecution. Repression was so central to life in East Germany that it became normal, in a way. While some citizens were enticed by the benefits provided in acting as unofficial informants, others used denunciations as their own personal vendettas. Those who were reluctant to denounce dissenters often feared for their own safety and gave in to the pressure. In this way, the Stasi were everywhere. If they were not physically present, their perceived threat led to denunciations. The constant awareness of the Stasi and of a repressive communist government fundamentally altered the way that East German citizens went about everyday life.

Life at Home

Citizens in the GDR were very much aware that had they been living on the other side of the Wall. Life would be very different for them. Regardless, life in the GDR gradually became more and more “normal” in the sense that citizens learned to live in a way in which they could go about their daily lives with minimal governmental interference (Madarasz 46).

In theory, life was very satisfactory in the GDR. It was the intention of the regime to give each citizen:

Good housing conditions, childcare and shopping facilities, clean streets and pathways, well-maintained gardens, playgrounds and sports facilities, quality restaurants, the care of citizens of advanced age, the shaping of an interesting cultural life, including youth dances, discotheques and harvest festivals, the cultivation of village traditions and the furthering sense of *Heimat*, civil defense, disposal of rubbish and sewage, ensuring winter road service and other communal political tasks essential to life. (“Information über Probleme und Aufgaben” 4)

In practice, however, the ability for the SED to provide such a life was severely inhibited by a general economic weakness. In taking on such a

broad scope of responsibilities, and failing to meet them, the regime met with a great deal of blame and resentment. Where in the West, private owners could be blamed for certain deficiencies in housing or consumer goods, in the East, inadequacies in the quality of living were blamed squarely on the state. Though citizens were not allowed to speak in direct defiance of the government, they were allowed to file individual citizen's petitions to the state. Throughout the course of the regime, complaints about inadequate housing were, by and large, the most common (Fulbrook 51). Rather than repairing much of the damage caused during the war, the SED and the Soviets found it more cost effective to construct new, relatively cheap apartment blocks. Between 1958 and 1971, an average of 60,000 to 70,000 new houses were built each year (Fulbrook 52). For many living in East Germany, especially those living in the older flats, the basic amenities that were taken for granted in the West (hot water, indoor toilet or shower) were not readily accessible (Fulbrook 53).

Within the home, however, East German citizens found refuge from the surveillance of the outside world. Because the Stasi seemed to be omnipresent, individuals had to modify their conduct accordingly. This was evident in all facets of everyday life within East Germany. One example in which this was particularly apparent was in the way in which East Germans raised their children. While citizens in the West enjoyed an abundance of cultural and economic freedoms, the citizens of the GDR had to adapt to a more standardized life, and had to prepare their children to do the same. Parents in the GDR had more protective and controlling attitudes to child rearing. East German parents tended to want to shield their children from harm while at the same time adhering to a uniform set of child-rearing principles (Uhlendorf 80). The family in the GDR was officially seen as the smallest unit or "cell" of the collective socialist whole, rather than a "private sphere" of mutual love (Fulbrook 117). The prevailing child-rearing ideology defined the primary goals of parenting as conformity and fulfillment of duty, observance of rules and norms, and assumption of and responsibility for others (Uhlendorf 72). In actuality, families tended to compensate for their dissatisfaction with extra-familial life by focusing more strongly on the nuclear family. In the privacy of their own homes, people felt less threatened by secret police and thus felt more comfortable in discussing their gripes regarding the regime. This, of course, is quite ironic. The SED had hoped to implement

the idea of a collective rather than a nuclear family within the culture; yet at the same time, they created such a vast system of distrust and repression that it was almost impossible to fully trust anyone outside of one's own nuclear family. According to Harald Uhlendorff, a professor at the University of Potsdam, "It thus seems reasonable to assume that East Germans developed a stronger family orientation than their counterparts to the west, where the social significance of the family had never been challenged" (72).

Life at Work

In 1961, the SED regime was well aware that for the survival of German socialism, it was of utmost importance to improve the country's economic performance while alleviating some of the socio-political tension that was undermining the stability of everyday life (Madarasz 46). As repressive as it was, the construction of the Berlin Wall did bring about some positive changes within the German Democratic Republic. With the prevention of emigration and the consequent assurance of a secure labor supply, the economic situation began to stabilize. Economic reforms that had been out of the question in the 1950's due to a fleeing population were officially embraced in the early 1960's (Fullbrook 37). By 1965, the SED introduced a number of legislative provisions had been made aimed at improving overall social conditions. They focused on work environment, medical and social care, workers' meals, products and industrial wares through enterprise, culture and sports, child care, provisions for holiday and spare-time activities, accommodation, and public transport to and from work (Fullbrook 52). These newfound economic improvements led to increased leisure time and a slight increase in wages for the citizens of the GDR. These conditions would later be undermined by new governmental restrictions within the workplace, but in the 1960's many East Germans clung to the idea that things were looking up and that a better life could yet be achieved.

Another goal of the socialists was to create equality between men and women. In the GDR, there was a strong belief that employment was the key to eradication of inequality between men and women (Sorenson and Trappe 399). It has been documented that by the time the GDR dissolved, it had achieved virtual gender equality in terms of years of schooling, training, and labor force experience. In spite of this, women

continued to receive less pay and had less access to powerful positions (Sorenson and Trappe 398).

In terms of maternity leave, the GDR had a friendly and accommodating system. First, working women were allowed paid time off to attend prenatal clinics. Not only were these clinics free to attend, but a reward of 100 marks (about half a week's pay) was provided to those who attended during their first 16 weeks of pregnancy (Greenberg 122). Other examples of benefits provided during pregnancy and early infancy included: six weeks of paid leave from work before the estimated date of delivery and twenty weeks after; optional unpaid leave for the remainder of the first baby's first year of life, with the mother's original position or a comparable one remaining available until she returned to work; \$500 for clothing and infant furnishings; generous financial support for single, employed mothers who had to stay home because they were unable to find a place in an infant day care center; progressive reduction, with the birth of each child, in the amount to be repaid on a \$2,500 interest-free loan available to newly married couples under 26 years of age; and 45 minutes of paid leave from work twice a day for breastfeeding (Greenberg 127).

Additionally, the GDR constitution granted its citizens medical and social services. In case of sickness or accident, they were guaranteed financial security, free medical care, drugs and appliances ("Panorama DDR"). Thus while citizens were displeased with the material condition of the GDR in comparison to the West, they did enjoy the securities that such generous social welfare programs afforded. In the words of Barbara Lassig, a 42-year-old mother of three who now owns an apartment building in Dresden, "The state gave us a lot" (quoted in Ewing 70).

The priority given to improvement of working conditions in the 1960s did not last for long. In 1971, Erich Honecker was made SED general secretary. Honecker thought the key to an improvement in material culture in the GDR was the renewed centralization of the economy. This proved to be disastrous as the costs of social policy continually rose, and the disparity between increased costs and what the economy could sustain continually widened (Fulbrook 39). Consequently, there was a long-term decline in real funding for the improvement of working and living conditions. With continual economic decline came growing discontent amongst the East German people. Nevertheless, real changes occurred

in East Germany following the erection of the Berlin Wall and the securing of a labor force. In the workplace, where people's daily lives came into contact with the regime's principles, expectations and power, came the internalization of the concepts and methods of the East German dictatorship (Madarasz 61), even as East Germans remained dissatisfied with their material inferiority to the West.

Consumerism in the GDR

In January of 1961, SED general secretary Hans Ulbricht wrote in a letter to Khrushchev that "the booming economy in West Germany, which is visible to every citizen in the GDR, is the main reason that in over ten years about two million people have left our Republic" (Kopstein 44). While the Wall effectively stopped the embarrassing trend of westward migration, it did not prevent the East Germans from being drawn to the material allure of the West. As stated by East German psychiatrist Hans-Joachim Maaz:

There was nothing that could beat the fetish value of western goods. Empty western beer or cola cans were placed as ornaments on the shelves of the wall unit, plastic bags bearing western advertisements were bartered, western clothes made the man. Real shortages and inferior merchandise in our country and the surplus of items and quality luxuries in the West were the emotional background for a never-ending and never-satisfying spiral of consumption. (86)

Whilst the SED knew that the happiness of the people relied in large part upon improving their material conditions, the fact remained that the East German industrial economy was not built for the production of consumer goods. There was great difficulty in trying to deliver modern washing machines, refrigerators, furniture, radios, televisions, and automobiles to East German citizens (Betts 748). As a result, consumer life in East Germany was marred by constant shortages and a long string of waiting lists. While many were aware of the state's repressive measures, not everyone was affected by them. Most citizens *were* affected, however, by the unsatisfactory material conditions that impaired their everyday lives. This has caused many to argue that the revolution of 1989 was essentially

a materialist one (Betts 764). By 1989, East German citizens were altogether fed up with their quality of life and hoped to enjoy the benefits available to their neighbors in the West.

Though the effort proved fruitless, the SED did all it could to dissuade the people of East Germany from aspiring to life in the West. A 1965 report to the Central Committee of the SED suggested:

Art and literature, with their specific means, can help develop the creative powers of people in a socialist society. But, in every area of art, this requires a decisive struggle against that which is old and backward from the capitalist past, and against the influences of capitalist non-culture and immorality, which find expression in American sex-propaganda and the glorification of banditry (Schubbe 1076).

Propaganda posters often depicted the capitalist West as being once again on the road to fascism. In a poster with the heading “the Resurrection,” Konrad Adenauer, the West German chancellor, was presented as standing in Adolf Hitler’s place, carrying an American flag and reading a speech. Other posters depicted the United States as dangerous imperialists. In a poster entitled “the World’s Policeman,” an American soldier was shown to have burned his feet standing at a fiery-red globe while attempting to dominate the world (*Windstärke* 12).

In reality, the material and economic backwardness of the GDR made the East German people feel unwelcome wherever they went. The East German “phony marks” were exchanged at a very poor rate, while government officials who traveled were often more interested in foreign exchange from the West (Bremkes 1). Travelers from the GDR were often placed in the worst campgrounds and treated like second-class citizens in restaurants (Bremkes 2). Vacations often left East Germans disillusioned at the disparity between the propaganda which preached socialist brotherhood and the reality in which they were pushed to the side in favor of wealthier Westerners.

Conclusion

In the end, the viability of the East German state relied upon the Wall. The early years of the Republic were marked by massive rates of

emigration and economic instability. It was only after the building of the Wall that life became “normal” for those living in East Germany. The securing of a labor supply brought (temporary) economic gains that led to an overall improvement in the East German quality of life. Without the option to emigrate, East Germans were caught up in a system in which they had to participate. The expansion of government surveillance and the weakness of the economy caused East Germans to change the way they lived their lives. Families turned inward as they began to distrust the outside world. At the same time, direct contact with the expectations and demands of the regime in the workplace caused East Germans to internalize some of the values of the SED.

Those living in East Germany were aware of the political and physical constraints which confined them, yet many clung to the hope that a better life could be achieved within the GDR. While the regime was quite repressive, many learned how to live within its limits. In life, we must sometimes deal with the hand that we have been given. Some East Germans learned to be as, if not more, oppressive than their Soviet counterparts. Others simply did what they had to do to live as peaceful a life as they could. In playing by the rules of the regime, the people were themselves changed. What the people of the former German Democratic Republic all have in common is the fact that they forever have been affected by their life behind the Wall.

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