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GDR Nostalgia (1996)

In the mid-1990s, an alleged GDR nostalgia made headlines in the German news media. In the following piece, Hans-J. Misselwitz, who was once an active member of the GDR peace movement, offers a critical analysis of some Western press reports on this topic. He rejects the notion of GDR nostalgia, claiming that political and mental differences between East and West Germans are the result of distinct life experiences and should have been expected.

Return of the GDR?

If one believes the opinion polls that were touted as a sensation by the news magazine *Der Spiegel* in the summer of 1995, then we are facing a paradoxical situation¹: although the majority of East Germans consistently emphasize that their economic situation has improved since unification, they express increasing disappointment with the course of the unification process, and no fewer than three-quarters of them see themselves as “second-class citizens” in Germany. To be sure, only 15% of East Germans still want the GDR back, fewer than ever before. Still, 75% of these new FRG citizens recently asserted that they were proud of their lives in the GDR. Five years after German unification, considerable majorities among East Germans even believe that conditions in seven out of nine important areas of societal life were better in the GDR than in the united Germany. With this, a dramatic turnaround in East German public opinion about conditions in the West had occurred, for in 1990 the Federal Republic had appeared superior to East Germans in no fewer than seven out of nine areas of comparison!

Mind you, the rebirth of a feeling of community (a sense of “us”) among East Germans as a reaction to the circumstances accompanying the unification process has already been under way for a while. Instead of growing togetherness, a picture that was almost the inverse of the one seen in 1990 had already presented itself in the summer of 1992: at that time, 51% of East Germans were inclined to see themselves once again as “citizens of the (former) GDR” rather than as simply “Germans” (40%). In comparison, in 1990, under the banner of unification, 66%

¹ *Der Spiegel*, No. 27, July 3, 1995, “Stolz aufs eigene Leben” [“Proud of One’s Own Life”]. The results stemmed from a study of trends commissioned by the magazine and carried out by the public opinion research institute Emnid.

of the citizens of what was still the GDR already saw themselves as “Germans,” and only 28% still regarded themselves as “GDR citizens.”²

East Germans’ identification with the GDR, which might be unprecedented in this form, cannot be dismissed as the outgrowth of a leftover ideological narrow-mindedness, precisely because it has already been overcome once. Assessments of personal economic situations have not changed substantially since 1992. Rather, one can note clearly that the majority of East Germans feel less and less at home in the Federal Republic in a political sense. Did the people share more with their state than the state shared with them?

Opinion pollsters interpret the present findings to mean that “East Germans are in phase three of their development, a phase in which they are moving ever closer to the West in material terms, yet ever farther away mentally.” After a phase of glorifying the West and a phase of resigned disenchantment that lasted until 1994, a new East-identity is taking hold. “Where once there was only shamefaced explanation, East Germans are now standing by their past, but above all by the will to determine their own future.”³

Why does the German public have such difficulties with this? Where is the problem? Is it perhaps disconcerting that East Germans agree on certain value judgments concerning their past, much more so than when it comes to assessing their economic condition? Is the problem that, with this development, the exact opposite of what was expected in 1990 has taken place? In fact, the economic realities did lead very quickly to disenchantment in the East. Evidently, however, among the majority of people in the East, these realities were not the sole cause of the growing sense of unease. Why had no one anticipated that there are also values other than those that qualify people as consumers?

Many had thought that at least the painful and scandalous “return of the GDR”⁴ that was expected in January 1992 on the occasion of the opening of the Stasi files would offer immunization against any wistfulness for GDR conditions. Intend as the final “outing” of the conditions under real socialism, and carried out as a “revolution after the fact on the basis of files,” the entire operation was to no avail. In fact, in political terms, this entire incident seemingly achieved precisely the opposite.

[. . .]

If there was a misunderstanding that made matters difficult from the very beginning, then this, according to West German journalist Karl Heinz Bohrer, who is devoid of any trace of “GDR nostalgia,” was the fault of the CDU, which acted as though “the residents of the GDR were a variety of West Germans who had been oppressed for forty years.” Far from it! In the GDR, “a

² Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, “Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit im Schatten der Stasi” [“Reappraising the Past in the Shadow of the Stasi,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, No. 181, August 6, 1992, p. 8.

³ Klaus Peter Schöppner, managing director of the Bielefeld-based public opinion research institute Emnid, quoted in the *Berliner Zeitung* from August 1, 1995, p. 4.

⁴ Klaus Hartung, “Die Wiederkehr der DDR” [“The Return of the GDR”], *Die Zeit*, No. 2, January 3, 1992, p. 5.

completely different mentality took shape, not only among SED activists, but on a mass scale ...”⁵ Given the current state of the debate, there is nothing one could add to this. Bohrer’s concluding observation certainly lacks no clear understanding of the situation: “Instead of melting pot fantasies, we would have needed differentiation.”⁶

Now we have differentiation. It is loudly lamented in the public area. Secretly, people have fun with it, especially those from the old schools of anti-communism and anti-capitalism. For the distribution of power can thus be described more precisely. As hitherto: if you don’t like it here, then go over there! Karl Heinz Bohrer concluded his reflections from the ivory tower with the English saying, “You can’t have your cake and eat it, too.” Thus, either liquidate or accept. You can’t have both. It’s just that simple.

Source: Hans-J. Misselwitz, *Nicht länger mit dem Gesicht nach Westen. Das neue Selbstbewusstsein der Ostdeutschen* [No Longer Facing toward the West. The New East German Sense of Self]. Verlag J.H.W. Dietz Nachfolger: Bonn, 1996, pp. 26-32.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

⁵ Karl Heinz Bohrer, “Deutsche Revolution und protestantische Mentalität” [“The German Revolution and the Protestant Mentality”], *Merkur*, vol. 46 (1992) 522/23, pp. 958-59.

⁶ Karl Heinz Bohrer, p. 962.