



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 10. One Germany in Europe, 1989 – 2009

Author Daniela Dahn Announces a New East German Self-Confidence (September 21, 1996)

With considerable bitterness, author Daniela Dahn comments on the disappointments of unification, which brought about industrial collapse and Western cultural dominance. She then makes reference to a new East German self-confidence – one that has arisen both from the difficult transition experience and the globalization crisis that also threatens the Western model.

East and West Misunderstand Each Other

Is it the money? A lack of patience? Or is the East too self-confident?

The basic misunderstanding between East and West lies in the fact that one side thinks that it's giving everything away, while the other side thinks that everything is being taken away. The West Germans pay the solidarity surcharge and have to tighten their belts terribly; the East Germans are paying it, too, and on top of that they have, through the hasty monetary union and a *Treuhand* policy that represented Western interests, lost millions of jobs in industry and agriculture.

The cutting of jobs was necessary given the increased demand for efficiency, but de-industrialization on this scale, seventy percent, didn't happen anywhere else in Eastern Europe after the *Wende*. Of course, the devaluation of previous efforts also has psychological effects – to say nothing of the legislator-organized East-West real estate war (“Restitution before Compensation”), which has left millions frustrated and is also proving costly to taxpayers.

The legend that there was no alternative to this kind of reunification, the most expensive for both sides, is cultivated chiefly by those Western minorities who earned themselves silly from unification: banks and industrialists, insurance companies, realtors, lawyers, and notaries. And their faithful servants: certain politicians and journalists. Whoever thinks that such patterns of explanation are nothing but Eastern conspiracy theories needs to be reminded that representative democracy is a society of institutionalized interest groups.

The most organized interest groups manage to push their agendas most successfully. The Eastern interest groups were truly poorly organized. Especially in confusing times of upheaval, democracy runs the risk of being dominated by lobbying interest groups. If that happens, equality of opportunity is blocked for a long time.

It is, in fact, this concern for the common good that many East Germans today find lacking. Wolf Wagner was right on the mark when he pointed out (*taz*, August 8, 1996) that West Germans have become very American. The unclouded faith in the limitless possibilities of the individual strikes me as just as naive as the basic notion that social phenomena have to be explained first of all psychologically.

After six years of unity, one suddenly realizes that this peculiar East German population is developing self-confidence instead of a sense of gratitude. Time to check and see what's going on. And so one gets into an armored jeep and embarks on a safari into the reservation. Boldly, one looks through the binoculars and marvels: members of this species still greet one another with a handshake. And they move in hordes, even though word should have spread that it's more profitable to set out for the watering hole alone.

Well, I guess there's no denying it any longer: mentally, the new federal states are still part of Eastern Europe. And for forty years people there had a different relationship to sociability, to time, and to money. One of my statements, which is instantly understood in the East and just as quickly misunderstood in the West, goes like this: our capital is the experience that money is secondary.

It may well be that this sounds quite antiquated today. That's why in the beginning I still had tremendous respect for tasks we were given, such as the modernization we had to catch up with. By now, many are beginning to suspect that a discontinued [clothing] model was foisted on them for the price of haute couture.

Nobody will take issue with Michael Rutschky (*taz*, August 15, 1996): the GDR was a "deeply unsatisfying way of life." That also expresses my feelings quite accurately. But no small number of Easterners wonder how the FRG, in the form in which it was imposed on us, can be possibly perceived as satisfactory. The collapse of real socialism essentially caught the West on the wrong foot: the unexpected victory allowed the illusion to arise that the unsettled debts of history had now been settled once and for all.

The formerly tormented who now acceded [to the FRG] would finally find contentment in the arms of prosperity and justice. But before they could, as hoped, enjoy pure democracy, a social market economy, and modern emancipation, those things disintegrated between their outstretched hands. More quickly than many of their Western relatives, who were still befogged by their victory, they understood that the model of society, rightly favored up to the *Wende* as a superior civilization, has at this very moment come to an end in its present form. Noting that we joined capitalism at the very moment when its advantages were beginning to dissolve has nothing to do with anti-Western resentments. What is alienating is the brutal energy of the restoration.

Although the profound crisis of the working society and the democracy-endangering globalization of capital are now identified by name, the overwhelming majority in the West is not yet viewing the globalization of worker and employee interests as a challenge. Granted, political activity leaves something to be desired in the East as well, but discussions here unfold quite differently.

Nowhere can this invisible mental division be read more clearly than in the once visibly divided capital: here, the party that calls for the greatest changes has more than 40% support in the East, in the West the figure is not even a tenth of that.

Some Western liberals feel especially accommodating when they concede, in the face of GDR life stories, that there evidently *was* – contrary to Adorno's overused statement – a genuine life in the midst of a false one. I myself was never able to follow this idea, which is taken out of context. For Adorno implies that there is in fact a non-false and thus correct way of being. I take the liberty of questioning this assumption. The differences are a matter of degree. In the end there is nothing but genuine life in the midst of a false one. Even today.

Source: Daniela Dahn, "Ost und West missverstehen sich" ["East and West Misunderstand Each Other"], *taz*, September 21, 1996.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap