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THE LAST EAST GERMAN AND THE MEMORY OF THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

The author ponders over the identity of the last self-identifying East German and wonders what he or she will say before leaving memories of the region behind. He distinguishes among three possible candidates for this honor: the ordinary citizen with little aspiration to political or social notoriety; the enthusiast with an interest in perpetuating the old regime's values; and the dissident activist dedicated to transforming that order. After identifying the likely last East German, the author speculates about the message our protagonist will have to share with the leaders of unified Germany. Finally, he provides reasons for why the Federal Republic can benefit from this advice.

KEYWORDS

German Democratic Republic (GDR); The Left Party; Erich Honecker; *Goodbye, Lenin!*; PDS; Gregor Gysi; Federal Republic of Germany (FRG)

There's an old East German joke that goes like this: "Erich Honecker has been on a trip. He returns to East Berlin to find the city brightly illuminated, but the streets are empty, there's not a person in sight. In a panic, he drives around until he finally comes to the Berlin Wall where he discovers an enormous hole. There, on a handwritten note, he reads. 'Erich, you're the last to go. Please turn out the lights when you leave.'" Today, Honecker can no longer be the last East German to leave the territory of the German



Democratic Republic (GDR). The general secretary of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) is no longer with us. Yet, others may still qualify to replace him. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the revolution of 1989, expressions of a certain east Germanness persist in the region. People convey their feelings in different ways: a wistfulness for the comforting niches of family and friends; a romantic attachment to the economic and political certainties of “real-existing socialism;” an outspoken frustration and resentment at the continuing burdens of national unification. Nonetheless, let us assume that these sentiments mellow with the passage of time, as they most likely will with each new generation. Who will be the last self-identifying East German? For that matter, will he or she have anything to say to us before leaving the region behind?

For two reasons, it is appropriate that we now begin thinking about this last East German. First, personal laments and nostalgia do not fully constitute an individual’s identity. The longing for some part of the GDR past is real for most easterners, but this emotion is primarily a complaint about the consequences of unification, not a desire to turn back the clock. Second, and just as important, the coming of the last East German raises profound questions about how future generations will interpret the fact that one part of Germany was ruled by a communist dictatorship for forty years. Is it possible that in another forty years, or even less time, no one will even care that the GDR existed? Indeed, will it matter to posterity that Germany was divided for much of its post World War II history?

To respond to these questions, we must begin by recognizing that one cannot speak about East Germans as a uniform bloc. Not long after the GDR’s collapse, it quickly became clear that unification would mean different things to different people. In this article, I address this issue by distinguishing among three personality types: the ordinary citizen with little aspiration to attain political power or social notoriety; the enthusiast for certain aspects of the old regime with a vested interest in perpetuating its values; and the dissident activist with a long dedication to transforming that order. As the reader will see, I believe that the last East German will come from the ranks of this final type, the dissident. Once I have established this point, I will then seek to anticipate this individual’s parting words. As I contend, our activist will have a lot to say about his or her contributions to the events of 1989. But even more significant, these words will call our attention to the ways in which a country, like modern Germany, can benefit from an underutilized legacy of defiance against dictatorship.

Three Types of East Germans

Let us begin with an ideal-typical person-on-the-street. In the years before 1989, this individual's defining quality, which he shared in common with all of his siblings, school friends, and fellow workers, was to be a realist. On the one hand, he did not have to watch West German television (although it was one of his regular pastimes) to know that Erich Honecker and his politburo colleagues would never live up to their promises of creating a world of socialist abundance and prosperity. He knew that he was destined to lead a life of hard work and low expectations. On the other hand, this East German recognized that there was nothing to be gained by openly voicing his dissatisfaction. Challenging his government's authority would have been foolhardy. Moreover, it would have been futile. Given that none of the SED's policies were likely to change in the foreseeable future, his safest bet was to make the most of what life had to offer, the city soccer club, a local pub, the market for Trabi parts, and above all, a carefree weekend at the family *Kleingarten*.

In drawing this characterization, I do not mean to suggest that our ordinary East German's feelings of attachment to his country were shallow or insincere. After all, it was inconceivable to him that he could choose any other life. But by the same token, when we consider how quickly the GDR fell apart after the opening of its borders, these feelings were unambiguously not deep enough. When tens of thousands of his compatriots poured into West Berlin in the first weeks after 9 November 1989, they were initially motivated by curiosity for the new and not yet opposition to the old. But, capitalism and the freedoms that went along with it quickly proved to be irresistible. Once the tangible benefits of life in West Germany were confirmed, there was no longer any point to preserving the GDR. Ironically, one of the SED's chief theorists, Otto Reinhold, had already acknowledged this fact in an interview with Radio DDR II on 19 August 1989. When asked why the Honecker government was not engaging in serious economic reforms like its Soviet counterparts, he emphasized that his country's sole reason for existence lay in its exclusive claim to represent a *socialist* alternative to West Germany. "What justification," Reinhold asked rhetorically, "would a capitalist GDR have next to a capitalist Federal Republic?" The answer, it became clear, was none at all.

This point is illustrated in a subtle way in the popular film, *Goodbye, Lenin!* (2003). On one level, the movie is about a mother and faithful Party member who has a heart attack and falls into a coma on the GDR's fortieth anniversary. Her family and friends are so worried about her fragile con-

dition that when she wakes up just before German unification is to take place in 1990, they go to comical lengths to convince her that nothing has changed. On a deeper level, the story is really about her son, Alex, who along with everyone else around him, has lost no time in shedding his East German identity. While his mother sleeps, he clothes himself in western gear, exposes himself to the corrupting influences of Heavy Metal and degenerate art, and relaxes by smoking dope with his Russian girlfriend. Alex's only misfortune, it seems, is when he loses his job at a failed state-run television repair shop. Still, it is telling that this loss does not bother him at all. Indeed, what the film's director has him say as he leaves the building can hardly be coincidental: "I was the last one out. I turned off the lights."

What happens figuratively in *Goodbye, Lenin!* is taking place literally every day in the former GDR. East Germany is no longer a place to be; it is a place to leave. Between 1990 and 2008, the region's population shrank from 18.2 million inhabitants to 16.6 million. Demographers estimate that an additional 1 million departures will take place by 2020. This rapid rate of depopulation, combined with a persistent decline in birth rates, should not surprise anyone since there is no clear future in this part of Germany. Significantly greater numbers of eastern Germans are unemployed or underemployed than in the West. Making the situation worse, those who leave in search of jobs are the young and the skilled whose services are needed to turn the region's economy around. Some have even fewer reasons to stay because they were children or not yet even born when the GDR ceased to exist. In contrast, those who stay behind do so not because of affection but because they have no other choice. With the exception of the few who find work in growth areas, such as Leipzig and Dresden, many will only add to the region's problems rather than alleviating them. A steadily rising population of older and retired citizens will not only strain the region's social security system but also test the convictions of the gainfully employed who must pay the taxes to support it. Indeed, eastern Germany's economic prospects are regarded to be so uncertain that even immigrant workers steer clear of the area.¹

If our ordinary, apolitical citizen is already in the process of leaving the region, psychologically but not yet physically, what about looking for signs of the last East German in the second group that I have mentioned above? Here, I refer to the individuals who have routinely cast their votes for the SED's successor party, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) or, in the past few years, the amalgam of political groups known as The Left Party (Die Linke). In this case, let us say that our potential last East Ger-

man was an idealistic young official in the Ministry of Culture who suddenly found herself out of work in 1990. Like many rising party members, she had never been enamored with all aspects of the Honecker government's policies, especially its disinclination to listen to new ideas. But, she still clung to the egalitarian and collectivist values that, she felt, had characterized her country in better times. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that she would be attracted to the PDS. Thanks to the energetic leadership of people like Gregor Gysi and Lothar Bisky, here was a party that would guarantee her a job. At the same time, the PDS would be a defender of many of the social policies that she admired—full employment, inexpensive housing, and free health care. In the face of a seemingly constant assault by carpetbaggers and *besser Weissis*, she could hold onto the best of East Germany without having to put up with the old regime's bricks, mortar, and barbed wire.

The big question, though, is how long it will matter to this young woman that she identifies herself as an East German. In many ways, this issue has become a defining question for the PDS and Die Linke in the 2000s. When one considers the SED successor party's evolution, the source of its success has been its continuing ability to present itself as two types of parties. In its time, the PDS was simultaneously a protest party that represented East German interests and, in its new form as the cornerstone of Die Linke, a national party that attempted to speak for all Germans. Inevitably, these two identities will clash. By design or by default, I believe, the party's national aspirations will come out on top.

In its early years, the PDS was inconceivable as anything but an East German organization.² Precisely because of this limitation, however, it was the only party in the East that could effectively present itself as truly independent of western influence. This position virtually guaranteed its leaders the privilege of representing the case against unification. The party's good fortune was the key to its extraordinary showings at all levels of electoral competition. At times, the party's successes at the voting booth were tested by the intense, internecine battles among the hodgepodge of warring groups that made its existence possible. Still, by the late 1990s, the PDS had earned a reputation in the East of being dedicated to addressing the needs of its voter base and capable of working effectively with other parties.

Against this background, one might think that the party's transformation into Die Linke in the mid 2000s will bring a robust East German voice into national politics. In fact, the opposite is true. Almost by definition, the entire strategy of merging the PDS's distinctive political culture with the motley group of radical intellectuals, disaffected trade union

activists, ex-Green environmentalists, and Fidelistas that comprise its western membership is destined to test the loyalties of its base. The results will be paradoxical. If Die Linke implodes due to its internal tensions, voters like our former SED official will lose faith in the efficacy of its leaders. Yet, ironically, if the party somehow succeeds in become a nationally competitive Volkspartei, it may inadvertently provoke these same supporters to look closely at the options presented by other all-German parties.³

For these reasons, I believe the last East German will come from the ranks of that small group of persons, the GDR's former dissidents and regime critics, who had the wherewithal to question their government's authority when opposition of any kind seemed pointless. The commemorations of the twentieth anniversary of the Wall's opening provided politicians, news organizations, and talk-show hosts with a pleasant occasion to reacquaint themselves with these heroes of yesteryear. Those who were once oppressed by a German dictatorship were momentarily given the opportunity to share their stories of ancient confrontations with the Stasi and the hardships of being ostracized by their own communities. Nevertheless, it is also part of the story of reunification that over the past two decades, these individuals have been among the most politically marginalized segments of the eastern German population.

How easy it has been to lose sight of the fact that these critics provided most of the moral substance and intellectual coherence that crystallized in fall 1989. Their record of defiance was long-standing. More than a decade earlier, activists had demanded that their country's leaders provide for precisely the democratic rights and free elections that were finally made possible with the fall of the Wall. After the signing of the Helsinki Final Accords in 1975, they openly campaigned for international support to pressure their government to reform its policies and live up to the civil rights guarantees in its constitution. For these efforts, many in their ranks, such as Wolf Biermann and Reiner Kunze, were expelled to the West or imprisoned, or both. Nonetheless, the threat of retaliation did not prevent others from stepping into their shoes. Because the dissidents' numbers were never large and because they were thinly spread out among a variety of opposition groups (e.g., in Lutheran parishes, women's circles, and pacifist bodies), most outsiders, including this writer, were disposed to dismiss these protests as ineffectual. Nonetheless, thanks to the opening of the files of the former Ministry of State Security, we now know that they had a profoundly unsettling impact on the communist regime.

To take just one episode out of many, consider the significance of the so-called Environmental Library which a handful of youthful idealists set

up in September 1986 to call attention to the environmental dangers of East Germany's industrial policies. A year later, this little hole-in-the-wall office across from East Berlin's Church of Zion would become known throughout the country as a symbol of defiance to dictatorship when it was stormed by the secret police and its founders were arrested. Yet, imagine what its organizers must have thought about their activities during its short existence. Every day, when they entered the courtyard where it was located, they knew that they were at risk of being expelled from their school or losing their jobs. At the same time, they were exhilarated by the possibility of demonstrating what their country could look like as a free society. The library operated in full view of the authorities who patrolled it. But in one way or another, these idealists succeeded in making it a repository for forbidden texts, a distribution center for *samizdat* literature, and a gathering place for the disaffected. In their hearts, they were convinced that all one needed to change their society was to muster the will to demand it.

In this light, we can understand why the founders the Environmental Library, as well as others in their position, would still be heavily invested in their East German identity. For years, they sacrificed everything for principles whose time had not yet come. At last, for a brief but glorious period in late 1989 and early 1990, they saw their dreams of a transformed GDR come to fruition: mass demonstrations against a seemingly unshakable dictatorship, a proliferation of independent opposition groups and nascent political parties, and a culture of civic engagement and dialogue that would have made Alexis de Tocqueville blush.

For these reasons, it makes sense that the last East German should come from those who could rejoice the most for *their* country in its final days. Unlike a majority of ordinary East Germans, their goal was to reform the GDR, not leave it. And unlike the followers of the PDS, they had no interest in compromising their principles for the sake of electoral gain. Thus, the loss of the GDR remains a nagging wound in the personal identity of each individual.

The Memory of the GDR

What will the last East German say when he or she turns out the lights? If this individual is one of the former dissidents, as I predict, the message will be simple: "don't forget what we accomplished." Of course, we would not want to deny any of the GDR's former citizens the right to

make a similar claim. All human beings are entitled to have lives worth remembering. But our last East German merits special attention. This person's resilience in dangerous times demonstrated that the fight for basic freedoms and human rights was worth making in even the most desperate circumstances.

Will this bequest mean anything to Germany's leaders ten or twenty years from now? In my view, the answer to this question will depend upon how they choose to interpret the dissidents' historical impact. Until 1989, the closest that Germany had ever come to a democratic upheaval was the convening of the National Assembly in Frankfurt am Main on 18 May 1848. This event, too, was rooted in the determination of an assortment of regime critics to stand up to an oppressive government. What the new parliament's members lacked in experience, they made up for in bold demands for political representation and an expansion of suffrage. When their grand experiment with liberalism failed, it was followed by nearly 100 years of despair. But on a second occasion, on 23 May 1949, these aspirations were reawakened with the proclamation of the West German Federal Republic. The distinguishing characteristic of the new state was its constitutional commitment to the rule of law. The Basic Law obligated Bonn to become a "militant democracy," committed to the defense of human dignity. In one major respect, however, this achievement was wanting. Because it was founded under the auspices of foreign occupation, it lacked one feature that was manifestly present in East Germany in 1989. This was the legitimacy to be gained through popular acclamation.

We know that the opportunity to share in certain aspects of this legacy was not lost on West Germany's leaders. One full month before the GDR's accession to the Federal Republic, foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher employed a verbal sleight of hand to inject his western compatriots into the discussion. "This was the first successful revolution in our history," Genscher proclaimed. "It was a peaceful revolution, which gave it particular historical value ... In these months, our people have demonstrated their political maturity."⁴ I am not personally persuaded that these events constituted a full-blown revolution since, much like our ordinary East German, the hundreds of thousands of people who went into the streets throughout the fall had many different motives. But, we can account for Genscher's suggestive manipulation of the facts as a perfectly understandable attempt to establish a common bond between a long-divided people.

It is less easy to comprehend what has transpired in subsequent years. Once the historical import of these events was acknowledged, they have

played an ever-decreasing role in the public articulation of Germany's official memory. In the immediate aftermath of the GDR's collapse, it is fair to say that there was a certain amount of *willful* forgetting on Bonn's part. Few of the Federal Republic's leaders had any confidence in the former dissidents' ability to meet eastern Germany's daunting challenges. They had good reason to be concerned. The representatives of a variety of eastern citizens' groups were determined to engage in elaborate negotiations over the terms under which national unity would be achieved. Yet, the Kohl government was not in the position to wait patiently. As the GDR's economy vanished into air, tens of thousands of the country's citizens were demonstrating with their feet how little they cared about their socialist identity. Unless Bonn wanted to see unification forced upon it through a massive rush to leave the GDR, it had no choice but to move the process along as quickly as it could. Accordingly, it was not to the heroes that the architects of unification turned for leadership but to people, such as Günther Krause and Peter-Michael Diestel, who had played little or no role in overthrowing the communist regime. In this regard, the dissidents were absolutely right when they claimed that their revolution had been hijacked from under their feet. "Please tell me, who was this Herr Krause," the outspoken activist Bärbel Bohley complained years later. "And who was this Herr Diestel? No one knew these people who were suddenly negotiating with Herr Kohl."⁵

These were the early days. Since then, the forgetting that has typified western German attitudes about East Germany in recent years does not appear to be consciously negligent. It is simply negligent. In 2010, one would expect to see a significant eastern German presence in the Federal Republic's most visible leadership positions. Yet, when German citizens went to the polls on 27 September 2009 to elect a new Bundestag, there were only two politicians from the East in the chancellor's cabinet. One was the former Social Democratic mayor of Leipzig, Wolfgang Tiefensee, whose *Ressort* was the not-so-scintillating Ministry for Transport, Building and Urban Development. The other was the chancellor herself, Angela Merkel, who bristles at the idea of being defined as an East German. After twenty years, can it still be that sufficient numbers of easterners with the qualifications for major political office cannot be found?

Symbolic tributes to the legacy of East Germany have been equally wanting. Indications of forgetting were present as early as June 1994, when Helmut Kohl presided over the opening of Bonn's National Museum of Contemporary German History (Haus der Geschichte). Long in gestation as one of the chancellor's pet projects, the museum was cre-

ated to pay homage to the vitality of German democracy. Somehow, the East German opposition movement was left entirely out of the exhibition. Of the few highlights of East German history that were included, the museum's curators mysteriously found room for Erich Honecker's work desk. A decade and a-half later, forgetting has become a habit. This instinct was evident when, in May 2009, another chancellor, Merkel, opened a major art exhibit in Berlin that commemorated the sixtieth anniversary of the Basic Law. Here again, East Germany's existence was barely a whisper. Of the sixty paintings and sculptures in the collection, only one was from the forty-year history of the GDR.

Under these circumstances, one can easily understand why many of the former activists are inclined to replace their indignation with resignation. The East German author and playwright, Christoph Hein, was among those whom Merkel invited to the art exhibition. In a widely circulated letter in which he politely turned down his chancellor's invitation, Hein remarked about the peculiarity of celebrating a document, the Basic Law, which was written to protect freedom. How could one, at the same time, ignore the work of people who had once battled for this cause? "I belong to the excluded," he wrote, "and not to the excluders."⁶ While Hein stayed home, others simply left the country. For example, Bohley went to Bosnia to work with the victims of genocide. She later explained that she did not intend to take leave of her East German identity. Rather, she hoped to preserve that identity by applying the principles of the citizens' movement to real life. "I didn't see any more purpose for me in Germany," she noted. "The lines were drawn after unification. I could put the new conditions behind me or simply sit in the corner and pout."⁷ Although Bohley returned to Berlin in January 2009, one wonders whether the Federal Republic will be able to provide her with the sense of purpose she is seeking.

No Reason to Remember East Germany?

One cannot fault those, like Hein and Bohley, who are potentially last East Germans for their disgruntlement over Berlin's habit of forgetting. After all, the last thing either wants to happen is to go down in history as one of Friedrich Nietzsche's "last men," obsessed with memories that are both stagnant and devoid of meaning. But this fate is not preordained. As J. D. Bindenagel, the deputy U.S. Ambassador to the GDR at the time of the Wall's fall, argued in 2007, the Federal Republic has never had the option to pick or choose what it likes about its history. In this case, its leaders are

morally obliged to remember that the events that led to unification provided Germany with a legitimacy that the old West German state could never have acquired on its own. For this reason, in Bindenagel's view, Berlin's failure to act on this principle has been one of its greatest "sins of omission."⁸ I would add another point. Germany's tendency to downplay or ignore the dissidents' role in destabilizing the SED regime has been an equally substantial missed opportunity

Yet, Bindenagel and perhaps even Hein and Bohley would have been heartened by one recent exception to Berlin's forgetfulness. The occasion was a commemoration on 8 May 2009 of the efforts of the East German opposition to identify cases of SED voting fraud in the GDR's last municipal elections of 7 May 1989. In her address, Merkel pointedly praised the role of the individuals who put their commitment to justice ahead of their personal well-being. Their success in documenting instances of electoral malfeasance, she emphasized, generated the energy that transformed the GDR's small protest movement into a country-wide force. "Without May 7," she underscored, "no November 9 and no October 3. Without the civic courage of these independent groups of citizens on the day of the local elections and without the protests, the Wall would not have fallen and there would have been no reunification."⁹

Nonetheless, despite Merkel's noteworthy recognition of the all-too-infrequently-mentioned East German dissidents, there was one enormous hole in her argument. Although she advised in her speech that Germany as a whole owes the oppositionists a debt of respect for making national unity possible, she treated the protests in the GDR as though they had little relevance to West Germany before 1990. At the risk of exaggeration, it is as if the mass demonstrations and cries of "We are the people" had taken place on another planet. Hence, only when the dissidents had finished their work was Bonn prepared to transmit to the region the legal, political, and economic institutions that were required for reunification.

The problem with this conception is not only that it fails to satisfy Bindenagel's moral imperative. It has also prevented Berlin from taking full advantage of an opportunity to incorporate the dissidents' actions into the Federal Republic's legitimating mythology. To cite one example of this missed opportunity, on 25 September 2007, Merkel gave a much-anticipated speech before the United Nations General Assembly in which she directly challenged the governments of Myanmar and Sudan to end their systematic violations of human rights.¹⁰ Yet, the speech was as empty as it was important. It was important because after years of equivocation by the chancellor's predecessor about such crimes, Germany was attempting to

take a leadership role on a matter of global significance. But, the speech was empty because the chancellor provided no specific reasons for why her country in particular should be motivated to make these judgments. The opportunity was there had she drawn upon the bequest of the East Germans oppositionists. By their actions, they had established the two facts that Myanmar and Sudan had most reason to fear. The first was that it was never acceptable to tolerate tyranny as a necessary evil and the second that it was always possible to overthrow such a government when the will to persevere was evident.

What should we say when the last East German turns out the lights? We can reassure our protagonist that historians will not forget who really made the fall of the Wall possible. At the same time, we can point out that the loss will be borne by unified Germany instead.

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Notes

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