

# GFL

*German as a foreign language*

**Former Contract Workers from Vietnam in Eastern  
Germany between State Socialism and Democracy 1989-  
1993**

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## **Between State Socialism and Democracy, 1989-1993. Former Contract Workers from Vietnam in Eastern Germany**

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The paper focuses on the largest group of contract workers, those from Vietnam, and examines how they fared in Magdeburg and the surrounding area since unification. Unification replaced, in principle at least, the institutionalised foreignness of the GDR with the west German system that extended rights of social citizenship to all residents. For contract workers, however, the transition towards democracy and a changed status was far from smooth. In 1990, even before unification, most lost their employment and their hostel accommodation. Most were forced to leave, and those who remained were only permitted to work as street traders. It took until 1993, before a 'right to remain' was formulated, and this envisaged only that former contract workers should remain for the duration of their original stay before return/deportation. Despite the uncertainties, some about one in ten remained in Germany (and others returned illegally). It took until 1997 for the Bundestag to pass a *Bleiberecht* that treated former contract workers on an equal footing to other migrant workers, and also incorporated their residency in the GDR into the time spent in Germany. Since then, a precarious interim between contact work and possible deportation has given way to confirmed residency and social normalisation.

### **1. Introduction**

From the 1960s onwards up to the collapse of socialist control in 1989, the German Democratic Republic recruited foreign workers on the basis of contracts negotiated by the two governments concerned (see table 1). The sending countries, for their part, tried to ease unemployment, while the GDR aimed at collecting trading debts from impoverished partners and also at reversing its own economic decline by boosting output without new investment. Despite persistent manpower shortages, a third shift was introduced in key industries to expand exports and ease shortages at home. These shifts were mainly staffed by foreign workers whose overall number increased sharply from in the course of the 1980s.

**Table 1**

<b>Sending Country</b>	<b>Year of Contract</b>	<b>Total on 31.12.1989</b>	<b>Total on 31.12.1990</b>
Poland	1966	6,000	3,900*
Hungary	1967	n/a**	n/a
Algeria	1974	nil***	Nil
Cuba	1978	8,300	60
Mozambique	1979	15,483	2,800
Vietnam	1980	60,067	21,000
Angola	1984	1,300	200
China	1986	900	40
<b><i>Overall</i></b>		<b><i>92,050</i></b>	<b><i>28,000</i></b>

\* More than half of this group worked in the GDR but lived in Poland.

\*\* At the height of recruitment in the late 1960s, 13,424 Hungarians worked in the GDR. By the 1980s, deployment had ceased.

\*\*\* Recruitment from Algeria had to be abandoned within months because of conflicts/fights erupting between Algerians and Germans.

*Sources: Compiled from Statistisches Jahrbuch der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1992 and IBA Werkstattbericht 1994, 7*

In December 1989 the GDR deployed close to 100,000 contract workers, 60,000 from Vietnam and 15,000 from Mozambique. While other groups were ordered to return home, contract workers from Vietnam and Mozambique were not, but gained a precarious chance of staying in Germany. With special reference to contract workers from Vietnam, this chapter examines to what extent the end of socialist control in 1989 and the unification of Germany in 1990 turned the ‘institutionalised foreignness’ of the GDR era into the ‘social citizenship’ and rights of settlement pertaining in a democratic political environment.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The programme of research is funded by the AHRB. It includes an evaluation of Stasi and other archival sources on the recruitment and treatment of contract workers in the GDR (Mike Dennis) and interviews with former contract workers, foreigners commissioners and other relevant officials to ascertain migration conditions and experiences for the period since 1990 (Eva Kolinsky). This chapter quotes from some of these interviews.

## 2. Arrival, Work and Daily Life in the GDR

Prior to leaving home, contract workers were not informed where they were to work and live in the GDR. (Müggenberg, 1996; Huong, 1999) Yet, those delegated or selected for contract work had no doubt that it would improve their personal circumstances. The young Vietnamese – most of the labour recruits were aged between 18 and 25, forty per cent of them were women – had learned at school how modern and affluent the GDR was and had come to admire it as the best among socialist societies.<sup>2</sup>

The GDR was paradise. For us, it was a wonderful country at that time. Of course, we had no comparison with western countries. We did not know that the GDR only appeared as paradise if compared with Vietnam. When I went to school, we learned that the GDR and the Soviet Union were on the road to Communism, and that we too shall reach this road in the future. (Interview Han)

Contract work in the GDR tended to be allocated as a reward for military service, academic results, employment record and political activism. Far from being lowly qualified and economically marginal, contract workers were high achievers, high flyers. Many had studied or taken part in vocational training programmes in the GDR before securing a placement as a contract worker. The link between deployment and personal merit loosened somewhat when the intake soared from 1,200 in 1981 to 40,000 in 1987, and a further 20,000 by the end of the decade. Throughout the recruitment period, however, bribes also changed hands to secure contract work since it provided access to presumed guaranteed employment and enough income to send money and goods home, enabling the family there to improve their living standards. As far as Vietnamese contract workers were concerned, working in the GDR was not undertaken as an individual act of migration or career development, but as a mission to improve the material circumstances of their family and accumulate capital to start a business in Vietnam.

### 2. 1. Conditions of Daily Living

Workers arrived and were deployed as groups, not individuals. From the airport in Berlin-Schönefeld, they were bussed to the factory that had applied to employ them, and

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<sup>2</sup> Interviews with 30 former Vietnamese contract workers were conducted between October 2002 and May 2004. Recordings and transcripts will be available in the Oral History collection at the University of Wolverhampton after completion of the project in 2005.

accommodated in its own hostels. Here, they lived in rooms in buildings that were inhabited only by foreign workers and controlled by a German warden (Krüger-Potratz 1991: 191). This type of accommodation afforded no privacy, but was not perceived negatively since housing conditions in Vietnam had been very poor and the rent was low at 30 Marks per month per person. Even in retrospect, hostels are remembered positively as a 'home from home' where Vietnamese contract workers could live among their own people (Interview Duc). None of them had migrated to the GDR with a view to living there permanently. All had come in order to earn as much money as possible. This material goal dominated their migration agenda, turning daily living conditions into a tolerable interim.

Although most hostels were located in blocks of flats in new developments for East Germans, contract workers and Germans barely mixed. Thinh who had been deployed as a welder in a big engineering factory in Magdeburg, met East Germans after work because he had joined the Chi Minh youth organisation and, being Vietnamese and a political activist, had been made welcome there, but this kind of participation was an exception, not a rule:

I worked in a normal, mixed brigade. I met all kinds of people. Everybody worked together. I was accepted quite normally. There were no problems with colleagues at work. Outside of work, there were also no problems. In the GDR time, there were no problems, really no problems at all. Only afterwards. Only after the 'Wende'. I had many German friends at that time, German acquaintances. I belonged to the youth organisation Ho Chi Minh here in Magdeburg and was very well accepted there. (Interview Thinh)

Very few others had contacts with Germans outside the factory. In most cases, Vietnamese workers were kept together and worked in a 'brigade' with other Vietnamese workers. Contacts with Germans were confined to foremen whose commands were relayed by an interpreter who had arrived with the group from Vietnam and was deployed alongside them. Some contract workers – most of them in engineering combines – who were allocated to a mixed brigade had some opportunities to meet Germans socially. Thuan, for instance, arrived in 1987 and belonged to a mixed brigade. Outside work, he joined the social activities that his 'brigades' undertook. When his factory closed down three years later, one of his former buddies told him, he should go back to where he came from; the brigade and its cross-cultural contacts fell apart immediately. (Interview Thuan)

As far as East Germans were concerned, the Vietnamese lived in a separate, segregated world:

In GDR times, one did not have contacts with them (the Vietnamese). They lived secluded, completely separate. They had their own shifts in the factories, they spoke very little German. This is what it was like, and it was not wanted that East Germans should have contacts with them. It was directed from above. There were no events outside the hostels. Nobody questioned

it. This is what it was like. There were always German minders, but ordinary contacts between Germans and Vietnamese did not exist at that time.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. 2. Working in a German Environment

Although contract workers received the same pay as Germans they tended to be employed at the bottom end of the wage spectrum. Their work was often dirty, monotonous or dangerous, i.e. of the kind that Germans did not want to take on. Once allocated, a contract worker normally remained in the same job for five years, until the contract came to an end. There was no system of promotion or career development. Some individuals, however, managed to take initiatives and improve their situation. Hoang, for instance, had been sent to work as a machinist in a textile factory where she found the work so tiring that she could not imagine doing the same job for five years. (Interview Hoang) To improve her chance of redeployment, she attended evening classes in German over and above the thirty hours' introduction to the language that she and her group had received on arrival. Knowing German, she thought, would enable her to communicate with the supervisors without depending on one interpreter and improve her chances of finding better work. After passing her German course with distinction, she was promoted from the assembly line to work in the design section.

Vietnamese contract workers earned between 400 and 1,000 Marks per month, on average one third less than East Germans (Mehrländer, Ascheberg, Casten and Ueltzhöffer 1996: 497; also Müggenberg 1996). Moreover, most East German households included two wage earners, since over 90 per cent of men and women were active in the labour market. By contrast, contract workers were not permitted to arrive with their spouses or live as family units. Women who became pregnant were sent home or forced to have an abortion. The GDR went as far as handing out contraceptive pills to prevent pregnancies. Most Vietnamese women, however, refused to take them because they distrusted the pills and also because they were offended by the assumption that they were promiscuous. (Duc 2002: 43)

Regardless of their personal status as husband, wife or parent, Vietnamese contract workers were recruited as if they were single, and forced to depend on one earned income. Yet, with very few exceptions, they managed to save enough money to support their families back home and to make use of their right – written explicitly into the intergovernmental agreement – of

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of the interview, Frau W., who had grown up in the GDR, worked as a assistant to a regional Foreigners' Commissioner.

sending goods home to the value of half their annual income. Once or twice a year, each of the Vietnamese who worked in the GDR would make use of this right to ship goods home. Top of the list were mopeds, bicycles, fridges, washing machines and other electrical goods as well as all kinds of machinery and equipment that might be used in the home or in small businesses in Vietnam.

In the GDR shortage economy, goods had to be purchased whenever they were available, not when they were required. East Germans had perfected the art of buying in bulk whatever came in the shops. Their Vietnamese contract workers were quick learners. As soon as anyone of their circle had located any of the items that were coveted for shipment, groups of Vietnamese turned up and bought the lot, usually but not only, for their own use. East Germans did not know and were not informed that these shipments were written into the recruitment contracts but accused the Vietnamese of causing shortages and of ruining the East German economy.

Feelings of envy were brought about by the shortage of goods. It was like this in the GDR. When anything was for sale in the shops, all the goods were bought up immediately. People bought, although they did not need it. It was just what everybody did. It was customary. The Vietnamese, I think, did exactly the same thing. They bought what they could and then put it aside, stored it, until they could send it in their container shipment to Vietnam. (Interview Frau W.)

East Germans also believed that Vietnamese contract workers were paid in western currency and were privileged in comparison with the indigenous population, because they bought radios, hi-fi equipment, cameras and the like in so-called *Intershops*, special outlets in the GDR where customers could purchase western, branded goods, provided they could pay in western currency.

### **2. 3. Conforming and Rule Breaking**

Despite misgivings about their presence and presumed privileges, East Germans preferred contract workers from Vietnam to those from other countries. Workers from Cuba and Mozambique, most of them men, would try their luck with East German women. The Vietnamese, by contrast, were perceived as smiling, quiet, friendly and likely to stay amongst themselves. Moreover, the Vietnamese had established regular contacts with Germans and, despite attempts to keep them apart, had turned themselves into a feature of GDR daily life. Many busied themselves in their spare time with sewing clothing that East Germans desired, but which their command economy did not supply. The most important output consisted of jeans, but the Vietnamese part-time tailors displayed considerable ingenuity to replicate, down

to the last detail, designer ware that was only available in the West. Frau W. who had grown up in the GDR reported that, provided she supplied the fabric, she could get a pair of trousers sewn up for 20 Marks. (Interview Frau W.) East Germans ordered specific garments or bought from stock, but always at a much lower price than they would have had to pay in an *Intershop* for regular and comparable merchandise. A group of contract workers in Chemnitz even copied and sold expensive linen-type jackets. Their version was made from bed linen, dyed to the correct shade of brown, and sewn as an exact copy of the original. They had bought one of the expensive jackets, taken it apart stitch by stitch to create a pattern and then recreated the whole in their own manner. Most were sold directly from the hostel and some taken to Plauen, a small town in Saxony where one of the few open markets in the GDR was held every Saturday. (Interview Herr C.)

East Germans regarded it as part of their normal life to have clothes made up by the Vietnamese whose goods were cheap and better than the output produced in their own factories. At the end of the 1980s, when East German businesses and research institutes began to use computers, many shunned East products and ordered models from the West. Many of these computers were supplied by Vietnamese contract workers whose business activities had shifted to meet the new needs while the scale of business often escalated from a pair of trousers for 20 Marks to hundreds of thousand of Marks for computer equipment. Although private enterprise of this kind was not permitted in the GDR, it was tolerated because it met consumer demand among East Germans that could neither be curtailed nor satisfied. Similarly, the rules and regulations governing hostels for contract workers banned everything except cooking and sleeping there. These rules, however, were violated on a regular basis as hostels became workshops, sales points and store rooms for the goods that were to be sent home. As the number of contract workers grew, hostels emerged as meeting places for social networking and celebration parties. The GDR authorities including the Ministry of State Security, the Stasi, were aware of the transgressions, but did not stop them. Hostel wardens seemed unable to tell bone-fide residents from illicit visitors and did not normally attempt to interfere. In the closing years of the GDR, hostel wardens resented the surveillance they were supposed to conduct on behalf of the state, and chose to ignore what went on around them.<sup>4</sup> As for the contract workers, they had grown up in a country where people worked all the time in order to improve their lot (Duc 2002: 59). They had come to the GDR to earn money, valued getting

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<sup>4</sup> I should like to thank Tamara Henschel for this information, based on her work as a hostel warden in the GDR.



together with other Vietnamese and helping one another out, and also valued doing their own thing, even if German rules and regulations had to be broken to do so: “The Vietnamese, they did not bother themselves too much with all these rules and did what they wanted to, forbidden or not.” (Interview Duc)

#### **2. 4. Life at a Distance**

By the time state socialist control collapsed in the GDR at the end of 1989, contract workers from Vietnam had developed a distinctive approach: they lived and worked in eastern Germany without being part of it. They did not challenge the institutionalised segregation forced upon them, but responded to it by establishing business activities and social networks of their own. These offered personal and collective security in a society that aimed at excluding them. Embedded in Vietnamese rather than German culture and values, these business ventures and social networks made the defiance of restrictions a collective project as one Vietnamese contract worker did what all his or her fellow workers were seen to do (Phuong, 1989, p. 19ff.)<sup>5</sup>

These separate networks were all the more important since Vietnamese contract workers had not normally been given an opportunity to learn enough German to overcome the helplessness of one who cannot understand or make himself understood. The networks allowed each person to communicate freely, albeit in Vietnamese. Since they had been sent to the GDR in groups and accompanied by a German-speaking interpreter, they did not have to use their own voice but could, and were even required, to speak through the voice of the designated professional. Only a handful felt the urge to learn German beyond the perfunctory introduction they had received in their *Betrieb*. Most were content to speak Vietnamese, seek the advice of their fellow countrymen or enlist the aid of an interpreter, if they had to relate to Germans.

Keeping Vietnamese contract workers separate from the local population was a shared aim of the socialist governments in the GDR and in Vietnam. The GDR set out to institutionalise foreignness in order to deter contacts and prevent integration. Despite these efforts, Vietnamese contract workers established their own utilitarian links with Germans as traders and suppliers of scarce merchandise. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, on the other hand, had no interest in permitting its citizens, who were scheduled to return after five years, to immerse themselves too deeply into East German society and possibly find fault with Vietnam

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<sup>5</sup> Although Phuong’s study deals with Boat People from South Vietnam, the sections on cultural assumptions and background also pertain to contract workers from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

as a result. Not only were groups accompanied by an interpreter who would act as the interlocutor. They were also supervised and controlled by a quasi official known as group leader who did not work on the shopfloor but was engaged to liaise between East German foremen and officials on the one hand and officials at the Vietnamese Embassy on the other (Interview K.). Above each leader for an individual group was a leader for a region, each of them keen to prevent integration of Vietnamese contract workers into Germany and enforcing their continued allegiance to Vietnam (Interview Herr C.). In many cases, group leaders and interpreters were agents of the Vietnamese secret service and the state it served. Together, they underpinned the GDR's intention of keeping Vietnamese contract workers at a distance, of restricting their social contacts to their own group, and of preventing them from becoming residents with a view to staying for good.

### **3. Unwanted and Unprotected: Experiences of Contract Workers during The *Wende***

In December 1989, the Socialist Unity Party and its structures of political control collapsed, although the GDR continued to exist until German unification on 3 October 1990. For East Germans, *Die Wende* brought momentous improvements such as freedom to travel, the influx of western goods, the introduction of West Germany's economic system and currency, all of them gains but also new uncertainties, as the old system had not quite disappeared and the rules of the new one were unknown and confusing. All in all, it was a promising interim. Unemployment had yet to haunt the region while new investments into a telephone network and transport infrastructure and other fundamentals of revitalisation were already under way. For contract workers, uncertainties dominated. On paper, intergovernmental contracts remained in force although China, Cuba and Angola, ordered their nationals to return home as democracy seemed imminent. Mozambique and Vietnam took no such steps, although for many the parameters of contract work collapsed without warning. From January 1990 onwards, East German enterprises took it into their own hands to rid themselves of their foreign workers. Some wrote to the relevant ministry asking for permission to enforce redundancies. Most of them simply declared the employment ended and closed their hostels or raised rental charges from 30 Marks per person for a multiple-occupancy room to two hundred

or even four hundred Marks before evicting residents. An unknown number of East German companies bussed their foreign workforce directly from the shopfloor to the nearest airport where chartered planes were waiting to take them away. The passports of contract workers had, in any case, been deposited with the East German authorities and were handed out on the plane. Personal belongings, other than the clothes they were wearing, had to be left behind. By March 1990, 60 per cent of the contract workers from Vietnam had been deported against their will (Kolinsky 1999 and 2004). In June 1990, Almuth Berger, a former Protestant pastor who had been appointed in March 1990 to the post of Foreigners' Commissioner in the first democratically elected East German government, renegotiated the inter-governmental contract with Vietnam. The new agreement came into effect on 27 June 1990. It sanctioned the dismissal of contract workers that had been in full swing for months, but also stipulated that those willing to return within three months were entitled to 3000 DM compensation as well as to pay that may be owed to them. Those determined to stay could do so up to the end of their original contract, would be treated like Germans with regard to employment and housing, and could, in addition, apply for a licence as a street trader. For contract workers from Vietnam, this agreement offered, for the first time ever, the opportunity to make a personal decision about staying on or returning home. Each worker, not the group, could decide. Confusingly, when the revised agreement came into effect, the GDR did not possess administrative structures in the areas of employment or housing to honour the pledge that the Vietnamese would be treated like East Germans, nor could East Germans at the time set themselves up as traders or start a private business.

Other factors exacerbated the confusion. Communicating the new choices to the Vietnamese contract workers in the GDR was left to their employers who had no interest in divesting information on staying but presented matters as if departure was inevitable. Most Vietnamese did not know enough German to find out for themselves what was written in the new agreement and many interpreters had already abandoned their groups in order to look after their own affairs. Even Han, who knew German, was under the impression that she had no choice other than to return to Vietnam:

For my group, the return to Vietnam was ordered by the factory. We lost our employment in June. Then, there was short-time working. In July, we were all unemployed. The flight to Vietnam had been booked for the end of September. Everybody who went home received a present of 3,000 DM, and then they were taken to the airport. Some had packed their things and wanted to go back. We had learned that capitalism was very bad, we had learned this at school, and we knew nothing of the welfare state or about unemployment. Nobody took any interest in us. We had no information at all. But for some though, there was nothing for them in Vietnam

either, and they had no idea what they might do there. So, why not stay here and try to keep one's head above water and return home only as a last resort. These were the brave ones, who said this. (Interview Han)

Han had already packed her things when, in August 1990, she attended a church meeting and learned that, contrary to what the factory had told her, she had a choice between staying and going. By and large, Vietnamese contract workers found it very difficult to obtain information about their rights, or to decide how to use these rights in an unfamiliar country, and after years of being directed by the state or its enforcers without personal scope to decide for themselves. Not only did Vietnamese contract workers have to assess the risks or chances of staying in Germany, they also had to learn to make decisions and live with them:

At that time, people were really afraid, because they had no idea what a future in Germany would be like. There was no historical precedent, no stock of experience from which to draw guidance. The Vietnamese contract workers faced the impossible decision to say there and then whether they would leave or stay. Somehow, everybody had to make a decision, it could not just be postponed. And then, whatever decision someone had made, he was haunted by doubts whether it had been the right one. (Interview Duc)

After June 1990, most of the remaining Vietnamese were dismissed by their employers and ordered out of their hostels. Most remained unclear about their rights and status and were still shipped to Vietnam en bloc. Frequently, the 3,000 DM compensation was withheld, or only paid after Foreigners' Commissioners, church advisors or other advocats turned up at airports, boarded the planes and delayed departure until payments were made.

After unification, contract workers were included into redundancy schemes or received unemployment benefit like their German colleagues. In Leipzig, Chemnitz, Rostock and Berlin, for instance, the city governments assumed responsibility for a small number of hostels to curtail homelessness among former contract workers. Some, notably Leipzig, also appointed Foreigners' Commissioners to oversee the departure of contract workers and advise those determined to stay. In Magdeburg, the Catholic Caritas ran a hostel and installed a Vietnamese advisor while elsewhere volunteers and self-styled helpers tried to protect former contract workers from injustice and deportation.

#### **4. Experiences of former contract workers after unification**

Unification should have ushered in an era where the rule of law and rights of social citizenship were extended to all, including former contract workers. In reality, matters were more

complex. In contrast to the GDR, the Federal Republic had permitted migration for decades, despite refusing to regard itself as a country of immigration. Given this ambiguity, policy oscillated between inclusion and rejection. Former contract workers bore the full brunt of these contradictions as some were given unrestricted residency rights while the majority suffered years of status uncertainty and near exclusion.

Contract workers who had lived in the GDR since 1982 or earlier were immediately treated like other foreign nationals and entitled to permanent residency because they had lived in Germany for eight years or longer. An estimated ten per cent of Vietnamese contract workers qualified for this secure status. (Mehrländer, Ascheberg, Casten & Ueltzhöffer 1996: 505) These individuals had successfully extended their stay in the GDR. This could be done if the employer requested to retain somebody and the Vietnamese Embassy could be persuaded to agree. After German unification, the residency status of these groups was secure, they were immediately entitled to find employment or receive any benefits to which they were entitled. They were also permitted to bring their spouses and children to Germany from Vietnam and normalise their daily lives.

The majority of Vietnamese contract workers had arrived after 1982 and could not point to eight or more years of uninterrupted residency in Germany. Instead of defining their status as conditional until they met the eight-year residency requirement, the Unification Treaty replicated the GDR approach of expecting everyone to return to Vietnam at the end of the original contract. Thus, former contract workers were treated as if they had been recruited for a specific project and classified as *Werkсарbeiter*, temporary, short-term labour, without rights of extending their stay, let alone aiming to make it permanent. Former contract workers learned of their restricted rights in 1991 when GDR-issue identity cards had to be exchanged. The replacements turned the GDR *Aufenthaltserlaubnis* that could be extended to an *Aufenthaltsbewilligung* that could not. Accordingly, former contract workers were not eligible for most forms of employment, to claim benefits or apply for family reunion. Attempts to appeal against this deterioration of their residency status, a well-established right in western Germany, revealed that east German officials interpreted German Foreigners' Legislation restrictively by claiming that their decisions were final without room for any appeals.<sup>6</sup> This

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<sup>6</sup> In Chemnitz, Herr C. who had turned himself into an advisor for former Vietnamese contract workers, helped prepare individual appeals that had been worded by West German immigration lawyers. When officials refused to accept them, Herr C. managed to have them delivered to their desk by internal mail, although the negative residency decisions were not reversed. Interview with A.C. in Chemnitz.

stance was exacerbated by the fact the new foreigners' authority, *Ausländeramt*, was staffed by erstwhile members of the police who had been in charge of foreigners in the GDR. They had assumed their new duties in the old spirit and without being reeducated (Riehe & Zeng 1998: 38-40).

These uncertainties left their mark on the Vietnamese contract workers who had opted to stay. Hu, for instance, had arrived in Leipzig in 1987. Having studied in the GDR, he spoke good German. After his dismissal as interpreter in 1990, he hoped to find employment as a special advisor and social worker, but all he could obtain was a succession of short-term courses and temporary jobs (ABM) because his insecure residency status made him ineligible for permanent employment and vice versa. It became a vicious circle of uncertainty which persisted at the time of the interview, sixteen years after his arrival in eastern Germany (Interview Hu). Frau Han and Herr Duc, by contrast, were immediately entitled to permanent residency and unconditional employment, because they had lived in the GDR since 1982. This secure status allowed Frau Han to retrain and both to secure regular employment as social workers, unimpeded by status insecurities (Interviews Han and Duc).

Nine out of ten Vietnamese former contract workers, however, found themselves, like Hu, classified as temporary residents. Contrary to Hu, most did not attempt to find paid employment but adopted the route of self-help and private enterprise that had already been evident in the GDR. Now, they became street traders. As mentioned earlier, in June 1990 the renegotiated agreement between Vietnam and the GDR had specified that those wanting to stay could apply for a street-trading licence, although the GDR knew no such licences and included no bureaucratic machinery to issue them. After unification, the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs published an information leaflet about the agreement of June 1990 in German and Vietnamese, but it failed to mention the all-important right of self-employment. Again, voluntary advisors, church leaders and local foreigners' commissioners stepped in to supply the missing information, as they had done with regard to compensation for returners, access to hostels and other problems since the *Wende*. In addition, the Vietnamese themselves had begun to turn the informal social groupings that had emerged in the GDR into more structured and effective networks where information could be shared and reach those who needed it. From 1992 onwards, Vietnamese Associations emerged in various east German cities in response to the many uncertainties arising from the collapse of the GDR and building a life in an unfamiliar country that was itself undergoing a transformation, and also in response to the

need of former contract workers to talk in their own language and seek the support of people from their own country and culture (Weiss 2004: 12).

Hoang's story is one of many to show how difficult such a new beginning was and how much endurance and tenacity were required to build a business in eastern Germany, however small. She had arrived in 1987 as a textile worker. Like others of her cohort, her temporary residency status meant that she could become self-employed while other employment was unobtainable. Like others also, she decided to trade in textiles, selling T-shirts. During the first two years after unification, there was no regulated system of issuing trading licences. These were handed out on a first-come-first-served basis, and only for one day at a time. In order to secure a favourable location in the centre of Leipzig, she had to queue from four o'clock in the morning for her daily licence, then travel by public transport to the wholesaler to collect her merchandise before setting up her stall and opening by seven o'clock. Her stall, in these early days, consisted of a plastic sheet on the ground and a laundry airer to display her wares. Later, plastic sheets gave way to trestle tables or wooden stands and, later still, traders acquired their own transport. The long working hours, however, remained the same, as did the centrality of textile trading. Two other branches have grown up alongside it: selling fruit, flowers and vegetables, and running an *Asia Imbiss*, a fast-food stand or small restaurant specialising in oriental cooking. At the time of writing, 90 per cent of former contract workers from Vietnam were self-employed in one of these three areas. Some, including Hoang, prospered; many others, however, earned just enough to live in poverty by German standards, but tolerably in comparison with the Vietnam they had left.

Not everybody chose this hard route to a new beginning. A significant number of former contract workers – anecdotal evidence suggests virtually all of them – turned to dealing in contraband cigarettes to earn a living. For two years and more, the east German police stood by and tolerated the rule-breaking in the same way as the Stasi had done with regard to the tailoring and other Vietnamese business ventures in the GDR. After 1992, fines were levied because several shootings and several deaths had occurred, pointing to turf wars and the existence of criminal gangs that had to be curtailed. Although gangs continued to operate, cigarette dealers on the streets were now fined regularly. An eerie criminalisation took place: cigarette dealers paid their fine without having their merchandise confiscated, resumed trading until the next fine, and so on. At no point were they informed that they were deemed to have a criminal record, nor did they understand that being fined in this way may impede their residency status. In the early 1990s, Vietnamese cigarette traders had become so normal a

facet of east German street-life that everybody, including the newly elected members of parliament, bought their cigarettes from them, partly to help them through difficult times, and partly because their prices were lower than in the shops. (Interview Sandig)

It was only after the *Bleiberecht* had been recommended on 14 May 1993 by the Conference of the Ministry of the Interior and agreed to by the Federal Chancellor on 17 June, that the illegality of cigarette trading became a major obstacle to residency, and an estimated 7,000 Vietnamese were forced to leave the country. The remaining 13,000 Vietnamese had, for the first time since the end of their contract work, a clear perspective of the conditions under which they would be allowed to stay. They had to satisfy three requirements: provide evidence of earned income, live in adequate housing and show that they had not accumulated a criminal record. Those deemed eligible to stay were then able to apply for family reunion and acquire permanent residency rights after eight years, like other foreigners. However, instead of counting the years spent in the GDR towards residency rights, the document stipulated that only the years spent in Germany after 1990 should count. Despite this unexpected obstacle, the former contract workers from Vietnam were galvanised by the promise of secure residency in the country they did not want to leave. Ninety per cent set up their own business and became self-employed, often drawing on the support of other Vietnamese in order to overcome the bureaucratic hurdles of German bureaucracy. The business expansion burgeoned in 1993 and occurred within the three branches that had dominated Vietnamese street trading from the outset: textiles, greengrocery, and oriental food.

The *Bleiberecht* offered a perspective for the future but did not banish insecurities. These came from many different directions. In Chemnitz, for instance, forms to assess the size and quality of housing were out of date and so restrictive that most flats inhabited by Vietnamese would have been condemned as overcrowded, preventing their tenants from firming up their residency status. Only when voluntary workers detected the fault and launched a protest did the German authorities agree to withdraw the contentious form. The major area of conflict pertained to the issue of criminal record. The police, as mentioned earlier, had not explained matters to the presumed perpetrators, but declared them ineligible for residency as soon as the *Bleiberecht* had been passed. In most east German Länder, Foreigners' Commissions fought valiantly to challenge this assessment and managed to have minor offences disregarded. In Saxony, however, whose Foreigners' Commissioner had been very happy to buy his cigarettes from the Vietnamese traders at the entrance of the *Landtag* building, so-called tax crimes remained on the books and prevented even the most casual offender from gaining a secure



residency status. (Interview Sander) Tien lived in Chemnitz and had been fined a small amount in 1992. Ten years on, he found himself still classified as a temporary resident, barred from all but self-employment and fearful of deportation. (Interview Tien)

Individually, many former contract workers from Vietnam succeeded in rebuilding their lives in Germany. As a group, however, they experienced their German environment as unexpectedly hostile once the shackles of Stasi surveillance and state-ordered internationalism in the GDR had been removed. Most encountered personal hostilities from east Germans who had seemed friendly before. They responded by evading conflict and withdrawing socially and culturally into their own group and community. Others were exposed to violence. Thinh, who relished his welcome in the ho Chi Minh Youth organisation in Magdeburg, reported that the door to his flat had been smashed in seven times within two years, and his possessions ransacked. (Interview Thinh) Thuan had successfully turned himself from welder into restaurant owner and cook. When his delivery van was set on fire in front of his newly opened premises, he blamed mindless hooligans, not xenophobia. Although he found east German society hostile and unwelcoming, he insisted that there was no conflict but looked back in fear and nostalgia to what it had been like in the GDR:

It was better in the GDR. There is no doubt about that. The GDR was better. It was much better than it is today. There were many regulations, but everybody knew the rules and adhered to them. One knew what was required and what to expect. I personally did not miss any freedoms. I was equal to Germans, I had the same status and was treated equally. I felt secure in the GDR. I felt integrated and accepted, in the same way as I had been when I was still in Vietnam. Since the *Wende* and unification, all this has, unfortunately, changed. (Interview Thuan)

## 5. Conclusion

It took until 1997 for the *Bundestag* to pass legislation that recognised years spent in the GDR as years spent in Germany. This *Bleiberecht* also required evidence of income, housing and criminal record but became a benchmark of normalisation since the majority of former contract workers had lived in Germany long enough to qualify for permanent residency status and also win the right of family reunion. For the first generation of Vietnamese labour migrants turned residents, the uncertainties of migration had been mastered although they continued to live at a distance from German society, closely attached to their own networks in business and social activities. They had settled in Germany but hardly immersed themselves into contemporary living there. With many east Germans, this first generation of labour

migrants shares a memory and perception of the GDR as a better society, because it seemed to offer more security of everyday living. Although their experiences have been mixed, former contract workers from Vietnam regard eastern Germany, their region and their town, as a second home, the place within Germany where they wish to stay for good. The second generation, the children who were born in Germany and those who joined their parents from Vietnam, tend to be fluent in German and so at home in their new environment that tensions are beginning to show between traditions and cultures of the migrant generation and German-inspired expectations and behaviour of their children. Unlike asylum seekers, German resettlers and Jewish refugees, however, former Vietnamese contract workers have made a positive choice to live in eastern Germany without plans to leave for the west.

At the time of the *Wende*, East German officials and Foreigners' Commissioners assumed that the Vietnamese and other contract workers would leave the country, and interpreted their duties as assisting them to do so. This approach changed dramatically in the early 1990s, when pogrom-like outbursts of xenophobia in Hoyerswerda, Rostock-Lichtenhagen, Magdeburg erupted to drive foreigners out, while local police forces looked on without protecting the victims. Shocked by events, city governments began to fund special advisors, appoint foreigners' commissioners and provide ABM posts to run cultural associations, in particular for former contract workers who had, it was argued, made a positive contribution to East Germany and its economy and should be helped to stay, not chased out. Commencing in 1992, demands for a *Bleiberecht*, the right to remain, were voiced jointly by Vietnamese would-be migrants and their German advisors and supporters. In several East German cities, demonstrations proclaimed that the Vietnamese were "our foreigners" whose rights to stay were denied by an unjust federal government. This German government treated Osis as second-class Germans and former contract workers as second-class foreigners. Although the image of Ossi-foreigners rides roughshod over the injustices and the practices of exclusion that were normal in the GDR, the new alliance gave an all-important backing to former contract workers and their desire to make Germany their permanent home. By the time they won this chance, however, the institutionalised foreignness of the GDR era and the protracted uncertainties of status and life chances since 1990 had created their own segregation and a precarious integration that remains at ease with a Vietnamese setting but detached from a German one.

## List of Interviews

The following interviews are cited in the text:

- 1) Interview with Duc, Magdeburg, 29 October 2002
- 2) Interview with Han, Magdeburg, 31 October 2002
- 3) Interview with Hoang, Leipzig, 11 September 2003
- 4) Interview with Hu, Leipzig, 12 September 2003
- 5) Interview with Thinh, Magdeburg, 30 October 2002
- 6) Interview with Thuan, Burg near Magdeburg, 31 October 2002
- 7) Interview with Tien, Chemnitz, 9 September 2003
- 8) Interview with Herrn C., Chemnitz, 8 September 2003
- 9) Interview with Heiner Sandig, Ausländerbeauftragter des Landes Sachsen, Dresden, 4 September 2003
- 10) Interview with Frau W., Mitarbeiterin im Büro des Ausländerbeauftragten des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt, 29 October 2002

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