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German as a foreign language

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ISSN 1470 – 9570

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More than a decade since the fall of the Berlin Wall, today's young east Germans are familiar only with a united Germany. Having received their entire education since unification, and with little or no personal experience of the GDR, they are reliant on parents, teachers, school education and collective memory to help them understand the complexities of socialist society. To what extent do young east Germans' perceptions of the GDR differ from those of their elders, who were brought up and educated before 1989, and how comparable are they to those of their western contemporaries?

This paper will firstly assess the way in which the GDR is presented to young people in eastern Germany through family narratives, the mass media and educational materials, and secondly draw on 43 interviews carried out in Sachsen-Anhalt in 2001 and 2002, in order to explore young people's own perceptions of the GDR, and identify the varying importance of materials and attitudes to which they have been exposed. The analysis will reveal that the perspective from which young people view their immediate history is highly influential in shaping their attitudes, and that this generation's perceptions of the GDR play a central role in identity formation in the present.

1. Introduction

Nearly 15 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the history of the GDR continues to occupy an important place within the public sphere in eastern Germany.¹ Acres of newspaper print have been filled with discussions about the GDR's legacy; politicians, town planners and historians have battled over the relative merits and flaws of the socialist landscape, and film directors, game show hosts, and writers have found the GDR to be a fruitful source of inspiration. It is hardly surprising that the history of this state continues to shape the personal lives, interests and passions of thousands of people who were brought up and socialised there prior to the *Wende*. Yet due to the contentious history of the GDR, its emotional importance for many eastern Germans is frequently seen to pose an obstacle to German unity. In 1999, for example, Reinhard Höppner, prime minister of Sachsen-Anhalt, claimed that celebrations of the Federal Republic's

¹ Following the accepted convention, I will use 'east'/'eastern' and 'west'/'western' to refer to post-unification Germany, and capitalise 'East' and 'West' only when referring to the period of division.

50th anniversary could not be truly inclusive without a “gemeinsam akzeptiertes DDR-Bild” in both east and west. (*Magdeburger Volksstimme*1999: 1)

In view of such concerns, expectations of unity are frequently placed on today's young generation, which has no, or little, first-hand experience of the GDR, and has been educated in a united Germany. To what extent, however, does this new generation adopt a distanced view of the GDR? Is the frequently lamented “Mauer im Kopf” simply a phenomenon of the older generation, conditioned by personal experience of historical division, or is it rather a result of social and economic circumstances of the present? Furthermore, how comparable are young east Germans' perceptions of the GDR to those of their western contemporaries? Has their socialisation in a unified Germany and exposure to capitalist culture been primary in shaping their view of history, or have the personal histories of those around them proved dominant? This paper will examine these questions in two parts, drawing on examples taken from the *Bundesland* of Sachsen-Anhalt. It will firstly assess the way in which the GDR is presented to young people in eastern Germany through family narratives, the mass media and educational materials. In a second part, it will then draw on 43 interviews conducted in Sachsen-Anhalt in 2001 and 2002, exploring young people's own perceptions of the GDR, and identifying the varying importance of the materials and attitudes to which they have been exposed.

2. The portrayal of the GDR

With only a few token memories of life in the GDR, today's teenagers are reliant on their surrounding environment to gain insight into the past regime. This is naturally made up of a number of influences, some more direct than others, yet each adheres to a distinct personal or political agenda.

The earliest and most emotional influence on young people is, of course, that of the family. Here parents' and older relatives' past involvement in the socialist regime inevitably affects the way in which they present it to their children; those who showed relative loyalty to the SED, for example, are likely to portray a different image to those who were involved in opposition groups. This is reflected in the political loyalties of parents, and as an Allensbach survey found in 1996, PDS supporters were much more

likely to paint a positive image of the GDR, whereas CDU/CSU and Bündnis 90/Grüne sympathisers tended towards a considerably more negative image. (Noelle-Neumann; Köcher 1997: 582f.) Time also proves to be an influential factor, for similar surveys have shown that judgements of the GDR have become more favourable through the 1990s. Whilst only 19% of the east German population claimed that conditions in the GDR were “erträglich” in 1990, for example, this had almost doubled to 36% by 1996. (Noelle-Neumann; Köcher 1997: 583) Although time itself clearly alters perceptions and memories, this finding also relates to the situation in which families have found themselves since the *Wende*, for rising unemployment and financial hardship in the east provide a stark contrast to the GDR’s record of full employment. Family narratives of the GDR have thus been dependent on both the past and the present.

Young people are further influenced by discussions in the public sphere, frequently precipitated by politicians, historians or media images. Whilst younger children often learn of public debates through the filter of their parents’ beliefs, they are increasingly likely to interact with such discussions on an independent level as they grow older. Indeed, a number of debates concerning the nature of the GDR regime have captured the public consciousness to such an extent over recent years that they have been hard to ignore. Following the comment by Sachsen-Anhalt’s PDS chairperson Rosemarie Hein, for example, that “Der Begriff *Unrechtsstaat* für die DDR ist völlig falsch und fehl am Platze” (Bock 2001: 1), the *Magdeburger Volksstimme* was dominated by a raging debate over the use of the term *Unrechtsstaat*, occupying full-page spreads during the following month. An ensuing readers’ survey, which asked “war die DDR ein Unrechtsstaat?”, provoked the second largest response to such a survey that year, demonstrating just how important this issue is for many east Germans. Other debates regarding the GDR have concerned questions as to whether the PDS should apologise for the building of the Berlin Wall, or whether a monument should be built on the Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin to commemorate the socialist martyr. (Halter 2002: 46f.; Zimmer 2001a, 2001b)

The majority of such media debates are triggered either by the PDS, as the above examples demonstrate, or western historians’ and social scientists’ judgements of the GDR. Examples of this second group include the Hanover criminologist Christian Pfeiffer’s denunciation of GDR kindergarten education as authoritarian and a cause of xenophobic attitudes, (Pfeiffer 1999: 60-66) and the Heidelberg historian Andreas

Meier's claims that the *Jugendweihe* is devoid of meaning, and carries a totalitarian aftertaste. (Meier 2000) Following the publication of both theses, the *Magdeburger Volksstimme* once again became a hotbed of ferocious debate, and letters from outraged readers came pouring into the paper for months afterwards – quite out of character for this regional newspaper. The direct criticism of the GDR and east German society by westerners such as Pfeiffer had quite clearly hit a raw nerve amongst many, who felt that their territory had been unjustly invaded by outsiders. For young observers of such debates, one element is dominant throughout: the GDR legacy is presented as highly controversial, for it frequently attracts opinionated and polemic viewpoints. Images gained from the media are thus largely bi-polar in nature, dominated either by outspoken proponents or staunch critics of the regime.

Perceptions of the GDR passed down to young people from parents, relatives, public figures and media debates clearly all follow specific personal and political agendas, yet none are imparted to the young generation in a formal or regulated manner. In contrast, school education follows a fixed curriculum, and despite some regional variations, the overall emphasis remains constant, and many school books are used across different *Länder*. The GDR is encountered in a number of school classes, most predominantly in history and *Sozialkunde* lessons, both of which are charged with the task of promoting the understanding of GDR history, whilst also strengthening the values of unified Germany. These aims, however, have proved problematic from the outset. Shortly after the *Wende*, for example, western schoolbooks were donated to east German schools in order to replace outdated socialist textbooks. However, they depicted the GDR in a radically different light from that to which eastern pupils were accustomed; the angle of historical events such as the Berlin blockade, the division of Germany and the uprising of 17 June 1953 was frequently turned 180 degrees, and some even drew direct comparison between the GDR and the Third Reich.² Written for a western audience, these textbooks failed to take into account the needs of a young eastern readership, and as one review of 14 such history textbooks revealed, 75% of their content concerned West Germany, and many gave accounts of how West German agricultural and industrial production surpassed that of the East. (Rust 1993: 213; Schumann 1990: 5) They clearly did little to help the young generation understand their immediate history.

Textbooks written since 1990 attempt to portray the GDR regime from a greater variety of perspectives (Hoffmann & Hug 1991: 117ff.), yet a clear western bias can still be detected, and many portrayals lack depth. (Maser 1999: 153). A number also continue to make assumptions about the nature of the GDR regime. One question directed at pupils in a 1996 textbook, for example, asks: "Nenne Gründe dafür, daß in der DDR das Bewußtsein einer eigenen Nation nicht durchgesetzt werden konnte." (Müller et al. 1996: 238). The formulation of this question does not allow any consideration of the idea that a type of GDR identity may have developed which still influences collective consciousness today. Similarly, the curriculum of 1992 states: "So ist die Erkenntnis wichtig, daß sich auch die marxistischen Parteien verbal zu diesen Werten [humanistisch, christlich, liberal und sozialistisch] bekannt haben, diese aber infolge totalitärer Herrschaftsstrukturen ins Gegenteil verkehrten." (*Bildungspolitische Information Nr 4* 1992: 11) (My addition in brackets) Here it is simply assumed that the GDR was totalitarian in nature, without any further discussion of the issue. Some textbooks also use the concept of totalitarianism to draw comparisons between the GDR and the Third Reich, thus showing little progress from older western materials.³ More than a decade after unification, problems of interpretation still continue to discolour history teaching in the east, and to quote a representative of the *Gewerkschaft Unterricht und Erziehung* in 2001:

Die Schulbücher sind oft veraltet und immer von Westautoren geschrieben. Die DDR-Geschichte wird aus Westsicht dargestellt - die Lehrer sind aber meist aus dem Osten. Manche Lehrer drehen sich um 180 Grad, andere sagen: "So war es nicht", und ziehen sich zurück. (Schmidt 2001: 1)

Not only are historical portrayals biased, but critics also claim that GDR history features too little on curricula.⁴ Indeed, in Sachsen-Anhalt it features considerably less than the history of the Third Reich, and is viewed only in comparison to the FRG, thus undermining its independent value.⁵ In this way, young people are presented with a

² See, for example, *Zeiten und Menschen B4* 1978: 198, used in schools in Magdeburg shortly after the *Wende*; also Pritchard 1999: 69.

³ E.g. Grosser & Bierling 1997: 185. Here the GDR is presented as totalitarian, with no space for discussion to the contrary. Pupils are taught the fundamental principles that mark all totalitarian regimes, exemplified by the GDR and National Socialism.

⁴ Most notably Marianne Birthler, Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR. See Birthler 2001.

⁵ East and West German history from 1945-1989 are treated together in years 9 and 10, constituting 13 hours of teaching at *Sekundarschulen* and 19 hours at *Gymnasien*. This

view of history that implies the relative insignificance of their immediate historical roots. Furthermore, many educational materials tend to avoid the more immediate emotional issues concerning the GDR legacy. (Birthler 2001; Schmidt 2001; Gauger, 1999: 236f.) Whilst the structures of the Stasi, for example, feature in many textbooks' examination of the SED dictatorship, few provide an in-depth examination of its function, or portray its influence on everyday life (Margedant and Marquardt 1999: 116f.). The onus is on the teacher to promote more detailed discussions and innovative activities,⁶ and as a result, controversial issues are frequently kept at a safe distance, often left to parents or the media to qualify further.

As the situation in schools demonstrates, the portrayal of GDR history today is far from straightforward. Today's young, supposedly *united*, generation is growing up surrounded by a plethora of conflicting images: at times the importance of the GDR appears to be deliberately undermined, or is presented in superficial terms; at other times the intensity of debate from varying eastern and western sources proves overwhelming. How, then, have young people's own perceptions of the GDR been shaped by their surrounding environment? Are relatives' versions of life in the GDR, for example, seen to be more credible than those portrayed in the public sphere, and how far do the realities of capitalist society and the dominance of western viewpoints prove influential? Is this generation one which will look to the past with rose-tinted glasses, or one which will rather let the GDR slip quietly into the unread annals of history?

3. Perceptions of the GDR

These questions will now be examined on the basis of 43 interviews carried out in Sachsen-Anhalt in 2001 and 2002 amongst two age-groups: young adults aged 27-31 and teenagers aged 17-21. Interviewees in the former group thus experienced their most

compares to 17 and 19 hours respectively on the single unit concerning National Socialism and the Second World War. See *Rahmenrichtlinien Gymnasium/Fachgymnasium: Geschichte 2000*: 62 and 68; *Rahmenrichtlinien Sekundarschule: Schuljahrgänge 7-10 Geschichte 2000*: 56 and 60.

⁶ As revealed in discussion with Frau Krüger, BStU Außenstelle Magdeburg (20 March 2003), who organises activities for schools and individual classes on the subject of the *Stasi* and the GDR. One teacher also found that pupils reacted enthusiastically when he presented this period from a more emotional and personal angle. (Sapparth 1995)

formative years in the GDR, whilst the majority of the latter have few memories of the socialist state, and have received practically all their education in unified Germany.

Despite the radically different socialisation of these two groups, three similarities can be detected in the way in which they approach the GDR. Firstly, family histories prove highly influential, particularly in interviewees' relative desires to keep the GDR legacy alive. Those whose families had been loyal to the regime, for example, were often reluctant to unearth the past. In this way, Eva, aged 31, who came from a family of formerly dedicated and high-ranking SED members, and whose grandfather was a Stasi officer, demonstrated her wish to move on: "Ach, ich denke mal in der ganzen Zeit jetzt danach ist soviel rausgekommen, was wir nicht gewusst haben [...] und ich denke mal, irgendwann ist dann auch gut. Und man sollte das für sich jetzt lassen, und die Leute damit in Ruhe lassen [...]" (Eva, 12 April 2002) Others, however, such as Annette, aged 18, whose parents were active within church opposition movements, (Annette, 19 September 2001) and Stefan, 29, whose family was pursued by the Stasi, see a moral obligation to keep the past alive. As Stefan claimed: "Deshalb denke ich persönlich, Aufarbeitung, besonders das, was dieses Bespitzelungssystem der Stasi betrifft, das darf nicht aufhören." (Stefan, 12 April 2002) Regardless of the age of interviewees, family narratives appear highly significant in shaping their attitudes towards GDR history.

Secondly, western interpretations of GDR history prove influential amongst both age groups, for all interviewees were keen to defend the GDR against western criticism. National surveys have also revealed that young easterners typically regard the GDR more favourably than western youth (Oesterreich 1994a: 274), and as Bodo von Borries found in his 1993 study, they even view the GDR past in a more positive light than the way in which their western contemporaries regard western history (Borries 1993: 80-82; Noelle-Neumann & Köcher 1997: 583). It seems that the portrayal of eastern history since 1989 contributes largely towards this trend. Indeed, the western domination of history books, GDR research, and public debates angers many, who believe, as Friedrich Schorlemmer: "Wir müssen uns auf jeden Fall unsere Geschichte selbst schreiben und sie uns nicht vom Westen oder vom SPIEGEL schreiben lassen." (cited in Matussek 1999: 128) One interviewee, for example, lamented that many research findings relating to her degree subject were ignored simply because they originated from the GDR. (Simone, aged 27, 13 April 2002) Others have found themselves being told that they suffered under the GDR regime, whilst personal experiences and family

narratives tell them that life there was much more differentiated. (Oesterreich 1994b: 349).

In reaction, many eastern Germans have begun to assess the GDR in a new, positive light. To quote Borries 1993: 351f. (Emphasis in the original):

Die “*nachträgliche Identifikation*” mit der DDR im Osten überträgt sich auch auf die dort größere Zurückhaltung bei der Definition der BRD als “*eigentliches Deutschland [...] schon seit 1949*”, und den Wunsch, nicht “*alles in der Geschichte der DDR zu verurteilen*”.

Indeed, interviewees’ defence of the GDR was frequently designed to counter common western images, rather than to display their genuine enthusiasm for the former state, as demonstrated by comments such as: “*so schlecht fand ich’s eigentlich gar nicht*”, (Michael, aged 21, 25 September 2001) and “[...] *fand ich also eigentlich alles naja nicht so übel*”. (Christian, aged 19, 27 September 2001) Related to this phenomenon is the fact that many also showed a strong desire to retain a number of former GDR institutions, including *Polikliniken*, the *Babyjahr*, subsidised transport, and particularly *Schulhorte*. According to one 1993 study, 100% of eastern Gymnasiasten were in favour of retaining such institutions, in comparison to only 67.3% in the west. (Oesterreich 1994a: 274) Many interviewees in both age groups felt that the negative sides of life in the GDR have been overplayed by the west, yet positive aspects have simply been ignored. Whilst these institutions are genuinely missed by many, their defence is clearly in part a reaction to the dominance of the west, rather than a desire to return to the GDR. As Henryk Broder commented in the *Spiegel*: “*Niemand will die DDR wieder haben. Aber keiner will sie sich nehmen lassen.*” (Broder 1995: 64)

The third element uniting both age groups is the importance that interviewees laid on their personal experiences of life in the GDR. Whilst their actual memories varied greatly, and were minimal for teenagers, the majority of interviewees considered their GDR upbringing to be enriching, and often a focus of pride. As Katharina typically claimed:

Ich bin froh, dass ich zwei Gesellschaftsordnungen kennen gelernt habe, was nie jemand anders schaffen wird, sag ich mal. [...] Und das ist eigentlich ein Vorteil, den man sicherlich auch ausnützen kann. Das empfinde ich so, und ich bin da eigentlich auch froh, dass ich da vergleichen kann, und da kann mir auch keiner sagen, das war schlecht und das ist schön. (Katharina, aged 31, 15 April 2002)

Whilst such statements from young adults are not surprising, teenagers adopted a similar stance, as demonstrated by Benjamin, aged 19: “[...] dass man zwei Seiten von Deutschland erlebt hat, [...] find ich schon cool ja, das hat nicht jeder erlebt im Prinzip.” (Benjamin, aged 19, 9 April 2002) Many, however, overestimated this experience; Thorsten, for example, who was only five in the autumn of 1989, claimed: “das Grundprinzip von der DDR fand ich ja eigentlich nie so schlecht.” (Thorsten, aged 17, 8 April 2002) Regardless of their depth of memory, it seems that personal experience of the GDR creates amongst young easterners a sense that they are part of a privileged group which *knows* what the GDR was like, and which can legitimately pass judgement on this former state as their own history.

Despite these similarities, interviewees' varying degrees of experience of GDR life have also conditioned their perceptions of this state, and a number of cohort-specific trends can be observed. This is particularly evident where interviewees were asked to name the positive and negative sides of life in the GDR, for the variation within each category is striking.

Of the positive elements named, young adults favoured one concept above all others: solidarity (see [figure 1](#)). Indeed, concepts such as *Zusammenhalt*, *Solidarität* and *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* were brought up 19 times in 20 interviews, and accounted for 30% of all positive elements they named. In addition, other commonly named aspects of the socialist state were full employment, social security and subsidised rents (17%), the perception that life in the GDR was *easier* for young people (16%), and that it was a safe, protected place (11%). (Stolz aufs eigene Leben 1995: 42-46). In the face of today's western standards, however, this age group is keen to highlight the *normality* of the GDR state: “ich mein', das war, vor allem in meiner Zeit, das war einfach'n Land wie jedes andere... ohne irgendwelches Politikdasein am Ende noch...” (Karin, aged 27, 24 September 2001) Having represented the *norm* for the first part of their lives, the GDR did not even constitute a dictatorship for some:

Klar, es herrschte irgendwo Zwang auf irgendeine Art, aber es war ja alles durchaus gelegt auf irgendeine Art, dass der Großteil der Menschen in Frieden und Freiheit auf irgendeiner Art dort leben konnte [...]. [...] Es war auch natürlich diktatorischer, sag ich mal, als heute [...] es war keine Demokratie, aber weiß Gott keine Diktatur, auf keinen Fall. (Paul, aged 27, 25 September 2001)

In contrast to older interviewees' positive emphasis on everyday experiences and interpersonal relationships in the GDR, teenagers rather favoured the institutional

elements of the regime. It is here that their lack of first hand knowledge of the socialist state proves crucial. Of the positive elements named by teenagers, for example, almost half related to social policies (see [figure 2](#)), most commonly the GDR's alleged history of full employment, but also subsidies on rent and basic foodstuffs, and the absence of so-called *Asoziale* on the streets. In contrast to older interviewees, this generation's emphasis on social policy results largely from the conditions of the present day. Indeed, family histories since the *Wende* prove to be highly relevant here, for many have encountered severe financial difficulties since unification, with one or both parents experiencing unemployment. This situation has had a notably more direct influence on the younger age group, all of whom were living with, and dependent on, their parents during this time. Indeed, many teenagers also stressed that life was much more straightforward for young people in the GDR than today, and that a young person's career path was uncomplicated and guided by the state. This is further compounded by the high levels of youth unemployment today, and the increasing difficulty of gaining a place in higher education, particularly in popular subject areas. As Dirk commented:

[...] dass man sich eben nicht so viel Sorgen machen musste, was aus der Zukunft wird [...] man hat bekommen, man hat immer was bekommen. Da muss man heute, dass man mehr leistungsorientierter [sein] muss eben, so soll's am Gymnasium vielleicht doch mehr, schon früher reifer werden. (Dirk, aged 17, 28 March 2002)

It is thus no surprise that the GDR's employment record features as a leitmotif throughout these interviews, and to quote just two interviewees: "Zu DDR-Zeiten war's besser gewesen als jetzt, weil die Eltern hatten auch Arbeit gehabt [...];" (Tobias, aged 21, 9 April 2002) "aber ich fand DDR voll besser, weil [...] jeder hat seine Arbeit gekriegt, seine Lehrstelle und so [...]." (Daniel, aged 18, 9 April 2002) As a result, teenagers' comments frequently veer towards defence of the GDR in sweeping statements such as "früher ja war's eigentlich auch ganz okay". (Karl, aged 19, 9 April 2002)

Whilst both age groups perceive the GDR in a relatively positive sense, neither is oblivious to its negative sides. Once again, however, a number of differences are notable within each cohort. Although some of the older generation were reluctant to use the term dictatorship, they all recognised that the GDR was not a democracy, and that the SED's claims to *freedom* were largely overstated (see [figure 3](#)). One interviewee, for example, typically described the GDR as "nicht wirklich Sozialismus", (Erich, aged 27, 25 September 2001) and 41% of all negative elements named by this cohort related to

lacking freedoms, particularly the restrictions on travel and self-expression. What is clear is that this generation, which values its upbringing in the GDR, does not under any circumstances wish to return to the GDR: “also ich find’s eigentlich gut, dass ich wirklich beide Seiten kennenlernen durfte [...] Ich werd’ z.B. jetzt niemals die DDR zurückwünschen, weil das war’s nicht [...] das war’s halt wirklich nicht [...]” (Erich, aged 27, 25 September 2001) Other frequently named elements were economic problems and goods shortages (23%) and *Druck* or *Zwang* exercised by those in power (20%). The latter is interesting for two reasons: firstly it was not mentioned once by the younger age group (see [figure 4](#)), and secondly it was frequently linked to the strong sense of solidarity that was felt. To quote Anna: “Die Sachen, die jetzt als gut empfunden werden, oder was ich auch selber als gut empfinde, ist zum Teil halt nur aus Druck entstanden, ja.” (Anna, aged 31, 10 April 2002) As demonstrated by this example, the majority of older interviewees clearly recognised the complexities of socialist society, and were wary of oversimplifying their experiences.⁷ Consequently, the boundaries between what was perceived as positive and negative were commonly blurred.

In contrast, the negative perceptions of younger interviewees were more clear-cut. On the one hand, a number were quick to name the lack of freedoms and the shortages in consumer goods and food products. Interestingly, material shortages and the lack of certain foods were considerably more important for this age group, perhaps a reflection of their upbringing in capitalist Germany. On the other hand, however, and in contrast to young adults, who all showed some awareness of the drawbacks of the GDR, a number of teenagers seemed unwilling to recognise any such aspects. To quote two younger interviewees: “Also die schlechten Seiten [...] gab’s denn schlechte Seiten? [...] eigentlich in der Kindheit hast du überhaupt keine Probleme gehabt [...]”; (Karl, aged 19, 9 April 2002) “in der DDR [gab’s schlechte Seiten] eigentlich nicht. Es wird wohl bestimmt welche gegeben haben, aber [...]” (Patrick, aged 20, 9 April 2002) Having never consciously experienced the negative sides of life in the GDR, they are easier to ignore, and some interviewees even convinced themselves that they would have liked the situation as it was: “[...] also von diesen ganzen Mangelerscheinungen

⁷ As claimed by Karen Lowry Miller of the wider former socialist bloc: “The under-30 crowd is too young to be poisoned by the previous system, but old enough to remember a child’s impression of the bad old days.” (Miller 2000: 31).

hatte ich nichts mitbekommen [...] ich mochte das auch irgendwie [...] ich hatte damit kein Problem”; (Mathias, aged 20, 3 April 2002) “wenn jetzt nicht die Wende gekommen wäre, hätte ich eigentlich auch kein Problem damit gehabt [...]” (Benjamin, aged 19, 9 April 2002) In accordance with these comments, an Allensbach survey from 1996 also found that it was the youngest sector of the population which regarded life in the GDR in the most favourable light. (Noelle-Neumann; Köcher 1997: 583) As a number of commentators have suggested, it seems that the collective memory of this younger age group is gaining some mythical and legendary qualities.⁸

Teenagers clearly appear more inclined to pigeonhole aspects of GDR life rather crudely into *good* and *bad* categories than older interviewees. This polemic attitude is demonstrated by the *Stichwörter* which interviewees were asked to name to describe the GDR. Whilst the younger age group named only 64, in comparison to the older group’s 114, the number carrying positive or negative connotations was proportionally much higher amongst younger interviewees. Furthermore, a large number of terms that were *neutral* or descriptive in meaning were repeated numerous times; Erich Honecker, the Wall and the Stasi, for example, were named three times more frequently by younger interviewees, demonstrating their less differentiated view of the GDR. In contrast, the vast majority of young adults’ *Stichwörter* fell into this *neutral* category (such as *ABC-Zeitung*, *Diskussionsrunden*, *EOS* [*Erweiterte Oberschule*] and *Kinoabende*). Clearly the younger generation’s reliance on second-hand images of the GDR has led to its simplification, and although this generation’s perceptions are, on the one hand, more distanced than those of older generations, they are at the same time more polarised and biased in their outlook.

Interestingly, attitudes towards the past appear to have transferred themselves onto young people’s values and judgements of present-day German society. In the same way that both age groups were keen to defend the GDR in the face of western criticism, for example, they were also inclined to judge today’s east German population more favourably than their western counterparts. Adjectives such as *locker*, *logisch* and

⁸ As Bernd Okun claimed: “Je mehr die DDR Geschichte wird, desto mehr Legenden und neue Wunschprojektionen (nunmehr aber verklärend auf die Vergangenheit gerichtet) können sich bilden.” (Distanz, Enttäuschung, Haß 1992: 36). See also Berg et al. (1999: 27), which claims: “Auch Jugendliche, die den Honecker-Staat nicht mehr erlebten, denken daher beim Wort DDR eher an soziale Sicherheit als an Staatssicherheit.”

zuverlässig were thus typically used to describe east Germans, whereas west Germans were considered to be superficial, arrogant and *Vorzeigemenschen*. Furthermore, in accordance with the above findings concerning the GDR, teenagers' comments were noticeably more prejudiced than those of young adults. Whilst older interviewees thus used expressions such as *anonymer, sehr selbstbewußt auftreten* and *Herzlichkeit fehlt* to describe west Germans, the younger age group claimed they were *arrogant, Besserwisser, nicht ehrlich* and *erhebener*. There appear to be two main explanations for the similarities in young people's judgements of past and present. Firstly, attitudes towards both time periods demonstrate a resistance towards the dominant west, and in the same way that interviewees defended the GDR against western criticism, they also felt the need to defend their values in the present. In this way, many young easterners appear unwilling to fully commit to a united Germany which simply continues the traditions of the former West German state and neglects those of the former GDR. Secondly, today's frustrations and fears prove to be of great importance in influencing attitudes towards both the past and the present. This is particularly true of the younger age group, many of whom have suffered from the direct or indirect effects of unemployment, and feel that life at present is a constant uphill struggle. Indeed, teenagers who have experienced the most difficulties over the past decade presented both the GDR and the east German population in a consistently more positive light than others, helping to explain this generation's more polarised and biased outlook. Despite their exposure to a wide variety of historical *filters*, it seems that personal experiences and family narratives, both in the past and present, dictate the attitudes of this youngest generation.

4. Conclusion

The GDR past is clearly still present in the minds of young adults and teenagers in eastern Germany today, and contrary to common expectations, it appears not to be fading. Ironically, however, it is the youngest age group whose assessment of the GDR is most favourable. Lacking personal experience of the complexities of socialist society, teenagers' perceptions of the GDR are often reduced to simplistic terms, in which the former socialist state is regarded as a mirror image of present-day society. This age group's favourable perceptions of the GDR thus reveal dissatisfaction with the present,

both on a personal level and through parents and family narratives, rather than any retrospective loyalty to, or nostalgia for, the GDR. The influence of present-day trends on the reception of the past is also evident in young people's resistance to western interpretations of GDR history, which has not only produced a loyalty to the GDR, but also to the values of present-day eastern Germany. In this way, we see how their attitudes towards the GDR still reflect a sense of eastern identity and belonging, thus suggesting that the so-called "Mauer im Kopf" is not simply a phenomenon of the older generations, and not based solely on first-hand experience of GDR society. Höppner's ideal of a *common image* of the past, whether desirable or not, is clearly still a long way off.

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Biodata

Anna Saunders is currently teaching at the University of Bristol, where she obtained her PhD in 2004. Entitled *The State's Youth and the Youth's State: Young People and Patriotism in East(ern) Germany, 1979-2002*, her thesis examines youth-state relations in East(ern) Germany before, during and after the transition from socialism to capitalism, and the impact this has had on regional, national and international identities.

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Appendix

Figure 1

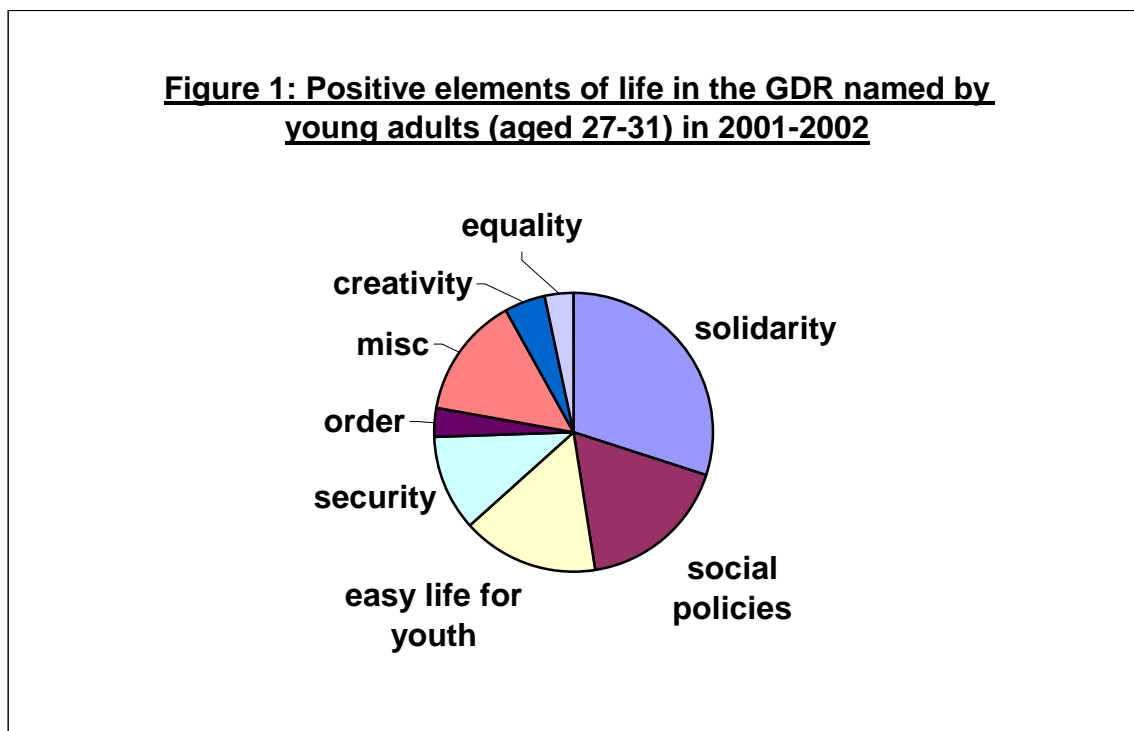


Figure 2

Figure 2: Positive elements of life in the GDR named by teenagers (aged 17-21) in 2001-2002

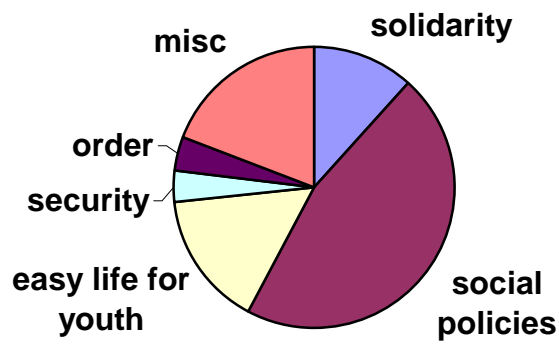


Figure 3

Figure 3: Negative elements of life in the GDR named by young adults (aged 27-31) in 2001-2002

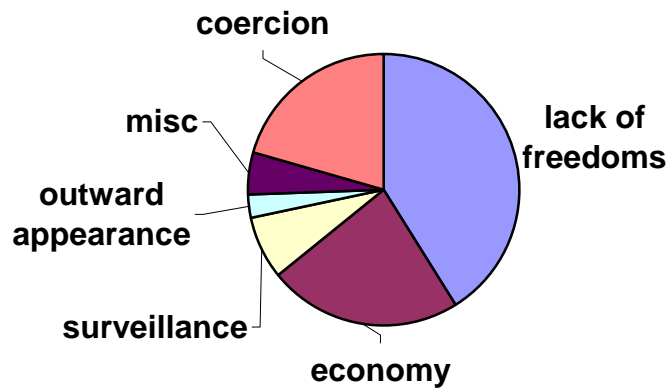


Figure 4

Figure 4: Negative elements of life in the GDR named by teenagers (aged 17-21) in 2001-2002

