



**Transformation Processes in Eastern Germany:  
Politics and Society**

Peter Barker (ed.), Reading

ISSN 1470 – 9570

## Introduction

Peter Barker, Reading

The seven papers in this volume are a selection from the politics and society section presented at the conference held in London in April 2004 and organised by the Association for Modern German Studies and the Centre for East German Studies at the University of Reading with the support of the Goethe-Institut London.

It is now fifteen years since the political upheaval in the GDR in the autumn of 1989, which led directly to the rapid unification of the two parts of Germany on 3 October 1990. The main focus in these papers is the impact on different sections of the East German population of the adaptation of their social and economic structures to those of West Germany. Barbara Gügold, whose experiences in academic life encompass both the GDR and a unified Germany, explores the problematic question of eastern German identity within a unified Germany and the growing gap in understanding between the two parts of Germany, a gap which became clearly visible in state election results in 2004 in Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg. The emergence of an extreme-right presence in two of the state parliaments, as well as an increased vote for the post-communist party, the PDS, in eastern Germany is a stark warning of the political effects of disaffection (amongst particularly the younger age groups in the east. Whereas the older generation is more likely to vote for the PDS, either as a protest or as an expression of solidarity with shared experiences in the GDR, the younger generation seems to have voted for more radical expressions of discontent.<sup>1</sup> Eighteen per cent of voters between 18 and 29 years voted for the NPD in Saxony, while 14 per cent voted for the DVU in Brandenburg, in both cases more than twice as many as the overall percentage vote for these parties.

The paper by Anna Saunders concentrates on the attitudes of young people towards the GDR, basing her conclusions on interviews she conducted in Saxony-Anhalt in 2001 and 2002, and the influence of those attitudes on their perception of their present

---

<sup>1</sup> See the analyses of voting patterns in the Saxon and Brandenburg elections in September 2004 put together by the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen. (*Frankfurter Rundschau* 2004, 4)

situation. Surprisingly, she concludes that the youngest age group has the most favourable perception of the GDR. This is obviously the group which has the least direct experience of the GDR, therefore positive attitudes to the GDR are a reflection of dissatisfaction with present circumstances, communicated to it by older members of their immediate social environment. Karin Weiss and Janette Brauer also focus on the younger generation, but concentrate on the attitudes of young women towards work. They base their conclusions on the Brandenburg longitudinal survey, in particular here on eighteen interviews with young people conducted between 1996 and 1998. Their conclusions provide further evidence of a continuation of GDR attitudes, in this instance in the area of female employment. The “housewife model” of West Germany largely disappeared during the lifetime of the GDR and was replaced by the “working mother” model. The dramatic reduction in female employment in the early 1990s seems to have done little to reduce the expectations of young women in this respect, even if they had no direct experience of employment in the GDR. This represents another example of social attitudes being passed on from one generation to the next. Attitudes towards role allocation in the family also seem to have continued from those in the GDR. The situation in which women in the GDR were expected to work and to do the major work in the household has not had a negative effect on female aspirations in employment. The major change post-unification is that families are often reluctant to start a family until they feel they have achieved a certain level of financial security: hence the dramatic fall in the birthrate in the eastern states. Weiss’s and Brauer’s conclusions are backed up by Debbie Wagener’s study of the impact of unemployment on women in eastern Germany. Her findings are based on over 100 interviews conducted in Saxony-Anhalt in 1999 and 2000. Eastern women remain determined to re-enter the employment market after being made redundant; also east German men retain a far more positive attitude to female employment, with only 25 per cent in 1997 favouring the “housewife” model. The equivalent figure in western Germany was 50 per cent.

Two further contributions consider the impact of unification on other groups in eastern German society. Eva Kolinsky conducted a number of interviews with Vietnamese workers in 2002 and 2003, and in her conclusions concentrates on the particular plight of the foreign workers in the east, whose situation was largely ignored by western authorities in the post-unification period. It took until 1997 for foreign workers from the east to be treated on an equal basis when it came to a right to stay in Germany. One

surprising conclusion is that those workers still in eastern Germany also look back on their time in the GDR in a relatively rosy light, despite the forced segregation of the foreign workers from the GDR population. Despite the attacks on foreigners' hostels in 1991 and 1992 in Rostock and Hoyerswerda these workers largely prefer to stay in the eastern states, rather than move to the less familiar western part of Germany. There is therefore an unexpected coincidence of views between eastern Germans and eastern foreigners, despite the growth of the xenophobic Right in the eastern states.

Claus-Christian Szejnmann uses a rather different group to focus on the marginalisation of east Germans. He presents three case studies of easterners who have attempted to run small businesses after unification and argues that the conditions laid down by western financial institutions were so stringent as to make failure the most likely outcome of new business ventures in the east. The inability of eastern business people to cope with the unfamiliar structures of the western economy also contributed to their difficulties, and in some instances reinforced a positive perception of the GDR which is at variance with the way in which small private businesses were actually treated in the GDR. But the difficulties experienced by small businesses do underline the statements made by some economists concerning the underdevelopment in certain sectors of small business activity, which have contributed to lower levels of economic activity in the economy as a whole,<sup>2</sup> and in particular instances have reinforced individual feelings of marginalisation.

The final paper is different in that Dan Hough and Jonathon Olsen focus not on individual eastern reactions to post-unification developments but look at the role played by the PDS in the political process since unification. The demise of the PDS was widely forecast in 1991 and 1992, but it managed to exploit the unhappiness of a significant proportion of the electorate with the post-unification process and from 1993 progressed steadily in its electoral success until 2001. Hough and Olsen argue that the PDS's involvement in state governments in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Berlin from 1998 and 2001 respectively has had a negative impact on its image with the eastern voters, which led to its exclusion from the *Bundestag* in 2002. Its problem was that on the one hand it aimed to represent a diverse range of eastern interests, having failed to

---

<sup>2</sup> In this context see Flockton 2004, 93-109. For a recent analysis of the overall situation in the east, see Goos & Kneip 2004.

make any electoral impact in western Germany, while on the other hand it became party to financial cuts in the budgets of Berlin and M-V. Its recovery from this setback in 2002 in the recent elections in Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg in 2004 can be directly linked to the unpopularity of both the ruling coalition at federal level and the opposition CDU. But the new challenge from extreme right-wing parties suggests that there are other potential representatives of eastern discontent in the wings who could undermine the PDS's claim to represent eastern interests.

The complicated social and psychological processes in eastern Germany since unification are illustrated in this volume by highlighting attitudes in selected social groups. It is clear that the process of the two Germanys growing together again after a relatively short period of time, as envisaged by the two main political figures in 1990 Helmut Kohl and Willy Brandt, has proved to be far more difficult. It is hoped that the papers in this volume shed some light on why this process has proved to be so complicated. Also, the material collected in field studies should provide useful primary sources for project work and essays both in schools and in higher education.

## **Bibliography**

- Goos, Hauke; Kneip, Ansbert (2004) Jammertal Ost. *Der Spiegel*, 39/2004, 44-72
- Flockton, Chris (2004) Economic Restructuring from Below? The Role of Small and Medium-sized Business in East Germany since 1990. In: Dennis, Mike; Kolinsky, Eva (2004) *United and Divided. Germany since 1990*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 93-109
- Frankfurter Rundschau* (2004) Männer, jung, Hauptschule. 21 September 2004, 4.

## **Biodata**

Peter Barker teaches German Studies at the University of Reading. He specialises in his research on the GDR and eastern Germany after unification. His most recent publication is a monograph on the Sorbian minority in Germany, *Slavs in Germany. The Sorbian Minority and the German State since 1945* (2000).