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**“Blooming Landscapes” and the Last Divide:  
Germany 30 Years After Reunification**

*Irene Rauch*<sup>1</sup>

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On 1 July 1990, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl delivered a televised address to the nation. A year earlier, he had been Chancellor of West Germany. Now, he presided over a newly unified nation and faced the immense challenge of integrating East Germany, which until then had been ruled by a socialist regime, into the capitalist Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). In his speech, an attempt to inspire enthusiasm and collaboration between East and West Germans during his campaign for federal reelection, Kohl promised redemption and revival for the East. He assured his audience that “through a joint effort, we will soon be able to transform Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Saxony-Anhalt, Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia into blooming landscapes once again, where it is worthwhile to live and work.”<sup>2</sup> Not only does this statement connote condescension—perhaps unintended but nevertheless palpable—towards the Eastern states, implying that life was not worth living there, but this speech, particularly the phrase “blooming landscapes,” would eventually come to haunt Kohl and becoming a standard by which the successes and failures of reunification are measured to this day.

At the time of reunification, the Eastern landscapes he described were far from blooming. In an economy where manufacturing and industry played a significant role, other aspects, like health and the environment, were largely overlooked. East Germany, or the German Democratic Republic (GDR), was a leading industrial technology supplier to several Soviet states in its heyday. As a result, industrial land was ravaged by pollution. For decades, “acid rain, corrosive soot and chemical toxins had been fouling its air,” posing an invisible threat to workers’ health.<sup>3</sup> In 1990, secret environmental records that the GDR had kept under wraps about the state-owned manufacturing companies came to light. It was agreed upon that unequivocal “ecological disasters” had been inflicted on the East by the East. Inspired by the release of this information, *Der Spiegel* magazine published an article on the city of Bitterfeld in Saxony-Anhalt, which was particularly afflicted by decades-long extreme pollution. An unknown “toxic cocktail” had been brewing in its groundwater, with immeasurable hazardous waste remaining from the past hundred years. To blame were unregulated open-cast lignite (brown coal) mining, film and paint factories, pesticide plants, and a six-kilometer-long open pit mine. At the time, Bitterfeld District Council Chairman August Pietsch saw the situation for how urgent it was:

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<sup>2</sup> Source of English translation: Konrad Jarausch, Volker Gransow, eds., *Uniting Germany: Documents and Debates, 1944-1993* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1994), pp. 172-74.

<sup>3</sup> Hämäläinen, *Uniting Germany: Actions and Reactions*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 187.

“We are sitting on a time bomb,” he said. If Bitterfeld did not receive help soon, there would be disastrous effects on the population’s health.

Before it began to be cleaned up post-reunification, Bitterfeld was widely considered the dirtiest city in Europe. In 1990, it was calculated that the city’s smokestacks emitted three times more dust and sulfur dioxide than the entire West German state of Hesse, which is forty-six times larger. Particles in the air were known to cause skeletal deformities. Gardens produced inedible fruit. Glass in church windows had to be replaced abnormally quickly because it disintegrated in the corrosive air. Factories built during the Third Reich were repurposed after the war—and insufficiently modernized, if at all—and were still in use in 1990. In some places, Bitterfeld positively stank. Toxins in wastewater threatened to poison people’s kidneys and livers. At a meeting of the Bitterfeld Chemical Combine, chemist Günter Krieg pleaded, “We only have one life, we still want to have some of it.” His worry about a shortened life was no exaggeration; people died of cancer at unusually high rates in Bitterfeld. The Deputy Production Director at the Bitterfeld Electrochemical Combine had a more specific request: “We urgently need Western help.”<sup>4</sup> The dire ecological circumstances were a danger for East Germans. However, the polluted state of these lands was worrisome to the FRG leadership because it did not bode well for future Western investments in Eastern industries. After all, a prospective Western family would be unlikely to be enticed to move east by murky rivers, smoggy skies, and the “sorry state” of Eastern infrastructure.<sup>5</sup>

Enter: Kohl’s promise of blooming landscapes. His vision for reunification was most successfully realized in terms of ecological rehabilitation in the East. In July 2014, German weekly news magazine *Stern* published a photo series in which locations throughout the East were pictured before reunification, side by side with photos from 2014. It is incredible how drastically the landscape had changed in less than thirty years. In the Saxony-Anhalt town of Leuna, a once-polluted street with a tram rattling through it is now neatly lined with trees. In Bitterfeld, the abhorrently polluted focus case of the 1990 *Spiegel* exposé, thick, impenetrable-seeming smog, has been replaced by blue skies. South of Bitterfeld, near a town called Wolfen, toxic industrial runoff once poisoned a marsh, ironically named the Silver Sea. Today, an idyllic pond populated by water plants has taken its place. While the pond is still closed to the public for its toxicity level, this is a marked improvement from the past. The area now shows signs of hope and life that were nowhere to be found before reunification.<sup>6</sup> These places, plagued by the consequences of an unbridled, industrial-command economy, are not yet blooming landscapes, yet they finally show potential for revitalization.

### **Tensions and Contention: Early Challenges in Reunification**

Unfortunately, the environmental progress made in the East is just about where the unequivocally positive results of reunification end. Everything else is a matter of opinion and debate and differs based on whether you ask a *Wessi* or an *Ossi*—a Westerner or an Easterner. Although it was regarded

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<sup>4</sup> Christiane Kohl, “Die Leute werden dun im Kopf,” *Der Spiegel*, January 8, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Härmäläinen, *Uniting Germany*, p. 187.

<sup>6</sup> Florian Gossy, Dieter Hoss, “Bitterfeld 1989 - und Jetzt: Von blühenden Landschaften und beleuchteten Wiesen.” *Stern*, 7 November 2014.

as a victory at the time, much of the reunification project played out in a way that left East Germans feeling disoriented, underappreciated, and ostracized by their new countrymen.

The federal government was determined to assimilate the East to its own economic and social standards and essentially scrap the East German system. Initially, spirits were high, and optimism radiated on both sides. However, this mood soon faltered for multiple reasons as logistical difficulties became apparent. In March of 1990, the federal government unveiled a plan for converting East German currency—the Ostmark—to West German currency—the Deutschmark. As explained by historian Pekka Kalevi Hämäläinen, the plan “allowed the East Germans to convert up to 2,000 Ostmarks at a one-for-one rate for the far more valuable Western currency.”<sup>7</sup> However, the rest of their money could only be exchanged at a two-for-one rate; this included pensions and wages. Predictably, East Germans were outraged, calling the plan a “swindle” and taking to the streets to protest against it. Neither exchange rate boded well for the East. Both the one-for-one and two-for-one left Easterners with significantly lower wages than the West: one-third and one-sixth, respectively. The government struggled to reach a compromise between the demands of the federal bank, the *Bundesbank*, and the demands of irate East Germans. After all, a generous exchange rate would mean depreciation of the Deutschmark and West German stock markets. Eventually, the one-to-one rate the Bundesbank had feared was announced.

While ordinary East Germans had cause to celebrate, economists already foresaw the issues this exchange rate could cause in terms of market competitiveness for the East and adaptation to a market economy system that Eastern workers had never experienced. This prediction would later be confirmed. However, the West had given at that moment, and the East had received. This showed Chancellor Kohl’s determination to make his vision of blooming landscapes a reality and a streak of political bravery for promoting an exchange rate that was viewed skeptically by his supporters in the name of reunification. In any case, this debate made very clear the notion that the East was of lower financial value than the West.

Westerners benefited from the high value of Deutschmark in comparison to Ostmark. Friedrich\*, sixty, grew up in West Germany and recalls visiting East Berlin when the Berlin Wall still divided East and West. “Women with strollers and little babies would corner you to exchange money on the black market,” he remembers with a laugh. “There was an exchange rate of one to one ultimately, but in Berlin, for a while there was an exchange rate of one to twenty. So, you could go for a great meal anywhere in a restaurant for one [Deutschmark].” Evidently, both West and East agreed that Western money was far more valuable and powerful. The currency debate further entrenched the popular notion that the East was hopelessly behind the West and created a Western savior complex of sorts.<sup>8</sup>

Along with the tensions created by this debate, there was a fundamental difference in how the East and West handled and perceived money. Easterners had to adjust to the idea of privately owned significant wealth that existed in the West. “There was no private ownership in the GDR,” remembers

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<sup>7</sup> Hämäläinen, *Uniting Germany*, p. 170.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich (pseudonym), interviewed by Irene Rauch, 12 February 2021, over Zoom Video Communications, in Isla Vista, California.

Susanne\*, “so parents in East Germany didn’t really have inheritances to pass down to their children.”<sup>9</sup> This difference in systems and relationship to money already put East Germans at a financial disadvantage compared to their new Western compatriots. It was perhaps the first clue that actual reunification and integration of the East into the FRG was a much more significant challenge than simply adjusting currency and redrawing borders. Due to the extremely different nature of competitive capitalism and collectivist socialism, lifestyles and attitude differences were much more elusive, albeit all-pervasive, hurdles to overcome.

Initially, Kohl and his party enjoyed popularity among the newly incorporated Easterners. As the realizer of reunification, he won the first free election that East Germans had participated in since 1933.<sup>10</sup> Alongside him, Lothar de Maziere briefly became the GDR’s prime minister, effectively its last leader. De Maziere had a record of protecting dissidents and conscientious objectors, which aligned with the East’s proud revolutionary spirit following the fall of the Wall. However, not long after, accusations surfaced about the new members of what was essentially East Germany’s last government having connections to the Stasi. This was a shock; the Stasi had been the East German secret police system and the government’s most oppressive and feared institution. Maziere was included in the accusations, as were many lesser politicians.<sup>11</sup> East Germans had been left with considerable scars and a lingering distrust of their government after enduring a dictatorship, particularly the Stasi’s surveillance methods that left people suspicious of their leaders, neighbors, friends, and even family members. Today, right-wing parties and groups can capitalize on this lingering nervousness and skepticism to gain supporters and paint the governing establishment in a scheming light.

Another point of contention between East and West, which today leads people to question the success of reunification, is the general state of the economy. Immediately following reunification, Germany dealt with its most significant recession since World War II.<sup>12</sup> Although this took its toll on both former parts, East Germany was hit especially hard, as it was already in such an intense period of total economic readjustment. Even ten years after reunification, the unemployment rate was still twice as high for citizens of former East Germany as it was for those who had lived in the FRG all along. By 2018, the gap had shrunk significantly; former East Germany had 7.6 percent unemployment, and the rest of the FRG had 5.3 percent.<sup>13</sup> While this is an improvement worth recognizing, it seems that by 2020, the economy in the East has stagnated again. The Eastern economy seems to no longer be actively growing. As a result, it may seem to some East Germans that reunification was a source of profit for West Germany and a disaster for them. Of course, this ignores the fact that all Germans have been paying taxes to support the integration of the East for decades.

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<sup>9</sup> Susanne (pseudonym), interviewed by Irene Rauch, 1 March 2021, over Zoom Video Communications, in Isla Vista, California.

<sup>10</sup> Hämäläinen, *Uniting Germany*, p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> Hämäläinen, *Uniting Germany*, pp. 146 - 47.

<sup>12</sup> Kurthen, Hermann, Werner Bergmann, and Rainer Erb, *Antisemitism and Xenophobia in Germany after Unification*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> Harrison, Hope M. *After the Berlin Wall: Memory and the Making of the New Germany, 1989 to the Present*, Cambridge University Printing Press, 2019, 401.

The East indisputably faced great financial struggles due to the economic adjustments of reunification. Political analyst Constanze Stelzenmüller cites the reunification-era job turnover as a significant reason for Eastern disorientation and frustration, even thirty years later. With the “communist caretaker state” gone, East Germans experienced competition in a new and daunting way. Stelzenmüller describes observing the *Treubandanstalt*, or Trust Agency, a government agency established in 1990 to oversee the privatization of East German corporations. She recalls “despondent foremen” working in factories in Berlin that “looked like locations for movies set in the 1950s, or the 1850s.”<sup>14</sup>

The East had a lot of technological catching up to do, but rather than being given a chance to attempt it themselves, the FRG’s federal government took over, altering and dismantling the Eastern economy as it saw fit. Thus, Easterners’ anger and resentment can be understood as a “displacement emotion” for “those who feel unheard, culturally marginalized, disrespected.” Rather than trying to meet their new compatriots halfway, West Germans gave them an “egalitarian promise” —read: “you’ll become just like us” —and expected assimilation without complaint. It is hardly surprising that fifty-eight percent of the people polled in the former Eastern states responded that they do not feel more protected from “arbitrary government” than before 1989.

Looking at the *Treubandanstalt*, or *Treuband*, it becomes clear that while the West could afford to move on from reunification, the wounds are still fresh for the East. A 2020 documentary by German broadcasting channel ZDF focuses on the *Treuband* and why many East Germans still blame it for their grievances today, despite its dissolution in 1994. The documentary features clips in which newly incorporated FRG citizens react in horror to the *Treuband* closing Eastern factories and taking over corporations. “It feels like there is an occupying power here,” one man said. “They’re destroying all businesses.” One woman goes so far as to say, “They’re going to destroy us all. The whole GDR. Former GDR.” Another calls the activities of the *Treuband* the “greatest annihilation of productive assets in peacetime.” The documentary supports this, citing the GDR as the tenth-strongest industrial nation in the world before its collapse.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, after the *Treuband* had finished its work, eighty percent of the production assets went to Western Germany, fourteen percent went to foreign investors, and only six percent remained with Eastern Germany.<sup>16</sup> Today, this remains an extremely sore spot for many Easterners, who view the *Treuband* situation as bad practice in integrating the East. For example, Saxon Interior Minister Petra Köpping demands that Angela Merkel’s immigrant-friendly government “integrate us first!” instead of focusing on the needs of refugees.<sup>17</sup>

The GDR economy also laid the foundation of Eastern social lives and lifestyles. Often, whole families would work for the same manufacturer or company. “It was actually nice,” Marita Heissig remembers. She and her entire family worked at Automobilwerk Eisenach (AwE) in Thuringia. They

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<sup>14</sup> Stelzenmüller, Constanze. “German Lessons Thirty Years After the End of History: Elements of an Education.” *The Brookings Institution*. 2019.

<sup>15</sup> ZDF, “Das Erbe der Treuband: Aufbruch und Ausverkauf” directed by Heike Nielsen (2019: Februar Film), Broadcast episode aired 4 October 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Kerstin Decker, “Integrationsministerin Petra Köpping: die Seelsorgerin der Sachsen” *Der Tagesspiegel*, 11 October 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Decker, “Petra Köpping.”



felt at home with their colleagues and the childcare that AwE provided for its workers. After 1990, Easterners were overwhelmed by consumer options and began to choose used BMWs manufactured in the West over new Wartburgs manufactured at AwE. Wartburg cars had been considered a luxury item in the GDR. They were obsolete within a year of reunification, and the company was shut down. Marita Heissig's husband was one of the first to be let go, followed by 4,500 others from one day to the next. The family still feels the heartbreak of that day. Her relative Jens Heissig explains, "In the GDR it was seen to that you could always work. This concept of unemployment was heretofore unknown to these families."<sup>18</sup> The *Treuhand* took away jobs that many felt were insufficiently replaced. Instead, it enforced the West's competitive capitalist system on the GDR, forcing workers to retrain for jobs they were often not suited for. While today the federal government praises itself for having objectively raised the average standard of living for Eastern Germans, introducing modern technology and systems, those affected by the collapse of the GDR do not feel that this has made up for the loss of their former lives and identities.<sup>19</sup>

At times, East Germans struggled to keep up with the pace and standards of a market economy. Hämäläinen best sums up the labor circumstances under the GDR:

Having grown up with a controlled system of guaranteed markets and prices, the East German managers' main worry had simply been to meet the quantitative quotas assigned to them; quality mattered less. Now they had to face the new and unfamiliar challenge of trying to sell their products in a new highly competitive market which put a premium on quality.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, not only were East German manufacturers now competing against the often technologically superior products of the West, but they had to unlearn the working mindset of the GDR. The latter ideology had essentially taught them that if only one brand of coffee was sold, it did not matter how good the coffee was; it was the only option so people would buy it regardless of quality. As Hämäläinen states, the GDR discouraged economic competition through taxes and propaganda. This explains the case of the Trabant, the Eastern car brand that today is more or less an endearing yet pitiful symbol of the GDR and the often-shoddy quality of products manufactured in a system with little to no market competition. The Trabant, or *Trabi* as it is commonly and affectionately known, was a compact, cheaply made car, which was more or less unchanged in design from its creation in 1957 until the Wall fell in 1989. In 1990, it received a new engine type from Western automobile giant Volkswagen, but the Trabant was discontinued two years later.<sup>21</sup> It simply could not survive in the new, merged Germany, where top-of-the-line Western automobile designs were constantly chosen over the Trabi that was often likened to plastic or cardboard. Incidentally,

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<sup>18</sup> ZDF, "Das Erbe der Treuhand."

<sup>19</sup> Stefan Berg, "Goodbye Ossi: The Demise of Eastern German Identity" *Der Spiegel*, 30 August 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Hämäläinen, *Uniting Germany*, pp. 168-70.

<sup>21</sup> Deutsche Welle, "The Trabant, the Iconic East German Car, Turns 60" *Lifestyle*, 7 November 2017.

thousands of *Trabis* can still be seen around Germany. However, they are a collector's item of sorts and are regarded with the same comical intrigue as one observes a rare bird with strange plumage. The economic issues East Germans experienced stemmed from the system of the GDR itself, not only from reunification. However, blaming the West and reunification might be easier than accepting how ill-prepared East Germans were to handle the pressures and pacing of a capitalist system.

### **After the “Woodstock Feeling”: Lasting East-West Divides**

In a nationwide poll conducted in January 2019, twenty-nine percent of West Germans and fifty-two percent of East Germans responded that they thought regional divisions still set Germans apart. The fact that Westerners are less aware of or bothered by such divisions is telling. Although Western Germans did carry a financial burden to reunify Germany, Easterners feel the unintended consequences of reunification more strongly. Nonetheless, these divisions are legitimate and perhaps most evident in the stereotypes that West and East perpetuate about each other. The East knows the West as the *Besser-Wessis*—a spin on the German word *Bessermisser*, meaning “know-it-all.” To the East, the West is a condescending wealthy cousin, perhaps even with imperialist tendencies. Some Easterners feel that the way West Germany scrapped the structure and ideals of the GDR and imposed its system on the Osis was dismissive and overly critical of their way of life. Meanwhile, the West knows the East as the *Jammer-Osis*, or “whiny Easterners.” In other words: the stubborn, less competent—yet never satisfied—junior sibling. Neither Wessis nor Osis feels adequately appreciated by the other.

We have already delved into some of the reasons for Eastern frustrations and resentment. However, the West had gripes of its own. Many Westerners are resentful of how much money continues to be pumped into former East Germany, which estimates show to be an equivalent of two trillion dollars total from 1990 to 2019.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of Eastern or Western origin or location, all Germans pay the *Solidaritätszuschlag*, or solidarity surcharge, a monthly tax anywhere from one to two thousand euros depending on financial status. The *Solidaritätszuschlag* was levied to close the gap between East and West: pensions, unemployment, welfare, infrastructural modernization, and much more. Incidentally, the tax is meant to be abolished in 2021 for ninety percent of Germans—it will continue to be paid at a reduced rate by 6.5 percent of Germans and in full by the wealthiest 3.5 percent.<sup>23</sup> A poll in May 1990 revealed that eighty percent of West Germans felt that they financially suffered from reunification. The West German government in Bonn had assembled an enormous Unity Fund aid package to incorporate East Germany into the FRG and arranged for infrastructural and industrial experts to help East Germany modernize and transition into a capitalist society. West Germany was entering the 1990s weary and resentful with such costs on its shoulders.

Despite the uncertainties, reunification was initially a joyous event. The Wall came down, Germany was one again, and a peaceful revolution had taken place. Elsa\*, who has lived in the Western half of Germany all her life, living through both a divided Germany and the Third Reich, still

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen Beard, “Fall of the Berlin Wall: Itemizing Germany’s \$2 Trillion Bill for Reunification” *Marketplace.org* (5 November 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Bundesministerium der Finanzen, “Fragen und Antworten zur weitgehenden Abschaffung des Solidaritätszuschlags,” *Steuern*, 18 November 2020.

remembers how emotional reunification was for both Easterners and Westerners. “You can’t imagine how we cried and celebrated,” she says.<sup>24</sup> She insists that the words “Ossi” and “Wessi” never entered her vocabulary and that she was overjoyed to see Germany reunified. However, it is important to note that Elsa witnessed Germany before it was ever divided. That reunification likely carried a connotation of revived pan-Germanity for her, especially since she grew up imbued with Nazi propaganda about German supremacy and a Manifest Destiny-style doctrine.

Other Westerners spoke of the East a bit more cynically. “Growing up (in the FRG), we made fun of them,” remembers Victoria\*, fifty-four. “In general, the perception was that they were controlled. We thought that they were stupid because it was Communism and we always thought, that’s not the right system... It was always, ‘what can we send them? What can we help them with?’ Because they were obviously lacking things.”<sup>25</sup> Today, Victoria acknowledges that she was imbued with a different sort of propaganda under the Western capitalist system and that there were some aspects of the GDR, such as childcare and gender equality, which were superior to their Western equivalents. However, the way she looked down upon the East in the past represents how Westerners generally felt about Easterners.

Even younger people who never witnessed a divided Germany express prejudice or stereotypes about Easterners. Julia\*, who is twenty and lives in southwest Germany, says, “We think they’re a bit more right-wing in the East. We don’t really like the way they talk.” She laughs and continues, “Some might say you can even tell from the way a person dresses whether they are from the East.”<sup>26</sup> She speaks light-heartedly but adds, “The young people have changed my view a little bit because they’re like me, but the older generation... I think lots of people have left the East and so the people remaining in the East are unhappy with the situation, so they’re voting for whoever appeals to them. They’ll vote for anything but what we have right now.” While Julia feels detached from the reunification era and the East, she says that her father cries every year on 9 November, when the Berlin Wall fell, and that his license plate is custom made to bear the year of reunification. Clearly, those who witnessed reunification, even from the West, were at least initially very emotionally invested in it.

Friedrich\*, who had visited Berlin while the 1990 currency debate was ongoing, recalls a feeling of wonder and excitement when the country was reunified because a significant part of Germany’s shared heritage had been “lost” when the country was split. From Johann Sebastian Bach’s musical compositions to Berlin’s renowned natural history museum to some of Germany’s best universities, such as Leipzig and Humboldt, many pillars of German culture had all been cut off from West Germany. They had seemed to vanish in the closed-off East.<sup>27</sup> Thus, at least in the early 1990s, people

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<sup>24</sup> Elsa (pseudonym). interviewed by Irene Rauch, February 18, 2021, over Zoom Video Communications, in Isla Vista, California.

<sup>25</sup> Victoria (pseudonym). interviewed by Irene Rauch, 3 March 2021, over Zoom Video Communications, in Isla Vista, California.

<sup>26</sup> Julia (pseudonym), interviewed by Irene Rauch, 9 February 2021, over Zoom Video Communications, Isla Vista, California.

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich (pseudonym), interviewed by Irene Rauch, 12 February 2021, over Zoom Video Communications, in Isla Vista, California.

on both sides were excited about the changes that were happening—Westerners were relieved to have regained their lost other half, and Easterners were throwing off the yoke of a socialist dictatorship.

Thomas Brussig, an Eastern writer who criticized the GDR through his satirical works, describes the initial joys of reunification as a “Woodstock feeling.”<sup>28</sup> He explains that reunification and the fall of the Wall, collectively known as *die Wende*—the turning point—was initially an almost “romantic event,” but that ultimately, the East paid a hefty price it had not anticipated. At its core, reunification became “a practice in coldness and devaluation” for Easterners as everything they knew was deemed insufficient and needed replacement. It is safe to say that most, if not all, Easterners were affected in some way. Countless academics, engineers, and other skilled workers lost their jobs and struggled to find new ones in the reunified nation.<sup>29</sup> As mentioned, regions were deindustrialized, thus affecting laborers as well. People’s living situations seemed unstable as properties were suddenly posed with the threat of gentrification. This concern, incidentally, continues to echo through many Eastern cities, perhaps most strongly in Berlin, where young international entrepreneurs flock to find their own corner in the increasingly cosmopolitan city. Berlin sees frequent protests about rising housing prices, and people who are born and raised there are understandably shaken by how quickly the city seemed to change in appearance and demographics.<sup>30</sup>

Not only did Easterners watch their institutions be dismantled and their economies deindustrialized, but they were also expected to adjust seamlessly to Western bureaucracy. Brussig explains that, being a populace with firsthand experience of dictatorship and freshly released from an authoritarian regime, Easterners “are more sensitive to what they see as overreach by German politicians.” It is not only the nostalgic Easterners who were happy under the GDR who resent Angela Merkel’s immigrant-friendly politics. Even some of those who rallied for the GDR’s collapse feel repressed and cheated by the current system; many see themselves as veterans who survived oppression together and tend to bond with each other over this shared experience. As a result, they may feel more closely aligned with fellow Easterners than with Westerners and the FRG despite reunification.

In an instance of razor-sharp commentary, Brussig describes the Western affinity for capitalism as no better an indoctrination than the East’s familiarity with authoritarian socialism. He posits that “Westerners, to whom free and social market economy, parliamentarianism and federalism were administered through their mothers’ breast milk,” could not possibly understand the complex feelings that Easterners had towards their former government. Indeed, expecting some degree of assimilation is no tall order. However, it seemed to many Easterners that they were being given one option—adapt or die, essentially—and that if they complained or demanded adjustments, they ran the risk of being dismissed as *Jammer-Ossis*. These factors combined to make Easterners feel like strangers in their own land. As explained by Brussig, who was raised in East Berlin, “we had to fight to be recognized in this country, we have all that in our past, and it wasn’t pretty.”

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Brussig, “Deutsche Einheit: Was nach dem Woodstock-Gefühl Kam,” *Spiegel*, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Peer Pasternack, “East German Universities Ten Years After” *International Higher Education* No. 21 (25 March 2000), p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Schumacher, “Thousands Rally in Berlin over World-Record Property Prices” *Deutsche Welle*, 14 April 2018.

The difficulty Easterners had in adapting to the market economy's labor standards led many Westerners to write them off as lazy, inefficient, and lacking in stereotypically German attributes like punctuality, reliability, and diligence. In reality, it took significant mental retraining to refocus one's attention to quality rather than quantity, to competition and an ever-changing market rather than collaboration, comradeship, and stability. Easterners were chastised for the methods and traits that they had been praised for under the slower-paced, uniform labor style of the GDR.<sup>31</sup> The impatient attitude of the West did nothing to encourage Eastern integration, either. With these factors at play, it turned out that the largest challenge in rebuilding the Eastern economy was not money but the mindset change required of Easterners to perform in the Western economic system.

### **An imperfect union: evaluating reunification**

While Kohl spoke as if the ideal of the blooming landscapes would be within reach in the next few years, economic journalist Christoph Keese predicted in 2010 that it would only take shape fifty years after reunification, if then. He recalls how disheartening this realization was. "Most people, myself included, really thought there was magic at work and that this could succeed within five years. However, after two years, it was clear this could not work in five years. And that's when a strong disillusionment set in. And frustration. And a belief that it would never work."<sup>32</sup> This disenchantment with Kohl's sweeping promise became abundantly clear even sooner than the initial imagined five-year deadline. When Kohl visited the Saxony-Anhalt town of Halle in 1991, he was pelted with eggs and heckled by attendees. The facade of the seamlessly unified nation was slipping from the start, and, as humiliating as the Halle visit may have been for Kohl, ordinary East Germans suffered the consequences of reunification daily.

As if to add insult to injury, Kohl admitted after leaving office in 1998 that he had not only glossed over the condition of the East with his "blooming landscapes" rhetoric but that he now considered his optimistic statement to be a "mistake." Later on, he admitted that it was not a mistake but a lie. According to transcripts of a conversation between Kohl and a confidant, at the time, he had not wanted to call out the ailing Eastern economy for what it was. In a later memoir, he again addressed his ambitious campaign promise. He confessed that he had been misled by GDR propaganda about the true economic strength of the socialist East before reunification. He had failed to see the cracks in the Eastern system and had thus insufficiently prepared West Germany to take on an unexpectedly large burden. Though Kohl comfortably won the federal election that year, and the CDU—today Merkel's party—continued to dominate reunification politics, the promise of blooming landscapes was quickly shattered.

It is hardly surprising that national-socialist clubs called *Kameradschaften* formed in the former East after reunification, particularly around the turn of the millennium. Lutz Kronenberger founded a notable one in Gorbitz, a bleak, socialist high-rise studded district southwest of Dresden. Groups like Kronenberger's united around common frustrations like unemployment and impoverishment in the East, which fostered "a dangerous mix of emotional socialism and boy scout romanticism."<sup>33</sup> At

<sup>31</sup> Hämäläinen, *Uniting Germany*, p. 168.

<sup>32</sup> Klaus Wiegrefe, "Kohl's Lie About the Blooming Landscape," *Spiegel Politics*, 26 May 2018.

<sup>33</sup> *Spiegel*, "Die schlagen schneller zu."

that point, right-wing extremism was driven by a longing for the communist order that had crumbled and the struggles Easterners faced as a result. The strong nostalgic element of the *Kameradschaften*, combined with such fresh wounds—indeed, reunification left tangible wounds on many East Germans—characterized them as a part of a distinctly Eastern right-wing movement. Indeed, it is misleading to imply that violence is endemic to a particular region. However, reunification conditions and its lasting impact have bred a unique right-wing movement in the East that differs from past incarnations of extremism in the West. The at-times drastic measures taken in the East to express or remedy their grievances—such as marching in the streets with Islamophobic signs or voting for parties espousing Hitler-reminiscent rhetoric—are an Eastern phenomenon precisely because of the difficulties the East faced. The East experienced reunification to a more substantial and often more negative degree than the West, so it stands to reason that Eastern right-wing activity would take on different and/or stronger forms than in the West.

As detailed in Hämäläinen's study of the flawed process of reunification, the core problem was West Germany's general misunderstanding and "lack of foresight" regarding the Eastern condition. Some West German intellectuals viewed the GDR as a "successful socialist experiment," a notion which seemed to be supported by the fact that it was considered the most successful economy of the Soviet bloc. However, the GDR's relative economic strength did not reflect East Germans' attitudes towards their government. As Hämäläinen explains, "to them it was no consolation that they were better off than the poverty-stricken Poles or the Soviets—they were comparing their lot with their fellow Germans in the [FRG]."<sup>34</sup> The Western intellectual perception of the East was out of touch with Eastern concerns and aspirations. Coupled with the indescribable pollution taking place, which was only revealed after reunification, it is clear that the West's understanding of the East was lacking in depth. With these Western misconceptions in mind, it stands to reason that the FRG thought economic modernization was the key to reunification. However, the false conviction that East Germans wanted the material plenitude of the Western capitalist system above all led to the West overlooking the Eastern desire for a feeling of identity and self-determination.<sup>35</sup>

The FRG leadership also overestimated—or, in their defense, perhaps they had no way of predicting—the degree of Eastern enthusiasm about the West. While many Easterners looked forward to economic aid and know-how from the West, they were also wary of property seizure or economic destabilization; as it turns out, their fears about both were justified. East Germans remembered the property confiscations after World War II, specifically the Communist expropriation of some properties belonging to people now living in the West, and were insistent that "new injustices should not replace old ones."<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, going back to the idea of lost identity and lack of common ground, it is important to remember that part of the motivation to unite Germany was to disentangle both East and West from any potential Cold War conflicts.<sup>37</sup> A reunified Germany meant that East Germany would no longer be dragged into Soviet affairs, especially as the Soviet Union teetered on collapse. Once the Soviets and Communism were out of the picture, people found internal divisions

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<sup>34</sup> Hämäläinen, *Uniting Germany*, p. 58.

<sup>35</sup> Hämäläinen, *Uniting Germany*, p. 59.

<sup>36</sup> Hämäläinen, *Uniting Germany*, p. 130.

<sup>37</sup> Hämäläinen, *Uniting Germany*, p. 229.

and inequalities to be agitated by. The German government became the new enemy for some, especially as Easterners saw issues like the exchange rate debate play out. The same is true today; since Germany is in peacetime, there is neither a common enemy to unite against nor a single unifying force to rally around. Thus, internal affairs have become a source of ire for Easterners who feel their circumstances are still not ideal thirty years after joining the FRG.

Reunification was certainly successful to the extent that it accomplished the mammoth task of, at least on paper, rejoining East and West Germany. However, the degree to which this incorporation happened—contingent on whether we mean economic, political, and cultural integration or simply reconfigured borders—was ultimately less than expected. Indeed, we can acknowledge the obvious triumphs of reunification. The collapse of a repressive, unsustainable, and dysfunctional regime meant that East Germans could suddenly enjoy greater freedom of speech, expanded consumer options, and a gateway to a more culturally pluralistic and cosmopolitan world. Their purchasing power was increased, having received “real money,” as some called it. Of course, these are all deemed successes by Western standards; they were unwanted and significant changes to some Easterners.

At the end of the day, though, Easterners were able to start enjoying the benefits of a welfare state. Hämäläinen puts it best, pointing out that “the very same things that attracted masses of refugees to Germany also ensured that the unemployed East German multitudes did not live in dire destitution.”<sup>38</sup> In fact, it is the same thing that continues to draw refugees to Germany today, and of which, Germans are becoming increasingly protective. Having discussed the logistical issues behind reunification, it is crucial that we now examine arguably the most significant barrier to complete reunification: the inability of East and West to see each other as a united, single people.

### **Misunderstandings and Nostalgia**

Reunification involved successes, broken promises, uncertainties and ultimately bred resentment on both sides. The process and its after-effects created cultural divides that left a disoriented and undervalued populace seeking vindication.

East Germany joined the FRG with doubts and uncertainties. Coupled with Helmut Kohl’s government’s misunderstandings of what the East wanted, this set up the country for decades of resentment and made it near impossible for East and West to become one attitudinally. Although the initial mood after the collapse of the Berlin Wall was celebratory, “the party could not last forever.”<sup>39</sup> According to political scientist and East German specialist Klaus Schröder, some even question whether the actual cost of reunification is known or whether the government is hiding the actual figures. Schröder primarily speaks about the financial aspect of reunification but emphasizes that money “was only half the story. We should have also paid attention to the fact that this reunited nation would need to start sharing common values. Everybody thought that these problems would go away if you threw money at them back then. That’s proved not to be true.” This has led many Easterners to believe they would be better off if the GDR had never collapsed, a phenomenon commonly known as *Ostalgie* (nostalgia, but for the East—the *Ost*).

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<sup>38</sup> Hämäläinen, *Uniting Germany*, p. 242.

<sup>39</sup> Hämäläinen, *Uniting Germany*, p. 224.

Lutz R., who lives in Berlin and experienced reunification in his early thirties, is a textbook example of an Easterner with *Ostalgie*. He claims that he felt a greater sense of freedom under the GDR than under Merkel's democratic government. He goes so far as to say that he felt reassured by the existence of the Berlin Wall, echoing the propagandistic name the GDR coined for it: the "anti-fascist protection rampart."<sup>40</sup> Even thirty years after the Wall's collapse, Lutz yearns for the East's former border and claims that it was not there to trap East Germans but "to protect us from the West."<sup>41</sup> Lutz's attitude seems ludicrous to Westerners who never experienced the difficult transition from GDR to FRG; indeed, the East Germans who fled the GDR would agree with the West. However, a 2009 survey revealed that nearly half of those polled would agree with Lutz; while sixty percent said that the GDR was an *Unrechtsstaat*, or unjust state. The remaining forty percent said it was not.<sup>42</sup> To them, the fall of the Berlin Wall signified the end of a life of peace and order, not the beginning of freedom.

What about the freedom to dissent and disapprove? The abundance of goods and choices in a capitalist society? "Freedom is relative," Lutz argues. He claims that in East Germany, he was able to complain to his boss without fear of being fired and that in unified Germany, this freedom to express one's thoughts does not exist. "In East Germany, I could say what I thought. Not about the government, of course, but then I didn't have anything against the government." One could respond that perhaps Lutz had it easy, that he did not have neighbors spying on him and did not have to spend a stint in the Hohenschönhausen prison as countless East Germans did. Alternatively, perhaps he was so indoctrinated with the GDR's fervent anti-West propaganda that, thirty years later, he is unable to appreciate the freedom of the FRG. However, could it not simply be that some people feel satisfied with the familiar and jarred by what is new and different?

Historian Hope Harrison points out that even those who marched in the streets and protested to urge reform in the GDR were not necessarily advocating reunification. It is important to remember that "not all of the East Germans calling for change wanted a Western-style system of democracy and capitalism."<sup>43</sup> Some simply wanted an improved socialist system; these people would have felt robbed by the collapse of the Wall and the reunification that turned their lives upside down in many ways. That Lutz's nostalgia for the pre-reunification era is so strong and that he is not alone in these sentiments further underscores the point that Easterners still do not feel quite at home in the FRG.

Harrison goes so far as to say that Easterners feel as though they have been colonized by the West and by capitalism.<sup>44</sup> This is a bold statement, considering the celebratory mood that characterized reunification in its early days. However, it is true that not all East Germans were thrilled to be incorporated into a system that was economically, politically, and culturally alien to them. To those who wanted a regime change, in the sense that they wanted the Stasi to be abolished and the GDR to become less authoritarian, for instance, but still wanted to keep their familiar socialist system, this unexpectedly drastic upheaval of the lives they knew was unwelcome. At that point, "the improved

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<sup>40</sup> Stelzenmüller, "German Lessons."

<sup>41</sup> Deanne Corbett, "Breaking Down the Wall in the Head," *Deutsche Welle*, 3 October 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Harrison, *After the Berlin Wall*, p. 314.

<sup>43</sup> Harrison, *After the Berlin Wall*, p. 323.

<sup>44</sup> Harrison, *After the Berlin Wall*, p. 136.



infrastructure and air quality in the East did not always compensate for these sentiments.” Harrison’s analysis mirrors Schröder’s in that both scholars identify the government underestimating East Germans’ bond to the GDR. In the narrative of capitalism triumphing over socialism, of free speech and revolution winning out over oppression, it was easy to forget that many, if not most, East Germans had never known a life outside the GDR and that its collapse was traumatic to a certain degree. Many were unhappy to have their entire way of life devalued and deemed outmoded.

As Harrison explains, even calling the GDR an *Unrechtsstaat*, or “state without the rule of law” —as the dominant discourse since reunification tends to do—is still perceived as an insult by East Germans. Many feel that this narrative condemns and invalidates the lives they lived, which in turn alienates them and breeds further *Ostalgie*. Indeed, while Westerners speak of the *Unrechtsstaat*, many Easterners fondly look back on living “a life of good within the bad state,” with the Wall as “a backdrop to their everyday lives.”<sup>45</sup> In oral histories, subjects reminisced on happy childhoods in the Young Pioneers socialist group; penpals with Soviet children; feeling fortunate to live in an anti-fascist state, away from the exploitative, crime-ridden West. Perceptions and experiences manufactured by the GDR span a broad spectrum and continue to shape East-West relations and tensions today.

Where does this leave us? As it turns out, the East, which underwent severe restructuring and political disorientation, experienced economic destabilization, and became emblematic of a lasting cultural divide between East and West, is home to fervent xenophobia and a disturbing right-wing scene today. Once the Wall came down and after the Eastern socialist regime collapsed, East Germans were initially welcomed with open arms in the West. However, the pressures and difficulties of reunification that we have discussed—unemployment in the East, rising taxes for the West, cultural differences, and great misunderstandings—collectively “brought to a halt tendencies towards post-nationalism attitudes and more cultural pluralism.”<sup>46</sup> It was as if each German was in a survival mode of sorts. As a result, working to patch up East-West misunderstandings and embracing other changes like multiculturalism and globalism slid down Germans’ list of priorities.

We live in a period of historic significance in its own right. Many nations seem to be slipping politically to the right and into situations of increased intolerance and heightened tensions. It behooves us to remember the roots of such alarming trends to take steps toward addressing them in the present. In Germany, the former Eastern states now show a much higher tendency toward right-wing extremism than the West, a symptom of the lasting divide between East and West. Understanding the prevailing Eastern self-perception as neglected and undervalued people helps us make sense of this divide. It also helps explain why some Easterners may be more likely to resent immigrants and express their long-brewing frustrations with the government through right-wing votership and even violence.

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<sup>45</sup> Harrison, *After the Berlin Wall*, p. 15, p. 325, p. 347.

<sup>46</sup> Kurthen et al., *Antisemitism and Xenophobia*, p. 261.