

Germany: A Tale of Two Generations

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Partner organisations: German-Russian Exchange, established in 1992, www.austausch.org and Perspektive3, established in 2010, www.perspektivehochdrei.wordpress.com

“A separated country that has been peacefully reunited is what characterises the unique case of Germany. While the majority of East Germans say the reunification has benefited them, criticism is directed at the speed of the transition and the process of adaptation to the West German system. People interviewed by members of Perspektive3 stated that despite their initial enthusiasm, they felt deprived of agency in the project 'Aufbau Ost' (building up the East) and in redeveloping the state, the society and the economy. Noting that East German viewpoints are underrepresented in the assessment of the GDR and the reunification process, Perspektive3 was created to give the the last one that grew up under the socialist system – the so-called third generation – a voice. This essay also addresses structural weakness of rural areas as a remaining societal problem.”

Mandy Schulze, Perspektive3

To Germans, transition refers to reunification, both as an event and a process. The period of transition, in a narrower sense, is clearly defined by the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 after months of peaceful protests. Its ending point is the Day of Reunification on 3 October 1990. During the following 11 months after the fall of the Berlin wall, every part of the society, including social, justice, education and economic systems, experienced changes to their regulatory environment at a tremendous pace.

The essential difference between this transition and other transitions in former socialist states in Europe is the reunification of two parts of one country. The reunification process – the continuous relationships and comparisons between East and West Germany – has also significantly influenced the transition experience and its associated debate.

The Third Generation East

Feeling that after 1989 it was primarily just West German voices that were heard when it came to explaining East Germany in public, and that East German viewpoints were underrepresented in this debate, representatives of the “Third Generation East” founded their initiative in 2010. The third generation refers to those born in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) between 1975 and 1985. The main purpose of the Association Perspective3, represented in the Transition Dialogue Network by Dr. Judith Enders, Mandy Schulze and Dörte Grimm, is to give this so-called third-generation a voice.

So far, they have guided dialogues between parents, who were socialised entirely in the GDR, and their children, who grew up during the transition phase in those “new times”. They also found 15 representatives from the third generation, who reflected on how they perceived the transition experience and its influence on interrelations between different generations of a family. Another focus they had was on the changing role of women in society. After all, Perspective3 is interested in finding ways to initiate discussions about the past and social involvement, particularly when it regards informal democratic self-empowerment within local structures.

Transition Experienced by the 2nd and 3rd Generation East

After the first and only free elections in the GDR in March 1990, the new government was made responsible for negotiating the accession of the GDR to the territory covered by the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany on 3 October 1990. This involved issues that would have huge impacts on the living conditions of people in East Germany when compared to those in the western part. These issues included changes to exchange rates for people's savings, pension levels and the acceptance of educational qualifications attained in the GDR. A spirit of optimism and euphoria characterised the years of 1989 and 1990, expressed by those interviewed by Perspective3: *"We could renew everything. We had to relearn everything, reinvent everything"* (interview excerpt)²⁵. However, reunification, with its remarkable speed and performance, also left East Germans under the impression that their country's development was taken out of their hands, causing East Germans to have an initial and ongoing disappointment,

“ *"During that time of change, I had the time of my life. I had the feeling of being involved in a revolution. We were so happy. [...] We spent whole nights making plans for how this country could be reformed. [...] But we lost our revolution to the West German parties and their visions"* (interview excerpt).

Thus, it was the generation of the parents who, having been completely socialised within the system of the GDR, had more difficulties with adapting than their third-generation children. "Now, they had to start from the beginning in many respects, often from the same level of information and knowledge as their children. [...] This was aggravated by fearing or actually experiencing unemployment, which meant an enormous insecurity with respect to the future. The course of the public dialogue seemed to be determined that

²⁵ J. Enders, M. Schulze & B. Ely, *Wie war das für Euch? Die Dritte Generation im Gespräch mit ihren Eltern*, (Ch. Links Verlag, 2016)

West German society would not have to change or learn anything. [...] To many, the present days became a permanent source of humiliation”²⁶.

In the collective memory of East Germans, mass unemployment remains as one of the most lasting experiences. From a 'mere' 15% in the years after 1989, it kept rising until it reached its peak of 20.6% by 2005²⁷. However, the term “unemployment” also signified a social decline and the devaluation of people’s life achievements. In the broader sense, experiences at workplaces also involved income breaks and new West German superiors who would declare that all of the employees’ previously used procedures and gained experiences were obsolete. Another effect was the differences in income that suddenly divided neighbours and relatives into 'winners' and 'losers' of the reunification. However, as the third generation was still young, it was better at adapting to and benefitting from, the new circumstances. This caused some tension in relationships between the generations.

“ *“I could not share my success with my parents, since at the same time they would experience the sale of the factories where they had been working, the dismissals, the closures, the demolition and the job hunt. [...] During that time, we primarily experienced things which separated us”* (interview excerpt).

This was confirmed by women interviewed for another survey (see below). Mutual misunderstandings and hurt feelings also hindered the dialogue between East and West Germans, *“My attempts to explain anything about the GDR to West Germans regularly ended with them telling me how the GDR actually was”* (interview excerpt). So, while the act of reunification was completed on 3 October 1990, the process of reconciliation of the people and approximation of

²⁶ A. Stemmler, Ein ostdeutsches 68? in: Judith Enders, Mandy Schulze & Bianca Ely, Wie war das für Euch? Die Dritte Generation im Gespräch mit ihren Eltern, (Ch. Links Verlag, 2016)

²⁷ M. Booth, Die Entwicklung der Arbeitslosigkeit in Deutschland, (bpb 2010), www.bpb.de/47242/

their living conditions still continues. *“Statistics in various fields still show significant differences between East and West Germany,”* the Federal Statistical Office stated in 2014. Their research found monthly incomes in East Germany were about 25% lower²⁸. These differences are another reason why some people cannot bring their own experience in line with the success story of the reunification, which is repeated annually around the Day of Reunification. Nevertheless, according to a social report by the association People's Solidarity (Volkssolidarität), more East Germans than West Germans see themselves as having benefitted from the reunification²⁹.



*“Human will can move everything. In the past, this house stood in a different country,” building on Brunnen Str. Berlin
Source: Christine Wetzel*

²⁸ Statistisches Bundesamt, 25 Jahre Mauerfall: Ost und West bleiben statistisch sichtbar, (2014) www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/ImFokus/Bevoelkerung/25JahreMauerfall_Statistik.html

²⁹ Anonymous, Osten sieht Deutsche Einheit positiver als Westen, (Welt, 2011), www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article13635760/Osten-sieht-Deutsche-Einheit-positiver-als-Westen.html

Transition as One of Life's Lessons – East German Women's Biographies

In the years after 1990, young East German women became both the most mobile and the best educated demographic group in Germany.³⁰ This was the subject of seven in-depth interviews with women aged between 25 and 35, which were conducted by Dr Judith Enders and Mandy Schulze³¹. Most of them had left their home regions after finishing school to study elsewhere and were either working or looking for a suitable employment. In their interviews, the women described the pursuit of their professional goals and the associated achievement of personal and financial independence as an important prerequisite for an equal partnership, *“I consider an independent woman... with her own experience and success to be very important in any relationship”* (interview excerpt). Equally essential is a good balance between private and professional life, *“so one is not only working all the time, coming home late, unable to do anything else”* (interview excerpt). Deciding to sacrifice their own professional interests for the work of a housewife and mother was not mentioned by any of the interviewees.

Confrontation with their parents' generation plays a major role for young East German women with children, as it does for any other young parent, *“If you have children, you inadvertently tend to analyse your own childhood over and over again”* (interview excerpt). However, the double socialisation in East and West Germany they experienced plays a special part in the lives of the interviewed women and becomes an intra-family and socio-political challenge.

³⁰ A. Domscheit-Berg, Familienpolitik in Ost- und Westdeutschland und ihre langfristigen Auswirkungen, (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2016), www.boell.de/de/2016/11/09/familienpolitik-ost-und-westdeutschland-und-ihre-langfristigen-auswirkungen#_ftn2

³¹ J. Enders & M. Schulze, Frauen in der Dritten Generation Ostdeutschlands, in: A. Bergfrede, E. Fuchslocher, K. Kollwe & K. Pittius, FrauenBewegung(en). (Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2013).
J. Enders & M. Schulze, Transformationsprozesse und Auswirkungen auf Geschlechterarrangements - zur Wertorientierung von Frauen der Dritten Generation Ostdeutschland, in M. Thomas & U. Busch, Transformation im 21. Jahrhundert. (Transformerless Wissenschaftsverlag, 2015)
J. Enders & M. Schulze, Feministische Mutterbilder? - Eine Verständigung von Feminismus und Mutter-Sein vor dem Hintergrund ost- und westdeutscher Entwicklungen, in M. Doldner, H. Holme, C. Jerzal & A. Tietge, O Mother where are thou?, (Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2016)

“A simple question like, ‘Tell me, mum, what time would you usually collect us from kindergarten?’ made her lose it completely that day, ‘We all had to work, we did not have any choice! Sure, we would have to take you there by half six because we would have to be at work by seven! And then in the 90s even, yes of course, you were latchkey kids. At least that is what they call it now but it was absolutely normal for you, kids, to have a key and to be able to go home whenever you wanted. You, children, were trusted and now it is as if we did not look after you” (interview excerpt).

Here, the critically viewed image of motherhood in the GDR, which gives the young grandmothers of today the feeling that they need to justify themselves, opposes the genuine interest of young women seeking their own place in society as mothers. One young woman, however, clearly expressed what she believed would be required of society in order to achieve a constructive debate and a productive reappraisal of the parents' transition experience. *“What is completely left out of the media discussion, as far as I can see, are the personal biographies beyond all those stories about jails or attempts of flight. I think this microcosm of a typical average family in the GDR, particularly of our generation, is being completely forgotten somehow”* (interview excerpt).

As Martina Rellins, a West German journalist and author who interviewed East German women after the reunification, put it, *“During my interviews, I, too, have repeatedly noticed: There is something that West German women have not got yet and East German women have not lost – the deep understanding that work provides independence, that having children is a part of life and that there is no shame in having your children looked after in day-care or after-school facilities”* (interview excerpt). Therefore, it remains important to listen to the women from the former GDR and to their accounts of everyday life back then and to maintain a dialogue with them. This is a chance to find a clearer identity and explore both the strengths (e.g. female independence) and the weaknesses (e.g. a double burden) of their former way of life, particularly for women of the transition generation.

Loss and Recovery of the Public Space: an Example of Community Learning and Self-Empowerment

We have already touched on the issues of departure and migration. Some East German regions have lost up to 38% of their population since the reunification³². But what happens in those parts that have been left? Over the last 25 years, the Upper Lusatia, a region near the borders of the Czech Republic and Poland, has gone through a profound structural change. This process of economic and political transformation has left many buildings vacant, due to closed down plants and a declining population. This has not just occurred with industrial buildings and historical half-timbered houses (Umgebinderhäuser), but also with buildings that used to serve the community as places of social life, such as guest-houses, pubs and theatres.



Abandoned public spaces in East Germany
Source: Mandy Schulze

³² A. Demografie-Portal, Große regionale Unterschiede im Bevölkerungswachstum, (2015), www.demografie-portal.de/SharedDocs/Informieren/DE/ZahlenFakten/Bevoelkerungswachstum_Kreise_ab1990.html

³³ S. Bartmann & S. Tiefel, Biografische Ressource und Biografische Reflexion: zwei sich ergänzende Heuristiken zur erziehungswissenschaftlich orientierten Analyse individueller Erinnerungs- und Biografiearbeit, in: Margret Dörr, Heide von Felden, Regina Klein, Hildegard Macha & Winfried Machotzki, Erinnerung - Reflexion- Geschichte. Wiesbaden, (VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008)

Public space also disappeared, both in its literal sense as the place where local people met, chatted and bonded and in a deeper sense as the places which shape a community. For years now, many of public spaces have been lingering over a sad fate or have just fallen into ruin. These “eyesores” became symbols for problems and failures of the transition time.

But in recent years, these buildings have received more attention. Members of the communities began to engage in activities around those vacancies. These dedicated people include inhabitants, as well as returnees and newcomers. During recent years in the region of Upper Lusatia, many very heterogeneous groups and initiatives have been formed around vacancies of spaces, usually without external support or highly institutionalised concepts. The engines for these developments are instead idealism, local ties and commitment, civil voluntary work and personal learning.

Creative Adoption Strategies Initiating Democratic Processes of Community Education

Learning in the course of life is part of a subjective transformation, meaning that each person has ‘biographical resources’³³. But in order to turn an experience into a biographical learning process, it is necessary to reach a certain level of reflection about these experiences. In order to promote this, various unconventional paths are offered. The most important conditions are to create the space for biographical discussion and to provide an opportunity for this³⁴. Community education is also described as a long-term and fundamental requirement to empower a sustainable basis for a lifelong learning culture³⁵, especially informal learning in civil society at a regional level. A culture of lifelong learning can be

³⁴ M. Schulze, Transformationserfahrung - Anlass zur Kompetenzentwicklung der Dritten Generation? Eine Annäherung an generationales Lernen im Lebensverlauf, in U. Busch & M. Thomas, Ein Vierteljahrhundert Deutsche Einheit. Facetten einer unvollendeten Integration. (Trafo Wissenschaftsverlag, 2015)

³⁵ L.Chisholm, L. Lassnigg, M. Lehner, W. Lenz & R. Tippelt, Wissen – Chancen – Kompetenzen. Strategie zur Umsetzung des lebensbegleitenden Lernens in Österreich, (2009), http://erwachsenenbildung.at/downloads/service/LLL-Strategie_ExpertInnenbericht.pdf

achieved through personal development, self-learning about social and cultural topics, and volunteering in new learning environments. Because of the long-term view of this strategy and its qualitative aspects, its focus is on the practice and organisation of existing projects and initiatives³⁶.

The vacant properties in Upper Lusatia are historical buildings, and volunteering in one allows people to combine a part of their own history with the history of the community, providing voluntary work in a space that can be experienced directly. Having concrete and immediately available spaces is one of the main triggers for common action and learning. The key factors, however, to start a change process in the community, in this case, was a space or building being open and free for use and open to the general public. Further, the community and the public were involved at an early stage and were asked for help continually. This open-door policy is crucial for gaining new members and support from the municipal administration. It was equally crucial for the initiatives to be open to listening to the volunteers and for them to lend a sympathetic ear to the volunteers' needs.

Members of the initiatives handle a number of aspects of community management. This includes dealing with the administration, learning about public decision making, finding supporters on the polity level, understanding funding policies, but also investigating local history. So, although the agenda of the vacancy-initiatives had primarily not been political, the effect was a contribution to the recreation of public space.

Lessons for Civic Education

An active examination of recent history in post-socialist countries is essential for strengthening democratic processes. Many of the interviews conducted in the countries of our project partners reveal a similar crucial experience, which has had a lasting impact: a loss of

³⁶ L. Lassnigg, Community Education als Aktionslinie der nationalen Strategie zum lebensbegleitenden Lernen, (Magazin Erwachsenenbildung.at, No. 19, 2009), <http://erwachsenenbildung.at/magazin/13-19/meb13-19.pdf>

trust, rules or orientation³⁷. However, trust in other people, groups and institutions is a prerequisite for the functioning of democratic processes. Civic education needs to deal with people's actual perception of society and democracy, rather than solely teaching them about it. However, it is not just history lessons at school and other educational situations that allow for discussion. People should be able to talk about the past, particularly in families, private circles and local communities like neighbourhoods.

“ If someone cannot come to terms with the past, this can impair their ability to accept new situations and experiences for entire groups or for a whole generation, which itself is nothing more than the many individuals it consists of. Many families are, apart from anecdotes or platitudes, quite lost for words when it comes to the past. It is not rare for the cosmopolitan attitudes and experiences of the young generations who have left for the big cities to be met with rather conservative or populist attitudes in their rural home regions.

The challenge for political education is to encourage and guide a dialogue. Experience working with shaping dialogues between the generations shows that simply asking the 'wrong' question at the beginning may cause the dialogue to fail ("Now you are starting to talk like a Wessi!" Nedo: 152). Therefore, we suggest the development of specific didactic concepts.

Finally, we strongly support non-formal education situations, in public spaces with 'real encounters', as they provide opportunities for social interaction and allow individuals to discuss their experiences of transition situations in recent history.

³⁷ Transition Dialogue Network, *Breaking the Silence. Memories of the Times of Change*, (2016), <http://www.transition-dialogue.com/breaking-the-silence>

This also applies to the international dialogue. It is important to include not only multipliers of civic education but also citizens of all age groups without a background or expertise in transition. Exchange should be accessible to different groups, including minorities. This requires resources for translation as the language barrier is a key factor, hampering large-scale dialogue across borders and social milieus.

DRA's experience over the last decade suggests that sharing the difficulties and not only the good practise examples, resonates greatly with our Eastern European peers. Partners consider this approach helpful and authentic, because it fosters understanding and dialogue. Last but not least, it is important to understand that history has happened to all of us and we all share similar challenges, much in the same way we all have the capacity to become a driver of change.

About the authors

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