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GDR Monuments in Unified Germany

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In April 1970, East Germany’s leader Walter Ulbricht unveiled a 63-foot red granite statue of Lenin in East Berlin. The statue commemorated the Soviet leader’s hundredth birthday and symbolized German-Soviet amity.1 Twenty years later, the statue became a new kind of symbol in the process of German unification. After the fall of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED), and the beginning of the unification process between East and West Germany, politicians and ordinary citizens debated which objects and legacies of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) had a legitimate place in unified Germany. The Lenin statue and its eventual removal marked the first stage in this debate. The following chapter draws on reports and records from the Berlin Senate and its subcommittees as well as on contemporary accounts to show how GDR monuments, in particular the Lenin Monument (Lenindenkmal) and the Ernst Thälmann Memorial (Ernst-Thälmann-Denkmal), were transformed from state symbols of the GDR to actual physical embodiments of GDR history and everyday life. At these sites, former citizens of East and West Germany, both now citizens of a united Germany, gathered to protect these monuments in order to advocate a post-Wende German identity that continued to reflect East Germans’ lived experiences and their contribution to the identity of a newly united country.

In the autumn of 1989, East Germans courageously protested against the SED and effectively claimed their citizenship rights as they brandished banners exclaiming ‘We are the People’. Indeed, across the former Eastern Bloc, citizens dismantled authoritarian socialist regimes and pushed for reforms that would open their markets and establish functioning democratic governments. The singularity, however, of the East German situation was its integration into an already existing western country, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), then under the leadership of Chancellor Helmut Kohl and his coalition government. The formal accession of the GDR to the FRG allowed the West German government to disregard the provision of the West German Basic Law (Grundgesetz) that called for a new constitution in the event of unification and thereby to forego cumbersome constitutional procedures in its replacement of East Germany’s political, economic, and judicial systems.
In agreement with legislative decisions in Bonn, the Berlin Senate undertook preliminary steps towards reunifying East and West Berlin – a massive project encompassing urgent matters like traffic, communication, and sewage as well as less pressing but equally weighty issues concerning universities, and art and cultural institutions. In rapid measure, West Berlin authorities also removed markers of East Berlin’s communist past. An early and highly public act was the renaming of streets. In general, imperial or prominent West German figures were favoured. Dorothee, wife of the Great Elector Friedrich Wilhelm, replaced Clara Zetkin on a street parallel to the main thoroughfare Unter den Linden; Chancellor Konrad Adenauer received an honorary street name; and Dimitroffstraße, named after the Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitroff, reverted to Danzigerstraße amidst complaints from the Polish consulate. Aside from the practical problems caused by the changes – the cost of changing business stationery or the confusion resulting from the new names – residents resented the intrusion into their neighbourhoods and the apparent double standard being applied to the East, pointing out that offensive names referring to the First World War and Second World War heroes in the West were not subject to similar re-evaluation. Largely excluded from policy-making, ordinary East Berliners looked on while their institutions lost financial support, their laws and social security system were replaced, and decisions affecting everyday life came under the jurisdiction of West German agencies. The issue was not whether East Berliners were happy to see the symbols of the SED regime torn down. Rather, oppositional voices worried that local wishes were being overrun as the state pursued its vision of integration.

Although new systems of government have the right to remove the symbolic markers of past regimes, particularly those ideologically opposed to the present system, as was the case with East Germany, the FRG faced the dilemma that East Germans were, in theory, to be integrated into the new nation as equals, not as a defeated people. West German scepticism about equal integration, however, grew amidst fears of increasing Ostalgie (nostalgia for life under the GDR). Although some politicians and activists called for a greater inclusion of East Germans in policy decisions, by and large the government response was to maintain the status quo.

It was thus in keeping with the status quo that West Berlin government agencies began to remove the protected status of East German buildings and monuments. Officials in Bonn demanded the complete demolition of East German government buildings. And, in 1993, the Federal government sponsored an international competition to rebuild the East German government buildings surrounding the Marx-Engels Forum in order to remove ‘the blemish on the new capital’. In response, activist and community groups rallied together to demand that the government acknowledge and preserve Germany’s divided heritage. Protesters charged that West German authorities meant to eradicate the material reminders of the East German past. International architects remarked upon what they perceived as conscious discrimination against East German architects. A diverse set of protestors gradually emerged, which argued that the material legacy of the GDR was integral to the construction of a new German identity.