The Nice Stasi Man Drove His Trabi to the Nudist Beach: Contesting East German Identity

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Marking East German identity

The fact that in the one and only democratic election in the existence of the German Democratic Republic, citizens voted to dissolve their country is the stuff of classic tragedy. The revolution eats its children, we are told, and so it happened in East Germany in 1989.

(Andrews, 2007, p.114)

For most of the 40 years of the existence of the GDR, the outside world took little interest in what happened there. If someone from the West were asked to talk about their image of East Germans, if they had anything at all to say, it probably would have been with regard to the marked achievement of East German athletes, whose performance, they might insinuate, could have been enhanced by artificial means. All this changed very dramatically in the months leading up to and following the opening of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. Within six months, East Germans held their first democratic elections, in which they voted to dissolve their country. Less than one year after the opening of the wall came the reunification of Germany; both the scale and the urgency of these dramatic changes caught the public imagination of much of the world. This attraction led researchers from around the globe to descend on what had once been East Germany to ask people about their lives, their sense of their new-found freedom. As one observer remarked, in 1989 East Germans were the most interviewed people in the world. East Germans were constantly narrating their lives, both publicly and privately, and many encountered the documentation of their lives by others, in their Stasi files.
One question which I repeated in both 1992 and 2012 was ‘If someone asked you where you were from, what would you say?’ The responses I heard varied in scope, but almost everyone claimed for themselves an enduring sense of ‘being from’ a place which now was no more. One of the greatest psychological challenges posed by the acute political change was that people had to effectively reconceptualise their relation to the state, not only in the present, but also to recreate a viable past for themselves – one that was not necessarily false, but that was recast in the light of those social positions and attachments which emerged as the most valued post 1989.

In a conversation with Andre Brie, a former leader in the communist party and one of its leading progressive theoreticians, I ask him about the role of East Germany in his own sense of identity. His answer is long and thoughtful.

AB: A decisive one. I was marked by it, I was socialised and politicised over there. Many of my values come from East Germany. Things I hope I practice myself, e.g. modesty, living among people. I live in a village now, where hardly anyone has a proper job. Those are my friends, those are my neighbours. I work with them, and they help me. I’m pretty much the only one there who is from a somewhat higher social standing. I hope that’s a positive aspect that comes from the GDR. At least, I want it to be that way, and I try to live that way.

AB: But there are many other things, cultural things. Many GDR writers, painters, musicians have influenced what kind of art is close to my heart. This opened my mind. […] Songwriters and singers from the GDR – that’s something that I still value greatly today.

AB: Another aspect is very important, as well. Maybe that only applies to someone who is left-wing, who thinks about alternative models of society. The GDR was not just a random concept, as there are so many in the political left. It was a powerful reality with its bad sides, with its failure, and possibly also with its positive aspirations. That is a huge treasure of experience I try to use. It’s not like reading an essay, but it’s having experienced something that did not work. […] We had 40 years of the GDR, that was our reality, that was our life. A huge compendium of mistakes from which the left-wing can learn. For me, the GDR is still very much alive, because I still deal with it.