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The Trabant and the Mercedes: A Psychological Analysis into the Disjunction of German Reunification

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THE TRABANT AND THE MERCEDES: A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS INTO THE
DISJUNCTION OF GERMAN REUNIFICATION

By

Faith Morris

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
Graduation with Honors from the
South Carolina Honors College

December 2020

Approved:

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Second Reader

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For South Carolina Honors College

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Abstract

Ostalgie, a combination of the German words *Ost* (east) and *Nostalgie* (nostalgia), is the psychological phenomenon that describes former East Germans' longing for a return to aspects of life from the period of communist rule. This paper explores the phenomenon of *Ostalgie* in reunified Germany in relation to psychological constructs of nostalgia and collective identity. *Ostalgie* is essentially both a means and an end. This paper seeks to prove *Ostalgie* is a means of creating identity, formulated by the interplay of nostalgia and certain social conditions that combined with and aided the failure of democratic capitalism for former East Germans. Nostalgia should be understood as a cultivation of the confronting hegemonic and oppositional memories. As an end, *Ostalgie* serves as a fundamental cornerstone for post-reunification East German identity itself. *Ostalgie* can be understood as an attempt to reclaim a sense of Heimat, home, in the wake of profound displacement following the German reunification. The abrupt and radical transformation of East Germans' lives through unification denied them the opportunity to complete their democratic revolution at their own pace. In addition, widespread job loss and early economic failures of reunified Germany in the early 2000s further divided the formerly Eastern and Western Germans. This paper maintains therefore, that this sense of nostalgia that developed suggests not that East Germans wanted the former socialist regime back, but rather they wanted to be recognized in the present, and they wanted to contribute to their new society while having their history appreciated. East Germans had been oppressed, disadvantaged, and without voice. After reunification, East Germans lives, thoughts, and traditions were systematically devalued just as much as their former government and economic ideologies. In the face of the reunified nation's failure to provide for and acknowledge East Germans, the former Easterners turned to each other to create a reality which values and affirms the identity of being "East German".

I. Introduction

Germany is not often perceived as a country with multiple, different national identities. Though its recent influx of immigration from the South has provided more diversity in the country, there are also distinct West German and East German identities associated with the division of Germany after the second World War. Daphne Berdhal's early twenty-first century research into the East German population offers a glimpse into the currently held beliefs and feelings of former East German citizens. As a native Leipzig woman is quoted: "This is a model from the West that was imported here and many Leipzig citizens are having an allergic reaction to this model, in part because it is not theirs, in part because they are excluded" (Berdhal p. 92, 2010). As this paper will explore, after the German reunification, East Germans felt fundamentally displaced while still being geographically at home. The society that took over eastern Germany after reunification was unfamiliar and largely inaccessible to former Easterners which created a divide between West and East German identities still lasting today.

Day-to-day life in East Germany, or the German Democratic Republic (GDR), was characterized by a lack of access to basic goods and necessities due to the authoritative nature of the communist government. East Germans led typical lives within the context of persistent state-level shortages, with "poor quality products, irregular and inadequate supplies, and inequitable and unpredictable distribution" ultimately shaping the culture of consumption (Weinreb, 2017). Compounded with hunger was constant surveillance of citizens by militant government organizations and perpetual deployment of widespread propaganda. Despite all of these

observable trends, there has still been a widely-documented trend amongst former citizens of the GDR: they remember this period for its simplicity and consistency, conclusively favoring their past condition over the present. *Ostalgie*, a combination of the German words *Ost* (east) and *Nostalgie* (nostalgia), is the psychological phenomenon that describes former East Germans' longing for a return to aspects of life from the period of communist rule. *Ostalgie* should be understood as an attempt to reclaim a sense of *Heimat* (home) in the wake of profound displacement following the German reunification.

This paper seeks to prove *Ostalgie* is a means of creating identity, formulated by the interplay of nostalgia, which is cultivated and fostered by the confrontation of hegemonic and oppositional memories, and certain social conditions that combined with and aided the failure of capitalism in reunified Germany. This paper will also attempt to differentiate the identity of East Germans constructed during the GDR period from that of the identity which developed during and following the process of German reunification. Additionally, this paper will analyze the identity created by the GDR State (one centered on individual production) in an attempt to better understand how the expansion of *Ostalgie* has transformed East Germany in recent decades through a communal remembering of a shared past. This analysis provides two possible explanations for the development of a post-unification East German identity: the failure of socialism in the form of the GDR and the failure of capitalism in reunified Germany. It can and will be argued that it was actually the failures of both economic systems that contributed to the resolution of *Ostalgie* in East German identity.

II. Authoritarianism and East German Identity

The early 1950s in Germany were characterized by high unemployment and severe commodity shortage as the war-time period ended. As a direct result of the agricultural shortage in the Soviet bloc, major supply shortages that appeared affected the entire East German population, specifically, “meat, butter, cheese, shoes, underwear and washing powder were scarce” (Ysselstein p.11, 2007). In addition, East Germans needed a new national identity that was separate from that of the West and from that of their past. The dark cloud surrounding the Nazi party was only beginning at this point, but most Germans were already eagerly searching for an escape from this association. This momentary absence of collective identity provided the state with an opportunity to intercede. By most accounts,

The Socialist Unity Party was confronted with two major problems when forming the GDR: on the one hand, they had to figure out how to provide enough material goods for East Germans and on the other hand, they had to determine how to do it without compromising its socialist ideology on consumerism (Ysselstein p.8, 2007).

GDR leaders are noted by the CIA as having openly admitted to not having adequate food supplies to satisfy the population, and the public was loud about their need for these very basic, German necessities. The response of the GDR was to attempt to produce enough to export in exchange for this necessary supply (CIA 1961). By doing so, the state also solidified production as a cornerstone for East Germany identity.

When considering the history of Nazism throughout Germany, it is clear how the necessity for a new national identity on both sides of the border emerged after the second World

War. The collapse in singularity was rapidly followed by economic fragility in both East and West Germany. As both countries sought to distance themselves from the atrocities committed by the Nazi party during the war, governments on both sides of the wall sought to invent and disseminate a new shared identity for their peoples. The reasoning for this was simple: a united population was far easier to manipulate and control. Thus, in the beginning of the GDR regime, the scramble away from Nazism combined with the food shortages provided the state with the opportunity to use production as a tool for creating a new East German identity. This goal of forming a new GDR identity, while also mitigating shortages, is the reason for the heavy reliance on community and work organizations by the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, or SED. This paper maintains that the East German identity manufactured by the state as a result was one of a producer and a comrade. The state used this moment of needing and uncertainty to formulate a distinct identity as citizens of the GDR. This marks the beginning of the major influence of production and propaganda on everyday life in the GDR, and it can be viewed as the moment in which SED plans to force party and state loyalty began fruition.

It is important to consider how enveloping and far-reaching the propaganda of the socialist state in the GDR was. State efforts to orient the East German population to Soviet ideals are reflected in art and literature movements of the time, such as the *Bitterfelder Weg*, or the “boy-meets-tractor” genre of literature. The goal of this literature was to overcome academic elitism and advance the belief that the SED was a tool for the workers and the common people (Kleßmann 2002). The SED sought to facilitate not only loyalty and support of the party, but also an identification with the party and its ideals. For example, the teaching of Marxism–Leninism and the Russian language was made compulsory in schools in an effort to engrain socialist

ideologies and practices into the East German people at a very young age. Furthermore, even young children in the state provided child-care centers were taught party slogans and how to be good workers of the state. The indoctrination into socialist ideals was present in every stage of life: from toddlers in state child-care to teenagers in school and the *Freie Deutsche Jugend* to adults working factory jobs and attending community organizations.

The Formation of a New Identity: Production and Propaganda

The economy was centrally planned and increasingly state-owned, meaning the pricing of housing, basic goods and services were heavily regulated by the government, as opposed to the supply and demand model in the West. This had repercussions in terms of luxury spending, though not all items labeled as ‘luxury’ were unnecessary. For example, while meat, dairy, bread and cheese became widely available again in the early 1980s, fruits and vegetables remained incredibly hard to find and items such as linen were exorbitantly priced. True luxuries like televisions, stereos, coffee, and brandy were exceptionally rare and expensive. In order to combat discontentment, the state used clever slogans and work benefits to formulate an identity around production and instill a sense of pride in the workplace, namely a pride elicited from working to produce their own products. *Wandzeitungen*, posters placed in workplaces, boasted sayings like, “Wettbewerb: Hohe Leistungen zum Wohle des Volkes und für den Frieden—Alles für die Verwirklichung der Beschlüsse des XI. Parteitages der SED!” (Blytwerk 1998). A sense of competition and production, therefore, became markers for this period, and seemed also a signal trending toward success for the Soviet and GDR leadership.

One of the more interesting flashpoints in the development of the collective destabilization of Germans’ psyches can be seen at the workplace. Most jobs had an abundance

of policies that were presented to be simply a benefit to the employee. However, it can be viewed that these positive opportunities afforded to those who worked at specific places actually had more sinister motives buried by the state. A prime example being in the majority of

East German factories [which] housed a daycare center, a general store, and even a doctor's office on factory grounds. Such policies were part of a process through which the state attempted to supplant certain roles and functions of the private sphere—child rearing, family meals, and so forth—with the public sphere of the socialist workplace. In the GDR, the workplace was thus not only the center of everyday sociality, it was also a symbolic space of community and national belonging (Berdhal p.49)

Many of these opportunities provided greater access to the labor force for many women and mothers and did therefore, seem to reflect the perspective of the SED as the people's party.

However, these policies were two-sided as they not only offered positive opportunities for the people, but they also encouraged an admiration and gratefulness toward the party which quelled frustrations and opposers. Many of the benefits afforded to the workers of the GDR were ultimately means to elicit loyalty and personal identification with the party.

Beyond the physical workplace itself, groups were formed by the state to help extend the party's reach into the private lives of their citizens. Community organizations served as a means of the state to collectively impose socialist beliefs onto people in the normally private domains of their lives. In addition, most leisure activities within the GDR were in some way a product of state involvement. Some of these groups included *Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands* (the women's organization), *Freie Deutsche Jugend* (the youth organization), and the organization promoting German and Soviet friendship, *Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft*

(DSF). All of these groups sought to facilitate the spread of pseudo-propaganda, serving as an extending arm of the state's ruling party. Furthermore, organizations like the *Freier Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund* (FDGB) and all factory trade unions monitored workers' social engagement and encouraged membership in the community organizations (Von Richthofen 2009). These efforts highlight a deeply worrying trend that was prevalent throughout East Germany: citizens were being predisposed to political schools of thought in every facet of their lives, without necessarily being aware. These covert attempts to affect the psyche of entire populaces can be directly drawn to the long-term fondness that some people still feel today.

The Authoritarian Threat

Life for the average citizen of East Germany necessitated an amount of caution unlike the lives of European neighbors. Due to the multi-faceted implementations of communist propaganda, most people were unable to determine when, where, or why they were being influenced. The *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, or State Security Service (*Staatssicherheitsdienst*, SSD), commonly known as the *Stasi* was the official state security service of the German Democratic Republic. The *Stasi*, being the most prominent mechanism of enforcement, routinely “wiretapped, bugged, and tracked citizens. It steamed open letters and drilled holes in walls. It had nearly 200,000 unofficial informers and hundreds of thousands more occasional sources providing information on their friends, neighbors, relatives, and colleagues” (Bailey, 2019). East Germans living in Berlin, for example, were also faced with the threatening nature of the Border Guards, whose patrols, watchtowers, and observations always consisted of two to three armed guards. Those unlucky enough to fall foul of the state experienced the full harshness of the period, often losing their lives or livelihood. As a result of these efforts of the

Stasi, community ties were eroded, and neighbors were turned against each other through the state's total control in both public and private spheres.

Emigration to the West became a significant problem as many of the emigrants were members of the young, educated class which threatened the state economically. In response to this, in 1961, the government fortified its western borders and built the Berlin Wall. Many people attempting to flee were killed or imprisoned for years by border guards. The *Stasi* employed a mass surveillance on the East German people, and its threat of force motivated and produced thousands of reports from the population on fellow neighbors, coworkers, friends and family for anti-state sentiment and actions. One of the most famous, and typical examples of the time is the case of the Olympic ice-skater, Katarina Witt. She was labeled as a "favored" citizen and collaborator of the state, revealed through the public release of her *Stasi* file after the GDR's collapse. This categorization was evident by her allowance of a car, a new television, and the home of her choice. In exchange for this, or rather the precedent for this: eighty percent of her earnings from *Holiday on Ice*, for example, went to the state. After her file was released, she learned that her every move was monitored by the *Stasi*, and she was extensively spied and informed upon from the year 1973 onward (Hiller 2009).

Mary Fulbrook, author of *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*, classifies the GDR as a "participatory dictatorship". This is one in which it is not so easily described as the people versus the state because the state, in this case, was the society. The regime of the state was so ingrained and far-reaching into everyday aspects of East German society. As a result of this structure, the East German population was categorized as very polarized and tense, but most East Germans settled into the system, became a part of it and

recognized their own limitations as to what they could change about it. While one in six adults disliked the GDR so greatly that they ultimately migrated elsewhere, one in five citizens felt so much state and socialist pride that they sought to become members of the ruling party, the SED (Fulbrook, 2006). Despite the SED rule being brutally coercive in its nature, Fulbrook estimates that eight to sixteen percent of the population carried out significant roles within the party and state in the form of trade unions, cultural organizations, armed forces, etc. Joining the party had unspoken rewards and led to preferential treatment which was undoubtedly one reason some subscribed to the party. For many, joining the party was a way of proving oneself a deserving citizen. The concealed nature of the authoritarian state through the use of other institutions, not only political parties but also workplaces and community organizations, made the oppression more psychologically apparent, as opposed to physical oppression.

Socialism's Successes

Despite all of the negative aspects of the GDR, there were certainly benefits present in some of its socialist practices, especially within its 'Golden Age' years of the 1960s. For post-war East Germans, the beginnings of consumer socialism emerged alongside pushes for domestic social reform. With the construction of the Berlin Wall came many protests and calls for expansion of rights, but economic growth and production in the following years caused most of those movements to be quelled. Housing was a tremendous problem in the devastation of the soviet bloc after World War II, especially in cities. Beginning in the 1960s, the SED began a major campaign to provide modern housing facilities which was impressively successful throughout the entire period, providing almost two million new or renovated apartments by the 1980s. Though these high-rise apartments were not necessarily spacious, diverse, or aesthetically

pleasing, they were functional solutions to the longstanding issue of a lack of housing that persists still in many free-market countries. This housing was also often located in proximity to schools, supermarkets, transportation, and other essentials. Through subsidies, housing cost East Germans on average less than three percent of their total expenditures, which was considerably better than the housing costs in the west which required much more. Many services, such as medical care and education, continued to be available for no cost to GDR citizens, and even other services (meals, concerts, postage stamps) were considerably cheaper than in the west. Demands for automobiles, washing machines, refrigerators and other goods were not met, however, as the demand far outweighed the supply available. Despite this fact, improvement over the years had been steady (East Germany, 1987).

Die Wende

With brighter economic forecasts, the East Germans began to not feel an entire world apart from their western counterparts - their daily routines began to converge to a relative normalcy. Despite the fact they ate similar foods and worked similar jobs, however, the constant pressure placed on citizens of the GDR certainly cut short any good feelings from the decade of growth. As time progressed, East Germans were increasingly exposed to spying by the *Stasi*, as well as routine exposure to propaganda at work and home. By the 1970s, the economy and social revolution had stagnated, leading East Germany to become more individualistic and its citizens disillusioned (Fulbrook, 2006). Despite the economic boom of the 1960s, most everyday German products remained largely the same for the next two decades. According to Berdhal, "This lack of product innovation and consumer choice... constituted the principal distinction between East and West" (p.49, 2010). This period is where Fulbrook notes a turn in the culture of East

Germany to materialism and hostility, a seemingly appropriate reaction to the lack of goods from the economic stagnation and the lack of progress in the social protests.

Following public outrage in May 1989 over faked election results, many GDR citizens began applying for exit visas or illegally leaving the country. By July, it is reported that 25,000 East Germans had fled the country. This illegal emigration was made possible by the removal of the electric fence along Hungary's border with Austria earlier that month. East Germans were able to enter Czechoslovakia, then make the crossing from Hungary to Austria and back to West Germany. The opening of a border gate between Austria and Hungary in August set in motion a chain reaction, at the end of which was the disintegration of the GDR and the entire Eastern bloc (Judt 2005). Following this, numerous social, economic and political forces in the GDR and abroad, one of the most notable ones being the peaceful protests starting in the city of Leipzig, led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The following year, a free and fair election was held and international negotiations led to the signing of the Final Settlement treaty on the status and borders of Germany. The GDR dissolved itself and Germany was reunified on the third of October 1990, becoming a fully sovereign state in the reunified Federal Republic of Germany.

The Loss of GDR Identity

After the wall between East and West collapsed, so did the barriers that stratified the two regions' identities from one another. Despite approval ratings supporting reunification amongst Germans, the devolution of East German structure is often overlooked when compared to the overwhelming good brought upon by the wall's collapse. East Germans faced numerous challenges throughout the transition back to one Germany, some of which will be explained later in context with the sudden shift into capitalism. However, some of the challenges faced by East

Germans during this time have clear and foreseeable consequences. For example, the dissolution of the GDR state meant a massive lay off throughout the former East and a nation-wide loss of formerly public land. The *Treuhandanstalt* was an agency established to privatize or reprivatize East German enterprises during the transition. It oversaw the sale and restructuring of over eight thousand state-owned companies which had previously employed over four million East German citizens, over half of which were laid off. The *Treuhandanstalt* also acquired and sold over two million hectares of agricultural land and forests, public housing property, property formerly belonging to the Stasi, and eventually all former property belonging to the party and its network of organizations (Berndt 2007).

Through reunification, East Germans lost their jobs, their coworkers, and the cornerstone for their collective identity: production. As such, *Ostalgie* can be understood as a product of the East German's search for identity post-unification, as well as a contributing factor to their understanding of personal identity itself. This paper will differentiate the identity of East Germans constructed during the GDR period from that of the identity which developed and is developing in the years since the *Wiedervereinigung*. Additionally, this analysis maintains the dissolution of the identity created by the SED, one centered on individual production, led to an initially grassroots attempt to create a new East German identity through a communal remembering of a shared past.

The sudden collapse of the socialist state and all its institutions meant a sudden absence of a collective sense of meaning for East Germans. The state had successfully ingrained socialist ideals into each individual, and it had successfully centered each individual's life around the branches of the party through community organizations, workplaces, and housing. Without the

uniting goals and institutions of the party, East Germans were suddenly stripped of the very things that had been forming their collective identity that united them with neighbors, friends, and all other East Germans. After the collapse of the GDR, the East German identity was lost, and many easterners needed something to fill the gap, the discontinuity, in their identity.

III. Wiedervereinigung

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, and German reunification, most traces of the GDR were erased, causing many East Germans' expectations of the transition into the new world to not be met. Reunification was something most Germans had been anticipating for decades; yet when it occurred, there were high levels of unemployment and an incredibly precarious economy. These facts of readjustment were juxtaposed next to life in the GDR where there was social and job security, so it wasn't long until former East Germans constructed a retrospective image of the former East as a caring and stable environment. Regardless of the political constraints they had been living under, East Germans missed the established patterns of socialism to which they had grown accustomed. One pertinent example given by Fulbrook on this harsh transition focuses on not only the financial repercussions but also the loss of more progressive egalitarian gender roles. According to her, approximately seventy percent of East German women lost their jobs after reunification, whereas the GDR was very progressive on gender roles and offered many career opportunities for women, state provided childcare, and abortion rights (Fulbrook, 2008). This harsh transition resulted in many women feeling disenfranchised from a society that once viewed them as integral members of production.

For many in the East, reunification felt more like a regression than an evolution. Those who had previously been guaranteed a certain standard of living were quickly learning that their security had been swept out from underneath them alongside the regime changing. Two systems were thrown together without much forethought as to their compatibility - and the two could not have been any more different. The Western half quickly became the baseline for a "normal"

society, causing the prerogative to be placed on the East to adapt their institutions to mirror the more successful West. Even more so, the transition was proposed to East Germans as a salvation of sorts, as the promises of economic gains with integrations were to be very large. However, the excitement regarding unification was very short-lived, as most East Germans rapidly faced an increasing amount of problems in the sectors of economy, sociality, and identity. In a collection of essays, *Das Buch der Unterschiede: Warum die Einheit keine ist*, Jana Simon expresses her own questions of her identity in the new Germany,

Auch bei der Zeitung, für die ich schreibe, bin ich für ‘den anderen Blick’ zuständig. Der andere Blick – was ist das? Ich lebe seit zehn Jahren im Westen, habe ich den überhaupt noch? Meine West-Kollegen setzen ganz selbstverständlich eine eigene DDR-Identität voraus, die ich nie dachte zu besitzen. Im Gegenteil. Ich überlege heute noch oft, wo ich hingehöre. Bin ich eine Ostlerin? Eine westliche Ostlerin oder eine östliche Westlerin? Die Grenzen haben sich verschoben. Ich weiß es nicht mehr. Ich gehöre wie schon vor der Wende nirgendwohin, habe ich mich irgendwo zwischen den Systemen verirrt. Erst durch das Bemerkten meiner Andersartigkeit ist für mich im nachhinein so etwas wie eine Ostidentität entstanden. (Simon p. 27)

Simon’s contribution and others demonstrate the extent to which the ‘*Mauer im Kopf*’ has remained for this generation over a decade after the *Wiedervereinigung*. This questioning of identity was prominent directly after the *Mauerfall*, but as in Simon’s case, can last for decades after. These feelings of loss and nostalgia have since been commercialized through the media, marketing, and the museum industry.

During the transition that allowed the split country to become whole again, almost all East German products, organizations, and institutions were quickly discarded in favor of adopting West German practices and standards. New products took over the shelves of new stores, and the consistencies that East Germans had ironically grown tired of were now completely unattainable. As East German psychotherapist Hans Joachim Maaz remarked: “People here saved for half a lifetime for a spluttering Trabant. Then along comes the smooth Mercedes society and makes our whole existence, our dreams and our identity, laughable” (McElvoy p.219). *Trabis* were a dream, an attainable goal for the East Germans before, something that symbolized the reward of their lifelong work. More than that, *Trabis*, as the only cars available in the GDR, unified all East Germans. *Trabis* represented a shared life for many in the GDR, and after the *Wiedervereinigung*, they transformed from a coveted, familiar object to a symbol of failure for the collective East German populace. Now suddenly their dreams and attainable goals were obsolete and laughable to their new neighbors, just like the products and goings-on of their everyday lives.

IV. Holding onto the Past

Ostalgie can be understood as an attempt to reclaim a sense of *Heimat*, home, in the wake of profound displacement following the German reunification. In addition to certain social conditions, the popularity of *Ostalgie* is cultivated and fostered by the interaction between hegemonic and oppositional memories. The formations of *Ostalgie* are undoubtedly a form of structural, collective nostalgia. However, the consequences of *Ostalgie* are also “culturally specific practices” that connect to the social, political, and economic conditions of late-stage capitalism in post-socialist eastern Germany (Berdhal 2010, Stewart 1993).

One product and argued catalyst for the current popularity of *Ostalgie* is a 1996 card game, entitled *Kost the Ost* (Taste the East). It consists of forty-six different GDR food brand labels, which are now mostly obsolete. The title, according to Berdhal, was a retort to the “Test the West” slogan of a popular western cigarette company which constructed billboards throughout eastern Germany after the *Wende*. As Berdhal sees first-hand from her time researching in today’s eastern Germany, the competition and fun of racing to remember and identify locked away knowledge captivates many East Germans, including those who would previously roll their eyes at *Trabi* fanatics and GDR postcard collectors. The game provided the opportunity for amusement, remembering, venting of resentments, and the expression of identification as East Germans. The knowledge and life skills ingrained for decades into GDR citizens are now largely obsolete, much like their well-known food brands. This knowledge, entrenched in every former East German, is revitalized through the games and products like this one and those that followed. Today, stores across eastern Germany boast collections of GDR

postcards and jokes, replicas of SED party merit certificates, GDR books, and even books about GDR products. The products of *Ostalgie* allow for remembering time in the GDR, as well as a means of connecting personal histories to the passing of time and the change it brings (Berdhal 2010).

The disappearance of the GDR meant for West Germans the disappearance of an “other” Germany that embodied the “wrong” sort of food consumption and production. Yet food has remained a pivotal symbol. The importance of food in the complex memory work that has surrounded German reunification since 1990 reflects the ways in which both East and West Germans have been struggling to come to terms with their divided past and shared present. The importance of food for remembering the past and imagining the future at least partially explains why it is that foods and drinks are some of the only East German products still being produced in reunified Germany (Sutton). The East German food landscape has become the focal point of distinctly positive memories and acts of recreation; it is a crucial, though underexplored, component of the phenomenon of the rise in nostalgia for the GDR—a sort of magical memory of the past that has even grown to include West Germans who in turn fetishize products of the imagined former East (Jarausch p.336). Indeed, the continued prominence of foodstuffs in post-reunification constructions of the GDR—ranging from the *Spreewald* pickles of the blockbuster film *Good Bye, Lenin!* to the revival of newly exotic “cult” classics such as the East German *Rotkäppchen* brand of sparkling wine or even the *Knusperflocken*—remind one that food-based fantasies of the self and the other have proved longer lasting than the political divisions of the Cold War itself.

Ostalgie in Film and Literature

The products of *Ostalgie* are diverse and far-reaching. The popular 2003 Wolfgang Becker film, *Good Bye, Lenin!*, which is argued to have caused the massive surge in *Ostalgie* feelings and consumerism from the years 2003 to 2007, is a story set in East Berlin at the time of the *Mauerfall*. Loyal to the party and the state, Christiane, a single mother of two, suffers a heart attack when she sees her son Alex at a political demonstration against the state. When Christiane wakes up from her coma eight months later, the Wall has fallen. Her son, Alex, is told by doctors that she must avoid any potential shock, or she may suffer another heart attack. Knowing his mother's zeal for and belief in socialism and the party, Alex seeks to cover up all evidence of the West in order to keep his mother from the truth of the GDR's downfall. He replaces the new wallpaper with the old, familiar mustard yellow, and raises the socialist propaganda poster of Che Guevara, socialist hero, on the wall in their living room. In pursuit of convincing his mother of this pseudo-world, Alex goes on a hunt to find former East products, looking for *Spreewald* pickles, *Globus* peas, *Mocca fix* coffee, *Fillinchen* crisp bread. He finds none of what he is looking for in the stores, so he resorts to repackaging western products with labels from dumpsters, until he later finds some of the products unused in an apartment abandoned by someone who fled West after the *Mauerfall*. This abandoned apartment of course suggests that there were many East Germans who suffered no hesitation when given the opportunity to leave the East. With the help of his sister and girlfriend, Alex successfully fools their mother for a while, even after she goes outside and sees the new western cars, Coca Cola banners, and the taking away of a Lenin statue. He goes to great lengths to do so, even constructing imaginary GDR news casts that boast of the state's superiority.

Good bye, Lenin! was well received both in Germany and the United States. The film, like others set in the GDR era, focuses on specific East German culture and restores a sense of belonging by appealing to shared collective memories of objects, brands, and feelings. Many viewers identified with Alex's slow realization that this recreation, and the seriousness with which he took it, was as much for him as it was for his mother. Alex truthfully enjoyed this ability to pretend they were in simpler, familiar times in the face of the chaos of the *Wende*. There are numerous other forms of entertainments: films and novels, which attribute to the *Ostalgie* movement and employ many of the same strategies and achieve many of the same feelings in their audience as result. Leander Haußmann's film *Sonnenallee* (1999), Thomas Brussig's *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (1999), and Jana Hensel's *Zonenkinder* (2002) are all flourishing examples. *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* offers a unique collision of efforts to contrast the oppressive state with character development of inner freedom. Brussig moves beyond the confines of the GDR disillusionment by having his characters attempt to smuggle, flee, and outsmart the border guards (Brussig 1999, Thesz 2008).

Some analysts of *Ostalgie* film, like Nicole Thesz, claim that the key to success for films and novels like these is the humorous way in which they recreate the East (Thesz 2008). She says, "The heroes Micha Kuppisch and Alex Kerner, respectively, navigate worlds that are defined by their relationship to the GDR, and that allows viewers to re-experience the oppressive state with comic relief" (Thesz p.107). Comic recreation of personal histories, especially traumas, is important for inviting positive social exchanges. This is a trend for collective restoration that is seen in other groups as well. Notably, this includes the use of comedy within the Jewish community in the generations following the Holocaust to cope with their traumatic

history, as seen in Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (2011), the 1997 Italian film *Life is Beautiful*, and many other examples. As noted by Psychologists, humor and laughter can open one's psyche and aid the transformation of distressing associations with past traumatic experiences into new understandings of self-awareness, increased self-empowerment, and an acknowledgement within the self of resilience (Landoni, 2019).

The sense of feeling lost ties these fictional stories together with true, personal histories which resulted in the same feelings of loss. This feeling of loss is prominent in the popular coming of age GDR novel, *Zonenkinder*, by Jana Hensel, who writes of her childhood in the GDR with a decisively nostalgic hue. She recalls of the period before the *Wende*, as "Eine Zeit, die sehr lange vergangen scheint, in der die Uhren anders gingen, der Winter anders roch und die Schleifen im Haar anders gebunden wurden" (p. 13–14). Hensel goes on to identify her childhood as a sort of locked away realm, referring to it as "ein Museum ohne Namen" (p. 25). For her, childhood was a past that she could see but not really access. Through Hensel's story, the reader understands her feelings of frustration following the *Wende*. Though frustrated with the influence of the political onto the private sphere in the GDR, she believes the systems post *Wende* are equally totalitarian and political in nature. Each of these nostalgic works seems to fulfill a need for a positive identification on the part of East Germans, which is accomplished by taking on the role of entertainment. Though each of these novels are written in an autobiographical style, they are nonetheless refracted in fictional retellings of a past (Thesz 2008, Hensel 2002, Evans 2005).

Much like Alex in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, many former Easterners found themselves surprisingly fond of the opportunity to reimagine life in the GDR in the face of the daily

hardships of reunified Germany. Whether this reimagining was through the use of a popular card game, movie or film, or visiting GDR replica museums and bars. As many East Germans felt lost and without a sense of community after reunification, reliving the time period associated with their traumatic loss was a way for former Easterners to come together and remember a shared time. Though popular products of *Ostalgie* undoubtedly spark debates or complaints about GDR standards of life, there is a healing that comes from unmasking old memories and feelings and recognizing one's own ability to recover and grow through major life disruptions.

V. Memory and Nostalgia

The term nostalgia was coined about 300 years ago not far from Germany, originally used to describe the physical and psychological symptoms shared among Swiss soldiers who were fighting far from home. Typical symptoms that accompanied this “homesickness” amongst soldiers were anxiety, irregular heartbeat, sadness, fever, loss of appetite and insomnia. (Batcho p.2, Sedikides et. al p. 202). Before the modern understanding of nostalgia was prevalent, mild cases were explained simply as a negative emotion due to longing for one’s home during a time of prolonged absence from it. The more severe instances, in which people could not shake the sadness and longing, were viewed as a psychological disorder akin to depression, or “melancholia” as it was then known. As a result of this persistent misunderstanding, Swiss doctors would frequently treat soldiers with “opium, leeches, and a journey to the Swiss Alps” in an attempt to cure nostalgic symptoms (Boym *xiv*).

Today, psychologists understand nostalgia as a positive emotion that arises out of a longing for the past, usually one’s personal, lived past (Batcho 2013, Davis 1977, Tannock 1995, Sedikides et. al 2004). Defined by Sedikides, Wildschut, and Baden in *Nostalgia: Conceptual Issues and Existential Functions*, “Nostalgia is yearning for aspects of one’s past, a yearning that may include but is not limited to one’s homeland. This yearning may pertain, for example, to events, persons, or sights” (Sedikides et. al pg.202). They go on to claim that nostalgia pertains mostly to marginalized groups of people such as soldiers, seamen, immigrants, and students “on the move”. Sedikides et. al also claim nostalgia is an emotion that transcends age and is a

“universal experience, present and prevalent across the lifespan” (Sedikides et. al pg.202). Dr. Boym, author and expert on nostalgia, defines it as “a sentiment of loss and displacement” and as “a romance with one’s own fantasy” (Boym xiii). She continues by comparing nostalgia to double exposure film, “a superimposition of two images-of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life” (Boym xiii). Even the word home in these definitions has come to have a different meaning, as today we have trailer parks, mobile homes, and more transient lifestyles. Longing for home may mean one’s longing for a person or people, a routine, or even a certain atmosphere (Davis 1979). Still, researchers critical of nostalgia assert that it is “essentially history without the guilt” (Kammen p.688). Nostalgia itself is an easily understood emotion for many, no matter how exactly it is defined, because it can be traced everywhere. Almost every person has come into contact with nostalgia, in an older family member, a movie, an advertisement or slogan, or within themselves. It is the incurable modern condition.

To understand nostalgia, one must first explore the most basic, internal struggle people face when confronting their own mortality. Researchers Goldenberg, McCoy, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon, invented the *terror management theory*, otherwise known as TMT. According to this theory, the knowledge, inevitability, and imminence of death, if pondered deliberately, can induce paralyzing terror (Goldenberg et. al). The human response, in self-preservation, is to deflect these thoughts and terror by engaging in two strategies. The first strategy is the suppression of thoughts surrounding death, or relegating these thoughts to the future, basically handing over worries for another day or time. This is referred to as the “proximal strategy”. The second strategy is the implementation of self-esteem maintenance tactics, adherence to cultural norms and values, or development of close relationships: the “distal

strategy”. Goldenberg et al. maintain that nostalgia is a process that facilitates the implementation of the distal strategies through enhancement of the self, support of the cultural worldview, and strengthening relational bonds. *Ostalgie* can be understood, therefore, as partially an internal process geared towards these goals of self-enhancement and social strengthening (Goldenberg et al. 2000, Sedikides et. al 2004).

Nostalgia: A Tool for Creating Identity

Dr. Krystine Batcho, professor of psychology and nostalgia expert, agrees that the goal of nostalgia is self-preservation. She believes the major function of nostalgia is unity: within the self, with others, and in face of conflicts. The first major way nostalgia seeks to unify, according to Batcho, is internal for each individual: to unite one’s sense of self, one’s actual self, and one’s identity over time. She argues that nostalgia motivates to remember one’s past life and connect to the most authentic self. This theory is supported by many other psychologists in the field (Davis 1977, Sedikides et al. 2004). In Dr. Fred Davis’s *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, he claims, “Nostalgia is one of the means... we employ in the never ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities” (Davis 1977). Davis believes that nostalgia is deeply implicated in the sense of who we are, beautifying certain segments of our past while also blurring or graying out others. In this sense, nostalgia is serving as a tool for a sort of homeostasis of one’s understanding of oneself, altering memories as life progresses and attempting to remain at the control level of the self. Nostalgia can also allow an escape from mediocrity and loss of self-esteem, reliving a more glorious past lends the present self to acquire more value and esteem (Sedikides et. al pg. 206). If the purpose of nostalgia is to maintain and substantiate identity in the present, this can be attained by reduction of uncertainty. Reducing

what is uncertain can serve as an effective tool for self-affirmation in coping with loss and helping to restore self-worth. This is an important point when it comes to understanding *Ostalgie* as a result of social conditions of the years following the *Wende*, as East Germans faced uncertainty in both their identities and in their new society.

The other way Dr. Batcho says nostalgia serves as a tool of unification is by connecting people with each other. According to her, nostalgia is a phenomenon of social connection and a very healthy pro-social emotion. In times of loneliness, nostalgia can feel therapeutic. Nostalgia alleviates one's existential fears by reinforcing value and increasing one's sense of cultural belonging. Nostalgia causes one's mind to latch on to those people who made them feel valued and meaningful, and those experiencing nostalgia often reestablish connection with significant others in their life (Batcho). This reintroduction of meaningful bonds satisfies one's need for self-esteem and the search for identity, as well as affording safety and security. (Sedikides et. al, 2004). Lastly, Batcho and others say nostalgia unifies situations that would otherwise be experienced as conflicts. Or as Sedikides et. al phrase it, nostalgia is like "a weapon in internal confrontations with existential dilemmas" (p.203). The collision of bitterness with sweetness. Nostalgia essentially deals with the conflict of the negative emotion of longing for what is no longer there: the bitterness with the sweet, positive emotions of having experienced it and having the ability to revisit the memory. Batcho and many others agree that one of the most basic functions of nostalgia is to maintain a sense of meaning in one's life (Batcho 2013, Davis 1977, Sedikides et. al, 2004).

Psychoanalysis of Nostalgia

A more contrarian view, held by some psychoanalysts, claims nostalgia “may present in primarily defensive forms as an act of defense” (Hook p.5) and views the phenomenon as more of an obstruction rather than an asset of retrieving memories. Dr. Derek Hook, another licensed psychologist and professor of psychology, utilizes this approach to analyze feelings of nostalgia in post-apartheid South Africa. Hook maintains the bitter-sweet theory of Batcho and others in dealing with nostalgia, though he believes the bitter, longing for something lost, is actually met with a sweetness that comes from the ability nostalgia allows one to avoid or screen memories, in slight contrast with Batcho who believed the sweetness came instead from the positive feelings of having the experience and the ability to remember it. This slightly altered theory is also supported by many researchers, primarily those of the psychoanalytic field, and is grounded on the Freudian belief that nostalgia is essentially a combination of accurate and inaccurate memories, in which feelings are often included or overlooked after the fact (Freud, 1918).

The comparison of nostalgia and fantasy is popular among these theorists, citing that nostalgia creates an imaginary experience as a part of one’s self-defense (Hook). Hook warns of the possible dangers of nostalgia:

Although it anchors and frames our perspective upon reality, fantasy harbours illusions; it screens out discomfoting knowledge; it entails its own rewards, its own types of enjoyment, and – at least in this sense – typically feeds complacency, resignation, mitigating against any change that would upset a given libidinal economy. Fantasy in and of itself – as is I would argue is the case with nostalgia - maintains no inherently

progressive potential. It is what we do with fantasy or nostalgia that counts, how their comforting images, their selective reminiscences of the past may be connected to a broader strata of related but less readily accessed memories and associations. (Hook p. 20).

Psychoanalysts such as Hook argue that nostalgia is a defensive function of the ego, which is highlighted by the compulsion to idealize self-understanding. In order to protect oneself from shameful or unpleasant feelings, nostalgia screens these feelings from memories, leaving painfully lived experiences as pleasant, but blurry, memories. Hook's perspective is one more critical on the self, claiming that the fetishized object, in this case the past, is "that magical object revered by a given society because it creates a sense of order and control in a frightening world" (p.16). Still, if nostalgia maintains "no inherently progressive potential", there must be a psychological reason, some meaning, for manifestations of the past in one's mind that are so strong they can result in changes in one's cognition and behavior.

Nostalgia as a Response to the Present

Sedikides et al. explain that nostalgia can be triggered passively by external stimuli associated with one's past, no matter how recent or distant. These stimuli can be social such as friends, family, reunions, birthday parties, or other people and events. There are also nonsocial triggers like objects, music, scents, or other possessions and products (Sedikides et. al, 2004). In the case of *Ostalgie*, there is a strong reliance and correlation with the latter-objects, brands, music and films of the GDR feed this phenomenon. On the other hand, nostalgia can also be the

result of a deliberate act of reflection. As Davis notes in *Yearning for Yesterday*, “[Nostalgia is] essentially a normal psychological reaction triggered by fear of actual or impending change” (p.10). What causes one to feel nostalgia must be also in the present with them, regardless of how much the experience is drawing from one’s memory of the past. Consider Davis’s perhaps most famous quote regarding nostalgia: “the material of nostalgic experience is the past” (p.7). But Davis continues this idea to make a point, that “nostalgia uses the past, but it is not the product thereof” (p.11). Nostalgia is triggered by *fear of change*. It is in periods of transition in which nostalgia thrives, discontinuities in one’s life leads to yearning for continuity (Davis, 1979). Similarly, in its collective forms, nostalgia thrives in the rude transitions throughout history, in the discontinuity brought on by war, depression, disasters (Davis, 1979). Events that cause people to feel uncertain and wonder if their being and the world are what they had previously believed them to be. Nostalgia is future-oriented, triggered by concerns for the future and uncertainty, one longs for times in the past that have been beautified by the years of being only memories.

The most fundamental understanding of nostalgia rests on the knowledge that human’s memories are incredibly fallible and inconsistent. This is based on decades of cognitive research that says individual memories are selective and distorted (Batcho, 2013). This means some recalled memories are exceptionally more dramatic than the experience itself was. This dramatization can result in memories with a significantly positive or negative skew. Individual differences can account for the different ways periods of the past are remembered, one of these that Batcho says may influence memories is an individual’s personality or their psychological well-being. She says that those suffering from depression or anxiety disorders are more likely to

be saddened by the past, rather than feeling content with where their life is now. But more important than individual differences, is the influence of the social element of the experience. Hearing others describe and remember shared experiences greatly influences the memory that is stored in oneself. The words, phrases, and emotions conveyed within conversations about the past permanently etch themselves onto the original memory. As a result, the perspective and feelings associated with a specific memory may be those that originated in the conversation about the experience years after it actually occurred. This is referred to as retrospectively comprehended or interpreted memories (Batcho 2013). This point is crucial for understanding how societal institutions can have such an overpowering impact on the people they affect, their beliefs of who they are and how the world works. Popular *Ostalgie* films and products have the ability to influence memories and trigger nostalgic emotions. Beyond the objects themselves, their media coverage, marketing, and advertising, as well as political and entertainment talking points all have the ability to alter memory and trigger nostalgia and its associated feelings.

Nostalgia in Context

Understanding the triggers of nostalgia and the retrospective nature of memory is crucial for analysis of the materials and products of *Ostalgie*, specifically films like *Good bye, Lenin!*. When this film was released, East Germans were facing a large transition and discontinuity in their lives, which as noted earlier triggers nostalgia through a yearning for continuity. Reunification was an uncertain time for many former Easterners when everything they had previously known changed, and their concerns and questions about the future were mitigated through the cathartic consumption of *Ostalgie* products. Appearances in *Good bye, Lenin!* of

specific products like the *Spreewald* pickles, *Mocca fix* Coffee, and the *Freie Deutsche Jugend* singing party songs were stimuli specific to East German history. Through these films, former East Germans were also being exposed to materialistic triggers in addition to the social triggers of their new lives. Equally important when considering *Ostalgie* products is the social element of experiencing and altering memories. Seeing the GDR and *Wende* years reimaged through popular films alters the specific memories that East Germans have of the period. These memories may become, in turn, the specific perspective that former Easterners maintain of the GDR period, though the perspective itself originated in the film, book or product consumed.

Positing a ‘once was’ in contrast to a ‘now’ creates a frame for meaning, or a way of complementing aspects of a tumultuous and unstable social life. Nostalgia is more about the construction of a present, rather than reproduction of the past. Nostalgia is a feeling that arises in response to uncertainty and loss, and its purpose is to formulate a sense of security in order to establish and affirm identity. Its means is connection: unifying the present and future self with an idealized past self. It would suggest then that there is an East German identity developing within post-*Wende* Germany which is distinct from not only the pre-*Wende* East German identity but is also different from the West German and German identity as a whole (Hogwood 2000).

Although these psychological constructs fundamentally explain why *Ostalgie* is experienced and developed on an individual level, they may fall short at explaining why the phenomenon is able to impact so many people and the nation of Germany as a whole. Therefore, a diversion from this line of research is needed to explore *Ostalgie* in larger context. To continue an earlier reference from Dr. Hook,

[Nostalgia] may present in primarily defensive forms whilst nonetheless providing an instrument to access precisely what is being defended. Making this point ushers in the tricky issue of the distinction between ostensibly individual as opposed to predominantly societal forms of nostalgia. Of course, this is a distinction we may wish to complicate inasmuch as these two categories of reality are necessarily juxtaposed; they are inherently intermeshed, and thus ultimately indivisible... (Hook pg.5)

To approach the phenomenon of *Ostalgie*, there must be an appreciation of the unique perspective of each individual and their own experience of nostalgia through their specific engagement with social reality, while acknowledging that these engagements are “always mediated by – cut from the cloth of – socio-symbolic reality” (Hook pg.5). Viewing *Ostalgie* as a cultural and historical formation allows one to avoid psychologically reductionist claims. It is therefore important to juxtapose this psychological approach with a socio-cultural one which considers historical or political nostalgia also subject to the functions and transitions that qualify individual nostalgia as a physical phenomenon (Hook, 2012). An important note, going forward, is that memory, though it may be a vessel for history, is not the same as history. History should be understood as the particular configuration of historical events, represented in a certain way, transcribed physically, or verbally (Berdhal 2010). On the other hand, memory is malleable and interactive and can be individual as well as collective.

VI. Heimatgefühl and Consumption

Establishing the Superiority of the West

In her chapter on ‘Consumer Rites’, Daphne Berdhal tells the story of one former East German border village which received a sort of “collective initiation ceremony” a year after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the *Mauerfall*. She says that this particular meeting entailed a “product promotion show,” (*Werbeveranstaltung*) that was sponsored by a West German health company. Throughout the presentation, the speaker essentially delivers a personally targeted sales pitch to each listener, convincing them that maintaining health is of the utmost importance, and this company’s nutritional products are the only way to safely ensure they do. She invokes language of production and consumption while also elevating individualist western values. Berdhal accounts that this saleswoman, like many, was not only selling her products, but also belonging and access to the new society. She points out, as well, that these types of discourses resulted in the construction of “Otherness” in East and West. Consumption of this kind rests on leveraging the power differences between the two. (Berdhal, 2010). West German society was preaching this belief and participation in capitalism at the East Germans much like the GDR State preached belief in socialism. In the GDR, the state was the authority, however, in newly reunified Germany, the West was the authority. Because of this power divide, Westerners advised East Germans to embrace capitalism while also implying that eastern inferiority would prohibit them from truly belonging in this society.

This consumption was not only a metaphor for the East-West distinctions, but also a means of preserving and re-constructing them. Berdhal states: “Indeed, consumption was part of

a process through which the former political boundary that once divided East and West Germany was replaced by the maintenance, indeed invention, of a cultural one” (2010 p.38). East Germans lacked a certain “cultural fluency” in consumption that aided in the construction of Otherness, as mentioned. Consumption was an area where many West Germans noticed and ridiculed the differences between the two groups. East Germans stereotypically referred to products by their use rather than brand names, for example, avoiding western colloquialism such as “*Tempo*”, instead opting for the term facial tissue. They were also unsure in purchasing scenarios of which to buy or how to do so and were considered to be more concerned with the fiscal repercussions, often comparing prices. As purchasing culture of East Germans was ridiculed and mocked, it was also exploited as in the *Werbeveranstaltung*,

As throughout the former GDR, numerous villagers in Kella were the objects, and occasionally victims, of various mail order gimmicks, door-to-door charlatans, and company-sponsored shows and trips... Some villagers sent in money after receiving notice in the mail they had ‘won a house’; others purchased items from door-to-door salesmen that were never delivered (Berdhal p.39, 2010).

The 100 DM *Begrüßungsgeld* given to East Germans after the *Wende* helped to fund the shopping spree of East Germans, but it also established consumerism as a key characteristic of (West) German culture and identity. Many historians note that East Germans spending after reunification was extremely high (Hogwood 2000, Berdhal 2010). East Germans rushed to restaurants and stores to buy new foods, drinks, and all kinds of products that they didn’t have before. Hogwood notes that over half of this extra spending was, in fact, on food and drink which

suggests that this increased consuming among East Germans was not about obtaining better products, but about novelty and variety.

Historians like Patricia Hogwood reason that East Germans' excessive shopping during the *Wende* was due to the unreliability of supplies former easterners experienced in the GDR. This behavior was a continuation of their buying and hoarding behavior when faced with food shortages, and this evidence is supported by the fact that most of the excessive spending of former Easterners during the *Wende* was on food and drink. In addition to this, East Germans were now able to purchase goods locally that they previously had difficulty obtaining. Televisions, fruits, well-made shoes, refrigerators, and washing machines were now widely available in variety everywhere in Germany, whereas GDR residents had to travel long distances to cities like Prague for special items. This along with the *Begrüßungsgeld* provided by western banks provided an opportunity for consumerism for East Germans, but this was like putting a band-aid on a bullet-wound. Many East Germans lost their jobs and friends in the transition, and many continued to lack the necessary resources to afford luxuries years after the *Wiedervereinigung*. (Hogwood 2000).

The ability to consume was a sort of initiation into West German society (Berdhal 2010). Whereas in the GDR East Germans had a duty to produce, reunified Germany prompted a duty to consume. East Germans, through personal experience and collective negotiation, soon became versed in product names, prices, advertising strategies, and fashion messages. Though in the transition period, they had to learn consumerism basics: how and where to shop, finance, credit, and money management. East Germans were accepted as second-class citizens beneath their Western counterparts, and the practices of the post-*Wende* society continually reinforced the

belief of western superiority. This sentiment is supported by evidence such as the popular German saying that arose during the *Wende*, “*besserwessi*” which colloquially denoted the arrogant manner in which some former Westerners talked down to former Easterners (*Besserwessi* 2017). Consumerism is thus both a symbolic marker of this moment in history and imperative in defining the transition itself. In the years after the *Wende*, East Germans accepted and internalized the domination of the West, however they also resisted it.

Resistance to Western Standards

Of the most well-known products of the GDR, is the East German *Trabant* (*Trabi*) which quickly came to symbolize the GDR itself as well as socialist inefficiency and inferiority. The *Trabi* is a simple, boxy car made of fiberglass and pressed cotton, nothing like the modern, fast West German automobiles such as Mercedes, Porsche, and BMW. In addition, East Germans often waited fifteen years and paid the equivalent of two years’ salary to obtain one. After the *Wende*, the *Trabi* quickly lost all value and was ridiculed by West Germans. Easterners soon ditched their Eastern clothes, hairstyles, and their *Trabis* in an effort to blend into western society and “catch up”. On the other hand, Easterners also began to use East German products as a means of asserting an emerging counter-identity, a consciousness, as East Germans. One Leipzig woman, interviewed by Berdhal, explains her diminishing infatuation with western products:

‘After the Wall fell we all threw ourselves at the western things... In the first months after the Wall I gained 25 pounds! I had to try out every chocolate bar—Toblerone, Rittersport. And the nice large rolls! But then we saw that they were only made out of air

and we wanted our Ossi rolls back. Our Spee laundry detergent, our mustard, our spices.

We all search until we find these things. Eastern products are back' (p.54).

By the 1990s, the “renaissance of a GDR *Heimatgefühl* (feeling of belonging or GDR identity)” was a widespread symbolic resistance (Berdhal p.44, 2010). *Trabis* were again coveted and gained a sort of “cult” following due to the pride associated with owning a *Trabi* the second time around. Cultural practices reminiscent of the GDR also flourished: discos designed as GDR replicas, the showing of East German shows and movies on television stations, and supermarkets specializing and carrying East German products. This contests with and fights against the systematic devaluation of the East German past by dominant western forces (Berdhal 2010).

These East German products take on a new symbolic meaning when used in the post-socialist era. Berdhal argues that “stripped of their original historical context of an economy of scarcity or oppressive regime, these products also recall an East Germany that never existed” (p.44). As previously discussed, memory shapes, and is being shaped by, current behavior, including consumption. These products illustrate the way in which memory is malleable, and the process of how objects can acquire a capacity for remembering and for forgetting. As developed earlier within the discussion of memory and nostalgia, retrospective memories play a vital role in the romanticization of the GDR. In response to the new commodities of the west, many Easterners heard neighbors and family complaining about the lack of ‘quality’ Eastern goods when compared to the new Western ones. In addition, the very real complaint that although there was now access to more goods, some were still not affordable for many. These conversations achieved two purposes: formulating a shared identity against an oppressor (now, the West) and altering the memories of the shared experience of the GDR. Though the products of GDR

production were not inherently better quality than those in the west, these GDR products were a piece of each individual's memories and personal histories. As a result, these 'throwback' GDR products were almost all reimagined to be greater and more substantial than the original products themselves were, though those experiencing this nostalgia viewed these objects as one in the same.

An important example of this conscious resistance through symbols and material objects is the *Ampelmännchen* debate of the 1990s. In 1961 traffic psychologist Karl Peglau invented new designs for color-coded and shape-specific traffic lights. Unlike the more ambiguous red and green stick figure of the West, the figures of East German traffic lights wore hats and bore more cartoonish shapes. The East German *Ampelmännchen* were designed to be emotionally appealing to pedestrians, especially those at risk like children, in order to catch their attention and prevent traffic accidents (Peschke et. al, 2013). After German reunification, a debate was sparked over the replacing of Eastern *Ampelmännchen* with their generic western counterparts, challenging the relative superiority of the West. East Germans began a grassroots campaign claiming their *Ampelmännchen* were more visually effective and were also an object of affection amongst Easterners. Former Easterners believed the *Ampelmännchen* of the GDR had character, and their developing collective consciousness was strongly connected to these figures because of their symbolism for GDR life. Because of this, Easterners organized and protested the replacement of their beloved *Ampelmännchen* until the government stopped this project, allowing all remaining GDR *Ampelmännchen* to stay in place. This makes the *Ampelmann* one of the only remaining artifacts of the GDR still in wide-use today, even throughout Berlin there is still a mix of both Western and Eastern *Ampelmännchen*.

Interestingly, the *Ampelmännchen* continue to be a representation of the polarity and disjunction in reunified Germany. Throughout East German cities, especially Berlin, the *Ampelmann* is sold as a souvenir on t-shirts, key chains, hats, and signs, and there are entire stores dedicated to the *Ampelmann* filled with products stamped with the figure. However, there is a resistance present against the revival of this GDR artifact, and many Germans today have incorrect assumptions in regard to the intent of the East German *Ampelmann* design that reflect a disdain or contempt for socialism and the former East. A Berlin tour guide is noted informing his group that “the Ampelmann was designed to be large because the Communist East German government wanted him to appear dominant over pedestrians” and furthermore, that he wore a hat because “good East Germans would (and should) always respect a man in a uniform” (Reilly 2013 p.1). However, as noted previously, the inventor of the design, Karl Peglau, claimed his design was intended only for safety and recognizability. There remains a debate and misunderstanding today about the *Ampelmännchen* because there is still an active erasure of former East German culture which continues to divide East and West Germans. The *Ampelmann* serves as a kind of mascot for former Easterners’ nostalgia and is now also one of the few representations of East German identity in reunified Germany. Since the growth of the *Ampelmann*, some western cities such as Heidelberg have even adopted the traffic lights of the former East. Much like the *Trabi*, the *Ampelmännchen* became a symbol for the Ostalgie movement and represented a small victory for East Germans whose lives and recent heritages had been erased.

From Producers to Consumers

Eastern Germans were also suffering from a loss of production and the identity as producers in reunified Germany. Because almost all East Germans were employed in the process of production in the GDR, there was a shared sense of pride in the products of their labor and the contenting feeling of producing for oneself. Their former duty as citizens to produce transformed into a duty to consume, all the while being excluded from certain aspects of consumerism. This sense of loss within individuals as ‘producers’ after the *Wende* and East Germans’ inability to assimilate fully into capitalism transformed into feelings of resistance against their new state economic system of capitalism. These feelings of resistance were not entirely organic however, as marketing practices commodified the movement. Above all, these post-*Wende* consumption practices both reflected and constituted important identity transformations and negotiations in a time of tense social discord (Berdahl 2008);

“The social lives of East German things... illuminate long-term shifts in value and demand—broadly defined: shifts in the value of objects that are linked to re-valuations of a contested past, shifts in the demand for products that are connected to demands for visibility and recognition. In using available materials and languages for constructing defiance, identity, and solidarity, Ostalgic practices reveal a highly complicated relationship between personal histories, disadvantage, dispossession, the betrayal of promises, and the social worlds of production and consumption” (Berdhal p.59, 2010).

Many objects of the GDR that now serve as nostalgic triggers have come to symbolize not only the failure of the GDR, but the struggle of East Germans since then to stabilize and regain their identity. East Germans were promised the *Wiedervereinigung* would provide a world of new

possibilities and solutions to their problems. However, East Germans quickly became aware of the dangers of capitalism through their experience with door-to-door salesmen and other gimmicks. Rather than being welcomed into a new society that recognized the tumultuous history of East Germany and the hardships its citizens faced, the former Easterners were pushed into a society that ostracized and viewed them as foreigners. The consumption of *Ostalgie* products and entertainment by East Germans after reunification can be seen as a form of resistance to traditional capitalism and the reunified German society.

The success of capitalism rests on the participation of the citizens or consumers. If socialism goes hand in hand with production, capitalism, then, goes hand in hand with consumerism. This paper maintains that it was not only the failure of socialism (in the form of the GDR) that led to this identity crisis and reconstruction, but also the failure of capitalism in post-unification Germany. The other countries in the Eastern bloc decided and controlled their transformation on their own terms. Whereas in the case of East Germany, the process was more of a transference of west to east as opposed to a true restoration. The social and economic community of the GDR suffered a sudden and traumatic disruption with their past lives, one with which many are still struggling to come to terms. In addition, many former Easterners were angry. Not only had the cornerstone of their entire society just collapsed before them, they had lost their jobs, coworkers, friends, homes, public parks, groups and amenities to an invisible western force which belittled and mocked them. The abrupt and radical transformation of East Germans' lives through unification denied them the opportunity to complete their democratic revolution at their own pace. As noted previously, the peaceful protests of 1989 essentially dissolved into the *Wiedervereinigung*, and East Germans found their economic and social

systems changing to that of their former neighbor, West Germany. The discontinuity in East German life and identity formulated a sense of anger and loss which prompted a re-construction of identity that was fulfilled through *Ostalgie* production and consumerism (Hogwood 2000).

The Search for Identity amidst Capitalist Crisis

The growing East German collective consciousness developed as a coping mechanism to the social conditions and problems after the *Wiedervereinigung*. The disintegration of former East German products, brands, and companies also meant massive sudden unemployment as these companies collapsed. This meant not only financial insecurity, but also a loss of community with co-workers and a sense of purpose. In addition, Germany was experiencing a strain on the welfare system due to the aging population which led to the government restricting these programs some. This job loss and the economic downturn enhanced the division between Western and Easterners, establishing the self-perception of East Germans as second class. Former Easterners began to long for certain state aspects of the GDR: social welfare, employment, subsidized housing.

This post-unification East German identity is formulated by the interplay of nostalgia and the post-*Wende* conditions that led to collective feelings of disenfranchisement and anger. Throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s Germany's economic growth was lower than its European neighbors, largely because of the cost of reunification; "The shock of absorbing an economy with 16m people, thousands of outdated smokestack factories and a 50-year legacy of central planning would have brought any economy to its knees," noted Katinka Barysch, of the Centre for European Reform, in a 2003 paper (p.1). Germany suffered a recession beginning in 2003, which the country declared over only six months after it began. However, this was clearly

not the case as unemployment rose to over eleven percent in 2005 (Romei 2017). This paper maintains that this recession demonstrated a failure of capitalism to many, but specifically to the former East Germans. It is no coincidence that the height of the recession in Germany is concurrent with the pinnacle of *Ostalgie* popularity, from the years 2002 to 2006.

Capitalism, according to Berdhal, is an ongoing process, a social practice, and a cultural performance (Berdhal, 2010). As such, Eastern Germans' indoctrination into capitalist practices was, much like in the socialist state, an attempt to reclaim and reassert a unifying culturally specific identity. A capitalist society redefines the rules for citizenship to now also include this identity as a consumer. And as Berdhal argues, an individual's presence in the public sphere isn't defined necessarily by the political transformation, but rather it is defined by the notion of the self, collective identity, and the entitlement of mass consumption (Berdhal p.89, 2010, De Grazia 1996). Although East Germans initially took on this role eagerly and later settled into it albeit less so, many of them never truly benefited from the large promises made about the opportunities from capitalism. As Berdhal notes through her recent interviews with those living throughout the former East Germany, East German towns may now have stores carrying luxury goods and exotic foods, but many East Germans can't afford them because they are still living in more poverty than their western counterparts today. The work of capitalism and consumption in reunified Germany constitutes certain boundaries of belonging while also excluding East Germans from these limits. The economic downturn in early 2000s Germany illustrated this point clearly to most former Easterners, many of whom had been waiting over a decade to see some of their share of the profits of capitalism. The recession was the nail-in-the-coffin for the unity movement, as it highlighted the economic disparities of the two groups even further. Many

former Easterners were hit much harder by this crisis due to their already substantial financial and employment struggles (Berdhal, 2010, Ysselstein, 2007).

This sense of nostalgia that developed suggests not that East Germans wanted the SED regime back rather, they wanted to be recognized in the present, and they wanted to contribute to their new society while having their history appreciated. East Germans had been oppressed, disadvantaged, and without voice. After reunification, East Germans lives, thoughts, and traditions were systematically devalued just as much as their former government and economic ideologies. Because of this, many former Easterners felt as if their lives post-*Wende* were equally as controlled and disadvantaged as they were in the GDR. *Ostalgie* is not just the reiteration of the lost GDR, whether this representation is accurate or fabricated, but it is a point to resistance against or rejection of the current political status quo in Germany.

Discussion: The Future and Politics of Ostalgie

The phenomenon of *Ostalgie* arose alongside an unique political trend in contemporary Eastern Germany: the surge of support for the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), a far-right German nationalist political party. An article in *DW* highlights that the AfD is now the largest opposition party in the *Bundestag*, with the Eastern States specifically being the place “where the party is performing the strongest, polling over 20%” (Chase 2020). This far-right support is a relative return to days of the past, as the GDR long dealt with problems stemming from such politics. Youth groups were a persistent problem for the socialist state, as their presence grew larger and more active throughout the East. After reunification, “some prominent Western far-right German activists hastily moved to the East in an attempt to establish a presence there”

(Weisskircher 2020 p. 1). In response to these newcomers -- along with members of the Soviet State looking to migrate -- the early 1990s were marked by violent attacks on immigrants, especially throughout eastern Germany and the county of Saxony-Anhalt (Weisskircher 2020).

Far-right sentiments were highly prevalent in the East after reunification, mostly in response to immigration. As with some facets of *Ostalgie*, the anti-immigration campaign was a result of feelings of abandonment and betrayal among the East German people. A 1991 New York Times article accounts of the moment,

“The violence reached a peak last weekend, when youths in 20 German towns attacked buildings where foreigners live. The attacks appear to be in response to the growing number of immigrants from Vietnam, Mozambique, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. They reflect both hostility to non-Germans and a belief that foreigners are taking jobs, apartments and Government subsidies that belong to natives” (Kinzer, 1991).

Like many other far-right political groups, the AfD has nationalist beliefs that encourage focusing on “native” Germans. The growing anger and resentment among East Germans in response to their treatment post-*Wende* formulated itself in these attacks. East Germans were already angry at their government for failing to meet their own needs after reunification, so when the former Easterners saw their government seemingly catering to and assisting foreign immigrants, their anger and resentment grew even more. East Germans felt abandoned by and disappointed in their government and their homeland after reunification, so they also feared being socially demoted even further by this immigration influx.

The specific East German identity is the driving force behind the new political leanings of Eastern Germany. East Germans no longer identify strongly with simply being German

because that identity fails to encapsulate the specific history and tribulations faced by East Germans. As evident through this political divide, it is clear the identity of being German also fails to reflect and acknowledge the oppression and associated feelings--anger, resentment, abandonment-- felt by former easterners. The Allensbach Institute conducted a study regarding this very correlation of identity representation and political tendencies; they found that, “Ostdeutsche Anhänger der Parteien am rechten und linken Rand des politischen Spektrums sind in hohem Maße von diesem spezifisch ostdeutschen Identitätsgefühl geprägt, während sich die Anhänger der anderen Parteien mit großer Mehrheit primär mit der Nation identifizieren.” (Kocher 2019). Strikingly, they found specifically that 62 percent of East German AfD supporters identified more with the term “East German” than “German”, whereas a lower percent (47%) of all East Germans felt this way. By contrast, over 70 percent of West Germans identified more with the term “German” than “West German”, showing a lack of disconnect between West German and German identity. This study illustrates not only the disconnection that East Germans still feel from their nation but the resentment of the status quo by former Easterners as well. East Germans were angry and resented the West Germans who defined the hegemonic German identity that failed to acknowledge them. As a result, they began to favor the opposition group which seemed to align with the East German feelings of anti-immigration and a returning to tradition.

This complete change in political association among former East Germans is further evidence that it is not the specific political ideologies and practices of the GDR that former Easterners cling to in their practice of *Ostalgie*. There are of course dangers in the growth of a far-right political campaign in Germany, a country that has seen the horrors of authoritarian

dictators more than most in recent history. Specifically, the danger this far-right ideology, which denounces gender, racial and sexual equality, poses to become instrumental in a new East German identity. However, it is not fair to denounce this new political trend without exploring why it is prevalent. *Ostalgie* is fundamentally a symptom, and coping mechanism, of East German oppression which manifests as a part of their communally formed identity. East Germans' lives were devalued individually and as a collective group by their former, and again current, homeland, and this alienation lent to feelings of anger and rejection. East Germans longed and still long for a society that is theirs: one that welcomes them, recognizes their hardships, and offers an important place for them. Rather than a continuation of control by their government and society, East Germans yearn for a nation that listens to and reflects them. But in the face of the government's failure from the former eastern perspective, East Germans turned to each other to create a reality which values and affirms the identity of being "East German". Easterners attempt to assuage this longing by collectively reimagining a world in which East Germans were on a path to discovering and establishing their own freedom and identity, before it was cut short by the *Wiedervereinigung*.

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