Migrating identities across time and space:
Life experiences of East German migrants to Australia.

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Abstract

This thesis follows the memories of East Germans from their lives in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SOZ), later called the German Democratic Republic (GDR), to their current residence in Australia. It is a documentation and analysis of their many “migration” experiences, which have been both physical and mental, and display both complexity and ambivalence. This is not least due to the fact that their homeland no longer exists, and that it has been necessary for them to adapt to new surroundings multiple times and in diverse contexts. Frequent changes throughout the lives of these people have given rise to the questions: “Who am I?” and “Where do I come from?”, and it is these questions which are at the core of this thesis. They will be addressed through an examination of the pasts of those who migrated from Germany’s East to Australia between 1959 and 2011.

The stories of East Germans warrant investigating, since there is often little consideration given to the fact that they have undergone various migrations, both physical and mental, from the time of the establishment of the SOZ to the post-communist years. For a number of years and in diverse contexts, East Germans have had to evolve in their identities, adapting and coming to terms with their lives in new surroundings. This identity evolution is particularly pronounced in the lives of East Germans who migrated overseas, and who have, in many cases, had to deal not just with an adaptation from a communist to a capitalist ideology, but also with the challenges which come with the choice to physically migrate.

The methodology employed combines aspects of oral history, social generational theory, memory studies and research on identity. This approach was adopted because it allowed the participants to be granted a voice within the research. Over the course of my studies, 42 interviews were conducted with former citizens of the GDR to cast light on the lives of East German migrants, most of whom now reside in Perth, Western Australia. During the interview process I came to the realisation that participants’ feelings regarding their identity and attachment to their country of origin and country of migration were closely linked to factors which, at varying times, both complemented and contradicted each other. A distinct generational trend emerged, where interviewees of similar ages recalled similar experiences, leading to the identification of three categories (generations A, B and C). However, these experiences were also cross-cut by
the effects of the social roles which interviewees had played while living in the GDR, creating a number of “sub-groups” or other “communities of memory”, which existed both within and across the three broad generational categories.

The thesis follows a structure based primarily on chronological time. This allowed for discussions of similarities within “social generations”, whereby participants were grouped according to the socio-historical contexts they experienced, both while living in the SOZ or GDR and in their country of migration; as well as a problematisation of the anomalies and differences of opinion which existed alongside generational narratives. The first section of the thesis presents an analysis of the backgrounds of interviewees, ranging from the post-WWII period to the fall of communism, and provides context regarding the foundation of the identities of the East German migrants involved in this study. The second part of the thesis commences with the way in which participants have negotiated their identities when faced with an unfamiliar context after the fall of the Wall and the complex legacy of the GDR, and culminates in the final chapter where interviewees’ identities are discussed in the context of their physical migration to Australia. Hence, this thesis explores how identity evolves and “migrates” over time and space, according to age and personal experience, in a variety of contexts, and what this means for the unique group of individuals who once called the eastern part of Germany home. The findings of this research contribute to a further understanding of the collected stories of East German migrants and what it means to (re)define one’s identity several times within one’s lifetime.
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Introduction

“[Experiences] make you who you are, whether they’re good, bad or neutral ...  
History ... I think it shapes us.”

(Sofia W.)

Individuals’ interpretations of historical events vary and evolve across and within generations and according to personal memories, resulting in the intersection and contrast of a number of different views which create a kaleidoscopic image of the past. In the realm of German history, the German Democratic Republic’s (GDR’s) past still affects numerous East Germans who have, at multiple stages of their lives, had to (re)negotiate meanings of past and present, and have been required to (re)position themselves in their surroundings. A need to adapt to the unfamiliar has been a hallmark of the East German experience ever since 1945 and particularly since 1989/1990, culminating in questions of identity and belonging. The search for meaning and an answer to the question “Who am I and where do I belong?” has repeatedly been at the forefront of the minds of many of these people. It is a question which seemed to resonate strongly with the East Germans interviewed in this study, who had physically left their pasts behind and migrated overseas to Australia, therefore reviewing their past from a distance.

People experience historical events at different points in their lives and as members of various “generation cohorts” or “social generations”. As Karl Mannheim (1923) once argued:

The phenomenon of generations is one of the basic factors contributing to the genesis of the dynamic of historical development. The analysis of the interaction of forces in this connection is a large task in itself, without which the nature of historical development cannot be properly understood.²

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¹ Sofia W. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd March 2013.
It was Mannheim’s belief that “generational dynamics are central to history”, an assertion which has supported much of my own research. Furthermore, they are tied to, as Sabina Mihelj (2014) has described, “the persistence of memory” over time, creating post-communist communities of memory where “people of different ages tend to remember the same events differently.” Those of similar ages experience certain historical events during a comparable stage in their life and therefore “are endowed [...] with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process.” Mannheim’s concept of “generation cohorts” has informed much of my research, although I ultimately decided to employ the terminology “social generations” utilised by Mary Fulbrook (2011) and others, as “social generations” had been applied specifically by Fulbrook to the situation of East Germans.

Intermingled with this concept of the social generation is a related approach involving more personal recollections of the GDR past based on individuals’ social roles. It was possible for participants to belong to a number of social “sub-groups”, or indeed, retrospective “communities of memory” which were not generationally-defined. Although generations are themselves “communities of memory”, they have a “much more heterogeneous relation to the past” and exist alongside a number of other communities of memory, such as those comprised of victims, perpetrators or bystanders. This tendency for individuals to belong to various sub-groups is related to their more specific, personal experiences of the past and, in the case of some interviewees, how they were treated or viewed by others in their past.

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3 Mannheim, p. 290.
7 This is related to Eric Hobsbawm’s (1972) assertion that all human beings are shaped by their past, although this sometimes means that some individuals will choose to actively reject their past. See: Eric Hobsbawm, “The Social Function of the Past: Some Questions,” *Past and Present* 55 (1972): p. 3.
Philosopher John Locke (1689) was one of the first to comprehensively document the link between personal consciousness, or memory, and the concept of identity.\textsuperscript{10} Other scholars, notably Maurice Halbwachs (1992), Aleida Assmann (2006) and Michael Roth (1995) have built upon these early theories. Halbwachs is best known for his study of collective memory and how it is shaped and reproduced in the present,\textsuperscript{11} while Assmann’s research has examined the relationship between memory and identity relating to the situation of post-World War II Germany in particular.\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, Roth has illustrated memory’s role as “the key to personal and collective identity” in his research linking memory, trauma and history.\textsuperscript{13} Throughout our lives, we become members of a number of different social groups, whether generationally-defined or otherwise, which determine the communities of memory to which we belong and shape who we become, and ultimately how we identify ourselves. Interviewees’ stories and identities involve the interplay of their collective experiences of the GDR past as members of specific social generations and an individual component as members of other communities of memory which cross-cut generational groupings.

The concept of social generations and memory also interested me because of their close relationship to that of Benedict Anderson’s (1983) “imagined community”, a concept which comes to the fore when discussing the formation of identities linked to the nation.\textsuperscript{14} Although not as central to my research, it does occasionally reveal itself, particularly in chapters discussing the efforts made to propagate associations with the GDR as the homeland, or Heimat, and those discussing post-communist nostalgia, or


\textsuperscript{12} Aleida Assmann is well-known for her work related to memories of the holocaust in Germany. Aleida Assmann, \textit{Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik} (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006).


\textsuperscript{14} At the root of Anderson’s theory lies the idea that people with similar experiences and interpretations identify with each other and share a common history. They feel solidarity towards each other. Imagined communities, according to Anderson, occur when “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” Benedict Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism} (London: Verso, 1983) p. 15.
Ostalgie.\textsuperscript{15} It is linked to the concept of social generations because it is another means by which people who were living in the GDR during similar time frames were both overtly and covertly encouraged to identify in a particular way. Likewise, the existence of various communities of memory has been revealed in this study, both in terms of members of similar ages possessing common memories and the more experience-specific groups being bound to others who played similar social roles.

During the course of this research, I conducted interviews with former East Germans who had migrated to Australia, focussing on their relationship with their past and their sense of identity. Surprisingly, research relating to East Germans as migrants is not as abundant as I had anticipated. While a number of authors have undertaken to investigate the situation faced by former GDR citizens who remained in newly-reunified Germany, or who migrated to West Germany following the fall of the Berlin Wall,\textsuperscript{16} the perspectives of those who chose to leave and begin a life elsewhere in the world has not been researched to a significant degree. One study by Anne-Kathrin Wende (2010) on German migrants to Australia, alludes to their presence, but provides little detail regarding East Germans’ specific experiences and perspectives.\textsuperscript{17} A study by Brigitte


\textsuperscript{17} Anne-Kathrin Wende, \textit{German Migrants in Western Australia and Queensland: Acculturation and Transnational Social Spaces} (Saarbrücken, Germany: Sudwestdeutscher Verlag fur Hochschulschriften, 2010).
Bönisch-Brednich (2002) on German migrants to New Zealand also describes the existence of an East German perspective, and some scholars have examined the circumstances of other groups who migrated from former communist countries, such as Milika Markovic and Leonore Manderson (2002), who investigated the situation of women from former Yugoslavia who had relocated to Australia. In light of the fact that there is little in-depth information available regarding East German migrants, it is my intention to provide insight into their specific experiences and more recent perspectives, considering their memories of life in the GDR and subsequently their migration experience “down under.” Australia is currently host to approximately 108,000 people born in Germany and of these approximately 10,100 live in Western Australia. However, I did experience great difficulties ascertaining how many of these “Germans” could be considered “East Germans”. Following correspondence with the Department of Immigration, I determined that it was impossible to acquire more accurate statistics; as prior to the collapse of communism, all German migrants entering Australia had been classified by region, but post-1990 all had been categorised simply as “Germans” upon entry, so that there was no longer any distinction made between Germans from the former East and those from the former West.

The purpose of the interviews I conducted was to investigate how interviewees recalled their experiences, how they negotiated their sense of identity, how they had dealt with the “migrations” they had undergone in their lifetimes, and where they placed themselves in the present. Demographically-speaking, most migrant interviewees resided in Western Australia at the time of their interviews; however, I did conduct two interviews with former East Germans who lived in other states, namely in Victoria and in the Northern Territory (for logistical reasons, this last interview was conducted via email). My preference for referring to interviewees’ migration to Australia, rather than Western Australia was also due to the fact that a number of interviewees had lived in different parts of the country since migrating, even if most of them had eventually settled in Western Australia. In addition to the interviews within Australia, I interviewed one migrant’s family in Germany as a point of comparison and to provide

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additional details regarding the changes experienced in the eastern part of Germany in more recent times.

I came into contact with participants through various avenues, including the Rhein Donau Club, the Goethe Society WA, the discipline of German Studies at The University of Western Australia, German specialty stores, the Fischkopf Stammtisch and through advertising in the Treffpunkt magazine and, in a deliberate attempt to reach those who no longer maintained contact with other Germans or East Germans, The West Australian’s “Can You Help?” section. In addition to this, I attended celebrations for the 20th Anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall and acquired participants through personal contacts and other interviewees’ friendship and kinship networks. My project followed the approach of mixed methods, mainly of close reading of qualitative oral history data and its socio-historical integration and social generational theory. It evolved in three stages. The first of these consisted of the collection of oral histories in the form of semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. According to Anne Galletta (2012), the aim of this style of interview “is to guide a participant in conveying an account of an experience as it relates to the topic of study.” The interaction is a dynamic process, meaning that the researcher is often introduced to new data or information which they did not anticipate before the project’s commencement. Furthermore, both the interviewer and participants engage in an interactive exchange and bring to the table diverse experiences and social roles. My own exposure to immigrants in Australia from the former GDR through my involvement in The University of Western Australia’s German department and other German language and cultural organisations in Perth, as well as my memories of studying post-communist nostalgia in my undergraduate years, fuelled my initial interest in this research topic. While I cannot profess to have the ability to personally identify with the experiences of interviewees, I believe that my understanding of Germanic culture and history, my various childhood experiences living as an expat overseas, and my background as a near-native German speaker of Swiss-Australian heritage, meant that I was able to build a significant level of rapport with interviewees. Interviews were conducted in English or

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22 Galletta, p. 47.
German, as preferred by the participants, and took place in various locations, ranging from participants’ homes or offices, to cafes and the grounds of The University of Western Australia. Interview length averaged approximately one hour, although a few were significantly longer. For German interviews, English translations are provided in the body of the thesis, with the original quote appearing in the footnote. Furthermore, some minor modifications relating to grammar and syntax have been made where this has not interfered with the overall meaning. All participants were given the opportunity to remain anonymous, something which, after much consideration, I decided to apply to all interviewees when quoting them in the body of this work. Vocalised pauses as well as the omission of some words from transcripts are indicated by an ellipsis. To avoid confusion when reading this thesis, interviewees are referred to using a first name and an initial, e.g. Frieda K., while scholars are denoted by the year of publication of their work following their name (unless multiple references to a specific work occur within a very short space of time).

Although a basic structure was in place during the interview process and I ensured that I covered a predetermined list of themes, the interviews were conducted in an open-ended style, allowing participants to speak freely. I determined that this was the most appropriate technique to use for this type of research, as it “enable[d] the researcher to give the subject leeway to answer as he or she chooses, to attribute meaning to the experiences under discussion, and to interject topics”. For a list of general themes covered in the interviews please see Appendix 2. The open-ended style certainly encouraged more depth and detail of answers than would otherwise have been possible through questionnaires or surveys and enabled me to gain a more comprehensive insight into interviewees’ points of view. During interviews, discussions of predetermined themes often occurred in a varied order, at times switching back and forth between topics and even introducing new personal anecdotes into the mix. As stipulated by William L. Miller and Benjamin Crabtree (1999), the interactions which occur in interviews of this type are by their very nature “complex, ambiguous, and jointly constructed from within the context of the discourse.” From this patchwork of personal stories numerous patterns emerged, and I was able to “move from a focus on

25 Miller and Crabtree, p. 91.
each interview as its own entity toward consideration of data across the interviews.”

This introduced the second phase of the research process which involved the analysis and interpretation of interview content (deep reading) and its relationship to historical context (comparison to existing literature). Deep reading encompasses an approach which “focuses on what is signified” rather than what is simply said. It requires the researcher to critically reflect and, in this case, draw comparisons between personal experiences and official historical accounts. The third phase of this research then consisted of gathering follow-up information from some participants to address gaps which had come to light during the composition process. In this way, the progression of my research could also be described as “recursive or iterative” because it required “continually raising questions in the field, further and further modifying and clarifying ideas about what has been discovered.”

This cyclical act is also frequently referred to as triangulation.

For this study, it was a requirement that participants had to have a living memory of their time in the former GDR. The ages of my participants at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall ranged from nine to 57, thus providing a multitude of perspectives: from that of a child just beginning to interpret his or her surroundings, to that of an adult who had spent a significant proportion of his or her life there. Although I began with the intention of investigating the identities of East German migrants from the more recent perspective of their migration, I quickly realised that in order to truly understand how participants had come to be the people they were today, I had to delve further into their pasts, both through listening to their personal interpretations and gaining some historical perspective on the GDR by drawing on academic research in the field.

Between 2009 and 2016, I conducted 42 interviews with former East Germans. Of these, 41 were conducted with migrants who had moved to Australia between the years 1959 and 2011. The remaining one interview was held with a family of one of the migrants in this study during fieldwork undertaken in Germany in 2012. Of the 41 interviews with migrants, 38 were conducted with individuals and three with couples.

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29 LeCompte and Schensul, p. 197.
Seven participants were selected for follow-up interviews. Due to the fact that some participants were interviewed more than once, the total number of migrant participants in this study numbers 36 (less than the number of interviews at 42). There were a significantly larger number of female than male participants (24 in comparison to 12). During the process of analysis, it became clear that the interviewees could be divided into three broad social generations: generation A (born between 1931 and 1945), generation B (born between 1946 and 1968) and generation C (born between 1969 and 1980). The generational groupings had not been pre-determined, but rather emerged as interviews progressed and I began to identify a number of patterns in the personal accounts of interviewees. During the course of writing this thesis, my focus shifted back and forth between individual and collective experiences and thus, between interpretations of individual and collective identities. The generational approach seemed to me to provide a logical structure for the thesis and a framework within which I was able to discuss social generational trends, as well as anomalies. The number of migrant interviewees in each generation was as follows:

- Generation A: 5 (all left the GDR prior to the building of the Berlin Wall).
- Generation B: 14 (5 left during the GDR regime, 9 remained until its collapse).
- Generation C: 17 (3 left during the GDR regime, 14 remained until its collapse).

Thus, interviewees’ experiences ranged from those who had all left prior to the building of the Berlin Wall (generation A), to those who had been born into the GDR (generation B), to those who only recalled their childhood or young adulthood there (generation C). Due to the realisation that many interviewees’ senses of identity had been shaped so significantly by their lives in the GDR, I viewed it as necessary to present a chronological story of their lives, from those who experienced the establishment of the GDR from its infancy during the post-war period (generation A), to those who were children when it ceased to exist in 1990 (generation C). It is for this reason that I chose to include chapters discussing interviewees’ previous experiences in the GDR prior to a discussion of their present identity as migrants to Australia. In essence, their lives have involved a number of “migrations”, both physical and mental, voluntary and involuntary, meaning that it was essential to speak as much about their past in the GDR and its legacy, as it was about their migration to Australia. In addition to the interviewee quotes throughout the thesis, I have included a brief profile on each interview participant in Appendix 1.
Although this thesis follows a broadly temporal structure and as such incorporates a strong generational component, grouping people solely according to social generations did not provide me with a complete impression of a person’s identity. While it is true that most people tend to relate more easily to the experiences of others who have lived through a similar time frame to them, it is not the sole determiner of their sense of self and outlook on life. There are a number of other communities of memory which exist within and across broad generational categories. Jane Pilcher (1994) has emphasised how people within social generations could be “further internally stratified: by their geographical and cultural location; by their actual as opposed to potential participation in the social and intellectual currents of their time and place; and by their differing responses to a particular situation”.\textsuperscript{30} Members of the same generation may not necessarily remember events in the same way, thus highlighting the importance of personal perspectives. The communities of memory or “social role” dynamics within each social generation are what Mannheim has called “generation units”,\textsuperscript{31} the boundaries of which are determined by factors such as “social position and level of involvement in the events of the day.”\textsuperscript{32} The existence of these generation units within the social generations determined for interviewees came to have particular significance for generation B, the generation which had experienced a large proportion of their lives in the GDR and thus had played a significant role in that society, although I would argue that these groups do not solely exist within generations, but also across them. Interviewees’ accounts revealed that it was possible for communities of memory such as victim, perpetrator and bystander groups to exist in spite of, or in balance with, social generations. As discussed previously, there is complexity in the generational approach, not least because it involves a certain degree of generalisation. As Fulbrook (2011) explains:

There is always fluidity in any moment of construction of a collective identity on the basis of generationally defined common experiences. Writing a history of ‘social generations’ is a bit like trying to paint a sky full of clouds which are constantly shifting in density, shape, relationship, sometimes barely existent at

\textsuperscript{30} Pilcher, p. 483.
\textsuperscript{31} Mannheim, p. 304.
all and at other times looming over the landscape in ways which are inescapable.\textsuperscript{33}

People are bonded to each other not just by common historical reference points, but their interpretations of these. Due to the fact that “[o]ur personal experience with history is a matter of ‘memory’,”\textsuperscript{34} and that much of my own research involved interpretations from a variety of perspectives, I decided to primarily employ the qualitative research method of oral history, an approach often used in generational research because “[a] distinctive characteristic of this research is the way in which intimate psychological processes are understood to be implicated in wider historical processes.”\textsuperscript{35} Oral history itself is defined as “the interviewing of eyewitness participants in the events of the past for the purpose of historical reconstruction”.\textsuperscript{36} In the past, reliance on personal memory was the subject of much debate and frequently considered problematic, as personal accounts and individual memories are riddled with subjectivity.\textsuperscript{37} Oral history has been criticised for its tendency to be inaccurate, as interviewees may convey situations differently from the manner in which they were portrayed in historical documents, whether this be due to personal motives, memory distortion, or other factors. In recent times, the portrayal of subjectivity as having an adverse impact upon research outcomes has increasingly been viewed in a positive light, and even as a valuable tool leading to an acceptance of the methods of oral history. From the 1970s,

oral historians in different parts of the world began to question this emphasis on the ‘distortions’ of memory and to see ‘the peculiarities of oral history’ as a strength rather than a weakness. One of the most significant shifts … has been this recognition that the so-called ‘unreliability’ of memory might be a resource, rather than a problem, for historical interpretation and reconstruction.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{33} Fulbrook, \textit{Dissonant Lives}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{37} Stake (2010) explains the belief of some researchers that “[q]ualitative research is subjective. It is personalistic. Its contributions toward an improved and disciplined science are slow and tendentious. New questions emerge more frequently than new answers. The results pay off little in the advancement of social practice. The ethical risks are substantial”. Robert E. Stake, \textit{Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work} (New York: The Guilford Press, 2010) p. 29.
Subjectivity enables researchers to view situations from the perspectives of others, which reveals much about human nature and our relationship to history; about memory and its lasting impact upon people’s lives. In particular since the digital age, oral history has grown in popularity and won respect, with the acknowledgement that recording living history in order to better understand the past and present is valuable. It has been viewed as especially advantageous in giving voice to ordinary people who “might otherwise have been hidden from history”, and whose voices act as a counter-narrative and corrective point of view to official histories. Oral history reveals not only much about an individual, but also “of society at large – what a society remembers and what that means.” Inconsistencies and gaps in memory can provide the researcher with insight regarding how people interpret both their history and their current sense of self. It is “[t]hrough working with memories – both ‘reliable’ and ‘unreliable’ – [that] oral history allows us to explore the relationships between past and present, between individual and collective memory.” This was a key aspect of my study as I sought to gain an understanding of the nature of East German identity through the eyes of individuals immersed in a changing world.

In the realm of academic research, a number of scholars have utilised oral history to provide details related to the East German past. Six authors who provided me with significant insight into this particular research technique were Alexander von Plato (1993), James Stark (2001), Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich (2002), Anselma Gallinat (2008), René Lehmann (2011), and Mary Fulbrook (2011). Von Plato published excerpts from interviews conducted with East Germans relating to their feelings after reunification, which contributed to an understanding of the complexity of the event. Stark utilised an ethnographic interview technique where a number of his students were set the task of questioning former GDR citizens about their pasts to “gain knowledge about life in the former GDR before the Berlin Wall was erected, and directly after it came down, as well as over a decade later”, and to provide them with “impressions

and critiques"\textsuperscript{44} of the GDR past. Complementing this, another study which proved valuable was \textit{The German Life History Study} (conducted between 1971 and 2005), which focused on life course research data concerning Germans living both in the East and West.\textsuperscript{45} Bönisch-Brednich’s book utilised oral histories of Germans who had migrated to New Zealand over a wide time frame, between 1936 and 1996.\textsuperscript{46} Unlike the other studies presented here, her work had the additional advantage of providing me with a view of German identity from the perspective of migrants of various ages.

Gallinat’s study is similarly applicable to my area of research, as it presented a case study in Saxony-Anhalt which commenced in 2001 as an example of how some East Germans struggled to define themselves in their new surroundings following the downfall of communism.\textsuperscript{47} Gallinat’s insights were enlightening in that they presented a cross section of different views of former GDR citizens and aided me in the interpretation of the stories of some interviewees in this study. Lehmann’s research discusses the presence of various generations of interviewees, their differing perspectives on the GDR past, and the relationships which exist between these generations.\textsuperscript{48} Although the generational-groupings defined by him do at times correspond with those of the interviewees in this study, there are some key differences, such as can be found in the experiences of the oldest generation, where all of the interviewees in his study remained in the GDR, compared to those interviewed for this thesis, who all chose to leave and eventually move to Australia. Fulbrook’s comprehensive publication concerns itself with distinct generations which personally experienced both the Nazi and GDR dictatorships.\textsuperscript{49} Her portrayal of their individual accounts against the backdrop of a collective German history and commemoration was instrumental in determining the framework of this thesis and my examination of the contested terrain of GDR and post-communist history. Nevertheless, although her study was significant in informing my research, the “social generations” which she identified did not correspond exactly to my own. One reason for this is that she dealt with a very

\textsuperscript{44} Stark, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{46} Bönisch-Brednich.
broad generational range, covering the two German dictatorships, while I focussed exclusively on the GDR period. Furthermore, this thesis concerns itself with the lives, memories and identities of East Germans who had also chosen to migrate to Australia and thus involved a sample of participants which differed from hers.

My research does not seek to uncover the facts relating to whose version of Cold War history and its aftermath is correct, instead it concerns itself with people’s perceptions and personal opinions regarding the communist and post-communist period, and specifically the way in which “the past is called upon in […] processes of identity construction”.\(^{50}\) Hence, this thesis investigates interviewees’ feelings and personal connections in relation to their pasts, referring “to meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things”;\(^ {51}\) rather than to the specific reality of what occurred.\(^ {52}\) The reliability of memory is not a concern when it involves how people view themselves, as it is, regardless of its accuracy, “the foundation of our living identity.”\(^ {53}\) It is through communicating memories in the form of life stories that people construct who they are. As Rivka Tuval-Mashiach (2006) explains,

> identity infuses the life story with content and meaning even as it is changed and shaped by the story being told. The story is one’s identity, a narrative created, told, revised and retold throughout life. We know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, through the stories that we tell.\(^ {54}\)

In a similar vein, speaking about the past with interviewees involved their reflection on life events and assessment of their perspectives and feelings regarding these events. The way in which they presented these and their discussion of the social groups,

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\(^{52}\) Karyn Cooper and Robert E White explain that oral history “is more concerned with how that reality is arrived at than it is with what that reality entails”. Karyn Cooper and Robert E White, *Qualitative Research in the Post-Modern Era* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012) p. 6.


whether generational or not, to which they belonged, provided a blueprint for the structure of this thesis and the resultant discussion of various sub-groups which existed in their home country and abroad. Interviewees’ present identity has undoubtedly been shaped by their pasts and is “a sensible result of a life story.”\textsuperscript{55} For the participants in this study, their many significant life experiences have often triggered a reassessment of who they are and where they belong. Dan P. McAdams’ (1993) assertion that “[m]ajor identity changes may follow significant life changes”\textsuperscript{56} rings true as identities have shifted and evolved throughout people’s lives and with the development and reassessment of their personal biographies.

The nature of identity itself is fluid and ever-changing and is influenced by other factors as well, not least interviewees’ past roles in GDR society. However, although their personal journeys may have been very different, they all shared both a common physical place of origin and present location. Interviewees spoke to me from a “self in context perspective,”\textsuperscript{57} drawing on both their memories of bygone times and present experiences to speak of their current sense of self. The personal memories which participants conjured up throughout their interviews helped highlight their belonging to a group or groups which had had similar experiences and thus a related collective identity. As Stuart Hall (1997) described, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.”\textsuperscript{58} Thus, personal experiences of a particular time, whether as members of a particular social generation or of a certain social group, contribute to how people identify themselves and how they view their lives in general. There is a tendency to define oneself more resolutely with something with which one has a history and of which one has a memory, even though the relationship to this history may be contentious. I have attempted to capture this link between past and present in the chapters of this thesis.

Chapter 1 – Germany in the post-war period: German identities before 1961

Chapter 1 focuses on the experiences of generation A interviewees while they were living in the GDR. They experienced the post-WWII period in what had previously been the Third Reich. As well as harbouring some memories of the Nazi past and the physical destruction of German cities by Allied bombing, this generation recalled the division of Germany into sectors by the Allies (Britain, France, Russia and the United States) and recounted personal experiences of life under the occupation of the Red Army in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SOZ). The spotlight is turned on the impact of this Soviet take-over upon the local population, the ideological re-orientation and the efforts made to come to terms with the Nazi past.

Furthermore, the post-war period was characterised by the mass migration of refugees, many moving westwards from the margins of the now-defunct German Reich, an occurrence which many interviewees spoke of and some even experienced themselves. The issues of widespread poverty, trauma and collective guilt are brought to light, as are other struggles related to daily life in the early SOZ and later GDR. This generation witnessed the communist regime in its infancy, and spoke of their experiences as its influence steadily grew and their turmoil in making the final decision to leave for the West. Interviewees also provided eye-witness accounts of specific events, such as the uprising of 17th June 1953 in Berlin, and the resultant hardline response by the authorities, which prompted so many to leave for the West. The death of Stalin and the subsequent rise to power of Nikita Khrushchev in 1953 acted as a further catalyst for the decision to migrate. In the case of interviewees, all belonging to this generation fled the East before the Berlin Wall was built in 1961. They spent many years of their lives outside Germany and migrated to Australia between 1959 and 1970. In comparison to younger interviewees, the experiences of this age-group were extremely uniform and in many ways they act as a contrast to later generations of interviewees who were born into the GDR. For generation A, having experienced the hardship of the early days of East German society framed their attitude towards their life thereafter and their desire to create a new life for themselves elsewhere in the world.

Chapter 2 – Life behind the Iron Curtain: The creation of an East German identity

The building of the Berlin Wall and the fortification of the Iron Curtain acted as a watershed in German history. It had the effect of isolating GDR citizens from the outside world, forcing them to build a life for themselves within their confined
surroundings. The second and third generations of interviewees, generations B and C, were born into this system and did not, in contrast to generation A, have any memory of Germany as one country. With the passing of the decades, the prospect of reunification reduced markedly, as the GDR established itself as a nation in its own right on the international stage. The impact of the intensification of the regime after the fortification of the border and the GDR government’s resultant implementation of specific measures to promote and maintain a strong attachment and identification with the GDR as *Heimat* are discussed. Likewise, the extent to which a particular brand of East German identity was created is considered. Interviewees recounted personal memories and the extent to which a sense of *Gemeinschaft* [community] with other East Germans was forged through community involvement and a focus on areas such as education, sport and the arts. The extent to which GDR authorities antagonised the West as the *Klassenfeind* [class enemy] and “capitalist enemy” is likewise discussed.

Although both generation B and members of generation C were born into the GDR system, I still thought it vital to make a distinction between them. Those belonging to generation B were in many ways part of the founding generation who spent much of their lives in the country, being between the ages of 21 and 43 when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. As such, they spent both their childhood and, in most cases, a number of their adult years in the GDR. Generation C, in contrast, were still children or teenagers when communism collapsed, signifying that the memories which they had of the GDR were reflections on their childhood, which were often idealised.

**Chapter 3 – Lives and identities in contrast: Multiple perspectives on life in the GDR**

Chapter 3 discusses the presence of a number of often-conflicting memories which interviewees had of the GDR, based on the social role they had played within it. The recollections of adult victims and their children are contrasted with those of citizens who described leading ordinary lives, relying on the GDR’s *Nischengesellschaft* [niche society] to balance their sense of claustrophobia. The measures used to maintain order and to promote the GDR’s ideals are examined, most notably through an analysis of the role of the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* [Ministry for State Security, henceforth referred to as the Stasi] in its attempts at suppressing dissident behaviour.
The nature of an individual’s involvement in society and society’s treatment of them proved to be a significant factor in shaping identity. Hence, differences emerged between victim and bystander groups, and stories of persecution contrasted with recollections of seemingly ordinary daily life. Among interviewees who were born into the GDR system, three contrasting communities of memory revealed themselves: adult victims, child victims, and those who spent their lives in relative peace, as members of a Nischengesellschaft. The two former groups included interviewees who had moved (whether this was by choice or otherwise) from the GDR and often resettled for some time in the FRG [Federal Republic of Germany], thus making it necessary for them to adjust to a new society. The emergence of these distinct communities of memory, which often conflict with the official histories of the generations who lived behind the Iron Curtain once the border was sealed, foreshadows later divisions which come to the fore once again after the fall of communism.

Chapter 4 – The demise of the GDR: The merging of public and private identity

The central theme of Chapter 4 is the downfall of communism in Eastern Europe and the GDR. The influence of an increased openness in other Eastern Bloc countries during the 1980s and the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev are investigated as triggers for the collapse of a system which just years before had been viewed as steadfast. The impact of Poland’s Solidarność [Solidarity] movement upon dissenters in the GDR is likewise problematised from the perspective of interviewees, many of whom were present at demonstrations leading up to the collapse of East Germany. The effects of Gorbachev’s policies of Glasnost and Perestroika are scrutinised, utilising personal examples from interviewees. Within the GDR, the effects of these changes upon the occurrence of more overt displays of resistance, such as the Montagsdemonstrationen [Monday Demonstrations], are called into question. The rise of reform groups, such as Neues Forum [New Forum], is discussed, as is the desire expressed in some interviews for the creation of a new brand of “socialism with a human face”.

The outcomes of increased confusion are recounted by interviewees and many narrated stories of escape during this time of increased openness, or of their own hope for reform within their country. Groups expressing dissent grew out of the latent Nischengesellschaft, who banded together with those East Germans who were leaving the GDR, and played a fundamental role in triggering the collapse of the communist system. The personal memories surrounding 1989 reveal much about the revolutionary
Zeitgeist, as expressed through the multitude of feelings recounted by interviewees who recalled the historic fall of the Berlin Wall on the 9 November 1989. Discussions with interviewees revealed the sense of communal purpose and a collective identity as East Germans, banding together to force reforms in their country.

**Chapter 5 – German reunification: The crises of East German identity**

Chapter 5 begins with the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the hope which still prevailed for many at this time. The chapter focuses primarily on the experiences of generations B and C interviewees, these being the generations most affected by the collapse of communism. Interviewees who had remained in the GDR until its collapse spoke of their first experiences of the West and feelings of freedom and elation, but also of uncertainty. This chapter highlights the initial optimism felt by many interviewees and the steady evolution of popular sentiment from a will to reform to a collective impatience and desire for immediate change. Economic problems are highlighted by many interviewees, as well as the influence of the charismatic West German chancellor, Helmut Kohl, in swaying East German opinion towards reunification. In many interviews, the speedy reunification process is problematised and the lasting impact of what has often been labelled as the FRG’s “colonisation” of the East is examined. Finally, the experiences of interviewees are likened to a migration process, involving adaptations to the foreign world which now surrounded them. Their existence in a world which had been so familiar to them and now was so different prompted many to question whether they were indeed, in a sense, migrants within their own country. Interviewees spoke of the concept of a *Mauer im Kopf* [Wall in the mind] between some Easterners and Westerners, who had spent so much of their lives apart. The role of the collapse of communism in the GDR in triggering an identity-crisis is explored, as is the rise of a *Trotzidentität* [identity of defiance] and *Ostalgie* [nostalgia for the East] to counteract many East Germans’ perception of being second-class citizens.

**Chapter 6 – The legacy of the Stasi and the issue of blame: Conflicting interpretations of the GDR past and the implications for identity**

The fall of the Berlin Wall also forced many to face their demons, not least those associated with the Stasi’s often relentless surveillance of GDR citizens. As chapter 6 reveals, dealing with the GDR’s legacy and with an increasingly uncertain future was not as straightforward as first anticipated by many. Contrasting opinions within and across generations are uncovered and the conflicting opinions regarding the opening of
the Stasi files and the issue of blame are illustrated. Diverse communities of memory come to the fore again in this discussion in dealing with the GDR past, where the opinions of victims of the Stasi often conflict with those of others who were not targeted by the authorities. The role of perpetrators is problematised, especially involving interviewees’ personal opinions on punishment for past crimes. Thus, this chapter discusses the alternative East German identities which emerged within and across generations, how it was possible to migrate between various identities and how these co-exist to create a multi-layered history of the GDR.

Chapter 7 – Life in Australia: Interpreting identity from the outside

Rather than focusing exclusively on East Germans’ past experiences of life in the GDR and, in many cases, their experience of post-communist German society, Chapter 7 introduces an additional factor which contributes to the discussion of interviewees’ identity and belonging. Physical migration away from the original homeland has served not only to separate East Germans from their past in terms of time, but in physical distance (or space) as well. In this respect, the interviewees in this study are unique because their physical distance from their place of origin means that they have been forced to review their past from the outside. In this chapter, I concentrate on East German interviewees’ memories of physical migration, their personal experiences in Australia, their remaining connection to their past and their relationship to their host country. Interviewees had varied migration experiences, ranging from generation A, who had left with the belief that it was highly probable that they would never be able to return to their country of origin, to generations B and C, most of whom came to Australia following the fall of the Berlin Wall during a period of increased global mobility. Against this backdrop, East German identities are investigated as a part of a changing world, in which they evolved with time and personal experience.

Just as the history of the GDR and the experiences of those who lived there are not black and white, the same applies to interpretations of identity. People tend to have multiple and fluid identities and it must be noted that “individuals identify themselves and are identified by others in different ways, according to the situations in which they find themselves.”

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60 Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, p. 230.
in the GDR which needs to be taken into consideration when discussing identity, but also their unique experiences following reunification and as migrants to Australia. Thus, it is not my intention to present an official history of the experience of all GDR citizens, but rather to highlight the complexity of life journeys and how one’s past is viewed differently by people of diverse social generations and those belonging to communities of memory which may reside within and across these. This in turn leads to questions of how people's placement in time and across space, and the various adaptations or “migrations” they undergo, can impact upon their sense of identity. All interviewees who participated in this study have individual histories, but they also share a number of common experiences which connect them to others, and which have aided in the determination of numerous identities which continue to change as interviewees themselves move through various stages of their lives.
Chapter 1 – Germany in the post-war period: German identities before 1961

“[E]specially the people who had family and friends on both sides ... Their dearest wish was ‘Let us unite, let us be together again’, but then when that was cut off I think a lot of the West Germans just ... went about their business and ... in many cases ... they didn’t think much about the other side.”

(Frieda K.)^61

8 May 1945 signalled the official end to the long, arduous and brutal battles of World War II in Europe. This occasion, Victory in Europe day, was greeted with much celebration and euphoria in the Allied countries, which had emerged as the ultimate victors. In the German territories, however, the conclusion of this period was marked mainly by the “dumb, apathetic silence”^63 of a war-weary population. According to historian Richard Bessel (2011),

[i]n 1945 Germany became the first country in modern history to achieve total defeat. Germans were confronted with the disintegration of their world at every turn: as a result of the enormous eruption of violence during the last months of the war, the massive destruction of the country’s infrastructure, the collapse of public administration, the plummeting of economic activity, the breakdown of law and order, the detention of millions of prisoners of war, and the arrival of millions of foreign occupation troops determined to tolerate no opposition from the defeated population.^64

It was at this time that many Germans began their quest to redefine themselves and when the story of the GDR, and of the interviewees in this study, begins. The first generation of interviewees, generation A, were just children at the conclusion of WWII, ranging in age from four to thirteen years at the time. Their childhood memories would

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^63 Briggs and Clavin, p. 304.
come to contribute to their understanding of themselves and how they viewed themselves throughout their lives. In spite of their later experiences, their years spent in post-war Germany would forever tie them to this common past. They can most aptly be described as a generation born on the “cusp” as a defeated nation emerged from fascism, and authorities in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SOZ) began to encourage a new ideology. Interviewees of this generation form a social generation who were present at the point in time at which the ruined German nation sought to carve out a new identity for itself. Theirs is a story of overcoming post-war hardship and dealing with the new precarious political situation in which they found themselves as they grew older. It is also a story of strong disagreement with the nascent GDR regime and, to a large degree, a lack of identification as citizens of the GDR. Too young to be held responsible for the atrocities of WWII, they had the advantage of comparing two dictatorships and, as a result of this advantage, had to decide whether they would remain in or leave what was to become the GDR.

In the nine months leading up to the Allies’ victory, many German cities had been systematically bombed, reducing them to rubble and costing many civilian lives and homes, as well as the country’s resolve to embrace the Totaler Krieg [total war]. The post-war period has often been described as Stunde Null [zero hour] for Germans, a time when “war had caused them to doubt the roots of their own identity.” Although what this signified in practice is a matter of great debate among academics, it is certain “that the end of the war meant a profound break in the biographies of millions of Germans, who perceived this as a personal ‘zero hour’.” For generation A interviewees, this break was perhaps not as pronounced due to their young age at the time; nevertheless, it did provide them with memories which would affect their lives for years to come. Like many Germans at the time,

their experiences were loaded with contradictions, continuities overlapped with the most abrupt and traumatic breaks, such as the loss of homes, the death of

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67 Bessel, p. 144.
family members and friends, loss of employment, arrival in a new landscape with new opportunities.68

They were, in short, part of a transitional generation which witnessed the emergence of the GDR from the ashes of WWII.

1.1 Memories of the Red Army
After months of uncertainty, the fate of Hitler’s defeated Germany was finally decided at the Potsdam Conference on the 2 August 1945. The country was to be divided into four occupation zones, each controlled by one of the former Allies: France, Britain, the United States and the USSR. As Stalin asserted at this conference, “Germany would be governed as a single economic unit by the Allied Control Authority, while the individual military governments would be given responsibility for administration in their zones.”69 Thus, although each sector would have some autonomy, it was planned that they would maintain a united front on the issues of the “German capacity to make war, the extirpation of National Socialism, and the collection of reparations.”70 For many, the Russians were a source of widespread fear. All generation A interviewees bore witness to the trials and tribulations faced by the majority of the German population during this period and vividly recalled events from this time which had impacted so significantly upon their own lives.

The status of Berlin in particular, was a major issue which had plagued the Allied powers since their victory. Initially within the SOZ, Berlin was supposed to remain in the possession of the Soviet Union, but was then divided between the Allies, as the Americans wished to stake their symbolic claim on the capital city. Negotiations between the Allied powers prompted the drawing and redrawing of borders, until they eventually reached an agreement. Frieda K., one of the interviewees participating in this study, described how “Berlin was only divided after Thüringen [Thuringia], which originally was taken by the Americans, but then when they [the Americans] decided that they wanted part of Berlin, they gave part of … [Thuringia] to the Russians.”71

68 Bessel, p. 143.
Army’s occupation was experienced by her and many others as ruthless, and a significant number of people who lived through this period escaped to the West during these early years. However, as Ernst M. narrated, the Red Army’s brutality was not felt straight away in his hometown of Dresden:

The Russians came and … it was almost unbelievable. They came in horse-drawn carriages. On the back of these horse-drawn carriages were mainly women, in uniform of course, … doing nothing. So it was, … in our section, a very peaceful takeover. I just couldn’t believe that we wouldn’t see any T34s, … the famous Russian tank. None of that … We saw them much later, but not on the day of the handover from one government to the other.\footnote{Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 23\textsuperscript{rd} August 2011.}

Ernst M.’s account above demonstrates the at times inconsistent nature of the Russian take-over. From his perspective as a child, he described how he and his brother “were watching from the windows…and they [the Russians] waved to us and we didn’t feel like vanquished people.”\footnote{Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 15\textsuperscript{th} July 2016.} Nevertheless, after this initial peaceful encounter with the Red Army, Ernst M. also recalled negative ramifications of their presence due to the fact that they were given free reign in the first few days after the take-over. For many, life quickly became very difficult. According to Norman M. Naimark (1995), “[t]he years of the occupation regime, 1945-1949, were harder on the Germans in the Eastern Zone than they were on their brethren in the West.”\footnote{Naimark, p. 1.} As became apparent from many interviews, there was a widespread fear associated with the Red Army, more so than there was with any of the other occupying forces. With shortages of food, fuel and resources of every kind,\footnote{Mary Fulbrook, \textit{A History of Germany, 1918-2008: The Divided Nation}, 3 ed. (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) p. 130.} the situation was dire, as described by Frieda K.:

Once the war was finished and the Russians came then there was no food. My grandfather actually died of starvation and you know that was … a horrendous time … probably from the end of ’45 to about ’48/’49 … ’48 my uncle came from West Germany … with a load of four hundredweights of food and we always had to rely on food parcels from our family from West Germany.\footnote{Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 2\textsuperscript{nd} August 2010.}
Being so close to the West and seeing what they were able to afford with their currency was frustrating for many such as Frieda K., who recalled visiting her auntie in West Berlin and “going around shops at that stage … [seeing] all these beautiful things and you can’t buy them because [of] your money.” Resources were scarce, living conditions appalling and stories of rape by Russian soldiers rampant. Numerous documentaries and personal accounts of the time detail the Red Army’s treatment of the local population. An anonymous diary, *A Woman in Berlin*, paints a sombre picture of this period of German history, detailing food shortages and widespread pillage and rape in the capital city. Documentations of traumatic wartime experiences were echoed in the stories of generation A interviewees, who lived through this time as children or young adults. Frieda K. remembered how she and her mother had been subjected to a search of their home:

> [W]e were living in a bedsit, and the Russians came in to look if we were hiding any soldiers or anything. They came and looked under every bed … and we just stood there looking out the window because my mother was very anxious about this … [M]y mother at that time was in her late 20s, so of course there was always that fear of being raped.

Ernst M. too, detailed how in the early days of the occupation, “women had to hide or disappear somewhere because it wasn’t safe … I knew the owner of a cinema which was around the corner from where I lived and he tried to protect his wife and girl and he was shot”. The Germans’ role as perpetrators during the War meant that often their own suffering was viewed as just punishment for atrocities committed. In the post-war period many Germans in the SOZ “were forced to kowtow to the occupation administration of a nation they had been taught to believe was inferior in every way to their own.” However, even though there was much fear associated with the Soviet

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77 Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 2nd August 2010.
81 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 15th July 2016.
82 Naimark, pp. 1-2.
occupying forces, the German population was in many respects dependent upon them for their survival. Ernst M.’s childhood memories illustrate how fostering connections with the Russians who had been allocated to his family could at times be highly beneficial:

We were sent by our Russians to … the canteen to fetch the food for them, and after a few days the lady who was in charge of the cooking knew us and … gave us something to eat because food was terribly short … and then we would take these pots back to our Russians and our Russians … said ‘OK, you must be hungry’ and gave us some more.83

Frieda K. likewise commented on the fact that her mother’s work as a tailor for the Russians meant that she was able to acquire cigarettes, which she could use in exchange for provisions.84 Much of occupied Germany had, in many respects, returned to a barter economy, with citizens hoarding and exchanging supplies to obtain what they needed.85 As described by F.A. Lutz (1949), “individuals and business firms acquired most of the commodities they wanted by exchange against commodities they had to offer, and a whole series of exchanges were sometimes necessary to obtain the desired commodity.”86 The climate of scarcity would have a lasting impact upon the lives of generation A interviewees, as Frieda K. described:

[In the post-war years] [m]y mother was a dressmaker … [so] I always sort of got by with something. She got some material from somewhere … And that’s why I now so often look at my two daughters [and] what they waste … They look at me and think ‘Can’t you throw anything away?’ Well, [who can] with a background like that?87

83 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd August 2011.
84 Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 12th April 2013.
86 F.A. Lutz, p. 122.
87 Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 2nd August 2010.
Generation A participants share common experiences of the Soviet occupation and as such are members of a social generation who understand the impact of the post-WWII occupation and the trials and tribulations which were a part of everyday existence at the time.

Another key issue in the post-war years was the mass-migration of refugees from the former German territories in the East. In accordance with the Potsdam Agreement, territory in the East was given to Poland (officially termed the Recovered Territories), along what was to become known as the Oder-Neisse line. The division resulted in the expulsion of the German population residing in this area, who were ordered to move westwards. The same applied to territories even further east. It is estimated that 12 million refugees left these areas. The expulsion of Germans had the effect that “the roads between the Recovered Territories and the river Oder were thronged with parties of Germans ranging in size from twos and threes to hundreds, who had been forced out of their homes with little or no notice and pointed westwards.” Expellees were often treated abysmally, as supported by Bernhard W., whose family was forced to flee. He depicted the experience and sense of loss emotionally, likening it to “ethnic cleansing”, a comparison supported in the realm of scholarship. He had fled westwards with his mother and sisters and described the manner in which they were told to leave:

I was born in Silesia … After the War the Russians wanted a bit of [the Eastern] corridor, and … so they wanted a bit of … Poland. They chopped it off and … they said to the Poles ‘You can have Silesia, Pomerania, Prussia’ … [T]hey just said to us after one year ‘Well if you want to remain here, you become Pole[s]. If you don’t want to become Poles, there’s the border. Off you go’.

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91 Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21st August 2010.
93 Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21st August 2010.
According to academic sources, it seems that the Germans leaving this area had less of a choice than that described by Bernhard W. in his above account. Historian Harold James (2000) noted how “most of the German-speakers in Poland were either expelled or fled from their homes.”

After Bernhard W. and his family left Silesia, they settled in Leipzig, where they lived with locals. It was common at the time for refugees from the eastern territories to be randomly assigned to families in the area to which they had moved, as had been Ernst M.’s experience, whose family had been host to some of these people: “We got refugees billeted to us that came from … Eastern Prussia and Silesia and Pomerania … We got … a mother with her child. Her husband had disappeared in the War.”

The allocation of refugees to certain families was a result of “the ACC’s [Allied Control Authority’s or Allied Control Council’s] Housing Law of March 1946, [which] authorized the requisitioning of surplus dwelling space, even down to the level of vacant rooms in individual houses”. The influx of refugees from the East contributed to an overcrowding of the little existing accommodation. Bernhard W. related his experience when his family acquired accommodation in Leipzig:

It was tough … A lot of people just died. There was no power. There was no gas. There was running water, but it was cold of course. We were living as tenants with … an old woman [and] … her spinster daughter, … but they gave us one room … I remember there were two beds, I remember we had our stuff piled in a corner … We weren’t allowed in the bathroom except on Friday night … the water we had to fetch from a tap in the hall.

His experience has been echoed in the work of R.M. Douglas (2012), who explained that many property-owners treated expellees “as unwanted guests or interlopers, who might be denied permission to use bathrooms or kitchens or to enter and leave the premises except at specific times.” However, in spite of numerous accounts of scarcity and inadequate living-conditions, interviewees occasionally expressed positive memories of this period, particularly concerning the relationships which they fostered with others close to them. Bernhard W. illustrated his sentiments towards his mother at the time: “When I was living with Mum, the world could get stuffed … I never knew

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95 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd August 2011.
96 Douglas, p. 308.
97 Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21st August 2010.
98 Douglas, p. 313.
that we were poor, not at all. We had each other, you know. Well, we were bloody poor, but so was everybody else.” Hans L. similarly recalled positive aspects of his childhood, describing the sense of camaraderie which he experienced as a child:

On school holidays … the whole class got together and they put us on a truck and they took us out to the fields and we had to look for potato bugs and things like that, because they were actually dropped during the War … and then at the end of the day … once the farmer went through and harvested all his potatoes there was always the odd one left and we had to go through and pick the odd ones out and then we lit a great big fire and we chucked our potatoes in. We all sat around with a glass of water, or a glass of lemonade and a couple of spuds, and we had a great time.

Adversity had the effect of uniting people against the challenges which they faced on a daily basis and interviewees of this generation, in spite of their hardships, recollected their early experiences of the post-war period as a contributing factor to their present sense of self and outlook on life.

Although participants’ perceptions of the Soviet occupation varied, one characteristic of the post-war period was certain: a shared sense of political confusion. While the Soviet Union and the other Allies had been united in their goal to defeat Nazism during the War, the relationship between them deteriorated in the following years, as ideological divisions became more pronounced. The British, French and American zones, who united to form “Trizonia” in 1949, were aided by the Marshall Plan and so were provided with much-needed economic assistance by the United States. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, had been sceptical of this plan’s intentions from its inception and refused to participate, labelling it “the embodiment of American imperialism”, instead creating its own alternative in the form of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (or COMECON). The intention of this council was to supply the local population with necessary resources, but this was not reflected in practice. Instead, the SOZ was effectively stripped of its supplies, to the extent that by Stalin’s death in 1953

99 Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21st August 2010.
101 Macdonough, p. 10.
102 Macdonough, p. 516.
they had “transferred resources out of Eastern Europe and into the Soviet Union on a scale comparable with [the amount provided by the other Allies as] Marshall Plan aid to Western Europe.”\textsuperscript{103} The Soviets were effectively robbing the SOZ of its resources, rather than providing it with much-needed aid. Frieda K. witnessed this in her own hometown where there had previously been a booming textile industry, stating that “[a]fter the War, the Russians had taken a lot of the machinery away as a war payment.”\textsuperscript{104}

The Soviets sensed that they were increasingly being left out of the decision-making process concerning the issue of Germany’s future and became ever more isolated. It seemed that the Western Allies had largely decided to abandon thoughts of reunification, a fact which appeared to be further proven by their decision to launch a new currency within Trizonia, which served to devalue the currency of the SOZ. The chasm in living standards between the East and West widened, as was observed by Frieda K. who travelled between the zones for work and recounted that “[f]or six East German Mark you got one West German Mark, so if you wanted to buy a pair of shoes in those days for 30 Marks, you had … to put [in] a whole … monthly salary.”\textsuperscript{105} Stalin interpreted the introduction of the new currency in West Berlin and the Western Allies’ zones as a provocation and this triggered his response in the form of the Berlin Blockade between June 1948 and May 1949. In particular, tensions between the USSR and the other Allies came to a head when Soviet forces in Berlin attempted to gain control of the city by blocking all routes utilised for the transportation of food and other necessary provisions to the British, American and French sectors. The tactic failed, as the other Allied forces responded with an airlift, landing at West Berlin’s Tempelhof airport and supplying West Berlin with necessary reserves such as food, medicine and coal for a number of months.\textsuperscript{106} The tension of this period and the response by the US to Soviet provocation, acted as a catalyst for the final separation of the SOZ from Trizonia and the establishment of what would officially come to be called the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the East and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the West. Ernst M., aged in his early 20s at the time, spoke of the rising tension between the zones, particularly during these years: “Everybody knew the Russians and the West

\textsuperscript{103} Briggs and Clavin, p. 316.
\textsuperscript{104} Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 2\textsuperscript{nd} August 2010.
\textsuperscript{105} Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 2\textsuperscript{nd} August 2010.
\textsuperscript{106} Frederick Taylor, \textit{The Berlin Wall} (London: Bloomsbury, 2006) pp. 82-87.
didn’t get on anymore and now they were really confronting each other, which was terribly.”\textsuperscript{107} The Allied powers perceived the Soviets as a threat\textsuperscript{108} and their decision to unite to form the FRG had only served to fuel the hostile relationship with the Eastern sector.

In those turbulent first few years following the end of WWII, the seeds of what would later become a restrictive communist society were sown. The post-war period witnessed the rise of the \textit{Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands} (Socialist Unity Party of Germany, or SED) as a result of a merger between the \textit{Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands} (the Communist Party of Germany, or KPD) and the \textit{Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands} (the Social Democrats, or SPD) in April 1946. It appeared to be the intention of the Soviet administration from the very beginning to create a ruling party aligned with Moscow. Although it initially appeared that the views of the public were being taken into account with the decision to merge the parties (as the SPD had more popular support than the KPD), it was a strategic move to tip the balance of power towards the more left-wing KPD.\textsuperscript{109} Frieda K. described how “the more they got established as a government in the GDR, they got more and more rules and regulations. You see, if there was an election … you had to vote … you had no choice because there was only one party.”\textsuperscript{110} According to historian David Pike (1992), gaining control also meant that “a purge of the recalcitrant was virtually inevitable and soon undertaken.”\textsuperscript{111} This resulted in a dictatorial party which would rule the GDR until its collapse.

\textbf{1.2 Confronting the Nazi past}

From the GDR’s genesis, those in power wished to enforce extensive measures to lay the foundations of what they believed to be the ideal socialist society. Already in December 1945, Walter Ulbricht, leader of the KPD and later General Secretary of the SED, had illustrated the intentions of his party:

\textsuperscript{107} Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd August 2011.
\textsuperscript{108} Fulbrook, \textit{A History of Germany 1918-2008}, p. 238.
\textsuperscript{110} Frieda K. interview with M. Durrer 2nd August 2010.
It is the first demand of our people to themselves and their demand to the Allies that in the first months of the new year Germany should be purged of war criminals, war profiteers and militarists. Just as the streets had to be cleared to be able to walk there must be a political cleansing to pave the way for the construction of the new, democratic Germany.\(^\text{112}\)

Political changes were specifically related to Germany’s Nazi regime, most particularly regarding its attempts at exterminating the Jewish people. The post-war period witnessed an intense denazification process, in both the GDR and FRG, as foregrounded by Giles MacDonogh (2009) and Frederick Taylor (2011), who described how former concentration camps, such as Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald, were utilised for the re-education of former Nazis.\(^\text{113}\) Although this was to be their primary purpose, it soon became evident that the administration was “using the Nazi-smear as a way of dealing with anyone who appeared to threaten the rapid ‘Sovietisation’ of the zone.”\(^\text{114}\) Most former Nazis were removed from positions of power by the new rulers, as “anti-fascism became a state doctrine and a central ideologeme of Communist rule”.\(^\text{115}\) The sudden expulsion of former Nazis and Nazi-sympathisers from administrative positions posed certain problems, as one interviewee, Ernst M., recalled:

[E]verybody with Nazi-Party connections was dismissed, and that was absolute chaos because, for instance, if you wanted to be a teacher [during the Third Reich], you had to be a party member … the whole public service really collapsed and that was why so many mistakes were made immediately after the War…They didn’t know how to do things, how to run departments and so.\(^\text{116}\)


\(^{114}\) Taylor, \textit{Exorcising Hitler}, p. 324.

\(^{115}\) Dietmar Remy and Axel Salheiser (2010) assert that: “the vast majority of the old elites of the Reich were ousted from power and permanently lost their social rights and private property”. Dietmar Remy and Axel Salheiser, “Integration or Exclusion: Former National Socialists in the GDR,” \textit{Historical Social Research} 35.3 (2010): p. 10.

\(^{116}\) Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 23\textsuperscript{rd} August 2011.
Most positions in the public service, which had previously been occupied by Nazis, were effectively handed to working-class people, communists or social democrats, who often had no experience in handling these affairs.\textsuperscript{117} This generation of interviewees was directly impacted by the re-education programme, as they belonged to the younger generation which lived during a time when the newly-created GDR sought to carve out an identity for itself. The education system provided a means by which Germans could exercise some control over their future. As Jaimey Fisher (2007) explained,

\begin{quote}
"[a]t a time when the Allies subverted German sovereignty on nearly everything – government and society as well as economy and culture – re-education became a site at which Germans could make a determined last stand in defense of traditional German culture."\textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}

The younger generation at this time, to which generation A interviewees belonged, would be educated in a new way and would be the "crucial building blocks in postwar German national identity, which had to reconstitute itself on the ruins of tainted cultural categories."\textsuperscript{119} Focus on youth and education promised a new direction for the GDR and "helped select and emphasize elements of German culture around which national identity could be constituted in the future."\textsuperscript{120}

The practical implementation of the re-education programme in the GDR was rather more complex, as most teachers in the Third Reich had had close ties to the Nazi party. In the Soviet-controlled territories 70\% of teachers were estimated to have had party-connections.\textsuperscript{121} The GDR administration recognised the necessity to purge the education system of these and to instate new teachers in their place. Frieda K. recalled this process, although she did not understand it at the time, when her usual teacher "was taken away from us in front of our class of 6/7 year-olds … We didn’t know what was happening."\textsuperscript{122} She had witnessed what has been termed "[t]he initial phase of re-

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\textsuperscript{119} Fisher, p. 63.

\textsuperscript{120} Fisher, p. 63.

\textsuperscript{121} Taylor, \textit{Exorcising Hitler}, p. 327.

\textsuperscript{122} Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 12\textsuperscript{th} April 2013.
\end{footnotes}
education”, which involved “removing Nazi teachers and material from the classroom.” These teachers were frequently replaced by inexperienced people, who were often required to teach in areas in which they had not necessarily specialised. As Ernst M., who was also of school-age at the time, explained,

[w]e had teachers who were … three years older than us … Now for instance, one would have … a Russian teacher who was always about two lessons ahead of us … and then we had … an engineer and he taught mathematics … and … writers taught German. It was very odd.

In addition to these internal efforts to rid the GDR of any traces of Nazism, the administration aspired to distance itself from the atrocities committed in WWII through the weaving of a “master narrative in which the Communist tragedy of the concentration camps and prisons was sublimated in a national cult of heroic resistance, valor, and self-redemption.” GDR authorities projected the crimes of the Nazi dictatorship onto West Germany in order to legitimise the existence of a separate East German state. According to Ruth Wittlinger (2010),

[b]y employing the concept of anti-fascism, the official discourse in East Germany found a convenient solution to the question of the past. It provided a useful tool to distance the GDR from Germany’s Nazi past but also from its current capitalist ‘other’, the Federal Republic of Germany.

Alison Lewis (1995) supported this assertion by emphasising how the “East German nation thus sought to cleanse its national imago of the stains of genocide and mass destruction by projecting these onto the other.” Nazi resistance-fighters, such as Ernst Thälmann, were elevated to levels of heroism and formed part of the GDR’s

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123 Fisher, p. 69.
124 Fisher, pp. 69-70.
126 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd August 2011.
127 Danyel Jürgen (1992) qtd. in: Remy and Salheiser, p. 11.
validation of its existence as a state which had rid itself of fascists,\textsuperscript{131} even if only in theory. The veneration of those who had challenged the Nazi regime enabled the GDR to distance itself from the atrocities committed and to ignore the fact that there were still former supporters of the Nazi-dictatorship in their midst. Ernst M. recounted this from personal experience when he decided to join the GDR’s youth organisation:

After the War … the communist governments … tried to convince people that Nazis were bad, [that] war was bad, [that] everybody should be for peace, and that all sounded reasonable, so … I joined the youth movement called \textit{Freie Deutsche Jugend}, FDJ [Free German Youth], and we had all these talks about atomic energy and Nazi cruelty … and I could agree with anything that I heard, and then suddenly [in] ’47 it changed. It was no longer ‘Nazis are bad’ … [They] said ‘Well, the West, the capitalists, are the real culprits.’\textsuperscript{132}

Ernst M.’s perception of the sudden change in focus of the administration coincided with what Bessel (2011) termed the “imposition of a Stalinist system”,\textsuperscript{133} an attempt by those in power to gain control over their population. During the early years of the Soviet regime on East German soil, limitations on freedom were already beginning to become apparent, as restrictions were placed on the kind of work which citizens were permitted to undertake in light of their family background. If a person’s family was found to have been linked to the Nazi Party, it was often a challenge to be granted access to university, as was the situation with Klara T.’s husband, who only managed to acquire a place after being specifically recommended by a teacher:

[My husband] was not supposed to study because his father was an enemy of the state or so … because he was a soldier … Through luck and circumstance, we managed to study, but you always had to be very very much on your toes … and then when you finished they wanted to put you where they wanted you to go, not what you wanted to do.\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{132} Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 23\textsuperscript{rd} August 2011.
\textsuperscript{133} Bessel, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{134} Klara T. in an interview with M. Durrer 16\textsuperscript{th} July 2010.
Other areas too, were subject to the enforcement of a Soviet-style system. Land reforms had been introduced as early as 1945, whereby the previously privileged Junker class was stripped of the farmland that they owned. It was believed that “the Junker landowners and the industrial magnates […] were responsible for having fostered the Nazi war machine and should be deprived of their property and influence.” Due to this belief, a number of members of this previously privileged class were driven from their land or even killed in the aftermath of WWII. The famous slogan Junkerland in Bauernhand [the land of the Junkers in the hand of the farmers], coined by founding president of the GDR, Wilhelm Pieck, became a reality, as privately-owned land came under state-ownership. One generation C interviewee whose grandparents had experienced the post-war years, described how they had lost what they had previously owned during this period: “[M]y nana and my granddad bought the mill when they were young, and … they paid it off. They had land and then the war ended and it was all taken away … land was taken away.”

The impact of this ideological re-orientation, starting with the post-war occupation and manifested in the denazification and the re-education programme and the fulfilment of land reforms, was felt for a number of years. Furthermore, until the 1950s, German soldiers who had fought on the Eastern Front during WWII remained as prisoners of war in Siberia. The absence of male relatives was a common experience which affected many generation A interviewees, who spoke of fathers or uncles who had been missing for a number of years, the whereabouts of some remaining a mystery until this day. Ernst M. described the impact of his father’s return on his family: “[When he went to war] we were children … and … when he came back I was an adult … He had … found it difficult to … re-adjust to normal life.” The psychological scars of former German POWs were often taboo, especially considering the atrocities committed

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136 Naimark, p. 10.
137 Naimark, pp. 142-43.
139 Angela H. in an interview with M. Durrer 4th April 2012.
140 According to Peter H. Merkl (1993), 11 million German soldiers were held as POWs after WWII. Merkl, p. 36.
141 Giles Macdonogh (2009) has communicated the opinion that “[t]he history of German POWs is murky”, as there is much left undiscovered and unexplained. MacDonogh, p. 392.
142 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd August 2011.
against the Jews in the Third Reich by Germans just like them. Frieda K. recounted how she had never been able to find out what had happened to her father because “[w]e never heard from him after the War … We don’t know if he survived … [H]e was in the SS, so … if the Russians … or even Americans … got hold of him, you don’t know what happened to these people.”\textsuperscript{143} Within private households, the past was often buried as a means of coping. Frieda K. recounted how the Nazi past was swept under the carpet in her own family: “We, for instance, would never mention that my father … was in the SS. We would never mention that to anybody we didn’t know … You never let anybody know that there was some connection.”\textsuperscript{144} Rather than confront the Nazi past directly, GDR authorities often turned a blind eye to maintain the illusion of having created an anti-fascist state. According to Dietmar Remy and Axel Salheiser (2010):

Due to the omnipresent myth of anti-fascism, disclosed brown shadows of the past could put careers at risk, but submissive loyalty to the young socialist state and its leadership could balance the scales. Keeping silent turned out a successful strategy in many cases: the general exculpation of the populace and the anti-fascist propaganda made serious checks rather inopportune for the Communist regime.\textsuperscript{145}

In many respects, the newly-established regime encouraged many former Nazi-sympathisers to remain quiet so that it could more adamantly justify its own existence.

\subsection*{1.3 Discontent, flight and the dawn of a new era}

The growing power of the state manifested itself in a very public and well-documented display of discontent. On the 17 June 1953, an uprising of construction workers occurred in Berlin, which would culminate in widespread protests.\textsuperscript{146} The workers had decided to take a stand against the rise in work quotas implemented by the SED leadership,\textsuperscript{147} as “[i]n Berlin they were building the Stalinallee, these new apartment

\textsuperscript{143} Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 12\textsuperscript{th} April 2013.
\textsuperscript{144} Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 12\textsuperscript{th} April 2013.
\textsuperscript{145} Remy and Salheiser, p. 9.
blocks in big numbers, and the state tried to raise … the work, the Soll [target/quota].”

Initially, the protest began when workers decided to march to the central union as a group, rather than sending a representative, as was usual practice. Other workers spontaneously joined them along the way. In the atmosphere of political uncertainty within the relatively recently founded GDR, the display of dissatisfaction on the part of workers acted as a catalyst for demonstrations of further discontent among the general population. On the day following the initial strike, the protest grew even larger, until between 300,000 and 375,000 workers joined in.

Frieda K. recalled passing an iron and steel works on this day while on a train. She remarked: “I remember the upheaval, so many people around there.” However, protests were swiftly and violently defused through the deployment of Soviet tanks which fired upon demonstrators. Ernst M. detailed how the Russians suddenly appeared from everywhere, and in hundreds … controlling and blockading the roads … and they were shooting, not just controlling everything that was suspicious … if it hadn’t been for the Russian army, it [the uprising] would have succeeded, but of course you can’t do [anything much] … against tanks and machine guns. And there were lots of … casualties.

This reaction to the protests by the Soviets had a significant influence on future oppositional movements in the GDR and contributed to the population’s apprehension regarding the response-tactics which could potentially be utilised by those in power. Interviewees spoke of the results of the uprising and the secrecy surrounding its aftermath, describing how “[a]fter it had been crushed, there were lots of incarcerations and death sentences … but of course that didn’t appear in the newspaper. That was only because you knew such-and-such a person just suddenly disappeared; obviously dead.” The event would remain as a reminder of the potential force implemented against those who thought to oppose the official party line.

148 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd August 2011.
152 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd August 2011.
153 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd August 2011.
Between 1950 and 1961, over 2.5 million East Germans fled the GDR for the West.\textsuperscript{154} Although fraught with difficulty, escape during the early years of the regime was easier than it would become later. The highest number of refugees (approximately 331,000) fled in 1953, around the time of the crushed uprising,\textsuperscript{155} and most escapes occurred through Berlin, due to the fact that crossing via the subway or train systems was comparatively simple at the time. As Ernst M. recalled: “It was very easy because you didn’t [yet] have a wall in Berlin. You could take the train … and … take the underground to West Berlin.”\textsuperscript{156} It was believed that the total number of refugees who fled during the early years of the Soviet occupation could be as high as four million.\textsuperscript{157} All generation A interviewees left some years later, between 1957 and 1959. Their personal stories of flight are unique, but nevertheless are a representation of what many East Germans at the time experienced: a severing with the socialist society emerging in their homeland. This was a pivotal moment for all generation A participants and defined their future and the perception they would have of their past for years to come. Their decision to leave would, furthermore, mark them as members of a unique community of memory and distinguish them from others of their social generation who chose to remain behind.

Bernhard W. left the GDR in 1957, after falling out of favour with GDR authorities. He felt pressured to join the party and sought a means of escape. However, being just under the age of 18 posed itself as a problem, as minors were not supposed to be granted visas, and were not considered to be fully independent and thus answerable for their decisions. Prior to his escape, he had joined a band which was due to play at a GDR-supported event and it was this which aided in his escape. He utilised the excuse of having to return to the GDR in time to play at this upcoming event in order to convince authorities that he planned to return to the country. He recalled his conversation with an official when he attempted to apply for a visa:

\begin{flushright}
155 Bundesministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen, p. 145.
156 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 23\textsuperscript{rd} August 2011.
\end{flushright}
I said ‘Look, I can’t stay two weeks [in the FRG] because International Women’s Day is coming up’, and [I said] we had to play for that and were looking forward to that. I said ‘Look, I’ve got to be back for that’, and that must have convinced her … She [also] didn’t realise that I was three months short of 18 … which means that I wasn’t responsible for my actions.\textsuperscript{158}

Bernhard W. couldn’t believe his luck and returned home to tell his parents that he would be going to the West. At first they doubted that what he was telling them was true, as he was not eligible for a visa, but supported him in his decision once they realised that he was indeed permitted to go. He described the moment he broke the news, telling his mother

‘I’m going on a trip to West Germany.’ She said ‘Yes, go on, go on.’ I showed her [the visa] … so she started crying of course and Dad came home and he went apeshit … I didn’t tell anyone [else] … because I didn’t want to indict anyone. So, I didn’t sleep that night. My Dad sewed some money in the bottom of the bag … and so I just left in the morning.\textsuperscript{159}

Bernhard W. communicated his memories of the day of his escape to West Germany via the train system, describing how Leipzig train station’s ‘[t]rack 26 was always fenced off. The ‘interzone’ track, they used to call it, where only people with a visa could go in … On the train … there’s a guard at every door … with a dog and a gun.’\textsuperscript{160} He made it to West Germany in two-and-a-half hours, crossing the border at Marienborn which is now a memorial site.\textsuperscript{161}

In the same year, Hans L. also left the GDR, after an earlier failed attempt. In his interview he recounted that

[t]he first time I escaped I was only 16 … Someone dobbed me in … I went … through the mountains and they caught me. There was about two metres of snow

\textsuperscript{158} Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21\textsuperscript{st} August 2010.
\textsuperscript{159} Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21\textsuperscript{st} August 2010.
\textsuperscript{160} Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21\textsuperscript{st} August 2010.
\textsuperscript{161} Hope M. Harrison makes reference to border crossings in Berlin and other areas of East Germany as sites of memory. Hope M. Harrison, “The Berlin Wall and its Resurrection as a Site of Memory,” \textit{German Politics and Society} 29.2 (2011): p. 98.
and they locked me up overnight. They couldn’t do much with me because I was still only 16, but the second time I escaped was just over a year later … I succeeded then.

Unlike some other interviewees, Hans L. only had a superficially political motive for leaving. As he sees it now, it was rather his naivety at the time and his rosy perception of Western consumer culture’s abundance which had prompted his decision. At the time he “thought the grass was greener on the other side. West Germany had everything.”162 The fact that West Germans were materially better off had not escaped the notice of those in the East, many of whom took advantage of the still-open border and sought their luck outside the GDR.

Ernst M. and Klara T. left the GDR together in 1959, having grown increasingly concerned for their future since the change in Soviet leadership in 1953. Changes in the USSR’s administration meant that East German ideology had to be rewritten to correspond with the new brand of socialism encouraged by Stalin’s successors. Ernst M. explained some of these changes:

> When Stalin died, the books had to be rewritten … [Stalin] had written a book on the history of the communist party of Russia, which was like the Bible. Everybody had to read this and regurgitate what they had read. And when he died, Khrushchev made this big speech at the Russian parliament saying that that was wrong. So, all these books were taken out of the libraries and [were] reprinted … [as] ‘New Science’.163

The change in leadership engendered restlessness among the population and, as in Ernst M. and Klara T.’s case, prompted a decision to leave for the West. At the time, rumours of Nikita Khrushchev’s plan to amend Berlin’s status spread like wildfire. He began to demand Soviet control over the entire city, a manoeuvre which had failed previously during the Berlin Blockade. Tensions mounted as Khrushchev communicated his intentions that all checkpoints would henceforth be exclusively under Soviet control.164

163 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 16th July 2010.
This did nothing to stem the flow of refugees to the Western zone, as the population became suspicious and uncertain of Khrushchev’s motives. Ernst M. and Klara T. left the GDR in 1959 due to the unstable political atmosphere after Khrushchev … spoke at [the] United Nations and he sent notes to all the Western Allies saying he wants to have the Berlin status redone … he gave six months for an answer to this request and otherwise he would take his own … measure. And with that, … we said: ‘Well, after six months something will happen and then we can’t get out anymore’ … and we left in March, and then the Wall didn’t come for another two years.\(^{165}\)

Ernst M. and Klara T.’s decision to leave was politically motivated, and Ernst M. explained how “under those circumstances, I felt sooner or later I would be in opposition to such an extent that I could end up in prison.”\(^{166}\) His position in academia meant that at some point he would be expected to kowtow to the requirements which the GDR had for its educators. In light of the increasingly restrictive atmosphere, a new life in the West seemed a better alternative. Numerous citizens residing in the GDR during the 1950s opted to leave and so-called Republikflucht [flight from the republic] was very common. It occupied “an uncomfortable space between taboo and open secret”,\(^{167}\) since GDR authorities did not wish to condone it, but also could not prevent its occurrence due to the permeability of the border.

The Berlin crisis of the late 1950s and early 1960s not only emphasised the conflicting views of the GDR and FRG, but also allowed the simmering friction between the USSR and the GDR to come to the fore. Khrushchev’s constant efforts at negotiation with the West concerning the control of the capital city tested the patience of Ulbricht, who professed that Khrushchev should “follow his words with deeds”\(^{168}\) and make the GDR’s separation from the Western zone more permanent. Tides of refugees were continuing to leave for the West, which made it necessary for Ulbricht to re-assert state control. To those in power, the mass-exodus “not only undermined the East German

\(^{165}\) Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 16\(^{th}\) July 2010.
\(^{166}\) Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 16\(^{th}\) July 2010.
economy, but also obviously belied the ruling Socialist Unity Party’s (SED’s) claims to popular approval.”169 The crisis culminated in the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, with the pretence of keeping the “fascists” out, while its real purpose was to keep the GDR’s citizens in. As expressed personally by Ernst M., “Of course they said: ‘We [will] build the Wall because … all these spies and saboteurs enter into East Germany.’ Of course it’s rubbish. They want to keep their people in.”170 The Wall was built virtually overnight, coming as a shock to much of the population. As has been described by authors Jeremy Isaacs, Taylor Downing and Peter Hennessy (2008), “[i]n the early hours of Sunday, 13 August 1961, Berliners were awakened by the clatter and clanking of military vehicles and the noise of barbed-wire coils and concrete posts being unloaded in the streets.”171 The sudden appearance of the fortified border, first with wire and posts and then with bricks and cement, effectively separated families, something experienced first-hand by Frieda K., who had been working in West Berlin with the plan … that my mother comes and joins me after I’ve finished my training and [started] working as a fully-trained sister. Then we could live on my salary together. But that didn’t happen because the Wall came up before that … That was pretty devastating … because the other thing was my mother was supposed to come over to visit me … our matron had actually set aside a room for her, which didn’t become available for a week after the Wall got up. So if it would have been a week earlier, she would have been with me.172

This is indicative of the unexpected nature of the construction of the Wall, corroborated by many interviewees, including those belonging to later generations. Generation B interviewee, Stefanie E., described how the construction of the Wall had sealed the fate of her family. She recounted how her parents were sort of trapped in the country. My Mum was actually from the West and stayed at the time when the Wall was built in East Germany and she fell in love with

170 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 16th July 2010.
with my Dad. She couldn’t go back. She had to make the decision, either to stay or go back, so she stayed. Her parents lived in West Germany.\textsuperscript{173}

This recollection demonstrates how the building of the Wall had a life-changing impact not only upon those who directly experienced it, but also upon those who were born in later years. The solidification of the barrier between East and West separated families and represented a watershed in GDR, and indeed German history. The closing of the border was considered a necessary measure by a soldier of the Stasi guard regiment, who was interviewed by Peter Molloy (2009), and who had marked the border between East and West. He recalled: “I painted that line still firmly convinced that the border would avoid a third world war.”\textsuperscript{174} With this action, the GDR’s existence as a separate state suddenly became permanent, visible and undeniable.

Generation A interviewees witnessed the commencement of a totalitarian regime which sought, from its foundation onwards, to distinguish itself from the West. However, due to the socialist society being in its infancy, the fact that interviewees had memories of both a unified and a divided Germany, and that they had all left before the building of the Wall, the emerging ideology was not able to impress itself so solidly upon their psyche. In spite of their young age during the post-war years, the recollections of WWII were still fresh in the minds of many, and the experience of having already lived through one totalitarian regime prompted some to question the development of another strict regime to replace the old. Ernst M. described his awareness of this: “[I]t more or less turned out that we had just left the brown dictatorship and come into a red dictatorship … [It] was exactly the same with different premises, but in effect it was the same.”\textsuperscript{175} Other interviewees also recounted how they had perceived that the new regime had been attempting to gain control over them. As Bernhard W. described: “We all knew we were [being] brainwashed. We hated it, but we just humoured it. It was absolute rubbish.”\textsuperscript{176} It seemed a common trend among interviewees of this generation that they did not believe what the emerging GDR state was telling them. It may be easy to dismiss this view as simply representative of those who chose to leave; however, Ernst M.’s assertion that “I don’t think anybody believed it. Even the ones who were in

\textsuperscript{173} Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6\textsuperscript{th} June 2012.
\textsuperscript{174} A soldier of the Stasi guard regiment qtd. in Molloy, p. 117.
\textsuperscript{175} Ernst M. in an interview with Monika Durrer 23\textsuperscript{rd} August 2011.
\textsuperscript{176} Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21\textsuperscript{st} August 2010.
the party, they felt a bit embarrassed about this sort of ‘over-doing’,”\textsuperscript{177} illustrates just how widespread disapproval of the political circumstances was. In light on this, it prompts one to question just how the GDR administration was able to maintain control in the years to come when so many allegedly disagreed with what was occurring. One suggestion provided by Bernhard W. in his interview was that people simply thought that it was at least better than what they had experienced previously. To illustrate his point, Bernhard W. described how he had been outspoken in his workplace regarding the maltreatment of the Hungarians by the Russians. As a result of this, he was told to apologize for his statements by Jewish man who had been persecuted during WWII:

He took me outside. He had tears in his eyes. He really cared ... He said ‘Do me a favour, I know how you feel...you can’t blame those people. They’ve invested all this shit in you ... Now, you can’t go and say that you hate this regime. They’re not the brightest, yes they do tell lies, but overall they’re going better than the Nazis did ... I lost my whole family in the concentration camp ... I can’t just now say this whole regime is wrong. It’s not the best, but it’s better than what we had under Hitler.’\textsuperscript{178}

It appeared that many among the population resolved to tolerate the regime, justifying this with the fact that it was the lesser of two evils. In spite of this; however, the GDR administration’s resolve to tighten control over all aspects of society in the years to come, albeit slowly, did wear down the population to the point where “you were constantly on your toes, but by force, not by persuasion or anything.”\textsuperscript{179} Propaganda was widespread and some interviewees alluded to the existence of a nascent private sphere, or \textit{Nischengesellschaft} [niche society], which would become such a prominent feature of later GDR society. Frieda K. illustrated this when she described how her family spoke about events differently at home, influencing her view of what she was being taught at school: “Yes [I was aware of propaganda] because when I came home … that was always the discussion.”\textsuperscript{180} She went on to state how the systems “were both very … totalitarian.”\textsuperscript{181} Having already experienced one prior dictatorship in the form of Nazism, interviewees claimed to recognise the tell-tale signs of an emerging

\textsuperscript{177} Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 15\textsuperscript{th} July 2016.
\textsuperscript{178} Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21\textsuperscript{st} August 2010.
\textsuperscript{179} Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 15\textsuperscript{th} July 2016.
\textsuperscript{180} Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 12\textsuperscript{th} April 2013.
\textsuperscript{181} Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 12\textsuperscript{th} April 2013.
authoritarian regime in the GDR; however, the possibility that this view emerged with the benefit of hindsight is a factor which must also be acknowledged. At the time of their decision to flee the East, generation A interviewees described how they had come to resent the oppressiveness of the leadership and the positive progress which the West had been making in comparison to the East. The GDR’s divergence from the FRG intensified in the following decades, not solely in a political sense, but in many facets of life, including the sense of identity and belonging felt by its people. Frieda K. expressed her interpretation of the GDR regime’s desire to educate its citizens, particularly those of the working classes, “to bring up a whole new generation.”¹⁸² Unlike generation A, all of whom left, future generations would not have the advantage of being able to compare these two systems. As one interviewee explained: “the people who did survive during the War, their own children eventually went to school and were taught different things altogether.”¹⁸³ Generation A interviewees in this study, however, felt increasingly alienated by Soviet tactics and this was cited as a primary motive for leaving before the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. For many, the rift between personal belief and the requirement of public conformity widened, prompting every member of this generation to leave their lives and families behind. As Patrick Major (2010) stated: “Flights occurred when the discrepancy between outward behaviour and underlying attitudes became too great.”¹⁸⁴

Participants’ memories of living in East Germany are permeated by the after-effects of war and a country unjustly divided. In many respects, national identity was in a state of transition at this time. According to one interviewee: “there was … a German identity because this German identity had just lost the War”, but the following years would bear witness to an emerging GDR identity, something which generation A interviewees would no longer personally experience, and which would define the boundary of their grouping as a social generation and unique community of memory. Coming from a country suffering under the repercussions of WWII, the East Germany which this generation would leave behind was very different from that experienced by later generations. Like many migrants of the post-WWII period, their choice to leave the GDR was most often prompted by the oppressive political situation in which they found themselves, as well as the search for a better life in the aftermath of the destruction

¹⁸⁴ Major, p. 82.
inflicted upon much of Germany during the final months of the War. To many, their original “home” had been disturbed and it seemed this perhaps made it easier for people at this time to make the decision to leave. The West seemed to be progressing much faster and many felt that life seemed much better on the other side. Furthermore, the post-war division of the country was considered by this generation to be overwhelmingly unjust as, in their eyes, East and West belonged together. Frieda K. illustrated this in her interview, when asked whether those in the East and West considered themselves to be part of the same nation during the post-war period: “Yes [they did], especially the people who had family and friends on both sides … Their dearest wish was ‘Let us unite, let us be together again.’”\footnote{Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 12\textsuperscript{th} April 2013.} During the post-war period and in the early days of the GDR’s existence, a sense of Germans as one people prevailed, not least due to the fact that “[a]lthough Germany was divided, it was still criss-crossed by family ties.”\footnote{Major, p. 59.} As the GDR grew in strength over the coming decades, this pre-existing connection between East and West would become increasingly complex, and the experiences of the coming generations would be much different from those who chose to leave prior to the regime’s consolidation of power. The eventual construction of the Wall cut this generation off from life in the GDR and served to create a barrier between Easterners and Westerners. Some interviewees of this generation commented that they observed the beginnings of this barrier themselves, when they first moved to the West. As Frieda K. explained: “West Germans … they had a good life and they went about their business and … in many cases … they didn’t think much about the other side.”\footnote{Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 12\textsuperscript{th} April 2013.} Another interviewee described being angry at how little West Germans seemed to care about what had been happening in the East. He recalled: “I was two years in West Germany [after I left the GDR] … I didn’t like it … They [the West Germans] were actually living a normal life … I was so unforgiving.”\footnote{Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21\textsuperscript{st} August 2010.} Those who had fled from the East during the early years recounted how they had perceived themselves to be a burden on West Germany, as many people looked down upon refugees. Klara T. expressed how she had sensed that “[w]hen we came as refugees from East Germany to West Germany, nobody wanted to know us. Nobody wanted to know a refugee.”\footnote{Klara T. in an interview with M. Durrer 16\textsuperscript{th} July 2010.} Interviewees of this generation witnessed the emerging rifts between the lives of those in the East compared to their Western counterparts as the two
societies began to “migrate” in different directions. Generation A escaped to the West in a period when it too was still emerging from the destruction and hardship of WWII and “before the economic miracle of the former West Germany had been fully achieved.”

At this time, the mental adjustment of these refugees did not primarily involve a change in thinking from the communist to the capitalist school of ideology, as the Soviets were only just beginning to assert their control over this area, although they did have to deal with a physical displacement and the restrictive regulations relating to returning to visit family.

In comparison to later generations, the case of generation A was relatively uniform. All left prior to the building of the Berlin Wall, during a time when there was still much uncertainty surrounding the durability of the barrier between East and West. Their choice to leave would forever separate them from those who remained. In this respect, they are united as both a social generation and community of memory by a detachment from ongoing life in the GDR and their choice to leave their past behind. They made a decision to start anew in the West at a time when there was very little possibility of returning to East Germany and seeing relatives again. As described by Major (2010), leaving meant that “[n]ational division was felt very deeply, as the rupture of emotional ties to family, neighbourhood, and Heimat.” This outlook contributed to generation A’s readiness to find a home elsewhere in the world in later years, as it was nigh impossible for them to physically return to the GDR, even if solely for the purpose of visiting relatives. Ernst M. described how “Well that was one of the reasons we came to Australia because it didn’t make a difference whether we lived in West Germany or in Australia or anywhere. We couldn’t go back and our mothers and all the relatives couldn’t visit us so that was it.” Klara T. reinforced this view when she stated: “[W]hen we went [to the West] we saw no possibility of ever seeing each other again.” As such, generation A interviewees were not able to easily maintain ties to those associated with their past. In Klara T.’s instance, the difficulty of living with the separation from family members left behind in the East prompted the eventual decision to migrate overseas: “We just could not stomach that Wall … Dresden wasn’t far and yet it was impossible to get together. So, it seemed easier to be in Australia, so far away

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191 Major, p. 11.
192 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 15th July 2016.
193 Klara T. in an interview with M. Durrer 16th July 2010.
… and not being able to see each other, than being so close.”\textsuperscript{194} Members of this generation also tended to either view Germany as one country, as they had grown up in an undivided nation before there had been a wall separating East and West, to identify as coming from a specific region (such as Saxony), or to recall the former East specifically under Soviet occupation because this was what they had personally experienced. Accounts of the post-war period witnessed by generation A interviewees were a representation of the GDR before its prime, their memories peppered with recollections of what it meant to live in a nation just beginning to define itself.

\textsuperscript{194} Klara T. in an interview with M. Durrer 16\textsuperscript{th} July 2010.
Chapter 2 – Life behind the Iron Curtain: The creation of an East German identity

“If you had felt too free, or had felt yourself to be simply ‘German’, that wouldn’t have shown this socialist society to be any different from the capitalist social order.”

(Renate S.)

While generation A had experienced the GDR in its infancy, the following two generations of interviewees, B and C, did not have any personal recollections of an undivided Germany. Efforts to shape the thinking of GDR citizens grew in strength once the border was sealed. As in the early days of the GDR, the value of upcoming generations was recognised as vital to the creation of a unique sense of GDR identity. Unlike generation A, generation B grew up without an awareness of a unified German nation. Their place in time is critical, as they emerged as the generation most conflicted and varied in nature. They ranged from staunch opponents of the regime to those who were content to tolerate the circumstances in which they found themselves and retreat to the private sphere, also known as the Nischengesellschaft. The lives of generation C also began during this period when the GDR closed itself off from the outside world and their insights provide a perspective on everyday life through the eyes of the child. Unlike the generation before them, they did not grow to adulthood in the GDR and thus did not have to actively decide whether they opposed or supported the status quo. This chapter provides insights from both generation B and C interviewees who lived behind this closed border and allows for an analysis of the evolution of identity during this time and how this was actively encouraged by those in power.

Once the Berlin Wall was built and the Iron Curtain fortified, a reunification of East and West no longer seemed possible and the next three decades witnessed the intensification of the communist regime in the East, as it became more isolated from the West in every way. GDR citizens could no longer flee the country with relative ease, as was evident from the significant decline in escapees after the Wall was built and from the recollections of generation B and C interviewees, some of whom attempted to flee.

According to Carol Mueller (1999), “[t]he annual average out-migrants dropped from 210,000 before the wall was built to 21,000 afterwards, a tenfold decline.”\(^{196}\) The gap between East and West widened in many respects, as Fulbrook (2009) has argued: “From 1961 there were very clearly two Germanies; and, with such different political and economic structures, they increasingly grew apart in their social and cultural patterns also.”\(^ {197}\) To a great extent, each state began to define itself in opposition to the other, which it considered to be following the wrong path. As Julia T. recounted: “Ideologically, a clear image of the enemy was constructed … So, they had already embedded [the image of] “evil” capitalism as the class enemy in our minds.”\(^ {198}\) This greater separation became evident in interviews, where attitudes and opinions often varied along generational lines, according to the amount of time they had spent living in the East and the era during which they had lived there. The perspectives of generation B and C interviewees, who experienced a part of their lives in the GDR between the 1960s and 1980s, whether as adults or as children, contrasted starkly with those of generation A interviewees, who had left prior to the building of the Wall. As generation B interviewee, Ilse F., explained: “It was different for my parents because they had seen something different beforehand, and then the Wall was closed, but for us it was always there and we just … had a normal life.”\(^ {199}\) The isolation of the GDR impacted greatly upon generation B and C interviewees, many of whom spent a number of years of their lives in the GDR and were shaped by both their collective and individual experiences behind the Iron Curtain.

Over the coming decades, the Wall became a permanent feature of the German physical and political landscape. A number of interviewees alluded to this, among them Julia T., who explained the sentiments of East German citizens regarding the eventual collapse of communism. She stated how “of course we would have never thought that that would happen.”\(^ {200}\) Scholars such as Peter Ludz (1970) reinforced this view at the time, doubting that the Wall would fall:

\(^{197}\) Fulbrook, A History of Germany, 1918-2008, p. 166.
\(^{198}\) Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\(^{nd}\) April 2013. Original quote in German: “Es wurde natürlich ideologisch ein klares Feindbild aufgebaut … Also, man hat sich den bösen Kapitalismus als … Klassenfeind in unseren Köpfen schon erzogen.”
\(^{199}\) Ilse F. in an interview with M. Durrer 18\(^{th}\) August 2010.
\(^{200}\) Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\(^{nd}\) April 2013. Original quote in German: “[W]ir hätten natürlich nie gedacht, dass das passiert.”
Realistically speaking, there would seem to be little prospect for such a fundamental political change in the ruling structures of the GDR as presently constituted. The SED leadership exercises such tight control over GDR society that such a thorough-going political transformation of the system seems out of the question, for the present at least.\textsuperscript{201}

To those within the GDR, as well as much of the international community, there was no sign of the socialist system weakening during this period.

2.1 Manufacturing an East German identity

GDR national identity was largely manufactured by the regime’s elite, as “the ruling party, the SED, embarked upon the artificial creation of a new state consciousness for the citizens of the GDR.”\textsuperscript{202} Due to the fact that the GDR was a very new country with undeniable ties to the “other” Germany, the state had to consider carefully how it would foster a unique sense of national pride and Heimat among citizens. For both generations B and C, the attempts at building a GDR Heimat would permeate their sense of identity into the future.

According to Elizabeth Boa and Rachel Palfreyman (2000), “[t]he core meaning of the word ‘Heimat’, its denotation, is ‘home’ in the sense of a place rather than a dwelling […] It bears many connotations, drawing together associations which no single English word could convey.”\textsuperscript{203} In the eyes of the East German leadership, the GDR was to eventually contribute to the construction of the wider socialist Heimat which was not specifically nation-based, but rather class-based. However, the fact that the GDR had once been a part of the wider German Heimat remained, and this was an issue which had to be combated in some way. The East German state attempted to overcome this quandary by emphasising its superiority over the FRG. Rather than ignoring the FRG altogether, the East German leadership foregrounded how the GDR was the legitimate German state and was not, unlike the West, “being destroyed by American culture and

\textsuperscript{201} Peter Christian Ludz, \textit{The German Democratic Republic from the Sixties to the Seventies: A Socio-Political Analysis} (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1970) pp. 52-53.
Allied militarism.”

One means by which they sought to communicate this message was through the East German media. Nicole P. recalled the programme Der schwarze Kanal [The Black Channel] which depicted West Germany in a negative light, for example by “showing pictures that the people are homeless, that they have nothing to eat.” By this means, the GDR administration propagated the view that they would act as a reference-culture for the FRG, which might one day embrace the wider socialist Heimat. This meant that they could avoid specifically addressing the issue of German division. The state wished to emphasise that “Heimat in the GDR was inherently about change, and not, as allegedly in the FRG, about clinging to the past.” They preferred to look forward to a new socialist Heimat, rather than dwell on past Blut und Boden [blood and soil] interpretations of the term. Former Minister for Education (and wife of long-time General Secretary of the SED, Erich Honecker), Margot Honecker, asserted in an interview published in 2012 that “[i]n our self-understanding at that time, the GDR was not simply the other German state, but rather the core of a socialist Germany of the future.” Interviewees often recalled the negative portrayal of the FRG, particularly in their lessons at school. Some interviewees, particularly those who were younger, believed what they were being told, although some others soon began to question the presentation of the FRG as the inferior Germany. Nicole P. described her personal memories of this during her school days and her growth in awareness and criticism of the regime:

Well in school … we had all these … subjects … [S]ome of them were quite political … So I remember I had, especially when I was older, I had huge arguments with my teachers about it because lots of things we just didn’t believe anymore … [T]he Russians and the GDR people, everybody was like heroes, and the rest of the world were all bad and horrible and poor, so it was really weird.

205 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
208 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 8th July 2016.
While it had been challenging to encourage the establishment of a particular East German sense of identity and belonging linked to socialism during the tumultuous 1950s, the 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of a conscious effort on the part of the state to promote the ideals of socialist Heimat which were distinct from the FRG. Renate S. provided an interpretation of the creation of this difference between East and West Germany: “If you had felt too free, or had felt yourself to be simply ‘German’, that wouldn’t have shown this socialist society to be any different from the capitalist social order.”

There was much emphasis placed upon distancing the GDR from the FRG in order to cement its own brand of Heimat and its associated identifications among its citizens. With the closing of the border between East and West in 1961, the divergence of Eastern and Western thinking intensified and the GDR’s understanding of what constituted Heimat became more distinct. There was, however, still one significant issue which had to be addressed: the GDR as a nation had no history and “could not lay claim to an ethnic sense of nationhood.” In order to combat this lack, the state determined that it was necessary to provide the population with a means of identification.

One of the means by which the GDR sought to propagate a sense of pride in the GDR, was through the use of people’s local sense of identity and Heimat to eventually create a feeling of belonging to a wider homeland. As Jan Palmowski (2009) explains: “[b]y the late 1960s party leaders recognized that by linking socialism and the GDR to heimat, the utopia of socialism could be endowed with historical roots.” By this method, the regime’s elite drew on GDR citizens’ attachment and loyalty to their region or local area with the aim of eventually encouraging them to feel a sense of belonging to the GDR as the socialist Fatherland. This was demonstrated among generation B and C interviewees, many of whom had also associated their Heimat with local areas, as numerous folk festivals and traditions were preserved. Sabine H. fondly remembered

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209 Palmowski, Inventing a Socialist Nation, p. 147.
212 Palmowski, Inventing a Socialist Nation, p. 3.
213 Palmowski, Inventing a Socialist Nation, p. 19.
214 Jan Palmowski explains that “[i]n the formative years of the GDR’s creation, even while at a central level the state asserted its political and economic control, identifications with regional and local cultures thrrove, as they were expressed through folk music, amateur theatre, folklore groups, traditional crafts, hobby enthusiasts, local festivals in towns and villages, and Heimat museums”. Palmowski, “Building an East German Nation,” Central European History, p. 368.
participating in a large number of activities during her childhood in the GDR. One local festival which was celebrated in her hometown was called the “Brunnenfest”, which involved townspeople coming together to celebrate the town’s water sources. Although many of these kinds of festivals were local in nature, they did have the effect of uniting people and creating a sense of collective purpose, and over time many local celebrations acquired an increasingly socialist flavour, in line with the administration’s intentions of discouraging too much exclusively-regional identification. Moreover, by order of the authorities, “[t]he five Länder [regions] from which the GDR was constituted were abolished by the ruling communist SED within less than three years of the state’s foundation.” The purpose of this measure was to gradually encourage a GDR-wide identification.

Over time, many came to identify more with the “social, economic and political developments in the GDR”, as these were based on national achievements and experiences which united them. “[A] sense of ‘GDR identity’ did indeed develop as a substitute for a regional sense of belonging. An affinity with the GDR was advocated to such an extent that Fulbrook (2002) argues that:

the main legacy of the SED to the history of German regionalism to date is to have created a new ‘ex-GDR’ wide regional identity, arguably overriding, or coexisting with, previously existing conceptions of regionalism in this geographical area: that of the Ossis [East Germans].

Fulbrook’s analysis is supported by some interviewees, who explained how there was a concerted attempt to erase class divisions and differences between regions. As Britta F. recalled: “There weren’t as many regional differences as in West Germany at all … Of course, it was not as pronounced in this sense. Rather, the whole aim had been to make everything equal.” Julia T. also reflected upon the fact that regionalism had

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220 Britta F. in an interview with M Durrer 30th August 2010. Original quote in German: “Da gab’s ja gar nicht so viele regionale Unterschiede wie in Westdeutschland … Das war ja in dem Sinne nicht so ausgeprägt, sondern es wurde ja alles vom Ziel aus gleich gemacht.”
dissipated: “Regional identity in the GDR did disappear somehow through this being ‘walled-in’.” However, although the state had been largely successful in creating a more homogeneous society throughout the GDR, some interviewees still perceived the persistence of regional variations, particularly between larger centres and smaller towns. As Natalie F. explained: “[W]here there were rivalries during GDR-times, was between Berlin and everything else surrounding it.” This was due to the fact that, as Thomas E. continued, Berlin “got everything.” As the capital of the GDR, Berlin had a special status and was frequently the envy of the surrounding cities and towns, as further illustrated by Renate S.: “Berlin was always well-prepared … We went up with the train at least once a year to go shopping … [There were] things you would never see down where we were … Yes, there was a difference.” Activities which traditionally encouraged group-involvement were utilised by the socialists to “foster (and police) a sense of collective identity” among GDR citizens, as well as a sense of common purpose and status. Britta F. supported this statement when speaking about the youth organisations of which she had been a member: “Whether I had lived in Berlin or in Saxony, I would have had to put on my Pioneer-outfit and be in the FDJ in any case.” Joyce Marie Mushaben (1993) provides a detailed explanation of how identification with the GDR was encouraged in society:

The instrumentalization of Heimat as a stepping stone to a larger collective identity was far from coincidental, both with regard to youth consciousness and in relation to general public interest. One must bear in mind the extent to which the post-war cohorts – especially those under the age of 40 [in 1993] – in both German states may, on the one hand, possess an insufficient grasp of what it

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means to be a nation in the conventional sense. “Blessed by late birth” and having been spared the nation’s historically militant manifestations, they may fail to develop an active interest in the topic.\textsuperscript{227}

In order to achieve a sense of collective identity and \textit{Heimat}, the state began to “reach deep into the community and the workplace, and affect even the most mundane aspects of everyday life.”\textsuperscript{228} A number of interviewees provided examples of this, referring to the many organised events which had been on offer and, in many cases, had aided in building a feeling of community (or \textit{Gemeinschaft}), and thus a sense of belonging to a homogeneous group. Julia T. described: “I mean communism … it’s got the word ‘commune’ in it.”\textsuperscript{229} She further made the observation that during communist times “[y]ou also met up and celebrated with each other a lot. Well, I think that that was more intense than … later in reunified Germany.”\textsuperscript{230} In an interview with Angela H.’s family in Germany, her father described how “there were collectives in the factories, brigades and such, and they held together.”\textsuperscript{231} The prevalence of such community spirit was a topic discussed extensively by many interviewees, particularly those belonging to generation B, who had spent a large portion of their lives in the GDR. Although they had valued this attachment on a personal level, they also commented on the fact that a close connection to others in the community was frequently a result of the necessity for networks in a climate of scarcity. Marta G. expressed this in her interview: “In GDR-times you were dependent [on others]. If you wanted something, … you had to know someone.”\textsuperscript{232} Another interviewee, Astrid N., described the sense of kinship in her hometown: “We were one large family … Everyone helped everyone else when it was necessary.”\textsuperscript{233} Moreover, this \textit{Gemeinschaftsgefühl} [sense of community] reinforced the

\begin{footnotes}
\item Palmowski, \textit{Inventing a Socialist Nation}, p. 11.
\item Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\textsuperscript{nd} April 2013. Original quote in German: “Ich meine Kommunismus … da steckt ja das Wort ‘Kommune’ drin.”
\item Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\textsuperscript{nd} April 2013. Original quote in German: “[m]an hat sich auch viel getroffen, viel zusammen gefeiert. Also, ich glaube, das war … intensiver als … später im vereinten Deutschland.”
\item Interview with Angela H.’s family in Germany 27\textsuperscript{th} June 2012. Angela’s father is quoted here. Original quote in German: “in den Betrieben waren Kollektive, Brigaden und so, und die haben zusammengehalten.”
\item Marta G. in an interview with M. Durrer 13\textsuperscript{th} February 2011. Original quote in German: “Zu DDR-Zeiten war man [auf andere] angewiesen. Wenn man irgendwas haben wollte, … da musste man jemanden kennen.”
\item Astrid N. in an interview with M. Durrer 1\textsuperscript{st} September 2010. Original quote in German: “Wir waren eine große Familie … Jeder half dem anderen, wenn es nötig war.”
\end{footnotes}
aims of those in power, who utilised citizens’ attachments to create a sense of identification with the wider socialist homeland.

*Heimat* became a key theme in many cultural practices and came to play a significant role in daily events. Within the media industry, television shows relating to the *Heimat* theme, and particularly to the representation of the GDR as the utopian socialist homeland, were strongly supported by the administration.\(^{234}\) Furthermore, with Erich Honecker’s rise to power in 1971, came a “boom in Heimat practices.”\(^{235}\) In his role as General Secretary of the SED, he attempted to explicitly address the problem of German division and the associated ambiguity of identity in December 1974, with the solution that citizens of the GDR should identify themselves as East German in terms of citizenship, but German in terms of nationality.\(^{236}\) This acknowledged the existence of a unified German heritage, but also emphasised its current division. It was perhaps an attempt to gradually shift people’s identification from “German” to “GDR-citizen”, particularly as the state seemed intent on “replacing the adjective deutsch with the label DDR-national (or ‘of the GDR’) in the names of various official organizations and publications”.\(^{237}\) Wittlinger (2010) draws attention to some of the changes which occurred: “[T]he ‘Germany Channel’ (Deutschlandsender) became the ‘voice of the GDR’ and the ‘German Academy of Sciences’ became ‘Academy of Sciences of the GDR’.”\(^{238}\) According to Joanna McKay (2002), this occurred “in an attempt to demonstrate that the GDR was a complete and legitimate entity in its own right and not linked to the Federal Republic in any way.”\(^{239}\) However, according to interviewees, this did not happen in every instance, as observed by Renate S., who worked for the GDR’s railway: “We still had the Deutsche Post [postal service] … The Deutsche Reichsbahn [train service] did not change either.”\(^{240}\) This perhaps pointed back to the citizenship-nationality debate addressed by Honecker, where rather than fighting all allusions to a

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\(^{234}\) Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, p. 113.


\(^{237}\) However, this was inconsistent e.g. names such as *Neues Deutschland* (the name of the SED’s official newspaper) remained. Mushaben, p. 11.

\(^{238}\) Wittlinger, p. 49.

\(^{239}\) McKay, p. 21.

\(^{240}\) Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23\(^{rd}\) April 2013. Original quote in German: “Wir hatten immer noch die Deutsche Post … [und] die Deutsche Reichsbahn hat sich auch nicht geändert.”
German past, authorities made the distinction between the emerging sense of national belonging of their people and their ethnic background. The GDR’s desire to carve out an identity for itself was riddled with challenges and “attitudes towards the national question appeared to be largely dictated by contemporary satisfaction or dissatisfaction” on the part of its citizens. The administration walked a thin tightrope between encouraging new modes of identification and alluding to citizens’ ethnic background. As explained by McKay (2002) “the state was no longer portrayed as a complete break with the past, but as the climax of German history.” By and large, however, the GDR sought to foster a unique identity among its citizens. Most frequently, this was encouraged through an emphasis on areas which would reach much of the population, such as education, sport and the arts.

2.2 The role of education, sport and the arts

The GDR administration sought to merge its ideal “public identity” with the “private identity” of its citizens, to varying degrees of success. One way in which this was attempted was through the education system. Reforms in education had been taking place since the SOZ had first been established; however, they did not become institutionalised until the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. This action, as Dorothee Wierling (2006) described, “removed the circumstances from the GDR which could keep children from becoming socialist personalities” and led to “a cautious shift in the politics of education and the attitudes towards youth”. There was an initial retreat from the old hard-line Nazi-era pedagogical approach and the adoption of a “more integrative, liberal discourse”, although this proved to be quite short-lived, as the GDR state realised that it could only maintain power by implementing a more controlled system with a prescribed political agenda. The 1965 Law on the Unified Socialist Education System afforded a more centralised, politically-monitored education system, headed by Minister for Education, Margot Honecker, which “related both to the ‘needs of society’ and to the individual’s political conformity.”

241 Wittlinger, p. 54.
242 McKay, p. 22.
244 Wierling, p. 319.
245 Wierling, p. 319.
246 Wierling, p. 319.
education system was alluded to by generation B interviewee Martina E., who stated that “[w]hen I went to school, it was a lot less about this political drill, which came later when my children went to school … There, there was a lot of value put on all manner of extra-curricular activities, that the children learn to think along the correct lines.”

Young people during the 1960s and early 1970s were extremely important to the success of communism in the GDR, as they represented a new generation which had not been directly associated with the Nazi past. The popular slogan “Wer die Jugend hat, hat die Zukunft” [ Whoever has the youth, has the future] highlighted the vital role of education in ensuring that the younger generations would evolve into ideal socialist personalities. The emphasis on educating those who grew up in the GDR to conform to the ideals of their society meant that significant differences developed between interviewees who had left the country before 1961 and those who remained in the country after the border was officially sealed. In this way, generations B and C share a bond which generation A does not, and

[t]here was a clear generational shift between those who had memories of life before the GDR, and those born into the East German state who tended to take the organizational and institutional landscape more for granted, however critical, distanced or disaffected they might be.

Nevertheless, both generations still have strongly generationally-defined experiences within this due to the varying level of exposure to the GDR regime in all of its complexity.

In order to instil pride in the GDR, the school system encouraged a focus on socialism’s benefits and achievements, and the validation of the GDR as the legitimate German state. This message was communicated through subjects such as Staatsbürkerkunde [civic education] and Heimatkunde [homeland studies], which glorified the socialist

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248 Martina E. in an interview with M. Durrer 12th August 2010. Original quote in German: “[E]s war, als ich zur Schule ging, sehr viel weniger dieser politische Drill, der später kam, als meine Kinder zur Schule gingen … Da wurde sehr viel Wert auf alle möglichen Aktivitäten außerhalb des eigentlichen Unterrichts gelegt, dass die Kinder in die richtige Richtung denken lernen.”

249 Fulbrook, The People’s State, p. 120.


system and emphasised negative aspects of the Western world. Generation C interviewee Britta F., who was a child in the 1970s, described her experience with one of these subjects at school: “[W]e also had a subject in which we were basically taught about Marxism, and some brainwashing, or a lot of brainwashing, went on there.”

Although Heimatkunde had already been introduced into the school curriculum as early as 1955, the 1960s and 70s would witness a persistent push for the superiority of socialism and an identification with the GDR nation in all aspects of life. Ilse F. recalled how she had viewed the West when she was a child: “[I thought that] the workers were exploited and they might not have [been] given enough wages, and [there was] the discrepancy between rich and poor … I didn’t think bad about the people, [but] rather the economical structure.”

Over time, and with the progression of generations, East Germans and West Germans grew further and further apart. In particular those who did not have relatives in the West, or who lived in the Tal der Ahnungslosen [valley of the clueless] near Dresden and did not have access to West German media, began to view the FRG as foreign. As Nicole P. reflected,

> [W]hen I was a child, I could never really make out what it means [to be West German]. The only time we would hear about them was when schoolmates received a Westpäckchen [parcel from West Germany], for example … I didn’t really know what it all meant, so it was really kind of like aliens for us.

In East German schools in particular, the concept of the GDR as a separate country striving towards a wider socialist future was encouraged. In the subject of Heimatkunde “it became necessary to define how Heimat related to socialist ideology as such, and to spell out how it helped define the GDR in the context of a divided Germany.”

Pride in the GDR was fostered through the glorification of prominent figures or “socialist heroes” who represented the ideals of socialism. Among these were Stalin (notably before the De-Stalinisation programme), Lenin, Ernst Thälmann, Walter Ulbricht, and even (to a more limited extent), Erich Honecker. In an interview with Angela H.’s

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253 Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, p. 68.


255 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.

256 Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, p. 68.

family, her sister described this tendency: “Yes, where we were, a lot was named after these … communist greats, like Karl Marx, Ernst Thälmann, Lenin.” It was through veneration of these figures that the state sought to “inculcate love of the Fatherland – and the national fathers.” Sofia W. experienced this personally during her childhood when she visited a monument commemorating one of these heroes, whom she thought had perhaps been Stalin. She recounted that

I remember we were going on an excursion and I was picking little flowers. We were going to a monument … I thought, ‘Oh, I might pick some of these daisies’ and I did and when we arrived at the monument, the teacher made me put down the bunch of flowers [in front of the monument] … and I didn’t want to put them down … I remember it was a big deal … obviously it was very important for her for me to put the daisies down.

Young East Germans were encouraged to become part of the wider socialist community through their involvement in selected youth organisations. Although membership was not compulsory, those who did not join were often shunned by their classmates and teachers. Sofia W., whose parents had forbidden her from joining any of these youth groups due to their political convictions, recalled how

I was ostracised … I never got a turn at doing anything special in the Appell … the assemblies. I wasn’t allowed to hold the flag or I wasn’t allowed to do anything and … even though the teacher knew that I wasn’t part of this, she would … tell me off for not having the handkerchief around my neck … I was six or seven years old … [A]t that age, all you want is to belong … I would be in tears.

As a result of the substantial pressure to take part in these organisations, membership numbers were high and this led to a further widening of political influence among the young. Children would begin by joining the Jungpioniere [Young Pioneers] when they

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258 Interview with Angela H.’s family in Germany 27th June 2012. Angela H.’s sister is quoted here. Original quote in German: “Ja bei uns hieß halt viel wie … diese kommunistische Größen, wie Karl Marx, Ernst Thälmann, Lenin.”
were eight years old, where they would remain until they turned 14. After this, they would join the Thälmann Pioniere [Thälmann Pioneers] for two years, before becoming members of the Freie Deutsche Jugend, or FDJ [Free German Youth]. Although these organisations were often perceived as fun and entertaining by many participants, political propaganda still played a significant role in their pursuits. Some of the activities of the FDJ, for example, involved “learning how to parachute jump and how to construct bunkers,”262 and the Jungpioniere often sang songs such as the well-known Unsere Heimat [Our Heimat], which emphasised the importance of the natural and man-made environment in creating a socialist homeland “belong[ing] to the people.”263

Martina E. explained the growing influence of the state once she joined the FDJ:

> A lot was done there because they were supposed to become the country’s elite. They placed a lot of emphasis on doing some stupid seminars where they would speak about theoretical things such as Marxism-Leninism and who knows what. They also did some pre-military things.264

Sabine H., who was of primary-school age during the 1980s, recalled more fondly some of the activities in which she had participated while flicking through an old scrapbook from her school days during her interview. She listed some of the pursuits which she and others had recorded in this book: “Scrap fabric collection, sports festival, pioneer afternoon, the NVA [National People’s Army], students’ concert, learning conference, young talent quest, the 100th birthday of Ernst Thälmann …”.265 Being of a relatively young age at the time, she, like many other generation C interviewees, had been largely unaware of the ideological and political undertones of these activities. Peter S., who had also been just a child, reflected as an adult upon the nature of the organisation of which he had been a part:

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263 Palmowski, Inventing a Socialist Nation, p. 186.
264 Martina E. in an interview with M. Durrer 12th August 2010. Original quote in German: “Da wurde dann sehr, sehr viel gemacht, weil ja eigentlich das die Elite des Landes werden sollte … Da wurde sehr darauf geachtet, dass irgendwelche blöden Seminare gemacht wurden, wo über theoretische Dinge, von Marxismus-Leninismus und was weiß ich, geredet wurde. Da wurden dann auch solche vormilitärischen Dinge gemacht.”
[The early years of school] was a time where they started already [with] the, I don’t want to say ‘military education’, but you can see it as a military education because this was wearing uniforms, this was coming into the yard and getting set up, standing still, waiting for … your principal who had to say something, greeting them with a special greeting … and so this was very military already … and it became more and more [so] from the Young Pioneers to the Thälmann Pioneers.266

Related to participation in these youth organisations, was the socialist confirmation ceremony called the Jugendweihe. Sabine H. remembered participating in this and described:

In Year 8 we had our Jugendweihe. That was a celebration where we would officially be considered adults. You had to swear on a socialist book, like [you would] on your honour, and say that you would defend the GDR and such things … In preparation [for this] you had these ‘youth sessions’, so that they could make a decent GDR citizen out of you.267

Each year it was estimated that 98% of East German students took part in this ceremony, which validated them as worthy socialists of the GDR.268 Even though it too was not compulsory, participation in it could be highly beneficial, as Martina E. detailed:

[I]n Year 8 … my parents were explicitly told that I would not be able to sit my leaving exams if I did not take part in the Jugendweihe … So I did my Jugendweihe in order to be able to sit my leaving exam … and with that, all of my problems disappeared … My parents said: ‘We don’t want to put any

266 Peter S. in an interview with M. Durrer 24th March 2013.
obstacles in your way with your education’ because education is the best thing that you can give to your kids, right?\textsuperscript{269}

The structure of the education system was such that it favoured those who conformed to the socialist path. All students in the GDR attended the \textit{Polytechnische Oberschule}, or POS [Polytechnic Secondary School], where they received a broad education. In their last two years at the POS, students were then divided into vocational and academic streams. The basis for this division did not solely depend on a student’s individual academic merit, but was also strongly swayed by their own or their parents’ conformity (or otherwise) to the official party line.\textsuperscript{270} This is discussed in an article by Jochen-Martin Gutsch (2009), who recounts his own experience of being selected to attend higher education, stating that “[i]t was not easy to do your leaving exam in the GDR. Access was limited. We had good grades and had been classed as politically convinced or inoffensive.”\textsuperscript{271} In addition, often those whose parents belonged to the peasantry or working-class were more likely to gain access to higher education, as the authorities feared that those with parents already working within more academic fields could be adversely influenced by their opinions. Angela H. was personally impacted by this ruling, which prevented her from becoming an early childhood educator. She was unable to do this

not because of my marks so much … it was mainly because my Mum, my Dad and my sister were already in the education system … and they didn’t allow that because we would be taking over because we would be in a position … where we could put our own thoughts and feelings into a young person.\textsuperscript{272}


\textsuperscript{270} Fulbrook, \textit{The People’s State}, p. 121.


\textsuperscript{272} Angela H. in an interview with M. Durrer 4\textsuperscript{th} April 2012.
For those who were fortunate enough to obtain their desired place at university, there was a heavy emphasis laid upon political studies and conviction, in order to encourage graduates who would form a party-loyal elite. According to Kurt S., “there were two days set aside where the professors had to point out … the political importance of the study, that you should do well to support the country in an effort to … outdo the other [Western] system.”

As John Rodden (2010) explains, regardless of the nature of their degree, students had to complete compulsory units “in GDR state communism and Soviet studies,” a requirement that was recognised as “[e]xtremely frustrating for almost every East German student.” Thus, there was more involved in the selection of suitable university candidates than their academic performance. Students had to be deemed politically reliable, as Kurt S. reflected further when speaking about his experience as a postgraduate student:

So when you were high up enough and you came in that situation [where your political views were checked] then I guess you were exposed to secret agents and so, or official agent[s] … party officials … who would sort of test your … political strengths or loyalty … to the country before they actually would allow you to … go to a conference or something like that.

Alexander S. described the experience of his father, who worked in academia and the constant exposure he had to the Stasi: “In our personal case it [the Stasi] had a very big influence … and that may be due to the fact that we were from Berlin and that my father, as an academic, was forced to have a lot of contact with government bodies throughout his education.” For those who sought to enrol in higher education, there were other means through which they were able to guarantee themselves a university placement, such as involvement in the army. Kurt S. was aware of the advantage which could be gained by doing this, although he did not personally pursue this path. He described how “there were some absurdities, I might call them, that you could enhance your chances of getting into a particular course in a particular place by … saying ‘OK,

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277 Alexander S. in an interview with M. Durrer 27th August 2010. Original quote in German: “Für unseren persönlichen Fall hat’s einen sehr großen Einfluss gehabt … und das mag daran liegen, dass wir Berliner waren und mein Vater, als Akademiker, zwangsläufig im Zuge seiner Ausbildung viel Kontakt hatte mit den Staatsorganen.”
I’m happy to serve three years in the army.””278 Another interviewee, Thomas E., did decide to volunteer for three years’ service in a particular branch of the military, not only because it would enable him to gain access to further education, but also because it would enable him to bypass further military service in the future and guarantee him a post in Berlin, rather than elsewhere in the GDR, where he did not wish to go. He recounted that

at some point I had decided that I wanted to study … It was like this: I had heard of cases where some people had been called up [to the National People’s Army] at 26 years of age, when most people had children already … and I did not want that, and the only possibility to get around that was if you served for three years [in the Felix Dzerzhinsky Guards Regiment] … It was pretty much compulsory to serve three years [there] to be able to study.279

To the state, political loyalty was a priority, as those who would attend university and become the new elite had to be deemed reliable in their views. The system was significantly tainted by political propaganda, as Sofia W. described:

In Kindergarten we had to do colouring ins and I remember distinctly having to draw a Pioneer, or an ‘FDJler’ [member of the FDJ] or something … [T]he activities we did, they were all regime-friendly … all activities were geared towards instilling into these young children, that they draw the right thing and they do the right thing.280

However, in spite of this fact, interviewees expressed the sentiment that the concept of socialist education in general had not been a wholly negative one. According to one participant: “Our education in the GDR was better than the Western education. [Our] general knowledge was better”,281 and another interviewee insisted that her schooling in

280 Sofia W. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd March 2013.
281 Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd April 2013. Original quote in German: “[U]nsere Bildung in der DDR war besser wie die Westbildung. Das Allgemeinwissen war besser.”
the GDR had served her well throughout her life, believing that “[t]his education and training which we experienced in the GDR … was very good, and this is something from which I still benefit now.”

The GDR administration did its utmost to discourage any deviation from the official party line and sought to stamp out the possibility of individualism; however, even in the classroom, this was not always achievable, as some people rebelled by their own means. Renate S. described an experience which she had had while in primary school:

We had a club which was called ‘German-Soviet Friendship’ … I was the only one who never joined and my teacher at the time could not believe it. He said: ‘[Renate], why not?’ I said: ‘Why should I be in favour of friendship? … I don’t tell my other friends that they have to be my friends’ … and then I refused [to participate].

Outward pressure to conform was intensified by the ubiquitous presence of the Stasi, which infiltrated many areas of education, and in an effort to stamp out opposition and independent thought, GDR authorities “blur[red] the line between education and propaganda”. As Margot Honecker explained in a 2012 interview relating to the role of parents and teachers in education:

[I]t was (and is) ideal if the personal beliefs of parents agree or correspond with the requirements of society, and in no way conflict with this. This [would be] a life in ‘two worlds’ and creates hypocrites and, in the worst case, enemies – either enemies of the family or of society.

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285 Translation by M. Durrer of original German quote: “Ideal war (und ist) es, wenn die persönlichen Vorstellungen der Eltern mit den gesellschaftlichen Ansprüchen und Interessen übereinstimmen oder miteinander korrespondieren, aber keinesfalls konträr sind … Das ist ein Leben in zwei Welten und bringt Heuchler und schlimmstenfalls Feinde hervor – entweder Gegner in Bezug auf die Familie oder in Bezug auf die Gesellschaft.” Honecker, p. 82.
In spite of the overarching control by authorities, many generation B interviewees, in particular, professed that it was possible to live a relatively normal life if you did not deviate significantly from predetermined norms. Participants’ stories are peppered with accounts of small rebellions against the status quo, perhaps also due to the necessity to paint a picture of resistance in a world which now characterises the GDR regime as inherently flawed. Nevertheless, interviewees’ small displays of resistance demonstrated that monitoring and punishment of every tiny act of defiance was not always possible. Thus, most interviewees remained within the realm of what could be tolerated by those in power.

Another related method which the GDR administration employed to reach ordinary GDR citizens and bridge the gap which existed between the state and its people, was through its emphasis on sport. In the 1960s and 70s, sport became “centrally organised” and was increasingly “identified with the state”. Thomas E. explained the vital role which sport played in creating an identification with the GDR, claiming that “I think, at some point, when it came to a game of football between the GDR and West Germany … then I bet that … most people would have been for the GDR. I believe that there was an identity.” The major sporting organisation *Deutscher Turn- und Sportbund* [German Association for Gymnastics and Sport] had been founded as early as 1957, and “sports days, festivals and contests at all levels” were encouraged across the whole community. Many workplaces introduced sporting teams, which further contributed to a sense of community or *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* and fostered the GDR regime’s attempt at “nation-building”. Sport had the capacity to reach many levels of society, and James Riordan (2007) explains how:

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290 Wilton, p. 102.

[S]port, with its broad relevance to education, health, culture and politics, and its capacity to mobilise people … may uniquely serve the purpose of nation-building and help foster national integration. It extends to and unites wider sections of the population than probably any other social activity.  

According to Dan Wilton (2009), the late 1960s and 70s in particular signalled an increase in “common interests between the ‘regime’ and the ‘people’”. The GDR became more stable and gained recognition on an international level. In 1968 the country was even able to enter its own team in the Mexico City Olympic Games, a ruling which in many respects contributed to the permanency of its separation from the FRG. By the Munich Olympics in 1972, the sovereignty of the GDR was further recognised, when its team competed under its own distinct flag and with its own anthem. Peter S. recalled how the GDR’s achievement in sport was so widely publicised, that pretty much every man and woman in the GDR knew which rank we took … on the list of medals in the Olympic Games … this was brought up very very much: ‘We are this little country and we … [will] leave [West] Germany behind us! We will leave the United States behind us!’

Renate S. recounted how consequently, athletes were glorified in the GDR: “They were also celebrated … I don’t know if you know the ice skater Katarina Witt? … She came from our area … and she was Olympic champion in everything … She was celebrated as the GDR’s prettiest face.” However, the GDR’s desperation to prove its validity as a country and gain international recognition through sport came at a price. Promising young athletes, often spotted through their involvement in the FDJ or through their success at national-level sporting competitions such as the Spartakiaden, were specially

292 Riordan, “The Impact of Communism on Sport,” Historical Social Research, p. 111.
293 Wilton, p. 105.
294 Childs, “The German Democratic Republic,” Sport under Communism, p. 82.
295 Childs, “The German Democratic Republic,” Sport under Communism, p. 82.
296 Peter S. in an interview with M. Durrer 24th March 2013.
selected to attend elite sports’ schools.298 Here they not only underwent rigorous training, but were often subjected, from a very young age, to performance-enhancing drugs in order to further improve their results, a fact which was only confirmed after reunification.299 Doping frequently occurred without athletes’ knowledge, as authorities and trainers would disguise these drugs as “vitamins”. It was estimated that, “[o]ver a 20-year period up to the fall of the Wall in 1989 more than 10,000 East German athletes were doped”,300 resulting in some devastating physical and mental consequences.

Female athletes, some of whom had been doped since the age of 12,301 began to exhibit masculine characteristics, a detail which did not escape the notice of the international media. The GDR women’s swimming team was suspected of using anabolic steroids at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal,302 although all drug tests at the time were negative. One interviewee, Elena T., who had been involved in competitive swimming in the GDR, recounted her personal experiences with doping:

I can still remember, when I used to do competitive swimming, we were given certain shakes, certain energy-drinks from a certain age … I think there were particular vitamins in these drinks … which we did not know about, but which were given to us to drink, but I did not realise this at all at the time.303

Due to Elena T.’s age at the time, she did not truly understand the link between sport and the state. For her, swimming was, as she explained, “actually always a pastime, ultimately a sport which I enjoyed and which I pursued”,304 rather than an activity in which she participated out of patriotism. Nicole P., too, described her experience as an elite ice-skater. As a child, she was initially “quite proud of it, to be participating in the

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298 By the end of the 1980s “the GDR boasted a total of 25 special schools for sport, which encompassed 989 classes, with an average of 10.2 pupils per class and a total student population of 10,053.” Fulbrook, The People’s State, pp. 79-80.
299 McKay, p. 18.
300 Molloy, p. 141.
303 Elena T. in an interview with M. Durrer 28th March 2013. Original quote in German: “Ich kann mich noch daran erinnern, als ich Leistungsschwimmen gemacht habe, ab einem bestimmten Alter haben wir bestimmte Shakes bekommen, also bestimmte Energiedrinks … Ich glaube, in den Getränken waren gewisse Vitamine, … was wir nicht wussten, sondern uns wurde das gegeben zum Trinken, aber das habe ich damals gar nicht realisiert sozusagen.”
country’s competitions and things,” although this pride eventually dissipated as she grew older and she began to question the regime. She recalled her exposure to drugs, explaining that “[i]n my sport they gave us injections and tablets … They gave you drugs so you didn’t get your menstruation.”

Being older than Elena T., Nicole P.‘s exposure to these substances covered a greater period of her life and so had a lasting impact upon her. Aside from her experiences with drugs, her heavy involvement in sport had exacerbated problems with her bone structure which she had had as a child. She explained that

I shouldn’t have done sport because of my hips. They still recruited me and my parents agreed for some reason. I suppose they all thought ‘then we can be proud of her’ or something … work for the socialism, work for the GDR, being heroes … Then when I was 14, I had my first accident with my knee because my body was already starting to be worn down … I officially stopped when I was 18 because I ended up in hospital having my first knee operation, and then from there it went just downhill.

In addition to being exposed to practices which were physically damaging, elite athletes were under the watchful eye of the Stasi much of the time. According to Jutta Braun (2007), “[t]he Ministry of State Security spied on the sportsmen and women, invaded their privacy and recruited them as ‘unofficial collaborators’, so that they could keep their sports colleagues under observation.”

Athletes’ exposure to the Western world meant that they had to be politically-reliable and ideal role-models of the communist system.

With East German success on the world stage, the GDR emerged as an international power-house in the world of sport and increasingly gained acceptance as a successful, and thus legitimate, nation. Nicole P. reflected that sporting prowess “was the only way

305 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 8th July 2016.
306 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
307 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
to show the world how strong they were … Same with the Russians … [and] Chinese. Just to show how strong the socialism is and how strong the people are growing up in socialism, I suppose … They just used them up like puppets.”  

East Germany fought against West Germany’s refusal to recognise it “by developing a strategy that utilised international sport, particularly the Olympic Games, to further its claims for statehood”, most considerably through the undeniability and visibility of its success.

Other areas too, were subject to instrumentalisation by the state. The role of the arts in general was to foster a sense of GDR national identity among the community, although perceptions of its success did vary. While the purpose of state-control over the music industry was to encourage works and productions which would promote socialism, the reality among those directly involved in the industry was often quite different. Due to its creative, subjective, and artistic nature, it was often difficult to decide what was appropriately socialist and what was not. Musicians were subject to censorship, so as to monitor their adherence to the socialist path, but the application of this was highly variable. Efforts to control music intensified throughout the late 1960s and continued into the 1970s, when “the ground-breaking first national Dance Music Conference of 1972” was held. At this conference, many “problems” of popular music were discussed, not least of which was the dilemma of how to make the individual, expressive nature of dancing more communal. During the 1960s and 70s, the GDR did boast some relatively popular home-grown musicians, such as the Klaus Renft Combo and Wolf Biermann, but these musicians were subject to close scrutiny and censorship by GDR authorities (the Klaus Renft Combo was banned in 1975, and Wolf Biermann was denied re-entry to the GDR following a concert in West Germany in 1976). Some generation B interviewees recalled this so-called “Biermann Affair”, although one explained that at the time “[the message which] was conveyed to us, was that they were assassins”, and thus a threat to the socialist way of life which the GDR administration wished to encourage. In addition to the bureaucracy of censorship, the fact that the GDR population increasingly had access to the Western media and pop

309 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
310 Hughes and Owen, p. 443.
311 Wilton, p. 106.
312 Wilton, p. 106.
313 Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd April 2013. Original quote in German: “uns wurde das so rübergebracht, dass das Attentäter waren.”
culture over the course of the 1970s and 80s, in particular, challenged the popularity of
groups within the GDR, especially those which produced state-supported music.

Literature, too, was an area of the arts which was multifaceted in nature. The GDR was
often referred to as a Literaturgesellschaft [literature-society], particularly because
literature “provided one of the few mediations between public and private life in the
GDR.”\(^{314}\) In this context, it was not surprising that Helmut Hanke (1990) noted that

> East German citizens have the reputation of being especially keen readers. They
> have a very lively interest in politics and in cultural matters. Some 30 percent of
> the population can be regarded as literature connoisseurs or book-lovers. Volker
> Braun, Christoph Heim, Hermann Kant, Heiner Müller, Erwin Strittmatter and
> Christa Wolf are all extremely successful authors. Their work contains serious
> reflections on contemporary problems and issues, and represents the humanist
> tradition of GDR literature in national and international perspective.\(^{315}\)

Interviewees frequently described reading as one of their primary pastimes when
growing up in the GDR and as a particular focus in East German education. Renate S.
explained that “[y]ou automatically read a lot … It was actually the only possibility to
let your guard down.”\(^{316}\) Officially, the writer’s duty was to promote socialism within
GDR society\(^ {317}\) and adhere to the Bitterfelder Weg [Bitterfeld Path], the special “path,”
the purpose of which was to unite writers, intellectuals and proletarians.\(^ {318}\) The concept
originated at the 1959 Bitterfelder Conference, which aimed to encourage the
development of a new socialist literature of the working classes. This was to closely

\(^{316}\) Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd April 2013. Original quote in German: “Du hast eigentlich automatisch sehr viel gelesen … Das war eigentlich die einzige Möglichkeit, wo du dich wirklich fallen lassen konntest.”
resemble the brand of socialist realism which had previously been promoted in the Soviet Union. In the early 1960s, devotion to socialism was shown through a number of writers’ works. One significant and controversial author, Christa Wolf, whom some interviewees remembered, published the novel *Der geteilte Himmel* [Divided Heaven] in 1963, to much critical acclaim within the GDR and abroad. It recounted the story of a woman whose partner had escaped to the West, expecting her to follow. However, she decided to stay, as she believed in the potential of the socialist society in which she was living, in spite of her present hardships. The novel was contentious and was alternately praised “for its adherence to the Bitterfelder Weg policy of exposing writers and intellectuals to the proletariat, producing literature that was accessible to them” and criticised, as some interpreted her work as a representation of how she was “caught between her commitment to Party policy and to the authenticity of her personal experience.” Although the political motive behind much GDR literature was criticised by the West as a “betrayal of art,” it did not deter GDR authorities from pursuing their objective of an antifascist education of the masses. However, their quest for total control over much that was published meant that authors had to undergo numerous stages of censorship. The *Ministerium für Kultur* [Ministry of Culture] was responsible for this process and it was not uncommon that “[a] potentially explosive manuscript might – not counting the Stasi – have to pass ten stations, from the special editor to the head of the censorship agency. It could also be handed on up to the top, to the ZK [Central Committee] or the Politburo.” If authors did not comply with regulations, they could be threatened with a number of possible measures, such as “censorship, silencing, fines, prosecution, surveillance and, for extreme cases,”

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319 Andrei Sinyavsky (1960) described that “[w]orks produced by socialist realists vary in style and content. But in all of them the Purpose is present, whether directly or indirectly, open or veiled. They are panegyrics on Communism, satires on some of its enemies, or descriptions of life “in its revolutionary development,” i.e. life moving toward Communism.” Andrei Sinyavsky, *On Socialist Realism*, trans. George Dennis. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960) p. 43.
320 Wallace, p. 11.
322 Grange, p. 247.
324 Wallace, p. 9.
325 Grange, p. 254.
expatriation.” A problem which many writers faced was that the regulations of the Ministerium für Kultur were often unclear and did not explicitly specify how much artistic license was permitted. As Nicole P. described, the process of censorship was subjective because “with any art, you put your own thoughts into it and you make out what you want to make out.” Although Honecker’s “no taboos” speech at the beginning of his term in office had theoretically signalled a new period of openness in the arts, he still wished “for art to relate more closely to the developed socialist society and its cultural aspirations.” This paradox led many within the literary community to enter into debates on the true role of literature and other forms of artistic expression, and was in many ways the catalyst for a shift in the “self perception” of the writer. Works of writers such as Wolf were increasingly criticised due to their characters displaying “a strong sense of individuality,” rather that contributing to “the collective consciousness of the socialist society.” Some interviewees reported reading some controversial works, such as Julia T., who introduced me to one of the works of Doris Griesser called *Ein Blatt vor meinem Munde* [A Leaf in front of my Mouth]. During her interview, Julia T. spoke of this text as one of the many which challenged the state of affairs in the GDR, asserting “They are only poems … but they are quite rebellious poems … ‘To hold a leaf in front of your mouth’ of course means … ‘not saying what you think’ … There are many quite belligerent things in here.” In a similar vein, Nicole P. recounted her memories of a regular Lesezirkel [reading circle] in which she participated, detailing that we would discuss books like Hermann Hesse or Franz Kafka or books which the GDR didn’t really want you to read … and then, you know, the books like 1984 from George Orwell, or Animal Farm, all these books which would teach you

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328 Stamp Miller, p. 4.
329 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
331 Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, p. 116
333 Stamp Miller, p. 4.
334 Stamp Miller, p. 4.
335 Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original quote in German: “Das sind nur Gedichte … aber das sind ziemlich aufmüpfige Gedichte … ‘Ein Blatt vor den Mund nehmen’ ist doch … ‘nicht das sagen, was man denkt’ … Das sind viele ziemlich angriffslustige Sachen hier drin.”
about a regime which is very similar to the GDR. So they were all forbidden, these books, obviously, but they were highly sought-after by us.336

Thus, although it seemed that the censorship process was strongly monitored, some works were able to slip through the cracks, often due to the fact that they were subjective in nature and their potential harm was dependent upon the personal interpretation of those who were involved in the censorship process. As a result, “[s]ubversive ways of reading, looking for “certain passages” and teasing out “special meanings” in texts which were officially approved, yet appeared to have escaped censorship, sustained an artificially high level of interest in literary work.”337 Writers had a tenuous relationship with the state, always striving to maintain some creativity, while remaining within the realm of what would be tolerated by those in power. In many cases, even though it was not necessarily the author’s intention to display their society in a negative light, the GDR regime became increasingly aware of any opposition within its ranks which might jeopardise its efforts to create a successful national narrative and identity. It was at times difficult for those in the arts to express their thoughts freely and it was reported at the time that

[f]ears are voiced among the ranks of the cultural intelligentsia, by teachers and educationalists, that the standards and stereotypes of mass culture will have a negative influence on people’s capacity both to critically analyse society and acquire a degree of self-knowledge.338

It was always a balancing-act for people involved in the creative industries, including actors. Carolin B., recounted her sister’s experience as the girlfriend of an East German actor and director of the Potsdamer Theater, who had caught the attention of the authorities. He was imprisoned for eighteen months due to the fact that

he wrote sarcastic … either poems or short stories and … went to Leipzig or Dresden and held a reading there in front of students, … of course that was in secret, and the Stasi got wind of it, and of course this reading was a thorn in the

336 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
338 Hanke, p. 181.
side of the Stasi … He was … against the State, … but it was all on an artistic level.339

From these interviewee accounts, it is clear that the GDR administration’s monitoring of the arts was inconsistent, their response varying between tolerance and control. Nicole P. recounted how her father, rather surprisingly, had been able to escape censorship of one his politically-motivated artworks, explaining that

he had … a little exhibition in one of the evangelistic churches in Dresden … He painted one of those old houses, you know how the houses looked terrible in East Germany … [H]e painted one of these houses in the typical GDR colour, which was grey or black, but then he would paint over it like a beautiful, colourful pink and red curtain with flowers on it, and stuff like this, which showed half the building and half of it was like covered by this beautiful piece of fabric. So that was a very typical interpretation … of the things which were going on … and they let it go. They didn’t do anything about it, no.340

Much of the time, it seemed that censorship was rather sporadic and this meant that as an artist it was often very difficult to determine what would be accepted by the authorities and what would not. Julia T. provided an analysis of the role of artists and their precarious position between freedom of expression and control in her description of the role of actors:

If they [actors] opposed it too much, they were unable to get good roles, and if they weren’t able to get any big roles, … they were unable to convey what they wanted to … For them, it was a tremendous balancing-act. Time and again, they

339 Carolin B. in an interview with M. Durrer 12th April 2010. Original quote in German: “Er hat … so sarkastische … entweder Gedichte oder so Short Stories geschrieben, und … ist nach Leipzig oder Dresden gegangen und hat dort vor Studenten Lesung gehalten … die war natürlich geheim, und davon hat die Stasi windbekommen, und diese Lesung, das war den Stasileuten natürlich ein Dorn im Auge … Er war halt … gegen den Staat, … aber das war alles auf einer Künstlerebene.”

340 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
had to withdraw and fit into [the official party line], in order to get another role in which they were able to, at least subliminally, express what they wanted to.\textsuperscript{341}

In her work, Sara Jones (2011) refers to Manfred Jäger’s analysis of the role adopted by many involved in the arts, that of “self-censorship”.\textsuperscript{342} This was rife in GDR society in general, where citizens had to be constantly aware of how their actions and words could be interpreted by the authorities.

Efforts to bring together public and private senses of identity (and thus, a sense of narrow and broad Heimat) through an emphasis on areas such as education, sport and the arts, were partially successful, but did not wholly determine GDR citizens’ sense of self. While most interviewees who grew up and spent a significant part of their lives in the GDR acknowledged that East Germany had been a dictatorship which should never be repeated, they also perceived that they had grown up very differently, and thus had often come to identify themselves differently from West Germans. The GDR’s separation from the FRG had in many respects fostered the creation of a new ‘GDR regional identity’, through a sense of common purpose and experience, monitored by the state. According to Fulbrook (2002),

\begin{quote}
Increasing central control of all aspects of life, most notably the educational institutions and the workplace, served to reduce any inherited experience of regional difference and diversity (which had in any event been dramatically disrupted by the experiences of the war and its aftermath, with associated massive population upheavals).\textsuperscript{343}
\end{quote}

The first generation to grow up behind the Iron Curtain, generation B, spent a large portion of their lives there and thus had formative, collective experiences linked to the GDR. According to Fulbrook (1999), generational shifts in identity were already visible

\textsuperscript{341} Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\textsuperscript{nd} April 2013. Original quote in German: “Wenn sie sich zu sehr dagegen gestellt haben, konnten sie keine guten Rollen bekommen und, wenn sie keine große Rollen bekommen haben, … konnten sie nicht das transportieren, was sie wollten … Es war für die immer ein … fürchterlicher Balanceakt. Immer wieder ein Zurücknehmen, sich eingliedern in die Linien, um eben wieder an eine Rolle zu bekommen, in der sie unterschwellig wenigstens auch mal was ausdrücken konnten, was sie wollten.”

\textsuperscript{342} Manfred Jäger qtd. in Sara Jones, \textit{Complicity, Censorship and Criticism: Negotiating Space in the GDR Literary Sphere} (Berlin; New York, 2011) pp. 15-16.

\textsuperscript{343} Fulbrook, “Democratic Centralism and Regionalism in the GDR,” \textit{German Federalism}, p. 159.
in March 1968, when a survey revealed that “as many as two-thirds (66.7 per cent) of those under the age of twenty were prepared to say that they saw the GDR as their fatherland.”

Furthermore, she states that

[a]mong younger generations (the ‘Hineingeborene’, those born into the GDR) factors such as the Wall, division, the grumbles and shortages of everyday life, the uncertainties and vicissitudes of unpredictable politics, and so on, took precedence over ‘historic’ regional differences between Mecklenburgers and Thuringians, Saxons and Berliners.**

Being subjected to the GDR administration’s effort to encourage a sense of identification with the GDR, and having collective memories of life in the GDR, bound those born into the system to a common past, although their personal relationship to this past varied. Generations B and C were born into a closed communist society. They had no personal experience of Germany as one nation, and thus began to associate themselves more with the GDR than with Germany, particularly when reunification became an increasingly far-fetched possibility and the state began to take an active interest in the development of GDR national identity. Although many did have relatives living in the West, thus maintaining some family ties, connections with some of these weakened over time. It was difficult to maintain contact, as relatives on both sides rarely saw each other, and grew apart after many years of physical separation. Generation B spent much of their lives in the GDR, and thus their experience there shaped, in the most part, the core of their identity.

Generation C form their own unique social generation consisting of those whose memories of the GDR remain restricted to their childhoods. Although they were not influenced as directly as their parents’ generation by the regime, they were old enough to have meaningful recollections of the period, which would influence their lives in years to come. Compared to adulthood, the world of a child is much smaller and more sheltered, and most children were not influenced as much by the limitations of GDR society. This was described by many generation C interviewees, who had spent only their childhoods in the GDR. As Sylvia E. explained from her own experience: “I can’t

\[344\] Fulbrook, *German National Identity After the Holocaust*, p. 195.
say that I felt locked-in … and when you’re so small, you don’t have to necessarily travel to Spain or somewhere,”³⁴⁶ As Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets (2009) explain, children “have fewer identities available to them than adults have”,³⁴⁷ and thus hold a simpler view of who they are and where they belong. For this reason, many of the interviewees described their contentment with living in the GDR while they were children. Generation C’s recollections centred around their experiences of school, and, for some, of the Hort [after-school care],³⁴⁸ both of which were portrayed in a positive light by most interviewees, as Anna K. explained:

They really made sure that people could go to work, that the kindergarten or school was open early in the morning before people had to go to work, and they also took care of the children until six in the evening or so, until the parents came again to pick up their children.³⁴⁹

Stefanie E. was self-analytical in her interview when she described her view of what had been her idyllic childhood world, and the transition to adulthood and a growing awareness of the hypocrisy of GDR society which she had begun to recognise:

[M]any say that it was horrible living in East Germany, but as a child you don’t see it like that. We always had a good life, we always had what we wanted, always self-sufficient. What we needed we grew in our garden, we had animals, we never missed out on anything … When I was older, yes, you find out that you are not allowed to leave that country. But as a child you don’t care where you live. You are happy where you are. Only later you realize that it is a bit limited, and of course then you enter a stage where you think, you need to get out of there. You need that sort of freedom when you are 16/17.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁸ This was extremely common for GDR children, as the Hort ran activities in conjunction with the ‘Pionier’ organisation, which most children were a part of.
³⁴⁹ Anna K. in an interview with M. Durrer 19th July 2010.
³⁵⁰ Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6th June 2012.
Interviewees’ experiences help define who they are today and how they perceive themselves in relation to the past. Those who spent a large portion of their lives in the GDR form their own distinct social generation, as do those whose memories were restricted to their childhoods. However, even within these social generations, there is a rich array of personal experiences, particularly among generation B, who grew to adulthood under communism and were old enough to determine their own stance towards the regime. Throughout the GDR’s existence, the authorities attempted to merge the identities of its citizens into one indistinguishable mass which supported the administration’s quest for a distinct East German national identity; however, interviewees’ individual experiences and the reality of the situation proved that this was not completely successful. Reflecting upon their experiences from afar, interviewees often described the formative role which their lives in the GDR had had upon their sense of identity. Although they were all migrants and thus removed from their past with respect to time and place, their point of origin had at one time been very similar. Generation B interviewees in particular, who, in most cases, had spent such a significant amount of time in the East German state, described an unshakable connection to their past, regardless of their personal stance towards the state. This often manifested itself in reflections on their childhoods, which most members of both generations B and C remembered fondly. As Erna P. explained, it was important to her to not just portray the injustices of the regime, but also “that not everything was bad in the GDR…Our childhood was really nice.” It was often these positive experiences which kept even some of those who eventually opposed the regime from totally rejecting their country of origin. Often, there was a sense of solidarity among members of oppositional groups, such as described by Nicole P.: “I mean, we had a lot of friends, you know, and we were kind of rebels, so we enjoyed being rebels, so to speak.” The structure of GDR society was multi-layered and affected interviewees in different ways. Some had the tendency to largely reject their East German past in preference for other identities, whilst others emphasised how it still permeated their lives as migrants. Even speaking many years later, interviewees of these two generations painted a complex picture of the communist state as having both positive and negative aspects, as a highly contradictory society, but ultimately for many, as a Heimat of the past.

352 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 8th July 2016.
Chapter 3 – Lives and identities in contrast: Multiple perspectives on life in the GDR

“If you didn’t rebel against this lack of freedom, you were actually able to lead a good, peaceful life.”
(Julia T.)

Although the lives of interviewees of generation B and C were influenced by their age while living in the GDR and their membership of these social generations, this is just one dimension to the lives of the participants in this study. In particular for generation B interviewees, those at the centre of the East German experience, the social role which they came to play within the GDR impacted greatly upon their sense of attachment and identification with the country in later years. The following chapter focuses on the presence of other communities of memory within the GDR which are not exclusively generation-based, but rather are dependant on the individual’s stance towards the GDR regime. At times the stories of interviewees who considered themselves to be victims contrasted with those of bystanders (the people who made do under adverse conditions and did not attract the attention of the authorities to a significant extent), not to mention those of perpetrators, who were conspicuously absent from this group of interviewees.

3.1 Adult victims of the regime

The increased power granted to the Stasi in the 1960s and 70s meant that the authorities were able to successfully gain information on suspected dissidents almost whenever and by whichever means they chose. As McKay (2002) reveals, “[t]he creation of a socialist identity was largely achieved through a system of rewards for those who complied and penalties for those who did not”.

Most generation B interviewees who grew to adulthood behind the Iron Curtain felt the Stasi’s presence to some extent, whether or not they were personally affected or knew someone who had been. For those who did not conform, oppressiveness and the fear of being informed on permeated their world to the extent that, as Hanna T. explained, with the following metaphor:

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354 McKay, p. 17.
[y]ou couldn’t say ‘Your jumper is green’. You would say ‘Your jumper is not red’, because ‘green’ was the nasty word you weren’t allowed to say. So you would talk around [it] and everyone would know what you meant, like [with] … money exchange … They called them the Fliesen, blaue Fliesen, because I think the hundred Mark note from West Germany was blue, so it was a ‘blue tile’ … You wouldn’t say ‘Ah, today I exchanged West [German currency]’, you’d say ‘Ah, I got some blue tiles today.’

The Stasi, whether obviously visible or not, was for many an ever-present entity. The Ministry was founded in 1950 and, paradoxically, continued to grow in strength when the border between East and West was officially sealed. An account of the Stasi’s foundation was provided by Heiner Timmermann (2013), who explains that they “came to exercise almost complete control over the population of the GDR.”

It was those who grew up behind the Iron Curtain, particularly generation B interviewees who did not toe the political line, who were to feel the Stasi’s presence most acutely and, in most cases, grow to fear them. Interviewees’ individual relationships with the Stasi would, furthermore, define them as members of other distinct communities of memory. The experiences of those who were targeted by them, and those who escaped their notice due to outward compliance diverged within the wider East German generational narrative. Citizens who acted in opposition to the regime were constantly under surveillance. Nicole P., whose father was imprisoned by the Stasi on suspicion of being a spy, and as someone who was involved with the GDR peace movement, described rather wryly how “[w]e dealt with them on a personal basis.”

She recalled one particular instance at home when

we heard just like a funny noise, like when you hear a really strange noise when these devices go off, the bugs … [T]hen we left [the house] and we stuck a little hair in the door just to see if somebody actually came in and replaced the thing … and yeah, they came, replaced the thing and then left.

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357 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
358 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
In the end, it was the Stasi’s ubiquitous presence in her life that forced Nicole P. to leave the GDR. As she stated in her interview, “it was never our intention to leave really. We only really left because we felt just threatened.”\(^{359}\) Hanna T., whose husband had attempted to escape the GDR, but did not at first succeed, was also subjected to interrogations, and feared that her children could be taken away from her if she showed any sign of having known about his plans. She related that at the time our apartment was bugged so you couldn’t talk at home. You know, you would leave the apartment if you wanted to talk about things because … I had been watched … you had to choose the people you talked to … I think more or less you were just on your own … fighting the fight.\(^{360}\)

The GDR’s ideology came to permeate not just the public sphere, but the private sphere of many citizens as well. Obstacles were not only put in the way of those who opposed, but also those who did not directly meet the regime’s criteria. Hanna T., a one-time devoted communist, had sought to join the party once she had finished school in the 1970s. She had wished to express her loyalty by signing up and thought that they would accept her due to her belief in the system. She was sorely disappointed by what she was told during the application process, which sparked her eventual loss of faith in the GDR’s ideology. She explained:

I was very much … in line with the system, until I wanted to become a party member when I was an apprentice and I decided: ‘Yes I believe in all that … I want to be a member’, and then I was told: ‘Hmm, you can’t become a member now unless you go into the production. We need workers’ … So I said: ‘Hang on, hang on, you don’t take me for my beliefs? So if I work two weeks in there then you take me?’ … I said: ‘No thanks.’\(^{361}\)

The Stasi regularly made threats involving people’s families or jobs to maintain conformity and to encourage those being interrogated to inform on those close to them. Julia T. described how the smallest remark could be misinterpreted and potentially have serious ramifications, as had once occurred with her father:

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\(^{359}\) Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 8\(^{th}\) July 2016.  
\(^{360}\) Hanna T. in an interview with M. Durrer 24\(^{th}\) August 2010.  
\(^{361}\) Hanna T. in an interview with M. Durrer 24\(^{th}\) August 2010.
My father, he once made a little joke at school … In his role as leader of the youth group sessions, he had always hung up these lolly-cones for those children who were starting school … As the cones always got bigger and heavier each year, he wondered, well, whether the ‘East German’ string would even be able to hold the cones against the ‘Westwind’ … Then, the next day he was ordered to the principal’s office and he [the principal] said ‘Well, if you say something like that again, then we will have to think about whether or not you will even be able to remain here as a teacher.’

For some generation B interviewees, the Stasi’s presence overshadowed so much of their lives that they felt they had to leave the country, sometimes leading to devastating consequences. Konrad S. described one of his failed escape attempts, when “I actually wanted to go across the Elbe [river] and then I tried via the subway in Berlin-Reinhardstraße. Unfortunately it didn’t work.” He was arrested and eventually served time in the notorious Hohenschönhausen and Bautzen prisons after a second escape-attempt, as punishment for his efforts. The ill treatment he received during GDR times has stayed with him and significantly influenced his view of the past. Of his time in Bautzen, he commented: “The time there, please don’t ask, is not easy to live with!” Konrad S. was interrogated by the Stasi which he described as “[a] systematic intimidation and breaking of your will.” In spite of his migration to Australia, Konrad S. still has contact with other former dissidents and spoke of the devastating impact their victimisation has had, contributing to long-term physical and mental illness. In terms of identity, Konrad S. seems to have distanced himself from his past in

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362 In German, these are called “Zuckertüten”. It is a tradition that each child receives one of these on their first day of school.


the GDR to some extent through his migration, whilst at the same time still maintaining
ties to other former victims of the regime.

A number of other generation B participants shared their recollections of flight, or their
memories of others whom they had known who had done so. Stories of oppression and
eventual escape were common among a number of interviewees. Erna P., who did not
leave the GDR herself, narrated the heartbreaking story of her niece’s flight from the
GDR and the emotional blackmail employed by the Stasi to convince her to return:

She left for the West with her boyfriend … in the back of a car, under a cover …
In this way they then drove over the border and were not stopped … My brother
was demoted … as a teacher … they sent him to the middle of nowhere … Then
they said: ‘If you don’t get your daughter to come back by such-and-such a time
… then you will be expelled’ … He took [his daughter’s] mother with him [to
make the telephone call] and she said: ‘[Katja], if you don’t come, then I will
kill myself.’ … After much to-ing and fro-ing … [Katja] said: ‘OK, I will come’
… The boyfriend, he wanted to hold her back even when they got to the border
… Anyway, she broke away from him and went over the border, and the Stasi
was already standing there … and you know where they took her? Straight to
jail.367

To the East German leadership, the very thought of escape was enough to be considered
a threat to the stability of the regime and was dealt with severely. Those found guilty
were imprisoned and often subjected to psychological torture in order to make them
cooperate. For some, imprisonment became unbearable, as Konrad S. related:

367 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 15th July 2010. Original quote in German: “Sie ist mit ihrem
Freund nach dem Westen abgehauen … hinten in dem Auto rein, zugedeckt … [D]ann sind sie so über
die Grenze gefahren und sind auch nicht angehalten worden … [M]ein Bruder ist geflogen … als Lehrer
… und zwar haben sie ihn an den letzten Ort geschickt … Dann haben sie gesagt: ‘Wenn du nicht
innerhalb von so einer Zeit deine Tochter wieder rüberholst, … dann fliegst du’ … [Er] hat die Mama
[zum Telefonieren] mitgenommen [und die hat gesagt]: ‘[Katja], wenn du nicht kommst, dann bringe ich
mich um.’ … Nach einem langen Hin und Her hat sie gesagt: ‘Gut, ich komme’ … Der Freund, der hat
sie bis zur Grenze zurückhalten wollen … [J]edenfalls hat sie sich losgerissen von ihm und ist über die
Grenze und da stand schon die Stasi da … und weißt du, wo sie dann hingeschafft haben? Gleich ins
Gefängnis.”
What was the worst for me in prison, was when we were in transition … It was the 24.12.1973. The warders switched the former GDR’s Radio, DT 64, onto the song of Jimi Hendrix. All along the Watchtower was played, and a friend jumped onto the table with a rope and hanged himself on the fan. No one moved in the cell. You never forget this picture.368

Political prisoners were viewed as having committed the worst possible crimes against the state and were treated with the utmost contempt by authorities. Astrid N. and her cousin were imprisoned in 1977, after discussing the possibility of leaving the country. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the apparent freedoms it could provide had inspired them. They had believed that it was their right to leave the GDR, as the agreement alluded to the fact that freedom of travel could be granted. However, as she explained, it was not as simple as it seemed:

At the time there was this agreement, this Helsinki agreement, where you allegedly had the right to swap [citizenship], but that was only on paper, it wasn’t [like that] in reality … [T]hen, we had put in an application to emigrate and … if you didn’t really have anyone (family or so), where you had a reason to go to the West, that was, yes … that was all just on paper. That wasn’t the case in reality.369

Astrid N. and her cousin were not alone in their efforts to leave at this time. It was reported that “tens of thousands [had been] deluging the government with requests for permission to leave the country.”370 However, unfortunately it was also the case that “[a]ll requests were sent to the Stasi in baskets where they lay, most unanswered and filed away, as evidence that the petitioners were potential enemies of the state.”371 An application to emigrate from the GDR certainly attracted the attention of the authorities,

368 Konrad S. in an interview with M. Durrer 30th June 2013.
371 Koehler, p. 375.
and most probably also contributed to Astrid N. and her cousin’s final arrest. As she recounted:

[O]ur problem was that we often went to Hungary for holidays and had tried to flee across the border in Austria, and … my cousin had a friend who … worked for the Stasi, and when we came back from our holiday in Hungary she [my cousin] told her [that we might plan to escape].

Astrid and her cousin ended up in prison for 13 months due to the actions of her cousin’s friend who had reported them. They were bought free by West Germany in 1978, an occurrence which was not uncommon. Although Astrid described the separation from her family as terrible and she missed them when she was living in the West, she emphasised “but [we did] not miss … the East.”

The exchange of goods and money for these people was a practice which largely occurred under the radar. Sofia W. explained that she herself was not even sure exactly how she and her mother and sister had been allowed to escape to the West, although it would not be far-fetched to guess that they too had been bought free. As she related: “Us leaving coincided shortly after a very big … donation, or a very big exchange of Divisen [currency exchange].”

The lives of those who had applied to leave, or those who had shown an open opposition to the socialist regime, were typically made very difficult. Particularly generation B interviewees, who had been persecuted as adults in the GDR, had felt themselves to be outsiders, with the constant surveillance by the state taking its toll. Nicole P. recalled the moment she reached her personal breaking point, describing that

376 Sofia W. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd March 2013.
[w]e had a car in front of our house day-in, day-out, day-in, day-out. That was actually … the trigger … The feeling just started creeping up more and more that I was with one foot in the prison … so that’s when we started applying for the Ausreiseantrag [exit visa].

Their ostracism greatly affected their lives and their view of the GDR, often influencing how they identified themselves in the present. Those who were victims of the regime often have the most ambivalent relationship with their past, due to a desire to simultaneously condemn the repressions of the GDR and defend the positive experiences they had during their time there. It was not uncommon for interviewees to sway between an intensely negative stance and a more positive one related to factors such as free childcare, a sense of comaraderie and fond recollections of their time as members of oppositional groups within the GDR. In spite of her many negative memories of life in East Germany, Nicole P. still thinks of “these times as very, very exciting really … I’m just thinking that I had such an interesting youth, you know … [N]ot everybody experiences this, and it’s also a completely different people you have in this kind of circumstance.”

Those who left the GDR as adults had done so with the belief that they would never be able to return to their place of origin. They had to adapt to a new life in the West and come to terms with their migration to an unfamiliar consumer-driven society. In many respects, this clear break with life in the East removed any option of return and forced them to find a place for themselves in their new surroundings.

3.2 Child victims of the regime

There is another group of victims of the GDR state which revealed themselves in this study. They are somewhat of an anomaly and do not “fit into” the dominant GDR, or indeed generational, narrative. The story of child migrants from the GDR cuts across generations, but its recurrence in diverse age groups highlighted the necessity to include them in this discussion on varying communities of memory. Of the interviewees in this study, three had left the GDR as children. One was born within the generation B age-range and the others were members of generation C.

377 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
378 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
For interviewees who were children during GDR times, the Stasi’s presence was, in the majority of cases, not felt as acutely, although this did depend upon their parents’ degree of opposition to the regime and to what extent the family was viewed as outcasts. Throughout the interviews I was struck by the, at times, unexpectedly vivid memories held by some who were very young at the time of their residence in the GDR. Esther Jilovský and Alison Lewis (2015) refer to this group of people in their research, calling them the “1.5 generation” whose “defining feature is the experience of forced exile from the GDR as a child.”

Mirjam K. was the eldest of these child migrants, escaping on Christmas Eve 1962, just a year after the fortification of the border between East and West Germany. Aged just 12 at the time, her father organised her escape through East Berlin. She travelled to the city by train (with her father in a separate carriage), on the premise of needing to buy contact lenses for her mother. Once she reached her destination, she was told to follow a man who would help her across the border. Mirjam K. left the GDR with another boy, swimming across the Elbe. She detailed how “First of all, [I was] slathered with grease … I did not dare to ask anything … and then I got into the water and there was also a boy there. We were escorted by someone with a torch. I have no idea where it was … I also have no idea for how long I swam.” Mirjam K. left the GDR firmly believing that her family would follow. She described that “[in] my naivety I thought it would be so. I wasn’t aware of what the building of the Wall meant. I had no idea that we would have to be separated over so many years.”

Once in the West, she spent approximately six months in a refugee camp, before spending five gruelling years in an orphanage.

Sofia W., who was just seven or eight when her family left the GDR in 1978, remembered the presence of the Stasi vividly, although she was not able to fully understand the degree to which her family had been observed. They had been watched following the escape of her father and her mother’s constant attempts to apply to leave the GDR and join him in the West. Life was made extremely difficult, as “[those who

380 Mirjam K. in an interview with M. Durrer 20th April 2012. Original quote in German: “[Ich bin] in Ostberlin erstmal in Fett eingerieben worden … Ich habe mich überhaupt nicht getraut, was zu fragen, … und dann bin ich ins Wasser und da war auch noch ein Junge, der dabei war. Wir wurden von jemandem eskortiert, mit einer Taschenlampe. Ich weiß nicht, wo es war … Ich weiß auch nicht, wie lange ich geschwommen bin.”
381 Mirjam K. in an interview with M. Durrer 20th April 2012. Original quote in German: “In meiner Naivität habe ich gedacht, das wird so. Ich war mir nicht bewusst, was der Mauerbau bedeutet. Ich habe keine Ahnung gehabt, dass wir über so viele Jahre getrennt sein müssen.”
applied repeatedly for permission to leave were regarded as negatively as were those who sought to cross the border illegally.”

Even as a child, however, she was aware that not everything was as it should be:

“I didn’t feel watched, but I know there was something going on in the atmosphere and there was plenty of police presence because we had to go every month [to apply to leave the GDR] … So I saw them all the time, they were plenty of times in our house. Every time you get a package, every time you get a letter, they would rock up and just turn everything upside down.”

Although just a child at the time, the events on the night of her escape never left her. She related how she and her family went with the train, … I do remember it as clear as day … You have 24 hours to get out. You hand your passports back … This train stopped at the border and we waited … The police … would come through these … very narrow walkways with their big German Shepherd dogs. They would pull out all the seats … to make sure no one’s hiding behind … They are so loud and they are so rough and you just fear for your life.”

Another interviewee whose family was bought free when he was just six years old was Alexander S. Like Sofia W., in spite of his young age, he was able to recall the events surrounding their leaving, perhaps due to their traumatic nature. Coming from a family with a long history of resistance, his father was arrested after a hunger strike in protest of the regime’s refusal to grant him and his family permission to migrate to the FRG. Alexander S. recalled when his father was imprisoned, stating that “[o]nes fine day the Stasi was standing in our apartment at four in the morning and arrested my father.”

His father was in prison for a year before being bought free, and Alexander S. and his family soon followed. As he narrated, “the rest of our family, consisting of my mother

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382 Mueller, p. 715.
and both of my younger brothers, were declared undesirable and were deported within two days."^

For those who had left the GDR as children, the sudden removal from a familiar world had consequences. Unlike older victims, who had actively resisted the regime and left the GDR as adults, the children who departed were often left in a state of confusion. For Sofia W., the events were traumatic, affecting her for years to come in the form of “post-traumatic stress disorder … I had some professional help and I can talk about these experiences now quite freely … I don’t think they pain me on a regular day, but it’s part of who I am.”^

Furthermore, once in the FRG, these people frequently had to contend with being ostracised and labelled as second-class Germans. Mirjam K. recounted her difficulty acquiring a room to rent once she left the orphanage, expressing that

as an East German, to find a room with West Germans? Impossible! They would open the door … [They asked] where my parents were. ‘My parents? My mother is in East Germany.’ ‘Oh, the room is already occupied’ … There I noticed for the first time that people from the East are second-class citizens.

Alexander S., who left with his family, described how they had been singled out as East Germans at school: “I noticed straight away that a very different system of values reigned there … Materialism played a huge role … At that time, former East Germans were publically discriminated against in the West. So, at school you were the ‘stupid Ossi’.” The children who formed this community of memory were bound to each other by their common experience of being child migrants from the GDR. They had to adjust to Western society in their schools, often uncertain of why they had even left

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their homes in the East. They migrated to a new place physically, but also, like their parents, had to mentally adjust.

3.3 The Nischengesellschaft of the GDR

Although the state was ever-present within society, it was surprising to find how many interviewees still asserted that it was possible to live a relatively hassle-free life under socialism if you did not ruffle the feathers of the authorities. While the Stasi’s power was obvious to most interviewees, it was possible to live with, if, as Kurt S. explained, you “were willing to adapt or to accept [it] … if you accepted that it was, as it was, then it had only little impact on most people’s lives.” 390 Many made the best of their circumstances and adapted to the situation in which they found themselves, acknowledging that it was possible that they were being observed, and so only trusting those closest to them. In literature, these individuals have occasionally been referred to as “bystanders”, because they were neither victims nor perpetrators in the GDR. 391

Due to the constant fear of being under surveillance, many interviewees, particularly of generation B, withdrew to the private sphere to express their true opinions, as far as this was possible. Britta F. illustrated how this had occurred in her own childhood: “You had a kind of schizophrenia … So, on the one hand you knew what you were allowed to say, but on the other hand, you knew that things were spoken about differently within the family. So these two worlds … were difficult to bring together.” 392 Erna P. supported this claim, when she spoke of her realisation that the society she lived in was zweigleisig, 393 a claim also made by Fulbrook (2009), who interprets this term as “living on two tracks, moving between two languages, public conformity and private authenticity.” 394 Jones (2011) similarly discusses this phenomenon with her reference to the work of Wolfgang Bialas, who observed “two levels of reality” 395 within the GDR.

A Doppelkultur [dual culture] emerged, where there was “an ever widening gap

392 Britta F. in an interview with M. Durrer 30th August 2010. Original quote in German: “[D]a hast du so eine Schizophrenie … Also, einerseits wusstest du, was du sagen konntest, aber andererseits wusstest du, in der Familie wurde eben anders geredet. Also, diese beiden Welten … konnte man schwer zusammenbringen.”
393 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 15th July 2010.
395 Wolfgang Bialas qtd. in Jones, Complicity, Censorship and Criticism, p. 203.
between the ideology of the SED regime and the reality experienced by its citizens.”

The perception of having led a double life under communism was strong among many interviewees, a symptom of having grown up in a Nischengesellschaft [niche-society], “a private realm which was characteristic of many former Eastern European societies.” One interviewee described how she had had the feeling that you were “sort of brought up to be a bit of a liar … [as there] was no space to express your own opinion.” Ilse F. admitted that GDR citizens “actually had a kind of double life … so at school with all the political things, you just went along with it and made the best of it.”

In the eyes of the authorities, the distinction between public and private identity did not exist, as the GDR administration wished to create the illusion that people’s public tolerance, if not support of the regime, extended to the private sphere. GDR citizens themselves, however, did experience this contrast and are frequently described as belonging to a Nischengesellschaft. Membership of this Nischengesellschaft was most prevalent among generation B interviewees, and may be considered as another subgroup, or generation unit to which GDR citizens belonged, although its presence was also felt by some generation C interviewees, who observed the contrasts between people’s behaviour in the public and private spheres. The Nischengesellschaft was often viewed as a necessary aspect of the social order, as it had a “ventilating function”, providing people with a means of release related to their frustration with the state of affairs in their country. According to Eric D. Weitz (1997), the niches of the private realm were “individualised forms of self-expression that, while sustaining of personal identities, also helped reproduce the existing structures.” They reinforced these structures in the sense that the absence of an outward display of resistance created the illusion of mass-conformity to the existing power structures. For many East Germans,

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398 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 15th July 2010. Original quote in German: “Man ist ein bisschen so zum Lügen erzogen worden … [Da] war kein Raum, die eigene Meinung zu sagen.”

399 Ilse F. in an interview with M. Durrer 18th August 2010.


401 Gaus utilised the term “Ventilfunktion” Gaus, p. 115.

life in the GDR was a balancing-act between public compliance and private disagreement. In order to make life easier, and often to keep their private sphere from being invaded by the Stasi, the majority of the population paid lip-service to the regime. Martina E. explained this phenomenon while describing her own decision to become a member of the SED: “It was important for your career. You saw it in my case. If I had not joined, I would have been cut off. So, it didn’t mean that you really believed in this system.” Thus, for the most part, dissent was restricted to “the most intimate recesses of private life, […] the very minds of individuals”, which authorities had the most difficulty reaching. The public and private spheres remained separate for many, even though GDR authorities sought to merge the two. The ideals of socialism, which emphasised a focus on the communal and collective identity with the socialist fatherland were achieved to some extent, but were also resisted by members of society who privately did not agree with the state and were more concerned with “making do” within their own immediate surroundings.

Depending on personal experience, interviewees, particularly of generation B, either did or did not come into substantial conflict with the status quo in the GDR, forming generation units made up of those who were victims of the state or those who tolerated the regime, only expressing discontent privately. Furthermore, some interviewees could be members of both groups at different stages of their lives, and depending on whether the Stasi had become aware of their opposition or not. The role which participants played in GDR society affected their lives into the future and, as Burke and Stets (2009) emphasise, had implications for identity: “Identities characterize individuals according to their many positions in society, and it is important to note […] that both the individual and society are linked in the concept of identity.” However, in spite of their efforts, the GDR would not be able to maintain its stability in the years to come, as private dissatisfaction within the “niches” began to spill over into the public sphere.

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405 Burke and Stets, p. 3.
Chapter 4 – The demise of the GDR: The merging of public and private identity

“[It was the whole spirit of the time ... Everybody wanted to change something ... people wanted freedom, wanted to be able to travel. I think that was the main spirit in the community: change things, get rid of old structures.”

(Stefanie E.)

The demise of the GDR and, indeed, of communism in Eastern Europe came about unexpectedly and took many, including interviewees, by surprise. Nicole P., who left the GDR in 1984, marvelled at the fact that “[t]here was not a sign in the air that there would be a change. It was literally at the heights of the Stasi when we left.”

The following examines how it was possible that events unfolded in the manner in which they did, along with the memories interviewees had of the historic events, which culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the implications they had for their identities. Furthermore, the sudden display of widespread opposition by GDR-citizens is considered in the context of its emergence from the presence of a latent community of East Germans belonging to niche societies and how public and private identities interacted at this time. For as long as the borders were closed and it remained isolated from the outside world,

[t]he GDR regime offered an implicit bargain: political compliance in exchange for social security and material welfare. This bargain provided incentives for most citizens to go along with the regime, given that the status quo was enforced and exit was unavailable. So long as a regime enforces an absolute political monopoly, the majority of people would prefer to improve their lot through opportunistic compliance than assume the costs of collective action aimed at challenging the state.

407 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
However, the altered political atmosphere in the lead-up to the collapse of communism triggered an unprecedented response from Eastern European citizens, including those residing in the GDR, and a system which had appeared unshakeable just a few years earlier was brought to its knees.

4.1 Catalysts for the demise of the GDR

In hindsight, there were many events which served as watersheds in the eventual collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. As George P. Schulz (2008) explains, the Cold War consisted of a number of “turning points, none more compelling than those of the 1980s.”

The early 1980s witnessed the beginning of a new openness in some countries of the Eastern Bloc, including Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, which would be a source of inspiration for citizens of the GDR. Poland, in particular, played a role in inspiring popular opposition to the status quo in Eastern Europe with its Solidarity movement.

Viewed as a “movement of moral regeneration,” it provided the populace with a means of challenging the regime and bringing about a number of reforms. This expression of collective purpose and identity would come to characterise oppositional movements across Eastern Europe, including, as interviewees reported, in the GDR. Poland and other countries of the Eastern Bloc were viewed by GDR citizens in the early 1980s as being rather liberal, as Renate S. recalled: “I had a Polish friend and I went over with her in ’80 or ’81. I found Poland open.” However, the freedoms granted to Polish citizens in 1980 were withdrawn swiftly upon the implementation of martial law in December 1981. As a result, it went underground over the following years, to re-emerge in the mid-1980s, following the introduction of Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms in the Soviet Union. Some
interviewees commented that the events in Poland at this time were a source of inspiration for them, as Julia T. described:

I remember these … demonstrations in Danzig, in Poland … A big undermining [of the regime] … took place there, where people everywhere suddenly realised: ‘Gee, this thing is not actually that stable’, [and] where they had the feeling: ‘We can bring this to collapse if that is what we want’.415

Poland was not the only country of the Eastern Bloc to experience changes during the 1980s. The collapse of socialism in the GDR would not have occurred without Gorbachev. He rose up the ranks with the death, in quick succession, of two General Secretaries, and was viewed as a new thinker416 and a member of a “more pragmatic and better educated (at least technically) generation”.417 His views had their origin in “the understanding that much of the old, ideology-driven agenda of international relations had become obsolete.”418 When he came to power, he inherited extensive economic problems, not to mention an icy relationship with the western world. His policies of Glasnost [openness] and Perestroika [restructuring] redefined socialist society and introduced a new transparency which had not existed previously in the USSR. In his Report to the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on 25 February 1986, he attempted to recognise the mistakes of the past and emphasised that

the leadership of the CPSU considers it its duty to tell the Party and the people honestly and frankly about the shortcomings of our political and practical activities, the unfavourable tendencies in the economy and the social and moral sphere, and about the reasons for them.419

418 Palazhchenko, p. xi.
Gorbachev’s approach to foreign affairs was pragmatic and over time earned him much respect in the Western world. His views appealed to the international community who admired his “common sense” and readiness to find a resolution to “a seemingly endless, destructive arms race.” His willingness to negotiate with the likes of the United States and Great Britain eased the tension between the superpowers and provided the basis for a mutual agreement to end the threat of full-scale war.

Another aspect of Gorbachev’s foreign policy concerned other communist countries of Eastern Europe, which had previously fallen under the ultimate control of the USSR. The so-called Brezhnev Doctrine, which had existed since the late 1960s, whereby the USSR had viewed it as its duty to maintain (and thus intervene in) the communist regimes of its satellite states, was abandoned by Gorbachev in an effort to reform society and allow each separate country to determine its own path. The USSR’s decision “not to interfere in the internal politics of these states” and Gorbachev’s assertion that “each socialist state was free to choose its own path” left the door open for critics of each state’s regime to demonstrate their opposition openly, without the fear of Soviet retaliation. It paved the way for the transition from a private expression of discontent to open displays of opposition and calls for reform by many citizens of Eastern Europe. Nicole P. was of the view that “‘Gorbi’, as they called him, he somehow managed to provide the people with strength and the will to actually finally do something about it [the regime].” Thomas E. reinforced this view, stating that the emergence of widespread opposition in the GDR was strongly correlated with “how Russia permitted it.” Gorbachev encouraged reforms across Eastern Europe, including the GDR, believing that “by taking the initiative in democratizing these regimes, reformist Communist leaders could retain control of the process.” Britta F. described the changes she had observed in GDR society due to Gorbachev’s leadership:

421 Lévesque, p. 25.
422 Negotiations with US president, Ronald Reagan, during various summits between 1985 and 1987, eventually led to the signing of the INF agreement in 1987, a pact which would see the reduction of intermediate range missiles on both sides. Zemtsov and Farrar, p. 168.
424 Lévesque, p. 54.
425 Lévesque, p. 54.
426 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
428 Lévesque, p. 3.
“At the time when Gorbachev came to power and Glasnost was having an effect, yes, it became better and more open … You did notice that … You were able to travel more.”

What Gorbachev had not predicted was the speed and scale with which the call for reforms would spread among the general population and that his policies of openness and non-interference would actually destabilise the socialist regimes of Eastern Europe and lead to the dissolution of the USSR. As Julia T. described: “I do consider the statements made by Gorbachev and this openness which he introduced to be a significant catalyst for this [the GDR’s] collapse.” Unwittingly, he had “opened a pandora’s box of new pressures on the system he wish[ed] to maintain.”

His vision to restructure socialist society “based on the principles of socialist justice, in which there are neither exploiters nor the exploited, in which power belongs to the people”, was a bold move which earned him much respect and foreshadowed the development of a sense of individual power. Unfortunately it also triggered the final demise of a regime which had become unsustainable, proving Alexis de Tocqueville’s (1998) observation that “the most dangerous moment for a bad government is usually when it begins to reform itself” as correct. Gorbachev’s increased liberalisation highlighted weaknesses within the ruling structures and paved the way for popular protest. During an interview, Julia T. provided her explanation for the failure of communism in Eastern Europe and the GDR: “In the end the trigger was actually also a political one … In the same way that communism had come from the Soviet Union, so too was it the birthplace of its collapse, via Gorbachev.”

Within the GDR, people began to perceive that they could personally influence their circumstances, a fact unthinkable just months before.

Gorbachev’s relaxation of the USSR’s stronghold over other countries of the Eastern Bloc was enough to spur on citizens who had previously remained quiet or tolerated the GDR authorities’ grip on society. Gorbachev’s visit to the FRG in June 1989 was met with cries of support from the West German population, who approved of his desire to


430 Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original quote in German: “[I]ch halte schon … die Äußerungen von Gorbatschow und diese Offenheit, die er reingebracht hat, für einen maßgeblichen Initialzündung für diesen Zusammenbruch.”

431 Lévesque, p. 368.

432 Gorbachev, p. 6.


434 Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original Quote in German: “Im Endeffekt kam auch der Auslöser eigentlich politisch rüber … So wie der Kommunismus aus der Sowjetunion gekommen ist, so ist eigentlich auch der Keim zum Zusammenbruch von dort gekommen, über den Gorbatschow.”
improve relations between the two Germanies. Here, “his popularity […] had reached unparalleled heights”, a fact which would not go unnoticed by the GDR’s population. A number of interviewees joined protests for reform, even those who had not done so previously, but had suddenly felt empowered to take part. Ilse F. stated how “there arose a kind of excitement” which swept her up in the protest movement.

The second half of 1989 saw reforms in countries which bordered the GDR, most importantly those relating to the Iron Curtain, with border controls being reduced. During the month of August, hoards of East Germans had crossed the Czechoslovak and Hungarian borders, among them some interviewees, who joined the many taking refuge in the West German embassies of Prague and Budapest, in the hope of having their East German citizenship recognised as a valid reason for asylum in West Germany. Angela H., who was 18 at the time, described how

we came to the fence [of the West German embassy] and then some people on the other side of the fence said ‘Do you want to go to West Germany?’ and we said ‘Yes, we do.’ So then we quickly passed the children over, and I don’t know actually how I got over the fence, it was so high … [W]e were in … the West German embassy, but we already saw the guards running down … because they wanted to hold us back.

In addition, on 19 August 1989, opposition groups in Hungary planned a picnic on the border with Austria to celebrate the easing of border controls. The event was intended as an opportunity for Austrians and Hungarians to “move across the border to eat and drink with each other”, and through this “give further impetus to the many other changes taking place in Hungary in 1989 in the direction of democratisation and greater openness.” However, the event attracted not only Austrians and Hungarians, but also East Germans who had come to Hungary with the intention of leaving for West Germany via Austria. What was supposed to be a small-scale event “became more of

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435 Lévesque, p. 146.
436 Ilse F. in an interview with M. Durrer 18th August 2010.
437 Angela H. in an interview with M. Durrer 4th April 2012.
439 Cox, p. 1627.
440 Cox, p. 1627.
441 Cox, pp. 1628-29.
a mass event involving several thousand people”, where a number of East Germans took advantage of the minimal security measures and made their way across the border. Developments in Hungary were frequently described as the moment at which East Germans first came to witness real change within their country and the collapse of the regime as a possibility, as Alexander S. recounted: “When things started in Hungary during that summer, then it was clear that there was a good chance that something would happen.” Furthermore, on 10 September, the Hungarian authorities permitted legal passage through to neighbouring Austria for East German refugees. Hanna T. was one of these refugees who remembered how she and her family had been permitted to cross the border after “the West German government had some negotiations with the Hungarians and they paid, I think it was one million Marks to the Red Cross in Hungary and they opened the border for us.”

Later that month, a number of those GDR citizens who had taken refuge earlier in Prague’s West German embassy were permitted to leave for the West as well, although GDR authorities forced their trains to travel back through the GDR in a last show of power, as Angela H. explained:

[T]hey did say to us … ‘[Y]ou’re going to be all put into trains and you need to go past the East German border’ and of course … we straight away thought ‘Oh my goodness, they’re going to shoot us’ because at that point in time … you’re just on … edge … You pretty much much expect them to do almost anything.

In mid-1989 the GDR was faced with a predicament, as “the mass emigration of tens of thousands of highly skilled, youthful workers to the West revealed the economic, political and moral crisis that the GDR faced.” However, although significant numbers of East Germans opted to escape, many remained in the hope that they would be able to reform their country from within. In contrast to the dynamic which

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442 Cox, p. 1628.
443 Alexander S. in an interview with M. Durrer 27th August 2010. Original quote in German: “Als es dann mit Ungarn losging in dem Sommer, dann war klar, es gibt eine gute Chance, dass was passiert.”
447 It has been estimated that approximately 350,000 East Germans left for West Germany in 1989, and a further 240,000 between January and June the following year. Mehrlander qtd. in Mueller, p. 717.
usually exists between those who leave (the “exit” movement) and those who remain and protest for reform (the “voice” movement), whereby those who “exit” are viewed as abandoning the cause within their own country in favour of an egotistical decision to search for a better life elsewhere; the “exit” and “voice” movements within the GDR complemented each other.\[448\] As Christian Joppke (1993) explains, “the dramatic exodus in summer 1989 created a situation in which exit and voice were no longer ‘antagonists’ but ‘confederates’”.\[449\] The tides of refugees leaving the GDR and the problems this caused for the regime in many respects spurred on opposition-groups within the GDR and encouraged them in voicing their private discontent for the first time. As emphasised by Albert O. Hirschman (1993), “[p]recisely because the East German regime had made the repression of exit into the touchstone of its authority, its sudden incapacity to enforce its writ in this area meant a huge loss of face that emboldened people to other kinds of transgression.”\[450\] Kristoff A., who was a child at the time, experienced the unfolding events from within the GDR. He and his family watched with anticipation: “It was a totally exciting time … from the moment when the first refugees crossed the border in Hungary and then when the drama with the embassy in Prague began. From that point on the atmosphere was electric.”\[451\]

The majority of East Germans had long been exposed to images of an alternative world: the capitalist world of the West. As stipulated by Lewis (1995), “[f]or forty years, the capitalist West represented an unattainable object of desire for those less privileged members of East German society who were denied access to travel and hard currency.”\[452\] Relatively easy access to West German television in the GDR meant that international events had been able to transcend the border.\[453\] According to both historians and interviewees, “[t]he West posed a problem for Communist systems simply by being there”,\[454\] as it continuously presented itself as an alternative “colourful,

\[448\] Ross, p. 472.
\[453\] According to Hanke (1990), “[a] major section of the population (some 85 percent) can pick up the terrestrial transmissions of three, and in some places four, FRG television channels and fifteen to twenty German-language radio services.” Hanke, p. 185.
Most interviewees who grew up behind the Iron Curtain in the lead-up to the fall of the Wall had regular access to western TV and were able to view an alternative world where, according to Martina E., you were aware of the fact “that the people [in the West] were materially better-off … that they had more freedom than us … that overall life was better there. That was my impression.”

Interviewees described being aware of the West’s privileged situation and “higher material standard of living and far more freedom,” which they were able to witness regularly through the media. This awareness helped contribute to the mounting discontent among the GDR’s population, who wished for a more affluent life and greater freedom. To Stefanie E., western TV was “like a window you could look through, but [you] don’t go there. That was a bit hard and I think that in the end it was that which ruined the system.”

With all of these factors at play, pockets of resistance grew within the GDR, the country which had previously been held up as an example for the success of communism to the rest of the world. As interviewees reported, in the past they had often expressed their dissatisfaction with the system in their private spheres of close family and friends, but now this underlying discontent came to the fore in the public sphere, in the context of increased openness in Eastern Europe, as supported by Steven Pfaff (2006): “The quasi-groups located in the ‘niches’ may thus be seen as latent groups for the purposes of collective action.”

The stability of the regime came under threat due to “the population’s shift from private and individual acquiescence to the public and ever more collective expression of their grievances in the years prior to 1989.”

The prevalence of private discontent with the state of affairs in the GDR revealed itself and more and more people found resonance with other protesters. They identified with the cause and, as Karl-Dieter Opp (2012) explains, “if identification reaches a certain intensity people begin to protest on behalf of the group, and protest increases with rising

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455 Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original quote in German: “bunte, glitzernde Leben.”
457 Brown, p. 459.
458 Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6th June 2012.
identification. Signicant unrest was rst heard on the streets of the Saxon city of Leipzig as early as March 1989, although there had been displays of opposition before this time. It was reported that “several hundred demonstrators carried posters for travel rights” during the internationally recognised Spring Fair. This had the effect of drawing international attention to the citizens’ protests and placing Leipzig in the spotlight. According to Pfaff (1996), “the revolution born in the streets of Leipzig was facilitated by collective identities and social solidarities that arose in the private sphere of trusted friends and associates.” GDR citizens at the time formed an imagined community, rising in solidarity against their government. As Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani (1999) explain in their research on social movements, “[t]o identify with a movement also entails feelings of solidarity towards people to whom one is not usually linked by direct personal contacts, but with whom one nonetheless shares aspirations and values.” This applied to generation B interviewees as well as some older generation C interviewees, who united through the collective desire for reform. A number of participants took part in these protests, one of them being Renate S., who stated her reasons for doing so in her interview: “I just wanted to be able to travel to wherever I wanted, and yes, [I wanted] more freedom of speech. That was all that I wanted.” Her sentiments were echoed by Julia T., who explained the motives for public displays of discontent as due to “being fenced-in and due to some restrictions which we had, and due to the surveillance.” Interviewees commented on the altered mood within the GDR at this time:

463 Some opposition had already been present among church groups in the early 1980s, although they did not openly resist the regime. It has been documented that “Deacon Günter Johannsen had initiated Monday, five o’clock prayer meetings in the Nikolaikirche as early as 1982. The long-standing weekly prayers for peace provided a preexistent nucleus of disaffiliation. The regime had left the church its alternative political space and voice – provided that it remained enclosed and not directly oppositional.” Maier, p. 139.
464 Maier, p. 135.
468 Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original quote in German: “das Eingesperrtein und über einige Einschränkungen, die wir so hatten, und über die Überwachung.”
There was a kind of excitement … maybe a month or six weeks before the Wall came down. We didn’t even know this, this came all so quickly, you see? We never thought in six weeks time this will happen … There was this particular day, I’m pretty sure it was a Thursday, where when we arrived … in Leipzig to do our usual thing, demonstrating … we could feel ‘Wow, there’s something going on.’”

Stefanie E., who also attended the protests, depicted the atmosphere at the time: “It was sort of … Aufbruchsstimmung [spirit of optimism] … I think everybody wanted to make the most out of it. Also, people did not know if this is going to stay like that, or are they going to close the borders again.” However, the true scale of what the protests would achieve was not yet apparent, as indicated by Julia T.:

It was a feeling … of doing something very special, but at the time I did not yet have the feeling that we were part of a big historical development … Of course it was exciting and … you had the feeling that you were doing something which was forbidden, but [you] hadn’t yet grasped the bigger picture.

As Pfaff (2006) explains, the protests were “the uncoordinated result of many discrete individuals reacting to the same set of interests, incentives, norms, and expectations at the same time”. Taken by surprise at the scale of this display of solidarity, the regime was unsure of how to respond to the protests at this time. However, they did ensure that the police’s presence was felt at the regular Montagsdemonstrationen [Monday Demonstrations] which would come to characterise prayer services at the city’s churches. It was reported that for many years “pastors had preserved and nurtured civil society in the GDR, turning church meeting rooms into incubators of free thought.” Churches had long provided dissidents with protection and were considered

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469 Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd April 2013.
470 Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6th June 2012.
473 Maier, pp. 135-36.
by many to be outside the control of the Stasi, although this was not always the case. At the time of the protests, as Julia T. explained, even “people who weren’t believers attended. They just went to church in order to be able to … work in these groups.”

With the churches’ history of dissent, it was not surprising that the core of the protests developed from the regular prayer-meetings for peace which would take place throughout the country. Leipzig’s Nikolaikirche [Nikolai Church], in particular, provided the population with a space to express their views, as Renate S. described: “In Leipzig … there was a special church where all the demonstrations ended and I actually even wrote in the book [in the church] as well: ‘We want to be free … and we’ve had enough of this!’”

The scale of the Leipzig protests was documented by John O. Koehler (2004):

> Beginning in early September, between 2,000 and 3,000 marched through the centre of the city every Monday evening carrying lit candles and gathering for prayers in front of the Nikolai church. Except for shouts for democratic reform and demands for freedom to travel, these marches were peaceful, and their ranks swelled by thousands every consecutive Monday.”

Henning P. was a university student at the time and decided to attend the protest after being encouraged to do so by a number of his classmates. He explained that “I went to the last demo, even though I was scared.” Within the GDR, the catch-cry of “Wir bleiben hier” [We are staying here] was being used by protesters of the so-called Bürgerbewegung [citizens’ movement], as a defiant gesture to call for the remodelling of the flawed political structure and an improvement in everyday life in the GDR. There were calls to restructure and liberalise the current system in order to create a brand of socialism which truly belonged to the people, also described as

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475 Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original quote in German: “[Da sind] auch Leute hingegangen, die nicht gläubig waren. Die sind einfach nur in die Kirche gegangen, um eben … in diesen Gruppen arbeiten zu können.”
476 Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd April 2013.
477 Koehler, p. 381.
480 Maier, p. 136.
481 Kettenacker, p. 105.
“socialism with a human face.” As Julia T. explained: “There were people who believed in the fact that you could reform this socialism.” Reform groups began to emerge, which called for systemic changes. One such group was Neues Forum [New Forum], which, according to Natalie F., was comprised of “intellectuals of the time who had grouped together.” Neues Forum emerged in September 1989, expressing their wishes for travel rights and fair elections. They “deplored the gulf between state and society, denouncing the informers, the violence, of the state” and demanded “democratic dialogue” with the SED leadership. For the first time in the GDR’s history, the public and the government were engaged in dialogue concerning the future of their country. Furthermore,

[a]s demonstrations continued in Leipzig and in Berlin, passionate public debates took place between protesters and politicians. These were aggressively reported by the Western media, which played a decisive role in forcing the Party hierarchy to its knees.

The Western media’s focus on Neues Forum also resulted in its increase in popularity within the GDR. Calls to officially recognise it were echoed by ordinary citizens, whose claustrophobia had reached a critical point. The group’s strength would lie in the fact that “it wished to be a citizens’ movement and not another party”, thus distancing itself from the ideological rhetoric which permeated East German politics. However, at this stage, there was no thought of reunification among these groups or among those on the streets protesting, as Julia T. recalled: “Yes, the reunification, well that also wasn’t really an aim … Rather, reforms were the maximum which you were able to imagine and also the minimum which you wanted, but I don’t think you were able to imagine

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483 Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original quote in German: “Es gab einfach Leute, die haben daran geglaubt, dass man diesen Sozialismus auch reformieren kann.”
484 Natalie F. in an interview with M. Durrer 29th April 2013. Original quote in German: “Intellektuelle dieser Zeit, die sich da sozusagen formiert haben.”
485 Maier, p. 136.
486 Kettenacker, p. 103.
487 Koehler, p. 382.
488 Kettenacker, p. 100.
489 Kettenacker, p. 104.
any more than that.\textsuperscript{490} Ilse F., who was also involved in the demonstrations, had been personally inspired by these calls for reform. For her “[i]t wasn’t so much that I could go to the West, but rather that there is a possibility to make changes in our country\textsuperscript{491} which had prompted her to attend in the first place. Similarly, Stefanie E. recounted that for her

it was the whole spirit of the time … You knew something was going to happen, you couldn’t really say what. Yeah, I thought it was a very exciting time. Everybody wanted to change something, also nobody really knew what, but it was more that people wanted freedom, wanted to be able to travel. I think that was the main spirit in the community: change things, get rid of old structures and … [e]verybody wanted to be a part of it.\textsuperscript{492}

The tide of public opposition grew to new strengths on 25 September, when a crowd of approximately 8,000 gathered in Leipzig.\textsuperscript{493} At this stage the SED was becoming desperate and

[b]y October 5, the Ministry for State Security had issued orders to get tough. From October 5 to 8, Erich Mielke [the Minister for State Security] sent instructions to mobilize factory militia units (Kampfgruppen) and reinforce the police with party reservists.\textsuperscript{494}

However, a police-presence was not enough to deter the throngs of protesters who had found courage in a sense of communal purpose. For the first time in the GDR’s history, private feelings of discontent merged with public displays of opposition to the status quo\textsuperscript{495} on a large scale in an unstoppable demonstration of communal resilience. It was this sense of solidarity, a striving for greater freedom, which would enable East

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\textsuperscript{490} Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original quote in German: “Ja, die Wiedervereinigung, die war auch nicht wirklich ein Ziel … Also, Reformen war eher das Maximum, was man sich vorstellen konnte und zwar auch das Minimum, was man wollte, aber ich glaube, mehr konnte man sich auch gar nicht vorstellen.”
\textsuperscript{491} Ilse F. in an interview with M. Durrer 18th August 2010.
\textsuperscript{492} Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6th June 2013.
\textsuperscript{494} Maier, pp. 140-42.
Germans to “ha[ve] a decisive impact on their own history.” East Germans persisted with their peaceful protests and displays of opposition continued to spread throughout the country. On 6 October, Gorbachev arrived in the country to attend the GDR’s 40th Anniversary celebrations to be held the following day. During his visit, it was noted that “he was welcomed like a liberator by huge crowds in East Berlin” who cried “Gorbi! Gorbi!” in a show of support for his encouragement of reforms across the Eastern Bloc. Gorbachev wished the GDR’s administration to pass reforms similar to those in his own country, but they were reluctant, even banning the Russian newspaper *Sputnik* in an effort to discourage oppositional activity and prevent ordinary East Germans from reading about changes which had been occurring in other Eastern Bloc countries. Gorbachev warned the GDR’s leadership and conveyed “a stern message to the governing party, urging liberalization and warning famously that delay could mean disaster.”

7 October saw the official celebration of the GDR’s foundation. In spite of Gorbachev’s previous display of a lack of faith in Honecker, the SED’s leader defiantly proclaimed the existence of a strong foundation of socialism in the GDR and its continued existence for decades to come. As Erna P. stated in her interview, Honecker had professed “The Wall will stand for another 100 years!” The security surrounding the celebrations was tight, but nevertheless, tension was perceived to be mounting, as described by Thomas E., who had just joined the army at this time:

I was answerable to the Stasi in the regiment in Berlin: it was called the [Feliks Dzierzynski] Guard Regiment, and we were right on the hot spot where we had to anticipate that something may happen, and before this had been the 7 October

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496 Maier, p. xiii.
497 Lévesque, p. 155.
499 Connelly, p. 12.
500 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 15th July 2010. Original quote in German: “Hundert Jahre wird die Mauer noch stehen!”
... the GDR’s National Day, the fortieth ... There we were on duty and you did pick up on some things then. 501

Renate S. recalled the security surrounding the demonstrations she attended just weeks before the fall of the Wall: “We’d been to Leipzig and the atmosphere, it was so frightening, really, because suddenly it was all quiet and you saw the big Militärtrucks [military trucks] coming, shops just closed and yeah, everybody was really scared of what’s next.” 502 The presence of the Stasi was felt among the crowd, as Julia T. described: “You did see the people who you suspected standing a bit on the sidelines ... You did observe them with some distrust.” 503 Ironically, the events of the following month would culminate in the speedy demise of the socialist state and the disappearance of the Wall. More and more demonstrators took to the streets as the population grew weary of dialogue and their participation in socialism’s experiment. Honecker was increasingly viewed as incompetent and incapable of dealing with the issue. He resigned on 17 October and was succeeded by Egon Krenz. 504 However, Krenz too continued to feel the pressure of discontent from the population, particularly after he was made aware of the “disastrous report on the GDR’s economic situation.” 505 Nevertheless, German unification was also never a consideration among those in power at this time 506 and would only become a real possibility during the dramatic culmination of events which unfolded in the lead up to and aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

501 Thomas E. in an interview with M. Durrer 29th April 2013. Original quote in German: “[I]ch war ... der Stasi unterstellt im Regiment in Berlin: Das Feliks Dzierzynski Wachregiment hieß das, und wir sind ... in Berlin direkt an dem Brennpunkt [gewesen], wo man erwarten musste, dass was passiert, und davor war ja der 7. Oktober ... der DDR-Feiertag, der vierzigste ... Da waren wir halt auch im Einsatz und man hat schon ein bisschen was mitgekriegt.”

502 Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd April 2013.

503 Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original quote in German: “Man hat schon die Leute, die einem verdächtig waren, ... ein bisschen abseits stehen sehen ... [Die] hat man schon ein bisschen misstrauisch beobachtet.”

504 Lévesque, p. 156.

505 The GDR was in serious debt and Krenz took the desperate measure of travelling to Moscow on 1 November to ask for loans from the USSR. The trouble with this was that the USSR was also suffering under dire economic circumstances itself and so when Krenz’s wishes were not met, he made Gorbachev aware of “his intention to ‘half open’ the GDR’s Western borders”, since the FRG was willing to loan the GDR money. However, this proposal was kept secret from the general population and was only intended to occur under tight control. Lévesque, p. 158; Jonathan Grix (2000) also discusses the GDR’s dire economic situation. Grix, p. 73.

506 Kettenacker, p. 110.
4.2 The fall of the Berlin Wall

The sudden opening of the Wall occurred due to a misunderstanding during a press conference held by an official of the SED, Günter Schabowski. He outlined the travel proposal put forward by the Central Committee, but because he had not been present at the meeting himself, was unaware of some minor details regarding the timing of the opening of the border. When asked when the borders would be opened, he mistakenly stated that this would take place immediately, rather than the following day. Kurt S. remembered watching this broadcast and recalled how Schabowski just announced that there will be the possibility for everyone to leave East Germany without actually having to give a reason … I heard Schabowski sort of stumbling, saying as far as he knows it [the decree] comes into effect immediately … I was deep in thought, thinking of the words he used [and] what they actually mean.507

Many other interviewees recalled Schabowski’s announcement and the disbelief it generated among GDR citizens. Martina E. described how “on the evening itself they said, shortly after seven or at a quarter past seven, Schabowski said … ‘We are opening the Wall’ … Then I went off to a parent-teacher evening. All of the others had also seen it. No one believed it … It was unbelievable.”508 Britta F., who was 18 at the time, recounted the confusion resulting from the broadcast of this press conference: “I saw how a highly-ranked politician … announced that the Wall would be opened at certain points … It wasn’t … absolutely clear what he actually meant by that. However, the result was that the Wall was opened at some of the border-crossings.”509 Many ordinary GDR citizens could not believe what they were hearing and even, as Erna P., asserted, “thought it was Carnival, or that it was a joke or something.”510 Schabowski’s announcement was interpreted by many as meaning that they would be allowed to cross

509 Britta F. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd October 2009. Original quote in German: “Ich habe gesehen, wie ein hoher Politiker … bekannt gegeben hat, dass die Mauer an bestimmten Stellen geöffnet wird … E war … nicht ganz klar, was er eigentlich damit meinte. Die Folge war aber die Konsequenz, dass an einigen Kontrollpunkten die Mauer aufgemacht wurde.”
510 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 15th July 2010. Original quote in German: “haben gedacht, [es] ist Fasching, oder es ist irgendwie ein Joke oder ‘was.’"
the border straight away. Within hours that evening, “a crowd was assembling at the Bornholmer crossing point north of the Brandenburg Gate”\(^{511}\) and demanding to be allowed to cross to West Berlin. Border guards were confused as they had not received any orders from above to allow this. By 11pm the crowd at the Bornholmer Straße crossing had grown to around 20,000,\(^{512}\) who were demanding that the gate be opened. As a result, “the local guards decided on their own authority that they must simply allow free passage, and crowds poured across the frontier that had been so deadly up to a few hours earlier.”\(^{513}\)

When it became clear that neither East German nor Soviet authorities would suppress the protest, more and more people joined in the rush to the West and GDR authorities lost all control of the situation. As Julia T., illustrated: “Well, the people were excited … uncertain, no, they were excited in a positive way, I think. Well, it was … like a … huge surprise. Of course we had never thought that that would happen.”\(^{514}\) With the threat of violence removed,\(^{515}\) dissatisfaction with the regime “overflowed from private circles into public life”. Thomas E., an 18-year-old at the time who was serving in the Feliks Dzierzynski Guard Regiment, described the confusing situation and the lack of specific instructions:

> [T]hese demonstrations in Berlin, for example. You sat there and you did not know anything. We were loaded onto a truck two or three times, in uniform with a sharp weapon, and then you sat there and thought: ‘What do I do now?’ … You did not know what was happening … I did not know where I was because they just drove us somewhere. It could have been that we were at the Alexanderplatz around the corner. It could have been that we were somewhere in Bernau … No idea where we were and no one told us either … and then you sit

\(^{511}\) Maier, p. 160.

\(^{512}\) Maier, p. 161.

\(^{513}\) Maier, p. 161.

\(^{514}\) Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\(^{nd}\) April 2013. Original quote in German: “Also, die Leute waren sehr aufgeregt … unsicher, nein, [sic] waren positiv aufgeregt, glaube ich. Also, das war … wie eine … riesige Überraschung … Wir hätten natürlich nie gedacht, dass das passiert.”

\(^{515}\) According to Pfaff (1996), “[i]f a cost-benefit analysis suggests individual actors that protest would fail or dissent be punished, they will avoid an open display of their grievances or political aims.” Pfaff, “Collective Identity and Informal Groups in Revolutionary Mobilization,” Social Forces, p. 101.
there for two, three, four or five hours and think: ‘What will I actually do if this order comes?’ But each time, we were driven back to the barracks.516

References to the importance of the authorities’ action – or rather, inaction – in response to the protests, were made by interviewees, who had been unsure of how the regime would react at the time. Elisa M. emphasised the vital role which the Soviet Union played at the time of the opening of the Wall, and how its decision not to intervene contributed to the demise of the GDR: “Well, I think in this case that a lot was due to Gorbachev, or Russia itself … in the sense that Russia approved [the demonstrations] … If they had said ‘No, we’re not allowing that’, then … there would have been tanks standing there.”517

At the beginning of the protest movement, there was a very real fear of military intervention. According to Natalie F., at the time it was uncertain: “[w]hether there would be another Prague, so with tanks at some point, or whether it would happen peacefully, I mean, of course it was not foreseeable that the Wall would fall.”518 Interviewees considered themselves to be lucky that there had been no retaliation by authorities, as Renate S. recounted: “I think we can be glad that Gorbachev was there … Look, the entire reunification was actually bloodless … and I don’t think that that would have happened if Gorbachev had not relented.”519 The USSR – true to its voiced intentions – had not interfered and the East German government was at a loss as to how to respond to the crisis and did nothing to hamper opposition. West Germans, too, reacted to the opening of the border by flocking to the Berlin Wall to witness the


517 Elisa M. in an interview with M. Durrer 17th June 2010: “Also da denke ich war vieles Gorbatschow zu verantworten, oder Russland an sich, … dass Russland das abgesegnet hat … Hätten sie gesagt ‘Nein, wir lassen das nicht zu’, dann wären da Panzer.”


519 Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd April 2013. Original quote in German: “Ich denke, wir können froh sein, dass Gorbatschow eigentlich da war … Guck mal, … die ganze Wiedervereinigung ist eigentlich blutlos geschehen … und … das glaube ich nicht, dass das so gegangen wäre, hätte der Gorbatschow nicht so eingelenkt.”
unfolding events for themselves. Thus, people from both sides clambered onto the Wall and East Germans were welcomed by West Germans with open arms. However, interviewees displayed varied reactions to the fall of the Wall, although most described feeling overjoyed that there was a possibility for change. Erna P. remembered the unexpectedness of the situation and recounted: “[Y]ou can’t imagine something like that … Now it’s all so obvious, but when we were stuck amidst all that with the view: ‘The Wall will never fall, we will stay sitting here in our box, the GDR, until we die’ … but all of a sudden it was all open!”520 Carolin B., who was 14 at the time, described the wave of euphoria which she witnessed on this night: “It was totally awesome, and, I have to say, just when we were at the Glienicker Bridge … when we went over there people were handing us so much champagne and they … knocked on the cars and there were people [everywhere] … It was absolutely crazy.”521 Britta F., too, crossed the border at the time of the opening of the Wall. She reminisced about what she did that night: “[W]e went over to West Berlin … [We] called up a friend who was already living in the West and made our way through Berlin with him, through bars [and] cafés.”522 For many interviewees, like Sofia W., who had earlier escaped the GDR, the fall of the Wall had deep personal significance:

I don’t think one will ever forget this scene … I was crying. We were all crying … tears, I suppose, of joy and of sheer disbelief … and also a little bit of … pain, you know, [thinking of] all these horrible things that have happened to others and to us … [that] it can’t repeat itself … It’s a good memory and I’ll never forget it.523

Other interviewees who had escaped prior to the fall of the Wall also viewed the events positively, as they often had relatives in the East that they had left behind. Hanna T., who had left a couple of months before the fall of the Wall, described her perception of

the unfolding events: “When the Wall fell, that was actually a huge surprise for all of us, because we didn’t think that it would happen so soon … We were happy, but we were also annoyed because we had left everything there and taken all the consequences upon ourselves.”524 Another interviewee who escaped beforehand, Angela H., described how “I felt like I’d been followed, to tell you the truth, because … it was such an effort to get out … of East Germany, and then I thought ‘I could have stayed there’ and I could have just walked across, rather than … doing it the risky way.”525

However, attention must also be drawn to the fact that open displays of opposition, as widespread as they were, did not represent the sentiments of all East German citizens in 1989. Although many did unite at this time and have a sense of collective purpose and of belonging to an imagined community of resistance and reform, there are some others who do not belong to this group and form their own generation unit. The media portrayed 9 November as a triumph, but what it did not show was the confusion and fear of some of those who did not take part, but rather looked on apprehensively as the events unfolded. Although most GDR citizens were happy to be granted greater freedom, many also expressed concern about what the future held for them. Kurt S. remembered how he had been

mainly happy [but] … [i]t was immediately clear to me that [the fall of the Wall] … would be followed by a lengthy period of confusion and uncertainty … Obviously to be able to go anywhere is great, but … it sort of became clear to me that once something as drastic as this happened there couldn’t be two German states existing next to each other, that the stronger, and the bigger West would simply somehow take over, and that meant uncertainty … In that sense it was like a dampener … I wasn’t jumping up and down.526

While the fall of the Berlin Wall had been brought about by collective action, the individual experiences and feelings at this time were very varied and extremely personal and, for some, signalled an identity crisis amid mounting uncertainty. Generation C

524 Hanna T. in an interview with M. Durrer 24th August 2010. Original quote in German: “Als die Mauer gefallen war, das war für uns eigentlich alle eine Überraschung, weil wir haben damit nicht so früh gerechnet … Wir haben uns gefreut und wir haben uns geärgert, weil wir haben alles dort gelassen und haben die ganzen Strapazen auf uns genommen.”
525 Angela H. in an interview with M. Durrer 4th April 2012.
interviewees, particularly those who were young children in 1989, often recalled feelings of fear in relation to these events. For some, it meant the collapse of an idyllic childhood world, as expressed by Daniela S., who lamented the loss of a society in which she had felt “safe”:

It was only a couple of years ago that I rediscovered why I had this … feeling of safety: because the GDR advocated ‘We are a country of Peace, and we want World Peace, and we take care of everyone and everyone has work’ and … when you are a naive, innocent GDR-child, it makes a relatively big impression.527

This sense of loss of the familiar and the insecurity of the future was also described by Peter S., who explained: “I realised that something [had] happened and I think my personal feelings were … actually more fear … [I was] a little bit scared about what’s coming up.”528 Some who were children at the time also did not recall the actual event itself. Elisa M. explained: “Well … at that time I was … 12, so actually of an age when you should be able to remember, but no, it doesn’t really come to mind, well no, I can’t remember … what happened.”529 While it is impossible to ascertain the exact reason why some interviewees, particularly of generation C, were unable to recall the event, one possible explanation could be that the social upheavals and changes occurring at the time cause so much confusion and a trauma of sorts, particularly among the young, who were still trying to gain an understanding of the world.

It was not only children of generation C who harboured mixed feelings at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Generation B interviewees who had been in the GDR at the time often identified these events as crucial to their path in life. One interviewee, Martina E., summarised people’s reactions very well:

528 Peter S. in an interview with M. Durrer 24th March 2013.
529 Elisa M. in an interview with M. Durrer 17th June 2010. Original quote in German: “Ich war damals … zwölf, also eigentlich schon im Alter, wo man sich erinnern könnte, aber nee, ist mir nicht wirklich geläufig, also nee, ich kann mich nicht d’ran erinnern, was da war.”
The people … were uncertain. They didn’t know what was coming, and … it was very varied in the individual GDR stories. Some greeted the whole thing … with a lot of enthusiasm, others were anxious … [A]ll in all … you came to terms with the situation. You couldn’t change it, it just happened.\(^{530}\)

With the fall of the Wall, forty years of German division came to an end and the unanticipated events of this night were “seen as the final death knell to East-Central European communism.”\(^{531}\) The following years would see many changes and involve a major adjustment process for many citizens of the GDR. Although they were largely ignored amidst the euphoria of the fall of the Wall, some possible problems, related to the fact that East and West Germans had spent so many years apart, were anticipated, even prior to the fall of the Wall. Hanke (1990) explained that

\[i\]t is certainly going to be more problematical to integrate this ‘foreign culture’ – moulded as it is by what are basically bourgeois predilections – into a social and cultural system with a socialist orientation, than it would be in a situation where one could presuppose agreement on all the matters of basic concern (the bourgeois idea of freedom and an individualized image of humanity).\(^{532}\)

Although the fall of the Wall “appeared to signal the end of an epoch and the beginning of something new”,\(^{533}\) the growing together of East and West would not be without challenges. What the event itself, however, signified to East Germans at the time in terms of identity, was to highlight the presence of widespread discontent and the desire for reforms. From the perspective of many interviewees, November 1989 was a moment when the majority of East Germans felt extremely proud of their communal identity, irrespective of whether they were protesters or onlookers, or pro- or anti-communism. It was a time when East Germans were mobilised, and identities “migrated” from the private to the public sphere. However, the aftermath of the event would pose new

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\(^{531}\) Philipsen, p. 3.

\(^{532}\) Hanke, p. 182.

\(^{533}\) Philipsen, p. 2.
challenges for some interviewees and highlight the divisions between them which emerged upon reflection on the society which was the GDR.

For many interviewees in this study, particularly those of generations B and C, the identity ruptures felt in the lead-up to the fall of the Berlin Wall were just the beginning of their migration journey, both mentally and physically. Their views of the time did not appear to differ markedly from other East Germans who had never physically migrated, as is demonstrated by a comparison to Fulbrook’s (2011) publication which also highlights the ambivalence surrounding the event.534 These interviewees, like their counterparts in Germany, displayed various reactions to the fall of the Wall with desires for reform rather than reunification dominating the discussion. Although not the primary factor in influencing interviewees’ decisions to migrate, for some the disappointments associated with reunification and its aftermath were listed among other reasons for leaving, as will be further discussed in chapter 7.

Chapter 5 – German reunification: The crises of East German identity

“The first four to eight weeks ... it was as if the whole of Germany were drunk ... [E]veryone, well I would say 90% or more, was overjoyed that the Wall was gone ... The East Germans drove to the West, [and] West Germans hosted Easterners whom they had never seen before and gave them old cars ... There was a connection there, it was unbelievable.”

(Martina E.) 535

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of communism in Eastern Europe would raise new questions regarding the identities of interviewees as the future of the GDR remained in limbo. East and West Germans had spent 40 years apart, although in the initial weeks after the fall of the Wall this seemed irrelevant. Most GDR citizens had long had access to West German television and, as Fulbrook (1999) explains, it was this which “had helped to keep alive the residual sense of all-German identity that could be drawn on in the changed rhetoric of street politics after 9 November”. 536 The road to reunification, however, would not be without obstacles, as the toll of decades of separation was realised and the impact upon the generations who had lived behind the Wall was recognised. In spite of their common German heritage, what many East Germans did not realise at first, was how they had “at the same time [been] growing apart, diverging in attitudes, lifestyles and values from those living in the very different society of the affluent West.” 537 This had widespread implications for their collective consciousness and sense of belonging. East Germans faced challenges related to their identities and had to reconsider these in light of their own generational position within the residual East German society, as well as within a whole new environment including West Germans. For many generation B and C interviewees, who were most affected by the post-reunification changes, and to a lesser extent generation A, the fall of the Wall

536 Fulbrook, German National Identity After the Holocaust, p. 207.
537 Fulbrook, German National Identity After the Holocaust, p. 236.
changed social dynamics. As a result, “winners” and “losers” of reunification began to emerge due to interviewees’ positions in time and place.

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Wall, many former East Germans flocked to the West in search of what they thought they had been denied access to in the GDR. Many wanted to experience the consumer culture which they had seen so often on West German television, but of which they had been unable to be a part until now. The West German government greeted Easterners by providing them with 100 West German marks as _Begrüßungsgeld_ [welcome money], which many of them spent in the initial days, during what was for most their first personal experience of Western consumer culture. Stefanie E. recalled “queuing up for this 100 [Westmark] _Begrüßungsgeld_ … We were queuing with [what seemed like] millions of others to cross the border.”

The atmosphere was overwhelming for many Easterners, who reacted to their long period of isolation from the outside world by rushing to see what was on the other side of the border. Hanna T. described this rush to the West in her interview in the following manner: “I always compare it with a herd of sheep. When you open the gate and you tell them: ‘One after the other’ … and they all run … The gate opened and they were all running for the TVs [and] cars.” For interviewees such as Stefanie E. it was their first visit to the “golden West”. She described her reaction at the time: “[Y]ou were walking through shops and [there was] all this abundance of stuff and everything was available and I didn’t know what to buy … I didn’t know what to do.” Many interviewees celebrated their new-found freedom and recounted the positive reaction which most West Germans also had towards them at the time. According to Martina E., both sides were in a state of euphoria in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Wall:

The first four to eight weeks … it was as if the whole of Germany were drunk … [E]veryone, well I would say 90% or more, was overjoyed that the Wall was gone, and the East Germans drove to the West, [and] West Germans hosted

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538 Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6th June 2012.
540 Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6th June 2012.
Easterners whom they had never seen before and gave them old cars … [T]here was a connection there, it was unbelievable.\textsuperscript{541}

This sentiment was expressed by David Clarke and Ute Wölfel (2011), who emphasised how the collapse of the GDR “was greeted with almost universal enthusiasm by Germans on both sides of the now dissolved Iron Curtain.”\textsuperscript{542} Other interviewees similarly recalled this period of elation, describing how what “was really very moving was how they received us when the East Germans came to West Germany. That was … so touching.”\textsuperscript{543} It seemed that most East and West Germans initially embraced the opening of the border and perhaps even saw each other as possessing a shared heritage and common identity. In the initial days, this sentiment prevailed and many people from both sides of the political divide thought themselves to belong to one imagined community. Particularly for members of the older generation, generation A, the collapse of the Berlin Wall symbolised the rightful rejoining of what had been unjustly divided. Although all interviewees of this generation already resided outside Germany at this time, the event signified an emotional reunion of people on either side of the Iron Curtain who had been kept apart against their will. As Frieda K. asserted: “When the Berlin Wall came down … [i]t was certainly a relief, something that we had hoped for for a long, long time, and sometimes gave up hope that it will ever happen.”\textsuperscript{544} For generation A, their decision to migrate had established a more distanced and detached perspective on events following the collapse of communism. Although the demise of the GDR did grant them the possibility of seeing family members or friends again more easily, they had been separated from their original \textit{Heimat} by both space and time and had already established themselves outside the former GDR. They had been too far removed from life there for the post-1989 changes to truly affect them, as Hans L. reflected in his interview:


\textsuperscript{542} Clarke and Wölfel, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{543} Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\textsuperscript{nd} April 2014. Original quote in German: “Was sehr, sehr bewegend war, war, wo die Ostdeutschen nach Westdeutschland kamen, wie die uns empfangen haben. Also, das war … so rührend.”

\textsuperscript{544} Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 2\textsuperscript{nd} August 2010.
What were my feelings when the Wall was down? All I can say is, I knew it had to happen, and when it did actually happen, my ties with Germany … [were] not that great anymore. I mean, I’ve got my family here now and, it didn’t go all that deep. [I] just felt it’s a good thing.\textsuperscript{545}

Klara T. similarly described how once the Wall did come down and physical return was possible, “it was too late. People said ‘Oh, you know, you can go home’, but it didn’t seem home anymore and the problems there were not our problems … We could not identify with them anymore.”\textsuperscript{546} The lives of generation A interviewees had long taken a different turn from younger interviewees who had remained in the GDR. Although generation A participants had suffered under the initial separation from family and friends, they all stated their satisfaction with the decision to leave and were content with their lives overseas. Having been away for so long, they had become more and more unfamiliar with the society which had developed behind the Wall once they had left. As a result, they were also unfamiliar which the challenges faced by many of those who remained following the fall of the Wall, such as unemployment, the breakdown of a previously familiar environment, and the moral dilemma surrounding involvement with the Stasi. For some, reunification provided an opportunity to re-establish and even nurture ties with relatives, while for others their long removal from life in the GDR had forever weakened their connections to those in the East. When generation A compared themselves to other generations, they viewed their lives in an extremely positive light. Ernst M., described an experience which he had had at a school reunion after the reunification, in which he saw the contrast between the lives of those of his generation who had left and others who had remained:

[T]here were four out of my class … [who] left and went to…the West, and they all became professors … and in the East there was one who did become a professor in medicine, and the rest, it was varied, they never had a really big career … and some had no career whatsoever. They couldn’t go to university and … they just did menial work to survive, so that was a real eye-opener.\textsuperscript{547}

\textsuperscript{545} Hans L. in an interview with M. Durrer 3\textsuperscript{rd} December 2010.
\textsuperscript{546} Klara T. in an interview with M. Durrer 16\textsuperscript{th} July 2010.
\textsuperscript{547} Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 15\textsuperscript{th} July 2016.
In Ernst M.’s view, leaving the GDR had been a pivotal decision, greatly influencing his career success. As he described above, others had not been so lucky and could be classed as unfortunate “losers” rather than “winners” of reunification. Their situation is not dissimilar to that of many generation B interviewees who remained in the GDR and had to come to terms with a whole new society following the collapse of communism. For many generation B and C interviewees, who were the generations most impacted by post-reunification changes, the events of the period unleashed a multitude of reactions, ranging from euphoria to uncertainty. For most, many years of exposure to the West German media had enabled them to vicariously observe as least some aspects of West German culture and maintain the feeling of belonging to a wider German “cultural community”, although this was in many respects superficial. In the aftermath of the fall of the Wall, the lure of the West was so strong for some East Germans that they abandoned their lives in the East in the initial days. As Stefanie E. explained: “a lot of people just left [their jobs] without even resigning.” One area impacted by this was education, with high school student Sabine H. discussing how “many in my class who actually wanted to sit their leaving exams simply went to the West. They didn’t come back to school … Many people didn’t know whether our leaving exam would be recognised at the time.” Carolin B. also described the confusion:

We went into … year 9 … during this tumultuous time. We had to do our East German exams after year 10. Then we were the first who had to do the West German leaving exams. So, we had to go to year 13 … It was a shambles … So, this whole school system was thrown on a heap.

In spite of this, an atmosphere of hope prevailed in the aftermath of the fall of the Wall. Henning P. described the time as “exciting and characterised by developments … The Wall fell and the SED tried to reform itself; there were changes and that is what we

548 Fulbrook, *German National Identity After the Holocaust*, p. 207.  
549 Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6th June 2012.  
wanted. In that respect it was a nice time.”

Nevertheless, the GDR government was facing a great number of obstacles, including a tainted past and a loss of public faith in its ability to salvage the dismal economic situation. On 13 November 1989, Hans Modrow had been named “prime minister of the transitional government” in place of Egon Krenz. Krenz remained as general secretary until early December, when he and the entire Politburo were forced to resign. They were replaced by a temporary committee, although this was still headed by Modrow. Unfortunately for him, he inherited a disgruntled population, as well as very real economic difficulties, instigated by the GDR’s poor management over the past decades. The communist system which had promoted full employment and communal ownership, meant that some had taken advantage of the system. According to Erna P., her husband “also worked in a firm where people were negligent and where a lot was stolen.”

It seemed that people themselves wondered how society could continue in this manner. As Erna P. further explained: “We thought: ‘How can … such a small country like the GDR … cope with that? How can they counter-balance that?’ It just doesn’t work.”

Economic difficulties had come to a head in the period following the fall of the Wall. As Modrow himself stated:

There are problems with our economy, its material resources are currently limited, its conditions must be improved considerably, its basic essentials must be modernised in many sectors, but the economic substance of our socialist state is strong enough and able to sustain a stabilisation in the foreseeable future.

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552 Henning P. in an interview with M. Durrer 6th October 2011. Original quote in German: “Aufregend und von vielen Neuigkeiten geprägt … Es ist die Mauer gefallen, und die SED hat versucht sich noch umzubilden; es gab Veränderungen und das war das, was wir wollten. Es war also in der Hinsicht eine schöne Zeit.”


554 Darnton, p. 23.

555 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2014. Original quote in German: “hat auch in einem Betrieb gearbeitet, wo so geschlüdert wurde und viel geklaut.”


As seems clear from the last section of the above assertion, the GDR government’s focus was still very much on economic and political reform, rather than German reunification. Erna P. recalled that “Modrow did want the opening [of the Wall] but … for a long time it was still: ‘We now want to make a better socialism here’ … They didn’t want to join West Germany in the beginning.” Yet Modrow’s inability to salvage the poor economic situation led to a decline in support, particularly as he opposed rapid privatisation, and there were no concrete plans in place for economic reform. This lack of a defined vision was felt by many of the interviewees, who looked elsewhere for guidance. One source of an alternative vision, one to amend the communist system and create a new brand of democratic socialism, was fostered by the formation of “Round Table” discussion groups comprised of members of the GDR government and people belonging to revolutionary groups such as Neues Forum, who made it their objective to overhaul the GDR’s structure. These discussions were intended to bring about systemic reform and were initially viewed as inspiring positive change, with a particular emphasis on the possibility of creating a “Third Way” between communism and capitalism.

As a participant in the peace movement, Nicole P. illustrated her frustration with the general population who had fallen victim to the lure of the West, stating:

That was one of the things which I really hated about this when the Wall broke down, that these people were talking about these blooming bananas and the 100 Westmark they got … Oh God, I couldn’t stand it. I thought people are really selling their whole lives and their futures for a banana and a hundred marks.

However, those who had been vital in bringing about communism’s collapse quickly found themselves to be very much out of their depth in the world of politics, as historian Jarausch (2006) explains: “The commitment to nonviolent reform that helped overthrow the post-Stalinist regime in no way prepared opposition intellectuals for taking

558 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2014. Original quote in German: “Modrow wollte die Öffnung [der Mauer] schon haben, aber … das war noch lange ‘Wir wollen jetzt einen besseren Sozialismus hier machen’ … Die wollten ja am Anfang gar nicht mit Westdeutschland so zusammen.”
559 Maier, p. 179.
560 This was set up very soon after the fall of the Wall. Konrad H. Jarausch, The Rush to German Unity (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) p. 75.
561 Jarausch, The Rush to German Unity, p. 79.
562 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
As Nicole P. said of her reform group in Dresden, “I never really felt that we were political groups, you know what I mean? We were like, yeah I guess interested citizens who wanted to change the world for the better, I suppose.”

Although cries had been emerging among some protestors in East Germany to reunify the country, it was not until West Germany’s Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, jumped on the political bandwagon for German reunification that calls for unity became stronger. On 28 November he proposed a ‘Ten-Point Plan for German Unity’, much to the Bundestag’s consternation and to some criticism from the international community. With the benefit of hindsight, Julia T. explained that she believed that Kohl wanted “the reunification so that he could go down in history as the unification-chancellor.” By contrast, however, Erna P. expressed the gratitude she felt for the significant role Kohl had played in the issue of German unity, stating: “We actually have him to thank for the fact that it happened at all.” Kohl was eager to create one Germany and believed a reunified country could act as “a vehicle to overcome the division of Europe”, although some in the international community, such as British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, were apprehensive about this, fearing the power of a reunified Germany. The course of history would be determined in the following months, where the thought of reunification began to gradually enter the minds of more and more East Germans. As Erna P. explained, Kohl “sowed this thought [in people’s minds], again and again, and more and more.”

With calls for reunification gaining momentum, Neues Forum and other groups associated with the Round Table, which had been such a driving force and source of inspiration for many during the early days of the revolution, were losing support, particularly because they were largely unwilling to form a political party. The initial objectives of protesters had already been met (open borders and freedom to travel) and it became increasingly obvious that “the harmony engendered by the transition to

564 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
567 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2014. Original quote in German: “[Es] ist auch ihm zu verdanken, dass das überhaupt so gekommen ist.”
568 Kettenacker, p. 138.
569 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2014. Original quote in German: “diesen Gedanken gesät, und wieder gesät und mehr und mehr.”
Many GDR citizens lost faith in the idea of reform, most significantly because they had not perceived many positive results from Round Table discussions and were eager for speedy changes. According to Wittlinger (2010), “it was dissatisfaction with their own system and the positive perception of the West German system that made the idea of national unity consistently more attractive and popular in the East.” Tired of the current tumult and frustrated at the thought of becoming part of another socialist experiment, many turned to the West for answers. Thus, many GDR citizens had not initially desired reunification because they thought themselves to have a sense of communal identity with the FRG, but rather for economic reasons. Reunification had not been a motivating factor for the initial protests in the GDR but, as Fulbrook (1999) states: “arose as a result, not a cause, of the collapse of communist rule in the GDR.” In the end, as many interviewees maintained, reunification came about largely as a result of “pressure from the people” within the disintegrating GDR who were desperate for change.

The initial euphoria following the fall of the Wall lasted scarcely a few months, culminating with New Year’s Eve celebrations, when “youths from both sides of the city gathered at the Brandenburg gate in a raucous party.” However, after New Year “the mood turned. The elation of the popular rising began to give way to frustration with the difficulties of a new start.” It was at this time that interviewees also perceived how the initial welcome they had experienced from their West German counterparts was beginning to wear off. In spite of their common German background, many East and West Germans began to realise that there were some fundamental differences between them which had arisen as a result of their lengthy separation. Erna P. recalled a change in the atmosphere in her daily life at this time:

I think at first there was this euphoria and then this awakening: ‘Ah, what just happened?’ … I don’t think that that took very long … it was still within the first year. It was after the fall of the Wall, at the end of the first year, or

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570 Connelly, p. 15.
571 Wittlinger, p. 54.
572 Fulbrook, German National Identity After the Holocaust, p. 218.
574 Jarausch, The Rush to German Unity, p. 91.
575 Jarausch, The Rush to German Unity, p. 95.
something like that, and you realised how this intensified, this distance [between Easterners and Westerners].

It began to dawn on many people that things were not as simple as they had initially seemed and that there was a long and difficult road ahead, especially regarding whether and how East and West should be unified and how they could potentially grow together.

5.1 Reunification: Looking to the West

By the new year, the majority of the population seemed to have become restless for immediate and drastic change. This was reflected in the political atmosphere, where political parties felt that they had to align with the population’s current interests. Members of many parties slowly edged towards supporting reunification, including Modrow himself, who finally gave his support on 1 February. This turn towards reunification as the solution, spelled trouble for groups such as Neues Forum, who had to find their feet in an environment with which they were unfamiliar. From the beginning, they had classed themselves primarily as a citizens’ movement, rather than as a political party; however, in the face of considerable political pressure, they formed a coalition with other oppositional groups including Demokratie Jetzt [Democracy Now] and the Initiative Frieden und Menschenrechte [Initiative for Peace and Human Rights] in early 1990. This coalition, called Bündnis 90 [Alliance ’90], would run for election in March, although it unfortunately

found itself campaigning for what it had already accomplished, while the other parties had taken up a new set of issues: not merely whether East or West Germany should unite, but how unification should take place – quickly, by means of an Anschluss (annexation), or deliberately, with protection from the social welfare system left over from the regime that had been abolished.

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576 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2014. Original quote in German: “Ich denke, das war erst diese Euphorie und dann dieses Aufwachen: ‘Ah, was ist jetzt passiert?’ … Ich glaube nicht, dass das so langsam ging … das war noch im ersten Jahr. Das war nach der Mauer, am Ende vom ersten Jahr oder sowas, und man merkte, wie das zunahm, diese Distanz [zwischen Ostdeutschen und Westdeutschen].”

577 Jarausch, The Rush to German Unity, p. 88.


579 Darnton, p. 25.

580 Darnton, p. 250.
Nicole P. described that, by the time of the election, the inevitability of the reunification of Germany “was just accepted.”581 Other parties, such as the East German CDU [Christian Democratic Union] had also formed coalitions with parties which were more specific about their goals, namely, the means by which East and West should be reunified. Allianz für Deutschland [Alliance for Germany] headed by CDU-leader Lothar de Maizière was successful in the GDR’s March elections, reflecting the East German population’s desire for Western prosperity. As explained by Koehler (2004), at the time “the country was economically bankrupt and the population was clamoring for a stable, convertible currency.”582 Erna P. described from personal experience that East Germans “wanted to go shopping over there [in the West], they wanted to travel, and for that you need Western money. You can’t do anything with Eastern money, and so then the pressure [to reunify] was so strong.”583 However, although the elections provided East Germans with the opportunity to finally determine the future of their country, the question of whether or not the country would be unified had more or less already been decided, as “parties from both sides campaigned as if the border had already disappeared.”584 In previous elections the GDR administration had claimed that 100% of their citizens had voted for the SED, but what they had not revealed was that East Germans had been forced to vote in bogus-elections where they did not really have a choice of political parties. Erna P. remembered the March 1990 election and the manner in which the majority of East Germans acted at the time: “I think that was the largest turnout ever of GDR-citizens to the election. That was the first time that you were able to vote without it being predetermined who you should vote for.”585 93.4% of GDR citizens participated in the vote by their own free will for the very first time since the GDR’s foundation.586 For many, the voting process was foreign, as for Nicole P.’s mother who “actually asked me how to vote and who to vote for because she didn’t know how this all works.”587

581 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
582 Koehler, p. 389.
584 Heneghan, p. 45.
585 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2014. Original quote in German: “Ich glaube das war die größte Wahlbeteiligung aller Zeiten von der DDR. Dass man das erste mal wählen konnte, ohne dass man vorgeschrieben gekriegt hat, wen man zu wählen hatte.”
587 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
Tired of the dismal economic outlook and restless for change, most GDR citizens voted for a speedy reunification with the West in the model of an *Anschluss*-like Western take-over, because, as Nicole P. described, “[t]he CDU offered … some financial contribution of some description and they were saying like ‘Oh, we will be rebuilding everything in a very short time and Germany will be a beautiful place of togetherness’ and this and that.” Although most East Germans voted for this, they did not perhaps realise at the time exactly what this would signify. The elections had confirmed that most of the population wished to be joined with the more economically successful West, as they had become weary “of socialist experiments and the utopian visions of their intellectuals.” In the face of the possibility of Western prosperity, “the collective desire to be reunited with the stronger ‘better’ other half of a divided nation proved far more effective an incentive than any attempts to breathe life into the tired and reluctant phantom of a socialism with a human face.” As Erna P. recounted: “We had this [attitude]: ‘We’ll take it as it comes … Whatever comes, we will just live through it.’ … We had no particular ideas in mind. We only thought of the West in a positive way … The golden West … was always in our minds.” Little did most East Germans know, the *Anschluss*-like take-over of the GDR by the FRG would leave many wishing for a more gradual adjustment. As Erna P. reflected: “They say that West Germany descended upon us like a steam-roller, and then there was absolutely no chance anymore to counter this intention.” Linda Shortt (2012) supported this explanation when she stated that “[r]ather than a fusion of equals, unification appeared to be a victory for the West, whose superiority was confirmed by the very collapse of the East.” The political climate at the time did not allow for a slow unification-process, as politician

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588 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
590 Lewis, “The Writers, Their Socialism, the People and Their Bad Table Manners,” *German Studies Review*, p. 257.
Markus Meckel, who contributed to Round Table discussions, commented in a documentary:

When it emerged after the free elections that there was a tendency to concentrate all efforts on preparing and negotiating the reunification, to then instigate a discussion about a GDR constitution, the GDR citizens would have sent us packing. Because this was the other point, that we weren’t just put under pressure by Helmut Kohl, but also by our own population.\(^{594}\)

Meckel’s sentiments were echoed in interviews as well, when Julia T. reported that “[y]ou weren’t prepared to wait. You actually wanted the Wende as quickly as possible.”\(^{595}\) East Germany’s perilous economic situation in early 1990 and an impatience for improvements had unleashed a wave of reforms which would leave a number of GDR citizens in its wake. The following months, and indeed years, would necessitate adjustments for many interviewees, particularly for generation B, who had lived so many years of their lives behind the Iron Curtain and had to adjust to an unfamiliar society which often did not recognise their contributions to GDR society or the qualifications they had acquired there.

Among one of the first changes to occur following the election was the introduction of the Deutschmark in the place of East Germany’s currency. Julia T. remembered this vividly: “At the time I worked in a grocery store and … then we changed all the prices, we changed all the stickers. That was a very exciting thing … to suddenly have the new money in our hands.”\(^{596}\) This Währungsunion [currency union] took place in mid-1990 at what seemed to many people an excessively swift rate, as described by Erna P.: “On 2 July came this monetary reform, and that also came in a mad rush.”\(^{597}\) The currency union, together with other social changes, meant that “the residents of the former GDR […] experienced a more rapid and complete systemic transition than any other post-

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\(^{595}\) Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original quote in German: “[d]a war man nicht bereit zu warten. Man wollte eigentlich die Wende zum Besseren sofort.”

\(^{596}\) Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original quote in German: “[I]ch hab’ damals in einem Konsumgeschäft … gearbeitet und … wir haben dann die ganzen Preise geändert, die ganzen Aufkleber geändert. Das war eine ganz aufregende Sache … plötzlich das neue Geld in der Hand zu haben.”

While nations such as Czechoslovakia and Hungary would have to rebuild themselves and redefine themselves on their own terms and at their own pace, the GDR was aided by the FRG, which acted as a role model and sponsor to its socialist sibling.

5.2 Adjusting to the new Germany
3 October 1990 marked the official reunification of East and West. Initially the reforms which had been occurring were a welcome measure for many East Germans, who were now able to enjoy more spoils of capitalism. However, they did little to stifle the eventual rise in unemployment. In 1990, the rate was only 2.7% and the outlook seemed positive, but by the conclusion of the decade, unemployment reached 17.1% in the East, compared to the former West Germany’s 9.5% at the time. Ilse F. described how “[t]he unemployment rate was 20% in some areas. It was devastating.” This was especially demoralising for generation B interviewees who had remained in the GDR until its collapse and who had been active in the GDR’s workforce. They had experienced a much different working-environment in the GDR and according to Julia T., “[a] struggle for a job did not exist [in the GDR]. Everyone had a job.” When interviewing Angela H.’s family in Germany, her mother recalled that “[t]here were hardly any unemployed people during GDR times. They were all engaged, [they] all went into businesses and worked.” Indeed, GDR citizens had belonged to a society which had prided itself on full employment and which had placed much importance upon work as a symbol of an individual’s self-worth and value to society.

In addition to this, the West German government had grossly underestimated the dire state of the GDR’s economy, mainly due to poor access to reliable GDR figures. The Aufbau Ost [reconstruction of the East] initiative aimed to bring the East in line with the West, but not without some difficulties. Taxes were increased in the form of the

599 Kettenacker, p. 197.
600 Ilse F. in an interview with M. Durrer 18th August 2010.
602 Interview with Angela H.’s family in Germany 27th June 2012. This quote is from her mother. Original quote in German: “[z]u DDR-Zeiten hatten wir kaum Arbeitslose. Sie waren alle beschäftigt, sind alle in Betriebe gegangen und haben gearbeitet.”
Solidaritätszuschlag [solidarity tax], much to the dissatisfaction of many West Germans, many of whom did not understand why they had to help finance the East. What some did not realise was that, as Julia T. explained “this so-called solidarity-tax … was paid … by East Germans as well.” Industries were privatised and many interviewees who experienced this process first-hand communicated misgivings. The Treuhand, a type of trust, was to aid in the privatisation of industry, but encountered many difficulties along the way, as Kristoff A., whose own family was affected, described:

[T]he company my mother worked for also went bankrupt at some point, like most of the companies in the region we come from. It was strange because everyone thought that everything would get better, but it got worse. The first few years were quite bad.

Those of generation B who were in the workforce at the time were hit hardest, as they also had to adapt to new ways of thinking regarding work. Markus B. described the situation of his father, who belonged to generation B, as follows:

Organisations weren’t sustainable, jobs were just not competitive, people were not competitive, and a lot went wrong … [T]his happened to my Dad. Then he found another job … and had to change his role, which again is something really new … that people suddenly had to think through the whole job or the whole idea or concept of work.

Most East Germans were not used to the competitive nature of the working environment and many found it difficult to come to terms with the cut-throat business world to which they suddenly had to adapt. Sofia W., who had escaped to West Germany from the East with her family as a child in the late 1970s, compared the confusing situation which she

had encountered after her escape to the situation faced by East Germans after Germany was reunified:

[W]hen you’re taken out of this system, then you don’t actually know what to do, you’re lost … I know from … moving to the West, all of a sudden we’re meant to be independent, we’re meant to be self-sufficient and we didn’t actually know how to cope with that situation … After the Wall came down and the population sort of mixed, I was working … in a national company then. We had some East Germans that came and you really had the feeling they came from a totally different planet … the way they talked, the way they thought … what they expected leaders to do for them. It was mind-boggling.\(^\text{607}\)

For many generation B interviewees, the generation most actively involved in all aspects of GDR life, the period following reunification was marked by financial uncertainty and disappointment that the promises made in the lead-up to reunification were not all realised. As Martina E., who had been employed in the GDR’s public service, described:

Throughout this entire time I was … relatively insecure because it was clear that I would lose my job if this changed … and that’s also what happened. The reunification was on 3 October 1990. On 4 October … Bonn’s Minister for Education called the employees of our department to a meeting and said: ‘On 31 October, you will all be dismissed.’\(^\text{608}\)

Julia T., too, recounted the confusion which she witnessed personally in her own family-life: “Of course that was … an extremely crazy time for me … I was a young mother, who was simultaneously being confronted by these upheavals, and that was

\(^{607}\) Sofia W. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\textsuperscript{nd} March 2013.

sometimes just a bit too much, especially because my then husband lost his job." The early 1990s was a time of widespread confusion and political and emotional adjustment for many West and East Germans. While West Germany had to adjust to sharing its wealth, most East Germans had to come to terms with the new and unfamiliar environment surrounding them. As explained by Roger F. Cook (2005): “In the rush to unification, Germans on both sides of the border moved ahead without understanding that they had lost a fundamental piece of their collective identity.” On the whole, former GDR citizens were faced with a society which had a very different approach to life. As Peter S. explained, in the GDR

you got feedback from the country, from everybody, that you were needed and then somebody says you are unproductive, … this job is unnecessary, … costs us that and that much … and … this makes people think … Then … they dream back to their past and they want to have probably mainly this feeling back, this feeling to be needed.

The sudden necessity of many to start afresh in new, unfamiliar surroundings prompted a personal and collective identity crisis for many of my generation B and C interviewees who had remained in the GDR until its collapse and been overwhelmed by its sudden disintegration. Particularly for generation B who had remained in the GDR, the adjustment process was extreme. They spoke of widespread unemployment, one interviewee describing the situation of former East Germans friends as follows: “I still have contact with two friends today … from the first class … and we met up … and of course then the conversation came up: “What are you doing now [Angela]?” and she is now working, just so that she has work, for five Euros an hour.” A number of others revealed a high rate of early retirement among former East Germans of this generation, such as generation C interviewee Britta F., who recalled the following situation: “You

609 Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 26th September 2013. Original quote in German: “Das war natürlich … für mich eine außerordentlich verrückte Zeit … Ich war also junge Mutter und war zur gleichen Zeit mit diesen Umwälzungen konfrontiert, und das war einfach manchmal ein bisschen zu viel, zumal mein Mann zu der Zeit sofort seine Arbeit verloren hat.”


611 Peter S. in an interview with M. Durrer 24th March 2013.

tried, because you didn’t have work for many … East Germans, to send many into early retirement … [Y]ou have parents of my friends who lost their jobs, suddenly, and that was something that East Germans didn’t know at all.” Among the interviewees in my study, there were a number of generation B who experienced these difficulties following the reunification of East and West. For some, although not for all, it is contrasted with their success as migrants to Australia where they have in essence taken matters into their own hands and become the masters of their future.

5.3 An identity crisis: Migrants in their own country

In the aftermath of reunification, a multitude of issues had to be addressed, among them how to help East and West grow together both physically and mentally. On the surface, reunification had been portrayed in an overwhelmingly positive light, as was witnessed by speeches such as the one given by de Maizière on the 19th April 1990: “From the cry of ‘We are the people’ arose the cry of ‘We are one people!’. The people of the GDR constituted themselves as part of a people, as part of one German people, which should grow together again.” However, reconciling two fundamentally different systems would prove to be a process requiring decades and generations.

In their 40 years of separation, both the FRG and GDR had carved out their respective paths, defined in opposition to each other. They had spent so many years apart, and indeed as rivals, that the sudden prospect of reunification was extremely daunting. Lewis’ (1995) explanation that “[t]he absence of another German state as a foil to one’s own has forced an identity crisis” for Germans on both sides held true for many interviewees. They discussed the problems of reunification at length, the common element emerging that, as Henning P. observed “[t]he reunification did not happen on equal footing. That was the general mistake.”

613 Britta F. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd October 2009. Original quote in German: “Man hat ja versucht, weil man keine Arbeit hatte für viele … Ostdeutsche, viele in Frührente zu schicken … du hast ja natürlich Eltern von meinen Freunden, die arbeitslos wurden, plötzlich, und das war etwas, das die Ostdeutschen gar nicht kannten.”


their lives triggered a sense of worthlessness among some former East Germans who now had to search for validation of their pasts. In this climate, a Trotzidentität [identity of defiance] arose from a sense of inferiority on the part of many East Germans who sought to combat the feeling they had of being perceived as Bürger zweiter Klasse [second-class citizens]. Julia T. described the gradual emergence of this sentiment: “That only began to develop in the following years … when these societies really mixed, when more Westerners settled in the East … and also when more Easterners went over [to the West].” In contrast to the initial friendly reception by West Germans, Erna P. described how “that totally switched … I think it even intensified so much that a hatred emerged … Now the West Germans realised: ‘They are bleeding us dry’.” East Germans’ Trotzidentität served to bond many former Easterners together through their common past and, particularly for generation B, provided them with validation of their past. It was during this time, when many former East Germans believed that their past had been delegitimised, that this strong identity emerged to counter a feeling of inferiority. Jens Reich (1991), a scientist and former civil rights activist in the GDR, suggested that during the Wende “a totally new sense of self develop[ed]: the GDR identity after the death of the GDR. An identity that affirmed its [the GDR’s] collapse and German unification, but which revolt[ed] against our second objectification.” For many, the period following the fall of the Wall signified a time of identity conflict. Fulbrook (1999) has discussed this and concluded that:

[u]nder these [post-unification] conditions, a very strong sense of East German collective identity began to be evident. In 1991 well over one-third of East Germans emphasised a GDR-identity rather than an all-German identity. When

617 Paul Cooke discusses the references which scholars, such as Faulenbach, make to this “identity of defiance”. Paul Cooke, Representing East Germany Since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2005) pp. 8-9.
618 Many interviewees commented on this, such as Martina E., who stated: “Those in the East feel like second-class citizens, yes.” Martina E. in an interview with M. Durrer 12th August 2010. Original quote in German: “Die fühlen sich als Menschen zweiter Klasse im Osten, ja.”
619 Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original quote in German: “[d]as hat sich dann erst entwickelt in den Folgejahren, … als diese Gesellschaften wirklich mehr durchmischt haben, als mehr Westbürger sich auch bei uns im Osten niedergelassen haben, … als auch mehr Ostbürger rübergegangen sind.”
asked whether they felt themselves primarily to be ‘German’ or ‘East German’, or to have primarily a regional identity, East Germans split with 37 per cent professing an ‘all-German’ identity, 37 per cent considering themselves to be East German, 21 per cent having a regional identity (5 per cent were undecided). 622

The sudden victory of capitalism over communism meant that most East Germans had to fight against the perception that everything in their past lives had been wrong and invalid. The perceived take-over of the East by the West, without any regard for what the GDR had achieved in its 40 years, was lamented by Kurt S.: “The thing was that whatever was established in Western Germany, be it for the good or for the bad, was simply transferred into the Eastern parts and in some ways Eastern parts had … developed separately into … a better direction.” 623 What Kurt S. described is what is commonly referred to as the “Kohl-onlisation” of the East, where sweeping changes were implemented under the direction of Helmut Kohl without regard for pre-existing structures. 624 Ilse F. described the personal difficulties she had had to come to terms with because of these changes:

> It was hard because after a year a lot of things were just ceased because we got this new structure and no questions asked, and some people from the West thought they know everything so well and we did everything wrong, as if we were just stupid and couldn’t work … It wasn’t right to blame us.” 625

For many generation B interviewees, who had comprised a large proportion of the GDR’s workforce, a mental rift began to intensify between East and West, triggered by the sense of inferiority felt by many East Germans. As Erna P. described:

> We were inferior, well that’s how we felt … You just noticed … that they often dismissed us. Some [East Germans] even made an effort to speak very properly, so that they [West Germans] would never guess that they came from the East,

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624 ‘Kohl-onisation’ is a play-on-words involving the word ‘colonisation’ and the efforts of Helmut Kohl to integrate the East with the West. Pfaff, *Exit-Voice Dynamics and the Collapse of East Germany*, p. 246.
625 Ilse F. in an interview with M. Durrer 18th August 2010.
and I think that was really stressful for people … That was a bad thing which came out.\textsuperscript{626}

Interviewees spoke of a mentality difference between East and West, a lingering \textit{Mauer im Kopf} [wall in the mind]. Like most of her generation, Renate S. expressed: “In our heads, it is still ‘East’ and ‘West’.”\textsuperscript{627} Julia T. similarly explained the existence of this mental Wall: “I believe that there is still a huge difference in mentality between the people. It’s just that there are two generations which grew up in the GDR and they are the ones who are still currently working … It’s just a totally different breed of people.”\textsuperscript{628} The manner in which interviewees reacted to the new society they found themselves in and coped with change was largely personal. Some described the complex adjustment process they underwent, such as Stefanie E., who experienced a crisis in the aftermath of communism’s collapse. She explained:

I think after a year or so I had … a nervous breakdown, but I think it was just the change. The whole thing was too much, and to be able to do whatever I wanted, to go where I wanted … it was just too much, and to make all these decisions, which before somebody else made for me … I was very young and inexperienced and [had] never travelled before much and … that was a big culture shock.\textsuperscript{629}

This sentiment was further elaborated upon by Julia T., who explained that “it was a slow realisation in the first few years. For many it was quite a painful learning process.”\textsuperscript{630} Most East Germans had to adjust not solely to their physical surroundings, but to the whole nature of the society in which they suddenly found themselves. Julia T. continued: “[W]e had to get used to … new commodities in the shops, we had to get

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\item \textsuperscript{626} Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\textsuperscript{nd} April 2014. Original quote in German: “Wir waren minderwertig, also so haben wir uns gefühlt … Man [hat] eben gemerkt … die tun uns sofort in die Kiste stecken … Manche [Ostdeutschen] haben sich sogar angestrengt, ganz fein zu reden, dass die ja nicht merken, dass man aus dem Osten kommt, und ich glaube das war eine ganz schlimme Deformation für die Menschen … Das war eine schlechte Sache, die dabei rauskam”
\item \textsuperscript{627} Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23\textsuperscript{rd} April 2013. Original quote in German: “Es ist immer noch in den Köpfen ‘Ost’ und ‘West’.”
\item \textsuperscript{628} Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\textsuperscript{nd} April 2013. Original quote in German: “[I]ch glaube noch immer, dass das von der Mentalität immer noch einen riesen Unterschied ist zwischen den Menschen. Das sind einfach zwei Generationen, die in der DDR aufgewachsen sind und das sind die, die jetzt noch immer im Arbeitsleben stehen … Das ist einfach ein ganz anderer Menschenschlag.”
\item \textsuperscript{629} Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6\textsuperscript{th} June 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{630} Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\textsuperscript{nd} April 2013. Original quote in German: “Es war ein langsames Begreifen in den ersten Jahren. Für manche war das ein ziemlich schmerzhafter Lernprozess.”
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used to the new money … A market economy and a planned economy are fundamentally so different, that you had to realise this first.”\textsuperscript{631} For many, particularly those belonging to generation B, life in the GDR had formed them so significantly that it was difficult to come to terms with the multitude of changes occurring almost on a daily basis. Stefanie E. recalled buying

lots of strawberries and food, and I always had huge … shopping baskets. I never ever could eat that by myself. I just thought: ‘Oh, I have to buy it now because it’s available’ and I was sort of hoarding things … It took me a long time to get used to the fact that it’s going to be there tomorrow.\textsuperscript{632}

In the years following reunification, one trend which did become evident above all others was the tendency for East Germans to look back on their former lives in the GDR with a sense of nostalgia. This \textit{Ostalgie} phenomenon highlighted some of the positive aspects of life in the GDR and has been described as “a reaction to the destabilizing effects of the move to a market economy”.\textsuperscript{633} It arose to counter the sense of subordination experienced by many interviewees. As Erna P. stated, East Germans eventually realised: “‘We can also do things. We’re not the dumb ones. We’re not the stupid ones who speak a different language, or have a different accent, or who can be labelled’ … This initiated a recovery, where you said: ‘Gee, we are people too!’”\textsuperscript{634} It seemed that the existence of a particular GDR sense of identity and \textit{Heimat} had grown out of a feeling of loss. As Günter Grass said in 1989, “Identity? Homeland? I believe that homeland is that which one can define only as what one has lost.”\textsuperscript{635} This claim was reinforced by Cook (2005), who described that “expressions of nostalgia in East and West reflect the mutual loss of an imagined national other that was possible as long as the Wall kept the two Germanys politically and geographically divided.”\textsuperscript{636}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{631} Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 26\textsuperscript{th} September 2013. Original quote in German: “Wir mussten uns an … neue Waren in den Shops gewöhnen, wir mussten uns an neues Geld gewöhnen … Marktwirtschaft und Planwirtschaft sind natürlich grundsätzlich sowas von verschieden, dass man das erstmal begreifen muss.”
\bibitem{632} Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6\textsuperscript{th} June 2012.
\bibitem{633} Clarke and Wölfel, p. 14.
\bibitem{634} Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\textsuperscript{nd} April 2014. Original quote in German: ‘Wir können auch was. Wir sind nicht die Dummen. Wir sind nicht die Blöden, die eine andere Sprache haben, oder die einen anderen Akzent haben, und, die abgestempelt werden können’ … Das hat wieder so einen Aufschwung gebracht, wo man gesagt hat ‘Mensch! Wir sind auch Menschen!!’”
\bibitem{635} Translation by M. Durrer of original German quote: “Identität? Heimat? Ich glaube, Heimat ist das, was man nur definieren kann, als das, was man verloren hat.” Günter Grass (1989) qtd. in: Mushaben, p. ix.
\bibitem{636} Cook, p. 43.
\end{thebibliography}
perception of inferiority, many generation B and C East Germans began to emphasise the positives in their past. According to Peter Thompson (2011),

far from longing for dictatorship, the current nostalgic identification with the GDR on the part of former East Germans represents instead a sublimated desire for a freedom beyond that on offer under present circumstances, and that the nostalgia inherent in the term Ostalgie is actually a longing for a future that went missing in the past rather than for a past that never had a Socialist or Communist future.\footnote{Peter Thompson, “‘Worin noch niemand war’: The GDR as Retrospectively Imagined Community,” \textit{The GDR Remembered: Representations of the East German State Since 1989}, eds. Nick Hodgin and Caroline Pearce (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2011) pp. 251-52.}

Unification was a whirlwind process, which led many East Germans to retreat to what they knew, due to suddenly finding themselves surrounded by so much unfamiliarity. Many wanted \textit{Sicherheit} [safety or security], something which they felt they had had while living in the GDR, for example job-security, free childcare, and accommodation. As Renate S. explained: “We had our securities. We had our job, no one took that away … Staple foods were so cheap.”\footnote{Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23\textsuperscript{rd} April 2013. Original quote in German: “Wir hatten unsere Sicherheiten. Wir hatten unseren Beruf, den hat uns keiner weggenommen … [D]ie Grundnahrungsmittel waren so billig.”} Stefanie E. reinforced this by asserting:

I think everybody wished that some things would have stayed the same, but it never did, and I think a lot of people, those are the people who say now: ‘I want this all back to the way it was before’ because there was a different sense of community, different types of friendships and belonging maybe, which got then … taken away because it wasn’t as important anymore.\footnote{Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6\textsuperscript{th} June 2012.}

To many, Western society was more individualistic and competitive, and was described by many interviewees as an \textit{Ellenbogengesellschaft} [dog-eat-dog society].\footnote{This term refers to the necessity to ‘elbow’ others out of the way in order to make your way to the top. It was used by almost all interviewees to describe the nature of capitalist society.} Renate S. explained her experience in this way: “[A]fter the Wende, it was such an \textit{Ellenbogengesellschaft}. Everyone just thinks about themselves. Everyone looks at what
their neighbour has … We were not like that in the GDR." Often interviewees were torn between their new-found freedom and the security of the society in which they had grown up. Disappointments with what the West had to offer took the place of initial awe, as Martina E. explained: “We always thought: ‘There is everything in the West!’ … and then the West came and there was not everything … This impression that there was everything in the West was quickly shattered.” Moreover, as Julia T. described:

We did not know to what extent it would overrun us politically. You hoped that it could all happen a bit more slowly … , that you had a bit more time … To learn and to adapt also takes time … That really did all happen within a few weeks and months … At that point, many people’s dreams were also crushed.

The phenomenon of Ostalgie emerged to counter what some interviewees referred to as the West German view that everything which had existed or taken place in the East had been wrong. Erna P. defined it as “hanging onto the past, soothing your soul maybe, also with regard to how West Germany hurt East Germany.” Interviews evidence the existence of different types of nostalgia, ranging from a desire for a return to communism, as described in the previous quotation, to a more innocent material nostalgia involving East German products. For many, particularly generation C, Ostalgie was simply linked to the positive memories of their past as children. Sofia W. explained the relationship she had with certain objects from the past which evoked strong childhood memories for her:

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641 Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd April 2013. Original quote in German: “[N]ach der Wende, das ist alles so eine Ellenbogengesellschaft. Da denkt jeder nur an sich. Jeder schaut, was der Nachbar hat … Wir in der DDR waren nicht so.”


644 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 15th July 2010. Original quote in German: “hängen an dem Alten, so ein bisschen die Seele streicheln vielleicht, von den Verletzungen auch her, wo Westdeutschland Ostdeutschland verletzt hat.”
I hope to get a … Brottasche [bread bag] … When I … visited my Dad, we went to this little cafe and it was decorated … with all these bits and pieces that they used to have in East Germany and they had one of those … I opened it and it was just the smell of leather and cut apple and … I just so wish I could have one of those bags … it just brings back this … multitude of memories.645

Elisa M. also illustrated how she had attempted to hold onto the positive memories of her childhood in the GDR: “A couple of years after the fall of the Wall I truly had … a GDR flag hanging in my room because for me it was my Heimat, for me it was my childhood, for me it was the symbol of communism which I had thought to be a good thing.”646 Ostalgie was a means of reconnecting to one’s past and of creating a sense of community among East Germans in the face of much outside criticism. Immersed in an unfamiliar Western culture, Thompson (2011) explains that it is a “desire to belong that is behind Ostalgie, not just a desire to belong to the retrospectively imagined community of the GDR, and the recognition of the impossibility of either going back or going forward is a traumatic experience.”647 As such, former East Germans engaged in Ostalgie as “an essential means of ‘traversing the fantasy’ in which an engagement with a GDR that never was is actually a precondition for living in a state that denies the possibility of there ever being a ‘real’ GDR of the kind that never was.”648 The portrayal by Western society of all aspects of East German life as having been “wrong” drove a will among many to provide a counter-narrative and tell their side of the story. Time and again, phrases resembling “not everything was bad in the GDR” and “I don’t want to make the GDR sound bad” recurred in interviews, an allusion to the ambivalence many interviewees felt regarding their past and the sense that they had ended up on the wrong side of history. Generation C interviewee, Daniela S., expressed this in the following manner:

645 Sofia W. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd March 2013.
646 Elisa M. in an interview with M. Durrer 17th June 2010. Original quote in German: “[I]ch hab wirklich nach ein paar Jahren nach dem Mauerfall … eine DDR-Fahne in meinem Zimmer [gehabt], weil für mich war’s meine Heimat, für mich war’s meine Kindheit, für mich war’s das Symbol des Kommunismus, was ich als gut empfand.”
647 Thompson, p. 261.
648 Thompson, p. 257.
[M]any historians bad-mouth the GDR, and rightfully so. It was a pretty bad system. But I also think they are stealing East Germans’ identity, well, East Germans who spent their whole lives there, or the majority of it. If someone then comes along, and a West German historian at that, and says ‘everything was bad where you were,’ then of course that hurts you. You also have the tendency to suppress bad things and emphasise the positives and I think that really has to do with the fact that East Germans feel that their pride has been hurt, that everything is spoken about negatively and that they maybe also feel that their identity was taken away from them … Of course you always have to say: ‘It was a bad system and you didn’t have any rights there,’ and in this respect it’s good that this system doesn’t exist anymore … but there is too much emphasis placed upon this system and not enough attention paid to the people themselves and their lives and feelings.649

In her explanation above, Daniela S. summarises the thoughts of a number of interviewees of both generation B and C. While the younger generation was not actively involved in all aspects of GDR society, they did, nevertheless, have formative childhood experiences there. For many, the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Wall was a traumatic period, as it meant the collapse of a familiar childhood world. Daniela S. recounted her memory of this period: “I had felt very secure in my GDR … That is why I had a feeling of intense panic … I think that is also why I do not have positive memories of the time.”650 For generation C, the former GDR was viewed overwhelmingly as a safe society where there had been a strong sense of community and responsibility towards other members. According to Anna K., this Gemeinschaftsgefühl no longer existed in reunified Germany: “Well, I have to say that I

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649 Daniela S. in an interview with M. Durrer 17th June 2010. Original quote in German: “[V]iele Historiker reden ja die DDR schlecht, was ja auch richtig ist. Es war ja schon ein ziemlich schlimmes System, aber ich glaube, sie stellen auch den Ostdeutschen Identität, also Ostdeutsche, die eben ihr ganzes Leben in der DDR verbracht haben, oder den Großteil. Wenn jetzt jemand kommt, und dann noch ein westdeutscher Historiker, der sagt ‘alles war schlecht bei euch’, das tut dir natürlich weh und, man hat ja auch das, na, die Angewohnheit, dass man schlechte Dinge eher so verdrängt, und das Positive dann herausstellt, und ich denke mal, es hat wirklich auch viel damit zu tun, dass die Ostdeutschen sich ein bisschen in ihrer Ehre verletzt fühlen, dass alles schlecht geredet wird … und, dass sie vielleicht auch das Gefühl haben, ihre Identität wurde ihnen weggenommen … Man muss eben immer sagen: ‘Es war ein schlimmes System und man hatte keine Rechte dort,’ und von daher ist es gut, dass es dieses System nicht mehr gibt, aber ansonsten eben, es wird eben zu sehr auf dieses System und zu wenig auf die Menschen an sich und ihr Leben Rücksicht genommen und eben auf deren Gefühle.”

actually find it a bit sad because, I come from a really small town … approximately 200 people … Before, the town was really a community and today everyone goes about their own business and that’s really a pity.”651 Due to their age, interviewees of this generation had not been in a position to make their own decisions to leave the GDR and so never had to make the conscious choice to abandon their society of origin and start a new life in the West. Furthermore, they “were old enough to have personal memories of the GDR at the time of the Wall, but too young to have made themselves culpable in this regime.”652 They were, as Shortt (2012) describes, a “transitional generation”653 and corresponded to what some have referred to to the *Dritte Generation Ost* or *Zonenkinder.*654 Still tied to the GDR past through their childhood experiences, they, nevertheless, did not have to justify their past actions in a post-communist world.655 Their views of East and West had not only been influenced by their limited childhood memories of the GDR, but also by the media and their parents’ perspectives and opinions of life before and after the fall of the Wall.

The world view of generation C at the time was associated with the naivety and idealisation of childhood. The GDR had been their childhood home and was considered by most to be a safe place with a strong sense of community (apart from a couple of the slightly older interviewees who were beginning to recognise flaws in the regime). Nevertheless, many had spent a significant part of their lives in reunified Germany as well, or in other locations overseas, before migrating to Australia. Thus, their lives were shaped just as much by Western capitalist influences as they had been by the communist system. As a result, the experiences of the generation C interviewees in this study mirrored others of their generation, who had, as René Lehmann (2011) explains, experienced “the end of the GDR and unification less in terms of collapse and more in

651 Anna K. in an interview with M. Durrer 19th July 2010. Original quote in German: “Also ich muss sagen, das find ich ein bisschen traurig eigentlich, weil … ich komme aus einem wirklich kleinen Dorf … ungefähr 200 Einwohner … Früher war das Dorf wirklich eine Gemeinde und heute macht jeder sein Ding und das ist wirklich schade.”

652 Shortt, p. 119.

653 Shortt, p. 116.

654 In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the memories of this generation, resulting in the publication of both more personal accounts of the time, as well as scholarly research. See: Michael Hacker, et al., *Dritte Generation Ost: Wer wir sind, was wir wollen* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2012); Jana Hensel, *Zonenkinder* (Reinbek: Rewohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 2002); Tobias Lehmann, “‘Bleiben will ich, wo ich nie gewesen bin’: Die Dritte Generation Ost: Auf dem Weg zu einer gemeinsamen Identität in Ost und West?” *Hesse-Forschung* 31 (2014): pp. 277-312; and Nicole Thesz, “Adolescence in the ‘Ostalgie’ Generation: Reading Jakob Hein’s Mein Erstes T-Shirt against Sonnenallee, Zonenkinder, and Good Bye, Lenin!” *Oxford German Studies* 37.1 (2008): pp. 107-23.

terms of the beginning of a new uncertain future.”656 They had indeed experienced the collapse of their secure, childhood world, but their negative experiences associated with this were soon overshadowed by their ability to easily adapt to their new surroundings. Nevertheless, the fact that many had not, however, been old enough to see all sides of the communist regime caused some among this generation to appear nostalgic for the security of their childhood. They were often critical of capitalist society, as they had an alternative past to compare it to, but perhaps did not fully understand how complex GDR society had been as they had not experienced it in all its dimensions. As highlighted by Gill Valentine (2003), it is necessary “to understand childhood as a process that shapes us throughout the life course”657 and therefore, to understand that in spite of their young age at the time, many of these interviewees had formative memories of the GDR which impacted upon their current outlook on life and sense of identity. According to interviewees, there was, and still is, a surprising sense of “Ossi-Pride” [East German pride] among generation C. They considered themselves to have a past which was interesting and unusual and they often enjoyed telling their stories. Some whom I interviewed even possessed a tendency to resent other East Germans their age who “sold themselves as West German.”658 As Elisa M. illustrated: “We had friends in Halle who would have hacked off their left leg if their classmates had known that they were from the East.”659 However, the effort to disguise the fact that one was East German was, in general, not very common among this generation of interviewees. If anything, many generation C participants, such as Carolin B., chose to specifically emphasise their East Germanness when introducing themselves to people:

[When people ask me], then I say … ‘East’, sure … well I’m a bit proud of that … because you seem … not more interesting, but then questions come straightaway: ‘What do you mean, in the East? Oh do tell’, and then a conversation develops. Then you get to know someone more quickly.660

656 Lehmann, “Generations and Transition,” Remembering the German Democratic Republic, p. 112.
Most of generation C related to the Ostalgie phenomenon in material terms. Although they had no desire to return to the GDR, they did express the belief that some of the Eastern products had been good and therefore should be available. Fabian A. said: “Well, Ostalgie in the sense of producing the old things again, is just like local product buying here [in Australia].”661 They categorised material nostalgia as separate from political nostalgia and thus did not view it as harmful.

When comparing generations, the mental migration required for generation C interviewees following reunification was not as great as for generation B. They were able to switch to the Western school system and had minimal problems eventually finding work in reunified Germany due to the fact that most had never been involved with the Stasi while living in the GDR, and they were able to gain Western qualifications. In contrast, generation B had been “part of an in-between generation” who “had been weaned on the Communist state, but were then asked to succeed in an entirely new system.”662 While generation C interviewees may have had some initial traumatic experiences after the fall of the Wall, resulting from the collapse of their secure childhood world, they were able to rebuild their lives relatively easily within reunified Germany due to their “cuspal situation.”663 As Sylvia E. reflected: “Thank God we were still young enough to steer our education so that it fitted in with the modern system; that we were not losers.”664 In summary, according to Shortt (2012), “although both generations are joined together by the communality of the experience of beginning anew, the parent generation is exposed as the historical loser of unification”.665 In turn, she explains that this is “a fate which the child does not want to replicate and which in turn motivates their drive to assimilate.”666 Throughout numerous interviews with participants belonging to generation C, interviewees expressed how grateful they were that they had been born at what they termed exactly the right time because they had experienced the positive aspects of the GDR during their childhood,

661 Fabian A. in an interview with M. Durrer 17th June 2010. Original quote in German: “Also Ostalgie in der Hinsicht, dass die alten Sachen wieder produziert werden, ist ja wie hier ‘local product buying.’”
663 Shortt, p. 118.
665 Shortt, pp. 118-19.
666 Shortt, p. 119.
but had not been exposed to the regime’s oppressiveness. In some respects, the impact of their experiences related to those of generation A, who also spent a small portion of their lives in the GDR.

Former East Germans’ experiences of life under a dictatorship and their role within the society provide clues about how they identify themselves today and whether they define themselves as winners or losers of reunification. For those who lived through the Wende period in Germany, the overwhelming societal changes in the East and the quest for a new home were at the forefront of the minds of many GDR citizens. During the tumultuous Wende period, when East Germans were trying to understand and come to terms with the world around them, their experiences shared many similarities with the experience of migrants in a new country. The rapid changes surrounding East Germans were reminiscent of a migrant experience. This was not necessarily a physical migration, but rather a mental migration, which was reinforced by some interviewees, such as Erna P., who said: “I do think that it was a type of migration for many who were also in the workforce … because the way of working was totally different from there [in the GDR] … That was surely a difficult thing for some people.”

The significant changes following the fall of the Wall impacted greatly upon German (both East German and West German) society and the psychological unity of the country. As Gisela Brinker-Gabler (1997) describes, the reunification of Germany meant that “East Germans were at the same time insider and outsider, familiar and foreign, central and marginal – participating in one (West) German nation-state, but deprived of the history and traditions of their former nation state.” Their work emphasises that this sense of dislocation and disorientation was not just restricted to East Germans’ place within the physical, surrounding environment, but also “refers to the spiritual or psychic displacement that came with the change from GDR to German citizenship.”

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667 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2014. Original quote in German: “Ich glaube schon, dass es für Viele, die eben im Arbeitsleben standen, auch, dass das wirklich so eine Art Migration war, … denn die Arbeitsweise ist total anders gewesen als da [in der DDR] … Das war bestimmt für Manche eine harte Sache.”


669 Brinker-Gabler, p. 266.
others were (or still are), in a sense, exiles in their own homeland. Toralf Staud (2003) describes this tendency by stating that

[they] left their *Heimat* behind, fell into a ready-made country, into an established society which had not waited for them. Like typical immigrants, East Germans were disoriented and largely destitute in the beginning. They had high expectations, experienced elation and disappointment. The only thing which was unusual about their state as migrants was that they had migrated without moving away. The new country came to them, not the other way around.  

The changes which many East Germans had so eagerly embraced in the beginning, were just too overwhelming for some to cope with. It was, as Renate S. described: “[t]oo quick … They [West Germany] didn’t give us a chance.” Interviewees often described feeling powerless and of being disadvantaged in the new society which they had to suddenly attempt to understand and adapt to. Moreover, some interviewees’ relatively positive experience of life in the GDR impeded their ability to adapt to life in a reunified Germany, a society which was foreign to them in many ways. The situation of those East Germans who remained in the East until the fall of the Wall and their sense of self changed drastically at this time. The quandary about how they were to come to terms with such a tumultuous event and “find” and “redefine” themselves within the new social structure they were faced with was an obstacle which needed to be overcome in order for them to be able to find a sense of belonging.

The early 1990s was a time of widespread confusion and political and emotional adjustment. On the surface, reunification was portrayed in an overwhelmingly positive light, particularly by the media. However, the collapse of the GDR provoked a reassessment of what being East German signified. Those of generation B who had remained in the GDR for the dictatorship’s duration seemed to have been most impacted

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by this type of identity crisis, as they had not personally chosen to leave the former East. As Ilse F. described:

We had to learn, … at least our generation, … this individual approach … [Y]ou really have to make an effort yourself, personally, individually, to get involved in activities. It’s not that society provides everything anymore and that’s a change … That’s the upbringing which still comes through … Also, you have [known] both sides [communism and capitalism].

The culture shock following the collapse of communism was huge, particularly for generation B, and many spent years re-establishing themselves in their new society. Some former East Germans are in many respects still recovering from an identity crisis, especially those who did not choose to leave the GDR for the West, as Hanna T. explained: “The people who left before the Wall came down, they had made up their mind and they wanted change so they were ready to … go with that change, but people who stayed there were just shocked.” Those who stayed in the GDR, unlike those who chose to escape, had not been able to mentally prepare themselves for the fact that they would be entering a new society. They were forced to adapt to their changed environment suddenly, much like the culture-shock which migrants might experience and this often explains the sense of “homelessness” felt by some interviewees of this generation.

As became evident from interviewees’ accounts, it is vital to view the fall of the Wall from multiple perspectives, as each interviewee experienced it differently. For those who had escaped prior to its collapse, it signified a bitter-sweet victory, but for those who stayed, it was often the start of a time of confusion and necessitated involuntary adjustments. For them in particular, there was an urgent need to migrate mentally and overcome the “Wall in the mind” between Easterners and Westerners in order to adapt to the new capitalist system. Some lost their jobs and found it challenging to adjust to the new Ellenbogengesellschaft of which they had suddenly become a part. As Fulbrook (1999) emphasises, “[t]here is nothing like a sense of adversity (of ‘being in the same boat’) for forging a strong sense of collective identity.” With the collapse of the GDR

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672 Ilse F. in an interview with M. Durrer 18th August 2010.
674 Fulbrook, German National Identity After the Holocaust, p. 215.
Heimat, many sought to protect themselves from prejudice and the shame of having been on the “wrong” side, through the advocation of a Trotzidentität. Along with systemic changes after reunification came psychological changes, particularly involving East Germans’ validation of their past experiences and sense of belonging. Particularly for generations B and C, the memories of this time would have a lasting impact and were carried into their future as migrants. This occurred in a variety of ways ranging from the refusal to accept a status as a “loser” of reunification through the establishment of a successful life elsewhere, to harnessing the knowledge of the mental migration experience they had undergone in post-reunification Germany in their new migration context overseas.
Chapter 6 – The legacy of the Stasi and the issue of blame: Conflicting interpretations of the GDR past and the implications for identity

“You have this different experience which you carry around with you and which of course affects your views.” (Ilse F.)

While it is true that much of the impact of the GDR’s history can be assessed through the comparison of social generations who lived through specific periods of its history, it assumes that generations are largely uniform and ignores the fact that various sub-sets, or communities of memory reside within these. Identity and people’s sense of belonging in the post-communist period is also dependent upon their more personal, individual experiences of the time and, more specifically, their past roles in GDR society. As has occurred in post-totalitarian societies around the world, the aftermath of the GDR dictatorship sparked a heated debate as to how the past should be remembered and who should be held responsible for the oppression which had been inflicted upon those who had been targeted by the regime. People’s identities in the post-socialist world are at least in part a product of “divergent experiences of the state socialist period itself.”

This chapter focuses on the existence of interviewees’ multiple interpretations of the past within and across generations and the divisive nature of the GDR’s legacy. As Sara Jones and Debbie Pinfold (2014) explain, although

[s]ome of the memory battles of post-socialism are indeed fought across generational lines […] in the Eastern European context, the battle lines would

675 Ilse F. in an interview with M. Durrer 18th August 2010.
676 Leith Passmore has investigated the legacy of the past in post-totalitarian Chilean society, the memory debates being waged between diverse groups and the fluidity of the terms ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ when applied to conscripts who served under Pinochet. Leith Passmore, “The Apolitics of Memory: Remembering Military Service Under Pinochet Through and Alongside Transitional Justice, Truth and Reconciliation,” Memory Studies June 2, 2015, DOI: 10.1177/1750698015587152; and Monica Ciobanu has examined the effectiveness of the Romanian Truth Commission in uncovering the atrocities committed under the leadership of Ceaușescu and the intense debate which surrounds the issue of how to remember the past. Monica Ciobanu, “Criminalising the Past and Reconstructing Collective Memory: The Romanian Truth Commission,” Europe-Asia Studies 61.2 (2009): pp. 313-36.
appear to be more frequently drawn not between generations, but between
groups that define themselves in relation to their particular experience of the
past: victim organisations conflict with groups of former state security officers,
memories of ‘normal life’ clash with accounts that emphasize repression and
control.678

Just like the “victim”, “perpetrator” and “bystander” groups which existed in the GDR,
there are once again diverse generation units and indeed, groups which cut across
generations altogether, which have arisen in the post-communist period. This goes to
show that although “shared memories might build collective identities,”679 people can
consider themselves to be part of many “sub-groups” which “can have an impact on the
meaning an individual gives to narratives about the past.”680 Particularly when it came
to discussing the legacy of the Stasi and who was culpable for crimes committed under
the SED’s rule, differences in opinion were so prevalent among interviewees that it
warranted the inclusion of a separate chapter on the issue to acknowledge “the
multivocal and often contradictory nature of memories that exist within the same
community of memory.”681 Furthermore, alongside the victim/perpetrator/bystander sub-
groups, another public/private identity clash has emerged involving efforts to hide
collaboration following reunification. The roles which former East Germans played in
their society and their personal experiences placed them in particular categories
following the fall of the Wall.

Due to their historical location as the main contributors to GDR society and their
participation in the workforce at the time, generation B interviewees automatically
became the generation most divided regarding the past. They were old enough to be
active participants in GDR life and in many ways were the drivers of the society itself.
They were most often the victims, perpetrators and bystanders to whom I refer in this
chapter. However, I would argue that this interpretation alone is too simplistic, as it
excludes those of other generations who might also see themselves as members of these

678 Sara Jones and Debbie Pinfold, “Introduction: Remembering Dictatorship: State Socialist Pasts in
679 Sara Jones, “‘Simply a Little Piece of GDR History’? The Role of Memorialisation in Post-Socialist
680 Jones, “‘Simply a Little Piece of GDR History’?” History and Memory, p. 159.
681 Loring M. Danforth and Riki Van Boeschoten, Children of the Greek Civil War: Refugees and the
categories to varying degrees. This is an instance where the “social generations” theory is too general in nature and where imagined communities of East German victims, for example, are able to exist across generations, rather than exclusively within them. For some, their identity as a victim of the regime is so strong that they draw a clear line between themselves and perpetrators or bystanders and come to have more in common with other victims of varying ages than with those of their particular social generation. This does not mean that the accounts and interpretations held by victims of the past are all the same, but rather that they had enough negative experiences and memories which bind them to each other and which create a retrospective “community of suffering.”

6.1 The demise of the Stasi

Many interviewees were impacted personally by the Stasi, which had observed them, or people with whom they had been acquainted, in their daily lives. The existence of the Stasi further complicated the understanding of the role which the GDR past would play in the lives of interviewees and, for many, contributed to an inner turmoil regarding the paradoxes which they had been witness to in the society which had been their home for a number of years. The oppressiveness of the Stasi and the general population’s disapproval of their operations, along with the desire for greater freedom and mobility, had of course been one of the initial reasons for the protests which had brought about the downfall of the regime. As Erna P. recounted, over the course of the GDR’s existence, the Stasi “grew and they got crueler and crueler … I think it had reached its apex and that the hatred which people had towards this and towards this … closed Wall, and towards the government, that was really paramount.”

Already in September 1989, during the height of the Montagsdemonstrationen, protestors in Leipzig had marched to the Stasi headquarters and vandalised the premises. Actions such as this continued over the coming months as the Stasi, for many, had personified the wrongs of the GDR state. With the collapse of the Wall, the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit had been renamed Amt für Nationale Sicherheit [The Office of National Security] in an effort to deter hostile protesters who demanded to see their files. However, this had not prevented people across the GDR from continuing to storm their premises in various locations. In January 1990, a mass of people had descended upon the headquarters of

682 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2014. Original quote in German: “Das ist total gewachsen und die sind immer gemeiner geworden … Ich glaube das war so auf einem Höhepunkt und der Hass der Menschen gegen diese und gegen diese … zur Mauer und gegen die Regierung, das war wirklich an der Spitze.”
683 Koehler, p. 383.
the Stasi in Berlin, which had spied upon countless citizens and kept records of their activities. Interviewees residing in other cities at the time witnessed similar events, as Erna P. recalled:

In Gera we had a huge area, inside which there was the Staatssicherheit. It was a concrete structure, which you could barely access, even from the outside … Workers banded together, it started very small, it started in pubs … and it grew … until they then said: ‘So, now it’s time. Now we are going to storm that thing.’ What they did exactly, I am not sure, but I know that they set fire to the place, … chased them all out and occupied it, this huge concrete thing … They were in there for days.684

The storming of these headquarters would eventually contribute to the decision for people to be allowed to have access to their personal files. The Stasi Files Law was passed in 1991, allowing German citizens to apply to view their files, an occurrence described as “unique in the post-communist world.”685 The opening of the collection became a contentious issue, primarily “because it involved the whole question of how a former dictatorship would deal with its past.”686 The archive was extensive, reportedly stretching 121 miles.687

The Ministerium für Staatssicherheit began destroying files when it became clear that the old regime would no longer exist, as was evidenced by the large number of shredded documents rescued by GDR citizens.688 Nicole P. described how her mother had witnessed the destruction of files in Dresden, sparking the following reaction from her daughter:

686 Maier, p. 200.
687 Koehler, p. 391.
I said to her ‘It’s just bloody stupid. This is all really, really good information … and really valid to find out what actually happened’ … [but] they just went and destroyed it and made a big fire of it … and they went through like in a rage, my mother said to me.689

As Bruce (2008) asserted: “In some instances, the destruction was complete. In the district of Schwerin, for example, Stasi workers burned and shredded the entire collection of Department XX, which dealt with underground opposition.”690 Many of these documents had been pieced together by hand for a number of years before the invention of a computer programme which could aid this laborious process.691 The mystery disappearance of some files was discussed by a number of interviewees, such as Sabine H., who declared: “Of course many files were destroyed.”692 Martina E. believed the obliteration of some files to have impacted upon her personally, as she had been informed that she did not have a file, even though she was sure that she should, given the role she had played as a staff member of the Ministry for Education in the GDR. She stated: “I think it has been destroyed. Whoever made sure that my file was destroyed, I cannot tell you.”693 Martina E. also recounted an uneasy interaction with others after she made it known that she had applied to view her file, explaining that in 1994 I put in the application … and in ’95 there was a reunion … our school year and the one above … and there I said that I had lodged an application. My husband was also there, so he was observing, and he said that the jaws of half of the people dropped. So, they must have informed on me. Yes, and then I said [to

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689 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
them]: ‘They told me that none exists.’ There was relieved laughter all around the table.694

The whereabouts of some files remains a mystery, although efforts to piece together those which were found shredded after attempts by the Stasi to destroy them continue to this day. Bernhard W. speculated on the actions of the Stasi at this time, recounting that “[t]he important stuff they were shredding day and night in the bunkers … The real stuff is gone.”695 Through these actions, the authorities tried their utmost to hide any evidence of wrong-doing, something which many GDR citizens who had informed on relatives, friends or co-workers also sought to do.

6.2 The Stasi file debate

Within the community of former East Germans, there remains much conflict in opinion regarding the past and how to confront and deal with the GDR’s more sinister side. Opinions frequently depended upon whether interviewees had considered themselves to be targets of the regime or not. Some interviewees’ perceptions of themselves as victims of the regime contrasted with the perspectives of others whose lives had not been directly impacted by the Stasi’s actions. Kristoff A. problematised the situation of much of the population following the fall of the Wall and the positive and negative aspects to file access. He described that

[i]n East Germany, everything was disclosed. It is an advantage, sometimes also a disadvantage because you can’t label a whole generation as guilty … A very small number of people are really that courageous that they want to fight for something … Most people want a family and children, they just want to live, they want a little bit of money and little bit of luck.696

695 Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21st August 2010.
The above assertion demonstrates the shades of grey which existed in the GDR and how many resigned themselves to make the best of the challenging circumstances in which they found themselves. For some, a lack of knowledge regarding an alternative life led them to accept the nature of their society. Diverse opinions regarding the true impact of the Stasi emerged following reunification, as Nicole P. observed in her own family. She explained the denial expressed by her mother when speaking about the past:

[My Mum totally, nowadays, declines what happened in East Germany in those days. So we still fight about it because I said ‘You really, really should start to be a little more realistic about what happened, you know, and that some people got hurt’, and she just goes totally ‘No, no, it’s not true!’]  

The view portrayed by Nicole P.’s mother is not unusual and revealed itself a number of times in interviews. Her interpretation is typical of those who were bystanders or conformists during GDR times, those

who were not knowingly victims of surveillance and intimidation, who were not politically active and thus exposed to the difficulties resulting from such activities, who were relatively happy to lead a quiet life and accept constraints they could not challenge or change.

Many “made do” with the circumstances and it is their passivity which has helped to explain why the GDR was able to exist for 40 years. According to Nicole P., approximately “80% out of the whole of East Germany … were quite happy to live and do what they had to do … They didn’t want to have the conflict or anything because obviously to have a conflict with your own regime had consequences.” On the other hand, those who did openly voice their discontent or those who spoke of their dissatisfaction in the private sphere but were “found out” by the Stasi, encountered a number of obstacles in their daily lives. For many victims, it was only when they were given access to their Stasi file that the full extent of the surveillance was revealed.

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697 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
700 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
The unearthing of the Stasi’s collection and the contents revealed within had flow-on effects in terms of how individuals viewed their pasts because it exposed a side of the regime which conflicted with some of the personal memories of interviewees. Lewis (2003) has described how the Stasi file can be viewed as a “hostile” and “unauthorised” biography, the reading of which has been instrumental in some victims “re-appropriating stolen aspects of their lives and rewriting their life histories.”\(^701\) For many former victims, the files had the capacity to provide answers, but also to destroy pre-existing relationships.\(^702\) Interviewees were strongly divided on the topic of file-access. Some, such as Erna P. were adamant that the opening of the files was necessary, as it had helped achieve justice for her niece:

They [the Stasi] tortured her, they hit her … and then she married, divorced, married, divorced, she was never at peace with herself again, and now, she’s now over 50 … Can you imagine … She’s now married again, but has no children and is totally broken … and that is the result of the Stasi … That’s why it’s so good … that no one can hide anymore … that’s why it’s so good that all the Stasi files are laid open.\(^703\)

Anna K. held a similar view, asserting that “everyone who took part in that should somehow be identified … because some people really had a difficult time.”\(^704\) This quest for justice was expressed by a number of interviewees and was a prominent discussion point, revealing the complex legacy of the Stasi past. However, even among former victims opinions varied, ranging from an adamance that files should be accessible to a resignation that even file access could not alter what had already happened. The choice to access one’s file could open old wounds and reveal unexpected information about a person’s past, as Renate S. described: “At first … I actually cried uncontrollably because there are so many private things in there, where I thought: ‘That

\(^{701}\) Lewis, “Reading and Writing the Stasi File,” German Life and Letters, p. 377 and p. 384.

\(^{702}\) Koehler, p. 391.

\(^{703}\) Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 15\(^{\text{th}}\) July 2010. Original quote in German: “Die haben die gequält, die haben die geschlagen … und dann hat die geheiratet, geschieden, geheiratet, geschieden, die hat überhaupt keine Ruhe mehr in sich gehabt, und jetzt, die ist jetzt über 50 … Stell dir mal vor … Die ist jetzt wieder verheiratet, aber hat keine Kinder und die ist so kaputt … und das ist das Ergebnis von der Stasi … [D]eswegen ist es so gut, dass die Stasiakten, dass sich niemand mehr verstecken kann … und deswegen ist es so gut, dass die Stasiakten alle offengelegt werden.”

\(^{704}\) Anna K. in an interview with M. Durrer 19\(^{\text{th}}\) July 2010. Original quote in German: “jeder, der da teilgenommen hat, sollte irgendwie erkennzeichnet werden, … weil einige Leute haben echt eine schwere Zeit gehabt.”
can’t be true.” Renate S. had known that her views and her readiness to express them openly had caused her to be considered somewhat of a rebel; however, she had never suspected the degree to which she had been watched and followed. As she explained, “there must have always been someone behind me … absolutely sickening … Now I always tell my friends: ‘Now I have a nice diary … of almost ten years [of my life]’ because there are many things in there that I could not even remember.” For Renate S. finding out what was contained within her records was a traumatic experience, as she further described: “At the time when I opened the letter or the envelope [containing my file], it was very overwhelming and I was disgusted. I was in tears because this is very personal information and I never really thought they had followed me for all these years.” In contrast, some others who had read their files described having a somewhat surreal and amusing experience, as Nicole P. reflected: “[O]ne day it [the file] just arrived in the letterbox in Stuttgart … Really weird, yeah … I found it quite amusing how they described us … [They documented] what you did day in and day out. It was really weird.” The multitude of reactions expressed by interviewees is consistent with Lewis’ (2003) claim that “[t]he harrowing nature of the experience of reading one’s secret police file can be seen in the sheer range of emotional responses that victims have reported, from crying, outbursts of hate, anger and nausea to disgust and laughter.” However, the hope which some people had that the files would explain their pasts, was not always fulfilled. In many interviewees’ copies, names of collaborators still remain blacked-out and their own lives as objects of the Stasi’s observation were often inconsistent with their personal memories of their life in the GDR. Nicole P. referred to inaccuracies in her own file, stating, “Some of it wasn’t really true.” She referred to one particular instance where the Stasi had analysed the character of her mother:


707 Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd April 2013.

708 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.

709 Lewis, “Reading and Writing the Stasi File,” German Life and Letters, p. 386.

710 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
[T]hey just described her, how she looked like, and she was obviously divorced from my father and then she started a new relationship … with [Marco] … and she never … had many men or anything like this but they described her in the thing like ‘[Nicole P.’s] mother seems to have a lot of men coming in and out of the house’, or something like that.\(^\text{711}\)

Nicole P.’s observation highlights the possibility for files to reveal both truths and errors. Kurt S. also alluded to the possible inaccuracies in some files, emphasising that as it was a dictatorship, one can almost accept the fact that there is secret police around … Having a dictatorship … where those files were generated under whatever circumstance … is quite different to a situation where you can say, oh, you know this and that. So these files, however they came into existence under the circumstances back then, are not too trustworthy.\(^\text{712}\)

Kurt S. makes a valid observation regarding the reliability of some files, as there are documentations of their possible “inconsistency and inaccuracy” and a need to consider “the balance of fact and fiction”.\(^\text{713}\) In spite of inaccuracies, however, there is no doubt that the Stasi’s network was extensive and involved a number of collaborators, and that the contents of the files “both dispel[led] and created myths about the course of individual and collective biographies in the GDR”.\(^\text{714}\)

The media-storm and controversy surrounding revelations which came about due to Akteneinsicht [file access] often drew attention away from the fact that there were a number of East Germans who did not wish to read their files at all. Some interviewees emphasised what they considered to be the necessity of leaving the past behind due to the damaging nature of many files’ contents, as expressed by Angela H., who stated “I’m against it [file access]. They should be burned.”\(^\text{715}\) For others, it was disinterest, the prevalence of bureaucratic red tape, or an unwillingness to relive past injustices.

\(^\text{711}\) Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 18th August 2015.
\(^\text{715}\) Angela H. in an interview with M. Durrer 4th April 2012.
which kept them from applying. Thomas E. described how his decision not to view his file was largely due to the fact that he did not believe that it would reveal anything about his life that he did not already know. He recounted: “I have also never looked at my file. I know my life. I know what happened in my life.”\footnote{Thomas E. in an interview with M. Durrer 29\textsuperscript{th} April 2013. Original quote in German: “Ich habe mir meine Akte auch nie angeguckt. Ich kenne mein Leben. Ich weiß, was in meinem Leben passiert ist.”} In contrast to my own expectations, it was at times those who had been the Stasi’s most ill-treated victims who did not wish to know what had been documented in their personal files. Nicole P. recounted: “[M]y Dad never applied [to see his file] and his file would be gigantic. He doesn’t want to know about the past, especially about prison. That’s a subject you cannot touch.”\footnote{Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 18\textsuperscript{th} August 2015.} Similarly, Astrid N., with her experience of being arrested in East Germany as a teenager, expressed the view that
to be honest, it doesn’t help anyone in the end. What happened, happened. The people who were driving the situation, so to speak, those in power were … the winners in the end again … [T]o be honest, I wasn’t at all interested after all that had happened and all those years later.\footnote{Astrid N. in an interview with M. Durrer 1\textsuperscript{st} September 2010. Original quote in German: ”es hilft ja niemanden mehr am Ende um ehrlich zu sein. Was geschehen ist, es ist geschehen. Die Leute, die am Ruder gesessen haben, wie man so schön sagt, an der Macht, die waren … am Ende wieder die Gewinner … [U]m ehrlich zu sein, ich war gar nicht interessiert nach dem ganzen, was passiert war und die ganzen Jahre später.”}

Astrid N.’s description above highlights the resignation felt by some former victims of the regime regarding their experiences. Inadequate punishment of perpetrators and a desire to forget traumatic events perhaps also contributed to some interviewees’ decisions not to exhume the ghosts of the past. In the cases where former collaborators have been punished, as David Clarke (2012) has explained, the focus remains on their specific crimes and depriving them of access to particular roles in reunified German society, “rather than improving the lot of those who suffered at the hands of the security services of the GDR state.”\footnote{David Clarke, “Compensating the Victims of Human Rights Abuses in the German Democratic Republic: The Struggle for Recognition,” \textit{German Politics} 12.1 (2012): p. 19.} In recent times, this rift has been illustrated not just in some of the interviews conducted, but also in documentaries made about the lives of former political prisoners and how they dealt with facing those who had victimised them (some of whom were still active in public life). For many, “the starting point … is silence”, the memories of persecution and imprisonment too painful to speak of for a
number of years.\footnote{Jeder schweigt von etwas anderem, dir. Marc Bauder, and Doerte Franke, prod. Marc Bauder, Bauderfilm/ZDF, 2006.} Hanna T. described a lingering sense of victimhood which has followed her to her present life overseas, describing how

My now-husband still notices when … we walk and somebody follows us, that I notice it straightaway … If that person follows us 50 metres, I’m still getting a bit nervous … It’s still in the system … not so much anymore … \footnote{Hanna T. in an interview with M. Durrer 24\textsuperscript{th} August 2010.} [T]here’s still a lot of things I can’t talk about, I can’t read.\footnote{Sofia W. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\textsuperscript{nd} March 2013.}

Hanna T.’s account above illustrates the hold which traumatic memories can have on those who were targeted, even after people have been far-removed from that period of their lives. For Sofia W., her childhood experience of escaping the GDR and her recollections of the searches conducted by the Stasi with their German Shepherd dogs, has remained with her, manifesting itself in a lingering fear:

[\textit{E}ven now, to this day, I’m … scared of German shepherd dogs … I think on my last visit to Germany … I’d come off the plane and … gone towards the ... customs section and the door gets opened and it was police there with a German shepherd. I nearly lost it ... So many years on and … I don’t forget ... it’s just so ingrained.\footnote{Sofia W. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\textsuperscript{nd} March 2013.}]

Years of surveillance and being the target of the Stasi’s attention both in the public and private sphere took its toll on many and left invisible scars which still exist in the minds of those who were singled out by the state. In the realm of scholarship too, people’s experiences as victims have been presented and analysed. Their time as opponents of the GDR state, and in some cases the trauma and imprisonment which they had experienced, had contributed to who they were and how they viewed their connection to their past. Although many dissidents and people who had been victimised by the Stasi still referred to a sense of East Germanness, I would argue that they frequently considered themselves to belong to the category, or even imagined community, of East
German victims.\(^\text{723}\) This is supported by Jones (2015), who described how prisoners held at *Hohenschönhausen* form their own distinct “community of memory”.\(^\text{724}\) In the case of interviewee Konrad S., he described the close contacts which he had with other political prisoners and the lasting legacy of their victimisation during GDR times:

> I think that people should know what … happened there. A lot of friends could not overcome the times in prison and are not on earth anymore. There are other ones which are very sick and in different institutions. We had a lot of discussions in our group about who is better, a murderer, rapist, pedo or political prisoner? The first three had a better life in jail … I’m still alive but a lot of people can’t imagine what was going on for us in there.\(^\text{725}\)

Konrad S.’s description above highlights the desire for justice expressed some interviewees, an appeal which often clashes with the interests of former perpetrators and collaborators to conceal past wrongdoing. The intense Stasi debate revealed rifts among former East Germans regarding whether or not collaboration should be revealed. Post-reunification injustices were felt intensely by a number of former targets of surveillance and contrasted with the sentiments of other GDR citizens, who had perhaps acted as bystanders or perpetrators and wanted to forget the past as quickly as possible.

### 6.3 The issue of blame in the post-communist period

In interviews, the divisions between victims and perpetrators were frequently discussed by those who had suffered at the hand of the Stasi. From the side of the perpetrators, however, a silence remains. No interviewees participating in this study classified themselves as perpetrators, a telling occurrence which I believe can be explained by the fact that those who were responsible for the ill-treatment of some East German citizens did not wish to face their demons in the post-communist world. As a contrast to this, many interviewees who had been victims were willing to share their stories, perhaps to counteract the silence propagated by perpetrators. Furthermore, their stories provide a counter-narrative to the nostalgia phenomenon which has occupied much of the post-

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\(^{724}\) Jones, “‘Simply a Little Piece of GDR History’?” *History and Memory*, p. 169.

\(^{725}\) Konrad S. in an interview with M. Durrer 21\(^{\text{st}}\) June 2013.
communist dialogue. In a similar vein, those who may be described as bystanders were also happy to share their stories, perhaps because they wished to encourage a better understanding of the complexities and many dimensions of GDR society. They had not directly incriminated themselves but neither had they openly challenged the regime, preferring to live a quiet life off the radar of the Stasi. Perpetrators, on the other hand, would most probably have little to gain from speaking about the past, preferring to forget about wrong-doings and move on with their lives. Although many interviewees spoke of former perpetrators whom they had seen since the fall of the Wall, even some in Australia, these people did not take part in this study (at least to the best of my knowledge). Mirjam K. described multiple encounters with former associates of the Stasi, highlighting that they had often been able to escape punishment in the post-communist period. One of her recollections involved a man whom she had encountered while working on a cruise ship and had suspected of working for the Stasi. She described how, in contrast to the other East Germans she had met, “[h]e was able to afford the most expensive trips on the MS Europa, [he] only stayed in suites with his wife.”726 Although the end of the GDR meant that the question of what would happen to the perpetrators of the regime would finally have to be addressed, the way in which this was done was often inconsistent and frequently did not have satisfactory outcomes for victims. As Benjamin Forest, Juliet Harrison and Karen Till (2004) assert, the shift from totalitarianism to democracy arguably requires a public discussion about how a society remembers its recent past, including how the previous regime repressed civil society through fear, silence and violence. Should these acts be defined as ‘crimes’? If so, who is held responsible: individuals, representatives of the state and/or society in general?727

It was those at the top who had been the engineers of the dictatorship, and although some of those who had been at the apex of GDR power were put on trial after reunification, there were often unsatisfactory outcomes as far as the general population was concerned, with “personnel changes” being described as “insufficient in many areas

of society.” Mirjam K. expressed her opinion that “[t]hey never really got the big-wigs.” Koehler (2004) supported this assertion, documenting that: “Trials of former Stasi officers and government officials continued until the end of 1999, but rarely did the courts hand down sentences more severe than a couple of years’ probation. Then the statute of limitations on all crimes except murder expired.” To the disapproval of many, a number of former Stasi officers were “pensioned-off” after the fall of the Wall, and although they did not receive as many privileges as they would have in the GDR, were able to continue living their lives rather comfortably, some still being rumoured to reside near Hohenschönhausen Prison in Berlin’s north-east. Konrad S. expressed his frustration with the fact that a significant number of former perpetrators had eluded punishment, emphasising that “[e]ven after the many years you don’t forget the former tormentors … [and] now they are receiving a nice pension!” Although key players in the SED, such as Erich Honecker himself, were “charged with responsibility for ordering acts against life and liberty”, the legal process against him ground to a halt in 1991 due to his ill health. Renate S. described the outcome of trial, stating that “nothing much really happened” because “Honecker emigrated to Chile” anyway. Many supporters of the GDR regime still remained in the public service, and interviewees described their discomfort with this. As Sofia W. explained: “I was hesitant even about Gregor Gysi … when he entered politics … [Y]ou always feel a bit strange that those people were given any position and they are now making decisions and [are] back at the top.” Many interviewees expressed disbelief and disappointment at what they perceived to be the lack of justice in the post-communist period. Mirjam K. recounted with frustration that “What I can’t understand is that these people haven’t

730 Koehler, pp. 391-92.
732 As reported by one of the tour guides (a former political prisoner) of Hohenschönhausen when I took part in a tour of the prison.
733 Konrad S. in an interview with M. Durrer 21st June 2013. Original quote in German: “Auch nach den vielen Jahren vergibt man nicht die ehemaligen Peiniger … [und] jetzt beziehen die eine nette Rente!”
734 Maier, p. 319.
735 Maier, p. 319.
737 Sofia W. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd March 2013.
been charged. They are walking around freely. They are the ones who are in the government once again.”738

Interviewees described how the effort to hide collaboration often manifested itself in a denial of the past or a reinvention of oneself as an fervent advocate for capitalism. As Erna P. stated, “The Stasi people, many became turncoats, [and] weazled their way into a position somewhere”.739 There is no doubt that the issue of blame is a highly complex one, and one which was often analysed and discussed in interviews. Renate S. expressed her opinion on this issue in the following manner: “A few of the very top ones got away … but the people in the middle, who were actually the worst because they really used all their power to exploit other people, they did not fall.”740 She refers here to those in her hometown who were employed in mid-tier government positions:

[Those] who had, for example, been on the district council, the Department of the Interior [of the Stasi], and who then worked at the employment agency after the Wende and were even able to determine whether or not we would get a job, these [people] did not fall, they even rose [up the ranks].741

One case where the question of responsibility became very cloudy, was in the investigation of the Mauerschützen, the GDR’s border guards. This was due to the fact that “[b]order guards had orders to fire on anyone trying to scale the wall”,742 and therefore claimed that they had just been performing their duty. According to Charles S. Maier (1997), approximately 200 people had been killed while attempting to escape across the border since the building of the Wall, 97 of these fatalities occurring at the Berlin Wall.743 Tragically, the last victim was a friend of Britta F.’s whom she described

740 Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd April 2013. Original quote in German: “Die ganz Obersten, da sind einige weggekommen, aber … das Mittelvolk, was eigentlich die Schlammstädten waren, weil die haben wirklich ihre ganze Macht benutzt, um andere Leute auszunutzen, die sind nicht gefallen.”
741 Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd April 2013. Original quote in German: “[Die], die dann zum Beispiel auf dem Rat des Kreises gesessen haben, Abteilung Inneres und nach der Wende auf dem Arbeitsamt gearbeitet haben und über uns noch dann bestimmen konnten, ob wir noch einen Job kriegen oder nicht … Die sind nicht gefallen, die sind noch gestiegen.”
742 Koehler, p. 374.
743 Maier, p. 320.
“was shot in February ’89 while trying to escape.” He had been with another friend who survived but was imprisoned and eventually bought free after the event. After the collapse of communism, the deaths which had occurred at the GDR’s border prompted the question of whether responsibility lay with Honecker and the head of the National Defence Council, General Heinz Keßler, who had issued the order to shoot; or whether the border guards who had carried out these orders were at fault. Thomas E. problematised the issue of blame regarding the role of the border guards in the following manner:

For me it was definitely the fault of the government because the government made the laws and had implemented the order to shoot to kill … I could imagine that a number of those who did shoot … they either did it out of love because they thought that they were doing something good and they believed in the system, … or they ended up having a breakdown because they had had to do it.

The complexities surrounding the GDR’s legacy prompted questions “about legal and moral guilt, personal responsibility, compliance and complicity and the possibilities for dissent and opposition under authoritarian regimes.” A number of interviewees drew comparisons between the authoritarian nature of the GDR and that of the Third Reich. Ilse F. explained this in correlation in the following manner:

[A]fter the Wall came down, I actually understood how the Third Reich worked because it was probably a similar structure … You had people who cheated and looked and reported, not so strongly as in the Third Reich, but from my point of view it was very similar and I understood how it worked because … we knew

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745 Maier, p. 320.
746 Thomas E. in an interview with M. Durrer 29th April 2013. Original quote in German: “Für mich ist das eindeutig eine Staatsschuld, weil der Staat sozusagen die Gesetzgebung gemacht hat und … das als Schießbefehl ausgesetzt hat … Ich könnte mir vorstellen, dass viele von denen, die geschossen haben … entweder haben sie das mit Liebe gemacht, weil sie dachten, sie tun was Gutes und haben an das System geglaubt, … oder sind daran kaputt gegangen, weil sie’s machen mussten.”
about it a bit, but we didn’t do anything about [it], or most people didn’t do anything. They just lived their normal lives.⁷⁴⁸

Nicole P. similarly reflected upon her own realisation that there were parallels between the two German dictatorships, explaining “I suppose it is the same with the people who were like under Hitler, you know. Some of them, they just got away with it and lots of them would say ‘oh, you know, we had to follow orders’ … and others say … ‘I believed in these things.’”⁷⁴⁹

In the post-communist period, complex questions regarding who was to blame for injustices committed under communism linger, especially considering that these actions had not been viewed as crimes under GDR law.⁷⁵⁰ Nicole P., who had been involved in elite sport as a young person in the GDR, and had been exposed to body-altering drugs, highlighted some of the pitfalls which people encountered if they went down the path of requesting compensation for past injuries. She explained that

[p]eople said to me … that I should go and try to get compensation for all this because obviously … I’ve got juvenile arthritis because of that … but I wouldn’t know where to start. I mean, where do you find these people who were responsible for all this? I couldn’t think of the names and it’s too much trauma … and it’s also the money side, I mean, it’s not cheap to do such things.⁷⁵¹

In contrast to those who considered themselves victims, a number of interviewees who were too young at the time to be fully involved in the intricacies of GDR society, were generally more forgiving of past crimes. They had been protected from the ugly side of communism and were often unaware of the profound influence of the Stasi. However, they did often express understanding for their parents’ turmoil over whether or not they should view their files. Natalie F. described how her “parents never looked at their Stasi file … because they did not want to damage any friendships.”⁷⁵² Some younger

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⁷⁴⁸ Ilse F. in an interview with M. Durrer 18th August 2010.
⁷⁴⁹ Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 8th August 2016
⁷⁵⁰ Clarke and Wölfel, p. 7.
⁷⁵¹ Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
⁷⁵² Natalie F. in an interview with M. Durrer 29th April 2013. Original quote in German: “[M]eine Eltern haben sich zum Beispiel ihre Stasiakte nie angeguckt, also, weil sie keine Freundschaften zerstören wollten.”
interviewees recalled the pain experienced by their parents when they discovered that someone close to them had informed. Sabine H. described the situation of her parents: “Yes, a friend of my parents was also a member of the Stasi, which nobody knew about, and so that was a bad discovery.”753 There were many instances in interviews where participants described being informed on by people whom they had trusted. When Renate S. viewed her file over 10 years after the collapse of the GDR, she grew suspicious of the possible involvement of her brother, and discovered that a former work colleague had been reporting on her, stating “I never thought he would have done this, but he did it and he was reporting back that I opened my mouth at work and that I am not agreeing with the politics and things like that.”754 Hanna T. likewise became aware of the collaboration of one of the few people whom she had trusted while under the Stasi’s strict surveillance. She described her disappointment and surprise when “I later found out that my good neighbour, friend, was part of that as well, which was a bit of a shock to me because … she was my confidante back then.”755

For younger interviewees, the boundaries between victims, perpetrators and bystanders were perhaps more fluid, as they had not usually significantly harmed or been harmed by anyone in GDR society. As Stefanie E. expressed, “Time is a big thing. The next generation, they don’t even know what you’re talking about.”756 They had been too young to be directly involved in this paradox and so did not view this as a significant part of their lives. Sofia W. was forgiving of members of her own family who had possibly informed:

I’ve got a lot of compassion as well for my uncles. They were all just in there to save their own skin … I mean, I do not condone any of those things; however, they were just normal people … [S]o, it’s not really great if you’re telling on your sister or if you’re spying on her, but I don’t really hold it [against them].757

753 Sabine H. in an interview with M. Durrer 10th August 2010. Original quote in German: “Ja, ein Freund von meinen Eltern war auch Stasimitglied, von dem keiner es wusste, und so das war schon eine schlimme Erfahrung.”
754 Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd April 2013.
756 Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6th June 2012.
757 Sofia W. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd March 2013.
With regard to the issue of blame, one interviewee, Ilse F., was of the view that “when you really want to judge people from those files it is very hard because you single out certain people and you don’t get other people who are worse, but cleverer, and so in the end you blame the little one.”

Interpretations of the past, both individual and collective, are vital to understanding the history of the GDR and its legacy, as Forest, Harrison and Till (2004) explain: “Discussion about ‘crimes’ and responsibility are central to the politics of public memory, because national histories are (re)narrated through such debates.” Julia T. further explained the multifaceted nature of the issue of blame and how it related not just to the actions of individuals, but to the system itself: “There are probably only a few whom you could blame, where you would say that they had to be personally punished because most people who were perhaps guilty of indoctrinating us [and] locking us in, they grew up in the system themselves.”

Amid this debate about victims, perpetrators and bystanders lingers another perspective of the GDR past: that of the Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter [unofficial collaborator], or IM. Interviewees often spoke of those whom they knew to be IMs, although their perspectives on the issue varied. While it seems that many IMs participated willingly, some interviewees’ personal descriptions reveal a more complex picture. For example, Nicole P. explained how one of my ex-friends who apologised to me for being a member … said to me that he basically didn’t have a choice because he was an orphan … He was very rebellious at school and not a good kid … and by the age of 12 he had done something again and … he was just about to receive another penalty of some description, and he was approached by the Stasi to basically start to spy on the kids and … their parents and they promised him that they would … get him through school and help him out … and he just joined, and then when he wanted to get out later on, when he knew that it was not really the right thing to do, he just couldn’t.

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758 Ilse F. in an interview with M. Durrer 18th August 2010.
759 Forest, Johnson and Till, p. 358.
760 Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original quote in German: “Es sind wahrscheinlich auch nur einige Wenige, denen man Schuld zuweisen könnte, dass man sagt, sie müssen persönlich bestraft werden, denn die meisten, die vielleicht schuldig sind, uns verbogen zu haben [und] uns eingesperrt zu haben, die sind ja selber in dem System aufgewachsen.”
761 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
Angela H. also discussed the complexity of the issue of blame surrounding IMs, emphasising that

a lot of people were forced into it. You know, there are stories of young women falling in love with a man … and then being photographed and exposed and … out of shame, they did things, and just imagine the position to be in, to be blackmailed like that. I think they’ve suffered enough.762

There are varying accounts of the number of collaborators in the Stasi network, but according to Lothar Kettenacker (2009), Mielke’s surveillance-machine had had such a profound influence on society that “no fewer than 91,000 full time officials and 173,000 so-called Informelle Mitarbeiter (IM) [unofficial collaborators]”763 were employed by the Ministry at the time of the GDR’s collapse. Wanda Menke-Glueckert (1992) provides similar figures regarding the extent of the Stasi network, asserting: “It is believed that 150,000 to 200,000 informants (IMs) helped the Stasi to compile dossiers on some six million people. The result of their spying is five floors stacked with files in the former Ministry of State Security building in East Berlin.”764

The case of the IMs in the post-communist world is highly contested; some former victims viewing their collaborations as inexcusable, while others, perhaps less affected, recognised the existence of many possible shades of grey regarding their involvement. As one interviewee asserted, some informants were just “small fish”765 and, in a sense, victims of the authoritarian system themselves. Furthermore, some interviewees swayed between conformity and rebellion, thus illustrating the complexity of GDR society and the impossibility of categorising all people into rigidly defined groups. While some East Germans are very obviously victims and others very obviously perpetrators, there are a number of people in the middle, people who may migrate between categories and be seen (and see themselves) as victims, bystanders or perpetrators at various stages of their biographies. At times varying interpretations clash, particularly when those who were targets of GDR authorities hear alternative descriptions of life in the former socialist state as relatively normal. For some, this may undermine their ill-treatment and

762 Angela H. in an interview with M. Durrer 4th April 2012.
765 Ilse F. in an interview with M. Durrer 18th August 2010.
“creates the impression that their suffering than and now has been forgotten or dismissed.”\textsuperscript{766} The ambivalence among interviewees echoes the claim made by Fulbrook (1999) that “only extremely rarely (if ever) do a majority of members of a given community share a deep-rooted and essentially unproblematic belief in their collective identity as a ‘nation’.”\textsuperscript{767} Thus, the questions “Who am I and where do I belong?”, are constantly debated, both in the public sphere and within the very minds of those individuals who are trying to make sense of their past in a world where their whole life is called into question. As Christiane Lemke (1992) has observed, “[c]oming to terms with the Stasi legacy has […] become a debate about the identity of former GDR citizens.”\textsuperscript{768} There are undoubtedly similarities which exist between the biographies of all interviewees, however, there are also a number of different interpretations of the GDR past which serve to highlight that

[s]peaking about a collective identity as East Germans … does not necessarily refer to social homogeneity or to a common East German subculture. Rather, as the transition process has come to an end, multiple ways of remembering the GDR and of coping differently with a new system have emerged.\textsuperscript{769}

Thus, being East German can mean a number of different things and cannot be understood solely as one single entity. A variety of perspectives of the former GDR exist, and will continue to exist both across and within generations, impacting upon the very question of what it means to belong to this unique group of people. Views vary between and within the victim, perpetrator and bystander categories regarding highly emotive issues, particularly the opening of the Stasi files, efforts to conceal collaboration and the quest for justice. While interviewees’ status as migrants has perhaps meant that they can view the developments within their former home country with greater detachment, for some generation B victims in particular, the pursuit of justice and making peace with the past remains an ongoing process. For interviewees who lived through the height of the GDR dictatorship, dealing with the existence of various sub-groups and the large array of perspectives following reunification contributed to a

\textsuperscript{766} Clarke and Wölfel, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{767} Fulbrook, \textit{German National Identity After the Holocaust}, p. 232.
\textsuperscript{768} Lemke, p. 44.
reconsideration of how they viewed themselves and their past. Some, such as Sofia W., are still searching for answers, emphasising:

I don’t want to forget it … I’m still very interested in everything that happened in the East German system … I was probably traumatised enough that I feel like I want to keep digging. Maybe there’s another piece that I can add to the things that I experienced”. 770

In contrast, others prefer to forget and move on with their lives. In spite of the impression of justice created through the opening of the Stasi files, the silence of perpetrators, and indeed some former victims who were deeply traumatised, has resulted in an environment where, as Nicole P. explained, “Lots of people just don’t say the truth, or they just don’t… want to talk about it. 771 Some do not want to know what details about their lives may be contained within their files in order to preserve relationships between family and friends and among interviewees, the pendulum often swung between a fervent desire for justice, disappointment with the lack of justice, resignation and the wish to erase negative memories of the past.

771 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 8th August 2016.
Chapter 7 – Life in Australia: Interpreting identity from the outside

“The basis for this migration here [to Australia], [was] that we had actually already been through this once before, because we had suddenly arrived in a different country [after reunification], even though we did not move. We arrived in another country by force.”

(Julia T.)

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been an era of rapid change in which the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe has played just one small part. For interviewees, particularly for those belonging to generations B and C, the communist past and the difficulties of adjusting to life in the post-communist world were a stark reality. Mihelj’s (2014) assertion that “[t]he demise of state socialism in central and eastern Europe triggered a profound restructuring of individual and collective relationships with the past” rang true for many participants, who were forced to question how their past had shaped their lives and identities. The experiences which this group of interviewees have had throughout their lives is unique, even within the East German community in general, as they, unlike their counterparts “back home” have been further uprooted from their past. Irial Glynn and J. Olaf Kleist’s (2012) observation that “[m]igration is a challenge to the traditional concept of social memory as a provider of national identity” is of great relevance to interviewees, who have had to face challenges to their identity in a foreign context.

For the participants in this study, the process of understanding who they are is influenced by their perspective as “outsiders”. As such, it is necessary to keep in mind that “when one goes abroad, one tends to classify oneself (or be classified by others)


773 Mihelj, p. 447.

differently from one’s categorization at home.” Unlike those East Germans who have remained in the GDR, they chose to leave their place of origin at various stages of their lives and of their country’s history. It is perhaps with distance and the passage of time that many have truly come to reflect upon their pasts and their place in the world more acutely. It is necessary to bear in mind that “the point at which the life story is told – plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative, because it is the lens through which the entire story is interpreted.” Just as the three social generations were impacted in numerous ways by the lives they had led in the GDR, so too would they come to be significantly affected by their migration experience in Australia. For some, this migration journey was largely complete, while for others it had only just begun.

The conclusion of the Cold War encouraged travel and migration overseas as countries which had previously been inaccessible to many from the Eastern Bloc now became possible destinations. As one interviewee stated, it was often this long period of isolation from the rest of the world which drove East Germans to “travel like wild, because they feel that they missed so much.” As Bönisch-Brednich (2002) expressed in her book on German migrants to New Zealand, it is necessary to recognise that there are two migration perspectives after reunification, that of West Germans and that of East Germans. Although it has never been my intention to present an analysis of the experience of all Germans, Bönisch-Brednich’s statement draws attention to the fact that the experiences of those from the East and those from the West are distinct, due to their diverse pasts, and that East Germans may exist as a unique group of migrants. I would like to build upon Bönisch-Brednich’s observation by suggesting that not only do these people possess distinctive characteristics as an “East German” migrant group, but their experiences within this wide category are often influenced, among other things, by their belonging to the social generational groups and other communities of memory described previously.

For many interviewees, the fall of the Wall had great significance and their personal history and path in life had been linked, to varying degrees, to the GDR past. After the downfall of communism, those who had spent a number of years behind the Iron

775 Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, p. 230.
776 Danforth and Van Boeschoten, p. 230.
777 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 8th July 2016.
778 Bönisch-Brednich, p. 186.
Curtain (mainly generation B) were now faced with the possibility of international mobility, something which they had long been denied. For those who had already moved overseas prior to the GDR’s collapse (mainly generation A), the demise of communism had provided them with an opportunity to return to their society of origin after many years of absence. Furthermore, migrants who had been children or very young adults at the time of the fall of the Wall and had come of age within reunified Germany or had been able to complete their higher education in the post-Wall years (generation C) also had their own unique migration experience and belonged to the generation most directly influenced by widespread global changes in the field of migration.

During conversations with interviewees, a recurrent theme was the degree to which their personal experiences of the past had impacted upon their lives overseas at the time of their interviews. This chapter aims to discuss how former GDR citizens of all ages and various communities of memory negotiate their identity and sense of belonging in the context of international migration, specifically their migration to Australia, and how their interpretations and experiences contribute to their membership to the prescribed social generations. All interviewees who chose to leave their original home, whether before or after the fall of the Berlin Wall, removed themselves from a familiar environment. Migration presented interviewees with challenges, confronted them with new ways of thinking, including ways of thinking about the GDR and reunification, and contributed further to the development of their understanding of who they are today. Their migration to Australia encompassed not just physical movement, but also re-emphasised the fluidity of identity, as supported by Serhat Karakayali (2013), who writes that migration “is identified with liveliness – not because migrants are more creative, but rather because the movement in firmly established identities, cultural codes and ways of living is encouraged with migration”.779 People are indisputably shaped by their life experiences, by their memories of these experiences and how they communicate these memories. As Kateryna Longley (2006) explains, “[t]he stories we tell about ourselves are our selves, they are the selves we fashion daily from our earliest moments of awareness to the day we die. And these stories, these selves, change as we

change. “780 This is consistent with the advocation for the existence of “multiple selves over an individual’s lifetime.”781 The view that people are shaped by their memories, experiences, and connection to others with similar backgrounds translates to the lives of interviewees in more recent times.

The stories of participants’ migration experiences encompass a wide time frame, ranging from the 1950s to the present day. Interviewees migrated under a range of circumstances, and it is for this reason that their personal experiences must be viewed in diverse contexts and with the acknowledgement that identity and people’s sense of belonging to particular social groups and communities of memory are not static, but rather highly dynamic. There are distinct variations between generation A and the two other generations in relation to their time of migration and the length of time they have spent away from the GDR, this being a significant factor in a migrants’ sense of belonging and determining the relationship which they have with their past.

7.1 Generation A (migrated between 1959 and 1970)
For generation A, all of whom left the GDR before the building of the Berlin Wall, migration signified a permanent break with the past and, from their view at the time, a true inability to ever return. As with their experiences of life in the GDR, this social generation’s experiences of life in Australia is exceedingly uniform. They all came to Australia during a similar time frame and have now been in the country for a number of years. Their decision to leave the GDR meant that they were leaving their old life behind and that there was a high degree of permanency associated with their decision. In general, interviewees of this generation often reported being unconcerned about their destination of migration and about what they were leaving behind. As Hans L. stated, “I thought, well, if you migrate at all, you might as well go as far away as possible. You can’t go any further than Australia. If you go any further you’re on the way back!”782 Possible destinations which interviewees most commonly referred to were Australia, Canada, South Africa and the United States. At the time of application, Australia was, as Hans L. described “pushing very much … [When I was] in West Germany, it was

very much pushed ‘come to Australia’ and all that.” This mindset showed a readiness to embrace new experiences and create a new life for themselves, as the place they had originated from was seen as unreachable. However, not all whom I interviewed migrated to Australia straight away. Frieda K. had lived in England and Hong Kong before deciding to migrate to Australia in 1970. She recounted her family’s decision in her interview: “We lived two years in Hong Kong and neither of us wanted to go back to England, so we decided we had a choice: Canada, South Africa or Australia. So, we picked Australia.” Other interviewees also described spending some time in other countries, or in one case, joining the merchant navy and travelling the world, before finally settling on Australia as their permanent place of residence. They had chosen to make a life for themselves overseas and were perhaps as a result more willing to undergo a “change of spots” and adapt to their host country. The impossibility of return, and the resultant “openness to experience” which many interviewees seemed to have had once they arrived in Australia, meant that they often adapted readily to their changed circumstances. Furthermore, most came with the intention of working and establishing themselves outside Germany, without thoughts of returning.

By the time of these interviews, generation A participants had been in Australia for between 40 and 55 years – more time than they had actually spent living in the SOZ or GDR. Their experience of post-war society there did impact upon who they were today, but their long period of absence from their country of origin also greatly influenced their self-perception and sense of belonging. With increasing distance, both in terms of space and time, between their past lives in the GDR and their lives overseas, interviewees became less attached to their country of origin. This distance was exacerbated by the fact that they were unable to return to the GDR to live for many years. As Ernst M. explained: “As long as this Wall was there, we didn’t feel like we could go back to

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787 In one of the chapters of her book, Bönisch-Brednich investigates the situation of migrants to New Zealand between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s. She describes how this group came to the country exclusively to work and set up their new lives. Unlike migrants in later years, they did not tend to have thoughts of exploring the country as tourists, but wished to establish themselves within their immediate surroundings. Bönisch-Brednich, p. 104.
Germany because we couldn’t go back to where we lived originally and we didn’t want to live anywhere else.” Migrants had made a conscious choice to leave their old way of life behind and start a new life in a new country. This seemed to contribute significantly to the high level of integration of this generation, as they came to Australia with a positive outlook and the belief that a return to an alternative life in their country of origin was not possible. As Alexander Freund (2008) explains of this generation,

their connections to Germany were fragile and tenuous, especially for those who had fled eastern Europe or the eastern German territories during or after the war and spent only a few years in western Germany, as well as for those who had few or no relatives left “back home”.

Generation A came to Australia during a migration boom. Particularly during the 1950s and 60s, Australia encouraged migration, most significantly from central European countries (as these migrants met the requirements of the White Australia Policy), and East Germans joined the many people from other countries who were migrating during the post-war period. The 1950s saw the introduction of “assisted migration schemes” between Australia and countries such as West Germany and the Netherlands, which brought approximately 120,000 people from these countries to Australia’s shores between 1951 and 1966. Interviewees of generation A migrated to Australia between 1959 and 1970 and came into a world very different from the place which they had left. For one interviewee who arrived at the beginning of this period, this meant a stay in a migrant reception and training centre. Hans L., who arrived in 1959, recalled his experience as an assisted migrant and his stay in temporary accommodation in Bonegilla, Victoria:

Our little huts were about as big as that [interviewee points to a mini-van] and that’s all. There was a bed in there, and sometimes two. They were the old … shearers’ beds, those with wire strung across. There was a mattress on there, a
pillow and one blanket and that was it. In winter in Victoria during the night it can be brutally cold and if you were in one of those corrugated iron huts it was freezing. During the day it was like an oven.\textsuperscript{793}

Hans L. eventually found work as a cane-cutter in Queensland. He recounted the difficult conditions he worked under at the time and how he had built up his life from almost nothing. In contrast to this, Ernst M. and Klara T. had a very different experience upon arrival, attributed to the fact that Ernst M. had been made an offer of employment before he and his wife migrated. He was highly sought-after in his field and recalled that it was “because I was brought out here [that] everybody looked after us.”\textsuperscript{794}

Nevertheless, Australia’s official policy at the time was assimilation, which meant that newcomers were often encouraged to abandon their culture and identity in favour of an Australian one.\textsuperscript{795} According to the Department of Immigration, assimilation signified “that migrants should shed their cultures and languages and rapidly become indistinguishable from the host population.”\textsuperscript{796} All new migrants were expected to adapt to the Australian (predominantly Anglo-Saxon) way of life and leave their old lives behind. Among other things, this meant becoming proficient in English.\textsuperscript{797} Although faced with an initial language barrier, generation A interviewees were forced to learn quickly, as Australia’s assimilation policy made it difficult for migrants to be accepted into mainstream society unless they made a conscious effort to integrate. Many of this generation had experienced a baptism of fire when they arrived, resulting in a necessity to survive in a country where foreigners were rarely given special consideration and where their dissolution into the Australian way of life was highly desirable, or rather, necessary. Even Ernst M., who had described his family’s adaptation to Australian life as relatively easy, recalled some difficulties which his children had encountered shortly after their arrival:

\textsuperscript{793} Hans L. in an interview with M. Durrer 3\textsuperscript{rd} December 2010.
\textsuperscript{794} Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 15\textsuperscript{th} July 2016.
\textsuperscript{795} Wende, pp. 82-84.
\textsuperscript{797} Bönisch-Brednich (2002) has described a lack of English competency as the biggest problem for female migrants of the 1950s and 60s. This translates to the lives of generation A interviewees, most of whom arrived without a knowledge of English. Bönisch-Brednich, p. 104.
The children, when they went to school later on, they had a few problems where the headmaster, that was a time when there was no multiculturalism, he wanted all of them to be Australian, meaning English more or less, and he didn’t like them speaking German amongst themselves … [H]e had this conviction, everybody had to be the same.\textsuperscript{798}

Although at times a challenging process, a need to abandon their roots, as they believed at the time of their leaving that they would never return, likely freed migrants of this generation to adapt to the Australian way of life more readily. Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess (1942) explain the process of migrants’ adaptation to the host culture in the following way:

Assimilation is a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life.\textsuperscript{799}

Although generation A interviewees shared memories of the SOZ and GDR in its infancy, they had also come to share a multitude of memories with members of their host society and become a part of another community through their assimilation into Australian society. In their interviews, participants spoke of their process of adaptation, particularly about their experiences regarding language acquisition. Hans L. described how he was encouraged to integrate and learn English as quickly as possible:

[T]his particular foreman [by whom I was employed] … every morning before we went to work, he got out the newspaper. He ate his breakfast, and … I had to read the newspaper from top to bottom, including the bereavement notices, everything. He wanted me to learn English as fast as possible.\textsuperscript{800}

\textsuperscript{798} Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 15\textsuperscript{th} July 2016.
\textsuperscript{800} Hans L. in an interview with M. Durrer 3\textsuperscript{rd} December 2010.
Bernhard W. also recalled his first experiences of employment in Australia and his efforts to learn the language. He explained that for the “first six years I had to work as a brickie’s labourer because I couldn’t speak a word of English.” His story included an account of how he would ask his Polish land lady to help him with vocabulary he had learnt at work. After work, he would often ask her in broken English: “What means this?” She’d say: ‘Oh, don’t say that, [that’s] terrible!’ … I’d write [the words] down … after a while I finished up three or four words a day … and knew how to pronounce them, knew the adjective and the infinitive.”

All interviewees of this generation were comfortable speaking English and their interviews were conducted in English. While they had not forgotten their native tongue, they had been in Australia so long that they had in many respects adopted aspects of an Australian identity, some interviewees even speaking with a noticeable Australian accent. Part of their success story as migrants is their mastery of the language, some interviewees recalling embarrassing events from their past which they now saw as a sign of what they had overcome. Bernhard W. recounted a story involving a mistake he had made with the language shortly after his arrival:

I was starting to get confident with English. If I knew a verb, I would guess what the noun would be like … My mate and his brother invited me for Christmas dinner … There was little [Anton] and me … he escaped six weeks before me to the West … We both went to this Christmas dinner … So, while we were eating all this lovely stuff I was preparing my … ‘thank you’ … I thought: ‘What would be the noun? … ‘Dinner host’… Ah, ‘hostility’ … When we left … I said to Mr and Mrs [Smith] ‘Thank you very much for your hostility’ … She just laughed … Tough times, I tell you, but you learn.

A particularly significant distinguishing feature of this generation was the fact that they seemed to view themselves as separate from other East Germans of other generations who had remained in the GDR and migrated in later years. Their use of pronouns demonstrated that they considered themselves as distinct from this group. Often, they spoke of East Germans (or, in some cases, Germans in general) using the pronouns “they” or “them”, as if they no longer counted themselves as part of this group, although

801 Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21st August 2010.
802 Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21st August 2010.
803 Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21st August 2010.
this did vary depending on context. As they were already in Australia when the Wall fell, it was not necessary for them to undergo another “mental” migration in the aftermath of the fall of the Wall, as was the case with those who had spent most of their lives under communism. Although they did believe that there was a difference in mentality between East and West which needed to be overcome, they excluded themselves from being a part of this by referring to the Easterners as “them” and not “us”. They took a third person stance, most probably because they had not personally experienced the height of the dictatorship and had actively chosen to remove themselves from it. This distancing was evident in Frieda K.’s interview, where she explained that after reunification

[t]hey [East Germans] had to pull their socks up so to speak because under communism, in a lot of cases, they were very well looked after and everything was provided later on for women who were working … they handed their kids in in the morning, picked them up in the evening after work … everything was very structured. Medical treatment was free … they had in one way a lot of privileges, but they didn’t have the freedom.\textsuperscript{804}

However, the identity evolution which participants underwent was gradual. Throughout their interviews, participants provided insights into how the process of feeling “at home” developed gradually and changed over time. As Klara T. described: “It took a long time.”\textsuperscript{805} Other interviewees explained how sporadic contact with family members and friends in the GDR aided in their integration into Australian society. According to Frieda K., “I was concentrating on making life work here … [T]he first time we went back to Germany for a holiday was in ’82 … All that time, so 12 years, we [had] … the occasional letter or something like that.”\textsuperscript{806} Physical distance had the effect of separating this generation from their past connections, in favour of a life in which everyday experiences in Australia began to dominate their lives.

\textsuperscript{804} Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 2\textsuperscript{nd} August 2010.
\textsuperscript{805} Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 16\textsuperscript{th} July 2010.
\textsuperscript{806} Frieda K. in an interview with M. Durrer 12\textsuperscript{th} April 2013.
Over the years, migrants of this generation formed a strong attachment to Australia. As Hans L. recounted: “We are naturalised. Australia is my country now. I’d do anything for this country.” Members of this generation often associated primarily with Australians, some, such as Hans L., even describing consciously avoiding other Germans: “I must say … I got on better with the Australian people than with migrants, especially with the … German migrants. There is a saying: Hüte dich vor Sturm und Wind und Deutschen, die im Ausland sind!” The exact reason for this is uncertain, although literature investigating how Germans adapted to foreign societies in the post-WWII period suggests that Germany’s role as a perpetrator during the War played a role in migrants distancing themselves from this history. Interviewees of this generation did not tend to mix as much with other Germans in Australia, and if they did, they said that this had usually occurred by chance, although considering that people are often drawn to each other through their similarities, it would not be surprising if being German, or East German, would attract others of the same background. However, they felt that they had adapted well to Australian society and said that they did not actively seek out German company, even if they did have some friends who had a connection to Germany. A few of this generation maintained features of their culture through involvement in organisations such as the Rhein Donau Club and the Goethe Society of Western Australia, perhaps in an effort to hold onto something familiar from their past during a time when contact with Germany was very difficult. After all, the role of these kinds of ethnic community organisations at the time was “to provide a piece of the old Heimat in the new homeland.” Ernst M. explained:

We mix mainly with Australians … There were very few Germans at the university, which we met of course … and there was a German club, which is the Rhein Donau Club and we occasionally went there because of the food they offered … and then a bit later we joined the Goethe Society because it had been

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808 Hans L. in an interview with M. Durrer 3rd December 2010. This translates as “Protect yourselves from storm and wind and Germans who are overseas.”
809 Christian Lieb, “German Diaspora Experiences in British Columbia after 1945,” eds. Mathias Schulze, et al., German Diasporic Experiences: Identity, Migration, Loss (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008) p. 307. The tendency for German migrants to integrate is contrasted with the trend among other migrant groups in Australia at the time, such as the Italians, who tended to form tight-knit communities. See: Loretta Baldassar, “Italians in Western Australia: From Dirty Ding to Multicultural Mate,” eds. Raelene Wilding and Farida Tilbury, A Changing People: Diverse Contributions to the State of Western Australia (Perth: OMI) pp. 266-83.
quite active and there were interesting lectures and so on … This was our German contact, but mainly we were mixing with Australians.”

Some interviewees had contact with other foreigners, perhaps symptomatic of the increasingly multicultural nature of Australian society. Frieda K. described her current contact with German-speakers:

At the moment I have a group going which are actually mostly Danish people. They want to learn to speak German … on a Tuesday afternoon we meet in a coffee shop and we have a cup of coffee and they want me to speak German with them … well, there is one Australian, no two Australians, well one is a Scottish lady but she lived in Australia for a long time, then there are three Danish ladies and … one English lady … so that’s where we always … have a group of Germans, but otherwise I don’t at the moment have any particular German people close here. We had one family, or a couple, but they moved back to Germany … but otherwise I’m mainly mixing with Australians.

Although interviewees did associate primarily with Australians, this did not necessarily deter them from practicing or appreciating some aspects of their original culture. As Frieda K. explained when I asked her whether she practised any aspects of German culture: “I celebrate Advent. I have to have some German Christmas biscuits … I watch the German news on SBS every day too … There are certain things … certain dishes you cook.”

Other issues surrounding the concepts of identity and belonging were raised through interviewees’ attitudes towards the idea of returning home. Klara T. explained that her country of origin itself had changed, so much so that: “[it was] not recognisable anymore…[W]here I lived for instance … is meaningless, completely and utterly different, so, we don’t have that feeling of homecoming.” This question of identity is discussed by Uriya Shavit (2009), who states:

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811 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 16th July 2010.
814 Klara T. in an interview with M. Durrer 16th July 2010.
When the immigrant returned to his homeland for a visit, even on a frequent basis, its landscapes gained the quality of memories revisited, re-explored and redefined through their new roles as symbolizing roots and heritage rather than simply now being home.\textsuperscript{815}

This correlates with Bönisch-Brednich’s (2002) description of the homeland as “terra incognita”, a place to be rediscovered by this generation on their travels back to their country of origin to visit relatives or to see new sights as tourists.\textsuperscript{816} The issue of nostalgia was also addressed by some interviewees when reflecting upon their sense of belonging. Bernhard W. highlighted uncertainties which he had faced in the past regarding his identity and home, but which he had realised to be unfounded: “[\textit{Heimat} is] definitely here. What I was fearing, that what might happen in old age, that … your mind goes back and the past becomes more and more real … [but] it’s never happened.”\textsuperscript{817} He further explained his thoughts by referring to a novel by Bill Bryson entitled \textit{The Lost Continent}: “If you go away, as Billy Bryson says: ‘She can never come home’. It’s never like you remember, or like you’d like to remember … and that’s very common.”\textsuperscript{818} Bernhard W.’s sentiments are supported by Thomas Wolfe (2011) in his novel \textit{You can’t go Home Again} when he writes: “You can’t go back home to your family, back home to your childhood […] back home to the escapes of Time and Memory.”\textsuperscript{819} Interviewees’ long absence from their country of origin, coupled with their long period of residence in Australia, and their resultant adaptation to life overseas, aided in their redefinition of home. Over time, Australia took on the place of home and the SOZ or GDR remained as a distant memory. Interviewees’ recollections of that period had helped shape their identity, but did not impact upon their present happiness. When asked whether she could envisage living in the East again at some point in the future, Frieda K. responded:

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{816} Bönisch-Brednich, p. 117.
\item \textsuperscript{817} Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21\textsuperscript{st} August 2010.
\item \textsuperscript{818} Bernhard W. in an interview with M. Durrer 21\textsuperscript{st} August 2010. See also: Bill Bryson, \textit{The Lost Continent} (London: Transworld Publishers, 1989).
\item \textsuperscript{819} Thomas Wolfe, \textit{You can’t go Home Again} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011) p. 602.
\end{footnotes}
Not for good, no. I enjoy visiting … I enjoy shopping over there … but no, to live, I couldn’t. It’s too, well, we say ‘spießig’ [bourgeois or stuck-up]. The people are very narrow-minded in many ways. Nobody talks to the neighbour … at times I’ve been in Germany for six weeks visiting my auntie in the past and I was so glad to come back home [to Perth].820

Frieda K.’s response is not unlike the opinions stated by some of Bönisch-Brednich’s interviewees, who concluded that they enjoyed being together with relatives and friends, but could not identify with the more regimented German lifestyle.821 Although all interviewees of this generation had a strong attachment to Australia, some did, even many years after migrating, feel as if they were in some respects in a state of limbo. As Klara T. stated: “Of course [here] we are from Germany … But if in Germany somebody asks us, we say we are from Australia because we feel odd now in Germany. We don’t feel at home there.”822 This tendency for migrants to emphasise what it is that they are not a part of, rather than to what they do belong is not unique to these interviewees. It occurs, as Shavit (2009) describes, due to the fact that “[a]n immigrant’s roots were easily identified in his receiving country, but so too when he went home was the fact that he lived abroad.”823 Ernst M. also felt that: “We are neither Germans nor Australians … [We are] in between.”824 Bönisch-Brednich’s study highlights this realisation of being in-between, where interviewees may identify as German, but somehow different.825 Some interviewees did say that they were still viewed as different from the local population, in spite of the fact that they felt generally accepted. Ernst M. described how people still enquired as to his heritage, stating that Australians “mainly ask us because of the accent, you see.”826 Frieda K. was adamant at introducing herself as German and made an effort to distance herself from the East German “label”. As she illustrated in her interview, “When they [people] ask me, which is very often the case: ‘East or West?’, [I say]: ‘I come from Germany’. When I was born, Germany was one country and it is one country to me. That’s how I feel.”827

822 Klara T. in an interview with M. Durrer 16th July 2010.
823 Shavit, p. 33.
824 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 16th July 2010.
826 Ernst M. in an interview with M. Durrer 16th July 2010.
In spite of the trials and tribulations they had had to overcome in the initial years, this generation viewed their decision to migrate in an overwhelmingly positive light. Frieda K. reflected: “We had a good life, yes, we had a good life … We were here for one year before we bought our own house and yes, it was a good experience and we’re forever glad we came.”828 It has been said that this tendency for long-term migrants to view their migration as positive is as a result of an inherent need to prove that they have made the right decision in life. There is a desire for everything to be worthwhile.829 For some East Germans, coming to Australia signified an ability to escape the prejudices of being labelled as an East German refugee in the FRG. Klara T. recounted how she felt accepted for the first time after she had left East Germany:

Here, we were treated as equals. It was wonderful, wonderful, and … during the first 10 days we were invited into many homes and they said ‘you have to get to know the people and then you can decide who you would like to be friendly with’ … and it was overwhelming. It was really overwhelming … We were fortunate when we came here.830

Generation A was the most homogeneous of the three social generations. They all had very similar experiences of early GDR society and a very similar migration experience, thus in many respects forming their own unique community of memory. The next generation, generation B, would have a very different experience and was much less uniform and much more complex to analyse.

7.2 Generation B (migrated between 1986 and 2008)

Generation B, the generation which has already proven itself to be the most multifaceted, is likewise complex in the migration context. Just as their sense of identity has been shaped significantly by the role they played in the GDR and, for many, their experience of post-reunification Germany, so too has it been influenced by their personal migration experiences. Of those interviewed, some had chosen to escape at the height of the regime and reside in West Germany before coming to Australia in later years, while others had remained in the GDR until its collapse, and had then migrated. However, something which did unite all of this generation was that they had all

829 Bönisch-Brednich, p. 108.
830 Klara T. in an interview with M. Durrer 16th July 2010.
experienced a profound break in their biographies and a need to suddenly adapt to an unfamiliar society once previously. Different interviewees did this to varying degrees of success, some adapting to change relatively easily, while others felt lost in an unfamiliar context.

In general, it seemed that those who had chosen to escape the GDR before its collapse were quite adaptable as migrants as well. Most having resided in West Germany for a while before migrating to Australia, they had already grown accustomed to some of the ways of the Western world before their arrival. Furthermore, many former escapees also identified as victims of the GDR regime, perhaps initiating an increased willingness to leave the pain of the past behind. Their status as survivors of oppression could be viewed as a positive characteristic when adapting to change once again with migration. Those who did not leave the GDR before the collapse of communism previously had to adapt to a new society as well, but their need to adapt had not come about due to their personal choice. As Bönisch-Brednich has described, many East Germans viewed the West German way of life which was invading their lives as exhibiting “very foreign and also threatening aspects.”

Not only have many of this social generation needed to adapt to life in West Germany, an experience which can be likened to that of a migrant, but it was necessary for them to adapt again to an unfamiliar context overseas. One quote from Julia T. drew parallels between her experience in Germany after the collapse of communism and her migration experience in later years. She said: “The basis for this migration [to Australia], [was] that we had actually already been through this once before, because we had suddenly arrived in a different country [after reunification], even though we did not move. We arrived in another country by force.”

In comparing her experience of adapting to new circumstances, she further explained that for her:

the migration here [to Australia] was a lot less traumatic. It was only a change of location, but it was the same type of society … It is actually a Western society which functions on the basis of a market economy, just like in Germany [today]

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… The adjustment was not as enormous as the one between the GDR and the FRG.\(^{833}\)

Although some interviewees of this generation had escaped the GDR before the fall of the Wall, most interviewees did not make the decision to migrate to Australia until much later. In fact, all interviewees (except two who came in 1986 and 1989) migrated between 1993 and 2008. In contrast to generation A, who had almost exclusively come to work and establish a new life for themselves, generation B’s reasons for migration varied. Some, such as Ilse F., had initially intended to come to Australia for a short time “because there was work.”\(^ {834}\) For others, such as Stefanie E., the decision to migrate came about after coming to Australia as a tourist. She described: “We [had] travelled for 10 weeks … through Australia and we just liked it a lot. That thought was sort of born in our heads that we could migrate … We were sort of [thinking] ‘Let’s do it now’ and not think back when we are 60 and think ‘Why didn’t we do it?’”\(^ {835}\) One interviewee of this group even alluded to the prejudices between East and West as a contributing factor in her final decision to migrate to Australia. She said, “You see, that was, by far not the main reason, but it was also a reason to leave [former] East Germany … because you weren’t viewed as being a fully valid person.”\(^ {836}\) Their reasons for leaving are consistent with changes to Australian migration criteria which occurred since the 1970s and 80s, such as an increased focus on skilled migration and family migration.\(^ {837}\) Generation B interviewees most commonly highlighted reasons behind their decision to migrate as being to join a partner, for employment, or for lifestyle reasons.

The relatively recent migration of this group suggests that they are still undergoing a transition in how they view themselves and where they belong, and how they relate to their country of migration. As Keith Jacobs (2011) asserts, “an important part of migration was the fostering or acquisition of a sense of place and belonging in their new

\(^{833}\) Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 26th September 2013. Original quote in German: “diese Auswanderung hierher … [war] viel weniger traumatisch. Das war nur eine Ortsveränderung, aber das war die gleiche Art Gesellschaft … Das ist eigentlich eine westliche Gesellschaft, die auf Marktwirtschaftsbasis funktioniert, genau wie in Deutschland … Die Umstellung war nicht so riesig, wie die zwischen DDR und der Bundesrepublik.”

\(^{834}\) Ilse F. in an interview with M. Durrer 18th August 2010.

\(^{835}\) Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6th June 2012.

\(^{836}\) Martina E. in an interview with M. Durrer 12th August 2010. Original quote in German: “Siehst du, dass war, bei weitem nicht der Hauptgrund, aber war auch ein Grund von Ostdeutschland wegzugehen. … weil man nicht als vollwertiger Mensch angesehen wurde.”

environment and that they often required a reinvention of the self over a period of time.\(^{838}\) This manifested itself in particular in the language in which these interviews were conducted. In contrast to generation A, the majority of generation B interviews were held in German, this being the language in which many interviewees were more confident speaking. Some of this generation who had either been in Australia for a number of years or who had lived internationally previously were just as comfortable being interviewed in English. For many of this generation, adaptation to life in Australia had been hindered by a language barrier, because they had learnt Russian at school and did not usually have much knowledge of English before they arrived. Martina E. described how significant the presence of this language barrier had been to her: “When we arrived here, I didn’t speak a word of English, and when you don’t speak the language, you also can’t get a good job, right? It didn’t matter what qualifications you had.”\(^{839}\) Julia T. reinforced this view, stating that “for as long as you are unable to integrate perfectly via the language, you remain a foreigner.”\(^{840}\) A number of interviewees spoke of the difficulties they had encountered with English and how proficiency in the language was often viewed as an important factor aiding in integration and determining how comfortable interviewees felt in Australian society.\(^{841}\)

Here, there was a noticeable split between those who cut themselves off from their roots by avoiding German contact and immersing themselves in their new society, and those who fostered contacts almost exclusively with others of similar backgrounds. Nicole P., who had been in Australia since 1997 had forced herself to become proficient in English: “My idea was instantly ‘I have to read English books, I have to watch English movies’, even though I only understood half of it in the beginning.”\(^{842}\) In contrast, Marta G. emphasised: “I don’t watch any Australian TV”,\(^{843}\) highlighting the existence of opposing attitudes to adapting to life in the new Australian society, which is not

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\(^{840}\) Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2013. Original quote in German: “solange man eben nicht sich perfekt mit dem Englisch hier eingliedern kann, bleibt man ein Ausländer.”


\(^{842}\) Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.

isolated from interviewees’ attitudes to their past “migration” between two different German societies.

Another factor which determined how well interviewees had adapted to life in Australia was the type of migration experience they had had. The 1970s had ushered in the era of multiculturalism, a period in which the maintenance of migrants’ heritage was more widespread. This policy reform served to alter the nature of the experience which migrants to Western Australia were to have. From 1973, “[p]ersons of any ethnic or cultural background could migrate to Australia provided they met certain criteria in terms of age, occupational skill, and education.”\textsuperscript{844} Nevertheless, interviewees’ sense of being accepted by mainstream society differed. Notably, positive or negative experiences in the migration country contributed to a positive or a negative attitude towards its people and the society in general. Both of these extremes were experienced by this group of interviewees. Hanna T.’s encounter with Australia was positive from the beginning. As she explained in her interview: “I met [my husband’s] friends and colleagues, I found them all very relaxed and very … helpful and straightforward.”\textsuperscript{845} In contrast, Astrid N.’s experience was quite negative: “I don’t really know any real Australians … It was always people who came from somewhere else.”\textsuperscript{846} Something which many participants referred to was other people’s perception of them as foreigners. Nicole P. illustrated the unavoidable fact that “[y]ou are obviously reminded all the time that you are not Australian.”\textsuperscript{847} Although some of this generation had made a concerted effort to integrate and communicated well in English, they still considered themselves to be different and came to accept this as a part of their identity. As Hanna T. elaborated:

I was aware that I have a strong accent and it annoyed me, but over the years I just decided, well, I can’t get rid of it … it’s just me … It’s sort of a switch now, where I feel more comfortable talking in English, but still you…have this barrier of, you know, using the small talk English.\textsuperscript{848}

\textsuperscript{844} Burnley, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{845} Hanna T. in an interview with M. Durrer 24\textsuperscript{th} August 2010.
\textsuperscript{846} Astrid N. in an interview with M. Durrer 1\textsuperscript{st} September 2010. Original quote in German: “Ich kenne keine richtigen Australier in dem Sinne. Es waren alles Leute, die von irgendwo anders herkamen.”
\textsuperscript{847} Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14\textsuperscript{th} August 2015.
\textsuperscript{848} Hanna T. in an interview with M. Durrer 24\textsuperscript{th} August 2010.
Being accepted by the host society has taken a long time for some generation B migrants, some of whom are still undergoing this process. In comparing two interviews with the same participant, conducted four years apart, the evolution she had undergone as a migrant even during the course of this study was clear in the following statement: “I [now] feel very comfortable in Australia … Somehow I have become more confident.” In light of this, it is necessary to remember that migrants’ sense of belonging and adaptation is not static.

When speaking about where they considered their home to be, interviewees’ responses were again varied. Some, such as Hanna T., were well-adapted and considered Australia as their home. She said: “My home is here now. I think it took me probably eight or ten years to really settle and really feel … home here.” Nicole P. similarly explained the reasons behind her current sense of belonging in the following way:

I think my sense of belonging is here, really, which probably has to do now because I now have my friends here, I have my partner here and his family, and because … I migrated once before, I suppose, you know, from East to the West. I lost a little bit the sense of belonging … [T]his leaving something behind … It doesn’t seem to bother me that much, you know. I don’t have this strong ‘I have to be here’ … I think that’s probably coming from that a little bit because you lose your Heimat, das Heimatgefühl … But it’s not something which bothers me.

In contrast, other interviewees, such as Ilse F., were still struggling to find their place in the world, explaining: “I don’t have a home, unfortunately, at the moment.” In an effort to feel at home, the number of generation B interviewees recreated aspects of their past lives here in Australia, most commonly by developing close contacts with people of a similar background. Usually, these people had had relatively comfortable lives in the GDR and had not been ostracised while living there. In contrast to those who chose to leave, they had not been in the firing line of the authorities in GDR times. The involuntary nature of their “migration” following the fall of the Wall meant that

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849 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd April 2014. Original quote in German: “Ich fühle mich jetzt sehr wohl in Australien … Ich bin irgendwie selbstsicherer geworden.”
851 Nicole P. in an interview with M. Durrer 14th August 2015.
they often highlighted more positive aspects of their past lives under communism, and perhaps found a sense of solidarity with those who had shared their sudden uprooting from their lives of relative stability. Of those who associated with other Germans, most still perceived that there were differences between Wessis and Ossis. For example, Erna P. believed: “I really have to say that with East Germans we’re of one mind … and with the others, well, we’re also friends, but somehow there’s … well, you can’t say a wall, but … I don’t know what it is.”

Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 15th July 2010. Original quote in German: “Ich muss wirklich sagen mit den Ostdeutschen, dann sind wir ein Herz und eine Seele … und mit den Anderen sind wir auch Freunde, aber irgendwo ist da … ’ne Mauer kann man nicht sagen, aber … ich weiss nicht, was das ist.”

Julia T. described a similar experience: “I mean, I have friends here … but … actually, I thought about it once, no Australian friends. They are all either German or of other nationalities.”


Some interviewed explained that they associated almost exclusively with East Germans and that if they associated with others, their friendships were not as strong with these people as with those with whom they shared a similar background. Another interviewee conveyed her feeling of being foreign and being surrounded suddenly by so much unfamiliarity in the early days of her migration:

With two small children and [my husband] being at work every day, and I was home alone, then I realised ‘What did I do?!’ You don’t just lose all your friends and family, but also everything you are familiar with. Even things in your subconscious, like ‘What does the post office look like?’ or ‘What does the letter box look like?’ Little things. I never thought about the fact that I would be a foreigner. I always thought: ‘I am me. I have friends’, but all of a sudden you are a foreigner and they don’t understand you and you don’t understand them.

Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6th June 2012.

One interviewee in particular expressed her displeasure at being labelled as an East German by another (West German) group member and strongly resented people focusing on the fact that she came from the East, when they were now so far removed from that past:

With two small children and [my husband] being at work every day, and I was home alone, then I realised ‘What did I do?!’ You don’t just lose all your friends and family, but also everything you are familiar with. Even things in your subconscious, like ‘What does the post office look like?’ or ‘What does the letter box look like?’ Little things. I never thought about the fact that I would be a foreigner. I always thought: ‘I am me. I have friends’, but all of a sudden you are a foreigner and they don’t understand you and you don’t understand them.

Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6th June 2012.
I can’t stand it when I’m … put in the ‘East German’ category … here in Australia. I had an experience here once, … I was … really annoyed about it … Once there was a [lady] here, who was visiting, also a German, and she asked everyone: ‘East or West?’ … If this woman is ever there again, then I won’t be. 856

Renate S. recounted a similar experience where she had felt as if she had been singled out by others. She recalled: “In the early years, when I went to this Treffpunkt [German group in Perth] or to the Rhein Donau Club … I thought it was stupid that I was always treated like ‘Oh, the Ossi-Trude’. 857 Others of generation B who associated mainly with German-speakers claimed that there was a certain unspoken understanding between people who came from the East. Erna P. illustrated this in the following way: “I want to almost say … I feel better among East Germans than when I’m together with West Germans … You understand each other differently, you have the same background. Well, you come from the same ‘stable’.” 858

The increased tendency for migrants to preserve their culture has perhaps contributed to the preservation of the society of origin in people’s minds, and in some cases a feeling of split loyalty. Julia T. analysed the experiences of migrants of her generation by explaining that “[f]rom a psychological point of view it is certainly not good to live halfway in both worlds because of course it, I don’t want to say that it tears you apart, but it halves your strength.” 859 Most generation B interviewees migrated during a time when technological advancements made communication and travel easier, and so most interviewees of this generation were able to return or maintain contact with home more easily. As Julia T. described:


858 Erna P. in an interview with M. Durrer 15th July 2010. Original quote in German: “Ich möchte fast sagen … ich fühle mich bei den Ostdeutschen besser, als wenn ich mit Westdeutschen zusammen bin … Man versteht sich anders, man hat denselben Hintergrund, also man kommt aus demselben Stall.”

859 Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 26th September 2013. Original quote in German: “[a]us psychologischer Sicht ist es bestimmmt nicht gut so halbwegs in beiden Welten zu leben, weil es einem doch, ich will nicht sagen, dass es einem zerreißt, aber es halbiert die Kräfte.”
Before it probably took weeks before a letter arrived, right? … and now the contact is so intensive. It also makes it easy to follow all the developments which are occurring at home, not only with personal contacts but also, for whomever wants to, with politics and that.\textsuperscript{860}

Marta G., who said she did not associate much with Australians, explained how easy it was for her to stay in touch with events in Germany through online television services, stating: “You can watch entire films on [the] ZDF [website].”\textsuperscript{861} Perhaps the ability to remain in such close contact with their former home had also enabled some interviewees who were extremely homesick to cling to their past and that which was familiar to them. Although this encouraged ties with home to be maintained, it could have the effect of inhibiting the adaptation of some interviewees to life overseas. Before times of technology, people had been forced to commit fully to their lives in a new place and perhaps only to maintain ties to home through their associations with other migrants. However, although many generation B interviewees did make use of technological advancements, they did not seem to utilise them as much as generation C, who grew up in the technological age.

Interviewees’ attitudes towards returning home and how they felt in their country of origin when they returned to visit were quite revealing. Some still saw it as their home and a place to which they could return, such as Martina E., who responded to the question of where her Heimat was in the following way: “Difficult to say where my Heimat is … To a certain degree I think my true Heimat is still Germany.”\textsuperscript{862} Julia T. reflected upon the deep connection she had to her past, stating that “I suppose that Germans, well in particular East Germans, have very intensive roots … because we grew up with this intense solidarity. Well, certainly my generation.”\textsuperscript{863} Some interviewees had debated the question of where they belonged themselves during

\textsuperscript{860} Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 26\textsuperscript{th} September 2013. Original quote in German: “Früher hat’s wahrscheinlich wochenlang gedauert bis ein Brief angekommen ist, na? … und jetzt ist der Kontakt so intensiv. Auch, was es so leicht macht, die ganzen Entwicklungen zu Hause auch nachzuverfolgen, nicht nur die persönlichen Kontakte, sondern eben auch, wer das möchte, Politik oder so.”

\textsuperscript{861} Marta G. in an interview with M. Durrer 13\textsuperscript{th} February 2011. Original quote in German: “Bei ZDF kann man ganze Filme gucken.” ZDF is a German TV channel [Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen].

\textsuperscript{862} Martina E. in an interview with M. Durrer 12\textsuperscript{th} August 2010. Original quote in German: “Schwer zu sagen, wo meine Heimat ist … Bis irgendwo denk’ ich mal meine wirkliche Heimat ist immer noch Deutschland.”

\textsuperscript{863} Julia T. in an interview with M. Durrer 26\textsuperscript{th} September 2013. Original quote in German: “Ich würde mal vermuten, dass Deutsche, also gerade Ostdeutsche, sehr intensive Wurzeln haben, … weil wir eben mit diesem intensiven Zusammenhalt aufgewachsen sind. Also, bestimmt meine Generation, ja?”
significant times of their migration. Erna P. explained “That is an interesting question and I asked myself this before we got our permanent visa … ‘Where do I belong?’ And I knew, my Heimat is here in Australia.”

A number of other interviewees also expressed feeling at home in their migration country, in particular those who had been victimised in the GDR. Konrad S., who had been imprisoned in the GDR, stated that “I could not live in Germany anymore. Here I enjoy the wide open spaces of the country and whoever wishes to can achieve something for themselves.”

Similarly to Konrad S., Renate S. felt that Australia had given her something which she would not have been able to get at home. She explained that her Heimat was “[h]ere … in Australia, in Perth … because what I have been able to achieve here in 15 years as a single mum … in Germany no one would have given me a chance, especially not in the Federal Republic.”

Interviewees’ attachment to their homeland varied according to their relationship with their past in the GDR and reunified Germany, and the experiences they have had since living overseas. They are, even in the migration-context an “in-between” generation.

7.3 Generation C (migrated between 1990 and 2011)
Generation C can perhaps most aptly be described as a unique “global generation”, a phenomenon which has been gaining in international relevance since the 1960s.

Although this timeframe includes migrants of other generational groupings, the application of technology and the media in daily life has most significantly impacted generation C. Being a member of a global generation is not exclusive to Germans, but rather refers to interconnections between various societies throughout the world. Although they migrated during a similar time frame to generation B (1990 and 2011),


865 Konrad S. in an interview with M. Durrer 30th June 2013. Original quote in German: “Ich könnte in Deutschland nicht mehr [wohnen]. Ich genieße hier die Weite des Landes und wer will kann etwas für sich erreichen.”

866 Renate S. in an interview with M. Durrer 23rd April 2013. Original quote in German: “[h]ier … in Australien, in Perth, … weil was ich in 15 Jahren hier erreicht habe als Single Mum … in Deutschland hätte mir niemand eine Chance gegeben, vor allen Dingen in der Bundesrepublik nie die Chance gegeben.”

867 Slackman.

generation C’s experience is more uniform in many respects, and yet highly dynamic in its own way, a symptom of the increasingly interconnected world in which we find ourselves.

Most generation C migrants had experienced the GDR as children, but had also spent a number of their formative years in reunified Germany. Although there was a large number of interviews conducted in German, most were confident speaking English as well. Their decision to be interviewed in their native language could perhaps be linked to the multicultural idea of maintaining roots in a foreign context when they had the opportunity to do so. A number of interviewees had spent time living or studying in other countries before coming to Australia, thus signifying that they had a high level of proficiency in English. Their familiarity with technology, coupled with more frequent and affordable air travel has made remaining in touch with their former home easier. As Daniela S. explained: “Nowadays, the good thing is that you can go back more often than you were able to 30 years ago.”

Other interviewees also stated that the internet had helped them to stay in touch with what was happening in their home country and that free video calls via the internet, using applications such as Skype, made it easier to maintain contacts while overseas. Furthermore, the international nature of the media and technology has perhaps also affected how generation C East Germans view Australia before they migrate, allowing them to familiarise themselves with their potential host country before deciding to leave.

The decision which people of this generation had made to migrate was not so much influenced by negative experiences in their own country prior to migration, but by factors such as employment opportunities, travel, study, the prospect of improving their English and having an Australian partner. Unlike some in the generations before them, they did not, as Daniela S. asserted, come to Australia “for political reasons or in order to have a better life than what we had already.” Others spoke of wanting to make a change in their lives, as Peter S. explained: “I got bored at home in my old job, so I had to make a cut … I thought about alternatives … and all I thought was ‘Even if you find

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870 Marta G. in an interview with M. Durrer 13th February 2011.
871 Everke Buchanan, p. 134.
872 Daniela S. in an interview with M. Durrer 17th June 2010. Original quote in German: “aus politischen Gründen, oder um ein besseres Leben als das, was wir hatten, zu finden.”
a job [in Germany], then it will be in the same … industry’ … and I didn’t want to work in this industry any longer.”873 For some, Australia seemed to be a land of opportunity, an exotic place which offered adventure or a new start. Others came to Australia due to personal connections, such as Sofia W., who recounted:

I met my husband in the Middle East in ’93 and we lived there for a while … In 2001, just before our second child was born, we decided that we wanted to finish up with our work over there and my husband was going to go back to study, so, him being from Perth, we decided that it would be a good idea to move here.874

Some interviewees met partners while visiting the country or after migrating by themselves. This often had the effect of helping them integrate faster, as they had immediate access to a group of local friends through their partner. This meant that they were less likely to acquire and rely on contacts with other migrants from their country of origin.875

For some interviewees, living in Australia had come about as a surprise, often instigated by the “working holiday”876 or a decision to study a postgraduate degree. As Kristoff A. described: “First we wanted [to come] for four months, then six months, and not only to travel around, but rather to also get some work experience in an English-speaking country.”877 Most of these migrants had also spent time living in the former West Germany (if their families had left when they were very young children) or reunified Germany, or studying in other countries such as Ireland and Switzerland before coming to Australia. Their exposure to a life of high mobility has influenced how well they felt they fitted into Australian society and their sense of belonging in the world. According to Petra T. Bürgelt, Mandy Morgan and Regina Pernice (2008) who conducted a study involving German migrants to New Zealand, “[p]articipants who had lived, studied or worked in other countries had greater cultural awareness and were accustomed to

873 Peter S. in an interview with M. Durrer 24th March 2013.
874 Sofia W. in an interview with M. Durrer 22nd March 2013.
875 Bönisch-Brednich, p. 204.
876 Interviewees of this generation were often eligible for the Australian Government’s working holiday visa which enabled them to work in the country for up to a year. See: Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Border Protection, Working Holiday Visa (subclass 417), 2015, last accessed 23 Nov 2015 <https://www.border.gov.au/Trav/Visa-1/417->.
culture shock,” thus also perhaps making them more adaptable as migrants. Due to their ability to transcend the boundaries of countries and maintain a feeling of belonging to both (or indeed, many) worlds, migrants, particularly of the last few decades, are often referred to as transnational in character or as transmigrants, “immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state.”

Their highly mobile nature has meant that they are often able to “inhabit more than one area.” While some generation B participants demonstrated this characteristic, it is really generation C which has been the most impacted by it. They are more readily able to maintain contacts with both their country of origin and their country of migration.

Generation C interviewees also differed in their interpretations of Heimat and belonging. When asked: “Where is your Heimat today?”, there was a very wide range of responses given. Different interviewees claimed to feel that their Heimat was in Germany, Australia, Europe, or their local area or town in Germany. Other migrants of this generation also described problems which they faced in their new surroundings. It was not uncommon for interviewees to lament that they missed the landscape and culture of Germany, which Australia seemed to lack. Anna K. told me: “The only thing that I miss a bit when I’m here is the culture, so old things … I also have to say (and I would never have thought this), but I miss the seasons. I miss winter, I miss snow.”

Many spoke of a sense of being zwiegespalten [ambivalent] regarding their place of origin and their adopted home. Sabine H. related her experience when she returned to Germany: “When I go to Germany, I don’t feel as German as my friends who live there, but I don’t feel like a tourist either, but somewhere in between, and here … I’m not an Australian either … I don’t know where my Heimat is. I can’t tell you … [I am] stuck in


880 Everke Buchanan, p. 334.

the middle.”\textsuperscript{882} Another interviewee, Anna K., was likewise conflicted as she felt that she belonged in both places.

Well, if I weren’t to think about it, then I would say [my \textit{Heimat} is] ‘here’. But now, if I were to think about it for a bit then I might still say ‘at home’ [in Germany]. Well, I’m a bit stuck in the middle now … I feel at home here and I also feel at home at home.\textsuperscript{883}

Many other interviewees spoke of the internal conflicts they had to deal with in relation to where they felt they belonged. Sofia W. expressed the sense that identity and belonging could be fluid:

I feel like I belong in both places. I feel totally at home with the Australian way of life … The Australian lifestyle suits me quite well … but on the other hand … I still have my German citizenship … and I would not give that up for anything … However, when I think about every time I go and visit, I wander around and I think I don’t feel 100% part of it. I feel sometimes a bit like a visitor, like a stranger. I talk to people in English on the streets without even thinking about it, accidentally.\textsuperscript{884}

After some struggles to come to terms with life in an unfamiliar country, some interviewees who had not had positive experiences in the beginning described how they had come to enjoy life in Australia, and as a result, began to feel more at home. As one interviewee explained: “You get used to it. It was difficult in the beginning.”\textsuperscript{885}

For some, earlier negative experiences gave way to a feeling of belonging as they began to build up a network of friends and grow more accustomed to the ways in which Australian society functioned. Stefanie E. gave me the following explanation regarding

\textsuperscript{882} Sabine H. in an interview with M. Durrer 10\textsuperscript{th} August 2010. Original quote in German: “Wenn ich nach Deutschland fahre, füh’ ich mich nicht als so deutsch wie meine Freunde, die dort leben, aber auch nicht unbedingt als Tourist oder so, sondern irgendwie dazwischen, und hier bin ich … also Australierin bin ich auch nicht … Weiss ich nicht wo meine Heimat ist. Kann ich nicht sagen … [Ich bin] zwischen den Stühlen.”

\textsuperscript{883} Anna K. in an interview with M. Durrer 19\textsuperscript{th} July 2010. Original quote in German: “Also wenn ich … nicht darüber nachdenk’ … dann würd ich schon sagen hier. Wenn ich jetzt eine Weile darüber nachdenk, dann würd’ ich sagen, vielleicht auch noch Zuhause. Also ich bin jetzt so ein bisschen zwiwespalten … ich fühl’ mich hier zuhause und ich fühl’ mich auch Zuhause zuhause.”

\textsuperscript{884} Sofia W. in an interview with M. Durrer 22\textsuperscript{nd} March 2013.

\textsuperscript{885} Daniela S. in an interview with M. Durrer 17\textsuperscript{th} June 2010. Original quote in German: “Man gewöhnt sich daran. Es war am Anfang sehr schwer.”
her sense of home: “I wouldn’t have considered Perth as my Heimat five years ago because it takes a long time. My Heimat is where I am happy and where my family is, and since my sister lives here it is even more like that. That is a good thing.”

Heimat was interpreted in a number of different ways by interviewees. Some understood it to be the place where they felt happiest and most comfortable, while others associated it with childhood, the landscape, family or language. This idea of Heimat as connected to childhood was echoed in some other interviewees’ stories as well. Kristoff A. recounted that he believed that “Heimat is Germany and where we come from: Magdeburg. I spent my childhood there.” Furthermore, the view of some, including Angela H., evolved over time. When asked where she considered to be her home she stated: Australia, definitely. There is this little place in this village that I grew up that is my home, but I can’t pick that up and put it here. So that’s where my roots are, that’s where my connection is, but living in Germany, I could not live in Germany and I knew that the minute I went back after my first two years in Australia.

Although some did say that they felt a sense of belonging to Australia, they still introduced themselves as German, East German, or from their local city, such as Berlin. Some interviewees chose to specifically emphasise their East Germanness when introducing themselves to others. Elisa M. made the following point: “[If] they ask where I come from, I make it clear that I come from the Eastern part, which was … communist before … I would like … to communicate that.” Other interviewees did not usually draw attention to the fact that they came from the East, but stated that they were not ashamed to admit that they were from the former GDR. Angela H. described her personal situation: “I don’t usually say anything. If they ask, … then I say ‘I’m from Germany’ and I often say ‘former East Germany’ because … I left when it was still East, sort of … I don’t connect with … some people I’ve met from West Germany.”

Most stated that they were not ashamed to admit that they were from the former GDR;

886 Stefanie E. in an interview with M. Durrer 6th June 2012.
888 Angela H. in an interview with M. Durrer 4th April 2012.
890 Angela H. in an interview with M. Durrer 4th April 2012.
rather, it was often something of which they were proud, as they had experienced happy childhoods there. Kristoff A. explained in his interview that if someone specifically asked him, he would say “I come from East Germany, if that’s important to know. So, if what you are asking is if I am ashamed of the fact that I come from East Germany, then of course I will say ‘no’.”891 It seemed that in many cases there was much pride associated with being East German, although some interviewees emphasised that it was no longer really important to people of their generation.

When asked with whom interviewees most associated, there were a variety of responses, although many associated with at least some other East Germans. Interviewees often perceived some differences between themselves and people from the former West. Elisa M. explained this in her interview: “[T]he topic [of the differences between East and West] comes up quite often … Of course we also ask ourselves, or we want to be able to pinpoint it, … to understand it, what it actually is, well we feel a difference, yes.”892 No matter who they associated with most of the time, many of these interviewees said that they felt a certain unspoken understanding with others who had grown up in the East, for example, Carolin B. revealed: “I don’t know if it’s a connection thing, but I do kind of feel like: ‘Ah, another Ossi’ … [I]t doesn’t always have to mean that you get on well straight away, but somehow you do understand each other better.”893 Britta F. explained that she believed this understanding resulted from a common past, where those in the East had formed a kind of collective identity due to their memories of the GDR. She believed that she and other East Germans she had met in Australia had common spheres of experience. That does not mean that … when you meet East Germans here, you [always] get along, but there are definitely things [you have]

891 Kristoff A. in an interview with M. Durrer 29th May 2011.
892 Elisa M. in an interview with M. Durrer 17th June 2010. Original quote in German: “[D]as Thema [Unterschiede zwischen Ost und West] kommt öfters mal zum Vorschein … Wir fragen uns natürlich auch, oder wir möchten es auch gerne benennen können, … also greifen können, was es denn eigentlich ist, also wir fühlen einen Unterschied, ja.”
in common, that you don’t, for example, have with West Germans. [You can]
form a good friendship anyway … but there is another dimension [to it].

Although a significant number of interviewees fostered East German contacts overseas, some did not. Daniela S. stated: “To be honest, I haven’t met any East Germans here yet.” Another interviewee, who was the first of this generation to migrate at the age of 18, just after the Wall fell, said she deliberately avoided contact with other Germans in general in the first few years of her migration in order to integrate: “because I couldn’t speak English, and I needed to learn the language and I wanted to make my life here … I always said to myself [that] there was a reason why I left.” In the course of the interview process, it became apparent that those who had had an initial negative experience tended to long for their home in Germany more frequently (although some were able to overcome these obstacles after a few years of living in Australia), while those who had had a positive initial experience or who had made a conscious decision to abandon thoughts of an alternative life in Germany, tended to feel happier in Australia and not miss their life in Germany as much. Markus B. had had a positive introduction to the country and its people, describing how when he first arrived, he found Australia to be “the most forgiving country for people not speaking English.” Likewise, Angela H., who came to Australia shortly after the fall of the Wall, recalled how she loved “living in Australia because we all were to a certain extent immigrants and that’s what unites us.” She even drew some parallels between what she perceived as the simplicity of life in both Australia and the GDR (compared to former West Germany or reunified Germany). She explained:

Coming from East Germany to Australia, it was very easy to settle into Australia because Australia 20 years ago didn’t have much, so that transition was very easy … the way of thinking was similar, you know. [For example] in East Germany you don’t care what car you drove, you [are] just happy to have one …

895 Daniela S. in an interview with M. Durrer 17th June 2010. Original quote in German: “Ehrlich gesagt, ich hab noch gar keinen Ostdeutschen hier getroffen.”
896 Angela H. in an interview with M. Durrer 4th April 2012.
and in Australia, nobody cares what car they are driving. You were not judged
on what type of house you have. You didn’t have to ‘keep up with the Joneses’.
So, that’s why I love it here as well … so that transition was very easy.899

Other interviewees did not have such positive experiences when they first arrived.
Daniela S. described how “Australia made it very difficult for me to love the
country.”900 These varied perspectives illustrate just how dynamic people’s sense of
identity and belonging can be. Nevertheless, this generation, in spite of some
differences in their personal biographies, shared the common element of having
migrated during the global age. A phenomenon which was described by a few
interviewees of this generation, was that their idea of Germany, or former East
Germany, had changed since they had been overseas. Some spoke of their sentiments
that their identification with it had become less regional, and more national or even, as a
couple of interviewees alluded to, Pan-European. Britta F. summed this up in her
interview when she explained that Heimat becomes “larger when you are overseas. It’s
already almost Europe.”901 Kristoff A. supported her statement when he described his
sense of identity: “I feel very European, not necessarily only German. We could
imagine going [back] to Europe [but] not necessarily to Germany.”902 Sylvia E.
observed that being overseas had made her see Germany as more unified, as she was not
confronted with the differences between East and West within Germany on a daily
basis:

I would say, the further away you are, the more Germany is one Germany. Well,
those of us who are in Australia would label Germany as one Germany.
Germans in Germany probably still want to label Germany as split in two, but

899 Angela H. in an interview with M. Durrer 4th April 2012.
es mir sehr schwer gemacht, … das Land zu lieben.”
schon fast Europa.”
sehr europäisch; nicht unbedingt nur als Deutscher. Wir könnten es uns vorstellen, irgendwo nach Europa
gehen, nicht unbedingt nach Deutschland.”
we are also on a small ‘island’ here, so to speak. We are on a German island and here we are all equal.903

Fluidity is the hallmark of this generation, who do not necessarily view their migration as permanent and whose exposure to an interconnected global society has nurtured their ability to belong in multiple places. Their migration is a journey in progress and attachments to their former home and current host society will undoubtedly continue to evolve with time.

Experiences and memories connect people and help them define who they are and where they belong. Interviewees of all generations revealed the many faces of identity and the rich contrasts which existed between and within individuals’ personal stories. Identity is complex and constantly in a state of flux throughout people’s lives, and individuals represent themselves differently and perceive themselves differently in varying contexts and at different points in time. Furthermore, their view is influenced, among other things, by their age at the time of an event, the relationship they have to their past experiences, and where they place themselves in the present. Throughout their lives, interviewees may belong to various communities of memory, whether as members of particular social generations or as social sub-groups, or indeed, as an overarching group of East Germans who migrated overseas.

903 Sylvia E. in an interview with M. Durrer 21st July 2010. Original quote in German: “Je weiter man auch weg ist würd’ ich mal sagen umso mehr ist Deutschland ein Deutschland. Also wir hier in Australien würden Deutschland als ein Deutschland bezeichnen. Deutsche in Deutschland wollen Deutschland wahrscheinlich immer noch als zweigeteilt bezeichnen, aber wir sind ja hier sozusagen auch auf einer kleinen Insel. Wir sind auf einer deutschen Insel und hier sind wir alle gleich.”
Conclusion – Remnants of the past and the complexity of East German identity

“I guess the past forms you … I guess you are just a part of history with your experiences … [T]hat was just what we knew.”  
(Hanna T.)

The recent celebrations commemorating the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall have reignited the debate regarding how the GDR past should be remembered. Officially, the demise of communism in East Germany and the subsequent reunification are viewed as a success story, particularly from the perspectives of the international community, where the idea of one justly-reunified Germany is propagated. For those who have personal memories of life behind the Iron Curtain and whose experiences of the period have impacted upon their lives in a post-communist world, interpretations of the past are much more varied and contested. As stipulated by Mihelj (2014), “the same event or experience can be incorporated into a range of distinct, even incompatible recollections.” In this respect, we are called to recognise “the plurality that inevitably exists beneath this surface” regarding recollections of the GDR.

My findings offer an insight into the process of identity evolution as a result of various migrations, both physical and mental, and are a reference point for further research on East Germans in a post-communist context. The production of the data in the form of semi-structured interviews provided in-depth insights into the lives, migrations and self perceptions of those involved in this study. There are undoubtedly improvements which could be made, especially when considering that the narrative which I have presented is solely a snapshot in time. It would, for example, be enlightening to observe and learn how interviewees’ lives and perspectives continue to change into the future.

So, how is it possible to present a uniform interpretation of the lives and identities of the participants in this study? The answer of course is that it is impossible. However, through conducting interviews with East Germans as members of three social

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905 Mihelj, p. 448.  
906 Clarke and Wölfel, p. 21.
generations and the diverse communities of memory which cross-cut these, it was possible to assemble a collage of personal memories and interpretations of interviewees’ experiences. Their at-times inconsistent nature mirrored the paradoxical nature of the GDR itself. From a generational perspective, as stated by Mannheim (1952), different age groups “are in a state of constant interaction” and there may at times be “related and radical tensions between different generations, as well as between different elements within generations, seen as in some sense ‘representative’ of a particular aspect of an era – whether past or present.” Thus, there is always tension when talking about the memories people possess of the past and their impact upon identity, and there are a number of forces which both complement and contradict each other at various stages of a person’s life, not least involving interviewees past social roles and their more personal experiences as members of distinct communities of memory.

In this thesis, I have presented the GDR experience from the perspectives of those East Germans who now reside in Australia. I have discussed how interviewees of three social generations and across various communities of memory have negotiated their identity in light of their pasts in the GDR and their experiences since, including their physical migration. As Pilcher (1994) explains: “Individual biographies are shaped by socio-historical location and through a lesser or greater participation in the events of the time.” Interviewees’ biographies are a reflection of the time through which they lived (and continue to live) and the experiences which they had at different stages of their lives, supporting Loring M. Danforth and Riki Van Boeschoten’s (2012) observation that “[m]emories are not shaped independently of the temporal and spatial contexts in which they are formed.” Furthermore, as Lehmann (2011) has expressed, “[t]he question of perspective on particular historical events becomes central, that is it becomes important in which phase of an individual’s biography he or she experiences those events.” Although all interviewees had the same starting point and end-point, in the sense that they originated from the same place (the SOZ or GDR) and ended up in the same country (Australia), they had very different personal journeys. They all came

907 Mannheim, p. 301.
909 Pilcher, p. 491.
910 Danforth and Van Boeschoten, p. 222.
from the same place geographically, but lived their daily lives as members of various social generations and inhabiting diverse social roles at different life-stages. They are, as reinforced by Pilcher (1994), “always a group at a particular stage in the span of life.”

As interviewees revealed, people are impacted just as much, if not more, by their individual, personal experiences, as they are by historical events themselves, and their present identity involves a connection to their past role in the GDR, as well as their age at the time. Moreover, their identities “migrate” with time as they add to their experiences and encounter new environments and perspectives. Interviewees have undergone numerous biographical shifts throughout their lives thus far and their recollections illustrate the dynamism of identity. As William James Booth (2006) stated, “To have an identity is to have a history”, and in the case of interviewees, this is a history which has involved continuous adaptation to foreign circumstances and migrations of identity which contribute to the “lifelong process of becoming who they are.”

Among the individuals interviewed was a rich collage of personal memories, but there were also many similarities between their stories. Common memories played a fundamental role in personal identity and how people related to others in society, supporting Danforth and Van Boeschoten’s (2012) argument that people remember, not as isolated individuals, but as members of social groups. These groups provide the frameworks that make it possible for individuals to remember and interpret their past. Both the social groups to which we belong and the social frameworks of memory they provide us with change over time.

Defining oneself as a member of a particular social group or community of memory draws certain people together and awakens an interest in each other’s stories, as interviewee Frieda K. explained: “[I]f you meet somebody who actually has gone through [a] similar sort of life … you like to hear what their experiences are.” A common origin did, at least for some participants, foster a sense of connection. Nevertheless, at times “[a]lternative versions of the past may emerge in the narratives of different individuals, challenging or contradicting the ‘approved’ version of the

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912 Pilcher, p. 488.
913 Booth, Communities of Memory, p. 8.
915 Danforth and Van Boeschoten refer to Halbwach’s argument. Danforth and Van Boeschoten, p. 223.
narrator’s own group,” making relationships between some East Germans difficult because they could not relate to each other’s more personal experiences of persecution or complacency.

In interviews, participants often negotiated their identities, shifting between different self-perceptions, thus illustrating the inherent fluidity of the concept and its tendency to migrate during a person’s lifetime. Identities are not static and there is no one “East German” identity. Rather, interviewees possessed a number of identities at different times, in different contexts and depending upon their personal relationship to both their past and present. Their view of themselves was layered, and it was not unusual for participants to drift between considerations of themselves as migrants, former East Germans, members of a particular social generation, victims and bystanders when describing varying stages and contexts of their lives. As Halbwachs (1992) has argued,

\[\text{[w]e can understand each memory as it occurs in individual thought only if we locate each within the thought of the corresponding group. We cannot properly understand their relative strength and the ways in which they combine within individual thought unless we connect the individual to the various groups of which he is simultaneously a member.}\]

It is this multi-dimensional aspect to memory which makes identity so intangible, but which is, at the same time, so essential to our sense of being to the point that “[t]o rob us of our memory is to destroy a part of us, something essential to who we are, something arguably as crucial to our identity as our physical person.” The illusive character of both memory and identity make it challenging to predict how the lives and perspectives of interviewees will progress, evolve, and indeed “migrate” into the future, but what can be said with certainty is that the impact of these changes upon the lives and self-perception of interviewees will continue to play a significant role in shaping them personally for years to come.

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917 Danforth and Van Boeschoten, pp. 226-27.
918 Halbwachs, p. 53.
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Appendix 1: Interviewee profiles

*Interviewees are listed in order of decreasing age.

GENERATION A (Born 1931-1945)

**Ernst M.**

Originating from Dresden, Ernst M. recalled the end of WWII and the destruction inflicted upon the city by Allied bombing. However, in contrast to other interviewees, he did not live in a section of the city which was destroyed, and his family’s connection to other relatives in the country meant that they were able to have access to foodstuffs more easily. Ernst M. recounted how his family was host to both Russian soldiers and expellees from the former Eastern territories which had been returned to Poland after the War. As a young academic, he noticed the growing power of the state over all aspects of society and finally left the GDR with his wife, Klara T., when he was 27. He and his wife migrated to Australia in the early 1960s for employment reasons, after Ernst M had been accepted for a job he had seen advertised in a scientific newspaper. Although both Ernst M. and Klara T. had lived many years in Australia by the time of their interview, and considered it to be their Zuhause, they still participated in some German cultural activities in their spare time and regularly travelled back to Europe.

**Klara T.**

Klara T. grew up in Dresden and lost two family members when the city was bombed in the final weeks of WWII. She was passionate about music and wished to study this at university, but was told that she was not allowed to because the state had enough musicians already. Instead she enrolled in a chemistry degree where she then met her husband, Ernst M., while studying. In 1953, Klara T. was banned from the university for a short time after refusing to sign a document which labelled a university Christian group as a spy organisation. Growing increasingly frustrated with the state of affairs in the GDR, she and her husband finally left. They migrated to Australia in 1961. Sadly, Klara T. passed away during the course of this research.
Frieda K.
Born just prior to the outbreak of WWII, Frieda K. recalls much of the hardship of the post-war years in Soviet-controlled East Berlin. Although a child at the time, she was aware of the hardships faced by her family. Her father went missing on the Eastern Front and she does not know to this day what happened to him. Frieda K. trained as a dental nurse in the GDR and moved to the FRG in 1959 for employment reasons when it was still possible to cross into West Berlin via the subway system. She was separated from her mother by the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. After living in England and Hong Kong, she and her husband decided to migrate to Perth, Australia in 1970. Frieda K. is grateful for her migration experience and does not desire to return to her former home, although she does enjoy visiting.

Hans L.
Hans L. was born in 1940 and lived in Wernigerode, Saxony-Anhalt in the post-war years. He lost his parents during the war and was separated from his sister, as they were brought up in different families. His desire to leave for the West was fuelled by curiosity and the pursuit of a better standard of living. He made two escape attempts across the mountains near where he lived, the first one failing when he was 16. His second attempt, a little over a year later, was successful. Hans L. first came to Australia in 1959 and, after a stint at an immigration camp, found work as a sugar-cane cutter in Queensland. After two years in Australia, Hans L. joined the German merchant navy to travel the world for approximately four years, before meeting his wife and returning to live in Australia. He now considers himself Australian.

Bernhard W.
Now in his mid-70s, Bernhard W. left the GDR just before he turned 18. He had fallen out of favour with the authorities for public comments he had made about the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. To pay for his actions and to redeem himself, he was strongly encouraged to join the SED, which he did not wish to do. As a result, he made the decision to leave for the West in 1957. After a brief period in the FRG, he migrated to Australia in 1960. Upon arrival in the country, he found
work as a brickie’s labourer in Adelaide. He now resides in Perth, Western Australia and views his migration as successful, emphasising that it is Australia which he considers to be his home.

**GENERATION B (Born 1946-1968)**

**Erna P.**

Erna P. witnessed the steady intensification of the GDR regime throughout her lifetime. As a devout Christian, she refused to join the SED when approached on multiple occasions to do so during her studies. In 1988, she and some of her relatives were granted permission to fly to Australia for the silver wedding anniversary of one of her brothers, who had left the GDR in 1953. This was extremely unusual, but occurred due to the fact that the law governing travel to the West for first-degree relatives was relaxed in the late 1980s. During her holiday, Erna P. fell in love with the country and hoped to one day return. After the fall of the Wall, she perceived a profound difference in mentality between East and West Germans, something which still impacts her today. Erna P. and her family have now been in Australia for almost 10 years and have many German friends here, of which some are East Germans. She is happy with her life, especially because much of her immediate family now also resides in Australia, and considers Perth to be her home.

**Mirjam K.**

Mirjam K. was born in Saxony in 1950. Her family owned a butcher’s shop and lived near a Russian family. Mirjam grew up speaking fluent Russian because of her association with the children next door. On Christmas Eve 1962 she left the GDR as a child after her escape had been organised by her father. She swam across the Elbe in East Berlin and spent some months in a refugee camp before being transferred to an orphanage. She believed that her family would meet her in the West, as this is what her father had told her, but they never did. Her father mysteriously died on his way back home from bringing Mirjam to East Berlin. In spite of her difficult childhood and maltreatment in the orphanage in which she was living, Mirjam K. excelled academically, eventually working for the Max Planck Institut. She migrated to Australia in 1989 and now leads tours for Germans visiting Australia.
Astrid N.
Astrid N. is in her early 60s. She grew up on a farm in a small village and described her childhood there as paradise. It was only as she grew older that she began to observe the hypocrisy of the society in which she lived. When she was in her mid-20s, she planned to escape to the FRG with her cousin, but was imprisoned because the Stasi were informed of their plans by one of her cousin’s friends, who was an IM. In July 1977, they were both taken into police custody and remained in jail for 13 months until they were bought free by West Germany. After living in the FRG for a number of years, she and her husband migrated to Australia in 1993. Although she has now been living in Australia for over 20 years, Astrid N. feels a strong attachment to Germany and has found it difficult to connect with Australians because of their different mentality.

Martina E.
Martina E. grew up in the East German countryside, as a child of farmers whose property had been collectivised after WWII. As a young adult, she studied water resources management in St. Petersburg and later joined the Ministry of Education as a researcher. She experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall while living in the GDR and spoke at length about the prevailing differences between East and West. After the collapse of communism, she lost her job at the ministry, but was fortunate enough to find work at the German Academic Exchange Service. She and her family moved to Australia in 2000. Although her children consider Australia to be their home, she still feels strongly attached to her place of origin and is considering splitting her time between Australia and Germany in the future.

Konrad S.
Konrad S. was born in 1955 and lived in Eisenach during GDR times. He attempted to escape the GDR via the S-Bahn between East and West Berlin by climbing over several fences and jumping onto a West German train. He did not realise that he had been followed and was arrested. Konrad S. spent time in Hohenschönhausen prison, being subjected to sleep-deprivation and was also held in the notorious Wasserzelle [water cell]. In addition, he spent 9 months in solitary confinement in Bautzen prison. Konrad S. migrated to Australia in 1986.
and has been here ever since. He has contact with other Germans via social media, but feels at home in Australia. He currently lives in the Northern Territory and so for logistical reasons his interview was conducted via email.

**Kurt S.**

Now in his late 50s, Kurt S. lived in the GDR until its collapse. He grew up in a small village, but later moved to Rostock. Kurt S. studied physics in the GDR, explaining the influence of politics in his everyday existence as a student. He nevertheless felt that he had had access to a good education. After the fall of the Wall, Kurt S. completed a post-doctorate in the UK, before migrating to New Zealand and then to Australia in 1996. At the time of his interview, he lived and worked in Perth in the medical field. Kurt S., unlike others of his generation, described himself as a “global citizen”, explaining that he felt at home anywhere in the Western world.

**Ilse F.**

Ilse F. was in her early 30s at the time of the collapse of communism. Growing up, she recalled being told at school, that the FRG was inferior to the GDR. As a young adult, she was approached to join the party and to spy for the Stasi, but declined. Ilse F. attended some of the protests in the lead-up to the fall of the Wall, being swept along with the excitement of making possible changes in her country. At the time of her interview, she had been living in Australia for 14 years, but was soon to return to Germany for employment reasons. In spite of her decision to leave, she asserted that she could imagine herself returning one day, since she did not believe that she truly had a *Heimat* anywhere at present.

**Hanna T.**

Hanna T. grew up in the GDR during the 1960s and 70s. In 1986 her then husband made a failed attempt to escape the GDR over the border to Czechoslovakia. He was imprisoned for six months and Hanna T. described how she was watched and followed by the Stasi during this time. In the upheaval of the late 1980s, she and her family escaped the GDR via Hungary and experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall on the West German side of the border. Hanna T. has been in Australia since 1997 and feels at home in her country of
migration, although she explained that this did take some time. Her traumatic memories of life in the GDR still influence her life today to some extent, although time and distance have helped her come to terms with the past.

**Julia T.**

Julia T. grew up in Karl-Marx Stadt (now Chemnitz) during the 1960s and 70s. For her, the changes of 1989 brought about much uncertainty. Her husband lost his job and she had two young children to support. She perceives a significant difference in mentality between East and West Germans, describing West Germany as an *Ellenhogengesellschaft*. Julia T. migrated to Australia in 2008, although she still feels strongly that she is German, or East German. She believes that her experiences have made her more adaptable than most to change, since in some respects she had to “migrate” twice in her lifetime, once after the collapse of communism and once when she came to Australia.

**Renate S.**

Renate S. was born in 1963 and lived in a small town near Chemnitz. She enjoyed her childhood in the GDR, but did come to disagree with aspects of the regime as she grew older. Renate S. applied to view her Stasi file after the fall of the Wall and was shocked to discover just how much information they had gathered on her. Unbeknown to her at the time, they had even followed her when she went on a trip to Bulgaria. Renate S. feels that even today there are significant differences between East and West Germans, even in Australia. She now does not associate much with other Germans at all, preferring to mix with expats of other nationalities. After approximately 18 years in Australia, Renate S. now considers the country to be her *Heimat*, stating that she has been able to achieve much more in Australia than she ever would have been able to in Germany.

**Nicole P.**

Born in 1963, Nicole P. grew up in Dresden, in the *Tal der Ahnungslosen*. However, in spite of a lack of access to the outside world, she described being well-informed on political matters in the GDR. She joined a peace movement in her hometown while she was still at school and described herself as an “East German hippy”. As a child, she had participated in sporting competitions in a
number of areas, witnessing the widespread use of performance-enhancing drugs, before injuring herself so badly that she was forced to stop competing. Within her own family, she described a number of contrasting views. Her father, the manager of an Interhotel in Dresden, was imprisoned on suspicion of being a spy, while her mother strongly denies the alleged atrocities of the GDR. Nicole P. left the GDR in 1985 after applying for an Ausreiseantrag and experiencing intensive surveillance by the Stasi. She has been in Australia since 1997 and is very happy in Perth, stating that she has never really felt strong ties to her past home in East Germany due to her decision to leave and begin a new life away from her former home.

**Henning P.**

Henning P. was born in 1964 and grew up in a town near the Polish border. He recalled a happy childhood and took part in activities organised by the FDJ along with most of his classmates, something which he described as more or less obligatory. Once he finished school, Henning P. moved to Leipzig for his university studies. He was a young student in 1989 and was swept up in the events leading to the fall of the Wall, participating in the last protest. He described the atmosphere at the time as exciting and tense. As a student of languages, his main reason for attending the protests was to allow for freedom of travel, something which he had a strong desire to do. In 2005 Henning P. moved to Melbourne. He loves the city and feels at home both there and in Germany, stating that he believes that he could quite happily live in both places.

**Marta G.**

Marta G. was born in the late 1960s and spent her early years near Dresden. Living in this area, she did not have access to West German television until she was older and moved to a town near Halle (Saale). She described how she felt that a strong sense of community existed in the GDR due to the fact that people had to rely on each other more in everyday life. Although she did not agree with the politics of the GDR, she still feels East German in some respects. Marta G. migrated to Australia in 2004 after she met her German husband, who was already living there. She misses Germany and stays up-to-date with current events online. She has a number of East German friends here, but does not have much to do with Australians outside of work.
Stefanie E.
Born in 1967, Stefanie E. recalled a happy childhood in the GDR. She explained how everything was well-structured and ordered and that she had mainly positive memories of this time. She took part in the FDJ and described how she now looks back and sees how many of the activities they did at school were regime-friendly (she described how many of her drawings from Kindergarten depicted soldiers or tanks). Stefanie E. was 22 when the Wall fell and attended the protests in the lead-up to this event. At the time she felt excited to be taking part in something which could bring about positive change in her country. After the collapse of communism she moved to Munich for work. In 2002 she and her family migrated to Australia. Stefanie is content with her life here, although she says it took her about three years to feel at home in her host country.

GENERATION C (Born 1969-1980)

Britta F.
Britta F. was born in 1969 and grew up in East Berlin. In February 1989, two of her friends attempted to escape to the West over the Berlin Wall. Tragically, one of them was shot and killed. On the night of the fall of the Wall, Britta F. and her boyfriend at the time went over to West Berlin and met up with a friend who had escaped to the West earlier, making their way through pubs and clubs. She still feels that being East German, or rather, from East Berlin, permeates her sense of identity. She migrated to Australia in 1996 and has lived here ever since. She has contact with a number of Germans in Perth, although she describes having a special connection with those who come from the former East.

Sofia W.
Sofia W. was born in 1970 and grew up in Dresden in the so-called Tal der Ahnungslosen, the area where they did not have access to West German television. As a young child, she felt ostracised at school because she was not part of any youth organisations and her family was planning to leave the GDR. Her father escaped first, posing as a Nordic businessman and travelling via several countries until he finally reached West Berlin. Sofia W.’s mother applied to join him, and Sofia W. recalls regularly having contact with the Stasi, even at
her young age. The family was finally reunited in 1978, when they were permitted to migrate to the West. Sofia W. came to Australia in 2001. She has an Australian husband and now mainly associates with Australians. Nevertheless, she still feels that her Heimat is Germany.

**Thomas E.**

Thomas E. was born in the early 1970s and spent his childhood and youth in the GDR. He described having a happy childhood. As an eighteen-year-old Thomas E. entered the Felix Dzerzinky Wachregiment just before the fall of the Wall and was on call as the protests in Berlin grew. Both he and his wife (Natalie F.) described that they were able to adjust well to the Western system, as they were still young when the change occurred. They have now been living in Australia since 2007 after initially visiting the country as travellers. Both interviewees developed a real love of travel, perhaps, as Thomas E. suggested, because the GDR had forbidden them to do so.

**Angela H.**

Angela H. was born in 1972 and grew up in a small Thuringian village. The child of farmers, she had an idyllic childhood, only realising the limitations of the society she lived in when she discovered that she would be unable to work in her desired field. During the confusion leading up to the collapse of communism, Angela H. escaped to the West with her sister and her husband, travelling to Prague and climbing over the walls of the West German embassy. After some weeks, they were allowed to travel to West Germany. However, they did not remain there for very long, migrating to Australia soon after. Angela H. has now been in Australia for 25 years and although she still identifies as East German in some respects, she feels very much at home in Perth.

**Natalie F.**

Born in 1973, Natalie F. had fond childhood memories of the GDR and felt fortunate to have been young enough to remember the society in a largely positive light. Nevertheless, at the end of her schooling, she did experience some difficulties with her application to sit for her Abitur [leaving exam] because she did not conform to the views of school authorities. Although Natalie F.’s memories of the time are mainly positive, she did acknowledge the difficulties
which Germany faces regarding people’s past involvement with the Stasi. At the time of her interview, she and her husband, Thomas E., had been in Australia for six years and described themselves as keen travellers.

**Sabine H.**

Sabine H. grew up in the GDR during the 1970s and 80s. As a Dutch citizen, her father was under constant observation, his correspondence with his family being closely monitored. While living in the GDR, Sabine H. was exposed to West German television, describing her impression of the FRG as a positive one. She was in year 11 in 1989 and recalled the chaotic months following the demise of the East German regime from the perspective of a school student. In 1999, she made the decision to migrate to Australia after meeting her boyfriend, and views her migration as a success. She is comfortable with life in Australia, although she feels that she is in many respects caught between two worlds.

**Alexander S.**

Alexander S.’s father, an academic, was imprisoned in the GDR when Alexander S. was six years old, after protesting with a hunger strike. He was bought free by the West in 1980 and Alexander S., his brothers and his mother were also bought free a year later. His family had always been very politically-engaged, his grandmother belonging to the communist party during Nazi times and then opposing the GDR regime after its foundation. Once in the FRG, Alexander S. noticed many cultural differences between himself and those who grew up in the West. As a teenager, he continued his family’s tradition of being politically active, attending many peaceful protests calling for the fall of the Wall. Alexander S. completed his PhD in Canada, and moved to Australia in 2009. He is reluctant to describe himself as East German, preferring to focus on the fact that East and West are now one and everyone should consider themselves German. Nevertheless, spending his early years in the GDR has had an effect and he does still recognise differences between East and West Germans.
Carolin B.
The Berlin Wall collapsed on Carolin B.’s 14th birthday. Being so close to Berlin at the time, she witnessed the excitement first hand. On the morning of 10 November, she and her family went over to West Berlin. For Carolin B., the collapse of communism had great significance because it meant that she would be able to see her sister again, who had escaped the country when she was 18. Carolin B. described the confusion following the fall of the Wall, specifically how it impacted upon the GDR’s school system. In 2002, she came to Australia for the first time to study on a scholarship and decided that she liked it so much, she wanted to stay. She has a number of German friends, including East Germans, and feels at home both in Australia and in Germany.

Kristoff A.
Kristoff A. was born in 1976 and grew up in Magdeburg. As a child, he enjoyed life in the GDR and took part enthusiastically in groups at school, such as the FDJ and Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft. He was not aware of the influence of the Stasi and only realised the role which they had played after the fall of the Wall. As a child, Kristoff A. was fascinated by the colourful image of the West which he saw on West German television. After the fall of the Wall, his mother eventually lost her job, something which his family had not anticipated because they had expected life to improve, rather than become more difficult. Kristoff A. eventually came to Australia in 2005 on a working holiday visa, and has been here ever since. He has many East German friends in Perth but could see himself returning to Europe to live in the future.

Sylvia E.
Born in the late 70s, Sylvia E. grew up in a small town near Magdeburg. She was 12 years old when the Wall fell and described how she felt she had been born at exactly the right time because she had not been adversely impacted by life in the GDR and was easily able to adapt to life under a Western system. As a young child, she was not aware of the influence of the Stasi, but as she became older, began to notice how those with suspected Stasi-connections were privileged when compared to the general population. Sylvia E. came to Australia in 2005 because she wanted to travel and improve her English. Although she has
now been here for 10 years, she still feels a strong attachment to her hometown and has many German connections in Perth, including a number of East Germans.

**Daniela S.**

Daniela S. was born in 1977 and grew up in Halle (Saale). She has very positive memories of her childhood and describes how she had felt safe in the GDR. For her, the reunification was quite traumatic, as it signified the collapse of her safe environment. Although she did recognise the wrongs committed by the GDR state, she did not agree with what she described as the West German tendency to devalue the lives of those who had been brought up there. At the time of her interview, Daniela S. had been in Australia for two years and was finding it difficult to adjust to life away from home, hoping to return to Germany one day in the near future. Daniela S. knows a number of Germans in Perth, but is not acquainted with many who are specifically from the East. She also associates with a number of Australians and people of other nationalities.

**Elisa M.**

Elisa M. was born in the late 1970s and grew up near Halle (Saale). She feels a strong sense of identity with the former GDR, especially because she had positive childhood memories of the time. Elisa M. found the period following the fall of the Wall quite traumatic, and both she and her husband (Fabian A.) still perceive a profound difference between East and West Germans today. At the time of their interview, Elisa M. and Fabian A. had been in Australia for approximately four years, their main reason being that they had come to study. They had many Germans within their friendship network, a significant number of them East Germans.

**Elena T.**

Born in 1977, Elena T. grew up in Magdeburg. She recalled the activities she had taken part in at school, which had fostered a sense of community with other students. Elena T. was a talented swimmer and described how she had realised that much of the GDR’s focus on sport had been to promote their national interests. Being only 12 years old when the Wall fell, Elena T. was not as active in competitive swimming as some of the older girls she knew. She described
how they had been given particular “energy drinks” to enhance their performance. Elena T. first came to Australia to visit friends and loved the country so much that she decided to apply for a working holiday visa in 2004. She returned to Germany after a year, but continued to come back regularly. She met her Australian husband in 2009 and eventually moved back to Australia in 2011. She mostly associates with Australians, although there are some German, as well as specifically East German, contacts in her circle.

**Fabian A.**

Born in the late 1970s, Fabian A. described his childhood memories of the GDR as positive. After the Wall fell, he recalled the debate which arose within his own family surrounding the Stasi files, after it had been revealed that a relative had been involved as an unofficial collaborator. However, his family was able to resolve the issue and forgave their relative, with whom they are still friends today. For Fabian A., the *Ostalgie* phenomenon is tied to positive memories of the past and he likens it to “local product buying”, rather than being politically motivated. Fabian A. moved to Australia in 2006 with Elisa M. and was completing a PhD at the time of the interview. Both he and his wife consider their *Heimat* to be Germany and are thinking about returning “home” when they start a family.

**Peter S.**

Peter S. was born in 1979 and lived in a small town between Leipzig and Dresden. As a young child, he took part in the GDR’s youth organisations and recalled the time surrounding the fall of the Wall as quite confusing and frightening. However, after the reunification, he was easily able to adjust to the Western system because of his young age. In 2011 he decided to come to Australia because he wanted a career change. At the time of his interview, he was very happy in the country, although he also stated that he could imagine returning to Germany to live in the future. His friendship network here in Perth is comprised almost exclusively of East Germans.
Markus B.
Markus B. was just 9 years old when the Berlin Wall fell. Although he does not recall specific events at the time they occurred, he did remember the sense of anticipation, uncertainty and fear within his own family. Markus B. did not think that there were great differences in mentality between East and West within his own generation, but he did perceive differences between those of his parents’ generation. Markus B. came to Australia with his girlfriend for their postgraduate studies and has been here for approximately 7 years. He enjoys the Australian work-life balance compared to that of Germany and has many German friends here.

Anna K.
Anna K. was just 9 years old when the Berlin Wall fell. She does not recall the event, although she does remember the time after it had happened and feeling excited that she would be able to buy the West German lollies she had seen on television. While living in the GDR, she valued the strong sense of community in her hometown, which she felt was lost after reunification. Anna K. came to Australia in 2007 to complete an internship for her studies. At that time, she met her boyfriend and eventually decided to migrate permanently. She now feels at home in both countries, although she described missing some aspects of German culture.

Interview with Angela H.’s family in Germany
During a visit to Germany in 2012, I was fortunate enough to be able to interview the family of one of my participants. They were in a position to provide me with details about life in the GDR and in the post-communist period. Three family members took part in the interview, Angela H.’s parents and her sister (who had initially migrated to Australia with her, but had since returned to Germany). Since GDR times, the family has resided in the same small Thuringian village. They described how the reunification necessitated a number of adjustments, but also how they perceived that East and West Germans were beginning to grow together over time.
Appendix 2: Interview themes

Below is an example of the questions which were most commonly asked of participants. Please note that some interviews did vary from this exact format, due to the fact that in-depth interviews allow for flexibility. Furthermore, some questions were asked differently depending on factors such as the generation to which participants belonged and how removed they were from the GDR past.

1. Memories of the fall of the Wall
   - Where were you?
   - How did you feel at the time?
   - How did life change after the fall of the Wall (if you think it did)?

2. Childhood/Life
   - Describe a typical day.
   - Describe the relationship you had with other family members.
   - Did you have relatives in the West? Did you feel connected to them?
   - Was there a strong sense of community in the GDR?
   - What was your experience of politics/the Stasi?
   - Did the state encourage you to identify as East German rather than German? If so, how?
   - Were there any regional senses of identity?

3. Education/Work in the GDR
   - What did you/your parents work as in the GDR?
   - Did this change after reunification?

4. Image of the West?
   - What was your image of the West?
   - Did it change with reunification?
   - Do you view East and West differently now that you have migrated to Australia?
   - Do you consider Germany to be one nation now or are there still differences?
5. Reunification
- Were there mistakes made with the reunification?
- Is there a difference in mentality between the East and West? If so, how would you describe this?
- Who were the winners and losers of reunification?

6. Western Australia
- Is there a difference in mentality between East and West Germans in Australia? If so, how would you describe this?
- Is there a difference between the German/East German and Australian mentality? If so, how would you describe this?
- Who do you mix with?
- How do you introduce yourself?
- Have members of your family also migrated?
- Do you practice aspects of German culture e.g. the language, Advent, Easter.
- Why did you choose to migrate to Australia in particular?
- Do you see your migration as successful? Why/why not?
- Do you have a lot of contact with the local community? If so, what kind of contact?
- Do you think that the fact that you learnt Russian rather than English at school impacted on your adaptation to life in Australia? If so, how?

7. Heimat
- What do you associate with Heimat? Where is it now? Where was it before?
- Have you been back to the former East? What changes did you notice?
- Could you imagine moving away from Australia? Would you go back to the former East?
- Do you feel like you belong in Perth/Australia? Where do you feel you belong today?

8. Significance of historical events (such as German reunification) for you?
- What do you think has most significantly shaped your life e.g. historical or personal events?