

**Goodbye Lenin, Hello *Nostalgiafest*?**

by Catherine Plum

Department of History and Political Science  
Western New England College



Published by H-German, May 19, 2008

Stable URL: [http://www.h-net.org/~german/pdf/20080519\\_plum.pdf](http://www.h-net.org/~german/pdf/20080519_plum.pdf)

Wolfgang Becker's 2003 film *Good Bye, Lenin!* can serve as an effective pedagogical tool and generate high praise and discussion among student viewers on issues such as East/West stereotypes and nostalgia. This film is suitable for survey courses on modern European history and German history as well as classes on communist East Germany, comparative communism, or revolution. Having used this film in a course on East German society and culture, I would like to provide a brief synopsis of the film, a discussion of themes to analyze with students and some recommended reading selections to use in tandem with a showing of the film.

*Good Bye, Lenin!* tells the story of a fictional young man named Alex Kerner who witnesses first-hand the changes of the *Wende* in the months between the mass protests in the fall of 1989 and reunification in October 1990. Alex's experiences are closely tied to his mother Christiane. The film portrays Alex's mother as an enthusiastic parent and teacher who could not find the courage to join her husband and defect to the West. Instead, Christiane wholeheartedly embraces socialist ideals and believes in an idealistic GDR that never really existed. Early in the film, Christiane suffers a heart attack as she witnesses her son's arrest on the fortieth anniversary of the foundation of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). While Christiane lies unconscious in a coma, Alex and his sister travel to the West for the first time, pursue new jobs with Western employers, and experience the financial troubles and rapid political path that ended with German reunification.

When Christiane awakens from her coma, her son Alex dutifully protects her fragile health and world view by recreating her GDR bedroom, foraging for discarded consumer products, and producing amateur news broadcasts to explain how the world is changing outside her bedroom window. Alex's tremendous efforts and the challenges he faces are endearing as well as comic. He invents creative

explanations for the presence of Coca Cola advertisements, Western cars, and a man from Wuppertal who moves into their East Berlin neighborhood. Shortly after reunification, Christiane falls asleep for the last time, leaving a son who will always associate his mother with the GDR and reflect back on fond memories of his childhood.

Alex's childhood love of cosmonauts and outer space provides a level of thematic unity and symbolism to the film. The film opens with a youthful Alex playing with rockets. Towards the end of the film, a taxi driver with an uncanny resemblance to GDR astronaut Sigmund Jähn transports Alex to his father's home in West Berlin -- a place that always seemed a world away. Alex discovers not only his father, but a half-brother and sister who are watching *Sandmännchen* on TV. This television show features an imaginary figure who travels the world and the cosmos, and is one of the few GDR TV shows that West Germans actually appreciated and continued to watch. At the end of the film --against the laws of both East and West -- the characters distribute Christiane's ashes into the winds of change. In Alex's eyes, Christiane's idyllic GDR was not a closed society, but a society open to reform that dreamed of higher purposes.

I use this film as an audio-visual complement to our class coverage of the revolutionary changes that transpired between the fall of 1989 and German reunification in 1990. Images in the film of mass protest, the new presence of Helmut Kohl in the East, and the introduction of the West German Mark reinforce developments we have just discussed together. Students gain a new understanding of an energetic, transformative Berlin complete with discoveries of abandoned apartments left by the individuals that fled to Hungary in the summer of 1989. The film works best in classes focused on German history. If used in a survey course, however, the film will require a detailed introduction to provide historical context and certain qualifications. Through the film students

gain only a brief visual sense of a protest in Berlin, whereas the first mass protests began in Leipzig. It is also worthwhile to point out to students the contrast between the spontaneous celebrations of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the planned events and fireworks orchestrated for the day of reunification, October 3, 1990. Given the contested holiday that October 3<sup>rd</sup> has become, one might posit the question as to whether the date of the fall of the Berlin wall, November 9, would have made for a more suitable national holiday. Students familiar with German history will recognize the inherent problems of using this date, however, given the disturbing legacy of Kristallnacht and the Beer Hall Putsch.

Additionally, I would stress to all students that the film was not and could not have been produced immediately after the *Wende*. For most West Germans at the time, including the director Wolfgang Becker, the GDR was a foreign world. In order to produce the film, the director had to study daily life in the GDR. This film also represents the nostalgia for the GDR that was well-developed by the time the film was released in 2003, but was not readily apparent during the period of revolution and reunification. During the *Wende*, many GDR citizens were skeptical of some of the changes they witnessed, but a nostalgia for the language and consumer items of the GDR was more prevalent after the *Wende*, despite the fact that in the film some older characters in the film wax nostalgic for the world Christiane still lives in, expressed so clearly in the socialist letters she dictates and the communist-era songs sung at her birthday celebration. Similarly, Alex's obsession with finding GDR consumer goods such as Spreewald pickles or Mocha-Fix Gold coffee mirrors the more recent nostalgia for GDR consumer items and symbols of life in the GDR.

If we recognize the film as both an outgrowth of and impetus for nostalgia, another set of analytical questions come into focus. What are former East German citizens nostalgic for beyond the GDR consumer goods, decorative styles, and Trabis depicted in the film? If GDR nostalgia extends to Ossi parties, hotels, bars, board games, Trabi clubs, and the new GDR museum in Berlin, what image of a GDR do these sources of nostalgia commemorate? Beyond flea market economics, why have former East German citizens purchased old consumer items, music, and images of the GDR in recent years? If nostalgia develops from a defensive stance as Paul Betts has argued,<sup>1</sup> is it so surprising that former GDR citizens would take a such a position with respect to Western influence, especially given the apparent rejection of everything for which their former nation stood--including its consumer products, traditions, everyday life, and even its politics? Was it inevitable that former GDR citizens would eventually question whether their consumer goods, social system, and way of life were really so misguided given post-

*Wende* experiences with Western goods, loss of employment, heightened rents, and the deteriorating social and economic status of women? Nostalgia in this context intersects with a loss of identity and the desire for a positive individual and national identity tied to the past. East German citizens were told that they were on the correct side of the antifascist wall and on the winning side of history, only to lose that identity with the fall of the wall. Advanced students would profit from a consideration of Betts's discussion of some of these questions in his article entitled "The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture" in the *Journal of Modern History* (2007).

In addition to the theme of nostalgia, the film's plot, characters and images suggest additional themes and questions for students to consider. I typically distribute a list of themes and questions before screening the film to encourage active viewing and to ensure an interactive discussion following the film. Scholars will find that the film sparks initial questions about the nature of revolution and East/West prejudices and stereotypes. Students can compare the revolution in East Germany to other historic revolutions and its contemporary counterparts in the Eastern bloc, which were relatively bloodless (with the exception of Rumania). Additionally, students might consider more closely whether Alex's ability to conceal the truth is tied to his experience living under a government that perpetuated a distorted version of reality. It may not be completely coincidental that Alex's Russian girlfriend objects to his lies and deceptions. Soviet leaders and Soviet media promoted critical dialogue and discussions earlier than did the GDR regime overseen by an aging Honecker. While they dissemble in their mother's presence, both Alex and his sister Arianne view aspects of the GDR negatively, although Arianne demonstrates a stronger tendency to embrace Western fashions, diapers, and a Western lover. As viewers see old GDR furniture and clothing styles tossed aside and Arianne's Burger King boyfriend emerges from a tanning bed, they should consider whether the film is making fun of East Germans, West Germans or indeed both groups. Students may find that a virtual wall still separates East and West in terms of attitudes towards consumption and life experiences, although the film could be more introspective on this level. The virtual wall can be highly comedic, as when the Burger King boyfriend Rainer nearly ruins Alex's ruse by confusing terms and titles within the East German communist youth organizations. Both East and West, Osis and Wessis, are the focus of comedic portrayals in a film that accents national unity through the unity of families and an emphasis on common human emotions.

Many of these themes can be considered in depth in combination with additional reading assignments. While considering the events of the summer and fall of 1989, I

have assigned my students Stasi reports on reasons East Germans were leaving their homeland to escape to the West via Hungary. These reports can be found in a volume Konrad Jarausch and Volker Gransow compiled some years ago.<sup>2</sup> Also, at the very end of my course on East German society and culture, we consider the changes brought by the *Wende* through Daphne Berdahl's highly accessible and readable monograph *Where the World Ended*.<sup>3</sup> I tend to assign students a lot of articles and book excerpts in my classes, but students will find *Where the World Ended* to be an excellent investment and a fascinating read. Trained as an anthropologist, Berdahl examines the village of Kella located on the edge of East Germany and visible to curious observers from the West. Berdahl lived, researched, and conducted interviews in the village between December 1990 and August 1992. In 1996, Berdahl returned to Kella and observed further changes in Kella affecting all of the senses. These included new sights, such as the white-washed buildings; new sounds -- or lack thereof because of reduced traffic; and new smells, as the air was cleaner and freed of brown coal and automobile emissions. Berdahl provides noteworthy chapters on borderlands, the politics of everyday life, and comparisons between consumption, religion and women's experiences before and after the *Wende*. The text builds on our previous discussions by providing a case study illuminating the lives of everyday residents in a rural area before and after 1989 in contrast to the typical narrative of events seen in Leipzig or Berlin. One can contrast Kella residents' initial forays to the West, changes in employment and attitudes towards consumer goods in this text with the movie to gain a more nuanced understanding of these important issues. The dynamic discussions and high praise this text garners from students are a testament to Berdahl's strong legacy as a scholar our community recently lost.

My experience suggests that *Good Bye, Lenin!* can provide a useful visual complement to lectures and discussions on the revolution of 1989, the rapid reunification that followed it and the question of nostalgia. Armed with contextual information, supplemental readings, and an awareness of the film's themes, students can view *Good Bye, Lenin!* with a critical eye and participate in thoughtful and engaging class discussions that extend well beyond the parameters of the film itself.

#### Notes:

1. Paul Betts, "The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture," *Journal of Modern History* 72 (September 2000): 731-765.
2. Volker Gransow and Konrad Jarausch, *Uniting Germany: Documents and Debates, 1944-1993* (New York: Berghahn, 1994).
3. Daphne Berdahl, *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999). This film forum will likely suggest additional texts that are deserving of our attention for student and/or instructor. Before or after seeing *Goodbye Lenin*, viewers could profit from additional reviews of the film including the following: Roger Cook, "Recharting the Skies Above Berlin: Nostalgia East and West" *German Politics and Society* 23 (Spring 2005): 39-57 and a section within Paul Cook's monograph *Representing East Germany Since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia* (New York: Berg, 2005). Students may also find instructive an article by Yosefa Loshitzky's on the role of television, multi media and the fall of the wall. See "Inverting Images of the 40s: The Berlin Wall and Collective Amnesia" *Journal of Communication* 45 (Spring 1995): 93-107.