



**Jonathan Grix, Paul Cooke, eds..** *East German Distinctiveness in a Unified Germany*.  
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Thanks for Watching the *Ultimative Ost-Show*-- Now Let's Move on

In 2002 the German comedy film *Good Bye Lenin* was viewed by many critics as another exemplification of "Ostalgie." Even long before the recent grotesque German public and private TV race for the best depiction of life in the former GDR, however, the tendency of many East Germans to withdraw to a yearning for GDR tradition started soon after unification. Jonathan Grix and Paul Cooke have compiled an interesting and diverse selection that not only elucidates this tendency, but also allows deep insight into the origins and mechanisms of the distinct cultural identity of Eastern Germany.

This volume is part of a series addressing the state of post-unification German society by incorporating views from a wide range of different disciplines; this volume includes mainly German studies and political science. All ten chapters make obvious that an emerging East German identity cannot simply be explained with bitter-sweet longing for the past or frustration with the post-unification transformational process. Grix

calls the subject matter of most contributors of this volume the "input" factor of identity, which encompasses social context, situational factors, language and socialization. Still, as he states, the "output" factor of political culture is worth exploring in order to understand the contribution of East Germans to a multi-dimensional German identity.

Joanna McKay creates a valuable basis for the task of this whole volume by describing the individual development of the GDR citizen, whose identity formation had been conceived by officials as an element of the state that could be planned down to the last detail. The state thought that socialist national consciousness might be achieved by the creation of founding myths as anti-fascism and proletarian internationalism. The latter did not root well in East German society. As McKay points out, attempts to create a strong sense of identification with the GDR mostly failed, in spite of *Jugendweihe* and other myth-creating elements that would have helped generate a strong identification with the official values. McKay argues that this failure to instill a sense of GDR consciousness

contributed to the success of the temptation of unification. Despite this failure, she notes accurately that a "real existing GDR identity" developed distinct from the SED-imposed official identity.

Laurence McFalls describes appropriately the process of the mutual "othering" of East and West Germans in the wake of unification. He also suggests that the East Germans have become more "Western than the West" (p. 32). Certainly former GDR citizens had to adapt to new values and traditions and have done so in a sometimes surprising fashion, abandoning their old values, yet not always unhappily. McFalls presents impressive data to support his findings. As he points out, even though East Germans seem to have surrendered to the post-industrial consumer capitalist society, their potentially "purer expression of that [Western] culture" is not enough to make Easterners and Westerners come closer to each other. Westerners and Easterners indeed do not consider this similarity as sufficient for accepting a common identity. However, as one can derive from the other chapters in this volume, the lack of a common identity cannot necessarily be attributed to a German repression of this notion of a common identity, as McFalls suggests.

The authors of the other chapters in this volume offer different interpretations for the often mutual East-West rejection. Patricia Hogwood's data shows that consumers in East and West have distinct spending patterns. In the East, she detects a Western lifestyle with values modified by the experience of consumer restrictions under the socialist state. This sometimes paradoxical consumer behavior is interesting also in terms of political behavior: poll data suggests that feelings of "attachment" to a party is significantly weaker in the East. Providing a comparative perspective to this data, Daniel Hough delivers a thorough portrayal of the attitude of political parties towards Eastern Germans in an essay that underlines the success of this volume. Hough's accurate depiction

of the parties' activities in the former GDR and analysis of their success or failure is understandable in the light of what the reader has learned so far about the development of East German identity. He identifies an inherent left-wing dimension within Eastern German-ness, the neglect of which is a reason for the failure of the CDU in most *Laendern*. The CDU is only successful in states with a strong regional identity under the leadership of charismatic and economically successful state prime ministers. This specific East German aspect of party politics contributes to the success and survival of the PDS.

Drawing from vast survey data, Gordon Charles Ross discusses the different types of identity East Germans refer to: East German, German, European or world citizen. East Germans seem to have a stronger sense of national identification than West Germans. Ross argues that this is the only viable source of identity left to East Germans since the notion of being a second-class citizen is still strong. He is certainly correct by stating that this conclusion "helps explain the relatively high levels of racism and right wing activism" in the East; however, several other factors have contributed to this phenomenon as well--reasons more to do with socialization than with situation.

Manuela Glaab's main thesis focuses on both of these factors. She argues that a common German identity has not been developed "owing to obstacles which are rooted in a disunited past and partly renewed by current experiences" (p. 76). She asserts that a lack of emotion about unification shows that unification has still not become a distinct feature of German identity. Data on the discontent of East Germans compared to West Germans reveals that in the late-1990s, the gap in mutual understanding between West and East German had not closed. She argues that a common identity can only develop through more carefully embracing both past and current experiences of East and West Germans.

The complexity of East German identity is also underlined by factors such as gender and regionalism. Employment, discussed by Debbie Wagener as a constituting factor of personal identity, also treats aspects of both socialization and situation in its discussion of female identity. Wagener shows that women in the former GDR were especially hard hit by unification, for they have experienced the greatest unemployment and drop in income. What is more, the "socialist legacy" that work is an essential part of a woman's life made them optimistic and economically independent. Wagener mentions the pressure of raised expectations on women—for example, in the devastating tendency of many working women in the early 1990s to be sterilized in order to improve their chances in the competitive labor market.[1] Due to their upbringing in socialist full employment, women believe in the emancipatory role of paid work, of which unification deprived them. Therefore, Wagener argues that women are likely to "continue to remain a distinctive identity."

An essay by Peter Barker treats the ongoing matter of loss of regional identity. It is obvious that the Sorbs, his example, had been continuously losing their identity even in the GDR. However, Barker's example shows here again that a strong local identity has been affected by the redefinition of the greater identity of the GDR.

Editor Paul Cooke concludes this volume by citing three important authors in Eastern Germany: Schramm, Brussig and Schulze. All three represent current trends in East German literature. They deal with the GDR past and explore their social place in the more or less hostile circumstances of the re-unified FRG. In addition to Cook's thorough analysis of these authors' most prominent works it might have been instructive here to look into a third group of East German writers: writers who appear not overwhelmed by events, but rather transcend to the East-West dichotomy to some extent—Durs Gruenbein might have been a good example here. Interestingly,

Gruenbein draws from common pre-separation German cultural elements. However, he does not hide the fact that he is informed by his East German socialization. Authors like Gruenbein reflect a tendency within Germany that (to different degrees) seeks a common ground for a *gesamtdeutsche* identity.

Overall this volume is a worthwhile contribution on the way to an understanding of how East German identity is distinct in its argument that the situation is just as important as the socialization of its remaining inhabitants. Nevertheless, the volume makes evident that this distinctiveness is already an inextricable constituting factor of common German identity—a gain but also a challenge. The authors suggest that unpleasant aspects of East German distinctiveness for East and West Germans alike can only be eliminated by ceasing to "other" the neighbor and by embracing a common future.

#### Note

[1]. Daphne Hahn, *Widerstand, Individualisierung oder Eigensinn? Der Anstieg der Sterilisationen in den neuen Bundesländern: die Wahrnehmung in den Medien und die Motive von Frauen, sich sterilisieren zu lassen* (Opladen: Verlag Leske-Budrich, 1999).

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