A Problematic 'Modell' for Success: East German Nostalgia and Identity in Modern Germany’s Attempt to Come-to-Terms with its DDR Past

Joshua H. Whitcomb
College of the Holy Cross

Follow this and additional works at: https://crossworks.holycross.edu/oflifeandhistory

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
Whitcomb, Joshua H. (2019) "A Problematic 'Modell' for Success: East German Nostalgia and Identity in Modern Germany’s Attempt to Come-to-Terms with its DDR Past," Of Life and History: Vol. 2 , Article 9. Available at: https://crossworks.holycross.edu/oflifeandhistory/vol2/iss1/9

This The Edward F. Wall, Jr. Prize Essay is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Of Life and History by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.
Problematic Modell for Success
East German Nostalgia and Identity in Modern Germany’s Attempt to Come-to-Terms with its DDR Past

Joshua H. Whitcomb ‘19

Introduction: Two Pasts, One Modell
In late 2000, a few days shy of the 20th anniversary of Germany’s Tag der deutschen Einheit (Day of Unity), The Chicago Tribune released an article titled “German Reunification Truly a Success Story.” The article, written by conservative Georgie Ann Geyer, praised the political experiment that brought together East and West Germany, claiming it was “working” and “already one of the great accomplishments of recent history.” Peter Voss, a German Radio executive that Geyer interviewed, applauded the former East’s “speed of normalization” and reported that he was happy to see that the old communist ideology found “a substitute” in the “better ways of the West.” However, the piece did more than simply celebrate the rise of Western consumer culture, it incorrectly equated the East’s communist dictatorship with that of the Nazi Third Reich. Geyer specifically emphasized how “They [Germans] had been wrong in their Nazism and wrong in their communism.” Declaring both regimes illegitimate, Geyer believes that the commonality makes communism comparable to Nazism.

Furthermore, Geyer combined the two governments not only in her condemnation but in her praise. This tactless journalism revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of the different processes Germany underwent when moving away from Nazism verses away from Communism. In the height of her praise Geyer discusses the German Jewish population and made a point about the

1 Georgie Anne Geyer, “German Reunification Truly a Success Story,” The Chicago Tribune, (Chicago; The Chicago Tribune, August 29, 2018)
substantial growth, “now 100,000, up from 30,000 when the wall fell (and down from 500,000 before Hitler).” Continuing her praise, she claims that Germany only has “friends as neighbors,” and that their acts of reparations, such as paying “enormous sums to the survivors of its terror,” qualifies Germany’s movement away from Nazism a success. These statements, though, have nothing to do with moving beyond East Germany’s Communism and suggest that there is a single interpretation needed to come-to-terms with the history of both regimes. Geyer’s American, capitalistic perspective is focused on the idea of quantitative success and fails to acknowledge the fundamental and categorical differences between the two regimes, erasing the important historical differences.

In 1933, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party came to power within the German Bundestag, and Germany’s democratic Weimar Republic soon gave way to a fascist totalitarian state as Hitler consolidated power. With improved economic stability and expansive infrastructure projects, Hitler’s Nazi Germany promised to restore the glory of Germany’s past empires - ‘to make Germany great again.’ However, the Nazi totalitarian state soon came to represent a regime of terror, oppression, and extermination for dissenters and individuals who fell outside the Nazi racial ideology of the Germanic, Aryan master-race. As early as 1933, prisons and concentration camps were filling up with “undesirables” such as communists, homosexuals, people with disabilities, Jews, and Gypsies. By 1939, Nazi Germany had declared a war of expansion and ethnic cleansing; by the war’s end in 1945, 15-20 million people had been systematically murdered by the Nazi regime.²

In contrast, the German Democratic Republic, or the die Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR), was a socialist nation-state and Soviet, Eastern-Bloc satellite state. The DDR lasted from 1949 to 1990. Following the Yalta Conference of 1945, which divided the territories of the defeated Nazi Germany amongst the Allies, Soviet premier Joseph Stalin began turning over control of the Soviet occupation zone to the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED), or the Socialist Unity Party. Despite its lofty goals of overcoming Nazism through the creation of socialist utopia, the ‘democratic’ part of the German Democratic Republic seemed to quickly give way to Cold War pressures and corrupt leaders. During its 40-year history, the DDR’s SED party went on to impose a dictatorial communist regime which suppressed dissenters through censorship, intensive Stasi (secret police) surveillance, and the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. In 1989, this wall separating Germany’s two nations fell in a non-violent “Peaceful Revolution” and in 1990 the BRD and DDR were reunified.

The 20th century has seen two distinct forms of German dictatorship rise and fall, each with varying aims and degrees of wrongdoing. However, assumptions

---

like those in the Chicago Tribune article which compared genocidal, Nazi dictatorship with SED dictatorship as equal ‘evils’ are by no means unique. Rather, they largely reflect the mainstream Western approach to German Vergangenheitsbewältigung – literally, “coming to terms with the past.” By the early- and mid- 1990s, West Germany’s willingness to come to terms with its Nazi past was “increasingly seen as a model for other countries” to overcome troubled histories. Modell Deutschland received international praise and was, at the time, instilling a new kind of pride in both sides of the political spectrum in Germany’s former West. Whether it be the gold-plated cobblestones scattered throughout German cities commemorating Holocaust victims, the indoctrinations of Erbschuld (inherited guilt) in textbook, or monuments with the slogan Nie wieder! (never again), by the end of the 20th century Germany was the undisputed Weltmeister im Erinnern (world-champion of remembrance).

In the 1990s, Princeton’s Jan Werner-Müller establishes that “it was then generally assumed that coming to terms with the East German [DDR] past…would come to fit the same success story.”

Two decades later, however, there is no evidence to suggest that mainstream Western notions of Vergangenheitsbewältigung have changed significantly. A German friend I knew once made a comment to me regarding the nature of academic discourse about the DDR period from his experience in the Bavarian school system: “you always find the DDR period and the Nazi period linked together in some form or another in those colorful little text boxes on the side of textbook pages. It’s always something about Germany’s two great evils and all that… ” This view is even reproduced to a larger degree inside Germany by official regime voices. According to the German Government’s Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur (Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED- Dictatorship) the reality of “coming to terms…with the communist past in United Germany” is still very much a process measured in the same terms as (West) Germany overcoming Nazism. In the foundation’s 2011 brochure, the DDR and Nazi periods are immediately juxtaposed in an introduction which considers the “obvious contrasts” and common “structural elements” of Germany’s “two dictatorships.” Furthermore, features of the “program” presented in the brochure outline how Germany “coming-to-terms” with its communist past (decommunization, if you will) closely resembles the “denazification” and the still-present post-Nazi Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Similarities can be seen in the purges of political elites, widespread trials, financial restitution and memorializing of victims,

---


4 Müller, 335.
the restructuring of education and above all, a kind of penitence through guilt and acknowledgement of past evils – the Erbschuld (inherited guilt).\(^5\)

Few can deny the fundamental and holistic moral failure of German society which culminated in the totalitarian Unrechtstaat of the Third Reich. It is largely a black and white issue: Nazism was illegitimate and wrong and democracy is legitimate and good, therefore Nazism and its associations were naturally to be purged from German society through denazification and replaced with democratic values. We are then, according to this Modell Deutschland-formula, to assume the same was true for East German communist dictatorship. Capitalist democracy won because it is good and communism lost because it was evil and illegitimate, therefore the faulty DDR naturally gives way to the freedom of enlightened, capitalist society. However, the success of this Modell was not initially obvious to many and continues to be viewed by some with great uncertainty, and even hostility.

It has been nearly three decades since Germany’s historic Wende and to some the reunification still resembles a work in progress, not a finished product. During the 2009 European Parliamentary elections, the question of reunification’s success was still a hot button topic as polls revealed that schoolchildren in former Eastern states were vastly misinformed and uneducated about DDR/SED oppression and had some “rosie-faced” impressions of the former communist state. Many western politicians and conservatives, including Angela Merkel, raced to condemn these eastern states and remind the nation that the DDR was an illegitimate Unrechtstaat like the Nazi Unrechtstaat before it.\(^6\) But her conclusion was not the absolute consensus; various western and eastern politicians alike argued that the DDR should not be condemned as having been entirely illegitimate. Furthermore, many more Eastern voices have emerged in the time since reunification to remind a modern, unified Germany that Ossis (a pejorative for Eastern Germans) and the old East were not a collective evil. While the mainstream West has continued to assess East German Vergangenheithbewältigung along the same black and white good vs. evil terms as denazification, various alternative accounts, indirect memoirs, debates, and primary sources complicate this clear-cut, success-story image and suggest that attitudes towards East Germany’s 40 years under DDR communist rule are, in fact, quite complex and do not share the kind of consensus which holds the Nazi period as illegitimate and evil. Above all, this complication is exemplified through the socio-cultural trend of Ostalgie, or nostalgia for the DDR, which emerged in the two decades following reunification. Ostalgie, in a broad sense, is a term which entails both a sense of longing and the memorialization and legitimization of various positive aspects of

\(^{5}\) “Coming to Terms: Dealing with the Communist Past in United Germany,” Bundesstiftung Zur Aufarbeitung Der SED Diktatur (Berlin: Bundesstiftung Zur Aufarbeitung Der SED Diktatur)

\(^{6}\) “Was Communist East Germany Unjust or Just Corrupt?” Reuters, May 22, 2009.
DDR life and culture which were lost in the context of West German, capitalist takeover. However, the aims and legitimacy of Ostalgie have become polarizing topics in modern Germany and have raised complicated questions of how the DDR should be remembered. This essay will attempt to analyze how the trend of Ostalgie evolved in the decades following reunification and furthermore, how Ostalgie complicates the West’s simple, good vs. evil success-story-narrative of coming to terms with communism.

**Historiography**

The historiography of Ostalgie and reunification has been shaped largely through political institutions and cultural forces. In years following reunification, American media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Economist* and *The Chicago Tribune* were quick to label reunification a success and hold Ostalgie as naïve and fleeting – a trend supported by backward, unenlightened, commie-Easterners.7 Furthermore, these American mainstream media outlets have consistently drawn parallels between the DDR and the Nazi period in their assessments of Ostalgie, labeling it as dangerous and antagonistic to the democratic goals of reunification.8 They are not alone in their assessment as West German outlets, such as *Morgenpost* and *Tagesspiegel*, and German political parties, such as Merkel’s CDU, have done the same. More recently, certain publications and academics within Germany, including the news magazine *Der Spiegel* and political scientist Klaus Schroeder, have been more hesitant to hail reunification an absolute success.9 Schroeder’s scholarship largely blames Ostalgie for the East’s slow Aufarbeitung (reconstruction/catching up) and dismisses the phenomenon as futile and self-destructive. However other scholars, historians, and Germanists have recently vouched for the value of analyzing Ostalgie, both as it relates to Eastern identity constructions and also how its manifestations in cultural texts such as film, music, and consumer markets inform East/West reunification narratives.10 These scholars include historian

---


Delores L. Augustine, music historians John T. Littlejohn and Michael T. Putnam, and Germanists Roger F. Cook and Paul Cooke.

I. Finding an Eastern Voice in a “Decidedly Western” Reunification

Firstly, we must consider how reunification was framed by political and cultural actors within the context of those pivotal Wende-years of 1989 and 1990. By October 1989, hundreds of thousands of DDR residents were taking to the streets to peacefully protest for reforms within the communist SED government. As East Germans marched through Leipzig and Berlin chanting, “Wir sind ein Volk!” (we are one people), “Demokratie, that’s what I need” and “Freie Presse,” public pressure for East Germany to reform and reunify was increasing.11 Meanwhile, behind the walls of the Palast der Republik, Gorbachev and Honecker were raising a toast to 40 years of the DDR. Then, on November 9th, a single media blunder occurred – a premature announcement that East Germans were free to cross the border – and the Berlin Wall was, at least metaphorically, toppled. In the following weeks, the Wall was physically toppled and thousands of East Germans took to the streets of a now borderless Berlin, celebrating deep into the night to the tune of David Hasselhoff’s “Freedom” with their long-lost West German brothers and sisters. In the following months, thousands more abandoned their homes and fled to the West for good. The Berlin Wall’s collapse was met with an incredible surge of both Eastern and Western euphoric emotion, both sides becoming easily swept up in the reunification-fever. West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl standing before Dresden’s Frauenkirche in 1989 bellowed out to a crowd of impassioned East German rally-goers that the “historical hour” had come “for the unity of our nation.”12 Similarly, SPD party leader and former West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt echoed the romantic, pan-German atmosphere present in late-1989 when he asserted, “what belongs together will grow together.”13 Even 1990’s World Cup of Soccer hosted in Italy seemed to be playing into the hands of Schicksal (fate) as East and West Germans collectively celebrated a memorable German win, albeit technically a West German one.14

Despite the collective enthusiasm, there was not consensus about what a reunified Germany would look like. In the years of 1989 and 1990 there existed a legitimate hope for a new alternative; a pan-German community. This community would be based on the cooperation and integration of East and West Germany.

extending beyond the Communist vs. Capitalist entrenchments of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{15} However, with the ousting of \textit{SED} communist hegemony during the \textit{DDR}’s free elections of early 1990, the East German planned economy sharply plummeted, ramping up pressures to unify quickly. In August of 1990, the \textit{Wiedervereinigungsvertrag} (Reunification Treaty) was signed, but the nature of the agreement itself was perhaps not the kind of West-East integration many East German citizens had been longing for. The treaty was a declaration of East German accession, in which West German Law, effective immediately, became East German Law. The former \textit{DDR}, with the stroke of a pen, became West Germany. The parameters though which the Reunification Treaty was framed would become symbolic of the West’s “paternalistic attitude” towards Easterners in the years to follow. In time, the framework of West German-conquest proved those earlier hopes for an alternative to be inconsequential. East German achievements, ideals and personal histories, not to mention consumer products and culture, soon became not only irrelevant but entirely non-existent in unified Germany. These were the illegitimate fruits of a failed system. By 1991, the East German voice had all but disappeared from the Western-dominated reunification discussion. However, throughout the two decades following Germany’s \textit{Wende} a new kind of platform for alternative dialogue emerged in opposition to the Western status quo which served to give East Germans a voice again: \textit{Ostalgie}.\textsuperscript{16}

As the reality of reunification shifted away from East/West integration and towards capitalist, Western conquest, some in the East developed a certain sense of nostalgia as the products and lifestyles which they were familiar with disappeared. East German food products like \textit{Kaffee Mocha Fix} and \textit{Spreewaldgürken} were suddenly absent from supermarket shelves, the \textit{Trabant} automobile factory in Zwickau ceased its production, jobs were lost, and companies were dissolved.\textsuperscript{17} Economic uncertainties in the face of a changing social landscape had left many Easterners longing for simpler, securer times when work and their pensions were guaranteed by the communist state. Layoffs, unemployment and homelessness now threatened many Easterners whose concept of work within a socialist, planned economy-framework was not equipped for the rapid “shock therapy” transition to competitive markets. Communist party members and state officials were blacklisted by the West, but so too were many of the East’s best-and brightest; intellectuals and even the mildest socialist sympathizers suddenly became social pariah.\textsuperscript{18} In 1991, former director of the East German State Bank, Edgar Most, watched as Easterners were thrown “to the wolves of the West” and became “poorer, older

\textsuperscript{16} “Merkel to Mark 20th Anniversary of German Reunification Treaty,” \textit{Deutschland Online}.
\textsuperscript{18} Augustine.
and dumber” through this sudden juxtaposition with the Western society and its norms. Former East Germans were becoming increasingly alienated in this new Germany, as their achievements, competencies, and basic social norms regarding work and community were discarded by the dominant West. Shortly after the Wende, eastern women began noticeably expressing nostalgia towards the liberation they enjoyed in the socialist system. Official Communist-State ideology had held women and men as equals and DDR women held full time positions as early as the 1950s right up until reunification. Women’s emancipation in the DDR was by no means perfect and shared criticisms from women both domestically and abroad. These criticisms called East German women überemancipiert (over-emancipated). They were now responsible for both work and domestic life, or were relegated to only lower-rung positions. Nevertheless, with the new reality of dominant, western gender norms, some female East-Berliners claimed they felt “discriminated against” since reunification and reminisced about a better, freer DDR where they “felt more respected as a woman.”

More than just grow pains, the nostalgia shared by many East Germans in the early 1990s contained critiques of the new status-quo, expressing their frustrations with West German social values and a refusal to “whole heartedly” accept the framework of reunification. Surveys at the time showed that few Easterners would have had legitimately hoped for a return to communist SED dictatorship or Stasi oppression. Rather, these expressions of nostalgia represented dissatisfaction about the loss of East German agency and voice in the new, West dominated Bundesrepublik. However, not all East Germans were so quick to express such nostalgic tendencies. The Christian Science Monitor reported in 1994 that, despite the growing disillusionment amongst many East Berliners in the years after reunification, many were nonetheless largely impatient with Ostalgie, such as the Alliance ’90 Party which aligned itself with the West’s Green Party and viewed Eastern nostalgia as a “hindrance”. Although a physical wall no longer separated East and West, it seemed a new, ideological wall was taking shape: Die Mauer im Kopf. In her 2004 study on East German identity, historian Dolores L. Augustine of St. John’s University exhibited that even the pejorative terms Ossi and Wessi did not emerge until the years after reunification. It was at that point that it became clear to many Easterners and Westerners that some form of group

19 Neubacher and Sauga.
22 Pew Research Center.
23 “Five Years After Fall of the Wall”
“othering” was necessary to establish identities in an ideological struggle of Eastern v. Western Germany.\textsuperscript{24}

Some critics have concluded that such constructions of East German collective identity and community through nostalgia are illegitimate and only stand to obstruct reunification’s aims. Political Scientist Klaus Schroeder of Berlin’s Humboldt University envisions Ostalgie as a kind of East German coping mechanism, through which disenfranchised East Germans strive to defend their own “biographies” and achievements by selectively glorifying certain aspects of their bygone DDR culture while deliberately downplaying other negative ones. For Schroeder, Ostalgie is nothing more than a distorted view of the past which “whitewashes” the evils of a totalitarian communist regime and stands in the way of true reunification-via-Western democracy from being realized.\textsuperscript{25} Thus, Schroeder constrains the successes of reunification along the terms of Modell Deutschland; Germany’s singular path to successful reunification lay in the relinquishment of the DDR-Unrechtstaat’s legitimacy by ostalgic Easterners and the absolute victory of Western values. The devaluation of Ostalgie is encouraged by more recent critics who contend that “downplaying the dictatorship” is a dangerous “price people pay to preserve their self-respect.”\textsuperscript{26} They depict Ostalgie as nothing more than an East German, psychological ‘comfort-blanket’ or delusional hindrance that stunts successful reunification. Such Western critiques of Ostalgie suggest that evil, SED, communist dictatorial rule tainted the DDR as a whole, rendering any and all East German alternatives, critiques of the West, and positive DDR memories as equally illegitimate.

These early manifestations of Ostalgie came at a time of both disillusionment and great economic uncertainty for once optimistic Easterners. However, with time, western optimism would, too, give way to more pessimistic attitudes toward reunification efforts. After the euphoria of the early 90s wore off, the harsh realities of reunification emerged as various logistical challenges in the democratization and privatization of the East German economy became drastically apparent. The demands of de-industrialization, the privatization of Eastern companies, and the loss of millions of workers who left the East once the Wall fell put those orchestrating the “sudden political birth” of the new, eastern German states “under a great deal of pressure.”\textsuperscript{27} However, the harshest of these realities was perhaps reunification’s price tag. Billions in Western investment and taxes “flowed” into the Aufarbeitung of East German historical areas, infrastructure, education and businesses during the 1990s as West Germans began to experience what financial burdens unification actually entailed. These logistical and economic

\textsuperscript{24} Augustine.
\textsuperscript{25} “Ostalgie: Romanticizing the GDR,” Deutsche Well, October, 3, 2014
\textsuperscript{26} Bonstein.
\textsuperscript{27} Neubacherand Sauga.
challenges to reunification, with time, seemed to have a significant effect on western psyches and Westerner’s certainty of the promise of the reunification-success story they saw themselves financing. In 1991, 77% of Westerners believed that the East would match the West’s standard of living in a 5-10 year time frame – these estimates proved overambitious.\(^28\) By the early 2000s, the triumphalism of democratizing the East and romantic, pan-German motives seemed to be losing momentum as many Westerners came to resent the very thing which they had, only a decade earlier, so fervently set out to do. A Sept. 2004 Pew Center poll revealed nearly a quarter of all Germans wanted the Berlin Wall rebuilt.\(^29\) Furthermore, market uncertainties brought about through a currency shift to the Euro in 2002, the EU expansion in 2004, and the increasing trends of economic globalization left some Westerners longing for simpler, more stable times. These new economic tensions and uncertainties were in fact altering many western attitudes towards the triumphalist-aims and promises of reunification as they were initially framed by the West. If western, capitalist liberation from the evils of the DDR was the path to success, then by the early 2000s it was becoming an increasing disagreeable, or imperfect, one for many Westerners.

II. Ostalgie for All: The Emergence of Commercial Nostalgia

While the economic uncertainties of the new century and globalism had brought about a pessimism in western German attitudes towards their own government’s reunification aims, many Easterners were seeing the dawning of a new age and their identities and ostalgie practices were changing as well in the years after 1989. By 2000 East Germans were far better off than they had been a decade prior, either in the DDR times or during the transitional phases of early reunification. East Germans reported themselves not only as being financially better off, but as having greater personal well-being compared with 1991. Even life expectancy has continued to steadily increase in the nearly thirty years since reunification.\(^30\) By the turn of the 21st century, former East Germans had grown very much immersed in Western culture. Furthermore, many former East Germans had moved to the West and a new generation was growing up in a reunified, capitalist Germany. Ironically, as differences between East and West diminished, a new type of East German nostalgia emerged – largely amongst a new generation of Ossis many of whom were too young to remember actual life in the DDR. This second wave of Ostalgie was uniquely characterized by its manifestation in popular culture and ability to operate within a Western commercial framework in order to garner mainstream-Western and even international attention.

\(^28\) “Chapter 5. Views of German Reunification,”
One area in particular where this new kind of Ostalgie emerged was in the German film industry of the early 21st century. Around the time of reunification, German cinema was dominated by two trends. One trend was what Roger F. Cook calls “catch up” comedies. These were comedy films made by wealthy West German filmmakers which trivialized the lesser developed Ossis through plots which poked fun at the “errors” and “struggles” for East Germans to literally catch-up with the West. These films include Go Trabi Go (1991), Das war der wilde Osten (1992), and Wir können auch anders (1993). The other, less dominant trend in early 90s German cinema was characterized by former East German filmmakers who created autenr films exposing the harsh realities of DDR life or post-reunification struggles in the East. Not only were western filmmakers reinforcing paternalistic, West German attitudes towards reunification and the othering of the silly Ossis through these blockbuster hits, but moreover, they had a monopoly on the entire German film industry. East German filmmakers who were less affluent and also less experienced in “working within a film industry geared for commercial success” simply could not compete to have their voices heard. However, that changed when eastern director Leander Haußmann’s 1999 ostalgic hit-comedy Sonnenallee broke through the Western dominated market.

Sonnenallee tells a witty coming-of-age story set to the backdrop of 1970’s East Berlin and presents a rather normalized and charming image of daily life in the DDR, an obvious divergence from portrayals of the DDR in earlier German cinema. The film revolves around teenage Micha and his friends who, in their final year of school, are preoccupied hunting down Western contraband such as Rock n’ Roll records and pornography and clumsily chasing after girls. Daily life for these characters revolves around Sonnenallee, the Berlin street on which they live and which also so happens to be intersected by the Berlin Wall with a border crossing at one end. This leads to countless absurd and humorous encounters with Stasi agents and border police who are portrayed more-so as buffoons or loveable idiots than intimidating agents of an oppressive totalitarian state. Haußmann notably utilizes a kind of self-deprecating humor when looking at everyday life in the East, as if to detach the ordinary experiences of Micha and his friends’ social lives from the goals and actions of the communist party which rules them. A notable example of this is Micha’s encounters with local Freie Deutsche Jugend leaders whose zealous devotion to communist ideals is portrayed as campy and naïve. Furthermore, Marxist indoctrination in Micha’s school appears equally ridiculous and is experienced as a harmless kind of going-through-the-motions routine by these teens. In the end, Macha finally wins over the heart of his “dream girl,” Miriam, and the story culminates when its characters and a crowd of East Berliners take to the Sonnenalle for a delightful song and dance number – a happy ending guaranteed

31 Cook, 206-19.
32 Cook, 208.
to bring smiles to the faces of German movie goers. However, the German press was less than won-over by Leander Haüßmann’s charming, sun-shiny representation of DDR life.

Reviews of Sonnenallee in the western, German-language press were nothing short of scathing. Hans Christoph Buch of West Berlin’s Tagesspiel published a review titled, “Schönen Gruß von Charlie Chaplin,” shortly after the film’s release in November of 1999. Buch wrote, Haüßmann “turned the DDR into a musical with Erich Honecker as the “Fiddler on the Roof” and glossed over “real conflicts” with “cheap Ostalgie.”33 Further critics drew comparisons between the films’ representation of DDR life with that of the Politikomödie genre of film produced under Joseph Goebbels’ Nazi Reichministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda.34 Some critics even filed lawsuits claiming “that Sonnenalle was nothing short of an insult to the victims of the former East German regime.”35 Western critics responded to Haüßmann’s ostalgic film with the kind of ferocity one might expect if he had instead produced a sing along comedy set in Auschwitz. The critiques themselves represent a Western evaluation of Haüßmann’s Ostalgie along Modell Deutschland’s parameters; delegitimize SED communist dictatorship through the same success-proven Vegangenheitsbewältigung that delegitimizes Nazism. Therefore, if the communist state was evil like Nazism was evil, then, as German Minister of Justice Klaus Klinkel claimed in 1991, “not only the Unrechtstaat must be delegitimized, but the everyday culture practiced in the DDR must be held as real, lived crime.”36

Sonnenallee, like various other strains of Ostalgie before it, takes issue with the way the West’s Modell has framed reunification and complicates notions of the DDR’s absolute illegitimacy by validating various ‘good’ aspects of East German culture – the sense of community on Sonnenalle or scenes of Micha playing air guitar to Rolling Stones records surely do not constitute “real, lived crime.” However, Historian Paul Cooke believes Haüßmann’s 1999 box office hit represented the dawning of a new productive kind of Ostalgie – one that attempts to break down the Mauer im Kopf (Wall in Head) between Ossis and Wessis, rather than provoke greater alienation and othering. Cooke notes that Haüßmann, through his introspective, satirical take on the Ossi/Wessi relations, “de-exotifies” East Germans precisely by mocking the comical and naïve ways in which Westerners in the film observe and comment on the Easterners on the other side of the fence as if they were observing

36 Stecher, 49.
animals at the zoo – “Hey, Ossi, gimme a little wave!,” says one western tourist. Furthermore, Cooke notes that the themes Haußmann utilizes, such as teenage romance and music, represent universal aspects of the human experience which function to normalize the East German experience and de-bunk Wessi myths about the blöde Ossis. However, what makes Haußmann’s *ostalgic* production so revolutionary for Cooke, is that it achieves this de-exotification and normalization of East German daily life within the framework of a commercial product which is both desirable and easily digestible for western pop culture markets. Simply put, *Sonnenalle* is a representation of *Ostalgie* which reaches Westerners through a platform they can understand. Despite the moral reservations held by some critics and opponents, *Sonnenalle* was a widespread commercial success throughout all of Germany, not just the East, charting as the highest grossing German-language film of 1999.

However, it was soon to be out done by a film, which in using Haußmann’s same recipe, would bring *Ostalgie* in cinema to the world stage. If *Sonnenalle* was to *Ostalgie* in western commercial markets what Karl Benz was to the invention of the automobile, then Wolfgang Becker’s 2003 international hit *Good-Bye, Lenin!* was Henry Ford. *Good-Bye, Lenin!* far surpassed the commercial success of *Sonnenalle* and was wildly popular among Germans, East and West, as well as reaching international audiences. The film tells the story of Alex Kerner, an East German twenty-something year old who becomes largely disenchanted with life in the DDR. In October of 1989, days before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Alex takes to the streets to join the protests parading through Berlin. When Alex’s mother, Christiane, who was an ardent communist party member and community leader, sees her son being seized by the Volkspolizei, she has a heart attack and falls to the ground. While Christiana spends the following eight months in a coma, the Berlin Wall comes down and Germany reunifies. When she awakes, doctors warn Alex that any kind of major excitement could cause another, this time fatal, heart attack. Fearful that the colossal news of reunification will inevitably mean his mother’s sudden death, Alex concludes that he must recreate a fictional, mini version of the now extinct DDR within the confines of his mother’s small apartment. However, this endeavor becomes impossibly challenging (and increasingly comical) as Alex, his girlfriend, and coworker are constantly rewriting history through fake, homemade, news programs and fabricated alternative storylines to the events of 1989 and 1990. In one notable scene, Alex’s mother escapes from her room to find western advertisements and automobiles in her neighborhood. Alex reacts by doctoring news footage to make it appear that “disillusioned” Westerners are flooding into the “more virtuous” East.

---

37 Cooke, 163
Many western critics responded to *Good-Bye Lenin!* with negativity, echoing past critiques of *Sonnenalle*. In the U.S., *The New York Times*' Steven Zeitchik labeled the film as “fondly recalling the bad old days.” Zeitchik even draws the same old parallels between *Ostalgie* and post-Nazi *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: “Did we have movements in the 1960's singing songs about how great the Nazis were and all the roads they built?” However, Becker’s masterpiece did more than simply paint a rosy, far-fetched image of East German social life. Through Alex Kerner’s creation of an ideal, alternate version of the DDR in his mother’s apartment, *Good-Bye Lenin!* functions as a microcosm for the entire trend of *Ostalgie* in that it constructs an East German identity through those promises of what the DDR could have been and not what it, in its entirety, actually was. Furthermore, Alex’s imagined, alternate-DDR represents as a kind of idyllic, “third way” alternative between actual DDR life under the corrupt SED regime and the reality of shallow western, capitalism. This is demonstrated when Alex finds himself delving deeper into the myth he has created and begins to find a kind of refuge in this alternate reality: “Somehow my scheme had taken on a life of its own. The GDR I created for her increasingly became the one I might have wished for.” Lastly, as moviegoers ‘escape’ from the ‘real’ world and lose themselves in Becker’s story, the film *Good-Bye, Lenin!* itself serves as a kind of imagined space where both eastern and western Germans could participate in alternatives to the reality of a “decidedly western” reunification. This space extended beyond the *Mauer im Kopf* and beyond *Modell Deutschland*’s one-sided path to success as it invited Easterners and Westerners alike to consider Alex Kerner’s idyllic, and caring “real, living” socialist society as a potential alternative to individualistic, consumption-driven western culture.

This “imagined space” for alternative discourse *Ostalgie* proved was not only highly appealing to disillusioned Easterners, but to Westerners as well who, by the early 2000s, where reflecting new doubts about German, European, and global capitalism. Following the release and commercial success of *Good-Bye Lenin!*, a demand for *ostalgie* goods and experiences was causing a market-boom in commercialized *Ostalgie*, with western Germans being among the biggest sellers and consumers. Furthermore, this *Ostalgie*-wave was emerging at a time when Western politicians and journalists were leading a new crusade to condemn DDR injustices by digging up or even piecing together shredded Stasi surveillance files. Nevertheless, countless new markets for East German items and brands that disappeared after *Wende* were popping up in the wake of *Good-Bye, Lenin!* offering socialist, DDR “clothes, music, films, food, and even original banknotes and

---


40 Cook, 165

medals” all for a marked-up price. Even a market for genuine DDR experiences began emerging, offering alternatives to Western “lifestyles or vacationing” such as DDR themed hotels. In September of 2003, The Economist reported that in Germany’s East and West, “Ostalgie is all the rage” as the popularity of “Goodbye Lenin” had “swept the nation.” However, The Economist warned of not only a potential economic “bubble-burst,” but suggested that through this “wild repackaging of German history,” Germans are “kidding themselves” that the DDR was “a sort of Utopia.” Other critics seemed to highlight the paradox represented by a commercial market for nostalgic, some might say fetish, goods that belonged to a society which, in theory, ascribed no value to such consumerism. However, Ostalgie was inevitably shifting into a western commercial framework, offering a means for Easterners and Westerners alike to critique, resist, or escape competitive and shallow capitalist consumer culture through participation in socialist alternatives. Ostalgie in the wake of Sonnenallee’s commercial appeal, as Robert Julien Hartmann notes, was becoming streamlined, or some might say hijacked, through a Western commercial framework, “crafted” in “West German marketing departments, advertising agencies and even film studios: Wolfgang Becker’s Good-Bye, Lenin! was after all, written and produced by Wessis.

The music industry represented yet another commercial market into which the trend of Ostalgie was expanding by the early 2000s. In 2001, eastern German pop artist Kai Niemann released his single Im Osten (In the East) which proved to be a hit success throughout Germany. In the lyrics, Niemann humorously tells listeners of all the things Ossis do better than Wessis. According to Neimann “men in the East kiss better”, “the girls in the East are prettier,” “that the Wall in the East held better,” and that “actually, practically everything is somewhat better in the East as in the West.” The Tagesspiegel’s Rüdiger Strauch, in a scathing critique of the song, called Niemann “the dumb Ossi with the big hit,” and labeled the song as nothing more than a satisfaction of an Ossi “need for revenge” against the West. However, the song received considerable playtime on Germany’s Munich based MTV station and one western MTV producer defended the song, remarking that MTV’s fans are largely oblivious to the song’s message, but rather, enjoy the song’s upbeat style. The debate surrounding the song did not stop in 2001. Viewer comments under the Niemann recording of “Im Osten” on Youtube reflect the continued debate around the issue of East German identity and Germany’s

---

42 “Ostalgie: Romanticizing the GDR”
44 “Ostalgie,”
45 Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann.
46 “Kai Niemann - Im Osten,” YouTube. October 03, 2011.
pattern for coming-to-terms with the DDR past. One reviewer wrote, “Good that I’m an Ossi! Go ahead and laugh at me,” while another commented, “With songs like these one doesn’t achieve a common identity, but rather the opposite. How sad that so many in the East find this song so great.”

By 2004, Grammy nominated, German metal band Rammstein was reaching the zenith of its commercial success with the release of their fourth studio album REISE, REISE and the group was, too, riding Ostalgie’s commercial wave. The band’s six original members were all born and raised in the DDR and formed Rammstein shortly after reunification in the early 1990s. Rammstein has been one of Germany’s most successful musical acts both at home and abroad since reunification and currently holds the crown as the most successful German language music act in US history. However, their strong politically driven lyrics and shockingly grotesque, live-show spectacles have long been criticized in the Western media, notably Rammstein’s use of pyrotechnics and sexual, sadomasochistic themes. During one 1998 US tour, lead singer Till Lindermann was arrested after simulating anal-sex at a show in Worcester, Massachusetts. However, Rammstein has ignited perhaps the most controversy through its deliberate use of ostalgie, anti-reunification, anti-Western lyrics and themes.

As Germany celebrated the 15th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the West’s great victory over communism, Rammstein was busy in the studio, conjuring up powerful critiques of the West, capitalism, and the BRD’s framing of reunification. As authors John T. Littlejohn and Michael T. Putnam point out in their 2010 study “Rammstein and Ostalgie: Longing for Yesteryear,” the band’s 2004 album REISE, REISE revolves around a contrast of East and West highlighted by back-to-back songs “Amerika” and “Moskau” located in the middle of the album’s track-list. “Amerika” achieved widespread commercial success in Germany and the US, but its lyrics depict a highly negative view of US cultural imperialism and capitalist consumerism. In the song, the United States is depicted as “dance master” who wants to lead or “führen” the dancers (nations of the world) as violins play to the tune of freedom and music “comes from the White House.” The chorus then repeats the lines “We’re all living in Amerika, Amerika, it’s wunderbar.” Furthermore, the song tells of Santa Claus coming to Africa, of Coca-Cola and Wonderbras, and that “in front of Paris,” Europe’s cultural center, “stands Mickey Mouse,” a direct reference to Disney World Paris. “Amerika” represents a strong critique of the dominant, US-led western consumer culture which enveloped the East after reunification’s lop-sided, “decidedly western” outcome. “Amerika” is then juxtaposed with the album’s next track “Moskau,” in which the singer

48 "Kai Niemann - Im Osten."
50 Littlejohn and Putnam, 35-44.
confesses his mixed emotions, but nevertheless, undying love for the Soviet capital city: “This song is about the most beautiful city in the world. Moscow! This city is a prostitute...she’s fat, yet so lovely...she is old and nevertheless beautiful.” Littlejohn and Putnam argue that these songs represent the antagonistic factors at play in ostalgic East German identity constructions; Rammstein is dissatisfied with western culture and opts to fondly reflect on the socialist east, despite “her” obvious imperfections. In exposing their flaws, the album rejects both “Amerika” (the U.S.) and “Moskau” (the old East) as being ideal models while simultaneously expressing nostalgia for the latter, the implication being that nostalgia and criticism are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

In an interview regarding the ostalgic themes present in Rammstein’s 2004 international best-selling album, lead guitarist Paul Landers remarked, “Nobody who’d ever lived there liked the DDR very much. That was true for me as well. [But] then I saw the entire polished surface of the West and thought it needed to be destroyed.” This tension present in East German identities simply does not fit nicely into the West’s Modell Deutschland success story of good overcoming evil – particularly when the good-guys do not seem so good anymore. Rather, some Easterners have been critical that in the “victor’s writing of history” and in the “public’s perception,” there only exists “victims and perpetrators” and “winners and losers,” with the “masses” of average citizens who led legitimate lives being herded into these binary categories. Many Easterners acknowledged the imperfections of the DDR, but reflected dissatisfaction with a mainstream society, which in its attempt to come-to-terms with the DDR, has held western capitalism to be the be-all-end-all perfect substitute. One East German recounts to Der Spiegel’s Julia Bonstein in the article “Homesick for a Dictatorship,” “I’m better off today than I was before [the Wende],” “but I am not more satisfied.” Rammstein’s ostalgic music engages its listeners in alternative discourse which refutes the simplified success story of good capitalism and bad communism. This is achieved through Rammstein’s tarnishing the West’s “polished surface” and reminding listeners, that despite its imperfections, the DDR did do a few things right – and those ‘things’ should not be defeated through the West’s absolutist, yet problematic, success-story narrative. Like Sonnenallee and Good-Bye, Lenin!, Rammstein’s ostalgic music, through its commercial framework and appeal in the West, proved to be an outlet through which many dissatisfied eastern and western voices could explore alternatives to what an increasing number of people found to be the unappealing reality of capitalism’s status-quo.

51 Littlejohn and Putnam, 41-43.
52 Littlejohn and Putnam, 38.
53 Bonstein.
54 Bonstein.
III. Conclusion: Off of the shelf and into the political spotlight

Lastly, we should consider Berlin’s relatively new DDR Museum and how in recent years some attitudes towards Ostalgie have changed. The museum officially opened in 2006, but began as a project started by Westerner Peter Kenzelmann who “grew frustrated during a visit to Berlin after searching in vain for a museum dedicated” to the former East. Accumulating its collections through public donations, the museum gathers the pieces and artifacts of 40 years of DDR history and “assembles” them into a family-friendly, educational, and thematically organized consumer experience. According to Kenzelmann, the museum was designed to make museum-goers feel as if they were “discovering” a lost world. Exhibits involve a high level of interactive experiences in which the museum-goer smells, feels, and tastes the DDR. Furthermore, the tone found throughout the inscriptions and videos in the exhibit rooms is a rather playful and joking one, guaranteeing an enjoyable consumer experience for the museum’s, and any museum’s for that matter, target audience: tourists – specifically western tourists. Even the DDR themed restaurant located at the end of the exhibits seems to cap off a perfect consumer experience. The museum makes sure, however, not to shy away from the DDR’s dark side; one can simulate a Stasi interrogation or listen in on Stasi surveillance. Nevertheless, Berlin’s DDR Museum has attracted sharply negative criticisms by those in the West and East for presenting too “soft” a picture of communist Germany. Spokesman of the German Historical Museum, Rudolf Trabold, “dismissed the DDR Museum project as shallow Ostalgie” when he stated, “There’s really no need for this museum…it’s on the level of ‘Goodbye Lenin’…sort of like saying, ‘Oh, wasn’t it all nice?’.” On the other hand, some Easterners were rather displeased with the museum’s western triumphalist undertones which suggest the “comical” East German practices, products and lifestyles were now as defunct and antiquated as the DDR itself.

For the public activist group Dritte Generation Ost, or “Third Generation East,” which was founded in 2009 by both eastern and western Germans, the DDR is not yet ready to be put in a museum. Memorializing something through a history museum presumes that thing to be, more-or-less, finished business. However, these young Germans have grown frustrated with the West’s channeling of Ostalgie into commercial markets. They, themselves are not ready to be ostalgic. For them, reunification still represents unfinished business and participation in alternative, Ostalgie consumption, only serves to emotionally alleviate real, legitimate, political criticisms of German capitalist society.

56 Stone.
58 Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann.
On November 9th, 2009, world leaders gathered before Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Berlin Wall’s collapse. The event was a truly incredible televised spectacle as hundreds of thousands watched as 1,000 massive, graffiti laden domino pieces set off a chain reaction along a two kilometer stretch which the Wall once followed. Angela Merkel called the event a “celebration for the whole of Europe” and U.S. President, Barack Obama, stated, “Human destiny is what human beings make of it.” The event’s message was clear – western democracy has triumphantly succeeded in overcoming communism. As Dritte Generation Ost founding member and westerner, Adriana Lettrari, watched the event unfold on her television, she could not help but become angry as the same, old “one-sided narrative” which has dominated reunification discourse for the past two decades played out before her eyes once again.

Since reunification, mainstream German society and western journalism has framed coming-to-terms with its communist past largely through the same Modell West Germany has used in overcoming the Nazi past. This form of Vergangenheitsbewältigung constrains its successes within a good vs. evil narrative – just as the Nazi’s illegitimate Unrechtstaat must be disavowed and substituted with ‘good’ capitalist, western democracy, so too must the DDR’s illegitimate Unrechtstaat be disavowed, replaced and regretted through some kind of post-communist Erbschuld -guilt. Thus, this framework suggests that in order for Easterners to come-to-terms with their communist past, they must recognize its illegitimacy and embrace the West’s morally superior capitalism. Ostalgie, since its emergence among Easterners in the early 1990s to its widespread commercial manifestations in the 2000s, has complicated this “one-sided” narrative by creating alternatives, or “third ways” between the reality of DDR dictatorship, and Western capitalist conquest – even if these alternatives arise out of nostalgic, imagined reconstructions of the DDR past. Furthermore, Ostalgie has highlighted the West’s problematic framework of ‘good’ capitalism overcoming ‘evil’ socialism through its appeal to the West as an outlet for critiques and alternatives to capitalism’s assumed ‘goodness.’ However, as Ostalgie has evolved to appeal to a wider audience through commercialization, we find that nostalgie films, music, and products have only functioned to create hypothetical alternatives and emotional pacifications of capitalism’s real social and political shortcomings – Ostalgie merely illuminates this problem with Modell Deutschland rather than remedying it. In moving beyond the Ostalgie fixations of their parent’s generation, Dritte Generation Ost, through political activism, is attempting to bring these alternative perspectives out of the imagined realm of Alex

60 John Feffer, “Germany’s Third Generation East,” The Huffington Post, December 01, 2013.
Kerner’s idealist DDR in *Good-Bye, Lenin!* and into modern political discussions of redefining East/West conciliation.

Joshua H. Whitcomb ’19 of Littleton, Massachusetts is a History, German double major with a History concentration in *Resistance, Revolution, Reaction*. Joshua has been passionate about history since childhood and is currently an E-Board member for Of Life and History as well as a member of the national history honors society Phi Alpha Theta. During his junior year, Joshua studied abroad in Bamberg, Germany where he also taught a weekly English conversation course at the local university. After graduation, Joshua intends to return to Germany to pursue a Master’s degree in International Business.

**Acknowledgement**
The essay was written for Prof. Cynthia Hooper’s “The Collapse of Communism” seminar as my senior capstone.