Diverging Memories: Emotive Representation of East Germany and its Communist Past in the German Bundestag

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A THESIS
Submitted to
The University of Chicago Division of the Social Sciences
Department of Political Science
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

August 2022

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„Das Vergangene ist nicht tot; es ist nicht einmal vergangen. Wir trennen es von uns ab und stellen uns fremd.“

- Christa Wolf

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MdB = Mitglied des Bundestags (Member of the *Bundestag*)
PDS = Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus
CDU/CSU = Christlich Demokratische Union / Christlich-Soziale Union
SPD = Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
FDP = Freie Demokratische Partei
AfD = Alternative für Deutschland
NPD = Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands
GDR = German Democratic Republic
SED = Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (communist ruling party)
MfS, **Stasi** = Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Secret Police Agency)
FDJ = Freie Deutsche Jugend (Communist Youth Organization)
NVA = Nationale Volksarmee (GDR Military)
BfV = Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (Domestic Intelligence Agency)

ABSTRACT

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Though formally reunified in 1990, the Federal Republic of Germany in many ways remains a deeply divided country. East Germans face higher unemployment rates, lower wages, worse access to healthcare, and decaying infrastructure among other challenging circumstances. Significant portions of the East German population feel alienated from the political system, with the most established parties – largely dominated by West German politicians – seemingly unable to connect with the East German electorate. Meanwhile, the communist successor party *Die Linke* and the right-wing populist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) frequently gain pluralities – in some cases even majorities – of the East German vote in state and federal elections. In their campaigns, these parties often evoke sentiments of *Ostalgie*, nostalgia for the socialist past, and present themselves as East German *Volksparteien*, people's parties.

In this paper, I analyze the rhetoric of members of the German *Bundestag* towards the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) and East Germany as a region. A sentiment analysis of all speeches given in the Bundestag between 1990 and 2021 reveals that representatives of PDS/*Die Linke* and the AfD are significantly more positive in their rhetoric towards East Germany and the GDR than their peers from the established, more centrist parties. Further, whether or not a representative was born in East Germany has little effect on their expressed sentiment towards the region and its communist past. Through natural language processing, this study contributes empirically to scholarly conversations around alienation, representation, and populism in postcommunist East Germany.

I

Introduction

"Wir sind das Volk!" – We are the people. This powerful rallying cry, central to the pro-democracy and civil rights movement it originated from, resounded through East German cities in the Fall of 1989 and propelled East Germans to rid themselves of nearly sixty years of authoritarian repression ranging from the Third Reich to the Soviet occupation and the communist regime of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Yet, October 3rd, 1990 – reunification day – hardly marked the end of (East German) history. In many ways, it was not until after reunification that the extent of the differences between East and West Germans had become fully apparent. To anthropologist Daphne Berdahl (1999), the "'wall in our heads' is the product of a process through which the former political boundary that once divided East and West Germany has been replaced by the maintenance – indeed, invention – of a cultural one" (167).

This maintenance of an imagined inner-German border is aided by the lasting socioeconomic deprivation and political alienation of East Germans. Within a year of German reunification, the unemployment rate in East Germany rose from 0% to 10.3% (Lenhart 2018); when the overall unemployment rate in Germany reached 10.5% in 2004, 20.1% of East Germans were affected by unemployment (Patton 2017). In addition to the "psychologically devastating effects of unemployment" (Howard 2003, 140), East Germans also developed "feelings of having been misled by West

German promises" (ibid.). As a result, a postcommunist identity emerged, in which East Germanness is constructed in opposition to West German discourses. In short, "unification wiped out East Germany, but created an East German consciousness" (Berdahl 1999, 174).

One prominent manifestation of this East German consciousness is *Ostalgie*. A portmanteau word for east (*Ost*) and nostalgia (*Nostalgie*), it describes widely felt sentiments of nostalgia for the socialist past. Of course, life in the GDR was far from rosy, as the economy was the slowest to recover from World War II, wages were chronically low when compared to the Federal Republic, and citizens were repressed by one of the most elaborate systems of state surveillance the world had ever seen (Stockemer and Elder 2015). East Germans might reminisce about positive aspects of life in the GDR such as advanced healthcare and education systems as well as more leisure time. In many ways, however, *Ostalgie* is more so the "mourning for an East Germany that never existed" (Berdahl 1999, 219), representing primarily a defiance of the West.

Empirical evidence supports the notion that *Ostalgie* is a widespread phenomenon within East German society: in multiple surveys between 1991 and 2018, 70% of East Germans consistently believed socialism to be a good idea that was poorly executed, as opposed to 40% of West Germans (Pickel and Pickel 2020). Moreover, in interviews with 200 participants from East and West Germany, Stockemer and Elder (2015) found that 39% of respondents had either somewhat positive or very positive views of daily life in the GDR, with 75% of respondents who held such beliefs being East German, and 25% West German. Conversely, of the 57% of respondents who had predominantly negative views of life in the GDR, 78% were West Germans and only 22% were from the East.

The collective memory of the communist past as well as the continuous alienation of East Germans have caused East Germany to become a distinct polity within the

Federal Republic. One distinguishing feature of this unique polity is the continued success of the *Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus* (PDS) and its successor, *Die Linke*. As the successor party to the communist *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED), the PDS/*Die Linke* frequently captures large parts of the East German vote in local, state, and federal elections (Doerschler 2015). The party is a controversial player in the German political system; its members have at times been monitored by the BfV, Germany's domestic intelligence agency, due to antidemocratic tendencies among them (ibid.).

Since 2013, the distinct character of the East German polity has become even more apparent through the electoral successes of the right-wing populist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). The 2017 *Bundestag* elections in particular sent shockwaves around the country, as the AfD became the first far-right party to enter the federal parliament since the ban of the national socialist *Sozialistische Reichspartei* in 1952 (Gehler 2021). The AfD received 12.6% of the vote and became the leader of the opposition for the following four years. Notably, the party received 'only' 10.7% of the vote in Western states, while 21.5% of East German voters cast their ballot for the AfD (Yoder 2020).

Gehler (2021) contends that the polarized outcome of the 2017 *Bundestag* elections is proof that "what was still missing in Germany, more than 25 years after reunification, was a unification of hearts and minds" (311). To him, the success of the AfD is driven by "the pent-up discontent of the losers in East Germany's 'Wende' [which] made the AfD the mouthpiece of malcontents" (ibid., 328). Pooling together the vote shares of *Die Linke* and the AfD, it becomes evident that almost half of the East German electorate, at times even more than that, consistently votes for parties that, at best, have a tenuous relationship with liberal democracy. The central question of this thesis is how *Die Linke* and the AfD position themselves vis-à-vis East Germany and its electorate to capture pluralities of the East German vote.

In the following, I postulate that one mechanism through which these two parties establish themselves as a representative of East German interests is through their rhetoric towards East Germany and its communist past. In the Western-dominated *Bundestag*, the established, more center-leaning parties often dismiss the GDR in its entirety as an *Unrechtsstaat*, a state built on and reproducing injustices, with the PDS/*Die Linke* having long been the only party to reject this notion (Prinz 2015). Given the prominence of *Ostalgie* among the East German population as well as populist tendencies among both the AfD and *Die Linke*, I hypothesize that members of the *Bundestag* (MdB) from these two parties exhibit a significantly more positive rhetoric towards East Germany and its communist past than the established parties of the political center. Moreover, I hypothesize that MdB from East Germany are more positive in their expressed sentiment towards the GDR and East Germany than their West German peers.

I test these hypotheses by conducting a sentiment analysis of all speeches given in the *Bundestag* since German reunification on October 3rd, 1990. I create different subsets of the data consisting of speeches that contain previously defined keywords. For example, in a GDR-subset, I collect all speeches that contain words related to the GDR and its institutions such as "GDR," "German Democratic Republic," or "*Stasi*." I then extract the context in which these keywords appear, i.e. a window of ten words surrounding each keyword, and match the resulting corpus with the SentiMerge sentiment dictionary (Emerson and DeClerk 2014). The analysis of the resulting sentiment scores reveals that MdB of the AfD and PDS/*Die Linke* factions indeed exhibit a significantly more positive rhetoric towards both the GDR and East Germany more generally. Whether an MdB was born in East Germany or not, on the other hand, has little impact on their expressed sentiment towards the GDR and East Germany.

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follows: In the section immediately

following, I review existing scholarship on the alienation of East Germans, their representation in federal German politics, *Ostalgie*, as well as the rise of right-wing populism in the region. I then specify the theoretical framework underlying this work before discussing the data and methodological approaches. After analyzing the results of the study, I offer some concluding remarks.

II

Historical and Conceptual Foundations

When the communist regime collapsed in 1989 and East Germans emerged from forty years of largely Stalinist and neo-Stalinist rule, there appeared to be great enthusiasm for democracy in the region (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017). Chancellor Helmut Kohl promised "blossoming landscapes," and other West German politicians were eagerly awaiting a second economic miracle akin to the one West Germany saw during its economic reconstruction following World War II (Träger 2017). Though the government's expenditure on *Aufbau Ost*, its plan to integrate the East and West German economies, at two trillion dollars over the course of twenty years exceeded that of the Marshall Plan (Gehler 2021), the outcome was traumatizing rather than empowering for many East Germans.

A major agent of the transition to the capitalist market economy was the *Treuhandanstalt*, a government agency in charge of selling off East German publicly-owned enterprises and agricultural collectives to Western investors (Berdahl 1999). The *Treuhand* oversaw "the largest shift of property and wealth in post-war German history" (Gehler 2021, 236), and at one time controlled an area covering more than half of the GDR's territory. The activities of the *Treuhand* left 20% of former employees of East German state-owned enterprises unemployed and were heavily criticized by East and West Germans alike, albeit for different reasons (Gehler 2021).

From the West German perspective, the *Treuhandanstalt* was seen primarily as a waste of taxpayer money, and the high cost of reunification was perceived as an expense more so than an investment. In addition to the financial cost of reunification, West Germans increasingly met their Eastern compatriots with disdain, and, as Berdahl (1999) notes, "began projecting East Germans as inferior, backward, and lazy" (163). On the other hand, East German discourses at times portrayed the activities of the *Treuhand* as the intentional deindustrialization of the East German economy with the goal of precluding any alternatives to capitalism from developing (Gehler 2021).

In light of the rapid and violent transformation of the East German economy, some scholars have described East Germany in the 1990s as showcasing characteristics "typical for a colonized region" (Eley 2002, 450). Large parts of the educated youth left their home in pursuit of promising opportunities in the West, and the staff of public administrations was replaced by West German administrative elites (Veit 2022). To Cooke (2005), the relationship between West and East Germany is more complex than that of a colonial center to its periphery, but he contends that "*perceptions* of colonization nonetheless have important implications for the way both east and west Germans relate to the unified state and the legacy of the past" (2). To him, the colonization of East Germany was primarily marked by "the destruction of east Germany's indigenous economic structures" (ibid., 10).

However, the theme of colonization extends beyond the economic realm. For example, to Grzymala-Busse (2002), the colonial character of East German political parties is related to the colonization of the East German public administration by state officials, academics, and bureaucrats. Political parties, too, were "imported from the West, and led by West German party representatives" (Grzymala-Busse 2002, 274), leaving only the communist successor party PDS as an authentically East German party. Since it was the only party whose leadership was not dominated by

West Germans, only the PDS "could credibly commit to representing East German interests" (ibid.).

Adding to the economic and structural transformation of East Germany, another alienating aspect of life in postcommunist East Germany is the devaluation of East Germans' life experiences that came with it. In addition to previously described processes, Berdahl (1999, 163) describes such devaluations as including the following:

> "the GDR educational system; the renaming of schools, streets, and other public buildings; the removal of socialist memorials and monuments; the trial of Berlin border guards; the dissolution of East German media such as local newspapers and the television station DFF; the restructuring and rebuilding of urban and rural spaces following western models; and comparisons in dominant West German discourses of the socialist state with the Nazi regime."

These processes of devaluation were central to the emergence of *Ostalgie*. National debates about the East German past often painted a very negative image of the communist state; West German voices, which were dominant in such discussions, often equated the GDR regime with the Third Reich (Berdahl 1999). Hogwood (2013) points out that "political elites have given high priority to establishing an official history of the SED regime in the GDR, because this forms a central plank in the democratisation project for the new Germany" (35). Sentiments of *Ostalgie* thus emerged in the context of such hegemonic discourses, and were seen by Westerners "as a problematic form of glorification" (Hyland 2013, 113), and sometimes even decried as "white-washing the SED dictatorship" (Gehler 2021, 240).

Stockemer and Elder (2015) found that among their interviewees, East Germans who acknowledged negative aspects of the communist past did indeed often minimize the extent of these negative characteristics. They nevertheless view *Ostalgie* primarily as symbolizing a "yearning for a return to life in the GDR with its numerous perks such as job security, cheap rents, or supposedly warm inter-personal relationships" (115). Relatedly, Howard (2003) finds that East Germans disapprove of society's shift towards more individualism and less solidarity, and cites one interview respondent

who laments how "people's relationships have become corrupted by the new influence of money, greed, and envy" (132).

Under socialism, individuals frequently exchanged goods and favors directly with one another in the second economy (Ledeneva 1998), which consequently "transformed the character of social relations under socialism" (Berdahl 1999, 122). As the introduction of capitalism and the ceasing of the shortage economy disrupted the social networks resulting from the second economy, *Ostalgie* also became a way for East Germans to express their "regret that the new importance of money has created new inequalities and a new social hierarchy, thus destroying the non-hierarchical friendships and broader social ties of the communist period" (Howard 2003, 133). Ironically, however, *Ostalgie* is often expressed through the consumption of Eastern products, which itself represents a capitalist mode of "resistance within the context of a market economy: consumer choice" (Berdahl 1999, 176).

Finally, an important aspect of *Ostalgie* as a politically charged form of remembrance is the centrality of "organized forgetting" (Connerton 1989). Take, for example, the *Stasi* as a major perpetrator of authoritarian repression in the GDR. More than one in seven East Germans are estimated to have cooperated with the agency in some capacity, yet many East Germans deliberately chose not to engage with these aspects of their past after reunification (Stockemer and Elder 2015). Berdahl (1999) frames such historical ignorance as "a reaction [...] to the discrediting of the GDR past" (219). Overall, "the production of historical memory is deeply imbedded in the dynamics of East and West German power relations" (ibid.), and, as a result, remains highly asymmetrical.

Sentiments of *Ostalgie* are perpetuated by the continued political alienation of East Germans. In 2018, a study found only 20% of East Germans to be content with liberal democracy, as opposed to 39% of West Germans (Holtmann 2020). East Germans exhibit lower trust in political and regulatory institutions (ibid.), and in

2018, 60% of Saxons indicated that they feel like second-class citizens in the Federal Republic (Pickel and Pickel 2020). Such feelings of political alienation are not exclusive to East Germany: Mierina (2014) finds that, when compared to citizens of more established democracies, postcommunist citizens generally feel more alienated, have less confidence in the government to act in their interests, and believe to a lesser degree that their individual actions can meaningfully affect the political process.

One symptom of this perceived alienation from the political process are lower levels of participation in civil associations (Howard 2003). Whereas between 1995 and 1997, East Germans on average belonged to 1.44 civil associations, the number decreased to only 0.78 in 1999. In comparison, West Germans between 1995 and 1997 on average belonged to 2.12 civil associations, compared to 2.00 in 1999 (ibid.). To Howard (2003), such low levels of participation in civil associations indicate that civil society "is weaker, and in some cases substantially weaker, in the East than in the West" (50). This is not to say that East Germans have removed themselves entirely from the political arena, however. Patton (2017) shows that East Germans are more likely than West Germans to voice their grievances by attending protests, and in doing so draw on the legacies of mass movements as a vehicle of social change in the GDR.

While it is crucial to recognize East Germans' feelings of estrangement from political processes in the Federal Republic, it is equally important to assess whether or not the political beliefs of East Germans are objectively underrepresented among the country's ruling class. In her seminal *The Concept of Representation*, Hanna Pitkin (1967) distinguishes between the formalistic, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive views of representation. While the formalistic interpretation views representation as a product of institutional arrangements, the descriptive interpretation asks to what degree a representative shares demographic characteristics with their constituents. Symbolic representation is closely related to descriptive representation, but instead

of emphasizing the physical likeness, "symbolic representation suggests the role of irrational belief [...] and the importance of pleasing one's constituents" (Pitkin 1967, 111). Finally, substantive representation views representatives less as 'standing for' and more as 'acting for' their constituents. Only the substantive view of representation allows for the judgment of a representative's actions rather than their identities.

Michael Saward (2010) further develops this model and proposes representation as a claim that is made by an actor and can be accepted or rejected by those the actor claims to represent. Representation can be practiced independently of formal relationships between representative and constituents, and often applies to contexts outside of the political realm as well (Saward 2010). Volk (2020) adopts this framework and proposes representation as "performed rather than institutionalised, [as] the constituency comes into being through the discursive construction of representation itself" (601). Another relevant interpretation of representation is the surrogation view. A representative might view themselves as a surrogate if they claim representation not just of their direct constituents, but also of "surrogate constituents in other districts" (Wolkenstein and Wratil 2021, 869). While many studies of representation focus on constituents' policy preferences and legislators' responsiveness to them, viewing representation as discursively constructed may be beneficial when addressing East Germans' feelings of alienation that may originate from perceptions of symbolic representation more so than frustration over specific policies.

There are several studies that analyze the degree to which East Germans are represented in the German political and administrative elite. In her study of descriptive representation of East Germans among elite civil servants, Veit (2022) finds that, though the share of East Germans in high-level administrative positions has increased over time, "administrative elite networks – both in Western and Eastern Germany – still are dominated by West Germans" (15). She argues that this underrepresentation of East Germans in the administrative elite is one reason for the success of anti-elite

parties like the AfD, as the "identification with politicians and top officeholders in public administration by the electorate forms an important basis for positive attitudes towards representative democracy" (ibid., 1).

In the *Bundestag*, the descriptive representation of East Germans is largely proportional, as intended by Germany's mixed electoral system. However, there are flaws to the system. For example, Haffert (2021) found "both a numerical and a substantive overrepresentation of urban and university districts at the expense of rural districts" (20). Moreover, it is common for West German politicians to run in Eastern districts, where there is less competition for the nomination. Take, for instance, the high-profile examples of Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and Chancellor Olaf Scholz, both of whom were born and raised in West Germany, yet represent Brandenburg districts in the *Bundestag*.

Furthermore, Träger (2017), analyzing the demographic composition of German political parties, finds the proportion of East Germans among party members to be quite low. Only 10% of members of the two biggest political parties, the center-right CDU and the center-left SPD, are East German, while this number, at 20%, is more proportionate for both the environmentalist *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* (hereafter referred to as the Greens) and the liberal FDP. The PDS stands out, as 90% of its members were East German prior to its merger with the West German *Wahlalternative Soziale Gerechtigkeit* (WASG) in 2007. Today, its successor *Die Linke* remains a predominantly Eastern party, with two thirds of its members being East German. Träger (2017) also analyzes the parties' platforms, and finds wide discrepancies in the parties' rhetorics towards East Germany and the GDR. For instance, while the conservative CDU claims reunification as its primary achievement for East Germans, the PDS in its 1993 program speaks of an *Anschluss* of East Germany to West Germany, evoking language previously used by the Nazis to describe the annexation of Austria in 1938 (Träger 2017).

Coffé and Reiser (2018) state that to underrepresented groups in particular, descriptive representation is highly important. They find that MdB who are East German believe themselves to be better suited at representing East Germans' interests, thus emphasizing the importance of descriptive representation to both the East German electorate and its representatives. Further, they show that though levels of descriptive representation of East Germans in the *Bundestag* are proportionate, 77% of East Germans claim they feel badly or very badly represented in the federal parliament (Coffé and Reiser 2018, 278). This may also be related to a lack of substantive representation: Elsässer et al. (2017), for instance, argue that the *Bundestag* is unequally responsive, as they find significant associations between political decisions and the policy preferences of more affluent constituents, while those associations are absent or negative for the less.

To contextualize this (perceived) underrepresentation of East Germans' interests in the national political arena, it is important to consider the differences between East and West Germans' political attitudes. Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln (2007) found East Germans to be more favorable towards state intervention than West Germans. Moreover, East Germans who live in East Germany were found to be "twice as much in favor of government intervention as East Germans who moved to the West" (Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln 2007, 1520). Relatedly, Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2017) provide evidence that postcommunist citizens generally tend to be less supportive of democracy and markets and more supportive of social welfare when compared to their non-postcommunist counterparts. Assessing the differences in attitudes between East and West Germans in particular, they assert that East Germans "show considerably higher concern for social egalitarianism in their understanding of democracy" (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017, 127). Using panel evidence from 1994, 1998, and 2002, they also find that "East German respondents were overall more anti-democratic and anti-market than their West German compatriots" (ibid., 269), and note that the

"anti-democratic turn was more pronounced for the younger cohorts" (ibid., 272).

Perhaps the most important characteristic of East Germans' sociopolitical attitudes is a propensity towards highly salient ingroup-outgroup dynamics which manifest in different ways. First, the East German identity is constructed in direct opposition to the West, and is viewed as a "reactive [...] identity of defiance" (Cooke 2005, 19). Second, Pesthy et al. (2021) suggest that "the revolutionary struggle against the authoritarian SED created a stark ingroup-outgroup distinction between 'the people' and the political elites, which was epitomised in the slogan 'Wir sind das Volk'" (75) and results in lasting anti-elite sentiments. Third, post-reunification East German history has been marked by a high prevalence of anti-immigrant violence, which scholars attribute to high levels of ethnic homogeneity in East Germany and, formerly, the GDR (Yoder 2020).

These ingroup-outgroup dynamics present a breeding ground for right-wing extremist political sentiments and parties to arise, as has been the case since reunification. In the 1990s, both East and West Germany saw increases in xenophobic attacks and mob violence. Instances of such violence happened at rates three times higher per capita in East than West Germany, and include prominent attacks in Hoyerswerda and Rostock-Lichtenhagen (Patton 2017). Though only one in five Germans live in East Germany, more than half of all known violence-prone right-wing extremists in Germany do (ibid.). The organized terror of the *Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund* (NSU) was a particularly dire chapter of right-wing extremist violence. Over the course of over a decade, the Jena-based terrorist group assassinated nine Turkish and Greek immigrants as well as one ethnically German policewoman. The episode revealed the existence of strong right-wing extremist networks within the German police, military, and the State Offices for the Protection of the Constitution (Gehler 2021).

In East Germany's charged political climate, right-wing populist parties have

only sporadically been able to capitalize on widespread, outgroup-directed resentment by appealing to an ethnonational understanding of the German identity (Yoder 2020). One example of this is the far-right *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD) which repeatedly surpassed the five percent threshold to enter state legislatures in Saxony and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in the 2000s (Hasselmann 2016). By and large, the popularity of right-wing extremist sentiments did not become politically potent until the rise of the islamophobic PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamicization of the Occident) movement. Shortly after its founding in 2014, PEGIDA was able to mobilize tens of thousands of East Germans to attend their weekly Monday strolls in Dresden and Leipzig, intentionally evoking the legacy of the Monday demonstrations that brought about the end of the GDR (Patton 2017).

A major beneficiary of the rise of PEGIDA was the AfD, which "had adopted a set of demands that mirrored those of Pegida" (Patton 2017, 490). Though it was initially founded as a single-issue party with the goal of leading Germany out of the Eurozone, the AfD has grown much closer to the radical right since its founding. A major paradigm shift was the party's convention in 2015, during which its founder, Bernd Lucke, was ousted by far-right Frauke Petry of Saxony. Lucke, alongside many of his supporters, subsequently left the party which led to a consolidation of far-right beliefs at the party's core (Lau 2019). Two years later, in 2017, the process repeated: Frauke Petry, who had previously gone as far as demanding border police to use firearms to stop refugees from entering the country, was now viewed as too moderate and replaced as party leader by Alexander Gauland and Jörg Meuthen (ibid.).

AfD officials frequently engage in historical revisionism. For example, Alexander Gauland in 2018 referred to the Nazi era as a "speck of bird shit considering 1,000 years of successful German history" (ibid.). Additionally, Björn Höcke, leader of the Thuringian AfD, referred to the Holocaust memorial in Berlin as a "monument of

shame" (ibid.) and called for "a 180-degree reversal on the politics of remembrance" (ibid.). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the AfD *Bundestag* faction compared the government's effort to contain the spread of the virus to the Nazis' *Ermächtigunsgesetz* (Hille 2020), while Höcke likened the government's vaccination campaign to the mass murder of people in the concentration camps (Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland 2022).

The AfD's radicalization does not seem to inhibit its electoral successes. Until 2019, the party's vote shares in most elections consistently increased and only recently started plateauing as immigration as an issue became less salient in national political debates. As mentioned before, the party is much more successful in East German than West German states. One example is Saxony, the most populous East German state, where the AfD first competed in the federal elections of 2013 and netted 6.8% of the vote (Egeler 2013). The party increased its vote share to 9.7% in the state elections of 2014 (Schreck 2014), and in the 2017 federal elections became Saxony's strongest party at 25.4% (Sarreither 2017). In the state elections of 2019, the AfD further increased its vote share to 27.5% (Schreck 2019), and only in the 2021 federal election saw a slight decrease as it netted 24.6% of the vote (Thiel 2021). In East German states, the AfD confidently proclaims itself to be a *Volkspartei* (catch-all party), and views itself as the 'true representative' of the East German people.

In its political campaigns in East German states, the AfD routinely evokes East German history. During its 2019 campaign for the state legislature in Brandenburg, the party mobilized voters with slogans such as "Complete the *Wende*!" and "*Wende* 2.0: Then as Now: Freedom instead of Socialism" (Yoder 2020, 46). Such symbolic campaigns appear successful in appealing to the East German psyche; indeed, only one third of those who vote for the AfD claim to do so because of the party's policies (ibid.). Rather, the AfD "validates the sense of collective deprivation felt by some easterners, and offers a basis for mobilizing national and often regional pride." (ibid., 44). Ultimately, the success of the AfD cannot be explained by looking at the party in

isolation; as Gehler (2021) argues, "what made the AfD so strong was the weakness of the main parties [and] their organizational ineptitude" (333). Thus, I end this section by providing a brief overview of the other parties represented in the German *Bundestag* and their positionality vis-à-vis East Germany.

Since reunification, there have been six distinct factions or party groups in the *Bundestag*, consisting of seven different parties. For the purposes of this research, I divide these into three groups: First, the AfD, for reasons outlined above, is an outlier as it exists on the rightmost extreme of the political spectrum and appeals to the East German electorate in unique ways. The center-right CDU and CSU, the center-left SPD, the liberal FDP, and the environmentalist Greens all view themselves as parties of the 'democratic center,' and they are the only parties to have been part of federal governing coalitions. Because of this and their largely West German origins, these parties are less able to successfully claim representivity for their East German constituencies. Finally, the socialist *Die Linke* views itself as an East German *Volkspartei* representing East German interests, and in many ways it directly competes with the far-right AfD for the East German vote.

The East German party system underwent major transformations following reunification. During the communist rule, the GDR regime did not allow for free or fair elections and forced all parties to jointly run on a so-called 'unity list.' Alongside the ruling SED, which grew out of a forced merger of the SPD and the communist KPD in 1946, this unity list consisted of a number of civil associations and the so-called *Blockparteien*, parties that were nominally independent and allowed for the illusion of a multi-party democracy (Eley 2002). Following reunification, the East German branches of the CDU and FDP grew out of these *Blockparteien*, while the SPD was reconstituted as an independent party in 1990 (ibid.). *Bündnis 90* was formed as an alliance of newly founded parties of the civil rights movement and in 1993 merged with the West German *Die Grünen*, forming *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* (Patton 2017).

With the exception of *Bündnis 90*, these parties have largely been dominated by West Germans since German reunification (Grzymala-Busse 2002, Patton 2017). The CDU and SPD in particular have been quite successful in East German elections: with the exception of Bodo Ramelow of *Die Linke*, all East German Minister-Presidents since 1990 have come from either the CDU or the SPD. Yet, because the parties of the 'democratic center' have become associated with the relative deprivation of East Germans vis-à-vis West Germany, their position in the East German party system has changed, in some cases rather dramatically, in recent years.

For example, in the most recent elections for the state legislature in East German states, the CDU netted only 15.6% in Brandenburg in 2019 (Trimbach 2019), and received only 13.3% of the vote in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in 2021 (Beneicke 2021). The SPD fared even worse in state elections in Thuringia and Saxony in 2019, where the party received only 8.2% and 7.7% of the vote, respectively (Poppenhäger 2019, Schreck 2019). In the state elections in Saxony-Anhalt in 2021, the party received 8.4% of the vote (Dieckmann 2021). Sometimes described as the 'death of people's parties,' the decrease in popularity of these parties is linked to the rise of the AfD (Yoder 2020) and the tendency of East Germans to vote "resoundingly *against* each recently elected government in local and state elections" (Howard 2003, 141). Though centrist parties have long been able to win pluralities in elections and govern East German states, they are seen by many as inadequately representing East German interests, and have suffered significant losses to the AfD (Yoder 2020).

Finally, the status of *Die Linke* as the successor of the communist SED distinguishes the party from its competitors to this day. Shortly after the fall of communism, the SED rebranded itself and ran as PDS in the only free and fair *Volkskammer* elections in 1990. In reunified Germany, the party consistently received around 20% of the vote in East Germany, while it was virtually insignificant in the West (Grzymala-Busse 2002). Many of the party's voters supported the PDS because they were able

to identify themselves with it as a representative of East German interests. Like other communist successor parties, the PDS represented a newly generated "class of 'losers of the transition'" (ibid., 3), with 80% of its voters naming disenchantment "with the process and outcomes of reunification" (ibid., 274) as the primary motivation behind voting for the party.

During and following the *Hartz IV* welfare reforms enacted by the SPD-Greens coalition in the early 2000s, the PDS was able to position itself as a champion of the protest movement against these reforms. The party subsequently merged with the West German anti-*Hartz IV* association WASG and formed *Die Linke* in 2007, as which it operates to this day (Patton 2017). The merger resulted in a nationalization of *Die Linke*, as the party began gaining traction in West German constituencies as well. Still, *Die Linke* remains one of three established people's parties in the East, consistently placing second or third in most state elections (Yoder 2020). The populist style of *Die Linke* and the AfD is appealing to East German protest voters; however, *Die Linke* is less able to capitalize on its anti-establishment positions, as it is increasingly seen as an establishment party due to being represented in several East German state governments (ibid.).

Even today, more than thirty years after German reunification, economic, social, and political differences between East and West Germany prevail. East Germans are economically worse off than their Western counterparts, have different political attitudes, and meet Federal German institutions with more skepticism. *Ostalgie* is a prominent way for East Germans to express their postcommunist identity and remains a widespread phenomenon in society. The interplay of these dynamics, the recent rise of right-wing populism in East German politics, and the legacies of the communist past in contemporary East Germany more generally form the foundations of the main arguments of this thesis, which I lay out in the next section.

III

Theory

The question that lies at the core of this thesis is how the rhetoric of MdB reflects and responds to the previously described dynamics of alienation, *Ostalgie*, and the postcommunist identity in East Germany. Given their specific positionality within federal German politics as well as reunified German society more broadly, I expect East German MdB to exhibit significantly different sentiments towards East Germany and its communist past than their Western peers. Moreover, I postulate that MdBs' expressed sentiments are also influenced by their party identity, as political parties position themselves quite differently towards both the general electorate and their East German constituencies. In the following, I will explain the reasoning behind these propositions and specify the hypotheses underlying this research.

3.1 East German Identity and Sentiment

As established in the previous section, there are strong attachments to the East German identity in the region. East Germans tend to view their history in a more positive light than West Germans and hold different views on life in reunified Germany. Additionally, *Ostalgie* as a phenomenon is, by definition, innately East German. Prior research has shown that East German MdB are aware of the relevance of their regional identity; as Coffé and Reiser (2018) show, they tend to believe themselves to be

more capable of substantively representing East German interests than West German MdB. Given the salience of *Ostalgie* and the postcommunist East German identity more broadly, I believe it is reasonable to propose MdB from East Germany to significantly differ from their West German peers in their expressed sentiment towards East Germany and its history. Therefore, I propose the following hypothesis:

> **H_1: In comparison to their West German peers, MdB from East Germany express significantly more positive sentiments when referring to the GDR, its institutions, and East Germany as a region.**

One challenge that arises when attempting to provide evidence to support this hypothesis is the wide variety of definitions of East Germanness. For example, Pesthy et al. (2021) treat anyone who currently lives in East Germany as East German; however, the high number of politicians who were born and raised in West Germany and represent East German districts complicates such a categorization for the purposes of this thesis. To counter such challenges, several scholars conceptualize place of birth as a proxy for East Germanness. For instance, Coffé and Reiser (2018) define East Germanness primarily as determined by whether or not someone was born in East Germany. Stockemer and Elder (2015) specify another condition for classifying East Germanness, namely that an individual was not just born in East Germany, but born in the GDR. This specification is bolstered by Pop-Eleches and Tucker's (2017) finding that political attitudes of postcommunist citizens are influenced more so by living through communism rather than living in postcommunist societies. For the purposes of this thesis, I thus differentiate between three distinct groups of MdB: Those who were born in the GDR, those who were born in East Germany but not during communism, and finally those who were born in West Germany or abroad.

3.2 Party Identity and Sentiment

In addition to East Germanness, I also propose party identity as a relevant layer of analysis. As established in the previous section, the centrist, more established parties in Federal German politics are strongly connected to their West German constituencies but are not as trusted by (segments of) the East German electorate. The roots of this go back to reunification, after which the conservative coalition of CDU/CSU and FDP under Chancellor Kohl operationalized the *Treuhandanstalt* as a driver of the capitalist transition. The subsequent coalition of SPD and Greens under Chancellor Schröder, on the other hand, is associated mainly with its Hartz IV reforms, which disproportionately affected East Germans and were highly unpopular in the region. Tied into this dynamic as well are prevalent anti-elite and anti-establishment sentiments, which further contribute to the disconnect between East German voters and the political parties governing them (Yoder 2020).

Another factor that might lead to differences in parties' rhetorics is their membership base. Aside from *Die Linke*, most members of German parties are West German (Träger 2017), and there is reason to believe that MdB at least to some degree want to be responsive not only to their voters, but also to the party members nominating them to appear on ballots in the first place. In addition to their membership bases, ideology plays an important role as well. The CDU, CSU and FDP, all of which are rightist, free market-oriented parties, reject socialist ideas and can thus be expected to express more negative views of East Germany's communist past. The East German origins of the Greens lie in the civil rights movement opposing the GDR regime, while the SPD was forced to merge with the KPD despite the parties' rivalries reaching as far back as World War I. Thus, for ideological, political, and historical reasons, centrist parties in the German parliament have a tenuous relationship with the East German communist regime, and its MdB might feel strongly about not expressing positive sentiments towards East Germany's communist past. The parties' views of

their own history are tied also to the broader societal processes of creating historical memories outlined before. These are highly asymmetrical and emphasize West German viewpoints (Berdahl 1999).

Die Linke, in terms of its positionality vis-à-vis East Germany, is the polar opposite of the established parties of the 'democratic center.' As the successor to the SED, the party is historically and politically most firmly grounded in the region, though with a polarizing relationship to East German constituencies. During the postcommunist transition to liberal democracy, the PDS presented itself as an ally to the 'losers of reunification' (Grzymala-Busse 2002), and resisted the emerging narratives of the GDR as an *Unrechtsstaat* akin to the Third Reich (Prinz 2015). Its long-lasting isolation in the political arena (Grzymala-Busse 2002) enabled it to capitalize on East German anti-establishment and anti-elite sentiments, and with a membership base of largely East Germans, the party can credibly claim representativity of its East German constituents. Given the party's history, ideology, and its political focus on East German voters, I expect MdB from the PDS and *Die Linke* to exhibit significantly more positive sentiments towards East Germany and its communist history than the Western-dominated, established parties in the political center.

Finally, the emergence of the right-wing populist AfD in recent years has fundamentally transformed the East German political landscape. In many ways, the party's relationship to the East German electorate is contradictory. On one hand, the party was founded largely by West German academic elites, and its economic policies are influenced by ideologies of economic liberalism and austerity, which stand in contrast to the interventionist preferences of East Germans (Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln 2007). On the other hand, the party's repeated successes in East German states have given its East German branches more influence, both in personal and policy matters. Its representatives intentionally and effectively evoke the (East) German past in a manner that elicits emotional responses from voters, and the populist rhetoric resonates

among those East Germans who exhibit anti-establishment and anti-elite sentiments.

The party has a two-sided relationship with the East German past: on one hand, it mobilizes voters by likening contemporary, democratically elected Federal governments with the SED and Nazi regimes, and calls for the completion of the *Wende*, the transition out of socialism. On the other hand, the party's campaigns evoke sentiments of *Ostalgie* (Yoder 2020) and validate East Germans' sense of deprivation vis-à-vis West Germany. Further, the party's portrayal of East Germans as a homogeneous *Volk* can be seen as a legacy of the rhetoric of both the SED and the NSDAP. Given the AfD's unique positionality in the East German political landscape and its controversial relationship to the (East) German past, I expect MdB of the AfD to be more positive in their expressed sentiments towards the GDR and East Germany more broadly. Thus, I propose the following hypothesis:

H_2: In comparison to MdB from centrist parties, MdB of the AfD and PDS/*Die Linke* factions express significantly more positive sentiments when referring to the GDR, its institutions, and East Germany as a region.

IV

Data and Methodology

4.1 Data

The data I use for this analysis comes from the Open Discourse Dataverse, a collection of datasets put together by Richter et al. (2020). The datasets contain all speeches given in the German *Bundestag* since the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949 through May 7th, 2021, though I will only be analyzing those speeches given after the election for the 12th *Bundestag* in December of 1990. This subset of the dataset contains 192,010 speeches and other contributions (e.g. interjections, calls to order) given by 2,223 unique MdB. In addition to the content of each speech, the datasets also contain biographical information on the speaker, such as birthdate, gender, and birthplace.

The Open Discourse Dataverse does not contain all contemporary names and locations of cities. For instance, an MdB who was born in Kaliningrad/Königsberg before the end of World War II would be listed as a) born in Königsberg, and b) born in Germany. Additionally, some of the towns MdB were born in have since become incorporated into bigger cities: for example, the municipality of Gadderbaum was incorporated into the city of Bielefeld in 1972. In order to accurately match birthplaces with modern *Länder* inside and outside of East Germany, I thus also draw on a dataset from the German Federal Statistical Office containing contemporary city

names and corresponding information (Statistisches Bundesamt 2022).

I use the *SentiMerge* sentiment dictionary (Emerson and DeClerk 2014) to match individual words (or tokens) in speeches with a sentiment and polarity score. The authors of the *SentiMerge* dictionary created it as a merger of the four most widely used German sentiment dictionaries, namely *SentimentWortschatz*, *GermanSentiSpin*, *GermanPolarityClues*, and Clematide's and Kenner's unnamed sentiment lexicon published in *GermaNet*. Using a Bayesian probabilistic model, the authors combine polarity scores from the different lexica to produce *SentiMerge*. *SentiMerge* is shown to outperform all of the individual lexica it is based on, which is why I chose it (Emerson and DeClerk 2014).

4.2 Methodology

Given its central role in Germany's political system, the *Bundestag* and the behavior and rhetoric of its members are of great interest to political scientists. While policymaking in many ways occurs behind closed doors, for example in closed committee meetings or working groups, the regularly occurring plenary debates present opportunities for MdB to directly communicate with the public. These speeches have long been the subject of scholarly endeavors, but only recently did the rise of natural language processing (NLP) and text-as-data allow political scientists to gain empirical insights into MdB's rhetoric in parliamentary debates.

An early example is Debus' (2008) contribution, in which he uses a wordscore method to compare the frequency of words in a given text when compared to a baseline reference text, and finds that German political parties adopt different programmatic positions at the state versus federal levels. Joschko and Glaser (2019) took a different approach as they conducted a multiple correspondence analysis of a subset of *Bundestag* speeches related to the introduction of a women's quote in companies' boards of directors. Yet another approach is that of Geese (2019), who constructs

a structural topic model – an unsupervised learning method – to analyze speeches given in the 18th *Bundestag* (2013-2017), studying the rhetoric employed by MdB when talking about immigration, refugees, and asylum-seekers.

Generally speaking, most NLP methods used today can be classified as one of two categories. Unsupervised learning methods, like the one employed by Geese (2019), do not rely on reference texts, and instead use word clusters or collocation analyses to infer from the textual data categories that were previously unknown (Young and Soroka 2012). Supervised methods, on the other hand, involve the hand-coding of a set of reference texts to train a machine learning algorithm, which then classifies features in the broader data (Osnabrügge et al. 2021). There are drawbacks to both approaches. Unsupervised models make inferences about raw data without any prior training or human-coded reference texts, which can lead to inaccurate results. Supervised models, on the other hand, are costly to train, and their efficacy hinges on the quality of the reference texts and is susceptible to human error (Young and Soroka 2012). Thus, one should ideally manually analyze textual data wherever possible. Maier (2020) did so, as he conducted a manual content analysis of interjections made in German state parliaments, and in doing so drew on manual labor of research assistants. However, the cost of manual content analysis is high, and goes beyond the scope of a project like this one.

Dictionary-based approaches such as sentiment analysis are very similar to supervised learning methods, as they rely on previously defined dictionaries; however, their implementation is simpler, since they only require counting the frequency of keywords in a text and matching them with a sentiment score (Young and Soroka 2012). Sentiment analysis is commonly employed when analyzing parliamentary speeches. For instance, Rheault et al. (2016) analyze the emotional responses of British politicians when responding to economic recessions, and Proksch et al. (2019) conduct a multilingual sentiment analysis of several European parliaments to show that members

of parliament from the opposition exhibit significantly more negative rhetoric than government representatives.

In order to conduct a sentiment analysis of Bundestag speeches, I first extract those speeches containing specific keywords related to the GDR, East Germany, and the East German Länder, and keep the original dataset containing all speeches in order to allow for comparisons between overall and GDR- or East Germany-specific sentiment. After subsetting the data, I extract only the ten words surrounding each keyword. This keyword-in-context approach ensures that only tokens that likely stand in direct relation to a given keyword remain in the data frame. I perform the keyword-in-context extraction on three separate sets of keywords, leaving four data frames, three of which contain only the specific keywords and the surrounding tokens, and one of which contains all speeches and serves as a reference point. The following are the English translations of the three sets of keywords I use to subset the dataset (please refer to the appendix for the original wording):

> **GDR keywords:** GDR, G.D.R., German Democratic Republic, SED, S.E.D., Stasi, State Security, MfS (acronym for Ministry for State Security), Free German Youth, FDJ (acronym for Free German Youth), Workers-and-Peasants-State, Workers and Peasants State, Volkskammer (GDR legislature), National People's Army, NVA (acronym for National People's Army), Central Committee, People's Police
>
> **East Germany keywords:** East Germany, the East, New Federal Länder, New Länder, Ossi (derogatory term for East German), Ossis
>
> **East German *Länder* keywords:** Brandenburg, Thuringia, Saxony, Anhalt, Mecklenburg, Western Pomerania

After extracting the words surrounding each keyword, I tokenize each of the four data frames, so that each word (or token) is a standalone observation, and I remove

irrelevant stopwords. I then merge the resulting tokenized data frames with the *SentiMerge* sentiment dictionary, which results in a data frame in which each token is assigned both a sentiment and a polarity score. Only those tokens with matches in the sentiment dictionary are kept in the data frame; however, since the sentiment dictionary contains 99,701 unique words, this should not pose a detrimental challenge to the results of the analysis.

In the next step, I calculate both an absolute and a relative sentiment score per MdB and electoral term. The absolute score is calculated by grouping each data frame by MdB and electoral term, and then averaging the products of each token's sentiment and polarity scores. The resulting values represent each MdB's sentiment – either generally or keyword-specific – in a given electoral term. An MdB's relative sentiment score towards the GDR, East Germany, or the East German *Länder* is calculated by subtracting their general absolute sentiment score in a given term from their keyword-specific absolute sentiment score. A negative relative sentiment score indicates that an MdB in a given term was more negative in their rhetoric towards the keyword-clusters than their overall rhetoric in parliament, while a positive relative sentiment score indicates the opposite. This is done in order to account for differences in baseline sentiments among different MdB. For example, as mentioned before, MdB from the opposition tend to express more negative sentiments in speeches than MdB from the governing coalition (Proksch et al. 2019). Analyzing relative sentiment scores instead allows one to make conclusions about each MdB's GDR- or East Germany-specific rhetoric while accounting for potential confounding variables.

In order to analyze the differences in relative sentiment of MdB, I construct a linear regression model. The dependent variable of this model is each MdB's sentiment towards the GDR, East Germany, and the East German *Länder* relative to the overall sentiment expressed in their plenary speeches. The main independent variables are an MdB's birthplace and party identity, as well as the electoral term in which a speech

was delivered. Considering the two hypotheses specified in the previous section, I propose the following regression model:

$$Y_{\mathrm{i}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_{\mathrm{birthplace}} + \beta_2 x_{\mathrm{party}} + \beta_3 x_{\mathrm{term}} + \epsilon_{\mathrm{i}}$$

I want to end this section by providing a brief overview over breakdown of the number of speeches in each cluster by party and birthplace. The three sample groups, containing GDR-, East Germany-, and East German *Länder*-related keywords, consist of 7631, 5812, and 6834 speeches, respectively. Corresponding to the varying degrees of representation in parliament, a plurality of speeches was given by MdB of the largest parties, the CDU/CSU and SPD, in each of the three groups. Accordingly, the number of speeches given by MdB of smaller parties like the FDP and the Greens is lower.

Number of Speeches by Party and Cluster			
Party Name	GDR Cluster	East Germany Cluster	East German *Länder* Cluster
CDU/CSU	2468	1549	2209
SPD	1648	2022	1601
FDP	917	609	731
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	872	652	779
PDS/Die Linke	1516	940	1335
AfD	210	40	179
Total	7631	5812	6834

Table 4.1: Number of Speeches by Party and Cluster

The relatively high number of speeches in the samples given by MdB of the PDS/Die Linke factions is remarkable. Though in terms of electoral success the party is closer to the FDP or the Greens, the number of speeches given by its MdB that are included in the subsetted data frames is considerably higher than the other smaller parties represented in parliament, perhaps hinting at the party's self-perception as an East German *Volkspartei*. Finally, since the AfD only entered the *Bundestag* in 2017,

the number of speeches given by MdB of the party contained in the subsets is lower than that of MdB of other parties. Considering that the party was only represented in the *Bundestag* for one of the eight terms, the number of speeches given by MdB of the AfD making reference to the GDR, in particular, seems relatively high at 210. Please refer to Table 4.1 for a detailed breakdown of the number of speeches by party.

Analyzing the distribution of relevant speeches by MdB's birthplaces, one can see that a majority of speeches in each of the three clusters was given by MdB born outside of East Germany. This reflects the asymmetrical nature of federal German discourses surrounding East Germany and its history discussed earlier, and in itself presents an interesting finding. Overall, each grouping of MdB is well-represented in each of the clusters, allowing for meaningful statistical analysis. Please refer to Table 4.2 for a detailed breakdown of the number of speeches by birthplace.

Number of Speeches by Birthplace and Cluster			
Birthplace	GDR Cluster	East Germany Cluster	East German *Länder* Cluster
GDR	2000	1851	2336
East Germany (not GDR)	686	415	361
West Germany and Abroad	4945	3546	4137
Total	7631	5812	6834

Table 4.2: Number of Speeches by Birthplace and Cluster

V

Results and Discussion

Before discussing the results of the linear regression model, I examine some summary statistics. Table 5.1 provides an overview over the distribution of relative sentiment scores per sample. The number of observations – i.e. average relative sentiment scores per MdB and electoral term – ranges from 1698 (East Germany cluster) to 2330 (East German *Länder* cluster). Note that, because the AfD only entered the *Bundestag* in 2017, the number of observations for AfD MdB is lower than those of other parties who have been represented in the *Bundestag* since at least 1990. Relative sentiment scores have been normalized and follow a Gaussian distribution.

Examining average relative sentiment scores per party, one can see that consistently in all three clusters, MdB of the CDU/CSU faction exhibit the most negative average relative sentiment scores. In the GDR cluster, the most positive average relative sentiment score is that of AfD MdB, while both in the East Germany and East German *Länder* clusters, MdB of PDS/*Die Linke* exhibit the most positive average relative sentiment scores. Noteworthy, also, is that MdB of the AfD, PDS/*Die Linke*, and the Greens in all three clusters exhibit average relative sentiment scores meaningfully above 0, while MdB of the CDU/CSU, SPD, and FDP factions almost exclusively exhibit negative average relative sentiment scores.

Distribution of Relative Sentiment Scores per Cluster					
	Obs	Mean	SD	Min	Max
GDR Cluster Total	2031	0	1.35	-7.42	8.07
CDU/CSU	831	-0.29	1.35	-7.42	8.07
SPD	535	0.06	1.34	-6.62	4.5
FDP	237	-0.22	1.17	-4.24	3.95
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	161	0.46	1.41	-5.02	7.57
PDS/Die Linke	205	0.69	1.14	-5.94	4.61
AfD	62	0.74	1.03	-1.16	3.51
Born in GDR	401	-0.02	1.21	-4.63	4.61
Born in East Germany	124	0.01	1.4	-5.94	5.11
Born in West Germany/Abroad	1506	0	1.38	-7.42	8.07
East Germany Cluster Total	1698	0	1.32	-9.88	6.03
CDU/CSU	585	-0.22	1.36	-9.88	6.03
SPD	588	-0.06	1.31	-5.97	4.22
FDP	185	-0.13	1.15	-6.12	2.83
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	147	0.43	1.18	-3.28	4.95
PDS/Die Linke	174	0.71	1.1	-3.39	4.26
AfD	19	0.29	1.58	-3.61	4.72
Born in GDR	373	0.02	1.18	-7.58	4.26
Born in East Germany	104	-0.05	1.24	-3.77	4.07
Born in West Germany/Abroad	1221	0	1.37	-9.88	6.03
E.G. *Länder* Cluster Total	2330	0	1.35	-8.06	9.98
CDU/CSU	853	-0.21	1.34	-7.63	6.1
SPD	679	-0.16	1.4	-7.88	9.97
FDP	247	-0.04	1.25	-5.99	6.75
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	242	0.3	1.26	-8.06	3.01
PDS/Die Linke	255	0.75	1.11	-3.6	5.52
AfD	54	0.64	1.11	-1.49	4.2
Born in GDR	461	-0.04	1.09	-5.99	2.87
Born in East Germany	112	0.11	1.16	-3.57	2.87
Born in West Germany/Abroad	1757	0	1.42	-8.06	9.98
Note: Relative Sentiment is calculated per MdB and Electoral Term					

Table 5.1: Summary Statistics: Distribution of Relative Sentiment Scores

The distribution of average relative sentiment scores by birthplace appears more homogeneous than the distribution along party lines. For all clusters, the average relative sentiment scores per birthplace are within 0.05 points from 0; the only exception is the average relative sentiment towards East German *Länder* of MdB who were born in East Germany at an average relative sentiment score of 0.11. Moreover, for all three clusters, more than 70% of observations stem from MdB born in West Germany or abroad, hinting at the dominance of West German voices surrounding discourses about East Germany and its communist past.

Table 5.2 displays the results of the regression analysis. The intercept serves as a reference category and includes the established centrist parties grouped together, MdB born in West Germany or abroad, and the 12th *Bundestag* (1990-1994) as an electoral term. Regarding H_1, the linear regression table shows almost no significant effect of birthplace on MdBs' rhetoric towards East Germany or the GDR. The only statistically significant finding is that MdB who were born in the GDR seem to exhibit significantly more negative sentiments towards East German *Länder* than MdB born in West Germany or abroad.

This negative association contradicts the expectation that MdB born in the GDR would hold more positive views of East Germany; however, at a correlation coefficient of -0.186, the effect is not particularly large when compared to the sample's standard deviation of 1.35. Nevertheless, the absence of a positive association between MdB being born in East Germany and positive relative sentiment towards East Germany and the GDR is an interesting finding in itself. It suggests that claims of underrepresentation made by alienated East Germans – particularly those who exhibit high levels of *Ostalgie* – are valid. It also allows for a more nuanced understanding of the different manifestations of political alienation many East Germans lament.

	GDR Cluster	East Germany Cluster	East German *Länder* Cluster
(Intercept)	0.167** (0.059)	0.077 (0.058)	0.382*** (0.07)
PDS/Die Linke	0.949*** (0.108)	0.94*** (0.11)	1.064*** (0.095)
AfD	1.349*** (0.165)	0.835* (0.375)	1.204*** (0.165)
Born in GDR	-0.077 (0.08)	0.011 (0.077)	-0.186** (0.07)
Born in East Germany	-0.24 (0.136)	-0.213 (0.14)	-0.254 (0.137)
Observations	2031	1698	2330
Notes: The dependent variable is relative sentiment, computed per MdB and electoral term. Coefficient estimates are reported alongside significance levels, with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors that correct for clustering by MdB in parentheses. Electoral term is controlled for in the regression model but not reported. Omitted categories include Mainstream Parties and Born in West Germany/Abroad. Significance levels: * $\leq$ 0.05, ** $\leq$ 0.01, *** $\leq$ 0.001			

Table 5.2: Effect of Party Type and Birthplace on Relative Sentiment

Ultimately, this finding might indicate that the rhetoric of East German MdB is informed by their own lived experience more so than the lived experiences of their constituents. After all, while the 'losers of the reunification' are generally thought of as suffering from socioeconomic challenges that arose after reunification, East German MdB largely gained their status as political elites only after the fall of communism. While their constituents experience heightened relative deprivation vis-à-vis West Germans, East German MdB – by virtue of being elected to the Bundestag in the first place – can hardly be seen as 'losers of the reunification' themselves.

Table 5.2 also indicates that there are significant differences in how MdB of different parties refer to East Germany and the GDR in parliamentary speeches. At correlation coefficients close to or greater than 1 (relative to sample standard deviations of roughly 1.35) for all three clusters, MdB of PDS/*Die Linke* exhibit a rhetoric towards the GDR and East Germany that is significantly more positive than that of

the more established, centrist parties in the German *Bundestag*. Relatedly, MdB of the AfD, too, appear much more positive in their expressed relative sentiment than MdB of the mainstream parties. At correlation coefficients of 1.349 and 1.204 for the GDR and East German *Länder* clusters, respectively, the relative sentiment of the AfD's MdB exceeds the average relative sentiment of *Bundestag* members by almost an entire standard deviation. Regarding the East Germany cluster, MdB of the AfD faction are also significantly more positive than those of the mainstream parties, but the effect of the relationship is less substantial.

Table 5.3, too, displays results of the regression analysis; however, instead of grouping together all centrist parties, each party is treated as a separate predictor. The intercept contains, as a reference category, observations for MdB of the PDS/*Die Linke* faction, MdB born in West Germany or abroad, and the 12th *Bundestag* (1990-1994). Similar to the findings in Table 5.2, there are largely no significant differences in expressed sentiment based on MdBs' birthplace, except for a significant negative association between MdB being born in the GDR and their expressed sentiment towards East German *Länder*.

	GDR Cluster	East Germany Cluster	East German *Länder* Cluster
(Intercept)	1.162*** (0.118)	1.076*** (0.123)	1.5*** (0.116)
CDU/CSU	-1.128*** (0.115)	-1.083*** (0.119)	-1.156*** (0.102)
SPD	-0.831*** (0.117)	-0.946*** (0.119)	-1.160*** (0.104)
FDP	-1.07*** (0.133)	-1.030*** (0.134)	-1.043*** (0.12)
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	-0.312* (0.159)	-0.369** (0.143)	-0.56*** (0.121)
AfD	0.38* (0.19)	-0.092 (0.385)	0.139 (0.184)
Born in GDR	-0.094 (0.079)	0.008 (0.078)	-0.172* (0.068)
Born in East Germany	-0.224 (0.14)	-0.199 (0.133)	-0.239 (0.135)
Observations	2031	1698	2330

Notes: The dependent variable is relative sentiment, computed per MdB and electoral term. Coefficient estimates are reported alongside significance levels, with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors that correct for clustering by MdB in parentheses. Electoral term is controlled for in the regression model but not reported. Omitted categories include PDS/Die Linke and Born in West Germany/Abroad. Significance levels: * $\leq$ 0.05, ** $\leq$ 0.01, *** $\leq$ 0.001

Table 5.3: Effect of Party and Birthplace on Relative Sentiment

Regarding H_2, Table 5.3 allows for a more detailed analysis of the different parties' attitudes towards East Germany and the GDR. When compared to the observations for MdB from PDS/*Die Linke*, one can see that MdB of the CDU/CSU, FDP, and SPD factions, throughout all three clusters, exhibit a much more negative rhetoric towards East Germany and the GDR. MdB of the Greens, too, exhibit significantly more negative sentiments towards the GDR and East Germany when compared to the intercept, albeit at a much lesser degree than the MdB of the other mainstream parties. Finally, MdB of the AfD faction display even more positive attitudes towards the GDR when compared to representatives of the postcommunist PDS/*Die Linke*. In the East Germany and East German *Länder* clusters, the rhetoric of the AfD representatives is slightly more negative than that of their peers from PDS/*Die Linke*, though not at statistically significant levels.

The uncovered party-level differences in relative sentiment towards East Germany and the GDR confirm H_2 to be true. The implications thereof are manifold, though they should not come as a complete surprise. After all, it has been established by many scholars that narratives surrounding the GDR and East Germany post-reunification have been heavily dominated by West German voices (e.g. Berdahl 1999). Since plenary speeches in the *Bundestag* constitute a major outlet for elected officials to shape such discursive narratives, the finding that established West German parties are significantly more negative in their rhetoric towards the GDR and East Germany is consistent with existing scholarship.

Conversely, the finding that representatives of the PDS and later *Die Linke* exhibit a highly positive rhetoric towards both the GDR and East Germany more broadly is coherent with previous qualitative assessments of the party's extra-parliamentary rhetoric as well (e.g. Prinz 2015, Doerschler 2015). As the successor to the communist ruling party, casting the region's communist past in a more favorable light not only allows the party to capitalize on widespread notions of *Ostalgie*, but it also enables its members to downplay or deny any past wrongdoings.

Considering the relatively less negative rhetoric of MdB of *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* alongside the positive expressed sentiments of MdB from PDS/*Die Linke*, it also appears as though the parties that have evolved from East German predecessors rather than having been imported from the West exhibit a more positive rhetoric towards the GDR. This finding is surprising, especially given *Bündnis 90*'s origins in the East German civil rights movement. It might indicate that, despite its roots in the opposition, authentically East German parties like *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* may be more attune to the sentiments of *Ostalgie* that are prevalent in the region.

Regarding the rhetoric of MdB from the AfD faction, the regression analysis underscores the contradictory nature of the party's messaging vis-à-vis East Germany and the GDR. On one hand, the party frequently calls for a completion of the *Wende*,

as it accuses the current government of continuing the communist legacy of the SED. On the other hand, the party's rhetoric towards the GDR appears even more positive than that of the PDS and *Die Linke*. Notwithstanding its calls to overcome socialism, this indicates that the party's representatives see merit in expressing positive views towards the GDR and evoking sentiments of *Ostalgie*.

The results of the study also carry important implications for the scholarly understanding of the relationship between representivity and the appeal of populist parties in postcommunist East Germany. In substantive terms, there are important differences between the preferences of East Germans (e.g. interventionist economic policies), and the AfD's platform (e.g. calls for more austerity). Yet, the AfD claims to be the 'true representative' of the East German people; the party's positive rhetoric towards the GDR and East Germany can thus be seen as a claim to symbolically represent the East German electorate. The continued electoral success of the party seems to suggest that large shares of voters accept this representative claim. Moreover, through their positive rhetoric, MdB of both the AfD and the PDS/*Die Linke* can be seen as surrogate representatives of East German 'losers of the reunification,' representing surrogate constituents in and outside of their own electoral districts.

VI

Conclusion

Through a sentiment analysis of all relevant *Bundestag* speeches given between 1990 and 2021, this paper finds that there are significant differences in how MdB of different parties refer to East Germany and its communist past in their speeches in parliament, while an MdB's place of birth has little to no effect on their expressed sentiments towards the region. The established parties of the 'democratic center' appear more negative in their expressed sentiment, while MdB of both the communist successor party PDS/*Die Linke* and the right-wing populist AfD are strikingly positive in their rhetoric towards the GDR and East Germany.

Given the prominence of *Ostalgie* as well as the salience of the postcommunist East German identity to East German citizens, these results are indicative of the disconnect between segments of the East German population and their elected representatives. Even thirty years after reunification, *Ostalgie* remains a potent force in the East German polity, and exists in part because the *Bundestag* has thus far failed to resolve persisting inequalities between East and West Germany. By exhibiting a more positive rhetoric towards both the GDR and East Germany as a region in plenary debates, MdB of the AfD and PDS/*Die Linke* are able to present themselves as more representative of those East Germans who feel alienated from social and political life in East Germany and yearn for the socialist past.

The sustained success of the communist successor party PDS/*Die Linke* is puzzling to many outside observers of East German politics. To this day, *Die Linke* remains much more popular in East Germany than in the West. The results of this study suggest that the communist successor party does indeed view itself as representative of those East Germans alienated by life in reunified Germany who feel strongly about their East German identity and yearn for the socialist past. It becomes evident that *Die Linke* may appeal to such voters not merely as the successor to the communist SED, but also through its rhetoric towards the GDR and East Germany in the *Bundestag*.

The study also has important implications for the understanding of extremist politics in postcommunist East Germany. The popularity of the AfD and other right-wing populist movements is often seen exclusively as a product of widespread xenophobia among the East German electorate. The results of this study complicate such assessments. The AfD and similar actors do not only mobilize voters by rallying against different out-groups, but also by emphasizing the similarities between themselves and other members of the in-group, namely East Germans. By exhibiting *Ostalgie* in the political arena, MdB of the AfD validate their constituents feelings of alienation and deprivation. As a result, the AfD has established itself as a new East German *Volkspartei* in part by filling a vacuum created by established political parties.

In the established literature, East German voters are often seen as protest voters whose primary motivation is voting against 'the establishment' (e.g. Howard 2003, Patton 2017). In light of the results of this study, such assessments seem too simplistic, especially considering the complicated relationship the established German political parties have with East Germany as a region and its communist past. Future research should thus examine how parties' rhetoric surrounding the GDR and East Germany is received by voters. Moreover, it is important to understand how potent of a mobilizing factor sentiments of *Ostalgie* and feelings of alienation are to East German voters.

Finally, there are many more ways in which natural language processing can be applied to the study of German politics. For example, it would be interesting to conduct a similar sentiment analysis not of speeches given in the *Bundestag*, but perhaps speeches given in state parliaments or on the campaign trail. Furthermore, one could employ a supervised learning model to understand differences between representatives' rhetoric in state or federal parliaments and their parties' platforms. Relatedly, one could employ unsupervised methods to reveal previously undiscovered patterns in such large bodies of textual data.

Thirty years after reunification, significant differences between East and West Germany prevail and affect the political sphere in Europe's largest democracy. Sentiments of *Ostalgie* contribute to a potent postcommunist East German identity through which many express their dissatisfaction with liberal democracy. Though this paper contributes to the existing scholarship on the politics of postcommunist East Germany, substantial work remains to be done. Only if we understand the mechanisms of its continued existence can we overcome the 'wall in our heads.'

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

German Keywords

The following is a list of German keywords used to locate and isolate GDR-, East Germany- and East German *Länder*-specific expressions in the dataset.

GDR keywords: DDR, D.D.R., Deutsche Demokratische Republik, SED, S.E.D., Stasi, Staatssicherheit, MfS, FDJ, Freie Deutsche Jugend, Arbeiter-und-Bauern-Staat, Arbeiter und Bauern Staat, Volkskammer, Nationale Volksarmee, NVA, Zentralkomitee, Volkspolizei

East Germany keywords: Neue Bundesländer, Neue Länder, Neuen Ländern, Ostdeutschland, der Osten, dem Osten, Ossi, Ossis

East German *Länder* keywords: Brandenburg, Thüringen, Sachsen, Anhalt, Mecklenburg, Vorpommern

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