

WIEDERVEREINIGUNG ODER ANSCHLUSS?

The Effects of Reunification in Former East Germany

This paper examines the structural changes in East German institutions that occurred in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the years following German Reunification and how they represented a western “takeover” rather than a honest East-West integration. We delve into the long-term impacts of these changes. Finally, we conclude that such West German policies had a detrimental effect on eastern Germany today.

By Wenhao (Winston) Du '19
Vanderbilt University



Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989)

Source: Raphaël Thiérmard (Flickr Creative Commons)

In recent German history, the period marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) is known by historians as *Die Wende*, or “the change.” The word “change,” however, is not necessarily imbued with good connotations. While many believe the crowning achievement of *Die Wende*, one Germany in Europe, to be unequivocally good, some citizens of the former GDR would disagree. Recently, east German politician Matthias Platzeck went so far as to label German reunification not as a “reunification,” but rather as an “*Anschluss*,” or annexation of East Germany by West Germany.¹ It was certainly controversial and arguably extreme to reference Hitler’s annexation of Austria in 1938. However, there is some truth to this statement. In many ways, German Reunification did lead to symbolic “takeovers” of East German institutions, from political to economic, by West German values.

“ARTICLE 23. KEIN ANSCHLUSS UNTER DIESER NUMMER”

Mr. Platzeck’s choice of words was hardly a new complaint. In the run-up to the historic 1990 free elections in the GDR, the *Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus* (PDS; legal successor of the former ruling communist party, the SED) widely distributed election posters, some with pictures of a telephone, captioned “Article 23, no annexation under this number.”² (This was meant to be witty wordplay: the German

word for annexation, *Anschluss*, also translates to “telephone connection.”) For the states of the GDR, reunification under Article 23 of West Germany’s Basic Law meant immediately adopting the entirety of West Germany’s constitution and legal system, abandoning all East German legal theory and precedent.³ Such a method of reunification was somewhat alarming, especially in light of the more amiable alternative allowed by Article 146 (which would have allowed the reunification process to draft a new, integrated constitution for all of Germany).⁴ Fearing the impending takeover that Article 23 represented, the PDS promised, if elected, to block any such attempt.

On a deeper level however, the PDS’s campaign slogan also represented a critique of the dynamics of the election itself. Most of the campaigning during the election was done not by East German candidates, but rather by West German interlopers. West German political parties such as the Christian Democratic Union (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands*, CDU), the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, or SPD), and the Free Democratic Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei*, FDP) “sent in all their big guns: Chancellor Kohl, former chancellors Brandt and Schmidt.”⁵ Throughout the GDR, “the complaint went up ... that the democratic renewal in the country was being hijacked by the seasoned politicians from the west.”⁶ Evidently, political power in the East was to be transferred quickly into hands of west Germans. This is confirmed by the result of these elections, which was a landslide victory for the Alliance for Germany (a coalition led by the CDU calling for speedy reunification). The new government promptly implemented the very thing PDS supporters had feared: a process of reunification under Article 23.

“SYSTEM-IMMANENT”

After reunification, former East German political and bureaucratic institutions were usually completely uprooted or radically restructured according to Western models. The signs of a takeover are quite apparent: most individuals who had been working for East German public institutions until October 1990 lost their jobs or were demoted.⁷ These newly “vacant” high-level political and bureaucratic positions were then redistributed to a significant number of West German administrators. Originally meant to be temporary, these



The Monday Demonstrations in Leipzig, Germany (1989)
Source: Friedrich Gahlbeck (German Federal Archives)

West German bureaucrats became, in a sense, permanent occupiers after politicians later decided it necessary to keep them in the East. It had been determined that East Germany would depend on outside professional expertise “for a very long time.” West German politicians hoped that by staying in the east, these elite administrators would develop more empathy for the people and local conditions.⁸

For East Germans at the time, this unprecedented level of systematic takeover (and simultaneous alienation of the old bureaucrats) was rather uncalled for. Many felt its political expediency to be a slap in the face. As former GDR foreign intelligence chief Markus Wolf dryly notes in his autobiography, “Eastern diplomats [who had negotiated reunification] lost their jobs because they were, in the new jargon, ‘system-immanent,’ while the [very] Western diplomats with whom they had until recently held negotiations moved on up the career ladder.”⁹ Simply, everything about east Germany had to be “westernized.” Old GDR document troves such as the Stasi files offered a “reservoir” of legal options for Westerners to disqualify, as well as sometimes criminalize, any of the old elite considered to be “expendable.”¹⁰ This was experienced first-hand by Markus Wolf, who found it ironic that he was the one prosecuted when “there had been no judicially relevant difference between the activities of the East and West German intelligence services.”¹¹

With so many *Wessies* occupying the upper echelons of their government, it is no wonder that “the majority of East Germans feel less and less at home in the Federal Republic in a political sense.”¹² East Germans began increasingly opting out of civic life and processes of political participation. Such alienation, as historian Jürgen Thomanek argues, has over the years threatened democracy in the East. It is a sign that the people do not view the new government as legitimate. Just one month before elections for various administrative

positions in 1993, for example, there were no candidates for 300 positions of mayor in the towns and village of Brandenburg.¹³

Perhaps one of the greatest scars of east-west inequality from the reunification process can be found in the incorporation of the militaries of the two former German states. The GDR’s National People’s Army (NVA) “had a reputation of being the second best equipped and trained armed force in the communist bloc.”¹⁴ With national fervor from reunification running high, along with an acute need by the West German Bundeswehr for more recruits (it “struggled” to meet its recruiting goals), former NVA soldiers expected to be welcome into the unified Bundeswehr with open arms.¹⁵ However, the opposite was true. Most former NVA officers had their ranks “reduced by one or two levels.”¹⁶ All East German soldiers were classified as those who “served in a foreign army” until 2005, and even today are not fully considered “German soldiers.”¹⁷ They have no military funeral honors.¹⁸ One former NVA artillery colonel summed up his frustrations succinctly in an interview: “I feel like a second-class person.”¹⁹

CHANGES TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

During reunification, a common education commission was established to “supervise the unification of the two education systems.” However, instead of creating unified standards and curricula for both German States, the commission was more concerned with adjusting the eastern education system to western standards. The election of the CDU “ensured that the most significant change to the education system would be the importation of federal West German structures.”²⁰ Experts from the old federal states (West Germany) were appointed to serve at former East German education ministries, while professors from West Germany were nominated heads of newly created or restructured east German university departments. This meant power over German academic institutions now lay squarely in the hands of West Germans.

The breadth and depth of these transformations suggest, whether good or bad, that reunification was going to entail a full promulgation of West German academic standards rather than just an integration. By 1994, over 13,000 positions at universities in east Germany had been liquidated, and 20,000 more people (including 5,000 professors) had lost their jobs. Many teachers and academics were fired “despite the fact that they had proven professional qualifications.”²¹ The popular movie *Goodbye Lenin!* portrays the plight of such academics through the fictional Dr. Klappath, a “former principal and highly respected teacher,” who, unemployed, drinks his troubles away.²² Even positive aspects of East German education, completely separate from communism ideology, such as small class sizes, were changed to fit West German standards: there was an extensive focus on adjusting “teacher-student proportions to West German standards” (each teacher in East Germany had proportionally less students than in West Germany).²³

ECONOMIC PROBLEMS: “40 YEARS FOR THIS?”

The most pronounced takeover by the west was perhaps economic. In a scene from *Goodbye Lenin!*, the protagonist looks for GDR-era Spreewald pickles at his local corner store, which had overnight “turned into a gaudy consumer paradise” in which the consumer “was king.”²⁴ He, like many others during the period, is unable to find any. After 1990, products in the GDR had been quickly replaced “by western alternatives more attractive to the population,” a development of great detriment to East German consumer industries.²⁵ Even the old East German currency itself was replaced by its western alternative: the Deutsche Mark. A popular, but economically disastrous, 1:1 monetary exchange rate between the currencies had been instituted, resulting in former East Germany being rendered “completely uncompetitive,” according to the former president of Germany’s central *Bundesbank* Otto von Pöhl.²⁶ To make things worse, unions in the East strove to close east-west wage differentials, leading wages to rise from 30% of western levels to 40% of western levels in just 1990.²⁷ Such a drastic wage hike only served to intensify the shock of the currency alignment in summer 1990 that precipitated a lengthy recession.

Discussions of economic policy during reunification were often incredibly lopsided. Due to the “confusing times” of political transformation in the GDR, eastern industry interest groups were “truly poorly organized” compared to their West German counterparts. As a result, the *Treuhandanstalt*, an agency which had been tasked with privatizing the former GDR state-owned companies, was given policy directives “that represented Western interests.”²⁸ This meant it often sold its interests off at bargain prices. The West Ger-



Steelworkers protest in front Treuhandanstalt (1990)

Source: Klaus Franke (German Federal Archives)

plant down not long after. The *Treuhandanstalt*, as it turns out, had not built the “smallest security” into the sale contract for the plant. “No promise from Krupp was enforceable,” German magazine *Der Spiegel* reported.³¹ Such results led to much anger among East German: in one instance unionized steelworkers rallied outside of the *Treuhandanstalt*’s Berlin office, holding a banner that asked: “How much further will the *Treuhand* playing with our jobs/workplaces?”³²

At the same time, east German attempts at business creation had unusual “difficulty in the face of experienced west German competition.”³³ The result of this was the loss of “millions of jobs in industry and agriculture” and deindustrialization of seventy percent, a scale which “didn’t happen anywhere

“Former East German political and bureaucratic institutions were usually completely uprooted or radically restructured according to Western models.”

man insurance company Allianz, for example, was able to “preempt its competitors” when it bought 49 percent of the former state insurance system. Nearly half the state-owned gas monopoly was sold to Ruhrgas AG.²⁹ Businesses which the *Treuhandanstalt* could not sell were liquidated.

For most struggling East German businesses, West German ownership was hardly a helping hand. Investors were “often less interested in keeping businesses running than neutralizing their remaining potential for competition and getting hold of their customers and real estate.”³⁰ In other words, taking over a business came first, responsibility for it came second. Often this meant factory closings. In one case, the West German steel giant Krupp acquired, with “brazen business acumen,” a competitive steel mill in east Germany. It shut the

else in Eastern Europe after the Wende.”³⁴ By comparison, not even post-WWII Germany had seen such decreases in industrial production.³⁵ East German industry was simply overrun by that of West Germany. Meanwhile, some west Germans “earned themselves silly from unification in this manner: banks and industrialists, insurance companies, realtors, lawyers, and notaries.”³⁶

The effects of deindustrialization and economic depression are quite apparent. Unemployment in former East Germany rose steadily from 10.2% in 1991 to a staggering 20.6% in 2005, compared to a mere 4.8% rise in western Germany.³⁷ Economic indicators were bad across the board. As Markus Wolf comments in his autobiography: “life in a reunified Germany has proven less glamorous than expected—work

Wiedervereinigung oder Anschluss?



A Reunification Sculpture, by Hildegard Leest (1962)

Source: Beek100 (Wikimedia Commons)

erize it with the pronoun “they” (Sie in German) and felt it had taken over all they held dear. In a later scene of *Goodbye Lenin!*, venting neighbors moan their economic problems in disbelief: “40 years for this?”⁴⁰

RESTITUTION BEFORE COMPENSATION

Some East Germans found no economic respite even in their own homes. For many, the new “Restitution before Compensation” policy could have very well represented literal annexation on a property-by-property basis. Described as a “legislator-organized East-West real estate war” by its opponents, this new policy tried to sort through successive

waves of property confiscations that had occurred in the old GDR (sometimes by the GDR state itself) on western legal grounds.⁴¹ One of its results was that a significant number of west Germans who had left the GDR decades ago were able to successfully reclaim their former homes, driving out long-time east German residents in the process. During the 1990s, claims under this policy by west Germans threatened the homes of some five million east Germans.⁴² As *Der Spiegel* reported in 1992, in East Berlin alone there were more than 110,000 restitution applications.⁴³ The results of the policy were appalling. In tiny Berlin suburb Kleinmachnow, 8,000 of the 11,000 residents were forced to leave their homes after unification. Nationwide, almost 4 million of East Germany’s 17 million population were eventually displaced.⁴⁴ Such drastic loss of property (and with it a sense of security) exacerbated economic uncertainties for a number of east Germans.

CONCLUSION

Strictly by definition, the reunification process was not an annexation of East Germany by West Germany. No military force was involved, and many in the East are still, with some reservations, quite happy to be part of one unified Germany. However, it is irrefutable that reunification came with significant degrees of westernization in many institutions of the old GDR, whether political, military, academic, economic, or legal. Moreover, it came at a serious cost, whether physical or psychological, to East Germans. Many continue to feel a sense of “second-class citizenship” in their “new” country.⁴⁵ While slowly healing, the scars of reunification, or *Wiedervereinigung*, will certainly continue to persist in German society for decades to come. 🏛️

Endnotes

- [1] "Reunification Controversy: Was East Germany Really 'Annexed?'" *Der Spiegel*, August 31, 2010; N.B.: Throughout this paper, I will use East Germany when referring to pre-unification institutions and east Germany for groups post-unification and may still be geographically split today.
- [2] "Art. 23. Kein Anschluss unter dieser Nummer," *German History in Documents and Images, Documents* (1989-2009), 2.9; Jonathan Osmond and Rachel Alsop, *German Reunification: A Reference Guide and Commentary* (Detroit: Gale Group, 1992), 58.
- [3] According to the translation approved by the Allied High Commission: "Article 23. For the time being, this Basic Law applies in the territory of the Länder Baden, Bavaria, Bremen, Greater Berlin, Hamburg, Hesse, Lower-Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate, Schleswig-Holstein, Württemberg-Baden and Württemberg-Hohenzollern. In other parts of Germany it is to be put into force on their accession," *German History in Documents and Images, Documents* (1945-1961), 4.5.
- [4] According to the translation approved by the Allied High Commission: "Article 146. This Basic Law ceases to be in force on the day on which a Constitution adopted by a free decision of the German people comes into force." *German History in Documents and Images, Documents* (1945-1961), 4.5.
- [5] Osmond and Alsop, *German Reunification*, 58.
- [6] *Ibid*, 58.
- [7] Marta Zazilska-Florczuk and Artur Ciechanowicz, "One country, two societies? Germany twenty years after reunification," *OSW Studies* 35 (2011), 35.
- [8] Jean-Claude Garcia-Zamor, "The Bureaucratic Transition of the Former East Germany From Socialism to Market Economy," *Journal of Contemporary Management* 3 (2014), 3.
- [9] Markus Wolf and Anne McElvoy, *Man Without A Face: The Autobiography of Communism's Greatest Spymaster* (New York: Public Affairs, 1997), 378.
- [10] Petra Bock and Edgar Wolfrum, *Umkämpfte Vergangenheit: Geschichtsbilder, Erinnerung und Vergangenheitspolitik im internationalen Vergleich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 98.
- [11] Wolf and McElvoy, *Man Without A Face*, 374.
- [12] *German History in Documents and Images, Documents* (1989-2009), 3.9.
- [13] John McKenzie and Derek Lewis, *The New Germany: Social, Political and Cultural Challenges of Unification* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995), 29.
- [14] Zazilska-Florczuk and Ciechanowicz, "One country, two societies?," 36-37.
- [15] Eric Solsten, "Germany: A country study." *Library of Congress, Federal Research Division*, 1995, 496-497.
- [16] *Ibid*.
- [17] Andrew Bickford, *Fallen Elites: The Military Other in Post-Unification Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 120.
- [18] Zazilska-Florczuk and Ciechanowicz, "One country, two societies?," 37.
- [19] Bickford, *Fallen Elites*, 120.
- [20] John McKenzie and Derek Lewis, *The New Germany*, 151.
- [21] *German History in Documents and Images, Documents* (1989-2009), 13.10.
- [22] *Goodbye Lenin!*, directed by Wolfgang Becker (2003; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Classics, 2004). DVD.
- [23] Zazilska-Florczuk and Ciechanowicz, "One country, two societies?," 36.
- [24] *Goodbye Lenin!*
- [25] Osmond and Alsop, *German Reunification*, 73.
- [26] *Ibid*, 168.
- [27] John McKenzie and Derek Lewis, *The New Germany*, 140.
- [28] *German History in Documents and Images, Documents* (1989-2009), 5.9.
- [29] Osmond and Alsop, *German Reunification*, 79.
- [30] Alexander Hagelüken, "The great sell-off," *German Times*. October 2014.
- [31] *Der Spiegel*, "Wie nach einem Unfall". May 5, 1993.
- [32] Klaus Franke, "Wie weit treibt die Treuhand das Spiel mit unseren Arbeitsplätzen?," *Das Bundesarchiv Deutschlands, Bild* 183-1990-1219-006 (December 1990).
- [33] Osmond and Alsop, *German Reunification*, 79.
- [34] *German History in Documents and Images, Documents* (1989-2009), 5.9.
- [35] Tamás Vonyó, "The wartime origins of the Wirtschaftswunder: The growth of West German industry, 1938-55" *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 55 (2014), 19; See Table 2, Total Industry section. Output for 1948 was about half of that of 1938.
- [36] *German History in Documents and Images, Documents* (1989-2009), 5.9.
- [37] *German History in Documents and Images, Documents* (1989-2009), 3.15.
- [38] Wolf and McElvoy, *Man Without A Face*, 388.
- [39] *Goodbye Lenin!*
- [40] *Ibid*.
- [41] *German History in Documents and Images, Documents* (1989-2009), 5.9.
- [42] *The Economist*, 9 June 1990, 27 (as cited in Härmäläinen).
- [43] *Der Spiegel*, "Alte Rechte, neues Unrecht", June 29, 1992.
- [44] Matthew Schofield, "Sunday marks 25 years since Berlin Wall fell, but East and West still divided." *McClatchyDC*, November 6, 2014, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24775885.html>.
- [45] *German History in Documents and Images, Documents* (1989-2009), 3.12.