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A HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON A SUMMER IN SAXONY

By Sam Aly

A nightly ten o'clock sun illuminated patches of construction netting over grey apartment buildings along the street I so often walked home during my summer in Leipzig, Germany. Located in the heart of Saxony, the self-proclaimed State of the Arts and home to a rich imperial history, the city's northerly latitude kept the streets bright for almost seventeen hours a day around the summer solstice, encouraging visitors of commemorations like Wave Gotik Treffen (Gothic Fest) and Bachfest to stay out longer and enjoy the atmosphere. Yet for all its transparency, certain aspects of life in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) seemed more obscure than lucid. The enigmatic legacy of the GDR and its machinations in the not-so-distant past left distinct impressions on me as a historian, leading me to ponder on the nature of history and historiography in a modern totalitarian state.

Much of this reflection arose from conversations with men and women who had lived through the period, even those who had been born and raised in the GDR. One discussion in particular stands out, filled with stories of everyday life told to me by a woman who I will refer to as Hannah for sake of anonymity. Hannah was the first woman to undertake and complete her electrician work program, known as being a grueling, physical job for men. Although she admitted that the work was very difficult for a time, I perceived from her tales that it was her adventurous spirit, rather than an inability in her electrician work, that eventually led her away from the career.

Hannah told me that she often stole supplies from her job in order to make improvements at home for herself and neighbors, who soon found out about her electrician skill. This was not out of malicious intent. In the GDR, even minor repair supplies were often in short supply no matter how much money one had, and Hannah told me that it was not uncommon practice for employees of state institutions to steal items unavailable through the market. This led to a culture of low waste and recycling which coupled with Germany's high degree of environmental waste consciousness. Another German man I met reflected on this

consequence of the GDR's socialist policies, saying, "If it belongs to everyone, it belongs to no one."

After Hannah married, she and her new husband had to live with his parents for a period of months before being assigned an apartment by the state. Similarly, when they applied for a washing machine, they waited two years before finally receiving one. Hannah's husband was a schoolteacher, enabling him to get in line for groceries at the grocery store before most other professionals got off work. Stories of the GDR I heard painted a vividly monochromatic portrait: streets of uninspired grey architecture left dilapidated by years of neglect. As one long-time Leipzig resident observed, "Communism needs no war to destroy houses." The constant shortages, delays, and unavailability of even the most basic necessities and repair jobs became a trademark of life in East Germans' lives under the GDR.

Another aspect of GDR life which is simultaneously well-known and mysterious was the Ministry for State Security, better known as the Stasi. Visiting the Stasi's headquarters in Leipzig was a chilling experience, especially after reading Anna Funder's work *Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall*. The book explores the intriguing relationship between the people and state on an individual level from Funder's time spent living in East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. But the harrowing tales of neighbor turning on neighbor and subtle indicators of an unwarranted home visits from the Stasi had another side as well. For many former citizens of the GDR still living in places like Brandenburg, Berlin, and Saxony, the system represented security and safety. Crime rates were low. Conservative values, such as respect for elders and thriftiness, thrived. Even today, many recognize the pros and cons of such a system.

Since reunification, East Germans have been forced to address issues of memory on a grand scale. When the dying days of the Nazi regime gave way to the GDR, freedom of information was not radically liberalized. But as the emphasis shifts from journalistic to historical, a new wave of German and international scholars, composed of a generation that never knew the realities of the Cold War, will be forced to deal with the complexities of gaining trustworthy, quantifiable data from a secretive, deceit-based regime. With decreased chronological

proximity and fresh faces in historical scholarship, new perspectives will arise.

I am a part of that generation. We were born after the Wall fell and the World Wide Web arose. We grew up under threat of global terrorism, not the Communist menace. From my summer in Leipzig, I gleaned a new perspective on the concept of modern German history. I saw and heard firsthand examples of the unique complexities of remembering life in the GDR. The regime grew up in the wake of Germany's darkest hour, and it retired in the twilight of the Cold War. It is my hope that the historical scholarship of East Germany will continue to grow both in quantity and variety as we reflect on a uniquely challenging state in modern European history.