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978-1-107-00636-2 - Rereading East Germany: The Literature and Film of the GDR

Edited by Karen Leeder

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction**Karen Leeder*

Das Fabeltier Sozialismus

Beißt sich selbst in den Schwanz und verschlingt sich

(The fabled beast socialism

Bites its own tail and swallows itself)¹

On 18 March 1990, the day when the Volkskammer elections put an end to hopes of a reformed socialism in an independent German state, Stefan Heym famously claimed, ‘There will be no more GDR. It will be nothing more than a footnote in world history.’² That prognosis might seem to have been refuted by the sheer volume of literature, film and analysis that continues to be devoted to exploring or reimagining the East German state. As Timothy Garton Ash commented,

Yet, if the GDR has indeed become a footnote, it is without doubt the longest, best documented and most interesting footnote in world history. No dictatorship in history – not even the Third Reich – has been so rapidly, comprehensively and scrupulously documented and analyzed.³

When Garton Ash made these remarks in November 2009, two decades after the spectacular implosion of the socialist state, the controversy showed no signs of abating. Indeed the anniversary was the spur for a widespread stocktaking both in Germany and the wider world, revealing that an absolute majority of former East Germans felt that life had been better under communism. But that was not the only story. Garton Ash’s comparison with the Third Reich is instructive. At one extreme was the former GDR remembered as ‘Stasiland’, that is, Anna Funder’s memorable label for a country remembered through its repressive security network.⁴ And this image has perhaps come to dominate in popular culture since 1990. At the other end of the spectrum, however, was the particular brand of nostalgia for the securities of the former Eastern bloc that had brought a new word to the German language: ‘Ostalgie’. This dichotomy goes to the heart of the debate, for the two visions of the GDR do not exist in isolation,

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but are, in Peter Thompson's phrase, the 'conjoined twins of really existing socialism'.⁵ This is important since the work of remembering and reinterpreting the GDR is also part of a larger task: that of coming to terms with the possibilities and catastrophes of utopian thinking writ large, and ultimately of the enlightenment project. David Bathrick was one of the first to identify the profound, if conflicted, critical investment in the project of GDR socialism that remained even after the state itself had disappeared.

Thus, despite their basically critical view of repressive Stalinist state socialism, many critical leftists – and here we must speak of East and West German intellectuals – never overcame a strangely libidinal attachment to the GDR as a potential purveyor of a post-capitalist alternative, as a preservation reserve for the idea of a noncapitalist utopia.⁶

But there is also the diametrically opposed tendency, identified most memorably by Hans Mayer in his *Der Turm von Babel*, to evaluate the literature and history of the GDR solely in the light of its demise: 'all's bad that ends bad'.⁷

This raises a broader question that has troubled many commentators: how does one judge the products of the socialist state? They were at once sponsored by the utopian dream that inspired it, but also marked by the crippling reality of what it became. What is more, it is undoubtedly the case that for many years critical judgements in East and West were skewed more to political or moral considerations than aesthetic ones. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the so called 'German literary debate' of 1990 (see the chapter by Carol Anne Costabile-Heming in this volume), it revealed the extent to which GDR literature had been stymied by its need to act as an alternative to the public political realm. Few would go as far as Grünbein, in referring to his early work, written before unification, as 'poetry from the bad side'.⁸ And yet it is clear that a radical re-reading of the GDR is necessary in order to feel one's way between the many political interests and prejudices. But it is also important to remember that this is not simply an academic debate. It is linked with the way a whole nation remembers and comes to terms with its own past. It is not easy to weigh the value of the culture of an unjust state (*Unrechtsstaat*) that was indissolubly indexed to a future that did not arrive. Equally, 'the question as to whether the German Democratic Republic was an "unjust state" is a question for historians. For the individual there was the everyday [den Alltag], that little eternity'.⁹

The fierce rejection of GDR culture in the aftermath of German unification (writers likened it to a state being dumped into a skip or put through the shredder) is only one story, however. There has also been a

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concerted attempt to recuperate and memorialize that culture, too, almost to the point of what has been called a musealization of the GDR. In the Berlin Republic the GDR is commemorated – one might say fetishized – in the Trabi tours, the Ostel design hotels, websites for GDR goods or the many GDR museums that boast an authentic experience of genuine GDR artefacts. But the fixation on a plethora of memory icons simultaneously raises two further aspects that go to the heart of how we remember: the extent to which our memory of the GDR is being constructed or simulated and how far it is also being commodified. These in turn feed into the broader memory contests of recent years.

Yet despite the sometimes overwhelming amount of information, there is also the possibility that the GDR reality will become impossibly remote, an indelibly lost country, the ‘fabulous beast’ of Grünbein’s libretto to *Oktoberfilm*, that supplies a motto for this Introduction and an image for the cover of this volume. Stephen Brockmann, among others, has pointed out how distant to a contemporary reader the GDR and its culture can seem, that is, as if one is looking at it through the wrong end of telescope.¹⁰ Moreover, it has also acquired the aura of myth or fairy tale. ‘It has to be called Atlantis’, says Hinrich Lobek, the protagonist of Jens Sparschuh’s 1995 novel *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen* (The Indoor Fountain), after he has invented a kitsch fountain with a map of the former GDR and a model of East Berlin’s television tower.¹¹ And Uwe Tellkamp’s *Der Turm* (The Tower, 2008) describes the GDR as a socialist Atlantis, a mythical island state that operated by different rules and even used a different time system: ‘the invisible realm behind the visible one, [. . .] ATLANTIS: The Second Reality’.¹² These things need not be mutually exclusive. The two visions of the GDR suggest an ambivalent even ‘spectral’ apprehension. It was, after all, a state founded on the spectre of communism; in its ideal form it existed as a spectre informing an inadequate reality; and it now haunts contemporary capitalism as unrealized aspiration, trauma or travesty.

Brockmann puts it thus: ‘Now [. . .] that the socialist Atlantis has long since sunk under the waves, it has precisely the quality of a legend, something unreal that may or may not have really existed.’¹³ Of course this is only a metaphor. The existence of the GDR is of no doubt to the many victims of its repressive reality. But it is a provocative formulation. In the same piece of 2009, Garton Ash also warned that East Germany might disappear: eclipsed within larger historical trajectories.

The history of East Germany increasingly looks like one of those neglected country roads that used once to be a main highway, but is now a slightly

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mysterious detour running more or less parallel to the motorway. More particularly, it seems like an extended episode in the epoch that the historian Tony Judt has described with the single word 'Postwar'.¹⁴

That possibility is even more acute today. Tackling the great paradox of late capitalism's cultural amnesia, on the one hand, and the ubiquitous 'memory boom', on the other, Andreas Huyssen, both in *Twilight Memories* (1995) and *Present Pasts* (2003), highlights the vital role of memory:

Memory and musealization are together called upon to provide a bulwark against obsolescence and disappearance, to counter our deep anxiety about the speed of change and the ever shrinking horizons of time and space.¹⁵

And answering that call is the aim of this volume.

The culture of the 'other' Germany, that is, the German Democratic Republic or East Germany, has long held a peculiar fascination for those interested in Germany today. It is not simply that many authors considered to be of world stature emerged from, or are identified with, it: from Bertolt Brecht to his radical successor Heiner Müller, the novelists Stefan Heym and Christa Wolf, and the poets Volker Braun and Durs Grünbein. Certainly a number of works that would stand in any pantheon of twentieth-century literature owe their genesis to the particular struggle between 'Geist' and 'Macht' (spirit and power) that characterized cultural production there. However, the GDR also fascinates because it offers a case study in the way literature, film and culture responded to the challenges of an authoritarian regime, so often staking out the territories beyond what was permitted and, to borrow a phrase from Wolf, 'stretching the boundaries of the sayable'.

This does not mean, though, that all GDR literature is only of historical value, trading on what might be called its 'dissident bonus'. Nor does it necessarily mean that all of it stands up to scrutiny today, freed from its particular context. Rather, under the pressure of censorship, writers and film-makers developed innovative strategies that negotiated between complicity, dissidence and autonomy. Works of prose, poetry, drama and film of extraordinary intensity and invention were created that bear repeated scrutiny for what they can tell us about the processes of literature itself. It is significant, for example, that an alternative vision for a future German culture emerged out of the ruins of the Second World War; that some of the finest women's writing of the 1980s owed its existence to the cultural climate of East Germany; that socialist writers were in the vanguard of the subjective turn and the development of a sophisticated and self-reflexive body of autobiography; that, in that most polluted of European

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territories, literature was at the heart of ecological initiatives; or that the samizdat scene pioneered experimental collaborations between artists, writers, musicians and film-makers that are still admired today.

Ironically (or inevitably, perhaps), the great boom in GDR Studies has come after the GDR has ceased to exist. The contemporary literature and film, which engages with the existence of that state, and the disappointed hopes which sustained it, plays a central role in the extraordinarily rich output of the Berlin Republic today. And it is striking that many of the most important German cultural exports of recent years have been films documenting the socialist state or the processes of coming to terms with its loss: Wolfgang Becker's *Goodbye, Lenin!*, for example, or Florian Henckel von Donnersmark's *The Lives of Others*.

Astonishingly no single volume has been published in English that attempts to come to terms with the GDR as a cultural phenomenon. Today, some twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, that absence is even more striking. The aim of this volume is, then, both to grasp the history and context of GDR literature and film as a particular historical entity but also to trace its repercussions in the period since its demise. The perspective gained from a contemporary vantage point allows research to take account of the important revisions and reflections on that legacy since 1989, but also to explore phenomena like *Ostalgie*, the retro-chic rebranding that has allowed GDR design items to become icons of high fashion; the emergence of Berlin as the cultural capital of Europe; and the fascination with the German Stasi, or secret police. It allows an insight into the various approaches which researchers have taken to this most contested legacy, from a generational schema to postcolonial models or the increasingly important paradigms of memory: cultural memory (Jan and Aleida Assmann), postmemory (Marianne Hirsch) or prosthetic memory (Alison Landsberg).

Fresh, often critical, readings of many of the major GDR authors who continue to be widely read today – from Brecht or Wolf to Müller and Braun – are integrated with critical overviews of the development of the different genres (film, poetry, drama, prose). But in addition the volume sets out to present a chronological overview of the development of the GDR: from the beginnings out of the rubble of the Second World War to the radical dissolution of the late 1980s. Within that broader arc, individual chapters home in on key debates (the so-called 'formalism debate' of the early years or the post-*Wende* 'German literary debate') or historical flashpoints – the *Aufbau* years, the liberalizations of the Honecker era, the expatriation of Wolf

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Biermann in 1976 and the *Wende* itself – and situate them in their literary and political context. Finally, key contextual information is offered in chapters on autobiography, gender, satire, cultural opposition, the underground and the Stasi, together, attempting to carve out what is the distinctive contribution of GDR authors and film-makers to the larger sense of German literature today. The volume is rounded off by a view from 2015 – twenty-five years after the fall of the socialist state – that examines the afterlife of the GDR in the Berlin Republic. Cumulatively, it is hoped, that these chapters allow a new reading of the cultural legacy of the GDR, but also of the way it has been read in the past and the way it is remembered today.

Notes

1. Durs Grünbein, libretto, *Oktoberfilm: Dresden 1989*, dir. Ralf Kukulka (Balance film GmbH, 2009).
2. Hannes Bahrmann, Christoph Links, *Chronik der Wende: Stationen der Einheit. Die letzten Monate der DDR* (Berlin: Links, 1995), p. 174.
3. Timothy Garton Ash, 'Preface', in Karen Leeder (ed.), *From Stasiland to Ostalgie: The GDR – Twenty Years After*, *Oxford German Studies*, 38.3 (November 2009), 234–35, p. 234.
4. Anna Funder, *Stasiland. Stories from behind the Berlin Wall* (London: Granta, 2003).
5. Peter Thompson, 'Die Unheimliche Heimat', in Karen Leeder (ed.), *From Stasiland to Ostalgie*, 278–87, p. 283.
6. David Bathrick, 'Crossing Borders: the End of the Cold War Intellectual', *German Politics and Society* (Fall 1992), 77–87, p. 84.
7. Hans Mayer, *Der Turm von Babel: Erinnerung an eine Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 17.
8. Thomas Naumann and Durs Grünbein, 'Durs Grünbein. "Poetry from the Bad Side". Ein Gespräch', *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter*, 30.124 (1990), 442–49.
9. Grünbein, libretto, *Oktoberfilm*.
10. Stephen Brockman, 'Remembering GDR Culture in Postunification Germany and Beyond', in Renate Rechten and Dennis Tate (eds.), *Twenty Years On: Competing Memories of the GDR in Postunification Culture*, (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), pp. 39–54.
11. Jens Sparschuh, *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 1995), p. 24.
12. Uwe Tellkamp, *Der Turm: Geschichten aus einem versunkenen Land* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2008), p. 9; *The Tower: Tales from a Lost Country*, trans. Mike Mitchell (London: Penguin, 2014), p. xiii.

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13. Brockman, 'Remembering GDR Culture in Postunification Germany and Beyond', p. 40.
14. Garton Ash, 'Preface', p. 234.
15. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) and Andreas Huyssen, 'Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia', in *Public Culture*, 12.1 (2000): 21–38, p. 23, also reprinted in his *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

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CHAPTER I

*The GDR and its literature**An overview**Wolfgang Emmerich***Twenty-five years on: a feeling of closeness**

The ruling party of the GDR, the Socialist Unity Party (SED), decreed that the socialist state was always to be referred to in full as the German Democratic Republic. The three-letter abbreviation was almost taboo. This fact alone gives an indication of the strict demands governing this remarkable state that existed for some forty years. The GDR authorities sought to persuade people that the future belonged to their state alone, the only state on German soil which was based on true democratic and republican foundations, and that as such it would be a model for all Germans; West Germany, moreover, or the Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Federal Republic, FRG) as it was derogatively called, would follow suit sooner or later. History turned out otherwise; the GDR submitted, peacefully and without coercion, to the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law), which had been the Federal Republic's constitution since 1949 – something that was unprecedented in world history.

More than twenty-five years have passed since that day. The GDR and the everyday life lived there is now as far in the past as the National Socialist regime was in 1965 or the end of the First World War was at the beginning of the Second World War in 1939. However, the distance to the epochal year of 1990 *feels* decidedly shorter: surely it was only yesterday that people danced on the Wall and 10,000 GDR Trabis suddenly congested West German city centres? In fact, all the events that we have come to call the *Wende* happened more than twenty-five years ago and have already become history. Despite any 'feeling of closeness',¹ the GDR is now clearly recognizable as the crystallization of political and sociocultural developments, which from start to finish were governed by the global constellation that emerged out of the Cold War and competition between political systems.

Translated by Nick Hodgkin

While the GDR was still in existence and West Germans were closely bound up with it through family and other relationships, this fact was much harder to identify. It is much more readily apparent today.

GDR chronotope

What are the distinctive characteristics of the GDR? One way of approaching this question, and it is the one I shall adopt here, is to employ Mikhail Bakhtin's key literary theoretical concept, the chronotope, as a tool for broader cultural analysis. For Bakhtin the notion of the chronotope, which he set out as early as 1937–38, is a significant category in the analysis of narrative prose.² Of central importance is the 'internal chronotope', that is, the 'time-space of their [the characters'] represented life' in the novel.³ But Bakhtin is interested, too, in the 'exterior real-life chronotope',⁴ from which the literary portrayal derives and in which it operates in the public sphere. Broadly speaking, it is the 'epoch-specific time-space structure of human world perception'.⁵ My aim is twofold: first I wish to expand on Bakhtin's central concept in order to imagine the notions of (geographical) space and (historical) time, along with their respective social and cultural conditions, as far as possible as mutually interconnected. Second, I wish to apply this expanded concept of the chronotope to the specific political and social structure which lasted more than forty years and which we call the GDR, and to consider this closely intertwined realm of 'time-space' and its specific organizational structures as a basic premise of the GDR and also of GDR literature. This way of approaching the GDR chimes with the insights suggested by what has become known as the 'spatial turn' in culture more generally.⁶ But what exactly does it entail?

1. The GDR was a coherent territory for over forty years, though it had an island at its centre – West Berlin – which naturally functioned as a constant disruption within the chronotope GDR.
2. The GDR was ethnically homogenous, being a Germanic-North German settlement area that was temporarily and partially settled by Slavs (a tiny Slavic minority continued to live there). The GDR territory stretched across two former states, Prussia and Saxony. This marks a regional, though not ethnic, distinction that could be acrimonious, though it was never critical during the GDR.
3. The GDR was religiously homogenous. In 1949, 90 per cent of the population was Lutheran Protestant. Catholics unquestionably constituted the diaspora. The consequence was what Max Weber called a

‘protestant ethic of achievement’, which in the end was also a significant factor for East German writers’ self-understanding.

4. Despite some changes in policy and some attempts at reform and restoration, the GDR had the same political administration and the same socialist state-organized economy for over forty years. The structure was hierarchical and subject to manifold control. Autonomous action in any area of society’s value system (that is the hallmark of a genuinely modern society, according to Weber) was the exception rather than the rule in the GDR. Moreover, things were identical in the cultural sphere. To borrow terms from sociology, the GDR was a land of ‘blocked’, ‘braked’, ‘partial’ or ‘halfway’ modernization.⁷
5. The GDR’s sociocultural and political traditions were not homogenous, but they nevertheless made a deep impression on the state. Along with the industrial heartland of West Germany, the Ruhrgebiet, Saxony was (with parts of Thuringia and Sachsen-Anhalt) the modern German industrial region par excellence, as well as one of the oldest centres of the workers’ movement and the state where the SPD had once won its first seats in the German parliament. These regions (including Berlin), which had once been red, became brown during the Nazi period and then red again after 1945.
6. Last but not least, the GDR literary system was based on a state-sponsored notion of all-encompassing homogeneity. This was already evident in the legal and economic structures. There were no private publishers, and book publishing, both wholesale and retail, was controlled by the state. In particular, the SED’s cultural and political education programmes, and the closely allied doctrine of socialist realism, were intended to ensure homogeneity in literature, which was certainly the case for the first twenty years in the GDR.

So, to summarize the GDR’s characteristics: it was a coherent territory, homogenous both in its ethnicity and religious orientation, always ‘half modern’ in its political and economic structure, politically and socioculturally unambiguous and, last but not least, with a strictly homogenized literary field at its core. Of course these fundamental characteristics are only sketched out here. Nevertheless they all point towards a single conclusion: the GDR as a place remained structurally unchanged for a long period of time. A further factor was the faltering increase in population size and its eventual shrinkage. The population shrank decisively until 1961 as a result of ‘Republikflucht’ (flight from the Republic), which was largely the flight of the educated elite – a fact that in turn resulted in the further homogenization