



Peter Alheit, Kerstin Bast-Haider, Petra Drauschke, Kerstin Bast-Haider. *Die zögernde Ankunft im Westen: Biographien und Mentalitäten in Ostdeutschland.* Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2004. 349 S. EUR 39.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-593-37484-0.



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When Do the East Germans Get Here?

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the study of reunification has been a kind of cottage industry of German academia. One need only look at the “Bibliographie zur Deutschen Einheit” to be convinced: it now includes over 50,000 entries, and it continues to grow.[1] Among the chief issues preoccupying scholars has been the frame of mind—the values, ideals, perceptions and ways of thinking—of Germans living in the former GDR. Motivated especially by the desire to make sense of expressed reservations about re-unification, widespread *Ostalgie* and political support for both the PDS and radical right that have persisted in eastern Germany, ethnographers, sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, criminologists, historians and clinicians have been prodding East Germans to give up their secrets. Arguably no other group has ever been so observed, polled, interviewed, number-crunched, analyzed, pathologized and criticized than the people of eastern Europe following the break-up of the Soviet empire.

So it is understandable, when considering a book with the title *Die zögernde Ankunft im Westen: Biographien und Mentalitäten in Ostdeutschland*, that the in-

formed reader may well wonder whether it represents anything new and anything other than a familiar lament about eastern Germans not being more like “us” (westerners). And indeed, this study can rightly take its place in a long line of pre- and post-*Wende* studies that have seen East Germans as generally resisting modernizing trends. By raising the specter of modernization—by identifying certain structures and dynamics in German social history as inherently “modern” and deviations as forms of “resistance” that, in turn, help explain authoritarian sentiments—the authors, of course, land themselves in a minefield of over-determined and value-laden historical assumptions and theoretical jargon. And no amount of invoking the ideas of Jose Ortega y Gasset, Theodor Geiger, Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu (as they do early on in the volume) will extricate the authors from this thorny predicament. The *Sonderweg* thesis returns here—this time, however, referring only to the eastern part of Germany (and, presumably, eastern Europe).

The study is part of a larger international research project—one apparently still in progress—that compares the development of mentalities in Poland, the Czech Re-

public, and East/eastern Germany. Rather than examining all of the former East Germany, Alheit, Bast-Haider and Drauschke focus on the region of the Oberlausitz and Eisenhüttenstadt (not because it is particularly representative, as they admit, but because it is a borderland region that allows comparison with the other states). Their analysis is based primarily on statistical data and interviews with two generations of eastern Germans (forty-two tandems in all). The interviews focused on the life histories and reflections on interpersonal life of the subjects in the study, with special attention paid to the experiences of grandparents and grandchildren within individual families.

What the researchers purport to have found is an “inter-generational resistance to modernization” (p. 322) that has served as a kind of foundational template for mentalities in the East. While the social structure of the Federal Republic, according to the authors, changed dramatically after World War II, upsetting “traditional” milieus and promoting a “modernizing type” of mentality, a quasi-feudal traditionalism—a kind of ethos of a “Ständegesellschaft’ ohne Stände” (p. 325)—rules in the East. This ethos shuns change, risk and movement, shaping the outlooks of both grandparents and grandchildren in the East. The “Sondersituation” (p. 8) of Germans in the East, then, should not be taken as the product of the *Wende* per se, but rather as an outcrop of a parochial, inward-directed niche society that dates

back decades. Racist and radical right-wing sentiments among young people, then, appear to be informed by the biographical, sometimes xenophobic, narratives of their grandparents, who themselves never truly confronted the Nazi legacy.

It’s not that this portrait is altogether without merit. Numerous studies have found similar evidence of this kind of social and familial “cocooning,” if you will, among Germans in the East.[2] But that’s the point: we know this. To be sure, it is striking to learn that grandparents and grandchildren often seem to share a common, insular outlook on life. But do we really need to frame this realization in the cumbersome language of modernization theory? Is there anything here that could not have been stated more succinctly and persuasively in the form of a couple of articles? Can we really find no better way to make sense of the fact that many in the West are perplexed by attitudes in the East than to project those very uncertainties onto those in the East? Maybe Germans in the East are not late in arriving: perhaps they simply found a more welcoming party to attend.

Notes

[1]. See www.wiedervereinigung.de.

[2]. See my upcoming essay “Homo Munitus: The East German Observed,” in *Socialist Modern*, Paul Betts and Katherine Pence, eds. (forthcoming).

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