



The GDR Today. Institute for German Studies and Graduate Centre for Europe, University of Birmingham, 10.01.2014.

Reviewed by David Zell

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (June, 2014)

The GDR Today

With 2014 marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the end of state socialist rule in Central and Eastern Europe, this international symposium was held to take stock of scholarship on the GDR today, as well as to identify areas for future research. The lively and engaging event brought together twenty postgraduates from the UK, Germany, USA, France and Ireland working on the history, memory and culture of the GDR with the aim of examining not only what the GDR was, but how its memory continues to influence attitudes and policies today.

Seventeen postgraduate scholars each presented an overview of their doctoral projects, all of which are still works in progress. Papers were grouped in five panels: Literature and Culture; Film and Visual Culture; The Politics of History and History of Politics; History or Memory? Communicating the East German Past; Museums and Memorials.

The papers in the panel 'Literature and Culture' all aimed to challenge an established but arguably unhelpful paradigm of conformity versus nonconformity. STEPHAN EHRIG (Bristol) examined the theatre collection of Frankfurt's Kleist Museum in order to reconstruct the stage history of Kleist in the GDR. He re-evaluated how the multi-genre works of major GDR authors adapted Kleist's works. In the second paper, DAVID ZELL (Birmingham) linked his central research question of how major cultural commemorations in the GDR were designed, executed and received to ongoing debates about the conceptualisation of the GDR. In this context, he discussed his ongoing selection of commem-

oration case studies, spread over twenty-three years, namely Schiller (1959), Kollwitz (1967), Beethoven (1970), DĂ¼rer (1981) and Luther (1983). Staying within the research ambit of literature in the GDR, JEANNINE JUD (Galway) examined Christa Wolf's work and public persona. Her project asks whether and how Wolf viewed herself in terms of victimhood and perpetration, the schematic dualism used widely during the 'Literaturstreit' of the 1990s. Finally, STEFANIE KREIBICH (Bangor) presented her work focusing on GDR memory relating to food and rituals of eating. In her paper, Kreibich investigated a range of memory narratives in contemporary German films and museums.

DENNIS TATE (Bath) observed that the papers by Ehrig and Zell offered good opportunities to explore historical patterns of commemoration and appropriation, but that both projects would benefit from expanding or reconceptualising the field of study. Notably, he recommended that Ehrig include analysis of a number of younger GDR authors, who also found a productive access to Kleist, and that Zell consider approaching the project through investigation of commemorations of the same personality, but at different points in GDR history. Similarly, Tate felt that Christa Wolf's self-presentation should be differentiated even further than the scheme proposed by Jud and, in reference to Kreibich's paper, suggested comparing GDR representations of 'Alltag' with contemporary representations in museums and films.

The three research projects presented in the panel

‘Film and Visual Culture’ examined various aspects of visual representation in the GDR, indicating that GDR culture needs to be interpreted in a wider context than ideology and propaganda. ELIZABETH WARD (Leeds) discussed the presentation of racial persecution in DEFA (Deutsche Film AG) films and how images of Jewish persecution were received. She suggested that the content of many films and motivations underpinning their production were often more complex than traditionally acknowledged. PERRINE VAL (Paris) surveyed DEFA’s output through the prism of French reception, arguing that underlying artistic aspects of the cinematographic relationship between the two countries transcended a traditional propaganda perspective. SARAH GOODRUM (Los Angeles) traced the unfinished development of GDR photographic exhibition culture, relocating debates about the artistic merit of photography within the Kulturbund and the Commission for Photography.

In response, JOANNE SAYNER (Birmingham) observed that the three papers all successfully drew attention to the complex interweaving of culture and politics in the GDR. She suggested that the representations of the Holocaust in film and understandings of antifascism, as analysed by Ward, need not be mutually exclusive. With reference to Val’s paper, she asked if there was evidence that pre-publicity for the films attempted to play a particular role in directing the interpretation of GDR film for different audiences. Finally, Sayner highlighted the effect that a focus on specific institutions, such as the Kulturbund in Goodrum’s paper, would have in positioning the research within the debate on the conceptualisation of the GDR – that is – history from below versus top-down state rhetoric.

The scholars in the panel ‘The Politics of History and History of Politics’ investigated relationships between the centre and periphery (whether urban and rural, national and local, official and unofficial), questions of generations, continuities and discontinuities, and heritage. IVOR BOLTON (Birmingham) discussed the complex relationship between the making, implementation and influencing of GDR heritage policy, arguing that there is a causal relationship between the history and/or culture of the GDR and its representation through memory. CHRISTIAN RAU (Leipzig) investigated the urban development politics of the GDR, proposing a differentiated analysis of decision-making processes in questions of urban development within the GDR as a method for understanding the subsequent *post-Wende* problems in this area. By analysing the role of agency, Rau argued that the complex negotiation of power relations suggested sup-

port for a participatory dictatorship model of the GDR. In contrast to, but nonetheless complementing, this urban context, MARCEL THOMAS (Bristol) analysed notions of locality in the life history narratives of rural East Germany. In order to offer new insights into the contradictory nature of personal memories of life in the GDR, Thomas argued for a greater focus on East Germans’ search for identity before 1989 than on post-reunification issues.

Addressing the common denominator of memory in these papers, ANNA SAUNDERS (Bangor) wondered how the ‘slippery concept of ‘collective memory’ referred to by Bolton, ‘differs from ‘state-mandated memory’, and/or to what extent the two overlap?’ Noting Rau’s work as an interesting example of the complex negotiation of the power relations in the GDR she recommended that he bear in mind the relationship between construction and destruction as well as the role that longer traditions play in urban development. Finally, Saunders asked to what extent generational differences and social status amongst rural interviewees in Thomas’s research are significant, and proposed that Thomas also consider the role and different modes of forgetting when discussing memory.

The scholars in the panel ‘History or Memory? Communicating the East German Past’ concentrated on current memories of the GDR, singling out the *Wendegeneration* in particular. KATRIN BAHR (Amherst, MA) and MELANIE LOREK (New York) described how the new generation of Germans (‘3te Generation Ostdeutschland’) utilises resources of communicative memory between and within generations to purposely shape the ‘cultural memory’ of the GDR. These views challenge the established ‘master narratives’ of many former East Germans as well as those of West Germans in the reunified Germany. In contrast, PAMELA HEÄ (Frankfurt) addressed the generation factor by highlighting differences between primary and secondary memories, that is examining the impact of public memories on the private memories of former East Germans. HeÄ thus argued that the public delegitimisation of the GDR since 1989 has superimposed itself on the often more mixed, even positive personal memories of everyday life. Based on two case-studies, HANNA HAAG’s (Hamburg) contribution perceived memory as a process of commemorative transmission, relating the GDR memory of those born immediately before or after 1989 to the social change typically experienced by their family as a central place of communicative exchange. Haag contended that the private experience of former East German parents interacts

through a process of exchange and reinterpretation with historical public knowledge, gained by the next generation from media, school and political discourses.

HELMUT PEITSCH (Potsdam) acknowledged the common concern of the three researchers in seeing the current memory of the GDR as either being 'dismissed' (Bahr / Lorek), 'not playing a prominent role' (Heß), or being 'underestimated' (Haag). They differed however in their conceptual approaches, that is, between cultural, political or social framing of GDR memory in the 21st century. Referring to the relationship between public and personal memory, Peitsch observed that the papers might, following Peter Burke, have addressed the role of the state as carrier of official memory, as distinct from public memory based on competing group memories. Pointing to the relative importance of 'generation' in each paper, Peitsch referred to that concept's place in Jan and Aleida Assmann's theory of 'communicative' and 'cultural memory' particularly with regards to the assumed processes of transition between the two and the equation of cultural memory with national identity. Peitsch proposed therefore that 'generation' be treated as a discursive construct which functions in public memory, rather than representing an unmediated role of social actors.

Based on a common theme of the underlying relationship between memory, history and commemoration, the final panel 'Museums and Memorials' raised new questions on the ongoing process of representing the GDR in museums and memorials. STEPHANIE BOSTOCK (Bangor) explored the representation of the 1950s as part of a specific chronotopic reconfiguration of the past focusing on privately funded GDR museums. Michail Bakhtin, (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin and London 1981. Bostock postulated that the 1950s have become fused into the historicisation of the whole forty-year narrative of GDR *Alltag*. Moving on to GDR museums focusing on state oppression, MICHAELA DIXON (Manchester) explored the significance of resistance within the German museum landscape, particularly with regard to its role in mediating the perpetrator-victim discourse. Dixon proposed that institutions such as the DDR Museum challenge the simple martyrological narrative by contextualising resistance within everyday life in the GDR. In her role as exhibition curator, SUSANNE WERNING (Vienna) developed the concept of a gradual blurring between the representation of the everyday and representation of oppression a step further. Werning's exhibition plan intro-

duced the idea of a spatial model to tell the social history of the GDR. Finally, DOREEN PASTOR (Bristol) related the concept of 'dark tourism' or 'trauma tourism' to research visitor experiences at two German heritage sites.

SARA JONES (Birmingham) recommended that the four scholars problematise certain theories underpinning their papers, notably Nora (*lieux de memoire*) and Assmann (division of memory into communicative and cultural). Indeed, it would seem that museum studies have an important role to play in thinking through the relationship between medium and memory. Jones suggested an aspect for further consideration in Bostock's paper: namely that a potentially valid monochronous representation of the GDR risks simplifying lived GDR history as monolithic and static. With reference to Dixon's paper, Jones observed that a museological representation of everyday *Eigensinn* as equivalent to achieve resistance might trivialise the real meaning of opposition in the GDR. Responding to the use of *Zeitzeugen* described in Werning's paper, Jones recommended that Werning also consider the potential impact of the exhibition on visitors with no prior experience of the GDR. Lastly, Jones acknowledged the timeliness and importance of Pastor's 'dark tourism' paper and its associated scholarly and ethical reservations. Jones drew attention to a concern that the emotional responses of visitors to these 'memorial museums' might prevent an appropriate recognition of the complex histories and socio-political causes of the represented trauma. For the concept memorial museum see: Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums. The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, Dorset 2007.

A core theme of much of the GDR scholarship covered in the colloquium was the interaction between memory and history. In their papers, researchers often argued against contemporary narratives of the GDR, whilst retaining some well-established terminology and tropes. It became clear throughout the day that none of the researchers subscribed to a view of the GDR as a purely top-down society, in which behaviour was dictated only by SED policy and ideology. All scholars challenged existing clichés and interpreted their research material on its own terms.

It is also worth noting that several of those in attendance were German postgraduates researching the GDR at British universities. It was felt that the growing number of such scholars might be a result of more multidisciplinary research opportunities being currently available in the UK than in Germany.

The considerable interest in attending this forum registered by the organisers, the geographical diversity of scholarly backgrounds and the range of research topics represented, all appear to reflect the robust health of GDR studies. All agreed that there is still considerable scope for more basic archival research, supplemented by an available but shrinking window of opportunity for oral history research. Based on this very positive outcome it is planned to arrange a follow-up colloquium in Bristol in late 2015.

Conference Overview:

Panel 1: Literature and Culture

Chair: Helmut Peitsch (Universität Potsdam)

Stephan Ehrig (University of Bristol), Kleist Reception in GDR Literature and Theatre

Jeannine Jud (National University of Ireland, Galway), Shifting Perspectives: Christa Wolf - From Victim to Perpetrator

Stefanie Kreibich (Bangor University), The Culinary GDR: Representations of Food and Rituals of Eating in Contemporary German Films and Museums

David J. Zell (University of Birmingham), Major Cultural Commemorations and the Construction of Cultural & Political Identity in the GDR

Panel 2: Film and Visual Culture

Chair: Dennis Tate (University of Bath)

Sarah Goodrum (University of South California), The Problem of the Missing Museum: Adventures and Misadventures in the Exhibition of Photographs in the GDR

Perrine Val (University Paris - Panthéon Sorbonne / Centre Marc Bloch, Berlin), The Cinematographic Relationships between France and the GDR

Elizabeth Ward (University of Leeds), 'Surely the East Germans didn't make films about the Holocaust?' Representations of Jewish Persecution in East German Cinema

Panel 3: The Politics of History and History of Politics
Chair: Debbie Pinfold (University of Bristol)

Ivor Bolton (University of Birmingham), What is the Relationship between the History and/or Culture of the GDR and its Representation in Memory?

Christian Rau (Universität Leipzig), The GDR in Urban Perspective: Urban Development and Conflicts of Interests within the East German State

Marcel Thomas (University of Bristol), Socialism in Our Village: Remembering the GDR through the Local Lens

Panel 4: History or Memory? Communicating the East German Past

Chair: Joanne Sayner (University of Birmingham)

Katrin Bahr (University of Massachusetts) / Melanie Lorek (University of New York), The GDR's Third Generation - Between Identity Crisis and Self-discovery

Hanna Haag (University of Hamburg), Memory as Transmission - an East German Generation - Remember the GDR

Pamela Heß (Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main), Public and Private Memories of the German Democratic Republic: Does Generation Matter?

Panel 5: Museums and Memorials

Chair: Anna Saunders (Bangor University)

Stephanie Bostock (Bangor University), The 'Lost Decade'? The 1950s in GDR Museums

Michaela Dixon (University of Manchester), The Romance with Resistance: The Instrumentalisation of Narratives of Resistance at Museums of the German Democratic Republic

Doreen Pastor (University of Bristol), A new Model for Dark Tourism?

Susanne Wernsing (Curator, Vienna), The GDR as a Model: An Exhibition Concept

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: David Zell. Review of , *The GDR Today*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. June, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42145>

Copyright © 2014 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.