



Hester Vaizey. *Born in the GDR: Life in the Shadow of the Wall.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xiii + 224 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-871873-4.

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In 1991, a year after East and West Germany were reunified, a former East German bishop wrote to the long-time West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, as quoted in Hester Vaizey's book, *Born in the GDR*: "We are expected merely to listen all the time. It is constantly suggested that we are not capable of anything, and that everything we have done was wrong. We are the only ones who have to learn something, because, it is said, all of our experiences belong on the trash pile of history. Apparently it is not worth listening when we are saying anything. But we can no longer take this permanent know-all manner and our degrading treatment as disenfranchised failures" (pp. 171-172).

A year earlier, in August 1990, shortly before formal reunification, a worker in Magdeburg preempted this in an interview for Dirk Philipsen's *We Were the People: Voices from East Germany's Revolutionary Autumn of 1989*: "In their [West Germans] opinion pretty much everything we've done, everything we've had here was somehow wrong, or at least deficient. In their eyes we are basically all failures, whether it was our fault or not. I don't think that's correct, and I certainly don't think it's fair. I am not going to let them steal my whole past, and I don't want to be a second-class citizen for the rest of my life."^[1]

These two comments on the project of German reunification now stand as testimony to its early difficulties and discontents. As they stood on the cusp of reunification, the two German populations eyed each other warily. The enthusiasm that characterized the ecstatic moment of the border opening on November 9, 1989, did not last. Now, twenty-five years later, a divided unity remains, and Vaizey's *Born in the GDR* provides valuable details about disaffection and discontent in what was the GDR as well as the disappointments and discriminations of the present. It does so with an eye, too, on the gains and possibilities provided by reunification, adding up to a picture of the mixed results of the transition—the alienation and unemployment of capitalism combined with the possibility to travel beyond the Eastern Bloc; escaping the Stasi's grip combined with the disappointing western German biscuits and bread rolls.

Vaizey tracks the experiences of former East Germans who were in their adolescence or early twenties when the Berlin Wall fell. Through eight narrative case studies drawn from questionnaires and oral history interviews with a group of thirty people born after 1961 (i.e., when the Wall went up), Vaizey touches on the major themes of this historical period. This cohort grew up solely in the GDR, in contrast to those born earlier (the *Kriegskinder*,

war children), who knew of a more fluid east/west division before the Wall went up, and those born later (the *Dritte Generation Ost*, Third Generation East), who came of age in reunified Germany but who nevertheless experienced a decade or more of the GDR.

The book's oral history method reflects a broader drive in research and documentary filmmaking about the GDR to capture these experiences as *Zeitzeuge* (contemporary witnesses) begin to age. This is particularly urgent for the older cohort, who have experienced three political regimes (Nazi, socialist, liberal capitalist). Vaizey recognizes such oral history is not straightforward. She reflects on the methodological limitations, compromises, and benefits of interviews as a historical source and resource—including how life stories blend the typical and the exceptional, as well as the discursive construction of memory and history across twenty-five years of debate in reunified Germany.

These questions are not merely academic, as they say, because we have in these cases people whose biographies include a world-historical caesura as they were becoming adults. How can subjects integrate these individual histories with the fiction of a neat, organic biography—a necessary fiction we share in day-to-day psychic functioning? Vaizey does not thematize this in her presentation of the interviews, nor does she ever seem to parse their experience through suspicious hermeneutics. Her role is one of narrator and reporter of experiences that, again, are both typical and exceptional. Space thus remains for scholars to take her material and interpret it in other ways.

Crucially, Vaizey's work shows that the Stasi—for so long a western German and international obsession—mattered deeply in some lives but was felt to affect others lightly, if at all. The Stasi is a presence in the book, as it was in GDR society, but its presence is in part that of an agency that, after 1989, bitterly shadows all eastern German lives—a shadowing that many eastern Germans rightfully resent. Beyond Germany, Anna Funder's popular *Stasiland* (2003) helped to cement the GDR's reduction to the secret police, at least by name (even if Funder's book itself was richer than that reduction).

If the Stasi is one dominant cliché of life in the GDR, the cliché of eastern Germans after 1990 is that nostalgia makes them unable to settle in reunified Germany and capitalist liberal democracy. Vaizey's interviews show that *Ostalgie* is often mere ambivalence about the past and present that western media outlets and politicians (wilfully or unconsciously) misrecognize as a longing for the totality of the GDR. This ambivalence is diffi-

cult for many western Germans to tolerate, yet Vaizey's accounts underscore the material (e.g., poverty, housing costs), psychological (e.g., denigration and stigma, disorientation) and social (e.g., mass unemployment, feminist losses) bases for this eastern yearning.

Vaizey's interviewees had diverse experiences and held diverse positions in the GDR, from regime support to ambivalent belonging to dissent and political opposition. Their lives and those around them have also followed more or less successful paths after 1990, but across the chapters, a clear sense emerges that something was lost in the move from East and West to a reunified Germany. Vaizey reflects on this in her evenhanded conclusion to the book, "Interpreting the End of East Germany." The "interpreting" here means how her subjects narrate and understand their lives, as well as how Vaizey and other researchers have interpreted that "end," including its afterlives and eastern Germans' belated identifications with the former nation.

Vaizey's light touch has produced an approachable book that underplays its richness. She has amassed a considerable bank of stories and qualitative data from her interview work, and she draws on key secondary sources in the study of the GDR and reunification. The scholarly work sits in the introduction, conclusion, and footnotes, while the chapters outline those eight stories that, as she puts it, "showcase the multiple and varied experiences of the transition." The choice of eight from her thirty possible cases "equally allow[s] each story to be explored fully within the confines of a single volume" (p. 18).

So who are the people we learn about in detail? They include Petra, who was a 25-year-old PhD student at Humboldt University in Berlin when the Wall fell. Petra was a member of the ruling socialist party for a few years. But, in the flourishing of social movements in autumn 1989, she became involved with the *Unabhängige Frauenverband* (Independent Women's Association), landing a position as the Verband's representative on the Electoral Commission for the March 1990 GDR elections. She shows commitment to socialist principles through to the present. A chapter on Carole follows, who had a different response from Petra's agitation for reform within state structures. Carole schemed her way across the inner-German border, fed up with the palpable gap between ideological enunciation and reality in the GDR. She was particularly concerned with environmental degradation in the east and frustrated with the inability to gain political traction outside the ruling party.

Others are less politically involved, feeling relatively sanguine about life in the GDR. Lisa, a schoolteacher, lived a contented and apparently trouble-free life in Berlin-Pankow, just as she lives a contented life today in reunified Germany. Peggy, meanwhile, was in primary school when the Wall fell and now recounts her early life of growing up happy in the GDR. Adult life in reunified Germany is beset by material worries—around housing, money, and work.

In some respects, these two stories are refreshing for their lack of political purchase in the GDR. The life course of everyone in the east has tended to be politicized by scholars in ways that do not necessarily accord with people's experiences and that, perversely, suggest an empirically questionable assumption of totalitarian achievement in the east (i.e., flattening of public and private). And, in the implicit system-comparative analysis that still haunts analyses of socialism from the vantage of researchers in today's capitalist countries, this politicized gaze on everyday life is rarely the same one used to understand the lives of our capitalist contemporaries. Vaizey's narrative device thus implicitly denies the politicizing gaze by allowing eight case studies to speak through their varied experiences across the gamut of ordinary positions. In other lives, of course, these experiences involve ceaseless Stasi persecution and religious intolerance. These chapters are particularly tough reading.

The GDR is too often a place people go looking for moral polarities and resolution (cf. the 2006 film, *The Lives of Others*). But as in much contemporary historical research over the past decade, *Born in the GDR* emphasizes compromise in East German lives and the limits of "dictatorship" as an explanatory model. Some chapters show people joining the party to be in a better position to gain holidays, while others occasionally keep quiet when they know jobs are at stake but speak freely elsewhere; still others collaborate with the Stasi only to deliberately pro-

vide useless or misleading information. This, then, becomes the value of the book for scholars who come to it with knowledge of the era: in individual lives, much remains to be considered and explored that can add nuance to existing accounts and theories.

Weaving individual stories with broader research to contextualize personal responses, Vaizey can thus foreground the ambiguities and ambivalences of 1) life in the GDR, 2) the transition and reunification, and 3) memories of the GDR. These three key moments in each life become particular experiences couched within political, social, cultural, and scholarly debates around the stakes of those periods. Through individual lives and their traumas, achievements, and high points, Vaizey explores questions of religion, the environment, education, sexuality, and travel. The book rises above a set of journalistic interviews because Vaizey knows the historical and scholarly material well. She approaches her interviewees with humanity and an ear for what they can tell us, even where it may differ from the historical and theoretical orthodoxy.

Vaizey's book is now the most up-to-date text for anyone first approaching the late GDR and German reunification. Though sometimes workmanlike in its prose and description, the book nevertheless extends a more writerly work such as Funder's *Stasiland*. Indeed, *Born in the GDR* joins *Stasiland* as the go-to source for a general or undergraduate audience to grasp everyday life in the GDR and reunified Germany. After all, German reunification remains a work in progress, and Vaizey's book underlines eastern disillusionment with that process and with their western counterparts.

Note

[1]. Dirk Philipsen, *We Were the People: Voices from East Germany's Revolutionary Autumn of 1989* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 329.

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