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SQUATTING AND SCHWARZWOHNEN IN TIMES OF TRANSITION, 1989-1990

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This article deals with something that really should not have existed in the German Democratic Republic under the watchful eyes of the Stasi and the *Volkspolizei*.¹ Thousands of East Germans solved their housing problems in the 1970s and 1980s simply by moving into empty flats without the required permission from the state. This socialist version of informal living, which was called 'squatting' in West Germany, operated under different names in the GDR. In Halle, Leipzig, and Rostock it was called *Schwarzwohnen* (lit. 'living on the black'),² while in Berlin it was mostly known as *Wohnungsbesetzung* (housing occupation). Many of the young 'occupiers' discovered other people's neglected property offered them an opportunity to show initiative and find fulfilment.

The photographer Andreas Münstermann, for example, moved into an empty flat in the Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg in the early 1980s without official permission. The flat was at the back of a shabby tenement. The front of the building was no longer there and the vacant space was used as a place to dump rubbish. The back of the building was owned by a West German and was administered by trustees, who apparently preferred to see the building unofficially occupied than standing empty. Nor did the state agency responsible for allocating housing, the Municipal Department for Housing Policy, show any interest in evicting the illegal residents. On the contrary, when the authorities found out in 1983 that Münstermann had moved in without permission, they asked him to pay a moderate administrative fine of 300 marks, and enclosed the papers

Trans. by Angela Davies (GHIL)

¹ The *Volkspolizei* was the national police force of the GDR from 1945 to 1990. It was a highly centralized agency responsible for most civilian law enforcement in East Germany.

² This essay uses the word *Schwarzwohnen* strictly in the sense in which it was used in the historical context of the GDR, as a name for the practice of illegal house occupation. This usage predates the current debate over whether the use of *Schwarz-* as a prefix for illegal activities (e.g. *Schwarzfahren*, *Schwarzmarkt*) has acquired racist connotations in modern Germany.

allocating the flat to him with the demand. This put an end to the problem as far as the authorities were concerned, while Münstermann now faced the challenge of keeping the flat habitable.

In the years that followed, he and other residents organized repairs to the building on their own initiative and removed the rubbish from the courtyard. To finance this, they made use of a regulation that allowed the residents of a given block to keep back part of their rent to pay for initiatives like this. In fact, the residents took on many of the responsibilities of the owners, including deciding who was allowed to move into vacant flats. Large parties were regularly held in the courtyard, and they mostly passed without incident. There was never any trouble with the Stasi or the police. It was not until shortly after reunification, in the autumn of 1990, that Münstermann witnessed his first ‘real’ raid by police in helmets and carrying truncheons.³ This experience was part of the systematic enforcement of civil property rights, which began with reunification and fundamentally changed the conditions governing informal living. Those who had occupied flats in the GDR and dealt with an East German bureaucracy that veered half-heartedly between suppression and tolerance were now exposed to the consistent and sometimes militant forces of the German federal state. The transfer of West German conflict-solving techniques to the East – which became blatantly obvious in November 1990, when Mainzer Straße in the Berlin district of Friedrichshain was cleared – accelerated the process by which the occupation of buildings and flats was either formalized or swept away.

After the end of the GDR, it took almost twenty years for contemporary historians to discover informal living in East Germany as a research topic. When I began working in this field in 2008, I was stepping on to virgin historiographical territory, and it is only in recent years that historians and geographers have started studying it.⁴ This neglect might be justified, given that we are dealing with the actions of

³ Interview Andreas Münstermann, Berlin 2008.

⁴ Peter Angus Mitchell, ‘Contested Space: Squatting in Divided Berlin c.1970–c.1990’, Ph.D. thesis (University of Edinburgh, 2015); Alexander Vasudevan, ‘Between Appropriation and Occupation: The Spatial Politics of “Squatting” in East Berlin’, *Urban Geography*, 9 Aug. 2019, at [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2019.1646035>]; Jakob Warnecke, ‘Wir können auch anders’: Entstehung,

a small minority, and the overwhelming lack of archival sources also plays a part. My research was based on about forty interviews which I conducted. The lack of official sources made it difficult to critically evaluate statements obtained using oral history methods. While many interviewees provided documents to support their views—from official letters to copies from Stasi files—there were often discrepancies between the monosyllabic and formulaic expressions used in official documents and the detailed, lively descriptions given by eyewitnesses. The latter, therefore, had a greater influence on the stories in the book I published in 2011 than did the files.⁵

For this article, which investigates changes in the practices of occupying housing in the period around 1990, the sources are less of a problem. This topic did not officially exist in the GDR, but it entered the public discourse soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Here, too, it was more the witness reports than the official documents that articulated an experience that questioned the master narrative presenting the fall of the Wall and reunification as the triumph of freedom.

Allocation of Housing as a Battleground

In order to understand the socialist variant of squatting, we need to look briefly at the legal framework governing housing. In the GDR, housing was allocated by the state. Unlike in the old Federal Republic, where a similar practice of compulsory housing management (*Zwangsbewirtschaftung*) lasted until its abolition in 1960, in the GDR, the emergency measure decreed by the Allies at the end of the Second World War was given permanent status in the Housing Control Regulation (*Wohnraumlenkungsverordnung*, or WLVO).⁶ This was intended to

Wandel und Niedergang der Hausbesetzungen in Potsdam in den 1980er und 1990er Jahren (Berlin, 2019).

⁵ Udo Grashoff, *Schwarzwohnen: Die Unterwanderung der staatlichen Wohnraumlenkung der DDR* (Göttingen, 2011); id., 'Cautious Occupiers and Restrained Bureaucrats: *Schwarzwohnen* in the German Democratic Republic. Somewhat Different from Squatting', *Urban Studies*, 56/3 (2019), 548–60.

⁶ Hartmut Häußermann and Walter Siebel, *Soziologie des Wohnens: Eine Einführung in Wandel und Ausdifferenzierung des Wohnens* (Weinheim, 1996), 168.

enable the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), the governing party of the GDR, to secure the right to distribute housing – always in short supply – according to social need, but also in line with the needs of the state. Receiving accommodation was thus ‘the result of an act of favour on the part of the state’.⁷ Decisions about who could move into a particular flat were made by the city authorities, or, to be more precise, by the Housing Policy Departments in municipal and *Kreis* councils. Tenants and landlords were only allowed to sign a rental agreement after an allocation had been issued for the flat.⁸ This practice of housing control made the GDR a ‘welfare dictatorship’.⁹ It allowed the state to allocate flats according to social criteria – for example, by giving families with children preferential treatment. It could also serve regulatory interests, for example, by ‘directing’ employees of the state apparatus and university graduates to particular places of work through offers of housing.

The state’s control over housing, however, was limited by the lack of homes. The SED’s ambitious housing construction programme did not succeed in providing every GDR citizen with adequate living space by 1990. On the contrary, while prefabricated housing estates sprang up on the outskirts of cities, the old inner-city districts fell into disrepair. The housing construction programme used available capacity and workers mainly to build new homes, leaving few resources for the renovation of old buildings. It was not only buildings under municipal management, but also privately owned apartment buildings whose condition deteriorated. Up to 40 per cent of the old housing stock was in private ownership. Rents, frozen at 1936 levels, did not yield enough to finance the renovation of these buildings. The result was not only the typical greyness of East German cities, but also an extremely high vacancy rate of up to 6 per cent of all housing.¹⁰

⁷ Hannsjörg F. Buck, *Mit hohem Anspruch gescheitert: Die Wohnungspolitik der DDR* (Münster, 2004), 169.

⁸ *Zivilgesetzbuch der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik vom 19. Juni 1975*, § 99: ‘Voraussetzung für die Begründung eines Mietverhältnisses ist die Zuweisung des Wohnraums durch das zuständige Organ’, at [<http://www.verfassungen.de/ddr/index.htm>], accessed 26 June 2020.

⁹ Konrad Jarausch, ‘Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship’, in id. (ed.), *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (Oxford, 1999), 47–69.

¹⁰ Buck, *Mit hohem Anspruch gescheitert*, 344.

The growing number of empty, run-down properties exacerbated the situation of permanent shortage. The tension between dilapidation and housing shortages turned the allocation of living space into a civil 'battleground' in socialist society. Many GDR citizens were suspicious of the practices by which housing was allocated, the handling of housing applications was a constant source of controversy, and housing issues ranked first among the grievances (*Eingaben*) addressed to local authorities in the GDR.¹¹

Schwarzwohnen

The vacancy rate was at least partly the result of mismanagement. In many cities, the authorities had lost track of what housing stock was available. Against this background, it is understandable that many people in need of accommodation simply moved into vacant properties without a permit and stayed there for years without any pronounced sense of guilt. In total, more than 10,000, mostly younger, GDR residents got around the state's housing regulations in this way.

While there are no official statistics on the extent of illegal occupation of flats, there is evidence to suggest this figure. In 1979, an audit of empty accommodation uncovered a total of 534 illegally occupied flats in the Berlin district of Friedrichshain alone.¹² In 1987, the Housing Policy Department in the Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg registered 1,270 flats with 'irregular tenancies' ('ungeklärte Mietverhältnisse').¹³ There were illegally occupied flats in other Berlin districts too, though the numbers were not so high. This was not something limited to Berlin, but was also widespread in cities such as Dresden, Halle, Leipzig, Magdeburg, and Jena.

Officially, this phenomenon did not exist, and the large variety of names by which it was known can be seen as reflecting the

¹¹ Felix Mühlberg, *Bürger, Bitten und Behörden: Geschichte der Eingaben in der DDR* (Berlin, 2004), 184.

¹² Archiv des Bundesbeauftragten für die Stasi-Unterlagen der ehemaligen DDR (hereafter BStU), MfS, AKG 4050, fo. 296.

¹³ Meeting of the Prenzlauer Berg district council on 10 Aug. 1987, Vorlage Nr. 395/87, Landesarchiv Berlin (hereafter LAB), C. Rep. 134-02-02, Nr. 1408.

regionalization of – largely invisible – informal living in the GDR. In many places (mainly in the southern districts), it was called *Schwarzwohnen*; in Halle it was often described as *Leben im Abriss* (living in demolition); while in Rostock, the term *Erhaltungswohnen* (conservation or maintenance living) was used towards the end of the GDR's existence. In Berlin, by contrast, the term *Wohnungsbesetzung* (housing occupation) predominated.

The latter term can be misleading because it calls to mind the left-wing housing occupation movement in western Europe. Informal living in the GDR differed from this in that its primary focus was the occupation of a single flat. It was a subversive act, but also a private one, in which political protest or performative 'otherness' played little part. Any display of slogans or banners on the facade of a building would have meant the immediate end of the 'occupation' anyway under the SED dictatorship. Unlike the occupations of buildings that took place from the end of the 1960s in western European capitals such as Amsterdam, London, and Paris, the occupation of flats in the GDR, which happened at about the same time, had no social presence in the form of public actions, leaflets, networks, symbols, graffiti, and so on. A media presence was out of the question. Secret, unnoticed action was what led to success. People acted alone, and did not shout about it from the rooftops. 'We didn't *occupy* buildings, it was not a political act, it was not an act of aggression or of provocation, it was really quite natural: living space was available and we took it. And that was *Schwarzwohnen* – a typical GDR term that no longer exists today.' This is how theatre director Bettina Jahnke remembers her time as an illegal occupier in Leipzig in the late 1980s.¹⁴ In view of the appropriation of vacant housing, one could speak of a partial privatization of neglected public property in the GDR – in contrast to the socialization of private property, which was the aim of West German squatters.¹⁵

Admittedly, in the 1980s, there were a few occupied buildings in the GDR whose residents in some respects modelled themselves on western European squatters. But despite the wild parties held there, these were above all places to live in, and graffiti was limited to the

¹⁴ Interview Bettina Jahnke, Leipzig 2008.

¹⁵ Peter Wurschi, Discussion Statement, Jena 2009.

interior. The facades did not stand out because of their colour or the slogans painted on them, and the police and housing authorities tolerated them for years (for example, on Dufourstraße in Leipzig, or on Lychener Straße in Berlin) before they were cleared – officially because of their dilapidated state. These places had long been way stations; most of the residents were punks who sooner or later moved to the FRG.

The most commonly used term, *Schwarzwohnen*, better expresses the difference from ‘squatting’, but can also create false associations by its linguistic proximity to the term *Schwarzfahren* (fare-dodging). The most important motive was not to save money, but the desire to have one’s own flat. *Schwarz* here referred merely to the fact that official housing controls had been evaded. Many *Schwarzwohner* regularly paid rent. This has left traces in the documents of the district council of Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin, where in the 1980s ‘unexplained rental income’ totalling more than 30,000 marks was registered. The paying-in slips generally lacked the name of the sender, so that the revenue could not be allocated to any particular person.¹⁶ Given the extremely low rents, most *Schwarzwohner* did not find it difficult to pay small amounts. They often sent their money with an expression of hope – never fulfilled – that their voluntary rental payments would automatically result in a tenancy agreement.

The restrained and relatively apolitical attitude of most *Schwarzwohner* went hand in hand with relatively mild repression on the part of the state. The main reason why the GDR authorities took only lenient, ‘soft’ action against the unauthorized use of vacant living space, certainly by comparison with the FRG authorities, was that two statutory regulations blocked each other. On the one hand, the Housing Control Regulation stipulated that flats could only be occupied by those to whom they had been allocated.¹⁷ On the other, for social reasons, the GDR’s civil code (*Zivilgesetzbuch*) made it illegal for tenants to be evicted with nowhere to go; they could only be moved into another flat. Thus, all the authorities could do to curb the practice of *Schwarzwohnen*, which had become increasingly widespread since the 1970s, was to bring misdemeanour proceedings. Administrative fines could

¹⁶ See LAB, C.Rep. 134-02-02, Nr. 1385, 1408.

¹⁷ Buck, *Mit hohem Anspruch gescheitert*, 169.

be a maximum of 500 marks. Irrespective of the fine, the authorities decided in a second step whether other reasonable living space was available so that an eviction order could be issued. If necessary, this was enforced with the threat of fines of up to 5,000 marks. But this was the exception. In many cases, tenants could not be evicted. My random sampling suggests that in Leipzig and Berlin the chances of legalizing the unauthorized occupation of a flat lay between 50 and 85 per cent. Occupants could put forward a number of arguments to the Housing Policy Department, from showing that they had carried out maintenance work at their own expense, to demonstrating a particular need, or threatening to file an application to leave the country. In most cases these resulted in them being able to stay in their flats, which were hardly fit for any other use anyway. This form of self-help became part of the repertoire of everyday life in the GDR during the Honecker era, which was characterized by improvisation and informal relationships. In the following, I will examine in greater detail how this changed during the course of the weakening of the late socialist dictatorship from around 1987, the Peaceful Revolution, and reunification.

Erosion of the Dictatorship: Illegal Cafes (Schwarzcafés) and Bars

While the illegal occupation of vacant flats was, as a rule, a private and individual act, during the last two or three years of the GDR's existence this practice gained something of a public dimension. We must remember that public space in the GDR offered only a very limited range of options for socializing. Cafés and restaurants were rare, and spontaneous visits were mostly difficult, given the limited space.

In response both to this situation and to the style of the existing restaurants, which did not appeal to young people, a number of *Schwarzcafés* and bars emerged in some of the GDR's larger cities, becoming part of a non-confrontational cultural opposition. This was the case in Leipzig, which I will look at more closely in the following. From 1987, an illegal bar subculture developed in various parts of the city, with a run-down villa in the Waldstraße district to the north-west of the city centre proving an especially popular nightspot. In the first half of 1989, the villa was transformed into a trendy bar monthly and at times even

weekly. Wine, beer, and cocktails were served. Sometimes there was hot soup. The host borrowed large numbers of glasses from restaurants for the drinks, and a friend delivered them in a truck. This was necessary because there were up to 200 visitors per evening. The villa was kept under observation by the Stasi. On two occasions, the evening ended with violent attacks by civilians—presumably plain-clothes members of the Stasi. In order to shake off the representatives of state power, the bar was relocated to a dilapidated apartment building in the east of Leipzig. Mattresses were laid out in the flats, a table-tennis table was set up, and the date of the next meeting circulated. The event was attended by fifty to sixty people.¹⁸ The mood was apocalyptic. Many of those who attended viewed their stay in the GDR as time-limited; they were only waiting for their applications to leave the country to be approved.¹⁹

Around 1988, another illegal night café was set up in the east of Leipzig. From the outside, there was nothing to indicate its purpose. The café was in a ground floor flat in an unlit courtyard at Zweinaundorfer Straße 20a. The windows were darkened, so people had to know what they were looking for to find it.²⁰ On entering, visitors found themselves in a large furnished space that looked like a living room. Those who ran the café had brought in tables and chairs from empty flats in the neighbourhood. The walls were painted, there were candles on the tables, and one or two people were on bar duty each night. Good, cheap red wine was served along with *Karlsbader Schnitten* (toast with ham and cheese).²¹

The building at this address was also ‘one of the most important meeting places for the opposition in Leipzig’.²² *Initiativgruppe Leben* (IG Leben), an environmental and human rights group that organized various actions and demonstrations, met there. A number of its members also lived in the building and printed leaflets in a flat under the leaking roof. For World Environment Day in 1988, the group organized the Pleiße Memorial March, which 200 people joined, to remind everyone that the Pleiße—once a river—now crossed the city

¹⁸ Interview Plattenralle, Leipzig 2009.

¹⁹ Interview C., 15 June 2009.

²⁰ Interview Plattenralle, Leipzig 2009.

²¹ Interview Gesine and Christian Oltmanns, Leipzig 2008.

²² Interview Uwe Schwabe, Leipzig 2008.

as a stinking, poisonous sewer in underground pipes. In addition, subgroups of IG Leben worked on human rights issues, the situation in Romania, and perestroika in the Soviet Union. In 1989, it began to network with other groups, and further demonstrations and actions were held, including a street music festival.²³

Other illegally inhabited buildings in Leipzig also offered living space for oppositional groups. It was not only the hard core of the political opposition that found a little freedom here; a broader counter-cultural milieu emerged in the city's dilapidated houses and illegally occupied flats. According to Dieter Rink, before the Peaceful Revolution this milieu 'hardly expressed itself in visible political behaviour because of the repressive political conditions, and it was imperceptible to the public'. In 1989-90, however, it quickly became apparent that the beginnings of a 'multifaceted scene consisting of projects, initiatives, and groups' had developed in the GDR's grey zones and niches, and that they represented similar attitudes critical of civilization as did the new social movements in the FRG.²⁴

In the Shadow of Emigration: 'Flat-Hopping'

Another factor that influenced the practice of *Schwarzwohnen* in the late years of the GDR was the rapid rise in the number of GDR citizens who became refugees and emigrants to the FRG. As early as March 1989, a few months before the mass exodus via Hungary, East Berlin's municipal authorities held a consultation because they could no longer keep up with clearing the flats left behind by emigrants. At this time, 175 flats were unused because they were still full of furniture. It is possible that even more flats had been abandoned because in the case of pensioners who did not return after a visit to the West,

²³ Uwe Schwabe, 'Die IG Leben' (video), Portal Jugendopposition von Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung und Havemann-Gesellschaft, at [<http://www.jugendopposition.de/index.php?id=207>], accessed 26 June 2020.

²⁴ Dieter Rink, 'Das Leipziger Alternativmilieu zwischen alten und neuen Eliten', in Michael Vester, Michael Hofmann, and Irene Zierke (eds.), *Soziale Milieus in Ostdeutschland: Gesellschaftliche Strukturen zwischen Zerfall und Neubildung* (Cologne, 1995), 193-229.

flats could only be registered as vacant once the official tenant's passport had expired.²⁵ By the summer of 1989 at the latest, the number of abandoned flats could no longer be counted.

Many of those who left did not officially cancel their tenancies, but simply gave their keys to people they knew. In this way, large, bourgeois flats became available overnight. This gave people looking for housing an unprecedented chance to improve their situation and, as an eyewitness remembers, resulted in widespread 'flat-hopping'.²⁶

In the north of Leipzig, a flat became vacant in a building where a young woman was still living with her parents in a tiny child's room. The tenant had left for the FRG and given the key to her father, who passed it on to the young woman in March 1990. In the meantime she had got married, and now she and her husband renovated the flat and moved in. When they applied to the district Housing Policy Department to be retrospectively assigned the flat, permission was granted relatively easily – possibly also because she was now pregnant. They were only asked to pay a moderate fine of 300 marks.²⁷

In some cases, flats vacated by emigrants triggered bitter quarrels among the neighbours. This happened in the spring of 1988 in a building in an attractive location in Halle (Saale). A tenant waiting for his application to leave the country to be approved took in a subtenant for the sake of appearance, although the woman in question did not actually move into the fully furnished flat until three days before he left the country. This set off a storm of indignation among the neighbours, who had already made other plans for it. One of the neighbours wanted to install a bathroom in her flat and to annex the two-room flat next door by way of compensation. In turn, the tenant of this flat (which had only a provisional water supply) was planning to move into the flat into which the sub-tenant – an artist – had illegally moved.

The two neighbours applied to the mayor, convinced that sooner or later they would be found to be in the right. They had already discussed their intended flat swap with the Housing Policy Department,

²⁵ Presidium of the Volkspolizei Berlin, criminal police, minutes of the deliberations of the municipal authorities of Berlin, capital of the GDR, Housing Policy Department, 20 Mar. 1989, BStU, MfS, HA IX, Nr. 3618, fos. 9–11.

²⁶ Interview Matthias Klemm, Leipzig 2008.

²⁷ Stadtarchiv Leipzig (hereafter StAL), SB Nord, Nr. 1577, fo. 28, 23–5.

and also provided some denunciatory details that made the artist appear in a bad light. The mayor found in their favour and instructed the head of the Housing Policy Department to evict the unauthorized tenant from the flat. When an attempt was made to seal off the flat, the artist living there negotiated a four-week postponement. Even after that she did not move out. More than a year passed before another eviction order was sent to the artist—this time, however, combined with the offer of another flat that was ready for immediate occupancy.²⁸

Approaches to a New Housing Allocation Policy

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the number of flat occupations in the GDR rose slightly. One indication of this is the increase in the number of misdemeanour proceedings. For example, the Halle-West district registered nineteen illegal occupations in each of the years 1988 and 1989, while in the first eight months of 1990 alone, the housing administration dealt with a total of thirty-three cases.²⁹ Similarly, there is evidence of forty misdemeanour proceedings for ‘the illegal use of living space’ in the same period in the Leipzig-North district.³⁰

An additional indication that illegal occupations were increasing is that even in the newly built prefabricated housing estates, a certain state of anarchy was taking hold. As the West German news magazine *Der Spiegel* reported early in 1990 from Rostock: ‘Citizens of the port city looking for accommodation have long since stopped occupying only ramshackle premises. They are also moving into newly built flats that have already been assigned to tenants, following the motto “first come first served”.’³¹ A meeting of the Housing Department in Halle in July 1990 discussed five specific cases of unauthorized occupation in the housing estate at Halle-Neustadt, one of which led to weeks of wrangling between the Housing Policy Department and the tenant. After her divorce in August 1989, this woman and her child had

²⁸ Stadtarchiv Halle (hereafter StaH), Rat der Stadt Halle, Abteilung Wohnungspolitik/Wohnungswirtschaft, Karton Nr. 84.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ StaL, SB Nord, Nr. 1577.

³¹ ‘Ein bißchen Anarchie’, *Der Spiegel*, 13 (1990), 50–3, at 53.

moved in with her sister, who rented a two-room flat in a newbuild. She paid a share of the rent and the two had also signed a subletting agreement. In the spring of 1990, the sister had moved to the FRG, and since then the mother and child had lived in the flat alone. In the meantime, the young mother had been threatened with a fine of 5,000 marks (a 'D' for Deutsche Mark was later inserted by hand as monetary union had happened in the meantime). Yet the last note on the file was a recommendation to leave the woman in the flat.³²

This rise in the number of illegal occupations went hand in hand with a clear increase in self-confidence on the part of those who determinedly stood up to the housing authorities. In April 1990, for example, two young people from Leipzig who had renovated a flat at their own expense and now wanted an official allocation wrote to their district Housing Policy Department:

It is now relatively clear that the housing industry is tending towards the free market economy. In this context, it would be uneconomical to leave residential accommodation standing empty for months, sometimes years. We noted these new conditions and simply reacted quickly. We pay [rent], have created reasonably rentable living space, help the owner of the building, and (this is very important and must be emphasized) we have freed ourselves from want and distress.³³

A new tone was undoubtedly being struck here. While the arguments and points of view articulated were not necessarily new, the self-confidence of this reply was based on the new freedom to express personal positions openly without having to subscribe to socialism, as had been necessary to get a hearing in the past.

In the GDR, *Schwarzwohnen* had been a taboo subject which was spoken about only among friends. Illegal housing became a public issue only with the Peaceful Revolution. At the Monday demonstrations in the autumn of 1989, protesters called for a new housing policy. 'Create space and legalize communal living – no more *Schwarzwohnen*' a placard demanded on 6 November 1989 in Halle. Soon, specific ideas for democratizing the allocation of housing and making it easier to use

³² StaH, Rat der Stadt Halle, Wohnungspolitik/Wohnungswirtschaft, Nr. 79.

³³ StAL, SB Nord, Nr. 1577, fo. 62.

vacant flats reached the decision-makers. Local citizens' groups were formed in some places. At the beginning of January 1990, a group called the Citizens' Initiative for Conservation Living (Bürgerinitiative Erhaltungswohnen) was founded in Rostock and campaigned for the legalization of occupied flats and houses.³⁴ Its founding meeting was attended by 200 people. Not long afterwards, the group concluded an agreement with the city of Rostock that guaranteed an official allocation to all residents living illegally in flats that were in good repair and had previously been vacant for more than six months. The city administration's intention in passing this regulation was to prevent the sort of 'free anarchy' found in Hamburg's *Hafenstraße*.³⁵ In Halle, too, at a meeting on 31 January 1990, the city council discussed a paper proposing that previously illegal acts of moving should be legalized, and suggesting ways of making it easier to move into flats that had been vacant for more than six months. Citizens were to be encouraged to report empty flats by assuring them that they would receive an allocation for the flat in question if it had not been blocked by the building authorities and had not already been assigned. In addition, the paper even provided for the privatization of flats in poor condition, provided that repairs would be carried out by the new owner within a certain period of time.³⁶ On 14 March 1990, the city council approved an amended version of the paper. Flats were now to be assigned if they had been vacant for more than six weeks. A commission consisting of representatives of the Round Table of the City of Halle and of the authorities was to decide on the allocation of housing. One of the conditions for a positive decision was that the accommodation had not been 'occupied by force'. At the same time, illegal residents were given the right to apply for a retrospective allocation.³⁷

In the context of this relaxation of the rules for allocating living space, students also gained a better chance to move into their own places. It was no longer necessary to break into a flat secretly. The

³⁴ 'Presseerklärung der Bürgerinitiative', *Norddeutsche Neueste Nachrichten*, 10 Jan. 1990.

³⁵ 'Ein bißchen Anarchie', 53.

³⁶ StaH, Rat der Stadt Halle, Wohnungspolitik/Wohnungswirtschaft, Nr. 79.

³⁷ StaH, Rat der Stadt Halle, Bestand A 3.29, council decisions Halle and Halle-Neustadt.

newly founded student council of the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg received a list of vacant flats from the city administration, many of which had water damage from leaking roofs or damp walls, no bath or shower facilities, a communal toilet in the stairwell, and needed extensive renovation. The student council passed the addresses of these flats on to students who felt able to undertake the necessary repairs. Sometimes, the student council officer had to write another letter to the relevant clerk in the housing department to push the matter, but that was usually enough. In this way, around fifty apartments were filled within weeks.³⁸

To sum up: in the first few months of 1990, the GDR's Housing Control Regulation became less and less effective, either as the result of administrative decisions or because, increasingly, it was simply ignored. Decisions were made on a case-by-case basis, and often in favour of the illegal occupants. The status of many people living in flats that had not been officially allocated to them was legalized. Housing managers also concentrated on gaining an overview of how many illegally occupied flats there were, and on putting a stop to the rampant state of anarchy. In Potsdam, for example, the city Council for Housing Policy issued a total of thirteen eviction orders between February and April 1990, threatening fines of 5,000 marks. As a deterrent, the evictions were made public in the press.³⁹ At the same time, however, compromises were negotiated with many people living in illegal housing in Potsdam.

Squatting during the GDR's Final Months

Another problem soon arose. During the rapprochement between East and West Germany, there were incidents of western European-style squatting in many places, taking advantage of temporary weaknesses in state structures in the East. In some cases, West German squatters played a significant part in this.

³⁸ Udo Grashoff, *Studenten im Aufbruch: Unabhängige studentische Interessenvertretungen an der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg 1987–92* (Halle, 2019), 62.

³⁹ Warnecke, *Wir können auch anders'*, 116.

There had been two large waves of squatting in the FRG in the early 1970s and early 1980s. Notwithstanding the different political and social conditions, these had not gone unnoticed in the GDR. From spontaneous occupations to communes and the illegal occupation of entire apartment blocks, there had also been isolated incidents in the GDR that were similar to those in the West. But once again, there were differences. The few 'occupations' in the GDR were usually not the result of collective action, but of gradual, silent proliferation. Although the residents might have had counter-cultural and anarchist inclinations, these were primarily homes for living in, not political projects. Facades were not decorated with banners or graffiti, and they did not send out clear political messages, as this would not have been tolerated by the SED dictatorship.

But in the final year of the GDR's existence, all this changed. The SED dictatorship's administrative threats had lost their deterrent effect, while the coercive means for protecting private property which were normal in capitalist market economies could not yet be used. In this temporary power vacuum, anarchy became a mass phenomenon.

It started in Berlin, where the transition from occupying individual flats to occupying whole buildings began in the summer of 1989. For example, young people from the opposition scene occupied a building at Schönhauser Allee 20 that was slated for demolition. Two further occupations followed at the end of 1989.⁴⁰ While the initiators were mainly concerned with creating living space, at the beginning of 1990 a number of cultural projects were created through squatting.

On 17 January 1990, a number of artists broke into an empty, dilapidated building at Rosenthaler Straße 68 in the Berlin district of Mitte. Before the building could be used, countless buckets of rubble had to be carried out of it—hence its later name, Eimer (bucket). The ceiling between the cellar and the ground floor was unsafe and had to be removed. A bar was built and outlandishly decorated and furnished. Soon the first punk concerts were held here, with the audience standing one floor down and looking up at the band. Those who ran it founded an association called Operative Haltungskunst and declared

⁴⁰ *Hausbesetzer: Selbstdarstellungen von 16 Projekten aus Friedrichshain, Mitte und Prenzlauer Berg*, Thüringer Archiv für Zeitgeschichte 'Matthias Domaschk' (ThürAZ), OAUB-K-14.09.

Eimer a project for musicians and artists, one that deliberately had no commercial intentions.⁴¹ This was demonstrated by a spectacular stunt in April 1990, when musicians threw Western money down from a roof into the assembled crowd and repeatedly encouraged them to shout 'We want to be Westerners'. Instead of the promised 5,000 DM, however, only pennies rained down.⁴² When Eimer got too small, some of those involved moved on. On 13 February they occupied the ruins of a former department store building that was scheduled for demolition and turned it into the 'Kunsthau Tacheles' (Art Centre Tacheles). Its name (the Yiddish word for 'plain speaking') made the intentions of its activist founders clear: this collective of artists, social utopians, and radical anarchists wanted to sweep away the GDR's 'culture of allusion'. According to one of the founders: 'Very few people dared to express their true opinions openly; generally everything was hinted at, suggested, alluded to. This was largely the case even in art, literature, films, music, and in painting and theatre. We wanted to smash this status quo once and for all.'⁴³

From February 1990 at the latest, we can speak of a squatting movement in East Berlin that was largely populated by East Germans, at least initially. At this stage, a number of apartment blocks that had been almost entirely illegally occupied retrospectively declared themselves squats. Given the imminence of reunification, joint actions were soon undertaken by squatters from East and West Berlin. In the days around 1 May 1990, half a street – 2–11 Mainzer Straße in the Berlin district of Friedrichshain – was taken over by squatters who largely came from West Berlin. An important source of inspiration for this action was an appeal by members of the East Berlin 'Church from Below' published in *Interim*, the magazine of the radical left-wing *Autonomen* movement in West Berlin, which called on West Berliners and West Germans to help occupy the neglected row of apartment blocks. Within a very short

⁴¹ Sabine Magerl, 'Eimer gegen alle: In Berlin-Mitte gibt es noch genau ein besetztes Haus. Nun soll es geräumt werden', *Die Zeit*, 25 Jan. 2001.

⁴² 'Sternthaleraktion mit Westmark im Osten', *taz*, 17 Apr. 1990.

⁴³ Rafael Insunza Figueroa, 'Die Entstehung der Tacheles-Bewegung' (Universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias de la Educación, Santiago de Chile, July 1995), in *Tacheles: Eine Geschichte*, at [https://archive.vn/20110408123717/http://super.tacheles.de/cms/new_site/history_start.php], accessed 29 Mar. 2020.

time, around 250 young people transformed the buildings into bastions of multicultural creativity. This was primarily a transfer of ideas and projects from the West Berlin alternative scene. The diversity of these projects, which ranged from a house for women and lesbians to small alternative shops (a late night convenience store and a second-hand bookshop named after the anarchist Max Hoelz), a café and so-called 'Volxküche' (people's kitchen), and a hip-hop and punk club, represented the revitalization of the West Berlin squatter movement.⁴⁴ This was also true of the 'Tuntentower', a gay party venue whose organizers knowingly adopting the word *Tunte* – a derogatory German word for a gay man. Among the thirty residents there were only four East Germans, who ironically dubbed themselves the 'token Osis'. The West Germans set the tone and influenced the debates, pointing to their many years of experience on the squatting scene.⁴⁵

The anarchical convergence of East and West encouraged a wave of squatting in the East. In May, the Housing Policy Department in the Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg was temporarily occupied, which prompted a meeting between squatters from the Berlin districts of Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg, and Friedrichshain and state representatives. The latter issued an assurance that they were prepared, in principle, to grant 'all squatters legal status' provided the buildings they were occupying were structurally sound. In the fifty-four occupied buildings, twenty-eight squatters were promptly granted residence permits and sixteen received usage agreements. An Alliance of Occupied Buildings was set up, and by the end of July 1990, eighty-one buildings in East Berlin belonged to it.⁴⁶ Squatters' councils represented the interests of the young squatters vis-à-vis government agencies and property owners. One important result of the negotiations was the 'no eviction guarantee' issued by the Berlin municipal authorities for all buildings in East Berlin that had been occupied before 24 July 1990, while all

⁴⁴ Susan Arndt et al. (eds.), *Berlin Mainzer Straße: 'Wohnen ist wichtiger als das Gesetz'* (Berlin, 1992), 43–55.

⁴⁵ Juliet Bashore, 'Battle of Tuntentower Part 2', at [<https://vimeo.com/165788327>], accessed 9 July 2020.

⁴⁶ 'Bündnis der besetzten Häuser', status: 24 July 1990, Archiv der Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft, NFO-PA/RBa 27 (1) Wohnungspolitik/Instandbesetzung 1990.

sites occupied after this date were to be vacated within twenty-four hours. At the height of the squatting movement in East Berlin, a total of around 130 buildings were occupied.⁴⁷ Among them was a house in the Berlin district of Lichtenberg which was occupied by right-wing extremists—the ‘odd one out’, so to speak, among the otherwise left-wing alternative projects.

As in Berlin, the spring of 1990 also saw a major squatting campaign in Leipzig, but it was organized by locals who had rather different motives. The disappointing results of the Volkskammer⁴⁸ elections on 18 March 1990 led the activists of New Forum⁴⁹ to conclude that there was no point in continuing to engage in national politics. Instead, they turned to organizing local actions. An association known as the Connewitzer Alternative was founded and registered as early as April 1990. It looked into the cases of fourteen empty buildings slated for demolition, published a call for an alternative housing project, and then distributed the flats to about forty young people. The occupations were approved both by the local *Abschnittsbevollmächtigte*⁵⁰ and a district councillor. The municipal owners of the building concluded usage agreements with the squatters. Social and cultural institutions such as a café, a ‘people’s kitchen’, a housing project for foreigners, a gallery, a fair-trade shop, and an alternative bookshop were set up. Concerts and big street festivals were held there in the summer of 1990. As an activist noted in retrospect, ‘this was simultaneously a farewell from “grand politics”, and from the “grand aims” of New Forum and the other citizens’ movements’.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ilko Sascha Kowalczyk, “‘Wohnen ist wichtiger als das Gesetz’: Historische Streiflichter zu Wohnungsnot und Mieterwiderstand in Berlin’, in Arndt et al. (eds.), *Berlin Mainzer Straße*, 231–59, at 259.

⁴⁸ The East German legislature, the Volkskammer, was the highest organ of state power in the GDR.

⁴⁹ Neues Forum was a political movement formed in the months leading up to the collapse of the East German state. It called for a dialogue about democratic reforms, and aimed to ‘reshape’ society with the largest possible popular participation.

⁵⁰ *Abschnittsbevollmächtigte* were community police officers in the GDR who carried out conventional policing duties, but also played a part in state surveillance.

⁵¹ Dieter Rink, ‘Der Traum ist aus? Hausbesetzer in Leipzig-Connewitz in den 90er Jahren’, in Roland Roth and Dieter Rucht (eds.), *Jugendkulturen, Politik und Protest: Vom Widerstand zum Kommerz?* (Opladen, 2000), 119–40, at 122.

The Neustadt neighbourhood of Dresden also developed into another hotspot of the alternative scene. Here, too, trendy bars opened, most with the ambience of a jumble sale, and ironically displayed souvenirs of the SED dictatorship. In the last years of the GDR's existence, a number of illegal cafés and bars had opened, and now they became a public attraction in many places. In Dresden, an autonomous zone known as the 'Bunte Republik Neustadt' (the Colourful Republic of Neustadt) was declared for three days – partly out of high spirits, and partly in protest at the impending monetary union.

The Question of Violence

The wave of squatting in Berlin was unique in that it was born out of the euphoric mingling between East and West Germans. The colourful diversity of the western European alternative scene provided a positive point of reference, and at first glance many occupied buildings in the East resembled those in the West. But soon the fundamentally different experiences of life in a capitalist democracy and a socialist dictatorship led to conflicts, sparked particularly by the question of violence.

In the GDR, physical violence played almost no part in the squatting movement. Evictions, which were rare in any case, generally occurred without the use of force. In most cases, illegal occupants were able to negotiate compromises with the state authorities. This experience led most East Berlin squatters to avoid confrontations with the police and state power as far as possible, and to seek negotiated solutions. A characteristic example was the behaviour of those squatting in the building at Schönhauser Allee 20, which was right next to a police station. In view of the radical right-wing attacks which began in the spring of 1990, they agreed a 'security partnership' with the *Volkspolizei*. Subsequently, members of the *Volkspolizei* often lined up in rows three deep in front of this and other occupied buildings to protect them from attack. Such arrangements did not continue in reunified Berlin. Conflicts between squatters and police had escalated violently for many years in West Berlin, and this militant culture carried over to the East after reunification.

Jörg Zickler, who had moved to Berlin from an illegally occupied building in Jena in 1988, was one of those who had negotiated the security

partnership in East Berlin. In 1990, he took part in the ‘squatters’ council’ and met West Berliners there who explained that squatting was a political act, which was why they made sure that they always had access to alternative accommodation in the event of an eviction.⁵² Their view of squatting as a symbolic act meant that some West Germans were more prepared to countenance violent escalation, and even to risk total failure.

By contrast, for most East Germans a squat was their permanent home. While their positive experience of the security partnership led East German squatters to act cautiously, some squatters from West Berlin made fun of the ‘gentle autonomists’ from the East. And more than that, they exported their culture of violence. This showed itself for the first time on 24 June 1990 at a protest against the building occupied by neo-Nazis on Weitlingstraße in the Lichtenberg district of Berlin, which was attended by several thousand people. Accustomed to years of violent confrontation with the West Berlin police, around 300 masked demonstrators attacked the *Volkspolizei* with steel balls, sawed-off chair legs, and alarm pistols towards the end of the protest. Twenty-one police officers were injured and four personnel carriers were burned out. The appropriation of the East by the West—the subject of several recent historical analyses⁵³—could be seen everywhere in the GDR in 1990, and even extended as far as the alternative milieu.⁵⁴

Added to this was another factor that practically forced a transition to defensive militancy. Attacks by skinheads put pressure on squatters in many East German towns and cities. A right-wing extremist scene had already formed in the GDR in the 1980s, and now, encouraged by logistical support from the FRG (including from the right-wing Republicans party),⁵⁵ it appeared more militantly in public. This included

⁵² Interview Jörg Zickler, Berlin 2008.

⁵³ Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, *Die Übernahme: Wie Ostdeutschland Teil der Bundesrepublik wurde* (Munich, 2019); Steffen Mau, *Lütten Klein: Leben in der ostdeutschen Transformationsgesellschaft* (Berlin, 2019); see also Wolfgang Dümcke and Fritz Vilmar, *Kolonialisierung der DDR: Kritische Analysen und Alternativen des Einigungsprozesses* (Münster, 1995); Andrej Holm, ‘Kolonie DDR: Zur ökonomischen Lage in Ostdeutschland’, *telegraph*, 1998, 1, at [<http://www.telegraph.ostbuero.de/1-98/1-98holm.htm>], accessed 14 Nov. 2020.

⁵⁴ ‘Anarchie ist Arbeit’, *Der Spiegel*, 6 Aug. 1990.

⁵⁵ Die Republikaner is a nationalist political party in Germany which opposes immigration.

attacks by skinheads and hooligans on left-wing alternative projects. Residents at Schönhauser Allee 20 in Berlin, for example, reacted to attacks in April 1990 by making structural changes. They reinforced the entrance door from the inside with beams, secured the stairwells with iron barriers, and hung nets in the hallway that were designed to fall on intruders. The situation was similar in neighbouring Potsdam, where the occupation of Dortustraße 65 in December 1989 had created a public meeting place for left-wing young people and punks. From February 1990, skinheads regularly attacked the building, and unlike in Berlin, the *Volkspolizei* in Potsdam offered no protection. In view of this, the squatters hung barbed wire from the facade, installed large spotlights to illuminate the area in front of the house, and held regular patrols so that they could issue timely warnings in the event of an attack.⁵⁶



Fig. 1: *Volkspolizei bei Otto*. Parked police car in front of a squat on Gutenbergstraße in Potsdam, 1991. © Hassan J. Richter

⁵⁶ Warnecke, *Wir können auch anders*, 122.

The Street Battle on Mainzer Straße as a Turning Point

With reunification, the legal and regulatory framework for squatters changed fundamentally. Neglected 'public property' in the GDR, with its many empty flats, had provided a natural habitat for *Schwarzwohner*, and the activist squatting movement had enjoyed a brief, intense heyday in the last few months of the GDR's existence. But with reunification in October 1990, the rights of owners and official users were fully restored. This development, imposed by police violence, was experienced as brutal repression by the anarchist squatters, who in the spring and summer of 1990 had enjoyed something like fools' licence. Yet the squatters themselves also contributed to the violent escalation.

The switch from tolerance to confrontation was already becoming apparent in September 1990, when negotiations between the squatters' alliance and the East Berlin municipal authorities broke down. Wolfram Kempe, at that time the spokesperson of the Prenzlauer Berg's squatters' council, remembers: 'For the municipal authorities, the principle of land ownership declared sacrosanct by the West Berlin consultants from the Department for Building and Housing prevented a pragmatic solution.' And in the squatters' representative body, 'squatters from East Berlin, who were working for more pragmatic solutions to secure their buildings, found it difficult to come to an agreement with West Berliners who were fighting the "corrupt capitalist system"'.⁵⁷ As the hardliners on both sides had prevailed by September, it was no surprise when, five days after reunification, the city representatives broke off negotiations with the squatters for good. The clearance of Mainzer Straße was the turning point. The confrontation between squatters and the police began on 12 November, when three buildings in the district of Lichtenberg that had been occupied after the agreed deadline of 24 July 1990 were cleared. A protest organized by the squats on Mainzer Straße led to the building of barricades and triggered street fighting reminiscent of a civil war. It ended on 14 November 1990 with the clearance of the whole row of houses.

⁵⁷ Wolfram Kempe, 'Aufbruchstimmung am Prenzlauer Berg: Hausbesetzungen in der Dunckerstraße', in Bernt Roder and Bettina Tacke (eds.), *Prenzlauer Berg im Wandel der Geschichte: Leben rund um den Helmholtzplatz* (Berlin, 2004), 223–41, at 225.

Although the site of the conflict was in the East Berlin district of Friedrichshain, most of the actors were West Germans. This applied to the police officers deployed there from the West, as well as to those who defended Mainzer Straße. More than 300 squatters were arrested, and only 17 per cent of them came from East Berlin.⁵⁸ Thus it was more of a re-run of earlier street battles in Kreuzberg, with the squatters barricading themselves against police formations advancing with water cannons and tear gas.

GDR civil rights activists desperately tried to prevent escalation, coining the slogan 'No violence'. But unlike in the previous year, when the renunciation of force had made the Peaceful Revolution possible, this time they were crushed between the two fronts. In vain civil rights activists formed a human chain between police formations and barricades, and in vain they tried to mediate in the negotiations. For hours, the co-founder of New Forum, Bärbel Bohley, tried to speak on the phone to the responsible politicians in the Senate of Berlin, the executive body governing the city. Unlike the SED, the CDU showed no willingness to enter into dialogue. In view of this, the 'punk philosopher' Lothar Feix went so far as to claim that 'the war for Mainzer Straße was for many people the end of the illusion of civil rights'.⁵⁹

But it seems that many – though by no means all – West German squatters had apparently set out to engineer their own failure, or to sell it as dearly as possible. This was the impression gained by Bärbel Bohley when she tried to find a non-violent, negotiated solution for Mainzer Straße during the street battle. 'I think they are often just performing a play', the disappointed civil rights activist said in an interview after the evictions. 'If anyone could have achieved a breakthrough, it would have been the squatters, who could have offered genuinely non-violent resistance.' But at a street meeting on Mainzer Straße, Bohley felt that

⁵⁸ See 'Die Mainzer Straße in Berlin-Friedrichshain von 1894 bis heute', at [<https://mainzerstrasse.berlin/toetungsbereite-chaoten-gegen-brutale-bullen-die-raeumung-der-mainzer-strasse-am-14-november-1990/index.html>], accessed 9 July 2020.

⁵⁹ Lothar Feix, "Die DDR existierte eigentlich nicht mehr." (Der Prenzlauer Berg, & was hat Kultur mit Politik zu tun?), in Bernd Gehrke and Wolfgang Rüdtenklau (eds.), . . . *das war doch nicht unsere Alternative: DDR-Oppositionelle zehn Jahre nach der Wende* (Münster, 1999), 44–63, at 59.

the squatters had no confidence in their own utopia and only wanted to stage a good exit by building barricades and throwing stones, thereby causing the failure of their own project. 'In this respect, they behaved just as stupidly as the politicians', said a disappointed Bohley.⁶⁰

East Berlin Squatters under Pressure to Conform

It was not only the documentary filmmaker Thomas Heise who saw the fact 'that one of the first measures taken by the Senate of Berlin was to restore property rights entered in the land registers and to establish peace and order by evicting the utopia that had developed in the anarchy of the transition' as a missed 'opportunity to make fundamental changes'.⁶¹ The evacuation of Mainzer Straße, which the majority of the population undoubtedly supported in their desire for order, sent some of those who had already been in opposition in the GDR back to the fringes of society. The East Berlin activists of the Church from Below initiative, whose appeal had helped trigger the occupation of Mainzer Straße, summed up the situation thus: 'The market value of flats, seen as goods, has risen to such an extent that it no longer bears any proportion to their function as living space, and attacks on that value are seen as a political issue.' The 'humane and relaxed approach' that had developed during the mass illegal occupation of flats in the last days of the GDR was 'no longer possible under current conditions', the authors of a book published in 1997 pointed out with regret.⁶²

The clearance of Mainzer Straße had exactly the deterrent effect on other squatters that West Berlin politicians had intended. 'Squatters and everyone else were shown what is tolerated in this state and what is not', as one squatter said bitterly.⁶³ The Senate's harsh response and the

⁶⁰ Interview with Bärbel Bohley, in Arndt et al. (eds.), *Berlin Mainzer Straße*, 182–6.

⁶¹ Anke Westphal, 'Dieser Haufen Geschichte. Die DDR ist Material, das längst nicht genug befragt wird: Ein Gespräch mit Thomas Heise', *Berliner Zeitung*, 29 July 2009.

⁶² Kirche von Unten (ed.), *Wunder gibt es immer wieder: Fragmente zur Geschichte der offenen Arbeit Berlin und der Kirche von Unten* (Berlin, 1997), 136.

⁶³ Arndt et al. (eds.), *Berlin Mainzer Straße*, 213.

failure of the squatters' militant strategy on Mainzer Straße increased the pressure on the remaining squats in East Berlin to conform, and these were gradually converted into legally compliant forms. Immediately after the evacuation of Mainzer Straße, the Rehab Squat Round Table (later renamed Working Group for Repairs) was convened in Prenzlauer Berg. Through it, squatters and state representatives negotiated a framework agreement to cover occupied buildings. The agreement provided for residents to be given individual rental contracts, while also guaranteeing their collective right to determine who should occupy flats that became vacant and to use common space. 'This framework, formally initialled by all those involved in the Round Table at the Working Group's ninth consultation on 11 January 1991 and later ratified by the counter-signature of each individual association, was considered a model of success in Berlin because from then on it not only prevented large-scale evictions of squatters in Prenzlauer Berg, but also made possible the legalization of squats after the deadline set by the municipal authorities', was the judgement of Wolfram Kempe.⁶⁴ The cost of the repairs which some squatters had undertaken could be set off against the rent, so that many residents lived very cheaply for a considerable length of time.

Some of the alternative projects dating from the summer of 1990 were even continued. Thus a new 'Tuntenhaus' was set up at Kastanienallee 86 in Prenzlauer Berg. This was legalized, but was less politicized than its predecessor on Mainzer Straße had been.⁶⁵ For the squatters at Schliemannstraße 39 it was even more difficult to realize their former ideals. They were among the last to accept the framework agreement, at the end of 1991. Abandoning their 'hard line on squatting' and agreeing to individual rental contracts changed the way they lived together in the building, remembers Jörg Zickler, who had squatted in the house with friends. The solidarity they aspired to could only be achieved in part. The house bar, LSD, at the front of the building was a constant source of strife. There were quite a few families with children living in the building, and they were anything but enthusiastic when a band started playing at 2 a.m. without prior

⁶⁴ Kempe, 'Aufbruchstimmung', 226.

⁶⁵ Bashore, 'Battle of Tuntenhaus Part 2'.

notice. Nor did the residents' meetings create a sense of community. It was impossible to agree on anything, which was perhaps also due to the lack of common denominator: 'We had a relatively large number of welfare cases—alcoholics, junkies, and the like—in the building', recalls Zickler, 'but we had no overarching idea. Of course, we always met for demos, but never everyone, only a few politically active people from the front of the building.'⁶⁶

Another squat at Schönhauser Allee 5 similarly lost its utopian ideals, as Carlo Jordan describes: 'It makes a difference whether I open up a free space under the conditions of a dictatorship, or under today's social conditions. When I did it under socialism, creatives moved in, people who wanted to do something themselves; projects with a similar approach in our democracy today attract welfare cases, blockheads, and drug addicts. There were enormous levels of vandalism in the building. A completely stoned woman jumped out of the window, the free space was only occupied by destructive forces, and those who created it suddenly had to lay down the law to keep the project going.'⁶⁷

Lost in Transformation?

With legalization, much of the colourful anarchy of 1990 was lost—though not overnight, but gradually. Many projects continued to exist for many years, such as Eimer and the Kunsthaus Tacheles. In some squats, too, it was possible to ensure the survival of alternative lifestyles. Some East Berliners, however, felt that they were being relegated to the sidelines by more professional or business-minded 'Wessis'. Thus the musician André Greiner-Pol pointed out that commercial interests had finally prevailed against the original intentions behind Eimer: 'Afterwards so many West Germans came into the building, and they just did better. We didn't want to do anything better at first, we just wanted to be creative in our own way. The Wessis were active, threw their cash around, they actually ruined everything with their business

⁶⁶ Interview Jörg Zickler, Berlin 2008.

⁶⁷ Interview Dr Carlo Jordan, Berlin 2008.

dealings.⁶⁸ In other buildings, former *Schwarzwohner* suddenly found that they were tenants of their former neighbours, West German ex-squatters who had been smart enough to get funding from the Senate of Berlin to pay for roof repairs and purchase the property.⁶⁹

In some cases, lack of financial resources was the deciding factor in putting an end to alternative housing projects. This was the case with the 'unofficially occupied building' at Rykestraße 27, in Prenzlauer Berg, mentioned at the start of this article. Andreas Münstermann had founded an association there with other residents in 1990. Little by little, international residents moved in, and the house retained its creative flair for a while. The landlord worked hard to enforce law and order, wrote down the names of those who lived in the building from the doorbells, and gave everyone a rental agreement. At the end of 1994 the building was sold at auction. The association tried to save the alternative housing project, but it did not have enough funds to buy the building. By the end of 1996, all the former tenants had moved out.⁷⁰

While order was restored in Berlin in the course of 1991, some of its squatters relocated to Potsdam. As the redevelopment of the inner city was still in full swing, many properties lay empty there. Those who had moved from West Berlin encountered a scene that was not as well organized as that in Berlin. They were surprised, for example, that the Potsdam squatters had neither infoshops nor squatters' councils, and that they did not take it for granted that an occupied house had to be identifiable from the outside by the banners it displayed.⁷¹ The local police consisted mainly of East Germans who wanted to avoid a violent escalation like that on Mainzer Straße. The city administration, too, pursued a course of temporary tolerance, albeit with the medium-term goal of clearing all buildings without exception. For now, however, given the thirty buildings occupied by squatters in 1991, Potsdam was declared Germany's unofficial 'squattening capital'.⁷²

⁶⁸ Roland Galenza and Heinz Havemeister (eds.), *Wir wollen immer artig sein . . . : Punk, New Wave, HipHop und Independent-Szene in der DDR von 1980 bis 1990* (Berlin, 2005), 673.

⁶⁹ Interview Dr Carlo Jordan, Berlin 2008.

⁷⁰ Interview Andreas Münstermann, Berlin 2008.

⁷¹ Warnecke, *'Wir können auch anders'*, 130.

⁷² *Ibid.* 153.



Fig. 2: *Nichts war unmöglich*. Squat at 65 Dortustraße in Potsdam, 1991. © Hassan J. Richter

The influx of West Germans, who boasted of their experience in West Berlin, sometimes triggered internal conflicts. But the increase in the number of squatters in Potsdam also contributed to the development of a functioning ‘infrastructure of alternative life’ in the occupied houses, especially on Gutenbergstraße. In addition to collective living and bars, cafés, and concert venues, an ecological housing project was also developed here.⁷³ In the long term, at least some of these were converted into legal forms, such as concert venues, bars, and left-wing information centres and book shops. Interestingly, this was also the result of a transfer from West Berlin. The Social Pedagogical Institute there, which had already worked on the legalization of squatting in the 1980s, developed a concept for converting the occupation projects into legal forms, which usually involved relocation to an alternative property.⁷⁴

⁷³ Ibid. 138.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 256.

Similar processes of normalization took place at the same time in Leipzig and Dresden. In Dresden's Neustadt, around twenty buildings occupied by squatters were either cleared or turned into housing co-operatives.⁷⁵ In the Connewitz district of Leipzig, neo-Nazi attacks led almost all of the first generation of squatters to leave their homes, and young, mostly radical left-wing and anarchist squatters continued the occupation. After the escalation of violent conflicts, threats of eviction, and a Squatter Congress held in 1995, the squats were transferred to the ownership of the Alternative Housing Association Connewitz (AWC) in 1996.⁷⁶

In Potsdam, the transformation phase marked by conflict and co-operation between authorities and squatters dragged on until 2000. After illegal housing and squatting became obsolete with reunification, a tough process of normalization began there, as in other East German cities, and squatting disappeared as a result.

What Remains?

What significance did the experience of *Schwarzwohnen* or squatting have for those involved even after 1989? Undoubtedly, moving into illegal housing was an experience that encouraged young people to act independently in the last years of the GDR, and also contributed to undermining the dictatorship's claims to power. Added to this, in 1990 they had the experience of almost unlimited freedom to shape their own lives, at least for a few months. A new era began in the autumn of 1990, when clear legal regulations significantly reduced their freedom to negotiate with property owners and the authorities. The large variety of options for negotiation that had existed in the GDR was lost. Before 1990, the state had assigned flats in an act of

⁷⁵ Andrej Holm and Armin Kuhn, 'Squatting and Gentrification in East Germany since 1989/90', in Freia Anders and Alexander Sedlmaier (eds.), *Public Goods versus Economic Interests: Global Perspectives on the History of Squatting* (New York, 2016), 278–304, at 289.

⁷⁶ Dieter Rink, 'Der Traum ist aus?', in Roland Roth and Dieter Rucht (eds.), *Jugendkulturen, Politik und Protest: Vom Widerstand zum Kommerz?* (Wiesbaden, 2000), 119–40.

favour, and had also prescribed how large the flat could be. At the same time, the widespread neglect of property in public ownership hastened the partial erosion of the concept of ownership. Those who lived in illegal housing did not see themselves as owners, but claimed usage rights. Tatiana Golova's observation that in Leningrad, substantial parts of the population did not see the private appropriation of public property as a criminal act probably to some extent also applied to the GDR.⁷⁷

With the introduction of the market economy, not only could everyone freely choose where to live, with price taking over the regulatory function previously exercised by the state, but clear normative signals were now sent to protect property. Thirty years after reunification, *Schwarzwohnen* no longer exists. In the new German federal states (on the territory of the former GDR) and in Berlin, there are occasional cases of squats which temporarily develop into 'islands' of alternative and counter-cultural life. But these follow western European squatting traditions and, as the most recent eviction in Berlin shows, have no chance of survival in the long term.⁷⁸

Is *Schwarzwohnen* purely a historical manifestation of life in the GDR which has no relevance today? The economic and political framework has changed radically since 1990, and a large percentage of the old building stock in Germany's new federal states has been renovated. But many buildings from the Wilhelmine period remained empty for some time. In view of this, a *Wächterhaus* (guard house) initiative started in Leipzig in 2004. Residents may live and work rent-free in these vacant buildings, paying only the running costs. In return, they maintain and repair the building, while acting as 'guardians' against weather damage and vandalism. The legal basis of this arrangement is a time-limited agreement concluded between owner and user, granting the residents permission to use the property.

⁷⁷ Tatiana Golova, 'Squatting and the Moral Economy of Public-Private Relations: Leningrad/St Petersburg', *Baltic Worlds*, 11/1-2 (Apr. 2016), 57-67. On the topic of property, see the *Schriftgespräch* with Kerstin Brückweh in this issue of the *GHIL Bulletin*.

⁷⁸ 'Berlin Police Clear Anarchist-Occupied House Liebig 34', Deutsche Welle, at [<https://www.dw.com/en/berlin-police-clear-anarchist-occupied-house-liebig-34/a-55211590>], accessed 13 Nov. 2020.

In the sixteen years of its existence, HausHalten e.V. in Leipzig alone has created thirty-two such 'guard houses'. Fourteen of them have been converted to new uses and eighteen continue to exist as residential properties. Chemnitz, Dresden, Erfurt, Görlitz, Halle, and Zittau have all set up associations with similar aims, which have also created guard houses.⁷⁹ Unlike the anarchist squatting that was typical of the West, these are not subversive, provocative acts, but unspectacular, individual attempts to solve housing problems in the tradition of *Schwarzwohnen* in the GDR. Like some of the housing co-operatives that have grown out of the squatting movement, guard houses combine a desire to preserve valuable buildings with the provision of free space for alternative lifestyles. They are as far removed from the logic of capitalist exploitation as living in illegal housing once was from the political and bureaucratic logic of the SED dictatorship.

⁷⁹ HausHalten e.V., at [<http://www.haushalten.org/de/index.asp>], accessed 26 June 2020.

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