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ARTICLE

Living through the *Wende*: Introduction  
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# LIVING THROUGH THE WENDE

## INTRODUCTION

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It has long been commonly held that state socialism and private life at home were at odds in East Germany. For GDR citizens and the regime, however, housing and the home had an important political valence that was ambiguous from the very outset, as this Special Issue on experiences of the *Wende*<sup>1</sup> and the ensuing transformations will show, building on the work of earlier historians. Housing created an opportunity for people to retreat from the state to a place where citizens could literally ‘allow themselves room’ for private activities. The term *Nischengesellschaft* (niche society), coined in 1983, implied that in the GDR, the home was a space where citizens could escape from the regime to carve out their own slice of happiness.<sup>2</sup> After the fall of the Berlin Wall, this idea was often used to explain the political functionality of the East German state. Paul Betts, for example, suggests that

<sup>1</sup> *Die Wende* (‘the turning point’) refers to the historical period around German reunification, 1989–90.

<sup>2</sup> Günter Gaus, the Permanent Representative of the FRG in the GDR, spoke of ‘individuelles Glück im Winkel’ – of people finding individual happiness in quiet corners. Id., *Wo Deutschland liegt: Eine Ortsbestimmung* (Hamburg, 1983). For *Nischengesellschaft* and early oral history approaches in the GDR, see Dorothee Wierling, *Geboren im Jahr Eins: Der Jahrgang 1949 in der DDR – Versuch einer Kollektivbiographie* (Berlin, 2002). Wierling’s examination of everyday life in the GDR managed to bring to light East German citizens’ ‘tacit accommodations’ with the political system. Another oral history project that is also particularly relevant in this context is Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato, and Dorothee Wierling (eds.), *Die volkseigene Erfahrung: Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR. 30 biographische Eröffnungen* (Berlin, 1991). For this 1987 project, a group of West German researchers was granted access – for the very first time – to undertake field work in the GDR, during which they conducted interviews with citizens.

a new social contract was struck after 1971 following the leadership transition to Erich Honecker, allowing GDR citizens more latitude in the private sphere in return for outward compliance.<sup>3</sup> Yet the private sphere could hardly be detached from regulated day-to-day life in a dictatorship. Rather, the two interacted in myriad ways. Sometimes, for example, the state did not passively tolerate citizens' housing practices, but challenged or took advantage of them. Nor did the home and the inner life it apparently protected necessarily destabilize political power; sometimes they were even a stabilizing factor.

In 1989–90, when the people's 'home'—in this case, I refer to the GDR state, not housing—ceased to exist, what did this mean for the private homes and housing practices of GDR citizens? How did East Germans navigate the politics of the socialist home at a time when socialism was crumbling?

Thirty years after German unification, we asked two historians—Kerstin Brückweh and Udo Grashoff—and the artist Sonya Schönberger to explore the theme of housing and home before, during, and after the *Wende*. They each show that housing and the home in

<sup>3</sup> Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford, 2010). Several historians have studied emancipatory practices in the GDR and contrasted them with the repressive structure of the state. Konrad Jarausch coined the neologism 'welfare dictatorship' (*Fürsorgediktatur*) to describe the GDR's paradoxical regime, which was clearly repressive while at the same time allowing its citizens to lead fairly ordinary lives. See Konrad H. Jarausch, 'Realer Sozialismus als Fürsorgediktatur: Zur begrifflichen Einordnung der DDR', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, B20 (1998), 33–46. Others have described the GDR as 'a society steeped in authority' (*durchherrschte Gesellschaft*) characterized by a dictatorship that determined social structures, but also refrained from interfering in certain activities, and have argued that this led in part to the failure of the state. See the contributions by Alf Lütke and Jürgen Kocka in Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka, and Hartmut Zwahr (eds.), *Sozialgeschichte der DDR* (Stuttgart, 1994), 188–216 and 547–53. Mary Fullbrook has examined the insistence of many former East Germans that they led 'perfectly ordinary lives' and spoken of the 'people's paradox', which she takes as the starting point for her social history of East Germany. See ead., *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, 2005). For an overview of various concepts in GDR historiography, see Mary Fullbrook, 'Approaches to German Contemporary History since 1945: Politics and Paradigms', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, Online-Ausgabe, 1 (2004), 31–50, at [<https://doi.org/10.14765/zsf.dok-2096>].

socialism, built on the assertion that they were superior to those in the West, were contested spaces. Peeking behind the curtains of private homes, the answers our contributors found are not straightforward. Rather, their findings encapsulate the tensions between housing, the home, and the state during the *Wende*. Housing and the home, in other words, were never isolated and detached from their socio-economic environment. They were where the private and the public, possession and dispossession, and the inside and the outside intersected. The contributions do not refer simply to the metaphorical and often slippery concept of ‘home’ as an analytical framework. Nor do they focus solely on the practical, material, or legal aspects of ‘housing’. Instead, they present the home as a highly politicized and emotive space. When looking at housing practices and the politics of housing, what was at stake, in fact, was a sense of belonging. Can a house be a home when the state starts to crumble and is shaken to its core?

After the end of the GDR, it was almost twenty years before historians discovered housing in East Germany as a research topic. Back then, authors stepped on to mostly uncharted historiographical territory, which has expanded since.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, they researched practices that did not even officially exist, such as illegal squatting. In these cases, the lack of archival sources was a challenge. While the scarcity of official sources made it difficult to tap into research topics, the documents, official letters, and copies of Stasi files that were accessible were by no means untainted and unbiased. While this is true of any historical source, the context of the GDR dictatorship and the ‘power structures and violences . . . upon which the archive is built’,<sup>5</sup> make the lack of archival neutrality more apparent and reading against the grain more difficult.

All our authors therefore chose to work with private eyewitness accounts articulating an experience that contrasted with the official documents—either exclusively, like Schönberger, or in addition to archival research. Since interviews were a fundamental part of their

<sup>4</sup> See the individual articles for further literature.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Freeland reflected on this aspect recently in relation to her research into gender-based violence in socialist East Germany, at [<https://ghil.hypotheses.org/251#more-251>], accessed 8 Feb. 2021. I thank her and Christina von Hodenberg for their comments on this introduction.

projects, two of our authors (Brückweh and Grashoff) additionally had to embrace discrepancies between the pragmatic language and expressions used in the official archive, and the often emotional and lively descriptions given by eyewitnesses. Given the tensions this created for historical enquiry itself, we asked all our contributors to reflect on the particular methodological challenges of researching contemporary histories, especially in dictatorships. How useful are official sources and state archives if any insights they can give into peoples' living realities are biased? How can they be reconciled with clashing oral histories and eyewitness accounts? Can memory simply become a historical source for events that happened almost yesterday?<sup>6</sup>

Although the *Wende* is still very present in current memory, the years 1989 and 1990 have long been seen by the German public as years of rupture. Yet history is not an isolated accumulation of events. The *Wende*, like all events, falls into a period of continuity—in this case, one that was dominated by experiences before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. 'Like all revolutions', Paul Betts has recently argued, '1989 brought in its train a mixed bag of dreams and disappointments, stark ruptures and stubborn continuities.'<sup>7</sup> Hence, what further unites our contributions is their refusal to subscribe to the notion that 1989 was a historical *Stunde Null*, or zero hour. Looking at the *Wende* as an event embedded in the context of long-term developments, the authors do not assume that peoples' lives changed immediately. Instead, they are interested in aspects of transition during the last phase of the GDR, the peaceful revolution of 1989, and the ensuing transformation. To what extent did certain housing practices persist when surrounding circumstances changed? What strategies of self-preservation and self-organization existed within communities in order to keep their homes

<sup>6</sup> Portelli highlights how these kinds of contradictions can be productive for historians. See Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop*, 12/1 (1981), 96–107; also reprinted in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998). See also Niethammer et al. (eds.), *Die volkseigene Erfahrung*.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Betts, '1989 at Thirty: A Recast Legacy', *Past & Present*, 244/1 (2019), 271–305, at 274, at [<https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtz016>]. See also his recent *Ruin and Renewal: Civilising Europe after World War II* (New York, 2020), and Marcus Böick, Constantin Goschler, and Ralph Jessen (eds.), *Jahrbuch Deutsche Einheit* (Berlin, 2020).

and housing, and what conflicts developed over time? The authors question the master narrative which presents the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification as a clear-cut event and a liberating triumph. Transitions in the GDR rarely happened in regulated, organized, and channelled ways. Instead, they were often the product of anarchic and random serendipities, short-term solutions, and chance.

This Special Issue is inspired by an event with Sonya Schönberger that the GHIL organized in collaboration with the Goethe-Institut London in 2019.<sup>8</sup> Schönberger's interviews, which she conducted personally and were subsequently read by actors at events held in Germany and London, were initially recorded in Neu-Hohenschönhausen, the largest housing development project ever built in East Berlin. To address the urgent need for living space, the GDR government focused on the industrial construction of housing from prefabricated concrete slabs. These so-called *Plattenbauten* were erected on the outskirts of cities from the mid 1950s onwards. Their modern amenities made these apartments quite popular.<sup>9</sup> Erich Honecker personally laid the foundation stone at Neu-Hohenschönhausen in 1984, and the high-rise at Zingster Straße 25 was part of the estate. Three years later, in 1987 – only two years before the *Wende* – most of these apartment buildings were complete and eager tenants were able to move in.

Three decades later, Schönberger interviewed the original tenants of Zingster Straße 25. What happened to the excitement of the 1980s? How do people see the estate now? How many people left? Who decided to stay, and why? The interviews she conducted in person, extracts of which are published here in English for the first time, offer a unique glimpse into different everyday realities. It was in their homes, where Schönberger had the privilege of conducting these interviews, that the interviewees shared details of their day-to-day lives in the GDR, their hopes and disappointments under a political system many believed in, and reflections on their present lives in reunified

<sup>8</sup> Sonya Schönberger, *Zingster Straße 25* (Berlin, 2017). For details of the event, see [[https://www.goethe.de/ins/gb/en/ver.cfm?event\\_id=21536581&fuseaction=events.detail&](https://www.goethe.de/ins/gb/en/ver.cfm?event_id=21536581&fuseaction=events.detail&)], accessed 19 Feb. 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Eli Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2008), and id., *Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space, and Memory in East Germany* (Oxford, 2016).

Germany. As different as these accounts are, they are all linked by history and by the interviewees' experiences in their home, the *Platte*.

The *Platte*, which, after the *Wende*, was quickly dismissed by many as a hideous addition to the urban landscape, became *the* symbol of the GDR housing experience. Today, *Plattenbauten* are coveted by hipsters, strangely replicating the experience of the former GDR citizens who once desired them as attractive alternatives to the often run-down, sometimes Wilhelmine city centre tenements that Udo Grashoff discusses in his article. Thousands of East Germans made these tenements their homes, occupying them without official permission from the state. This practice of *Schwarzwohnen* was not comparable with western European squatting.<sup>10</sup> Grashoff looks at the motivations for *Schwarzwohnen* in the GDR and also the factors that enabled it. Contrary to most assumptions about dictatorships, the GDR often tolerated or even tacitly supported these acts of occupation, deliberately obscuring the boundaries between formal and informal practices. The Socialist Unity Party (SED), in other words, bent the rules if circumstances demanded it. The result was ambiguous. On the one hand, it undermined governmental authority, but on the other, it helped solve the problem of a severe housing shortage, thus stabilizing and legitimizing state power. Even after the Berlin Wall came down, illicit accommodation continued.

Schönberger's and Grashoff's interviews and research highlight strategies, negotiation processes, and permitted latitudes not just from above, from the perspective of the state, but mainly from below, from that of the actors.<sup>11</sup> Kerstin Brückweh takes this approach further. The last item in this Special Issue, an interview with Brückweh on a book she has recently published with her project partners,<sup>12</sup> highlights that ordinary citizens can become active agents in history-making itself.

<sup>10</sup> See the discussion of this term in Udo Grashoff's Article in this *Bulletin*.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Fulbrook argues that the GDR should not only be studied top-down, from the perspective of the regime, but also bottom-up. See *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949–1989* (Oxford, 1997) and her documentary *Behind the Wall: Perfectly Normal Lives in the GDR?* at [<https://vimeo.com/113996074>], accessed 19 Feb. 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Kerstin Brückweh, Clemens Villinger, and Kathrin Zöller (eds.), *Die Lange Geschichte der 'Wende': Geschichtswissenschaft im Dialog* (Berlin, 2020).

Brückweh has researched the theme of home ownership and property between expropriation, appropriation, and new modes of organization around 1989. From the 1970s onwards, when older buildings were deteriorating and the state began to provide *Plattenbau* estates, property titles were loosened by means of political privilege, and informal ownership arrangements held sway. Purchases and conveyances were carried out even before new regulations on restitution were passed in the official unification treaty. How could this not pose a significant challenge for occupants or current and previous homeowners after the *Wende*?

Looking at the relationship between a changing political system and day-to-day life, Brückweh has explored the experiences, emotions, hopes, and disappointments of people in relation to their homes, where tenants and owners were forced to carve out spaces for self-determination. Linking archival sources with oral histories and hitherto lesser-known research methods, her project also followed an unusual path. Interview partners were asked to comment on the research results, thereby evening out the hierarchies between those who study and those who are studied, as well as between residents of the former East and West German states. This marks a noteworthy shift in historical research approaches. A widespread fear among historians is that popular views, driven by emotions, affect, and dim memories, might undermine the very notion of scholarly enquiry. The witness to history as the historian's enemy ('der Zeitzeuge als Feind des Historikers')<sup>13</sup> has become a common trope in scholarship on contemporary history. Instead of succumbing to anxiety, the authors in this Special Issue embrace eyewitness accounts. This is a welcome development. For a long time, former GDR citizens, including professional historians, were under-represented in shaping the GDR's historical narrative. 'Never before has so much human capital been thrown on the scrapheap', one historian from the former GDR asserted

<sup>13</sup> See Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei (eds.), *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945* (Göttingen, 2012), especially the contribution by Martin Sabrow ('Der Zeitzeuge als Wanderer zwischen zwei Welten', 13–32); also Konrad Jarausch, 'Zeitgeschichte und Erinnerung: Deutungskonkurrenz oder Interdependenz?', in Konrad Jarausch and Martin Sabrow (eds.), *Verletztes Gedächtnis: Erinnerungskultur und Zeitgeschichte im Konflikt* (Frankfurt am Main, 2002), 9–37.

in an essay last year.<sup>14</sup> By taking their interview partners seriously and not treating them only as historical sources, our contributors turn them into equal partners on a par with official records or historical analysis (and artistic enquiry) itself, and in the process reach a wider public.

These approaches also represent the beginning of a transition to a new generation of authors who question their own backgrounds, acknowledging the biased views they might bring into their field of enquiry. As we venture into this new phase, the next chapters will come from the 'Dritte Generation Ost' ('Third Generation East'). Recent interviews suggest that these younger generations—including those born after the *Wende*—often still identify as 'Ossis'.<sup>15</sup> How will they embrace the history of the GDR? How will the new voices of Jewish East Germans and the descendants of immigrant families—partly inspired by recent literary works—change future narratives?<sup>16</sup>

Not least to reflect the value of the interviews and unconventional approaches taken by our authors, this Special Issue has itself taken an unconventional approach. Schönberger's artistic project makes the

<sup>14</sup> Ulrich van der Heyden, 'Nie zuvor wurde so viel Humankapital auf den Müll geworfen', *Berliner Zeitung*, 12 Aug. 2020, at [<https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/zeitenwende/ddr-geisteswissenschaft-nie-zuvor-wurde-so-viel-humankapital-auf-den-muell-geworfen-li.97869>], accessed 19 Feb. 2021. See also the recent event held by the Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands on 17 Feb. 2021 under the title 'Zwischen Katerstimmung und Neuorientierung: Der VHD und die Vereinigung der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaften in den 1990er Jahren', which asked how far GDR historians were marginalized after the *Wende*. See [<https://www.historikerverband.de//mitteilungen/mitteilungs-details/article/125-jahre-vhd-ankuendigung-zum-ersten-podium-der-diskussionsreihe-zur-geschichte-und-gegenwart-des.html>], accessed 19 Feb. 2021.

<sup>15</sup> An excellent and diverse collection of memories and points of views can be found in the 'Zeitenwende' series published by the *Berliner Zeitung* at [<https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/zeitenwende>], accessed 19 Feb. 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Olivia Wenzel, *1000 Serpentinien Angst* (Frankfurt, 2020); Khuê Pham, Özlem Topçu, and Alice Bota, *Wir neuen Deutschen: Wer wir sind, was wir wollen* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2012). See also the panel 'Minoritized Voices: Decolonizing the East German Experience' at the 45th Annual German Studies Association Conference in Indianapolis, 30 Sept.–3 Oct. 2021 (panel sponsored by the Black German Diaspora Network, the Socialism Network, and Third Generation Ost). For details, see [[thirdgenerationost.com/cfp-minoritized-voices-decolonizing-the-east-german-experience/](http://thirdgenerationost.com/cfp-minoritized-voices-decolonizing-the-east-german-experience/)], accessed 19 Feb. 2021.

point that art can offer a valuable contribution to historical discourse. Even if art is never impartial or free from ideology, the mostly unedited eyewitness responses are testament to a conversation whose goal was to represent an authentic and unanalysed experience; not a scholarly extraction. The interview I conducted with Brückweh reflects the *Schriftgespräch* method that Brückweh herself uses in her research project in order to make research results more accessible to a wider audience.

During a pandemic when many readers are forced to stay at home, the idea of housing and the home might stir a range of divergent emotions. However private, homes are not neutral or apolitical. Touching on the private and the public, gender, sexuality, family, ownership, design, and urban planning, the home can be described as the centre of everyone's life circle.<sup>17</sup> What does housing mean when we are trapped indoors, and the outside world is dramatically changing? How will the changes outside affect our lives inside?

Looking at the life changes experienced during and after 1989 through the lens of housing and the home allows us to understand how the changing outside world also impacted on the inner lives of people in their own, supposedly private spheres. This, in turn, gives us greater insight into identities and everyday practices in order to understand where people were coming from, what their homes and surroundings meant to them, what it meant to be East German, and whether and how this changed once the outside world ceased to be the same. All contributions take a long perspective on society at a time of upheaval, concentrating on moments when traditions, politics, and practices were far from regulated. For some, the home might have been one of the stable factors in this period of upheaval. Nevertheless, it was as fragile as everything else around it.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Schlögel, *In Space We Read Time: On the History of Civilization and Geopolitics*, trans. by Gerrit Jackson (New York, 2017), 262. Historian Karl Schlögel saw the house as 'the scene and junction of all the events that shape a life'. See also my *Schriftgespräch* with Kerstin Brückweh, where this quotation is cited. Books in English on the theme of home and design in the GDR include Betts, *Within Walls*; Josie McLellan, *Love in the Time of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR* (Cambridge, 2011); Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism*; id., *Amnesiopolis*; Emily Pugh, *Architecture, Politics, and Identity in Divided Berlin* (Pittsburgh, 2014); and Katrin Schreiter, *Designing one Nation: The Politics of Economic Culture and Trade in Divided Germany* (Oxford, 2020).