

The GDR Today II

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A month before the twenty-fifth anniversary of German reunification, *The GDR Today II* brought together postgraduate and early-career researchers from the UK, Germany, Canada and Italy working on the history, memory and culture of the German Democratic Republic. The conference followed in the footsteps of *The GDR Today*, a one-day postgraduate symposium held at the University of Birmingham in January 2014. One and a half years after the first conference, the aim was to revisit the progress of the research projects presented in Birmingham as well as to showcase new research that has been initiated since then. The conference thus offered a platform for early-career scholars of the GDR to present and discuss new approaches to the history of East Germany in an interdisciplinary environment.

The conference was divided into seven panels over two days. The four papers in the first panel, 'Revisiting GDR Literature', set out to offer fresh perspectives on East German literature. JEANNINE JUD (Galway) re-examined the literary oeuvre of Christa Wolf in the context of her traumatic experiences under National Socialism and in the immediate postwar years. While assessments of Wolf's life and work have so far been overshadowed by the revelations of her Stasi collaboration, Jud argued for a reading of Wolf's literature as texts that shed light on the complex entanglement of dictatorial repression and individual biographies in twentieth-century Germany. STEPHAN EHRIG (Bristol) investigated Stefan Schütz's adaptation of Heinrich von Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas*. With the example of Schütz, he showed how writers in the GDR meandered between criticising the system and promoting a socialist message, thereby exploring the space between conformity and opposition. RICHARD SLIPP (Calgary) focused on the shifting perception of the East German writer Christoph Hein in post-

reunification Germany. Through the example of Hein, he offered insights into the post-1990 debates about what constituted 'GDR literature' and how its role in German literature should be assessed. Finally, MARY FRANK (Bristol) presented her research on the translation of GDR children's books into English. She used her case study to pose broader questions about the limits of our ability to 'understand' GDR texts in present-day society. In her response, DEBBIE PINFOLD (Bristol) noted that all four papers raised important questions about how and why we read GDR literature today. Revisiting East German texts the way these four projects do, she concluded, illuminates the tensions between the contemporary meaning of writings produced under socialism and our present-day reading of them.

The second panel, 'Socialist Bodies', comprised two papers which focused on the role of the body in socialist dictatorship. MARKUS WAHL (Kent) explored the SED regime's attempts to regulate its citizens' health in case studies of local doctor-patient relationships in the first two postwar decades. Highlighting continuities with the Nazi era, he showed that the doctor's practice in the GDR was a space in which East Germans were subject to the power and control of the regime. TOM SMITH (London) examined notions of masculinity in representations of East German soldiers. He showed that the regime used the bodies of its soldiers to promote an image of the ideal socialist citizen, while the soldiers themselves negotiated these expectations in very personal ways. In her comments, JOSIE MCLELLAN (Bristol) pointed out that both papers highlighted the state's attempts to control socialist bodies and thus add to our understanding of the regime's interventions into the lives of its citizens.

'Socialist Mediators', the final panel of the first day, examined two quite different sets of actors in socialist society. JONATHAN KAPLAN (Berlin) offered his research on the GDR foreign service as a window into East German attempts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. He demonstrated that GDR diplomats developed their very own ways of dealing with the Nazi past as a means to distinguish themselves not only from Nazi

Germany but also from the FRG. CORMAC Ó CALLANÁIN (Edinburgh) focused on recording studios in the GDR to investigate the intersections between culture and industry in the GDR more generally. MARK ALLINSON (Bristol) commented that both papers provided welcome additions to the historiography, as they shed light on the quite 'normal' side of the GDR. Moreover, he stressed that both contributions offered new insights into the GDR's attempts to find its place in the world and the complex ways in which the socialist ideology trickled down into the actions of different actors in society.

Panel four, 'Reframing Cultural Heritage', brought together three papers which examined the regime's attempts to create a distinctly East German culture. CHRISTIAN RAU (München) investigated the *Deutsche Bücherei*, the self-appointed 'national library' in the GDR, and its efforts to set itself apart from its West German equivalent. In the attempts to showcase socialist culture to the West, Rau showed, the *Deutsche Bücherei* built up on Prussian heritage and firmly placed itself in a long tradition of classic German culture. DAVID ZELL (Birmingham) explored the celebrations of the 1959 Schiller bicentenary in the GDR as a key moment in which the regime tried to define an East German cultural identity. As he demonstrated, the gap between the ambitious plans, the underlying ideological framework and the reality of the commemoration events eventually limited the regime's ability to claim Schiller as part of a GDR cultural heritage. ANDY MACHALS (Bristol) analysed the history of the Friedrichstadtpalast in Berlin during the GDR era through the prism of camp and queer theory. He demonstrated that the revue extravaganza built up on the 1920s in form and style but at the same time became a popular medium to depict a socialist reality of the future. In her response, CHLOE PAVER (Exeter) noted that all three papers fruitfully illustrated how the GDR constantly found itself under pressure to mark an 'East German' culture in a range of areas. She highlighted that the panel thus reinforced the understanding of the GDR as a state and society caught between past and present as well as East and West.

Shifting the focus to the post-reunification era, the panel entitled 'Narrating the Self after the Wall' offered new perspectives on narratives East Germans developed about life under socialism after 1990. PATRICK WITTSTOCK (Berlin) analysed how former East German ambassadors to the USA and the Soviet Union narrated their life histories in autobiographical texts after reunification. He showed that the diplomats tried to navigate the thin line of highlighting their professional achievements while at the same time distancing themselves from the socialist system in which they were accomplished. DIRK THOMASCHKE (Oldenburg) turned to the medium of village chronicles, lay histories written by local historians after reunification, in order to investigate how villagers portrayed the GDR era in their localities. He found that most chronicles shared a narrative which detached the village community from the wider historical context and described socialism as just one of many challenges the local community successfully mastered. MARCEL THOMAS (Bristol) observed a similar phenomenon in his oral history interviews in an East and a West German village and argued that Germans on both sides of the Wall used 'distancing strategies' in order to make sense of the relationship between their lives in the locality and the political context in which they happened. ANNA SAUNDERS (Bangor) responded by highlighting that all three papers shed new light on how East Germans tried to resituate the self in the post-1990 environment. By showing how former GDR citizens made sense of the political as part of their lives in their own narratives, she stressed, the contributions in the panel challenged the dominant belief in a binary of unpolitical memories and official histories of dictatorship.

The papers in panel six, 'Becoming One Again', offered new approaches on the growing together of the two Germanies after 1990. PIA DEUTSCH (Warwick) analysed the role of the *Deutschlandradio*, which was formed in 1994, in the merging of the two German states and revealed its efforts at balancing memories of a divided past with visions of a united future. DANIEL KUBIAK (Berlin) analysed the state of German-German inte-

gration twenty-five years after reunification from a sociological perspective. Using imitation game theory, he showed that Germans born after 1990 still possessed what could be called East and West German identities, although these have become normalised and accepted as regional differences among young Germans. COSTANZA CALABRETTA (Rome) examined the demands to establish the 9th October, the date associated with the 1989 Monday demonstrations in Leipzig, as a commemorative day in the reunited Germany. She demonstrated that the competition between the proponents of October 3rd and October 9th revealed tensions between a Berlin-centred official memory culture and an alternative narrative centred on East German protests in Leipzig. In her response, SARA JONES (Birmingham) commented that the interest in the process of 'growing together' in itself marks a welcome shift from the one-sided views of East German integration into a seemingly static West which were dominant in the 1990s. She stressed that this framework has the potential to integrate more of the Eastern perspective into our understanding of the post-reunification years.

The final panel, 'Contesting Socialist Memory', focused on memory conflicts in the reunited Germany. MARIE MÜLLER-ZETZSCHE (Leipzig) shared her observations of classroom discussions about the GDR in schools. She showed how tensions between the conflicting memories of the teachers, the post-1990 generation and their parents often remain unresolved in the classroom. PAMELA HESS (Frankfurt am Main) analysed families' responses to the official representations of GDR history in present-day Germany. She argued that a more balanced approach to GDR history needs to be pursued which integrates personal memories and relieves tensions between individual recollections and the official history. JOANNE SAYNER (Birmingham) pointed out that both papers highlighted the continuing tensions between public and official memories. By underlining the differences between a common memory and a common understanding of the GDR past, the papers provide a more nuanced picture of memory conflicts in the reunited country.

In the final discussion, the participants concluded that even twenty-five years after reunification, the GDR is still far from becoming a 'footnote in history', as Stefan Heym famously predicted. Instead, the GDR seems to remain a continued presence in the life and culture of the reunified Germany. Rather than passing into distance with time, it was noted, the GDR appears to remain close to the identity of present-day Germany, similar to the National Socialist era. At the same time, the participants were aware that our understanding of the GDR in the broader picture of German history is getting fixed, and scholars are increasingly facing the task of exploring nuances rather than finding new grand narratives.

The conference thus indicated that GDR scholarship might be moving towards a new stage. The research projects presented at the conference painted a picture of the GDR that is increasingly nuanced and that moves away from simplistic images of East Germany as a repressive *Stasiland*. In the works of this new generation of scholars, the GDR is more and more understood as an in many ways very 'normal' state that was embedded in the German context as well as a wide range of international networks. It was a remarkable fact in itself that none of the papers focused on the Stasi or the repressive state apparatus. Moreover, the conference showed that the interdisciplinary nature of current GDR research is ground-breaking, as the panels featured contributions from literary and visual studies, history, sociology, performance studies, political science and translation studies. Cutting across disciplinary boundaries as well as established models to describe life in the East German state, the research showcased at the conference demonstrates that the new generation of GDR scholars is in many ways exploring a new language to understand the history and legacy of the GDR.

Conference Overview:

Introductory remarks: Stephan Ehrig and Marcel Thomas (University of Bristol)

Panel 1: Revisiting GDR Literature

Jeannine Jud (National University of Ireland Galway): Re-Evaluating the Literature of

Christa Wolf. Patterns of Conformity, Memory and Identity in *Kindheitsmuster* and *Stadt der Engel* oder *The Overcoat* of Dr. Freud

Stephan Ehrig (University of Bristol): Deconstructing Revolutionary Traditions: Stefan Schütz's *Kohlhaas*

Richard Slipp (University of Calgary): The Narrative of Memory in Christoph Hein's Prose Works

Mary Frank (University of Bristol): Translation of East German Children Stories for Modern Audiences

Discussant: Debbie Pinfold (University of Bristol)

Panel 2: Socialist Bodies

Markus Wahl (University of Kent): Local Doctor-Patient Relationships in Post-War East Germany

Tom Smith (University College London): Looking beyond the Ideal: GDR Military Masculinities Reimagined

Discussant: Josie McLellan (University of Bristol)

Panel 3: Socialist Mediators

Jonathan Kaplan (Freie Universität Berlin): The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the GDR and the Nazi Past

Cormac Ó Callanáin (Edinburgh College of Art): Recording Studios in the GDR

Discussant: Mark Allinson (University of Bristol)

Panel 4: Reframing Cultural Heritage

Christian Rau (Institut für Zeitgeschichte München): A National Library in Divided Germany: The Deutsche Bücherei 1945-1989

David Zell (University of Birmingham): 'Denn er ist unser: Friedrich Schiller': The 1959 Schiller Bicentenary in the GDR and the Creation of National Identity

Andy Machals (University of Bristol): Popular Theatre in Contemporary (East) Berlin: Contesting New Histories of a Cultural Legacy

Discussant: Chloe Paver (Exeter University)

Panel 5: Narrating The Self After The Wall

Patrick Wittstock (Berlin): Worker – Ambassador – Unemployed. Life (Re)Constructions in Autobiographical Memories of GDR Ambassadors after 1990

Dirk Thomaschke (Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg): „Die Geschichte im Dorf lassen“. The GDR in „Ortschroniken“ and „Heimatlbücher“ after 1990

Marcel Thomas (University of Bristol): Beyond Ostalgie: Memory, Space and Social Change in East and West Germany

Discussant: Anna Saunders (Bangor University)

Panel 6: Becoming One (Again)

Pia Deutsch (University of Warwick): Mediating German Identities in the Every-Day: DeutschlandRadio

Daniel Kubiak (Humboldt-Universität Berlin): German-German Relations – Identity and Identification 25 Years after Reunification

Costanza Calabretta (La Sapienza Rome): Commemorating the GDR. Memories of the Peaceful Revolution

Discussant: Sara Jones (Birmingham University)

Panel 7: Contesting Socialist Memory

Marie Müller-Zetzsche (Universität Leipzig): Memory Debates on the GDR in Classrooms

Pamela Heß (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt): History as a Matter of Political Interest – Remembering the GDR through the Public Eye

Discussant: Joanne Sayner (University of Birmingham)

Concluding Discussion

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