

# Remembering and Re-thinking the GDR: Multiple Perspectives and Plural Authenticities

## Round Table discussion, 10 September 2010

Round table participants: Professor Mike Dennis, Dr Patricia Hogwood, Dr Astrid Köhler, Professor Bill Niven, Professor Dennis Tate. Moderated by Dr Anna Saunders.

The round table participants were asked to give a brief opening statement on how their own work in GDR studies had developed over the years and to reflect on what they considered to be the significant points of the conference before the floor was opened to questions and general discussion.

### Opening statements

**Patricia Hogwood** explained that she had taken a ten-year break from her initial work on post-GDR identity and had found that on returning to this area recently she had been more willing to work in an interdisciplinary manner, particularly with cognate disciplines such as social anthropology and geography. She felt she had become more aware of the multi-faceted nature of the problems surrounding the construction of political identity, and that wrestling with these problems seemed to require the kind of interdisciplinary approach the network had adopted. She suggested that in any future work the network might wish to consider more explicitly the political context of state structures and processes in Germany.

In reflecting on the conference, PH felt that what had come over most strongly was the entrenched nature of the asymmetrical power relations between former East and West Germany; if anything, these asymmetries seemed to have become more pronounced over time. Many papers had suggested that former East Germans are still experiencing a raw, visceral identity vacuum and feelings of humiliation which accompany their belief that their life experience is not being taken seriously in united Germany; they are clearly still struggling to establish a sense of their identity, even if they are not entirely sure what that identity is. She identified *Ostalgie* as a major theme of the conference, and suggested that this problematic phenomenon stands in the way of post-socialist 'normalisation' in East Germany. It simultaneously undermines the FRG elites' concept of 'inner unity' and hinders the construction of an independent East German identity. Finally PH suggested that there was a need for further academic work on the balance between remembering and forgetting in transition processes such as that seen in Germany.

**Bill Niven** came to GDR studies particularly through his volume *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Nazi Past* (1992) and through his engagement with anti-fascism in the GDR. He had been deeply concerned by the way GDR anti-fascism had been dismissed as worthless immediately after reunification and was disturbed by the polarised debates around this topic which had resulted in equally polarised critical reactions to his book. He is now focusing on the common legacy problem which was relevant to the subject of his keynote address, the topic of flight and expulsion; he feels Germany is now looking for a common past, whether it be one of

gaps and omissions as provided by this topic, or of achievements, as suggested by the *Freiheits- und Einheitsdenkmal*.

In reflecting on the conference BN said he was particularly struck by the topic of the durchherrschte Gesellschaft which had evoked for him the terms used by the Sabrow commission, Herrschaft, Widerstand and Alltag; he felt that these problematic terms and the interaction between them needed further exploration.

**Mike Dennis** first went to the GDR as a postgraduate student in 1963, in order to research the Thirty Years War. He returned to the GDR some ten years later to pursue his fascination with it, and since then his work has fallen mainly within the anti-totalitarian paradigm, focusing on the interaction between the GDR authorities and various groups in society, and asking to what extent authority also depends on other groups. He suggested that there had been a fascination with the GDR in the UK and the USA during the forty years of its existence, and that this had led to good groundwork being laid by Germanists who stood at a distance from the state itself. He particularly mentioned Ian Wallace's work with the journal *The GDR* (later *The German Monitor*), which had allowed for multiple perspectives on the state and its workings, and felt he had benefited from travels to the states where he had met not only other UK Germanists working on the GDR, but also East German academics. He has written on a variety of aspects of the GDR, including economic modernisation, sport, and the Stasi, and since 1989 he has enjoyed the opportunity to do more archival work to see, for example, how far his views on the Stasi might have to be adapted in the light of newly available evidence. He felt that this conference was evidence that the GDR would not be a mere footnote in history, but would have its own chapter.

**Astrid Köhler** grew up in the GDR and was 25 when it ceased to exist. She came to the UK in the early 1990s and was relieved to find that debates about the GDR were much more neutral and conducted in a more rational manner than those she had experienced in Germany. On arrival in the UK she was naturally asked to teach GDR literature and as a result developed a research interest in it; she has particularly enjoyed challenging prejudices and assumptions about GDR authors, for example the widespread belief that they would 'have to' re-invent themselves if they wished to continue writing after 1990 (see Astrid Köhler, *Brückenschläge: DDR-Autoren vor und nach der Wiedervereinigung* (2007)) She is now working on a biography of Klaus Schlesinger, and quoted a passage from his diary from 1991, which might be helpful for our deliberations:

Je radikaler die Erinnerung an das Ländchen ausgelöscht werden wird, je mehr es als reines Teufelswerk, als Produkt eines mörderischen Geheimdienstes institutionalisiert wird, desto romantischer, desto intensiver auch wird seine Renaissance sein. Warum? Die Widersprüche zwischen dem Alltag einer Diktatur und ihrer zeitgenössischen Darstellung werden zu offensichtlich sein. Schon jetzt stellte ein französischer Künstler bei der 'Generalstän­deversammlung' diesen Widerspruch fest, indem er sagte: Dann müsse ja in der Diktatur eine schöpferische Struktur möglich gewesen sein. – Er sagte es mit allen Tönen des Zweifels, aber sie war ja tatsächlich vorhanden?

(Klaus Schlesinger: Chronik 31.10.91 - 18.12.91, AdK, KSA, 171)

AdK = Akademie der Künste Berlin / KSA = Klaus Schlesinger Archiv

AK has been a member of the network since its inception, and reflecting on both the conference and the network as a whole, she felt that it had examined a wide range of different discourses and had placed the GDR in a broad historical and thematic context, rather than seeing it as an aberration. She suggested that we need to continue to analyse it as part of a much bigger picture and as embedded in a much broader process of historical and social change.

**Dennis Tate** has been fascinated by the GDR since the era of *détente*, and has found the study of literature a productive means of pursuing this fascination through all the upheavals of the following decades. He identified an initial western tendency to read GDR literature purely as a form of *Landeskunde*, but suggested that serious scholarly analyses had enabled a much deeper engagement with the culture of the state. He felt the fragility of the GDR had been very clear in its literature from 1976 onwards, and that it was misleading to place too much emphasis on 1989-90 as if it had been an overnight transformation. Studying autobiographical writing was an ideal means of looking at the ‘before’ and ‘after’, understanding this longer term process of change as seen from a variety of personal viewpoints (see Dennis Tate, *Shifting Perspectives: East German Autobiographical Narratives Before and After the End of the GDR* (2007)). This provided a much-needed opportunity to view works in their historical context as well as in the light of today’s insights.

DT had been impressed by the openness of the conference, which had provided multiple perspectives and avoided setting any homogenising agenda; this openness might be partly attributed to our outsider perspective as (mainly) UK Germanists. However, he had been concerned to hear a number of papers referring to much more restrictive agendas in dealing with the GDR past in Germany, where there seemed to be a stronger desire to adopt a homogenous view of the past (for example, the recent insistence on using the term ‘friedliche Revolution’ rather than ‘Wende’). He felt it was our role to challenge and where possible to impact on the debates within Germany, and he had particularly enjoyed papers which had clearly set the GDR in wider comparative contexts and thereby challenged the idea that it was an entirely alien culture (e.g. Mark Allinson on the NVA; Mike Dennis on doping in GDR sport). He felt we needed to continue to look at the GDR in this comparative way. Internal differentiation was also important: some of the most stimulating papers had been those which had identified smaller memory communities within the GDR and their often conflicting positions, rather than trying to deal with the potentially more problematic concept of (an overarching) collective memory.

### **General discussion**

The importance of our external perspective on German debates was emphasised, particularly because it frees us from assessing the GDR against an implied FRG ‘norm’ and allows us to abstract more general conclusions from the individual case studies in ways which may be more difficult for German commentators mired in the specificities of the German case (PH). Some of our contributors also felt that their own external perspective had sometimes allowed them to approach GDR literature without preconceptions, simply as (German) literature (Elke Gilson). However, it was also suggested that such external perspectives are not always helpful – AK made the point that during the GDR’s life time it had looked homogenous from the outside, but that seen from the inside there was no such homogeneity of experience. There is now a

temptation to try to give a coherent, definitive account of the GDR simply because it is over, but given the difficulties we experience even in creating a coherent definition of the self, we should perhaps be wary of trying to develop one for a whole community / political system (Annie Ring).

There was also a question about the extent to which we need to develop / maintain a moral position in dealing with this past (Felix Ringel); we tend to consider the GDR in comparison with the West, which necessarily means looking to the past, but we will soon reach a point (if we haven't already) where former East Germans are having to deal with new issues in the present and that these have to be dealt with without reference to the West or the past. MD also made the point that we tend to examine the autocratic dictatorship of the GDR through our own western, democratic lens, without taking account of the fact that in the worldwide context, dictatorship rather than democracy is the 'norm'.

It was felt that we might be able to counteract our own insidious need to homogenise / moralise by continuing to focus on smaller memory entities as DT had suggested in his opening statement. However, Mark Allinson also suggested that while this approach enabled us to discuss a multiplicity of 'GDRs of the mind' and thus to create a much more differentiated approach to the GDR, it was important not to lose sight of the bigger picture; the fact that there continue to be attempts to characterise the UK of the late twentieth century suggests that it is in fact possible to define entities even while they are still in flux, and the historians' task could be to take the new insights derived from a focus on smaller memory groups and attempt to put together an overall picture of the GDR on the basis of this information.

BN suggested that we might be taking an 'anti-moralising' stance in reaction to the very politicised (and by extension moralistic) debates in Germany, and that our determination to look through this anti-moralising lens may in itself exclude certain aspects of enquiry and restrict our perspective; for example, we will find it difficult to assess the presentness of some East German problems. He also suggested that we might be losing sight of the GDR in relation to other Eastern European states; the former GDR has gone through a very different transitional process from other Eastern European states because they have all been allowed to see themselves as 'victims', whereas the West German perspective on the GDR has created more of an image of the GDR as 'perpetrator'. PH suggested that East Germans themselves were fixated on their progress relative to West Germany rather than comparing themselves with other Eastern European states; AK commented that in fact the GDR population had always tended to compare itself with West Germany rather than with, e.g., Poland. Joanne Sayner suggested that we needed to look at the transmission of memory here and ask how the transmission of post-traumatic memory between generations in the GDR compares with that elsewhere, e.g. Hungary. DT pointed out that generations themselves do not necessarily have homogenous experiences to transmit.

Regarding the moral perspective David Clarke suggested that we cannot forget the role played by the Holocaust, and that it is very difficult for West German politicians to position East German victims relative to this master narrative of victimhood. Any attempt to find a morally satisfying history is doomed to failure because there are too many different groups jostling for precedence in the public domain, and it is more important for us to observe this process and analyse its workings. MD suggested that

while we may not wish to adopt a moral position on history, none the less there are ethical issues at stake, for example in the Stasi's process of *Zersetzung*, and that we need to continue to bear in mind the blurred boundary lines between victims and perpetrators, who might actually co-exist in the same person.

The discussion moved on to the reasons for the ongoing fascination of the GDR for the UK and for western scholarship. AK felt that this was in part due to the vision of Utopia entertained widely among East German intellectuals – Christa Wolf being a prime example – when the West lost the GDR it also lost any alternative to the western system, and there are still those who would be keen to find a 'third way'. BN suggested that the Utopia described by the likes of Wolf had been the ivory tower of GDR 'Alltag' – it had allowed writers to retreat from the reality of the GDR and to be blind to the dystopia around them. PH added that East Germany had for a long time functioned as a necessary counterpoint to West Germany, in some cases providing a tool in West German policy making: for example, West German immigration policies always had to be formed against the backdrop of the ongoing (if unlikely) possibility of reunification. Is it possible that *Ostalgie* is kept alive because West Germany still cannot really face up to losing its counterpoint? Joanne Sayner pointed to the difficulties of positioning ourselves discursively, particularly within political debates (i.e. when considering present and future political alternatives) because making an explicit statement about our initial position leads to individuals being pigeonholed in a potentially unhelpful manner. She suggested that in some cases it may be difficult to divorce our academic / discursive position from our wider political view, though this might to some extent depend on individuals' disciplinary perspective.

BN raised the issue of the different ways the past was remembered in East and West and to what extent this and the resulting memorial landscape has changed. For example, in the GDR Polish and Soviet victims of the Holocaust were remembered and commemorated in memorials to a much greater extent than in West Germany, where Polish Jews tended to be remembered as Jews rather than as Poles.

Anna Saunders raised the issue of genre and the extent to which it conditions the memories produced. There is clearly a productive tension generated by the multi-disciplinary nature of the network, in that while some of the historians (MD, Mark Allinson) would attempt to instate a whole narrative of the GDR, others were more interested in small *Erzähl-* and *Erinnerungsgemeinschaften*. There was a general sense that different genres certainly produce very different kinds of memories and varied means of interacting with them; BN referred to the difference between a museum, which can reproduce a specific physical environment, and a film which can populate that environment and so 'add history'; at the same time, however, this means that the film directs the memories produced, whereas a museum exhibit may allow for a more open response from the viewer. Joanne Sayner highlighted again the constructivist v. determinist debate mentioned by Susannah Radstone at the network's first workshop in April 2009, and suggested that while certain museums have clearly adopted a highly constructivist approach to the past, it is not clear that this is true of all of them. We should perhaps consider where our different genres fall on this constructivist / determinist spectrum. AK suggested that we seem to be moving from more visual to more textual memories and that it was important to continue examining the cultural context determining both individual and institutional memories. Felix Ringel

highlighted various ways in which the GDR past is instrumentalised in current discussions about problems in the German present (*Ganztagsschule*; district nurses) and felt the network needed to look more at the way the past impacts politically on the present and future. MD felt it would be important to continue to run smaller workshops in order to maintain a broad focus on different forms and a plurality of approaches.