

Cultural Distinction and the Example of the “Third East German Generation”

Jaqueline Flack

“Central Europe is hardly a geographical notion... The ways of feeling and thinking of inhabitants must thus suffice for drawing mental lines which seem to be more durable than the borders of the states” (Czesław Miłosz, 1986)

When in 1989 the Berlin Wall collapsed, both East and West Germans experienced an existential shock as those walls, which once seemed so permanent, very suddenly became permeable and changeable. Today, despite the fact that all Germans experienced this change together, Germany is still divided. The division has outlived the wall.

The biographies and daily lives of West Germans did not change much after 1989, but East Germans saw the coordinates of their lives change dramatically as they faced the new challenge of crossing the invisible border that remained. We know today that this border was more durable than the political border that once separated the two Germanys. From the moment the Berlin Wall fell, East Germans were enveloped by a new and different social, economic, and cultural system to which they had to adapt. However, neither East nor West Germans realized then just how durable, subtle, and deep the differences between the two societies had become during the years of separation.

East-west differences in cultural, social and communication practices, values, and norms quickly became a standard subject for German magazines, newspapers, and research grant proposals. They have been widely analyzed in the last twenty years by many researchers from different fields

as well as by writers, journalists, and politicians. Despite the fact that the unification process has become one of the most studied phenomena in German history, it still makes sense to inquire into its continuing progress, even over twenty years later, because the transformation has affected each generation differently and this influence sometimes becomes clear only decades later.

THE “THIRD EAST GERMAN GENERATION”

In the course of the last few months, a new voice has strengthened in the din of public discourse: the voice of the “Third East German Generation”, a group that includes Germans born between 1975 and 1985 in the GDR¹. These individuals experienced the impact of the fall of the Berlin Wall during childhood or adolescence. We do not need much knowledge in developmental psychology to understand how deep the social and psychological impact of this historic moment must have been on individuals at such an important period in personal development. The questions they pose for themselves about this impact and the answers they provide are important, and they differ from the questions and answers of their parents and grandparents.

We are all familiar with the social and economic particulars of this change, but we know very little about the individual circumstances and experiences of this important generation.

1 | The term “Third East German Generation” is inspired by the concept of “third-generation migrant,” which is used in the migration literature in discussions of how the grandchildren of immigrants live between two different cultures. The term is used metaphorically to liken the shared experiences of the last generation of adult East Germans to the experiences of third-generation immigrants. Hence it is set in quotation marks. The sociological research on East Germany uses different terms to describe the same group, such as the “Fourth Generation” or the “Unadvised Generation,” while the journalist Jana Simon talks in an essay about the “Generation Zero” (Lindner 2003; Simon 1998). According to the Mannheimian generation concept, which defines a generation as the result of shared historical events by individuals of a similar age who develop a collective and distinctive consciousness, the effect of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the sweeping social changes that ensued on East German adolescents demarcates the main generation-building event defining the “Third East German Generation.”

What did it mean to grow up in social and economic instability and uncertainty, with family members who lost their jobs, and with parents and teachers who themselves were disoriented in the new social and economic system, often unable to give advice about important school and career choices? Who explained the world to this generation after the established social knowledge of the older generation appeared to have been made obsolete?

Further, what lasting influence did these experiences have? In what manner did their experiences shape the way they see the world and act in it today?

The members of the “Third East German Generation” ask themselves these questions and some have publicly articulated their specific experiences. This contribution analyzes the experiences of this generation as discussed in two sets of interviews published in *Der Spiegel* (Hollersen/Gutsch 2009; Kastner 2011). In these interviews, ten East Germans discussed their individual experiences in East Germany during the social transformation process and its impact on their present lives. These texts of the East German transformation experience are analyzed as border-crossing experiences, focusing on their relevance to the lives of members of the “Third Generation” today. I will therefore characterize these East Germans’ specific transformation experience since 1989 as a border experience.

Important to the analysis is the concept of cultural distinction, defined as cultural practices that *draw a cultural borderline*. This act is realized either consciously or unconsciously by a person or group who makes a distinction between other persons or other groups. Acting distinctively characterizes an important aspect of constructing personal and cultural identity.

The question of “who we are” is also the question of what makes us distinctive from others. We can find out the answer to this question by experiencing actual or constructed differences in how people act and think in other cultures or societies. The construction of a post-unification eastern German identity began with the confrontation with the “different other,” in this case defined by the norms, roles, values, and social practices of West German society. Although Germans from the east and from the west are both “German” and share a common ongoing history that has lasted much longer than the forty years of post-war national separation, many observers underestimated the intensity of the differences forged in those forty years. Expectations and reality differed greatly.

As a result of the confrontation with the “other Germany” after 1989, western Germans began to construct an image of *the* eastern German that

reproduced many of the already existing prejudices about the citizens of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). These images were projected through the media and became very dominant in the public discourse (cf. Ahbe et al. 2009; Pates/Schochow 2013).

Of course, eastern Germans constructed an image of western German at the same time, and these were often based on prejudices too. Easterners' image of westerners, however, was not reinforced through the mass media as were western German perceptions of eastern Germans. The media construction of eastern Germans began soon after the Wall fell and anchored itself securely in the public discourse on both sides of the old border. In contrast, eastern German perceptions of westerners circulated for the most part only in the east. Although the self-perception of eastern and western Germans was for both mostly positive, westerners' perceptions of easterners in the media tended to be negative and undifferentiated.

Many more eastern Germans migrated to the west than vice-versa, so easterners' opinions about "the other Germany" were often based on personal experience and was thus subject to modification and differentiation. Eastern German migrants in western Germany were confronted with negative public ascriptions on a daily basis, but many fewer westerners were affected similarly. Accordingly, those born in the east have been forced to reflect and cope with what were mostly negative stereotypes and, as a result, many more easterners have undergone a process of personal redefinition within the context of negative perceptions.

One gets the sense from the interviews below that young eastern Germans have acquired a self-confidence not very widespread among their elders. Public forms of reflection on the questions of "who we are" and "where we come from" represent an expression of this new self-confidence and indicate a desire among young eastern Germans to understand and reflect upon their origins.

As mentioned, the western German media not only influenced the self-perception of eastern Germans after unification but also the way that eastern German identity is constructed by others. For outsiders, eastern German identity is often reduced to the product of socialization during the GDR period, while the experiences of unification and transformation after 1989 are largely ignored.

With regard to the formation of a specific eastern German identity, however, the transformation years are just as important as life before

1989. The interviewee C., for example – an eastern German woman born in 1983, explains the meaning of this period as follows:

I have only recently come to realize just how big an influence the transformation period after 1989 had on me – as suddenly all the adults around me, including parents and teachers, had to reorient themselves (Kastner 2011).

M., born in 1979, discusses the difficulties then faced by the adults who were close to him, as parents and teachers tried to adapt to new and different social structures and had to reorient themselves entirely. He describes his first impressions after the reunification as a culture shock:

The west was not totally new for me, in East Berlin we had bananas and could watch West German TV. After the collapse of the government, West German products were suddenly everywhere on the shelves and that was the first culture shock [...]. The second culture shock was seeing homeless people and junkies. I have no idea what they did with them in East Germany, but you never saw anything like that (ibid.).

The essential point here is that he was experiencing culture shock *without having moved* from where he grew up. Culture shock is generally described in ethnology as a typical reaction of individuals to a foreign culture or a different country. For most East Germans, however, the defining experience after 1989 took place at *home*, where ordinary things like groceries or the educational system changed “overnight.” M. also describes how social instability and insecurity in East German society increased tremendously. Before 1989, homelessness and drug abuse had been virtually unknown.

Radical social, cultural, and economic change as well as the awareness of opportunities for a new beginning are characteristic experiences of the “Third Generation” during the transformation process. “Anxiety about the future,” “uncertainty,” and “disorientation” are commonly mentioned as negative aspects of the transformation process. Yet some individuals claim to have been “crisis-proofed,” “liberated,” or left “without fear of their own future” and have assumed personal responsibility for their own lives. A., born in 1978, expresses herself as follows:

We survived a complete transformation. At that time, our parents did not know what to expect or how the new system works. So you learn that it is possible to adapt to new circumstances (Hollersen/Gutsch 2009: 66).

D., born in 1973, noted:

For me it was a feeling of great liberation..., that in the future, everything will depend on me and on what I can do, not on the system (ibid.).

Confronted with mainly negative public images constructed by the media, eastern Germans started to reflect upon and criticize them. Young people today still struggle with unsophisticated generalizations and stereotypes. D. summarizes these stereotypes: “Easterners of all ages are on the dole, complain, are not willing to work, vote for the *The Left* party, and are atheists...” (ibid.: 67). A. and D. express themselves similarly:

A: “They always say that easterners complain too much and too loudly. But I have seen the same thing with West Germans who have rigid, pre-formed expectations about their own future, and when these are not fulfilled, they get scared” (ibid.: 66).

D: “It happens constantly to me. Nine times out of ten, people assume I am a westerner. They just can’t fathom how the young attorney in front of them could possibly come from the east” (ibid.: 69).

S., born in 1982, remarks that the public often associates East Germany with “Nazis” (Cf. Kastner 2011). In contrast to ascriptions made by the media, interviewees formed a self-image distinct from the public image of eastern Germans in their personal processes of contemplating the existence of a specific East German identity. In this context, D. emphasizes the importance of integrating East German history into the whole of German history instead of erasing it:

“During all the media coverage of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany, what I noticed and what makes me so angry is that they always only report the history of the Federal Republic: the end of the war, the economic recovery, the new *Ostpolitik*, the 1968 generation, the R.A.F. The GDR is covered only in passing with the construction and fall of the Wall. What happened in this country during all those years is not covered. The GDR is treated as a foreign country.... You’ll never get a westerner to think of GDR history as a part of his own history. But they expect us easterners to adapt the history of the Federal Republic before 1989 as our own” (Hollersen/Gutsch 2009: 69).

East German history is seen as an essential part of eastern German identity. To have grown up in the GDR, having experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall as well as the impact of the transformation process – all of these aspects are understood as essential to the development of what they call *Ostprägung* or *Ostidentität* (eastern coloration or eastern identity). Those experiences shape a feeling of being different from western Germans of the same age, as reflected in the following exchanges between D. (1973) and C. (1978):

Der Spiegel: “How long do you think your eastern coloration will last?”

D.: “It will always be there. I was 16 when the Wall fell, that was my youth” (ibid. 66).

Der Spiegel: “Do those younger than you have this eastern identity, too? That feeling of being different from westerners in the same age group?”

C.: “Theirs is a diffuse eastern identity, a kind of distinction... It will continue to be passed along for a long time...” (ibid.:67).

Even if the eastern Germans who were interviewed were not able to describe what *Ostidentität* exactly means, they feel it still exists:

Der Spiegel: “Sometimes it is argued that there are no differences any longer among eastern and western Germans in our generation.”

C.: “That argument is made all the time. You start a conversation with someone your age from the west and everybody starts out saying, ‘there are no differences anymore.’ But in the course of the conversation the consensus grows between east and west that these actually do still exist” (ibid.: 68).

Members of the “Third East German Generation” claim now to have found their own voice, now articulating their own experiences instead of allowing themselves to be characterized and stereotyped by others. In the rise of Angela Merkel, an eastern German, to the position of Federal Chancellor, D. once saw a potential end to prejudice against eastern Germans:

“When Merkel was elected I thought that the east-west discussion would be over after one legislative period. Now that an eastern German is Federal Chancellor, then every westerner [should] know that eastern Germans can do every other

damn job in Germany.” But D. noted that this hope remained unfulfilled due to the fact that Angela Merkel is “completely unrecognizable as an East German.” At the same time, he argues: “If Angela Merkel takes a long time to formulate a clear opinion, some call that typical of eastern Germans. They say she learned that in the GDR. It makes me want to scream” (ibid.: 69).

CULTURAL DISTINCTIONS

Individuals of the “Third East German Generation” have begun to discover a self-confidence about their East German origins. Being East German and having “this different, exciting past” (ibid.: 67). C. describes as “trendy” (ibid.). When the younger generation wears T-shirts with the logo of East Berlin, it can be considered an act of expressing East German distinctiveness.

At the same time, East German identity is described as a “diffuse” (ibid.) feeling, objectified, for example, through an emotional affinity to other eastern Germans.

C.: “My university was in Baden Württemberg. The strange thing was that easterners hung out together there. Now a lot of alumni are moving to Berlin, but both westerners and easterners keep to themselves” (ibid.: 68).

Der Spiegel: “How did you recognize each other?” (ibid.).

C.: “It may be that I felt more protected among my own crowd, so to speak. Or that I simply thought I can trust them more. I have the feeling that you can talk about weaknesses and difficulties more openly among easterners” (ibid.).

A.: “I also have the feeling that easterners are more direct and open” (ibid.).

Based on his work as a clinical psychologist, Hans-Joachim Maaz confirms this impression: “West Germans keep up appearances even when a crisis has erupted on the inside. Eastern Germans are more typically ready to talk about anxiety or insecurities. This creates a warmer interpersonal connection” (Maaz 2009).

D. objects to this generalization based on his experience of having close western German friends, who are “just as authentic and open... willing to admit that they have weaknesses” (Hollersen/Gutsch 2009: 68).

The construction of an eastern German identity was described above mainly as a *reaction* to ascriptions made by others, especially by the mass media. Below, the focus switches to the distinctive socio-cultural practices of eastern Germans.

The wish to keep souvenirs of the GDR, to sing old songs, and to tell family stories appear to be important social practices used by individuals of the “Third Generation” to deal with their own history. These activities indicate a wish to understand and conserve their own cultural and historical roots, despite the fact that these activities are sometimes perceived as ambivalent or shameful:

C.: “On my 25th birthday somebody took up a guitar and we started singing old songs. That was pretty borderline, and the westerners were thinking ‘we’ve never seen that before.’ It was ‘interesting’ for them” (ibid.: 67).

When C. uses the term “borderline” to evaluate the described situation, he instinctively realizes what is going on with regard to culture at that moment. While eastern Germans are drawing a cultural borderline by singing “old songs,” thereby excluding those who do not know them, western Germans see the border as something unfamiliar. In addition, the term “borderline” in the original German also carries an undertone of ethical critique of the distinction thus drawn.

K., born in 1975, mentions another way of preserving personal memories: taking pictures of specific East German subjects such as old shop signs or collecting old GDR product packages. This practice she describes as an act of *Ostalgie*, a neologism that combines the German words for “nostalgia” and “east”: “I’ve preserved a bit of *Ostalgie* in me. I take photos of old shop signs from GDR times in eastern German cities and I collect old GDR product packages: gelatin, pudding, soap” (Kastner 2011).

An example of how identity is narratively constructed can be seen in the experience of having to tell the “Wall story” over and over again, which is described as being typical for young East Germans. It demonstrates how the narrative construction of an East German identity by themselves and others takes place. C. states that there is a “need for those stories as well as for young people telling them” (Hollersen/Gutsch 2009: 67).

D. and A. similarly explain: “We constantly have to retell the Wall story. Where were you?”

All: (laughing) “Yes! Where were you!” (ibid.).

A.: “I spent some time in England and sometimes I had to tell the Wall story to the same person three times in the same week. Oh please, tell me again. I was shown all around: an East German! They kept offering me food, I guess because they thought I grew up hungry” (ibid.).

The importance of the act of story-telling for cultural self-placement, especially for young eastern Germans, becomes clear in the following quotation from C., born in 1983:

“I don’t have any personal memories. I never even went to the Pioneers [a party youth organization]. I was in kindergarten when Germany unified. I can tell a couple of stories, but they are the stories of my parents or my big brother. I only remember the three-cornered bags that milk used to come in” (Kastner 2011).

Hence, *telling* and *being told* these stories by family members became an important cultural practice that allowed eastern Germans to pass down specific eastern German experiences to the younger generation. Furthermore, these stories help to reproduce East German socio-cultural specifics. Above all, comprehending these social practices helps us to understand why very young people still consider themselves to be “eastern German” even without having experienced the GDR.

D.: “Some young people who never experienced the GDR use that country or the east as a basis for their identity” (Hollersen/Gutsch 2009: 67).

A.: “When I am in Thuringia [a new federal state], the kids down there don’t say “I’m a Thuringian.” They say: I’m an easterner. There’s this feeling that we are something special” (ibid.).

In addition, these individuals emphasize the fact that the period *after* the fall of the Berlin Wall, the process of social transformation, is just as important for the development of an eastern German identity – especially to the younger generation – as having experienced the GDR first hand. In contrast, C., born in 1983, tells that she feels “much more European than German or even eastern German” (Kastner 2011). Furthermore, she emphasizes her distinctive interest in traveling and considers herself cos-

mopolitan and open-minded. She notes that until graduating from high school she lived in a small suburban village. She then moved to the nearby city to study social work, “but not necessarily in order to stay in the east; it was simply the most convenient place” (ibid.). After that, she went to South Africa for six months and then moved to a large city in western Germany. She says that she travels a lot and does not feel that the world ends at the eastern German or European borders (Cf. ibid.).

Despite the collective experiences they described, the interviewees have different concepts of life and personal values as well. Reflecting on what they consider to be the “right way” to provide for themselves in the future, D. and C. remark:

D.: “I have some stocks.”

C.: “Investments don’t interest me, and I don’t want to own real estate” (Hollersen/Gutsch 2009: 66).

As we can see, members of the “Third East German Generation” describe distinctive identity-establishing cultural practices, but they are not all alike. They reflect also on observed transformations and differences in the mentality of young East Germans born after 1989.

C.: “It will interesting to see how the next generation turns out, those who were one or two during unification... there were many young eastern Germans... They talked about how their résumés define their lives... I had the impression that they’ve completely internalized the mechanisms that are necessary for success.”

A.: “I notice that too... The haste and ambition they have to improve their résumés. Everything has to fit just right” (ibid.: 66).

However, in drawing comparisons to young west Germans, the interviewees explain these changes as a product of financial insecurity.

C.: “People in the west at my age or even younger have a different level of security. They get money, even the 32-year-olds, even if they don’t finish college right away, sometimes quite a lot of money. In the east, you know that you have to do everything on your own. There’s no safety net” (ibid.: 67).

CONCLUSION

Eastern German identity has been discussed as a product of a reaction against negative ascription and socio-cultural practices. The construction of an eastern German identity, I suggest, should be seen as a complex interaction between both. The ascriptions made by the media are an externally drawn distinction. And although many heterogeneous practices among individual easterners and westerners can be observed, many social practices are unique to young easterners and these create a line of cultural distinction from the inside. Both mechanisms are a substantial part of the construction and reproduction of an eastern German identity.

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