

THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

This essay will analyse how ordinary people lived in the GDR after the division of Germany until the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The failure of the soviet model the Stasi wanted to realise in the East German sector determined the disappearance of an entire nation created from nothing. The birth of the Democratic Republic represented a surprising event for the world, but most of all for the German people: they found themselves catapulted into a new country, separated from their fellow citizens and away from the rest of the world. The socialist authorities had to restore stability inside the country and obtain legitimacy, not only from other nations, but also from its citizens. The idea was to create a new model that would show how socialism could be a better alternative to capitalism and what the Western world had to offer. The core of this social transformation and cultural renewal was the importance given to the concept of *Heimat* ("homeland").

Everything had to change and take a new direction, opposite to that which Germany had always gone in and against the Western world. In fact, the German Federal Republic and the other Western countries were seen as enemies to fight and was necessary to remove people from any possible contamination by capitalism, consumerism and imperialism.

For this reason the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*) had to "invent a new socialist nation" (from the work's title of Jan Palmowski, 2009) and to create a new collective identity no longer tied to Germany but to the GDR: to achieve this it was necessary to start from the people and their culture.

1.1 Socialism, Heimat and the German Democratic Republic

The basis of the socialist project was the desire to eliminate all traces of the Nazi past and to spread anti-fascism: this was to be a key element in the new socialist state. The Soviet

model was the only model possible to live happily: any event that was held in the GDR was organised in the name of the socialist revolution and the same concept of Heimat was inextricably linked to socialism as if it were a natural part of the German soul. In order to achieve the stabilization of the country and to raise the GDR to the level of other European countries, the SED decided to use the link of the citizens to their heimat, to their own history and to their own traditions, to make the socialist project real. The citizens of East Germany were much more attached to their local microcosms than the nation as a whole. The GDR was a new country and the concept of nationhood and community was very far from the hearts of the people. In order to create a united country under the aegis of socialism, the SED realised that it had to start from the roots of the Germans, the most marginal communities and act on their culture. They must all learn that the GDR and then socialism were the only reality they should identify with.

Socialism was the perfect alternative to capitalism and to the Western world, representing everything from which the East Germans had to stay away from. The German Federal Republic was deceived by economic liberalism, by the professed democracy and by the myth of the United States, betraying the true heimat German. A general sense of Anti-Americanism was widespread: the SED considered dangerous the spread of all American culture's forms, even books and movies. The task was to protect its citizens from capitalist countries since their proximity would have hindered the project of the SED.

1.2 The Cultural Dimension: the Everyday Life of East German Citizens

The Cultural Revolution was intended to cover every aspect of daily life: the economy, culture, television, the press, even sport and urban development were all part of the program of socialist renewal. Above all, the culture was the most invasive and most effective way to get people involved in the project. Every cultural event, such as theatrical performances, concerts, exhibitions were controlled by the SED and *Kulturbund*, the

largest cultural association in the service of the state. Created in 1945, the Cultural League (or *Kulturbund*) was in charge of overseeing all cultural events and conveying an idea of democratized culture that reflected socialism in the GDR. Despite the control of the state over the whole of society, in the cultural dimension the pressure was not so strong because of the work of cultural functionaries, who represented the essential link between the state and the people. These men worked in the Cultural League and other organizations linked with the authorities, but they would always meet the interests and needs of citizens, not exceeding the limits: they managed to achieve the perfect compromise, allowing the party to continue to monitor society and individuals to feel free. People did not see officials as representatives of the socialist authorities, but they saw them as individuals with whom you could talk. Despite the SED's continuing attempts at monitoring every cultural event, the number of citizens registered associations never diminished. Even when the party gave the order for all clubs and districts to take records in order to increase the pressure on the members, this did not lead to an estrangement of East Germans from the cultural world. The citizens were always very active in participating and organised new festivals in honor of the socialist heimat and GDR.

The Cultural Revolution had to get to every citizen of the republic and transform the collective identity of the GDR in a socialist direction. The SED used all media, but television in particular played a key role thanks to its daily character and its widespread among East German families. New television programs about the concept of heimat, who valued traditions and customs, began to be broadcast. The influence and control of the SED was not limited only to television and magazines, but also in music and sports. For these two areas, however, the action of the SED developed differently: while sports were always a tool of propaganda for the SED, popular music was less subject to the decision of the SED. Sport was a symbol of the socialist hero, an inseparable element of the worker to strengthen the body and soul, instead music left a space of freedom for citizens and it was

difficult for the party to situate it in associations and rigid patterns. Music and sport were two areas in which the SED played a particularly attentive role for the importance they had among young people. In fact, the socialist project started mainly by creating a new socialist personality for teenagers: it was necessary to reconstruct society from individuals, particularly those who had not dealt with the Second World War and the Nazi past, as the guys. Democratization of the education system allowed for the formation of an open model to all, without exclusions or privileges due to membership to a specific social class, without influence from the church or the state. Everybody had to be able to study, work and live in a dignified manner. The SED controlled the lives of young Germans through the Free German Youth, an institution created in 1946, which aimed to educate young people to the socialist model, without discrimination based on social class. The future of the GDR was placed with the German youth and they had to grow up in a society far away from the evils of the Western world: equality and justice could only be achieved in a society such as East Germany, that would create real socialists men.

1.3 The Control of the Stasi

The control of society was carried out by the Ministry for State Security, the Stasi. This was a spy organization, founded in 1950, whose task was to control all individuals suspected to be a problem for the state. Citizens were supervised at all times by members of the Stasi and everyone had a confidential file about their lives in the archive of the organization. The purpose of the Stasi was to gather as much information as possible about opponents of the GDR and the people connected to the non-socialist countries, to prevent any infiltration by Western culture. The documents gave all the details about the suspects, their birthdate, work, income, travel, and much other data. In addition to the officials, one of the greatest resources of the Stasi was the action of unofficial collaborators (IM, *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*), who were ordinary citizens who helped with the

organization. Many spontaneously decided to participate in the work of the Stasi and this led to the spread of a sense of distrust among the population: anyone could be a spy and as a result no one could trust the other, not even a parent or son. However, some citizens of the former GDR have stated that the Stasi was a ubiquitous figure in their lives, as they had learned to accept the Stasi and live by the rules of the party. The design of the SED would also cover women: they were the basis of the socialist family and they had equal dignity as men. In fact, to ensure their children's happiness, and enable them to become true socialists, a sense of mutual respect had to be present between the parents. In the GDR women played an important role not only within the household, but also on a political level. The socialist program aimed to create autonomous women, tireless workers and at the same time loving moms: the GDR was to be seen as a young and modern country, where everyone could develop freely, without discrimination.

1.4 The Economy in the GDR

The socialist revolution also included the economy. The authorities had to find an alternative model to the West to show how this Marxist project was the best. After World War II the economy of the GDR had to recover and the SED would drive economic growth, starting from the participation of each individual. The planned economy of the GDR provided the interference of the state in all areas. Everyone was considered important, because everyone could contribute to the economic recovery by performing his task best: a symbol of socialism was the hero worker engaged in the development of his country. Despite the efforts of the party, the economy of the East remained behind that of the West: the unbridled free trade and the wealth of the United States taken as a model by other European countries, were instead strongly opposed by the GDR. Despite the SED propaganda about the superiority of the socialist model, East Germany found itself always behind the GFT or other capitalist countries. Citizens had to face economic crisis, scarcity

and a general sense of international isolation. The Eastern world was exactly the opposite of the West and the living conditions of the citizens were much lower: the lack of housing, poor product quality, the low level of exports, unemployment, not to mention the Eastern citizen's fascination with the West, were all elements of the planned economy.

1.5 The Architecture in the GDR

A problem that the authorities faced ever since the birth of the GDR was the lack of housing. Most of the buildings were falling apart and needed to be restored: some did not even have a bathroom inside the house. The design of the SED provided for a renewal of the city through the action of the individual to bring people close to their communities. A special campaign called "More beautiful our cities and communities - Join in!", which began in 1967, was intended to improve the places dear to the people in the name of socialist change. The aim was to form a collective movement, united in the name of their city and their society: through the participation of each individual "a socialist democracy in action" would be born. Both Walter Ulbricht and subsequently Erich Honecker, both General Secretaries of the Central Committee of the SED and Presidents of the Council of the State, pointed much on building: new houses for the citizens of the republic were meant to give them new hope and restore confidence in the state. Embracing the socialist doctrine should not mean living in poverty and giving up a comfortable lifestyle. The new buildings were built according to the principles of austerity and simplicity: they were built in a standardized way and entrusted to the needy families. The most important project was the construction of Marzahn, district of East Berlin planned in 1973 and started in 1977. The plan also involved other outlying districts near Marzahn, as Hohenschonhausen and Hellersdorf. Many *Plattenbauten* (large buildings, made with reinforced concrete) appeared throughout the area around East Berlin and new buildings, roads, railways, schools, offices were built throughout the suburbs. The message of the SED was always the same:

socialism had allowed it to happen and Marzahn was only the first step towards the construction of a large socialist "metropolis". The transformation was swift and sudden and German families found themselves living in the most marginal of East Berlin. Though the benefits were satisfactory (the new apartments were clean and safe), on the other hand, the social relations of the community were disintegrated. In the new area it was difficult to connect the people due to the size of the districts: a general sense of loss and strangeness pervaded the minds of newcomers; the community did not recognize the district as their place of origin. With the collapse of communism and consequently the GDR, the ambitious project is lost in time: the historical sights of Berlin were reassessed and the new buildings of Marzahn quickly forgotten.

Conclusion: The Failure of the Socialist Project

When the first citizens of the East began to climb over the wall during that fateful night in November 9, 1989, the reactions were most disparate. The collapse of communism and the end of the GDR meant that Germany was finally united after forty-one years of division: East Germans finally became part of Europe with all that it represented (welfare, democracy, modernity and more) and gained the freedom denied to them for a long time. On the other hand the citizens of East found themselves suddenly without their country, which they had grown to love over the years. They felt they belonged to Germany, the one and only homeland from which they descended, but inevitably the GDR had represented the state in which most of them were born and raised: they believed in what they had been promised by the SED, but the socialist society had failed and they found themselves catapulted into a new world without a nation. Many people found themselves without a job, some homeless and unemployment increased; the products of the GDR were forgotten and public companies were privatized and purchased by West Germans. A feeling of melancholy about the past (*Ostalgie* from *Ost* "East" and *Nostalgie* "Nostalgia") had

spread between the ex-citizens of the East after the fall of the *Berliner Mauer*: their society was turned upside down and capitalism, which until then they had opposed, stood imposing on their lives. The film *Goodbye Lenin* of the director Wolfgang Becker shows clearly the drama of a family dealing with the end of the GDR: Alex and Ariane's attempt to recreate the GDR in the room of his mother Christiane, fallen into a coma after a serious illness and reawakened after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as a way to avoid the shock to a woman who will sooner or later have to face the disappearance of the world in which she believed in. She was firmly convinced of the rightness of socialism and the possibility of its realization in the GDR: the German people would thus have reached a good lifestyle never experienced before by other countries, finally acknowledging the superiority of the Marxist doctrine. The history of the GDR is the story of its citizens who were forced to face the beginning and the end of their nation. The revolution started with the individual to form a community linked to the socialist doctrine: the project was necessary to obtain the consent of the citizens and their loyalty. But when the GDR collapsed, all hopes vanished as did the beliefs of its people: the citizens had to start all over again and become part of a world they barely knew, feeling as if they were strangers.