

WHY DO EAST GERMANS FEEL AFFINITY TOWARDS RUSSIA: AN ANALYSIS OF ATTITUDES TO RUSSIA IN GERMANY'S EASTERN FEDERAL STATES

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Despite the reunification of Germany taking place more than 30 years ago, the Eastern and Western federal states still have different attitudes toward foreign policy. This article explores the reasons and prerequisites for greater understanding and lower awareness of Russia in the eastern part of Germany. The author examines the correlation between East Germans' perception of Moscow and their political culture, as well as the economic ties between the Russian Federation and the new federal states. Using archival materials, newspapers from the former German Democratic Republic, interviews, and social surveys, the author tests the hypothesis that sympathy toward Russia in East Germany may be rooted in the shared history of the GDR and the USSR. The steady dissemination of Soviet culture and the Russian language, along with various personal and institutional contacts, made Russia seem less foreign and more familiar. Furthermore, both the GDR and the USSR avoided raising difficult questions about World War II that could have complicated mutual relations. The study also identifies differences between memory politics in Germany and in several other former Eastern Bloc countries, which have influenced perceptions of Russia. Due to the nature of reunification and the rapid integration into Western organizations, reunified Germany did not construct the image of Russia as an antagonistic 'Other' to affirm its European identity.

Keywords:

Russia, USSR, Germany, GDR, East Germany, East Germans, Russian-German relations, political culture, politics of memory, The Society for German-Soviet Friendship

The reunification of Germany occurred over 30 years ago, yet disparities persist between the eastern and western federal states. East Germany continues to lag behind the west of the country in terms of labour productivity, per capita GDP,

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average salaries, and other economic indicators. Some German researchers and politicians have expressed concerns about the differing political cultures and the lack of democratic experience in the former GDR [1, p. 258]. These concerns have grown as support for the right-wing party Alternative for Germany has increased among East Germans since 2015 [2].

Public speakers have voiced unease over another distinctive feature of East Germans: the citizens of the former GDR hold a different attitude towards German foreign policy and relations with other countries. These differences in assessments of international relations echo the divisions of the Cold War. Osis (the German informal label for citizens of the former GDR, just as Wessis is the label for West Germans) tend to view the policy of Western allies, NATO and the US more critically. For instance, in 1999, only 36 % of respondents in East Germany and 94 % of respondents in the West were satisfied with NATO's operation in the Kosovo war [3, p. 95–96]. According to 2021 polls, 36 % of Germans believed their country should become more independent from the US. However, 60 % of East Germans and only 32 % of West Germans shared that view.¹

At the same time, East Germans generally express greater understanding and a positive attitude towards Russia. In 2019, the Körber-Stiftung compared how German citizens viewed the importance of allied relations with the US and Russia. Forty-three per cent of the population in the old federal states (i.e. West Germany) considered close relations with the US more important for the country, while only 21 % favoured relations with Russia. In contrast, only 23 % of the population in the new federal states prioritised transatlantic ties, while 38 % supported German-Russian relations.²

Even after the launch of the conflict in Ukraine, amid the dramatic worsening of relations between Berlin and Moscow and the Germans' growing distrust of the Russian Federation (in both parts of the country), East Germans continue to express greater interest in Russia and weaker support for sanctions and military aid to Ukraine than their western compatriots.³ For instance, in 2023, 47 % of West Germans and 70 % of East Germans opposed the supply of Taurus cruise

¹ Forsa-Umfrage: Ostdeutsche fühlen sich Russland deutlich näher, Westdeutsche den USA, RND, URL: <https://www.rnd.de/politik/forsa-umfrage-ostdeutsche-fuehlen-sich-russland-deutlich-naeher-westdeutsche-den-usa-HMUGK6VO6BADTCBKZM6ZY4GANU.html> (accessed 07.07.2024).

² Germany and the United States: Reliable Allies, Pew Research Centre, 07.05.2015, URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2015/05/07/germany-and-the-united-states-reliable-allies/> (accessed 07.07.2024).

³ Russland-Bild der Deutschen, *Infratest dimap*, URL: <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/umfragen/aktuell/russland-bild-der-deutschen/> (accessed 07.07.2024) ; Keine Mehrheit für mehr Waffenlieferungen, *Tagesschau*, 05.01.2023, URL: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/deutschlandtrend-3255.html> (accessed 07.07.2024).

missiles to Kiev.¹ In 2024, 33 % of respondents in the old federal states viewed military support to Ukraine as excessive, and 22 % believed it to be insufficient. In the new federal states, these figures were 47 % and 15 % respectively. Forty-five per cent of West Germans and 34 % of East Germans believed that the sanctions against Russia were inadequate, while 17 % of respondents from the West and 27 % of respondents from the East Germans saw them as unreasonable.²

Methodological differences in sociological polls prevent an analysis of how East German attitudes towards Moscow have evolved since 1990. However, one pattern can be clearly identified: East Germans tend to express greater understanding and less criticism of Russia.³

Differences in political culture between East and West Germans have been critically examined in academic papers [5, p. 383; 6, p. 281; 7]. Yet, some texts, mostly journalistic, addressing East Germans' differing attitudes towards foreign policy and Russia, often lack impartiality. Firstly, East Germans' positive attitude towards Russia is viewed as an anomaly, a feature that warrants scrutiny.⁴ However, even before the conflict in Ukraine, it was difficult to imagine articles such as 'Why do West Germans express less understanding of Russia?' or 'Why are many East Germans mild towards Russia?'.⁵ Regardless of foreign policy preferences,

¹ Zurückhaltung bei möglicher Lieferung von Taurus-Marschflugkörpern an die Ukraine, Infratest dimap, URL: <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/umfragen/aktuell/zurueckhaltung-bei-moeglicher-lieferung-von-taurus-marschflugkoerpern-an-die-ukraine/> (accessed 07.07.2024).

² ARD-DeutschlandTREND Januar 2024. Eine repräsentative Studie im Auftrag der tagesthemen. Infratest-dimap. *Tagesschau*, 02.01.2024. URL: <https://www.google.ru/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/deutschlandtrend-pdf-134.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwjXuoJGy4KLAXwWicKQEHUUiEvEQFnoECBoQAQ&usq=AOvVaw3w-ns50yxVoQx8wvwTbEjj> (accessed 07.07.2024).

³ The author analyses the opinions expressed in the five eastern states, noting that published polls usually exclude data from Berlin. In the last five years, only a paper prepared by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZoiS) reveals that respondents from Berlin are less supportive of relations with Russia than those from both eastern and western federal states [4, p. 15]. It is assumed that these results were influenced by the inclusion of data from West Berlin and migration to the capital from other regions.

⁴ Darum sympathisieren im Osten mehr Menschen mit Russland, *Krautreporter*, 05.06.2023, URL: <https://krautreporter.de/4909-darum-sympathisieren-im-osten-mehr-menschen-mit-russland> (accessed 10.06.2024) ; Woher das Russland-Verständnis kommt. *MRD*, 24.10.2023, URL: <https://www.mdr.de/geschichte/ddr/politik-gesellschaft/ostdeutsche-russland-versteher-beziehungen-ukraine-krieg-sowjetunion-100.html> (accessed 10.06.2024).

⁵ Reference to the article 'Why are many East Germans mild towards Russia' [Warum viele Ostdeutsche russlandmilde sind], *Spiegel*, 03.10.2022, URL: <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/nach-putins-angriffskrieg-warum-viele-ostdeutsche-russlandmilde-sind-a-961d45a1-b648-4d8f-8292-04873df157cb?dicbo=v2-c29b19b7f695b7420efefb8a48f2243d> (accessed 10.06.2024).

the West German attitude seems to be considered the norm. Secondly, even before the Ukrainian conflict, some texts appeared to assess this interest negatively. Thirdly, in some texts, East Germans appear not only as objects of research but also potentially as objects of political education.¹ Finally, even scientific research has at times conflated East Germans' sympathies for Russia, the Russian political system and the Russian political elite [4].

This article explores the reasons and prerequisites for a more positive attitude towards Moscow in the eastern federal states of Germany, investigating the hypothesis through various theoretical approaches. Firstly, the hypothesis that positive attitudes towards Russia may correlate with political culture (political culture theory) and economic ties (economic determination) requires verification. Secondly, it is suggested that significant preconditions for the perception of Russia might have been shaped by the history of the GDR and the USSR. Thus, the process of Soviet-German reconciliation is explored. Thirdly, to understand why East Germans' attitudes towards Russia differ from those in several other Eastern Bloc countries, the article also examines distinctive features of memory politics in reunited Germany. The final sections draw on Aleida Assmann's theoretical approach, particularly her definition of collective memory [8], as well as Maurice Halbwachs's thesis that personal memory operates within a collective context [9].

The article draws on the author's interviews with German and Soviet politicians and researchers, archival documents, the GDR newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, statistical data and published opinion polls.

The limitations of this conceptual framework are acknowledged, with the hope that future research will explore this question using sociological methods as well.

'With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed'

Hypothetically, economic ties between nations foster political cooperation and positive mutual perceptions. Therefore, it is necessary to challenge the assumption that East Germans' relatively positive attitude towards Russia correlates with more intensive economic cooperation between the new federal states and the Russian Federation. Given that the sanctions imposed in the wake of the Ukraine conflict and the concurrent deterioration of Russian-EU economic cooperation, this study focuses on pre-2022 data.

Trade statistics from two eastern federal states provide strong support for the assumption regarding the significance of economic ties. In 2021 and 2020, Russia was the top export destination for Brandenburg, while for Sachsen-Anhalt, it ranked first in 2021 and second in 2020.²

¹ Russland ist Teil der ostdeutschen Identität, *Tagesschau*, 26.02.2023, URL: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/gesellschaft/ostdeutschland-ukraine-101.html> (accessed 10.06.2024).

² Calculated by the author for Brandenburg based on *OECD World*, URL: https://oec.world/en/profile/subnational_deu/brandenburg (accessed 30.04.2024) ; Saxony-Anhalt, based on *OECD World*. URL: https://oec.world/en/profile/subnational_deu/saxony-anhalt (accessed 30.04.2024).

In 2021, Russia accounted for 15 % of Sachsen-Anhalt's goods exports, amounting to 2.9 billion euros, a figure significantly exceeding that of other suppliers.¹ At the same time, exports from Sachsen-Anhalt to Russia reached 314 million euros, a relatively low figure.² Russia's major exports were fossil fuels — natural gas and oil. With the Druzhba pipeline running through the federal state, the refinery in Leuna sustains gas stations, households, and the chemical industry in Sachsen-Anhalt, as well as in Thuringia and Saxony.

In 2021, Russia's share of goods exports in Brandenburg was 19.2 %, amounting to 3.93 billion euros.³ The refinery in Schwedt processed Russian crude oil flowing through the Druzhba pipeline in Brandenburg, directly employing 1,200 people. The oil refining industry in the eastern federal states created jobs for 54,500 individuals and supported 160 enterprises in the chemical and pharmaceutical sectors.⁴

Russia was significant, though not the main trade partner, for other eastern federal states. In 2020, the country ranked 12th among exporters and importers in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.⁵ Moreover, the Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines terminate in Greifswald, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, where the EUGAL and NEL pipelines originate. Russia's role, however, is less significant in two other eastern states: in 2021, it ranked 15th as an exporter and 30th as an importer to Thuringia,⁶ and 20th as an exporter and 29th as an importer to Saxony.⁷

The above suggests that although economic ties may shape perceptions of Russia, they are not the decisive factor, as no correlation exists between trade balance and attitudes towards Russia in Saxony and Thuringia. While the share of Russian exports and imports was insignificant, the US, in contrast, was the

¹ Counted by the author by Saxony-Anhalt. *OECD World*, URL: https://oec.world/en/profile/subnational_deu/saxony-anhalt (accessed 10.06.2024).

² Wirtschaft und Verbraucher: So abhängig ist Sachsen-Anhalt von Russland. *MRD*, URL: <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/sachsen-anhalt/krieg-russland-sanktionen-folgen-wirtschaft100.html#sprung> (accessed 30.04.2024).

³ Counted by the author by Brandenburg. *OECD*, URL: https://oec.world/en/profile/subnational_deu/brandenburg (accessed 30.04.2024).

⁴ Ukraine-Krieg: Ohne russisches Öl aus der „Druzhba“-Pipeline — geht das?, *Merkur.de*, 25.03.2022, URL: <https://www.merkur.de/wirtschaft/ukraine-krieg-news-russisches-oel-druschba-pipeline-ende-zr-91434319.html> (accessed 10.06.2024).

⁵ Statistische Berichte zum Thema Außenhandel, *Landesamt für innere Verwaltung Statistisches Amt*. URL: <https://www.laiv-mv.de/Statistik/Zahlen-und-Fakten/Gesamtwirtschaft-&-Umwelt/Aussenhandel/Statistische-Berichte> (accessed 23.01.2025).

⁶ Russland und die Ukraine im Fokus — Außenhandel und Bevölkerung in Thüringen, *Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik*, URL: https://statistik.thueringen.de/presse/2022/pr_035_22.pdf (accessed 12.06.2024).

⁷ Counted by the author by Außenhandel, Statistisches Landesamt des Freistaates Sachsen, URL: https://www.statistik.sachsen.de/html/aussenhandel.html?_cp=%7B%22accordion-content-8029%22%3A%7B%22%22%3Atrue%2C%22%22%3Atrue%7D%2C%22previousOpen%22%3A%7B%22group%22%3A%22accordion-content-8029%22%2C%22idx%22%3A2%7D%7D (accessed 30.04.2024).

second-largest exporter and fourth-largest importer to Saxony in 2021.¹ As noted earlier, Eastern Germans believe that relations with Russia are more important for Germany than those with the US. Furthermore, despite the dramatic deterioration of Russian-German economic relations and the Nord Stream explosions, the new federal states still maintain a relatively positive attitude towards Russia. This indicates that economic cooperation and gas pipelines were not the sole factors connecting East Germany with Russia.

The wall in the mind: differences in political cultures

East Germany's distinct political culture, along with its similarities to that of Russia, could be seen as a prerequisite for a deeper understanding of Moscow. German public figures and researchers suggest that shared experiences of the crises of the 1990s, disillusionment with pro-Western ideals, and a sense of being treated as second-class citizens may have shaped East German-Russian relations.² Support for Moscow appears to be tied to the struggle for the vulnerable East German identity.³ Although there is no definitive evidence linking the trauma of the painful transition to capitalism with a favourable attitude towards the Russian Federation, this hypothesis remains thought-provoking. Although it has been argued that the roots of the current perception of Russia can be traced to the history of the GDR and the *Wendezeit* (the period of transformation after the collapse of communism in the GDR), this does not explain why Russia became embedded in East German identity. We will explore this question in the following paragraphs.

Weaker support for democracy is seen as another distinctive feature of East German political culture. Indirectly, this could reinforce positive attitudes towards Russia — a country often regarded as undemocratic in German discourse — as well as for Russian political elites. According to polls, in 2019, 33.8 % of East Germans and only 20.3 % of West Germans considered Vladimir Putin an effective president [4, p. 11]. However, East Germans' political culture and weaker commitment to democracy cannot be the primary cause of the difference in attitudes. Firstly, it seems more accurate to attribute East Germans' sentiments not to anti-democratic views in the new federal states but to dissatisfaction with the German political system. According to 2020 data, 59 % of respondents in the

¹ Sachsens Außenhandel, *Sachsen!*, URL: <https://standort-sachsen.de/de/exporteure/sachsens-aussenhandel> (accessed 12.06.2024).

² Warum viele Ostdeutsche russlandmilde sind, *Spiegel*, 03.10.2022, URL: <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/nach-putins-angriffskrieg-warum-viele-ostdeutsche-russlandmilde-sind-a-961d45a1-b648-4d8f-8292-04873df157cb?dicbo=v2-c29b19b7f695b7420efefb8a48f2243d> (accessed 10.06.2024).

³ Russland ist Teil der ostdeutschen Identität, *Tagesschau*, 26.02.2023, URL: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/gesellschaft/ostdeutschland-ukraine-101.html> (accessed 10.06.2024).

West and only 39 % in the East were satisfied with it.¹ Secondly, attitudes towards a country appear to carry more weight than perceptions of its political regime. The presidency of Donald Trump, widely regarded as populist in the German mass media, did not alter the pattern of stronger support for the US in the West than in the East of Germany. Another notable feature is the lower level of trust in political institutions, including official mass media, in the new federal states [7, S. 170]. As a result, some East Germans may disregard criticism of the Russian regime in the German media. Nevertheless, the case of Donald Trump demonstrates that scepticism towards media criticism alone is insufficient to alter the pattern in which West Germans show greater support for their US ally, while East Germans express more support for Russia.

Therefore, political culture could influence East Germans' attitude towards Russia, as some East Germans are less susceptible to the criticism of the Russian political regime in the German media. However, as noted above, attitudes towards a country may be a more significant factor than perceptions of its political regime. Consequently, the roots of East Germans' idea of Russia, as well as the differences between the new and old federal states, can presumably be traced back to the times of a divided Germany.

'Learning from the Soviet Union means learning to win'

The Soviet-German friendship became a crucial element of East German ideology following the establishment of the German Democratic Republic in 1949. On May 5, 1949, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED) passed a resolution requiring party members to actively support friendship with the USSR [10, S. 77]. Amity with the Soviet Union, alongside ties with other socialist countries,² was enshrined in the GDR's Constitutions of 1968 and 1974.³

The SED political elite ensured the inviolability of Soviet-German ties. The rationale for their commitment was the protection offered by the Soviet Union, which secured the existence of the young German Democratic Republic and its socialist system. However, another driving factor behind their pro-Soviet orientation was the personal biographies of the party leaders, who had deep emotional ties to the USSR. Prominent figures of the GDR, such as Wilhelm Pieck and Walter Ulbricht, had fought against the Nazis in the National Committee for a Free Germany, an organization that operated in the USSR during World War II.

¹ *Ostdeutschland. Ein neuer Blick. Bericht 2022*, 2022, Berlin, Der Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Ostdeutschland, 92 S.

² Verfassung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik vom 9. April 1968 in der Fassung vom 7. Oktober 1974. Kap. 1. Art. 6. (2.), URL: <https://www.verfassungen.de/ddr/verf74.htm> (accessed 10.01.2024).

³ Verfassung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik vom 9. April 1968 in der Fassung vom 7. Oktober 1974. Kap. 1. Art. 6. (2.), *Verfassungen der Welt*, URL: <https://www.verfassungen.de/ddr/verf74.htm> (accessed 30.04.2022).

Others, such as Horst Sindermann and Erich Honecker, had been incarcerated in Nazi prisons and concentration camps. Some, such as Erich Mielke, studied in the USSR after fleeing the Third Reich, while Marcus Wolf, the head of the Ministry of State Security's foreign intelligence service from 1952 to 1986, spent his childhood and youth in the Soviet Union and was known to his friends as 'Mischa' [11]. The Soviet Union, therefore, was a natural and significant ally for them. Willi Stoph, Chairman of the Council of Ministers from 1976 to 1989, and Hans Modrow, Chairman of the Council of Ministers from 1989 to 1990, both served in the German army but became fervent communists after their time in Soviet POW camps and anti-fascist schools¹ [12, S. 36–45]. Quantitative data on members of the SED Central Committee provides additional support for this thesis.

In 1954, 20 % of Central Committee members and 6 % of candidates had been in exile in the USSR between 1939 and 1945 [13, S. 175]. Furthermore, 24 % of members and 9 % of candidates had received education in the Soviet Union before 1945, while 6.6 % of members and 11 % of candidates attended Soviet educational institutions after the war [13, S. 176].

Several public and cultural organisations were established to promote Soviet-German friendship and disseminate Soviet culture. In 1946, the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union approved the opening of the House of Soviet Culture in Berlin, which covered a library, theatre, art exhibitions, among other initiatives.² In 1947, Societies for the Study of Soviet Culture were founded to combat anti-Soviet sentiments. Two years later, these smaller societies were consolidated into a mass organisation named the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (*Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft*, DSF). The DSF held public lectures, discussions, concerts, films, exhibitions, and managed the Houses of Soviet Culture.³ By the end of the 1980s, approximately 6 million people had become members of the DSF. However, as the number of members steadily grew, their involvement became more symbolic. Many members no longer actively participated in the organisation's activities, leading to a decline in membership fees and increasing reliance on government support.

The dissemination of the Russian language and Soviet culture aimed to strengthen Soviet-German ties. In 1951, Russian became the primary foreign language taught in schools. Russian books were translated and published, and events such as the Days of Friendship and Culture of the USSR in the GDR, tours by Soviet dance troupes and music ensembles and film festivals were organised annually in East Germany.⁴

Public sentiment towards the Soviet Union evolved over 40 years. Initially, anti-Soviet attitudes were strong, with Germans criticising Soviet soldiers,

¹ Author's interview with Hans Modrow. 10.03.2020.

² State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) F. R-9493. Op. 1. D. 3. P. 24; State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) F. R-9493. Op. 1. D. 2. P. 10.

³ State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) F. R-9576 Op. 4. D. 13 (1). P. 1, 7, 34.

⁴ Neues Deutschland, 9 Mai, 1980.

the Soviet political system, the Stalin cult, and the Society for German-Soviet Friendship [10, S. 83]. Citizens condemned the Soviet propaganda, particularly a large number of posters at the time when children did not have school textbooks [10, S. 84]. However, attitudes gradually shifted. Interviews indicate that by the early 1970s, East Germans no longer viewed Soviet people as foes. While the Society for German-Soviet Friendship still sparked irritation, this was primarily due to its obligatory nature and membership fees [10, S. 25]. Some East Germans had already befriended Soviet citizens. According to Filitov, the dissemination of Soviet culture was successful and contributed to a positive image of the Soviet Union [14, p. 9–10].

Some East Germans already had Soviet friends. According to the article Alexey Filitov, the dissemination of Soviet culture was successful and contributed to the positive image of Soviet Union [14, p. 9–10].

Thus, the policy of Soviet-German friendship, along with the dissemination of Soviet culture and the Russian language, laid the foundation for contact and apparently fostered a sense of familiarity with the Soviet Union among East Germans.

Dealing with the past

Although both Soviet and German propaganda promoted the slogan of Soviet-German friendship, there was no mention of reconciliation. It seemed that the Soviet and German peoples had moved from war to friendship without that stage. Yet, confronting the Nazi past was a crucial aspect of Soviet-East German and later Russian-German relations.

On the one hand, the GDR elites acknowledged the crimes of the Hitler regime immediately after the war. More significantly, they promptly recognised the atrocities committed on Soviet territory,¹ a contrast to the reluctance of West German elites to do so [14, p. 17]. In the official GDR discourse, one of the main outcomes of World War II was ‘the liberation of East Germany by the Soviet Union’. Although East German political elites sought to promote the idea of liberation by the Red Army at the war’s end, Soviet leaders contested this narrative, preferring to describe it as a victory over Germany. It was only after the establishment of the GDR on 8 May 1950 that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin officially congratulated the new republic on Liberation Day by telegram [15, p. 32]. Stalin’s telegram legitimised the narrative of Germany’s liberation. Even former Soviet soldiers, such as the war hero Mikhail Yegorov, described the liberation of the Germans in their official speeches as a key objective of the Red Army,² which contradicted the reality of 1945.

On the other hand, public discussions on the collective guilt of the East German people waned. In the first decades after the war, there was room for politi-

¹ Neues Deutschland, 7 Mai, 1950.

² Er hisste die rote Fahne auf dem Reichstag. Neues Deutschland, 8 Mai, 1955.

cal discourse on East German responsibility for the lack of anti-Nazi resistance. However, under Erich Honecker, the emphasis shifted from responsibility to pride in belonging to the anti-fascist state.¹ Official GDR propaganda asserted that only the Hitler regime had been the aggressor.

The remembrance of World War II enriched the concept of Soviet-German friendship. East Germany emphasised the Soviet Union's dominant role in both the victory and the Eastern Bloc. However, under Erich Honecker, images of two forces fighting side by side, almost on equal terms, appeared in public addresses and publications.² The political elites of the GDR did not confine themselves to the role of 'the grateful pupil'. Under Honecker, East Germany celebrated Liberation Day with the same symbols as those used for Victory Day in the Soviet Union.³ Party and state leaders received congratulations from representatives of the Warsaw Pact countries and awarded Soviet veterans the Scharnhorst Order and the Patriotic Order of Merit.⁴

Given that silence is just as important as commemoration within the framework of the politics of memory, public dissatisfaction with Soviet actions was not permitted in East Germany. With West Germany using the suffering of prisoners of war in the USSR for propaganda, the GDR viewed POW camps as an effective means of re-education. East Germans displaced from Czechoslovakia and former German territories in Poland and the USSR were not allowed to form associations or criticise their displacement [16, S. 151]. Any conflicts between German and Soviet citizens, including military personnel of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany, were concealed [10, S. 94]. As a result, difficult and painful moments of mutual history did not become part of the shared collective memory.

Thus, East German elites, largely composed of members of the Anti-Nazi Resistance, immediately acknowledged the crimes of Hitler's regime against the Soviet people. With Moscow's approval, the GDR equated the victory in World War II with the liberation of East Germany. At the same time, both sides avoided addressing complex issues of the war and post-war history. The Soviet decision to support the SED's discourse of liberation was driven by political pragmatism. Over time, the victory of the USSR in World War II came to be seen by East Germans not as humiliation but as liberation. In turn, East German elites consistently complemented the thesis of the liberation of the German people with a statement emphasising the importance of Soviet-German friendship.

People-to-people contacts

The slogan 'German-Soviet friendship' could seem hollow without social contact between the two peoples. Paradoxically, within Soviet-German interactions, a declaration of friendship coexisted with a limited number of private contacts. There were two main types of contact between citizens of the USSR and

¹ Autor's interview with Prof. Jens Reich und Eva Reich. 13.12.2017.

² Neues Deutschland, 8 Mai, 1975.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Neues Deutschland, 7 Mai, 1985.

the GDR. The first was formalised interactions in groups, according to a pre-approved programme, including official visits and meetings. The second was informal communication among ordinary citizens, free from control or censorship.

Shortly after World War II, only limited groups of people, predominantly communist elites, were allowed to visit the USSR. Prominent party members travelled abroad to receive an education in Moscow. From the mid-1950s, Soviet and German worker delegations visited each other's industrial factories as part of mutual exchanges.

Another opportunity for citizens of both countries to visit the USSR and the GDR was tourism, although the number of individuals travelling to the 'brotherly nation' remained limited. In 1956, only 3,516 East Germans visited the USSR; by 1975, the number had risen to 143,000, and in 1988, it reached 380,000 [17, p. 156]. The number of Soviet tourists in the GDR was roughly two to three times smaller [17, p. 156].

Tourist visits were organised according to officially approved guidelines. Tourist groups were often arranged by profession, with routes tailored to participants' fields of work. Agricultural workers visited *kolkhozes*,¹ while industrial workers toured factories. Soviet groups visited memorials to the Great Patriotic War, sites dedicated to the history of the communist movement, and locations associated with German anti-fascism. German tourists toured places related to the history of the communist party and Lenin, as well as the achievements of the socialist system, with reduced emphasis on cultural and historical heritage [18].

Both official and tourist visits included semi-official meetings and intercultural dialogue. Organised by the Society for German-Soviet Friendship, these gatherings took place in a formal yet highly amicable atmosphere, featuring addresses, toasts and artistic performances. While their structured and controlled nature made them seem artificial, they also minimised the risk of serious conflicts.

Co-education and collaboration fostered even deeper and stronger informal connections, sometimes developing into lasting friendships. For instance, Russian-speaking East German scholars maintained warm relationships with their Soviet counterparts and remained in contact even after the collapse of the Soviet system [10, S. 92].² Co-education, as an interaction between representatives of two nations, could not be entirely controlled or confined to propaganda slogans. While respondents and researchers noted the presence of observers and informers among Soviet and German students, this did not have a significant impact on the daily lives of the youths [19, p. 76].³

It is worth noting that German students enrolled in higher education in the Soviet Union cannot be regarded as a representative sample of GDR society. Firstly, the number of East German students who studied in the USSR was not considerable, never exceeding 22,000 after 1951 [20, p. 535]. Secondly, only motivated, well-educated and trustworthy youths were permitted to study abroad.

Soviet-German educational exchanges strengthened friendly relations between the two countries. According to surveys, many Germans who studied at So-

¹ State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) F. R-9612. Op. 3. D. 54. P. 2.

² Autor's interview with Prof. Jens Reich und Eva Reich. 13.12.2017.

³ Author's interview with Dr Viktor Vasilyev. 14.11.2022.

viet universities maintained an interest in Russian culture and people [21, S. 17]. Respondents from the former GDR assessed their studies in the USSR positively, valuing the knowledge and experience they had gained. One of the most decisive factors was human relations, with one respondent noting that none of their teachers or acquaintances blamed them for the war [21, S. 15]. Unexpected everyday challenges, such as travel restrictions and less comfortable halls of residence, did not diminish their positive attitude towards Soviet education. Moreover, some respondents highly valued experiences that contradicted the official image of the USSR, mentioning political debates among students, opportunities for critical discussions on Soviet reality and socialist ideas, and access to Western literature [21, S. 12–13]. Similarly, Soviet students who attended universities in East Germany expressed similar sentiments. They were particularly struck by student discussions, open communication, books (such as those by Heinrich Böll), access to Western television, and relatively high levels of consumption.

Contacts between ordinary citizens of the GDR and Soviet troops, including the medical corps deployed in East Germany, had an ambiguous nature and impact. On one hand, these contacts were strictly restricted; on the other, both official and unofficial communications took place. Some of these interactions left a positive impression [6, S. 26], but at the same time, several members of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany committed crimes against civilians, undermining the entire concept of Soviet-German friendship¹ [10, S. 94]. Additionally, German soldiers, particularly officers of the National People's Army (NVA), interacted with their Soviet counterparts, and this experience was ambivalent, with the most positive memories stemming from contacts with ordinary people in the USSR [22; 23, S. 19–22]. However, the consequences and influences of military contacts require a more thorough evaluation in future studies.

An uncommon but fruitful practice of Soviet-German interaction was pen friendship. Worker² and student³ collectives would find pen pals from the 'brotherly nation' through the Society for German-Soviet Friendship or the embassies. Pupils, especially young pioneers, sent letters to *Pionerskaya Pravda* and International Friendship Clubs to request the addresses of pen friends. While some participants may have used such correspondence for career purposes, it seems that most schoolchildren had a genuine interest in the exchange or a desire to improve their foreign language skills. Soviet-German pen pals exchanged similar experiences (everyday pioneer life, pioneer bonds, summer camps) and shared aspects that were unfamiliar to the correspondents (daily goods, life abroad) [24, p. 230, 244].

Thus, contacts between the Soviet and East German people, although relatively rare, should not be underestimated. Firstly, even organised visits and meetings fostered a sense of familiarity, and a structured programme reduced the risk of

¹ Bundesarchiv, DC 20/8970. S. 31–32.

² State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) F. R-9576 Op. 4 D. 12 (1). P. 65.

³ State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) F. R-9576 Op. 4. D. 13 (1). P. 29–30.

conflicts.¹ Secondly, mutual perceptions of the German-Soviet relationship, particularly as one of similarity and exoticism, heightened interest and communication. Thirdly, paradoxically, rare informal contacts amid a reality that differed from the official ideal image proved powerful and contributed to the positive perceptions of both countries.

Post-reunification politics of memory in Germany: *exceptio probat regulam in casibus non exceptis*

The hypothesis that the ties between the USSR and the GDR, along with the dissemination of Soviet culture, has translated into a more amicable attitude of the new federal state towards Russia raises the question of why this sentiment is not shared by all Eastern Bloc countries. Indeed, in all Warsaw Pact countries, there were communications with Soviet citizens, Russian was taught in schools, and Soviet culture was strongly promoted [25, p. 20].

The East German attitude towards Russia (distinct from, for instance, Polish sentiments)² was supposedly influenced not only by shared history but also by the remembrance of that period, as individual memory of a particular event is shaped not only by personal experience but also by social and collective memory. Maurice Halbwachs noted that one ‘must often appeal to others’ remembrances to evoke his own past. He goes back to reference points determined by society, hence outside himself” [9]. Particularly for generations born after 1980, perceptions are based both on the stories of elders and the image of the past shaped by the politics of memory.

German politics of memory does not focus on critically examining the GDR-USSR ties or the Soviet influence and pressure on East German elites. Even the East German uprising of 1953 did not become a significant or critical part of collective memory. 17 June, the day of the East German uprising suppressed by Soviet troops, was a national holiday in West Germany (Day of German Unity) but was replaced by 3 October, German Unity Day, following the reunification. Apparently, the lack of criticism of the Soviet Union in collective memory can be explained by the history of the past 30 years. Additionally, the differences between the former GDR and other Warsaw Pact countries may have influenced Germany’s politics of memory towards Russia.

Firstly, the new elites who came to power in post-socialist countries after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc were predominantly representatives of the anti-socialist opposition and projected their experiences onto national politics. The last President of Czechoslovakia and the first President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel sought to shape the identity of the new elites by positioning them as heirs of the 1968 protesters. He appointed the architect of the Prague Spring, Alexander Dubček, as Chairman of the Federal Assembly of Czechoslovakia [26,

¹ Yet, conflicts between citizens of the two countries could not be entirely eliminated. For example, the archives of tourist organisations contain complaints from Soviet citizens regarding the rudeness or the unnecessary political discussions raised by German guides [13].

² Taking into account that the memories of the population of Central and Eastern European countries, as well as their attitude towards the Russian Federation, are also heterogeneous.

p. 25]. These elites actively criticised the communist past and, to some extent, the USSR. For instance, Václav Havel described Russia as a potential threat in his speeches [27, p. 62]. In contrast, with former West German elites remaining in power in reunified Germany, the anti-communist struggle was not central to German identity. Moreover, the country's authorities sought to avoid complicating Russian-German relations with anti-Soviet rhetoric.

Secondly, some dramatic events in the shared history of the USSR and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries became significant elements of their politics of memory — the Prague Spring [28, p. 194] in the Czech Republic and the Warsaw Uprising in Poland. A united Germany cannot radically revise the commemoration of World War II, given its commitment to overcoming the Nazi past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). For instance, while the demolition of the monument to Marshal Konev was possible in the Czech Republic, a comparable decision in Germany would provoke condemnation and violate the Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness, Partnership and Cooperation, as well as the German-Russian War Grave Agreement. Moreover, Berlin cannot blame the USSR for the occupation of the GDR, as this could be seen as a revision of the outcomes of World War II.

Thirdly, Germany and other Eastern Bloc countries interpret the historical events that took place in 1989 and 1990 differently. While CEE countries commemorate the Velvet Revolutions as a victory over their communist regimes and the USSR [29, p. 162], Germany largely credits Mikhail Gorbachev with enabling the peaceful revolution and the country's reunification.¹ Former Chancellor Helmut Kohl expressed gratitude to the Soviet leader, alongside the American president and opposition figures in former Warsaw Pact countries, in a speech marking the 10th anniversary of reunification.² Chancellor Gerhard Schröder similarly acknowledged in his 1999 reunification address: 'We commend the Soviet government of Mikhail Gorbachev for not opposing the people's desire for freedom. Quite the opposite: Gorbachev's reform policies contributed to this development'.³ Chancellor Angela Merkel also included Gorbachev among those who facilitated the fall of the Berlin Wall in her speech on 9 November 2014.⁴

¹ Deutsche Teilung und Friedliche Revolution, *Infratest-dimap*, URL: <https://www.bundesstiftung-aufarbeitung.de/sites/default/files/uploads/files/2019-11/2014-10-02-umfragebundesstiftungaufarbeitung-2-graf.pdf> (accessed 20.06.2024).

² Rede von Dr Helmut Kohl, Bundeskanzler a. D., *Deutscher Bundestag*, URL: <https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/geschichte/gastredner/gorbatschow/kohl-247410> (accessed 20.06.2024).

³ Rede von Bundeskanzler Gerhard Schröder zum Tag der deutschen Einheit am 3. Oktober 1999 in Wiesbaden, URL: <https://politische-reden.eu/BR/t/49.html> (accessed 20.06.2024).

⁴ Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel anlässlich der Eröffnung der neuen Dauerausstellung der Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer am 9. November 2014, Bunderegierung, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/rede-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-anlaesslich-der-eroeffnung-der-neuen-dauerausstellung-der-gedenkstaette-berliner-mauer-am-9-november-2014-415742> (accessed 20.06.2024).

Finally, in the discourse on affiliation with Europe, Russia came to be perceived as the *Other*. With the former GDR merging into reunified Germany, it automatically joined Western structures — NATO and the European Communities/EU. For CEE countries, however, this remained a goal to be achieved over the following decade. While East Germans did not have to prove their European identity, some CEE representatives were acutely aware of their alleged alienation from Europe. Europe was their quest [30, p. 2], a mythical lost home to which they had been returning [31].¹ They could construct their (Central) European identity by defining Russia as the antagonistic *Other* — the force that had severed them from their roots. This perception of Russia as the *Other* was already present in Central European intellectual debates of the 1980s [32, p. 200—207]. Milan Kundera, for instance, wrote in his essay: '[n]othing could be more foreign to Central Europe and its passion for variety than Russia: uniform, standardizing, centralizing, determined to transform every nation of its empire... into a single Russian people'.² After the Velvet Revolutions of 1989 and 1990, political elites in CEE countries sought integration into the Western community by positioning themselves in opposition to the East, particularly Russia [32, p. 211—212; 33].

Thus, while the integration of the former GDR into Western society shaped its distinct politics of memory and set it apart from CEE countries, the relatively low level of criticism of the Soviet Union did not significantly influence perceptions of Russia in the new federal states.

* * *

The more favourable attitude of East Germans towards Russia may result from a combination of factors. Economic ties and, in particular, cognate political cultures shape perceptions of Russia in the new federal states. However, since economic and political factors alone cannot fully explain the exceptional empathy for Russia in eastern Germany, a shared history appears to be another significant element.

Historical ties fostered a sense of closeness between the two countries. While Soviet-German friendship did not fully align with its official image, the steady dissemination of Soviet culture and the Russian language, along with various points of contact, made Russia feel less foreign and more familiar. Familiarity often breeds understanding, as East German politician Matthias Platzeck observed: 'When you get to know the Russians better, it doesn't mean that you love them,

¹ Havel, V. 1996, The Hope for Europe, an address in Aachen on May 15, *The New York Review*, URL: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1996/06/20/the-hopefor-europe/> (accessed 10.06.2024).

² Kundera, M. 1984, The Tragedy of Central Europe, *The New York Review*, URL: https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1984/04/26/the-tragedy-of-central-europe/?srsltid=AfmBOoqG6qlfzrdFRq1_EQIysWa526pTHIvPkf10ReWgMLSxTVd-0uJR (accessed 10.06.2024)

but you assess them more realistically and you don't have any irrational fears'.¹ Notably, this rapprochement was strengthened not because of propaganda, but in spite of it. Germans who had direct contact with Soviet people retained empathy towards the USSR and Russia, even as they recognised that the country differed from the idealised portrayal in Russian language textbooks.

Another key factor was the relatively low level of criticism directed at the Soviet Union in both the GDR and reunified Germany. The process of reunification and Germany's swift integration into Western organisations shaped its post-1990 politics of memory. In the socialist GDR, condemnation of the USSR was not permitted due to the close ties between the elites of both countries and the Soviet Union's endorsement of East Germany's narrative of World War II. Both states sought to avoid raising difficult questions.

Silence about painful historical issues is a contentious approach that does not necessarily lead to reconciliation. For instance, in the first decade after the war, when memories of the conflict were still raw, oblivion was not an option. Although the enforced suppression of memory and restrictions on openly discussing personal tragedies may have seemed harsh, restrictions on the remembrance of traumatic events caused these episodes to be ultimately excluded from the collective memory of subsequent generations. A balance must be struck — one that allows victims to share their difficult experiences while ensuring that their suffering does not become the foundation of a historical myth (in the academic sense of the word) that could hinder future generations' ability to engage in constructive dialogue.

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¹ Author's interview with Matthias Platzeck 12.11.2019; Die späte Liebe zum großen Bruder, in Spiegel: <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/die-ostdeutschen-und-russland-liebesgruesse-nach-moskau-a-00000000-0002-0001-0000-000166007141> (accessed 10.01.2024).

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