Actually existing post-socialism: Producing ideological others in eastern Germany

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Abstract
In this article I will argue that we need to continue working with and through the notion of post-socialism as long as local populations are treated as transitional. That is, as long as policy-makers, politicians, managers and academics engage with local people in the belief that their dispositions, behaviours and personhoods in the democratic present are a result of their own or their predecessors’ life in socialism, and as long as they develop initiatives that aim to counter attitudes seen to result from the state-socialist past. Taking this concept seriously in the sense that powerholders believe in ‘actually existing post-socialism’ allows us to explore not only how such perceptions come about but also their lasting effects on local populations, which is relevant to our anthropological understanding of humanity more widely. The article shows how a perception of a transition to democracy that is yet to be concluded has become intertwined with the production of all-Germany as democratic, which therefore rests upon the continuous reproduction of eastern Germans as ideological, democratically deficient others.

Keywords
Coevalness, eastern Europe, Germany, memory, post-socialism, time

On a hot summer’s day in 2007, I am sitting with Frau Buesing in her office at the Agency for Civic Education (LpB) in the federal state of Mittelland, eastern Germany. The agency, which is part of Mittelland’s State Chancellery, provides funding for civic education projects of a range of governmental and non-governmental organizations, and runs
training events for so-called ‘multipliers’–people and groups engaged in education, such as school teachers, politicians, journalists. It is my first day at the LpB and Frau Buesing is keen to tell me that her department, which focuses on countering right-wing extremism, is very relevant to our research project on ‘The East German Past Today’. Co-researcher Sabine had spent most of her time ‘down there’ she explains motioning down the corridor to the department of historical education, which includes the past of the German Democratic Republic (GDR hereafter). While that department may seem more explicitly relevant to the project, her topic of right-wing extremism is of equal relevance. After all, ‘it [right-wing extremism] is here also partly a result of the GDR system’. She is organizing a workshop precisely on the topic of right-wing extremism and GDR structures in the autumn, she goes on to tell me.

A sense of the lasting legacies of socialism impacting on their work was palpable at the LpB on a number of occasions. In another conversation, Frau Buesing explained to me she felt that the people in Mittelland were as xenophobic as western Germans had been in the 1970s. Western Germans had moved on, while Mittellanders continued to repeat the common refrain that foreigners were responsible for high levels of unemployment. And this even though there were very few foreigners in the region, she added. According to her and her colleague Frau Wolf, head of the department of historical education, an East German upbringing caused local people, including some ‘typical GDR teachers’, to expect too much of the state, a sign of their experiences of socialist authoritarianism. And people lacked civic courage, the head of the LpB, Herr Bohlmann, explained on another day during fieldwork. When, later in the year, the results of a large-scale survey on political attitudes were published, staff at the LpB and the State Chancellery, which had commissioned the Mittelland Survey, found further confirmation of their concerns about local people’s lacking civic skills. They placed heavy emphasis on survey responses that, to their minds, indicated local people’s incorrect understandings of democracy, their lack of attachment to democratic values and their nostalgia for socialism.

None of the concerns staff at the LpB raised during fieldwork are exclusive to Mittelland. Nor is the treatment of a population group as problematic, backward, or as inappropriately equipped specific to post-Wende eastern Germany.2 Sociologists of Britain have explored a political rhetoric that treats the long-term unemployed and young people from underprivileged backgrounds as ‘failing’ members of society, lacking the initiative and character assumed necessary to make it in a neoliberal economy (Chapman, 2018; Payne, 2018). But also, more generally, if we see government as a problematizing activity that ‘poses obligations of rulers in terms of the problems they seek (and are able) to address’ (Rose and Miller, 1992: 181), we need to expect at least parts of all populations to be constructed as problematic, and as ‘Other’ in some sense, by ruling elites.

What is particular in Mittelland, and what is most noticeable at the LpB, is that almost all such problems are related to the state’s East German past. For example, the survey on political attitudes, which the LpB co-organized that year, showed that xenophobic attitudes in Mittelland were lower than the eastern German average while anti-Semitic attitudes were lower than in western German states. The state’s government, however, overlooked these findings and focused instead on responses that indicated long-suspected problems (Gallinat, 2016). For them and for a good part of the national media, it is the
region’s post-socialist character that is the cause of issues such as apparent misunderstandings of democracy, lack of civic courage, and right-wing activity. This perception, in turn, guides governmental responses and political strategy. To address the survey findings, the government of Mittelland developed a ‘campaign for democracy’, which aimed to increase education about democratic processes. Announcing the initiative, the state chancellor suggested that since Mittelland’s economic and judicial structures had now successfully transformed, it was time ‘to further the so far neglected mental transformation process’, which positioned the initiative squarely as a transition activity 20 years after the fall of state socialism.3

In this article I will argue that we need to continue working with and through the notion of post-socialism as long as local populations are treated as transitional. That is, as long as policy-makers, politicians, managers and academics (Buchowski, 2006) engage with local people in the belief that their dispositions, behaviours and personhoods in the democratic present are a result of their own or their predecessors’ life in socialism, and as long as they develop initiatives that aim to counter attitudes seen to result from the state-socialist past. Taking this concept seriously, in the sense that powerholders believe in ‘actually existing post-socialism’, allows us to explore not only how such perceptions come about but also their lasting effects on local populations, which is relevant to our anthropological understanding of humanity more widely. I use the term ‘actually existing post-socialism’ here, since, as the article aims to show, local people are treated as stuck in the transition, rather than as remaining in the past. As such, the term has a slightly different connotation to ‘zombie socialism’ (Chelcea and Drută, 2016), which conjures socialist attributes in the present. While actually existing post-socialism also entails such conjuring, I want to emphasize that what is seen as problematic here are the behaviours that are believed to come about due to the ways socialist attitudes find expression in the democratic present. The term ‘actually existing post-socialism’ further captures the expectation that such attitudes and behaviours must and will be overcome through a completion of the democrato-capitalist transition. Moreover, while much of the anthropological literature has foregrounded the economic change to capitalism, this article draws attention to the political field instead.

In their treatment of the local population as ‘post-socialist’, policy-makers at the regional LpB and nationally deny eastern Germans coevalness (Fabian, 1983). This denial stems from a binary view of socialism and market democracy, rooted in an understanding of the GDR as a ‘dictatorship’, which intertwines with a particular understanding of history that is driven by a modernist sense of progress. The title of the Mittelland Survey ‘A population between past and present’ (emphasis added) highlights that there is a strong view of eastern Germans as remaining caught up in or with the transition and failing to come into the present of united Germany; a Germany that was predominantly shaped by western Germany during unification (Jarausch, 1994).

The article begins by exploring the temporal implications of anthropological arguments about the post-socialist period, which are linked to the stickiness of progress-thinking in the Euro-American world. I will show how this linear and forward-facing view has impacted in understandings of 20th-century German history and gives shape to the ongoing memory work of Aufarbeitung. In the next section, the implications of progress-
oriented Cold War thinking with regard to the work of the LpB are explored in their understanding and governing of the local population. The substantive part of the article draws to a close with a consideration of the role of party-political concerns in memory work.

**Post/socialism in thought and time**

Recent work suggests the term ‘zombie socialism’ (Chelcea and Drută, 2016) for assumptions about the illegitimate, inappropriate or troublesome continuation of socialist practices or opinions. The phrase suggests that aspects of socialism are conjured in the present, outside their proper time, so they appear uncannily ‘undead’. This notion highlights the temporal aspects of conceptualizations of post-socialism, which remain under-explored. However, as Fabian points out: ‘there is no knowledge of the other which is not also a temporal, historical, a political act’ (1983: 1).

Anthropologists have long criticized transition thinking, which expects eastern European countries to go through a linear and accelerated move from a seemingly archaic economic structure to that of advanced, global neoliberalism (Berdahl, 2010; Berdahl et al., 2000; Verdery, 1996). Some anthropologists, in contrast, observed that in certain areas development seemingly moved backwards, as the dissolution of the large cooperative farms meant communities lost access to crucial technologies and work organization (Creed, 2010; Pine, 2007). Seen whichever way—as forward or backward movement and/or path dependency—–the discourse surrounding the post-socialist transformation is suffused with notions of progress and accompanying views of time as linear, even if it can slow down, reverse or even stop.

While it can be argued that the system’s fall created the triumph of capitalism, which in turn cast eastern Europe as ‘behind’ the West, views of eastern Europe as backward imply that the formerly socialist countries had been in a different time to the advanced, democratic world all along. Berdahl’s (2010) argument that the popular uprising in East Germany in 1989 was heavily based in consumer frustration entails this sense that many East Germans saw West German products (whether exotic fruits, fashion, rock and pop music, magazines or the news industry) as more desirable and, as such, as potentially ‘ahead’ of eastern German productivity. As Veenis (1999) observes with regard to East Germans watching West German TV programmes:

(t)he beautiful material world they saw there, with its harmonious aesthetic compositions and its tangible, soft and sensuous characteristics, somehow seemed to be the concrete realization and the ultimate fulfilment of all the beautiful-sounding but never-realized (socialist) promises about the Golden Future. (1999: 86)

Making the argument from the other side, the authors of *SED: Schönes Einheits Design*—a catalogue accompanying an exhibition of East German design shown in West Germany in 1990—observe that ‘[t]hanks to its policy of protecting the domestic consumer goods market from foreign competition, East Germany has unwittingly preserved fossils
of articles which, 20 to 30 years ago, were near and dear to us (West Germans)’ ((Bertsch and Hedler, 1990, cited in Ten Dyke, 2001: 273).

These views are fuelled by different regimes of time in capitalist democracies and state-socialist orders. The seeming monotony or repetitiveness (see Yurchak, 2006) of state-socialist land- and cityscapes, consumer goods, and practices seemed to stand in stark contrast to the eventfulness of changing technology, products and marketing techniques of a capitalism that depends on the continuous speeding up of time to accelerate the circulation of capital (Harvey, 1989; cf. Verdery, 1996).

**Progress-thinking**

Intertwined with modernity, however, both socialist and capitalist systems entailed a strong orientation to the future (Buck-Morss, 2000), and a belief in continuous scientific and technological development for the betterment of society (Pine, 2007). What differed was the substance of what constituted progress, and the detail of how it would be achieved. Therefore I argue that, rather than not developing at all, socialist societies moved along a different path of change to that of the democratic-capitalist nations, but were heaved onto the democratic-capitalist track when socialism fell and democratic capitalism appeared to be solely ‘triumphant’ in modernity. This allowed the West a hegemonic position and return to the role of colonizer, now of the East, where experts in capitalist systems, democratic structures, local administration (Gallinat, 2016) and civil society techniques (Junghans, 2001) were urgently needed. As Dzenovska (2013; see also Cooke, 2005) observes, colonial attitudes led to a positioning of eastern Europe as the ‘not yet’ of free-market democracies. As eastern European states were tutored by the ‘always-already-there’ West in democracy and capitalism, they remained the ‘not-quite-European’ East (Dzenovska, 2013: 411; see also Böröcz, 2006).

According to Koselleck (1985) the notion of progress goes back to developments in European thinking in the 18th century. At this time parts of society began to desire to arrive in the future more quickly, which led to a perception of time as both forward moving and accelerating. In the 18th century this ‘acceleration became obligatory for worldly invention, before technology completely opened up a space of experience adequate to this acceleration’ (Koselleck, 1985: 18). Progress, as Koselleck shows, entails a conception of the historicity of time, of the past as being known through distinct epochs and periods that are different to both present and future. Progress is an expectation that these epochs link to one another, leading humanity forward into an ever better future through learning more, understanding more, becoming better: it is an ‘interpretation of history which regards men [sic] as slowly advancing … in a definite and desirable direction’ (Bury, 1932, cited in Boyarin, 1994: 7).

The notion of ‘actually existing post-socialism’ attempts to capture these dynamics. The term is based on East German Rudolf Bahro’s (1977) notion of ‘actually existing socialism’ (‘real existierender Sozialismus’), which critically described the socioeconomic realities of state socialism in the 1970s. For head of the GDR Erich Honecker, contrastingly, actually existing socialism came to describe the fact that the supposedly transitional stage of socialism had become manifest in East Germany (Fulbrook,
2005: 44–5). My use of the term ‘actually existing post-socialism’ aims to capture this ambiguity between the realities of the post-1989 situation and the institutional and social construction of eastern German society as in a permanently transitional stage. This construction is underpinned by a complex of intertwined binaries of Cold War thought and the stickiness of the Euro-American master-narrative of progress, which posits East/eastern Germans as ‘remaining’ in a(n immediate) post-Second World War society, a population that had only just moved away from life under a dictatorship and must continue its transition towards democratic values and practices.

**Historical continuities and the Sonderweg**

Memory work regarding the East German past is commonly referred to as Aufarbeitung, the reappraisal of the past. In this discourse, the Cold War worldview of socialist, dictatorial East versus democratic, liberal West has been extended to bring the Third Reich and socialist East Germany together under the banner of totalitarianism, which speaks of unfreedom, repression, injustice. In this vein the GDR is referred to as Germany’s ‘second dictatorship’ and part of the nation’s ‘double burden in history’ (doppelte Vergangenheit). While there is a strict political and moral consensus among policy-makers, politicians and academics that neither the GDR, nor any other period, is to be equated with the horrors of the Nazi regime, the socialist past is included in the wider bracket of difficult eras that require working through, and that are clearly distinct from the present.

The production of this perception of the GDR is embroiled with the exegesis of Aufarbeitung in the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany, West Germany). Two problems that shape these ideas are to be highlighted, that is the notion of the Sonderweg, and anxieties over a third guilt connected to the Holocaust. The Sonderweg thesis concerns the question of the degree to which Germany’s ‘path’ into modernity differed from those of other nations. The arguments of the early 20th century centred on Germany’s late development as a nation-state, and the strength of its bureaucracy and monarchy. Post-Second World War, the focus of discussions in the FRG changed significantly, exploring instead what traits had enabled the rise of the terrible Nazi regime. Similar arguments emerged, but now the focus was negatively on Germans’ preference for a strong state, and potentially authoritarian rule. There was a sense that the events of the 20th century raised a question over whether Germans had sufficient aptitude for democracy, which left the Bonn republic to prove its worth to its European neighbours. This was achieved partly by distinguishing itself clearly from the Nazi Reich enabled by the so-called ‘anti-totalitarian consensus’—an agreement of the parliamentary parties to reject all ‘totalitarian’ rule, whether from the right or the left. The East German state has been included in this category since the 1960s (Beattie, 2006).

While this position was questioned at times, a complication arose in the late 1980s, when Holocaust survivor Giordano (1987) accused Germany of not having adequately dealt with the Nazi terrors described as the nation’s ‘second guilt’ (zweite Schuld). Many see a self-conscious attempt to avoid any suggestion of a ‘third guilt’ as having led to West German actors’ interest in managing the East German past, including in the 1990s Enquiry Commissions into the ‘SED dictatorship’. At the same time, a more confident sense of
identity had also emerged based in *Verfassungspatriotismus*, pride in the constitution and its values of democracy, justice and human rights (Arnold de-Simine, 2013: 48). Having approached both the Nazi past and now the East German past fed into the sense of pride as this proved (West) Germany’s ongoing efforts to become a democratic and just nation-state by seeking to overcome its totalitarian, anti-democratic pasts. Part of this effort is the funding of a range of institutions that engage in *Aufarbeitung*, and thus memory work, locally and nationally. Local offices of the Agency for Civic Education (LpB) are one such institution.

**A local population with history**

The LpB in Tillberg, on which fieldwork centred, is attached to Mittelland’s State Chancellery. Thematically it focused on initiatives to counter right-wing extremism and history education regarding the Third Reich and the East German state during fieldwork. The LpB is part of the wider Working Group *Aufarbeitung* in Mittelland, which is comprised of publicly funded institutions primarily concerned with state socialism, including the state’s *Stasi* commissioner (LStU), local branches of the *Stasi* archive (BStU), memorial museums, as well as political foundations. At the time of fieldwork, the LpB was chairing this group. The LpB is therefore heavily involved in *Aufarbeitung*, which, at the time, although it should concern both ‘German dictatorships’, focused almost exclusively on the GDR.

The full denotation of this discourse, the ‘*Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur*’ (reappraisal of the SED dictatorship), goes back to two parliamentary enquiry commissions of the mid-1990s (Beattie, 2008). As already indicated, the discourse can be seen as having been led by West German experiences of dealing with the Nazi past; moreover, former East German civil rights activists were prominently involved in the enquiry commissions (see, for example, Beattie, 2008). Many ‘ordinary’ eastern Germans, however problematic the term, have often felt excluded from the historical narrative the commissions fuelled, which paints a picture of a society made up of victims, perpetrators and by-standers. A closer look at the production of the discourse shows that the situation was somewhat more complicated than the relatively neat East versus West, and ordinary people versus civil rights activists binaries suggest (for example, see Beattie, 2008). Party politics, for example, also played a considerable role. As national elections drew closer, the Conservative Union Party (CDU) in particular hardened its stance that the GDR was nothing but a dictatorship, a position that enabled the party to discredit its main political rival, the left of centre SPD (Social Democratic Party), for sympathizing with a dictatorial regime (Beattie, 2008; Jarausch, 1994).

Nevertheless, these categories of East versus West and ordinary people versus ‘resistance fighters’ continue to play a role in people’s imagination, and in Mittelland’s governmental sphere. At the LpB, director Bohlmann and heads of departments Frau Wolf and Frau Buesing came to Tillberg from West Germany in the early to mid-1990s with the explicit goal of building the new local administration. Their experiences of moving to and living in the East include senses of pioneering, hardship, exclusion and mission. At the time of the fieldwork not all managerial staff at the LpB were western German or
convinced about eastern Germans’ lack of civic skills, but the few who disagreed struggled to make their voice heard for a variety of reasons, including director Bohlmann’s strong leadership. Party politics also came into play. The LpB is designated überparteilich (‘beyond partisanship’), which means that Mittelland’s political parties get posts within the LpB depending on the number of their seats in the state’s parliament (Landtag). At the time of fieldwork, the number of CDU-associated staff greatly outweighed any other faction. Mittelland’s State Chancellery, which the LpB is attached to, was at the time also a conservative Christian Union government.

Within the Working Group a mixture of approximately half local eastern Germans and half western German administrators collaborated, and membership depended on the representation of relevant institutions, not political parties. However, key actors in relation to the East German past here were either western German or eastern German with credentials of at least regime-criticism. For example, the directors of the two memorial museums to the Stasi past hailed from the so-called old, formerly West, German states, while the managers of the two local branches of the BStU and the head of Mittelland’s Stasi Commission were eastern German and, in two of three cases, had been actively involved in political opposition in the 1980s. In its make-up, the group mirrors the national landscape of Aufarbeitung.

Within the Working Group and at the LpB a sense of problematic lasting legacies of state socialism in the local population concerned three areas: (a) nostalgic understandings of the GDR; (b) continuations of GDR-time practices and dispositions; (c) and seeming lasting legacies from the Third Reich. Through the causal double binary of a dictatorial socialist past versus a free, democratic present, all three were seen as creating issues for local people’s attachment to democracy as a value, and their understanding of democracy in terms of political processes. This view was evident in various ways during fieldwork, but most clearly when director Bohlmann introduced the Mittelland Survey to his staff. The survey, which the State Chancellery had asked the LpB to coordinate, would, according to Bohlmann, include questions on ‘young people’s knowledge of the GDR, nostalgia’ and, importantly, ‘whether re-evaluations of the GDR are linked to right-wing extremist attitudes [today]’. In the following sub-sections I will explore each of these three areas in turn.

Nostalgia

During fieldwork there was a growing concern among Working Group members that nostalgia for East Germany was spreading within the population. This was at least partly because East German history was frequently not taught in schools. As the last topic in a chronologically taught history, it often fell away when illness or project weeks pressurized the timetable. Without history teaching the new generation of young people, who had not experienced the GDR themselves, had to rely on their parents’ recollections, which, it was feared, were heavily nostalgic. For these policy-makers nostalgia meant rose-tinted recollection and, most prominently, a lack of understanding or denial of the dictatorial character of the GDR. These concerns appeared to be confirmed when preliminary results of the Mittelland Survey were reported.
In Bohlmann’s first conversation with Sabine about the results, for example, he focused on how half the respondents believed that the foundation of the GDR state had also had social motives; that respondents rated the GDR’s health system as better than today’s and that people were believed to have been safer. Not only did all of these evidence ‘incorrect understandings’ of the East German past, to his mind, they are also frequently mentioned focal points for nostalgia. This is true in particular for the topics of health, education and schools (aside from the now infamous East German bread rolls). The statistic cited most often by members of the Working Group was that over 90% of the respondents had agreed with the, in their minds, most nostalgic statement of all that ‘not everything was bad in the GDR’.6

However, there were also concerns about respondents’ understanding of the present-day political system for Frau Wolf. She was very concerned to see that respondents did not seem to understand that the role of political opposition was to query government decisions, instead of supporting government, which had received the majority response.8 This response in particular was again seen as an indication of continuing socialist understandings, here regarding the one-party-state. The LpB, wider Working Group and the State Chancellery thus saw the survey findings as clear indications of widespread rose-tinted views of the GDR which, to their minds, led to a lack of understanding of democratic processes.

**Continuity of GDR-time practices**

Lacking understanding of politics had first appeared on the radar of Frau Wolf a few months earlier. A school class had been on an LpB-sponsored visit to a session in parliament. Their experience had not been great. They saw many politicians arrive late, leave early, distracted by their phones. The Member of Parliament, who was going to meet them, also ran late. In response to a student question as to whether politicians should be honest with their electorate, the politician ventured that ‘it’s not wise to tell the electorate everything, if you want to be re-elected’. In response the students wrote a letter, which was published in the local daily paper, voicing their unhappiness with their local politicians. Inevitably, the letter gave rise to further letters from frustrated readers. The State Chancellery became aware of the issue, saw it as a significant denigration of its parliament, and tasked the LpB with a response. Frau Wolf was greatly disgruntled. She, and colleagues at the LpB, felt that the incident showed students’ lack of understanding of how politics worked and, specifically, of the very busy timetables of politicians. She also suggested that this was a targeted move by a former East German teacher. In our conversation in her office she conceded that that particular class teacher was one of the better ones. She was ‘politically quite engaged’, so she wouldn’t have expected that of her. This comment has two connotations. On the one hand it concerns the teacher’s potential understanding of present-day political processes, which she expects to be good if a teacher shows an interest in politics. On the other hand, the double bind of the dictatorial past and democratic present comes to play here. An engagement in today’s democratic political system is expected to mean a simultaneous distancing from socialism, in terms of nostalgia but also in terms of practices.
Nevertheless, in Frau Wolf’s mind the action was too similar to GDR-time practices to have come from the pupils. The collective authorship of the letter by a class of pupils was reminiscent of the seemingly collectively authored letters that used to appear in East German newspapers about pupils’ good socialist deeds, such as tidying up the local park or collecting recyclables. Since the pupils were too young to be aware of this practice, despite her concession, Frau Wolf suspected the impulse behind the incident to have come from their teacher, who trained during the GDR time.

This issue fed into other concerns of Frau Wolf and Frau Buesing. Both women felt strongly that teachers trained during the GDR time continued to use outdated didactic practices in school, which taught their students GDR-time behaviours and dispositions. The teachers lacked agency and initiative; instead of engaging in debate and discussion to develop teaching materials at training events for example, they wanted to be presented with ready-to-use materials instead. She also suspected that these students, like their parents, continued to expect that the state would always put everything right. This worry about local people’s high expectations of the state was a frequent refrain, as these appeared as unwelcome echoes of the reliance on a strong state and a preference for authoritarian leadership, akin to the Sonderweg.

These teachers’ behaviours, seen to result from the expectations they were assumed to have, were seen as indicative of inappropriate civic personhoods stemming from life in the GDR. This sense is often expressed in conversations with the phrase that people were ‘geprägt’ by life ‘under’ the dictatorship, suggesting that external structures moulded or shaped particular personhoods. Socialist Prägung, which is counterposed by Bildung, education in the wider sense of self-development (cf. Boyer, 2006), is often related to a preference for authoritarian leadership, a reluctance to engage in politics and a lack of initiative. In this view, eastern Germans were shaped to be subjects in the totalitarian state which created passive persons and are now asked to make themselves citizens of democracy through education: adopting an enthusiastic and agentive democratic civility by leaving behind old habits (cf. Junghans, 2001). Frau Wolf’s and the LpB’s wider response to such problems was thus always education and training. At the time of these conversations Frau Wolf was, for example, planning a teacher training course on ‘GDR myths and GDR truth’, which would include engagement with the notion of ‘freedom in the democratic system, which demands much of the people’, as Frau Wolf put it.

Legacies from the Third Reich

Beyond views of the GDR past and GDR-time practices, associations with the Third Reich also played a role in LpB staff’s perception of Mittelland’s transitional character. Head of LpB Bohlman, for example, explained to Sabine during fieldwork that there was a lack of understanding of the continuities between the Third Reich and the GDR. Many Nazi Special Camps–Mittelland is home to two former concentration camps now memorial museums–were also used by the Soviets post-Second World War and in many cases the guards remained the same. They had been trained well and served the Soviets just as well as they had the Hitler regime, he pointed out. What is lacking therefore in the local population is an appreciation of the continuities between the two regimes in their
character as dictatorships. This sense about problematic continuities was furthered at the
LpB in everyday work encounters.

Since Frau Buesing’s department was dedicated to countering right-wing extremism, the
topic of local neo-Nazi groups and their attractiveness to Mittelland’s young people
was brought to her attention on a daily basis. Moreover, at times she had herself faced this
threat. At the annual Mittelland day in the spring for example, Frau Buesing and her
multiculturally themed stall attracted a confrontational gathering of a group of young neo-
Nazis. In the summer Bohlmann was late to a meeting of the Working Group as he had
been called into an urgent meeting at the State Chancellery following a xenophobic attack
on a theatre ensemble that had put several of the actors into hospital. Right-wing activities
are therefore something that staff have faced directly, something they have to deal with the
aftermath of, and something an entire department is dedicated to countering in the long
term. As an ongoing concern that arises conceptually, experientially and structurally, this
brings up unwelcome echoes of the Third Reich, reinforcing a sense of problematic
continuities in the new federal states, which reconfirms a view of eastern German society
as post-dictatorial and in need of (further) transition. In this vein the Ministerial President
of Mittelland explained in a media interview that local people lacked 60 years of
democratic experiences creating a considerable deficit. In response, during fieldwork at
the local daily paper a young journalist commented, somewhat aghast in conversation:
‘Who is he talking about? The 90-year-olds don’t take to the streets!’

**Bildung to counter Prädung**

Given its position as an Office for Civic Education, the LpB’s response to all these
problems was education. As the preceding sub-sections suggest, any problem of the
present appeared to be addressed through education about the GDR past and the former
state’s dictatorial character. This approach was shared in the Working Group and at the
CDU-dominated State Chancellery. So, in response to the Mittelland Survey and its
seeming indication of continuing nostalgia and lack of understandings of politics, the
State Chancellery announced an Initiative for Democracy Education. Given the upcoming
20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, this initiative soon became connected to
anniversary activities which, according to the relevant government paper, aimed: to
explore this most recent history using multiple perspectives to allow societal dialogue; to
organize actions that focus on students and young people, and that fit an all-German and
European framework; to ‘highlight happiness about the great bliss of unity in freedom and
peace’; and for all activities to be clear about ‘the great value of democracy’. These points
were laid out in a Proposal for Action, entitled: ‘20 years of the peaceful revolution and
German unification—measures to further understandings of democracy’.

At the same time as these documents were being written, the Working Group was
developing a teacher training event on the East German past, which was eventually
entitled ‘Dealing with central events of GDR history in school lessons’. The 2-day
workshop was to focus on three events of the East German past: the uprising on 17 June
1953; the building of the Berlin Wall on 13 August 1961; and the autumn of 1989. The
event combined talks by experts to deliver historical and didactic information with workshops in which teachers were to develop relevant teaching materials.

The three chosen events that were signalled to be of importance to East German history in this workshop serve to support both a view of the GDR-as-dictatorship and of present-democracy-as-freedom: the popular uprising against the socialist state in June 1953 developed in the wake of post-Second World War deprivation and unfulfilled promises of economic recovery by the GDR government—it was suppressed militarily; the fortification of the inner-German border in 1961 is emblematic of increasing state control and suppression of a population ‘which had been voting with its feet’ as Mittelland’s Ministerial President suggested at a commemorative event that summer; and the Berlin Wall fell due to a mass social movement for freedom and democracy. There are other important events that were not chosen, such as the foundation of the GDR as an independent state in 1949, or the first free elections in 1990 among others. These events appear to be less emblematic to the ‘vernacular narrative’ (Collins, 2003) emerging here of an SED dictatorship that controlled a population which strove for democratic rights, succeeding in 1989. Beyond their symbolic import, however, the chosen events drew on existing strengths and knowledge of the institutions involved. All three historic occasions were central topics at one or more of the institutions of Aufarbeitung in Mittelland (Gallinat, 2016).

A political consequence of the double bind of bad past and good present that we saw in the assumed interrelation of nostalgia for socialism and a lack of understanding of democracy, is the assumption that education about the state-socialist past’s true character as dictatorship will produce democratically inclined citizens. It is expected that Bildung, education, will overcome socialist Prägung to produce citizens better suited for life in democracy and easier to govern. Bildung and Prägung thus follow the same binary logic as socialist past and democratic present in governmental discourse, whereby Bildung doubles up as the process that creates the bridge between past and present. It is the medium that will allow the local population to advance beyond their Second World War status, through a ‘mental transformation’, to come into the same time as the old federal states and achieve ideological coevalness. As such Bildung is seen here as a progressive process of self-development through which, just like history, men and women can be seen to be ‘slowly advancing … in a definite and desirable direction’ (Bury, 1932, cited in Boyarin, 1994: 7) that should see them eventually arrive in the democratic, pluralistic all-German present.

The party politics of time

The previous sections have shown the ways the local population is constructed as problematic, as Other, and as in need of transformation. The main driving force here is an intertwining of a linear understanding of time as progress with a binary view of both socialism and democracy, and past and present. The earlier sections also indicate that there are further factors that play a role here, including the dynamics of the realm of government, actors’ personal biographies and their current professional role, as well as party politics. I cannot attend to all of these here, but the final example will make the latter
somewhat clearer. It is also one of only a few examples where opinions began to differ publicly among members of the Working Group Aufarbeitung.

Towards the end of our fieldwork the landscape of Aufarbeitung was being restructured in Mittelland. Until this point government-funded memorial museums and similar sites had been independent and needed to regularly apply for funding. They were now to be centralized in a new Memorial Foundation, which would make some of these processes more efficient. The foundation was to be supported through an Advisory Committee, which consisted of significant stakeholders, including representatives of all parliamentary parties as well as historic witnesses, such as members of the Association of the Victims of Stalinism, which was based in Tillberg. The leading committee of this association was well known to the Working Group, as they were highly active as historical witnesses in education activities as well as being sharp political lobbyists.

In order to send party representatives to the committee each party proposed a candidate and the group was voted onto the committee by parliament in one block. Among them was a member of the party The Left, which regime critics see as a continuation of the SED, the former ruling socialist party of the GDR. More problematically, it was known that this specific MP had served as an unofficial employee (IM) of the State Security Police and that she had been a prosecutor of political cases in GDR times. The Association of Victims of Stalinism, whose convictions for political reasons in GDR times were due to prosecutors like her, refused to work with this MP, placing their committee membership in abeyance. This stalled the foundation’s work, and led to a wide discussion of the issue in local media. It was at this point that members of the Working Group were more obviously at odds with each other.

Victims of the GDR are usually treated as possessing a certain moral currency in post-1990 Germany (Gallinat, 2016). They are valued historic witnesses who play a strong role in educational activities, especially in the field of Aufarbeitung. They embody the dictatorial character of the regime through their suffering, which makes their testimony invaluable to the reappraisal and, through the double bind of past and present, also to democracy education. Nevertheless, head of the LpB Bohlmann felt very strongly that in this case the Victim Association had mis-stepped. ‘They don’t understand democracy’, he commented in the local newspaper. If they learned more about the new political system they would accept that this was a democratically elected member of the committee who was there by right. Bohlmann’s view of the issue therefore clearly followed the rationale of the LpB, which treats all the local population as lacking knowledge if they criticize the current political system. This view was quickly countered by Herr Franke, head of the memorial museum at the Former Stasi Prison. Franke was a trained historian and also originally West German, like Bohlmann, although from a younger generation. He had been a member of the Greens as a student but had rescinded his membership in 1990. At the time of fieldwork, he did not belong to any party. His institution and the Victims Association moreover worked very closely together. The association is physically based on the premises of the Former Stasi Prison, and its members appear frequently at events organized at and by the memorial museum. Herr Franke’s view of the issue with the MP fundamentally differed from Bohlmann’s in that he argued that a view of the Victims Association as lacking in understanding of democracy is fundamentally incorrect. Quite
the contrary, their courage in GDR times and their continuing work as historic witnesses proved their commitment. Indeed, they could teach us more about democracy than vice versa, so Franke argued in a letter to the local newspaper. For Franke, then, the Victims Association was at least coeval to him and his counterparts, while for Bohlmann, head of an educational institution closely linked to the conservative party, any eastern German criticizing the current political system remained ‘actually post-socialist’.

To be sure, it was not just the governmental sphere that applied progress-thinking to the local area. Notions of progress are heavily engrained in European society more widely, but in Mittelland at least they are often limited to concerns about the economy and people’s livelihoods. For example, the local daily paper took many positive messages from the Mittelland Survey, which showed much improvement in local people’s satisfaction with their situation, and with positive economic developments since reunification. The paper however also noted that the survey identified a group of ‘losers’ comprised of the long-term unemployed. Rather than describing this group as stuck between past and present, however, the paper identified them as having been left behind by a fast-moving society, a phrasing that suggests that responsibility for protecting this group also lies with society, not the individuals themselves.

**Conclusion**

This article showed how the local population of Mittelland is construed as lacking through concerns over nostalgia for socialism, continuing GDR-time practices, and legacies from the Third Reich. These issues play a particular role in Germany, where history writing has long been embroiled in the fashioning of national identity. This context serves to highlight two issues with particular clarity. First, the socialist past is seen here as a continuity of undemocratic, authoritarian forms of government which is seen as impacting on the eastern German population and raises questions regarding their ability to be democratic citizens. Having experienced ‘both German dictatorships’, eastern Germany, it seems, is at least 60 years behind the democratic progress of the ‘old’ (read: mature, experienced, senior) federal states. This view underpins a situation where the western parts of Germany will always be at least 60 years ahead, forever leaving the ‘new federal states’ chasing expectations. While the view of a double burden in history should encourage a sense of eastern Germany as more generally ‘post-totalitarian’, in Tillberg the relative historical closeness of the GDR led policy-makers to cite the state-socialist period as the dominant problem. Due to the historical practice of Diktaturvergleich (comparison of dictatorships), the socialist past was inflected with associations to the Third Reich. Second, through an extension of the double binary of a socialist, undemocratic past and a democratic, free present to the notions of Prägung and Bildung, eastern Germans are now asked to educate and transform themselves, in the vein of self-actualization, into democracy-loving, responsibly free citizens.

As Fabian (1983: 1) argues the imagination of the ‘other’–here the construction of the local population by a group of administrators and policy-makers, whose very raison d’être is Aufarbeitung the reappraisal of the past–is also always a temporal and political act. In this sense the notion ‘actually existing post-socialism’ points to a situation where a
population is treated as ‘stuck in between past and present’, as in need of completing the post-socialist transformation and, therefore, a view of the transformation as continuously ongoing by hegemonic others, ‘who are always-already-there’ (Dzenovska, 2013: 411). There is however much to post-socialism that would support arguments that it goes hand in hand with postmodernity (cf. Creed, 2010). The boom of the socialist nostalgia industry, and the establishment of socialist-themed cafés, restaurants and hotels can easily be seen as evidence of postmodernity’s playfulness, pastiche and the dissolution of grand, linear narratives. Much of anthropology has focused on these economic changes, yet the article shows that the political sphere paints a different picture. The material presented here shows very clearly that our understanding of the world remains wedded to a view of time as progress, and that this structures an imagination of temporal others that continues to justify hegemony. In the governmental sphere described, the denial of coevalness that arises from the stickiness of progress-thinking has real, tangible effects.

Through a denial of coevalness in the western-German-defined present, the population of eastern Germany is posited as an ideological Other that needs to overcome its fraught, if not dangerous, mindset to meet with its western German counterparts in their present. These dynamics rest on a continuous reproduction of this Otherness, as German democratic identity can only be achieved, can only become, through overcoming what are now seen as two German dictatorships (Gallinat, 2016). In Germany the ‘bad’ past and its proactive management has become intertwined with a national-political identity, just as in other post-socialist countries a history of ‘bad occupation’ has become central to national narratives (see Annist, this issue). The double bind of the Cold War binaries of unfree socialism versus free democracy means that eastern Germans have to go on achieving education and going through transformation to help reproduce democratic united Germany, which therefore in turn forever reproduces eastern Germans’ ‘actually existing’ post-socialist status.

For a wider anthropological understanding, this highlights the degree to which Cold War mentalities and modernist views continue to shape the present and future. While path-dependency (Thelen, 2011) or ‘continuity thinking’ (Robins, 2007) has been much criticized in the discipline, this article shows clearly that we need to pay heed to the potentially lasting impact of thought regimes that lead to political grand narratives on which the institutional reproduction of experienced identities rests. Where thought categories fit into schemata long used to shape our worldviews, such as binaries and linearities, we need to be open to their problematic persistence and lasting effects. This does not mean accepting their reiteration as a fait accompli, rather it means adopting a longer-term view that explores in depth the dynamics such legacies continue to interact with, and through which new and old inequalities are reproduced.

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Notes

1. Fieldwork was conducted over a period of 14 months during 2007–8. It was carried out by two researchers, the author (PI) and research associate Dr Sabine Kittel. It entailed anthropological participant observation and life-story interviews among members of the ‘Working Group Aufarbeitung’, and at a local daily paper. See also Gallinat (2016).

2. I use the term ‘eastern’ and ‘western’ for the period since unification in relation to former East and West Germany. For the period prior I use the phrases East and West Germany respectively.

3. In order to protect my informants’ anonymity I refrain from citing internal documents or articles from local newspapers. Further details can be obtained from the author.

4. The path-dependency argument in some post-socialist literature considers how ‘strategic choices, often highly contingent, shape further policy discourses’ (Stark and Brusz, 1998: 7).

5. The SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei – Socialist Unity Party) was the party of government in the GDR from 1949 to 1989.

6. This is an important topic of ordinary life for eastern Germans, who feel that the bread rolls baked in GDR times tasted better than those made in the new facilities that were built after reunification. Often locals have inside knowledge of the one or two bakers who still use the old recipe. During fieldwork Sabine, born in a western German state, felt obliged to try one but was not able to see any great difference in taste.

7. The survey questionnaire itself is indicative of the governmental discourse’s preoccupations and deserves further exploration.

8. The Mittelland Survey also highlighted that respondents rated German unification in positive ways. The overall picture appeared to be one of support for democracy and a united democratic Germany alongside re-evaluations of certain aspects of life in state socialism.

9. I have explored the interrelations between these factors in depth elsewhere (Gallinat, 2016).

10. The second issue weighed more heavily. How relevant the work as IM was remained unclear, as it had been time limited and happened when the MP was still in her teens.

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