Material Fantasies

Veenis, Milena

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Veenis, Milena.
Material Fantasies: Expectations of the Western Consumer World among East Germans.
Amsterdam University Press, 2012.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66524.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66524

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2360909
Chapter 3
The GDR: Future Promises

When the Americans left Thuringia to be replaced by Russian troops in the spring of 1945, most of the region’s residents feared the situation would deteriorate further. As the national socialist regime had always portrayed the Soviet Union as the empire of evil, most East Germans had strong anti-Russian feelings. The population’s general attitude towards the various occupational forces was aptly summed up by a female resident of Berlin, who stated: “When we saw Russians coming, we would run down the basement steps. If we saw Americans, we would run up the steps to meet them.”1 East Germans’ worst fears about the Russian occupiers were painfully confirmed with the massive violation of East German women by members of the Red Army, and with the brutal ways the Soviet occupying power claimed its war reparations. This all resulted in widespread anti-Soviet attitudes and strong opposition to Soviet “early socialization policies.”2 The new East German leaders who wanted to win the population round to the socialist project were thus setting themselves an almost impossible task.

In spite of the general hostility, people seemed to gradually come to terms with their country’s socialist project. This was mainly thanks to the appeal of what can be termed the GDR’s ideological fundament: its presumed antifascist nature. Claiming this label as an apt description of the new state’s raison-d’être was accomplished by thoroughly rewriting recent history. As will be suggested in this chapter, the new, socialist-proof version of the recent past perfectly accommodated widespread popular yearnings – to quietly build a new life (materially and socially) in order to cover up the lack of mutual trust and restore faith in the future. Despite East Germans’ widespread reluctance to conform to the Russian occupation, the state’s promises for the future and popular strivings eventually established a form of alliance between the new socialist state and the East German population after 1945.
The Past Rewritten

When the Soviet Union occupied the eastern part of Germany, it had no well-designed plans for its future. This began to change amidst mounting antagonism between the western allied powers and the Soviet Union, and when it gradually became clear that the western part of Germany was going to be integrated in the capitalist bloc. In 1949 the GDR was founded as a separate German state under direct Soviet control. This new state was not supported by popular feelings of belonging or national identity, and its leaders faced the task of ruling a country with practically no national legitimacy. In order to grant socialist Germany a certain rationale of existence, it was necessary to claim that the new state was different – different from its predecessor, and different from the western part of the country. These differences were professed to have been caused by the GDR’s distinct anti-fascist nature. “The GDR claimed the historical honorary title of a ‘new Germany,’ whose politically and social-economically founded antifascism meant a rigorous and definitive break with all traditions that had resulted in 1933.”

The first claim to substantiate this title was by arguing that Germany’s fascist history was the unique result of the capitalist system – which had been abolished in the GDR. Secondly, the collapse of the national socialist regime was ascribed exclusively to the incessant battle with East German communists and other antifascists – who were the new leaders of the GDR. Last of all, it was claimed that the necessary denazification after 1945 had only been carried out successfully in the eastern part of Germany. Denazification of the western part was said to be a mere farce (for how could it be otherwise – so it was claimed in the GDR – given the historical continuity in the west of Germany, where the capitalist mode of production had remained unaltered). These three reasons were used to justify the assertion that the socialist state had to be established in order to preserve all the valuable elements of the German heritage.

It is important to stress that the GDR’s socialist leaders indeed forced considerable changes in the existing political, economic and social structures of East German society, by radically altering the social relations and mode of production – as briefly sketched in the previous chapter. Also, the majority of the politicians who cooperated with the Soviet occupying powers, and who were later to join the first government of the GDR, had indeed risked their lives in the struggle against fascism. Last but not least, the new East German leadership had achieved a radical transformation in the existing balance of power. Most members of the commercial and intellectual bourgeoisie were bereft of their positions, and many teachers, professors, and judges, as well as the majority of administrative executives, were
dismissed and replaced with people from a lower class background. “In order to realize its political and ideological program, the SED replaced the entire elite, an unprecedented upheaval in modern German history. This process of restructuring destroyed traditionally developed milieus, basically changed the social climate, and mobilized society to a considerable extent.” The restructuring of society had a major additional advantage for the new leaders: it assured them of a large group of loyal adherents and advocates of the socialist ideology.

Given that the East German leadership had indeed accomplished real changes, they were blown out of all proportion by the East German regime. The result was a completely unrealistic representation of the recent past and the near future. No matter what sources one consults, whether East German history books, songbooks, autobiographies of famous East Germans, educational literature for young people, or advertising placards: they all show the same razor-sharp line drawn between pre-1945 national socialist and post-1945 socialist society. Before socialism, life was allegedly infected by the continuous capitalist struggle of “all against all.” This struggle was said to have disappeared in the new socialist society, to be replaced by friendly cooperation, “collective commitment,” and feelings of mutual solidarity. The last period of the war was thoroughly rewritten – it was reported to have been characterized by “heroism, resistance, and victory.” The East German population was described as an innocent people, living in an innocent country, in which unfortunately two brutal categories had lived and reigned: the Junker [derogatory reference to the aristocracy] and the Monopolkapitaliste [monopoly capitalists]. These groups were responsible for all the disasters that had taken place, and they were exclusively described within the well-known Marxist, socio-economic framework of analysis. Although national socialism had claimed to be a variety of socialism, East German historians explained it had to be regarded as the last horrific convulsion of the capitalist system. As East German historiography drew attention to the anti-Semitic and racist characteristics of national socialist politics, this was within the framework of an overarching critique of capitalism.

East German historiography on the post-war period is equally clear and one-dimensional. Denazification of the Soviet-occupied part of Germany was said to have been pursued in a strict, just, and successful way. Almost all Nazis had presumably been punished, and their possessions were said to have been redistributed or sequestered, nationalized and subsequently used for the common good. Official historiography claimed that the majority of the East German population swiftly understood that they had been abused by national socialism and its capitalist leaders. Contrary to the situation in the western part of Germany, the GDR was said to have been liberated of fascism in 1945 once and for all, allowing the records to be
closed. As part of their education, generations of Rudolstadt’s schoolchildren visited the former concentration camp Buchenwald (twenty-five miles to the north) in order to learn about the socialist liberators who successfully put an end to the catastrophic “profit seeking of German Monopolbourgeoisie [monopoly bourgeoisie], its bestial exploitation, and repression in concentration camp Buchenwald” and the “horrid history of German imperialism.”

Although, as I mentioned before, a significant part of the East German government indeed consisted of members of the resistance who had risked their lives combating Nazi Germany, present-day historians generally agree that “the image of a pristine antifascist government cleansed of all ex-Nazis was more antifascist mythology than East German reality.” Denazification of the eastern part of Germany was neither more thorough nor more successful than in the western zones, and the Soviets appear to have known this all too well: “[T]he Soviets publicly claimed satisfaction with their success, while privately they too admitted failure.” The officially sanctioned representation of East Germany’s recent past was “as fictitious as it was self-serving for the SED.” Because admitting it would have completely undermined the legitimacy of the GDR as a separate German state, antifascism was and remained the core of the socialist state, which helped to “morally lift up” the GDR. Reference was constantly made to the “identity-confirming ideological fundament of the East German state” in order to legitimize the state’s continued existence, its balance of power, and political decisions. Apart from its legitimizing role, the GDR’s antifascism was also used to morally bind people to the regime, by commanding loyalty with the brave antifascist Widerstandskämpfer [resistance fighters].

Life in socialist society was apparently characterized by the common ownership of all, which would bring about equality, mutual harmony and solidarity. This would bring forth “the gift of a new people,” claiming to differ from their fascist-capitalist predecessors thanks to their genuine identification with collective goals. Because they knew their individual interests corresponded entirely with the collective ones, there would be no more “petty bourgeois and individualist ambitions. Envy and hate would rot away, and people would be freed from the existential loneliness on earth.” The East German population would be released from the social-destructive tendencies and experiences that had always plagued their existence. Instead, they would become part of the “socialist community of people” where “man was the only goal and standard.” This would allow for the “free development of one in the service of all.”

All in all, the socialist state thus promised its citizens nothing less than a complete form of harmony and unity – both for individuals and between people. This
was to be realized in the near future, because the main condition for its development had already been fulfilled in the eastern part of Germany, where capitalist relation of production had been partly terminated, and large-scale nationalization of agriculture and industry had been implemented by the end of 1945.

In a country that was in desperate need of optimism and faith in the future, and where recent history was being written around heroes, villains and victims, true recollections of events were not welcome – but repression was. The betrayal, pain, hatred, and envy that I described in the previous chapter remained unspoken. There was no room for people's memories unless they were in line with the officially propagated and sanctioned history. Open-minded investigation of the past was even more difficult when the country became one of the Soviet Union's major partners in the Cold War. Openly posing questions about national socialism's appeal remained practically impossible, unless they were approached in the obligatory, well-known standard of Marxist-Leninist rhetoric. Until the mid-1970s there was only one way to write about the Nazi period: from the perspective of those who had already recognized the reprehensible character and aims of fascism during the war. When in 1976 the first novel appeared in which the author, Christa Wolf, openly admitted that she – as so many of her peers – had been under the spell of national socialist promises, the book was fiercely criticized. Wolf was blamed for not being able to subordinate her own experiences to the progressive forces and developments in her country.

East German history's rigorous rewriting must have resulted in broadly shared experiences of alienation, as has been aptly worded by German cultural historian Frank Trommler: "Whatever the experience, it cannot even claim an appropriate understanding of the events of which it has been part." But apart from being estranging, it was probably also reassuring not to be able to think and talk about the past in other than the mythical way described above – with heroes, villains and victims. Because the officially approved perspective on the past was not only important for the establishment and legitimacy of East German socialist politics but was also used "to instill a sense of political commitment which was to be beyond valid questioning," there was simply no room for objection. All possible means were used to steer East Germans' emotions in support of the imposed politics of the time. A false dichotomy was created: if you are against fascism, then you are for the GDR; if you are critical of the GDR, then you are essentially a fascist.

As a result, it appears to have always been difficult for East Germans to hear (let alone voice) criticism of the GDR – because of the presumed antifascist nature of the state. Fulbrook calls this the "psychological coercion" the inhabitants of the GDR fell victim to. A 68-year-old judge, whom I regularly visited during my
stay in Rudolstadt and who was usually quite critical about the former socialist state, once sighed: “In spite of everything, the GDR’s original goals and assumptions were very good and worthwhile.” Any critique of the GDR was implicitly a critique of antifascism, and as such highly suspicious. The use of morally loaded ideological claims was the main way “to capture the public political imagination by tapping into its wells of moral conscience” – a frequently used tactic by moralizing states. For the new East German state, antifascism functioned as a fetish. The signs, vocabulary and narratives it produced were not meant to be mere symbols; they were officially invested with a surplus of meanings which were not negotiable and which one was officially forbidden to depart from or challenge.

Although the “legend of the good beginning,” which was so important for the new state’s legitimacy, was forced upon the East German population, Mary Fulbrook has concluded that “the myth of innocence of the workers and peasants…appears to have gone down relatively well with the vast mass of the East German population.” This is not as surprising as it may seem, because it must have been quite an attractive myth for many people. First of all, it promised to realize a fully harmonious society, without social tensions. Secondly, the GDR’s proclaimed antifascist nature offered the population a perfect escape route to avoid personal confrontations, responsibility and involvement with the rise of national socialism, the war and the ensuing void. By presenting these issues as the sole result of capitalism’s evils (successfully dismantled in the GDR), the East German state presented its population a story of collective innocence for the recent past’s disasters. Personal misgivings and internal differences were erased in light of the bright future of mutual solidarity and security awaiting the East German people.

The myth of the new beginning has had a deep impact on the development of the future GDR. By presenting 1945 as an overall watershed, East German society was built on a collective denial of past experiences. It was also built on an undisclosed gap in which experiences of mutual distrust, betrayal and the failure of solidarity were hidden, covered up with beautiful promises of mutual solidarity. Both the state and the population had a firm interest in concealing this gap, brushing socially disruptive experiences under the carpet, while emphasizing the better future on the horizon. The combination of a state-sanctioned, collective amnesia and a rigorous reinterpretation of real memories has been very effective “for achieving a constrained loyalty” to the state. In spite of general skepticism amongst East Germans with regard to the socialist cause, an unsaid, partly unwitting consensus developed between people’s desires, motives and endeavors on the one hand, and the claimed antifascist, socialist state ideology on the other. The image of 1945 as a firm dividing line functioned as the nation’s ideological core, helping to create a
semblance of national unity and command internal loyalty. “Our loyalty towards the GDR contained irrational, almost mythical dimensions. All those flat, worn out stories have in one way or another had a deep, subconscious impact on all of us. It was certainly no coincidence that the Wall was called an ‘antifascist protection wall.’”

The antifascist, socialist doctrine functioned as a mask, which both the population and the government were keen to wear. One result of the widespread, state-sanctioned “Schluszstrich” [draw a line under] mentality was that “the most important issues on the country’s past, like national-socialism’s broad popular base, were ignored along with questions about the population’s involvement in the regime’s politics of persecution and destruction.”

Comparable reactions of silently and industriously sweeping away the past as soon as possible were displayed in the western part of Germany, but these patterns changed over time. Especially after the violent riots in the late 1960s, the darkest period in German history became an undeniable part of West Germany’s self-representation – a development which was unthinkable in the GDR.

The establishment of democracy in the west also meant that, in sharp contrast to the dictatorship in the east, the decisions of the early years were not final. East Germans were able to freeze political memory...In West Germany, political freedom and open debate fostered criticism of the shortcomings of the Adenauer era and a growing knowledge about the Nazi era.

In the GDR, the ruinous experiences remained suppressed and hidden, on which the bright future was to be built. The question of how this has influenced East German society’s social texture will be answered in the coming chapters. There, I will also show what collective stockpiles were developed for the containment of experiences and memories that did not fit in with the past’s officially sanctioned representations. At an individual level, people created different stockpiles. My 70-year-old neighbor in Rudolstadt appeared to be revealing her memories in the songs she sang every time she was drunk, allowing her to return to her lost Heimat.

She lived next to me in an old apartment on Rudolstadt’s market square. Just like me, she had to go down to the courtyard every day in autumn and winter in order to gather coal and kindling for the fire. But whereas my apartment had hot running water, a shower, and a private toilet, she had to heat water on the stove and put it in a tub before she could wash herself, and her toilet was in the communal corridor. She was lonely. Apart from her son, who reluctantly visited her every three or four weeks, she seemed to have no social contacts.
at all. Sometimes we had a little chat when we met in the corridor, but she always seemed a bit absentminded. She originally came from Silesia, a part of Germany that was assigned to Poland after the war. She probably left her home town in the spring of 1945 in a hurry. I don’t know whether her son was already born by then. Like the millions of others who were driven from their homesteads at that time, she probably walked all the way to Thuringia (400 miles). When she arrived in Rudolstadt, people probably frowned disapprovingly at her because she needed the food and shelter that were in such short supply. I don’t know for sure whether she ever really managed to feel at home. My impression was that she did not. There was a small landscape painting on the wall of our communal hallway. The scenery resembled the area around Rudolstadt, but I always imagined it to be her native Silesia. During the time I lived next to her, she came home really drunk several times a week, stumbling noisily to the door of our hallway. Sometimes she didn’t even make it that far, and I would find her downstairs, lying in her urine. She had fallen down and was too drunk to get up. Once I heard her fall – it was a hard thump. I went down and saw her lying in a pool of blood, her legs in a strange position under her body. An ambulance took her to hospital where she stayed for some weeks. When she returned, she had lost some weight, but it wasn’t long before she began drinking again. And yet again, she came home drunk a few times a week, hardly able to reach the door of her apartment or get the key in the lock. Once she was inside, the evenings always elapsed in the same way. The walls were so thin that I could hear her singing, sometimes till deep at night. One time I was able to work out some of the words and then I realized it was always the same theme: Heimat, Heimat, it sounded melancholically.

Every town has its alcoholics, but it struck me that my aged neighbor returned to her native country every night, having left it fifty years earlier. Her history contained many elements that had been written out of official East German historiography. The story of her life was taboo: socialists do not recognize homesickness for the area where you were born, certainly not when there were sound political reasons to allocate it to a befriended, bordering nation.

A New Future: Material Well-Being

Concentrating on the socialist leaders’ general promises allowed me to sketch the wonderful perspective that was presented to the war-beaten East German population after 1945. A complete break with the past would automatically bring about a community of new people, living together in great harmony and solidarity. Or as the first line of the East German anthem went: “Auferstanden aus Ruinen und der
This prospect must have been extremely attractive. However, as I showed in the previous chapter, the German population was searching for a new symbolic order, not only by silencing past social fissures, but also by materially rebuilding society. The question is to what extent the socialist state accommodated this search.

In theory, the answer to this question is very simple: according to Marxist theory, a radical change in the material basis of East German society would bring about the desired socialist utopia. Transforming society’s material basis would lead to a fundamental transformation in people’s attitude towards work, re-establishing it as the central, constitutive element of their existence: “Work is joy, volunteering and responsibility; it is courage, diligence, heroism, success, specialty, and plan. The worker recognizes his productive activities as the purpose of his life and his patriotic duty.”28 The destruction of capitalist “non-culture” would liberate people, allowing them to invest all their energy, hope and faith in “securing the uttermost welfare and the free development of all members of society.”29

Although the obvious question of course is to what extent these general axioms were achieved, it is important to recognize that by allowing material circumstances to bring ultimate fulfillment for all in mutual harmony, the socialist leaders endowed the material domain with capacities far beyond economic recovery and material resurrection. In this respect, their promises came close to the general hopes and ambitions of the East German population, leading to a further merging of people’s needs and wants on the one hand, and the main promises of the socialist state on the other.

During the first decade after the Second World War, the East German regime was internally divided on the issue of consumption. The central importance of meeting the needs of the consumer in order to establish state legitimacy was not generally recognized.30 Until the end of the 1940s, the material situation in the GDR was extremely bad; hunger and scarcity dominated daily life. East Germans’ attitude towards the new political course in their country fluctuated along the lines of material improvement. With East and West Germans keeping a close watch on the developments in both parts of the country and comparing the advances in each country’s consumption, it goes without saying that when the material situation in the western part seemed to recover more rapidly, this had a devastating impact on the credibility of the GDR’s socialist project.31

In 1946 and 1947 the population of Saxony (a province in East Germany) was relatively favorably disposed towards the political decisions of the new leaders. However, when material circumstances deteriorated, partly due to the long and harsh winters of 1947 and 1948, popular support eroded immediately, reaching
rock bottom in mid-1948 once people learned that ration cards had been abol-
ished in West Germany. The impact was tremendous. From that moment on, the
West German population was able to pay with real money when they went to
shops that actually had something worth buying. Therefore, in West Germany,
the end of rationing “symbolized the end of the war years and times of depriv-
ation. It was the beginning of the long-expected return to ‘normality,’ security and
welfare.”32 For the East German population, the abolition of rationing in the west
was equally important, albeit in a negative way. Many then concluded that “life is
simply better in the west.”33

The symbolic and political significance of full shops was insufficiently recog-
nized by all East German politicians. Many still considered the politics of con-
sumption subordinate to the recovery of heavy industry. They would soon find out
that improvement in the sphere of consumption was fundamentally important for
legitimatizing their political course.

From the early 1950s onwards, increasing numbers of East Germans left their
hearth and home to build up a new life in the western part of the country. The fig-
ures are telling: in 1950 almost 77,000 people left the territory of the GDR, in 1953
the number of exiles amounted to over 317,000.34 Most East German party leaders
viewed these developments suspiciously but seemed confident that they would be
able to turn the economic tide at short notice and bring an end to the country’s
material and consumption problems. This confidence was based on two assump-
tions. Firstly, they believed that the collectivization of agriculture would produce
“a surplus in foodstuffs and [increase] the overall availability of goods.”35 Secondly,
they assumed that the socialist mode of production would eventually far outrank
the capitalist mode of production. At the second party congress in 1952, party
leader Walter Ulbricht announced the acceleration in socialism’s development:
“As a result of the double enslavement by American and West German monopoly
capitalism, the living standards of the West German population will continue to
fall, whereas in the GDR and the democratic sector of Berlin, material and cultural
conditions for the workers will improve according to plan.”36

In spite of these promising words, consumer developments in the GDR were
sluggish in comparison with the west, and the resulting dissatisfaction played a
fundamental role in the only revolt worth mentioning that occurred in the GDR,
which took place on June 17, 1953.

The immediate cause of the revolt was the ongoing increase in production de-
mands, which was not compensated by an improvement in consumption potential
or a reduction in prices. By the beginning of June, workers took to the streets to
voice their dissent. When the party leadership did not respond satisfactorily, dem-
onstrations were announced for the next day, under the motto “butter instead of canons.”37 On June 17, the entire country was hit by strikes and demonstrations, and the uprising was a fact. It was harshly crushed by the local Soviet forces, but the message to the party leaders was clear: state legitimacy depended very much on how well the material situation improved. “The lessons about the power of consumer opinion in sowing concord or dissent had been drummed into the minds of the new elite in East Germany with the uprising of June 17, 1953.”38 In an attempt to improve the food shortages and lack of consumer goods, the SED gave the remaining private industries more freedom. The result was an immediate improvement,39 and the numbers of emigrants are telling: whereas in 1953 over 317,000 people left the GDR, this number dropped to 114,000 in 1954, again illustrating the importance of material improvement for the establishment of state legitimacy.

The socialist German state struggled with the problem that its existence was not supported by time-honored national sentiments. The socialist leadership was therefore unable to foster a state with the “powerful force of national emotions.”40 When the government finally understood to what extent the state’s legitimacy depended on satisfying consumer demand, it “seriously strove to improve the population’s standard of living, in order to be ensured of its loyalty.”41 Although comparable issues haunted the new West German state, its restructuring soon appeared to be an all-out success, finally resulting in the famous Economic Miracle.

The collective attempt to banish the traumas of the Second World War by covering them up with beautiful examples of prosperity was one of the critical stakes in West Germany’s 1968-generation’s revolt. Since then, Germany’s war traumas have been laid bare and never disappeared from the public stage in the FRG again. But by that time, the new German democracy’s legitimacy was beyond doubt, thanks to its marvelous economic achievements.

Such developments were impossible in the GDR. Until the state ceased to exist, silence reigned regarding the socially unsettling experiences of the past. In chapter six I will show that in time, the silence related not just to matters of the past, it was generally impossible to publicly name or discuss socially disruptive issues. They were covered up with the beautiful story about mutual equality and solidarity in the wake of transforming the socialist state’s material basis. This story was not just relevant for the new state and its leadership, it also had a great emotional and social impact on the East German population. Collectively aiming for a new and materially improved life diverted their attention from traumatic experiences. In this way, state and citizens came to a kind of agreement in which consumption and material developments had far-reaching powers.
This agreement has had a deep and long-lasting effect on the GDR. The post-war habit of silently denying social disasters and the state-ordered taboo on breaking the silence continued to exist in East German society. Not only did it nourish the belief in an ideal society without social fissures or tensions, it also met East Germans’ widespread hopes and expectations that material improvement was the most appropriate solution to social problems. “The communist system was built on unambiguous promises of material progress. The [inhabitants]...were perpetually on the threshold of the promised land. Socialism...aroused the desire to consume by its promises of material improvement.”

When I refer to the pact between state and citizenry in the GDR, I highlight how the state’s ideology became enmeshed with the needs of the traumatized population not only to build a materially safe future, but also to deny and remove experiences that were at odds with the newly-to-be-formed communal ties. Key elements of this ideology would form the basis for the new symbolic order in the eastern part of Germany. The socialist state’s promises that seamlessly matched the lessons of life which were as important as they were taboo became the silenced core of a secret collusion between state and citizenry.