Material Fantasies

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Chapter 5
The East German Dictatorship

The classification of political ideas into only two categories, dominance and resistance, gives analytic life to a mythical reduction of the complexity and multifacetedness of human thought. There can be many more than two sides, many more than two postures, many more than two ideas of ‘reality’ (Sally Falk-Moore, 1993).¹

One of the most interesting themes which emerged from my conversations with people was the way the power of the state featured in their past. On the one hand, people wholeheartedly admitted that the state had exerted a far-reaching influence on their existence. In their stories, the state was generally portrayed as a distant entity, responsible for everything that had gone wrong in the GDR: “Them at the top, they were always thinking up such strange things...” At the same time, the influence of the state was perceived in a highly relative way, with phrases such as: “It wasn’t that bad, we didn’t take it seriously.” Furthermore, as will be shown in this chapter, it was precisely thanks to the bond between state and citizenry that the majority of the people I met had not seen the state as a threat, but on the contrary as a force that had actually played a rather positive role in daily life. It was partly due to the state’s omnipresence that the general atmosphere in the GDR had been so warm and friendly.

Initially, I found this inconceivable. Why did people’s stories about the past sound so mild, sometimes even entirely positive, and nearly always defensive – as for instance in the frequently heard sentence “es war nicht alles schlecht damals [it wasn’t all that bad].” Two of the most frequently mentioned positive aspects people recalled were the warmth and mutual equality that had supposedly characterized their former lives. Yet another comment that many people repeated about their past was: “We were all in the same boat then.” Spoken in a somewhat defensive manner, like an excuse, the same boat apparently represented the security brought about by mutual equality.²

Although I did occasionally hear critical comments about the past, they were negligible compared to the amount of protective and positive accounts. The main criticism was limited to material consumption. The major problems and limita-
tions that I as westerner was used to associating with living in a dictatorship appeared to have been relatively insignificant for most East Germans, as they were only mentioned by a relatively small number of people. I could not understand this. In my eyes, the GDR had been above all a state where deprived liberty, oppression, and restriction were the order of the day. And the neutral and positive way in which East Germans identified their former existence was a mystery to me.

Naturally, I could appreciate that it must be hard for East Germans to be constantly confronted with westerners’ negative, one-sided perspective of their past. And I also appreciated that my attempts to understand their history were greatly hindered by the fierce conflict concerning East Germany’s past that had been raging between East and West Germans since the Wende in 1989. The people I met were accustomed to westerners being nothing but judgmental about the past. As they assumed beforehand that my questions would be based on western disapproval, I saw their positive comments about bygone days primarily as a reaction to this negativity. However, time and time again people tried to explain to me that this was not the only issue, and that I did not understand anything about life in the GDR if I was not able to appreciate that there were positive sides to their lives, also as a result of the dictatorship. It was stalemate: whilst I could not help approaching East Germany’s past in a rather negative way, my informants tried to convince me that it was not so bad. “That’s just the way it was,” was the third most often repeated sentence, emphasizing that what westerners saw as horrific was merely a way of life for East Germans.

Thus, these three sentences used by East Germans to ward off criticism from westerners show that there were positive sides to life in East Germany which have never been understood by the west.

1. “Es war nicht alles schlecht damals [It wasn’t all bad in the past].”
   I wondered, in silence: “Wasn’t it? Tell me one thing that can withstand critical scrutiny!”

2. “Damals saßen wir allen im gleichen Boot [We were all in the same boat then].”
   I wondered, in silence: “That’s what I mean: imagine finding consolation because everyone is equally badly off!”

3. “Es war nun mal so [That’s just the way it was].”
   I wondered, in silence: “Right! Precisely the fact that nobody could change anything was what made it so awful!”

For me as a westerner, the significance of the above-mentioned statements was shaped entirely by the all-devouring perspective of the GDR as dictatorship. But time and time again people tried to persuade me that I could not maintain this
perspective if I wanted to understand how East Germans had experienced their past.

Finally, people managed to convince me that their attitude towards the past was more than just a reaction to the huge changes that had taken place in their lives since 1989, or to the west’s condemnation. They made it clear that there were also intrinsic reasons why they felt sad when thinking about bygone days. I came to realize that in order to understand why so many East Germans, despite everything, had such a strong sense of belonging to the GDR and described its warmth in such nostalgic terms, a radical change in perspective was necessary. I would have to learn to differentiate my views on the relationship between the East German powers and the country’s inhabitants. In this chapter I describe my struggle to understand their perception of their past, including the conflict going on in the media and among intellectuals and historians (especially German ones).

**Theorizing Dictatorship**

Historians and intellectuals have long been debating how East Germany’s past should be viewed and to what extent the notion of dictatorship was helpful to understand it. For a long time experts in various disciplines have viewed and analyzed socialist societies in Central and Eastern Europe – especially the Soviet Union – as being totalitarian dictatorships. They applied the term totalitarian in an attempt to explain that the powers in such societies were indeed total and capable of penetrating all of their citizens’ existence.

In the 1960s, the totalitarian concept passed into disuse mainly due to a number of academic and social developments. First of all, academic thinking on political systems changed. Whereas formerly much emphasis had been placed on the role and actions of individuals or relatively small groups of powerful people as decisive historical and/or social actors, now attention was more focused on the political and social structures in which these actors were operating. Second, people were becoming more aware that there was also criticism and opposition in what up until then had been called totalitarian societies. Claims of power, for example in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, may have been total and totalitarian but that did not automatically mean they had been realized or were as successful as planned. As a result of these insights and doubts, the totalitarian concept lost its analytic value.

At the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, however, the concept of totalitarianism began to raise its head again, thanks to the influence of dissident
East European thinkers. But the way this concept was being applied by them was considerably different. First of all, western thinkers generally viewed the concept as being clearly anti-socialist, whereas Central and East European dissidents like Václav Havel leaned more to the political left, and their criticism was not directed at the socialist structure of society as such, but more to the fact that socialist principles and values had been discredited by those in power in the so-called socialist states. Second, they applied the concept of totalitarianism to demonstrate the difference between European socialist dictatorships on the one hand and normal dictatorships on the other.

Unlike in traditional dictatorships (for example in Central and South America), they felt that the socialist claims and characteristics of the Central and East European dictatorships benefitted from a long ideational tradition which gave these systems “a sense of durability and permanence that dictatorships often lack.”

At the same time, the South American dictatorships could only exist due to the explicit and omnipresent threat of physical violence. It goes without saying that there were also instances of violence and threats in Central and Eastern Europe, but life on the street was not affected as much as in South American military dictatorships. The basis of the relationship between rulers and ruled in socialist dictatorships was therefore totally different. Fear of violence was not really the main reason why people obeyed. It was more a case of conformity, which according to some could only be explained as an expression of successful totalitarianism.

As an example, Havel pointed to the masses of flags flying during socialist celebrations. Although this clearly demonstrated a kind of consensus between rulers and ruled, it raised the question of how far this consensus went and how it should be interpreted. According to Havel, the flag was a sort of talisman. The person who decides to hang it does so, says Havel, “because he thinks that by doing so, he will appear loyal to those around him, to officials, and, ultimately, to the police.” In this context, hanging out a flag should be seen as a form of camouflage as “it helps him [to] slip quietly into the background of daily life.”

In Havel’s opinion, power was maintained in Central and East European socialist societies not so much by the use of weapons, but “through each citizen feeling the ‘existential pressure’ to conform.” This led to a type of conformity which, although motivated by pressure, achieved “a tacit agreement between citizen and regime.” According to some (though not Havel), this ‘agreement’ in fact boiled down to a form of brainwashing by the regime: “The most totalitarian system is the one where the penetration of the regime into the soul of the individual is complete.”
Since 1989, several East German academics and intellectuals have analyzed East Germans’ former existence in a similar fashion. One of the most outspoken voices in these debates is the East German psychiatrist Hans-Joachim Maaz. In many of his books, he has tried to clarify what an extraordinarily deep and destructive influence the dictatorship had on everyday life in East Germany. In his work *Der Gefühlsstau*, he claims that: “Finally everyone in the GDR was infected by a virus which caused a pathological destruction of society.”7 Similar comments can be found on nearly every page. Because, according to Maaz, repression infiltrated every aspect of East German (social) life, the GDR should be regarded as a totalitarian dictatorship.8 From a socio-historical perspective, similar conclusions were drawn by historians Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle.9 They also concluded that from the outset, the GDR has been an entirely illegal society based on violence and repression, which could only continue to exist due to the presence of Russian bayonets.

Their statements confirmed the predominant western view of Central and East European dictatorships. After 1989 that view was significantly reinforced once it became evident how much the socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe had depended on the operations of their secret services. For this reason many western observers tend to reduce the entire existence in socialist countries to the dictatorial aims of those in power. Due to the regime’s totalitarian claims, people assumed that life in such societies was primarily colored by the political aims of their leaders.

Comparable conclusions were reached by the enquiry commission set up by the German government to investigate how the East German dictatorship operated. According to this commission, East Germany had been a dictatorship based on violence and injustice.10 In June 1994 the inhabitants of Rudolstadt were informed through one of their local newspapers that from the outset the GDR had been a totalitarian dictatorship, “in which the powers of the ruling party, that is to say: its leaders, infiltrated and...controlled every aspect of life,” thus sentencing the inhabitants of the country to “life-long imprisonment.”11 During my stay in Rudolstadt, these statements caused great anger. People were almost unanimous in their opinion that the way former East Germany was represented was generally far too prejudiced and absolutely incomplete.

Anyone with insight into East German society’s structure would not find the conclusions reached by the commission and by Maaz farfetched. The socialist state’s influence and control penetrated so deeply into the private lives of GDR citizens that the concept of totalitarianism springs to mind almost automatically – a short introduction will be presented below.
One of the most significant pillars which upheld the socialist promises in the GDR was its social security system. Every East German had a right to education, accommodation, a job, and child care. That sounds wonderful, but apart from the fact that in the long run it was unaffordable, one of the main effects of this extensive social provision was that it enabled far-reaching forms of ideological influence and indoctrination. Nowhere was this more evident than in education. People who worked in education told me that schools focused especially on developing skills and values which were classed as socialist, for example being able to subordinate oneself to the greater good, the Kollektiv [the collective]. Independent (not to mention critical) thinking was not encouraged, creativity was soon labeled disruptive, and the curriculum (with the exception of applying Marxist-Leninist theories) was geared to learning factual knowledge. Obedience was considered a major character trait, and the same applied to the ability to adhere to rules and regulations. According to some intellectuals, education had a disastrous effect on the attitude and mentality of many East German inhabitants.

It was generally known that teachers kept a close eye on which children (and thereby also which parents) were loyal to the socialist party. Teaching staff ensured that pupils did not vent any criticism of the GDR. Children were admonished in public if they wore western clothes or carried their school stuff in western plastic bags. One young woman who worked at the museum in Rudolstadt recalled that a teacher once snapped at her: “You’re surely not advertising für westliche Ausbeuter-Konzerne? [for western companies that abuse people].” And a well-known trick to find out which families watched West German television programs was to ask the children if the clock on the television showed the hours in dots or in lines – allowing the teacher to find out which families could be accused of being more or less critical of the state. Social engagement was also one of the factors which determined who could and who could not go to university. Obviously a scholar’s intellectual capabilities had to be sufficient, but if an excellent student wanted to become a doctor, his parents’ loyalty to the state was very much taken into account. Another factor which played a decisive role was social background. If the parents belonged to the so-called Intelligenz [intelligentsia], he had less chance than if his parents were workers or farmers.

Besides this indoctrination by the schools themselves, the socialist youth organizations – respectively the Jung Pioniere [Young Pioneers, for the youngest], the Pioniere [Pioneers, six and older], and the Freie Deutsche Jugend [Free German Youth, 14 and older] – played a significant role in East German school-life. If secondary school children did not join the FDJ, not only were they confronted by rep-
representatives of the organization itself but also by their teachers. It was one of the most apparent signs of subversion and indicative of parents’ loyalty to the state.

As the FDJ was also responsible for young people’s cultural and leisure activities, part of how East Germans spent their free time was indirectly controlled by the state. Obviously, the FDJ focused a great deal of attention on “gesellschaftspolitische Arbeit [socio-political work],” consisting of military exercises and political debates. But the ideological indoctrination began even earlier, as children were made aware of the lessons of international class conflict in young children’s organizations. A relevant article from 1959 found in the SBZ archives described a group of youngsters playing a game of Verteidigung der Republik [defending the republic] one early Sunday morning. The youngsters were divided into various Kampfgruppen [battalions]; there were Gruppenkommandeure [group commanders] and in order “to teach the children to be socialist people…they wear red paper armbands on their left arms.”

All work and leisure organizations functioned the same way. Every inhabitant of the GDR was expected to join the Deutsch Sowjetische Freundschaftsbund [Society for German-Soviet Friendship] and one of the numerous socialist organizations in order to engage in public life. Even though people could choose which organization they wanted to join, in reality it made no difference: everything had been aligned to the party, and party members were present everywhere to enforce adherence to the party line and deal with social themes. Church membership was certainly not encouraged, and if parents wished to have their child baptized, that was seen by the government as a sign of their suspect loyalty to the state. The exact implications varied, but the choice would not be beneficial for that particular family’s career prospects.

When tracing how and to what extent the state tried to govern its citizens’ lives, the measure which had the deepest and most direct effect was of course the Wall. The exact rules regarding traffic across the border between East and West Germany changed many times over the years, but right up to the end it was only possible to visit West German relatives for so-called urgent family matters. A request for such a visit could be denied without an explanation, which happened very often. After all, a visit to the FRG was a privilege, not a right. An elderly man recalled that he was the only member of his family not allowed to attend his older sister’s 50th birthday in West Germany. Unlike many others who never found out why their request was denied, he was told. Because he worked in the telex department of a large company and had to store details of employees’ wages, he had access to secret knowledge which he could have passed to the class enemy. An older woman, who had submitted a request to attend her aunt’s funeral, said that they had snarled
at her: “The most important thing in life is certainly not the aunt or uncle in the west. Most important is that peace is maintained” – hereby referring to the official reason for erecting the Wall, namely as *Schützwall des Friedens* [wall for defending peace]. The only people who were allowed to visit West Germany once a year were East German pensioners. The reason for this leniency was that they no longer represented any economic value for the GDR. Should they decide not to return to the *Heimstatt des Friedens und Geborgenheit* [secure and peaceful homeland], this would not constitute a loss for the country’s production or finances.

Most of the other measures and rules which illustrate the dictatorial nature of the GDR are known: telephone conversations between East and West Germans were tapped, visits from West German relatives and friends were watched closely, letters and parcels from the west were opened and searched. Strict security measures were in force at the border zone, including visibly armed policemen. Someone who wanted to visit people living in the border zone had to submit a request long beforehand. If those who lived in the villages and towns around the border wanted to receive visitors, they had to request this several weeks in advance. Everyone walking around in the border area could be stopped by the police and detained, frisked, and even shot for no official reason. For the same reasons it was impossible for most East Germans to have a holiday on the east coast: being part of the border area, the coast could not be freely visited by everyone. Any holiday there had to be requested well in advance, and usually the hotels and holiday homes were entirely reserved for members of the SED and other organizations that formed the National Front. A holiday on the Baltic Sea was one of the most enjoyable ways to be rewarded for political loyalty in the GDR.

Although East Germans were scarcely able to leave their country, West Germans were allowed to visit the GDR. The principal reason for not restricting the number of visitors was an economic one. Because they were obliged to change 25 West German marks for East German marks at an exchange rate of one to one every day, West Germans were bringing in hard cash.

It is well-known that westerners visiting the GDR were not allowed to bring certain categories of magazines (opinion and pulp) and books (critical or so-called decadent ones). As the criteria governing what was and what was not allowed to be imported were never published anywhere, and moreover seemed to alter regularly over time, it was always a tense situation waiting to see what could or could not be taken over the border. One such incident was experienced by the owner of a flower shop in Rudolstadt. While working at a florist in the former GDR, she wanted to take home a large yucca (indoor plant) from West Germany. That was forbidden. She had to leave it at the border, because:
The official explanation was that there might have been bacteria in the soil. But I knew that was not what it was about. In my opinion, the real reason was that we did not have plants like that. And so that plant was not only a symbol of the west, more importantly it epitomized an enjoyment of life that our state could not and would not give us. Seeing such a plant would cause dissension.

Although she was probably right, it is of course ironic that nearly all East Germans could see what life was like in West Germany every day by watching television in their own living room. Understandably, this transfer of information was a thorn in the face of the GDR government, particularly because the programs on the West German channels were generally considered much more appealing than those on East German television. This led to a large-scale action in 1961, whereby the members of the aforementioned FDJ climbed onto East Germans’ roofs in order to turn round all the TV aerials that were facing west.

There are many more examples which could demonstrate how strongly the state affected and determined the daily lives of people living in the GDR. What went on at school also went on at work, at university, and in the army. Even at home people could not escape interference from the government. Every district and block of flats had its own Hausgemeinschaft [housing association], which not only ensured that flats were kept clean and homely but was also meant to stimulate the correct ideological climate in the direct vicinity of people’s homes. Even the allotment gardens, where people liked to withdraw – mainly so they did not need to be involved in anything and could finally get some peace and quiet – were made part of the state’s politically ideological framework. The annual reports of Rudolstadt’s Allotment Association were bulging with ideological wording and political lip service. This association apparently concerned itself with “the peace policies of offensive socialist states,” for the sake of “the oncoming military-strategic balance, despite the confrontational political stance of NATO,” and with “the German history regarding war and suffering.”

The state’s influence penetrated every aspect of East Germans’ existence, and their entire lives were coated with a thick political and ideological wash. All the social and cultural activities people undertook were embedded in a politically ideological framework, and people’s behavior in the various social organizations and arenas was closely scrutinized. Every inhabitant of the GDR also had a personal file. This contained people’s class background, as well as what and where they had studied, what results they had achieved, which organizations they had joined,
what role they had played as member, where they worked, their profile at work, how they related to the *Kollektiv* of which they were a part, and so forth.

Based on the above, it is clear that the inhabitants of the GDR were monitored and indoctrinated in numerous ways. This occurred both publicly, under the mantle of specific laws, rules and regulations, as well as under implicit, less obviously apparent pressure, which made people comply with rules and regulations that had not been laid down anywhere. All in all, East Germans’ existence appears to have been so swamped with state orders, interference and regulations that the totalitarian concept seems very apt.

It is therefore remarkable, as mentioned earlier, that the majority of the people I met tried to convince me that their earlier lives were for the most part removed from the regime’s political claims and intentions, and that even they should be taken with a pinch of salt. As Mrs. Pätzold, the retired owner of one the few clothes shops that remained in private ownership at the time of the GDR, explained to me:

Superficially, of course, everything here was dictated by the state, but at the same time, many more things were possible. If you had the right contacts, stood your ground, kept on grumbling a bit, or simply refused, taking care of course not to overstep the law or do anything that was strictly forbidden, there were plenty of opportunities. And so many things happened differently or were more flexible than officially stated. Formally, there was the official line which was the same for everyone, and under, alongside, and in between that, there was a bit of fixing here and a bit of rustling there. Everyone knew it, and everyone did it.

German historian Martin Sabrow also concluded that most of the GDR’s inhabitants did not really experience their country as a dictatorship. Along with him, other historians have denounced the conclusions of the enquiry commission, that the GDR was a totalitarian dictatorship based on violence and injustice, as being very biased and superficial. According to them, it is important to develop a more balanced perspective of East Germany’s history.

American historian James McAdams was fiercely critical of the enquiry commission’s conclusions: in his opinion they reminded him more of “contending campaign platforms than thoughtful enquiries into the East German past.” British historian Mary Fulbrook came to a similar conclusion after reading a great number of historical studies on the GDR, which according to her are unjustly “deeply immersed in an accusatory undertone.” She warns in powerful terms against criminalizing East Germany’s society and history. Renowned German ethnologist Ina Merkel has also noted that historical accounts of the GDR are extremely
cliché, mostly written from a judgmental western perspective, in which “[d]ie Schlüsselworte Stasi, Totalitarismus und Kommandowirtschaft ein Bermuda-Dreieck [formen], in dem die Vergangenheit der ehemaligen DDR-Bürger/innen zu verschwinden droht [the key concepts of Stasi, totalitarianism and controlled economy form a Bermuda Triangle, threatening to erase East German citizens’ past].”25 American anthropologist John Borneman concluded that “totalitarianism never existed in the GDR. To confuse the theory of totalitarianism with everyday life is to mistake ideal type for an empirical reality.”26 And British historian Mark Allinson states that East Germany’s existence cannot be identified with its political context. Despite the Wall and the fact that people were not allowed to leave the country, he concludes: “The GDR was quite a normal country, despite its unusual international and domestic political setting…its citizens for the most part led normal lives, dominated as in most countries by family life and concerns about work and material welfare.”27

The previous scholars warn against identifying the East German political context with the lives that had developed there, and they advocate that historical perspectives on the GDR should include the accounts of those involved, and take them seriously. Although in theory I firmly agree with them, in practice it proved more difficult than I thought to use the very experiences of those concerned as a starting point. This was affected by more than just my inability and/or unwillingness to relativize the previously described dictatorial structure and characteristics. Another influential factor was the mounting tension since the Wende over East Germany’s past, which had sparked heated debates, especially between East and West Germans. As a result, many East Germans were pretty well convinced that their perspective of their past would never be understood and therefore adopted a hardened, defensive attitude towards inquisitive outsiders.

**Local Conversations on Dictatorship**

Many people reacted defensively to my attempts to talk to them about their past, but by far the most extreme reaction to my curiosity was displayed by Thomas, who ran the bar near my lodgings. From the very first time I visited that bar, he had been on his guard. After a while he seemed to thaw a bit, but one day when I started asking one of the regulars about the GDR, he burst into a tirade, leaving no doubt about what he thought of me. He did not trust me at all. I was an actor. I tricked people and ridiculed them behind their backs. All that inquiring of mine was just not right, and the only reason I asked questions was to degrade people. I
was much cleverer than I would have them believe with all those questions. It goes without saying that this exchange did not go unnoticed. A number of regulars joined in the debate and said that they were just as suspicious of me.

That day I actually managed to calm things down and continued to visit the bar. Sometime later, while chatting to a West German one evening, I laughed out loud: “You Germans, it’s unbelievable,” and that sparked things off. Although afterwards I could not remember in which order the accusations were hurled at me, I do remember Thomas’s face when he confronted me. It was contorted with fury, and he almost spat at me: he had always known that I was deceiving the whole caboodle. He knew all along: I was far smarter than I acted. “I knew right from the start that you were not to be trusted. I told you already that you’re a thoroughly bad person. You act as if you’re superior, with your nose in the air!” Totally flabbergasted at this unexpected attack, I told him he was crazy, and he laughed as if he had finally caught me in the act: “Oh yeah, so I’m crazy? I’m just small, right? This small? Well, I don’t have to listen to you. You’re leaving here in two months, and we’ll never see you again. I don’t need anything from you, and you don’t need anything from me, so I can tell you what I think of you: deine Augen lügen [your eyes are lying]!” I left the bar and never went back, which was apparently his intention. My continual questioning made me unreliable in his eyes, and his reaction revealed why this was the case: my questions about the past made him feel small.

In the first instance, such reactions may seem to confirm Maaz’s ideas about the impact of forty years of dictatorship on his countrymen’s “collective psyche.” In my view, however, Thomas’s anger did not so much relate to an East German legacy as to the argument that had been going on in Germany since 1989. During the time I was doing my research, one could not open a newspaper or magazine without reading something negative about the former GDR. One could not switch on the television without seeing a program in which aspects of former East Germany were being raked up and condemned: from Stasi scandals to horrifying reports on East German nursery schools. East Germans’ entire past was being reduced to a pitiful tale of repression, adjustment and petty bourgeoisie. Similarly, sociological studies had shown that people laughed less in the GDR than in the FRG, drank more than their counterparts in the FRG, and despite all their boasting about mutual helpfulness, the average East German had fewer friends than the average West German or Dutch. Even the Protestant Church, always assumed to be a stronghold of resistance, was proved to have been deeply involved with the Stasi and the state of East Germany. In the same condemnatory tone, the local newspaper portrayed the country as Trümmerfeld DDR [scene of devastation GDR].
In the conflict surrounding East Germany’s past, many West Germans equated life in the former GDR with its wrongful state form, they “felt that the lives of East Germans were a failure because their state was a failure.” The defensive attitude towards me was first of all a completely understandable reaction to the general condemnation. Secondly, many people were probably also reluctant to respond to my questions because they concerned matters of material consumption. One of the reasons why my research was so sensitive was the fact that the material aspects of East Germans’ existence featured so strongly in westerners’ utterly negative image of East Germany’s past.

The first time I realized what a direct effect the subject of my research had on the reactions I triggered was when I asked a woman in Berlin for directions. After she had pointed out where to go, I asked her about the building (a tall, rectangular concrete building with yellowish-brown plate-glass windows) on the other side of the street. She replied that it was the Palast der Republik [Palace of the Republic]. I had read about people and materials being brought from all over the GDR to Berlin in order to build that palace and so I tried to find out from her if all that effort to erect an imposing structure in the eastern section of the city was perhaps to show western visitors something like “we can produce something good too, you know.” However, when I put it to her tentatively: “Was that meant to be a showpiece?,” she burst out:

No! This was a real Palace for the People! With huge halls and everyone could always go in. It was truly built by and for the people. And it was all open to the public, except of course during important conferences. Throughout the building there were restaurants where you could get cheap meals (a scarcely veiled reproach of the era since the Wende, when although restaurants were set up everywhere, they were unaffordable), a coffee bar and ice-cream parlor, and vast halls that held thousands of people: it was all there. But now it has to go, nur weil man etwas gegen DDR-Bauen hat [just because people have something against GDR buildings].

According to her, the city council had initially tried to have the building demolished, referring to its traces of asbestos, but that excuse did not work after it appeared that the same was true for a considerable number of buildings in the western section of the city (one building on the west side was even eight times more contaminated than this one!). So then they had to think up another way to get rid of the building. Now the latest plan was to pull down the front and just leave the interior intact. She was furious about it. Her GDR was being demolished under false pretenses, and only because it was the GDR!
In the previous chapter I showed that the GDR's material environment was certainly not neutral: it was explicitly meant to express socialist ideals. Whereas the close relationship between these ideals and the forms it induced did not really work out the way it was planned then, the association between socialism and its material culture has been firmly established since the Wende. What is more: the GDR's material remains have played a major role in the conflict over East Germany's past. This was not only suggested by the angry outburst from the woman giving me directions, but on arrival at my destination something happened that further confirmed the impression that my focus on material culture was one of the main reasons for people's reluctance.

I was on my way to meet the director of a museum with a collection of items of the GDR heritage. The museum turned out to be hidden in one of Berlin's courtyard. Inside, the large space was filled with piles of furniture, objects, boxes and cabinets which I immediately recognized as the old East German style. The director shook my hand and asked the exact reason for my visit. I told him about my research on the changed significance of western consumer goods in the former GDR. As if stung by a horsefly, his panic reaction was: “Oh no, not another of those studies showing how functionalism didn’t work, is it? Just like all the criticism we got in the Fifties?”

Before we could go any further, his retort had already doubly discredited me and the subject of my research: my potentially critical conclusions did not just contain the wrong criticism, but they were moreover completely irrelevant. I hardly dared to open my mouth any more. He asked if I knew who he was: former Editor-in-Chief of the design magazine Form und Zweck. He explained that I could read all about the old (by now completely out-of-date) discussions in this magazine. Anyway, he did not have much time, but he would show me the permanent collection of East German objects.

We walked into the room where the objects were exhibited. The first cabinets displayed items from just after the war: enamel pans, igelit (artificial leather) shoes. Then there were some beautiful objects, obviously inspired by the famous Bauhaus style, which by this time I had learned were hardly ever for sale in the GDR. After that were a few displays of impressive machinery and technical gadgets. And next was a cabinet with everyday objects such as plastic ice-cream bowls, egg-cups shaped like chickens, etc. It was obvious that my guide would have preferred to usher me past all this, but as that was not possible, he remarked in a rather cynical, half-bored tone: “Yes, well, of course these are the things westerners always find very interesting. They think this is typical of the GDR! They assume that this was the only type of thing we were capable of manufacturing!” With unmistak-
able disdain, he moved on to the next cabinet full of lovely objects that were never available in the GDR.

His words were crystal clear and achieved the desired effect. I did not ask about anything else in the cabinet and let him guide me to the next exhibit. At the end of the tour when I enquired about the records he kept, he was rather vague. The archives had not yet been properly filed, he was not always here, and besides he was not being paid because the town council did not recognize the museum or the archives. One thing was for sure, he would never lend out a GDR object again. He had done that once with a Fifties poster which in his opinion exemplified the collective German-German image and design of the period. However, the poster was used at an exhibition to illustrate that even in the early days, the notion of a rigidly controlled state-aesthetics had been brewing in East Germany. I should perhaps have asked him again to see the archives, but I did not bother. It was obvious that we would never be able to have a normal conversation on this or any other subject.

The failed interview with the director really irritated me – not just because it was definitely discouraging to be continually confronted with such unwilling and defensive reactions, but also because I had hoped to find interesting information in his archive about material goods at the time of the GDR and how the public perceived them. However, while on my way back from Berlin to Rudolstadt, I began to understand his unwillingness a bit better. When my travel companion, a West German architect, saw the picture of the egg-cups which the director had not wanted to discuss with me, his reaction said it all: “Great,” he laughed, “real GDR!” In one stroke, his words highlighted why the director was unwilling to discuss East Germany’s past with western outsiders: in the eyes of many westerners, the material legacy of the GDR was not only ugly, but also inferior, stripped, and grey. As such, it was above all the visible symbol of the widespread misery in that country’s past and therefore deserving of westerners’ sneering condemnation.

Another significant illustration of this perspective is the way Michael Moeller, West German psychiatrist, described his journey by train through the former GDR sometime after the Wende. Both the images he sketched and the associations they evoked in him were probably less personal than they might seem at first glance:

I had boarded the by western standards rather ramshackle and gloomy train from Leipzig to Halle. Initially, it felt exciting sitting in the train, entering unknown territory, but after travelling through the dark evening for three-quarters of an hour, I noticed the houses, and my heart sank. What I saw before me was a forlorn world. I was unwittingly witnessing what I already knew: everything has fallen into decay; no-one has looked
after the houses or the fields… At the same time I realized what a long time it had been: all these forty, fifty years of unlived life! What all had been neglected, repressed and given no lease of life? This question had a deep effect on me, possibly because I was a child during the war.30

It is surprising how the noticeable decay – from a shabby train in a barren landscape – gradually began to color his entire perspective until what he saw was a totally neglected country where little had been able to grow. The countryside’s appearance evoked associations with a greater, all-embracing stagnation. Many West Germans experienced the same when they visited the former GDR for the first time: “Just like in the Forties and Fifties!” they often called it.31 And it was obvious they were not just referring to the cobbled streets and crumbling houses. This remark summed up their association with the country’s social, cultural and mental stagnation – left behind, undeveloped, conservative, ridiculous and less. Dutch historian Willem Melching uses a poignant example to illustrate his conclusion that in the eyes of West Germans, the lives of East Germans had failed because their state had failed: “This feeling was eloquently described by the East German writer Sparschuh, whose novel…tells of a westerner (‘Wessi’) drawing the following conclusions: ‘You didn’t have a life there!…The elections weren’t real elections, the streets weren’t streets. Even the cars weren’t cars.’32

In the eyes of westerners, a direct line can be traced from the outward appearance of the GDR, via the reprehensible political system, to the deplorable (and failed) existence said to have been developed there. Due to these dominant associations, East Germans’ existence threatens to be recorded as a pitiful tale of dismal, dilapidated houses and plastic egg-cups.

The main reason why people reacted so defensively to my querying their material surroundings now and in the past was that to East Germans’ ears, such questions were by definition neither innocent nor inquiring but indicative of a general condemnation of their past. It confirmed their suspicions of feelings of satisfaction on the part of West Germans; satisfaction that East Germans’ existence was finally exposed in the crumbling remains after 1989. If a westerner asked about East German egg-cups, state palaces or heaps of furniture on pavements, an East German would interpret this question as: Can’t you see that your lives are a mess? You think so too, don’t you? Don’t deny it, because as soon as you can, you will put your past on the pavement as well. We always knew it; the GDR was ugly, broke and rotten. And you are just as small and pitiable as your past. “You were psychologically pressed together, just like far too narrow beds.”33
This is the image that East Germans defended *en masse*: some by keeping quiet, most by stressing again and again that their past should be viewed in a different light: more differentiated, less general and judgmental, and with more understanding and frankness. “The past was not all that bad!” was the saying or – in a somewhat jaded tone: “It is all much more differentiated.” The weariness and frustration were not so much due to the negative attitude towards aspects of East Germany’s former material consumption (for this criticism was mostly underlined by East Germans), but more to the implied criticism of the past in general.

For many East Germans, although they complained a great deal about the material conditions of East German life, these conditions had also brought about the well-known warmth and community spirit which were a feature of East German society. “In the old days you felt closer to people,” said Heinz, a somewhat alternative young man. And he gave me an example of what he meant. “Hardly anybody had a car, and if for example we went to a concert and there were no trains going back, we just spent the night at each other’s houses. Now we all go home in our own cars, but we miss the togetherness.” Another youth, Heiko, told a similar story: “In the past we didn’t have much, and there wasn’t much to do. So you had to make the best of it. Everyone did that, but at least you had each other, and you were happy to be together. Partly born out of necessity, there was more of a community spirit between people.” Every time, when listening to their stories of how they made a virtue out of necessity, I tended to hear just the necessity, whereas they tried to bring across the virtues. The same happened when Claudia, a student at Rudolstadt’s secondary school, tried to explain why especially the past’s hardships sometimes had such positive results:

All those Wessis say that everything about the past was bad, but that’s not right. In the old days, people were closer to each other. For instance in the classroom. If the teacher happened to make a critical comment about Honecker, we were highly impressed: ‘For him to say that! He must really trust us to tell us that!’ That created a bond, and I am certain that no one ever revealed any of that. But now? Now everyone only thinks about themselves.

Here again my cynicism tended to prevail (because how could she be so sure no one had ever reported some of this conversation), but the anecdote is significant. It demonstrates that Claudia was not denying or disguising the dictatorial circumstances, nor did she deny or tone down the influence of the state. On the contrary: it was in fact the dictatorial circumstances and omnipresence of the state – the two aspects which underpinned the west’s disapproval of dictatorial society – which in
her account attributed to the community spirit and warmth. There was a feeling of community because we couldn't say much. There was warmth because we couldn't do much.

Although I kept getting the impression from listening to these stories that life under a dictatorial form of government was uncommunicative, a number of aspects seemed to be responsible for the fact that the East German dictatorship was experienced so differently from what outsiders imagined. Anticipating the description and analysis I will present below: they had learned to tolerate the power of the state in a fundamentally different way than outsiders could envisage.

Irony, a Caring State, and the Nische

Many people I spoke to reminded me that East Germany reality, as enforced on paper, was not something I should take too seriously. At the time of the GDR there were of course rules and regulations for everything. People knew them and had to abide by them. That is to say: for show. But in between all that, a great deal was possible. “And it was like a game, learning how to live with the rules and the bans,” as Sigrid (a high-ranking local government official in the cultural department) and Jörg (youth worker), explained:

Naturally, the game was a serious one, and sometimes it was played so hard that it was no longer funny, but in fact everyone knew that there was a game going on between the state and the people. ‘We are not allowed to say this, but we will say it anyway, and although we know you understand exactly what we are saying, you pretend it is not true, and we act as if we believe that.’

The party, for instance, dictated what was deemed correct socialist literature and what was not, and it was able to actually impose and maintain these rules by censorship. However, many people explained to me that this actually resulted in writers doing their utmost best to slightly disguise things which did not conform. As a side-effect of censorship, people learned how to write and read between the lines. Consequently, literature was one of the mainstays in many East Germans’ daily lives. And as soon as a certain author’s latest book was published, it was sold out in no time. Everyone wanted to read it so that they could discuss it together: What has he been saying now, did you see that ‘they’ have not even noticed his implicit criticism of... Although a negative fact in itself, the Romanian philosopher and literary critic Andrei Plesu showed that “the existence of censorship led to the
elaboration of ingenious subtexts, allusions, and camouflage, techniques practiced with great virtuosity by writers and assimilated promptly by the mass of readers.”

The same was true in the GDR, where many people considered it a sport to find out what had actually been said. Thanks to the close relationship between certain writers and their readership, the role of literature in East Germans’ public lives was comparable to the significance of religion or psychotherapy elsewhere. And the same applied to the theatre.

People needed to camouflage what they were saying, yet they at the same time wanted to call things by their name, and this gave rise to a huge number of jokes in the GDR. Sigrid remembered:

It was a different language: jokes were being told all the time, so that people could at least explain things to each other. Obviously, this language had been prompted by necessity because officially so much could not be said, but meanwhile it was really good. When the Wende came about, the entire culture of telling jokes disappeared at once, and there is nothing left. Now and again someone tells a joke, but somehow it doesn’t work. Because nowadays you can say whatever you want, nothing has to be disguised. And what is funny about saying that Kohl is an Arschloch [a rot-ter]?

East Germans’ habit of making jokes about the political and ideological environment in which they were forced to live is aptly described by the term used by a German journalist: “conspiratorial irony.” This term conjures up Dutch sociologist Wim Wertheim’s work on forms of resistance amongst repressed groups, in which he frequently used the term counterpoints. American anthropologist James Scott provided the following examples of counterpoints: “Such deviant values may take the form of myths, jokes, songs, linguistic usage, or religion.”

Apart from explaining the critically ironic role of jokes, Sigrid’s comments also showed that there was a huge difference in the GDR between reality as it appeared on the surface and the ironic, somewhat long-suffering way people dealt with it. People were used to not taking seriously the authorized reality that was decreed and outlined by politics. They read between the lines and laughed about it together, thereby endorsing that it was extremely questionable whether the state “that never stop[ped] talking” was ever really heard. In domestic circles people of course laughed more freely and heartily about the state than in public, but in the public arena, irony had a place as well. There, people laughed – albeit carefully and sneakily – at the exhilarating, positive phrases which dominated public life. It is a well-known way to ridicule the almighty powers of the state, by “separating words
or phrases from their conventional meanings and using them in quite another sense. People do conform, but through their ironic stance, they nevertheless maintain “a kind of inner autonomy, holding off the ceremonial order by the very act of upholding it.”

Although prompted by necessity, such “quasi konspirativen Kommunikationsformen [mock, conspiring forms of communication]” first of all lightened people’s lives because the oppression and loss of freedom forced on them by the state was softened a little bit. Second, these forms of irony also united people in their semi-conspiring attitude towards the mighty state which was able to exert such an extreme influence on their daily lives. By ridiculing the coercive conditions they had to live in, East Germans were mentally toning down part of the social and material limitations inflicted on them. Moreover, the fact that ‘everyone’ laughed and made jokes about the same things created a kind of mutual understanding, unity and equality among people.

Looking back on things in this light, I began to understand that while I only took certain phenomena to be characteristic of the state’s coercive force, Claudia and so many others were actually trying to convey the opposite: it was precisely the dictatorial circumstances that had created a form of mutual belonging.

Earlier I showed that even the allotments in the GDR were wrapped up in political phrases. The people who were so pleased to have a garden assured me that they were very ordinary gardens where you went on your day off, mostly in order not to be involved with anything. In the beginning there was some resistance from the government against these petty bourgeoisie tendencies, as the director of the Allotment Association explained. And naturally the state was against people retreating from public life in that way. But when it finally became clear that there was nothing they could do, the allotments were tolerated, and in exchange the association paid lip service to the state. Thus, the director weaved the well-known hollow phrases into his speeches. “But,” he told me, “meanwhile we withdrew to our gardens, where we produced the honey and fruit which the state had no other means of producing and which we could sell for a great deal of money (to state trade organizations, mv). But the plots had nothing whatsoever to do with politics: it was simply enjoyable and relaxing, and the party knew that.” When I re-read the minutes of the allotment association’s meetings, a completely different type of interaction between citizen and state emerged than the coercive, dictatorial relationship I had initially recognized.

For instance I read one report in which – after the obligatory political and ideological statements – a request was made to obtain more beehives. It was recorded that things could not continue as they were. More and more honey was being
produced and inevitably from time to time beehives got broken. Besides, some hives were too old. These discarded hives were not being replaced, even though it was well known that the production of honey was of such importance to the population.

Reading this report, I came to realize that the omnipresence of the state had not only been coercive and threatening, but also very quotidian and even caring: the problems involved in acquiring new beehives (in my view, relatively minor details in the private life of a beekeeper) were brought to the attention of the district councilors by the chairman of the allotment association. Because beekeeping was encapsulated in the political-ideological framework of the state, like everything else in the GDR, it had become a matter of social relevance and was imperative for the population’s provisioning. It was therefore also the responsibility of the state to provide the material prerequisites. As the state tried to invade every aspect of people’s existence, its power was not just a component of their daily lives, but caring for people’s daily needs had also become a necessary task. Citizens put up with the invading powers, and the arising contact worked both ways. This meant that the powers were partly responsible for resolving people’s everyday problems, such as the material prerequisites to continue with their hobbies.

The omnipotence of the state, which at first I only saw as threatening, suddenly seemed mundane in a touching kind of way. A similar impression struck me on re-reading someone’s personal file. Beforehand, I had really only considered the phenomenon of an official file in relation to the omnipotence of the East German state, but reading it a second time made it look more like a school report from a concerned teacher than dictatorial power reflected in writing.

Coll. L. always does his best to further qualify himself in order to be in complete control of the tasks for which he is responsible. He carries out his duties conscientiously...his appearance is always positive... Despite coll. L.’s positive qualities as supervisor and his good achievements, there is room for improvement. He must demonstrate more and greater effort in adjusting to future tasks, and seek possibilities and improvements as well as put forward suggestions as to how additional tasks can best be incorporated in the organization. He should not be satisfied with the current state of his department... Coll. L. has been promised support in this area from the social representatives.46

The text gave new meaning to the term father state, for precisely thanks to its authoritative power, it acquired something intimate.47
In the GDR, the (language of the) state's power was everywhere. It permeated existence in every feasible way, and daily life was imbued with its ideological flavouring. If I asked people about it, they said that they were used to looking and reading past the language in order to find the tangible and necessary information. “We didn't read the paper,” Claudia said, “only the weather forecasts and news that was directly relevant to Rudolstadt. That's what everyone did.” Because everyone glossed over the same words in the knowledge that everyone had to live by and with these words, a community of people existed who knew that the deceiving, though originally well intended language formed the structure of their existence: no one could escape, everyone simply had to live with it.

“In those days we were all in the same boat.” People used this sentence to convey the fact that everyone being in the same situation led to a feeling of security, calm and a certain warmth. For a long time I found this a particularly sad expression, for it told me that people had found consolation in a bad situation because it was experienced by all. It took a while before I realized that their words signified something totally different. Above all, they expressed a feeling that had nothing to do with the values dominating my (western) frame of reference. The expression refers to the experience that what we tend to call misery is simply a fact, and no matter what you think about it, it is a mutually experienced fate.

The phrase about the same boat was meant to show that, irrespective of the value one attributed to it, the omnipotent language of power was a decisive factor in East Germans' existence. The state's rhetoric was “the great enframer of [their] lives.” Affecting everyone to the same extent, the daily recurring language soaked in ideology was one of the main binding factors in East Germans' lives. A comparable conclusion is drawn by American political scientist Lisa Wedeen with regard to the symbolic language of power in Syria:

Every Syrian…is fluent in this symbolic language, if only because all are subjected to a constant barrage of its rhetorical iterations. To be Syrian means, in part, to be able to operate, either rebelliously…or obediently…within the universe of the official rhetoric. This generalized familiarity with the regime's language and iconography operates to integrate Syrians, because every citizen in every location of the political landscape, from those who admire Asad's political savvy, to those who despise him, have been required to share in this experience of Asad's rule.

In analyzing the relationship between the inhabitants and authoritarian states in Africa, Cameroonian political scientist Achille Mbembe used a similar expression when describing that both inhabited “the same living space.” He refers to
the same involuntary form of unity as expressed by my interviewees – one that is brought about by people inhabiting the same material (the land) and ideational (the language of power) structure. When talking about the same boat, people were not so much alluding to the fact that they could not leave the country, but to the simple fact that everyone had to make the best of it within the same, clearly circumscribed space.54 That was the fundament of what some have called East Germans’ “symbiosis born of necessity.”55

The relatively positive way East Germans looked back on their past appeared to be closely bound with the fact that the dictatorial state manifested itself more ambiguously in their daily lives than I would have thought possible. Remarkably, it was precisely the totalitarian characteristics of the power of the state which were partly responsible for the neutral-positive way they were depicted retrospectively. Through a complex, layered, bureaucratic system, the state asserted its powers over every aspect of life, and although this meant that there was scarcely a place to be found which the state could not access, it presented itself in rather trivial ways. The state was, for example, the neighbor who continued to cajole you to be more committed. Or it was the person who compiled the beekeepers’ annual report – incorporating a number of obligatory sentences that made people chuckle together. Precisely due to the fact that the power of the state had penetrated society so deeply, its omnipotence, seen to be extremely threatening from the outside, was largely neutralized. Its very omnipresence was the reason why people were able to negotiate with the state in so many situations, it looked after them, and they so often laughed about it together – albeit sneakily.

What struck me most about peoples’ stories were the innocent, amusing and caring features. Although the more threatening and liberty-depriving characteristics of the East German powers were not named as such, they were of course implicitly present in the stories I referred to. The story told by Claudia, the school pupil, about the ‘dissident’ comments of her teacher is the most obvious example. The reason Claudia and her classmates had a bond of trust with their teacher was because he said something critical even though this was not allowed. This ‘not allowed’ only featured implicitly in the stories East Germans told me about their former society. In the following chapter I will go into more detail about what in my opinion has been omitted and why. For the remainder of this chapter, I will concentrate on the mechanisms that ensured the state’s liberty-depriving characteristics remained invisible – to a certain extent.

The story Reiner (director of one of Rudolstadt’s main cultural institution) told me about his personal life in de GDR offers a good start: He had become a party member out of idealism, because he was critically involved with the society he
happened to live in. He hoped that if many more people would dedicate themselves to it, East German reality could perhaps be brought more in line with socialist ideals in the future. Finally, however, so little was left of his initial enthusiasm and dedication that he ended up just trying — as he put it — “to survive as a kind of jester.” Yet he remained a party member. Partly because he was rather lazy — as he himself described it — but also because he always cherished the hope that someday things here would change for the better...And that hope was also fed, he recalled.

There always were these enthralling remarks, like ‘Mensch, wir brauchen dich! Wir brauchen Leute so wie dich, die einfach mit ein kritisches Selbstverständnis an die Sachen ’ran gehen [Hey folks, come on, we need you! We need people like you who critically help things to progress].’ And of course, the ideal of a classless society, as it was so cleverly put, with equal rights for all…well, who would not identify with that?!

Still, he did not become politically active again until after the Wende. At the time of the GDR, he merely sat out his party membership. Fortunately, he went on to tell me, he was surrounded by a group of people at work who mostly shared the same attitudes, and who got on well together. For him, his work was really a sort of Nische; an island to which he and his colleagues could withdraw together: “there we shut ourselves off from the outside world, which we tried to keep out as much as possible. Many people had their own Nische, their own island to which they withdrew: there was always a group within which people felt as one.” Within the Nischen, there was no room for party attire, for that was where real life took place.

His story illustrates three elements which are typical of the complex relationship between the citizens and the power of the state in the GDR, two of which have already been discussed. First of all, Reiner’s story shows that his relationship towards the power of the state was quite ambiguous. His attitude contained elements of idealism, disappointment, irony, and opportunism in equal measures. Ultimately, he saw himself as a jester – a term which not only sounds opportunistic but also mocking, so typical of the attitude many East Germans adopted towards the state. Second, his story also demonstrates how the power of the state was intertwined with his personal life in an entirely imperceptible way. Although he suffered from political pressure in his daily life, it was in the form of an acquaintance reproaching him for his lack of political commitment, encouraging him to show his face more often. In Reiner’s retrospective view, the state’s pressure was hardly experienced as threatening or oppressive. This much we know.

What is new in Reiner’s story is the separation between public and private, between the public arena and the Nische to which people retreated together. Besides
personalizing the state and ironically distancing themselves from it, this was the third way East Germans managed to avoid the dictatorial pressure confronting them.

Separating the public domain from private life was characteristic for life in the GDR. It was prompted by the need for honesty. For however nice it was to sneak a laugh together at the lies which dominated the public domain, the cleft between fine words and visible reality was such a characterizing feature of everyday life in the GDR that people felt urged to deal with it in a less ritualized manner. Because true openness was not possible in public, people confined the expression of personal opinions to their private circles. East Germans’ existence was thus split; there was the public domain, where the lies governed that everyone laughed about together, and there was the private domain, where real life prevailed.

The Nische was a prominent feature of East Germans’ existence.56 For not only the factory worker, the taxi-driver, and the critical artist, but also the party secretary, the head of the communal Handel und Versorgung [trade and maintenance] department, and the judge wanted to withdraw with like-minded people at the weekend, after work or even at work. Even loyal party members wanted to remove their public face when in private, so that – in their own Nische – they could be really honest. Some people's Nische might have been a group of colleagues, for another it was a group of friends.

From an early age on, people thus learned to present themselves differently in different situations. On the one side there was the private sphere where people generally trusted each other, and where in principle everything could be said.57 Then there was the public sphere, characterized by a massive gap between fine words and everyday reality, managed by people one usually knew, and joined by everyone who was able and willing to (re)produce the half-truths which were subsequently ridiculed by everyone in public, but not too loudly.

Obviously, people knew that a third domain existed alongside this, populated by “them up there.” It was not known what exactly went on there, and nobody wanted to have anything to do with it. That was the place where the fine words originated (and yes, other things as well, but it was better to keep this in brackets), and it was better to stay as far away from there as possible. Some people were affected – like for instance Karl D., whom I met while he was working in the council’s youth welfare and culture department.

I really wanted to study, but that was not possible because I was not a party member. Then I considered joining the party, but decided against this. Later, when it became more and more obvious to me how much was
wrong in the GDR, I did become a member. I thought: if that is where the power is, and I feel that things should change, then that is where I ought to be. That is why I became a member. After a while, however, I loathed it more and more. It began to dawn on me that the power did not lie with the party at all, but with a little, unknown, higher-ranked group, who in fact had the whole of society in their pocket. That sickened me, and so I left. The official statement was that I had been thrown out of the party, because obviously no one left the party of their own accord. That was just not possible. Shortly afterwards, a rumor circulated at work that one of our colleagues had been spying for the west. As time went by, it was made known that I was the one. Then I was really afraid. I even considered leaving the country.

A rumor, no more than that. But the underlying threat alone was enough to make Karl consider leaving the country. According to him, it was a little handful of high-ranked people who had real power – threatening power. Most people had nothing to do with them, so they could simply carry on as if that handful did not exist and as if the state was mainly an encouraging neighbor. At the local level, power had such an everyday, accessible, and sometimes even caring face that it was not difficult to join in. In the ensuing solidarity, people laughed together, they read between the lines, and if they felt the need for real frankness, they withdrew into the Nische. In this way most people managed to banish the real power beyond the margins of existence (and consciousness). This led to “people feeling perfectly free and autonomous in their own little world and treating the domain of power as somewhere beyond the private sphere.”

Thus, although the omnipresent state might give the impression of keeping people small, most people did not experience it that way. The society that had evolved in the GDR was primarily remembered as one of warmth and solidarity. When people could not avoid recognizing another type of power than the friendly lady next door, this was demystified and banished to a faraway domain inhabited by the unknown category of them up there.

The warmth and trust that existed in the Nischen and the community spirit were typical features of life in the GDR, and they are what people claim to miss since the Wende. The more or less secretive nature of these privation communities, the slightly subversive grumbling and laughing together and helping one another gave them something extra. People were united because they shared so much: they lived in the same area within the Wall, they lived with the same language of power and developed a commonly shared ironic attitude. If East Germans
tried to explain positive feelings about their former existence, the western criticism was devastating. In West German eyes, the GDR was barely a footnote in German history and even a criminal footnote at that, so who would want to be identified with such a footnote?

Many westerners’ experience of the GDR’s outward appearance and material deterioration seems to have been the staunchest – because visible – reason for the country’s negative image in general. Although this explains the unenthusiastic reactions to my questions on the subject, it is remarkable that East Germans’ only outspoken criticism of their past was the material situation in their country (as will be discussed in chapter seven). This was a sore topic that I was not allowed to ask or talk about. Somewhat overstated, one could therefore say that I was not allowed to say what they also felt. This illustrates that when talking to me about their past, they were making a selection.

In this chapter, I have concentrated on the positive aspects of the relationship between the East German state and the population, in which irony played a significant role. As the theoretical literature on jokes in relation to the social order illustrates, however, jokes can always be interpreted in two contrasting ways. They can indeed be seen as a form of moral resistance or criticism against the existing social order. But one can also allege that such a strict ritualized form does not pose any threat whatsoever. As an “institutionalized and harmless form of symbolic protest,” the jester was allowed to joke about the royal court. Rather than being a threat towards the existing social order, his jokes merely consolidated it.

Resisting or accepting the existing social order? However imprecise this may sound, in my opinion it was both. I will return to this subject in the conclusion. The simple fact, though, that hardly any criticism was accepted about their past and that so many East Germans presented it in such unequivocally neutral and positive tones clearly indicates that the complexity of East Germany’s past was not only glossed over by western scholars, but also by East Germans themselves.