Designing One Nation

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Conclusion

*The Ties That Never Broke*

By the late 1980s, the dynamics of German-German economic competition in the realm of living standards had created an unsustainable situation for the GDR. The high costs of the promised socialist consumer society under Honecker’s Unity of Economic and Social Policy program had incurred mounting debts, a strategy that relied on short-term borrowing from the West to patch holes in domestic consumer good production. This entanglement with the Federal Republic opened up the possibility of rethinking the German-German relationship. In early winter of 1989, East German demonstrators changed their chant from “We are the people” to “We are one people.” What turned a gentle revolution, or an insistence on long-overdue reforms within socialism, to a clear avowal for German unity that December? The question is particularly important because it became quite quickly evident that such a course of action would mean the disappearance of the GDR as a state and, with it, the end of the socialist experiment on German soil.

Much of the historical discussion addressing this question has centered on the economic performance of the GDR and the consumer history of its population’s privations. What has been less analyzed is the courage East Germans displayed in turning the very understandable request for reform of an oppressive state system, one that spied on its own citizens, decisively hindered their mobility, infringed on their civil rights, and was unable to deliver on its consumer promises, into a complete rejection of that state and the social security it provided. East Germans voluntarily left behind the safety net of the GDR, where the “welfare dictatorship” protected them against poverty, offered high social wages, and heavily subsidized consumer goods that qualified as a “need.”¹ This study suggests that, long before 1989, the two Germanys came to operate under one economic culture marked by interdependencies and shared expectations, which made the transition from reform to unity plausible and feasible in German minds. Moreover, the dynamics that four decades of intra-German trade had created also put West German politicians in a position to shape East Germany’s future. For all intents
and purposes, the Federal Republic had co-financed the economic reforms in the East, supporting Honecker’s Unity of Economic and Social Policy via generous Swing credits in the intra-German trade. When the new GDR head of government Hans Modrow asked West German chancellor Helmut Kohl for a DM 15 billion solidarity payment to avoid state bankruptcy during the tumultuous days in late 1989, Kohl contemplated helping at first, yet withdrew this commitment in January 1990. With this the Federal Republic finally pulled the plug on an economic Deutschlandpolitik that had propped up the East German regime. It also foreclosed any chance for survival of a reformed GDR, as financial solidarity was now closely linked to political unity.

Across four decades of Deutschlandpolitik the Federal Republic consistently supported intra-German trade, not least by providing credit to the GDR. Yet the more important point is that it upheld the line that economic exchanges did not imply de facto political recognition. The government minimized regulation of the economic contacts with the GDR but rather let the private sector deal directly with the economic structures in the East. In this way, the political question remained separate from private economic interests in the West, and this depoliticization decoupled intra-German trade from party politics to some extent. Of course, one must not forget the many heated debates among and between CDU and SPD over Ostpolitik in its different iterations ranging from Adenauer’s policy of strength to Brandt’s policy of compromise. The economic principles on which German-German trade relations were built, namely the 1951 Berlin Agreement and the 1958 Protocol on Intra-German Trade, spanned, however, both major parties’ periods in government. Hence, there was a basic political consensus on this kind of cooperation across the forty years of German division, broadly supported by the West German population, who continued to feel a bond with their socialist neighbors to a certain degree.

Western modes of rapprochement eventually engaged people in the GDR on all levels, ranging from politicians to company managers to workers who did contractual work for the West. Meanwhile, the GDR utilized West German interest in a sustainable relationship via intra-German trade to increase exports and to yield more foreign currency. In order to establish itself and survive in an international market, the East German production aesthetic converged with western ones. With the continuous interconnection of the two national economies, and the relatively high level of living standards in the GDR that western credits enabled, East and West Germans, knowingly or not, worked on designing one nation. These ties facilitated making the step from reforming communism to joining the capitalist system.
With the conceptual framework of the economic culture approach it is possible to explore the intricate nature of the German Cold War in the realm of the economy, looking at possibilities, rather than solely at outcomes, and the opportunities and limitations that designers faced in the implementation of aesthetic discourse in the production and consumption processes. In the early reconstruction years, elites focused on pronounced national aesthetics for political rather than social purposes. Alongside the cultural identification with the West, such aesthetics expressed Adenauer’s policy of strength on the German Question, based on the logic that Westbindung, rearmament, and NATO membership would eventually bring about German unification. In reaction to Bonn’s position, the GDR followed a policy of demarcation from the West by showing allegiance to the Eastern Bloc, both ideologically and culturally. However, when one examines design discourse beyond initial bloc alliances, it becomes evident that the ideologically loaded Cold War climate limited the elite’s ability to inscribe material culture with a spirit of social reform. These developments contributed to an emerging economic culture that was profoundly outward looking, while deeply imbedding production ethics that would come to be known as the “made in Germany” brand: durability, functionality, material thrift, and modern aesthetics.

Looking at values and norms inscribed in product culture, the economic culture approach levels the playing field for the GDR, which from the outset was disadvantaged in its economic competition with the Federal Republic. The transfer of goods across the border shaped eastern and western understandings of what it meant to be a modern industrial nation. The economy served as a field for competition until these adversaries developed a shared language of progress and security, enabling trade contacts and mutual projects that reproduced interconnections on the institutional and the personal level. The two German states, located geographically at the heart of the confrontation between Eastern and Western ideologies, created a political space that magnified the precariousness of the Cold War in Europe. At the same time, this space also amplified the moments of rapprochement in later decades that unfolded on a global scale in the East-West conflict: economic cooperation, political détente, and peaceful coexistence. Bringing these areas of cooperation into focus enables an appreciation of the continuous ties between the FRG and GDR that opened up a sustainable dialogue and maintained a certain degree of mutual understanding throughout the Cold War.

Significantly, what this process produced were not two different kinds of modernity, a socialist and a capitalist one, but one German conservative modernity
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based on a shared value system in the production and consumption processes, a
pan-German economic culture that emerged due to the diplomatic necessities
and economic practicalities of the German Cold War. It developed between the
extremes of fast-paced American production cycles, creating demand by bring-
ing the next big thing to the market, and the static structures of the Soviet-style
centrally planned economy that supplanted market mechanisms with state in-
terests. Industrial design, which had for so long served as a field for Cold War
competition, became an arena in which to mediate inter-German relations. The
pan-German economic culture developed a vocabulary of transparency, human-
ity, and morality that shaped German efforts for peace in Europe in the 1980s.

When the superpowers ended global détente and entered the Second Cold War
by stationing new nuclear missiles in Europe, the two German states took the
opportunity to define their own positions.

This outcome was not clear from the beginning. From the 1950s to the build-
ing of the Berlin Wall in 1961 was a time of pronounced demarcation and adver-
sarial relations from both sides. Yet this period of delineation proved to be only
a prelude to the détente of the 1970s. Many of the early policies that facilitated
East-West contacts, such as the Berlin Agreement and the EEC Protocol on
Intra-German Trade, in fact papered over major cracks. Contemporaries feared
that European integration and German unity were necessarily opposed to ea-
Each other, and it was therefore imperative to develop a European economic foreign
policy that achieved maximum flexibility in the German Question. Therefore
a “natural” alignment of West German national interests and European inte-
gration during the Cold War, which current debates often assume, cannot be
claimed. Similarly, Germany’s change from reflexive multilateralism, expressed
in Germany as a reliable partner of the Western alliance with a normative com-
mitment to European integration, to a more instrumentalized multilateralism
in the service of post-reunification national interest has been deemed a new phe-
nomenon. The opposite was in fact the case; postwar Germany has always fol-
lowed a national interest–guided policy in Europe. This conclusion is supported
by the way in which the Federal Republic handled the question of intra-German
trade within the EEC.

It was this early foundation on which a thriving economic and even cultural
exchange across the inner-German border were built. The decisive later decades,
in which GDR decline became palpable on an everyday level, show how delin-
eation and demarcation policies were overcome on political, economic, and per-
sonal levels. Additionally, the examination of the 1970s and 1980s introduces
the relational aspect of trade with the West into East German efforts to build a
sustainable vision of GDR modernity, which indicates where propaganda ended and economic reality set in. Pragmatism not only trumped ideological dogma, but also revealed the GDR’s underlying economic-cultural values and aspirations for a place among modern industrial nations, a goal the Federal Republic shared. By creating direct contact between the populations of East and West Germany with a gradual decrease in state involvement, which came to a head with the opening of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, the German Question moved beyond the reach of the GDR government and eventually co-opted even the staunchest critics among the Allies into a plan for a unified German future.

Despite their systemic differences, the FRG and GDR co-created an economic culture in which designer, producers, retailers, and consumers increasingly agreed on the same values and norms that governed economic interaction and inspired shared ideas of modern living standards. It was conservative not just in form, but also in content. Two Germanys developed large welfare states to democratize industrialization under the auspices of both capitalism and socialism. The fact that the Federal Republic had such a security net in place, to some extent thanks to the pressures exerted by the socialist alternative across the border, enabled a rather smooth reunification, where East Germans were successfully integrated in the pension insurance scheme and unemployment benefits, even at high costs and with enormous effort on the part of the German taxpayers. Of course, there is much evidence that suggests that the realities of the market quickly disillusioned enthusiastic East Germans; it took time to adjust to the level of personal initiative needed to succeed in the labor market or to navigate the commodified insurance sector. Industrial output in the neue Bundesländer contracted by 60 percent in the first two years following unification. Many hard lessons were learned. A term was dubbed for the long-term unemployed and those in the low-income groups in Eastern Germany: Einheitsverlierer, literally losers of unification. This experience of displacement has given rise to Ostalgie, nostalgia for the East German past, a much-debated phenomenon, especially in the realm of consumer goods.

Indeed, the country’s collapse immediately endangered its material culture. Not only did GDR industrial production slow down, but, once the border was open, the novelty of the western product culture also attracted GDR citizens who could cross the border unhindered. East German interior design was quickly replaced with western furniture and domestic appliances. Wolfgang Becker’s film Good Bye Lenin approaches the topic from a tragic-comical perspective. To shelter his fragile mother from the fatal shock after a long coma, a young man re-creates a socialist lifestyle to keep her from learning that her
beloved GDR was about to disappear. The ruse quickly turns into a struggle because East German food products already begin to disappear from store shelves. Several scenes show sidewalks filled with discarded furniture that neighbors who moved to the West left behind or those who stayed traded for western items. Ikea posters advertise affordable storage furniture, some of which ironically was produced in the GDR.9

Entertaining as this film is, it blends reality with fiction not just through its use of archival footage. A sense of looming loss set in as soon as the first free East German elections in March 1990 paved the road to reunification. AiF employees and affiliates of the institute’s design product collection *Sammlung industrielle Gestaltung* went on a last shopping spree across East Berlin in the spring of 1990.10 The approaching monetary union of 1 July jeopardized the future of thousands of East German companies. Outdated machinery and low technical standards clearly disadvantaged them on the capitalist market. With the arrival of the D-Mark their products became more expensive, and when European socialism collapsed the following year, the COMECON market broke away as well. Privatization of national industries kept many workers in limbo until mostly western investors bought a company, only to sell it for parts or restructure it for greater profitability after years of Treuhand trusteeship.11

The western Werkbund noted as well that reunification had strained East German product culture and made an effort to engage with it. The design show *From Bauhaus to Bitterfeld: 41 Years of GDR Design* of December 1990 and the accompanying exhibition catalog aimed to address “the difficulties of transitioning from one social order to another” and to document “the work done to avoid loss of identity.”12 Nonetheless, in the catalog West German design historian Gert Selle observed that “the people have not only had their national state supplanted by a foreign state but also seem to have lost the world of their experienced material and immaterial cultures. Objects that once filled the stage of daily ritual as familiar props and that, in their meager charm, could remind one of the dead or dying culture, now age at a highly accelerated rate.”13 Among the catalog’s contributors were a number of East German industrial designers, art historians, architects, and former AiF employees who joined in this requiem for GDR product culture. To explain the fast depreciation, they quickly pointed to the country’s inability to reform economically, the scarcity of resources, and empty ideological discourse about certain design styles and products. These voices solidified the picture of a bygone era already in the process of being historicized. The usage of black-and-white photography in the catalog further underpinned this obsolescence.
But it was not only the populations’ excitement for western consumer goods, a lack of sentimentality among East German professionals, or a lack of awareness on the part of western investors that sidelined GDR material culture and industrial design after 1990. Political circumstances necessitated an immediate confrontation of dictatorial power structures in the former GDR. Infiltration of institutions and organizations by informants especially came to the forefront of discussion when the Stasi files were declassified in 1992. Two organizations that had represented industrial design interests, the Association of Artists in the Applied Arts (Verband Bildender Künstler, VBK) and the AiF, were questioned about the nature of their support for the SED regime. Former VBK president Clauss Dietel defended the association but claimed to speak for many GDR industrial designers when he criticized the AiF’s style diktat and ideologization of aesthetics. These comments were made in an interview with RfF magazine Design Report in response to the question “What remains of GDR design?” It thus seems that what remained was a politically implicated profession and its products, which had given shape to the goals of German socialism, but had no place in the newly reunified Germany because of the complexity of this past association.

Thirty years after the fall of the Wall, a united Germany has developed not only domestic stability but also leadership in Europe and international diplomacy. As one of the worldwide leading export nations, Germany receives international acknowledgment for its economic policies and contributions to European integration and peace. Here the experience of the economic foreign policy strategy vis-à-vis the GDR seems to inform Germany’s current position as a “reluctant hegemon” in Europe and its continued skepticism toward military leadership. The checkbook diplomacy of the Cold War era has set the tone for a foreign policy that uses economic cooperation as a means for conflict resolution and a path toward increasing political opponents’ receptiveness for German interests.

Trade policy, it has been argued here, provided similar incentives for modernization in East and West and forged conditions conducive to deepened cultural relations, which in turn rekindled notions of a pan-German identity. Design, taste, and consumption were at the center of this postwar identity discourse in both parts of Germany. These realms help to explain why German unity came about without further great social upheavals or political disruptions in the fall of 1990. Shared visions of economic prowess, cultural belonging, and Germany taking its place among modern industrialized nations in a sense paved the way for reunification. Given the challenging process of two different political and
economic systems growing together, it is remarkable that such past negotiations in the field of economic culture have not played a greater role in the current debate over united Germany’s identity, especially because its economic strength continues to decisively shape German political culture and foreign policy. *Designing One Nation* thus proposes that we need to stop thinking about the two Germanys in isolation from each other in order to see how much they still had in common in 1989, after forty years of separation, and how this shared past affects Germany today.