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# Germans 25 years after reunification – How much do they know about the German Democratic Republic and what is their value judgment of the socialist regime?

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we evaluate German residents' level of knowledge and their value judgment, that is, positive or negative, of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Based on a simple random internet survey that asked 100 citizens from the East and 100 citizens from the West to describe life in the former GDR in at least 200 characters, we have found some nuanced results with regard to our two themes: First, our results indicate that the average German citizen has some decent knowledge of the *Alltag* or everyday life in the former East, with older individuals having significantly more knowledge than younger individuals. Second, we discover a clear pattern pertaining to peoples' value judgment of life in communist Germany. Citizens born in the East have more positive memories of their *Alltag* in the GDR than citizens in the West who have not experienced life behind the Wall.

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## 1. Introduction

The Berlin Wall has been breached after nearly three decades keeping East and West Berliners apart. At midnight East Germany's Communist rulers gave permission for gates along the Wall to be opened after hundreds of people converged on crossing points. They surged through cheering and shouting and were met by jubilant West Berliners on the other side. Ecstatic crowds immediately began to clamber on top of the Wall and hack large chunks out of the 28-mile (45-km) barrier (BBC World, 1989).

Citizens in Germany (and elsewhere) remember the fall of the Berlin Wall as the turning point in the Cold War. They memorialize November 9th, 1989 as the culmination of popular unrest in Poland, Hungary and East Germany, the trigger of revolutions in Czechoslovakia and Romania, the spark for the reunification of Germany, and the defining moment for the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Buckley, 2004). However, it is less clear how much and what aspects of the Communist regime German citizens in both East and West Germany remember. Do they have strong memories? Are these recollections positive or negative?

Interested in these questions, we conducted a random online survey of 200 German citizens (100 respondents were selected from the former East Germany and 100 respondents were selected from the former West Germany).<sup>1</sup> In an open format we asked them to describe in at least 200 characters what they remember of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted by the professional survey company Cint between October 22 and 25, 2012.

To decipher the type of factors that determine an individual's amount of knowledge and his or her evaluation of the East German communist regime, we also probed our respondents about their gender, age, education, and birthplace, as well as whether they are German-born citizens. For one, we have found not only that the average German citizen has relatively good knowledge of the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany – *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*) regime, but also that the amount of knowledge residents have depends on an individual's age and, to a lesser degree, his or her education. In addition, our results indicate that a person's birthplace, that is, East or West Germany, strongly influences an individual's attitudes *vis à vis* the regime in the GDR.

This article proceeds as follows: in the next section, we briefly familiarize the reader with the multifaceted nature of the GDR regime. In the following, third part, we highlight the theoretical and empirical importance of this study. Next, we explain the research design and describe our methodology. Second to last, we present the results with the help of descriptive statistics and multivariate regression modeling. Finally, we conclude and provide some avenues for future research.

### 1.1. *The multifaceted life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR)*

The Berlin Wall, the barrier that separated East and West Germany for more than 28 years, became a symbol of oppression after its erection on August 13, 1961 for West-Berliners, West Germans and citizens in NATO countries. Politically, the Wall personified a regime that locked in its citizens to avoid a mass exodus of East-Berliners and GDR residents to the West. It incarnated a regime that spied on its citizens and used the *Schiessbefehl* (firing order policy) to stop its people from escaping (Major, 2010). It embodied one of the most sophisticated secret services in the world with approximately 90,000 paid employees, and up to 170,000 unofficial collaborators (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*) by the end of the 1980s (Pfaff, 2001). The proportion of GDR citizens cooperating with the state security (*Staatssicherheit* or *Stasi*) in official, or unofficial, roles at some point during their lives was estimated at approximately 1 in 6.5 (Grieder, 2007). GDR citizens, who were accused to engage in subversive activities, were subjected to harsh prison stays in one of the agency's many secret institutions (Horster, 2004). In addition, the GDR frequently expelled or "sold" political dissenters to the Federal Republic – between 1963 and 1989, approximately 33,000 prisoners were either deported or ransomed to the West in return for much-needed funding (Pfaff, 2001).

The Wall presented an economic system in distress. An apparent prioritization of industrial production over the production of consumer goods often led to shortages of common household items for East Germans (Landsman, 2005). Although the centrally planned economy sought to produce artificially low prices, this luxury came at the expense of high state subsidies on food (Kandil, 2001). For example, reconstruction after World War II was slower than elsewhere in Europe and the GDR was the last country in Europe to end World War II rationing of goods such as meat, milk, sugar and eggs in 1958 (Landsman, 2005). As in other Eastern Bloc countries, food shortages became a fixture of daily life in the GDR, a theme that is still echoed in popular accounts of life in the state.

Throughout its existence, laborers experienced economic pressure in the German "workers' paradise". For instance, to cope with consumer shortages, SED propaganda always emphasized the necessity of increasing labor output; a goal that should be achieved through the imposition of more work hours (Landsman, 2005). Another characteristic of the GDR regime, the "right" to full employment, was featured in the GDR constitution, and thus the state was obligated to plan, create and subsidize jobs for every citizen (Kandil, 2001). However, despite the attempts at full employment and increased productivity, GDR citizens often received little reward in wages: between 1970 and 1989, the average East German wage grew at a rate of only 2.9 percent, while West German counterparts saw an average increase rate of 6 percent (Kandil, 2001). Aggravating this problem was a government policy providing better wages and provisions to workers in heavy industry, political administration and the intelligentsia over other laborers (Landsman, 2005).

Although in West Germany the economic and political plight of Easterners was often harnessed as election rhetoric, the GDR's citizens did enjoy some everyday benefits such as a strong sense of community in their private and professional surroundings, a relatively advanced health care system and a good education system (Horster, 2004). In fact, there was another less well-known side of the daily life behind the impenetrable border to the West. Citizens of the GDR often led fulfilling personal lives; as part of the SED's socialist ideology, leisure time was considered important to the overall "socialist project" of the state (Johnson, 2008). As Fulbrook (2005) argues, the non-political aspects of life in the Republic played a very important role in the formation of memory in addition to the state's repressive nature. For example, women enjoyed more fulfilling professional lives, with higher rates of inclusion in the workforce than in the 21st century (Rosenfeld, 2004). Although the state's core motive was of course to produce loyal socialist citizens, citizens of the GDR did enjoy a robust and comprehensive education system (Brock, 2005). The state actively encouraged its workers to travel during their free time, albeit only domestically and within Eastern Bloc countries (Kreck, 1998). In the area of sports, especially, East Germans found a sense of community and fun (Johnson, 2008). The state encouraged its citizens' active lifestyles, and often championed their sporting prowess as evidence of socialism's triumph over capitalism (Anderson, 2011).

The two perspectives described above point toward the fact that life in the GDR was multifaceted. On the one hand, the repressive nature of the regime and the lack of basic human rights and freedom, (particularly at the beginning of the regime) occupy a large part of the legacy of the German Democratic Republic. On the other hand, citizens in the GDR frequently enjoyed their communities, had quite a lot of leisure time and were not exposed to the harsh economic environment that characterizes the free market economic system that has triumphed after the fall of communism. If any, which of the two

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