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## **An East German Ethnicity? Understanding the New Division of Unified Germany**

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What has happened to German unity? The euphoria of 1989—during which former Chancellor Willy Brandt exclaimed, “What belongs together now grows together!”—was supposed to pave the way for the restoration of that “natural” unity between East and West German “cousins.” When over 90 percent of East German citizens voted for unification with the West, the path was made clear for this “reuniting” of the German nation. As it turns out, however, the six years following this emotional high point that led to rapid German unification have brought about an unexpected result: East and West German identities are becoming increasingly polarized.

In this article, I attempt to explicate this peculiar phenomenon. Applying the social science literature on ethnicity to this case study, I suggest that East Germans can be characterized as an ethnic group within the unified Germany. This conceptualization is intentionally provocative, but it can be useful in three broad respects: First, it brings into question the primordial definitions of ethnicity that predominate in discussions of former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and the former Soviet Union in which ethnic groups are made out to have essentialist and ancient roots; second, it helps to dispel the myth of a German nation, defined biologically, which follows long and illustrious literary and legal traditions, that achieved political expression in West Germany’s policy of repatriating “ethnic Germans” from abroad and that continues to dominate questions of immigration and dual citizenship today; third, and most important for this analysis, conceiving of East Germans as an ethnic group will provide a better, although by no means complete, understanding of the nature of today’s social and political problems in contemporary Germany.

### **What is Ethnicity?**

As daily newspaper accounts describe ethnic rivalries, ethnic hatred, and, at the extreme, ethnic cleansing throughout the world, “ethnicity” has become a catch-all word, often used carelessly and inaccurately. Although one ethnicity scholar warns that “there is no purely definitional way of

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distinguishing ethnicity from other types of identity,”<sup>1</sup> I will clarify my working definition of ethnicity from the outset. In my five-part definition, I conceive of an ethnic group as: 1) a critical mass of people who identify themselves and are identified by others as constituting a bounded group, 2) united by a common subjective sense of history, culture, values, and often ancestry, 3) with the potential to be politicized, 4) giving its members a unique sense of emotional and/or material security, solidarity, and continuity about their origins and moral worth, 5) in direct opposition to at least one identifiable “other.” But this definition is only a starting point, and certain features of it must be clarified and elaborated.

The first part of this definition begs the pivotal question: What constitutes a “critical mass,” and how is it “bounded”? The answer has to do with the relative *strength* of the identity and the extent to which it can serve as a “catch-all” that captivates *all* people who are associated with it, whether they themselves choose it or not. In other words, a group is more likely to be ethnic if the identity is one from which members cannot easily escape.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the scope of the group encompasses all sub-societal cleavages such as class, gender, sexuality, occupation, interests, etc.

The crucial (and inevitably impressionistic) comparative factor is the degree of salience. Some ethnic identities may be undeveloped or latent, making it easier for members to act outside of them; others become more pronounced, particularly when the stakes are raised politically (or, of course, by war). Some ethnic identities touch only certain categories of people within the group; others affect *all* people who can be ascribed to it. In extreme situations, when ethnic groups strive vigorously for independent statehood, ethnic identity can escalate to *ethnic nationalism*.<sup>3</sup> The difference between an ethnic group and a nation is simply that if an ethnic group has a realistic chance at achieving statehood, recognized both from within and without, then it adds national status to its self-definition.<sup>4</sup> Aside from this clear difference, contingent on the rise of the modern nation-state, the mechanisms of creating and developing ethnicity and nationalism are the same, as will be discussed below.

On the other side of the conceptual boundary surrounding ethnicity, in some cases a particular group identity may not be strong or all-encompassing enough to be ethnic, and would better be described as a *regional* identity. The difference is extremely difficult to pin down, both in the abstract and in specific empirical cases, because there are few accurate tools to measure the “critical mass” of a group. But the main difference is

the degree to which the identity can penetrate all the group's members, such that they see themselves, and others see them, as fundamentally and permanently belonging to that group. As Fredrik Barth writes, "A categorical ascription is an ethnic ascription when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background. To the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for purposes of interaction, they form ethnic groups in this organizational sense."<sup>5</sup> In other words, although *all* identities are constructed, an ethnic identity is more likely to be perceived as primary, in that it is considered a fundamental part of a person's essence and existence, whereas a regional identity tends to be seen as contingent and therefore more easily surmountable.

The second point in my definition starts with the assumption that ethnic groups can best be understood as "imagined communities"<sup>6</sup> that have coagulated over time, as a result of modernization, coercion, and historical contingency. Ethnic groups tend to be bound together by the various myths of origin that make them believe that they have a shared history.<sup>7</sup> Since these feelings of common descent and history are inevitably subjective and constructed, the ties between members of a group include a strongly perceived common culture as well.<sup>8</sup> Anthony Smith writes, "Over and above myths of descent and common memories, *ethnie* are differentiated by one or more elements of 'culture' which both help to bind members together and to separate them from outsiders."<sup>9</sup> Once again, the empirical specification of such a nebulous notion as "common culture" within an ethnic group leads to difficulties in measurement, but it is nevertheless possible to make some headway, as I will attempt to do below in the empirical section on East Germany.<sup>10</sup>

The third element of my definition of ethnicity has to do with the potential for political mobilization. If certain organized political parties or institutions can successfully garner support along "ethnic" lines, the chances of creating a mobilized ethnicity increase. This does not mean that ethnicity is inherently political, but as Joseph Rothschild writes, "ethnicity can be honed to that trenchant political cutting edge because it also fulfills other, nonpolitical, prepolitical, or only incipiently political, human needs—emotional, cultural, moral needs."<sup>11</sup> If, however, ethnicity does become politically mobilized (as has been the case throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union since the collapse of Communism) its potential to polarize a society along ethnic lines increases; this division, in extreme cases, can result in a secessionist movement demanding na-

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tional status. The key factor in such situations is what Barth calls “the agents of change,” or “the new elites: the persons in the less industrialized groups with greater contact and more dependence on the goods and organizations of industrialized societies.”<sup>12</sup> The particular strategies that these political elites choose to pursue are often extremely consequential, as I will show below with the Party for Democratic Socialism (PDS) in the East German case.

The fourth component of my definition has been alluded to several times already: ethnicity can offer people an extremely powerful sense of security, solidarity, and continuity. In a sense, ethnicity speaks both to people’s emotions and to their instrumentality, combining ideal and material interests.<sup>13</sup> But most importantly, it affects people’s sense of *dignity*. As Weber explains it, “the belief in ethnic affinity” is based on “one’s conception of what is correct and proper, and, above all, of what affects the individual’s sense of honor and dignity.” This kind of claim about human dignity is almost impossible to quantify, but it is extremely important in the East German case, as I will address repeatedly below.

The fifth component is perhaps the most important: the flip-side of Weber’s conception of dignity is the judgement of what is deemed *incorrect* and *improper*, which thus creates an exclusive boundary and establishes the possibility for mistrust, hatred, and perhaps even violence. Weber continues,

Usually one group of competitors takes some externally identifiable characteristic of another group of (actual or potential) competitors—race, language, religion, local or social origin, descent, residence, etc.—as a pretext for attempting their exclusion. It does not matter which characteristic is chosen in the individual case: whatever suggests itself most easily is seized upon. Such group action may provoke a corresponding reaction on the part of those against whom it is directed.<sup>14</sup>

Weber points to the interactive and reactive mechanism of this polarization. In other words, one should not underestimate the power that cultural characteristics and stereotypes can have in terms of fostering feelings of exclusion and alienation.

The significance of exclusive categorizations and stereotypes is further elaborated by one of the leading scholars of ethnicity, Donald Horowitz, who makes the distinction between “backward” and “advanced” groups.<sup>15</sup> Horowitz says backward groups “feel at a competitive disadvantage as they

compare their imputed personal qualities with those imputed to advanced groups.”<sup>16</sup> He goes on to describe the most common dimension of opposite stereotype clusters, “passive-uncompetitive versus active-competitive.” The importance of stereotypes in this interactive polarization process will be addressed in the discussion of East Germans below.

Although the literature on ethnicity is inordinately muddy, I have tried to impute the most plausible and tangible conceptualization possible. Most importantly, as has been made clear by the discussion of my five-part definition, ethnicity does not refer to static entities that have existed throughout time; rather, ethnic groups are constantly involved in a process of creation and change, as well as potential disintegration and collapse. As Crawford Young writes, “the definition of groups is in constant flux; any theory of ethnic conflict must incorporate change as a central element.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, an ethnic group can emerge without necessarily having existed in the same form a century before, nor will it necessarily carry on as an ethnic group into the future. Furthermore, all ethnic groups are *not* presumed to be of the same kind, and there is no set pattern for their political development. Given these assumptions, my definition, and the criteria delineated above, we can now turn to a closer look at the German case.

### What is German?

Before turning to the specifics of the argument for an East German ethnicity, we should first raise the question of “German-ness.” What is German? In his famous *Reden an die Deutsche Nation*, Johann Gottlieb Fichte described it as follows: “To have character and to be German undoubtedly mean the same. . . . The first, original and truly natural boundaries of states are beyond doubt their internal boundaries. Those who speak the same language are joined to each other by a multitude of invisible bonds by nature herself; they belong together and are by nature one and an inseparable whole.”<sup>18</sup> More recently, Timothy Garton Ash claimed amusingly that for “the last forty years (some would say for the last two hundred) the question of German national identity has provoked some of the longest, deepest, most contorted answers ever given to any question by any branch of humankind.”<sup>19</sup> Accordingly framed, the challenge may seem daunting, but it is nonetheless possible to make some headway into this question of German identity.

Nowhere was the Cold War so dramatically felt as in Germany. When the

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Allied powers divided conquered Nazi Germany into four separate zones, the Western powers of Britain, France, and the United States found themselves in direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. This encounter was not merely over military policy or dividing war spoils but also about creating a new way of life for Germany. The stalemate that ensued *did* lead to two new ways of life, that of Western social capitalism in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and that of Soviet Leninism in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). But both countries saw themselves as German, and each maintained that it was the legitimate state of the German nation. As a result, this notion of a German nation based on "blood" (*jus sanguinis*), often a tool of extremist German nationalism, not only survived but flourished during the Cold War period.

The citizenship policy of the Federal Republic played a pivotal role in this persistence of the idea of a German nation. "Not wanting to validate the division of Germany, the West German authorities insisted on the continued validity of a single German citizenship."<sup>20</sup> This represented a point of continuity for West Germany, which wanted to claim lineage with the old *Reich* and also to accept responsibility for the Germans who, over the previous two centuries, had settled in many parts of Eastern Europe, many of whom then suffered in postwar anti-German reprisals for the Nazi crimes. This definition of citizenship, based on a 1913 law, seemed outdated and irrelevant during the stalemate of the Cold War. However, it became the central element in the unfolding of events leading to unification, and it continues to play a major role in German politics today.

In his *Nationhood and Citizenship in France and Germany*, Rogers Brubaker compares the foundations of French and German concepts of the nation and the state. Relying partly on the work of Benedict Anderson and others, in terms of an "imagined community" that developed from local, linguistic, and religious identities, Brubaker shows how the *idea* of the German nation as an ethnocultural idiom remained completely separate from the "territorial frame of a state."<sup>21</sup> This German nationality centered around vague notions of a common language and culture. Hence Brubaker labels the German understanding of nationhood "differentialist," as opposed to the "assimilationist" French view.

What is important about this exclusionary idea of what it means to be German is not just the fact that it is a myth but also how the FRG and GDR governments accepted and manipulated the notion for their own political purposes, striving to create their own version of the German nation, hence

two separate nations. The remainder of this section will explain the goals and strategies of the two German states, drawing out the implications and consequences for post-unification Germany.

The position of the FRG was fairly straightforward. West German leaders refused to recognize the GDR as a legitimate government of the German people. At the same time, however, their awareness of the genuine danger of military disaster, along with their professed compassion for their “cousins” in the East, led to the diffusion of tension through *Ostpolitik* starting in the late 1960s.<sup>22</sup> In terms of its national identity, the FRG, starting with Adenauer, sought to overcome the horrors of the Nazi past by following a policy of integration into Europe. Thus, the focal point of German identity in the West was, on the one hand, a claim to being the genuine representative of all German people, and on the other hand, the pursuit of a complementary transnational European identity.

The situation in the GDR was much more complicated. Since claims of being the only legitimate German state were preposterous, particularly after the erection of the Berlin Wall on August 13, 1961, GDR leaders sought to create the identity of “the better Germany.” At the heart of this contention was a careful combination of Leninist and antifascist ideology. Based on Bulgarian Communist Georgi Dimitrov’s famous pronouncement in 1935 that capitalism was the root of fascism, the GDR placed all responsibility and guilt for the Nazis on the West. Not only did this formulation leave East Germans free from accountability and alleviate the need for a traumatic process of denazification, it provided a certain ideological legitimation and stability for the regime. Antifascism, which started as a foundation myth, became the “ideological tool” of the authoritarian power of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED).<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, the GDR tried to appropriate the positive ethnocultural aspects of what it meant to be German. By proclaiming in effect, “Our Goethe, your Mengele,”<sup>24</sup> the SED leaders attempted to refashion German literary and cultural figures as socialist heroes, while associating the worst horrors of Nazism with the Federal Republic.<sup>25</sup> This clever use of antifascism was coupled with the standard Communist-bloc attempts to portray capitalism as exploitative, inhumane, and unjust. This latter strategy was relatively ineffective in the GDR, given the immediacy of the West, particularly through Western television, which was watched by over 85 percent of the population.<sup>26</sup> However, the moralist rhetoric of socialism being the highest stage in history has left a substantial legacy in East Germany,

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as will be addressed below.<sup>27</sup>

### **Is there an East German Ethnicity?**

Now we can turn to the key question in this analysis: to what extent have both the historical experiences of life in the GDR and the struggles in the aftermath of unification actively created a distinct East German identity strong enough to be called "ethnic"? My argument is that East Germans do constitute an ethnic group within today's unified Germany. Although the conceptualization of ethnicity, as elaborated above, is difficult to measure, I think it allows for a better understanding of the current division within Germany. While they do not distinguish themselves by race, language, or religion,<sup>28</sup> East Germans do constitute a separate group in the Federal Republic of Germany: They are to a large extent self-perpetuating and territorially bounded; they have powerful and emotional ties to a common past, common values, common struggles; they are represented politically and are opposed to a common "other." In this section, I will attempt to make my case by analyzing some of the existing literature on East German identity as well as the qualitative results of relevant survey data, placing it as systematically as possible within the five points developed in the theoretical framework of ethnicity above.

The first point refers to a "critical mass . . . constituting a bounded group." Since the unification process began over five years ago, many surveys have been conducted to compare the differences between East and West Germans. The general content of these surveys is familiar to most followers of Germany. The key point is that more and more easterners see themselves as "East Germans" instead of "Germans." According to one survey, 22 percent of West Germans and only 11 percent of East Germans feel that they belong to an all-German identity.<sup>29</sup> In short, although they are by no means looking to recreate the old state division, both East and West Germans do see themselves as profoundly different from one another.

This trend is closely related to the so-called "Wall in the mind" and *Ostalgie*, whereby East Germans increasingly romanticize their past and criticize West Germans for being arrogant, greedy, and heartless. Meanwhile, West Germans blame East Germans for their current economic difficulties and accuse them of being lazy, backwards, and of complaining too much. A recent *Emnid* survey in *Der Spiegel* shows that despite the fact that 83 percent of East Germans say they are glad that reunification took place, 67 percent still insist that "The Wall is gone, but the wall in the minds is

growing.”<sup>30</sup>

In terms of the self-perpetuation of East Germans, current demographic research on East Germany has yielded perplexing results. Demographer Nicholas Eberstadt writes, “In the four years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Eastern Germany’s population patterns have been jolted by dramatic, anomalous, and in some respects historically unprecedented shocks.”<sup>31</sup> Most importantly, there has been very little intermarriage between East and West Germans. Furthermore, according to the August, 1994 *Spiegel* survey, when asked the question, “If you had the opportunity to change, would you prefer to live in the old *Bundesländer* [former West Germany] or not?” only 17 percent responded “yes,” while 80 percent said “no.”<sup>32</sup> Given these features, as well as the statistics mentioned above about the separate East German identity, I think it is fair to say that a “critical mass” of East Germans do see themselves as primarily and fundamentally different from West Germans, and vice-versa.

The second component of my definition of ethnicity deals with the subjective sense of a “common culture,” or what Daniel Bell calls “common history and coherence through common symbols.”<sup>33</sup> What are some of the “common history” and “common symbols” that East Germans increasingly construct and appropriate? In the aforementioned *Spiegel*, two articles, entitled “Proud of One’s Own Life” (*Stolz aufs eigene Leben*) and “We Love the Homeland” (*Wir lieben die Heimat*), discuss this increasing identification with the GDR. The first article analyzes the survey, in which such themes as “security” and “equality” dominate the discussion of former life in the GDR, as well as references to more safety from criminals, equality for women, social security, better schooling, apprenticeships, health care, and housing systems.<sup>34</sup> These recollections, which are clearly exaggerated responses, are fast becoming the “common history” around which East Germans have united.

As for “common symbols,” there has been a recent revival of old GDR rock groups, the *Jugendweihe*,<sup>35</sup> and of course Trabants, as well as numerous GDR consumer products.<sup>36</sup> More than half of the products sold in East German grocery stores are made in the East, while most of these items are unavailable in the West.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, although 53 percent of East Germans claim to make their shopping decisions only on the basis of quality and price, a surprising 45 percent said that they buy eastern products as often as possible.<sup>38</sup>

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In terms of a common culture, Laurence McFalls attempts in his recent book to provide a cultural explanation for the East German revolution and its aftermath that both complements and contests many of the assumptions of the leading structural accounts. His argument posits the existence of a specific GDR culture based on the primary values of "modesty, solidarity, and above all, equality." McFalls seeks to account for the multifaceted and seemingly contradictory nature of East Germans' recent "regained solidarity and their identification with, if not pride in, the GDR." He writes, "Yet the fact that in opinion surveys East Germans increasingly accent their distinct identity even as they express greater optimism about their personal well-being within reunited Germany suggests that this revived GDR-identity is neither purely reactive nor interest-based but rather has a cultural content."<sup>39</sup> Although the crux of McFalls' argument deals with the events of the fall of 1989, his suggestions about a GDR culture certainly apply to this analysis as well.<sup>40</sup>

Referring to the same general topic in a contemporary context, Jürgen Kocka argues that "there still seem to exist the elements of two different political cultures." He writes,

There is, of course, some mixing. A thin layer of West Germans live and work in the East, usually in leading positions. East Germans move to the West to work and be trained. Still, different newspapers are read in the East than in the West, and the best-seller lists differ. West German and East German historians tend to publish in different journals. Even in united Berlin, the circles of intensive communication and collegiality, friendship, and marriage continue to be divided between East and West.<sup>41</sup>

The fact that widespread differences exist is certain, but what is still more striking is Kocka's observation that "one can still speak of two different societies, and awareness of this split seems to grow."<sup>42</sup> By stating that it is the *awareness* of the division that is growing, Kocka correctly places the emphasis on mental distance, as opposed to merely structural differences in standard of living, levels of unemployment, and so on.

This leads to a paradox that is implicit in much of this analysis, but remains to be clarified explicitly.<sup>43</sup> Why would this East German identity suddenly develop *post hoc*, only after the disappearance of the very state that had tried unsuccessfully to bring about such an identity? Although it may at first seem puzzling, it is possible to make some sense out of this paradox, particularly since it actually fits in with the ethnicity literature

quite well.

On the whole, it is difficult to evaluate the effects of the GDR experience upon its population. Certainly the jubilation of 1989, which came to be dominated by the theme "We are one people!" seemed to indicate clear rejection. But today's more sober reality suggests that 1989 did not create the *tabula rasa* or return to the old "natural" order, as so many people assumed it would. In fact, one could say that the private, antipolitical attitude of this "niche-society" (*Nieschengesellschaft*) did in fact achieve much deeper roots, to the point of creating a genuine *GDR culture*. Even further, in terms of understanding today's problems, 1989-1990 could be viewed as the exception, especially since the post-1990 developments reveal consistent parallels with the pre-1989 culture that had developed during forty years of "real, existing Socialism."<sup>44</sup>

So why would such a powerful manifestation of this longing come about now, precisely at a time when it should disappear? Joseph Rothschild offers an important suggestion:

The politicization of ethnicity entails yet a further, related, irony and paradox. It stresses, ideologizes, reifies, modifies, and sometimes virtually re-creates the putatively distinctive and unique cultural heritages of the ethnic groups that it mobilizes—precisely at the historical moment when these groups are being thoroughly penetrated by the universal culture of science and technology.<sup>45</sup>

In other words, it might actually make sense that during a period of complete discontinuity, of massive "modernization," a group would engage in a process of drastically changing its own identity. In the East German case, many people, strangely enough, are stressing, ideologizing, reifying, modifying, and re-creating an identity based on a system and a state that they had earlier opposed and rejected. Furthermore, since an ethnic group is a constantly changing construct, in which its members hold subjective, imagined, revisionist, and even contradictory viewpoints and attitudes, the initial paradox should not be as daunting as it might seem.

Turning now to the third component in my initial definition of ethnicity, we should look at the extent to which East Germans have the potential to become *politicized* along "ethnic" lines. Although they are clearly accountable to the Bonn leadership as a part of the centralized Federal Republic, the five new German states, each with its own regional and local governments, do to some extent constitute "a field of communication and inter-

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action”<sup>46</sup> separate from the eleven western states. The political campaigns are of a completely different nature in the East, exceeding by far the typical variations between states in the West. And among the five eastern states themselves, the differences are relatively minor, as most campaigns revolve around discussions specific to the problems of former GDR citizens, irrespective of state.

Of course, main “agents of change” or “new elites”<sup>47</sup> are the leaders of the former SED, now the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). Many recent articles have analyzed the origins, dynamics, methods, goals, and prospects of the former Communist party, which has significantly jolted German party dynamics, particularly over the past year.<sup>48</sup> For the purpose of this article, I will not delve into an analysis of the party itself, but will simply touch upon what its presence means in terms of an East German ethnicity, precisely because its future is intimately tied up with the future of East Germans as an ethnic group.

First of all, it is crucial to recognize that support for the PDS goes well beyond the 15–25 percent that it regularly wins in elections in the East. An October 7, 1994 *Die Zeit* survey showed that 53 percent of East Germans said that they “find it good” that the PDS should make it into the German Parliament (*Bundestag*), with only 32 percent opposing it, and 14 percent providing no answer. Other surveys have had similar results.<sup>49</sup> What this indicates is that the phenomenon of East German discontent and polarization is by no means exclusive to PDS voters, and a majority of former East Germans see the PDS as the only party that consistently represents specifically East German interests.

Why do East Germans support the PDS, electorally or tacitly? In a recent interview, Claus Offe commented on the electoral base of the PDS:

It is not those who have lost most, not even the unemployed, who voted disproportionately for the PDS, but people who are managers, white collar workers, employees, students, professors, intellectuals, lawyers, and so on, who suffered less than average but feel a strong sense of indignation about issues of identity and collective GDR history and experience. I call this “secondary ethnification” or “post-festum patriotism” that we now see unfolding in the GDR.<sup>50</sup>

Aside from the issue of “indignation,” which recalls Max Weber’s discussion of “honor and dignity” and will be discussed further below, Offe points out that votes for the PDS do *not* merely come from unification

losers, as most people might expect from a “protest party.” Rather, the PDS seems to have all the diversity and variety of support of an established party that will play a force in local, regional, and even national politics in the years to come.

The success of the PDS is both a cause and an effect of the creation of an East German ethnic group. Its campaign strategy has been precisely to provoke anti-Western sentiment, appealing to East Germans in all socio-economic positions, from ambitious youths to stubborn old-timers, to take pride in their identity. What is remarkable about the PDS is not only its claim to represent East Germans, but also its all-encompassing propaganda, with mass local distribution, stating, for example, on a campaign poster: “The PDS is Opposition: It can promise nothing, but can attempt everything.” The poster then touches on all sorts of issues, including decreasing unemployment levels, justice in the tax system, housing as a human right, human dignity in the welfare system, equality for women, equal opportunity education, affordable health care, local agriculture, alternative possibilities for eastern Germany, peace, disarmament, and solidarity.<sup>51</sup> What the PDS has accomplished, brilliantly, is to give East Germans the impression that their identity in the unified Germany is fundamentally linked with discrimination against *Ossis* on every level. Indeed, in responding to the question, “Are former GDR citizens second-class citizens in unified Germany?” the differences between East and West Germans were striking: 72 percent of East Germans said “yes,” and 27 percent “no,” while only 22 percent of West Germans said “yes,” and 77 percent said “no.”<sup>52</sup>

In a different piece, Laurence McFalls evaluates the PDS as follows: “The PDS . . . has succeeded in positioning itself as the defender of this eastern desire to maintain biographical continuity without threatening seriously to disrupt the on-going integration process.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, both from within and from without, whether people support it or not, the PDS has now successfully become the single political representative of East German interests. And the future of East Germans as an ethnic group will in many ways depend on the extent to which the PDS continues to be a major player on the German political scene, since (as of now) there are no conceivable alternative “agents of change.”

Moving on to the fourth and fifth criteria of my definition of ethnicity, which have been alluded to several times already and are too closely related empirically to be separated here, several questions arise: Why is it

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that East Germans seem to be acting in a way that many people would call irrational? What exactly can explain the fact that both East and West Germans are turning away from each other so dramatically? There are no easy answers to these questions, but Michael Walzer offers a useful suggestion. He puts it as follows: "There is, I think, a fairly ordinary human desire to live in a familiar world with known others, and to establish some sort of continuity over the generations."<sup>54</sup> In other words, whether in a small group or association, a workplace, a community, an ethnic group, a religion, a race, a nation-state, or a supra-national entity, people have two main concerns in terms of their identities: familiarity and continuity.

It is precisely this familiarity and continuity that East Germans have lost. Other post-Communist countries, with the obvious exceptions of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, have certainly undergone major changes, but they have at least maintained some coherence as a national group. Although there are increased problems of ethnic minorities in these countries today, Poland is still populated by Poles, Hungary by Hungarians, Romania by Romanians, and so on. Despite the rupture of 1989, their identities can take into account a common past, a common present, and a common future.

East Germans have almost no continuity, and the only semblance of familiarity they experience is based on that mythical notion of a German nation that naturally belongs together. Since this does not appear to go much further than a common language and a vague cultural tradition, East Germans are searching for something to call their own. Seeing only a disturbing present and a blurry future, they are predictably turning back to their past in order to maintain some sense of continuity and familiarity.

Recalling again Weber's notion of "honor and dignity," I think this factor is extremely important in the East German case. One of the initial reactions of East Germans describing their past is to make such comments as "It was not really that bad," or "We had plenty of good things too." They feel compelled to justify the morality of life in the GDR, which they feel is constantly under attack from the West. This sense of having to defend one's own moral worth, in the face of constantly perceived contempt, underlies the East German identity today.<sup>55</sup>

A significant reason for the division today is the propagation of stereotypes, demonstrated by the constant references people make to themselves and each other as *Ossis* and *Wessis*. Recall here Donald Horowitz's distinction

between “passive-uncompetitive” and “active-competitive” ethnic groups. Echoing the argument above about the importance of modernization to explain the “paradox” of a *post hoc* identification with an identity based on a state that no longer exists, Horowitz writes, “It will be apparent that imputed qualities are heavily influenced by the economic roles played by the respective groups. But they go beyond this, for they clearly reflect felt differences in acculturation to modern ways.”<sup>56</sup> Horowitz goes on to argue that a complete catalog of stereotypes<sup>57</sup> leads to the obvious conclusion that “backward groups feel weak.” The tone of these stereotypes strikes a similar chord to those of East and West Germans. In essence, although the terms “backward” and “advanced” sound overly dramatic, Horowitz’s categorizations of ethnic groups fit surprisingly well in the German case.<sup>58</sup>

### Conclusion

The concept of ethnicity developed at the beginning of this paper stresses the notion of relatively bounded, dynamic, and changing identities within a group. This observation fits the East German case well, for since this ethnic identity has come about so recently, and it continues to redefine itself today, any theory about it must take into account how it is changing. Crawford Young suggests that “we need pay particular heed to the social vectors which alter identity patterns and to the political arenas which define their saliency.”<sup>59</sup> What are these “social vectors” in the East German case, and how will they affect the future of East Germans as an ethnic group? Will East Germans be able to perpetuate themselves as a distinct collectivity in the unified Germany of the twenty-first century? Or will these characteristics gradually decrease over time, as East Germans integrate the economic, political, social, and cultural institutions of the Federal Republic?

It is difficult to speculate about such a fast-changing social environment, but I would argue that, although it is still possible that they remain unified as an ethnicity, the solidarity that makes East Germans an ethnic group inevitably will decrease over the course of several generations. For one, despite the perceived neglect by or contempt from West Germans, it cannot be denied that the government is pouring in tremendous amounts of money to build a viable infrastructure in the East. While it will not be sufficient in itself, certainly economic improvement, along with increasing familiarity with the new institutions over time, will contribute to the East German adaptation to this new way of life, hence reducing their present

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feeling of separateness.

But the most important reason has to do with *the passing of time*. The origin of the common bond of East German identity, which also serves as its boundary, is three-fold: 1) "we" lived under Communism in the GDR;<sup>60</sup> 2) "we" are currently experiencing great difficulties in converting to a new way of life (economic, political, and cultural); and 3) "we" resent the West German attack on "our" dignity. A closer look at these three reasons shows why this identity will have difficulty lasting into the future in its present form: as time passes and young people grow up in the unified Germany, the first condition will be impossible, the second unlikely, and the third less pronounced. Barth maintains that in situations where ethnic interaction proliferates and where groups do not fear arbitrariness and violence, "cultural differences will tend to be reduced with time," perhaps eventually disappearing altogether.<sup>61</sup> Younger East Germans, growing up in the post-unification German system, will certainly feel a sense of "Easternness" for several generations because of their parents, but it remains to be seen whether or not such an identity will remain powerful enough to be called ethnic.

The wild card in any predictions about East German identity is, of course, the PDS. Most analysts assume that the PDS's chances in the next *Bundestag* elections are slim, because some of the bitterness among the population should attenuate by the next elections. But even so, this does not rule out its extensive influence on the local and regional levels. The adaptability and pragmatism of the party's leaders should not be underestimated. A few key questions emerge: Will the PDS keep using divisive tactics to encourage "ethnic" hostility between East and West? Will the PDS continue to strike a chord with East Germans on the critical issues of their honor and dignity? And finally, will the PDS succeed in transforming itself into an established regional (or ethnic) party, whose viability will depend upon creating a new "we," continuous with the old "we," but one that will last into the future? Certainly my projection that the future of East Germans as an ethnic group depends on the PDS makes that party's challenge even more formidable.

These long-term predictions do not in any way attenuate the immediacy of today's polarization. In fact, the sense of separate identity still seems to be growing today, and many years may pass before it begins to decline. Politicians, journalists, and academics alike have not yet grasped this peculiarity. I have suggested that it might be better understood by looking

at former East Germans today as an ethnic group, not only because such a conceptualization dismisses the false primordial definition of ethnicity and dispels the myth of natural unity within the German nation, but because it provides a better analytic tool for understanding East German distinctiveness and the deep social split within Germany today.

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I would like to thank Margaret Anderson, George Breslauer, Gerald Feldman, Ken Jowitt, Dieter Segert, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier versions of this paper.

1. John Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), p. 6.

2. Anthropologist Fredrik Barth, who conducted one of the first comprehensive analyses of the concept of ethnicity, writes that regardless of the content, "ethnic identity is superordinate to most other statuses, and defines the permissible constellations of statuses, or social personalities, which an individual with that identity may assume. In this respect . . . it constrains the incumbent in all his activities, not only in some defined social situations." Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1969), p. 17.

3. Slavenka Drakulic provides a powerful example of the phenomenon of extreme ethnic nationalism in Croatia: "But I am not in a position to choose any longer. Nor, I think, is anyone else. Just as in the days of brotherhood-unity, there is now another ideology holding people together, the ideology of nationhood. It doesn't matter if it is Croatian, Serbian, Czech, Slovak, Georgian or Azerbaijani nationhood. What has happened is that something people cherished as a part of their cultural identity—an alternative to the all-embracing communism, a means to survive—has become their political identity and turned into something like an ill-fitting shirt. You may feel the sleeves are too short, the collar too tight. You might not like the colour, and the cloth might itch. But there is no escape; there is nothing else to wear. One doesn't have to succumb voluntarily to this ideology of nation—one is sucked into it." Slavenka Drakulic, *The Balkan Express: Fragments from the Other Side of War* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993), pp. 51–52.

4. As Max Weber writes, "A nation is a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state of its own; hence, a nation is a community which normally tends to produce a state of its own." An ethnic group, on the other hand, according to Weber, is merely a potential nation, and it may well never become a nation: "The sentiment of ethnic solidarity does not by itself make a 'nation.' Undoubtedly, even the white Russians in the face of the Great Russians have always had a sentiment of ethnic solidarity, yet even at the present time they would hardly claim to qualify as a separate 'nation.'" Max Weber, "The Nation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 176.

From a more contemporary standpoint, it is unfortunate that the recent onslaught of

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naïve media coverage of so-called “ethnic groups,” most notably in former Yugoslavia, has conflated definitions of ethnicity with nationalism, by falsely assuming that the existence of a so-called ethnic group must entail the striving for an independent nation-state. This is regrettable not only from an academic point of view, but also because the assumption that ethnic groups automatically want and will strive for secession from multi-ethnic federations has undoubtedly served to further fuel the fires in many areas in the post-Communist world.

5. Barth, *Ethnic Groups*, p. 14.

6. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983, revised 1991).

7. See Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 24–25.

8. In a section entitled “The Belief in Common Ethnicity,” Max Weber offers the following definition: “We shall call ‘ethnic groups’ those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists.” Weber’s definition emphasizes the importance of such a constructed notion as “customs” in ethnic group formation, and his reference to “memories of colonization” will show striking parallels in the more empirical section on East Germany below. Furthermore, he stresses that *belief* in a group’s common descent is crucial, even though it may be patently false. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. 1, p. 389.

9. Anthony Smith, *Ethnic Origins*, p. 26.

10. Barth writes, “The cultural contents of ethnic dichotomies would seem analytically to be of two orders: (i) overt signals or signs—the diacritical features that people look for and exhibit to show identity, often such features as dress, language, house-form, or general style of life, and (ii) basic value orientations: the standards of morality and excellence by which performance is judged. Since belonging to an ethnic category implies being a certain kind of person, having that basic identity, it also implies a claim to be judged, and to judge oneself, by those standards that are relevant to that identity.” *Ethnic Groups*, p. 14.

11. Joseph Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 5.

12. Barth, *Ethnic Groups*, p. 33.

13. I thank Ken Jowitt for suggesting this way of expressing the effect of ethnicity.

14. Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 342.

15. Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), especially pp. 166–171. It should be noted that Horowitz is specifically concerned with ethnic *violence*, an issue that does not pertain to the East German case. Nevertheless, his characterization of ethnic stereotyping is quite applicable and helpful.

16. Ibid., p. 167.
17. Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), p. 5. Young's basic definition of ethnicity is similar to others: "The defining attributes of ethnic commonality may include language, territory, political unity, or common cultural values or symbols" (p. 48).
18. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, ed. George Armstrong Kelly (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) pp. 177, 190.
19. Timothy Garton Ash, "Germany Unbound," *The New York Review of Books*, 22 November 1990, p. 15.
20. Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 83.
21. Ibid., p. 4.
22. See Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (New York: Random House, 1993).
23. J. H. Brinks, "Some Remarks on Anti-Fascism in East Germany." Talk given at the *Center for German and European Studies*, University of California, Berkeley, 15 November 1994. Also see Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft in der DDR* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992).
24. Cited by Brinks, "Some Remarks."
25. Interestingly, this tactic seems to have been quite successful. A survey from the *Allensbacher Jahrbuch* shows how widely East and West German conceptions of German history differ. Asked in August 1992 if there is a specifically German history, 59% in the West and 60% in the East said yes. However, the percentage of those who identified the "Third Reich, National-Socialism, and Hitler" with this history was 52% in the West, but only 11% in the East. This surprising result shows to what extent the idea of Nazism being a Western phenomenon was believed in the GDR, which further indicates the division between East and West today, given the importance of the issue of continuity with the Third Reich in Germany. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and Renate Koecher, eds. *Allensbacher Jahrbuch der Demoskopie, 1984-1992* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1993), p. 385.
26. While the combined effect of this antifascist and prosocialist legitimation may not have been overwhelming, it is nonetheless striking when compared to countries such as Poland and Hungary, which had less ambiguous national traditions, and where the Communists encountered significantly more opposition. On this issue, see, among others, Christian Joppke, *East German Dissidents and the Revolution of 1989: Social Movement in a Leninist Regime* (New York: New York University Press, 1995).
27. For example, when asked whether socialism was a system that was doomed to fail, 79% of East Germans said instead that the collapse was a result of the incompetence of politicians. See "Egozentrik setzt sich durch," in *Berliner Zeitung* (1 August 1995), p. 7.
28. There are many linguistic differences in Germany, including regional accents and dialects. But while this factor may make it more difficult to hide one's local origins, it

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probably does not contribute much to the consolidation of East German identity. Similarly, despite the fact that the East is significantly more Protestant and atheist than the West, religion is also not an issue.

29. Allensbach Institute, cited by Marc Fisher, "East and West Grow Apart as They Come Together," in *The Washington Post* (27 June 1993), p. A1.

30. *Der Spiegel*, 27/1995, p. 41.

31. Nicholas Eberstadt. "Demographic Shocks in Eastern Germany, 1989-1993," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 46, no. 3, p. 520.

32. *Der Spiegel*, 33/1994, p. 111.

33. Daniel Bell, *The Winding Passage: Essays and Sociological Journeys, 1960-1980* (Cambridge, MA: Abt Books, 1980), p. 196.

34. The following percentages of people responded in 1995 that the GDR was superior to the FRG in the following areas (with the 1990 numbers in parentheses): 88% said more safety from criminals (62%); 87% said more equality for women (67%); 92% said better social security systems (65%); 64% said better schooling (28%); 70% said better apprenticeships (33%); 57% said better health care (18%); and 53% said better housing (27%). *Der Spiegel*, 27/1995, p. 43.

35. For more on the revival of this "coming of age" celebration for 14-year olds in the GDR, see Laurence McFalls, *Communism's Collapse, Democracy's Demise? The Cultural Context and Consequences of the East German Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 164.

36. For example, the old East German champagne called "Rotkäppchen" has experienced a remarkable comeback. Before 1989, approximately 15 million bottles were sold each year. In 1991, sales sank to a low of 2.9 million, but in 1992 they went up to 5.7 million, in 1993 they were 10 million, and in 1994 a total of 17 million bottles were sold, only 50,000 of which were sold in the West. This phenomenon, which is certainly not limited to champagne, is intricately related to the post-1989 rise of GDR identity. See *Der Spiegel*, 27/1995, p. 59.

37. See "Sehnsucht nach F6 und Rotkäppchen-Sekt: Die Rückkehr der Ostprodukte in die Warenregale der neuen Bundesländer," in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (14 August 1995), p. 3.

38. *Der Spiegel*, 27/1995, p. 43.

39. Laurence McFalls, *Communism's Collapse*, pp. 91, 152, 162.

40. Also see "Easterners Show Their Feelings, Westerners Their Success, Psychologists Say," in *The Week in Germany* (10 March 1995), p. 6, reporting on a study called "States of Mind in East-West Comparison," in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. The results of this survey of 1,022 East Germans and 2,025 West Germans indicate that "easterners tend to be more open and sympathetic to others, tend more to self-criticism and are less egoistic than westerners . . . [and] they are more strongly anchored in their relationships to others." The reason for these differences, according to the authors, is that East Germans developed "a 'private counterculture' that acted as an antidote to the regimen-

tation of the state.”

41. Jürgen Kocka, “Crisis of Unification: How Germany Changes,” in *Daedalus*, vol. 123, no. 1 (Winter 1994), pp. 173–192.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

43. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out to me the need to clarify this paradox.

44. I am grateful to Dieter Segert for pointing this out to me. See his unpublished paper, “Politische Kultur der DDR/Ostdeutschland—ein postkommunistisches Phänomen?”

45. Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics*, p. 3.

46. Barth, *Ethnic Groups*, p. 11.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

48. For good analyses, see Rainer Land and Ralf Possekel, “On the Internal Dynamics of the PDS: The Leninist Challenge and the Challenge to Leninism,” in *Constellations*, vol. 2, no. 1 (April 1995); Laurence McFalls, “Political Culture, Partisan Strategies, and the PDS: Prospects for an East German Party,” in *German Politics and Society*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring 1995); Jürgen W. Falter and Markus Klein, “Die Wähler der PDS bei der Bundestagswahl 1994: Zwischen Ideologie, Nostalgie und Protest,” in *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, (23 December 1994).

49. For example, see *Der Spiegel*, 33/1994, p. 111.

50. Claus Offe, Interview by Andrew Arato and Dick Howard, in *Constellations*, vol. 2, no. 1 (April 1995), pp. 21–30.

51. I would like to thank Agnes Peterson, Curator of the Central and Western European Collection at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, for collecting recent PDS documents and propaganda for the Hoover archives.

52. *Der Spiegel*, 27/1995, p. 49.

53. Laurence McFalls, “Political Culture, Partisan Strategies, and the PDS: Prospects for an East German Party,” in *German Politics and Society*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring 1995).

54. Walzer, “Only Connect” (Book review of E. J. Hobsbawm), in *The New Republic* (13 August 1990), p. 34.

55. In the recent *Spiegel* cited above (27/1995), three-quarters of East Germans agreed with the statement, “I can be proud of my life in the GDR, because I made the best of it and only involved myself with the regime as much as was unavoidable” (“Ich kann stolz sein auf mein Leben in der DDR, weil ich das Beste daraus gemacht habe und mich mit dem Regime nur soweit eingelassen habe, wie es nicht zu vermeiden war”), p. 52. Furthermore, 97% of East Germans agreed with the statement, “only those who lived there can have a say about life in the GDR” (“über das Leben in der DDR kann nur mitreden, wer selbst dort gelebt hat”), p. 49.

56. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, p. 168.

57. The following are the attributes of backward groups: “poor, lazy, traditional, inef-

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efficient, ignorant, leisurely, indolent, docile, easygoing, feudal, polite, submissive, unintelligent, lacking initiative, proud, dependent, and spendthrift.”

And for the advanced groups: “enterprising, aggressive, ruthless, money-hungry, industrious, shrewd, successful, stingy, arrogant, cunning, intelligent, energetic, resourceful, serious, clannish, nepotistic, tribalistic, progressive, crafty, frugal, avaricious, pushy, efficient, thrifty, ambitious, coarse, miserly, clever” (p. 169).

58. In addition to the stereotypes cited earlier, another *Spiegel* piece (3/1993, pp. 58–59) revealed the biting stereotypes of East and West. Westerners were asked to write a brief comment to Easterners. Here are a few examples:

“You spit in our hands.”

“You must work more yourselves.”

“Don’t complain so much, most of you are much better off than before.”

“Don’t see things so narrowly.”

“Shut your mouths and work more.”

“Rome wasn’t built in one day either.”

“More modesty and thankfulness.”

“Take us as your model.”

“The prosperity in the West didn’t come from twiddling thumbs.”

The comments from the Easterners to the Westerners were equally harsh:

“Don’t always think about money.”

“They won’t take advice, they all think they know better.”

“Let us decide on our own.”

“You don’t need to educate us to work.”

“Take something of ours too.”

“Unification means taking the good from both.”

“Why are we being treated like minors?”

“Get off your high horse.”

59. Young, *The Politics of Cultural of Pluralism*, p. 11.

60. It is surprising to what extent having lived in the GDR *through* 1989 is important. Even East German dissidents who had been expelled (or sold) to the West are no longer seen as being “one of us.” For example, Wolf Biermann, a popular folk singer whose critical lyrics led to his expulsion to the West in 1976, was overjoyed to return to East Berlin in 1989, only to find himself shunned by many who viewed him as a converted *Wessi*.

61. Barth, *Ethnic Groups*, p. 36.