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Chapter One

Introduction: The people's paradox

When in November 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, Westerners were aghast at the state of East Germany: the crumbling housing; the pot-holed, cobbled roads; the brown coal dust and chemical pollution in the industrial centres of the south; the miserable offerings in the shops; the relative paucity and poor quality of consumer goods; and the ubiquitous, spluttering, Trabant or 'Trabi' cars. Western condemnation of the failing economy was more than matched by condemnation of the repressive political system. The people, whose well-being was allegedly so dear to the regime, were walled into their own country, with hundreds of miles of inner-German border guarded by watchtowers, tanks, vicious dogs, a wide strip of mined no-man's-land and a larger guarded hinterland; their capital city was divided and they were prevented from entry into the Western (capitalist, democratic) half by the Berlin Wall. Their human rights in terms of freedom of movement and freedom of expression and association were dramatically restricted, and an extensive system of internal surveillance and suppression through the secret State Security Service (Staatssicherheitsdienst, or Stasi), complemented the activities of the regular police, military forces and border guards. Once the figures on paper were revealed, immediate impressions were confirmed: the economy was heading rapidly towards bankruptcy. In short, the GDR had neither political legitimacy nor economic viability.

And yet, once historians, sociologists and political scientists started to write about East Germany under communist rule, protesting voices began to be raised. Faced with accounts of repression, complicity and collusion, former citizens of the GDR claimed that their own memories and experiences told them otherwise. Their own biographies did not seem to fit easily within the bleak picture of oppression and fear. Most East Germans did not feel that they had spent up to four decades of their lives trembling in 'inner emigration', or conspiratorially plotting against the regime, or making a pact with the Red

Devil for private advancement. Life for most people in the GDR was simply not (or not for most people, most of the time) the way it was described in black-and-white characterisations of 'Germany's second dictatorship'. The GDR was not the equivalent, albeit under different ideological colours, of the Nazi Third Reich. The experience of East German citizens was far more complex: the distinctions between a brutal repressive state and a subordinate, repressed, or complicit society could not be drawn so neatly.

Herein lies the paradox, the question that is at the heart of this book. A massive disjuncture appears to have opened up between analyses of the dictatorial political system of the defunct GDR, on the one hand, and the experiences, perceptions and memories of many of those who lived through it, on the other. The institutionalised denial of human rights was given literally concrete embodiment in the shape of the Wall; yet even so, for long stretches of time – more in some periods than others – the GDR came to appear quite 'normal', taken for granted, among large numbers of its citizens. The undoubtedly dictatorial political system was 'carried' by the active participation of many of its subjects. It is the purpose of this book to explore in more detail the character of 'normal lives' in the East German dictatorship.

History and memory

For forty years the communist Socialist Unity Party (SED) ruled over a rump state – that part of defeated Nazi Germany that had come under Soviet control at the end of the Second World War. At first tentative – called by the West a 'provisorium' or 'the Zone' – a separate East German state became an ever more accepted fact of the post-war division of Europe. By the late 1960s, refusal to acknowledge the existence of a separate German state (under the so-called Hallstein doctrine) was clearly no longer a tenable position. Following the *Ostpolitik* of West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, the GDR's existence was begrudgingly accepted by the West; and, for all the peculiarities in the relations between the two German states, to all intents and purposes through most of the 1970s and '80s the GDR became an apparently permanent feature of the geopolitical landscape. Within the GDR, new generations grew to maturity who had known nothing else; those who remembered an undivided Germany, those socialised in Imperial Germany, the Weimar Republic or the Third Reich, became an ever-dwindling minority of the population. The GDR began to be taken for granted, both within and without. 'Normalisation' was reflected, too, in academic writing on the GDR, which by and large adopted a more sober tone than that of the early years.¹

With the dramatic collapse of communism in 1989, all this changed – not only, and very obviously, in respect of present realities, but also in terms of prevailing perceptions of the past. Denunciations of an illegitimate dictatorship were unleashed again in full fury. A media feeding frenzy erupted as newspapers, magazines and television shows scrambled for the latest revelations on who had been an 'unofficial collaborator' (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, or IM) or informer for the hated Stasi. The slightest taint was sufficient to destroy relationships, topple careers or blight lives. Debates raged over the problems of bringing to justice through the law courts those who had been responsible for a system of injustice – a repressive system symbolised by the 'order to shoot' any citizen who sought to escape across the 'Iron Curtain' or the Berlin Wall.² The parliament of the newly united and enlarged Federal Republic of Germany instigated an extraordinarily thorough investigation, with two lengthy parliamentary 'commissions of inquiry' (*Enquêtekommissionen*) into the character of the East German dictatorship, involving both experts and witness testimonies.³ Both scholars and journalists became fascinated by the repression of human rights, the infiltration of the Churches and the everyday malign and sinister activities of the Stasi.⁴ And academic interpretations were fractured and coloured by their political implications, from denunciation, through the quest for a more neutral understanding, to pleas for exoneration and exculpation.

But beyond all this turmoil, this heated ferment of debate, lay the largely inarticulate voices of those East Germans who had lived through it all and found little that reflected their own experiences, that touched a chord with their own lives, perceptions and aspirations, in the babble of accusations and denials, prosecutions and protests. Many East Germans were surprised and shocked to hear the revelations of corruption, to learn the extent of Stasi infiltration. And they were baffled by the analyses of the political scientists who told them they had been victims or, worse, accomplices in a dictatorship comparable with that of Hitler. Many thought, by contrast, that they had been able to lead what they considered to be 'perfectly ordinary lives' – or, to use the German expression, 'ein ganz normales Leben' – in the GDR. Little over a decade after the GDR had been dealt the double death blow of 'gentle revolution' in autumn 1989 and unification with the West in 1990, a 'memory boom' was under way, with GDR products, GDR design and aspects of GDR everyday life enjoying a massive posthumous renaissance.

It may of course be objected that this perception of normality is a retrospective projection, a symptom of 'ostalgia' (*Ostalgie*) – nostalgia for the good times in the East German past, a sentiment flowering only under the conditions of upheaval and uncertainty in the difficult years after formal political

unification. There is, of course, an element of truth in this. In a situation of high unemployment, of even higher general anomie, there will of course be a yearning for at least some of the security and certainties of the old regime, however compromised and constraining. But there is more to it than merely rosy memories. Even if one discounts entirely the dubious evidence of hindsight, there is much by way of pre-1989 evidence to suggest that all was not quite as clear-cut as it is sometimes depicted. The East German dictatorship was one that managed to involve large numbers of its citizens in its political structures and processes. One in five adults became a member of the SED. An astonishing number appear to have been willing to act as unofficial informers for the Stasi. Nearly all working adults were members of the state trade union organisation, the Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (FDGB). The vast majority of young people were members of the state youth organisations under the Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ). And, by the 1970s, despite continuing grumbling over all manner of specific irritations and shortages, there is much evidence to suggest that there was widespread acceptance of the general parameters of life, that this was simply the 'way things were'. For long stretches of time, the GDR functioned not primarily through the overt exercise of coercion – although (again paradoxically) the apparatus of coercion and covert capacity for repression was growing exponentially – but rather through some form of internalisation of, or willingness to play by, the unwritten 'rules of the game'.

These 'rules of the game' were of course not internalised overnight. The early years in particular were characterised by very obvious repression, the wilful exercise of 'political justice' and widespread experience of brutality and force. The replacement of the Nazi dictatorship by a communist dictatorship – with a very different ideology and in principle far more humanistic set of goals, yet with a comparable disregard for individual human rights and liberal notions of freedom – was for millions of Germans a traumatic experience. But this experience was to some degree class-specific, and highly variable according to political and moral standpoint. The imposition of the East German dictatorship was particularly unpleasant for people from upper-class, bourgeois and professional backgrounds, and also for Christians and others with explicit moral and political disagreements with the new regime. People from working-class or peasant backgrounds, people who were not direct targets of repression, and people with strong left-wing sympathies, by contrast, often found new opportunities in the post-war upheavals, or at least were able to grumble and get by without being any more adversely affected than they had been during the previous decades. These were decades, it should be remembered, which had even in peacetime been characterised by horrendous

inflation, mass unemployment, political violence, repression of independent political parties and trade unions, and in which ordinary workers were nearly always on the receiving end of orders. Moreover, whatever people's experiences in the early years of the GDR, over time new generations came to maturity who were in many ways products of the regime, used to living by its rules and agreeing with many of the aims in principle, if not the realities in practice, of 'actually existing socialism'. This is not to suggest that everything was wonderful in the GDR, about which both many jokes and far more savage critiques were made at the time and since; but it is to suggest that the experiences of East Germans were highly varied, with some suffering far more than others, and some a great deal more enthusiastic and willing than others. There was some genuine basis in the realities of a selectively recalled past to provide material for nostalgic memories after unification. Most importantly, it is to suggest that the history of East German society cannot be adequately understood purely within the parameters of a top-down political and institutional history.

The transformation of German society

East German social history is the key to understanding the paradox of history and memory. It is not a mere adjunct to political history, or an interesting side-line, or an antiquarian rag-bag of the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life for nostalgia addicts, but rather it is fundamental and integral to developing a more adequate interpretation of GDR history as a whole.

In the process of trying to achieve the Marxist vision of an egalitarian society, East German communists pursued radical policies, effecting a major social revolution, often wholly against the wishes of those members of the population who found their previous interests, freedom and material well-being adversely affected. This social revolution was not, and was not intended to be, democratic in the Western sense of having the implied consent of a majority of the population (if only in being able periodically to vote an unpopular government out of power). The transitional stage of transformation to communism had inevitably, on the Marxist view, to be undemocratic: it had of necessity to be a stage of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', since the attempts of the oppressed classes to overthrow an unequal and unjust society would inevitably provoke protest and active opposition from the previously rich and powerful, now at risk of being ousted from their positions of privilege. But the proletariat might still be suffering from 'false consciousness' arising from generations of exposure to the ideology of the ruling classes, and thus might well not consciously recognise what was in their own long-term

best interests. So, on the Marxist-Leninist version, the transitional period was in effect one of the 'dictatorship of the vanguard party'. The leading communist party's historic mission was to act on behalf of the oppressed classes, whether or not they liked what was being done in their name. The end, in this world-view, clearly justified the means.

Hence the transformation of East German society was pushed through by force. A war-ravaged population – those who had survived twelve years of Nazi rule, six years of which had been characterised by death and destruction at the front, shortages, air-raids and eventual occupation at home – faced a new and arguably even more interventionist regime of a very different ideological persuasion. The constant haemorrhage from East to West Germany of people who were variously persecuted, disadvantaged, or sought pre-emptive escape from the new economic and political policies logically led to the effective incarceration of the entire population behind the ever more fearsome 'Iron Curtain' and, from 1961, the Berlin Wall. In face of all manner of problems, the SED continued to struggle mightily to achieve its conception of the perfect society, periodically revising its own strategies and labels for the alleged 'stage' that had been reached. In the process, the overall shape of East German society was dramatically transformed. Radical policies were introduced to transform society in the desired directions. But one cannot write East German social history simply and only in terms of communist intentions, explicit policies and domestic resistances.⁵

Some social changes in the GDR were clearly the direct results of communist policies. A combination of successive economic reforms and political pressures led to a radical transformation of the socio-economic structure: the abolition of major private ownership in industry and finance was effected very soon after the war, and the collectivisation of agriculture effectively completed by 1961. At the same time, the 'bourgeoisie' was transformed from the old propertied or professional middle classes into a state-dependent socialist 'intelligentsia'. However, many changes were a result of quite other factors outside the control of the SED. Of crucial importance were long-term socio-economic trends, continued industrialisation and urbanisation, and the imperatives of economic competition, within the constraints of the Soviet bloc, on international markets. Wider processes of change – the unintended impact of aspects of industrialisation, urbanisation, globalisation of communications and culture; the economic strains of defence expenditure in a Cold War context; and the lures of consumerism – constantly deflected these policies into unexpected developments. The partly self-contradictory Enlightenment aspirations embodied in Marxist thought – that the Party could understand, intervene and guide the 'Course of History' – proved

impossible to realise in a divided world in which capitalism in the West, for all its periodic wobbles and crashes, showed little sign of succumbing to fatal collapse under the weight of its supposedly inevitable contradictions.

Nor did influence run in only one direction. SED policies were affected not only by the dictates and limits set by external parameters (the Soviet Union, the Cold War), but also by pressures and inputs from below and considerations with respect to a variety of social groups. The notion of an implicit 'social contract', and the effective, if limited, veto power of the GDR workforce, have often been remarked upon.⁶ Following the uprising of June 1953, the regime never again dared to risk quite such unpopularity on the economic front. Frequent unofficial work stoppages – small acts of sabotage, protest or mini-strikes and walk-outs – were constant reminders of the importance of keeping the workers at least satisfied, if not happy; sops to consumerism were repeated ploys to keep levels of unrest from rising. The SED also made strenuous efforts to gauge, influence and respond to the popular mood, not only through Stasi reports and surveillance, but also – perhaps more importantly – through mountains of regular reports from functionaries (such as the reports from local functionaries of the SED and FDGB on popular 'mood and opinion'), and through opinion poll surveys carried out by social research institutes, such as the SED's own research institute, the Institut für Meinungsforschung beim ZK der SED, and the sociological institute for youth research based in Leipzig, the Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung (ZIJ). Citizens' letters ('petitions', complaints or *Eingaben*) and controlled public 'discussions' of policies were also the SED's variation on the Western practices of controlled leaks, the publication of White Papers, or the use of 'focus groups' and opinion polling. No modern government can seriously risk ignoring the views of the population – least of all a government that wants at least some basis for the claim that it is supported by 99 per cent of the population.

There were, too, subterranean socio-cultural currents transmitted over generations within the private sphere. Traditional conceptions of gender roles, with a tenaciously persistent division of labour in the privacy of the home, and often unconsciously biased expectations in the workplace or public life, proved remarkably resilient. Similarly, to take a quite different example, certain religious traditions survived and developed, leading to what some have termed the 'Protestant Revolution' of 1989, symbolised by the prevalence of pastors, prayers and candles. Tales told in the privacy of the home – about what grandpa actually did in the war, or why Great-aunt Amalie was a committed member of the Nazi women's organisation – also undercut simplistic historical lessons of heroes and villains presented in school. Despite the high prevalence of single-parent families and predominance of collective

socialisation outside the home, the influence of the family retained considerable significance.

As important as changes in class structure and official ideology were changes in patterns of social and political organisation, and in the ways in which East Germans were not merely coerced, but also in many cases actively and voluntarily participated in the manifold organisations and institutions of the state. An emphasis on the collective rather than the individual was a fundamental element in the GDR. It was a key feature in all areas of life, from collective potty training in state-run crèches and nurseries, through conformity in youth organisations, schools and military service, to the participation in the work brigades, the frequent campaigns and regular public rallies, and the mass organisations and bloc parties of adult life. None of these organisations was ever completely successful in encompassing all of the target audience. The state youth organisation, the FDJ, for example, was constantly competing for the attention of young people with Western popular culture – from blue jeans, Elvis Presley and rock 'n' roll in the 1950s, through beat music and jazz in the 1960s, to rock concerts in the 1970s and '80s – or with the alternative culture and discussion groups held under the ambiguously protective umbrella of the Churches. But it has also to be recognised that many of these state-controlled mass organisations not only sought political control and influence, but also offered some genuine pleasures and benefits to members. Many were upheld not only by paid employees of the state and the SED, but also by the active participation of honorary functionaries, who sustained their activities and who both represented and supported grass-roots activities in all manner of ways. The picture is thus far from being simply one of repression and containment; there was not only much mutual support within these organisations, but also, interestingly, a degree of genuine representation and the possibility of the facilitation of individual interests. Such activities and channels for the pursuit of individual pastimes came to be seen as ever more 'normal', particularly by those younger generations born into the GDR. At the same time, wider patterns such as the growth of consumer culture and the 'privatisation' of aspects of life and leisure, as well as the individualised channels of complaints and grumbling – all fostered and sustained by official policies – ironically led to or reinforced the growth of individualism in this would-be collectivised society.

The GDR lasted, it should be remembered, for forty years – long enough for new generations to be socialised, to grow to maturity and to experience their everyday life as 'perfectly normal'. Younger generations, born into the GDR, differed in crucial respects from the older generations of those born before the Second and First World Wars respectively (often termed the 'Hitler Youth

generation' and the 'Front generation'). The extraordinarily slippery concept of 'normalisation', with its linguistic variations of 'norm' and 'normal', can refer to the internalisation of culturally and historically specific norms; it may refer also to the ways in which people are able to predict the parameters of their situation and be prepared to behave 'as if' they accepted the dominant norms in order to achieve certain goals, and to the routinisation of structures and institutions – to the stability and predictability of the social world. Arguably, in all these ways the GDR enjoyed (if that is the right word for this very modest 'achievement') a period of 'normalisation' in its middle decades.⁷

It is important also to remember that the SED did not simply seek to exercise and retain power for power's sake. The SED actually wanted to do something with their power: to transform society into what they thought would be a better, more egalitarian, more just society. In pursuit of these ends they deployed means that from a democratic perspective can never be justified – the Wall stands as a symbol for the SED's attempts to control by force what could not be achieved by consent – but at the same time there was a great deal more willing (or unthinking) participation, even goodwill, in politically less contentious areas. Analysis of topics such as healthcare, demography, gender, leisure, housing and work reveals a world that is not often represented in traditional political histories of the GDR, a world in which, of course, the big questions – questions of human rights, freedom of speech, association and movement – could not be discussed, but in which there was far more openness and genuine debate about how to improve the basic conditions of everyday life than might be thought.

To say all this – to point to the existence of a dialogue of sorts, and within limits – is not to deny the dark side of the regime. The sinister Stasi, with its long shadow of unofficial informers (IMs), was everywhere, and observed and reported on everything. For those among the very small minority of active, principled dissenters (or to use the words deriving from Rosa Luxemburg, 'those who thought differently'), including committed Christians and human rights activists, life in the GDR was far from 'ordinary'. Prevented from progression through higher education in any subject except theology, or from any professional career except in the environs of the Church, many principled dissenters were constantly aware of the boundaries set by the regime. Anyone found to have transgressed permissible limits, in whatever way, could be subjected to brutal measures of repression, arrest and incarceration, as well as physical and mental maltreatment; some were forcibly exiled against their will, while others had their lives within the GDR subjected to sometimes unintelligible distortions and miseries in both professional and private lives. Any freedom to choose subjects of study, place of occupation or residence, was

severely curtailed. Even for those who did not step quite far enough over the boundaries of acceptable behaviour to attract adverse attention from the authorities, the effects of living in a dictatorship were often evident. There is no denying the constraining effects of pressures for conformity in the education system, the frustrations borne of lack of freedom to choose holiday destinations, or the extraordinarily difficult personal choices faced if developing an intimate relationship with someone who was not a GDR citizen. And, at the very end, the frustrations were massively exacerbated by the ever more visible, tangible collapse of the East German economy. Once it was clear that the political deprivations would not even be to some degree compensated by social security and a modest degree of material well-being, for huge numbers of East Germans there could be no justification whatsoever for the continued existence of SED rule. Thus for very many people the limits were very obvious, and affected their behaviour in myriad ways, to which the rich repertoire of GDR jokes bears ample witness.

Once one breaks loose from a focus solely on the formal structures of social and political institutions to explore the wider dynamics of GDR social history, it becomes clear why a framework emphasising power, repression and fear does not do justice to the very different memories of many of those who lived and worked under this regime. Both among grass-roots functionaries who did their best to improve living and working conditions in their local areas, and among large numbers of essentially apolitical people who at least thought that they were able to live 'perfectly ordinary lives', there were many East Germans of goodwill and good faith. To categorise them as immoral collaborators and accomplices in an evil regime, or simpleton dupes of ideology, or even heroes of opposition and victims of repression, is fundamentally to misrepresent the ways in which East German society, for the most part, functioned. And while it is vital to understand patterns of political repression and dissent in a dictatorship, it is important also to reinsert back into the wider historical picture the vast areas of life that cannot be adequately encompassed by such a focus. There was, in curious and multiple ways, also a 'normality' about the history of the GDR that needs to be recaptured.

Rethinking approaches to GDR history

The old dictum that 'social history is history with the politics left out', if indeed it is ever true, could not be less apposite with respect to the GDR. The social history of the GDR was fundamentally affected by politics; it cannot be understood without analysis of political structures and processes. Accounts of politically determined social policies are not only integral to any social history,

but blindingly obvious in a highly interventionist state such as the GDR, in which a fundamental and explicit political aim to transform society was evident from the outset. Yet, for a variety of reasons, the social history of the GDR is neither exhausted nor comprehensively explained by an analysis of the effects of – or resistances to – top-down policies alone.⁸ Of course it was a dictatorship. But it was not only a dictatorship.⁹

All modern societies are in large measure intrinsically constituted and affected by political regimes that claim responsibility for a wide range of matters from birth, through socialisation, education and employment, to retirement and death; from collective welfare to warfare. There is no modern society in which people's individual lives – in aspects ranging from birth weight, through acquisition of social or regional accent, probabilities of educational success, patterns of social mobility, consumption and life chances, to even the causes, timing and manner of death – are not in some way affected by the political system in which they live. Nor is there any modern state that has succeeded in shaping its social policies to achieve exactly the effects intended: there is always more to societal and cultural change than what any given government of the day seeks to achieve. Yet, while no Western historian would seek to write the social history of a Western society solely in terms of regime policies and popular resistance, this is very much how the social history of the GDR has been conceived, particularly when added in to general historical overviews of political developments.

These considerations suggest we need to rethink approaches to GDR history. First, GDR history needs to be considered not merely from the perspective of 'dictatorship', or 'communist state', but also from that of 'modern industrial society'.¹⁰ Changes in society were not merely driven by the political agendas of the ruling elite. There was of course clearly an interaction between the ever-changing international context and the articulation and execution of SED goals and policies. This was most notable in the manner of the GDR's birth and eventual demise in relation to the Soviet Union: the GDR was a product of the Cold War, and its end came with the end of the Soviet empire and the bipolar system. But the social history of the GDR was implicated in and affected by far wider trends that were not merely political in the narrow sense of the word. Despite the marked differences in organisational framework, not to mention official ideology, there were interactions and similarities between trends in East German society and those of Western industrial states from the 1950s to the 1980s. This does not mean rejecting the narrative of politically driven social change, but rather both augmenting it and recasting it within a wider framework of changes occurring across many industrial societies in the later twentieth century.

The GDR, however politically isolated by the Iron Curtain between East and West, was not insulated from broader socio-economic and cultural changes in the latter half of the twentieth century. East German society was no less affected than other modern industrial states – though in different ways, through a different institutional system, and at a different pace – by the implications of industrial production and technological revolution, internal migration and the growth of urban areas and new towns, and the internationalisation of communications and the spread of youth culture in an increasingly global system. Collective mentalities and subcultures were affected by changing styles in, for example, youth culture and popular music, exposure to Western television, and the increasing porosity of the inner-German border. Patterns of consumerism, materialism and increasing individualisation were noticeable in East Germany, if in different ways from those of the West. Both the wider population, and those responsible for taking key economic decisions, were affected by these trends. The utopian hopes and aspirations of the 'age of ideology' gave way in the GDR, as in different ways in so many Western states, to a form of everyday 'consumer socialism', in which the individual pursuit of the fulfilment of everyday hopes and needs took precedence over collective projects and idealistic plans for the future.

Secondly, it is necessary to rethink the social character of political processes in the GDR, with respect to the means, the structures and the goals of politics. In this book, I develop the notion of a 'participatory dictatorship'. This somewhat oxymoronic expression is intended to emphasise the extent to which 'democratic centralism', as practised in the GDR, did actually involve very widespread participation of large numbers of people, for a wide variety of reasons: not always or necessarily out of genuine commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideals; nor always or necessarily as a result of being simply coerced or cowed into compliance; nor merely in a sometimes defiant representation of one's 'own interests', as suggested by the notion of *Eigen-Sinn* (hard to translate – literally, 'own meanings' or 'own sense', but generally used to focus on the active defence and pursuit of personal interests).¹¹ The notion of a participatory dictatorship is intended to underline the ways in which the people themselves were at one and the same time both constrained and affected by, and yet also actively and often voluntarily carried, the ever changing social and political system of the GDR.

The exercise of power was in many areas both far more multifaceted and complex, and also less sinister and repressive, than totalitarian theorists would have us believe. The 'state' or the 'regime' was not a unitary actor, which simply did (mostly nasty) things to the ill-defined, undifferentiated mass of 'the people'. There were clearly hugely repressive and utterly reprehensible aspects

of the SED regime; but there were also areas in which thousands of citizens cooperated and felt they were able to pursue common goals and ideals.¹² The notion of what constituted the East German state thus needs in some way to be extended to take into account its less sinister, less oppressive aspects. We have to recognise that political goals were not always or only to do with the maintenance and retention of power; there were many common humanitarian goals, as in areas of health policy, housing and gender equality, that were not achieved in practice largely because of economic constraints, but which were not always or intrinsically manipulative, coercive or repressive. A very small ruling elite, with a linked apparatus of repression and injustice, was supported and sustained by a very much larger number of people who played key roles in trying, under exceedingly difficult circumstances, to build a better society, or at least to make the best of the present through engaging in such communal activities as attempting to 'beautify' their village, construct a new swimming pool, or organise a youth sports festival. At the same time, 'society' was far more diverse, and characterised by complex varieties of subcultures and milieus, than an undifferentiated notion of 'the people' – let alone of a society that was allegedly 'frozen' under the dead hand of the regime – might suggest.

This analysis, particularly with respect to state policies but also in relation to popular participation and patterns of conformity, inevitably entails moral evaluations of the spectrum of what is more or less 'reprehensible'. The point here, however, is not so much what historians as outside observers think about these issues (although clearly some historians see it as a central task to engage in either denunciation or apologetics); rather, it is to highlight the fact that people living in the GDR were active participants in a more complex maze of practices, and inhabited a more complex moral and political universe, than has frequently been posited. There was at least limited space for more dialogues and 'conversations' in the East German SED state than is allowed for in many approaches. These were, of course, asymmetrical conversations; but there was a great deal more input from a variety of quarters, at least within a narrow range of policy areas, than is generally recognised.¹³ Over time – and particularly with détente and international recognition of the GDR – citizens were not only enabled, but actively encouraged, to voice their opinions in a variety of (well-controlled) ways. The treatment of issues arising from 'discussions' and letters of complaint, as well as related reports by trade-union officials, parliamentary committees and investigative commissions and inquiries, provide evidence of very real concern about, and strenuous efforts to deal with, questions relating to housing, transport, childcare, shopping, the demands of shift work and so on. The widespread, if not universal, desire to find a resolution of these everyday issues, with their immense impact both on the economic

productivity of the system as a whole and on any sense of individual satisfaction or well-being, was common both to those complaining and those charged with providing responses to complaints. Moreover, many of the conflicts that existed in the GDR were not between 'state' and 'society' or 'Party' and 'people', but rather within and cross-cutting different levels of political and social hierarchies. On some issues, and at some times more than others, policymakers made efforts to listen and respond to the voiced needs and frustrations of certain groups of people, particularly the economically productive – so long, of course, as they stayed within the closely defined limits of permissible debate and did not touch on the fundamental parameters of the GDR's very existence.

Paradoxically, this very sensitivity to popular opinion on domestic social-policy issues contributed both to the short-term stabilisation and the ultimate downfall of the GDR. Honecker's policies of the 1970s were designed to improve material conditions and heighten popular support as well as raise productivity. At the same time, there was an institutionalisation and routinisation of a 'grumbling culture' that led people not only to expect, but even to demand, delivery from the state. Just as – in very different ways – heightened expectations of the state in the post-war society of the Weimar Republic produced systemic frustration in the 1920s such that particular problems became conflated with critiques of 'the system' as a whole, so too in the GDR the regime's unrealisable claims to be the provider and organiser of all finally contributed to its undoing.

By phrasing it thus – participatory dictatorship – we can wilfully emphasise both the relatively broad popular participation, and the undoubted differences between this form of dictatorial political system and the representative democracies of the capitalist West (which, it should not be forgotten, have their own priorities with respect to which voices can be heard and what issues are on the practical agenda, as well as their own shortcomings with respect to resultant inequalities in practice). And we can seek to do justice to the realities of life as actually experienced by the vast majority of GDR citizens, while not overlooking the constraints and injustices of the political system within which they lived their lives.

Rejecting a totalitarian interpretation does not entail sticking one's head into the sand and denying the brute facts of force and repression in communist society, nor overlooking the utopian moments – the visions which, for the committed, provided the justification for highly proactive interventions in social policy – as well as manipulative and repressive means for clinging onto power. Without understanding these broad (and by now relatively familiar) parameters, both in terms of the changing overall shape of society and in

terms of changing domestic and international politics, one cannot fully comprehend changes within any specific area of inquiry.¹⁴

To paraphrase Karl Marx, East Germans sought to make their own history, although in conditions not of their own choosing. Some were indeed victims of oppression or heroes of resistance, although such roles would have been merely elements in more complex biographies; others sought to lead lives that cannot be reduced merely to compromise, acquiescence, retreat into private niches and public conformity. This vocabulary of life in a dictatorship is applicable only to a proportion of the population at particular times and moments in their lives; it by no means captures comprehensively the ways in which the vast majority of East Germans lived multifaceted lives, made careers, cared for family and friends, and sought to improve their conditions and to make sense of their modes of being in the world in a great variety of circumstances.

Viewed from the perspectives just outlined, distinctive patterns can be discerned. Although emerging somewhat differently in different areas, two simultaneous, and perhaps in part mutually contradictory, developments begin to become evident over the course of GDR history.

On the one hand, the character of the new institutional landscape and its constitutive collective entities – state institutions, social organisations, economic enterprises, bloc parties and so on – changed over time such that what was initially forcibly imposed from above eventually became routinised, accepted or 'carried' by very large numbers of people in ways that are not adequately exhausted by notions of dictatorial imposition by a repressive Party-state. There was an enormous penumbra of overlap between what from one perspective can be seen as 'state', and from another as 'society', indicating the difficulties with this old dichotomy as a tool of analysis.

Yet at the same time, the desired 'socialist personalities', the individuals whose lives were supposed to be devoted to the collective enterprise of building socialism, did not emerge. Quite the opposite in fact. Over time, one can observe a complex set of processes that may roughly be subsumed under the concept of emergent individualism, or an enhanced focus on the fulfilment of individual goals, which were increasingly frustrated by the constraints of a failing economy. These mutual trends can be observed, in one way or another, in virtually every area of society.

In the process of exploring East German social history, it becomes ever more clear that 'society' was neither 'frozen' – 'laid to rest', as some interpretations have it – nor merely some faceless mass that was the passive recipient (or victim) of decisions made on high. Rather, East German society included a wide diversity of people, a range of social groups and subcultures, who actively participated in all sorts of ways in making their own history and thus the

history of the GDR. In this way, it becomes possible to understand the paradox of history and memory with respect to the GDR.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that this paradox is not merely a parochial question about what some would dismiss as a 'footnote' in German history. GDR history, as much as the history of the western Federal Republic of Germany, represents one version of the possibilities that were immanent in the Third Reich. It illustrates the lack of closure in history – the multiple possibilities and routes out of any given constellation of forces. Moreover, the formation of a distinctive East German society is central to the understanding of united Germany after 1990. It is as much a part of the complex and divided history of the German present as is the history of West Germany.

But GDR history is also of more far-reaching significance. It is rooted in a wider set of questions that have exercised political and social thinkers for centuries: how is it possible to bring about a fairer, more equal, more just society? How is it possible to bring about a secular paradise, a utopia not merely of the imagination or of the heavenly afterlife, but rather in this world, which can be reached through realistic mechanisms of change? The answer, according to the prophet of secular paradise in communist colours, Karl Marx, entailed a revolutionary transition, with violent struggle against the privileged and powerful and consolidation under initially dictatorial rule before pure communism could be achieved. In its Leninist and Stalinist variants, this transitional phase saw its bleakest realisation. In the GDR – and indeed in all 'actually existing' communist regimes of the twentieth century – the need for dictatorial control was never transcended: earthly paradise was never attained. While committed communists felt that the ends justified the means, those not committed to the Party vision argued that the use of repressive, manipulative and brutal means nullified any chance whatsoever of achieving the visionary humanistic goals embedded in Marx's ultimately utopian vision. People simply did not change in the ways they were meant to: repression continued to be necessary.

So this book is about the experiences of the people in this wider and ultimately doomed search to achieve paradise on earth; and the ways in which their experiences, perceptions and actions contributed to the complex social and political history of their country, which was not purely made by the ruling Party's policies and practices. It is about the ways in which East German society changed, such that – for all the undisputed political constraints and repression – many East Germans came to feel that they were able to lead 'perfectly ordinary lives' within the GDR. It is about the intersections and disjunctions between dictatorial structures and the experienced normalities of everyday life. This book explores the ways in which the ruling Party's attempts to realise a

communist utopia on earth brought about instead the picture revealed when the Wall fell: the built legacies of decades of good intentions, with soulless new towns and decrepit housing estates; the giant factory complexes – 'people's own enterprises' – or rusting dinosaurs of industry, belching lurid fumes and choking dust; the drab shops and the dearth of decent consumer goods; the symbol of aspiration, endearment and ridicule, the 'Trabi' car; as well as a measure of gender equality, a widespread sense of community and collective responsibility, and the civil courage of those who came out on to the streets in the 'gentle revolution' of 1989. And it asks how different East German society had become from that of those 'fellow Germans' in the West, who shared a common language and history, but had very different experiences during the extraordinary decades of separation following the collapse of the Third Reich. Social history, on this conception, is not history with the politics left out; rather, it is history with the people put back in.

The organisation of the argument

The book is organised in three major parts, although the themes within each overlap and run, in different ways, throughout the book.

From its inception, the GDR was characterised by a combination of repression and vision. Following a brief overview of the changing shape of East German society as a whole, Part One focuses more closely on some of the pragmatic and everyday consequences of visions for a better society. Succeeding chapters explore such seemingly mundane topics as housing, leisure and health, and examine the ways in which social identities rooted in the supposedly 'biological' categories of age and gender changed over nearly half a century. All these areas of life – some of which one might think were hardly 'political' at all, others of which are more obviously of direct relevance – have major implications for the ways in which we conceive GDR history. Whichever area one looks at, distinctions between 'state' and 'society' appear ever more difficult to sustain. Even conceptions of 'ruling through' society, or society being 'drenched with authority' do not fully allow us to think of the ways in which the characters of people's behaviour, attitudes and physical lives were constructed and affected by the period and place in which they were living. Yet to say this is not as yet to say very much.

Artificial distinctions are often drawn between the 'public sphere' and the 'private sphere'; it is also frequently alleged that East Germans could 'withdraw' into private 'niches', escaping the pressures of the intrusive state. It is of course true that in all societies people can at times withdraw from the stresses, tensions, challenges, rewards and opportunities of one area of their

endeavours into the different combinations of such forces and experiences in another sphere; and that, for many but by no means all people, for much but by no means all of the time, the experiences of home, family and leisure activities may seem more relaxing and pleasurable, more under personal control, than those of work or politics, where centres of power are more distant and daily activities less under individual control. But this does not mean that possibilities and constraints of the supposedly 'private' spheres of home and leisure are any less shaped by the wider social and political environment. Similarly, people's experiences of health and illness, family size and life expectancy, may well be interpreted by themselves as the results of fate, genetics or personal lifestyle choices. But as physical animals, from birth to death human beings are also shaped (even literally) by the times and places into which they are born, and the character of the states within which they live. These points are true, in principle, of all societies, though there are very wide differences in practice in the ways in which the character of a state affects the life-experiences of its population. Analysis of the ways in which the areas of housing, leisure, health and lifestyle developed and were experienced in the GDR yields some surprising findings.

One of the most notable is the sheer extent of broad agreement between sections of the SED leadership and significant groups among the wider population over general aims and goals, even if for often different reasons. Within the undesired but unchallengeable confines of a walled-in state, it was in most people's interests to be able to lead as comfortable, enjoyable and healthy lives as possible. Frictions and disputes were generally rooted in disappointed expectations and common frustrations about the ways in which widely shared ideals could not be realised in practice. During the earlier part of the GDR's existence, experienced shortcomings were seen by many people, in so far as they considered the matter in any depth, as rooted in the legacy of the wartime past; in insufficiencies that might in principle eventually be overcome through increased productivity and economic development; or which might be dealt with successfully on an individual level, through active pursuit of 'connections' and the like. But the balance of both popular perceptions and the economically practicable changed over time. A scheduled improvement in the GDR's economy remained on the official historical agenda for a very long time after it was no longer seriously plausible, but it became increasingly apparent to increasing numbers of people – SED functionaries as well as 'ordinary' citizens – that inadequate facilities, crumbling housing and environmental pollution were endemic to a collapsing economy.

Part Two addresses the complex issues of structural and societal change, of social revolution and patterns of stratification and social inequality in 'actually

existing socialism'. In theory, pure communism should have produced a classless society in which the imposed division of labour was overcome and all humans were free to follow their own interests and develop their own aptitudes. In practice, the GDR never officially reached this stage: even the 'actually existing socialism' of the Honecker era remained riddled with social inequalities that, while evident to GDR sociologists, were resistant to easy conceptualisation; historians and social scientists since 1990 have not had much easier a job of making sense of the cross-cutting patterns of stratification. The situation is riddled with ambiguities. Power and social stratification interacted in ways that do not neatly overlap; the GDR as communist state and the GDR as modern industrial state often faced conflicting demands and challenges, with intrinsic tensions and inherent contradictions. There were, in effect, multiple systems of stratification: older notions of status and prestige were increasingly challenged and displaced by new hierarchies of power; there was an inversion of the inherited class–prestige hierarchy; and there were new inequalities of lifestyle and consumption. The duality noted in the rhetoric, if not the reality, of the Third Reich, was put into practice with the East German social revolution. Political power displaced economic capital as the key to elite status and control over resources.¹⁵ Given the curious combination of high official prestige and often appalling working conditions for the manual working class, 'class' in the sense of occupation in the sphere of production remained highly significant; but it was overlain and cross-cut by issues to do with prestige and consumption. And curiously, the tendency of this most collectivist society was towards a pattern of increasing individualism under consumer socialism.

Part Three looks at ways in which not only the political elites and the cultural intelligentsia interacted and debated (or sought to channel and contain attempts to debate) but also at the ways in which ordinary people were intrinsically and intimately involved in the 'enactment' of the state in everyday life. The extent to which large numbers of East Germans actively participated in social and cultural institutions, contributed to collective 'discussions', or used individual channels of complaint, is very striking, particularly from the point of view of received theories of 'totalitarian dictatorships'. This was not 'democracy' in the Western, liberal sense: no whiff of freedom of association, let alone of freedom of movement if this meant what was designated as the crime of *Republikflucht* – escape from the Republic. But there was far more space both for active participation, sustaining the institutions and practices of East German society, and also for what might be called 'constructive griping' over shared aims with respect to domestic issues, than totalitarian theory allows space for. Very large numbers of East Germans made a significant

contribution, under very difficult circumstances, in contested attempts to realise conflicting visions of a better society in the here and now for those who had to live in it. To more of a degree than is generally recognised, East Germans were indeed able to have some input into 'making their own lives', and particularly so in areas of widely shared goals and values.

The state was involved in all areas of life. But the experience of this state involvement ranged from the oppressive and unpleasant, to the facilitative and supportive. For many people it is also arguable that, in terms of everyday life, it was possible both to expect much of the state – for example in terms of housing – and yet at the same time almost to ignore its demands and expectations if one had few ambitions within the system. The main problem for a state party that claimed to be doing 'everything for the well-being of the people!' ('Alles zum Wohle des Volkes!') was, however, that it also had to take all the blame. Since the East German economy not only never reached a level of performance that could compete with that of West Germany, but actually entered a process of ever more visible decline, East Germans in the later 1980s had ever more to complain about. It was not merely 'ordinary' East Germans, nor only those involved in the running of economic enterprises, but also the many functionaries of the mass organisations, and those involved in town planning, housing construction, or in running a variety of leisure facilities, who were concerned about growing inadequacies and shortcomings. Complaints were thus not so much, or not only, about the impositions of or constraints imposed by the state – which could by many people be relatively easily navigated, exploited, or even to a large extent ignored – but rather, or also, about the ways in which the state failed to live up to expectations and fell short of achieving its own proclaimed goals. Actively sustaining the state, feeling one could live a 'perfectly normal life' within the GDR, and ultimately critiquing it and contributing to its downfall, were thus not mutually incompatible.

The issues discussed in each section are overlapping, the themes dealt with in each part being relevant across the whole book, and are merely separated out in this way for a degree of convenience; but the hardest part of writing a social history is the recognition that all the parts are interrelated in innumerable ways. Analysis is not mimesis.

Part I

Visions of the good society (and how they were not realised in practice)