

Chapter Twelve

In place of a public sphere? 'Discussions', cultures and subcultures

It is well known that around three and a half million people fled East Germany while it was still possible to do so in the 1950s and that very large numbers were involved in the popular uprising of June 1953 and in other forms of active protest and opposition to the East German regime over the years, including widespread protests in 1968 and the growth of a variety of forms of political dissent in the 1970s and '80s, well before the mass demonstrations and stampede to the West of autumn 1989.¹ But what has often been less seriously explored is the way in which there was space for some form of discussion within the system itself; and the implications of such channels of discussion for people's experiences of life in the GDR. This system arguably only really came into its own following the building of the Wall and the securing of a rather different, self-contained – or imprisoned – society. Yet it was important for the stability of the GDR, particularly in the middle decades, and it played a role, too, in the climate of open critique that ultimately contributed to the downfall of the GDR.

Clearly there was no 'public sphere' in the GDR in the Western sense. Newspapers, television coverage, social and political organisations, were all in one way or another ultimately controlled by the SED; the borders of permissible debate and behaviour were as closely policed as were the physical borders of the country itself. Those who stepped too far out of line were subjected to a variety of measures for disciplining, metaphorically having their 'spine broken' (to use a favoured German expression for forcing people into a submissive mould), manipulation, bullying, or, at the extreme, severe and often arbitrary punishment including incarceration under appalling conditions in the Stasi prisons. Human rights to freedom of speech and freedom of association were clearly not priorities on the SED agenda, and the breaches of human rights in the GDR are well known. On some of the more critical

accounts, personalities in the GDR were 'deformed' by a peculiarly constraining, repressive if paternalistic system of rule.

But this did not mean that there were no forums for any kind of collective debate about the character and future of East German society, or for the development of different subcultures and lifestyles. The bases, channels and outlets for such debates were always subject to varying degrees of political control. But far from being 'laid to rest', or repressed into dumb conformity, East German society was constituted by a rich variety of voices – not all of which, of course, were given equal space for expression, but which nevertheless played a role in the life experiences of perhaps the vast majority of 'ordinary' East Germans who did not seek to challenge and change the system but rather made their lives within the boundaries of the permissible.

None of this should be overstated: the GDR was no democracy in the Western sense of the term. But the story of political dissidents and opposition, which has rightly received much attention since 1990, has tended to displace from view the simultaneous story of constructive input on the part of very large numbers of ordinary East Germans. There was a curious combination of dissent and opposition, and constructive (if often disgruntled) critique; both aspects – or rather the full and often ambiguous palette of colours and shadings of critical participation and reaction – need to be held simultaneously in the picture. Recognition of the (limited) spaces for discussion and debate is an important ingredient in explaining the 'people's paradox': many East Germans did feel they were at least on occasion able to have a legitimate voice in matters of collective rather than merely individual concern, and that they could play an active role in shaping their own social environment and suggesting improvements for the future; and yet at the same time that they critiqued the GDR for very real shortcomings. Many East Germans also had a sense of being able to 'make their own lives', in the sense of abstaining from participation in the East German variety of the rat race, and simply opting for alternative lifestyles in ways that they found personally fulfilling.

'State poets', critical spirits and cultural interventions

Intelligent people in any kind of regime – whether capitalist or communist – do not appreciate being constrained, controlled or hoodwinked by political and media manipulation. And there were plenty of people in the GDR who had a relatively low opinion of flat-footed functionaries and dull ideologues, but who retained a dream of a better form of socialism – or, at least, felt there was greater opportunity for developing this in the East rather than the West.

The choice – or rather, the feeling that it was not so much a choice but merely a question of which regime was ‘the lesser of two evils’ – could be agonising for individuals. Victor Klemperer, having miraculously survived throughout the Hitler regime, was under no illusions about the character of the GDR; but he was even more bitter about the failure of the Federal Republic to deal with the Nazi heritage. As he noted in diary entries in April 1958: ‘Personally, I find the people in Bonn hateful; but the pig-headed hostility to culture, the lack of education and the tyranny of the Party here daily get on my nerves.’² He continues by criticising ‘the blatant battle for culture [*Kulturkampf*], the blatant education policy, the blatant arse-licking [*Arschkriecherei*] of the LDP, the CDU and NPD ... [It’s just that] Bonn is *even* more hateful to me than “Pankow”.’³ He summarises the situation in the two German states of the late 1950s, weighing different aspects and levels of disagreeability against each other:

Everywhere ‘flight from the Republic’ [*Republikflucht*], particularly among doctors, university professors, the intelligentsia. The battle for culture, the passport law, the tyranny, the pressures on conscience, the way children are torn apart – it’s Nazism through and through. And in the Bonn state an open Hitler regime, ministers and generals from the Hitler state – but in general the individual lives in somewhat greater freedom ... [and] can express opposing opinions in the newspapers, whereas here the press etc. are closed off to individuals – but over there Hitler supporters can also openly pursue their hate campaigns etc. etc. Vile, and always the same and every day even more vile.⁴

Clearly there was a gulf between those in positions to impose the dumb ideological tenets of the new regime and those more critical spirits trying to think through ways to a better form of society. For the latter, the choice for the GDR was very often a critical choice for what they perceived as the lesser of two evils, and compromises were constantly essential to maintain any kind of discussion.

Members of the cultural intelligentsia – the core of which was actually only a rather small group of people – who were in principle committed to at least some version of the communist project found it possible in a number of ways to seek to have an input into internal debates. Christa Wolf, Stefan Heym and others repeatedly – but always within bounds – made critical interventions in debates about the character and future of the GDR. At times such interventions seemed easier, at others there were stronger restrictions, as periods of liberalisation (the period 1963–5, the early 1970s) were followed by periods of clampdown (the Eleventh Plenum in 1965, the expulsion of Biermann in 1976).⁵ Writers such as Günter de Bruyn, Christoph Hein, Jurek Becker and

many others constantly contributed to sometimes veiled debates about the character and shortcomings of the development towards some form of would-be socialist society in the GDR.

It is in some senses too easy to divide the cultural intelligentsia simply into those ‘in favour of’ and those ‘against’ the regime. The relationship between intellectuals in one or another area of endeavour and the socialist project was by and large far more ambivalent. Nor was it the case that intellectuals were in any sense expected merely to praise the status quo: criticism of one sort or another was, within limits, part of the very task of ‘constructing’ the GDR. It is also perhaps a little too easy, perhaps glib, to periodise the cultural production of East German creative writers, poets, artists and film-makers purely according to the ups and downs of official cultural policy. Yet certain overall trends in the character of those public discussions that could take place can nevertheless be perceived.

Relatively early novels such as Brigitte Reimann’s *Ankunft im Alltag* (roughly, ‘Arrival in Everyday Life’, 1961), or Christa Wolf’s *Der geteilte Himmel* (‘The Divided Heaven’, 1962), managed to portray the sheer difficulties of the everyday construction of socialism, both literally – in building sites and industrial plants – and metaphorically, in terms of the social interrelations among very different individuals, all of whom needed in one way or another to work through the tensions of the new society. Despite recognition of the massive difficulties involved in trying to create a better society under the given conditions – including, at the end of Wolf’s novel, the brute fact of the Wall and the finalising of German division – these novels were essentially optimistic about the possibility of creating a better society.

Many films of the early 1960s, too, succeeded both in grappling with the very real strains and tensions of the present and yet suggesting ways forward. Somewhat ironically, even those that fell victim to the cultural slaughter unleashed by the Eleventh Plenum portrayed East German society as one in which there were signs that a better future could, or indeed would, eventually be able to triumph. Films such as Kurt Maetzig’s *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (‘The Rabbit is Me’), Hermann Zschoche’s *Karla*, Frank Vogel’s *Denk bloß nicht, ich heule* (‘Just Don’t Think I’m Crying’), all produced in 1965, and the perhaps best-known film of this era, Frank Beyer’s 1966 adaptation of Erik Neutsch’s novel *Spur der Steine* (‘Trail of Stones’) were remarkably frank in their portrayals of the shortcomings of East German society. Depictions of the official representatives of the new society – whether in the person of party bureaucrat, prominent judge, trade union official, heavy-handed head teacher or school inspector – were often surprisingly unflattering, given that such films could emerge only after months of internal discussion and adaptation in the

light of the reality or perceived threat of censorship. At the same time, however, there were clear glimmerings of hope in each case, such as through the figure of a young protagonist, hovering between critique and commitment, often treated with unexpected kindness or clemency by an older, somewhat avuncular functionary. Depictions of struggles and tensions in this *Aufbau* period were, then, still conceived as contributions to pointing a constructive way forwards.

Oddly, while the literati of East Germany continued to grapple with the problems of their society, a shift in emphasis or focus of the cultural production of the 1970s and '80s can be discerned that runs parallel to wider shifts in social attitudes and relations. There is – just as in public opinion caught in official reports and surveys – a trend towards bracketing out wider questions about the political whole and its potential future, and an enhanced focus on the individual, or topics to do with personal fulfilment and individual identity in the present. Films and novels to some extent enter the era of the *Alltag* ('everyday life') with debates about daily issues and personal relationships that do not stand for wider issues. Typical of this movement is the contrast between, for example, the role of love triangles in Brigitte Reimann's *Ankunft im Alltag* of 1961 and, just over a decade later, the widely popular film by scriptwriter Ulrich Plenzdorf and director Heiner Carow, *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* of 1973. In this later film, the choice between potential partners for both of the key protagonists is not at the same time a choice between different stances towards the political order as it is for the young heroine Recha in the earlier novel. Many novels of the later 1970s and '80s deal with individual questions of self-fulfilment and personal identity, rather than issues to do with the character of society as a whole, as evident, for example, in the growing literature on women's personal identities in this period, a development echoed, too, in later GDR films.

Film-making depended of course on significant investment of money, equipment and teams of producers and actors. Even films that were in the event made, after months of production, might ultimately be killed off by officially orchestrated criticism after a very short screening. Film production was thus far more easily controlled, and far more dependent on the state than was the more lonely pursuit of writing, where authors could often come to arrangements with censors through a combination of veiled writing and prior self-censorship; and poetry was a form that lent itself particularly well to ambiguity. But in every form of creative endeavour in the GDR there was almost inevitably some form of engagement with the political context, giving rise to multiple possible interpretations. In the visual arts, for example, paintings such as Wolfgang Mattheuer's *Die Flucht des Sisyphos* ('The Flight of Sisyphus', 1972), depicting a working-class figure (represented much on the

lines of earlier socialist realism) fleeing down a bleak hillside in a somewhat surreal landscape away from the mammoth boulder he has been condemned to push repeatedly up the hill, or Mattheuer's *Die Ausgezeichnete* (roughly, 'The Award-winner', 1973–4), showing an apparently miserable, resigned and lonely elderly woman – or rather perhaps just a simple member of the working class embarrassed at being singled out for attention? – who has been given flowers in recognition of her contribution to socialist labour, illustrate the ambiguity and scope for cultural critique that was possible within GDR art.⁶

Any sort of writing could in principle, if it could not officially be published, or not published in sufficient quantities to be widely available (another form of semi-censorship), be read aloud in small circles. Some texts were in fact first published in the West; although writers were often to some degree protected by international status and visibility, they might then be pursued by euphemistically framed 'tax' laws, or other unpleasant consequences, particularly for works explicitly engaging with present realities as in the case of Rudolf Bahro's critique of 'actually existing socialism', *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* (1978). The cultural intelligentsia was also riddled through and through with Stasi collaborators and informants – including, briefly, the great 'state poet' Christa Wolf, occasioning a storm of controversy when this revelation followed hard on the heels of her post-1990 publication of a novelette describing a day under Stasi surveillance, *Was bleibt?*⁷ Even the allegedly highly dissident 'scene' of Prenzlauer Berg 'alternative poets' in the 1980s had Stasi informants at its heart, most notoriously in the shape of Sascha Anderson.

Thus any notion of a 'public sphere' in any genuine sense was severely circumscribed by the SED's express concerns about giving ammunition to the 'class enemy', about the 'abuse' of critical utterances by the Western media, and about the possibility of fomenting internal unrest. There were always clear limits, many of which were more constant features than the periodic visible ups and downs of cultural policy might suggest. Censorship, while an uncomfortable fact of life, was one that in different ways many writers learnt to circumvent, address, evade and live with. The public image had to be strenuously controlled by the Party, as demonstrated by Honecker's intensive concern with press presentations of himself and Party policies. The restrictions on the extent of any wider public sphere were quite clear, as articulated, for example, by the playwright Heiner Müller in a small circle discussing the controversial statement, signed by key members of the cultural intelligentsia, protesting against the enforced exile of Wolf Biermann:

The point now is to see what can be made of this situation, how it can be used as a chance to talk about the things that we all want to talk about, and that could only

ever be talked about in such circles. I do not think it is possible any more, in the current international context of the GDR, just to define the public sphere as the public sphere in factories, institutions and so on. The press also has finally to open up slowly as a forum for debate. Of course the question of how much is possible here will remain a controversial one.⁸

As far as the SED leadership under Honecker was concerned, the question was not merely controversial: it was closed. The public image of the GDR had to remain without any vestiges of dissent and uncontrolled debate, despite Honecker's desire to present himself as a reformer, encouraging 'dialogue'. For critical members of the cultural intelligentsia, there could in these circumstances be no public sphere in any real sense.

It would, however, be very unwise to over-generalise in this most diverse area. Debates among East German intellectuals in the Kulturbund and in unofficial discussion circles were far more lively than anything that was able to appear in print. The twists and turns of official policy, and of the various alternative 'bohemian' scenes in the GDR, have been traced in detail by cultural scholars, and it would be out of place to try even to begin to summarise the complexities in this context. But by the time the big names of the GDR cultural intelligentsia came out on the metaphorical barricades of the 'gentle revolution', sharing a platform in Berlin's Alexanderplatz at the mass demonstration on 4 November 1989 with such unlikely revolutionaries as the long-term spy Markus Wolf and calling for a 'dialogue', it was clear that such a dialogue had long hence been taking place in far wider quarters than merely among the 'state thinkers and poets'.

Controlled participation in public debate

Public debate was of course always controlled, and nowhere more so than when instigated by the SED itself. Here, however, it is important to distinguish between the undoubtedly often cynical and manipulative aims (on which, incidentally, politicians in the GDR did not have a monopoly) of at least some of those instigating the debates, and the ways in which orchestrated public 'discussions' were experienced and perceived by East Germans.

At certain levels of the political and social hierarchy, a degree of controlled debate was in part actively fostered, in part tolerated – although at certain times more wide-ranging discussions were possible than at others. Both among the technical experts whose input was essential for an advanced industrial society, and in the sphere of (always-censored) cultural production, it was possible for individuals who were not necessarily politically close to the regime

to have at least some limited say in the development of their society. As far as broader groups of the population were concerned, one of the SED's favourite slogans was: 'work together, plan together and govern together!' ('Arbeite mit, plane mit, regiere mit!'), and there were continued attempts to put this slogan into well-controlled practice. In certain local settings, programmes for 'voluntary' community action – tidying up the village, constructing a new sports facility – could even generate a degree of spontaneous enthusiasm. Within less mainstream subcultural milieus, people initiated and developed all manner of conversations about the kinds of community life they wanted to practise; sometimes in conscious engagement with or in opposition to official conceptions; sometimes in active development of social and cultural traditions that had long predated East German communism, often by many centuries.

Contributions to internal debates took place at all levels of society. In the 1960s – within the security of the Wall – Ulbricht sought to involve more technical experts in processes of planning and advising as an integral part of political decision-making. Stenographic reports of discussions between Ulbricht and his advisers give the impression that Ulbricht appears to have enjoyed debate, frequently making his own impromptu interventions, and often provoking laughter (the reports note *Heiterkeit*, or mirth) in a way not apparently characteristic of Honecker's rule. But Ulbricht also sought to involve wider circles in what might be considered the GDR equivalent of the 'focus groups' and media manipulations of well-controlled agendas of public debate characteristic of later twentieth-century Western politics, although the latter of course did not impose repressive sanctions on those who chose to disagree vociferously and fundamentally with government policies.

One of the ways in which the East German state actively sought to involve citizens was through well-orchestrated 'discussions' of particular policy statements, issues or developments. Such 'discussions' were of course initiated, controlled and evaluated from above. But their purposes were multiple, and not always purely manipulative or malign. 'Discussions' were very closely related to the practice of 'citizen's petitions' or *Eingaben*, and the opinions thus aired were often taken into account in policy-making processes.

'Discussions' were of course designed to serve a number of functions, the most obvious of which are the 'top-down' political functions for the SED. They were in the first instance a useful means of tapping popular opinion – as an information-gathering exercise on matters affecting people in everyday life, perhaps more important than Stasi general 'situation and information' reports. Secondly, they were designed not merely to record but also – or rather – to influence popular opinion, for example by having functionaries put

forward the 'correct' arguments in response to hesitations, doubts, queries and downright 'counter-revolutionary' arguments on the part of the participants. And even if the task of convincing people of the correctness of an unpopular measure proved impossible to achieve (as most blatantly in the case of the building of the Berlin Wall), then at least such discussions could in some measure serve to instruct, by parading what was held to be the 'correct' answer, so that people would know what the current official line was on any given topic. Thus, they served a key educational function. Over time, there is evidence that people began to internalise the categories of discussion, along with some of the underlying concepts and assumptions; they learnt what could or could not be usefully discussed in any given context, and they learnt to deploy – or even, among younger generations, actually internalise – the 'language' of 'actually existing socialism', even if they did not always fully agree with the substance. In an interactive process, popular uses of the language also affected the ways in which those in a position to frame policy thought and responded. Finally, such discussions performed a crucial function in relation to *Kaderpolitik*, or the selection, training and also, where necessary, disciplining of functionaries. Keeping a close eye on who was less than articulate, or who failed to propagate the official line with sufficient energy (to use the favoured expression, those who failed adequately to 'intervene, taking the offensive', or 'offensiv eintreten') was a means towards the identification and weeding out of weak functionaries.

But to recognise these undoubted political functions is not quite to do justice to the place of 'discussions' in the life of the GDR. What such an account leaves out are the ways in which views and voices from below were often (though not always) taken seriously and listened to by those in positions of power. Input from below could, on a rather limited range of matters, even affect the character of policy or the precise formulation of legislation. Of course this was far from always the case, and least of all where the general boundaries of the regime – in all senses – were concerned: the Wall alone is sufficient proof, if such were needed, that where the essential parameters of power were concerned popular opinion mattered not at all. But as far as domestic social policies are concerned, on issues to do with youth or women, for example, there was far greater scope for popular input into policy formation. Over time, people came not exactly to accept but rather (most of the time) to bracket out the Wall or the 'system' as a whole from daily consciousness, and were able to have (at least the sense of) some input into (at least some of) the domestic matters that affected their more immediate existence. They did not, in short, experience the regime as always repressive, in face of which they had to maintain silence or retreat. And in so far as the unwritten

rules of the game were internalised, such processes began to appear more ordinary, more 'normal'. It should perhaps be remembered in this context that widespread cynicism about one's own capacity to affect events, or about the motives and morals of politicians, is not unique to communist states. A degree of resignation, or acceptance of one's fate, is common to all those who have had to develop a folk wisdom of 'you have to make the best of it', 'you've only got one life', and similar sentiments, whatever the political system.

The Wall itself was of course a non-negotiable issue for the regime. Thus 'discussions' about the 'National Document' of March 1962, which inevitably raised issues relating to the inner-German border, could only be 'educational' in intent. Yet the mere fact of the Wall's existence led to changes in the character and possibilities of debate within a GDR whose labour supply was now – for the worst of reasons – more secure. Thus the second decade of Ulbricht's rule saw a wide range of public 'discussions'. There were frequent well-orchestrated 'discussions' around particular political events, such as Party conferences and important anniversaries such as the fiftieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution in 1967 or the twentieth anniversary of the GDR itself in 1969. Probably the most genuinely open in purpose were the 'discussions' about specific social policies, designed both to inform citizens of what they were about to receive, and to anticipate and possibly negotiate or deflect potentially critical reactions where concessions, compromises and modifications could readily be made. So for example, in 1965 the Council of Ministers decided that there should be (controlled) public discussion of the new Family Law (*Familiengesetzbuch*). The process of discussion was inaugurated on 14 April, and by 30 September 1965 a staggering total of 33,973 meetings had been arranged to discuss the proposed legislation. Discussions were also conducted in the press, on radio and television, and in 'readers' and listeners' circles'. Editors of local and national newspapers had the duty of sending on all letters to *Bezirk* law courts and to the Ministry of Justice. Arising from these communications, 23,737 specific suggestions were made, of which around half concerned the proposed legislation directly; and, on the basis of these 'discussions', it has been estimated that perhaps 230 changes were made to specific details of the new family code.⁹

The 1968 constitution, which explicitly enshrined the 'leading role' of the SED, was also the focus of extensive 'discussions' in the lead-up to a plebiscite that was to give the new constitution the seal of popular legitimation. For a variety of reasons, 1968 was a turning point in a large number of both capitalist and communist states, with political and cultural clashes over a range of issues, linking matters of international war and peace (notably Vietnam) to individual lifestyles and gender roles ('hippies', bra-burning, rethinking

sexuality) under slogans such as 'make love not war', and seeking to redefine politics in a wide variety of ways (workers marching with students in Paris, young Germans challenging the roles of their parents' generation under Nazism, Alexander Dubček's reform policies in Czechoslovakia). Even had 1968 not been so notable for such a cluster of internationally significant developments, including not least the suppression of Dubček's reforms – the 'Prague spring' – by Warsaw Pact troops, the new constitution in the GDR might have aroused little general attention. It was in large part merely registering the realities of GDR politics nearly two decades after the state's foundation; it reflected more accurately the existing political system than had the constitution of 1949, drafted at a time when the division of Germany was viewed as merely temporary and provisional. Thus in terms of any really fundamental constitutional issues, the views of ordinary East Germans were not likely to make much of a dent.

Yet in a number of respects the public discussions surrounding the introduction of the new constitution have to be taken seriously. In general, it seems that by the spring of 1968 in the GDR, most people were capable of living a double-track life: on the one hand perfectly aware of the outer constraints on their freedom, on the other hand prepared to participate in channelled discussions about the detail of domestic policies and arrangements that would affect their everyday lives. This is a form of 'coming to terms with the present' – or, to adapt the words of an old prayer, people having the courage to try to change the things that they could change, the patience to accept those that they could not change, and the wisdom to know the difference.

From FDGB reports of the discussions, it is clear that some questions were debated more intensively and with greater interest than others.¹⁰ Two questions were of course particularly contentious: that of why there was no right to strike contained in the draft of the constitution; and the question of freedom of travel to West Germany, alongside the right to emigration and freedom more generally. Members of the intelligentsia, in particular, seem to have focused on this wider political picture: questions of the relations between the two German states, the status of Berlin, the right to strike, to travel and to emigrate, figured alongside searching questions concerning individual articles, such as those dealing with the right to defence in court, the meaning of *Dringlich-keitsfall* (case of emergency) that would allow the Council of State to have the final decision, and whether 'it will still be possible to hold opposing opinions'. But what is also striking about this report is the way in which – bracketing out these wider questions of freedom – people appear to have been not merely engaged by, but also clearly felt their input could have some impact on, domestic issues that closely affected their own lives.

Thus women, for example, are reported as debating in detail the implications of having not only the constitutional right, but also the duty to work, given problems with how this could be realised in practice if there were insufficient childcare facilities (including for children who were unwell). They also welcomed the fostering of women's chances of obtaining further qualifications, as well as their right to accommodation, and in particular the suggestion that elderly single women should be re-housed in favour of making large flats available for families with children. Somewhat less welcome was the proposal to raise the school leaving age, extending compulsory schooling to the tenth class, which appears to have met considerable hostility from parents of large families who felt they could not afford to have a child delaying the start of work for so long, and from those who were concerned that their child might not have the mental aptitude to meet the demands of the tenth grade. The close and detailed engagement of women and parents with these questions that would affect their daily lives is echoed, if less positively, in the reactions of young people to the draft constitution. Here, what was euphemistically termed 'lack of clarity' (*Unklarheiten*) – in other words, disagreement with official views – seems to have been more widely prevalent, including criticism of the restrictions on freedom if one could not listen freely to Beat music; criticism of the ways in which social background rather than (only) school achievement was taken into account when under consideration for higher and further education; criticisms of the proposal that all young people should have to learn a trade or profession, even if skills were not really needed as a manual worker; criticisms of having to stay at school for more than eight years; and criticisms of restrictions on being able to choose one's own profession or area of apprenticeship due to lack of appropriate training places. It is nevertheless still very striking that these young people seem to have bracketed out (or perhaps had learnt that it was not worth explicitly raising) wider questions, and were, rather, intensively engaged with issues that affected their daily lives.

A local study of the constitutional 'discussions' in Thuringia confirms this general picture in more detail.¹¹ There appears to have been extraordinarily extensive coverage in this area: no fewer than 716,077 (57 per cent) of Bezirk Erfurt's citizens attended meetings or events within one week alone, from 28 March to 3 April. Yet at the same time, even functionaries sometimes appear to have had difficulty explaining the individual articles or the reasons behind some of the constitutional changes. A further feature of note is the fact that, by 1968, the general parameters of the political system and the 'leading role' of the SED were not widely discussed or directly criticised, while attention was focused primarily on more specific policies that affected everyday life, including freedom of movement and socio-economic reforms. Questions

concerning religion (particularly in Catholic areas) and education also appear to have been the subject of considerable controversy. Perhaps the most interesting aspect to emerge from the Thuringian example is the extent to which popular views on religion were actually taken into account by the authorities, leading – in the context also of massive input by the Churches – to revisions and modifications of the draft.¹² In the event, for a variety of reasons the plebiscite delivered the required level of support: when the votes were cast on 6 April 1968, just under 95 per cent of the population who voted proved willing to give their formal assent to the new constitution.

This interlude reveals that by the late 1960s, many East Germans abstained from explicitly challenging the existence, character and continuity of the GDR as a separate state – about which they rightly felt they could do very little – and concentrated rather on making their voices heard with respect to those issues where they could hope to effect changes in a desired direction. A later oppositionist, Freya Klier, commented how at the time of these discussions she was still naive enough to believe that her voice counted for something, and that as a young person she took the discussion very earnestly (although she was also highly ambivalent about the GDR at the time, for a variety of reasons).¹³ Given that Klier was a politically sophisticated and highly intelligent person, her experience of trust and active engagement in the discussions at the time must have been rooted in a wider culture and shared by many less politically sensitive individuals. Another ‘discussion’ of the same year, on proposed reforms of higher education, similarly appears to have been taken very seriously by contemporaries.¹⁴

Similarly, the draft Youth Law of 1974 was circulated widely for consultation before the final version was produced. A study by the ZIJ analysed around 1,200 responses, including 2,400 suggestions, in order to be able ‘better to evaluate the character, strength and spread [among the population] of these arguments and also to provide tips for answers’.¹⁵ Those whose comments were considered came from ‘the widest circles’, ranging from ‘Christian citizens right through to political functionaries’. The character of the SED regime as a ‘listening state’ is well illustrated by this evaluation, which rightly drew attention to the fact that ‘many of the problems raised here will continue to determine the character of discussions in the near future’.¹⁶ Interestingly, around three-quarters of all suggestions relating to the Preamble and the first section of the proposed Youth Law came from Christian circles.¹⁷

The suppression of Dubček’s reforms in Czechoslovakia with the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968, and the rapid repression by the security forces of any signs of protest about this in the GDR, obviously underlines the point that there should be no illusions about the extent of real democracy

in East Germany in this middle period. Nevertheless, this did not preclude a degree of continued popular input into matters of domestic policy formation where the ultimate aims were roughly in line with those of the regime and where there was no risk to the external security or political character of the GDR.

The key point here is not so much that the SED retained ultimate control of policy formation – a point that has been made often enough – but rather that, at least from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, citizens were involved, in however controlled and circumscribed a fashion, in officially orchestrated discussions of domestic policy. Thus many of them at least had the experience of being able to participate actively in discussions on domestic matters that directly affected them, so long as these issues were not politically highly sensitive.

Subcultural variations and distinctive milieus

Discussions, debates and alternative ways of living co-existed also in a wide variety of subcultural milieus that developed and changed in a variety of ways throughout the lifetime of the GDR. Different religious and cultural traditions, regional accents and habits, persisted – as the many jokes about Walter Ulbricht’s Saxon speech readily attest (to speak in a Saxon accent even has a verb of its own in German: *sächseln*). New regional variations developed in part as a result of new economic developments, with changing patterns of settlement, as in the socialist new towns.¹⁸ There were also a variety of subcultural milieus based in more long-standing cultural, social and religious traditions.

Members of the tiny remaining Jewish community – numbering only in the hundreds, among whom the religiously committed community were ageing and dwindling – found themselves in an ambivalent position, privileged and fostered on the one hand, subjected to a degree of constraint on the other.¹⁹ The SED’s policies towards Jews were always somewhat double-edged: Jews were passive ‘victims’ of fascism, rather than active ‘fighters against’ fascism, as communists had been; and the SED was extremely anti-Zionist as far as foreign policy was concerned. Higher pensions for having been ‘persecuted’ by the Nazi regime were counter-balanced by constraints; the Jewish community in the GDR only gained a degree of leeway and support, for example for the renovation of the Berlin synagogue, accompanied by the appointment of an American rabbi, in the later 1980s. The situation on the ground, in terms of daily experiences, was equally ambivalent. Those who survived persecution within the Third Reich, or returned from exile abroad, often had rather

uncomfortable experiences in a German society that had been exposed to, passively condoned or actively carried out Hitler's anti-Semitic policies. Even the children of survivors had ambivalent experiences with respect to their identity and heritage. Anetta Kahane, for example, recounts the difficulties of being 'different' in school, and of being treated with hostility by the parent of a schoolfriend when she came to her house wearing a Star of David on a necklace. She was utterly shocked when, on wandering around the former Jewish quarter of Berlin where her father's family had lived, she asked an elderly resident who it was who had formerly lived here and received the reply: 'Riff-raff. Just scum. Tarts and Jews! Today only decent people live here.'²⁰ There are numerous other instances of everyday anti-Semitism in this and in other accounts of life in the GDR: not quite so headline grabbing as the major incidents, such as the periodic daubing of swastikas, the desecration of graves in the Weissensee Jewish cemetery, or racist physical attacks on individuals, but indicative of a combination of philo-Semitism and anti-Semitism that made Jews feel never completely at home among their German compatriots. This ambivalence is caught well in a scene, based apparently on an autobiographical incident, in Jurek Becker's novel *Bronsteins Kinder* (1986), where the young protagonist, having punched a schoolmate in the showers after swimming, is effectively exonerated by the teacher on spurious grounds relating to his Jewish identity.

The Christian community formed a very much larger, and indeed initially a majority, 'subculture' in the GDR. At the end of the war, in eastern Germany between 90 per cent and 95 per cent of the population belonged to a Christian church, whether Catholic or one of the Protestant regional church organisations in this area of Germany, which was historically predominantly Protestant. The Christian Churches, while subjected to a combination of political attacks and more subtle infiltration, nevertheless continued to play a major role in East German society in all manner of ways, including making a significant contribution to the health and welfare system of the GDR. They also provided a quite distinctive environment and alternative value system for some families and individuals. Catholic communities – totalling somewhere in the region of one million people – were particularly concentrated in certain areas such as the Eichsfeld in Thuringia, lending a quite different flavour to these rural communities, which proved more resistant to processes of secularisation than did the wider Protestant society.²¹ Those who remained active in the various Protestant Churches of the GDR, with eight different regional Churches (*Landeskirchen*), although scattered more sparsely and widely across the GDR than the generally more concentrated Catholic communities, nevertheless inhabited small metaphorical islands forming a very different milieu

from that of the dominant and increasingly secular culture. For most of the GDR's history, people with religious commitment found themselves discriminated against and under more or less active attack from the atheist state. With processes of industrialisation and population movements, particularly in urban centres, Christian beliefs began to decline – although with some notable variations, and not without efforts on the part of the Churches to counter this tide. The original figure of around 15 million Protestants at the time of the foundation of the GDR had shrunk to a mere quarter or so of that total by the 1980s. But in the wake of the 1978 Church-State agreement – an agreement in which the SED in effect sought to co-opt the Church as a long arm of the state, beholden to and ultimately under the control of the dominant SED, which could withdraw its privileged status at any time – the Protestant Churches began to take on renewed political significance in the 1980s. If anywhere, it was within the context and under the protective umbrella of the Protestant Churches that a public sphere of sorts really began to develop in the GDR. Unofficial discussion groups allowed people to explore major issues of the day in a period of heightened international tension and increasingly palpable economic decline without needing constantly to pay obeisance to the official rhetoric or ideology of the SED. It was from within this context that the first unofficial peace movements, and environmentalist and human rights groups began to be formed, which in the later 1980s found the courage to break out from the confines of the church environment. In the revolutionary autumn of 1989, nevertheless, the influence of the Church was still evident in the insistence on non-violent demonstrations, prayer meetings and the use of candles to symbolise the peaceful protests. Without the discipline and spirit infused by the religious penumbra, it is arguable that the demonstrations of September and October 1989 might not have proceeded with such little bloodshed; the history of the end of the GDR might have been far more violent. Religious institutions and the renewed significance of alternative views of life, morality and political responsibility were to prove immensely important in the history of the GDR.²²

More regionally based were the linguistically and culturally distinct communities of the Sorbs, who had mixed experiences in the GDR – although infinitely better than their previous experiences under Nazi repression. The Sorbish or Wendish peoples (the terms *Sorben* and *Wenden* are used interchangeably), speaking dialects of a Slavic language with, variously, similarities to Polish and Czech, had inhabited a (shrinking) area of Central Europe for many centuries; subjected to increasing Germanisation in the nineteenth century, in 1912 Sorbs founded a political body to represent their interests, the Domowina. This was abolished in 1937 by the Nazis, who sought ruthlessly to

erase Sorbian language and culture; but it was refounded after the end of the war. From the foundation of the GDR, the creative development of Sorb cultural traditions was both constrained and at the same time fostered by the SED regime.²³ The Sorbs' representative body, the Domowina, could of course only operate within the wider political constraints of conformity to SED policies. Nevertheless, active steps were taken to preserve the culture and language. In the areas of Sorb residence in the Upper and Lower Lausitz, around Cottbus, Hoyerswerda and Bautzen, Sorbs had their own Sorb-language schools or were able to attend German-language schools in which Sorbian (in its variant dialects) was also taught. Dual-language signs were put up in towns and villages, and Sorbian theatre, literature and customs – including the colourful traditional costumes and seasonal festivals, particularly around Easter – were fostered. It was scarcely under SED control that younger Sorbs themselves chose no longer to wear the distinctive and varied costumes (*Trachten*) that many of the older generation still wore, either on a daily basis or on occasions such as weddings and seasonal festivals.

But, for all the official support of Sorbian language, culture, traditions and customs, SED economic policies tended in two ways to undermine (even literally) the continued existence of a viable Sorbian community. Sorb settlements were very severely affected by the devastating impact of extensive shallow brown-coal mining and the village clearances necessitated by the switch to reliance on brown-coal energy in the 1980s. Even before this, Sorb communities had begun to disintegrate as younger members not merely became disaffected with the religious beliefs and apparently old-fashioned habits of their grandparents, but also discovered they would be disadvantaged in the search for employment if they did not speak German as their first language; and there was considerable migration of young Sorbs from villages to cities in search of work. By the 1980s, Sorb culture was essentially fostered as a somewhat fossilised tourist attraction in the Spreewald area, with its old-world charms and winding rivers; but despite Kurt Hager's proclamation on the occasion of the Sixth Festival of Sorbian Culture in June 1985 that 'the Sorbian culture is a firm and at the same time independent constituent part of the socialist national culture of the GDR', the preconditions for a genuine living Sorb community were slipping away.²⁴ In this respect, the situation was not so very different from that of other minority languages and cultures in Western European states, such as Gaelic in Ireland; the success of the resurrection of Welsh as a living language is perhaps a remarkable exception.

Pockets of linguistic and ethnic difference existed also, on a rather different basis, among the many immigrants and foreigners who lived, studied and worked for longer or shorter periods of time in the GDR.²⁵ While some were

kept well segregated in special hostels and expected to return to their homelands within a relatively short period of time, others became sufficiently integrated to develop close personal relationships with East Germans. Mixed marriages were not uncommon, but they could, however, prove highly problematic when it came to a desire for residence outside the GDR. Many experienced not only official hostility and difficulties at the hands of authorities, but also racism in everyday life. Reports of troubles in the workplace involving foreign workers also crop up quite frequently in FDGB files.

There were many other subcultures within the variegated mix that made up the ever-changing kaleidoscope of GDR society. Musical tastes, clothing and lifestyles often served to distinguish different youth subcultures – from the rock 'n' roll fans of the 1950s, through the Beat groups of the 1960s, to the punks, gruffies, and others of the 1970s and '80s. Whether forced into a category of political relevance by an over-censorious regime, or whether simply entering some kind of a refusal by the decision to 'drop out', or whether through one or another sort of non-conformist behaviour being designated an 'asocial', people who pursued alternative lifestyles in this highly politicised state inevitably appeared to make some kind of political statement. But these subcultures were, on the whole, far less politically relevant than either the paranoid Stasi at the time, or subsequent accounts of their expressions of disaffection, have sometimes made them out to be.

Conclusion

For large numbers of ordinary East Germans the experience at the time of relative stabilisation of the GDR in the later 1960s and early '70s was not one of constant repression under a distant and malevolent dictatorship, but rather one of being able to participate in limited ways, even to help build for the future, and also to be able to speak out critically on at least certain issues. The experience of being able to speak one's mind, even if what was said was subsequently ignored by the powers that be, was crucial to the sense of being an active participant in shaping one's future; and not that of being an 'accomplice' in evil or a passive victim of constant oppression. The immense frustration experienced by many ordinary East Germans in the later 1980s, when Gorbachev was calling for greater 'openness' and discussion in the Soviet Union, was in part because of the sense that even the semblance of dialogue was no longer on Honecker's agenda. This is why so many East Germans can see no dissonance between their critiques of the GDR at the time of its fall and their capacity to live within its boundaries and make a critical, even active and positive, contribution to its development in earlier years: rather than making

a startling jump from allotted role as 'complicit accomplice of evil' to later 'passive victim' or 'hero of opposition', many East Germans simply registered the combination of rising problems and declining willingness on the part of the regime even to admit, let alone discuss, these problems at precisely the time the opposite development was taking place in the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, vast numbers of East Germans made use of far more individual channels for the expression of their views.

Chapter Thirteen

The people's own voices? The culture of complaint and the privatisation of protest

There were many ways in which East Germans could moan. People complained to each other, in a daily 'community of solidarity'; they cracked jokes about the shortcomings of daily life and made fun of their political leaders; they operated practices of idling on the job, taking time off during working hours to shop for sudden supplies of otherwise scarce goods; and on occasion they downed tools and went on unofficial strike. Oddly, they were even encouraged to complain through official channels, a feature of the dictatorship that has received little explicit coverage in analyses focusing on the organisational structure and formal political system. Over time, the character of complaints changed subtly, reflecting the changing character of perceptions and experiences of everyday life in the GDR.

Every aspect of life, from the quality of coffee on the breakfast table to the question of whether one even had a home in which to enjoy a breakfast table, was a matter of concern for the very top, in a state in which the SED claimed responsibility for meeting popular demands. Many areas of domestic politics and policies were also the subject of well-orchestrated 'discussions', in which widespread popular discussion and criticism were actively elicited. The fact that the bottom line did not add up – that a very wide range of demands could never, in principle, be met – added to the ways in which criticisms of specific deficiencies ultimately amounted to a critique of the system as a whole.

Reflecting on the (stifled, controlled) channels of communication in the GDR, several important developments can be discerned. On the one hand, the state fostered, even encouraged, a climate of complaint – sometimes dismissed as a *Meckerkultur*, a culture of constant grumbling and dissatisfaction – that, while underlining the regime's paternalistic concern for the welfare of individual citizens, could ultimately only serve to draw attention to the GDR's many shortcomings. On the other hand, the channels of complaint were intended to be individual, rather than collective, in character: in the form