

leadership was increasingly incapable of rising to the challenges of a global economy, and failed almost entirely even to acknowledge, let alone adequately respond to, a rising mountain of domestic problems in its descent into environmental disaster and economic bankruptcy in the 1980s.⁴⁰ The emergent political challenges of the 1980s were met by enhanced political surveillance and repression – which proved inadequate once the Soviet Union signalled its unwillingness to intervene in 1989.

This plunge into political crisis was, however, not merely an effect of changed Soviet policies under Gorbachev. Nor was it simply a result of a long-standing dislike of the system in principle that could precipitate political action once conditions were right. Rather, in part it resulted, ironically, from the combination of enhanced popular participation in political processes and heightened expectations of the improvements of which the GDR might have been capable under Honecker. But the state claimed to deliver more than it was capable of; and people's goals – which, under consumer socialism, in many material respects overlapped with those of the regime – were increasingly frustrated. The response of the ruling gerontocracy in the 1980s was an attempt to deny that problems even existed. The response of many of the people, in so far as this was an option, was – as before 1961 – to want out. Attempts to square an impossible circle of economic decline led, not only towards the mass stampe to the West once conditions changed in 1989, but also to the recognition on the part of many state functionaries as well as grass-roots members of the SED that reforms of some sort were essential; hence the 'gentle revolution', which ultimately culminated in the totally unexpected and rapid collapse of the GDR and absorption into the Federal Republic in 1990.

In the end, in the context of a collapsing economy that precipitated the end of the Cold War, the individual search for material well-being and personal freedom won over the utopian dreams born in the violence of the Second World War.

Chapter Three

Citizens at home

The SED had high ideals for the everyday life of its citizens. Visions of the good society included:

good housing conditions, childcare and shopping facilities, clean streets and pathways, well-maintained gardens, playgrounds and sports facilities, quality restaurants, the care of citizens of advanced age, the shaping of an interesting cultural life, including youth dances, discotheques and harvest festivals, the cultivation of village traditions and the furthering of a sense of *Heimat* [attachment to homeland] . . . civil defence, disposal of rubbish and sewage, ensuring the winter road service and other communal political tasks essential to life.¹

Associated with the fulfilment of these needs was 'raising the authority of local mayors as representatives of state power and persons in whom citizens could have trust'. As ever in the GDR, nothing could be apolitical, not even sewage or rubbish removal, sandwiched as they were between civil defence on the one hand and maintenance of safe conditions on winter roads on the other.

Belief in the ideals of a decent life, in a basic minimum of fulfilment of everyday needs, was genuine. These aspirations were not just about maintaining the trust and confidence of duped citizens, but were rooted in a real desire to better the lot of ordinary people – however compromised this desire was in practice by corruption, political instrumentalisation and the sheer incapacity of the centralised economy to deliver the kind of material growth that would make the realisation of such visions practicable in reality. Nevertheless, failure to deliver the material goods cannot be compensated forever by good intentions. And the situation becomes worse when problems are not admitted to and addressed, but rather attempts are made to deny them through slogans and propaganda. When citizens are acutely aware – as they were in the GDR – of the fact that material conditions could be very much

better under a different system, they will not continue to swallow promises of a better future if an alternative present becomes more readily available. The gap between the ideals and the realities – the sort of gap that gave rise to slogans such as 'make ruins without weapons' (nicely rhyming in the original German: 'Ruinen schaffen ohne Waffen', a play on the peace movement slogan of 'make peace without weapons') on decrepit, crumbling buildings – was a significant factor in the continued orientation towards the more affluent West of the vast majority of East Germans through to the final collapse and reunification. Yet at the same time, to say all this is not to give any kind of adequate or comprehensive picture of life in the GDR.

Underlying the developments considered here there is a far wider point of fundamental importance. Having a roof over one's head, a decent place to live, is fundamental in any society. What was distinctive about the GDR, in contrast to most contemporary Western societies, was the sheer extent to which the state took responsibility for housing. If, in the West, one could blame rapacious private landlords, banks and building societies, or the vicissitudes of the impersonal market for one's housing problems, in the GDR it was increasingly the state that stood to take the blame. And the state simply could not, for a variety of reasons, satisfy everyone's needs. While post-war West Germany had money and know-how pumped into the economy through the Marshall Plan and managed within a couple of decades to rebuild and renovate the housing stock, East Germany – whose major urban centres had been hit far harder by bomb damage, most notably of course in the case of Dresden – found its economic recovery hampered by Soviet policy's focus on reparations rather than investment. In subsequent decades, the weakness of the centrally planned economy was exacerbated by the GDR's involvement in Comecon, tying it to the fates of far less industrialised and less productive regions of Eastern Europe. This was in contrast to the Federal Republic's very much more benign experience of an 'economic miracle', and closer economic cooperation with other capitalist states in the context of the European Economic Community founded in 1957.

General economic weakness thus rendered attempts to solve the GDR's housing problems almost doomed to long-drawn out struggles, with much frustration along the way. And these frustrations would inevitably be vented against the well-meaning, paternalistic state. In the area of housing, as in so many areas of life in the GDR, there could be no truly 'private sphere', in some sense utterly unrelated to the wider political context. Housing was truly a political matter.

Home, sweet home?

Housing was, and remained, a central problem of the SED regime, and one of the chief causes of popular dissatisfaction: by far the largest category of complaints in individual citizens' petitions, or *Eingaben*, were complaints about inadequate housing.² There were two key challenges: repair and rebuilding of housing stock in areas that had suffered heavily from bomb damage or sheer ageing and neglect; and the provision of large quantities of new housing in areas of new industrial concentration, such as oil and petrochemical works. As always, the outcomes represented an unsatisfactory compromise between high ideals and utopian visions (particularly with respect to 'socialist new towns') and severe economic constraints.

The housing stock in many urban areas of eastern Germany after the war was in an abysmal condition. Around two thirds of the housing stock in large cities had been destroyed. Major cities such as Berlin and Dresden had been bombed out of all recognition; simply clearing the rubble, restoring sanitation and ensuring roofs and walls were leak-proof were the major priorities of the early post-war years. But much of the older housing stock remained barely fit for human habitation, and its condition, even after basic initial restoration, continued to deteriorate with time. In 1989, the crumbling plaster and still-visible battle pock-marks from the Second World War came as a dramatic shock to previously ignorant Western visitors to East Germany. Although attempts began to be made, particularly in the 'history-and-tradition-boom' years of the 1980s, to restore older housing in town centres – or at least to prevent total decay and possibly dangerous physical collapse of older buildings – renovation of older housing stock was not always as simple or cost-effective as building anew. Thus the major focus was on constructing new and relatively cheap, purpose-built apartment blocks in towns, or constructing entirely new out-of-town residential areas that, like Halle-Neustadt, were essentially satellite towns for large industrial centres.

Renovation was most extensive in the Ulbricht period, and declined steadily from the later 1970s, while from the early 1970s Honecker had given top priority to the construction of new housing. Ulbricht himself was personally very interested, not only in the construction of new industrial satellite towns, but also in architectural schemes for town centres, including Berlin, Dresden, Halle and the major district towns. He was deeply interested in the details of architecture and design, and was even perceived as such by ordinary people. He allegedly exclaimed, on seeing in 1952 the monotonous blocks rapidly

constructed for workers in the new town of what was then Stalinstadt, later Eisenhüttenstadt, 'those are barracks, those are not houses [fit] for workers.'³ Honecker, by contrast, was more interested in the visible expression of the 'unity of economic and social policy': he wanted to be seen personally handing over the one-millionth new home in Berlin-Marzahn to an ordinary working-class family, and took pride in the sheer numbers of new flats that were being constructed.⁴ Statistics for the numbers of new homes built annually were only kept from 1958; from then until the end of the Ulbricht period in 1971, an average of 60,000 to 70,000 new homes were built each year (with a high of 85,580 in 1961). When Honecker came into office, there was a vigorous drive to push up these figures, with around 100,000 new homes (sometimes over 110,000) being built every year from the mid-1970s to the mid-'80s. This figure dropped to a low of 83,361 in 1989.⁵

There were a few well-known architectural prestige projects, such as East Berlin's Stalinallee (renamed Karl Marx Allee), notorious as the place where the workers first downed tools and set off to protest on 16 June 1953, inaugurating the popular uprising of the following day. But GDR housing construction was not merely a matter of individual prestige projects or unrealisable visions. Architects who had cut their teeth on the socialist ideals of the 1920s, or been influenced by the Bauhaus school of modern design for the masses (based in Dessau), as well as a few who had absorbed or participated in Nazi ideals of construction for the 'folk community', strove to produce new housing that was functional, liveable and 'modern', as well as capable of being individualised according to personal tastes.⁶ In the 1960s, the vision was one in which every household, of whatever size, should have adequate space in which to deploy functional furniture – built-in cupboards, flexible sets of do-it-yourself shelving, tables and chairs – in a variety of ways to create unique and homely living spaces. But this vision had to be realised in terms of available machinery and materials: 16-metre cranes that would produce four-storey buildings of five sections, or three-storey buildings of six to seven sections; pre-formed slabs for the walls of what were called *Plattenbauten*, or prefabricated high-rise blocks; cheap asbestos cement rather than traditional tiles for the roof. With the crane producing a radius around which the buildings could be located, apartment blocks were arranged around what eventually became somewhat dismal open spaces.

In the event, the shortcomings of the economy, as always, frustrated the full realisation of utopian visions, both in the new towns and with respect to the renovation or construction of new housing in old towns. One of Honecker's few genuinely popular pronouncements was his promise to increase the housing stock as rapidly as possible; yet utopian visions, as so often in

the GDR, turned increasingly into miserable realities. Vast numbers of East Germans in the 1970s and '80s remained dissatisfied with their housing conditions. In 1974, over one third of young couples were 'extremely dissatisfied' with their housing conditions, and as many as one in five (20 per cent) of young couples who had been married for less than two years were unable to live together because they could not obtain housing and an additional partner could not be accommodated in either of the parental homes.⁷ As late as 1986, as many as one in fourteen families (7 per cent) with two or more children still did not have their own home.⁸ And those that did were not all entirely happy with what they had. In Dresden in 1980, only one third (35 per cent) of young residents of older housing were satisfied with their accommodation, compared to over three quarters (76 per cent) of those living in newer flats. This was scarcely surprising, given that less than half (44 per cent) of the older flats and houses had hot water, only 60 per cent had a bath or shower, and 65 per cent an indoor toilet, compared to figures of 89 per cent, 100 per cent and 100 per cent respectively for newer residences.⁹ Getting oneself a decent home was indeed the highest 'life goal' of young people in a survey carried out in Leipzig in October 1984: over half of those surveyed (53 per cent) put 'settling in a modern flat' as their most important goal in life. This figure compared with just under a half (48 per cent) seeking an 'occupation in which they could be totally fulfilled'; and, at a mere 27 per cent, a 'full and total commitment to socialism' barely topped the more materialistic 'pursuit of all possibilities for earning money', named as a major life goal by precisely one quarter of young people.¹⁰

It has sometimes been suggested that housing in the GDR was not as strongly associated with social class as it is in, for example, Britain or the US, where the contrasts between luxurious private housing and rented accommodation in slums or public estates (council housing in the UK, the 'projects' in the US) were and remain extremely marked. In the GDR, by contrast, only a small fraction of new building was in the form of private ownership: there were on average around 11,000 to 12,000 new private homes a year in the 1980s, a mere one-tenth of the amount of public housing being built at the time.¹¹ Thus the private/public divide, so marked in Western capitalist societies, arguably became ever less salient in the GDR. Members of the bourgeoisie – or socialist intelligentsia – nevertheless still lived in large villas amidst trees or at the lakesides on the outskirts of Berlin, or in the spacious *Gründerzeit* flats around courtyards in the centres of the cities that had grown so rapidly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while the old working-class slums of the cities remained as depressed as ever. But in new housing estates, members of the working class and professionals would, so at

least it was claimed, live side by side in identical apartment blocks, and make use of the same shops and transport services.

Like so much else, this claim is not entirely borne out by the facts. Social class and other social inequalities still played a role in the unequal access, for whatever reasons, to newer rather than older housing stock. Older and weaker members of society tended disproportionately to live in older houses and tenement blocks of flats. The least educated members of society also lived in the worst housing conditions.¹² Highly qualified and politically privileged workers were prioritised over others in the allocation of scarce new housing stock. The contrast between older and newer housing stock was, as indicated, very stark: as late as 1984, around one in six older flats and houses in Leipzig still had *none* of the sanitary amenities (hot water, indoor toilet and shower or bath) that most Westerners took for granted in the latter half of the twentieth century. In certain areas, it is notable that while nearly two thirds (64 per cent) of young professionals ('Intelligenz') lived in accommodation with all modern sanitary facilities, less than a half (49 per cent) of young working-class people enjoyed such amenities.¹³

To Western eyes, the new housing estates might appear bleak and soulless. Even contemporaries made jokes about these estates – in which some eight-storey blocks had no lifts – as 'stone deserts' ('Steinwüsten'), 'silos for living in' ('Wohnsilos'), 'lockers to keep workers in' ('Arbeiterschliessfächer'), 'comfort cells' ('Komfortzellen') and 'housing ghettos' ('Wohnghettos'). And the crime statistics speak for themselves: apart from East Berlin, crime rates were highest in the new town areas of Eisenhüttenstadt and Schwedt in the Frankfurt/Oder region, and around the Buna and Leuna works and in Halle Neustadt (known popularly as 'Hanoi', with a 20 per cent higher crime rate than the neighbouring old town of Halle) in the Halle region. The distinction is borne out too on a micro level, with higher crime rates in the *Plattenbau* areas of the town of Schwerin than in older urban areas or the surrounding countryside. The old city of Dresden had the lowest rates of criminality (as well as of divorce).¹⁴

Perhaps one of the greatest sources of frustration with respect to housing was the widespread dependence on the state, and the significant lack of personal control over the quality and state of repair of one's living conditions or the chance of moving. The sheer difficulty of being able to achieve any improvement – from simple housing repairs to a complete change of location – is evident in vast numbers of citizens' letters to official authorities over the whole period of the GDR.

In 1962, for example, the 51-year-old Frau P., who was severely disabled, was desperate to move out of her decrepit flat in the back courtyard of an

apartment block: she had no running water, no toilet, and the roof and walls appear to have been falling in. When the resident of a flat in the front of the block suddenly died, Frau P. hoped to be able to effect a rapid move; but the owner of the block refused, saying that she needed the newly vacant flat as an 'exchange object' to get her own son a larger flat, 'although the son of the home-owner already had a flat large enough for himself and his family'.¹⁵ Frau P. was then given extremely short shrift by the relevant local council official when she uttered the sentiment that, had she known how little help she would get with re-housing, she would have gone to her relatives in the West when her husband died.

Despite massive efforts in the meantime to improve the housing stock, letters written two decades or so later read in a remarkably similar vein, though with fewer mentions of the West. In 1980, Frau Lotte A., resident in Borna, a small town in a poor brown-coal mining area, describes her horrendous housing situation, with rain coming in, windows falling out, the area all around the house being cordoned off (presumably because of safety issues) and the cellar in such a state that 'the potatoes all go bad on us'.¹⁶ This poorly written letter was by a woman who had to revert to being a housewife following a stroke, with a husband who, despite being severely disabled, had a job as a shift worker in the brown-coal industry, and a son who was also disabled and confined to a wheelchair; only the other son, also working in the brown-coal mine, appeared to be in reasonable health. Frau A.'s letter reeks of desperation – that the family simply could not continue to live in such appalling conditions.

Similarly, a letter from Frau Gabriele S. in 1988 depicts her difficulties with a husband who turned violent and started beating her and the four children, including his own baby and the three children she had from a previous marriage; Frau S. had to flee with her four children and live for some considerable time cramped up in a one-and-a-half room flat with her 71-year-old grandmother before the authorities managed to organise her a new flat in Schwedt.¹⁷ This move was achieved on the basis that she was not merely in desperate need, but also deemed not to be 'an asocial problem case', with a good work record on a collective farm and a willingness to take up any sort of work, anywhere in the GDR. The official dealing with the case noted that he was currently juggling annual figures of around 700 applications for housing and more than 550 'socially urgent cases' against a total maximum number of around 70 to 80 flats becoming vacant each year.¹⁸ Frau B., who in 1978 lost not merely her flat but also her son when her marriage ran into difficulties and her husband insisted on divorce, found that her problems with alcoholism and depression played a major role in the authorities' responses to her case; the

amount of care and time lavished by the authorities on what was in effect a form of personal counselling is quite remarkable, given that some of the immediate practical problems were so hard to solve.¹⁹ Other cases were treated as less deserving and received somewhat more peremptory responses. The 51-year-old Frau Helga S., for example, in 1988 found it difficult to make the 30 kilometre journey between her home in Braunsbedra and that of her 82-year-old mother in Querfurt, for whom she wanted to provide personal care in her own home, given the lack of adequate facilities for care of the elderly and her mother's preference for care by a member of the family; but the Querfurt authorities, noting that the granddaughter had already achieved a flat exchange from Merseburg to Querfurt for this reason, advised Frau S. that her mother was therefore not to be considered as in need of care and that she would have to try to organise a swap privately.²⁰

Even for those lucky enough to be rehoused, new problems might merely be created. An extraordinarily wide-ranging letter from Frau Ingeborg R., speaking for a large number of women with whom she had informally talked, and covering the whole gamut of frustrations from the non-availability of children's clothing in certain sizes, through the total absence from the shops of grapes, peppers and peaches, to the inadequacies of the health service in her area, included also perceptive comments on the difficulties for many women associated with moving house. That small minority who managed successfully to move house then found knock-on effects with difficulties in childcare arrangements, which were often located very far from either place of work or residence, and sometimes necessitated a change of occupation or a switch to shift work and further frustrations.²¹ The close links between workplace, childcare, housing and the state could, when untangled, lead to a vicious circle in which no single aspect could easily be unpicked without upsetting all the others.

Common to very large numbers of East German citizens, then, was a sense of near total dependence on the state for the most basic need for shelter, for habitable accommodation. State authorities appear to have expended considerable time and effort trying very earnestly to treat each case on its merits, and devising refined strategies for trying to identify and deal with what were seen to be the most socially urgent, vulnerable and needy cases first, so long as they also came into the rather inchoate category of 'deserving' with respect to commitment to the GDR, lack of 'asocial' behaviour or character and so on. The dependence on the state of more robust citizens could in part be alleviated by the private organisation of apartment exchanges and the private organisation of house improvements and repairs through do-it-yourself activities. This in turn often required the 'liberating' of appropriate materials from the

workplace and the fostering of a range of acquaintances with appropriate skills. Illegal purloining of materials from the workplace accounted for very significant sums: in 1984, for example, the FDGB estimated that materials valued at somewhere in the region of 778,000 Marks were taken from the workplace, accounting for the vast bulk of the 'special incidents' of that year.²² It was indicative that losses were greatest in the areas of building materials – wood and metal; they were minimal in the areas of science (actually nil in 1984), art and education.²³

If finding acceptable basic accommodation was a very widespread problem, then a common compensation for a fortunate and sizeable minority was a weekend escape to a 'second home' of sorts. Arguably the most agreeable abodes – if one is more interested in atmosphere than size or the boasting of all 'mod cons' – were the innumerable weekend cottages, often little more than garden sheds, dotted around on the allotments or small plots of land (*Schrebergärten*), that served a double purpose as private fruit and vegetable patch and weekend retreat. Untrammelled by official flags and slogans, and lovingly painted and renovated with copious use of materials from the black market, these served a number of vital functions in the lives of many East Germans. The ways in which these retreats were constructed and renovated with materials and labour obtained through contacts, friends, barter and exchange is yet another illustration of levels of popular initiative and energy in making one's life. And for those lucky enough to own such a retreat, the possibility of sitting with family and friends and drinking generous quantities of beer and spirits under the apple trees on a warm (if mosquito-infested) summer night could arguably more than compensate for lack of indoor sanitary facilities. Here a little decorated rustic wooden sign with the time-worn slogan beloved of many Germans over the previous century or more could be proudly displayed: 'Klein, aber mein' – 'small, but mine'.

Visions of a new society

In part, the attempt was made not merely to provide people with decent housing, but to create a wholly new form of society, bringing workers and gigantic new industrial enterprises together in entirely new communities. Founded in the 1950s and '60s, 'socialist new towns' were designed not merely to house the working masses required for major new industrial plants; they were based in a far more ambitious vision and designed to produce built environments in which a new socialist lifestyle could be realised and socialist communities flourish. 'Flourish' may perhaps be overstating the case; but distinctive community patterns did develop in these areas. Of particular

importance, again, is the question of relations between the state and any 'private sphere'. In major new towns, the complex of industrial enterprises (or 'combines'), housing, healthcare, childcare, social and sporting facilities were so very closely intertwined that the people who lived in them were essentially living through and within a network of GDR social institutions, in which no area of life was not in some way coloured and informed by state policy. While this could be disagreeable, many people – particularly those coming from a harsh background of poverty, war and uprootedness – genuinely had positive experiences to report.

The first of the 'socialist new towns', founded in 1950, was based at the old town of Fürstenberg on the redrawn border with Poland on the Oder river. Fürstenberg itself, despite its long history of mining, shipping and glass-blowing, was nearly a ghost town at the end of the war, with so many of its inhabitants fleeing from the advancing Red Army that there were a mere twenty-eight residents still in place when the Red Army entered in April 1945. By 1948, one third of the residents were not people who had returned to their homes, but refugees from lost German territories east of the Oder river.²⁴ For a variety of reasons, Fürstenberg was well situated to become a centre of the major heavy industrial production foreseen in the GDR's five-year plan of the early 1950s, and construction of the Eisenhüttenstadt works and the barracks for workers took off at a tremendously fast pace. Following Stalin's death in March 1953, the new town was in May given the name of Stalinstadt, with a ceremonial event graced by the presence of Walter Ulbricht at the podium, although apparently with little input or agreement from residents, many of whom felt uneasy about such a name a mere decade after Stalingrad. It was subsequently renamed Eisenhüttenstadt in 1961, after Stalin's fall from the pantheon of communist heroes five years earlier and the consequent embarrassment of the name was rather belatedly officially registered in the GDR.

Vast numbers of people – often refugees from lost eastern territories, orphans, single mothers, young men with no strong roots or prospects anywhere else – were attracted to work in the near wilderness conditions of 'sand and pine trees' by the chance of secure employment, better provision with foodstuffs and the offer of a flat, at least in the near future: the population grew from 15,000 in 1953 to nearly 45,000 in 1969 and then more slowly to over 53,000 in 1988.²⁵ It was repeatedly emphasised to workers that this was a special place: the GDR's 'first socialist town', where no church towers would be built, but where there would be all the cultural amenities, schools, hospitals and shops – none private – required to construct the perfect new community. The architect of the early residential areas stressed the importance of light,

sunshine and air, and of cultural and social amenities close to hand. This was to be a liveable community, not merely barracks for workers, even if it would take time to complete. For those who could not entirely stand conditions in the as-yet-unfinished utopia, there was always the possibility of a quick shopping trip to the private bakers' shops in the old town of Fürstenberg on the other side of the railway line, or drowning one's sorrows in beer with the workers' collective at the end of the shift.

From the accounts of people interviewed in 1989, before the end of the GDR, and also of individuals interviewed in 2004, fifteen years after the collapse of the SED regime, experiences in the early years were characterised by a combination of considerable hardship and yet high hopes.²⁶ Despite horrendous working conditions with exhausting labour amid hot furnaces and exceedingly primitive living conditions, with even those lucky enough to obtain a flat of their own still lacking the most basic furniture, there nevertheless appears in the 1950s and early '60s to have been – at least in memory – a sense of building up something new (*Aufbau*), being part of a collective spirit, making a contribution to a better life in the future. The willingness to work regardless of reward, to step in when needed for emergencies or overtime, the sense of 'ownership' of the enterprise and the related cultural and social facilities were, according to some participants' memories, displaced in the course of the 1960s and '70s by a retreat into individualistic concerns, with a growing focus on home, family and private gain.²⁷ According to others, the positive sides of the new community continued to outweigh negative aspects: older residents interviewed in 2004 recalled what they saw as excellent childcare and educational provision, social and cultural facilities that were genuinely for the 'people' (*Volk*), and a real sense of community spirit, with people willing to help each other when in personal difficulties, or to put time and energy into communal building schemes.²⁸ For these residents, the sense of community more than made up for what they saw as far less significant disadvantages of pre-1989 life: the paucity of 'southern fruits', the relative lack of telephones, the long wait for a car. In place of these purely material possessions, they prized more highly aspects such as enhanced 'law and order', with police ready to discipline rowdy or work-shy youngsters; the ways in which the work collective would help out when a *Sorgenkind* (a young person giving cause for concern) failed to turn up for work, or when a colleague's marriage was in trouble; and the cheap and enjoyable holidays in the FDGB-owned holiday facilities on the Baltic island of Rügen, or the trips to destinations in Eastern Europe, most often to Czechoslovakia or Hungary. Not everything was entirely rosy, however. A major battle of these later decades appears to have been finding a way around the SED-sponsored technical interference in what could

have been perfectly good Western television reception by 'organising' the installation of special antennae and converters to gain access to the blocked Western channels; this was a battle in which the SED only finally capitulated in 1979.²⁹

Eisenhüttenstadt was in some respects unique: renowned as the 'first socialist town', relatively well provided for, and with a genuinely pleasing architectural design, at least in the areas constructed before the new concrete-slab building techniques of the 1960s were introduced. It was soon followed by other new town developments: the decision was taken in 1955 to build a new satellite town at Hoyerswerda, in the south-eastern part of the GDR for the growing workforce of the energy production enterprise, the Schwarze Pumpe; in the 1960s further developments at Leuna II (oil refinery) and Halle-Neustadt expanded the chemical complex around Halle and Leipzig; and a number of developments in Schwedt (paper and packaging works, oil refinery and petro-chemicals combine) followed Eisenhüttenstadt as part of the expansion of new industries in the previously relatively thinly populated border area to the north and south of the major centre of Frankfurt-an-der-Oder.

Hoyerswerda was the pilot project for the industrialisation of building techniques, boasting the first use of the concrete slab or *Plattenbau* techniques: the first such mass-produced large block of the GDR was opened in Groß-Zeitz near Hoyerswerda in 1957.³⁰ But Hoyerswerda was important for more than merely building techniques. The intense architectural competition for control of this project, in which the renowned architect Richard Paulick (1903–79) was ultimately successful, was in part rooted in much grander visions than merely producing a cost-effective dormitory town for workers. Paulick, who had during the Weimar Republic worked with the Bauhaus Director Walter Gropius in Dessau, was associated both with attempts to restore and develop a traditional architectural heritage (Schinkel's legacy in Berlin) and with prestige projects to represent the new (including part of the Stalin-Allee development).³¹ Located in the Sorbian Lausitz area, Hoyerswerda was intended in part to be a centre of Sorbian culture, with prestige buildings to house the Sorbian 'parliament' or representative council (Domowina) and a Sorbian national museum, as well as a Sorbian theatre, cinema and restaurant. But by the early 1960s, the Hoyerswerda project was plagued by uncertainties about the speed and cost of construction, and dramatically increased estimates of the numbers of people who would need housing (at least 90,000 new residents, against the figure of 54,000 for which the plans had originally been designed). The plans to link the new town with the old town centre and to provide appropriate leisure facilities were first postponed, and then shelved; Paulick left to take on other commitments (Schwedt from 1962–4, and Halle-Neustadt from

1963–8); and when the Cottbus District took over control of the project, the central authorities lost interest. In 1968, over a decade after the first housing block had been opened, the first department store was finally opened in the central square, and in 1975, a full two decades after the foundation stone had been laid, general facilities for the new town area were finally constructed. The original idea of an extensive 'culture park' linking the old and new towns, however, was dropped in the later 1970s in favour of memorials to the 'Red Army fallen' and the 'Victims of Fascism', alongside new housing estates, a school and some shops. Finally, some three decades late, a glass structure with seating for 820 people was opened as a 'House of Culture'.

The utopian visions for new towns – which, it may be noted, were not unique to the GDR but shared by many capitalist states at this time (the early example of Welwyn Garden City in Britain, for example, followed by Basildon and Milton Keynes) – were thus not entirely realised. But the socialist new towns of the GDR did differ in significant respects from the old, and from their counterparts in the capitalist West. For one thing, the construction of new Christian churches was not part of the socialist design, assisting processes of secularisation by omission. For another, new towns in the GDR were generally remarkably homogeneous in terms of the occupations of inhabitants and their close relation with their places of work, which in turn very strongly affected the character of urban social life. So, for example, the location of new industries in the area around Frankfurt-an-der-Oder in Schwedt, Eisenhüttenstadt and Guben led to a large influx of workers from other areas (including migrant Polish workers from across the river).³² Between 75 per cent and 83 per cent of the workers in these three towns worked in the massive, interrelated chemical combines of the area (the Chemiefaserkombinat in Guben, the EKO or Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost in Eisenhüttenstadt, and the PCK or Petrolchemisches Kombinat in Schwedt). With a high proportion of female workers, many of whom were 'commuters' (*Pendler*) working in a different location from their partners, particular attention was paid to the provision of adequate childcare facilities, good transport links, shops and health care facilities. The massive semi-conductor plant (Halbleiterpflaume) in Frankfurt-an-der-Oder dominated the social, organisational and political life of the area: it had close connections with local schools and cultural centres (partnership and twinning arrangements); it organised sports teams and competitions; and its workers were nominated to the local town council, played a significant role in local parties and mass organisations and served as chairs of residents' committees. Similarly, the EKO dominated the whole cultural and social life of its town. There is no doubt that a new form of society rooted in both the demands and the support provisions of the workplace

developed in these socialist new towns; and although it was not always entirely the form of socialist society originally envisaged, there is much evidence to suggest that perhaps a majority of residents in particularly those areas far from Western borders developed ways of living that were both meaningful and satisfying to them without closing their eyes entirely to the associated disadvantages of GDR conditions.

Meanwhile, in certain areas of older city centres, other sorts of very localised community were developing that were not entirely of the sort officially envisioned or desired. In Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg, for example, a form of retreatist, semi drop-out subculture of dissident artists and poets developed; similar though internationally less renowned subcultural currents were evident in other cities in the later 1970s and '80s, including Leipzig and Dresden. In part, disaffected individuals were seeking a degree of self-expression and self-fulfilment in alternative lifestyles; in part, new forms of communal living were merely an attempt to make the best of the often appalling housing conditions.

Finally, it is worth raising to attention the likely regional distribution of political discontent in 1989 and the related roots in social history. The weekly Monday demonstrations in Leipzig and comparable, if at the time less renowned demonstrations in Dresden, Schwerin and elsewhere, have rightly been the subject of major historical attention. What has received very much less attention is the relative lack of political activity in the autumn of 1989 in other areas, such as Cottbus and Eisenhüttenstadt. Residents of these areas – at least those that chose to remain once the opportunity to leave for the West had been available for more than a decade – spoke of the ways in which they and their friends, relatives and colleagues almost 'slept through' the revolutionary autumn.³³ The differential regional distribution of 'social peace' and discontent would be well worthy of further investigation.

Regional disparities in a centralised state

During the lifetime of the GDR, the percentage of the population living in cities with over 100,000 inhabitants barely rose, from one fifth to just over a quarter (20.7 per cent in 1950, rising to 25.9 per cent in 1985 and 27.1 per cent in 1989).³⁴ Extraordinarily by Western European standards, in the 1980s a similar figure of just under a quarter of the total East German population – a little over 23 per cent – still lived in tiny hamlets and scattered rural communities with less than 2,000 inhabitants, where the physical appearance changed very little from the 1920s right through to the '80s, giving much of rural East Germany an extraordinarily old-fashioned air as far as Westerners were

concerned. Like a film set viewed from afar, in many areas one could for decades pretend that one was looking at Germany in the 1920s.

But appearances are deceptive. These general continuities in terms of statistics disguised massive changes in the structure of industry and agriculture, significant movements of population within the GDR, and even more significant differences in the social composition and atmosphere of different areas.

Towards and just after the end of the war, millions of people were on the move: evacuees returning to search for their former homes in the ruins of bombed-out cities; prisoners of war returning from incarceration; and refugees fleeing from the advance of the Red Army in the eastern territories, or 'expellees' forced out by the resettlement and redrawing of post-war borders. Estimates suggest that a total of somewhere between 11 and 18 million people left their former homelands in Eastern Europe in this massive migration westwards.³⁵ While many treated the Soviet zone as merely a staging post on their way further west to the areas that became the Federal Republic, millions remained in what was to become the GDR. In some areas, such as the previously relatively sparsely populated rural expanses of the northern province of Mecklenberg, the social landscape was permanently altered by this influx.

The expropriation of industry and agricultural estates, and the subsequent central planning of economic development had a major impact on the social geography of the GDR. In 1952, with the abolition of the *Länder* (federal states) a totally new administrative structure introduced new regional disparities.³⁶ Fifteen new *Bezirke* (regions or 'counties') were created, which were in turn made up of smaller *Kreise* ('districts') and *Gemeinden* (local communities or – to use anachronistic religious language – 'parishes'). The capital, East Berlin, was always advantaged over other areas of the GDR, as were cities such as Leipzig, host to international trade fairs. Towns that were key administrative or industrial centres were advantaged in terms of investment in housing and infrastructure, as well as supplies of food and consumer goods, over other towns and villages. New towns were constructed, producing concentrations of population in areas of new industry in previously sparsely populated rural areas. There was a relatively high proportion of 'mono-structural regions' concentrating on one form of production to the virtual exclusion of other types of economic activity.³⁷ Thus there could be extraordinarily rapid growth and investment in some areas because of administrative or industrial importance while other areas – particularly city centres and tenement buildings in residential districts of older towns – suffered from massive neglect.

Regional disparities in the GDR, while never entirely disappearing, thus changed markedly in character over the course of four decades. This is all the more surprising given a lengthy historical background of strong regional

identities – rooted in centuries of decentralised patterns of political authority and cultural attachment – within the German lands.³⁸ Disparities between sparsely populated rural areas and the older areas of traditional handicrafts and industry were augmented and in part overlain by new disparities between the areas of massive expansion – with the growth of new urban centres and commuter towns – and areas of relative neglect. New industrial towns with a predominantly blue-collar manual working-class population, or a high proportion of 'peasant-worker' migrants, were very different socially from areas with a more settled population, and those with a more highly educated workforce and institutions of further and higher education. Changes in the organisation and methods of agricultural production led to new relationships between people and the land that they farmed, with the dissolution of the close ties between 'blood and soil' that Hitler had sought to foster, and the emergence of a new breed of educated agricultural specialists. Extensive brown-coal mining in lignite-rich areas, particularly in the 1980s after the USSR withdrew significant volumes of oil supplies to the GDR, led to the literal undermining and effective destruction of large numbers of villages in affected areas. Intensive development of certain areas of industry, associated with massive under-investment in health and safety measures, exacerbated inequalities in environmental pollution, with the worst affected areas concentrated in the Halle, Leipzig and Cottbus regions.

Regional disparities in access to scarce goods were to some extent overcome by travel – for example, regular forays across country in pursuit of spare parts or desired consumer items, or shopping trips to Berlin. But travel by highly subsidised public transport, despite being remarkably cheap, was time-consuming and arduous. Private car ownership only expanded in the course of the 1970s and '80s, which clearly made a difference to those households fortunate enough to be in possession of a fully functioning car (not always the case); but, with the exception of the transit autobahns in part maintained by Western money, and the autobahns of strategic (and potential military) importance to the regime, the state of the roads, generally pock-marked by potholes and often still cobbled, rendered car journeys a rather slow and inconvenient means of travel. Lack of telephones – the largest saturation was to be found in East Berlin – meant that many friendships were local or maintained by letter-writing and periodic face-to-face contacts.

Overall, it is true, a degree of homogenisation can be discerned, formed partly out of increased labour migration, but even more through negotiation of common institutional structures and economic constraints within very limited political boundaries. Within this common wider framework, there nevertheless remained striking regional and cultural variations. Thus, while

much of the landscape may have looked to the casual visitor – and particularly to the tourist strenuously evading the polluted air and dispirited atmosphere of major industrial centres – little changed from the 1920s and '30s, the character and experience of the lived environment changed considerably with the development of the new East German society. This was even more true, eventually, of the less easily visible, but equally important, social and institutional environment: the network of institutions and practices within and through which East Germans came to lead their lives.