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# The Life and Experiences of the East German Woman

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THE LIFE AND EXPERIENCES OF THE EAST GERMAN WOMAN

An Honors College Project Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Political Science and Criminal Justice  
and  
The Department of History and Global Studies

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for  
Honors Scholar

by  
Mackenzie Elizabeth Sanderson  
Spring 2018

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This Project Thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee,  
has been accepted by the Honors College of Abilene Christian University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the distinction

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## **ABSTRACT**

After German reunification, the East German people were incorporated into the Western world and their old way of life under the Stalinist influence of the USSR was replaced by a capitalist open market, a democratic government, and an emphasis on individual freedoms. As the GDR was left in the past, the citizens of former East Germany—particularly East German women—had to adapt to a new way of life with cultures, values, and expectations unfamiliar to them. However, it is presumptuous to believe that their adaptation to West Germany meant forgetting their own past. In light of this, this paper is focused on the central question of how having lived in the GDR continues to influence women in their every-day culture and self-identity. To answer this question, I interviewed a selection of six women, aged 54 - 90 years old, who have lived their entire lives in Saxony and invited them to share how the GDR's cultural norms and expectations continue to affect their personal and professional lives.

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## INTRODUCTION

As the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall approaches, West Germany and East Germany's reunification remains a unique case, especially when considering its influence on the German people. The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were comprised of one, divided people group. In their 45 years apart, they experienced different histories, economies, governments, and values, and their reunification showcases the disparities in thought and lifestyle of the two systems. As the East German people were incorporated into the Western world, their old way of life under the Stalinist influence of the USSR was replaced by a capitalist open market, a democratic government, and an emphasis on individual freedoms. These changes have, without doubt, brought prosperity to the East. However, as the GDR was left in the past, the citizens of former East Germany—particularly East German women—had to adapt to a new way of life with cultures, values, and expectations unfamiliar to them. While these women were mostly successful, it would be presumptuous to believe that their adaptation to West Germany meant forgetting their own past. In light of this, my research is focused on the central question of how having lived in the GDR continues to influence women in their every-day culture and self-identity, especially now that more time has elapsed after the fall of the Wall than the time the Wall was in place.<sup>1</sup> To answer this question, I interviewed a selection of women who have lived their entire lives in Saxony and invited them to share how the GDR's cultural norms and expectations continue to affect their personal and professional lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Construction on the Berlin Wall began on August 13, 1961. It stood for 10,316 days. February 5, 2018 marked 10,316 days since the Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989.

## RESEARCH

### Culture

Culture is an elusive and abstract concept difficult to clearly and adequately define. Generally, though, culture includes the notions of the norms (common, acceptable behaviors), values (what is desirable for a society), and beliefs (what is thought of as true) of a community of people.<sup>2</sup> Culture is understood both as a single person's psychological bias based on her particular context and as factors that make up social structures.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, not only is a person's culture her actual beliefs and attitudes resulting from her environment, but it is also based on her perception of what others believe is acceptable. Actions, then, are decided by weighing a person's own desires as well as what she thinks are the majority values in her community and how society might view her as a result.<sup>4</sup>

### Acculturation

Acculturation is the group process of cultural change when two cultures come together.<sup>5</sup> Although it is possible that both groups can be equally influenced by

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<sup>2</sup> D.J. Hruschka and C. Hadley, "A glossary of culture in epidemiology," *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* (1979-) 62, no. 11 (Nov. 2008): 947.

<sup>3</sup> Hruschka, "A glossary of culture in epidemiology," 948.

<sup>4</sup> Chi-Yue Chiu, Michele J. Gelfand, Toshio Yamagishi, Garriy Shteynberg, and Ching Wang, "Intersubjective Culture: The Role of Intersubjective Perceptions in Cross-Cultural Research," *Perspectives on Psychology Science* 5, no. 4 (Jul., 2010): 483.

<sup>5</sup> Hruschka, "A glossary of culture in epidemiology," 948; Raymond H.C. Teske, Jr. and Bardin H. Nelson, "Acculturation and Assimilation: A Clarification," *American Ethnologist* 1, no. 2 (May, 1974): 351.

acculturation, this is not the case with East Germany.<sup>6</sup> Because of the political strength and perceived Western superiority, West Germany was in the dominant position and East Germany was unilaterally expected to adapt and assimilate to the culture of the global West.

The fact that culture is so difficult to define and because it incorporates such a wide range of concepts — personal beliefs, societal perceptions, motivations for actions — this paper includes several concepts that might point to former GDR culture and which inform the interview questions.

### **Identity Theory**

A foundational understanding of Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory is important in order to form the context for my questions. Studies of identity attempt to explain the relationship between self and society.<sup>7</sup> Identity is frequently a “self-definition” that individuals apply to themselves.<sup>8</sup> This means that people’s identities depend solely on how they perceive themselves and the world around them. Every person has multiple identities that correlate to the various roles or groups they see themselves a part of. These identities are categorized hierarchically within the mind.<sup>9</sup> Essentially then,

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<sup>6</sup> Because of the unique political changes that have occurred in this country, in this paper, “East Germany” and “the GDR” both refer to the former state of the German Democratic Republic. The term “east Germany” is used to refer to the former East German states after reunification. “The East” refers only to the eastern states of Germany, and not to the traditional global East or East Europe. The term “FRG” is only used when referring to the West Germany government before reunification. “West Germany” and “west Germany” both refer to the states that comprised to original FRG before and after reunification respectively. “The West” refers to the west German states, which include influences from the US and West Europe, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>7</sup> Michael A. Hogg, et al, “A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (Dec., 1995): 257.

<sup>8</sup> Hogg, “A Tale of Two Theories,” 256.

<sup>9</sup> Hogg, “A Tale of Two Theories,” 256.

the identities that are most important to a person and influence his or her actions most frequently and universally are toward the top of the hierarchy. Those that are less important in determining behavior are lower down the scale because they do not hold as much influence in the person's life.

Social identity, on the other hand, stresses the concept of group membership. It especially encourages viewing one's own group in a positive light and other groups negatively as outsiders.<sup>10</sup> Identity shapes behavior, therefore, and behavior is understood using identity and identity meaning.<sup>11</sup> These theories are important to acknowledge because they are the underlying forces emphasized in the GDR's praise of a strong social community and group identity as well as the assimilation process of becoming German rather than remaining East German.<sup>12</sup>

### **Connection to Home**

A connection to a home helps establish one's identity because a home forms in an environment where familiar routines and expectations are established.<sup>13</sup> While home is usually physical in the form of a structure or an environment, it can also manifest emotionally as a feeling or metaphorically as a symbol.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the concept of

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<sup>10</sup> Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (Sep., 2000): 225.

<sup>11</sup> Jan E. Stets and Chris F. Biga, "Bringing Identity Theory into Environmental Sociology," *Sociological Theory* 21, no. 4 (Dec., 2003): 398.

<sup>12</sup> In this paper, "East German" and "West German" are capitalized. The terms are capitalized to refer to East and West Germans both before and after reunification. Thus, they reflect identity, but not necessarily citizenship.

<sup>13</sup> Theano S. Terkenli, "Home as a Region," *Geographical Review* 85, no. 3 (Jul., 1995): 326.

<sup>14</sup> Ilan N. Magat, "Israeli and Japanese Immigrants to Canada: Home, Belonging, and the Territorialization of Identity," *Ethos* 27, no. 2 (Jun., 1999): 120.

home is often incorporated in society as the sense of routine and habit.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, although East Germans did not experience a change in physical location after reunification, they faced significant changes in routines, social norms and expectations, and habits that may have left many feeling lost and “homeless” as they attempted to re-establish themselves in new and unfamiliar surroundings. Reunification would have affected East Germans’ identities because the concept of home is very closely tied to one’s concept of self. A change of this nature would also have emphasized the differences in attitudes and actions between the two sides — differences that possibly remain visible even today.

### **East German Identity**

The protests and demonstrations in the GDR that brought about the fall of The Wall emphasized the unity of the German people as “*ein Volk*.”<sup>16</sup> They hoped for an improved economy, increased opportunity, and an overall stronger Germany.<sup>17</sup> However, as the years progressed, East Germans realized that integration would be much more difficult than previously expected. They not only struggled under the heavy costs of economic changes, social adaptation, and feelings of belonging to “a defeated society,” but they also grappled with the differences between their own history and experiences and those of West Germany.<sup>18</sup> This was especially true in light of the fact that while East Germany was absorbed into the FRG and was expected to adapt to a Western perspective,

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<sup>15</sup> Terkenli, “Home as a Region,” 325.

<sup>16</sup> Anne-Marie Le Gloannec, “On German Identity,” *Daedalus* 123, no. 1 (Winter, 1994): 130.

<sup>17</sup> Gloannec, “On German Identity,” 129.

<sup>18</sup> Harold James, “Reflections of German Identity: Introduction,” *German Studies Review* 15, (Winter, 1992): 4.

the FRG was not sensitive to the GDR's interpretation of history or their experiences.<sup>19</sup> As a result, many East Germans rallied behind others from the GDR in an attempt to validate feelings of resentment against the vast expansion of West German culture.<sup>20</sup> Although feelings of gratefulness toward the FRG and optimism toward the future were predominate after reunification, these inner conflicts represented the discrepancies in identity caused when East Germans' history and culture, along with the communist system of the GDR, were swept into the past in the wake of the incoming West.

In the decade after reunification, East Germans were less patriotic toward Germany than West Germans, perhaps because of their limited time in a Western country as well as the significantly higher possibility of negative economic and social experiences.<sup>21</sup> According to several polls conducted in the decade after reunification, a majority of East Germans claimed to be East German rather than German and only a small minority of West and East Germans thought that the two peoples had a shared identity.<sup>22</sup> Essentially, these studies show that former East Germans and West Germans, now living in the same, unified nation, did not think of themselves as belonging to the same people group. Many researchers believed that a common identity, and thus a more thorough assimilation into Western culture, would come with time as West and East Germans developed a shared past, similar experiences, and common goals for the

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Fulbrook, "Aspects of Society and Identity in the New Germany," *Daedalus* 123, no. 1 (Winter, 1994): 215-217.

<sup>20</sup> Dolores L. Augustine, "The Impact of Two Reunification-Era Debates on the East German Sense of Identity" *German Studies Review* 27, no. 3 (Oct., 2004): 563.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Blank and Peter Schmidt, "National Identity in a United Germany: Nationalism or Patriotism? An Empirical Test with Representative Data," *Political Psychology* 24, no. 2 (Jun., 2003): 299.

<sup>22</sup> Le Gloannec, "On German Identity," 142.

future.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, the difference in experiences between West and East Germans was emphasized by the difficulty East Germans had in transitioning from the GDR to a unified, Western Germany.

## **East German Culture**

### **Government and the Stasi**

The German Democratic Republic was created on October 7, 1949 out of the Russian zone after Germany's defeat and occupation by the Allied Forces.<sup>24</sup> It was modeled after the Stalinist government of the USSR, and the ruling communist party, the Socialist Unity Party (SED), was transformed to align with Stalinist Marxism as the region was established as a sovereign nation.<sup>25</sup> The Party also became more exclusive as it implemented a stricter hierarchy that emphasized inside connections and loyalty. The government was highly centralized, with all decisions being made by the various departments and branches of the SED. This ruling strategy painted the Party as an all-encompassing and all-surrounding entity.

One of the most significant entities of control, oppression, and fear in the GDR was the Stasi—the State Security Service. The Stasi was known for its intense spying, interrogations, and record-keeping on its own citizens, meant to keep the government

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<sup>23</sup> Fulbrook, "Aspects of Society and Identity in the New Germany," 232; Le Gloanec, "On German Identity," 145; Thomas Blank, "Determinants of National Identity in East and West Germany: An Empirical Comparison of Theories on the Significance of Authoritarianism, Anomie, and General Self-Esteem," *Political Psychology* 24, no. 2 (Jun., 2003): 284.

<sup>24</sup> "A Guide to the United States' History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, since 1776: East Germany (German Democratic Republic)," *Department of State: Office of the Historian*, <https://history.state.gov/countries/german-democratic-republic>.

<sup>25</sup> Monika Kaiser, "Change and Continuity in the Development of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 4 (Oct. 1995): 691.

informed on the thoughts, actions, and opinions of the people in order to preserve the appearance of a collective mentality of communist unity.<sup>26</sup> After the fall of the Wall and reunification, the evidence left in the wake of the Stasi has served as a reminder of the harsh reality of living under a totalitarian regime. The extensive files on East Germans in particular, which were opened to the public, detail the intense scrutiny that each citizen endured in her everyday life in the GDR.<sup>27</sup>

### **Economic Policy**

The GDR emphasized industrial development after World War II to rebuild its economy.<sup>28</sup> However, while it had relatively high investment rates, its output per capita was extremely low when compared to the FRG. Despite this, the GDR was still the leading trade partner of Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup> One of the most significant markings of the GDR's economic policy was its lack of non-necessity consumer goods.<sup>30</sup> Although the East German people had enough, they did not have quality or quantity standard provided in the FRG nor did they have access to the Western (mostly American and British) brands of products or clothing. As a result, after reunification, the abundance of the new capitalist market, while coveted during the Cold War, presented a shock and a challenge for the people coming from the GDR's economic policy.

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<sup>26</sup> Molly Andrews, "One Hundred Miles of Lives: The Stasi Files as a People's History of East Germany," *Oral History* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 24.

<sup>27</sup> The Stasi records, rumored to have once contained files on a third of all East German citizens, were kept by the modern German government and opened to the public in 1992.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Gregory and Gert Leptin, "Similar Societies under Differing Economic Systems: The Case of the Two Germanys," *Soviet Studies* 29, no. 4 (Oct. 1997): 525.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas A. Baylis, "Explaining the GDR's economic strategy," *International Organization* 40, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 384.

<sup>30</sup> Gregory and Leptin, "Similar Societies under Differing Economic Systems," 532.

The GDR was also low in natural resources and suffered from a steady decrease in labor and intellectuals.<sup>31</sup> Although it had a high labor participation rate and the highest female participation rate in the world, the Communist regime compelled many to flee to the West.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, because those who were intellectual, academic, or artistic were more heavily scrutinized by the Stasi, the GDR experienced a significant brain drain. In fact, this constant emigration was one of the reasons the Berlin Wall was built.<sup>33</sup>

### **Education**

A defining feature of the GDR education system was the indoctrination and thorough integration of Stalinist values in children's lives. The Young Pioneers instilled classic communist values in children from a young age. Later, as the young adults completed secondary school, their pursuit of a higher education was inhibited by the extremely centralized decision-making process for acceptance of students into universities.<sup>34</sup> Many times children of non-Party members were refused entry into higher education. Furthermore, students who applied for a place in a university were sometimes offered spots in other areas of study, which was their only chance at receiving a university education. After their education ended, whether with the completion of secondary school or with graduating from university, people were assigned a job in a field in which they were expected to remain until their retirement. Thus, the government

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<sup>31</sup> Gregory and Leptin, "Similar Societies under Differing Economic Systems," 384.

<sup>32</sup> Gregory and Leptin, "Similar Societies under Differing Economic Systems," 529.

<sup>33</sup> Kaiser, "Change and Continuity in the Development of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany," 696.

<sup>34</sup> Jennifer Bryson, "Studying in the GDR," *Die Unterrichtspraxis / Teaching German* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 63.

of the GDR was extremely influential in the education of its citizens through its indoctrination of children starting at a young age and its heavy control over their continuing education and jobs later in life.

## **Religion**

At the end of World War II, the German people's defeated situation reflected onto their religious life. While Germans had had relatively separate religious and public lives before World War II, after the war, church attendance dropped and the people became more openly atheist.<sup>35</sup> Although churches in West Germany were encouraged to recover under the democratic leadership of the United States, Great Britain, and France, it was already clear that the USSR was beginning to suppress the church and that the general atmosphere was becoming more distrustful of the government and public institutions.<sup>36</sup>

Under socialism, the separation of the church and state is complete. The constitution of the GDR gave full religious freedom to its citizens, but dismantled any connections between the new government and the Church.<sup>37</sup> The government did not have ambassadors or representatives from any religious institution nor was the church supported by tax money. In turn, however, the all-encompassing dictates of the Marxist ideology excluded Christians from leadership positions in the Party on the grounds of Christians not being wholly committed to the state.<sup>38</sup> Thus, while the churches were not

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<sup>35</sup> Helmut Thielicke, "Religion in Germany," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 260, (Nov. 1948): 144.

<sup>36</sup> Thielicke, "Religion in Germany," 153.

<sup>37</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, "Religion and State in Germany: West and East," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 483 (Jan. 1986): 114.

<sup>38</sup> Moltmann, "Religion and State in Germany," 115.

dissolved nor were Christians always discriminated against in the GDR, religion was thrust totally into the private sphere of life. Furthermore, not only was religion expected to be private, it was considered contrary to and interfering of full participation in the state. Association with religion in general, therefore, was a liability, cutting one off from respect and trust in society and in the eyes of the authority. Even today, the former East German states make up one of the least religious places on the planet, with nearly half of people saying they do not believe in God.<sup>39</sup>

### **Women in East Germany**

In 1950, there were three women for every two men in Germany because of the extremely high fatality rate of German soldiers during World War II.<sup>40</sup> Practically then, the GDR could not afford to waste the labor skills of roughly 3/5 of its population. The East German state needed both men and women to work full time to rebuild the country and reconstruct society.

#### **In the Work Place**

Officially, one of the GDR's ideological goals under Soviet-inspired communism was equal rights for women.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the Soviet slogan of "equal pay for equal work" attracted much support from women who had disagreed with gender

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<sup>39</sup> "East Germany world's most Godless area," *TheLocal.de*, last modified April 20, 2012, <https://www.thelocal.de/20120420/42081>. & Peter Thompson, "Eastern Germany: the most godless place on Earth," *TheGuardian.com*, last modified September 22, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/sep/22/atheism-east-germany-godless-place>.

<sup>40</sup>Marilyn Rueschemeyer and Hanna Schissler, "Women in the Two Germanys." *German Studies Review* 13, DAAD Special Issue (1990): 72.

<sup>41</sup> Sibylle Meyer and Eva Schulze, "After the Fall of the Wall: The Impact of the Transition on East German Women," *Political Psychology*, 19, no. 1 (Mar. 1998): 96.

discrimination of earlier years under the Nazi regime.<sup>42</sup> With more women working in the labor force, more women gained independent incomes and a furthered purpose in society at large. Compared to their counterparts in the FRG, women in the GDR were two to three times more likely to participate in the workforce; furthermore, compared to men, women enjoyed a nearly equal employment rate in the GDR at 89% for women and 92% for men.<sup>43</sup> However, while there were clear strides in gender equality in the workplace, this progress did not necessarily translate to gender parity as the social constructs of male dominance still persisted. Thus, women were more likely to be found in traditionally female-caregiver roles for decades and men struggled to accept women as equals.<sup>44</sup>

Although women may have struggled for gender parity in East Germany, the fact that the majority of women worked and were able to rise in their careers alongside men reflected both the necessity for workers in the GDR and the success of the implemented gender equality. For the first generation in German history, women enjoyed control over their own independent finances, social lives outside of the home, and the freedom to make their own decisions without a husband's or father's permission. Therefore, although women who wished to stay home were frequently judged by their community, women gained importance, and therefore a voice in various aspects of society.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Rueschemeyer, "Women in the Two Germanys," 72.

<sup>43</sup> Anna Matysiak and Stephanie Steinmetz, "Finding Their Way? Female Employment Patterns in West Germany, East Germany, and Poland." *European Sociological Review*, 24, no. 3 (Jul. 2008): 331, 333; Rachel A. Rosenfeld, Heike Trappe and Janet C. Gornick. "Gender and Work in Germany: Before and after Reunification," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 30 (2004): 107.

<sup>44</sup> Rosenfeld, "Gender and Work in Germany," 104.

<sup>45</sup> Ingrid Sandole-Staroste, *Women in Transition: Between Socialism and Capitalism*, (Westport, Praeger, 2002), 85.

## Maternity

Along with their new role in society as equal employees in the workplace, women were still expected to be the main caregivers for their children and families. Due to the pressure of these dueling responsibilities, the GDR saw an extreme decrease in the birth rate, so that it fell below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per mother.<sup>46</sup> The GDR, needing both to encourage female workers in the labor force as well as encourage re-population, approached this problem by increasing maternity benefits and childcare. Maternity leave was increased to include one paid “birth-year,” which translated to job security with the expectation that the women would return to work afterward.<sup>47</sup> Leave was also permitted to include reduced shift hours, unlimited days off to care for sick children, and one “housework” day per month.<sup>48</sup> In this way, a woman was expected to balance a full-time job and raising her children.

While the state funded many policies that opened the workforce to women, it also limited their influence over their children’s schooling and activities. As women returned to work after maternity leave, their children were placed in childcare where they stayed until they became old enough to go to school. Approximately 80% of children born in the GDR aged 1-3 years old went to state-funded childcare.<sup>49</sup> After children reached school age, parents still did not have a say in their children’s schooling or after-school activities

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<sup>46</sup> Rueschemeyer, “Women in the Two Germanys,” 75.

<sup>47</sup> Rosenfeld, “Gender and Work in Germany,” 107; Meyer, “After the Fall of the Wall,” 96.

<sup>48</sup> Meyer, “After the Fall of the Wall,” 96.

<sup>49</sup> Matysiak, “Finding Their Way?” 334.

because only state-funded programs were allowed and the great majority of parents worked after children were out of school in the afternoons.<sup>50</sup>

### **Home Life**

These new rights and shared responsibilities translated into home life as well. Within a marriage, husbands and wives had a more balanced relationship than those in the FRG.<sup>51</sup> Men were more involved with childcare and household chores and women participated in decision-making for the family. Women contributed an average of 40 percent to the household income.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, women were usually the dominant deciding party in how many children to have and when.<sup>53</sup> This meant that women took over the role of making significant family-planning decisions, rather than being completely submissive to their husbands' will for the family. Furthermore, divorce was more prevalent in the GDR, as two-thirds of divorces were initiated by women with one of the main reasons being that the men refused to help at home.<sup>54</sup> Women were also encouraged because they were usually awarded custody of any children.<sup>55</sup> The fact that women had their own financial means to support themselves and their children meant that they had the option of independence, and were not forced to stay in an unhealthy, unequal, or even abusive relationship.

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<sup>50</sup> Meyer, "After the Fall of the Wall," 96.

<sup>51</sup> Rueschemeyer, "Women in the Two Germanys," 79; Meyer, "After the Fall of the Wall," 102.

<sup>52</sup> Meyer, "After the Fall of the Wall," 104.

<sup>53</sup> Meyer, "After the Fall of the Wall," 102.

<sup>54</sup> Meyer, "After the Fall of the Wall," 104; Rueschemeyer, "Women in the Two Germanys," 79.

<sup>55</sup> Meyer, "After the Fall of the Wall," 104.

Many women of the younger generation who grew up in the GDR felt supported to be both working professionals and mothers.<sup>56</sup> Because of their jobs, women were able to support themselves financially, and they were not forced to become dependent on either their families or their husbands. This advanced gender equality in the workplace, but also in the home, as housework, childcare, and decision-making became more balanced between men and women. Furthermore, because women worked, they were able to form close friendships outside of their immediate familial circle with their colleagues.<sup>57</sup> These connections allowed them to create stronger social ties with other women and form support groups to deal with life and home problems.

In addition, although women in the GDR usually became mothers at a younger age than women in the FRG, they were given ample maternity leave and support that did not pressure them to choose between their jobs and family life. So, while the state required employment for women, it also allowed them to form social bonds outside of their families, to be financially independent from husbands, to demand equality in the workplace and the home, and to live a life that did not divide employment and motherhood into non-overlapping lifestyles.

### **After Reunification**

After reunification in 1989, east Germany experienced many changes. Among the most significant for women were the economic shock caused by the fall of the socialist regime and absorption into the capitalist market of the west, as well as the social shock

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<sup>56</sup> Meyer, "After the Fall of the Wall," 96.

<sup>57</sup> Meyer, "After the Fall of the Wall," 104.

upon the introduction of West German traditional values and family order as opposed to the communist ideals of equality from before. As a result of these changes, the state's attitude toward women changed and created an unfair negative bias, causing East German women to lose status, equality, and freedoms. These transitions ultimately harmed them, despite the overall and overwhelmingly positive impact the west had on the east in general.

In the workplace, women were the first to lose their jobs and the last to be hired back to the workforce. Because former East Germany rapidly advanced under the influence of the west, the demand for highly skilled workers, especially those trained in the west, increased dramatically after reunification. The comparatively less skilled employees in the east were consequently let go or had trouble finding jobs. In fact, the east German states, which had had a higher rate of employment before the fall of the Wall, fell below the west's employment rates afterward.<sup>58</sup> Women, particularly mothers, were hurt the most by this new demand. While women's average wage rose overall, their employment fell drastically, and 64 percent of the unemployed were women.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, although it is normal for a society to reduce its demand for low skilled labor during a time of economic change, women are usually more likely to quit or be let go from a company during such times because they face home and childcare constraints,

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<sup>58</sup> Matysiak, "Finding Their Way?" 333.

<sup>59</sup> Meyer, "After the Fall of the Wall," 106.

inflexibility in work location compared to men, and societal pressure to give up jobs in favor of men.<sup>60</sup>

In addition, many of the socialist welfare programs disappeared so that childcare and care for the elderly or the sick, which had previously been taken on by the state, were now primarily the responsibility of the family.<sup>61</sup> This, combined with women's mass unemployment and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles, meant that women remained home rather than seeking a job. For women who retained their jobs, reunified Germany provided far fewer childcare facilities than the former GDR previously had supplied.<sup>62</sup>

Germany's reunification immensely benefited the east in terms of government, economy, personal rights and freedoms, and connection to the outside world. The majority of citizens in the east felt and supported these incoming advantages. However, because East German women lacked their own income, ability to acquire independent resources, and a way to provide for their own and their children's needs as a result of their high unemployment rates, women lost status and equality to men in society. Not only were they disproportionately affected economically by their new reliance on males in their families, they were also negatively affected socially in that they lost non-familial companions and personal autonomy. Despite these initial disadvantages, though, the new

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<sup>60</sup> Jennifer Hunt, "The Transition in East Germany: When Is a Ten-Point Fall in the Gender Wage Gap Bad News?" *Journal of Labor Economics* 20, no. 1 (2002): 167.

<sup>61</sup> Meyer, "After the Fall of the Wall," 96.

<sup>62</sup> Meyer, "After the Fall of the Wall," 106.

government opened up many political, economic, and social opportunities for the women that they would not have had under the strict control of the GDR government.

### **Women in the East Today**

Today, East German women shine as examples of resilience, self-efficiency, and power in society, particularly because of their experiences with adapting to Western culture and overcoming rampant unemployment and discrimination after reunification. The east German states have a higher percentage of women who work than the west German states.<sup>63</sup> As a result, eastern women rely more heavily on themselves rather than family or a spouse.

However, east German states maintain disproportionate numbers of unemployed women. This factor, combined with the general lack of economic opportunity, has led a large portion of the population to move west. Of those who have left the east since reunification, up to 2/3 have been women—particularly young, highly educated women.<sup>64</sup> While both the unemployment gap and the pay gap between men and women are narrowing in the eastern states (more so than in western states), East German women are underrepresented in the political sphere, as CEOs, and in the entertainment sector.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> “More women work in east than west: Study,” *TheLocal.de*, last modified January 14, 2015, <https://www.thelocal.de/20150114/female-work-force-stronger-in-east-than-west-study-gdr-ddr>.

<sup>64</sup> “Lack of Women in Eastern Germany Feeds Neo-Nazis,” *Spiegel.de*, last modified May 31, 2007, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/she-goes-west-he-goes-right-lack-of-women-in-eastern-germany-feeds-neo-nazis-a-485942.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Rosenfeld, “Gender and Work in Germany,” 109.

Despite this, East German women have continually challenged the traditional notion that women must choose between motherhood and full-time employment.<sup>66</sup> As a result, they are generally more self-sufficient, self-confident in their looks, relationships, and sexuality, and more entrepreneurial than their western counterparts.<sup>67</sup>

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

My main research question is: Do the cultural aspects, norms, and expectations of the former GDR continue to influence East German women's attitudes and decisions in their daily lives, and if so, how? In order to answer this question, I intend to ask my interviewees open-ended questions that invite them to describe their professional and home lives, individualism and collectivism, and consumer patterns and free time as well as their general impressions about what continues to influence their attitudes on religion, politics, and social responsibility.

I also answer how the transition of the concept of "home" continues to influence the women in my interviews. Depending on how the women in my study identify socially — that is, whether they continue to identify with their former citizenship and experiences as East German or whether they only identify as members of the unified German state — they may let their former way of life influence more of their behavior in everyday life today. I attempt to determine if a shared 30 years has developed into a common German self-identity from the perspective of the East German women in this study as well as if

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<sup>66</sup> Katrin Bennhold, "20 Years After Fall of Wall, Women of Former East Germany Thrive," NYTimes.com, last modified on October 5, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/06/world/europe/06iht-letter.html>; "More women work in east than west: Study."

<sup>67</sup> Bennhold, "20 Years After Fall of Wall, Women of Former East Germany Thrive."

and how their past continues to influence their actions and behaviors despite this potentially new identity.

In the GDR, East German women were able to and encouraged to work, as opposed to the unemployment and traditional gender expectations prevalent immediately after reunification. As a result, they had more independence and autonomy in their choices for themselves and their children. However, they were less able to make decisions about their children's education, free-time, and upbringing. This interview process reveals how these past experiences of East German women have shaped their adaption into western society and how they continue to be influenced in their behaviors in everyday life.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The participants of this interview process are a convenience sample of six women who grew up and still currently live in the state of Saxony in the former East Germany.<sup>68</sup> They are now aged 54-90 and all held jobs in the GDR, were married, and have children. All interviewees replied through written responses to the questions. I also spoke with two women who agreed to a Skype interview after I received their replies so they could expand upon and clarify their responses to the questions. The other four either declined to be interviewed via Skype or could not because of time constraints.

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<sup>68</sup> See the "Gatekeeper" section for information on my selection of and contact for these women.

**Women**

I chose to interview only women for this research because of their unique perspective about the changes they experienced in the workplace, home life, and society in general during reunification and how they are still affected by their past today.

**Gatekeeper**

My gatekeeper and main contact for these women is an American woman who knows them personally from her nearly three decades of living in Saxony while working as an English teacher. She was the primary correspondent between the interviewees and myself. She contacted them to ask if they were willing to be interviewed. After they agreed, I sent a copy of the letter and interview questions via my gatekeeper in both English and German. They sent their answers to her and she forwarded them to me. She was also present during the Skype interviews.

**Translation**

I sent the letter explaining my research and the interview questions to the participants in both English and German. I translated both myself and had them reviewed by my gatekeeper and the university's German professor. All of the interviewees sent written responses in German, which I then translated back into English. Of the two women who agreed to be interviewed afterward via Skype, one spoke in English and one spoke in German. I translated all German responses, whether written or spoken, into English with the approval of my gatekeeper for the purposes of writing and presenting the research.

### **Representativeness**

Because this study is a qualitative interview, the numbers were small in an attempt to find in-depth information about a breadth of the women's experiences. Therefore, this is not a statistically representative sample of all Saxon women who lived during the GDR times, but rather an attempt to understand the ways in which living through the GDR has continued to affect some women through the experiences of the women I interviewed.

### **Consent**

The women's participation was requested via email by the study's gatekeeper. After they agreed to be interviewed, I sent a summary of my study in English and German to explain what I was researching and how the data I collected from them would be used. The participants were free to accept or decline to respond to my interviews and to be interviewed over Skype. Their agreement to respond to the interview questions was considered consent. See Appendix A for the letter in English and Appendix B for the letter in German.

### **Confidentiality**

Participation in this study did not pose any risk or threat of revealing the participants' identities. The participants' names were not referred to in writing in this paper and were replaced with aliases. The aliases were chosen alphabetically to represent the six interviewees. They are: Angelika, Brigitte, Claudia, Doris, Elke, and Frieda.

### **Interview Questions**

I developed the interview questions based on the research above. Because there is no set measure for culture or acculturation, I selected a variety of topics in an attempt to

cover both the public and private spheres of everyday life. The public-life questions give voice to the women's experiences as they reflect on the culture of East Germany in the public realm. The home life personal questions allow the women to voice their thoughts about how their private lives and decisions are affected by the former East German culture. See Appendix C for a complete list of the interview questions in English and Appendix D for a complete list of the interview questions in German.

### **DATA**

After analyzing the responses from the interviewed women, major themes emerged about how the women are influenced by their past in their opinions and actions today. An initial similarity in the interviewees was the intrigue at my interest in their pasts in the GDR. Several commented on the difficult process of answering the questions, and many insisted that this difficulty arose from not having considered how the change in culture influenced them and a slight resistance to the idea that the GDR still held influence over their lives. Angelika said, "We don't think back, but rather live in the here and today without letting ourselves be influenced."<sup>69</sup> Elke expanded on this sentiment by explaining, "It's not so easy, though, to think about the influences of the life in the GDR because the time without the wall is now a little longer already than the time the wall had existed [*sic*]."<sup>70</sup>

Another similarity from the beginning was the openly-expressed sentiment that they only spoke for themselves and that every situation, even the GDR, had pros and

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<sup>69</sup> "Wir denken nicht zurück sondern leben in Hier und Heute ohne uns beeinflussen zu lassen."

<sup>70</sup> Originally in English

cons, producing many memories and thousands of stories. This overarching thought can be expressed as Frieda initially wrote, “Life is never only black or white. All things have two [sides] or more, like a cube, for example [*sic*].”<sup>71</sup> While their experiences may be shared by several others, the women also acknowledged that many in the GDR had vastly different, but still valid, experiences to theirs.

## **Themes**

### **Identity**

There was a range of differences in the responses to the question of identity. The most predominant sentiment was identifying as an East German during the GDR, but identifying in the present-day as a German with a GDR background. Despite this majority, the question revealed a span of thoughts, from Brigitte expressing, “I have always felt German”<sup>72</sup> to Frieda stating, “I was East German for 40 years and remain so.”<sup>73</sup> Because Brigitte was older and born in the time before the GDR, she did not feel an influence on her identity quite as strongly as the younger women.

Elke explained that while she identifies as German today, it took her and others longer to see that former East Germans and West Germans were part of a unified culture.

She said there were

two completely different societal, political, and social cultures. Except for the same language, there were hardly common interests with the West

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<sup>71</sup> Originally in English

<sup>72</sup> “Ich habe mich immer als Deutsche gefühlt.”

<sup>73</sup> “Ich war 40 Jahre eine Ostdeutsche und bleibe dies.”

German culture...[but today] we have adopted much of the West German culture.<sup>74</sup>

Though the responses are expressed differently, the women born and raised in the GDR still feel its influence on their identity (though not an allegiance to its government or regime) as a central theme in their past and upbringing.

### **Politics and the State**

A strong similarity among the women was that they were not and are not politically active, nor did they support or join any political party. Rather, the women emphasized an interest in their own lives, their families, and their work. For example, Claudia explained, “I have never been a very political person: I have never taken a large interest in...societal change. My daily life was more impressive and important to me;”<sup>75</sup> and Frieda said,

The politics and the economy in the GDR made me doubt that this is the way that leads to happiness. As a child, I always wished that people would unify the good sides of both of the different societies. Only later did I understand that in reality this wouldn't work. Because there is no ideal

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<sup>74</sup> “...zwei vollkommen unterschiedliche Kulturen in gesellschaftlicher, politischer, sozialer Hinsicht. Außer derselben Sprache gab es kaum Gemeinsamkeiten mit der westdeutschen Kultur... Wir haben viel von der westdeutschen Kultur übernommen.”

<sup>75</sup> “Ich bin allerdings nie ein sehr politischer Mensch gewesen:... gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen überhaupt habe ich nie sehr interessiert wahrgenommen. Mein tägliches Leben war mir eindrucksvoller und wichtiger.”

[political or economic system] for me, I held back politically and took care of my personal work and my children.<sup>76</sup>

Although the lack of political interest may not directly correlate to their GDR background such as in Claudia's example, in some cases, as exemplified by Frieda, it was certainly related.

Whether or not they were political during the GDR or today, all wrote very positively of their life now in a non-communist state. While Doris simply commented, "I am very happy that the GDR collapsed. It is better for us now,"<sup>77</sup> and Brigitte said, "I would not like to live in a communist state again,"<sup>78</sup> Angelika stressed the political freedoms they now have in contrast to the era under the GDR, writing, "...our eyes and senses are wide open and not obscured anymore...because we have learned to think for ourselves."<sup>79</sup> In summary, when asked what influenced her the most in the GDR, Doris said, "the oppression, close guarding, restriction, and spying."<sup>80</sup>

Additionally, more than one woman recalled the creativity of GDR citizens in protesting the government in their daily lives. Claudia mentioned that "[The] cultural scene was very special because it had to deal with obstacles and censorship. Wonderful

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<sup>76</sup> "Die Politik in der DDR und die Wirtschaft haben mich zweifeln lassen, dass dies ein Weg ist, der auf Dauer zum Glück führt. Ich habe mir als Kind immer gewünscht, dass die Menschen die guten Seiten der beiden verschiedenen Gesellschaften vereinen. Erst später habe ich verstanden, dass dies in der Wirklichkeit nicht funktioniert. Da es für mich die ideale Gesellschaft nicht gibt, habe ich mich politisch zurückgehalten und mich um meine persönliche Arbeit und die Erziehung meiner Kinder gekümmert."

<sup>77</sup> "Ich bin so froh das es zum Zusammenbruch der DDR kam. Jetzt geht es uns viel besser."

<sup>78</sup> "Ich möchte nie wieder in einem kommunistischen Staat leben."

<sup>79</sup> "...unsere Augen und Sinne sind weit offen und nicht mehr vernebelt...denn wir haben selbständig denken gelernt."

<sup>80</sup> "die Unterdrückung, Bewachung, Einengung, Bespitzelung"

songs and poems were written then. You can interpret them politically or not.”<sup>81</sup> As she mentioned, the songs and poetry of this time could be interpreted in reference to the oppressive nature of the state, talking about life for the people under the control of the state and their hopes for the future, or in a literal sense so as to avoid being penalized by the government. Elke said,

Because official criticism of the state, the government, the socialist Party or the authority of the GDR was very restricted because people had to deal with penalties and discriminations, there were a lot of jokes about the authorities, especially over the representatives of the Party and the government. People told these jokes in private and the laughter at them was certainly an outlet against the political pressure and against the dissatisfaction with it.<sup>82</sup>

Both women mentioned that the art and the jokes have now disappeared, as people do not need to be creative when discussing their dissatisfaction with the government.

While this freedom is certainly a positive, after describing the anti-government jokes, Elke mentioned that “Nowadays, where people can say (almost) everything publicly, grumbling and ranting against government decisions and also local authorities

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<sup>81</sup> “[Die] Kulturszene war etwas ganz Besonderes, weil sie sich mit Hindernissen und Zensur auseinandersetzen musste. Wunderschöne Lieder und Gedichte sind damals entstanden. Das kann man politisch deuten oder auch nicht.”

<sup>82</sup> “Da öffentliche Kritik am Staat, an der Regierung, der sozialistischen Partei oder an den Behörden in der DDR nur sehr begrenzt möglich war, weil man mit Strafen und Benachteiligungen rechnen musste, gab es sehr viele Witze über die Obrigkeit, besonders über die Vertreter der Partei und Regierung. Diese Witze erzählte man sich privat und das Lachen darüber war sicherlich ein Ventil gegen den Druck der Politik und gegen die Unzufriedenheit damit.”

has almost become a habit.”<sup>83</sup> Therefore, while political freedom is certainly recognized and appreciated in full, there were also weary tones toward an over-use of this freedom in the eyes of those who lived during the GDR where this right did not exist.

Although many of the political aspects and controlling nature of the communist society were overall negative and restricting, multiple women commented on the positive emphasis on community values during the GDR. Claudia praised the sense of achievement and value growing up in a tight-knit community as a child gave her:

In the socialist education system that I went through, value was placed on achievement and on helping weaker students by ‘taking them along.’ The community was stressed; not being an individual. Achievements were recognized and praised and rewarded. I felt wholly recognized and confirmed.<sup>84</sup>

Because these supportive and encouraging associations with a strong sense of community were instilled in her as a child in school, it has continued to influence her values and sense of self today.

Others recognized this sense of community as well. One of the most important aspects of GDR culture, according to Elke, was community and “Thinking of the wellbeing of others...Sometimes I can fight better for the interests of others than for

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<sup>83</sup> “Heutzutage, wo man (fast) alles öffentlich sagen kann, ist Meckern und Schimpfen gegen Entscheidungen der Regierung und auch kommunale Behörden fast zur Gewohnheit geworden.”

<sup>84</sup> “Im sozialistischen Bildungssystem, das ich durchlaufen habe, wurde Wert gelegt auf Leistung und darauf, dass schwächeren Schülern geholfen wurde, dass man sie ‘mitnahm.’ Die Gemeinschaft wurde betont, nicht das individuell einzeln besonders sein. Leistungen wurden anerkannt und gelobt und belohnt...Ich fühlte mich wohl, anerkannt und bestätigt.”

myself.”<sup>85</sup> She interpreted this expression of community later as coming from a sense of equality with others directly around herself. She said,

Certainly based on the fact that materials and the social conditions of the majority were all nearly equal (and envy was thus limited), there was more community, relationships, and friendships between neighbors, co-workers, etc. People spent a lot of free-time with each other and helped each other. That was not forced. Today, people hardly spend time with their colleagues in their free-time and the neighbors in apartment buildings barely know each other sometimes.<sup>86</sup>

The situations and circumstances of life in the GDR are certainly not missed. What the women do miss is the feeling of community, mutual understanding, and support from neighbors, co-workers, and friends—even though these benefits stemmed from negative circumstances.

### **Consumerism**

Consumerism, wastefulness, and the comparison of goods available before and after the fall of the Wall were consistent topics of discussion with all of the women, informing their answers to multiple questions. In many of their comments, the women were happy about the better selection and quality of goods, especially fresh produce, that they have access to now. For example, Brigitte said, “I remember the continuously poor

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<sup>85</sup> “Das Denken für das Wohl des anderen...Ich kann manchmal besser für die Interessen von anderen kämpfen als für mich selbst.”

<sup>86</sup> “Sicherlich darauf begründet, dass die materiellen und die sozialen Verhältnisse der Mehrheit nahezu gleich waren (Neid hielt sich somit in Grenzen), gab es mehr Gemeinschaft, Beziehungen, Freundschaften zwischen Nachbarn, Arbeitskollegen usw. Man hat viel Freizeit miteinander verbracht und sich gegenseitig geholfen. Das war nicht erzwungen. Heute verbringt man kaum mit Arbeitskollegen die Freizeit, die Nachbarn in Mietshäusern kennen sich manchmal kaum.”

supply of fruit and vegetables in the GDR and because of that I am thankful and I am especially careful with the modern selection.”<sup>87</sup> There was also a limited supply of clothing in the GDR, leading many of the women to take up sewing and making clothes for their family, or as one woman said, “The fashion was often not ‘up to date,’ so we liked to wear used “fashionable” clothes from West Germany.”<sup>88</sup> Western items were in high demand and short supply. As a result, they were strictly controlled by the government and by the retailers, with Frieda saying: “...in the shops there was often a sign on a commodity that said ‘take only 1 article’ ...”<sup>89</sup> Brigitte summarized the difference in supply between the GDR and reunified Germany by saying,

In the GDR, we were constantly searching for certain things. They were often small things, but people didn’t find them anywhere easily, even though we had the money. Today everything is different. You can buy anything; you only have to have the money.<sup>90</sup>

While all the women spoke positively of the higher quality food, clothing, and other necessary items, they also spoke ardently against what they perceive as over-consumption and waste, as well as a change in values. The GDR had subsidized the necessities so doctors appointments, groceries, public transportation, and education,

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<sup>87</sup> “Ich erinnere mich noch immer an die mangelhafte Versorgung mit Obst und Gemüse in der DDR und deswegen bin ich dankbar und gehe ich besonders sorgfältig mit den heutigen Angeboten um.”

<sup>88</sup> “Die Mode war oft nicht ‘up to date.’ So haben wir gern gebrauchte modische Kleidung aus Westdeutschland getragen.”

<sup>89</sup> “...oft stand in den Geschäften an einer Ware ein Schild ‘Nur 1 Artikel nehmen...’”

<sup>90</sup> In der DDR waren wir ständig auf der Suche nach bestimmten Dingen. Das waren oft Kleinigkeiten, aber man hat sie einfach nirgends bekommen, obwohl wir das Geld gehabt hätten. Heute ist alles anders. Man kann alles kaufen, man muss nur Geld haben.

among other things, were free, but of a lesser quality. However, other things like cars, jewelry, television and radios, and even things like wheelchairs and dentistry materials were extremely expensive and limited and thus reserved for important members of the Party. Frieda said,

In the GDR, vital things were secured for all people and cheap or free ... The quality was often at a low level ... For less necessary so-called luxury goods, high prices had to be paid ... After reunification, it was often the opposite. The important things like housing, the doctor, [and] education were expensive and the luxury goods cheap.<sup>91</sup>

There has been a change in societal values that lowered the margin of difference between “necessary” goods for the public and luxuries for the select.

There has also been a shift toward over-consumption, which all the women addressed. Elke was more hesitant in her critiques, explaining, “We truly wished for an extensive range like the West had. But I find that now it’s the opposite extreme,”<sup>92</sup> but Brigitte put it more simply: “The surplus in the shopping centers won’t lead to good.”<sup>93</sup>

Later, Elke was more specific, saying,

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<sup>91</sup> “In der DDR waren lebensnotwendige Dinge für alle Menschen gesichert und preiswert oder kostenfrei... Der Qualität war oft auf einem niedrigen Niveau... Für weniger notwendige sogenannte Luxusgüter mußten hohe Preise bezahlt werden... Nach der Wende war es oft umgekehrt. Die wichtigen Dinge wie Wohnung, Arzt, [und] Bildung wurden teuer und die Luxusgüter preiswerte.”

<sup>92</sup> “Wir haben uns damals eigentlich gewünscht, so ein reichhaltiges Angebot wie im Westen zu haben. Aber ich finde, das ist jetzt das andere Extrem.”

<sup>93</sup> “Das Überangebot in den Shopping-Centern halte ich nicht für gut.”

Why do I need 50 different toothpastes, a flood of cheap clothing that no one can wear, or a surplus of groceries, many of which will be thrown away? The consumer society didn't remove the problem; it easily creates more.<sup>94</sup>

Frieda explicitly blamed West Germany for what she saw as blatant waste and ruin resulting from capitalist structures:

These injustices and many other factors lead overall to great competition, jealousy, corruption, dishonesty, crime, violence, waste of land, air, and natural resources...But I think that the East Germans are not striving for this to the same extent as the West German areas.<sup>95</sup>

Thus, in one way or another, all of the women commented on the wasteful society created by modern, capitalist affluence. However, more than one woman also recounted how many people, particularly the youth, from East Germany were drawn into debt and financial ruin immediately after the fall of the Wall because of the over-abundance of western goods and, most importantly, the introduction of credit. Frieda said, "Many were taken in by the temptation of offers of goods and credit to spend more than they earned."<sup>96</sup> Elke said, "Besides that, the wide range and the demand tempted many people

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<sup>94</sup> "Wozu brauche ich 50 verschiedene Zahnpasten, die Flut von Billigkleidung, die keiner anziehen kann, oder das Überangebot an Lebensmitteln, wovon vieles wieder weggeworfen wird? Die Konsumgesellschaft löst nicht die Probleme, sie schafft eher welche."

<sup>95</sup> "Diese Ungerechtigkeiten sowie eine Menge anderer Faktoren führen überall zu Konkurrenzkampf, Neid, Korruption, Auseinandersetzungen, Unehrlichkeit, Kriminalität und Gefahren, Verschwendung von Luft, Land und Rohstoffen...Aber, ich denke, dass die Ostdeutschen dies nicht in dem gleichen Ausmaß anstreben wie in den westdeutschen Gebieten."

<sup>96</sup> "Viele haben sich von den Verlockungen des Angebotes an Waren und Krediten verleiten lassen, mehr auszugeben als sie einnahmen."

into always needing to have the most modern things, especially the young people, who get into debt and can't get out anymore."<sup>97</sup>

For these women who witnessed the low supply and pre-determined allocation of goods under the authoritarian GDR, as well as the surplus and waste of today, it is easy to see why they feel a critique of modern consumerist society is valid. Angelika starkly commented, "A dictator is only good for people of the same opinion, and that, today, is capitalism for the rich and prosperous..."<sup>98</sup> Therefore, although their criticisms appear harsh, they are given context by the East Germans' experience with learning to navigate the temptations and potential downfalls of capitalism.

### **Professional Life**

The women's professional lives were extremely influenced by the GDR because citizens' education level and job were assigned by the government. A couple pointed this out because they were prevented from continuing on to higher education. Angelika described her experience as

completely negatively. There was only education for the children of blue-collar workers and the children of parents who came from Intelligence, but only in exceptional cases, and when the parents were a member of the

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<sup>97</sup> "Außerdem verlocken das große Angebot und der Anspruch, immer das Modernste haben zu müssen viele Leute, heute besonders auch junge Menschen, sich zu verschulden und aus dieser Falle nicht mehr herauszukommen."

<sup>98</sup> "Eine Diktatur ist nur für Leute gleicher Meinung gut und das 'Heute' im Kapitalismus für die Reichen und Wohlhabenden..."

SED (party). Children of small, private businesses owners had no chance.<sup>99</sup>

Thus, their professional lives during and after reunification were heavily influenced by the level of education and training the GDR had allowed them to receive in their youth.

A theme, even among those women who had not experienced employment difficulties after reunification, was the increased job insecurity brought about by the end of the GDR. Frieda told the story of finding a new job as a highly trained economist: “However, the content of [my] training contained very strong political and false economic perspectives. Because of that, I lacked necessary factual knowledge that is required in a capitalist economy.”<sup>100</sup> Because they had come from a society that boasted 100% employment and ensured each person was assigned a job for life, the high levels of competition introduced fear and inconsistency where none had been before.

Additionally, Elke mentioned that a main reason East Germans lost employment opportunities when compared to West Germans after the fall of the Wall was because West Germans were experienced in presenting themselves and their work well, while East Germans had no experience with this, and instead relied only on the quality of their work. As she said,

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<sup>99</sup> “Vollkommen negativ. Studium gab es nur für Arbeiter-Kinder, Kinder von Eltern aus dem Intelligenzbereich nur in Ausnahmefällen und wenn die Eltern Mitglieder der SED (Partei) waren. Kinder der Besitzer von kleineren Privatunternehmen hatten keine Chance.”

<sup>100</sup> “Jedoch war der Inhalt [meiner] Ausbildung sehr stark mit politischen und falschen ökonomischen Ansichten behaftet. Dafür fehlten mir notwendige fachliche Kenntnisse, die ein Ökonom im Kapitalismus benötigt.”

For me and many other East Germans the experience was shocking that some ‘Westerns’ who had come to east Germany could make a career because they portrayed themselves and their work as good and could make their mistakes seem better than they actually were. The actual quality of the work did not stand with it in the foreground...For former GDR citizens the quality of their work was more important than speaking about it. In this way, they were more modest.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, East Germans suffered because they had never had to learn how to “sell themselves” in the open market. Their careers were assigned and there was no direct competition, so when the Wall fell and they had to compete for jobs with West Germans, they expected the quality of their work to speak for itself. Instead, they were required to learn to exaggerate their positive features and speak highly of themselves and their work, just as the West Germans had done from the beginning.

On top of working full-time and living under the rules of the GDR, all of these women were mothers. To this experience, there were a variety of responses. Brigitte preferred to work, but was forced to stay at home to care for her children when she could not find them a place in childcare: “I would have liked to go to work. My life as a homemaker was not fulfilling.”<sup>102</sup> On the other hand, Elke wished she had spent more time with her children, saying, “I think it’s good when children don’t have to stay in day-

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<sup>101</sup> “Für mich und viele andere Ostdeutsche war auch die Erfahrung schockierend, dass manche ‘Wessis’, die nach Ostdeutschland kamen, Karriere machen konnte, weil sie sich und ihre Arbeit gut darstellen und Fehler ‘schön’ reden konnten. Die tatsächliche Qualität der Arbeit stand dabei nicht im Vordergrund. Natürlich sind wir ‘Ossis’ sehr sensibel in der Unterscheidung, wer nur schön redet und wer gute Arbeit leistet und Verantwortung übernimmt...In dieser Hinsicht waren sie bescheidener.”

<sup>102</sup> “Ich bin sehr gern arbeiten gegangen. Mein Leben als Hausfrau hat mich nicht ausgefüllt.”

care all day long. I was often sorry about that before.”<sup>103</sup> Claudia took the happy medium stance of enjoying her time at home, but always looking forward to returning to work. She explained, “The time at home with my children was wonderful, but I also always enjoyed going back to work again.”<sup>104</sup> Thus, while the women’s opinions about how much time they preferred to spend at home versus in full-time employment differed, all were adamant about the importance of women being able to return to work when they wanted with the support for the state.

### **Private Life**

The primary ways the women’s private lives were affected by the GDR were in religiosity, a change in hobbies, and attitudes toward people from the western states of Germany. East Germans as a group are generally non-religious and my interviews reflected that. Of the six women, only Claudia was religious. She described her childhood growing up Catholic saying,

I grew up Catholic, that was my mother’s business. Basically, it was not that different: to be surrounded in a community, that spoke the truth. There was also an occasional problem as religion and beliefs were not spoken about in social life. And when high church holidays approached, I had

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<sup>103</sup> “Ich finde es auch gut, wenn Kinder nicht so ganz lange am Tag in den Kindereinrichtungen bleiben müssen. Das hat mir früher schon oft leid getan.”

<sup>104</sup> “Die Zeit mit meinen Kindern zu Hause war wunderschön, aber ich bin auch gern wieder arbeiten gegangen.”

‘stomach problems’ with the instructions from my mother: ‘Don’t tattle on yourself!’<sup>105</sup>

Her mother made her tell the lie that she was sick in order to get out of her school and after-school activities on religious holidays so that she could celebrate in the church.

Addressing her life as a Christian now, she said,

I still have inhibitions (like in the GDR) about speaking freely about this. Somehow, there were no Christians in the working world of the GDR—it was surprising to see how immediately after reunification, leaders said things like ‘with God’s Blessing.’<sup>106</sup>

As for the other women, Freida summarized their attitudes by explaining, “Most GDR citizens are not religious...I have not made any change.”<sup>107</sup> The anti-religious sentiment and even discrimination that East Germans who were religious faced in the GDR has clearly exacerbated the lack of a religious life for the majority of East Germans today. If they are religious, they are still influenced by the decades-long tradition of hiding their beliefs from society as a whole.

Many of the hobbies and interests the women had in the GDR were of a practical nature. These hobbies had real-world benefits like providing food or clothes for the

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<sup>105</sup> “Ich wuchs katholisch auf, das war Sache meiner Mutter. Im Grunde war es ja auch gar nicht so unterschiedlich: in der Gemeinschaft aufgehen, die Wahrheit sagen. Da war dann auch mein gelegentliches Problem: Über Religion und Glauben wurde im gesellschaftlichen Leben nicht gesprochen. Und wenn hohe kirchliche Feiertage anstanden, hatte ich „Magenprobleme“ mit der Maßgabe meiner Mutter: Verquatsch Dich ja nicht!”

<sup>106</sup> “Ich habe aber noch immer (wie in der DDR) Hemmungen, dies frei auszusprechen. Irgendwie gab es in der DDR in der Arbeitswelt keine Christen – es war überraschend, zu sehen, wie nach der Wende plötzlich leitende Personen Dinge sagten wie: ‘Mit Gottes Segen.’”

<sup>107</sup> “Die meisten DDR-Bürger sind nicht religiös...Ich habe keine Veränderung vollzogen.”

family. For instance, Brigitte said, “We had a garden, because we could then harvest strawberries, which were seldom if at all in the grocery store.”<sup>108</sup> Elke learned to sew and said,

In GDR times I liked to sew and knit for myself and the children and do other creative things. That was fun because you couldn’t buy all of that... Nowadays, I hardly sew anymore...there is not the incentive to sew for yourself anymore because there are so many clothes to buy and materials like fabric and cotton have become so expensive that it is no longer worthwhile from a financial point of view.<sup>109</sup>

From her, it becomes clear that hobbies that were useful and creative are neither practical nor purposeful after reunification. Now, their hobbies consist of things like dancing, playing sports, and tending their gardens, influenced by an increase in opportunities and time after their retirement.

Finally, the women’s relationship to the former western states of Germany and their inhabitants was extremely influenced by the GDR’s attitude. One of the most influential experiences was the almost paternalistic attitude of incoming West Germans immediately after reunification. Elke explained this with the story,

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<sup>108</sup> “Wir hatten einen Garten, weil wir dann Erdbeeren ernten konnten, die es im Geschäft selten oder garnicht gab. Sportvereine gab es überall, für wenig Beiträge.”

<sup>109</sup> “Zu DDR-Zeiten habe ich gerne für mich und die Kinder genäht und gestrickt und andere kreative Dinge gebastelt. Das hat Spaß gemacht, denn es gab nicht alles zu kaufen...Heutzutage nähe ich kaum mehr...Es gibt heute nicht mehr den Anreiz zum Selbstnähen, weil es so viel Kleidung zu kaufen gibt und die Materialien wie Stoff und Nähgarn so teuer geworden sind, dass es sich von der finanziellen Seite gesehen nicht mehr lohnt.”

We had to fight especially with the fact that after reunification many East German employees in leadership positions in our businesses and governments were replaced with West German bosses, who should show us ‘the right way to work’ under the new circumstances. They supposedly knew exactly how it had been for us, although they had not lived here. This depressed many East Germans and their self-esteem dropped.<sup>110</sup>

Two of the women expressed two distinct thoughts about the west today. From one of the older women, Brigitte, the sentiment was kind, but exhibited the noticeable differences between those born and raised in the West and those born and raised in the East:

The mental thought processes and behavior of a West German are strange to me and I often don’t like them. The prejudices of both sides are still there. Through that very seldom comes friendship. That still separates us.<sup>111</sup>

On the other side, Elke expressed the positives of the East and West coming together as one nation, saying,

A very positive experience is related to the opened borders together to the ‘west.’ I met many people either by traveling to foreign countries or when

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<sup>110</sup> “Wir hatten besonders mit der Tatsache zu kämpfen, dass nach der Wende in unseren Betrieben und Behörden viele ostdeutsche Mitarbeiter in leitenden Positionen durch westdeutsche Chefs ersetzt wurden, die uns zeigen sollten, ‘wie man richtig arbeitet’ unter neuen Bedingungen. Diese wussten angeblich genau, wie es bei uns zugegangen war, obwohl sie nicht hier gelebt hatten. Das hat schon viel Ostdeutsche deprimiert und das Selbstwertgefühl heruntergedrückt.”

<sup>111</sup> “...mir die Denkweise und das Verhalten einiger Westdeutscher fremd ist und mir oft nicht gefällt. Die Vorurteile auf beiden Seiten sind immer noch da. Dadurch kommen selten Freundschaften zustande. Das trennt uns immer noch.”

visitors came from the western states, who had referred to us as ‘enemies.’ I could persuade myself, so to speak, that the majority are very nice people, who in principle had the same worries and joys as us, no matter where we grew up. And I have gained very good friends.<sup>112</sup>

So, while the older generation may still be politely perplexed by the ways of the west, others have long-since recognized the benefits of having West German friends, learning from their experiences, and being able to share their own, despite what may have been an initially negative introduction to the West Germans as a whole during the first years of reunified Germany.

## CONCLUSION

The two-sided identity the women wrote of demonstrates the complicated experiences the majority of them have faced in coming to terms with who they are. Although the older women born before the creation of East Germany may have only thought of themselves as German, the young women raised in the system of the GDR identified as East German during that time. Now, while they all identify as German within unified Germany, they still speak of the GDR informing their identity and background, both consciously and unconsciously.

Shaped by the culture of the GDR, these women still reference its systems as they continue to navigate life in a different society from the one in which they were raised. By freely recognizing the flaws of the GDR, East German women become more reliable

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<sup>112</sup> “Eine sehr positive Erfahrung hängt mit den nach „Westen“ geöffneten Grenzen zusammen. Ich habe viele Leute entweder im Urlaub im Ausland oder als Besucher aus westlichen Staaten in unserem Land kennengelernt, die uns vorher als „Feinde“ eingeredet wurden. Ich habe mich sozusagen davon überzeugen können, dass die meisten sehr nette Menschen sind, die im Prinzip die gleichen Sorgen und Freuden haben wie wir, egal wo wir aufgewachsen sind. Und ich habe sehr gute Freunde dazugewonnen.”

critics of the western system of government, economics, and society. In this way, their identity as full citizens of the GDR in its time and full citizens of Germany today, along with the experiences and expectations of both, gives them a dual perspective on the values, benefits, and downfalls of the opposing societies, particularly as the women have lived in reunified Germany for the same length of time as the Wall divided the FRG from the GDR. This dual perspective is exemplified by their insistence that every system has its pros and cons, and that each woman can only speak for herself.

This dual-natured position allows them to both praise the political rights and freedoms they have now in a democracy, and to criticize the tendency to complain that a life of bountiful freedom can be foster as well as the lack of community and solidarity with one's fellow citizens. It allows them to both welcome the supply of constant and high-quality food, clothes, and materials that are available to all, and to condemn the over-consumption and wastefulness now seen in society as well as the depravity in unabashed economic competition that permits some to flourish off the financial ruin and debt of others. It allows them to both acclaim the security and equality for women in the GDR, and to denounce its biased, strict, and absolute approach to education, training, and career allocation.

Through the lenses of their personal lives, the women are also able to recognize the benefits and downsides of the two competing systems under which they have all lived—democracy and communism, and the political, economic, and societal values both entail. This is evident in the women's approach toward religion. Though most are non-religious, they are not anti-religion, and they accept their own experiences simply for

what they are and not as thoughts about the right or wrong approach to religion.

Similarly, the women's thoughts about West Germans also lead to this conclusion.

Whether they view West German ways as different and struggle to find a commonality with them, or have learned to see westerners as their equivalents with a separate set of experiences and tendencies, they view neither themselves nor the west as universally better.

Instead, each woman assigns meaning to her choices in and understanding of politics, economics, religion, and all other aspects of society by referring to her identity as a German, and not only a German, but one informed by her life in the GDR—encompassing everything from attending school and working to raising children and buying groceries. Later, it included learning a new system of realities and assimilating to a new culture while at the same time retraining for and finding new work. Through all these experiences, the women witnessed the positives and negatives of modern life in a democratic and capitalist system.

In the past, the experiences of former East Germans were dismissed more easily in an attempt to sweep out the old of the USSR and bring in the new through reunification with West Germany. Now, it is important not to overlook the valuable insights and opinions of those who lived under authoritarianism and under democracy, under communism and under capitalism. The Cold War pitted these two systems against each other in a strict dichotomy, but that polarizing language does not have to advise our understanding of the East Germans' experiences. A critique of one system does not equal

praise for the other, just as a praise of one does not equal an undying support for it as a whole.

The stories and thoughts of the citizens who lived both in the GDR and in Germany today reflect the real and daily values and struggles the systems present. In a world with changing identities, borders, and peoples, the experiences of East Germans are valuable in highlighting how people with conflicting histories and perspectives, through their own determination and strength of character, have learned to live in a new culture with new rules and new expectations. Of course, this paper highlights the stories, perspectives, and opinions of only six such women. Even so, they are invaluable because they reveal deep and personal understandings of the best and worst of what each society contains. The life and experiences of the East German woman is inherently rich in understanding, uncovering her engrained creativity, tenacity, and resolute confidence in none other than herself.

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## Appendix A

Hello!

My name is Mackenzie Sanderson. I study Political Science and Global Studies at Abilene Christian University in Texas and I will graduate in May. I have worked with Pam Sullivan for the past year teaching English as a Second Language.

The focus of my research is on women and their experiences in East Germany. Particularly, I want to know if and how the cultural aspects of life the GDR continue to influence women's attitudes and decisions today. You do not have to answer each question. Rather, these questions should guide your thoughts and stories during our discussion.

If you are willing to help me with my project, you are consenting to an interview as part of my research. My paper will include your stories and experiences, but I will not use your name. I also will change other specific information, if you wish. The interview should not take longer than one hour. Please find the questions below.

Thank you for helping me with my project!

Mackenzie Sanderson

## Appendix B

Hallo!

Mein Name ist Mackenzie Sanderson. Ich studiere im Bachelor-Studiengang Politikwissenschaft und Global Studies an der Abilene Christian University in Texas und ich werde in Mai meinen Abschluss machen. Ich habe mit Pam Sullivan zwei Jahre lang im Bereich Englisch als Zweitsprache gearbeitet.

Der Fokus meiner Forschung liegt auf Frauen und ihre Erfahrungen in die DDR. Es ist mir vor allem wichtig herauszufinden, ob und inwiefern kulturelle Aspekte des Lebens in der DDR die Haltungen und Entscheidungen vieler Frauen heute noch beeinflussen. Sie müssen nicht jede Frage beantworten. Vielmehr sollen diese Fragen während unseres Gesprächs Ihren Gedanken und Erzählungen Orientierung geben.

Wenn Sie dazu bereit sind, mir mit meinem Forschungsprojekt zu helfen, stimmen Sie hiermit zu ein Interview zu, welches Teil meiner Forschungsarbeit wird. Meine Facharbeit wird Ihre Geschichten, Erfahrungen, und Gedanken zum Inhalt haben, der Name wird jedoch nicht verwendet. Wenn Sie es wünschen, kann ich weitere besondere Einzelheiten ebenfalls ändern. Das Interview soll nur nicht länger als eine Stunde dauern. Die Fragen finden Sie unten.

Vielen Dank für Ihre Hilfe mit meinem Projekt!

Mackenzie Sanderson

## Appendix C

Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about yourself briefly.
2. In the GDR, did you identify more as “East German” or as “German”? Do you see yourself now as “German,” “East German,” “Saxon,” etc. first?
3. How did East German/Saxon/local culture change after reunification?
4. How does your past in the GDR continue to influence your attitudes and decisions today?
5. When you think back on your life in the GDR, which aspects of the culture (political, social, and pop-culture) influenced you the most?
6. How does your past in the GDR influence your current attitudes about employment (especially women’s employment)?
7. How does your past in the GDR influence your professional life?
8. How does your past in the GDR influence your home life and/or motherhood? What is the government’s role in children’s education and upbringing?
9. What positive and negative experiences did you have during reunification? Were there cultural adjustments or sensitizations that you had difficulties with?
10. How do you spend your free time? Did you have hobbies in the GDR? How did these change after reunification?
11. Please describe briefly your current consumption behavior. Are there differences in the way you dealt with money then, compared to today and shortly after reunification? What is your general opinion about consumerism?
12. How does your past in the GDR influence your current attitude on religion and religiosity?
13. How does your past in the GDR influence your current attitude on politics?
14. In your opinion, in which situations is a collectivist mentality of solidarity preferable for society?
15. In your opinion, in which situations is an individualist mentality preferable for society?
16. Do you have anything else to say that did not fit into one of my questions?

## Appendix D

## Interview Fragen:

1. Stellen Sie sich vor und erzählen Sie kurz über sich.
2. Haben Sie sich zu DDR-Zeiten mehr als „Ostdeutsche“ oder als „Deutsche“ identifiziert? Sehen Sie sich selbst jetzt in erster Linie eher als „Deutsche“, „Ostdeutsche“, „Sächsin“ oder ähnliches?
3. Wie hat sich ostdeutsche/sächsische/lokale Kultur nach der Wiedervereinigung verändert?
4. Wie beeinflusst Ihre Vergangenheit in der DDR heute noch Ihre Einstellungen und Entscheidungen?
5. Wenn Sie an Ihr Leben in der DDR zurückdenken, welchen Aspekte der DDR-Kultur (politisch, gesellschaftlich, und pop-kulturell) haben Sie maßgeblich beeinflusst?
6. Wie beeinflusst Ihre Vergangenheit in der DDR Ihre heutigen Einstellungen zu Arbeit Beschäftigungspolitik (v.a. hinsichtlich der Beschäftigung von Frauen)?
7. Wie hat Ihre Vergangenheit in der DDR Ihren beruflichen Werdegang beeinflusst?
8. Wie hat Ihre Vergangenheit in der DDR Ihr Familienleben und/oder Ihre Mutterschaft beeinflusst? Welche Funktion hat die Regierung Ihrer Meinung nach, wenn es um Bildung und Erziehung der Kindern geht?
9. Welche positiven und negativen Erfahrungen haben Sie während der Wendezeit gemacht? Gab es kulturelle Anpassungs- oder Sensibilisierungsprozesse, mit denen Sie Schwierigkeiten hatten?
10. Wie verbringen Sie Ihre Freizeit? Hatten Sie in der DDR Hobbys? Wie haben Sie diese nach der Wiedervereinigung verändert?
11. Beschreiben Sie bitte kurz Ihr jetziges Konsumverhalten. Gibt es Unterschiede in der Art und Weise, wie Sie damals mit Geld umgegangen sind, im Vergleich zu heute und kurz nach der Wiedervereinigung? Wie stehen Sie allgemein zur Konsumgesellschaft?
12. Wie beeinflusst Ihre Vergangenheit in der DDR Ihre heutigen Einstellungen zu Religion und Religiosität?
13. Wie beeinflusst Ihre Vergangenheit in der DDR Ihre heutigen politischen Ansichten?
14. In welchen Situationen wäre Ihrer Meinung nach eine kollektivistische, solidarische Mentalität für eine Gesellschaft von Vorteil?
15. In welchen Situationen wäre Ihrer Meinung nach eine individualistische Einstellung für Gesellschaft von Vorteil?
16. Haben Sie irgendetwas hinzuzufügen, das in den vorhergehenden Fragen nicht angesprochen wurde?