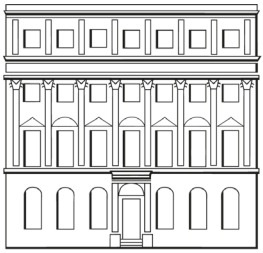

German Historical Institute London

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

ARTICLE

Home Sweet Home: A *Schriftgespräch* on Doing the Long History of 1989
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German Historical Institute London Bulletin
Vol. XLIII, No. 1 (May 2021), 66–86

ISSN 0269-8552

HOME SWEET HOME: A SCHRIFTGESPRÄCH *ON DOING THE LONG HISTORY OF 1989*

KERSTIN BRÜCKWEH AND MIRJAM BRUSIUS

MIRJAM BRUSIUS (MB): Kerstin, you have been looking at questions of ownership and property, with a focus on housing. The working title of your project is 'Home Sweet Home: Property between Expropriation, Appropriation, and New Modes of Organization in the Long History of 1989'. The articles in this issue of the *GHIL Bulletin* concentrate on the same themes. Why is the topic of housing so suitable for making the experience of the *Wende* tangible?

KERSTIN BRÜCKWEH (KB): In the research group, 'The *Longue Durée* of 1989–90', we are concerned with the connection between system change and life-world (*Lebenswelt*) and, in a sense, with a *longue durée* history of society and everyday life going beyond the turning point of 1989. I therefore looked for themes that were important in both areas—that were fundamentally affected by system change, and that played a part in everyday life, in the life-world. While the Ph.D. students in the group are researching schooling and consumption, my subject of housing and the related question of the ownership of residential spaces and land is also particularly suitable for an investigation of the history of everyday life during a turning point because it allows system change and the life-world to be viewed simultaneously. Analysing the everyday life-world demonstrates the connection between the individual and the system, the micro and the macro levels.

Karl Schlögel, a historian of eastern Europe, demonstrates this connection by taking housing as an example. He sees the house in the widest sense (that is, including flats), as '*the* scene and junction of all the events that shape a life'.[1] Living space plays a central role in everyday life; routines, preferences, possessions, status, and much

Trans. by Angela Davies (GHIL)

[1] Karl Schlögel, *In Space We Read Time: On the History of Civilization and Geopolitics*, trans. by Gerrit Jackson (New York, 2017), 262 (original emphasis).

more can be seen there. At the same time, the relationship between mobile residents and their immobile homes is fragile. This is visible throughout the twentieth century with its history of politically motivated expropriation under National Socialism, in the Soviet occupation zone, and in the GDR—but it could also be investigated outside German history. Homes offer a retreat from the adversities of everyday life; they seem to promise security at times of uncertainty. But in fact they cannot provide this, or only to a limited extent.

MB: So the topic of housing gave you access not only to the inner structures of the residents' life-worlds, but also to the structures of a state in upheaval?

KB: Yes, from a systemic perspective, housing as a research topic reveals ideas and ideologies of property, property rights, and the politics of property. Everyday life and the political, legal, and economic system are connected here; administrative and everyday practices become visible. After 1989, all post-socialist states regarded the privatization of property as vital to the development of a functioning economy, the rule of law, and a democratic society. It was believed that everything could be achieved at once, and all via the privatization of property. Behind this lay the idea that the new legal and economic order would guarantee the existence of a liberal economy, the rule of law, and civil society, as Hannes Siegrist and Dietmar Müller put it for eastern central Europe.[2] This ties in with a long-standing Western liberal, individualistic understanding of property as conferring strong and absolute rights which are assigned to the individual—in other words, private property.[3] This may sound complicated, but the important thing is the idea that post-socialist societies sought to use property to solve several problems at once: to build a capitalist economy and to strengthen individuals as self-confident, active, and autonomous citizens. In short, to bring about a new economic

[2] See Hannes Siegrist and Dietmar Müller, 'Introduction', in eid. (eds.), *Property in East Central Europe: Notions, Institutions, and Practices of Landownership in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2015), 1–26, at 3–4.

[3] Hannes Siegrist and David Sugarman, 'Geschichte als historisch-vergleichende Eigentumswissenschaft: Rechts-, kultur- und gesellschaftsgeschichtliche Perspektiven', in eid. (eds.), *Eigentum im internationalen Vergleich: 18.–20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1999), 9–30.

and social order. Therefore, what appears commonplace in the life-world is, in fact, highly politically charged.

The relevance of this topic also lies in the fact that East and West Germany still diverge in this respect today. The fact that the East has less wealth and more tenancies compared with the West is related to the history of the GDR and the way in which assets and ownership were regulated during the period of upheaval in 1989–90. Thus inequalities persist here to the present day.[4]

MB: You have written that life plans are reflected in housing. To what extent is living space something special?

KB: That remark alludes to the fact that different social groups have different life plans. For some people, living in a single-family house with a garden and space for children is a central element of their plan for life. That is what they work towards and save for. Often, the intention is for the house to be passed on to the next generation. For some, this remains a dream that will never be achieved. For others, a single-family house represents an ecological catastrophe, a nightmare; they prefer to live in flats or alternative housing projects. For others again, it is a pure investment project, designed to amass wealth. People living in cities and in rural areas also have different ideas on the subject. And in any case, these ideas are subject to historical change. This can be seen very clearly in the example of the prefabricated tower blocks that many GDR residents moved into, mainly from the 1970s, because of the mod cons they offered, but which were abandoned by some social classes after 1989. This did not happen in the same way in all regions or city districts. But in the interviews conducted by Sonya Schönberger and in her interpretation of them, it becomes clear that because of people moving out, or perhaps even more because of unwanted new people moving in, something changed in the residents' perception of their living environment.

MB: As a place of retreat in a state like the GDR, a home can offer protection against the outside world. Sonya Schönberger chose an entire tower block as the setting for her artistic work. Udo Grashoff

[4] Berlin-Institut für Bevölkerung und Entwicklung (ed.), *Vielfalt der Einheit: Wo Deutschland nach 30 Jahren zusammengewachsen ist* (Berlin, 2020), 30–1, 48–9.

investigated *Schwarzwohnen*[5] and squatters, who often lived in communes. Can't we equally think of the home as a collective space in which we can be protected, but may also be exposed and vulnerable?

KB: For some time, the prevailing idea was of a retreat or niche where one could escape from the system. My research shows very clearly, however, that these supposedly private places were, in fact, more strongly penetrated by the regime than some residents recognized in their everyday lives. For instance, they did not look after their homes—renovating, refurbishing, extending, and converting them—solely out of self-interest, as this activity was supported, or at least condoned, by the GDR state. In the 1970s and 1980s in particular, the GDR regime was unable to meet the housing needs of its citizens. Instead, it depended on its 'socialist citizen inhabitants' (I call them this by analogy with the 'socialist citizen consumer')[6]—that is, on people who contributed to the functioning of the system by their actions. This is shown clearly by the example of DIY manuals. Thus we read in the Foreword to *Du und Deine Wohnung: Heimwerkertips* ('You and Your Home: Improvement Tips', 1973): 'The home in which the citizen spends much of his free time constantly calls upon the tenant to show social responsibility in using it rationally, looking after it independently, preventing damage, and properly repairing minor damage.'[7] I don't want to give new impetus to the totalitarianism thesis; we have already had this debate in the historiography of the GDR. Rather, both these narratives are valid. Throughout this project, interviewees again and again described the seemingly everyday experience in the GDR of having free spaces and options for action beyond the reach of the regime in the context of both housing and

[5] See the discussion of this term in Udo Grashoff's Article in this *Bulletin*.

[6] I thank Clemens Villinger for drawing this to my attention. On the significance of DIY, see Reinhild Kreis, 'A "Call to Tools": DIY between State Building and Consumption Practices in the GDR', *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity,* 6/1 (2018), 49–75, at 65. Also Katherine Pence, '"A World in Miniature": The Leipzig Trade Fairs in the 1950s and East German Consumer Citizenship', in David F. Crew (ed.), *Consuming Germany in the Cold War* (Oxford, 2003), 21–50. The basic text is Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003).

[7] Max Pause and Wolfgang Prüfert, *Du und Deine Wohnung: Heimwerkertips*, 6th edn. (Berlin, 1973), 5.

consumption in general. And yet the GDR regime is visible everywhere in the sources.

MB: How do such findings, which provide a more nuanced picture, fit in with earlier interpretations? To what extent was the process of coming to terms with circumstances at the time partly responsible for the situation today?

KB: These narratives are firmly established today; they have emerged as counter-narratives to interpretations of the total penetration of society that were developed in the 1990s.[8] From an analytical perspective, I would say that the residents looking after their homes and the state measures complemented each other. But it is especially important—and this leads us back to the argument of fragility—that there was no legal security with regard to housing in the GDR. Thus single-family houses could be bought, but the land registers were not kept properly, and changes of ownership were often not recorded. Moreover, while a house could be bought, the land on which it stood could not. All this made it possible for the GDR regime to take action against residents whenever and wherever it wanted to. I call this policy of sketchy registration of property sales 'arbitrary by design' because it often seemed arbitrary to the owners of property, who sometimes successfully opposed it in grievance procedures (*Eingaben*). Sometimes a sale was entered in the land register, sometimes not; sometimes *Eingaben* were successful, sometimes not. All this created the impression of arbitrariness, but at the same time it was intentionally designed by the regime to produce a lack of legal security.

[8] This refers to criticism expressed by Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, who regards the process of coming to terms with the 1990s, which was shaped by oppositional forces in the GDR and West Germans, as partly responsible for these counter-narratives and the situation today. For criticism of the process of coming to terms with the past, and for reflections on the relationship between historiography and this process, see Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, 'Zur Gegenwart der DDR-Geschichte: Ein Essay', in Marcus Böick and Kerstin Brückweh (eds.), 'Weder Ost noch West: Ein Themenschwerpunkt über die schwierige Geschichte der Transformation Ostdeutschlands', *Zeitgeschichte-online* (Mar. 2019), at [https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/themen/zur-gegenwart-der-ddr-geschichte], accessed 8 Jan. 2021.

MB: In this issue of the *Bulletin*, we look at different forms of housing before, during, and after the *Wende*. The role of ownership is often there in the background as well. You write in your book that after the *Wende*, the privatization of property was seen as hugely important for the development of the new state. To what extent was the reorganization of property ownership a challenge in East Germany?

KB: This carries on directly from my previous answer. For those who felt that they owned their property by virtue of having looked after it—sometimes for decades—or who had bought or built a house, it was a blow when in 1990, the old owners, who may have left the GDR for economic or political reasons, came back and reasserted their rights of property ownership. The German–German negotiations that led to the Property Law (*Vermögensgesetz*) are interesting here. Ultimately, the land register was consulted as the ultimate authority for decision-making in order to establish the true state of things. But as we have seen, it was not always reliably maintained in the GDR, both because of the policy described above and because the administration was overstretched.[9] I found many such complaints in the files from the 1950s, in particular, when a large number of people left the GDR. A decision could have been made that the years of maintaining and living in properties should be valued more highly than legal ownership. For land, at least, the German Civil Code (BGB) provided for the possibility of adverse possession,[10] and this also existed in the GDR. The thirty-year period specified in the BGB was, however, interrupted by the Basic Treaty between East and West Germany, in which property issues remained open. The law of 1990 was therefore called the Law Regulating Open Property Issues (*Gesetz zur Regelung offener Vermögensfragen*). The basic principle laid down there, 'return before compensation', was based on the land register, and governed

[9] Kerstin Brückweh, 'Wissen über die Transformation: Wohnraum und Eigentum in der langen Geschichte der "Wende" ', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/ Studies in Contemporary History*, 16/1 (2019), 19–45, at [https://doi.org/10.14765/zzf.dok-1335].

[10] This is a legal principle under which a person who does not have legal title to a piece of property—usually land—acquires legal ownership based on continuous possession or occupation of the property without the permission of its legal owner.

the decisions taken by the relevant offices. Gradually, GDR practices were taken into account, which in some regions led to long processing times and thus to longer periods of uncertainty. Those affected described these as unbearable, and they had a lasting impact on their feelings towards German unification. This was the case, for example, in communities close to Berlin, where property prices rose immediately in the 1990s. In the rural areas in my investigation, the Property Law played a minor role as far as houses were concerned, because the families who lived in them had often been there since before the GDR era. We therefore have to look very carefully to see for whom the Property Law posed a particular challenge. At the same time there were people, for example, on the outskirts of Berlin, who were very successful in making their concerns public. This created a biased view of the problem and shifted attention to narratives that foregrounded a negative picture of a clash between East and West.

MB: In your research, you explain that you do not see any major differences between the ideas of property held by many East Germans in the GDR and those of West Germans—a conclusion you draw from their everyday activities around the home. What were some of the most surprising discoveries you made in the context of your research project?

KB: I was often amazed by the sources, most recently when I was looking in greater detail at the negotiations for the Property Law held in the spring of 1990. Contemporaries repeatedly suggested to me that the West German negotiating partners had ripped off East Germans, and I saw this power imbalance reflected in the sources too. There was also a huge degree of ignorance on both sides. According to the current state of research, both negotiating partners seem to have had only rudimentary knowledge of the nature and extent of property ownership in the GDR. Günther Krause became a key figure for me. He negotiated for the GDR side, later became Minister of Transport under Helmut Kohl, and several scandals were associated with his name. The sources are not straightforward, but in her analysis, the historian Anke Kaprol-Gebhardt suggests that Krause did not really represent the interests of the GDR people. The effective date regulation (*Stichtagsregelung*) is interesting in this context. While the Property

Law was being negotiated, ownership of property changed on the basis of the law concerning the sale of publicly owned buildings of 7 March 1990, which became known as the Modrow Law after the last chairman of the GDR Council of Ministers. Among other things, this law permitted the owners of houses in the GDR to buy the land on which their houses stood. The West German side could not simply accept this as a *fait accompli*, which is why Klaus Kinkel is said to have brought the effective date regulation for the recognition of sales into the negotiations.[11] It seems that Kinkel proposed 1 January or 1 March 1990.[12] In the end, however, the negotiators settled on 18 October 1989, the date of Erich Honecker's resignation. This caused considerable consternation among those affected because it implied that GDR citizens 'would or could have known that on Erich Honecker's resignation, the GDR authorities lost the right to authorize the sale of anything, although the independence of the GDR was not in any way in question'.[13]

MB: What does this mean in the larger context of historiography about the *Wende*?

KB: In conversations with contemporaries, they often point out that the effective date was suggested by the West German side. According to Kaprol-Gebhardt, however, the sources are equivocal on this. In fact, it is more likely that the GDR delegation suggested the date. On 14 June 1990, Kinkel wrote: 'The new version called for by the GDR is better for us too; the date of 18 October 1989 was suggested by the GDR in view of Honecker's resignation.'[14] When Kaprol-Gebhardt asked

[11] Anke Kaprol-Gebhardt, *Geben oder Nehmen: Zwei Jahrzehnte Rückübertragungsverfahren von Immobilien im Prozess der deutschen Wiedervereinigung am Beispiel der Region Berlin-Brandenburg* (Berlin, 2018), 119.

[12] Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Akten des Bundeskanzleramtes, B 136/264569; 421-52602-Ve45, Klaus Kinkel to Lambsdorff, Seiters, Tietmeyer, Schäuble, and Ludewig, Re: Gespräch am Freitag den 8. Juni 1990 im Gebäude des Ministerrats in Sachen offene Vermögensfragen, Bonn, 6 June 1990, quoted from Kaprol-Gebhardt, *Geben oder Nehmen*, 119.

[13] This is how Thomas Singer puts it in his 'Kommentar', in Kerstin Brückweh, Clemens Villinger, and Kathrin Zöller (eds.), *Die Lange Geschichte der 'Wende': Geschichtswissenschaft im Dialog* (Berlin, 2020), 74–6, at 76.

[14] Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Akten des Bundeskanzleramtes, B 136/264569; 421-526-Ve45, Klaus Kinkel to Lambsdorff, Seiters, Tietmeyer, Schäuble, and

Günther Krause about this, he replied on 4 November 2012: 'There is no doubt that Honecker's resignation marked the beginning of the "official" change, both in the GDR and in the SED.'[15] At this point, therefore, a question mark remains, given the present state of research and the sources. However, this example shows the inner struggle and different interests within the GDR, which are sometimes forgotten when people today speak about East Germany as a unity or 'the' East Germans.

What I would also like this example to illustrate is that I am repeatedly surprised by how strongly and confidently certain contemporaries present their opinions as the only truth. In a sense, this was the starting point of our research because there are already many interpretations of the GDR and the *Wende* in fiction, for example. We therefore asked how these individual representations are connected to a greater whole; we were looking for a pattern.

MB: Your research group, 'The *Longue Durée* of 1989–90: System Change and Everyday Life in East Germany',[16] asked how people in East Germany experienced the final years of the GDR and the change of system. Your premise was that anyone who wants to understand East Germany must connect the periods before, during, and after the upheaval of 1989–90. Why is this important? Do people remember things differently if they view turning points like the fall of the Berlin Wall in temporal isolation?

KB: Our starting point was the simple observation that the lives of East German people did not start anew in 1989, but continued, and that the turning point of that year must be integrated into people's biographies in order to construct meaningful, individual life stories. The goal was to relate people's expectations of the Federal Republic or

Ludewig, Re: conversation of 14 June 1990. Re: Offene Vermögensfragen, here: gestriges Gespräch mit Herrn PSt Dr. Krause in Ost-Berlin; coalition talks held on Friday, 15 June 1990, 13.30 in the Federal Chancellery. Quoted from Kaprol-Gebhardt, *Geben oder Nehmen*, 119.

[15] Kaprol-Gebhardt, *Geben oder Nehmen*, 123.

[16] The title of the research group in German is 'Die lange Geschichte der "Wende": Lebenswelt und Systemwechsel in Ostdeutschland vor, während und nach 1989'. The group was funded by the Leibniz Association and based at the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam.

unification before 1989 first to their experiences during the core period of upheaval in 1989–90, when one system was replaced by another, and then to experiences since the 1990s, when the decisions made during the core period were implemented. All three periods shape the memories and narratives of today. Let's look at the core period of 1989–90 as an example. Udo Grashoff's research leads him to speak of 'the experience of almost unlimited freedom' in 1990, and I also recognize this from my sources. This short period was perceived as exciting and often as positive; the 1990s could only pale in comparison. It is interesting to consider how segments of time were perceived at different points. For the school sector, for example, one of the sources is a longitudinal study in Saxony, which has been interviewing the same people since 1987. It shows that the memories of one and the same person could change considerably depending on how far in the past the GDR was. This is not a matter of right or wrong, but of noticing divergences and contextualizing them—something which is well known to oral historians, as is the tendency for stories to be narrated differently depending on the setting or context in which they are told.[17] In public, the people living in the community on the outskirts of Berlin in which I did my research describe the 1990s as a clash between East and West Germans, but they do not mention who was able to move into houses in the GDR when and why. This sort of information is more likely to be forthcoming in qualitative interviews that are seen as more private. There, interviewees talk about 'envy' and 'privilege', 'fat cats' and 'the average punter'.[18] This is one reason why we travelled out to the places we were studying

[17] Dorothee Wierling, 'Zeitgeschichte ohne Zeitzeugen: Vom kommunikativen zum kulturellen Gedächtnis—drei Geschichten und zwölf Thesen', *BIOS*, 21/1 (2008), 28–36, at 33.

[18] I refer here to interviews conducted in the context of the research project 'Property Restitution and the Post-1989 Transformation Process in Germany and Poland: An International and Interdisciplinary Research Project', funded in 1999–2001 by the Volkswagen Foundation. Carsten Keller gave me access to them for a second analysis. They include audio recordings of interviews with three contemporary experts, sixteen semi-structured interviews, and two focus groups, as well as documents and transcriptions of some of the interviews. There are also a number of unpublished working papers, a final report on the project, and a central publication: Birgit Glock, Hartmut Häußermann, and Carsten Keller, 'Die sozialen Konsequenzen der

and tried to give the quiet people a voice. In other words, we didn't want to let those people who regularly speak out in public have their say again. Rather, we wanted to hear the stories of those who have so far held back with their stories in public. We wanted diverse narratives.

MB: This issue of the *Bulletin* explores interviews as historical sources. Apart from the previously unheard voices, for you it was especially important to have insights into the views of people who had first-hand experience of the period, and you used different approaches to compare the narratives of the ruling classes with those of their subjects. How would you describe your approach? How does it differ from established methods, such as oral history or ethnographic field research?

KB: We clearly started as a research project that combined various different sources. My main sources were the files of the offices for resolving open issues concerning property. In selected locations (rural, urban, and suburban), I investigated typical streets house by house. By 'typical', I mean here that these locations could be subdivided into different areas (for example, single-family or multi-family houses, villas, or settlements whose Jewish owners had been expropriated under National Socialism), and that I examined selected streets in these areas. I supplemented this approach by drawing on various other sources, such as media reports, and especially by carrying out secondary analysis of interviews that urban sociologists had conducted in one of my research locations in 1999–2000, and which they made available to me (see footnote 18). In addition, I conducted oral history interviews. The combination of all these sources made it possible to divide the period into the three segments before, during, and after 1989.

The secondary analysis of material from the social sciences is rather new for the writing of contemporary history. My colleague Clemens Villinger based his historical analysis on ethnological studies dating from the 1990s, and he placed the secondary analysis of interviews at the centre of his work on consumption in the long history of the *Wende*. And in the longitudinal study in Saxony mentioned above, another

Restitution von Grundeigentum in Deutschland und Polen', *Berliner Journal für Soziologie*, 11 (2001), 533–50.

colleague, Kathrin Zöller, also chose a social science source which combined quantitative data that had already been used in different ways with open questions that had not yet been evaluated. Thus in our project, we conducted 'contemporary history in the archives of the social sciences',[19] because various funding initiatives in the 1990s ensured that research projects had already been carried out on almost all topics. Sometimes we have the results of these projects; sometimes we have only the interviews or photographs.[20] These are wonderful sources. Thus our work consists only partly of oral history. Moreover, during my time at the German Historical Institute London, I gained the impression—strengthened by insight into the methods used by my ethnologist colleagues working at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt—that German historiography has not yet developed any comparable ethical standards. There is still urgent need for exchange between different disciplinary and national academic cultures. And to work in social science archives often requires a knowledge of the history of data collection and of the institutions that collect it.[21] This is a huge undertaking that goes well beyond the usual source criticism.

MB: How did you deal with these challenges?

[19] Jenny Pleinen and Lutz Raphael, 'Zeithistoriker in den Archiven der Sozialwissenschaften: Erkenntnispotenziale und Relevanzgewinne für die Disziplin', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 62/2 (2014), 173–95.

[20] On the development of transformation research in the social sciences, see Raj Kollmorgen, 'Eine ungeahnte Renaissance? Zur jüngsten Geschichte der Transformations- und Vereinigungsforschung', in Marcus Böick, Constantin Goschler, and Ralph Jessen (eds.), *Jahrbuch Deutsche Einheit 2020* (Berlin, 2020), 46–72; Stephan Weingarz, *Laboratorium Deutschland? Der ostdeutsche Transformationsprozess als Herausforderung für die deutschen Sozialwissenschaften* (Münster, 2003). On the relationship between social science research and historiography, see Kerstin Brückweh, 'Das vereinte Deutschland als zeithistorischer Forschungsgegenstand', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 28–29 (2020), 4–10, at [https://www.bpb.de/apuz/312261/das-vereinte-deutschland-als-zeithistorischer-forschungsgegenstand], accessed 8 Jan. 2021.

[21] Kerstin Brückweh, 'The History of Knowledge: An Indispensable Perspective for Contemporary History', *Blog GHI Washington, History of Knowledge: Research, Resources, and Perspectives*, 4 Dec. 2017, at [https://historyofknowledge.net/2017/12/04/the-history-of-knowledge-an-indispensable-perspective-for-contemporary-history/], accessed 11 Feb. 2021.

KB: Our initial response was to look in depth at selected individual studies. But in contemporary history, it seems to me that secondary analysis is not yet really established as a method. We are therefore also addressing these questions in a follow-up project, in which the GHIL is also involved.[22] So much for the research project.

However, I would distinguish this from another aspect of our research group's work that arose out of current political discussions and from the fact that during the elections in Brandenburg, the right-wing, populist political party Alternative for Germany (AfD) put up posters virtually on our doorstep in Potsdam. With slogans such as 'Wende 2.0' and 'Vollende die Wende' (Complete the *Wende*), the AfD hijacked the central concerns of our project. We did not want to let this stand without comment, and therefore decided to follow a citizen science approach and travel through the former East Germany instead of holding a concluding academic conference.

MB: Your project then gave rise to a publication that, in an unusual combination, contains academic work, the memories of contemporaries, photography, and journalism along with research findings, travelogues, and memories of experiences of the *Wende* in the GDR. You presented your findings in an unusual format which you called a 'dialogue trip' (*Dialogreise*), visiting East German locations where you had conducted your studies, but also discussing your results with contemporaries. Thus even after you had completed your research, you kept up a conversation with the people you interviewed. In preparation, you summarized your results in something that you called a *Schriftgespräch* (lit. 'written conversation'), sent it to contemporaries and other academics, and asked them for comments in advance of the trip. In this *Bulletin*, too, inspired by your methodology, we decided to present your methods and research results in a similar format rather than in an article. Why did you choose the *Schriftgespräch* form?

[22] 'Sozialdaten als Quellen der Zeitgeschichte: Erstellung eines Rahmenkonzepts für eine Forschungsdateninfrastruktur in der zeithistorischen Forschung/Data from Social Research as Source for Contemporary History: Designing a Framework for a Research Data Infrastructure for Research on Contemporary History', funded by the DFG, at [https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/418958624?language=en], accessed 8 Jan. 2021.

KB: We settled on the *Schriftgespräch*—this is not an established form in historiography—because it had two functions for us. First, it allowed us to relate the different results that we arrived at as individual researchers working in the archive and at our desks, to those of the other members of the research group. It offered us the chance to draw more general connections, but also to highlight the specificities of the individual thematic areas that we were working in. The *Schriftgespräch* differs from traditional academic formats in that it reflects the process of writing. It is less about the spoken word—and thus lacks the dynamic of an interview—but reproduces the process of discussion and its results. It is quite clearly not an interview that has been transcribed, but an artefact in which we have invested a great deal of effort to put our thoughts in order in a readable form. That is why it contains footnotes and quotations. Our aim was to present complex results to a readership outside academia in a more easily understandable form, rather than in abstract academic language. This brings me to the second function of the *Schriftgespräch*. It is a way of making research results available to a broader public. Our target audience is made up of people who are interested in our topic, who like to read, who enjoy thinking, and who are open to new ideas, but who have not necessarily studied history. We want to make it possible for this audience to come to grips with historical works and with a specific historical topic. The *Schriftgespräch* is intended as a method of academic communication in two respects: within research groups, and with a wider public that has not studied history.

MB: You and your team won the Potsdam Prize for Academic Communication (WISPoP) in 2020. Congratulations! The jury stated that your project is particularly convincing because of the breadth and type of communication it represents. They went on to say that in addition to academic research, your focus is primarily on the 'human being', and that there is a 'direct exchange between equals'. It is not unusual for contemporaries to be involved in historical research—but what prompted you to view them not only as 'sources of information', but also as actors?

KB: Our research topic, 'The *Longue Durée* of 1989–90', is politically highly charged. I have already mentioned the AfD's election posters,

and have pointed to the many exciting interpretations offered in fiction. We could also add references to film and music (for example, the song 'Grauer Beton' by Trettmann). Among historical research initiatives, our project was one of the first to look at the rupture of 1989 from a *longue durée* perspective covering the history of everyday life and social history. As a historian, I am interested not only in individual experiences, but also in larger patterns. We found these in our projects—over and above the thematic sections on consumption, schooling, and housing—and we wanted to present and discuss them with those who lived through the events. We wanted to take the diversity of experiences seriously, but also to show where they remained individual experiences and where they formed overarching patterns. For this reason, we also avoid the term 'witness to history' (*Zeitzeuge*) because it is associated with a high degree of authenticity, whereas we know from oral history research how complicated it can be to assess the statements of contemporaries.

MB: So your group engaged closely with interviewing as a method, while also reflecting on your own roles. It is generally accepted that oral histories and archives are not neutral. So far, however, there has been little or no reflection on how our own biographies also influence our approaches to sources and historiography itself. Your approach is therefore interesting for other research areas as well, such as feminist and queer history, or global and colonial history, where we often find power imbalances between researchers and the 'researched', and different standards apply. Male, white, cisgender, heterosexual historians are more often perceived as neutral—a privilege not always shared by women, transgender people, or marginalized colleagues from diasporic backgrounds who, depending on the research topic, may be considered biased. Prejudices can also arise when, for example, a Wessi researches East Germany. How did you deal with this?

KB: In the course of our research we found that we ourselves were being labelled as 'West German'. After our initial disappointment with this pigeonhole thinking, we found the identification itself understandable. After all, nobody likes it when someone talks about or researches them while the right to interpret the findings is reserved for the researchers. What we were really interested in was

an 'exchange among equals'. Yet history does not belong exclusively to anyone, and it is equally legitimate for us, as historians, to be interested in history. Ultimately, in our book we dealt proactively with this question, which the group had already discussed in detail. Right from the start, Anja Schröter was involved as a postdoc in the project alongside me, which meant that an East and a West German were involved. Unfortunately, Anja left the project for a (permanent) new position before our 'dialogue trip'. One of our Ph.D. students, Clemens Villinger, grew up in Bremen, but has now spent most of his life in the former East Germany, and the other Ph.D. student comes from Hamburg. Both Ph.D. students, who were born during the *Wende*, repeatedly stressed that not one but a number of factors play a role in interviews, an issue that is addressed in the introduction to the book. I am glad that although we were labelled 'West German', this never deteriorated into the pejorative 'Wessis'. Hendrik Berth, for example, who is currently jointly responsible for the aforementioned longitudinal study in Saxony, referred to the origin and socialization of the researchers in his commentary on our *Schriftgespräch*, coming to the conclusion that 'a certain personal distance can be beneficial when researching complex historical facts'.[23]

MB: You also tried to make heterogeneity visible in the label 'East German'.

KB: Yes, against the background of this experience of labelling and of our research, we made a few conscious preliminary decisions before our 'dialogue trip'. Our research had shown us how strongly certain local actors can influence interpretations. We therefore deliberately did not invite them to join us on the stage, calling instead on those who normally do not appear in public. Thus in Kleinmachnow, on the outskirts of Berlin, it was not a protagonist of the typical East–West narrative who was on the podium, but an architect from Schwerin, whose experiences with the Property Law there were completely different, and who took a different view of property. We wanted to shake up the established or engrained public narratives one

[23] Hendrik Berth, 'Wie lang ist die lange Geschichte der "Wende"?', in Brückweh, Villinger, and Zöller (eds.), *Die Lange Geschichte der 'Wende'*, 99–100, at 100.

finds in certain places, and to encourage various different people to tell us about their experiences. Even in Kleinmachnow, a prime example of the Ossi–Wessi narrative, there were examples of peaceful encounters. East Germans are not simply East Germans—we all know this—but the distinction has survived in everyday speech. The panel discussion, which we did not open to the floor, formed only the first part of the evening's events. In the second half there were stands with information on our research topics and dialogue cards that the audience could fill in.

MB: How did people react?

KB: What was interesting for us was that our basic results were confirmed, and that we became positive West Germans—that is, ones who listen and show interest. It was also exciting that some of the people who shared the stage with us told us later that the project had encouraged them to talk about history more—including with their children. We had a lot of positive experiences with the people we met who lived through the *Wende*, and I think we learned from each other. Of course, there were also older people who signalled that they wanted to speak after the first contribution from the podium, or who said afterwards that the young people who had spoken earlier had no idea. We not only had older contemporaries on the stage, but also younger ones, because we believe that it is everyone's history.

MB: So there were imbalances in certain respects. How did you deal with these, or did something need to change here?

KB: For our citizen science approach, it was important that our 'dialogue trip' and its preparation and follow-up were organized as democratically and non-hierarchically as possible. Thus, for instance, a student assistant analysed the dialogue cards, and her analysis forms part of our book. She and another student assistant also posted about our 'dialogue trip' on the social media accounts of the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam, where the project was based—with a surprisingly positive reception. This response showed me something else as well. I sometimes have the impression that certain colleagues, especially in the field of contemporary history, believe that the impact of their research depends on a review in the prestigious national press. But my observations suggest that

important social struggles about the interpretation of East German history take place on social media. Perhaps this is specific to the topic of East Germany, which tends to eke out a marginal existence in historical research because it counts as neither eastern nor western European history. For me, the discussions conducted on social media provide interesting insights; yet I also see a disadvantage in how opinions have to be expressed so briefly. Historical research has long taught us that different counter-publics exist; whether and how they are connected in the digital age is an open question for me.

MB: On the 'dialogue trip' held in January 2020, contemporaries were actively involved in your research process, in a spirit of citizen science or citizens creating knowledge. The journalist Christian Bangel and the artist Clara Bahlsen travelled with you as observers. With Sonya Schönberger, we also present an artist in this issue of the *Bulletin*. Using practices that partly relate to historical studies but are nonetheless different, Sonya, along with witnesses to history, produces knowledge about the *Wende*. What value did it add to include art in your research on experiences of the *Wende*?

KB: As we all had so much to do on our 'dialogue trip', we invited Clara Bahlsen and Christian Bangel to come along to observe us and the events we organized, and then to comment from their own points of view. We benefited greatly from both perspectives. For example, the photo essay by Clara Bahlsen, which she personally compiled, initially grated on me because she mixes up various places and presents people from one location alongside motifs from another. While this runs counter to my idea of order as a historian, it opens up new interpretations. This is discussed in the conclusion of the book, and I don't want to give away too much here.

We knew Christian Bangel as an active writer on East German topics and also on subjects that did not initially come up in our sources. As a result of his work, the violence of the 1990s became widely known as 'the baseball bat years'. With our focus on the history of everyday life, topics such as violence, racism, antisemitism, and nationalism had not come to the fore in our research until our 'dialogue trip'. But many newspaper reports of the last few years explicitly linked the success of the AfD in East Germany with hostile attacks on people. Although

Kathrin Zöller's analyses of schooling in the longitudinal study in Saxony had already shown results relating to nationalist nation-building from below, and although the restitution of residential property had involved negotiations about the expropriation of Jewish property under the Nazis, these topics did not feature prominently in our results. So we wondered whether we had missed something. We therefore brought another Ph.D. student on board after the 'dialogue trip', and with her moderating our discussions, we re-examined our sources and looked into the everyday occurrence of racism, antisemitism, and nationalism. I can say at this point that it was the most difficult chapter in the whole book. The discussions started with the (controversial) term 'right-wing extremism' and ended in the question of whether we were doing violence to our sources by working anachronistically. Ultimately, this gave rise to some suggestions about how to continue researching the history of these topics in East Germany.

MB: How has the media discourse about East Germany influenced memories of life in the GDR? How do you see memories and views of the GDR changing over the next few decades?

KB: For me as a historian, forecasting the future is not something I do everyday. This became clear to me when I was asked to make proposals for action in the context of a report produced by the 'Thirty Years of Peaceful Revolution and German Unity' commission set up by the German federal government.[24] But I would say that much depends on whether the various publics can be forged together. There have been interesting but, in my opinion, problematic attempts by a generation born after 1989 to spread a new awareness of the East. And many people, including historians, still have reservations about East Germany's relevance for German history, even if, after Hans-Ulrich Wehler's comment on the 'intermezzo of the East German satrapy', no one else has dared to express this so clearly.[25] I would like people to

[24] Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, *Abschlussbericht der Kommission '30 Jahre Friedliche Revolution und Deutsche Einheit'* (Berlin, 2020), at [https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975226/1825612/cbdbb1fd3b4ca0904aa796080e3854d1/2020-12-07-abschlussbericht-data.pdf?download=1], accessed 8 Jan. 2021.

[25] Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte: 1700–1990,* 5 vols. (Munich, 1987–2008), vol. v: *Bundesrepublik und DDR 1949–1990* (2008), pp. xv–xvi. On the

set aside their preconceptions of an East–West clash more often when trying to explain current problems, and I would like more positive curiosity on all sides—more listening, and fewer quick opinions. For me, this also includes discussing historical research and findings outside the university from an early stage, and doing history on an equal footing.

Further reading:
Kerstin Brückweh, Clemens Villinger, and Kathrin Zöller (eds.), *Die lange Geschichte der 'Wende': Geschichtswissenschaft im Dialog* (Berlin, 2020).

debate over Wehler's comment, which was made in a footnote, see Patrick Bahners and Alexander Cammann (eds.), *Bundesrepublik und DDR: Die Debatte um Hans-Ulrich Wehlers 'Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte'* (Munich, 2009).

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