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The Young Generation in the East (October 5, 2000)

The collapse of the Communist regime and reunification brought enormous changes for the citizens of the former GDR. This report by a twenty-eight-year-old man from Dresden examines how young people in the East have come to terms with the situation and how they differ from their West German peers.

Young Pioneers

The Future Belongs to the Young East Germans

Everything was perfectly laid out for Anna: first Abitur, then one of the sought-after places at the university in Potsdam, two semesters abroad in the Soviet Union. And after five years of study, a guaranteed job as a Russian teacher with an above-average salary and a good pension. Anna chose that future when, having just turned 15, she applied to the Special Russian School in 1987. Her country, the GDR, had planned her life path for her. What hadn't been planned was the Wende.¹ Suddenly, Russian teachers were no longer in such high demand.

It's a popular pastime to proclaim a new generation every few years. Look at what we've already seen: the 68ers were replaced by the No-Future Kids, followed by Generation X, and later Generation @. The latest name for Germans between 25 and 35 is "Generation Golf."² That has a nice ring to it. Except: what about the East?

Young people in East Germany have had a unique experience. They [are old enough to have] consciously lived through one system – the GDR; they still belonged to the Young Pioneers,³ they went through military education and the "Fair of the Masters of Tomorrow" [*Messe der Meister von Morgen*].⁴ Then they experienced the radical upheaval. They went to demonstrations and saw for the first (and last) time live broadcasts from the *Volkskammer*.

¹ The German term *Wende* refers to the events that led to the downfall of the Communist regime in 1989/90 – eds.

² Named after the popular Volkswagen brand *Golf* (marketed in the United States as Rabbit and Jetta) – eds.

³ The youth organization of school children aged 6-14 – eds.

⁴ The *Messe der Meister von Morgen* (1958-1990) was an annual youth competition sponsored by the East German youth organization Free German Youth [*Freie Deutsche Jugend*, or FDJ] – eds.

Eventually, they found themselves in the world of McDonald's, MTV, and *Milchschnitte*.⁵ And all of this in one and the same country.

Today, these people – much like “Generation Golf” – are around 25-35 years old. Yet there is nothing that their lives resemble less than the “sluggish immobility of a well-cushioned Sunday afternoon” (FAZ editor Florian Illies in his book *Generation Golf*). They have experienced more than the agony of choosing “between a green and a blue Barbour jacket.” It is a generation that may have grown up with years of waiting for a Trabi, but without a Golf and West German prosperity. There are young people in the East whose lives are far removed from the arrogance and ceaseless irony of the self-celebrating (Western) “Generation Golf.” And who don't care about the salon-mindset of the young snots from the arts section of the FAZ. In the upheavals of the nineties, they acquired a fine sense for social tensions and changes.

Sociologists speak of a generation in connection with a formative phase – the year 1968 was, without a doubt, such a phase. The years 1989/90 – the fall of the Wall, the democratization of the GDR, and then reunification – gave an entire people the opportunity (and compelled them) to make new arrangements. In a single stroke the GDR was gone, and with it the SED Central Committee, the polytechnic secondary schools and services *Kombinate*, the waiting in line for a couple of green oranges from Cuba. From one day to the next there were twenty kinds of laundry soap instead of two, private television and complicated ticket machines on city busses, kiwis and avocados. And of course one shouldn't forget free elections and – the employment office. With enormous flexibility, East Germans made the best of the situation. Many were undone by the upheavals. But the young East Germans, who were in their last years of school in 1989, were given an opportunity to take their lives into their own hands – immediately beforehand, the GDR, with its centralized allocation of university places and jobs, would have programmed their biographies irreversibly.

Many of today's fifty- to sixty-year-olds have lost social status. They often associate the loss of the GDR with personal defeat. And they feel this even though hardly anyone is worse off, at least in material terms. Many people around age 40 have created new livelihoods for themselves. They have opened stores, moved from the prefabricated housing blocks to green pastures. In the end, most of them succeeded in some way or another. But they have wrestled with their fate. The GDR is in their bones and thus often in their thinking and their mindset as well. Those who are around 25, however, had the best starting conditions: their life in the GDR was long enough for them to have gotten to know the state, but short enough for them to find their way quickly in the new system.

The most recent Shell Youth Study shows that the young generation in East Germany is more optimistic about the future than the young generation in the West. The “new youth in the East” is more mobile and readier to accomplish something, they learn more quickly and finish their university studies faster. The women stand out in particular: they are more driven and success-

⁵ Popular candy for children – eds.

oriented. And they are determined to juggle work and family. According to the Shell study, 63 percent of young women in the East would move within Germany for a job (women in the West: 45 percent). Young people in the East are readier to make the leap to independence (53 percent; West: 46 percent).

At the same time, young East Germans are skeptical toward their country and the new society. Their trust in the state and parties, in associations and organizations is markedly lower than that of their Western counterparts. Interest in politics has declined rapidly over the last few years. No wonder: when the GDR collapsed, they felt the powerlessness of politics. Why, then, waste time and attention on it? In this sense, the 89ers are more modern than some would like: more modern because they are adjusting to the New Economy and no longer count on Father State.

Still, it is not ultra-liberalism that has broken out in East Germany, for at the same time one finds a strong appreciation for all things social. East Germans – especially also the young – rely more strongly on friends and family. And in case of need, higher demands are also made of the government. Evidently, (economically) liberal and social attitudes come together here – that would make the young East Germans precisely the sort of people that economists and politicians are always looking for: ready to work hard, independent, mobile, and with a social conscience.

The 89ers are thus the more modern young Germans – they are once again young pioneers, only different: from the GDR period they carry forth a spirit of social togetherness, reunification gave them the ability to land on their feet, and from the experience of capitalism (less cushioned than in the West) they derive the will to succeed. The number of young East Germans is continually shrinking, however. Migration to the West has increased again in recent days, and it is mostly the best educated and the most active who go.

And this despite the fact that large parts of the new states have the most modern infrastructure in Europe – after all, many things in the East aren't even ten years old. There is no better telecommunications network anywhere in Europe; most hospitals have the latest technology; the Ilmenau Institute for Media Technology is the best of its kind. And for all intents and purposes, democracy is functioning as well. Not perfectly, to be sure, but things didn't run so smoothly after 1949 in the West, either.

New things are easier to implement in the East. When Gerhard Schröder speaks of the cured "German disease," he is referring to West Germany's Bermuda Triangle of parties, unions, and associations. East German pragmatism has long since progressed beyond this. Many East Germans are asking themselves whether (Western) society would even be capable of a similar feat of adjustment. They have reason to be self-confident: "What we have behind us awaits you."

After the Wende, Anna finished her Abitur at the Special School. Instead of a Russian teacher she became an interpreter. Today, she works at the German Protestant Secondary School in Cairo. She would like to return to Germany in a few years, preferably to Leipzig. Does she miss the GDR and the security it offered? "No, I could have never had the experience I've had in the last few years in the GDR."

The author, 28, is a political scientist and a staff member of the SPD Landtag party faction in Dresden.

Source: Thomas Kralinski, "Junge Pioniere. Den jungen Ostdeutschen gehört die Zukunft" ["Young Pioneers. The Future Belongs to the Young East Germans"], *Die Zeit*, October 5, 2000.

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