

## The Unbreakable (Copper) Glass

by Alexandre Kramatschek Tavares



### Introduction

From the landmark ball of the *Fernsehturm*, Berlin presents itself as a fractured and duplicitous city. Below, the reconstructed fake baroque façade of the *Stadtschloss*, a hollow echo of a no longer Prussian imperial past built on the asbestos rubble of a socialist dream. The mocking building stands precisely where the old modern socialist *Palast der Republik* once was. The *Palast*'s copper-mirrored windows, reflected a divided but vibrant horizon of this flat city, a building that was not a place for the forgotten monarchs, but a palace for the *Volk*. Not only open as a space for governance and the heart of the socialist dream in Germany, but for art and life. Its demolition, beyond mere architectural or healthy choice, it was a very act of ideological erasure<sup>1</sup>, a deliberate new-model *Kristallnacht*. The *official* narrative of the *Wende*, the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (DDR) bankrupt and *dictatorship* simply collapsed under the weight of its own inefficiency, to be rescued by the colourful and bringer of freedom West. But from the height of the *Fernsehturm*, we may see the phantoms of a different story.

This (hi)story is about the communist baby that was thrown out with the bathwater of German socialism. It is about the social rights and guarantees that, like the DDR's famous *Superfest* glasses, were designed to be universal, durable, practical and *unbreakable*<sup>2</sup>. This entry argues that the post-reunification Federal Republic, in its rush to declare total victory for capitalism, did not simply dismantle a so-called authoritarian state, but it actively waged war on a whole scale of a social project, vilifying its achievements to foreclose any memory that could be organised around principles other than profit and rivalry. The triumphalist and disrespectful manner of this process created a deep social and political wound in Germany's core. The failure to properly account for both the Nazi and DDR pasts produced a fertile ground of alienation and grievance of its own history, which has been directly exploited by the far-right and culminating in the rise of the neo-Nazis of *Alternative für Deutschland*. The physical state of the socialist dream was broken from the very inside of the Union of

<sup>1</sup> Urban, F. (2007). Designing the past in East Berlin before and after the German reunification. *Progress in Planning*, 68, 1-55. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.progress.2007.07.001>

<sup>2</sup> Betts, P. (2012). Socialism, Social Rights, and Human Rights: The case of East Germany. *Humanity*, 3(3), 407-421.

Soviet Socialist Republics, but the unbreakable spectre of communism, as Marx and Engels<sup>3</sup> would say, is still haunting Europe, fighting for a better future.

### **The Original Sin of the Manufacturing a Divided Germany**

The *official* history of post-war Germany is a simple morality tale. It speaks of a western democratic and free *Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (BDR) rising from the ashes, aided by a benevolent United States of America, while in the East side, a totalitarian state was imposed by a dreadful Soviet Union. This narrative, however, is a foundational myth of modern times, a deliberate erasure of history designed to obscure the West's own culpability in the division of the nation. The historical record shows a more complex truth: the division of Germany was not an unfortunate act of the East to counter the Cold War, but also political project actively pursued by the West to ensure its part of Germany was firmly anchored in the capitalist order.

The divergent paths were set from the very moment in 1945. The Soviet Occupation Zone, which would become the DDR, was born under the burden of huge amounts of *war reparations* owed to the Soviet Union – the country responsible for winning the *Great Patriotic War* (or World War Two) and the world's liberation from the Nazis, which had suffered the most catastrophic destruction at the hands of the *Wehrmacht*. This meant the systematic dismantling of two thousand four hundred East German companies, stripping away nearly 70% of its pre-war industrial capacity. The West, in extreme contrast, was rebuilt with the generous infusion of capital from the USA Marshall Plan. This economic divergence was mirrored by a political play: in the East, an important, necessary, rigorous and often brutal (as it couldn't be otherwise) *denazification* was carried out, besides expropriating the property of war criminals and removing former Nazi officials from all institutions of power, a high number of them were sentenced to death; while in the West, this process was notoriously superficial, if not counter effective, where the Europeans and USA state apparatus quickly reintegrated former Nazi members into the highest levels of its judiciary, its intelligence services, and its government, a reality that cast a long shadow over its claims to a clean democratic break from the past<sup>4</sup>.

This Western strategy culminated in the rejection of the most significant opportunity for a different future: the 1952 *Stalin-Noten*<sup>5</sup>. The Soviet Union and Stalin's proposal offered the Western powers a unified, democratic, economic free and *neutral* Germany, with its own armed forces, in exchange for a commitment not to join any military alliance directed against the former Allied powers. For the West German government under Adenauer, a neutral Germany was an obstacle to the western primary goal: the irreversible integration of Germany into the Western bloc. Stalin's offer was rejected. The West and capitalist powers chose a divided nation under its hegemony over a unified nation with an independent path. Freedom was not a word in western dictionaries.

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<sup>3</sup> Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2002). *The Communist Manifesto* (G. S. Jones, Trans.). Penguin Books.

<sup>4</sup> Internationale Forschungsstelle DDR, & Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. (2021). *Risen from the ruins: The economic history of socialism in the German Democratic Republic* (Studies on the DDR, No. 1).

<sup>5</sup> Stalin, J. (1952, March 10). Telegramm an die Regierung der DDR [Telegram]. Lebendiges Museum Online. Retrieved August 2, 2025, from <https://www.hdg.de/lemo/bestand/objekt/dokument-stalin-note-telegramm.html>.

This choice for division was carved into the landscape of Berlin even before the *Antifaschistischer Schutzwall*. One of the most potent symbols of this policy was the demolition of the once one of Berlin's most important railway stations, the Anhalter Bahnhof in West Berlin, between 1959 and 1960. A vital link to the south and east of Germany, its destruction was an act of severing the city's and Germany's connection and a physical manifestation of the refusal to reunification. This stands in contrast to the policy of the DDR, which, in a remarkable act of pragmatism, allowed West Berlin's S-Bahn and U-Bahn trains to continue running through its territory on designated corridors. For decades, these trains passed through the *Geisterbahnhöfe* in East Berlin, a constant, tangible reminder that the division was not absolute, that connections, however fragile, could be maintained. The West demolished its gateways; the East, for all its faults, allowed the arteries to keep flowing. The Wall, when it was finally built in 1961, was not the beginning of the division, but the brutal and concrete conclusion for the constant refusal from reunification from the West for more than a decade.

### **The Annexation**

The official concept of *Wende* ("turn" or "change") is itself a masterpiece of ideological understatement. It suggests an almost natural course correction, a society peacefully finding its way back to a preordained liberal-capitalist normality. The reality, by the other hand, as experienced by millions of East Germans, was not a *turn* but a *rupture*, a hostile takeover.

Presented in 1990 as a neutral body tasked with privatising the DDR's *Volkseigene Betriebe*, the *Treuhandanstalt* was, in practice, the single greatest act of economic pillage in modern European history. The agency's work was a politically-motivated shock therapy designed to obliterate the DDR's economic structures and integrate its territory on subordinate terms into the West German model. The DDR was not bankrupt, it was bankrupted by those forces. It possessed immense material assets, coming from industrial enterprises and agricultural land to extensive public property, with an estimated value of 1.4 trillion German Marks. The *Treuhandanstalt* sold these assets off at symbolic prices, primarily to West German corporations (80%) and foreign investors (15%), while only a negligible 5% were acquired by East Germans. The result was not the *Blühende Landschaften* of Chancellor Kohl<sup>6</sup>, but a historic dispossession and pillage. Within a few years, two-thirds of all jobs in the former DDR were lost. An entire economic system, built over forty years under the most difficult conditions of war reparations and Cold War embargoes, was not reformed or served as a lesson, but it was liquidated<sup>7</sup>.

This economic pillage led to an alienated social reproduction that was not limited to the factory floor, it tore through the very fabric of daily life. The destruction of workplaces was simultaneously the destruction of communities, of social networks, and of the shared form of life that gave life itself a meaning<sup>8</sup>. This process represents the violent replacement of a socialist urban model, which treated housing and social

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<sup>6</sup> Kohl, H. (1990, July 1). "Blühende Landschaften" | 20 Jahre Deutsche Einheit [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved August 13, 2025, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGOHsOkJwaU>

<sup>7</sup> Internationale Forschungsstelle DDR, & Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. (2021). *Risen from the ruins: The economic history of socialism in the German Democratic Republic* (Studies on the DDR, No. 1).

<sup>8</sup> Reichle, L. R. (2021). *Alienated social reproduction: A study on the politics of neoliberal urban restructuring in Leipzig, East Germany* [Doctoral dissertation, De Montfort University].

infrastructure as collective goods, with an *entrepreneurial* one that sees them only as commodities for profit. The mass unemployment and forced migration that followed were a profound social trauma, an experience of being rendered superfluous in your own home. It was the material basis for the deep and lasting alienation that would come to define the post-unification East German experience.

### **Saving the Communist Baby from the bathwater**

The annexation of the East was justified by a relentless ideological campaign to frame the DDR as nothing more than a failed state, an *Unrechtsstaat*. In the political discourse of the West, the complex 40-year history of a society was flattened into a caricature of Stasi surveillance and economic mismanagement. This made up tale conveniently positioned the DDR as a “second German dictatorship,” creating a vulgar moral equivalence with the Third Reich that served the political aims of the Kohl government<sup>9</sup>. To challenge this is not to deny the real problems and challenges of the DDR, but to reduce the entire social project to these elements is a profound historical injustice and crime. It is to throw the communist baby out with the bathwater.

The fundamental error of the Western critique is to judge the DDR by an external standard: that of liberal and individualist human rights. The socialist project was built on an entirely different foundation: a distinct regime of social rights<sup>10</sup>. These were not abstract, negative freedoms *from* the state, but concrete, material guarantees provided *by* the state. They were collective rights to a dignified *life*, established in the constitution and woven into the fabric of the planned economy. The right to work, to housing, to healthcare, to education and to comprehensive childcare were the pillars of this social contract. As Stalin’s markable saying: “Мы построили его ради действительной личной свободы, свободы без кавычек. Мне трудно представить себе, какая может быть “личная свобода” у безработного, который ходит голодным и не находит применения своего труда. Настоящая свобода имеется только там, где уничтожена эксплуатация, где нет угнетения одних людей другими, где нет безработицы и нищенства, где человек не дрожит за то, что завтра может потерять работу, жилище, хлеб. Только в таком обществе возможна настоящая, а не бумажная, личная и всякая другая свобода”<sup>11</sup>.

This commitment to social rights was very visible in the DDR’s approach to housing. While the capitalist West treated housing as a commodity and a vehicle for financial speculation, the DDR treated it as a fundamental social utility<sup>12</sup>. The 1973 Housing Program, a massive state-led initiative, aimed to solve the housing question by

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<sup>9</sup> Eley, G. (2004). The unease of history: Settling accounts with the East German past. *History Workshop Journal*, 57(1), 175–201. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/57.1.175>

<sup>10</sup> Betts, P. (2012). Socialism, Social Rights, and Human Rights: The case of East Germany. *Humanity*, 3(3), 407–421.

<sup>11</sup> “We built it for the sake of real personal freedom, freedom without quotation marks. It is difficult for me to imagine what kind of “personal freedom” an unemployed person can have, who goes hungry and finds no use for his labour. True freedom exists only where exploitation has been abolished, where there is no oppression of some people by others, where there is no unemployment and poverty, where a person does not tremble for the fact that tomorrow he may lose his job, home, bread. Only in such a society is real, not paper, personal and any other freedom possible”. Stalin, J. V. (1933, April 3). *Ответ товарищам колхозникам*. Marxists Internet Archive. Retrieved August 13, 2025, from [https://www.marxists.org/russkij/stalin/t14/t14\\_33.htm](https://www.marxists.org/russkij/stalin/t14/t14_33.htm)

<sup>12</sup> Betts, P. (2012). Socialism, Social Rights, and Human Rights: The case of East Germany. *Humanity*, 3(3), 407–421.

1990, building millions of new, modern flats in vast, comprehensively planned estates that included schools, clinics, and shops<sup>13</sup>. Rents were frozen at 1936 levels, consuming on average a mere 5% of a household's income<sup>14</sup>. The result was the virtual elimination of homelessness and it was the direct outcome of a system that based on basic human need.

This principle of collective well-being extended to all spheres of social reproduction. Full employment was a constitutional guarantee, the healthcare system, was a world-class, preventative and public system with its network of local polyclinics that provided free, comprehensive care from the cradle to the grave, the universal, state-funded childcare and generous maternity leave enabled the highest rate of female workforce participation in the world, at 92% by 1989<sup>15</sup>. These were parts of an integrated social project that the system was built on a real commitment to equality, whether measured by income, housing, or access to cultural and educational resources<sup>16</sup>. To acknowledge the problematic dimensions of the DDR is necessary, but to allow those failings to be used to erase these profound social achievements is to accept the western propaganda and to lose vital lessons for the future of the communist project.

### **Unsettled Pasts, Authoritarian Futures**

The method of reunification systematically invalidated an entire society's forty years of lived experience. East Germans were not invited as partners into a new, unified Germany but were treated as a defeated population in need of political and cultural re-education – against the very idea of the Stalin's note. This process created a profound vacuum of recognition, a deep-seated and legitimate grievance of being unheard, unseen, and unvalued<sup>17</sup>. The terms of unification deprived Easterners of their agency, forcing them into a form of political development and institutional practices already established in the West, thereby erasing their separate identity in any positive sense. This was not a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in any meaningful sense, it was a cultural colonization<sup>18</sup>.

This historical erasure produced the fertile ground for a politics of resentment. The decades of lived experience under the DDR were rendered illegitimate. The resulting sense of loss, coupled with the real economic pain of deindustrialization, generated a powerful mistrust of the Western establishment, its media and liberal promises. It is precisely this vacuum, filled with alienation, betrayal, and wounded pride, that the new far-right has exploited. The rise of the AfD in the East is a direct political consequence of this flawed reunification. The AfD's core narrative of forgotten people

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<sup>13</sup> Urban, F. (2007). Designing the past in East Berlin before and after the German reunification. *Progress in Planning*, 68, 1-55. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.progress.2007.07.001>

<sup>14</sup> Internationale Forschungsstelle DDR, & Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. (2021). *Risen from the ruins: The economic history of socialism in the German Democratic Republic* (Studies on the DDR, No. 1).

<sup>15</sup> Internationale Forschungsstelle DDR, & Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. (2022). 'Socialism is the best prophylaxis': The German Democratic Republic's health care system (Studies on the DDR, No. 2).

<sup>16</sup> Stand, K. (2012). Ambivalences, contradictions, choices: The legacy of GDR socialism. *Socialism & Democracy*, 26(1), 102-120.

<sup>17</sup> Reichle, L. R. (2021). *Alienated social reproduction: A study on the politics of neoliberal urban restructuring in Leipzig, East Germany* [Doctoral dissertation, De Montfort University].

<sup>18</sup> Eley, G. (2004). The unease of history: Settling accounts with the East German past. *History Workshop Journal*, 57(1), 175-201. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/57.1.175>

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betrayed by a corrupt elite, of a nation that has lost its pride and of a righteous anger against a condescending political class is made to resonate with the East German experience since 1990. It offers a perverse form of recognition.

The Palast der Republik was demolished, the copper-glass shattered, but the social promise it represented, the everyday resilience of a society built on solidarity is far harder to break. The old DDR state may be gone, but the unbreakable spectre of communism continues to haunt the failures of the present capitalist system. This haunting is not *Ostalgie*, but a critical consciousness, a living memory that another way is possible, a reminder that housing is not a commodity, that healthcare is not for profit and that a society can be organized around the principle of collective well-being rather than individual competition.

The task, then, is to salvage the unbreakable principles from its ruins. For those of us engaged in the international struggle for a communist future, the history of the DDR is a vital and contested terrain that requires a necessary act of praxis: to learn from its profound social achievements without excusing its failures. It demands that we defend the memory of its social rights against the triumphant narrative of the West, not to rebuild the *Antifaschistischer Schutzwall*, but to sharpen the weapons for the struggles to come.