

3. What might the study of emotions add to our understanding of the 20th century? (You may, if you wish, restrict your answer to part of the century and/or a particular geographical area.)

We cannot escape our emotions. They are involuntary responses to our circumstances which influence our everyday decisions and how we interpret, understand and analyse facts and events; comprehending history inescapably involves some form of subjective processing and our emotions influence this process. Historians cannot scrutinise history from a completely impartial position as they are the product, consciously or unconsciously, of the society to which they belong¹. Conversely, emotions will have also played a key part in the actions and motivations of those individuals who the historian studies. Throughout this essay I will examine the effects of the existence and fall of the Berlin Wall on citizens in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in an attempt to show how studying the emotional motivations of participants and observers can uncover themes and perspectives that enrich our historical understanding.

This essay will argue that the historical accounts of life in the GDR during and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, on November 9th 1989, can only be fully comprehended if we understand the objective emotional perspectives of our historical sources and also the subjective emotional perspective of the historian who uses such sources. This requires a balancing of the emotional influence of the contemporary values of a historian whilst recognising that their source material will have been motivated by emotions specific to their historical era. The history of the Berlin Wall encapsulates many of the prevalent themes of the 20th Century, including the conflict between liberal and authoritarian regimes that characterised much of that century. It is a fertile case study in demonstrating the importance of recognising the influence of emotions on our historical understanding, especially from the differing perspectives of the GDR citizens.

The Berlin Wall was laden with profound emotional symbolism and was undoubtedly a historical caesura for the East Germans. A simplistic view of the Berlin Wall could merely order the chronological facts into a narrative of it being a result of the Cold War stand-off between superpowers in which the Germans were merely pawns; and ending with the victory of the western democratic political model over the flawed Soviet socialist model. But history is more than simply a chronological stream of facts so in order to fully understand the impact of the Wall, and to challenge our contemporary assumptions, it is illuminating to analyse the different emotional perspectives of GDR citizens. If we examine the impact of the Wall ‘from below’ through personal experiences, a different historical perspective is revealed and we are reminded that there were real people behind the facts. Exploring these different perspectives will demonstrate how studying the impact of the Wall on the underlying emotional influences and experiences of “ordinary” East Germans, whose state traumatically ceased to exist following unification, reveals a complex and nuanced historical narrative.

It is a common contemporary assumption that East Germans disliked daily life in the GDR and longed for a new start in the capitalist Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Due to the efforts of the State Security Service (the “Staatssicherheitsdienst” or “Stasi”) to indoctrinate and control Easterners with state propaganda and coercion, many western observers regarded the GDR as simply a brutal dictatorship whose lack of physical and intellectual freedom created an intolerable burden on its citizens, who were thereby willing to risk everything to escape. Studying the emotional experiences of these people helps us to understand how the Wall affected and damaged everyday life. Though 5,000 people successfully crossed the Wall from 1961-1989², many others were unsuccessful and suffered persecution or imprisonment as a result. Mario³, who was born in 1968 in the GDR, is an illuminating case study. Having declined a Stasi request to inform on his boyfriend (who was a West German

¹ E.H Carr, *What is History?*, p.29, Palgrave 1961

² <https://www.history.com/news/berlin-wall-crossings-east-germany>

³ Hester Vaizey, *Born In The GDR*, p.85, Oxford 2016

politician) Mario lost his job and became subject to continual Stasi surveillance. He felt that “We were as walled in emotionally as our country was blocked off physically from the outside”⁴ and when he could bear it no longer he attempted to cross the Wall in 1987. He was betrayed by a Stasi informer and sent to Hohenschönhausen, an infamously brutal Stasi prison, where he was held for two months and psychologically traumatised. After his release, Mario attempted to kill himself and was taken to a mental hospital where he attended intensive therapy for the next ten years to recover from his treatment by the Stasi.

Julia’s story similarly highlights the emotional isolation created by the Wall. At the age of sixteen a Stasi officer pressured her to inform on her boyfriend, who was Italian and seen as a threat to the state. Having refused, she was unable to get into university or hold a meaningful long term job, and was observed daily by the Stasi for the rest of her life in the GDR. When the Wall fell she subsequently moved from the GDR to San Francisco and, like Mario, attended intensive therapy to address her trauma, explaining that “it was the total surveillance that damaged me most”⁵. Mario and Julia are just two of many of thousands of other East Germans who were emotionally traumatised by their experiences of life in the GDR. It is therefore no surprise that 22,000 East Germans fled to the FRG within 3 days of the Wall falling⁶, revealing the extent to which other people had shared similar emotional experiences.

These first hand narratives of Stasi emotional intrusion reflect the generally accepted liberal democratic interpretation of life in the GDR, but to get a more rounded understanding of the emotions generated by the existence of the Wall, and insight into life in the GDR, we need to examine the other side of the argument, revealing more unexpected emotional perspectives.

There are many records of positive experiences of life in the GDR that challenge our contemporary assumptions that East Germans were disaffected by the Wall. Many people were immensely proud of their communist regime which to them represented stability and equality. These people may have been influenced by GDR propaganda which painted a rosy picture of the successes of the regime, but nevertheless their emotional responses have validity in providing a factual counterpoint and in helping the historian reach a more informed view.

Stasi officers perhaps felt the greatest sense of pride for the GDR, believing they were ‘doing a service for humanity’⁷. A Stasi officer conference held in 2007 revealed how this pride remained intact almost 20 years later. At the conference, a former Stasi officer in charge of spying activities in the West, Werner Grossman, claimed without irony that they had ‘fulfilled their mission to restore peace’⁸. This allows us to better understand the Stasi’s emotional motivations by highlighting a different perspective on the role of the Stasi and challenging our preconceptions of these officers as amoral bureaucrats.

Another example of someone who echoes this pride, is Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler, journalist and frontline propagandist for the notorious GDR political television programme *Der Schwarze Kanal* (‘Black Channel’⁹) from 1960 to 1989, known for its incessant condemnation of FRG broadcasts. Even in 1998 he still declared that the Wall ‘was the most useful construction in all of German history!’ and shrugged off all criticisms of his propaganda practices. In an interview given in 2001, just two years before his death, he continued to claim ‘I am not ashamed of anything I have done’¹⁰. Again, although

⁴ *Born In The GDR*, ibid p.87

⁵ Anna Funder, *Stasiland*, p.113, London Granta 2003

⁶ Frederick Taylor, *The Berlin Wall*, p.403, Bloomsbury 2009

⁷ *Stasiland*, ibid p.134

⁸ <https://www.dw.com/en/former-stasi-officers-coming-out-of-the-shadows/a-1978117>

⁹ <https://www.transdiffusion.org/2001/06/14/gdr>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/sep/28/guardianobituaries.michaelsimmons>

it is difficult to sympathise with him, his pride in the GDR and conviction that his work was for the good helps create a more balanced historical counterpoint to our understanding of life in the GDR.

Many ordinary citizens who served as Stasi informers also felt this sense of pride. These informers were crucial to the success of Stasi surveillance, with a total of around 189,000¹¹ participants, equating to 1 in every 9 GDR citizens. A Stasi recruiter explains ‘It was pitiful... they were hardly paid at all’ but that they did it because ‘in doing it, they were somebody’¹². Hester Vaizey echoes this idea, explaining that it ‘made people feel like they were active citizens making a positive contribution towards the GDR’s collective goals’¹³. This desire to belong is another emotional response to life in the GDR that is not commonly acknowledged.

This pride, however, was for many transformed by the fall of the Wall in 1989, and the period following German unification, into emotions of deep regret and a longing for the past. This sense of nostalgia was termed *Ostalgie*¹⁴ (combining ‘Ost’ and ‘Nostalgie’ meaning longing or nostalgia for the GDR) in 1992 and refers to the aspects of GDR life that the Easterners most wanted to preserve: the culture, economic security and moral values.

Ostalgie is fascinating to observe from a contemporary perspective as it highlights how historical interpretation can “retrofit” emotions and sentimentalism into an analysis of the past. It was commonly assumed that Easterners were overjoyed when the Wall fell and would embrace culture in the “free” and glamorous FRG, meaning many contemporary commentators overlooked the Easterner’s feelings of nostalgia or their romanticisation of their GDR past. But the *Ostalgie* emotional response was so widespread throughout East Germany that some even set up businesses that capitalised on this phenomenon, such as Michael Fruehauf¹⁵ who had great success in selling GDR-era food, TV programmes, furniture and domestic goods. Museums were also set up to honour GDR culture, such as the DDR museum in Berlin¹⁶ which offers a ‘hands-on experience’ of what life was like there, exhibiting an extensive display of GDR objects and even offering a simulated car ride in a Trabant P601.

However, *Ostalgie* also highlights a series of moral questions affecting reappraisals of the GDR. An article in *Der Spiegel* asked former GDR citizens whether reunification ‘had more good sides than bad sides’, and 57% responded that life had been better in the GDR¹⁷. As time has passed, the rise of this nostalgia has meant the significance of the Stasi’s activities has been marginalised by sentimentalised recollections of the GDR. The head of a Berlin support group for Stasi victims, Theo Mitrup, argues that *Ostalgie* needs to be balanced by reality, claiming ‘this nostalgia seems to ignore the oppression, the secret police and the intimidation – history is somehow being rewritten’¹⁸. The memory of life in the GDR is slowly fading and the subject is no longer seen objectively, so it risks being trivialised or simply forgotten¹⁹.

Despite efforts to integrate Easterners into West German culture, almost 30 years of cultural division meant that different mentalities continued to divide Germany after 1989 as both sides were said to be living with *Die Mauer in Kopf*²⁰ (A Wall in the Head), as predicted by historian Peter Schneider in

¹¹ <https://www.dw.com/en/east-german-stasi-had-189000-informers-study-says/a-3184486-1>

¹² *Stasiland*, *ibid* p.200

¹³ *Born In The GDR*, *ibid* p.164

¹⁴ <https://diasporiclivesofobjects2012.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/east-german-objects-nostalgia.pdf>

¹⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3077054.stm>

¹⁶ <https://www.ddr-museum.de/en/collection/exhibition>

¹⁷ “Majority of Eastern Germans Feel Life Better under Communism”, Julia Bronstein, *Spiegel Online*, July 3, 2009

¹⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3077054.stm>

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbbWIRhJbgc&list=PLBAD0Z9cpW8NMO03WhThompkrhPlUI6PD>

²⁰ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/13/opinion/tearing-down-berlins-mental-wall.html?_r=1

1983. Many East Germans felt demeaned as second class citizens and experienced a loss in their sense of identity when the Wall came down²¹, particularly those younger persons born after the establishment of the GDR. Psychologist Walter Friedrich reflects on this phenomenon, observing that German reunification caused ‘psychological chaos’ for GDR youth as their new historical perspective undermined everything they had been taught about the evils of the West and the brutality of capitalism. He observed that their ‘normality had been turned on its head and their country had disappeared and been replaced by an unfamiliar one, leaving them feeling as if they had a black hole in their biographies’²². This raised questions of the value of life generally, as psychoanalyst Hans-Hoachim Maaz concluded that ‘the loss of the GDR evoked fundamental questions of identity’²³. Such a loss of identity explains why so many people longed for their former lives of belonging and familiarity, which is an issue overlooked by many historical narratives. One former GDR citizen explained ‘It was so much better before. So what if we didn’t have bananas or mandarins. I mean we had a social state – you didn’t even have to pay for medicine’²⁴, revealing the widespread criticisms of capitalism which caused further emotional and moral division between Easterners and Westerners.

The rise of Ostalgia over time seems to have over-written history and romanticised everyday life in the GDR, highlighting the importance of studying contemporary experiences of history as well as the emotional aftermath in maintaining a balanced understanding. The nostalgia and sense of isolation felt by the Easterners after 1989 reveals that the Wall was not just a temporary physical divide, but served as an enduring emotional barrier between the East and West even after it had fallen.

As Western post-millennials, our pre-conceptions of how a ‘fair’ society should be organised inevitably influence our view of the GDR and lead us to assume people were unhappy living under such repressive conditions. But whilst the historical facts give us an initial understanding of what happened, a fuller understanding requires us to view history ‘from below’, including exploring the participants’ emotional motivations. Historians require mental frameworks that are primed to understand and to assess the available data and to challenge and update both the frameworks and the details when presented with new or conflicting data²⁵. The study of emotion allows us to view history in a way that takes into consideration how events affect people. This idea is reflected in the Alltagsgeschichte²⁶ school of history, a form of microhistory developed in the 1980s by German historians, that studies ‘everyday history’ in relation to how ‘large processes’ were passively experienced in ‘small worlds’. This is applicable when examining how the Berlin Wall as a ‘large process’ impacted the ‘small worlds’ of the East Germans’ emotional experience and redressed the westernised bias of more structuralist interpretations of the effect of the Wall.

This brief study of life under the GDR shows how understanding the emotions of those living in such a complex regime can illuminate this key era of the 20th century. It shows that study of the emotional experiences of East Germans who lived through the existence and fall of the Berlin Wall reveals a more subtle and layered understanding of life in the GDR than narratives which fail to take this important topic into account. Lastly, this study has endeavoured to show that viewing history through both a subjective emotional lens, in terms of our own judgements, and an objective emotional lens, in terms of the objects of our study, allows the historian to uncover valuable perspectives that may otherwise be ignored or overlooked.

Word count: 2,496

²¹ *Born In The GDR*, ibid p.11

²² *Born In The GDR*, ibid p.18

²³ https://www.jstor.org/stable/4140983?read-now=1&seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents

²⁴ *Stasiland*, ibid p.251

²⁵ https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/why_history_matters.html

²⁶ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4546159.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Af2dfaf62eff3b8ad3969c5f1fa50ba46>

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