Nostalgia or nightmare?

RECOLLECTIONS OF URBAN CHILDHOOD IN EASTERN GERMANY

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The two authors Grit Lemke and David Blum attribute the significance of the big city with its modal housing in high-rise housing estates (nowadays somewhat derogatorily called “Plattenbau” in German) as a symbol of a collapsed system, based on their own memories of reunification.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

Grit Lemke has chosen a high-rise building as the cover image of her book. One of the three tower blocks depicted is the one she grew up in as a child. This tower block is the starting point for her novel about Hoy (Hoyerswerda).

abstract

If the grand narrative of German reunification in the autumn of 1989 in media discourse used to be a more or less coherent story of successful reconciliation, recent political developments have made it necessary to question some of the nuances of this seemingly flawless narrative. One way of doing this is to present personal memories in narrative form for consideration as more or less autobiographical accounts from the inside, so to speak. A growing number of writers who were children and young people 35 years ago, at the time of reunification, are now starting to write about their childhood and memories of the reunification process. These stories display more or less biographical features, albeit composite and contrived. In this paper, two novels, both dealing with the past, are compared: Grit Lemke's affirmative oral history *Kinder von Hoy* (2021) and David Blum's more critical Dantesque underworld narrative *Kollektorgang* (2023). Lemke's depiction of a happy childhood is rather nostalgic, if not downright *ostalgic* ("*East-nostalgic*"), while Blum's is much more discerning. Generational considerations may explain this difference in approach. What they have in common is that they ascribe significance to the big city with its high-rise buildings as a symbol of a collapsed system, based on their own memories of reunification.

KEYWORDS: GDR, memory, Grit Lemke, *Kinder von Hoy*, David Blum, *Kollektorgang*.

The anniversary of November 9, 2024 celebrates the peaceful revolution in German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the subsequent events that contributed to the unification of Germany. This celebration is an occasion to look back and ask whether Germany has grown together or is still divided thirty-five years after reunification.[1] Although reunification is usually described as a success story, a kind of act of liberation, alternative narratives have always prevailed, though with less public support. Reunification marked a period of uncertainty throughout Germany, but perhaps most obviously in the eastern parts of the country. The division of Germany into East and West, which had once resulted in two regions with different infrastructures, was instructed, with Western financial support, to grow together. Although the preconditions for a reunion existed, the population of the two parts sharing the same language and history, there were also significant political, economic, and cultural differences between the capitalist FRG and the socialist GDR. In retrospect, the process was not as quick and easy as promised. Wages are still lower, unemployment higher and inherited wealth less in the East, even if new investments are made.

The Eastern regions are also home to a number of writers who are now gaining recognition. Authors such as Andrea Backhaus, David Blum, Jenny Erpenbeck, Richard Friebe, Alexander Fromm, Michael Hacker, Isabel Hempel, Grit Lemke, Lothar Probst, Jana Schallau and János Can Togay have been telling their story about the GDR since 2021 – from the inside, so to speak. They belong to a generation often referred to as the 3rd generation East German, sometimes also the "generation of the unadvised" [*Generation der Unberatene*], born between 1973 and 1984. What these authors have in common is that they grew up in a united Germany and had little political experience of the socialism that actually existed in the GDR. Because they were children when the system collapsed, they may have been unaware of the more sinister side of the GDR system. They grew up in some form of forced adaptation to a new society after reunification without much support from their parents who were also dislocated and directionless. Voicing his own experiences, but also those of others, rapper and writer Hendrik Bolz (*1988) explains in retrospect that: "There was no orientation [...]. Everything was in flux, the adults were busy finding their way in the new system."[2]

THE REFERENCE to generations as in "3rd generation East German" is typical of the debate about the GDR and an approach to the past in Germany. There is a time before and after the Second World War, just as there is a time before and after the GDR. The reference reflects traumatic experiences, framed through both place and time. These experiences are subject to a policy of remembrance about how and what can be told and in what way. Regarding the former GDR, the population is often divided into three groups depending on when they were born, differentiating between those who established the state system, those who were employed within it and those who experienced its collapse. The assumption about the 3rd generation is that the upheavals of 1989

had a noticeable influence on the youngest children, as they suddenly found themselves in the midst of a major systemic change.

The objective of this essay is to show how the reunification is depicted in two novels, Grit Lemke's *Kinder von Hoy* [Children of Hoy] (2021) and David Blum's *Kollektorgang* [Service Tunnel] (2023). While Lemke describes what it was like to grow up in the GDR, Blum picks up where Lemke leaves off, after reunification. Like Bolz, however, both authors describe reunification as a time of confusion, chaos and dashed expectations. Where the two authors begin, their story may explain their emphasis. While Lemke writes about a childhood that was in many respects happy, Blum's account is much darker. What they have in common are the dark colors with which they paint the reunion. In this respect, their depictions resemble other literature by other representatives of the same generation. If the success story of reunification is uniformly bright, these authors problematize this master narrative through their work. Thus, they adhere to a narrative tradition that stands as a counter-narrative to brighter descriptions. These counter-narratives are not only related to real events and real or perceived broken promises, although such critique is also rampant. If, back in the 1970s, Erich Honecker promised East Germans a more modest prosperity with "unity of economic and social policy", Helmut Kohl turned this promise into "flourishing landscapes". Instead of heated streets, unemployment was a fact, industrial areas lay fallow, deindustrialization occurred as directed by the Treuhand company, leading to "ABM" job creation schemes and Hartz IV social welfare benefits. Differences in wages, unemployment and inheritance continue to persist across the country. Rather, one can speak of a narrative tradition or a canon of voices that draw stylistic elements interchangeably and from the East German storytelling tradition.

IN FACT, SO MANY AUTHORS are choosing to tell their version of the story of the fall of the Berlin Wall and a childhood in the GDR that one could even speak of a veritable literary boom. A pioneer in this regard was Jana Hensel with her internationally acclaimed novel *After the Wall* (*Zonenkinder*, 2002). Hensel was born in 1976 in Borna, in the former district of Leipzig, now in Saxony. Her novel is a story of loss, but also of the difficulty of finding one's place as part of a minority in a majority society. To mark the loss of the everyday once given, she uses words like *verschwinden* [disappear], *abschaffen* [abolish], *wegsein* [be gone], and verbs like *verloren* [lost], *verschwunden* [disappeared], *vergangen* [gone], *ausgeschieden* [eliminated], creating the image of an irrevocably lost past. She concludes:

> **The fall of communism hit us like a ton of bricks. We were just twelve, thirteen, fourteen or fifteen years old. It hit us really hard and made everything revolve around us. We were too young to understand what was going on and at the same time too old to look away, and we were torn away from our childhood world before we even knew that such a thing existed.**[3]

With these words, Hensel describes the abrupt end of a world so familiar to her as a child and the beginning of something new and different. Although these stories have also attracted a lot of readers, they have received a considerable amount of negative publicity. Critics hailed Hensel's novel as both sensitive and objective, but it was also accused of being purely poetic, apolitical. Analysts detected a smug tone. They even went so far as to claim that no West German would have dared to write such banalities. This criticism demonstrates the difficulty of portraying the humanity of an inhuman system faced by 3rd generation descendants. As the criticism of Hensel's novel shows, the very attempt to describe something positive in the closed society now gone risks being dismissed as mere nostalgia, if not some kind of morbid longing for the past.

"LIFE IN THE FORMER GDR CANNOT BE REDUCED TO PERPETRATORS AND VICTIMS OF THE STASI SECRET POLICE."

While there is a human need to recall personal memories with some nostalgia – a happy childhood, first love – these flashbacks are so much more than just nostalgia because they still influence how we act in the present. Stories are not true representations of objective facts, but they can prompt us to reflect on the past, current events, and futures. Stories like Hensel's have the potential to challenge all preconceived histories and stereotypes, and more than that, they show the ambiguity of a democracy where different and contradictory narratives can coexist. Particularly if this literature also takes a critical look at the past and is not merely about young pioneers, state control and the melancholic sense of loss of a childhood whose familiar context has vanished, it might perhaps open up a conversation that can lead to a greater understanding of different perspectives and voices.

True life in a closed system

What the generation of writers known as *Zonenkinder* or *Unberatene* have in common is that they offer a counter-narrative to the usual narrative of reunification. They are offering a voice for those who perhaps do not recognize themselves in the official policy of remembrance. From an overly casual Western perspective, it may be easier to judge life in a closed system as less worthwhile, but even that might have had its joys at a personal level. Life in the former GDR cannot be reduced to perpetrators and victims of the Stasi secret police and the private cannot be described merely in terms of the regime's policies and the people's resistance to them. For most East Germans, everyday life might have been not a question of ideology but a promise of progress and prosperity: a wardrobe, a Trabant car or a holiday at Lake Balaton was a guarantee for those who played by the rules. In exchange for good political behavior, social progress was promised.

Life at the Leninplatz in Eastern Berlin in 1990, In the background a block of flats, so called Plattenbau. PHOTO: ULRICH BAUMGARTEN/GETTY IMAGES

Accepting the joy of small memories is not the same as reducing a closed society to something harmless. The Stasi harassed the political opposition, post offices controlled the mail, and anyone who thought differently faced imprisonment or deportation to the West. No one knew when or if their application to leave the country would be processed, and many lost their jobs when they applied. Yet to dismiss this closed society too lightly risks depriving those who grew up and lived in it the opportunity to recall the everyday glimpses of happiness that still existed amidst all the censorship and regulation. To categorize the people living in this society as immoral collaborators and accomplices of an evil regime or as simple-minded victims of an ideology would be too hasty, because the GDR was much more than an SED state. Nor should this recognition embellish life in the GDR.

THE CHALLENGE FACED by contemporary writers who wish to describe life in the East before and after reunification is to find the words to describe everyday life in the GDR and during the period of reunification in a way that will be understood and resonate in the West German media and among those who have not had similar experiences is. In this respect, it is also important to remember that these are personal memories shared by many others and not a question of statistics on how many people were detained. A fictitious novel is definitely not the same as a historical document. Fictional worlds are autonomous worlds, which means that their existence is not reliant on extra-textual information, but an act of *noesis*, or "world-imaging". Memories are not narratives, but rather flaming images and fragments. Put together, they tell us more about ourselves now than then.

As a result, recollections are framed in a setting in time and space. Or citing Aleida Assman, "Memories are always perspectival, they are particularized to certain details, they are biased. We can see this from the fact that the oldest child in a family remembers things very differently from the youngest child."[4] She and husband Jan Assman address how cultural memory is staged and ritualized forms of expression that are institutionalized to create memory cultures. From this point of view, memories are biased, because the process of remembering involves two things: (1) the "recall of an event in the past, which works in the same way as clicking on a file on the computer", and (2) the link to highly subjective characteristics. Yet despite the biased nature of memories, it is important for a democracy to remember and allow conflicting memories to be heard, because it is only then that the multi-layered resonance that a democracy requires can be achieved. The writings of the 3rd generation are important precisely for this reason. They resist the attempt to create a monotonous narrative, and in doing so, they contribute to paving the way for a real conversation about what the future might look like in Germany, where the public debate takes the form of an open discussion.

Narrated spaces: Growing up in urbanity

As argued above, memories are always framed in a setting. The setting for both Grit Lemke's *Kinder von Hoy* and David Blum's *Kollektorgang* is suburbia, with monotonous concrete tower blocks. While the title of Blum's novel for teens remind the read-

er about the underground system consisting of tunnels that connect high-rise buildings and supply them with water and electricity, Lemke has chosen a high-rise building as the cover image of her book. One of the three tower blocks depicted is the one she grew up in as a child. This tower block is the starting point for her novel about Hoy (Hoyerswerda). It is no coincidence that both Lemke's and Blum's attempts to remember the past are thus linked to the modal housing in high-rise housing estates (nowadays somewhat derogatorily called "*Plattenbau*" in German). Hereby they are not only reflecting personal memories and an architecture that has become a symbol of the GDR, but also relating to a literary tradition.

Unlike West Germany, "almost a quarter of the population" in the GDR lived in urban areas such as Berlin-Marzahn, Halle-Neustadt, Hoyerswerda and Rostock-Lichtenhagen. These satellite towns were "ideal societies" in which the work and life of the socialist human community were to be merged. They were supposed to provide people with modern, well-equipped flats as well as other amenities such as childcare and cultural facilities. This kind of urban modal housing was regarded as "proof of socialist efficiency" and attractive due to their modernity. In these modern and promising suburbs, a new humanity would grow, more socialistic and egalitarian. The sociologist Steffen Mau notes in his study *Lütten Klein*:

> **The GDR was proud of its new housing estates, so proud that postcards were made of them. […] The new housing estates – no one spoke of the "Platten" at the time – were proof of socialist efficiency, and scientific and technological progress, and the realization of a new way of life. They […] symbolized the GDR's aspirations.**[5]

Given these social developments, it is perhaps not surprising that more GDR writers came to address this living environment in their works. The motif is so common that a "dominant narrative pattern" is noticed from the 1970s onwards.[6] Lemke and Blum continue this tradition. Once well-known authors like Alfred Wellm, Benno Pludra and Edith Bergner wrote about migration from the village to the city. If government-controlled magazines and programs spoke of urbanity in terms of development and modernity, these authors address the difficulties of growing up in suburbia, taking a critical look at the modern buildings, for example Benno Pludra in *Insel der Schwäne* (1980).[7] For these authors, the social utopia promised by the adult world becomes a bore for children who find it difficult to settle in the suburbs because they cannot find any natural areas for play and socializing on the tarmac.

With the collapse of the Berlin wall, the dream of a happy suburban life in modal houses was shattered. If these buildings once held the promise of positive development, they are now a manifestation of loss and decay. This ambiguity of the theme has also made it a popular topic in literature and film studies.[8] The GDR equivalent of the Swedish "million homes program" has also found its way into literature research, although further studies are needed in this area.[9] Although the research interest in the significance of the home environment has grown in recent years,[10] however there has only been isolated research on housing policy and the representation of prefabricated buildings in the GDR.[11] This is particularly noteworthy given that migration from village to city became a "dominant narrative pattern" from the 1970s onwards.[12] In this context, it is significant that the GDR and Eastern Europe have a (shared) political and economic past manifested in socialist aesthetics, architecture and material culture.[13]

"BOTH NOVELS DEPICT LIFE AS IT ONCE WAS FROM A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE, USING DIFFERENT LITERARY STYLES."

A themed issue of Baltic Worlds is planned for fall 2025 including this topic, linked to how memory and place are connected, their scents and sounds.[14] According to Sigrid Weigel, spaces are something "that need to be constructed, shaped […]"[15]:

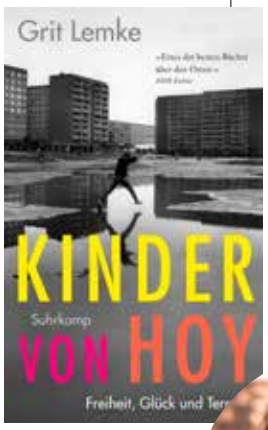
> **Places, on the other hand, are defined by the fact that something has already been done or experienced and suffered in them. History has always taken place here and left its mark in the form of traces, relics, remnants, scars and wounds. Places have names and histories or stories, they contain the past; spaces, on the other hand, open up dimensions of planning and point to the future.**[16]

Lemke and Blum use suburbia to juxtapose the familiar with an experience of alienation and loss. Contrary to a writer like Benno Pludra, Lemke describes a happy childhood in the suburbs before 1989. After reunification, the children in her story are now grown up and they look with dismay on the cities of their childhood. Blum, who picks up his story where Lemke leaves off, is clearly more critical and thus closer to the tradition represented by Pludra, even though his story has a completely different premise. He talks about the modal houses as *Platte* ["slab"], thus capitalizing on the negative attribute that these buildings first acquired only after reunification. Both novels depict life as it once was from a contemporary perspective, using different literary styles. While Blum uses fantastic devices to tell a dark story, Lemke borrows the ephemeral style of reportage with a snappy exchange of dialogue. To get a clearer picture of their different stories, let's take a closer look at them in chronological order, starting with Lemke.

Kinder von Hoy [Children of Hoy]

Grit Lemke's *Wir Kinder von Hoy* is an oral history, and as such a novel with some documentary qualities. Lemke interweaves longer quotations from various friends, similar to Annie Ernaux's well-known narrative style, avoiding the first person. The opening line of the book recalls: There are simply too many children

in this city. "No matter how many schools they build – every time they ceremoniously open the next one, it will already be too small again. The number of children grows faster than the cranes turn."[17] It is a portrait of this generation of children. It is a generation that created its own freedom from the state in an artistic sense, before not only its city but also its sense of belonging was lost with the fall of the Berlin Wall and Hoyerswerda gained the sad reputation of a xenophobic place in 1991. The quotations allow the past to appear in the intense present that comes along with remembrance.



Lemke interviewed 16 of her friends about their childhood growing up in Hoyerswerda in the 1960s and 1970s. They recount how they came to the place, which for them meant something positive, the beginning of an exciting time full of adventure and friendship. They appear with their first names or nicknames and are interspersed with narrative passages, mostly in the present tense, in which the individual statements are placed in a larger context. They remember how they moved to the town with their parents and experienced childhood, youth, and the fall of communism. Some of them still live there or are living there again, but not in the same prefabricated buildings that they grow up in.

The voices of her friends are brought together in a way that is also reminiscent of a film reportage. The story could therefore also serve as the basis for a documentary. Grit Lemke is also a well-known documentary filmmaker. Her film *Gundermann Revier* [Gundermann Precinct] (2019) sheds light on the excavator-driving singer-songwriter, but also on a brown coal mining region in transition.[18] The ideal of the biographical interview has been said to be a freely improvised narrative, under certain constraints. One such constraint is that a story is told to a conclusion.[19] Here lies the limitation on both sides of the fall of the wall. By bringing up childhood memories, Lemke offers an alternative history of the GDR. Ultimately, she also attempts to understand what happened after reunification and how her childhood Hoy could become the Hoyerswerda that made newspaper headlines with racist rallies.

LEMKE DESCRIBES URBAN HOUSING in positive terms, as something modern and new. She moved to Hoyerswerda in the 1970s with her mother, who had got a job at the Schwarze Pumpe [Black Pump] gasworks, a lignite-fired power station near Hoyerswerda. Her family was – like everyone else – happy to move into a new apartment with hot water and an inside toilet. On August 31, 1955, the first stone was officially laid in building Hoyerswerda, 35 kilometers south of Cottbus and 55 kilometers northeast of Dresden, transforming the sleepy little town into a "socialist residential city". There was a need for living facilities for a large number of people, the new workers for the newly built Black Pump. Eventually, ten residential complexes – WK I to WK X –, kindergartens and schools, shopping centers, restaurants, service businesses, and even a planetarium were built.

While Lemke's descriptions of growing up in a socialist society surrounded by high-rise buildings and concrete are firmly grounded in the region, her attempts to describe the unfathomable events following the fall of the Berlin Wall are almost verbatim. From the outset, it is made abundantly evident where the story is heading: the racist pogrom of 1991. This is not only because the book was published on the 30th anniversary of the pogrom and because terror forms a dialectical triad with freedom and happiness in the title. It is also made clear by the fact that David, a former Mozambican contract worker, addresses everyday racism early in the text. Since 1991, Hoyerswerda has been synonymous with right-wing radicalism in the East, which the novel documents and tells us about.

As early as June 1991, there was a right-wing extremist 'vigilante group' in the town, and at the end of August 1991, right-wing extremists attacked a home for asylum applicants and burned it to the ground: When incendiary devices fly into the dormitories of foreigners and a crowd gathers in front of them and cheers, [...] it will be said that the violence came out of nowhere and from outside. We really know better now.[20]


Grit Lemke.

Particularly strong is the use of dialect when it comes depicting the loss, such as the loss of work:

Suddenly something becomes currency, which until now was nothing more than spring, summer, fall and winter, like undressing washing bed. It was something that inevitably happened – whether you wanted it to or not. Now we are learning that the world is divided into those who take work and those who give it.[21]

In total, up to 150,000 jobs disappeared in the region. The city's population declined rapidly: in 1991, 62,400 people lived there, today there are around 32,000. Unemployment rose to over 26% at times in the 1990s. At the same time, right-wing extremists gained influence.

The many voices in the text offer many perspectives and therefore some possible answers, but there are also things that cannot be explained. For example, how the voices that can be heard could be involved in an art project in September 1991 while a mob raged for days 200 meters away: "While the Vietnamese are running for their lives towards the high-rise building where they live, we in our venue are preoccupied with the figure of the dead hare by Beuys. The essence of movement that connects worlds. When the hunted reach the dormitory, the first stones are thrown."[22] When right-wing violence escalated, the voices in Lemke's book were first helpless, and finally became victims of right-wing violence themselves. Lemke refrains from

any interpretation and leaves the comments uncommented. She only wants to depict, rather than impose; the reader should form his or her own opinion. However, her own perception of this development becomes apparent already in the subtitle of the book: *Freedom, Happiness and Terror*.

Kollektorgang [Service tunnel]

David Blum opts for a different way of describing the past in his novel *Kollektorgang* with younger readers in mind. The novel is set in the post-reunification period and depicts the lives of children and young people in suburbia, including the emergence of fascist youth gangs who rally around a "leader" (*Anführer*) in an attempt to create an "order" (*Ordnung*). The narrator is 14-year-old Mario who was murdered, a victim of right-wing violence. Looking back on the last months of his life from the grave he reflects on the thirteen years he lived. He remembers his friends who with him sought shelter and excitement in the underground system between the new building blocks where the supply lines converge (the service tunnel). This ductwork is both a bit of an adventure for Mario and his teenage friends – "It was dreary. It was scary. It was great" – but also a setting for violent confrontations.[23]

Mario and his friends are united by their exclusion, where neither school aptitude nor a foreign passport is a positive thing. As for Mario, he is being bullied for being the only one of the teenagers in his neighborhood to attend high school. Mario's world is characterized by brutality, marginalization and the desolate existence between prefabricated buildings. Mario remembers an unfair fight between Ricki and "Jugo" Rajko and how he died defending his friend. The fight is not described as a personal vendetta, however: Instead, a story of guilt unfolds on a more general level, where one explanation for the violence is the absence of prospects and the loss after the *Wende*, the political transition. Everything is far away, even further away than Mario's own funeral, which he followed with interest. What remains is the resignation "It's impossible to believe in a second chance when you haven't even had a first one."[24]

Mario and his friends are looking for refuge in an underground system, but there is no safe place in a place where not even the adults can offer support. From his position on the gravestone, Mario recalls how everyday life changed and with it the people who live in the neighborhood he considers his. He lists those who have committed suicide or died prematurely due to the new circumstances. Mario's father is one of many who have lost their jobs when the factory workshop where he used to be employed must abruptly adapt to Western standards. Mario notes how his father's hands once "bent steel and welded gates", but now he has no job and uses "those hands mostly to hold on to the bar tables in front of the Spring pub". The strength of the hands becomes a symbol of an inner strength that bends until it breaks, but is also an expression of a bygone ideal where labor was valued differently due to the lack of technical finesse. A male ideal emerges where actions count more than words. When Mario's father tries to find words for his feelings, he fails, even though he shares his experience with others in the pub. Mario overhears him talking to other people in the pub, but does not understand where he is coming from. However, he does not ask either, used as he is to a closed-door culture.

MARIO HAS A SLIGHTLY better relationship with his mother, who in turn does her best to look after him. She cooks and urges him to stay at home; she is portrayed positively as a carer. This ascribes to her the role that many mothers have in children's books, as she becomes someone who wants to protect her child's wellbeing. In Lemke's book, this kind of relationship between children and their mothers does not exist; instead, the children in the tower blocks have many mothers, as they are cared for by a collective. Lemke speaks of "apron women". However, even Mario's mother is unable to reach out to him. Nor can she get through to her husband. Instead, she escapes into romantic TV programs and magazines. At the same time, she is coping somewhat better, as she is both studying and working at a kindergarten center. However, the conversation between the three is missing and there is therefore no opportunity to share their experiences. The result is a rather loveless home, where everyone tries to cope alone. Symptomatically, not until after his death does Mario realize how much his parents love him.


David Blum.

The only person Mario can talk to is Hoffman in the grave beside his. It is also Hoffman who addresses the changes brought about by reunification. A dialogue develops between him and Mario, in which the boy is finally able to voice his concerns. It turns out that Hoffman is not only able to find words for his own feelings, but is also happy to listen to what Mario has to say. This ability opens up the possibility of a meeting between generations. Their discussions reveal that Hoffman used to be a respected engineer in a secure position in the city administration. After losing his job and his belief in the system he was part of, he suffered a heart attack and died. After reunification, Hoffman (like Mario's father and many others) had to look for a new job and Mario realizes the injustice of sudden unemployment, as well as the waste of experience. For Hoffman, reunification was not something desirable. He claims that as soon as he heard the news, he feared that the transition would be difficult. Prompted by this concern, he then asks Mario where he was at that particular point in time. Unlike Mario, Hoffmann looks back on his past with melancholy. However, this is a past set in the GDR.

Hoffman knows a lot, but his knowledge is of no value in a society in which he does not have a defined identity. Mario indignantly asks: "How could anyone have thought of letting this knowledge go to waste!" He compares Hoffman's fate to his

father's and finds a similarity in that they have been faithful to a social system that no longer exists and turned out to have no future prospects. The difference between Mario's father and Mr. Hoffman is not only that the former has a family while the latter is alone, but also their position within the system. Together, the two men become the symbol of those who were caught between two clashing systems. The fact that Mario himself is dead reinforces this grim scenario, of a past that is not given enough space and thus risks being suffused with painful silence.

Blum's black humor in the novel is palpable. However, the story, written in an almost post-modernist manner, gains credibility because the author himself lives in the east and to some extent echoes the experiences of hopelessness and disorientation that he writes about. Behind the descriptions of how Hoffman and Mario's conversation unfolds between tombstones are personally experienced memories. Yet Blum's message is serious as he speaks up for all young people on the outskirts of big cities who believe themselves to have no future. If the novel is interpreted in this way, the problems of the eastern part of Germany serve as an illustrative case for something more benign.

"TOGETHER, LEMKE AND BLUM [...] PRESENT COUNTER-IMAGES TO A SIMPLISTIC VIEW OF LIFE IN THE GDR AND REUNIFICATION."

Conclusion

In this essay, two examples of fictional accounts of what it was like to be a child in the GDR, published since 2021, have been used as a comparative reference. Lemke and Blum oscillate between a nightmarish and a nostalgic tone in their novels, a style that also express the dreams and hopes once related to reunification [the "*Wende*"]. Lemke experienced the collapse of the GDR when she was 19 years old. She remembers her childhood in GDR in part with a wistful look. She demonstrates that despite rules and top-down control, it was possible to live a sometimes happy everyday life. Reunification brought new uncertainty to this otherwise fairly routine everyday life. The workplace where many parents had worked was closed down and society changed. The tower blocks that had been promoted as modern became a sign of social decay. This discrimination is also reflected in the name used to describe the buildings that were once the pride of the city. Until 1989, model housing was spoken of with admiration, but in the following years they became places without prospects and were called *Plattenhaussiedlung* (prefabricated housing estates).

David Blum, by contrast, was 6 years old in 1989. He also describes the period after the fall of communism, but by taking up motifs that are fairly characteristic of those years, he paints a different East German identity based on the difficulties many faced in what has otherwise come to be described as a success story. Blum does not attempt an affective idealization of the past in a closed society, although this aspect is also represented in his novel by the figure of Hoffmann, who tells of everyday glimpses of joy in the GDR. The comparison shows that a reference to a third generation of East Germans is too wide-meshed, as Lemke recalls a childhood in the GDR and Blum focuses on the time just after reunification.

IN THEIR WRITING, both Lemke and Blum demonstrate the importance of commemoration, but they do so in literary form. A literary text is part of a literary system. It relates to other texts that have preceded it both in terms of its graphic design and imagery, and also in terms of its style. Publishers try to respond to readers' expectations, and the two authors are thus forced to respond to the majority narrative of reunification, which has gained wide acceptance. By setting their stories in an urban environment, they also relate to an East German narrative tradition as mentioned above. While Benno Pludra's protagonist in the aforementioned *Insel der Schwäne* probably commits suicide, the protagonist in Blum's story is already dead when the story begins. In both novels, memory is portrayed as a process of transformation that is bound to its rhetorical interpretive community in the historical context.

Together, Lemke and Blum, as well as other writers who have addressed similar themes, present counter-images to a simplistic view of life in the GDR and reunification. The importance of such counterviews is demonstrated by the current media debate on the elections in the eastern parts of Germany. In the media, the idea of an East German identity is often spoken of too lightly.[25] If such an assumption can be applied, it would not be a preference for the former GDR state, but rather a vaguely sub-national "we" feeling associated with the experience of a still divided Germany where one's own experiences and memories are not ascribed the same value in public discourse.[26] By encouraging personal remembrance as a kind of open and collective resistance to hasty conclusions, even though they are invented, stories might teach us something important about ourselves and about others. A democracy must be open for a discussion about who gets to tell stories, in what contexts and whose interpretation of everyday lives is valid – this is also a rhetorical device.

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2 Hendrik Bolz, *Nullerjahre* [Noughties], (Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2020): “Alles war am Rutschen, die Erwachsenen waren damit beschäftigt, sich im neuen System zurechtzufinden”.

3 Jana Hensel in *Zonenkinder* [After The Wall: Confessions from an East German Childhood and the Life that Came Next] (Rowohlt Taschenbuch), 2004), 159. “Die Wende traf uns wie ins Mark. Wir waren gerade zwölf, dreizehn, vierzehn oder fünfzehn Jahre alt. Sie fuhr uns in die Knochen und machte, dass sich alles um uns drehte. Wir waren zu jung, um zu verstehen, was vor sich ging, und zu alt, um wegzusehen, und wurden unserer Kindheitswelt entrissen, bevor wir wussten, dass es so etwas überhaupt gab”.

4 Aleida Assman cited in “Archiv: Erinnerungskultur und Verdrängung”. Deutschlandfunk [Memory culture and repression. German radio]. “Erinnerungen sind immer perspektivisch, sie sind partikular an bestimmte Einzelheiten geprägt, sie sind parteiisch. Das sehen wir schon daran, dass sich in einer Familie das älteste Kind ganz anders erinnert als das jüngste Kind”.

5 Steffen Mau, *Lütten Klein. Leben in der ostdeutschen Transformationsgesellschaft* [Lütten Klein. Life in the East-German *Transformative* Society] (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag 2020), 26f: “Die DDR war stolz auf ihre Neubaugebiete, so stolz, dass man Postkarten von ihnen herstellte … Die Neubaugebiete – damals sprach niemand von der ‘Platte’ – waren Ausweis sozialistischer Leistungskraft sowie des wissenschaftlich-technischen Fortschritts und Ort der Verwirklichung einer neuartigen Lebensweise. Sie […] standen für das, was die DDR sein wollte”.

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13 Magdalena Kamińska, *Platte ist nicht gleich Platte. Kooperation und Konkurrenz zwischen der DDR und Polen im Wohnungsbauwesen der 1970er Jahre* [Not all slabs are the same. Cooperation and competition between the GDR and Poland in housing construction in the 1970s] (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2022).

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17 Lemke, *Kinder von Hoy*, 7.

18 Grit Lemke, Gundermann Revier [Gundermann Precinct] (2019), https://gundermannrevier.de/

19 Donald A. *Ritchie in Doing Oral History* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Paul Thompson. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

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21 Lemke, *Kinder von Hoy*, 135 [Auf einmal wird etwas zur Währung, was bis jetzt nichts anderes war als Frühling, Sommer, Herbst und Winter, wie Ausziehn Waschen Bette: Orbeet. Sie war etwas, was unweigerlich eintrat – ob man wollte oder nicht. Nun lernen wir, dass die Welt sich teilt in solche, die Arbeit nehmen, und andere, die sie geben.]

22 Lemke, *Kinder von Hoy*, 174. [Während die Vietnamesen Richtung *Polenmauer* um ihr Leben laufen, beschäftigen wir uns im *Laden* mit der Figur des Hasen bei Beuys. Das “Wesen der Bewegung, das Welten verbindet”. Als die Gejagten das Wohnheim erreicht haben, fliegen die ersten Steine.]

23 Blum, *Kollektorgang*, 37. [Es war trist. Es war unheimlich. Es war großartig]

24 Blum, *Kollektorgang*, 66. [Es ist unmöglich, an eine zweite Chance zu glauben, wenn man nicht einmal eine erste hatte.]

25 Källström 2024.

26 Steffen Mau et. al., *Ost- und Westdeutsche für immer? Zu Wahrnehmungen von Unterschieden und Konflikten zwischen Ost- und Westdeutschen* [East and West Germans Forever? On Perceptions of Differences and Conflicts Between Eastern and Western Germans] KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie (2024), 2024, 1–23.