



A Tale Of Two Cities

Description

For those who do not dwell on the cold and barbarous actions of the Stasi, what is now often forgotten is that the GDR also represented an effort to create a completely new and egalitarian society. Gender equality and equal pay for men and women were part of the GDR from the very beginning. The 1949 constitution was direct and very clear: "Men and women are equal." A law introduced in 1950 ensured that women retained their rights after marriage and introduced financial support for mothers who devoted their time to looking after their children. This applied not only to married women but also to single mothers.

It would be decades before equivalent legislation was enacted in the west. Even today, the pay gap between men and women remains significantly higher in the western part of unified Germany than in the eastern states. The pay gap between workers and managers was also significantly less in East Germany, and most housing areas included a mix of blue and white-collar workers. There is no doubt that some people were able to use personal connections to improve their quality of life, but few were able to amass personal wealth or possessions as happened in the west. All workers in the GDR were guaranteed work by the government, and all had access to free healthcare, housing at subsidized and regulated rents, and a number of other free or reduced-cost social services. In the workplace, the team system encouraged all workers to think not just in terms of their own advancement but of the good of the enterprise as a whole. Workers at all levels were encouraged to take part in meetings, and teams regularly socialised together to celebrate achievements.

The vast majority of the population lived in rented accommodations in apartment blocks. In contrast to the west, the social mix in these apartments covered all levels of society. A professor might live next door to a bus driver, and a senior civil servant might have a cleaner as a neighbour. In each block, a Hausgemeinschaften (residents' association) was responsible for keeping communal areas clean and tidy, but often also organised social events such as trips to the theatre for all tenants. None of these were compulsory, but all were popular and helped to promote a sense of community. The lack of consumer goods meant that the competitive need to own the most impressive home or car that was coming to characterise capitalist societies was almost entirely absent in the GDR. Society was generally more cohesive, and serious crime and anti-social behaviour were virtually

unknown.

It was possible to enter any part of any city in the GDR at any time of day or night in complete safety, even for women. For children, too, the situation in the east was completely different. Women entering a shop would often leave their child in a pram outside, something that would have been unthinkable in most western countries. It was not uncommon to see rows of prams left outside large stores, and if a child became distressed, passers-by would often stop to interact with the child in an effort to calm it. Despite this, the abduction of children was virtually unknown throughout the history of the GDR. East Germany also had what was arguably one of the best childcare systems in the world. State-regulated and subsidised nurseries, schools, and colleges provided care and education by well-qualified professionals.

By the mid-1970s, legislation covering women and children in the GDR was in advance of that in most other countries in the world. Abortion was legal and free contraception available to all women over 16. Maternity leave (during which 90% of salary was paid) lasted for 26 weeks, and on the birth of a second child, a full, paid year off work was introduced. A payment of 1,000 marks (equivalent to more than a month's salary for most people) was given to new parents, and an interest-free loan of up to 5,000 marks was available to all couples under the age of 26. All parents had the right to claim up to four weeks of paid leave each year to look after a sick child. As a result of this legislation, women were encouraged to take a much greater role in the society of the GDR. One-third of all women in the GDR worked in technical and engineering professions.

By 1969, 34% of judges in the GDR were women, while in West Germany at the same time, the level was less than 6%. In more than 10% of towns and cities in the GDR, the post of mayor was held by a woman. In the FRG, there were just 12 female mayors out of almost 15,000 towns and cities. None of these things mean that the society developed in the GDR was desirable, but it was nevertheless an attempt to create an egalitarian society based on equality and mutual cooperation. For many people living in East Germany, this was a source of great pride. Of course, this must be balanced against the ruthless and brutal repression carried out by the Stasi; those who spoke out against the government rapidly found themselves excluded from this society and barred from any but the most menial jobs. The GDR was a nation of contradiction, balancing genuine and advanced benefits for people against totalitarian government control.

When Germany was finally reunited many people in the east, particularly women, suddenly found themselves with fewer rights and less access to essential social and support services.

History, Hourly. East Germany: A History from Beginning to End (History of Eastern Europe) (pp. 33-35). (Function). Kindle Edition.

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1. Politics & Society

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