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## GERMAN REUNIFICATION: OPPORTUNITIES LOST

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The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the 'reunification' of Germany in 1989/90 mark the beginning of one of the most exciting and promising periods of modern German history. However, these events also mark the beginning of the so-called economic and political 'Blitzkrieg' undertaken by West Germany to bring about reunification and east Germany's client status.<sup>1</sup>

It is the experience of east German women in particular that highlights the unique opportunity that presented itself to all Germans in 1990 to undertake a truly reunifying process of social, economic and political reform. However, east German women's experience of reunification has not been shaped by the motivating principles of assimilation, integration or consultation. Instead, their experience, mirroring that of the eastern states as a whole, has been predicated upon the asymmetrical power relations that existed between the two Germany's. As the real 'losers' of the reunification process, women in the new German states have surrendered what legal and economic rights they had won during the 45 years of the 'socialist experiment', in the process of enhancing their civil rights. Their post-reunification experience continues to raise serious

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<sup>1</sup> To distinguish between the two Germanys prior to their official unification in October 1990, West Germany (with a capital 'w') is generally referred to as the FRG, and East Germany (with a capital 'e') as the GDR. However, following their reunification, this thesis follows the trend in some literature which distinguishes between the old or west German states, and the new or east German states. It is also interesting to note that the Federal Republic of Germany has remained the official title for the united Germany.

questions about the manner in which the reunification process was orchestrated by the West German states, and how reunification might otherwise have unfolded.

### The West German Business Blitzkrieg

The (European) summer of 1990 was a period of tremendous optimism, set against the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the break-up of the Soviet Union. Politicians in both German states spoke of "mutual understanding" between "compatriots and friends who refuse to be estranged any longer", and the creation of an "ecologically-oriented social market economy". Their words inspired the expectation that Germany's reunification process would allow the 'old' and 'new' German states to come together as equals to form a new and truly 'reunified' nation.

There is strong evidence to suggest that German reunification was not purely the outcome of the populist uprisings across eastern Europe in 1989. Rather, the political void they created in East Germany provided the Bonn Government with the opportunity to take the crucial step towards its long-standing goal of reunification. A mandate in the West German *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law) legitimated Bonn's swift and strategic intervention<sup>2</sup>, ultimately allowing it to set the pace and direction of what became a 'West German business Blitzkrieg' (Grass 1990:22). However the client status that has been bestowed on east Germany in the process is now threatening to undermine the possibility for the future convergence of east and west Germany's economies and their standards of living (Brakman and Garretsen 1993:163).

A cautious but co-operative relationship between the two Germany's was initiated in the late 1960s. What was referred to as *Ostpolitik* was an

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<sup>2</sup> The mandate stated that when the opportunity 'to achieve in free self-determination the unity and freedom of Germany', it should be embraced. According to Chancellor Kohl, "this is what our neighbours expect from us", and it will "serve the peace of the world in a united Europe" (Documents of German Unity 1990:3).

attempt on the part of the Bonn Government to re-establish diplomatic relations with Eastern European governments, and to establish more secure east-west relations. Under the chancellorship of Willy Brandt (1969-1974) and in pursuit of Ostpolitik, West Germany sought to transform inter-German relations from 'well-ordered co-existence to co-operation' (Watson 1992:243). This was reflected in the signing of treaties with the Soviet Union and Poland, and the establishment of an inter-German Treaty in 1972. The political antagonism that had hitherto characterised their relations became less acute as the benefits of inter-German co-operation were acknowledged over the 1980s, together with the gradual easing of Cold War tensions.

The successful challenge to the legitimacy of the East German State in November 1989 provided the opportunity for the Bonn Government to step into the political void. The escalation of Bonn's involvement was carefully timed, beginning on a humanitarian level with the acceptance of east German political refugees and the provision of 100DM 'welcome money' to each of them. However, as the ease of access into the Federal Republic of West Germany (FRG) improved and the numbers of emigrants from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) multiplied, the provision of food and shelter became increasingly problematic. Impatience for democratic change and material equality with its western neighbour also escalated in the GDR as the number of visitors and emigrants to West Germany grew.

The release of Chancellor Kohl's 'Ten Point Plan for German Reunification' on November 28th, 1989 was a well-timed political response, designed to pave the way for German reunification. However, the Plan received a mixed reception, particularly in the GDR, as the scale of intervention it outlined clearly indicated Bonn's disregard for the agendas of the popular East German citizens' movements. All but one of the larger citizens' movements had no agenda for German reunification. Of the political movements that formed in September and October 1989 in opposition to the Socialist Unity Party of (East) Germany (SED)<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>3</sup> The movements referred here include: *Neues Forum* (New Forum), *Sozialdemokratische Partei* (the Social Democratic Party), and *Demokratischer Aufbruch* (Democratic Departure).

only *Demokratie Jetzt* (Democracy Now) advocated a neighbourly relationship between the two states, with the option of eventual reunification. In the short-term, *Demokratie Jetzt* actually shared the goals of the other prominent citizens' movements - namely, to maintain the GDR's sovereignty, and to democratically reform socialism so that it might constitute an alternative to the perceived consumerism, economic manipulation and imperialism of capitalism.

The Bonn Government carefully pitched its campaign for German reunification. Focusing on the historical inevitability of the reunification of the two Germany's, Chancellor Kohl evoked a sense of nostalgia for the German 'Fatherland' with slogans like *Deutschland einig Vaterland* (German Fatherland unite). Adding to the momentum of West Germany's reunification process was the lure of the Deutschmark and the West German economy.

Chancellor Kohl recognised the Deutschmark as "our [West Germany's] strongest economic asset" (Marsh 1992:211). He was aware of the East German population's eagerness to experience the consumer benefits of the capitalist system, and was in a position to introduce economic and monetary unification of the two countries prior to the staging of the first all-German elections in December 1990. Kohl's decision to fast-track German economic and monetary union effectively made German reunification inevitable and led many Germans to regard the Chancellor as the father of German reunification. It was a public image and an historical milestone that set his party's election campaign apart from those of its opponents in the FRG, and proved too alluring for the comparatively modest election strategies of the East German political parties and movements.

The Economic, Monetary and Social Union (EMSU Treaty) of the two Germany's took place on 1 July, 1990, beginning the process of unification. Rather than triggering a second German economic miracle, monetary union was instrumental in cementing East Germany's client status. It not only introduced the Deutschmark as the sole currency of the GDR, but transferred the authority to regulate the quantity, circulation and stability of money in that country to the Bundesbank in Frankfurt. The effective exchange rate offered to East German citizens was 1.8 Ostmarks to 1DM, which eradicated nearly half of the GDR's

personal savings overnight, and significantly curbed endogenous entrepreneurial ambition.<sup>4</sup> The inflation of the value of the Ostmark by a factor of three (Priewe and Hickel 1992:58) left the East German domestic market vulnerable to cheaper imported goods, and domestic producers exposed to the rigours of international competition.

The terms of the EMSU Treaty clearly served the interests of West German capital as a result of their devastating effects on East German enterprises. It is unlikely that even the most robust economy would have been able to absorb 'shock treatment' on such a scale. The great disparity in economic strength and political legitimacy between the GDR and the FRG has made it virtually inevitable that the legal, political and economic course of reunification has been determined by Bonn's agenda. The one-sided nature of the 'assimilatory' process of reunification has given credence to accusations that the term is in fact a euphemism for colonisation.

### **The 'Political Colonisation' of East Germany**

From the outset, West Germany has enjoyed the dominant position in reunification negotiations. This dominance stems from the tendency of Western liberal thought to reduce differences to either the confirmation of its own superiority, or misguided deviations from it (Flax 1992:194). This has resulted in the labelling of East Germany as a 'loser' of the Cold War. The Western media's focus on the 'defeat' of socialism in East Germany has implied that West Germany is by default, the 'winner' - superior not only in terms of economic power, but also ideologically on

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<sup>4</sup> The EMSU Treaty allowed East German citizens to exchange the first 4,000DM of their savings in Ostmarks at the rate of 1:1, and the remainder at the rate of 2:1, effectively setting the exchange rate for East German citizens at 1.8:1. Small business and state-owned industries were particularly disadvantaged by the conditions of exchange, which stipulated that their liquid assets would be converted at the rate of 2:1, but their debts at 1:1, effectively reducing the East German operating capital by 50 percent without an equivalent reduction in enterprises' debts.

account of the liberal democratic foundations of its politics, society and culture.

This self-perceived superiority of West Germany in December 1989 afforded legitimacy to the Bonn Government's determination of the pace and direction of the reunification process. West German political parties played a highly influential role in the organisation of the first East German Parliamentary elections, as well as the development of East German party politics (Sontheimer 1993:182). The East German faction of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Democratic Rural Party (Demokratische Bauernpartei) merged with the West German CDU; the East German Social Democratic Party (SPD) merged with the West German SPD; and the East German Liberal Democrats and affiliated National Democrats merged with the West German Free Democrats Party.

These links with West German political parties proved an invaluable source of financial support, political guidance and training, but above all, political popularity. The West German political parties appeared to represent the means to guarantee the GDR's rapid economic growth, and perhaps a second German economic miracle. The comparatively modest platforms of the East German citizens' movements, their advocacy of some socialist policies, and their strong opposition towards reunification were less alluring to East German voters. They lacked the candidates of public notoriety, the grand visions of future prosperity and consumerism, and experience in political campaigning. As Konrad Weiß of *Demokratie Jetzt* noted, "[i]f the citizens' movements had been aware of their power in 1989 and taken control of the government, things might have turned out differently. .... We believed totally and utterly in democracy, thinking we could win by purely democratic means. We never imagined that so much outside influence could have come into play, and under-estimated the power of the opposition." (Schneider 1990:127).

The devastating defeat of the two coalition parties formed from the citizens' movements<sup>5</sup> and the clear victory of the CDU and SPD coalition in the March 1990 GDR Parliamentary election<sup>6</sup> confirmed German reunification as a political, economic and social certainty. The coalitions formed among the citizens' movements and the Greens in the GDR were relegated to the political fringe, and were unable to maintain the public support and political momentum they had once enjoyed. Even after uniting to form one party with the West German Greens (Bündnis 90/Grünen) the citizens' movements were again out-performed in the first all German elections in December 1990. Although the east German voters did indicate some support for the Bündnis 90/Grünen and the Party of German Socialists (successor to the former GDR State), their preference and that of the West German population was clearly for the neo-conservatism and economic reform package of the CDU.

The ideological chasm that developed between the two Germany's has proven difficult to bridge. Focusing on the common language, culture and history of the German people up to 1945, politicians involved in the reunification process have overlooked the fact that '[o]n both sides of the wall the German peoples had come to accept division at a deep psychological level' (Watson 1992:302). The stigmatisation of socialist theory, and the general denunciation of the former GDR's tertiary education, social welfare and judicial systems, have proved an effective means of demobilising and discrediting what little intellectual and academic criticism of German reunification has occurred, on both an individual and collective basis.

What began as the 'political colonisation' of the former GDR (Schneider 1990:128) has not only ruled out the option of maintaining East German sovereignty, but also facilitated the financial and intellectual dependence of the eastern states on their western neighbour. The first freely elected

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<sup>5</sup> In February 1990, a coalition was formed between Neues Forum (New Forum), Demokratie Jetzt (Democracy Now) and the Peace and Human Rights Initiative, which became known as Bündnis 90 (Alliance 90). The UFV (Independent Women's Association) formed a coalition with the East German Greens (die Grünen).

<sup>6</sup> The coalition between the UFV and the Greens won only two percent of the vote, or eight seats.

East German Government sought reunification with the FRG under Article 23 of the West German Constitution, despite an alternative route having been possible under Article 126, which would have allowed for the formation of a new State with a new Constitution. Instead, the wholesale importation of West German economic and political structures and values afforded West German capital a significant advantage in the new German states, and has acted as a symbolic articulation of the West German political 'victory'.

### **The Unity That Divides: East and West German Women**

The impact of the 'adjustments' required in the transition from a socialist to a capitalist economy have been most accentuated in the case of east German women. Women's increasing under-employment and 'redomestication' have led those few feminist writers and economists examining the costs of reunification for east German society to suggest a ghettoisation of two-thirds of east German society may result. Such a prediction is indicative of the varying impact of the reunification process on different sectors of the German population.

In many respects, conformity to the west German level of female emancipation represents a regressive step for women in the eastern states. Even when compared to other advanced industrial nations, the West German economy has been described as having 'a relatively low level of female employment, a highly gender-segregated labour force, and poor integration of women into the male professions'. Its taxation system is supportive of the "housewife marriage", its abortion laws highly conservative, and its family policy 'encourages mothers to leave the work force, while its labour market and childcare policies discourage them from returning to it' (Rosenberg 1991:134).

As east German women regress from a 'concealed patriarchal system' to one that is 'openly patriarchal', women have been the primary casualties of the restructuring process (Braun: 1993:381). Where they once represented 49 percent of the work force in 1989, only about 30 percent of east German women were employed in 1993 (Braun 1993:381). Having experienced only a society in which employment was a moral

obligation and equated with emancipation, most east German women perceive their unemployment and redomestication as a stigmatised and subordinating role. Only 1 percent of east German women see it as a meaningful or rewarding alternative to devote themselves to their home and/or the care of their family, and over 65 percent of east German women want a job, even if it is not financially necessary that they work (Winkler 1993:3).

Many of the industries formerly classed as traditional sectors of women's employment are among the most affected by the economic upheaval. The decline in competitiveness of the textile, clothing and footwear industry, light industry, agriculture and food production, have in some cities resulted in women's unemployment exceeding 70 percent (Braun 1993:382). Other industries such as banking, finance, postal services, sales, and insurance, have experienced competition from male labour, particularly west German male labour, following their professionalisation after monetary and economic union in 1990. The sectors of employment for women are being redefined according to the experience of west German women, and generally to the detriment of the (already narrow) diversity of women's employment in the eastern states.

The deconstruction of the East German welfare state and the chronic rates of unemployment in the eastern states have placed extraordinary hurdles in front of east German women's employment. The 'boom' in voluntary sterilisation and abortion among women aged 18-33,<sup>7</sup> the decline in divorce,<sup>8</sup> and the 50 percent reduction in births, are indicative of the uncertain and difficult economic circumstances faced by east German women, as well as the perception among many that children or the ability to bear them is a barrier to employment (Funk 1993:198).

The 'mental acrobatics' and personal hardship that the 'transformation' to capitalism has entailed for most east German women has led many to

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<sup>7</sup> In the GDR between 200 and 400 women were sterilised annually. However, in 1991 a women's hospital in the eastern state of Magdeburg performed 1,200 sterilisation operations, compared to 8 in 1989; Leipzig University Hospital has seen a trebling of its figures (Der Spiegel 1992:99).

<sup>8</sup> During the 1980s, there were on average 50,000 divorces annually, however this figure fell to 846 in 1991.

reflect on their quality of life before reunification (Nickel 1993:146). Interviews conducted among east German women reveal their perception that in spite of heavy restrictions on their civil rights, the socialist welfare state provided them the means to exercise their right to gender equality. To appreciate the true impact of the reunification process on women in the eastern states and the extent to which their lives have been transformed as a result of it, it is important to evaluate the extent of women's emancipation in those states prior to 1989/90.

### **The Experience of Women in the 'Socialist Experiment'**

In the context of a country where politics was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union and controlled by a Marxist-Leninist State, it has been easy to discredit the entire 45 year history of the 'socialist experiment' that occurred in East Germany, without investigating the extent to which social progress was made. While the extent of that progress did not deliver female emancipation as the Honecker Government claimed as early as the 1970s, 47 percent of German men and women surveyed after reunification believed the GDR's system had been superior to that of the FRG in regard to gender equality (Nürnberger 1991:2).

The position of women in the GDR and the extent of their integration into the economy highlights both where progress was made, and where the capitalist and socialist systems of the FRG and GDR shared a patriarchal commonality.

A *Frauenpolitik* or policy concentrated specifically on the needs of women was necessary in the view of the GDR's ideological commitment to the achievement of social equality. Officially the three principal goals that *Frauenpolitik* sought to guarantee remained constant during the existence of the GDR - namely, the equality of men and women before the law, the integration of women into the labour force, and the protection for mothers and children by the State. Although the eradication of gender discrimination was believed to harness women's political support behind socialism, the imperative of economic factors and political success were arguably upper-most in the eyes of the SED. The difficulty of economic recovery that existed in the initial post-war

period as a result of the GDR's status as a defeated aggressor, coupled with the imperative of economic success during the Cold War, necessitated women's integration into the labour force.

Women's integration into the labour force was achieved not only through the moral duty that socialism attached to employment, but also through the wage structure. For a couple to live comfortably, it was necessary for both partners to work, which also encouraged the heterosexual marriage and nuclear family as the norm. However, full-time working women in the GDR received on average 78 percent of the average male income, perpetuating the role of the male as the principal breadwinner (Geißler 1991:15). Some explanation for this inequality can be traced to women's shorter working week, their predominance in part-time employment, and their difficulty in working overtime or shift work as a result of family commitments. However, the gender wage gap was also caused by women's employment in the more poorly-paid sectors of the work force, and the scarcity in positions beyond middle management for women, particularly in administration, the judiciary, science, the media and manufacture.

Some of the most progressive provisions made by the State to ensure women's participation in the economy could be maximised were enshrined in the Family Law Act of 1965. For example:

- women could take one year of paid maternity leave with the guarantee of re-employment at an equivalent level. If childcare was not available (ie for single mothers, who constituted 30 percent of all parents in the GDR), the 'baby year' could be extended to a maximum of three years. For the second and subsequent children, paid maternity leave was available for 18 months;
- the State provided creches, kindergartens and after-school childcare for children aged between one and ten;
- in the case of child sickness, either the father or mother could take up to 13 weeks of sick leave;
- all mothers, married women and women aged over 40 were provided one paid day at home a month to do the housework;

- student mothers received a child endowment supplement, special consideration during examination periods, and had access to free creches and kindergartens within tertiary education institutions;
- from the early 1970s first trimester abortions were available on demand; and
- women had access to free oral contraceptives.

The high rates of women's labour force participation and educational qualification in the GDR that were boosted by this legislation were often accepted in the West as evidence of East German women's relatively more emancipated status. However, the gender language of these 'reforms' reflected the State's 'gendered mode of thinking that not only defined women as mothers, but also absolved men from any formal responsibilities as fathers' (Ferree 1993:94). The fact that the State invariably promoted the goal of achieving motherhood and family (as opposed to fatherhood and family) did impact on the socialisation process. Men in the GDR did not experience the same pressure from the State to conform to the image of a model male citizen who took an active part in domestic work and the care of the children, as well as being a worker. Men were given only one role by the State - that of the socialist worker.

Although the average woman in the GDR might have been more economically independent, better qualified and more politically involved than her western counterparts, most official statistics masked the true nature of women's experience under socialism. By the end of the 1960s the existence of a polarised economic and career structure was evident in the GDR. Women constituted approximately 92 percent of the positions in social welfare, 83 percent in the health sector, 77 percent in education, 72 percent in sales and retail, and 69 percent in the postal and telecommunications sector (Nickel 1991:76). By contrast, they were under-represented in manufacture, the building and construction industry, agriculture, transportation and small business. Segregation within the apprenticeship system suggested that the State participated in a quota system designed to systematically phase women out of the 'male' professions and men out of 'female' professions (Nickel 1991:77).

Even in the traditionally male-dominated sectors, women tended to be concentrated in the traditionally female occupations. Looking specifically at the manufacturing sector where women occupied roughly 40 percent of positions, women dominated those sectors that received on average the lowest wages: the textile industry, light industry and food processing. In the GDR these industries also tended to be technically deficient, with unfavourable work conditions that included considerable amounts of manual labour, little worker interaction and poor hygiene conditions. However, this was not only the case in the manufacturing industry, but typical of a great deal of women's employment, due to their concentration in 60 percent of all un-skilled and semi-skilled positions in the GDR (Nickel 1991:12).

Despite claims by the State that women occupied one third of all decision-making positions in the GDR, formal qualifications of equal merit did not guarantee women equal opportunity in a non-discriminatory labour market. The intensification of male dominance in the political hierarchy is evident as one moves from the level of mayor (where only four women in the history of the GDR held office), to the Politburo where women were completely excluded (Klenner 1991:26). The consequent exclusion of women from participation in all fundamental political decision-making is unlikely to have fostered a State truly able to empathise with their position.

### **The 'Experiment' in Hindsight**

The existence of a sexual division of labour in both the public and private spheres, and gender-related wage inequalities in the GDR, cannot be disputed and should be acknowledged in an analysis of women's experience in the GDR. However, these are criticisms that can be made of all advanced industrial countries, the FRG being no exception. Using the example of the gender wage gap, some areas of inequality were more acute in the FRG than in the GDR: women working full-time in the FRG in 1988 received on average 64 percent of the male wage, whereas women working in the GDR received 78 percent (Geißler 1991:15).

It is equally important to acknowledge the degree to which the SED's *Frauenpolitik* had provided women with the economic security and the opportunity of (limited) economic independence. A study conducted by Meyer and Schulze (1992:46) documents the assurance that women growing up in the GDR felt in regard to the compatibility of career and family that was provided by GDR legislation. The women interviewed related their conviction that, even as small children, they would find secure employment after leaving school and remain in employment until retirement. A tertiary education, a career, marriage and the establishment of a home and family would be able to be undertaken at an early age, and in conjunction with each other rather than staggered.

Aspects of the GDR's legal measures to empower women remain high on the agenda of feminists in most advanced Western nations. The struggle for equal pay for work of equal value, the broad-based provision of childcare facilities, the equal representation of women in all levels of employment, women's right to control their own fertility and so on, feature on the agendas of feminists internationally. However, the contradictory experience of women in the GDR should be important to all feminists as it highlights the limitations of an approach to gender emancipation that equates economic independence with gender equality.

Although the 'emancipation from above' that was delivered by the GDR State sought to guarantee women's economic independence, it was a top-down approach that defined women's 'difference' as mothers as a deficiency. The legal and policy framework provided by the State did not challenge the notion that the reproduction of the private sphere was primarily women's responsibility. Rather, the State's failure to address the unequal relations of production in the private sphere was instrumental in preserving the unequal sexual division of labour in the public sphere. The GDR's *Frauenpolitik* was used as a means to persuade East German women that the difficulties they faced in managing their responsibilities in the home and the work place were anomalous. In individualising women's problems and focusing on women's high levels of economic participation, the State was able to deny the existence of women's subordination.

## Conclusion

German reunification has been conducted in a manner that has sought to ensure its irreversibility. Although significant inroads have been made into establishing east Germany's intellectual and financial dependence on west Germany, the 'mental ruptures' (Nickel 1993:146) which are evident in the eastern states, and the financial expense born by west Germans threatens to unsettle the nation's political status quo. The effect of the reunification process on women in the eastern states and concern that they are emerging as the new German underclass is one consequence that should be of particular concern to the Bonn Government. It will be interesting to watch the development of an east German feminist consciousness as east German women attempt to 'insert themselves in a world that plays by different rules [and] different standards', and already comes complete with its own power hierarchies and feminist discourse (Funk 1993:319).

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