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Whenever I watch an awards show, I get nervous during the speeches. My nerves are not because I fear the speaker will misspeak or trip, but because I dread the music playing that signals that they need to wrap up. Luckily, a thesis comes with no such music, especially since I am fortunate enough to have such a large web of supporters.

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Abbreviations

GDR-German Democratic Republic

SED-Socialist Unity Party

FRG-Federal Republic of Germany

USSR-Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

FDJ-Free German Youth

DFD-Democratic Women’s League of Germany

UFV- Independent Women’s Association

SOFI-Socialist Women’s Imitative

CDU- Christian Unity Party

DSU-German Social Union

SPD- Social Democratic Party of Germany

EU-European Union

Stasi-Staatsciherheit (State Security/Secret Police)

**Introduction**

“I was not an immigrant, but at the same time, I was,” stated Heike Herzsprung as we sipped our water in the warm summer breeze outside the Paula Panke Women’s Center in Berlin. When I asked her about the GDR, she turned to me and said “Brenna, you cannot imagine.” She described the GDR as an old, decaying economy with the conservatism of a Catholic Church. “Thank God the Wende came,” Herzsprung concluded. However, Herzsprung soon discovered that adjusting to a reunified Germany was not as easy as she had hoped. She started studying city planning and found it hard to acclimate to the classroom setting, where professors expected students to speak their minds and openly discuss books, something that did not occur in the GDR. She also found that when she studied books and films, they were always about West Germany, never about East Germany. For Herzsprung, it was as though everyone was ignoring the culture in which she grew up. Herzsprung began to grapple with her identity.[[1]](#footnote-1) She found herself in a new country, without even having moved. This was a sentiment many women expressed. They were living in their same houses, on the same streets, speaking the same language, yet they were immigrants in a new land. Women found themselves in a new political and economic system, in which they had to learn to navigate. Not only were they in a new country, but their old country had ceased to exist.

Although there is extensive reading about women in the GDR or during the Wende, there is a gap in literature about East German women after Reunification, especially in English. Until this point, the discussion surrounding East German women after Reunification has focused primarily on East German women as either winners or losers of Reunification. Starting in the Wende, the period of transition before Reunification, feminists used the rhetoric that East German women would be the losers of Reunification to try to gain supporters.[[2]](#footnote-2) This phrasing continued in reunified Germany. Six years after Reunification, the Institute for Social Data Analysis (ISDA) conducted a study about East German Women and Reunification. In this study, they included a section titled “Losers” and went so far as to quantify that 33 percent of women were losers.[[3]](#footnote-3) Newspaper articles, and even scholars, briefly reference that East German women were losers after Reunification.[[4]](#footnote-4) Myra Marx Ferree and Brigitte Young wrote a journal article in which they briefly state that women were described as losers of Reunification, but they do not engage with this terminology further.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Both Ferree and sociologist Irene Dölling do explore the meaning of categorizing women, but Ferree focuses on women during the Reunification process. In “The Time of Chaos Was the Best,” she describes that defining women as losers during the Wende brands women as passive figures and does not address the role they played.[[6]](#footnote-6) This argument serves as a predicate to looking at women after the Wende and Reunification because it touches on similar themes but during a different time period. Dölling begins an article about the identity of East German women stating that the slogan of women as losers appeared shortly after Reunification. However, she approaches the question from a sociological perspective and focuses on what effect this phrasing has on women’s studies.[[7]](#footnote-7) These sources touch on the idea that labeling East German women as losers could be problematic, but they dance around the problem by not refuting this classification as a whole.

It is clear that the description of women as winners or losers has entered the public discourse to the point that women I interviewed used these labels without me prompting them to do so. During this interviews, I was always careful to not use the phrase “winner” or “loser” unless women referenced them. When Petra Schmidt talked about generational differences, she stated that women of her generation “were the losers of Reunification.”[[8]](#footnote-8) After my interview with Ursula Bredereck, she and her husband clearly stated, “We were the winners of Reunification.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

However, this dichotomy does not address the complexity of Reunification or provide women and scholars with an accurate depiction of what happened. As Kinzel described, “East Germans describe themselves as being losers of Reunification…but when one scrutinizes this, it is certainly not so.”[[10]](#footnote-10) In her interview, Renate Hürtgen described how defining East Germans as winners or losers of Reunification is complicated and depends on how one defines a “loser.” Hürtgen stated the complication of whether to define a loser by objective standards or simply by whether someone felt they were a loser. To make her point, Hürtgen elaborated on the situation of a woman who as a professor in the GDR and lost her position after Reunification but received a lower position at the university or elsewhere. Hürtgen believed this woman would feel like a loser of Reunification because she lost her original position and prestige, but that by most people’s standards, especially those of the unemployed, she was not a loser. Hürtgen reiterated the complexity by saying that although many may argue all working class people were losers due to high unemployment, many of those workers’ jobs were inhumane, brutal, and destructive to the environment. [[11]](#footnote-11)

Hürtgen’s examples demonstrate how using the labels “winners” or “losers” disregards many aspects of women’s experiences. Categorizing women as winners or losers does not advance the discussion of German Reunification and its impact on women. Instead, it creates a black and white picture of German Reunification, which is far from the truth. The lack of historical research about East German women after Reunification makes it so that these labels are easy to accept or simply insert into an article. Nothing about Reunification was simple; therefore the analysis of Reunification must address its complexities. East German women experienced both gains and losses after Reunification and their experiences with Reunification depended on factors such as age, political party, family, and personal history. In order to understand the larger picture, one must analyze women’s lives before, during, and after Reunification. Only by looking at women’s lives and experiences during these three phases can one gain a holistic view of the impact of German Reunification. Ultimately, women experienced both gains and losses after Reunification, depending on factors such as age, political status, and job experience.

To address the complexity of Reunification, this thesis focuses on the three phases of German Reunification, giving the reader a full picture of women’s lives before, during, and after Reunification. Watching the transition unfold makes it clear that we cannot simply categorize women as winners or losers. It is important to study East German women twenty-five years after Reunification because the level of analysis of Reunification’s effects in regards to women was high directly after Reunification soon tapered off.

Interviews make up a majority of the source material in this thesis. I conducted these interviews in Germany during the summer of 2014; all interviews were in German, my second language. I began my interviews by contacting the Paula Panke Women’s Center in Berlin, where I was studying abroad, because they had a photo exhibit about women from East Germany and how they adapted to reunified Germany. I emailed the center describing my project and asked if any women would be willing to speak with me. The center distributed my email, and women began contacting me, wanting to share their stories. Once I began these interviews, women recommended friends to me, and I created a network of women. I also interviewed women at different archives, such as the Terre de Femme archive in Berlin and the Lila Archiv in Meiningen. In total, I conducted 20 interviews, 18 of which appear in this thesis.

Before I started my interviews, I made a basic sketch of questions, but I decided to approach the interviews more thematically. I began all of my interviews by asking women an open-ended question about their background. I then molded my interview questions to their individual lives. For example, if a woman had children, I asked her about being a mother, which I obviously could not ask a woman who was not a mother. Some questions I did ask every woman, including their connection to the Party in the GDR and whether they believed Reunification affected men and women differently. Additionally, I asked women about all phases of their lives, including before, during, and after Reunification. At the end of my interviews, I always asked women if there was any additional information they wanted to share.

Once I was back in the United States, I transcribed these interviews and translated them into English. At times, the German does not translate accurately, for which I use footnotes to express the general meaning. I translated all other sources in German as well, unless otherwise stated in the footnote. I worked with my advisor, Professor Konrad Jarausch, on any translations with which I had difficulty. I gave every woman the option of remaining anonymous. Those whose names I changed are in the footnotes.

It is not only important to look at the women I interviewed, but also the women I did not interview. I went through a very specific route for my interviews, which provided a specific type of woman. Although women always tried to refer me to women who had different experiences than they did, many women knew each other from a certain social circle. Those women who suffered immensely after Reunification and found themselves homeless or out of my reach in other ways are not represented. In addition, I did not interview women who were highly successful, such as Chancellor Angela Merkel. These women contacted me, making it clear that they wanted to share their stories. They had a specific reason for doing it, ranging from simply helping an American student to correcting what they believed to be misconceptions about East Germany. Many women were politically active in some way, meaning the political narrative dominates this thesis and the voice of those who simply went along with the GDR government and were happy about consumer culture during the Wende are not as strong. However, I was able to interview a wide range of ages, from 49 to 70. By speaking to 20 women, I also gathered a variety of opinions and political affiliations before and after Reunification. I interviewed women who had been members of the SED, women who opposed the SED, and women who simply were not involved in politics. For further information about the women I interviewed, see the attached appendix.

Before beginning my interviews, I thought they would simply be an interesting addition to this thesis. However, after my first couple of interviews, it became clear to me that they were pivotal to my thesis. This point hit home when one woman thanked me for speaking with her because, as she put it, too many people write about East Germans without ever having spoken with them. To write about women’s history without speaking with women would be incomplete and unfair to their points of view. Regardless of how historically accurate their depictions were, we can gain a lot of understanding by analyzing how and why they spoke about their experiences. As Helene Böhm and I ended our discussion and stood to leave, she turned to me and said, “Do not let them forget us.”[[12]](#footnote-12) This thesis serves not only as an academic paper, but also as a way to immortalize East German women’s experiences with German Reunification.

Chapter One: Socialist Utopia and Violent Dictatorship: The Paradox of the German Democratic Republic

As Editha Künzel sipped tea in her eclectically decorated apartment, she fondly reminisced about her life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR).[[13]](#footnote-13) For Künzel, the GDR was a socialist utopia that supported and cared for her. At an early age, Künzel knew she wanted to be a part of the social work that took place in East Germany. She described the exact day she realized she wanted to become a social worker, a job she never achieved in the GDR or after German Reunification. During the “most beautiful time of her childhood,” Künzel stayed home with her mother and a social worker would regularly come by to check on the children. The social worker was in charge of confirming that the children had what they needed and that they were receiving free lunch and milk at school. Künzel also fondly reflected on how the social worker would sit with her mother and chat. Künzel marveled at what a wonderful job it would be to visit people’s homes and drink coffee. A nurse and member of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), Künzel became increasingly politically active, as she got older. She often helped plan programs for the high-rise in which she lived. When she described the various gymnastics and sports programs she organized with the high rise, she emphasized the low, or free, rent the SED provided for such programs. Künzel also emphasized the safety in the GDR and the low crime rate. Künzel concluded the interview by saying that she was glad she was able to “know a country in which [she] had no existential fear.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Helene Böhm, a builder, did not expect that her boss would violently assault her over her short, punk haircut. Böhm’s haircut did not match her boss’s idea of femininity, so he proceeded to beat her on the workroom floor. When Böhm went to the doctor, he told Böhm that this would not have happened to her if she were not an asocial. This was not the only time Böhm experienced hardship in the GDR. Due to her predilection for punk music and her opposition to the GDR and SED, the government labeled Böhm a rebel. As punishment, the GDR fired her mother, something Böhm’s mother did not tell her about until after Reunification. Persecution of Böhm’s family reached back to the Nazi period, when the Nazis murdered Böhm’s grandfather in Mauthausen, a concentration camp; Böhm’s family was communist and Jewish. Böhm recalled how even in the small village she grew up in, people would call her a “communist pig” and that ex-Nazis lived in the area. She stated that there were a few times where she had to make a quick get-away. Although Böhm was raised in a communist household, she grew to resent the GDR and SED because they did not allow her to take the Abitur and continue studying. “This made me sour,” said Böhm. [[15]](#footnote-15) Böhm did not see herself as living in a socialist utopia; she lived in a violent dictatorship that restricted her freedom.

Künzel and Böhm’s stories illustrate the range of experiences women had in the GDR. The GDR created benefits for those it supported but it was not hesitant to strike down those it labeled as enemies of the state. Although these two women represent the extremes on the political spectrum, the range of their experiences is not abnormal. Women’s experiences in the GDR hinged on multiple factors, such as age, class status, and political affiliation. It is important to analyze how these factors affected women’s positions in the GDR in order to understand how and why women’s lives differed drastically.

Most women fell in the middle range of the spectrum because of the paradoxical nature of the GDR. On an everyday level, the GDR provided comprehensive benefits for women. The government supported women in all spheres, including education, work, and family. This meant that women were able to maneuver within the workplace and support themselves and their family. However, the GDR was a dictatorship that possessed characteristics of a patriarchal government, which prevented it from reaching the true egalitarian society it claimed to be. Any woman who was outside of what the GDR considered a respectable citizen risked facing hardship, and even women who toed the party line were unhappy with certain aspects of the GDR, such as travel restrictions and the Berlin Wall. Although women were never truly equal in the GDR, it is also important to analyze their perceptions of equality in the GDR to understand their views on lives before Reunification.

**Women and Socialism**

The GDR grew out of a socialist tradition, which affected its policies and the socialization of women. Women in East Germany often had a different understanding of equality and social justice than women in the West due to the socialist rhetoric they encountered. For most women, equality was a class-based problem, not a gender-based problem. This provides one explanation for why women in East Germany did not always recognize when gender discrimination took place. To understand the context in which women found themselves and the socialization that would have an impact on their world views, it is important to look at how the relationship between socialism and women developed.

From its inception, the GDR presented itself as a state of equality. In 1949, the year the GDR was founded, it wrote its constitution to include equality for women and men. Article 7 stated that men and women were equal and that all laws and provisions that opposed women’s equality were nullified from then on.[[16]](#footnote-16) In 1974, the GDR amended its constitution to include Article 20, which extended Article 7’s initial claims. The 1974 version included the statements that men and women “have the same legal status in all areas of society, state, and personal life” and that the “advancement of women, especially in occupational qualification, is a social and state task.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The second sentence illustrates that the GDR saw itself as having an increasingly important role in ensuring equality for women. The Free Republic of Germany (FRG) included equality between men and women in its constitution, but it did not go as far as that of the GDR in acknowledging its role in promoting gender equality.[[18]](#footnote-18) For comparison, women in the United States had been fighting for the addition of an Equal Rights Amendment to the United States’ Constitution to no avail.[[19]](#footnote-19) By writing equality into its constitution, the GDR provided a document it could use as proof for the equality it purported to guarantee.

Many saw the GDR’s constitution as revolutionary, but the GDR politicians and writers of the time often described it as a continuation of the equality that socialism guaranteed. One can trace the relationship between socialism and women to August Bebel’s work *Women under Socialism,* in which Bebel discussed the impact that different types of economic systems had on women.[[20]](#footnote-20)Bebel’s ideas carried over into the GDR; Heike Herzsprung described her feminist father quoting Bebel to her to reinforce the idea that women’s independence begins in the wallet.[[21]](#footnote-21) In 1919, Vladimir Ilʹich Lenin also discussed the role of communism and socialism in bringing about equal rights for women. According to Lenin, women would only gain full emancipation when they were emancipated from the household. He saw the socialist economy as the only way to begin this transition.[[22]](#footnote-22) In 1936, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) included equal rights for women in their constitution. The USSR granted women equal rights in multiple realms of society. It also stated that it would assure that women could exercise these rights by granting “women equally with men the right to work, payment for work, rest, social insurance, and education, and by State protection of the interests of mother and child, pregnancy leave with pay, and the provision of a wide network of maternity homes, nurseries and kindergartens.”[[23]](#footnote-23) When forming its state with the help of the Soviet Union, the GDR situated itself in this historical context and saw its nation as continuing and contributing to the expansion of equality under socialism.

As Robert Moeller argues, after WWII the GDR used women to create its identity and situate itself in a post-war world.[[24]](#footnote-24) One major factor in the post-war era was Germany’s Nazi past. The GDR wanted to distance itself from the Nazis and prove that their policies were not related to those of the Nazis. When granting women and families social benefits, the GDR made sure to state that

When §1 of the law thus proclaims that state subsidies must be granted to improve the material condition of large families and to promote greater numbers of children, herein lies the fundamental difference. There is no comparison between the population policy of Hitler and that of the German Democratic Republic. The Fascist population policy served the war and the downfall, our population policy serves peace and prosperity.[[25]](#footnote-25)

After asserting that these benefits were not similar to those of the fascists, the GDR juxtaposed them with the West, stating that without socialism women would not have broken free of their chains.[[26]](#footnote-26) Due to the Cold War tensions of the time, it was important for the GDR to position itself against what it considered the fascists in the West. By doing so, the GDR sought to solidify and promote its position as a socialist and egalitarian government.

The intellectual ties between women and socialism influenced the way in which the GDR discussed women’s rights and the way women themselves viewed their rights. Women in East Germany often did not believe their issues were gender specific; instead, they believed that their problems were part of a larger societal problem that socialism could solve. As Renate Hürtgen stated, she could not be a feminist because she is a Marxist and “feminism puts gender as the absolute problem.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The relationship between socialism and women’s equality also propagated the idea that capitalism could never free women. Understanding the socialist environment in which women grew up is crucial to analyzing their opinions and thoughts about the GDR.

**Advances in the GDR**

After WWII, the GDR urged the inclusion of women in the workforce because of its immediate need to establish infrastructure in the new state. In his 1950 speech about new family laws, Otto Grotewohl, the Prime Minister of the GDR at the time, emphasized two reasons to include women in the workforce. The first was the population dynamics in the GDR. Grotewohl emphasized that the percentage of women who were between the ages of 14 and 65, the age of employment, was 50 percent higher than that of men.[[28]](#footnote-28) The GDR needed to figure out how to harness the working power of women. Women were also important to the work force because the GDR was a new state trying to build an economically feasible society. In his speech, Grotewohl described the Five Year plan for the GDR and that the demand for workers required an increase of women in the work force. To accomplish this goal, Grotewohl called for an increase of 39 percent in employment for women. According to Grotewohl, “the building of a new society without active and thorough involvement of women is today not possible.”[[29]](#footnote-29) The necessity for women in the work force directly after WWII paved the way for women to leave the home and become a significant part of the labor force.

In the GDR, work was an explicit right and duty in the constitution, which put women on a more equal footing with men in the job market and led to increased participation of women in the workplace.[[30]](#footnote-30) By the late 1980s, 91% of women worked.[[31]](#footnote-31) The GDR also did not limit the types of jobs women could have.[[32]](#footnote-32) To integrate women into the workforce successfully, the GDR passed legislation to help women. In 1953, the GDR passed a law mandating that companies with a high percentage of women provide daycare for the children, and in 1973 the GDR expanded on these rights.[[33]](#footnote-33) Most women were very aware of the work environment the GDR provided to them. Christine Kahlau remembered the requirement that work places provide rooms where pregnant women or women who felt unwell could rest. [[34]](#footnote-34) These supports increased how comfortable women felt in the workplace, a place to which they had previously had limited access.

Women in the work place automatically changed the gender role dynamic. Joining the labor force meant that women earned their own money and felt more independent from men. Due to the fact that working was a right, women were not afraid of losing their jobs or that they would not be able to support themselves.[[35]](#footnote-35) The independence women experienced created a sense of self-esteem and self-worth, which fostered a sense of appreciation of the labor system among women.[[36]](#footnote-36)

To strengthen its future, the GDR created a network of social policies aimed at encouraging women to have children and providing mothers with assistance. In addition to promoting women in the workforce, the GDR actively provided for women and their family. From the beginning, the GDR viewed children as necessary for the growth of the nation. Grotewohl stated that the familial structure of mothers having two children was a system of a population dying off. He explained, “Only a population whose number of children grows and has more than 2 children per family is in the position to use all its power to develop its full potential and to secure the happy future to which we all aspire.”[[37]](#footnote-37) When couples got married in the GDR, the government gave them a loan and the amount the couple had to repay depended on the number of children they had. Kahlau and her husband experienced this practice firsthand. When they got married, the GDR gave them the standard 5,000 Mark loan. When the couple had one child, they did not have to repay 1,000 Marks. When they had their second child, they did not have to repay another 2,500 and when they had their third and final child, the complete amount of the loan was forgiven. Kahlau described how her friends would jokingly ask her if she and her husband had three children to simply avoid repaying the loan.[[38]](#footnote-38) Of course, this was not the reason Kahlau had children, but it was an added benefit. This support improved women’s lives on a daily basis and helped women balance work and families. Although the GDR had specific motivations for implementing these policies, some women did not see the GDR as trying to create families. Dagmar Rösler did not believe that the GDR was pushing for more children; she believed that families in the GDR had more children “because it was simply easier and more organized.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

Women also experienced access to education and positions in the government. After the equivalent of high school in the United States, many women went on to study at technical schools. These schools were usually aimed at teaching women a specific job, which helped them make way in the job market. Although it was not as common, women could also enroll at universities in less technical fields, such as foreign language.[[40]](#footnote-40) Women did not feel that they were treated differently in school and boys and girls were not separated.[[41]](#footnote-41) The GDR also included women in politics. The Women’s Democratic Federation of Germany (DFD) was the women’s organization that was part of the SED. The GDR described the main purpose of the DFD as “to get women to actively participate in the fight for peace and socialism, for the happiness of women and their families.” Through the DFD, women had access to the party. Women also served in the People’s Parliament as mayors and as judges.[[42]](#footnote-42) However, one must take women’s position in politics with a grain of salt because the GDR only allowed women to participate in politics if their participation fell within what the SED saw as beneficial.

**Constraints in the GDR**

Despite the benefits the GDR provided women, it was undeniably a dictatorship. Women faced persecution and a “lack of overall freedoms.”[[43]](#footnote-43) In the 1980s, Lola Königin founded the Sonntagklub (Sunday Club), an organization for gays and lesbians. Königin described how she wanted to print pamphlets, but how “one could not simply hand out a newspaper” in the GDR. When she wanted to print more than fifty copies of a pamphlet, the government had to approve them. However, Königin found an illegal way around this rule; she collaborated with a printer who was willing to take the risk. When Königin printed 100 copies of her program, the printer simply wrote “Printing Error” in the record book. When describing this act, Königin chuckled and mildly stated that if someone had found out about her and the printer, it could have been quite bad. In fact, one of Königin’s friends was caught smuggling in western feminist literature for Königin. Due to Königin’s involvement in the oppositional scene, the Stasi monitored her and she was not able to find work due to a mark on her record. However, it was important for Königin to resist the government because she recognized the inequalities that existed in the GDR.

Königin’s story is just one of many that exhibit the general lack of freedom in the GDR. As a dictatorship, the GDR did not allow East Germans to vote democratically, but the restrictions on freedoms extended beyond that. Kahlau discussed how her friends went to jail for reading the wrong type of literature; Hürtgen had an encounter with the Stasi because she and her husband had been involved with dissident literature.[[44]](#footnote-44) Even something as simple as a telephone was known to be a tool that enabled the Stasi to spy on people. Kahlau said that when the GDR provided someone with a telephone, you knew the Stasi was observing them.[[45]](#footnote-45) Women were unaware of who was spying on them and this sense of paranoia created a “latent atmosphere of danger.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Not every lack of freedom was as serious. East Germans could not travel outside of the Eastern Bloc, which was Wuschek’s largest wish.[[47]](#footnote-47) This lack of freedom contributed to East Germans’ hardships in the GDR and their overall discontent.

In addition to overall restrictions, women experienced specific difficulties in the GDR. Women enjoyed more advances in East Germany than the Western world; however, these benefits came with an ideological background and often did not create the equality they promised. Kahlau, the woman with three children who did not have to repay her 5,000 Mark loan, did not blindly accept help from the GDR. She was aware of what ideology it was trying to promote. When the GDR offered to pay for all of her rent, she refused because she wanted to pay rent herself, without the Party’s help. Kahlau also criticized Women’s Day on March 8 in the GDR. She described how it made her want to vomit because it gave women special recognition but that it was also fraudulent. She felt the GDR used the day as a way to show what it did for women but then problems, such as women making less money than men, would continue for the rest of the year.[[48]](#footnote-48) Kahlau’s thought process shows the tension in the GDR.

Women did have a large presence in the work force, but they also experienced discrimination while on the job. As Böhm’s story of her boss beating her illustrates, having a job did not always keep women safe. Her boss did not experience any retribution because of his actions.[[49]](#footnote-49) Despite women being in the workplace, gendered division of work still existed. Hürtgen referenced this division of labor in the GDR. According to her, the government provided a list to schools that emphasized the difference of what men and women should learn.[[50]](#footnote-50) The GDR did not directly limit the types of jobs women could have, but as Hildegard Maria Nickel explains, notions about what work was suitable for boys and girls still existed. Nickel cites the fact that in 1987, 60 percent of girls leaving school chose the same sixteen jobs that girls in 1968 chose. [[51]](#footnote-51) This example shows how gender roles in the workplace remained steady over time.

Jobs with a large percentage of women were also predominantly lower paying jobs, and women’s wages were often lower than men’s were. Between 1972 and 1989, the difference in monthly earnings between men and women hovered around 64 percent.[[52]](#footnote-52) Many were aware of this phenomenon and cited it as a recognizable difference between men and women.[[53]](#footnote-53) Women in the workforce exemplify the discrepancy in the GDR between laws on paper and laws in practice. Although the government guaranteed the right to work, this did not make women equal with men or prevent sexism in the workplace.

The incorporation of women in the workforce and benefits for women with children successfully deconstructed the idea of a woman as purely a dependent housewife, but it did not reverse societal expectations as revolutionarily as the GDR claimed. Women ended up carrying the double burden of taking care of the home while also being committed socialist workers. A good woman was considered to be a wife and mother who worked and was able to conquer this double burden.[[54]](#footnote-54) German sociologist Irene Dölling argues that the double burden prevented women from escaping the ideology of the GDR and the Party because they depended on state benefits to be able to carry the double burden.[[55]](#footnote-55) Many policies in the GDR also reinforced traditional gender roles, such as the one day a month where employers allowed working women to stay home and clean while still earning their pay.[[56]](#footnote-56) The GDR did provide women with opportunities to break out of the typical gender role, but it did not emphasize the need for men to reexamine their roles as well. Instead, it put women in roles that created increased pressure and reinforced gendered ideas.

Women’s representation in the government and academic sphere showed progress, but numbers alone do not mean equality. Due to harsh laws limiting freedom of speech, women were not able to form movements and fight for change like women in the West. Hürtgen believed that the main problem with the laws in the GDR was that the government simply handed women laws, which she did not see as emancipation. She believed that women did not have the ability to fight for what they wanted.[[57]](#footnote-57) As Ferree describes, what the GDR provided were not due to women’s requests, but were “patriarchally bestowed gifts.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Although the DFD was an organization aimed at women, it was still part of the SED and toed the party line. Other women’s movements did not exist in the GDR and the government often ostracized women who spoke out against the regime. The extent to which women had agency in education was also limited. Women did have access to courses and professional training, but they were often limited in their choices. Wuschek accredited her ability to study languages and the humanities at Humboldt University to luck.[[59]](#footnote-59) Hürtgen recalled not continuing her education after tenth grade at first because her mother told her she was a girl and thus did not need further education.[[60]](#footnote-60) This shows that representation was not enough to completely reverse gender roles or eliminate sexism in society.

Regardless of what policies existed, women experienced a gap between legislation and their daily lives. Hürtgen experienced the gap between law and public action when her husband beat her. She went to the police and reported what had happened. The police treated Hürtgen like an asocial, which was a negative term used to describe people outside of the socialist community, and said, “Cad’s fighting when ended is soon mended” in response. [[61]](#footnote-61) Even Hürtgen’s mother replied by saying “See? Life is harder than you thought.” In the GDR there were no resources for women to get help and Hürtgen stayed with her husband for another year before taking her daughter and leaving him. Hürtgen’s experience was not unique. According to her, many women in the GDR experienced abuse and had no help. [[62]](#footnote-62) Abuse was in no way limited to the GDR, but it proves that life was not as perfect as the GDR liked to portray.

**Factors Determining Experience**

Women had different experiences in the GDR based on the intersections of their identities. Many factors, such as age, class, and family, influenced what women experienced in the GDR and how they viewed the GDR. The impact of these factors also followed women through Reunification.

The era in which women grew up played a large role in women’s experiences. Those who grew up directly in the post-war era had very different experiences from women who grew up in the 60s and 70s. The post-war era created an atmosphere of urgency and conformity. These women were taught about the need to rebuild the GDR and the fight against the fascists in the West. In comparison, women who grew up in the 60s and 70s were more willing to push back against the GDR and had a less clouded picture of the state. These women were more rebellious and felt as if their lives were over because of what they saw as the stagnation of East Germany.[[63]](#footnote-63) As Herzsprung described, “For the young person who is curious, the GDR was old and closed.”[[64]](#footnote-64)

A woman’s relationship to the party could heavily shape her life in the GDR. Women who either were against the SED or connected to someone in the opposition encountered obstacles that made their lives difficult. Although the constitution guaranteed the right to work, this was only a reality for those following the party line. The GDR would only extend such benefits to those who did not politically oppose the party. Women who were members of the SED had less trouble finding work and received benefits. However, women who opposed the party did not experience the same freedoms or rights. Ursula Bredereck was not allowed to be a teacher because according to the government she “could not raise kids if I was not in the Party.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Böhm was not personally fired, but her mother, a school teacher, lost her job due to Böhm’s behavior.[[66]](#footnote-66) Even women who were not personally opposed to the party experienced difficulty. Elke Böttcher could not find a job because her sister had fled the GDR. She described searching for jobs and having possible employers scan her ID and conduct a background check. They would then reject her simply because of her sister’s actions against the state.[[67]](#footnote-67)

The political and socio-economical background of women’s families also influenced women’s experiences and viewpoints. Karla Popp had an anti-fascist background, which she cited as part of the reason she identified as anti-fascist. Popp’s father fought in Spain as part of the International Brigade, a group of international volunteers who fought against General Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Popp spoke proudly of her father and his commitment to anti-fascism. In the GDR, Popp actively participated in the Free German Youth (FDJ), the youth program of the SED, and eventually became secretary of the FDJ.[[68]](#footnote-68) Communist backgrounds also had a range of impact. Even with communism, how the SED reacted depended on the type of communist a person was. Although her father was a communist, Herzsprung recalled that he had many problems with the government because of his identity as a Stalinist.[[69]](#footnote-69) Women’s access to education also depended on their family. Blasche recalled that she could not go to Gymnasium or take her Abitur because her father worked in a private industry.[[70]](#footnote-70) All of these stories show that a woman’s experience was often out her control. From her birth, there was the potential that the GDR would provide her with benefits or take away her access to things like education.

Many women in the GDR had neither positive nor negative experiences overall but were simply Mitläuferin, people who simply went along with the SED and were not in the opposition or avid followers of the party. According to Tanja Morgenstern, these Mitläuferin simply came to terms with the party and accommodated to it.[[71]](#footnote-71) Ultimately, there was no one typical experience of women in the GDR. Whether the GDR was a socialist utopia or violent dictatorship for women depended on many factors. Overall, the GDR did afford women with many benefits on a daily basis. However, these benefits did not overturn the patriarchal system or provide the complete equality that the GDR promised.

**Decades of Change**

Women’s rights and views of the GDR changed over the four decades that the GDR existed. It is important to examine the changes that took place in the 1970s and 1980s to understand women’s positions at the time of the Wende, the period of transition before Reunification. Similar to the immediate post-war period, the GDR needed to define itself in the 1970s and 1980s. However, it was in the process of redefining itself due to normalization with the West and détente in the Cold War.[[72]](#footnote-72) These two occurrences made it clear that things could not remain the same and pressured the GDR to position itself in a new way in the Cold War struggle between the East and West.

In the 1970s, the GDR began increasing the benefits it offered women. According to Kahlau, these social programs were in response to a declining youth population. She believed the GDR was supporting and creating social programs to put more children in the world.[[73]](#footnote-73) However, GDR policy had always been aimed at producing more children and in 1972 the GDR decreased the regulations on abortion and decreed it as necessary for women’s equality, which counteracts Kahlau’s description and helps clarify the GDR’ motives.[[74]](#footnote-74) In the 1970s, the GDR saw a need to position itself strongly against the West, and one way to do this was to increase the appearance of equality. One main impetus for the GDR guaranteeing abortion was the debate over abortion in the FRG. In the GDR, women believed that only the rich would be able to afford an abortion and some people went so far as to believe that the West was making abortion difficult in order to create a larger labor base for their capitalistic goals.[[75]](#footnote-75) This shows how East Germany successfully shifted part of the focus on abortion to the battle between socialism and capitalism. By allowing abortion, the GDR was able to use it as evidence for its continuing guarantee of equality, especially in comparison to the capitalist West.

In the 1970s, the GDR wanted to promote its image as a great nation, which can be seen in its pamphlet on the International Women’s Year of 1975. Not only did the GDR compare women’s rights in the GDR to those in the FRG, but it included an analysis of how things had steadily improved for East German women. For example, one chart chronicles the number of women in the public sector every year from 1964 to 1974, which showed an increase of 76,000 to 405,000. The GDR used women to prove that it was a progressive, not stagnant, nation.

The 1980s brought about what Hürtgen described as a parallel society. On one hand, the world and GDR was becoming more open; on the other, it was trying to crack down and had some heavier restrictions. Hürtgen recalled her daughter’s school instituting a policy that no bags or paraphernalia with a western symbol on it were allowed. She also believed that her daughter experienced more political indoctrination in school than she had. Hürtgen saw the parallels taking place as a historical phenomenon.[[76]](#footnote-76) As the GDR relaxed on one end, it had to make sure to keep control on the other end.

This parallel society came out of the GDR’s attempt to position itself in a world of détente. In his speech at the Second Dundee International Conference on the GDR in 1983, Günter Minnerup conjectured that “This decade will submit the GDR to the sternest test of its ability to survive since its foundation in 1949—a proposition which, at first glance, seems utterly ludicrous.” According to Minnerup, the challenges the GDR faced were due to the fact that the GDR was not a genuine, organic development. As Morgenstern stated “The GDR was a dictator of the proletariat. Dictatorships are not able to survive.”[[77]](#footnote-77) Minnerup also believed that the GDR gained strength from the Soviet Bloc, but that Erich Honecker, General Secretary of the SED, also needed to have a foothold in the FRG. He worried that these two tracks would exacerbate confusion and lead to factions in the GDR government.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Minnerup also cited the increase of political organizations and new literary freedoms as a threat to the GDR. Youth not demoralized by war began to pay attention to certain movements, such as the environmental and feminist movements.[[79]](#footnote-79) Historian Mary Fulbrook credits the SED government’s decision to allow churches to be autonomous organizations as the catalyst for the rise of dissent because organizations could use the churches as a place of meeting and protection.[[80]](#footnote-80) In 1987, Hürtgen became active in the church opposition though she was not religious, but according to her, the church was the only option.[[81]](#footnote-81) The new dissent was not only about the dictatorial government, but also about its international policies and environmental degradation. Blasche recalled the catastrophic events of Chernobyl, which took place in 1986, and having an intense fear that her children would never see snow. Blasche joined an ecological group to try to engage with environmental issues.[[82]](#footnote-82) These women show how women tried to become involved with political issues in the 80s. Due to the normalization with the West, which was an easing of tensions between East Germany and West Germany, there was an increase of exchanges between intellectuals in the GDR and FRG. If the GDR tried to clamp down on these freedoms again, there would be potential for people to become enraged.[[83]](#footnote-83) Therefore, the GDR struggled with accepting these new freedoms while also trying to keep control.

In addition to the normalization occurring with the West, Soviet policies of the time influenced policy in the GDR. Perestroika and Glasnot, which focused on creating openness and transparency in the USSR, were two policies that played a large role in the mid and late 1980s. In a 1987 speech, Gorbachev described the Party has having created a “theoretical and conceptual system which is in many ways new, and in establishing a theory and practice of the restructuring and acceleration on the basis of which we are building our domestic and foreign policies that take into account the new realities.”[[84]](#footnote-84) The GDR government had reservations about Perestroika and Glasnot. Until late in 1989, the GDR did not want to adopt Perestroika and Glasnot because they dismissed “them in terms of a cosmetic change, equivalent to putting up new wallpaper, which was not necessary in the GDR.”[[85]](#footnote-85) However, the GDR’s rejection of Perestroika put it in a hard position because as Kiefer wrote, “With modified socialism, the Russians are still Russia, the Hungarians are still Hungary, the Poles are still Poland. But without socialist ideology, the East Germans are what…West Germany?”[[86]](#footnote-86) Herzsprung described how the GDR government “did not care what the Russians were doing” and said it “would do its own, old thing.” She criticized the GDR’s rejection of perestroika, saying the GDR’s attitude was reflective of “an old, catholic, confined, church you cannot get out of.”[[87]](#footnote-87)

**Conclusion**

During its 40 years, the GDR proved itself to a paradoxical government. On one hand they advocated for equality and took measures they believed would help citizens; on the other hand, they persecuted anyone who dared step outside of the Party lines. For East German women, this enigmatic dictatorship strongly influenced their experiences in the GDR. The main factors in determining women’s status and lives in the GDR were their age, or era in which they grew up, political standing, and family background. The intersection of these factors helped determine whether women viewed the GDR as a positive, socialist government or if they recognized it as a restrictive, dictatorship.

Regardless of whether women were completely equal or not, it is important to look at how women viewed their rights in the GDR. Many women believed they were equal even though they recalled experiences in which they faced discrimination. This discrepancy in their recollections of the GDR prove its effectiveness in propagating equality and also can explain the range of emotions and opinions women had in relation to Reunification.

Chapter Two: “Women have no fatherland to lose, rather a country to win:” East German Women during the Wende

Doris Sieminewski set two glasses of wine on the living room table next to her homemade cake topped with fresh strawberries and whipped cream. As she cut into the cake, she reclined back on her plush sofa in her Berlin apartment and began recounting her experiences with the Wende, the period of transition between 1989 and 1990 in East Germany. As she spoke about the Wende, a smile appeared on her face and her speech changed. It was clear she was reliving a time of hope, in which she felt she could incite real change. Sieminewski had always cared about women’s rights. In the GDR, she was a member of the Democratic Women’s League (DFD). As a member of the DFD, she worked in the international sector, which meant she communicated with women in the West. She enjoyed this part of her job because she loved engaging with politically minded women and discussing the different viewpoints that women in the West had. During the Wende, Sieminewski was one of the youngest women in the DFD and earned the position of sitting at the Round Table, a political organization aimed at political change. Although the DFD was an organization of the SED, Sieminewski believed things in the socialist state needed to change. She hoped that the Wende would be a time of change where women could use their power to truly gain equality.[[88]](#footnote-88)

One moment that stuck out in Sieminewski’s memory was when she gave a speech about abortion rights on behalf of the DFD at Alexanderplatz, a large square in Berlin. It was night and the train above was illuminated, making it easy for Sieminewski to clearly see the people inside. What she saw did not please her. Women in the train were sitting there and clearly shopping in the West. In that moment, Sieminewski witnessed the divide between what women wanted during the Wende. She believed that women had suffered under the GDR for 40 years and finally had the opportunity to say what they wanted. She saw these women expressing what they wanted: shopping in the west. She felt that she was talking about important issues and that other women simply wanted to shop.[[89]](#footnote-89) This gap between what feminists wanted during the Wende and what the everyday woman wanted was not uncommon and contributed to how women viewed the unification process.

The Wende created a complicated and tumultuous time full of dichotomies for East German women. Women experienced both great fear and euphoria. Women were fearful because they were unsure of where their state was headed or even if their state would continue to exist; they were euphoric because a people’s revolution had caused the fall of a 40-year dictatorship. How fearful or euphoric women were depended largely upon their experiences in the GDR and what they hoped the Wende would bring.

The environment of fear and opportunity created a unique time for East German women, especially for feminists, who had not been able to openly petition for change in the GDR. However, this combination of fear and opportunity ultimately led to the gap between what feminists and other women wanted to gain from the Wende. Feminists saw the Wende as a chance to take control of their future country; everyday women were afraid of what would happen to them and their country and saw an opportunity to join the West. To understand East German women after the Wende and Reunification, one must consider what role women played in the Wende and where women put their priorities.

Men also found themselves in a changing political climate during the Wende, but the Wende was a gendered process due to the face that men had always had more agency in the political sphere. In addition, women in the East saw the West as threatening their advances in the work place and in gender roles. Overall, women had more to lose in the Wende because of their positions within society.

**Leading to the Fall**

The opening of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 was preceded by two main events that began to change the ways in which women in the GDR viewed the government. Mass emigrations and protests throughout the GDR began to chip away at the exterior of the dictatorship and expose some of the problems people had ignored or accepted over the last forty years. Women who had never questioned the government before began to take a closer look at the GDR and others saw this as a chance to improve the status of women.

When Hungarian soldiers cut a barbed wire on May 2, 1989, they made way for mass emigrations that would spark a change in the GDR. Over the next few months, the number of emigrants steadily increased until November 1989, when it reached its peak of 133,400 emigrants in that month alone.[[90]](#footnote-90) These emigrants made their way to Austria or West German embassies. In an article covering the arrival of refugees in Vienna, one young refugee described wanting to leave the GDR because “The GDR is stagnating; nothing is moving there. You always have to fit in, always say what they want to hear. They’re hopeless. All the countries around us are opening up; only the GDR is staying the course.”[[91]](#footnote-91)

This mass exodus spurred new thought and political action in the GDR. In response to the flight, East German activists and intellectuals created the New Forum in September 1989, which was aimed at creating a “democratic dialogue on the responsibilities of the state, the economy, and culture.” In their founding document, the New Forum cited the “widespread disillusionment to the point of withdrawal into the private sphere or mass emigration” as evidence that “communication between the state and society had broken down in [their] country.” They stated that this breakdown of communication was clearly the problem because although refugee movements from other countries are usually in reaction to poverty, hunger, and violence, none of those things existed in the GDR.[[92]](#footnote-92) This shows that although the GDR provided citizens with means for survival, it was still a dictatorship people wanted to flee.

Dagmar Bäumle, a data processor and member of the SED in the GDR, exemplified the New Forum’s claims of disillusionment. Bäumle described herself as always having had a critical eye on the GDR but not being directly in opposition. Therefore, it was a complete shock to her when mass emigrations began in 1989. Bäumle recounted watching the news in the GDR and hearing that all those leaving were simply against socialism and its ideals. As the numbers of emigrants climbed rapidly over the next couple of months, Bäumle began to question the rhetoric in the news. She believed that hundreds of thousands of people were not simply complaining and must have had not only political reasons, but also personal reasons for leaving.[[93]](#footnote-93) This shift in thought shaped the path to German Reunification because it created a feeling of disenfranchisement and shattered some women’s notions about what the GDR truly was.

The blooming fleeing and dissent in the GDR escalated and created an atmosphere of change and openness in which people began to protest. Although Article 27 and 28 of the East German Constitution guaranteed freedom of speech and peaceful assembly respectively, these rights were purely on paper.[[94]](#footnote-94) In practice, people in the GDR could not openly speak their minds without fear of retribution. Therefore, when protests broke out in 1989, citizens were unsure of how the government would react to them and what the consequences would be. Protests started on September 4 and rapidly escalated to larger and more numerous protests in October. Protestors began to take part in what became known as “Monday Demonstrations” in Leipzig and Dresden. At this time, protestors were not focusing on unifying the two Germanies; they wanted to reform the state from within. To express this message, they used the slogan “We are the People.”[[95]](#footnote-95)

The protestors adamantly believed in peaceful protest in the face of the government, but the government responded with violence; this act made many people begin to question the GDR dictatorship. Although the GDR had always used violence, this was the first time that many people were seeing it in public. On October 6, Factory Combat Groups advocated the use of force and weapons against protestors in the name of the socialist state.[[96]](#footnote-96) The police agreed with this evaluation and saw the protests as acts of rebellion, which they used to justify the violent measures they used to control the masses. As a citizen at the protest on October 7 in Dresden recounted, he went to the protest merely out of curiosity and ended up in Bautzen, one of the most notorious prisons of East Germany. He described how the police beat and abused him at the demonstration and while he was in prison.[[97]](#footnote-97) Women who were protesting also faced violence. One woman recounted being made to strip even though she had her period. When she saw police beating old women, she asked them to stop and they simply laughed.[[98]](#footnote-98) However, protestors did not let the violence of the police intimidate them. Despite the force of the police and their resemblance to an “armed camp” at the Leipzig demonstration on October 9, protestors remained calm and opposition leaders called for peaceful resistance.[[99]](#footnote-99) The use of force challenged some women’s beliefs about the state and its role. Claudia Kinzel, a kindergarten teacher in the GDR and member of the SED, was mystified at the demonstrations taking place. She described how she had never questioned the SED, but her view shifted when the SED began to use police and weapons to control demonstrators. Kinzel did not understand why the GDR was labeling these people as enemies of the state.[[100]](#footnote-100) This perspective shows how the new atmosphere made women begin to challenge their previously held beliefs.

The political energies in the air also inspired many feminists and activist women to come together and vocalize their opinions. On November 1, 1989, a group of women intellectuals wrote a letter to the SED. In this letter, the women wrote, “Reforms will only have success, if the interests of the female half of our society are perceived and considered.” In this letter, they also enumerated a list of short-term tasks the government needed to resolve, including a quota system and reorganization of the DFD.[[101]](#footnote-101) These tasks would become a common thread for feminists throughout the Wende. However, at this point, these women were not envisioning a reunified Germany, rather a restructuring of the GDR. From their position, there was no way for them to know that in only eight days everything would change.

**The Opening of the Wall**

On the night of November 9, 1989 Günter Schabowski unexpectedly announced that the GDR would be loosening travel restrictions and opening part of the Berlin Wall. This created chaos in Berlin with East Germans rushing to the border. At first, the GDR tried to maintain order and required IDs and the mandatory exchange of currency. As more people, both East and West Germans, rushed the border, this was no longer possible. Around 1:00 AM the guards completely opened the border.[[102]](#footnote-102) East German Women’s reaction to the opening of the Berlin Wall varied, depending on their situation in the GDR and what they believed would happen after the opening of the Wall. There was a mixture of euphoria for those who had felt oppression for so long and panic because women were unsure of what the consequences of the newly opened border would be.

The euphoria of November 9 stemmed from the new freedoms ushered in by the opening of the Wall. A trip to Italy or France: this was the thought that rushed through Wuschek’s mind when she heard that the GDR had opened the Berlin Wall. Wuschek had studied languages in the GDR and fostered a love for other countries. Therefore, travel was her “biggest wish” in the GDR. In the end, she decided to take her first trip out of the country to one not so far away: West Germany, specifically West Berlin. Wuschek met up with her friends and spent the night in Kreuzberg, a well-known part of West Germany. During her stay, she worried the Wall would go back up, but she recalled the time in West Germany as pleasant. She described how everyone was happy to see them and that the world smelled different.[[103]](#footnote-103) During its 28 years of existence, the Berlin Wall touched women in a variety of ways. Some proclaimed they did not have much of a relationship with the Wall and for them, it was simply where the world ended; others actively pointed the Wall out to their children and said that this was not a normal living condition.[[104]](#footnote-104)

People often focus on the opening of the Wall as a time of euphoria, but they do not consider the immense fear some women felt. Although most East Germans did not support the Wall and wanted it gone, the opening of the Wall caused many East German women to become unsure of what would follow. The main source of fear in regards to the opening was safety. Kinzel remembered worrying that war would break out, probably between West Germany and the USSR.[[105]](#footnote-105) Urusula Bredereck described her journey into West Germany and the fear she felt that the GDR would close the wall again. Her children were at sleepovers the night of the opening, so when she heard that the border was open, she hesitated to cross over into West Berlin in fear she would strand her children in the East. Ultimately, she did cross the border, but she recalled being afraid the whole time that she was deserting her children with no way to return. After buying chocolate for her son as a surprise, she said she must return to the East.[[106]](#footnote-106) Other women feared the opening simply because they knew it would usher in change in the East. Many women in the GDR held a secure position and were concerned about how things would change. Heidemarie Braun recalled finally receiving the job she wanted right before the Wende. Although she did not want the Wall to remain, she described how she did not celebrate the opening of the Wall with everyone because she knew it would create vast changes that would lead to unemployment.[[107]](#footnote-107)

Feminists in the GDR saw the opening of the Wall and the turmoil of emotions and events after it as a chance to garner support for their cause. The day after the Opening, the Lila Offensive, a women’s organization, wrote a document for *Für Dich*, a woman’s magazine in the GDR.[[108]](#footnote-108) The magazine did not publish its article “Women in the Offensive!”, but the document created a base for women’s movements and organizations during the Wende. The Lila Offensive described how women wanted to decide things for themselves and that at demonstrations women cried out that without women, things would not continue. They mentioned how people laughed at women’s attempts and did not take them seriously. Their ultimate goal was to take action and contribute to the socialist renewal occurring with a woman’s perspective.[[109]](#footnote-109) This perspective came out of a fear that new political changes would not include women adequately in the Reunification process. The Lila Offensive was not the only group to take action after November 9. In the coming months, women activists used the newly open environment to create movements that addressed the changing climate and state what these activists wanted to see happen.

**Women’s Organizations and Their Wants**

In November and December of 1989, the creation and involvement of women’s organizations in politics drastically increased. These organizations tried to give women activists a voice and garner greater support from the everyday woman, who was not involved in the political process. To try and persuade the average woman that her participation was important, these organizations focused on rhetoric about how the Wende threatened women more than men. It was true that women had more to lose because of the social standing and social benefits they enjoyed in the GDR. Although these organizations recognized that patriarchy did exist in the GDR, they believed that socialism was the best way to earn equality and that the capitalist West would force them into the home, back to the stove.[[110]](#footnote-110) To secure their future, activists envisioned introducing new egalitarian policies to the GDR and revising ones that still had patriarchal overtones. It is important to understand who these organizations were and what they envisioned during this time of change because it shaped their opinion after Reunification.

One organization that exhibited the change women’s organizations underwent during the Wende was the DFD. The DFD began as a non-affiliated, international group aimed at advancing women; in 1957, the SED took control of the group in East Germany. Due to its relationship with the Party, the FRG government banned the organization in West Germany.[[111]](#footnote-111) During the GDR’s 40 years, the DFD advocated for certain women’s issues like abortion rights, but they were always an organ of the SED and not an opposition group. During the Wende, the DFD knew it needed to distance itself from the dictatorship and SED. In its document about the renewal during the Wende, the DFD declared that it could not exist without the activity of women. They stated that the history of the GDR and socialism was in its hands. To show its new inclusivity and distance from the SED, it opened its organization to all women without discriminating based on party affiliation or other factors.[[112]](#footnote-112) Sieminewski, who was a DFD member at the time of the Wende, recalled sitting at the Round Table, an organization aimed at reform in the GDR, and giving speeches on behalf of the GDR. She described feeling that she could listen to the arguments during the Wende but that she could not contribute because people viewed DFD as an appendage of the SED; however, Sieminewski believed other women’s organizations were giving in to Western demands too much.[[113]](#footnote-113) The tensions between the two made it clear that even feminist organizations did not agree. The DFD showed the difference in how women’s organizations operated before and during the Wende since it was the only one the GDR allowed under the SED.

In the fall, activists created the Initiative Committee for the Establishment of an Independent Women’s organization, which put out a call to all women to participate in the political change during Wende. To try to persuade more women to attend, they specified their fears about what would happen to women during the Wende, which included a worsening of the social position of women and a new political exclusion of women in decision-making. They believed that an organization to unite women’s groups would serve as a way to advocate for and organize women. Therefore, they invited women to what they envisioned as a festival on December 3. Every woman was welcome to join, and in typical East German feminist fashion, men were welcome as well.[[114]](#footnote-114)

At the event on December 3, Ina Merkel gave a speech titled “Without us, you cannot make a state” that exhibited the platform and purpose of the Independent Women’s Association (UFV).[[115]](#footnote-115) Merkel pointed to three types of people: those who believed the Woman Question had been solved, those who believed it was not the priority problem, and those who thought it needed to be on the agenda; the UFV fell in the last category. Merkel described how women had been at every step of the upheaval of the GDR but that they were being left out of the renewal of society. Therefore, she saw it as necessary that women help create a new societal model. She wanted to keep socialism, but to also acknowledge the problems of the GDR and create a society based on the individual. In reference to possible Reunification she asked, “Do we want to reunify with the men in Bonn who replicate the dictator of the Politburo with the dictator of the Bundeskanzleramts?”[[116]](#footnote-116) Of course, West Germany was not a true dictatorship like East Germany, but Merkel used this rhetoric to appeal to women’s fears of oppression under capitalism.

Merkel believed that Reunification would lead to women taking three steps back because they would have to fight for the right to work. She and other feminists feared that women would once again end up back at home and behind the stove. For Merkel, socialism was the way forward and reforming the GDR was the best way to achieve equality for women. As Merkel phrased it, “Women have no fatherland to lose, rather a country to win.”[[117]](#footnote-117) Merkel’s speech represented what women’s organizations wanted early in the Wende; they did not want a capitalist government, they wanted a revised, socialist East Germany.

December 3 did successfully see the creation of the UFV, which would become one of the most important feminist and activist organizations during the Wende. The UFV envisioned its role as an umbrella organization for many other autonomous women’s groups. The UFV was free from political and party influence, but it did want to serve actively in the politics of the Wende and work towards creating equality for women. Organizations, such as the Lila Offensive, Socialist Women’s Initiative (SOFI) and Jena Women’s Initiative joined the UFV. These organizations mirrored Merkel’s original claims. SOFI issued a statement that if the Wende underwent a capitalist turn, women would be the losers of such a Wende. They saw it as their role to stop any such change from occurring.[[118]](#footnote-118) Over the course of the Wende, the organization fought for inclusion in the political process and ultimately ended up running for seats in parliament.

These groups believed that the changing times needed to analyze and address the “Woman Question.” Their documents often pointed to the fact that women did not achieve full equality in the GDR by referencing the wage gap or violence against women. Activists believed there needed to be an engagement of women with the changing government in order to create a new system in which women would be able to gain true equality. At first, these goals were to create a better East Germany, but once it became clear that the GDR would cease to exist, they transformed into goals for what Reunification would include. These organizations expectations for the Wende and Reunification shaped their opinions of Reunification.

One of the goals women activists and the average women shared was the continuation of employment. Women wanted to maintain the right to work for fear that if they lost it, they would once again be relegated to the house.[[119]](#footnote-119) When arguing for their rights, women pointed to women in West Germany and the percentage of unemployed women and housewives.[[120]](#footnote-120) Women also feared that they were more at risk for losing their jobs due to their gender.[[121]](#footnote-121) In this regard, both feminists and other women felt at risk during the Wende. Unlike most women, feminists explicitly addressed the potential for unemployment in the political arena.

To address the risk of unemployment, activists proposed the implementation of a quota system in government positions and jobs; some organizations suggested a 50/50 split between men and women.[[122]](#footnote-122) They believed that a quota for women in the work place and within organizations would ensure that women were able to influence society. Lola Königin, founder of the gay and lesbian rights group Sonntagsklub, described how she believed a quota was important because a larger percentage of women in a group can change the whole atmosphere. In her organization, Königin made sure to have an equal balance of men and women in leadership positions. Königin referenced the different socialization men and women undergo, which affects the way the two perceive the world. For this reason, she believed that men would not always be able to understand women’s needs.[[123]](#footnote-123) Throughout the Wende, a quota system was an integral part of what activists urged.

In addition to battling unemployment, many women’s organizations described the risk of losing social benefits they had gained in the GDR. One of the major social benefits was childcare. Königin stated that childcare is the basis of equality, which women could not gain without it.[[124]](#footnote-124) The free childcare the GDR offered allowed women to go to work and not be required to stay home. In this way, women were also at greater risk during the Wende because a decrease in childcare benefits would most likely result in women having to stay home to take care of children, since women were traditionally in lower paying jobs. Activists fought hard during the Wende to keep childcare as it was in the GDR. In addition to childcare, feminists believed they needed to retain the right to an abortion and support for single mothers and those with disabilities.[[125]](#footnote-125) Women saw these benefits as a pivotal part of equality.

To help achieve these goals, women’s organizations wanted access to the Round table. The Round Table was a development of the new political climate of the opening and became one of the central elements of the Wende. On December 7, 1989 a group of political organizations established the Round Table, which was meant to bring together different organizations and give them a platform for discussion. The Table stated they wanted to create a constitution independent of the GDR and to be alerted to political occurrences. They described their purpose as being caused by the “concern for our deeply crisis-ridden country, for its independence, and its long-term development.”[[126]](#footnote-126) The DFD and UFV used the Round Table as a political springboard to launch ideas and reach other political groups. The UFV was able to use the Round Table as a platform for their ideas and appealed to the Round Table by saying that the positions of women were especially endangered.[[127]](#footnote-127)

**The March Election**

Once activists formed these organizations in the fall and winter, they used them throughout the Wende to try to implement change. During the spring of 1990, their goals had to adjust to the changing political climate and the reality that Reunification would take place. Elections were poised to take place in March, which meant women had to adapt to the political currents. For activists, the election meant they had to change their rhetoric from opposing Reunification to one of addressing Reunification and how they could still achieve their goals, if, or more likely when, it happened. The elections were also important because they reflected the desire of average women, who were not involved in the political movements of the Wende.

Leading up to the election, the UFV joined with the Green Party, which focused on environmental policy, to strengthen its cause. The UFV had always cited ecological development and environmental policies in its program, and the Green Party focused on social justice issues that affected women as well. The Green-Lila alliance, as it came to be known, created a platform that described the ecological and social crisis in which the GDR found itself. They also stated that even with a connection to the FRG, the structural change would have not only winners, but losers. Therefore, they argued against a “rash and uncontrolled merger for both German states.”[[128]](#footnote-128) This showed that the parties had begun to accept that reunification was likely. They did not, however, accept that it had to be soon or dominated by the FRG. Both parties continued with their demands and hoped they could advance their causes by working together.

After 40 years of not being able to truly voice their opinion at the polls in the GDR, East Germans went to the vote on March 18, 1990, an act that provided one of the first glimpses into their true political leanings. Going into the election there were high hopes that a large number of East Germans would participate in voicing their opinions, and the GDR did not disappoint; 93 percent of eligible voters went to the poles. In an unexpected turn of events, the “Alliance”, a coalition formed of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Democratic Awakening, and the German Social Union (DSU) won. The CDU, the party in power in West Germany under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, won 40.5 percent of the coalition’s 49.8 percent victory.[[129]](#footnote-129) While campaigning, the CDU promised “Social market economy-not socialist experiments!” and “Social justice instead of communist leveling.”[[130]](#footnote-130) The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the anticipated winners, won a mere 22 percent. Of the smaller parties, the Liberal Alliance did the best with 5 percent and the UFV and Green party coalition received 2 percent of the vote.[[131]](#footnote-131)

The day after the election, the *Tageszeitung* published an article that showed the perceptions of the election in both East Germany and West Germany. Helmut Flieg, a writer under the pseudonym Stefan Heym in East Germany, was not hesitant to proclaim, “Nothing remains of the GDR but a footnote in world history.” Meckel, the chair of the SPD, claimed that the results were due to inexperience of voters and unfair campaigning. Steffen Reiche, a co-founder of the SPD in East Germany, admitted that those who voted, voted for the government of the FRG and not for any particular party. West Chancellor Kohl mirrored this argument and said that it was clear that East Germans wanted to unite with the FRG.[[132]](#footnote-132) The results of the election shed light on the fact that East Germans did want unification and were not as terrified of the West German political system as many of the activists or those in the political sphere believed.

**The Women Have Spoken**

The election outcome disappointed many women activists and demonstrates the divide between what feminist movements wanted and what the average East German desired during the Wende. Ultimately, women were not opposed to feminist notions, but the atmosphere of fear, change, and opportunity led them to elect a government they believed would support them.

During the Wende, the West German government provided women with a clearer picture of what their future could be than the feminist movements of the East. Myra Marx Ferree cites women’s belief in Chancellor Kohl’s promise that unification would not cause suffering as a main reason why women voted for the Kohl’s party, the CDU.[[133]](#footnote-133) Irene Dölling goes a step further and believes that the paternal nature of the GDR government set women up to vote for the CDU during the Wende because women believed the CDU would support them. She describes the need to analyze the nature of the GDR government in order to understand women during the Wende and the choices they made.

Dölling describes part of the reason women voted for the CDU as due to the fear of increased personal responsibility. This may be true, but in the situation of the time, it is understandable that East Germans were afraid of what would happen. One newspaper article after the election declared that women’s fears were “irrational”.[[134]](#footnote-134) However, in this situation East Germans were living in an unstable, quasi-government that was falling apart both politically and economically. As Frau Petra Schmidt stated, “Nobody believed there would be Reunification without war.”[[135]](#footnote-135) For women, and all East Germans, choosing security was a logical choice.

In addition to security, West Germany offered consumer goods and political freedoms that appealed to the majority of East German women. As Herzsprung described, “The Wende came, and I was free.” Women had been limited in both their freedoms and what the consumer goods they had. Kahlau described how women in the GDR were “masters of improvisation because there was nothing.” She blatantly stated “We had to make gold out of shit.”[[136]](#footnote-136) Kahlau described her first trip in the West and how “It was awful for me when I saw the consumption…but on the other hand I saw how pretty things looked and saw colors and how gray everything here in the East is. The East was gray. There was no color. It was really so, people forget this, but that’s how it was.”[[137]](#footnote-137)

Feminists recognized their inability to appeal to the average woman. After the election, Tatjana Böhm, one of the founders of the UFV and a government Minister under the Modrow government, accurately stated that feminists and activists failed to mobilize the average woman for many reasons. Her analysis of the election was that in such a time of crisis and uncertainty, women and men voted for the seemingly stronger, more secure argument, which in this case was the Deutsch Mark, the currency of the FRG. Although she understood why women voted the way they did, she did not believe they understood the full consequences of their actions. She guessed that it would become socially hard for women in a way that East German women perhaps could not imagine.[[138]](#footnote-138)

**Conclusion**

In the fall of 1990, Angela Merkel, who was a federal minister at that time, conducted a survey of 1,432 East German women between 16 and 60 to find out about their predictions for Reunification. The survey asked women what they believed would happen to their quality of life after Reunification. In response, 31 percent said that they believed things would be better for them in reunified Germany; 21 percent believed it would go equally as well as it had previously; 38 percent were skeptical of Reunification; 7 percent expected a bad situation.[[139]](#footnote-139) These answers show that women’s expectations for Reunification varied.

Feminists and activists wanted to create a new GDR in which women gained true equality, other women focused on keeping their jobs and trying to secure their futures. The variation in women’s hopes and expectations in relation to the Wende and Reunification made it hard for activists to attract the “average woman.” The very atmosphere of chaos and fear that feminists believed they could use to motivate women was the primary cause of East German women’s fears. The fear of unemployment and drastic change caused women to vote for the government of West Germany, and ultimately, for Reunification. To these women, Reunification was a more secure option than a hypothetical government.

Apart from security, many East German women wanted the consumer goods and freedoms of West Germany. Women who had undergo persecution in East Germany saw the Wende and Reunification as a change of freedom. As Herzsprung proclaimed, “The Wende came, and I was free.”[[140]](#footnote-140) For many women, this freedom outweighed the possible negative side effects of Reunification; for feminists, these freedoms were not enough. Women’s desires during the Wende and Reunification ultimately shaped how they would feel about Reunification.

Chapter Three: “I was too busy to kill myself”: Women after German Reunification

“I was too busy to kill myself”, said Helene Böhm as she ate a cheese and olive plate at Café Olivenbaum. This statement came after Böhm expressed that she knew of people who killed themselves after German Reunification due to the trauma they experienced. Despite the weight of the subject, Böhm expressed the sentiment with little emotion, as though it was simply a matter of fact. And for Böhm, it was. After German Reunification she found herself looking for work and taking care of a sick mother. She also had a son to care for and was adjusting to the new society in which she lived. Although Böhm was a staunch critic and dissident in the GDR, as shown in Chapter 1, she was not satisfied with German Reunification.[[141]](#footnote-141) Reunification was a complicated matter that did not automatically please those who were critical of East Germany or had hard lives in the East. Dissidents did not always approve of Reunification and were not always satisfied with the result.

After feasting on a traditional German breakfast in Berlin during her interview, Urusula Bredereck and her husband declared themselves the winners of German Reunification.[[142]](#footnote-142) In the GDR Bredereck had not been part of the SED, but her ex-husband was a member of the Stasi; she described herself as simply a normal worker. Although Bredereck called herself a winner, she too had some difficulties after Reunification, but she did not consider them a large problem. For half a year, she worked as a cashier at Aldi, a popular discount grocery store in Germany. However, she stated that one must simply find their way in post-reunified Germany and get into a competitive mindset. Bredereck considered herself a winner of Reunification because of her comfortable lifestyle after Reunification. During her interview, she reiterated multiple times how fortunate and thankful she was to own a house in Berlin, something she could never have accomplished in the GDR. She and her current husband were also able to travel to the United States to visit her daughter, who lived there. Bredereck did not deny that there were complications with Reunification, but she did not face any that hindered her from becoming successful.[[143]](#footnote-143)

These two women illustrate the opposite ends of the spectrum of East German women’s experiences shortly after Reunification. Both encountered problems after Reunification, but the extremity of their situation differed drastically. All East German women entered a country, in which they had never lived, but how women adjusted in reunified Germany and to what degree they struggled differed. The obstacles East German women faced included a new work environment, economic system, fewer social benefits, and an emphasis on gender roles. Some women flourished in this new system, while others tended to sink. Similar to how women’s experiences in the GDR differed based on many factors, so did their experiences after German Reunification. Overall, women did experience larger disenfranchisement than men and encountered sexism, but this does not sum up every woman’s experience. Women’s experiences after Reunification are much more complex than winning and losing; they were a web of self-made decisions and circumstances beyond women’s control. When considering women’s positions after Reunification, it is important to look at not only their unemployment and loss of social benefits like free childcare, but also their political and consumer freedoms.

**Reunification**

Unifying two countries that had been separate for forty years was no simple task; in figuring out Reunification, both Germanies had to examine what they wanted out of their future country. In East Germany, feminist women wanted a third way that included a democratized GDR with extensive social benefits for women. However, East Germans voted the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) into power on March 1990, which paved the way for Reunification. The CDU was also in power in West Germany, which seemed to signal that a more conservative and western-based unification treaty would follow. The Unification treaty had many positive and negative stipulations, but it is important to analyze it in the context of East Germans overthrowing and voting out a decaying dictatorship that had no financial stability. West Germany was in the position of merging with a dying state and trying to revive it. While this does not excuse some of their actions or invalidate women’s hardships and opinions, it is necessary to understand how and why Reunification took place the way it did.

An important step in Reunification was the monetary, economic, and social union that took place between the GDR and the FRG. When women’s groups heard about the economic union months before it happened, they believed this measure did not go far enough. They worried that the economics of the program would take over the social aspects. In February, the Round Table’s Working Group for the Equality of Men and Women issued a resolution that stated that an economic and monetary union without a social union was not acceptable. As Tatjana Böhm stated, the original impetus of the social component was from the pressure of the GDR, not from others claiming credit.[[144]](#footnote-144) They wrote that cuts in social programs always affect women first and proposed that women from the GDR and FRG come together to discuss what rights of women needed to be preserved.[[145]](#footnote-145)

The economic and social treaty did not fulfill activists hopes. The two governments came together on May 18 to write the treaty, which would become law on July 1. The treaty established a social market economy and the Deutsch Mark (D-Mark) as the common currency. The government chose the D-Mark because of its stability and power. The FRG stated that they would integrate the GDR into the world economy and expected the GDR to adjust agricultural produce prices to the FRG standards and there would be no more subsidies for food and agriculture. The treaty did attempt to address the social issues. Article 19 described the need for vocational training and retraining, especially for women and the disabled. The treaty also assured that the FRG would fund pensions and insurance.[[146]](#footnote-146) However, activists believed there was still a lot of ground that the two governments had not covered and worried about the economic implications.

On August 23, 1990, the Volkskammer (Parliament) voted on Reunification and

On August 31, 1990, the Volkskammer passed the Unification Treaty, which would take effect on October 3. The treat established a new political and economic structure for East Germany, while maintaining most of the policies of West Germany. The writers of the treaty opened that they were resolved to “achieve in free self-determination the unity of Germany in peace and freedom as an equal partner in the community of nations, Mindful of the desire of the people in both parts of Germany to live together in peace and freedom in a democratic and social federal state governed by the rule of law…”[[147]](#footnote-147) From the beginning, it was clear that the treaty would rely on West Germany’s constitution, the Basic Law. Article 3 clearly stated that the Basic Law would take force in the new Eastern states.[[148]](#footnote-148) However, parliament did recognize that it would take East Germans time to adjust. Parliament inserted Article 143 into the Basic Law, which stated that the new Eastern territories would have some flexibility in deviating from the Basic Law in the following years.[[149]](#footnote-149) East Germany would need this time to reorganize its system. Overall, the grand scheme of the treaty favored West Germany because the CDU held the majority in parliament and because western politicians were hesitant to keep anything from the East, most likely because of its dictator past and the lingering Cold War tensions.[[150]](#footnote-150)

The East German feminists of the Wende did not achieve all of their goals, but the parliaments of East and West Germany did consider women when creating their treaty. The first time they mentioned women specifically was in Article 30, where they discussed the safety regulations for working women and the pension for women. This article also stated that women who reached 55 would receive early retirement payment for a period of up to five years.[[151]](#footnote-151) The immediate article thereafter, titled Family and Women, left most laws regarding women ambiguous or up to future lawmakers. The Basic Treaty of the FRG did guarantee the equality of men and women, but the first part of Article 31 stated “it shall be the task of the all-German legislator to develop further the legislation on equal rights for men and women.”[[152]](#footnote-152) This statement shows that the new parliament recognized the need for a discussion about equality but declared it an issue for future discussion.

Some East German women described the reunification process as the West adopting the East and getting rid of their “livelihood, socialization, and society.”[[153]](#footnote-153) In a way, that was true and was a product of East Germany voting predominantly for the CDU. In addition, West Germany was financing and supporting the merger of the two countries, which gave it a certain degree of authority during decision-making. Although West Germany could have been more lenient on certain rights like abortion, certain social programs of the GDR were not only unsustainable after Reunification, but had never been stable in the GDR. Many East German women reminisced fondly about the social programs in the East, but others discussed the failing economic situation of the East and were aware of the rotting economy.[[154]](#footnote-154) Kinzel believed that when women say they are the losers of Reunification, they are forgetting that East Germany could never have continued.[[155]](#footnote-155)

West Germany took on a large financial burden at the time, which affected the way in which it could unify the two countries. In the Unification Treaty, parliament established that it would allot 85 percent of the German Unity Fund to pay for the “general financial requirements” of the new Eastern states and 15 percent for the “public requirements at a central level.”[[156]](#footnote-156) The parliament also took on East Germany’s debt and provided money to help the rehabilitation of victims of the SED and East Germany.[[157]](#footnote-157) These serve as examples for how the West economically supported the merger and the East Germans for whom they were taking responsibility. The economic bailout that the West provided does not mean that East Germans should not be critical, but it is crucial to understanding the reality of the economic and political situation in which East Germans found themselves during German Reunification.

The Treuhand Program (Trustee Agency), which the government wrote on June 17, 1990 and which ended on December 31, 1994, had a large impact on reunified Germany. The program said it was meant to create a competitive business and create new jobs. It also stated that it would oversee “closure and utilization of the property of businesses or parts of businesses no longer amenable to reorganization.”[[158]](#footnote-158) Ultimately, the Treuhand undid the socialist economic basis of the GDR by privatizing previously owned businesses and organizations. This had a large impact on the economic and working environment after Reunification. In Kahlau’s words, the Treuhand was “systematic shattering.”

However, not everyone shared her negative opinion. In 2005, Birgit Breuel, who was the President of the Treuhandanstalt from 1991 to 1994, evaluated the successes and weaknesses of the Treuhand program. Overall, Breuel credited privatization through the Treuhand as the “central success of the transformation, as something unparalleled in world history.” As evidence, Breuel cited the fact that investments in the areas that had been East Germany made up 50 percent of the GNP, whereas they were only 25 percent of the GNP in West Germany. Breuel recognized that the Treuhand was not perfect and did make mistakes. She also described situations in which there was a negative consequence that could not be helped. For example, the fact that the Treuhand was not able to keep many large East German corporations was harmful for the East, but it was necessary in the economic climate. However, Breuel does not blame the Treuhand for this because according to her, the corporations did not have the financial or entrepreneurial skills simply because the infrastructure in the GDR could not keep up with the advancements in the FRG. [[159]](#footnote-159)

Just as the question of whether women were winners or losers of Reunification is not black and white, neither is the discussion of whether the Unification Treaty or Treuhand was good or bad. Both had positive and negative effects, depending on many factors, such as whether people valued the old socialist system or political freedoms more. Regardless of one’s view on Reunification, there is no doubt that it created a completely new and foreign environment for most East Germans. This new system made it difficult for East German women to figure out how to adjust, since many of them had never operated in a capitalistic economy before. Many East German women felt they had to “struggle through it” or “find their footing” in the new environment.[[160]](#footnote-160) Some women did just that, while others always felt that the floor was falling out from beneath them. Although the treaty and Treuhand affected women’s jobs and abortion rights, women’s hardships after Reunification were based more on sexism and the nature of becoming part of a foreign capitalistic country than they were on the Unity Treaty itself.

**Women and Work after Reunification**

The combination of economic collapse and a new social structure made it difficult for most East German women to both keep and find a job. The traditional gender roles in West Germany exacerbated women’s struggles to find work. Unemployment created further problems for East German women because they depended on work not only for money, but as part of their identity as well. For most working women, unemployment dealt a paralyzing blow; however, some women embraced the new freedom the free market offered them. Women who embraced the freedom were often those who were not able to choose their job in the GDR or who did not experience the guaranteed right to work. Often, women landed in the middle of having their dream job or being consistently unemployed and ultimately found their footing in one way or another.

With the fall of the GDR came the fall of its economy, which created hardship for many women. The failing economy meant that the economic situation of the GDR was already in an unstable situation when it entered a chaotic and tumultuous time. What led to the ultimate demise of the Eastern economy and employment opportunities was a combination of factors. Former East Germany was grappling with acclimating to being a part of a new country while West Germany was working hard to try to incorporate East Germany and keep its economy afloat. Both of these factors, and the demand for superior western goods, combined with the general chaos to make an environment not conducive to women searching for work.

This perfect storm of conditions created a drastic decline in the number of employed women from East Germany. Whereas women made up about 50 percent of workers in the GDR, women accounted for 2/3 of the unemployed in unified Germany.[[161]](#footnote-161) One of the main factors that contributed to the closing of factories was the fact that West German companies did not want competition with companies from the East. Dagmar Bäumle described how women’s unemployment was not due to stereotypical beliefs about laziness or stupidity; they were unemployed simply because everything was closing due to competition and that there was nothing in the area.[[162]](#footnote-162) East German women were not oblivious to this fact and often cited West Germany’s want of lack of competition as the main reason for unemployment.[[163]](#footnote-163) When talking with formerly employed East German women, it was clear that the acts of West Germany left a bitter taste in their mouths, which influenced their experiences after Reunification and their feelings towards Reunification. Whether West Germans really believed these companies could compete, or whether they simply wanted to get rid of the expenditure, is another question. In addition to competition, many East German factories had to close due to the fact that their technology and infrastructure could not keep up with those in the West.[[164]](#footnote-164) The closing of factories and companies meant East German women often found themselves suddenly unemployed and facing few options.

West Germans were not the only ones responsible for a decline in East German production; East Germans themselves marveled at the products in grocery stores and were excited about participating in western consumption. In the GDR, the government controlled the market and regulated competition. When East German women went to the supermarket, the options were limited. Women recalled going to the supermarket and only having cabbage and apples to choose from.[[165]](#footnote-165) Bredereck recalled the one time a year when citizens could buy strawberries. She remembered waiting an hour in line to buy strawberries for her children.[[166]](#footnote-166) After reunification, the number of options in market exploded for East Germans. East Germans had access to products they had either rarely, or never, seen. While many women did appreciate having access to a larger supply of products, this expansion meant a decrease in products from the East. Dagmar Bäumle described East Germans’ sudden interest in Western products after Reunification. In Meiningen, where Bäumle lived, people would buy pallets of yogurt every day simply because they could and because it had been so scarce in the GDR. While working at Aldi, Bredereck recalled a particular day when she witnessed an argument between an “Ossi,” someone from East Germany, and a “Wessi”, someone from West Germany. Both wanted the last container of yogurt. Bredereck heard the Ossi turn to the Wessi and say that the Wessi had already had yogurt and it was now the Ossi’s turn to be able to buy it.[[167]](#footnote-167) This story gives insight into not only the tension between people from East Germany and West Germany, but also the urge that East Germans had to be part of the consumer culture.

The enchantment with western products meant that East Germans reduced the number of eastern products they purchased. Bäumle explained that eventually East Germans realized western products were not what they hoped for and wanted to buy products from the East. However, by that time, the products they had grown up with were no longer available. Bäumle did not deny her appreciation of having access to bananas whenever she was craving one, but she recognized that many shops in the Former East Germany had to close due to the decrease in demand.[[168]](#footnote-168) The consumerism that the new capitalist system ushered in was overwhelming for many East Germans, who were excited to have access to products and to not have to wait years for cars. However, due to the economic atmosphere in which East Germans grew up, they did not realize that their consumption would contribute to their own undoing.

Women in the academic sector of the work market exemplify the complicated situation of East German women after Reunification and why it is not possible to paint East German women as winners or losers of Reunification. In her article, Behrend states that those in academia were the largest losers of Reunification. To support her claim, she cites the decrease from 140,000 academics to 40,000 by the end of 1992. To prove that women had it harder than men, she shows that 50 percent of academic women age 55-59 lost their jobs, compared to 27 percent of men.[[169]](#footnote-169) While many academic women did lose their position, some East German women were finally able to experience the freedom to choose an education and the subject which they wanted to study. Younger women had a stronger chance of going back to school or retaining their jobs than those in the age bracket of 55-59. To understand women in the academic field, we must look at both ends of the spectrum.

Women who held academic positions or degrees were at a disadvantage if they were close with the SED and if they had a degree or training that the new government did not recognize. Morgenstern felt that the West German government did not believe East Germans had learned the right material and were skeptical to hire them.[[170]](#footnote-170) Women who encountered this felt that the West was devaluing their education. Wuschek, who studied languages in the GDR, believed the West had an attitude of “How can anyone in a land with a wall speak a language?”[[171]](#footnote-171) However, other academic women saw Reunification as a chance to pursue their academic dreams. In the GDR, the government only allowed certain women to pursue academic degrees. The SED limited the number of women who could pursue certain degrees, especially if women came from learned families or were dissidents. After Reunification, some women who had wanted to pursue academics finally had the chance. Renate Hürtgen, who had dreamt of being in academia in the DDR but encountered obstacles as a dissident, was finally able to explore the academic world. She described how she does not complain about the Wende because “after 1989, my academic life could begin.”[[172]](#footnote-172) Academic women represent a small portion of the population, but they prove that Reunification was not black or white.

In every sphere of life, age was a critical factor in determining a woman’s success after Reunification, and this was especially true in the workforce. Schmidt, born in 1945, stated that women of her age were “the true losers of Reunification.”[[173]](#footnote-173) Women who were in their 40s and early 50s during the Wende and shortly after Reunification did experience a greater disadvantage after Reunification because they could not find work easily or had to retire. Editha Künzel, who was born in 1955, recalled being unemployed after the Wende and applying to a doctor’s office in reunified Germany. The doctor met her at the door and asked her her age. When she replied, the doctor simply told her they wanted younger people to have “a young praxis.”[[174]](#footnote-174) Morgenstern found it hard to find a job after Reunification because according to her despite her education, employers “wanted twenty year olds with twenty years of experience.” Women also referenced the fact that it was harder for both older men and women because they had grown up in the GDR and it was as though the “floor fell out from under them.”[[175]](#footnote-175)

Older women also found themselves receiving the short end of the stick in regards to work benefits. The Unity Treaty made it so that women had to reach the age of 55 before receiving early retirement payments, which could not exceed five years.[[176]](#footnote-176) Women who were under 55 did not have this benefit and had to continue searching for work. However, those who met the age requirements for retirement were also not always satisfied. According to sociologist Ferree, the pension the government provided women was below the poverty line.[[177]](#footnote-177) Königin lamented that even though the West supposedly offered more retirement, the increase of rent and food prices meant that retirement funds were not enough.[[178]](#footnote-178) In addition, many women wanted to continue to work. Sieminewski declared that she was not looking forward to retirement “where the highlight of my day is going to be shopping and cooking lunch.”[[179]](#footnote-179) Women looked for work not only to occupy themselves but because they needed the money. Braun hosted an exchange student in her apartment every year because otherwise she could not afford rent.[[180]](#footnote-180) Older women also typically had more trouble adjusting to the new environment and were not able to acclimate as well as younger women.

Despite the negative impacts of Reunification, some women had a positive experience in the workplace. Growing up in the GDR meant many women could not pursue the job they wanted. Due to the planned economy in the GDR, the state controlled employment and decided the positions that needed to be filled. Hildegard Maria Nickel argues that women had to wade through new factors that determined their course in reunified Germany, but that women ultimately experienced pluralization and new opportunities.[[181]](#footnote-181) Heike Herzsprung described how she was happy with her unemployment after Reunification. In the GDR, Herzsprung was a civil engineer, a job she fell into simply because she wanted to move out of her small town and to Berlin. For Herzsprung unemployment meant a chance to start over and discover other interests. She interned as a gardener, went to England to learn English, and then came back to Berlin to study city planning. Herzsprung did encounter problems in reunified Germany, as everyone does throughout life, but she appreciated the ability to make a fresh start.[[182]](#footnote-182) Other women were able to start their own businesses and be successful in reunified Germany. According to Bredereck, those who fought hard and made their own way could find success.[[183]](#footnote-183) Of course, whether one sees one’s self as successful or not depends on what they place emphasis.

**Social Benefits and Rights**

The decrease of social benefits for women after Reunification influenced women’s ability to acclimate to their new country. The GDR provided families with substantial money for having children and companies had free daycare for children. After Reunification, the government abolished most of the social programs from the East, mainly due to expense. Additionally, East German women lost certain rights, like the right to abortions, which both East and West German feminists fought to keep. However, East German women no longer lived in fear of the Stasi and feminists could open political cafes and centers, where they could speak freely about the issues they believed the state should address. For East German women, Reunification was a mixture of losses and gains. Whether women defined Reunification as a success or failure ultimately depended on what issues they viewed as most important.

One right that both East and West Germany feminists wanted to keep from the GDR was the right to have abortions. While these two groups of feminists often butted heads on issues, they agreed on the right to abortion. During the separation of the two countries, abortion had been a hot issue. In the early 70s, both East and West Germany used the abortion debate as a tool in the Cold War. The East relaxed its restrictions on abortion and used it as a way to show the equality socialism guaranteed.[[184]](#footnote-184) When feminist organizations formed during the Wende, they made it a point to include retaining their abortion rights in their platforms.[[185]](#footnote-185) East German feminists were not successful in their quest; Article 31 of the Unity Treaty stated “It shall be the task of the all-German legislator to introduce regulations no later than 31 December 1992 which ensure better protection of unborn life and provide a better solution in conformity with the Constitution of conflict situations faced by pregnant women…” The article then goes on to describe how they would implement a “network of advice centers.”[[186]](#footnote-186) On June 27, 1992 the government passed a new law on abortions; however, a year later the Federal Courts declared aspects of the law unconstitutional. In 1994 and 1995 the government reworked the law. The new version of Paragraph 218 laid out the legal implications for those who performed abortions and for women who had abortions. One could face imprisonment for up to three years for terminating a pregnancy in certain situations, such as if the doctor did not provide the woman with the associated risks or if the doctor served as the counselor. If the woman had undergone counseling or was in danger because of the pregnancy, she and the doctor would not be persecuted.[[187]](#footnote-187) Overall, the new abortion laws were significantly stricter than those in the GDR. Abortion was one arena in which East German women experienced a major loss of freedom.

Although East German women lost social benefits and abortion rights after Reunification, every woman gained new freedoms. Suddenly, women were allowed to travel outside of the Eastern Bloc and could take long awaited trips. Böttcher fondly stated that Reunification was a gift for her because the world was open and she could travel anywhere.[[188]](#footnote-188) Feminists could open cafes and hold political discussions without fear of the Stasi imprisoning them. When discussing her life after Reunification, Kinzel said, the “biggest difference in my biography is that I can be active in church and actually say that I am.”[[189]](#footnote-189)

Some East German women stated that although these new freedoms were great, you had to have money to pay for them. Morgenstern described this problem, “Now we have the freedom to be able to do anything and travel, but everything depends on money, and when things depend on money, you cannot do them.”[[190]](#footnote-190) While it is true that the extent to which women could enjoy consumer goods and travel depended on money, Hürtgen rejected the idea that things did not revolve around money in the GDR. According to her, “everything revolved around money” in the GDR. She described how East Germans did have money, but they could not buy anything, had to wait for three years for a refrigerator, and were constantly busy trying to acquire material needs that the GDR did not provide.[[191]](#footnote-191) Regardless of money, women had the freedom to make choices without the fear of a dictatorship. For women the state persecuted, this freedom was critical. Women had certain rights like the right to work in East Germany, but these were always contingent upon not ending up on the black list or having a family member that acted out.

**Gendered Lens**

The post-Reunification economic policies and adjustments are not enough to explain the gender-specific plight of women who suffered after Reunification. The new economic climate and the loss of social benefits affected women differently than men. Women experienced a reversion of gender roles that made it more difficult to find work, while also losing social benefits that helped them balance work and family. Hanna Behrend believes women struggled more with unemployment due to three factors: hierarchical division of labor in the GDR based on gender, the fact that many working women’s qualifications were not recognized, and the ousting of older women and single parents from the work force.[[192]](#footnote-192) Many of the women interviewed demonstrate Behrend’s points with their struggles with unemployment; however, other women thrived in the new environment.

Despite its problems, the GDR did eliminate women as simply housewives and established the right to work for men and women. Women in East Germany were aware that women in the West encountered more traditional gender roles, though how much was due to exaggerated propaganda is unclear. However, West Germany did have stronger gender roles and more women stayed at home. Morgenstern recounted how after Reunification, West Germans were “always astounded that women were not happy to just stay home with a man, children, and kitchen.” During the Wende, East German feminists warned women that a reunified Germany would relegate women back to the house if Reunification occurred without the feminists’ demands.[[193]](#footnote-193) East German feminists did not succeed in their plans, such as a establishing a quota for women in the workplace and after Reunification women found that their sex affected their job possibilities more so than it did in the East.

Women found themselves unemployed at a higher rate because of their positions within society and the job market in the GDR. Historian Konrad Jarausch describes how women appeared “expendable” in reunified Germany because of the type of jobs they held.[[194]](#footnote-194) In the GDR, women made up a large percentage of the service sector, which did not serve them well after Reunification. According to Gisela Helwig, between 1991 and 1995, men in the service sectored gained 114,000 jobs and women lost 50,000 service jobs.[[195]](#footnote-195) The decline of childcare created unemployment for women because women traditionally served as caregivers and teachers. Kinzel recalled being a kindergarten teacher in the GDR losing her job after Reunification because nurseries and kindergartens were different and the government no longer regulated them. She also stated that in the GDR she would have taught Marxism and Leninism after her class, which reunified Germany clearly did not offer.[[196]](#footnote-196)

Children were the largest factor that affected women’s abilities to find or keep a job. Treaty Article 31 stipulated, “In order to ensure that day care centers for children continue to operate in the territory specified in Article 3 of this Treaty [Eastern territories], the Federation shall contribute to the costs of these centers for a transitional period up to 30 June 1991.”[[197]](#footnote-197) The parliament knew that families needed support, but it was not economically able to sustain the day care scheme past 1991. Women recounted stories of looking for a job and having the employer ask who would look after the children, a question they believed an employer would never ask a man.[[198]](#footnote-198) In the GDR, women had access to free childcare and it was normal for women to part with their children for the day. Bäumle explained how this did not seem to be the case for women in West Germany. She described how after Reunification, West Germans looked at East German women who left their children in childcare as “Rabenmutters.”[[199]](#footnote-199) Rabenmutter, literally a “Raven Mutter”, is a German term to describe a woman who does not take care of her children, often due to her career. This discrepancy in how West German women and East German women viewed childcare made it hard for them to forge an alliance to fight for improvements in the childcare system.

For many East German women, the ability to keep working was one of the most important factors in their lives. These women had grown up in a world that not only guaranteed employment as right, but that also emphasized the worker as a key member of society. Women not only felt the economic impacts of losing their job, but personal effects as well. Previously employed women did not want to stop working and fought against the idea of sitting at home. As Tanja Morgenstern phrased it, “Nobody wanted to stay home and twiddle their thumbs.”[[200]](#footnote-200) For East German women, working was part of their identity and made them feel independent, because they were not tied to a man for money. They believed that East German women had a certain self-confidence and independence due to the fact that they knew they could independently support themselves.[[201]](#footnote-201)

On the whole, women suffered more in the workplace due to their occupations and a reversion to old gender roles. Many women believed their role as the family caretaker intensified the negative impacts of Reunification. However, other women believed that men struggled more with unemployment because they did not have another role to fall back on.[[202]](#footnote-202) These women believed that men based their identity on work and felt that society expected them to be gainful members of the workforce. A couple of women cited the fact that women were more flexible than men and bounced back quicker.[[203]](#footnote-203) While this may be true for some women, most women still strongly identified with working and were unhappy with simply being a stay-at-home mother. Other women, such as single mothers, had no choice about working and struggled to find enough support for their families. On an individual basis, certain women may have fared better than men, but statistically, unemployment hit women harder.

East German women suffered heavier losses in terms of the social benefit cutback because social benefits often revolved around the family, a sphere in which women were predominantly involved.[[204]](#footnote-204) In the GDR, the government provided many social benefits for families throughout all stages. Companies held women’s jobs for them during maternity leave and the government gave families considerable funds for each child they had.[[205]](#footnote-205) Of course, the government also extended benefits to fathers, but women often reaped the benefits because they bore the double burden of work and motherhood. When East German women, especially mothers, found themselves in a new country that did not offer them as much money per child or a monthly day to take care of the home, it was difficult.

These benefits made it so that most East German women felt supported and independent. Irene Dölling argues that social benefits in the GDR compensated for and hid the fact that women “were less economically independent than men” but that the loss of these social benefits made this clear.[[206]](#footnote-206) This phenomenon helped lead to women feeling less independent in reunified Germany and reminiscing, or romanticizing, their independence in the GDR. Many East German women spoke of a certain self-confidence that came with being a woman in the GDR and did not question this feeling of independence. They connected this confidence to their economic independence.[[207]](#footnote-207) The social benefits and the right to work made it so that most working women did not feel economically tied to a man. The loss of social benefits and unemployment after Reunification had a negative impact on women’s confidence. Morgenstern believed that East German women’s “confidence suffered” after being fired because of Reunification. Wuschek reiterated that after Reunification there was a change of women’s worth. She cited GDR laws as protecting her, such as the fact that she “could not be kicked out her apartment” as a reason for the increased insecurities women felt after Reunification. However, not all women felt that women’s confidence greatly suffered. Sieminewski believed that nobody could take away the confidence of someone who lived in the GDR.[[208]](#footnote-208)

**Conclusion**

East German women exemplify the complex nature of reunifying two countries. One decision in regards to Reunification could have a large range of effects on women. A law about childcare could simultaneously have no effect on a woman who was not a mother while drastically influencing a mother of five. This example serves as only one of many decisions that affected East German women after Reunification. The Unification Treaty could have addressed women’s issues more thoroughly, but it would be counterproductive to hypothesize what the effects of such a decision would be. Instead, it is important to look at unification in the economic and political context in which it occurred and the concrete effects it had on women thereafter.

After Reunification, women were entangled in a web of societal and economic factors that affected their lives. This web consisted of external forces that and personal decisions that dictated where women landed after Reunification. The complexity of this situation refutes the idea that women were either winners and losers of Reunification. Women underwent vast unemployment, but they also experienced political freedoms, such as the right to protest against unemployment. How East German women evaluated these losses and gains depended on what their priorities were. For working women trying to support and raise a large family, the freedom to travel across the world was not as important as it may have been for a single woman. This range of desires complicates the narrative of East German women after Reunification because it clarifies how gains and losses are subjective and often depend on what an individual prioritized.

It is also important to analyze Reunification as a gendered process. In comparison to men, women fared worse as a group. In addition to the reversion of traditional gender roles, women were more disenfranchised because of their lower positions in society and the workplace. In the GDR, women were the prime benefactors of social benefits relating to the family. Without these benefits in the new Germany, women struggled to find their way and balance their new responsibilities. Women were also not satisfied with losing certain rights, like abortion. Women did suffer great loses after Reunification, but most of these were due to sexist attitudes in both East and West Germany that did not allow women to advance.

**Twenty Five Years Later: “That Could Have Been Us”**

“That could have been us,” declared Claudia Kinzel in reference to the crisis and violence occurring in Ukraine during the summer of 2014. She described how after seeing how other post-soviet European Union countries like Romania and Bulgaria fared after the fall of the USSR, she felt lucky that the GDR had a “Big Brother” to adopt it. However, Kinzel had not always felt this way. In the GDR, Kinzel was a member of the SED and believed the West and those who lived in it were “evil.” When talking about Reunification, she stated, “We were sold, and for cheap.” However, over the years, Kinzel’s feelings toward Reunification began to shift. Originally, she could never imagine living in a part of Berlin that was in the Former West, but now she could see herself living somewhere like Neukölln, where a large portion of her friends live. She does not deny that Reunification was hard, but she felt that things have improved over time. “At first it was very difficult, but after 25 years, I can accept it as lucky,” said Kinzel.[[209]](#footnote-209)

Kinzel’s story demonstrates an additional factor that contributes to the complexity of women’s situations after German Reunification: time. Reunification occurred in 1990, but its effects and legacy continue to live on in Germany. Directly after Reunification, women grappled with how they would fit into a reunified Germany, but they did not give up; women continued to carve out new lives, despite struggles and in wake of successes. After 25 years, women have become accustomed to living in reunified Germany and things that were once new or unthinkable have become their everyday lives. Wuschek elaborated on how she was sad at the beginning of Reunification, but now she has “found a rhythm…a rhythm of life.”[[210]](#footnote-210) Seeing how their lives have progressed and no longer being bewildered by things such as grocery stores gives East German a different perspective on Reunification. They are no longer guessing whether they will make it in Reunified Germany; whether they have kept their dream job or not, they know they can, and have, survived. Of course, not all East German women approve of Reunification. Some women continue to be unhappy with Reunification, or at least with certain aspects of it. Even women who recognized that Reunification was the best solution for the GDR wished that the government had carried it out more slowly. Despite the differences in women’s views, it is clear that time has provided women with a chance to reflect on Reunification and analyze it from more of a distance.

One facet of time that allows women a new perspective is that the political climate has changed. Over time, women have noticed that some things they miss from East Germany, especially social policies, are slowly trickling down into German politics. As Lola Königin sad “Victors are always influenced from the defeated.” She continued to explain how the discussion about guaranteed kindergarten places for children is a result of the East.[[211]](#footnote-211) In addition, the parliament in Germany has recently passed the quota for women in the workplace that feminists fought for during the Wende.[[212]](#footnote-212) During their interviews, women said they slowly saw things from their past coming back.[[213]](#footnote-213)Women explained how after Reunification, the West wanted to distance itself from the East. Probably, this was because Reunification came at the end of the Cold War, which pitted capitalism and communism against each other. The animosity between the United States and the USSR meant that when East Germany fell and became part of West Germany, which the United States had largely rebuilt and supported, it shunned many policies from the GDR simply because they could appear communist.

German Reunification ushered in great change for East German women and created a unique environment. In addition to adjusting to their new country, they had accept the disappearance of their old one. While many women were happy to see the end of a dictatorship, it also meant saying goodbye to childhood TV icons and certain products, with which they grew up. The situation also meant that women’s memories and experiences with the German Democratic Republic stopped in 1990. They were not able to see how their country would have developed after Reunification, leaving the “What if?” question lingering. This facet of Reunification has left it so that many women fantasize about a “third way” that could have taken place, where the GDR would have remained, but with the comforts and democracy of the West.

As this thesis has shown, time was but one of many factors that influenced East German women’s view of Reunification. This is why the current historiography of East German women as winners or losers of German Reunification does not convey the complexities of women’s experiences after German Reunification. In order to understand the impact Reunification had on women, one must analyze women’s lives before, during, and after Reunification. Overall, Reunification did have a larger effect on women because of their standing in society and the reversion to older gender roles. On an overarching level, women gained new freedoms after Reunification but struggled with high unemployment and the loss of social benefits; however, on the lower personal level to what extent they thrived or struggled after Reunification depended on age and their personal histories.

It has been 25 years since the opening of the Berlin Wall, yet Germans still feel the ripples of both Divided Germany and Reunification. There are still large discrepancies between the Former East and West Germany. To understand Germany’s current political and economic situation, one must understand how Reunification happened and what its effects were. It is especially important to address how Reunification affected women because, as one woman stated, “men’s stories are often told at a higher rate.”[[214]](#footnote-214) For this reason, it is important to give East German women a voice, since otherwise they may not be heard.

Heike Herzsprung, who began this thesis struggling with her identity in reunified Germany, came to embrace her identity as an “Wossi,” a combination of the nicknames for West and East Germans.[[215]](#footnote-215) Herzsprung stated that she sometimes think there could have been a “third way.” However, she is unsure whether the GDR could have accomplished it like Poland or the Czech Republic because the GDR was never a nation, just a zone, a fact she described as one that many people do not want to hear. Ultimately, Herzsprung advised enjoying the moment. “Tomorrow there can be war…Phases of peace are not forever,” Concluded Herzprung, “We must enjoy the moment of democracy and treasure democracy.”[[216]](#footnote-216)

Appendix

In addition to basic information (age, job, etc) that will help the reader understand how women fit into the context of this thesis, I have included additional personal information about these women to exemplify the complicated and colorful lives they led. These women’s stories extend far beyond the 70 pages in which they feature.

Bäumle, Dagmar\*: Born 1955 in Meiningen. She worked as a data processor in the GDR. After the Wende, she lost her job and eventually worked at a bank for ten years. She described herself as critical of the GDR, but not as a concrete opponent of the Party. When the Wende came, she was in utter shock. She did not believe the West would be all sunshine and said that one must remain realistic, but she also advocated for having an open mind and not having overtly strong opinions.

Blasche, Sabine: Born in 1962 in Berlin. Her father was employed and her mother was a housewife. She could not take the Abitur because her father worked in private industry. In the GDR, she worked as a medical laboratory technical assistant. Her family was affiliated with the church. She also became involved with an environmental movement. She had children, to whom she explained the abnormality of the Berlin Wall. Her children say they simply needed to speak with Erich Honecker and ask to have the wall removed. Shortly thereafter, the Wall fell, causing them to believe simply talking about it caused it to fall.

Böhm, Helene: 1965 born in a small town. Böhm’s family was communist and Jewish. Her grandfather died at the concentration camp Mauthausen. Her parents divorced when she was 2, and her mother raised her until Böhm left home at age 18. Her mother was a teacher and lost her job because of Böhm’s “asocial” behavior. Böhm was not allowed to take the Abitur, which made her sour towards the GDR because her dream job was being a student.

Böttcher, Elke: Born in 1958 and grew up near Görlitz. In 1984, she had a son, who died very young due to illness. Studied energy application but joined a theater group in Berlin. There, she met women who were politically involved. She could not find employment in the GDR because her sister had fled the GDR. She worked in a Literature Café for adolescents, was a speaker for the Greens, and a then a member of the UFV during the Wende.

Braun, Heidemarie: Born in 1944 as her parent’s fourth daughter. Her father fought in WWII and was imprisoned. He came home when she was 3 or 4, but she ran to her mother because she did not recognize him. In the GDR, she was a member of the SED and took the Abitur. Began working for worker’s theater. However, after her son was born, she worked as a corrector at a pharmacy. She also had a daughter. Once, she left her children at home and they prank called police, she told them another house had burned down because of it to teach them a lesson. In the GDR, she had a seizure at work and then moved branches of her firm and had great job right when the Wende came and then she became unemployed. After Reunification, she tried to open a newspaper delivery service with her boyfriend at the time. However, they were not successful. She retired in 1999 and now hosts exchange students to earn money. She also occasionally works at her daughter’s wine shop.

Bredereck, Ursula: Born in 1952 into a family of 5. Her father was a teacher and her mom was a housewife. Bredereck did not want to join the Party, so she had to search for a job other than teaching. She learned how to be electrician and then worked in an office with electronics before the Wende. After Reunification, she worked for half a year at Aldi. Then worked in a bank and climbed the ladder. Married and has two kids. Father of her daughter was in the Stasi, but she said she did not know it at the time. She and her husband, who is not the father of her daughter, declared themselves the winners of Reunification.

Herzsprung, Heike\*: Was 20 years old at the time of the Wende. In the GDR she was a miner in Berlin because she wanted to leave her small town. She was critical of the Party and of the GDR. The government asked her to join the party, but she did not. She has no children or husband. When the Wende came, she finally felt she could be free. However, after Reunification, she grappled with her identity. She was unemployed directly after Reunification but now works at a women’s center in Berlin.

Hürtgen, Renate: Born on November 7, 1947 in Berlin. Her father was invalid after war and her mother was a housewife. Her parents raised her to be loyal and conform to what people wanted. Her mother did not believe Hürtgen should continue schooling because she was a girl and it was unnecessary. Hürtgen left her house at age 17 because she felt it was too confined. She had luck and in 1970 was able to study at Humboldt University. In the GDR, she had an abusive husband and a daughter. When the Berlin Wall was built when she was 15, she was relieved because it meant she did not have to see her grandparents in the West, whom she did not like very much. She now recalls that as ridiculous.

Kahlau, Christine: Born in Berlin and took the Abitur. In the GDR, she studied agriculture but realized she was a city kid and could not live on land. She worked hard to find an art job, but became a massage therapist. Her husband worked in the church, so opposition to the GDR surrounded her. She did not lose job during the Wende and had to support 3 kids, so she continued working until 1995.

Kinzel, Claudia: Born 1967. She went to school until 10th grade. She then went to school to learn how to be a kindergarten teacher. She was a member of the SED and had a daughter in 1993. She lived near Hohenschönhausen, one of the notorious prisons in the GDR, but she stated that she had no idea what occurred there. The Wende made her question the Party because she was the violence. After Reunification, she could no longer teach, so she went into management.

Königin, Lola\*: Born in 1946 in Thüringen. Her father died in WWII and her mother remarried. She helped found the Sonntagsklub group, a group aimed at gay and lesbian rights in the GDR, and was not able to find work easily because she was a dissident. The Stasi watched her because of her political engagement. She now works at an Archive.

Künzel, Editha: Born in 1955 as the second of five kids. She was a member of the SED and was a child nurse. She was a mother and worked at a medical clinic that was liquidated during the Wende. In 1990, she was unemployed. Independently employed since 2005 as a baby swimmer instructor and holds multiple other jobs. She believes “capitalism is simply not for me.”

Morgenstern, Tanja\*: Born in 1952. She was a technician for machine tools. Her work was liquidated after the Wende because there was a similar firm in the West. Learned and held multiple jobs after Wende.

Popp, Karla: Born May 27, 1949 in Torgau. Her mother was sick and could not work; her father was a police officer. In 1957, they moved to Thüringen. She took her Abitur and then studied journalism in Leipzig. She became a member of the Party at age 18 because she wanted to be politically active. Her father’s history as a anti-fascist fighter in Spain with the International Brigade influenced her political views and caused her to want to engage with politics and governments. She had been involved in the FDJ, so she began to work for its international section because she did not have the ability to be a journalist. After Wende, stayed on with FDJ archive until it was bought by institute. After Reunification, she worked for an electronic newspaper, scanning articles. In 2006, she had knee operations and is now retired.

Rösler, Dagmar: Born in 1963 in a small town. She attended school until the 10th class, which was normal for students not taking the Abitur. She worked in artisanship and described herself as having no relationship to the Party. She was in London when the Berlin Wall was opened. Her son was born in 1985. She lost her job after the Wende and then went on to study. She believes there is no question that Reunification was good for Germany.

Schmidt, Petra\*: Born in 1945 in Sachsen. She has three children. Worked as gardener and then worked in a cemetery. She became a mortician after the Wende since the state-owned cemetery in which she previously worked was taken over. She was then unemployed for 4 years and was sick. Ultimately, she retired. Believes that her generation were the losers of Reunification.

Sieminewski, Doris: 63 years old. She has lived in Berlin for 35 years and considers herself a true Berliner. In the GDR, she was in the DFD and SED. During the Wende, she sat at the Round Tables. After Reunification, she became a life coach for people. She believes that the next generation is our hope. Says people always talk about what they will do when older and successful and now she and her husband are and are finding what will move them for the next ten years.

Wuschek, Ines: Born in Thüringen and grew up in Mecklenburg. She moved to Berlin at age 18 to study at Humboldt University to learn French and Italian. She felt lucky because only six students every two years were able to do so. She was critical of the Party. She became a translator for chemical engineering. She then worked at a travel agency in Berlin. After Wende worked for student trips and had a lot of fun.

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105. Interview with Claudia Kinzel. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Interview with Ursula Bredereck. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Heidemarie Braun, interview by author, Berlin, Germany, July 18, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. *Für Dich (For You),* was a women’s magazine in the GDR, but it was run by the SED, which means it was not an independent publication during the time of the GDR. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Frauen in die Offensive! in Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation*[Uprising! The Women’s Movememnt in the GDR], 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Ina Merkel, *Ohne uns ist kein Staat zu machen* in Cordula Kahlau *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation*[Uprising! The Women’s Movememnt in the GDR]*,* 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Myra Marx Ferree. *Varieties of Feminism : German Gender Politics in Global Perspective*. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. DFD Erklaerung zur Erneuerung des DFD in Cordula Kahlau *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Interview with Doris Sieminewski. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Aufruf an alle Frauen in Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation* 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. The title of this speech was originally “Ohne uns ist kein Staat zu machen.” The translation I use is the best estimate of how this title would translate. It implies that a state cannot be created well without the involvement of women. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Ina Merkel, Ohne uns ist kein Staat zu machen in Cordula Kahlau, Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. SOFI Programmentwurf in Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation* [Uprising! The Women’s Movememnt in the GDR]*,*108. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Ina Merkel, *Ohne uns ist kein Staat zu machen* in Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation* [Uprising! The Women’s Movememnt in the GDR], 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Programm des UFV in Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation,* 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Ina Merkel, *Ohne uns ist kein Staat zu machen* in Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation* [Uprising! The Women’s Movememnt in the GDR]*,* 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Standortsbestiummung Arbeitspapier in Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation* [Uprising! The Women’s Movememnt in the GDR]*,* 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Interview with Lola Königin (name has been changed), interview with author, June 26, 2014, Meinigen, Germany. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Ina Merkel, *Ohne uns ist kein Staat zu machen* in Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation*[Uprising! The Women’s Movememnt in the GDR], 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Zeno and Sabine Zimmerling, eds.,*Neue Chronik DDR: Berichte, Fotos, Dokumente* trans. Jeremiah Riemer, 3, (24. November - 22. December 1989). (Berlin: Verlag Tribüne, 1990-91), p. 57 ff. <http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=559> (accessed March 19, 2015).. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Antrag an den Runden Tisch in Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation* [Uprising! The Women’s Movememnt in the GDR]*,* 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Wahlplattform in Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation* [Uprising! The Women’s Movememnt in the GDR], 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. “DDR-Bürger haben den Kohl fett gemacht. Sensationeller Wahlsieg für die ‘Allianz’”, trans. Allison Brown, *Tagezeitung*, March 19, 1989, <http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3015> (accessed March 19, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. “CDU – Die Partei der Mitte. CDU – Umkehr in die Zukunft, trans. Allison Brown, flyer, January 22, 1990. <http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=2983> (accessed March 19, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. “DDR-Bürger haben den Kohl fett gemacht. Sensationeller Wahlsieg für die ‘Allianz’” [“GDR Voters Hungry for All-You-Can-Eat Kohl-Slaw. Sensational Victory for the ‘Alliance’”], trans. Allison Brown, *taz*, March 19, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. “DDR-Bürger haben den Kohl fett gemacht. Sensationeller Wahlsieg für die ‘Allianz’”, trans. Allison Brown, *Tagezeitung.* [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Myra Marx Ferree. 1994. "The Time of Chaos was the Best" Feminist Mobilization and Demobilization in East Germany”. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Myrle Dziak, Heike Held and Ursula Koether, ”Im Abseits?” [On the Sidelines?], *Volkszeitung,* April 6, 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Interview Petra Schmidt. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Interview with Christine Kahlau. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Gemeinsam, Mannigfaltig, Unterschiedlich, discussion by Hilke Schlaeger in Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation* [Uprising! The Women’s Movememnt in the GDR], 184 [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. “Bundesfrauministerin Dr. Angela Merkel Stellte INFAS-Studie ‘Frauen in den neuen Bundesländer im Prozess der deutschen Einigung” vor” [Federal Minister Dr. Angela Merkel introduces INFAS-Studie ‘Women in New Germany in the Process of German Unification’], February 15, 1991, in A Rep. 400 DDR 14.3.15, Frauenforschungs-, Bildungs- und Informationszentrum (FFBIZ), Berlin, Germany. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Interview with Heike Herzsprung. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Interview with Helene Böhm. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. This statement was made in discussion with Bredereck after the official interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Interview with Ursula Bredereck. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Gemeinsam, Mannigfaltig, Unterschiedlich, discussion by Hilke Schlaeger in Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation*, 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Beschluss der Arbeitsgruppe Gleichstellung von Frauen und Maenner des Runden Tisches der DDR in Cordula Kahlau, *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation* [Uprising! The Women’s Movememnt in the GDR], 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. International Legal Materials, Volume 29, Number 5 (September 1990). [29 I.L.M. 1108; (1990)]© 1990 American Society of International Law, Washington, DC. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\_id=539. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. *The Unification of Germany in 1990 – A Documentation.* Published by the Press and Information of the Federal Government, Bonn. April 1991. <http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=554> (accessed March 19, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Ibid.  [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Ibid.  [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Interview with Doris Sieminewski. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. *The Unification of Germany in 1990 – A Documentation.* [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Interview with Claudia Kinzel. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Interview with Heike Herzsprung (name has been changed). [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Interview with Claudia Kinzel. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
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159. Birgit Breuel, trans. Thomas Dunlap, “Die Treuhandanstalt – Zielvorgaben, Rahmenbedingungen und Ergebnisse” [“The Trusteeship Agency – Objectives, Basic Parameters, and Results”] in Birgit Breuel and Michael C. Burda, eds.,*Ohne historisches Vorbild. Die Treuhandanstalt 1990 bis 1994. Eine kritische Würdigung* [*Without any Historical Model: The Trusteeship Agency from 1990 to 1994. A Critical Assessment*]. Berlin: Bostelmann & Siebenhaar, 2005, p. 13 ff, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\_id=3474(accessed March 19, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Interview with Dagmar Rösler and interview with Ines Wuschek. The original is “durchbeißen”, which literally means to bite through. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
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162. Interview with Dagmar Bäumle. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Interview with Dagmar Bäumle and interview with Renate Hürtgen. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Interview with Elke Böttcher. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Interview with Dagmar Bäumle (name has been changed) and interview with Editha Künzel. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Interview with Ursula Bredereck. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Interview with Dagmar Bäumle. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Hanna Behrend. 1995. East German Women and the Wende, .*European Journal of Women's Studies* 2, no: 2, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Interview with Tanja Morgenstern. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Interview with Ines Wuschek. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Interview with Renate Hürtgen. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Interview with Petra Schmidt. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Interview with Editha Künzel. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
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177. Myra Marx Ferree. 1994. "The Time of Chaos was the Best" Feminist Mobilization and Demobilization in East Germany”, 614. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Interview with Lola Königin (name has been changed). [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Interview with Doris Sieminewski. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
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181. Hildegard Maria Nickel, 1992, Frauenarbeit in den neuen Bundesländern: Rück-und Ausblick [Working Women in the New Germany: Background and Outlook], *Berliner Journal für Soziologie 2*, no:1, 39-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Interview with Gudrun Herzsprung. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
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184. East Germany Staatliche Zentralverwaltung für Statistik. *Women in the GDR : Facts and Figures*. 1st ed. Dresden: Verlag Zeit im Bild, 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Ina Merkel, *Ohne uns ist kein Staat zu machen* in Cordula Kahlau. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. *The Unification of Germany in 1990 – A Documentation.* [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Code in the Version Promulgated on 13 November 1998 Federal Law Gazette trans. Michael Bohlander, http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch\_stgb/englisch\_stgb.html#StGB\_000P218 Reproduced with edits by the GHDI staff. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\_id=4631(accessed March 19, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Interview with Elke Böttcher. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Interview with Claudia Kinzel. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Interview with Tanja Morgenstern. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. Renate Hürtgen. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Hanna Behrend, East German Women and the Wende, 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Ina Merkel, *Ohne uns ist kein Staat zu machen* in Cordula Kahlau *Aufbruch! Frauenbewegung in der DDR: Dokumentation* [Uprising! The Women’s Movememnt in the GDR]*,* 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Konrad Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity*, 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Gisela Helwig, “Perfekte Organisatorinnen” [“The Perfect Organizers”], trans. Allison Brown, *Das Parlament*, nos. 43-44 (October 22/29, 1999), p. 14, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\_id=4641(accessed March 19, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Interview with Claudia Kinzel. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
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198. Interview with Heike Herzsprung. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
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200. Interview with Tanja Morngenstern. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
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202. Interview with Christine Kahlau. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Interview with Christine Kahlau and interview with Doris Sieminewski. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Irene Dölling, 1991,Between Hope and Helplessness: Women in the GDR after the ‘Turning Point’. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
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206. Irene Dölling, 1991,Between Hope and Helplessness: Women in the GDR after the ‘Turning Point’. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
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209. Interview with Claudia Kinzel. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Interview with Ines Wuschek. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Interview with Lola Königin. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
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213. Interview with Dagmar Rösler. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. Interview with Claudia Kinzel. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. West Germans bore the nickname “Wessi” and East Germans “Ossi”. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Interview with Heike Herzsprung. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)