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# Clear-Cut and Clearly Drawn: Analyzing Portrayals of the GDR in Modern German Comics

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Elena Souris

Clear-Cut and Clearly Drawn: Analyzing Portrayals of the GDR in Modern German Comics

### Introduction

Asking Americans to play a word association game with “Germany” usually results in Nazis or the Holocaust being a first answer; the Berlin Wall is often second. Though not as prolific in international memory as World War II, the impact of Germany’s division into a Western capitalist country and an Eastern socialist state is difficult to overemphasize. The twenty-eight year separation was a defining moment in German culture. From 1961 to 1989, the wall interrupted lives, running through cities, between buildings, and across families. With such a dramatic political and personal impact, it’s no surprise that the time period has been both reflected and explored in popular culture.

But interestingly, three comics have been published in the last six years that take a personal approach to recording Eastern German history, perhaps due to a rejuvenated interest following the 2009 twentieth anniversary of the wall’s demolition. *Das Land, das es nicht gibt* (The Land That Didn’t Exist) by Peter Auge Lorenz was published in 2013, *Drüben!* (The Other Side of the Wall) by Simon Schwartz was published in 2009, and *Berlin: Geteilte Stadt* (Berlin: A Divided City) was published in 2012. The books deal with everyday life, familial impact, personal conflicts, and attempts to escape, all from an Eastern German perspective. Exploring this past is not uncommon, but its application to the comic book format is somewhat unique, which brings up a wide variety of questions about Germany history, general memoirs, and the historical and memoir comic format.

## Literature Review

### *Issues of Germany History and Memory in Media*

Understanding how these comics address the issues of a divided past cannot be done without exploring Germany's unique struggles with its World War II history and separation, as well as how they have previously been addressed in traditional German media. The combination of *Erinnerungskultur* (culture of memory), a recent "openness and willingness to right past wrongs" after years of silence,<sup>1</sup> and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a mastery of or coming to terms with the past,<sup>2</sup> has resulted in more "museum exhibits, memorials, popular and scholarly historical works, films, and literary texts" that deal with WWII and the Nazi time period.<sup>3</sup> In the past seventy years, the focus on German memory has shifted to a discussion of "collective memory as a normative discourse of shared values and cultural identity," which can also be seen in the subject of separation.<sup>4</sup>

Germany as a whole has huge cultural traumas to overcome, but specific questions about recording memory are raised with respects to former Eastern Germany, or the German Democratic Republic (GDR). As a failed country, the preservation of its past has become "controversial" as Germans try to decide "who should own this memory and how this memory will be constructed."<sup>5</sup> As is traditional when one country falls to another, the West German victors' view has been given the most attention. Instead of including an Eastern German

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<sup>1</sup> Jill E. Twark is an Associate Professor of German and East Carolina University. See: Twark, J. E., & Northeast Modern Language Association, (2011). *Strategies of Humor in Post-unification German Literature, Film, and Other Media*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Page 8.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia P. Brodsky is a Professor of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Missouri, Kansas. See: Brodsky, P. P. (1996). *Dressed Like A Soldier: World War II In Central Europe in Two GDR Novels*. *Symposium*, 49(4), 250. Page 250.

<sup>3</sup> Twark 8

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Littler is a professor of German Literature at the University of Manchester. See: Littler, M. (2007). *Cultural memory and identity formation in the Berlin Republic*. In S. Taberner (Ed.), *Contemporary German Fiction*. 177-195. Cambridge: University Press. Page 177.

<sup>5</sup> Katharina Gerstenberger is an associate professor of German at the University of Cincinnati. See: Gerstenberger, K. (2008). *Writing the New Berlin: The German Capital in Post-Wall Literature*. New York: Camden House. Page 109.

perspective, most representations focus on “the victory of democracy over Communism” and on “inherently” Western German values.<sup>6</sup> The wall itself was “for a long time dominated by western triumphalism.”<sup>7</sup> Memorial events, including the twentieth anniversary, celebrate the event but do not acknowledge the “bittersweet memories” that can come for former Eastern Germans, as “only a minority of the population took part” in dismantling the wall and many experienced “a sense of disappointment” in West German life.<sup>8</sup> While Western Germany was portrayed as a *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle), Eastern Germans did not always receive the “material comforts and benefits” they expected in the west.<sup>9</sup> While there have been more efforts to include a “more coordinated and multifaceted approach” to the wall memorial, Professor of History at the University of Edinburgh Pertti Ahnon calls the wall “not politically neutral, with the prime focus still on the wall as a symbol of repression and injustice.”<sup>10</sup> Ultimately in media and history, Eastern Germany has been portrayed through a Western perspective partially “because the media discourse is largely dominated by Westerners.”<sup>11</sup> These portrayals are then generally simplified in two ways. Eastern Germany is either shown as an “exotic” other or as entirely “characterized by the Stasi, the wall, the doping and the Stalinist ideology.”<sup>12</sup>

Part of the hesitancy to include Eastern German perspectives has come from a fear of *Ostalgie*, or nostalgia for and “supposed sentimental attachment” to East Germany, according to

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<sup>6</sup> Nick Hodgkin and Caroline Pearce are both professors in the Department of Germanic Studies at the University of Sheffield. See: Hodgkin, N., & Pearce, C. (Eds.). (2011). *The GDR Remembered: Representations of the East German State since 1989*. (N. Hodgkin & C. Pearce, Eds.) (Vol. 106). Boydell & Brewer.

<sup>7</sup> Hodgkin and Pearce, 2011, p. 8-9

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.2

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 9

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 11

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Grüning is an Adjunct Professor and Research Fellow at the Department of Philosophy and Communication Studies at the University of Bologna. See: Grüning, B. (2010). The art of narrating and the question of cultural acknowledgment: the case of Die Kinder von Golzow and a reunified Germany. *Sociological Review Monograph*, 5844-59. Page 45.

Jason James, an Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology.<sup>13</sup> When *Ostalgie* is used in Western media, it is not as a recognition of the Eastern German experience, but as “a way of defining a Western German identity as a counter to that in the east.”<sup>14</sup> Though Eastern German representation may not be entirely fair in Western media, there are many films, books, and other sources of media that do show the Eastern perspective.

Despite fears of *Ostalgie* and dormant communism, Eastern German creators typically show a nuanced approach, often including personal reflection.<sup>15</sup> In literature, this includes work that utilizes “documentary texts, diaries and interviews, fiction, and poetry.” Protagonists deal with complex issues of integration, exploring the “political, economic, and physical” aspects, as well as a struggle to “understand” the GDR.<sup>16</sup> Films also address similar questions. Gabriele Mueller, an Associate Professor of German Studies, found that in these movies, many teenage characters having a “oppressor-victim dichotomy characterizing the East German state. . . projected onto family relationships.”<sup>17</sup> Additionally, they employ border crossings to “examine West German or Western values,” often through coming of age stories.<sup>18</sup> However, Professor of Germany History Mary Fulbrook raises questions about the legitimacy of some Eastern German memoirs and autobiographies, as most “have been written by young authors (born in the late 1960s, or in the 70s or 80s)” who “offer a retrospectively imagined eastern German state, whether self-consciously or not.”<sup>19</sup> Even so, given the wide variety of opinions, experiences, and

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<sup>13</sup> Jason James is an associate professor at the University of Mary Washington. See: James, J. (2010). Coming to terms through Cinema: The Lives of Others in Germany's Cultural Landscape of Memory. *Journal Of The Society For The Anthropology Of Europe (JSAE)*, 10(2), 29-40. Page 29.

<sup>14</sup> Hodgkin and Pearce, 2011, p.11

<sup>15</sup> Gerstenberger, 2008, p.109

<sup>16</sup> Gerstenberger, 2008, p.109

<sup>17</sup> Gabriele Mueller is an Associate Professor at York University. See: Mueller, G. (2008). Going East, Looking West: Border Crossings in Recent German Cinema. *Seminar -- A Journal Of Germanic Studies*, 44(4), 453-469. Page 454.

<sup>18</sup> Mueller, 2008, p. 455

<sup>19</sup> Mary Fulbrook is a professor at the University College London. See: Hodgkin and Pearce 12

perspectives that Eastern German media offers, very few could simply be characterized as wistfully idealizing the former state. Therefore, the delicacy of German history, cultural memory, and consequential questions of identity make historical GDR comics an especially interesting niche and area for analyzing historical portrayal.

### *General Memoirs, Historical Comics, and Memoir Comics*

Schwartz, Lorenz, Buddenberg, and Henseler's works, while commendable, are far from the first of their kind. Historical and memoir comics have been well populated and closely examined sub-genres. Traditional memoirs themselves as a genre also offer a rich history of analysis that is applicable in this study. Understanding how these niches have been used in the past gives important insight into how the three GDR comics can be analyzed.

Historically, memoirs have been sometimes used as propaganda, which can be seen in post-WWII Bulgarian soldiers' accounts of war. Through these memoirs, the stories created both an explanation of the war and showed heroes who embodied communist values.<sup>20</sup> The books focused on detailed battles in order to "convey the idea of 'authenticity' through the reporting of directly observed events." Similarly, the GDR also used documentaries as propaganda, utilizing the appearance of truth to relay an ideological message.<sup>21</sup> While powerful, these so-called "historical" sources are generally the exception to the rule. Memoir, especially following important events, can also give insight to important cultural issues and anxieties. For example, Romanian Literature specialist Nicoleta Ifrim explains that post-communist Romanian memoirs

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<sup>20</sup> Nikolai Vukov is a researcher at the Centre for Advanced Study Sofia (CAS), a center studying Humanities and Social Sciences. Vukov is a professor at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, specializing in history, identities, and culture Southeast Europe. See: Vukov, N. (2015). The war experience as a 'recent past': Memoirs, witness accounts and modes of representing the Second World War in Bulgaria during the 1940s and 1950s. *Portuguese Journal Of Social Science*, 14(1), 39-56.

<sup>21</sup> Grüning, 2010, p. 46

and autobiographies dealt with questions of identity and a “memory of history” that was “rewritten” and “relived” through writing.<sup>22</sup> Though one of these memoir niches is more accurate than another, both have important historical and political value.

Additionally, as a genre, memoir and nonfiction have a specific power in their ability to develop a connection with the reader. In comparison to fiction, sociocultural anthropologist Amy Malek argues memoirs “can’t do without” this relationship.<sup>23</sup> According to Nancy K. Miller, a Professor of English and Contemporary Literature, with a memoir, readers “can’t help but remember [their] own: [their] parents, [their] love affairs, [their] ambitions.”<sup>24</sup> Because of this connection, Miller argues that memoir ultimately serves as a “narrative” that helps readers “make sense of [their] own past.”<sup>25</sup> In contrast, while nonfiction can have this effect on the reader, it brings in another issue of authenticity not found in the memoir genre. A biography or historical account introduces a second person, a layer of perspective between the actor and the reader, which can subtly reshape the message.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, comics written to describe historical events always reflect the author’s perspective and time period.<sup>27</sup>

However, historical comics in general tend to be simplified. For example, Kees Ribbens, a professor of Popular Historical Culture and War, found that WWII comics from a variety of European countries all had clear, black and white story lines about conflicts between “good

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<sup>22</sup> Nicoleta D. Ifrim is a professor of Romanian Literature at the University Dunarea de Jos of Galati. See: Ifrim, N. D. (2014). History and Identity in Post-Totalitarian Memoir Writing in Romanian. *Cleweb: Comparative Literature & Culture: A Web Journal*, 16(1), 1-8. Page 1.

<sup>23</sup> Amy Malek is a sociocultural anthropologist. She is currently a visiting lecturer in Anthropology Scripps College. See: Malek, A. (2006). Memoir as Iranian exile cultural production: A case study of Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis series. *Iranian Studies*, 39(3), 353-380. Page 366.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy Miller is a professor at the Graduate Center, CUNY. See: Miller, N. K. (2000). But enough about me, what do you think of my memoir?. *The Yale Journal of Criticism*. 13 (2). 421-436. Retrieved [https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/yale\\_journal\\_of\\_criticism/v013/13.2miller.pdf](https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/yale_journal_of_criticism/v013/13.2miller.pdf). Page 423.

<sup>25</sup> Miller, 2000, p. 430

<sup>26</sup> Jenny Simeus is a PhD student of English at the Linnaeus University. See: Simeus, J. (2015). Collaboratively writing a self: textual strategies in Margaret McCord's *The Calling of Katie Makanya: A Memoir of South Africa*. *Research In African Literatures*, (2), 70. 72-73.

<sup>27</sup> Ribbens, K. (2010). World War II in European Comics: National Representations of Global Conflict in Popular Historical Culture. *International Journal Of Comic Art*, 12(1), 1-33. Page 2.

guys” and “bad guys.”<sup>28</sup> In contrast, memoir comics as a genre tend to be much more nuanced. As English professor Nancy Pedri argues, like prose memoirs, comic memoirs are not necessarily entirely truthful, but have an “expectation” of truthfulness and legitimate experiences where readers “assume the author has included only events she believes to have occurred, narrated as occurring in the order in which she believes them to have occurred.”<sup>29</sup> While comic memoir authors have to cut material to best tell the story,<sup>30</sup> according to artist Ellen Forney, the genre has a certain strength in its ability to convey the mood of an experience better than prose.<sup>31</sup>

### *Techniques Used in Memoir Comics*

Because memoir comics involve both the artist’s story and personal portrayal of themselves, special attention should be paid to their illustrations, especially because “nearly anything is possible in a drawing.”<sup>32</sup> Instead of always drawing themselves simply and efficiently, artists often use more complicated images to show metaphors or the experience’s effects.<sup>33</sup> Drawing with plasticity or caricatures can show emotional responses, mythic dream

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<sup>28</sup> Ribbens, 2010, p. 3

<sup>29</sup> Nancy Pedri is a Professor of English at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. She studies visualization and gender. See: Pedri, N. (2013). *Graphic Memoir: Neither Fact Nor Fiction*. In Thon, J., & Stein, D. (Ed.) *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels : Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Berlin: De Gruyter. Page 127.

<sup>30</sup> William Bradley is a Professor of English at St. Lawrence University who studies creative nonfiction and popular culture. See: Bradley, W. (2013). *Graphic Memoirs Come of Age*. *Fourth Genre: Explorations In Nonfiction*, 15 (1). 161-165. Page 163.

<sup>31</sup> Courtney Donovan Professor of Health Geography at San Francisco State University and she specializes in visual communication and art therapy’s effects on health. See: Donovan, C.(2014). *Representations of Health, Embodiment, and Experience in Graphic Memoir*. *Configurations* 22(2), 237-253. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved December 17, 2015, from Project MUSE database.

<sup>32</sup> Adrielle Anna Mitchell is an Associate Professor of English who specializes in comics. She teaches at Nazareth College. See: Mitchell, A. a. (2010). *Distributed identity: networking image fragments in graphic memoirs*. *Studies In Comics*, 1(3), 257-279.

<sup>33</sup> Mitchell, 2010, p. 258



sequences communicate internal conflicts, and a highly detailed background instead of a simple one gives clues at the setting's importance to the character.<sup>34</sup>

In the example of *Persepolis*, a similar historical memoir comic, Malek points out that Marjane Satrapi's simple characters evoke Scott McCloud's idea of icons, which states that comics function as stripped-down version of any human face. These images are successful because readers recognize themselves in those images.<sup>35</sup> As a result, the reader "feels sympathy, pain, and anger, but not the gruesomeness."<sup>36</sup> According to Malek, the simple drawings also allow for discussion of "taboo issues" like "the reality of torture, war, and exile while insisting on making them palatable."<sup>37</sup> Similarly, English professor Julia Emberley argues Satrapi's inclusion of her childhood self creates a powerful juxtaposition between "childhood innocence" and political problems, especially "violence towards children and youth."<sup>38</sup> In an interpretation of Lauren Berlant's theory of infantile citizenship, Professors Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall explain that children can be used in works as a "stand-in for a complicated and contradictory set of anxieties and desires about national identity."<sup>39</sup> Additionally, as a historical memoir comic, Satrapi uses her narrative to "emphasize both important moments of truth and self-reflection in her life, as well as important moments of national self-reflection in the history of Iran,"<sup>40</sup> which can easily be seen in the German comics.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid 259-277

<sup>35</sup> Scott McCloud is the author of many comics and is a world-renowned comic expert. See: McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperCollins. 29-36.

<sup>36</sup> Malek, 2006, p. 372

<sup>37</sup> Malek, 2006, p. 372

<sup>38</sup> Julia Emberley is a professor of English at the University of Western Ontario. See: Emberley, J. (2009). This is not a game: testimony and the making and unmaking of the child as a political subject. *Humanities Research*, 15(3), 133-152. Page 135.

<sup>39</sup> Leigh Gilmore is a visiting professor at Brown University in the English Department who studies Feminist Theory and Memoir. Elizabeth Marshall is a Professor of Education at Simon Fraser University specializing in popular culture. See: Gilmore, L. I., & Marshall, E. B. (2013). Trauma and Young Adult Literature: Representing adolescence and knowledge in David Small's *Stitches: A Memoir*. *Prose Studies*, 35(1), 16-38.

<sup>40</sup> Malek, 2006, p. 378

In order to address the issue of accountability and accuracy in memoirs, artists also use various techniques. In Allison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Pedri points out that Bechdel consistently uses the phrase "I think" to "expose her awareness that the 'facts' about her life are merely what she perceives to be true," which actually "builds credibility."<sup>41</sup> Other authors, including *Maus*'s Art Spiegelman, have used photographs, which bring an implied truth.<sup>42</sup> However, the emphasis is ultimately not on exact truth but on the author's personal experience and interpretation, which is communicated through artistic style.<sup>43</sup>

### Research Question and Methodology

Given the complications of Germany cultural history and the uses and techniques of memoir, historical comic, and memoir comic genres, analyzing Schwartz, Lorenz, Buddenberg and Henseler's works raises interesting questions about the perspectives the books include. In these comics, how do authors address issues of fair portrayals of the GDR, specifically when describing everyday life and establishing the legitimacy of personal anecdotes to tell these stories? Do they follow the conventional black and white portrayals or are they more nuanced?

To answer these questions, this study looks at three elements. First, what is the story's approach to history? What experiences does the comic claim to represent? Does the comic focus on one person's experience, a whole family's, or a variety of characters? Are these experiences supposed to represent the East German experience as a whole? Second, what was the author's approach to historical accuracy? What lengths did they go through to make sure their story was portrayed fairly? Were research, interviews, or editors involved? Did anyone else corroborate their stories? Finally, how did the authors portray themselves or their characters as trustworthy

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<sup>41</sup> Pedri, 2013, p. 130-133

<sup>42</sup> Ibid 137-138

<sup>43</sup> Ibid 145

sources? What character perspective did they choose to utilize and how were these characters drawn? Was the focus on realism or portraying the emotional experience, and what are the implications of accuracy based on those decisions?

Schwartz, Lorenz, Buddenberg, and Henseler's three comic books were chosen as a sample for multiple reasons. First and foremost, access to German comics in the United States is relatively difficult and these three were more readily available, which is an inherent limitation of this study. However, each comic brings a unique approach to a very specific niche. Simon Schwartz directly examines his family's experience escaping the GDR, Peter Auge Lorenz only recalls limited personal anecdotes about life in Eastern Germany all centered around a theme, and Buddenberg and Henseler recount five very different personal stories. Additionally, while Schwartz's and Lorenz's works fit easily into the historical memoir comic genre, Buddenberg and Henseler's stories are clearly not memoirs, as they do not portray their own experience. Even so, they can be included in this study because of their very personal exploration of individual citizens' experiences with the GDR in a comic format. The books were also chosen to include a variety of perspectives on Eastern Germany. Both Simon Schwartz and Peter Auge Lorenz offer an Eastern German perspective, but where Lorenz was born in 1963 and raised in the GDR,<sup>44</sup> Schwartz was only born in the GDR in 1982 and was raised in Berlin-Kreuzberg, part of the Western half of the city.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, Susanne Buddenberg and Thomas Henseler represent a Western German perspective, as they went to the University of Aachen and were not born in the

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<sup>44</sup> Lütthge, K. (2013, September 6). Von Ostkindern und Hansakeksen. *Berliner Zeitung*. Retrieved from <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/berlin/portraet-peter--auge--lorenz-von-ostkindern-und-hansakeksen,10809148,24230848.html>

<sup>45</sup> Schwartz, S. (2009). *Drüben!* Berlin: Avant-Verlag.

GDR.<sup>46</sup> Finally, all three books deal specifically with Berlin, which makes their comparison both easier and more interesting.

### Findings

First, the comics' approaches to history and what aspects to portray were very different. Schwartz explored his parents' decision to leave and the impact both on him as a child and their family as a whole. Through this narrative, he showed censorship of academics, college students' coming of age in an oppressive government, the difficulty of escaping, citizens who embraced socialism, and the separation of families by the border. Though the story focuses on one family's experience, it addresses a wide variety of aspects of life. In contrast, Lorenz only discusses his own memories in a collection of short anecdotes that sometimes feel more like inside jokes than reflections on history. While Lorenz makes general statements about everyday life, including children's war games, seeing violence in the streets, joining the military, and confusing hints about the Stasi, they are more focused on his personal experience rather than representing Eastern Germany as a whole. This distinction between Schwartz and Lorenz is mostly due to their difference in explanation. While Schwartz explains decades of backstory to the reader, Lorenz leaves his comic at short, unelaborated memoirs. In contrast, Buddenberg and Henseler have the broadest attempt at history, partially because their comic is a historical retelling instead of a memoir. In this collection of stories, they include a wide variety of stories dealing with a student having to escape, nurses working at a hospital near the border, a family's dramatic border crossing, another student's obsession with the wall and Stasi interrogation, and a teenager whose birthday was on the same day as the wall's demolition. These stories are a clear attempt to portray many aspects of Eastern German life.

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<sup>46</sup> Buddenberg, S. and Henseler, T. (2012). *Berlin: Geteilte Stadt*. Avant-Verlag. Page 97.

Second, all four authors had dramatically different approaches to historical research. While Schwartz, Buddenberg, and Henseler have all described their methods in interviews, Lorenz has not discussed it. Unlike the other two comics, *Das Land* also does not include historical asides or descriptions of political events at the time. Lorenz's foreword gives the most insight into his method, describing the comic as just "a few thoughts and stories" that he and his friends sometimes tell when they are together. The book is an attempt to describe "the country that didn't exist," a reference to his title, which he explains as the limited understanding of the world that he had as a child.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the stories are just based on his memories and personal experiences and probably did not require much historical research. Where Lorenz apparently did the least amount of research, Schwartz did a little bit more. In an interview with Splash Comics, he explains that while he "wusste das zum größten Teil schon" (already knew the biggest pieces), he did not know the "27 Jahren irendwo im Hintergrund" (twenty-seven years of background history) or exactly "warum [sein] Vater schließlich gesagt hat: 'Jetzt reicht's!'" (why [his] father finally said, 'Enough!'). To fill in these missing pieces, he "[hat] [sein] Eltern zwar wirklich noch einmal interview, aber das war mehr so ein Nachfragen bei bestimmten Dingen, um Fakten zu checken" (interviewed his parents again, but more as follow-up questions to fact-check specific things).<sup>48</sup> Therefore, Schwartz widely relied on interviews with his parents and his own memories rather than including historical research to corroborate this family history.

In contrast, Buddenberg and Henseler did extensive research to portray their stories as accurately as possible. As they explain in an article with Comic Gate, they only chose stories where the protagonists, or *Zeitzeugen* (witnesses of the time), were still alive and available for

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<sup>47</sup> Lorenz, P. (2013). *Das Land, das es nicht gibt*. Berlin: Jaja Verlag. Page 4.

<sup>48</sup> Hofmann, M. (2012, January 22). Von der ehemaligen DDR zum Nordpol—Interview mit Simon Schwartz. [Web log post]. Retrieved from [http://www.splashcomics.de/php/specials/seiten/5588/von\\_der\\_ehemaligen\\_ddr\\_zum\\_nordpol\\_interview\\_mit\\_simon\\_schwartz](http://www.splashcomics.de/php/specials/seiten/5588/von_der_ehemaligen_ddr_zum_nordpol_interview_mit_simon_schwartz).

interviews. These subjects acted as “historische Berater” (historical consultants) and even checked the scripts for their stories to make sure they were “auf dem richtigen Weg” (on the right path). Additionally, by only choosing stories that dealt with geographic locations that are still standing today, Buddenberg and Henseler were able to revisit the scenes, even taking a tour of one building that was key to an escape story. In addition to family photos that the subjects supplied, the authors also spent weeks searching for “Materialien und Quellen” (materials and sources).<sup>49</sup> The extreme attention to facts and background can not only be seen in the stories themselves, but also in two-page summaries that follow all five accounts and explain the historical and political issues the story discussed.

Finally, the artists also used a variety of techniques to portray the characters as legitimate sources to tell their stories. Both Schwartz and Lorenz utilize simple, cartoonish characters, where Buddenberg and Henseler use highly detailed drawings with shading and clothing wrinkles. For Lorenz, his child-like characters continue to communicate to the reader that his stories are limited and only apply to his life. Instead of focusing on ultimate truth and accuracy, his art is evocative, playing to the emotional experience of the stories. The drawings feel like a dream or memory, also highlighting the distance between Lorenz in the GDR and Lorenz today. While Schwartz’s characters are also simple, they are stylized in a crisper, more graphic way. In addition, his backgrounds are extremely detailed and very realistic, which create a sharp contrast to Lorenz’s simplified, often partially blank backgrounds. Additionally, where Lorenz’s drawings function more as cartoon characters, Schwartz’s are consistently identifiable, but more detailed, showing changes in clothing and hairstyle over the course of their lives.

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<sup>49</sup> Muschweck, C. (2013, January 12). Deutsch-deutsche Geschichten: Interview mit Thomas Henseler und Susanne Buddenberg. *ComicGate*. Retrieved from <http://archiv.comicgate.de/Interviews/deutsch-deutsche-geschichten-interview-mit-thomas-henseler-und-susanne-buddenberg.html>.

Again, Buddenberg and Henseler's work appears on the opposite end of the spectrum, with lots of details included in characters' clothing and faces, as well as their backgrounds. Additionally, *Berlin* is the only book to make use of photographs, diagrams, and maps both in the stories and in the historical discussions afterwards. Where Schwartz's story combines emotional experiences with concrete details and Lorenz emphasizes personal memory, Buddenberg and Henseler focus every aspect of art and character portrayal to emphasize historical accuracy, even using their interview subjects as direct models for the characters' appearance.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, all three comics are similar in their character representations in that they focus on young characters as protagonists for their narratives. In this way, the comics can be direct applications of Berlant's theory of infantile citizenship as a reflection of "national identity" questions and "anxieties."<sup>51</sup> Additionally, though some memoir comic artists use visual metaphors and fantastic elements to portray their experiences, none of these three books used that technique. Instead, they remained firmly in the realm of concrete representations of events.

## Discussion

Though many comic memoirs utilize some visual metaphors, these three books were very traditional, preferring concrete depictions rather than experimental art, perhaps because of their serious nature and the controversial history of GDR experience portrayal. Unlike most memoir comics, these books tell personal stories that speak to an entire generation's political experience, one that deeply affected German history and identity. Instead of emphasizing an individual perspective, the stories are straightforward and give serious weight to historical accuracy.

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<sup>50</sup> Muschweck 2013

<sup>51</sup> Gilmore and Marshall, 2013, p. 21

However, the way each author addressed the question of historical portrayal of the GDR varied. The three books actually formed a consistent scale, from Lorenz to Schwartz to Buddenberg and Henseler, with Lorenz being the most liberal and the *Berlin* pair being the most thoroughly researched. This comparison is to be expected, both because *Berlin* has a more historical objective with its inclusion of textbook-style explanations and also because it is not a memoir. Even so, given that it deals with individual's experiences and the authors worked so closely with their subjects, they could have taken a more emotional route, at least in artistic style. Therefore, this difference is also based on some recognition of author perspective. It is no mistake that the book with the most intense focus on exact historical accuracy rather than just personal storytelling authority came from West German authors. In contrast, Lorenz, who spent the most time in the GDR by decades, is not very concerned with research, artistic realism, or speaking to a general population's history. Instead, he lets his biography and personal experience act as its own validation of accuracy and a fair portrayal.

Interestingly, it is also both Eastern German authors who use simple, cartoon characters. Like Marjane Satrapi applies McCloud's ideas of an iconic character to *Persepolis*, Lorenz and Schwartz also use this technique in their works. By using simple images, the reader can connect to the comic character because the character's icon relates to "our perceived icon of ourselves."

<sup>52</sup> In this way, the reader experiences more empathy with the character.<sup>53</sup> Instead of only building empathy through the details of the characters' lives, Schwartz and Lorenz make their characters—and therefore, their stories—seem more real. Additionally, since readers identify with these simple characters, the figures have an inherent trustworthiness that plays an important role in validating the stories' portrayal. By combining this artistic technique with memoir's

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<sup>52</sup> Joseph Darda is a University of Connecticut English doctoral candidate. See: Darda, J. (2013). Graphic Ethics: Theorizing the Face in Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis.". *College Literature*, 40(2), 31-51. Page 39.

<sup>53</sup> Darda, 2013, p. 39



already unique potential for a connection to the reader, Schwartz and Lorenz create a powerful testimony to their stories' legitimacy.

Buddenberg and Henseler also appeal to their stories' accuracy through their character depictions, but do so by reiterating concrete accuracy in highly detailed drawings. As a result, these characters seem more like real people, but they are kept at a distance from readers, who cannot as easily picture themselves as those characters. This distance can be partially attributed to the distance of time and historical emphasis the entire comic has. However, the authors' Western German perspective may also play a role. Despite more than twenty years of reunification, some distinctions between East and West Germany remain. In 2010, people still referred to each other as "Ossis" (from the German word *Ost*, or East) and "Wessies" and even at that time, people were occasionally denied jobs because of coming from the East.<sup>54</sup> This is not to imply that Buddenberg and Henseler are similarly prejudiced, rather to point out that some possibly subconscious divisions between Eastern and Western Germans still exist. In drawing their characters in a very realistic way, Buddenberg and Henseler create a line between not only the reader and the characters, but also themselves and the characters. The characters are very much their own individuals and distinctly representations of others. As a result, the detailed drawings may speak to still-existing, subtle divisions of identity.

Finally, the use of young protagonists is the most powerful similarity between the three comics. Because the stories are told from a young perspective, they offer a very specific piece of history. By focusing on young people and their inherent symbolism of hope, they authors speak to an entire disillusioned generation questioning the GDR. Having older protagonists, like Schwartz's grandparents who only play a supporting role, could include supporters of the GDR. Telling these older citizens' stories might make the portrayal of both those characters and the

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<sup>54</sup> Hodgin and Pearce, 2011, p. 3

government more complicated. Instead, the authors all use the safe, standard approach to criticizing the GDR by using characters that do it for them.

In a way, these characters can be seen as applications of infantile citizenship, as they do embody the “anxieties” of “national identity” during a confusing period of history. However, they do not fully fit English professor Lauren Berlant’s original theory because she describes infantile citizenship characters as “eliciting scorn and cynicism from ‘knowing’ adults who try to humiliate them” in response to their naiveté.<sup>55</sup> Instead, the German comic characters represent this national anxiety by questioning the GDR, noting strange comments a friend makes, or watching a friend get expelled from university for suggesting improvements. As students, their curiosity plays an important the narrative role of critiquing the GDR. As young people, they fundamentally represent the idea of coming-of-age, realizing realities of the world, and changing them.

In *Das Land*, Lorenz recounts parts of his life in the GDR, from being a child to a nineteen-year-old in military service. By the end of the issue, Lorenz is young and suspicious, no longer playing childhood military games in basements without a thought to politics or reality. He is unsure of the truth and trustworthiness, but the issue ends with him both experiencing strange aspects of East German life and first discovering the comic scene. Though Schwartz’s family experienced censorship, threats and intimidation, and being disowned by his father’s parents for leaving the GDR, the book ends with baby Simon given a new life in the West. *Berlin* ends with the uplifting story of a boy whose eighteenth birthday falls on the same day the Wall is finally opened up in 1989. Ultimately, these young characters and their stories act as a classic symbol of hope and something better—namely, life in West—or a unified—Germany.

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<sup>55</sup> Lauren Berlant is an English Professor at the University of Chicago. See: Berlant, L. (1993). The Theory of Infantile Citizenship. *Public Culture*. 5 (3). 395-410. Page 399

Though these comic books attempt different descriptions of history, come from different angles, and use different methods of narrative storytelling, the reader comes away with very similar messages. This research suggests that though historical portrayals of the GDR is a carefully addressed topic in German media, resulting depictions are generally similar, at least in this limited sample. Measuring factual accuracy is not the purpose of this study. Instead, given the historically controversial portrayal of Eastern German life through a Western German perspective, the three comics were examined as to how they attempted fair portrayals both through background research, the story's characters, resulting narrative. Interestingly, the book from the most "pure" historical source actually has the least historical weight. While *Das Land* is useful as a memoir and reflection on a historical time period, it mostly hints at themes and political issues through connected short stories, rather than describe an experience with an overarching narrative. Lorenz may have done this because as an Eastern German author, he has an innate validity to his work.

Where Schwartz and Buddenberg and Henseler include more deliberate attempts at an accurate portrayal, all three are similar in an interesting exclusion. Critics have accused other media of only representing the division in a black and white, simplified way. Despite coming from authentic or heavily researched sources, these comics still fall into traditional depictions of GDR history as either an "exotic other" or entirely dominated by the Stasi and the wall.<sup>56</sup> Even Lorenz's work does not include any positive to living in the GDR. Like most other works, the three comics only focus on the negatives, despite the unification often being a "bittersweet" experience for Eastern Germans.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, though there were many disappointments and problems with reunification, the comics also do not explore the difficulty of new life in Western

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<sup>56</sup> Grüning, 2010, p. 45

<sup>57</sup> Hodgin and Pearce, 2011, p. 1-2

Germany and the struggles of reunification. Instead, to Schwartz, Lorenz, Buddenberg, and Henseler, Western Germany is still a redeeming savior with Eastern Germany being a punishing land without any benefits. While it is difficult to celebrate aspects of an oppressive state when compared to a prospering, free country, everyday life was not as clear-cut as these media portrayals suggest.

As a result, this study concludes that despite coming from an Eastern German perspective, being carefully researched, and being produced in a unique comic format, representations of the GDR still follow standard conventions, both in the factually focused history comic and individual-centered memoir comics. These standard accounts fit into the traditionally simplified historical comic genre and may be examples of Fulbrook's conclusion that memoirs from younger generations actually include a reimagined GDR. Having been born in 1982, Schwartz falls directly into this category, but Lorenz, born in 1963, should not. Perhaps, then, the findings speak to a broader nature of German media and what consumers are interested in seeing. Could this mean that there is little to no market for media with a more nuanced portrayal of the GDR, even twenty years later? This study suggests that earlier findings about Eastern German portrayal in media are still valid, even when portrayed from an individual's perspective or when based on extensive research, and even when done in a different format. Ultimately, these portrayals are East Germany's legacy, at least in popular culture and the German cultural identity and memory.

### Conclusion

More than twenty years after the Berlin Wall fell, Germany is still dealing with the separation's effects on its country, its people, and their collective memory. While questions have

been raised about the fairness of a simplified, mostly Western-dominated portrayals of Eastern Germany, an analysis of three historical and memoir comics depicting life in the GDR shows that the “good vs. bad” dynamic has not changed over the years.

Given the recent attention on victor-dominated media and controversies about creating appropriate GDR memorials, the study explored how issues of historical legitimacy and perspective were addressed by authors of the comics *Das Land, das es nicht gibt, Drüben!*, and *Berlin: Geteilte Stadt*. By looking at the stories’ approach to history and the experiences they claimed to represent, the research authors did to involve factual accuracy, and the portrayal of the self or characters as authoritative sources, the study found that while the comics varied in their attention to legitimizing their portrayal of history, they included similar messages for the reader. These findings suggest that these three components were not as imperative to determining a balanced portrayal as originally thought.

Additionally, the fact that all three books had similarly negative depictions of the GDR, despite the inclusion of two Eastern German authors, offers insight into German media culture as a whole. Recognizing that the same messages are repeated in various works hints at an interesting lack of variety in perspective. Though media messages are always important in building a cultural identity, media dealing with history are especially influential, as “many young Germans increasingly gain their perspectives on the GDR from sources including books, films, museums and the media.” As a result, “those who transmit cultural memory have a responsibility to present a non-biased approach,” though this is not generally realistic.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, as these portrayals of the GDR become imbedded in cultural identity and mass media, they spread across borders to become an international version of history. While negative portrayals of an oppressive

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<sup>58</sup> Hodgkin and Pearce, 2011, p. 14

regime are not the biggest problems with today's media, the quiet implication of a broad simplification of international history is important to note.

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