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The Most Godless Region of the World:

Atheism in East Germany

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“*There was once a time when all believed in God and the church ruled. This time was called the Dark Ages.*”¹

Some say that religion is an essential part of human nature. Statistics and history would generally support this conjecture—religion and spirituality have been a part of mankind from the start, as far as the history books tell. From Aboriginal worship to institutionalized Christianity, religion has played a key role in the lives of those of the past. However, an assertion that religion, spirituality, or God is essential to *every* human being would prove false. As prevalent as many individual faiths, comes atheism. While a minority religious identity in both developed and developing countries, atheism still has teeth in the game. Its national presence currently ranges from 0.7% to 52.1% according to 2008 data, the lowest being in the Philippines and the highest in East Germany.² This dominance of atheism in East Germany materialized primarily within the span of 1945 to 1989, or the reign of the German Democratic Republic.³ The government’s enforced atheism led to a decrease in both available churches and in public yearning for spirituality, or in other words, the supply of and the demand for organized religion.⁴ The decline of religious supply and demand due to secularization and institutionalized anti-religious sentiment during the German Democratic Republic has caused East Germany to become the most atheistic region of the world.

In order to fully analyze the effects of the secularization in the German Democratic Republic, it is critical to clarify terms with often ambiguous or multiple definitions. For the purposes of this analysis, *East Germany* is defined as the geographical area under the jurisdiction

¹ Richard Lederer, “Atheist Quotes,” Ask Atheists, last modified December 15, 2013, <http://www.askatheists.com/atheist-quotes>.

² See Appendix Figure 1.

³ See Appendix Figure 2.

⁴ Paul Froese and Steven Pfaff, “Explaining a Religious Anomaly: A Historical Analysis of Secularization in Eastern Germany,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 4 (2005): 406, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3590554>.

of the German Democratic Republic from 1945 to 1989, commonly known as the land behind the “Iron Curtain.” It is used interchangeably with *German Democratic Republic*. *Secularization* refers to not only the separation of church and state, but the prevention of religion’s influence in government policy. *Religiosity* is determined by current subscription to a religious establishment, and/or inclination towards some form of spirituality, as well as potential to subscribe to a religious establishment. *Agnosticism* defines a present state of not participating in any established religion or spirituality, but the potential to either do so, or deny it altogether. Finally, *atheism* refers to one who rejects religion on the whole, without potential to participate or subscribe to any established religion or spirituality.⁵

In addition to understanding the language associated with this topic, it is essential that one comprehends the statistics that dictate and prove East Germany to be the most atheistic region of the world. Presently, 52.1% of East Germans, while only 10.3% of West Germans say “I don’t believe in God.”⁶ 54.2% of West Germans, while only 13.2% of East Germans say “I believe in God now and I always have.”⁷ 46.1% of East Germans, and only 4.9% of West Germans consider themselves “Strong Atheists.”⁸ While the Germanys on either side of the Berlin Wall have turned out similar culturally despite almost fifty years of separation, their spiritualities vary immensely. This phenomenon has been present since the German Democratic Republic’s infancy. In 1945, the percentage of East Germans attending religious services once or more per month hovered around 40%, while that of West Germans was closer to 80%.⁹ In 1989, at the end of the German Democratic Republic, West Germans attended religious services once

⁵ Ibid., 402.

⁶ See Appendix Figure 1.

⁷ Tom W. Smith, “Beliefs about God across Time and Countries,” *NORC/University of Chicago* (2012): 8, www.norc.org/PDFs/Beliefs_About_God_Report.pdf.

⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁹ See Appendix Figure 3.

or more per month approximately 40% of the time, while East Germans did so approximately 10% of the time.¹⁰ These numbers only increased in West Germany, while they continued to decrease in East Germany.¹¹

Before analyzing the causes of this gradual decrease in religious adherence, one must understand the historical context in which this decrease took place. The origins of the German Democratic Republic begin with the Yalta Conference on February 11, 1945. This conference secretly united the three Allied leaders, United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin.¹² After Germany surrendered, ending World War II on May 9, 1945, the Allies divided Germany amongst the United States of America, France, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, each with a portion of Berlin, the capitol.¹³ The American, French and British-ruled sectors of Germany united to create the Federal Republic of Germany, or West Germany on September 21st, 1949, as tensions with the Soviet-ruled territory rose.¹⁴ In response, the Soviet-ruled territory created the Democratic Republic of Germany on October 7th, 1949.¹⁵

The leadership of the young German Democratic Republic consisted of a President, Wilhelm Pieck, Prime Minister, Otto Grotewohl, and First Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party, Walter Ulbricht.¹⁶ The office of First Secretary had the most influence, making Ulbricht essentially the most powerful person in East Germany from 1949 to 1961. The era under his

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "The Yalta Conference, 1945," U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian, last modified December 3, 2010, history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/yalta-conf.

¹³ See Appendix Figure 4.

¹⁴ "A Guide to the United States' History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, since 1776: East Germany (German Democratic Republic)," U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian, last modified December 3, 2010, history.state.gov/countries/german-democratic-republic.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Alice Ladkin, "History of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) 1949-1990," Suite 101, last modified January 3, 2011, <http://suite101.com/a/history-of-the-german-democratic-republic-gdr-1949-1990-a327244>.

leadership is known as “the creation of the basis of socialism in Germany.”¹⁷ His Socialist Unity Party controlled East Germany, with state control of large industries, media, and most important to the rise of atheism, the church.¹⁸

The Berlin Wall was built in August of 1961 to impede the flow of refugees emigrating from the German Democratic Republic to West Germany, dividing the two territories.¹⁹ It successfully sealed off East from West Berlin.²⁰ It served as a symbol of the inability of East Germans to escape the effects of socialism.

In hopes of receiving asylum in West Germany, East Germans began to escape by storming West German Embassies in Prague and Budapest in 1989.²¹ News of these flights was broadcasted on West German television, viewed by many East Germans, causing tensions to rise in the German Democratic Republic. Many took part in large demonstrations in Leipzig, which were quickly dismembered forcibly by the East German secret service, the *Staatssicherheitsdienst*, or Stasi.²² When the Hungarian government opened its borders in September, tens of thousands of East Germans poured out of their country. On October 7th, East Berliners had a spontaneous demonstration in the center of the city, attracting several thousands.²³ In response, the police and Stasi beat and arrested over one thousand demonstrators, and were “humiliated, mistreated, denied food or use of toilets, and in some cases forced to stand for hours without moving or to run a gauntlet of police armed with clubs.”²⁴ This cruelty likely

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “East Germany begins construction of the Berlin Wall,” History Education, last modified 2013, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/east-germany-begins-construction-of-the-berlin-wall.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Belinda Cooper, *Policing in Central and Eastern Europe: Comparing Firsthand Knowledge with Experience from the West* (Slovenia: College of Police and Security Studies, 1996), <https://www.ncjrs.gov/policing/fall239.htm>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

lead to a crucial demonstration on October 9th. A typical Monday prayer service for peace in Leipzig turned into a demonstration drawing seventy thousand. While the police and Stasi were mobilized, last-minute intervention by prominent political figures kept the peace.²⁵ This was the beginning of change in East Germany, which ended the German Democratic Republic's reign with the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification of Germany in 1989.

The reign of the German Democratic Republic marked a period of repression and suffering for some East Germans, while it evoked nationalistic sentiment and intellectual prosperity for others. In times of oppression and hardship, or prosperity and lightheartedness, in economic destitute and in affluence, humans seem to naturally turn to religion as an answer. As indicated by previously stated statistics, this was not the case during the German Democratic Republic. Critical to the religiosity of any region is the supply of religious goods.²⁶ In economics, the supply of any product affects the number of consumers. High quality and appropriate quantity of goods become desirable. Low quality and undesirable quantities of goods do not cater to consumption.

Religion can be viewed through an economic lens, as an institution that provides *goods* to potential consumers. Religion, through its goods, remains the single vessel that can satiate certain human desires: those of an afterlife, existential security and reassurance,²⁷ and a sense of divine universal purpose. Thus, when the churches make these “goods” available, they provide religious supply. A religiously pluralist society, or one with a variety of religious institutions, tends to have more competition amongst churches. “To the degree that religious economies are

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Froese, 397.

²⁷ Ibid, 401.

unregulated and competitive, overall levels of religious commitment will be high.”²⁸ A religiously pluralist society creates competition among the religions. This makes the religious goods more desirable, as each religion’s individual offerings become seen as competitively better or worse than others’. It additionally caters to a greater consumer pool. A greater variety of religious goods are offered, increasing the number of people potentially desiring these goods. Supply-side theory suggests that the quality, quantity, and variety of religious goods indicate the religiosity of a region.

While supply-side theory accounts for the population of people in a given territory that could potentially subscribe to a religious institution, it assumes that everyone could be a potential consumer of religion. It focuses completely on religious supply, while neglecting to account for those who have no demand for religion. The two primary groups that do not participate in any organized religion are agnostics and atheists. Agnostics can be included in the potential consumer pool. Because their lack of certainty could result in an eventual bent towards religiosity, they could potentially become consumers. They simply have not found a religion that provides the religious goods that they desire, yet this is subject to change in the event of a religion emerging that does satiate their demand for specific religious goods.²⁹

Atheists, on the other hand, completely exit the religious marketplace—they are the catch. Unlike agnostics and religious adherents, they are not potential consumers of religious goods. They believe that religious goods have no intrinsic value, are worthless. They cannot be affected by supply-side theory because religious supplies are irrelevant to them.³⁰ Thus enters demand-side theory. Demand-side theory postulates that religiosity in a given region is product

²⁸ R. Stark and R. Fink, “Acts of Faith,” University of Berkley Press, 2000, quoted in Paul Froese and Steven Pfaff, “Explaining a Religious Anomaly: A Historical Analysis of Secularization in Eastern Germany,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 4 (2005): 406, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3590554>.

²⁹ Froese, 402.

³⁰ Ibid.

of the populace's demand for religious goods. Their lack of demand could be due to an innate disinterest, or because the demand is satisfied elsewhere.³¹

Supporters of the demand-side theory argue that demand-side theory disbands supply-side theory. Because supply-side theory does not include atheists, they argue that its presumptions become skewed.³² Contrarily, demand-side theory cannot exist without supply-side theory. While only demand can account for the atheists in a society, the agnostic and religious population cannot be accounted for unless a supply exists which provides them with the opportunity for religiosity, such as a church or a religious community. Potential religious consumers will not have demand when the supply is either low (a lack of religious pluralism or religious institutions in general) or spoiled (a religious supply that has particularly undesirable goods). Supply-side theory and demand-side theory are interdependent.

With this economic-religious model, one can analyze the ecclesial history of Eastern Germany through the lens of supply-side and demand-side theories. At the birth of the German Democratic Republic, religious participation was low in comparison to previous years, yet high when compared with its future. In 1950 over 92% of East Germans reported membership in a religious organization.³³ In contrast to this high level of identification, religiosity would severely decline in the coming four decades. The East German Communist Party would first institutionalize atheism and anti-religious sentiment, and then continue to secularize the country, decreasing the value of the religious goods supplied.³⁴

The initial governmental perception of religion in East Germany could not benefit any church. "Anti-religious regulations and the official promotion of an exclusive, socialist-inspired

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, 405.

³⁴ Ibid.

atheism devastated religion.”³⁵ The Communist Party made atheism the state religion, alienating every other faith as contrary to the government, and completely obliterating the religious supply. They announced scientific atheism as the official party policy in the late 1950s.³⁶ A lecture at the Free University of Berlin on “Marxism and Christianity” in West Germany in 1958 described communist atheism as “the elevation of logical rationalism and immanentism [the explanation of the world from within itself] into the dogma of a social-revolutionary system.”³⁷ This rationalism was the state-imposed alternative to religion. All religiously affiliated Communist Party members were forced to renounce their religion.³⁸

As Soviet authorities controlled East Germany, they laid the foundation for communist rule. This included preventing the reorganization of churches, potential threats to the success of communism, and removing religious instruction in the schools, or once again, depleting the religious supply.³⁹ The East German Communist Party attempted to push religion to the outskirts of society. From 1952 to 1953, they began a “de-churching” campaign, or *Kirchenkampf*. They disbanded Christian youth movements, banned many religious organizations and charities, and demolished historic churches, replaced with new socialist government buildings. Active churchgoers faced harassment and discrimination in the workplace, specifically if they had not become a confirmed Communist Party member.⁴⁰

The churches, too, did not take actions that benefited their social standing. While in the early days of the national division, Lutheran church officials resisted state pressure to cut ties with Western German churches, however, they eventually gave into the government’s wishes

³⁵ Ibid, 406.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Chr. Kaiser Verlag, *The Demands of Freedom: Papers by a Christian in West Germany*, trans. Robert W. Fenn (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1965), 137.

³⁸ Froese, 406.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

during the period of religious oppression from 1957 to 1958. The government also compelled the Catholic Church to accept reorganization that broke its organizational ties to Rome.⁴¹ These adaptations in the connections of the church reduced the perceived quality of its religious goods, accounting for a portion of the decline in subscription to religious institutions. A lack of association with the Pope or the rest of the Rome would have caused the church to have a lesser appeal to the religious consumer pool.

In 1968, it appeared that things could be looking up for religion in East Germany. The Communist Party of East Germany drafted a new constitution, promising “freedom of conscience and officially established...separation of church and state,”⁴² as compared to the previously institutionalized atheism. In response, the League of Evangelical churches drafted a “Church in Socialism” doctrine in 1971. This expressed a desire of the church to be a part of socialism, rather than against it. First Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party Erich Honecker endorsed this doctrine, and secured the cooperation of church leaders to strive for common political objectives. Roman Catholics regained ties with Rome.⁴³ Because of these strides, East Germany did see a rise in religious participation.⁴⁴ However, this rise was nominal. The lecture on “Marxism and Christianity” described the church as living in an “unstable, insecure position, in an atmosphere of vacillation between tolerance and opposition and in fear of what might happen.”⁴⁵ Evidently, while the church now received a level of tolerance, its position was tenuous and not without fear of a return to the previous oppression.

More than it increased religious participation, the League of Evangelical Churches’ new alliance with socialism neutralized its popular reputation. Soon after the “Church in Socialism”

⁴¹ Ibid, 409.

⁴² Ibid, 410.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See Appendix Figure 3, 1965-70.

⁴⁵ Verlag, 141.

doctrine was proposed in 1971, church attendance began to plummet once again. The Protestant church lost almost half of its members, and the Lutheran church attempted to stifle any political dissent in its affiliates, who yearned to voice their opposition to the unjust regime.⁴⁶ Yet, both churches failed to capitalize on the opportunity to provide an institution for the politically discontent. Religion has served as a powerful vessel for political dissent in everywhere from Poland, to Iran, to Central America, to the Jim Crow South. In these regions, religion provided an outlet for frustration and opposition to dissatisfactory governments, and a community in which members could plant the seeds for revolution. The ecclesial institutions of East Germany could have served as a popular alternative to communism, but instead chose to be a part of it. They could have been more successful by taking an anti-communist stance, which would attract a religious demand for the supply of revolutionary sentiment.⁴⁷

In addition to devastating the religious supply in the German Democratic Republic, the East German Socialist Party significantly lessened nationwide religious demand. The Communist Party provided secular alternatives to religious goods, and great enough benefits from these alternatives that they proved challenging to pass up. It did not only require party members to renounce religion and conform to scientific atheism, but it inspired this sentiment in youth. Christians have Confirmation, Jews have Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and members of the Communist Party had the atheist *Jugendweihe*. *Jugendweihe* was a mandatory consecration ceremony for 14-year-old East German youth, confirming them as a socialist citizen: it provided a substitute for the religious goods found in religions like Christianity and Judaism.⁴⁸ As preparation for this ceremony, youth were taught the two fundamental worldviews: “Materialistic scientific,” a progressive ideology, or atheism, and “idealistic unscientific,” an irrational ideology that puts a

⁴⁶ Froese, 410.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ See Appendix Figure 6.

brake on human progress, or religion.⁴⁹ In the ceremony, the youth pledged themselves to scientific socialism. *Jugendweihe* became a requirement for access to higher education and good jobs. Though church leaders protested that it violated the First Commandment, by the 1980's 97% of children participated in *Jugendweihe*, while only around a fifth were religiously confirmed.⁵⁰

Not only did the majority of youth participate in *Jugendweihe*, but they took its teachings to heart. The Central Institute for Youth Research in Leipzig, a public opinion research institute, recorded the religious convictions of East German Youth. It found that from 1969 to 1988, the number of young people identifying as atheists jumped from 40 to almost 80%. Fewer than 15% reported religiosity, likely because of the influence of the *Jugendweihe* ceremonies.⁵¹ This research also found, unsurprisingly, that university students, often children of the atheistic socialist elite, were more atheistic by 20% than the working-class youth, perhaps children of the impoverished churchgoers. Youth had a strong sense of patriotism and pride for their socialist government, and this patriotism included atheism.⁵²

Nationalistic attitude was muddled by the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification of Germany. This reunification had a significant impact on both patriotism and the churches of Eastern Germany. Rather than an expected increase in religiosity, religious participation continued to decline. Towards the end of the East German Communist Party's reign, religion was relatively unregulated. After reunification, however, churches found themselves reregulated. All churches were now placed under police surveillance and newer religious movements like

⁴⁹ Froese, 407.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ See Appendix Figure 5.

⁵² Froese, 408.

Scientology and evangelical Christianity were cast as cults.⁵³ This regulation depleted the religious plurality, and thus religious supply. Any individual registered with a religious organization was required by the state to pay tithes. This economic reason alone could deter potential converts and convince members to resign—46% of East Germans who left the church after reunification stated church taxes as their reason for resignation.⁵⁴ East Germans also began to view the lost socialism with an increasingly positive outlook. From 1990 to 1998, political sympathy for socialism rose from 13% to 41%. A desire for atheist alternatives resurged, with the revival of *Jugendweihe* organized by atheist associations.⁵⁵

The influence of the German Democratic Republic has lasted to this day—East Germany remains the most atheistic region of the world. With the reunification of Germany only twenty five years ago, persons alive through the reign of the Communist Party continue as members of East Germany to this day. Those most heavily influenced by institutionalized atheism, the youth of East Germany, are now likely the adults in positions of power. The influence of atheism lingers with present East Germans, yet time may show either an increase or decrease in the religiosity of East Germans of future generations. Future research could include study of the trends in religiosity in the next generation of East Germans. Furthermore, it could inquire as to whether the reasons for atheism in East Germany match those of other highly atheistic nations, or whether they hold alternate reasoning for their atheism. This would give key insight into why certain regions have an abundance of atheists, while others hold a population that uniformly pledges itself to one specific religion.

In many nations, most all believe in God, and the church rules. Perhaps these nations do suffer a “Dark Age.” This history reveals that in many places, atheism is beginning to take root

⁵³ Ibid, 413.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 413.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

as a competitor to religion. Though other nations surely will not all become communist, atheism is beginning to spread. East Germany could be the precursor to a worldwide movement of non-religion. While religion has managed to survive throughout the millennia, East Germany has proven that atheism can survive too. Which one will win out in the end, however, only God or time can tell.

Appendix

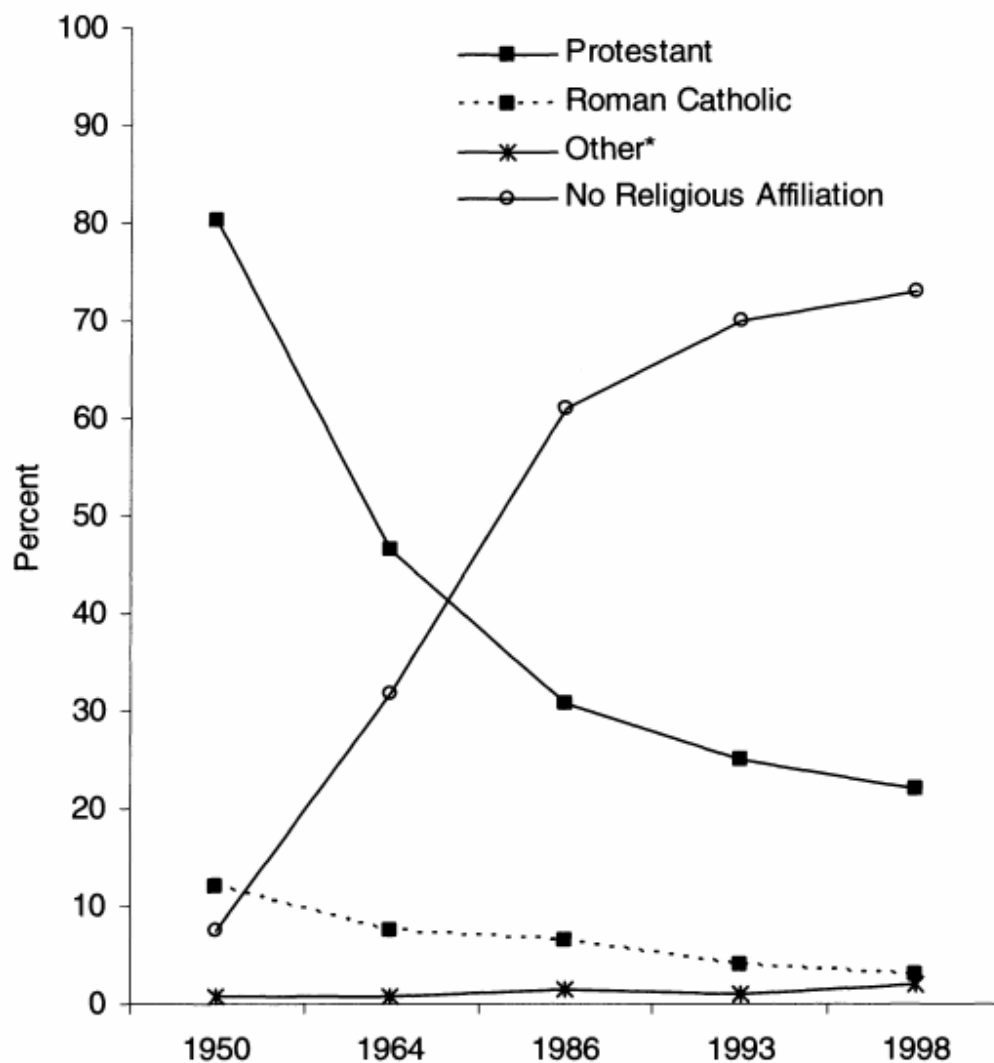
Figure 1:

Belief in God Across Countries in 2008

Country	% I don't believe in God.
Germany (East)	52.1
Czech Republic	39.9
France	23.3
The Netherlands	19.7
Sweden	19.3
Latvia	18.3
Great Britain	18.0
Denmark	17.9
Norway	17.4
Australia	15.9
Hungary	15.2
Slovenia	13.2
New Zealand	12.6
Slovakia	11.7
Germany (West)	10.3
Spain	9.7
Switzerland	9.3
Austria	9.2
Japan	8.7
Russia	6.8
Northern Ireland	6.6
Israel	6.0
Italy	5.9
Portugal	5.1
Ireland	5.0
Poland	3.3
United States	3.0
Chile	1.9
Cyprus	1.9
The Philippines	0.7

Froese, Paul and Steven Pfaff. "Explaining a Religious Anomaly: A Historical Analysis of Secularization in Eastern Germany." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 4 (2005): 397-422, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3590554>.

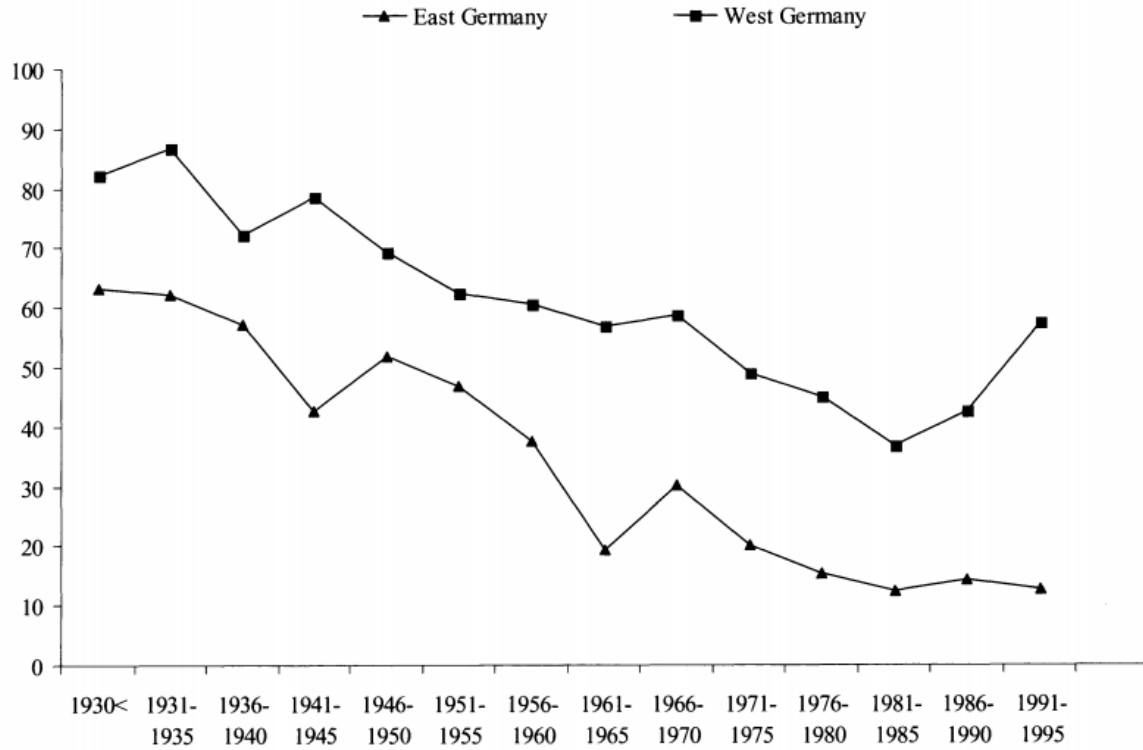
Figure 2

MEMBERSHIP IN RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN EASTERN GERMANY, 1950–1998

Froese, Paul and Steven Pfaff. "Explaining a Religious Anomaly: A Historical Analysis of Secularization in Eastern Germany." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 4 (2005): 397-422, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3590554>.

Figure 3

PERCENTAGE OF THE WEST AND EAST GERMAN POPULATION ATTENDING RELIGIOUS SERVICES ONCE OR MORE PER MONTH, 1930–1995, IN FIVE-YEAR COHORTS BASED ON RETROSPECTIVE DATA



Froese, Paul and Steven Pfaff. “Explaining a Religious Anomaly: A Historical Analysis of Secularization in Eastern Germany.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 4 (2005): 397-422, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3590554>.

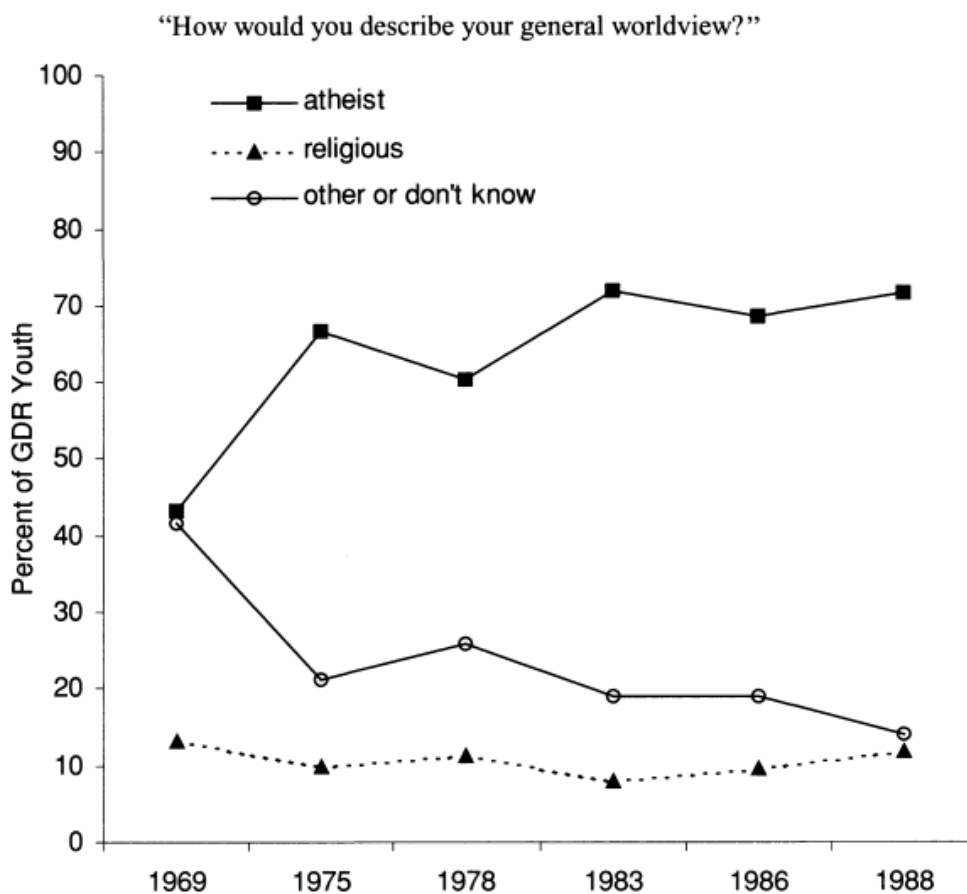
Figure 4

Germany Divided, 1945



Germany Divided Post-WWII. Graphic. <http://www.pbs.org/behindcloseddoors/maps/>.

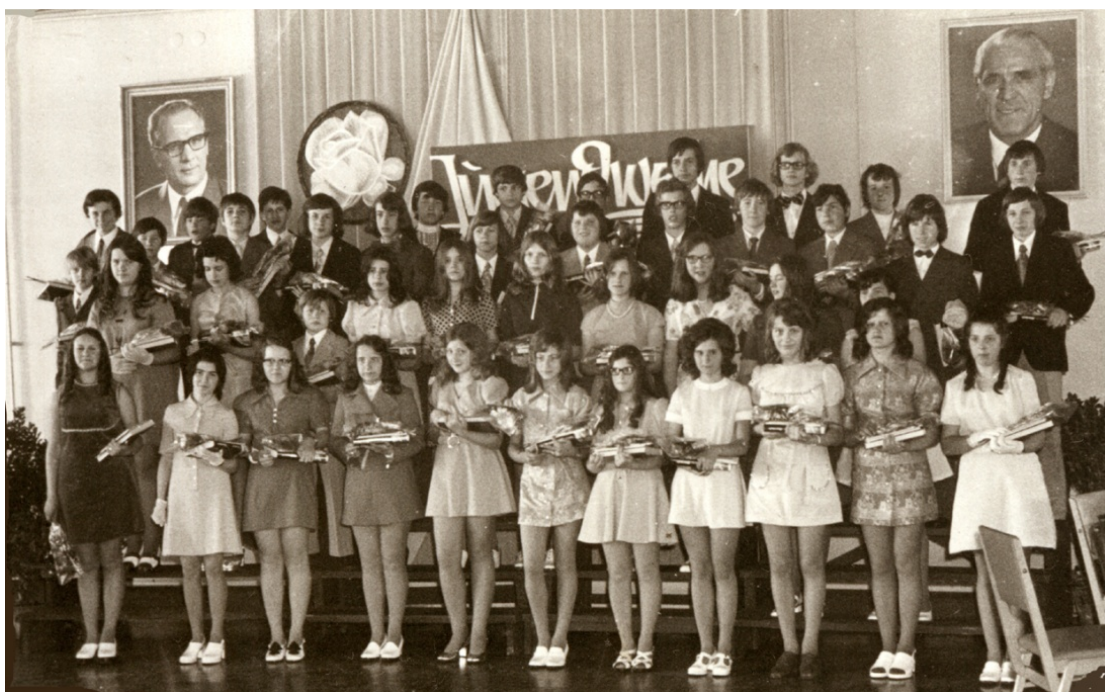
Figure 5

REPORTED RELIGIOUS CONVICTION OF GDR YOUTH, 1969–1988

Froese, Paul and Steven Pfaff. “Explaining a Religious Anomaly: A Historical Analysis of Secularization in Eastern Germany.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 4 (2005): 397-422, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3590554>.

Figure 6

Jugendweihe Consecration Ceremony, 1974



Jugendweihe 1974. Graphic. 2005. <http://home.arcor.de/luttuschka/Jugendweihe%201974.html>.

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Germany Divided Post-WWII. Graphic. <http://www.pbs.org/behindcloseddoors/maps/>.

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