

EAST GERMANY

Envy of West vies with pride in nation

A covetous look westward, a proud look back

EAST BERLIN - "The world seems to have three general opinions about us," said an East German official at his most engaging. "One, the Germans work very hard but this is not so good, because they are unlovable and their life is grim.

"Two, the Germans work very hard, but they can't really be socialists inside, because socialists don't work.

"And then people say: 'We're so happy that Germany is divided!'"

It is one of the cheaper ironies of World War II that both the Federal Republic of Germany to the west and the German Democratic Republic to the east are at the heads of their respective classes, European team captains in the ideological Super Bowl. Of course, Germans on both sides of the border will tell you that work habits aren't what they used to be anywhere, but it is just this sort of critical, analytical intelligence that reminds a visitor that Germans are Germans whatever their ideological costume - Bismarck's work has proved at least as resilient as Stalin's.

But like twin sisters who twirl the baton for rival high schools, there is a special piquancy to the relationship at home. One of the girls, you see, is rather more lissome, more outgoing, and has a better sense of humor. But she's bored with high school, wants to be a movie star, and her grades are beginning to slip.

But the other girl at East Berlin High, her friends admit sadly, has become just a bit neurotic: Everything she was, is, or will become must be measured against her pretty sister. Her grades are good, but she's a bit of a bore, and aggressively moralistic. And when she ever gets going on her sister! Why, you just want to leave the room.

The back cover of the most recent issue of *Eulenspiegel*, the East German humor magazine, is a good case in point. A West German soldier bedecked with braid and imperial eagles, his hat labeled with the word "Panopticon" - the name Jeremy Bentham gave to his model prison - beckons to the East German reader: "Come on in, if you're not a Red!" Behind him is a gallery of Western grotesques: a neo-Nazi; a Ku Klux Klan member; a clown with a flower growing out of his hat; a cross-eyed Hare Krishna devotee; a motorcycle gang member; a punk rocker with green hair, a safety pin through his neck and a straight pin through his head; and a stiff Bavarian burgher with a Homburg hat who carries a sign: "Come back to your own country!"

How many would leave if they could?

It is a biting commentary, not without wit, but it's most interesting, perhaps, because it raises the big issue: How many East Germans would cross the border, if they could?

Nearly 20 years after the Berlin Wall went up in August 1961, that question remains at the heart of East German life, despite all the improvements: the growth reg-

istered, the flats built, the Olympic gold medals won. As the satire in Eulenspiegel indicates, this is something that East German officials are prepared to discuss. "Between 5 and 10 percent would leave," they agree, after a moment of contemplation. "Some intellectuals, some people with relatives in the West, some malcontents - and every society has them.

"This is why the wall was necessary in the first place," they say. "Twenty years ago, life wasn't so good here - this part of Germany suffered terribly from the war, and the Soviets could only help so much..." Here (a question of taste, perhaps), comes one of those *lactinae* - it is not polite to mention the widespread looting of German factories and brains the So-

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viet indulged in just after the war. "We were losing our best-trained people to the West, our engineers, our doctors. But we've accomplished enormous things since then" - without question true - "and we look toward the day," they conclude, summoning up all the serenity that "Scientific Socialism" can muster, "when West Berliners will be climbing over the wall to join us."

But Western diplomats here confirm an informal survey of one's own: The number of true believers here is very small. One diplomat told the story of two apprentices about 18 chatting in a restaurant. How did he like the GDR, they asked. "I rather like it, nice countryside," he said, diplomatically. We're not talking about that, they said - we mean the system. "Well, I'm not wild about it." That's very ordinary, they said - nobody likes it. "All right. Suppose there's a plebiscite tomorrow, for or against the system, what percentage would vote for it? Twenty percent?" They laughed. Hell, that's too high! "Three percent?" No, they thought, that's a bit low. They settled on five percent.

The diplomat believed they were being honest, but in any tightly-run socialist country, it's often hard to tell. "The East Germans are very materialistic," he said, "and they complain all the time. It's not that all of them want to be West Germans - they have an excessive picture of the disorderly West, the unemployment, the inflation, the neo-fascism. A lot of them would like a good socialist society, and perhaps in time they'll get one."

But the West - as close as West Berlin, a stone's throw - is not merely a forbidden alternative. It's a dreamland, and not just because East Germans cannot go there.

Walking along, if they look up, they can

see the rooftops of this other side of themselves; from the revolving restaurant of East Berlin's TV tower they can see the cars moving in the streets and point out the old landmarks, like the Reichstag building, that they cannot visit. But at home, with their family, away from the eye of the regime, 80 percent of East Germans can watch West German television - the other side of the moon, yet in their own language.

East Germans well-informed

It's not just the news, as if they lived in Romania and could listen to Radio Free Europe. It's the situation comedies and the sports, the dramas and the soaps ("Dallas" dubbed in German) and the whole skewed shadow-play that television renders from life. But as important as all the programming are the advertisements, which are very catchy, and the best propaganda of all - evocative, no matter how absurdly, of a good, carefree and affluent life.

So the wall is not a block to information - the East Germans are extremely well-informed, especially since their own press must acknowledge and confront what everyone learns from West German television. In fact, it is almost impossible to understand the East German party newspaper, Neues Deutschland, without having seen the West German news the night before. So the newspapers here are less to inform than to guide, to mold opinion, to keep people slogging away in the long fight of future good against current evil and temptation.

But it's not always very convincing, since so much of it is simplistic and militant, dogmatic and stuffy, and so blatantly underestimates the analytical intelligence that both Germans share. And even when the criticism is telling, particularly now, given West Germany's sorry state, one walks through a playground to hear little East Germans, the generation of the future, singing the advertising jingles they heard last night on West German TV.

Everything East German, one hears, is second-rate, and the comparison is to Poland. One East German said with some excitement that he'd gotten ahold of some West German sugar and did a comparison with the East German kind. Guess which one dissolved sooner and tasted pure. Another East German was discussing a popular singer who defected to the West. "Why didn't she sing that way over here?" she asked.

Leaders don't trust the people

The point isn't the reality, of course, but the belief. The East Germans don't believe all the propaganda about the bad old West (though some of it, of course, is true), because everything they see of the West here is better, and either very expensive or unavailable. Many begin to think, naturally, that it is they who are second-rate - it's a cry from the heart, and very debilitating.

And that leads to the question behind

the one about the wall, and how many East Germans might emigrate tomorrow.

For the leadership of the GDR, it is a question of identity and history: Are we permanent, no matter how many flats we build, or are we temporary? Will our citizens ever love us? Will they ever see the world the way we see it - can we trust them? Can we ever trust them to visit the West, and look, and then come back home?

"It's important to understand something," said a diplomat here. "The leaders of the GDR were true anti-fascists - they fought Hitler and everything he stood for. They came back, after the war, in the baggage train of the Soviet army to rule a devastated country lived in by the same Germans who loved Hitler and repudiated them. They still don't trust their own population."

What they are trying to do, however, is to build an identity that will be lasting, to construct a structure of meaning around the label: GDR. "The war is over," officials here always say. "The German Democratic Republic has existed for over 30 years, and Berlin is its capital." That is the first thing that strikes a visitor: the new terminology. There is a ban on "East Berlin," the period when it might be considered the Soviet zone of occupation under the Four Power agreement is long gone. Now, everywhere here - on road signs, maps, welcoming cards, movies - it is "Berlin, capital of the GDR" (Berlin, Hauptstadt der DDR).

But ask someone here their nationality, and they'll as often say "German" as "citizen of the GDR." There is a new sense here that there are things in the bad old German past that weren't so bad, and that might help a sense of tradition, nationhood and belonging. The "New Germany," it seems, goes down better with some elements of the old. Many of the stark, bombed-out palaces of the bourgeoisie that served as brutal memorials of the war now have scaffolding around them, for reconstruction. Even some of the city's magnificent churches will be redone, with substantial help from the West German faithful. Dresden, especially, is an enviable example of skilled reconstruction with few resources, and though there have been numerous mistakes, it is once again a beautiful city.

But also, in the last few years, there has been a new interest in Prussia: the famous statue of Frederick the Great that lay on its side for so many years in Potsdam was brought to Berlin last August and set up right on Unter den Linden. And in 1983, the East Germans will throw a big celebration for the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther.

The East Germans have always been proud of Bach, but why such complicated figures as Luther and Frederick? Luther, one is told, was of course a great reformer who challenged the power of the Catholic aristocracy and laid the foundations for the Peasant Revolt. But Luther threw in with the aristocrats at the end, one says, and betrayed the revolution. Yes, the answer comes, a little annoyed, but he showed the way for others.

And what about Frederick the Great and Prussia? Think of Prussia, and one always thinks of junkers and militarism, yes?

Yes, that's true, the East Germans say, but the Prussians produced a lot more than war, and Frederick was also a great reformer. He organized, one is told, the first craftsman's union.

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