

## PREFACE

Why a book on the transformation of East Germany seventeen years after the Berlin Wall crumbled in 1989 and sixteen years after German reunification? There are scientific, historical, and biographical reasons why we publish this book now. When the communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe imploded, the social sciences were—with very few exceptions—taken by complete surprise. In contrast, the following transition processes were under very close scientific scrutiny from the beginning. Often empirical studies were, however, confined to the first years of transformation with a danger of getting short of breath too early. They also concentrated overwhelmingly on the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe without looking at East Germany. In the post-communist countries, expectations about the pace and the outcomes of the reforms differed widely, ranging from swift market liberalization and rapid economic growth to resistant mentalities and the holdover of communist power elites. For East Germany, the situation seemed much clearer and the future much brighter: instant inclusion into a well-functioning West German democracy and an affluent and socially regulated market economy as well as a thoroughly pluralized society.

As students of social structure and the life course, we were already very skeptical about such expectations in the early 1990s. Although institutions can be implemented quickly as legal rules, persons need time to adjust. They must be reallocated in a reshaped social structure and realign their past lives to a new institutional order. Meanwhile, it became indeed apparent that the process of transformation and reunification would take at least a generation and not simply a few years, that the course of transformation was less smooth and less predictable, and its outcomes were more ambivalent than

many hoped. The transfer of formal institutions from West to East Germany turned out to be only a part of the story. Thus, the East German case got more interesting for comparisons with other cases of post-socialist transformation. However, although much research on the East German transformation has been carried out, with few exceptions the results are published in German only. For this reason, the East German case was excluded from the attention of many relevant scholars, especially from those doing empirical analyses. This book sets out to fill this gap for the English-speaking audience.

At least in Germany, the attention for analyzing and discussing the transformation and reunification is now in a third phase. During the first years, interest was high in science as well as in politics and the general public. When it became apparent that the process was more protracted and difficult than assumed, the activities calmed down to a considerable extent in all of these spheres. It was only a few years after the millennium that attention increased again. More and more people seemed to notice that observations in East Germany are of wider interest than for the region itself and that the transformation process is not just a bit too slow. The awareness was growing that the difficulties of reform in East Germany might tell us a lot about German institutions and their ability to meet the demands of a changing world. Similarly, the study of East German life courses adds to our general understanding of how individuals, institutions, and policies contribute to coping with fast social change. Most of our knowledge stems from life course studies in rather stable societies. The pace of social change may have, however, speeded up not only in transition countries but in all modern societies, thus compelling collective and individual actors increasingly to deal with new challenges. This makes it worthwhile to study the East German example of dramatic social change.

Not least the production of this book has its biographical components. If it is able to provide insights into the process of East German transformation, then this is especially due to the fact that from its start in 1990 the East German Life History Project was a joint venture of both East and West Germans. While for the West Germans among us, German unification was mostly an academic challenge, for our colleagues Gaby Bendmann, Anne Goedicke, Britta Matthes, Anja Rampolokeng, Karola Rockmann, Heike Solga, and Heike Trappe it was an existential turning point. Without them as native guides, we would have done much worse.

In this book we examine the process of transformation of East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 through the lens of individual life histories. In contrast to ethnographic approaches, we do not rely on a handful of biographical case studies. Our empirical material consists of a very large number of detailed, but quantifiable life histories for representative samples of the East German population. Thus, we cannot only look at individual life course dynamics, but we can also clarify distributive and structural mechanisms. The study is part of a longer and larger research program—the German Life History Study (GLHS)—which was initiated by Karl Ulrich Mayer in 1979. It has since produced nine surveys of a series of birth cohorts and collected data from more than 12,000 respondents in West and East Germany altogether. The East German Life History Study (EGLHS) was started in 1991/92 with a study of 2,323 women and men of the birth cohorts 1929–31, 1939–41, 1951–53, and 1959–61 and supplemented by panel studies in 1993 and 1996/97 as well as the addition of the 1971 birth cohort in 1996/97.

Over the years, we have become indebted to many persons, to those closely connected as well as others unconnected to the EGLHS, without whose help and support we could have never brought this project to a successful completion. We owe special gratitude to our colleagues in the East German Life History Project: Johannes Huinink, Britta Matthes, Heike Solga, Annemette Sørensen, Heike Trappe, and Sylvia Zühlke. The late Erika Brücker gave us not only precious advice on matters of survey practice—without her we would have hardly dared to carry through the momentous work of the GLHS. Ralf Künster, Beate Lichtwardt, Maria Martin, Sonja Menning, Renate Minas, Karola Rockmann, Petra Spengemann, Karin Visser, Sandra Wagner, and Sigrid Wehner were responsible for data editing and data organization. We also owe special thanks to a large number of student research assistants who helped us in the data editing process. Doris Hess of INFAS (Bonn-Bad Godesberg) had the courage to break away from survey routines and carried out the data collections with her professional staff.

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