



Clockwise from bottom left, at the West Berlin border; East Germans reinforce the wall with glass, 1961; Americans at the Checkpoint Charlie border crossing; the SED's Erich Honecker in 1986.



Above, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and US President Ronald Reagan. Top, West Berliners watch East German border guards demolishing part of the wall in 1989. Right, Germans celebrate.



lookalike at the old Checkpoint Charlie, you can buy Soviet-era hats and badges, and even stay in Ostel – a GDR-themed hotel complete with retro furniture and portraits of former SED General Secretary Erich Honecker on the wall.

"We're like a museum to visit and it's very funny," says Daniel Helbig, a former East German circus performer and co-owner of the hotel. "You can say it's like an adventure park to the past."

Unsurprisingly, there's also serious opposition to what many, including Robert Rueckel, director of the GDR Museum in Dresden, see as a "dangerous trivialisation of a dictatorial and degrading system".

"It's totally normal that East Germans like buying *Rotkappchen* or that it makes them happy to see a Trabant [two-stroke car formerly produced in the GDR]," says Rueckel. In his opinion, this type of *Ostalgie* isn't "bad or dangerous for our society". But when "hotels offer Stasi [East German secret police] suites or bars like 'Zur Firma' [a nickname for the Stasi] open, this is tasteless and ridicules people ... When *Ostalgie* takes this form, we have to fight it."

"Objective elucidation" is the key, he says. "We have to address the obvious and real positive elements of the GDR, and view them as inseparable from the GDR dictatorship. Our institutions for dealing with the past have to show the dialectics of the system so that no one can say the GDR had a few faults but was otherwise good. In my view, this is only possible if

we show everyday life in all its facets."

Last year, a panel set up by German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrat party (CDU) to look into eastern Germany's future went considerably further and called for an end to nostalgia about the east. Talking to the German Press Association, Dagmar Schipanski, president of the parliament in Thuringia and head

Despite the federal government having pumped over a trillion euros into the former republic, unemployment remains close to double that of the western states.

of the commission studying the future of eastern Germany, said: "Ask the people who run those [*Ostalgie*] businesses if they would still want to live in an old, small, box-like flat in a concrete high-rise. Most of them now own expensive apartments and drive nice cars." She believed there had been "a deliberate exclusion of the real historical context" and spoke of the need for curricula and teaching practices to be reformed to better address "the history of divided Germany in our schools".

Another survey, done last year, concluded less than one in two school pupils in Germany knew who built the Berlin Wall. Klaus Schroeder, the Berlin professor who headed the survey, also speaking to

the GPA, said: "Pupils know next to nothing", and the little they do know has been learnt from their families or TV shows.

Watching Katarina Witt prance around in a socialist girl-scout uniform a few years ago, presenting pieces about her old school reports and someone's first Trabant, would have done little to elucidate the brutality of the GDR regime for the country's youth. Admittedly, a short segment dealt with a 14-year-old girl who had the temerity to draw a moustache in lipstick on a picture of Stalin at her school and spent eight years in an East German jail as a result. But it was clearly out of sync with the general feelgood theme of a show primarily concerned with how people in the GDR "lived, loved and laughed".

Although undoubtedly there are people like Arnold who lived comfortable lives away from the attentions of the long and pervasive tentacles of the GDR's Ministry for State Security, for the millions of other East Germans who were placed under surveillance, intimidated, interrogated, tortured or interned as political prisoners by the Stasi, life behind the Iron Curtain wasn't quite so rosy.

Oliver Sehm knows first-hand what it was like to fall foul of the East German State. In the early 1980s, Sehm's family, wishing to be reunited with relatives, applied to leave their harbour city of Rostock on the Baltic Coast, to live in West Germany. Not long after the application, things rapidly changed for Sehm and his family. The 35-year-old, an insurance broker who now lives in Hamburg, had been a class rep at the time, and his mother was on his school's Parents and Teachers Association. They were informed that neither of them would be required to fulfil those roles in the future.

Worse was to follow. Their neighbours, who had previously been friendly, began seriously harassing the family. "They were working for the Stasi," says Sehm. "They smashed our windows with stones and poured petrol over our vegetable garden; they even shot and killed our cat while we were sitting on the terrace." The Sehms reported these incidents to the authorities. "We took photos of what our neighbours were doing and went to court, but the photos disappeared." When the harassment continued, the police parked a patrol car outside their house for a night. Predictably, nothing happened and they left again the next day.

This intimidation continued until the Sehms were granted permission to live in Hamburg by the West German Government. Ironically, by the time they received this information the wall had already fallen.

The actual number of people used, in one capacity or another, by the *Staatssicherheitsdienst* (Stasi) during the Cold War has never been fully known. The documents that survived the Stasi's hurried attempts at destroying them in the final days of the regime put the number of official staff in 1988 at just over 100,000, with another 170,000 employed as informants. Other estimates, including one by former Stasi Colonel Rainer Wiegand, put the figure as high as two million (in a country of 17 million), if occasional informants were factored in. The secret police and their informants infiltrated every facet of society, including schools, hospitals and universities. Every apartment building in the GDR had its own Stasi informant,

and even the Church wasn't beyond its influence: both Catholic and Protestant clergymen fed the state information about their flock, and their confessionals were also bugged.

For Harald Stutte, there is no place in his life for *Ostalgie*. As a student, Stutte – now political editor of the *Hamburger Morgenpost* – spent a year in an East

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German prison after being caught trying to escape to Turkey via Bulgaria. Granted asylum by the West German Government halfway through a two-year sentence, he moved to Hamburg where he still lives.

"*Ostalgie* is a typical phenomenon," he says. "You find this kind of nostalgia everywhere after a historical upheaval – as soon as the first problems arise. When the first economic crisis hit West Germany, some

people said, 'In Hitler's Germany, no one was unemployed.' In South Africa I know a lot of coloured people who say that under apartheid life was more secure, there was no crime or corruption and so on."

People of a certain generation don't only have bad memories of the GDR, Stutte says. "They had fun, love and friendships. But you'll also find people who lived through the Nazi era who also say that, although they admit the Government was horrible, they still had parties, music, love and nice holidays."

He also says there's no place for *Ostalgie* in politics, and finds it troubling that groups like the *Linkspartei* (the Left Party) and, ironically, the CDU are using this type of nostalgia to benefit politically.

Berlin's Social Democrat mayor, Klaus Wowereit, is similarly forthright about *Ostalgie*, but for different reasons. "It's an emotion that I don't share, not least because I was born and raised in the west part of Berlin," he says. But does it have a place in modern Germany? "If it's about a backwards political view that wants socialism back, then *Ostalgie*, for me, has no place in our country. The only thing I can understand is that if some of my fellow citizens like to remember that back then, in everyday life, there were successes, positive achievements and acts of humanity beyond what the system dictated."

Those feelings of pride at overthrowing an old system have always been foreign to a lot of former West Germans, says Hans-Joerg Stiehler. As the country gears up for the 20th anniversary, he says a second wave of *Ostalgie* has been building among former East Germans. "It's a mixture of proud and sentimental memories of a time of a peaceful revolution when a lot of people felt they were forming their own history; the memory of a short time when the future really seemed open." ■



From left, Robert Rueckel, Oliver Sehm, Harald Stutte, Mayor Klaus Wowereit.



TV presenter Katarina Witt; GDR memorabilia.