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Text in a Changing Context:

Reconstructing Lives in East Germany

It is important to ask the question, who wants whom to remember what, and why?

Whose version of the past is recorded and preserved... To understand the workings of the social memory it may be worth investigating the social organization of forgetting, the rules of exclusion, suppression or repression, and the question of who wants whom to forget what, and why (Burke 1989:107-108).

The decade following Eastern Europe's revolutionary changes has been widely characterized by an uncritical enthusiasm for "the rediscovery of memory" of those who lived under state socialism (Brossat et al 1990:7). But representations of the past which emerge in the present are precisely that, representations, with the stamp of the present upon them. Members of societies in acute social change are not only (and perhaps not even) experiencing a liberation of their memory; they are scrambling to construct new and acceptable identities for themselves, ones which will be compatible with the changed world in which they now live. The stories which they tell about themselves and their pasts are connected to this struggle to form a new identity. Thus their pasts are also products of the present, and just as certain memories are being selected as component parts of the constructed past, so are other memories excluded.

In the first half of 1992, I was in Berlin collecting life stories from women and men who had been leaders in the citizens' movements which spearheaded the revolutionary changes of East Germany in 1989. I arrived only weeks after the Stasi files had been opened to the public, and the general atmosphere in those grey winter months was of a very raw society. Conversations about identity were commonplace - where to get one, how to lose one, how to find one which had been lost. East German Wolfgang Herzberg, the country's first oral historian, told me that identity had become "a fashionable word."¹ People of East Germany, he said, have "lost their old identity, which has always been a bit unstable. Now they are looking for a new identity." Bertaux (1992) refers to the "struggle for reconstructing the past" as involving an "overturning [of] both a collective and an individual identity, and historical consciousness" (p. 206). Major social changes had occurred in East Germany between the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and when I collected my data in 1992; what I witnessed in the months I spent there was a revolution of memory and identity.

Ruth Reinecke is an actress at the Maxim Gorki Repertoire Theatre in Berlin, and was one of the organizers of the November 4th demonstration in Alexanderplatz, which precipitated the opening of the wall five days later. She describes that time in her life as "difficult to analyze, because the events took place so rapidly, one was chasing the next. Not only the events in the street, but the events inside the self." As the Berlin Wall was opened, Reinecke was immediately aware that this would have vast implications, not only for the political situation in the GDR², but for her very personal sense of self.

When the wall was opened, suddenly another world existed, which I did not know, which I would have to live in, whether I wanted it or not. There was of course a great curiosity to explore the world, this still exists. On the other hand I had the fear somehow whether I would be capable of making this new world... my own... Maybe there was also some fear that I could not stay any more the same person I had been so far.

By 1992, many East Germans had come to feel inferior to their Western neighbours. At this time, the postcards for sale on what were once East German streets had messages such as "Greetings from the new states" while showing cartoons of old dinosaurs eating each other. In old East German factories, workers received instruction on how to "cleanse" their language of its socialist residue - an attempt to bring the very mode of communication in line with Western standardization. East German author Christa Wolf vividly conjures up a different, and more paralyzing, loss of language which the revolutionary changes produced in her, a sensation she likens to "a bush growing in [her] throat" (1997: 152-155). Wolf describes "the manner and the speed with which everything connected with the GDR was liquidated, considered suspect" and views herself and her fellow citizens as being "housed in a barracks under quarantine, infected with Stasi virus" (1997:241).

Andre Brie, Deputy Chairperson of the Party of Democratic Socialism (the remake of the old Communist Party), believes that East Germans are "forced into the West German identity" whereas he "would have preferred to come to a new identity... I think millions of East Germans

are living at the moment as if they have no past." This is why, he explains, many East Germans "are now orienting again towards a national identity." Barbel Bohley, who has been labeled "the mother of the revolution" and "the Joan of Arc of the movement," shares Brie's assessment. She explains "some people do not want to profess their identity, they feel second class citizens compared to the west Germans, so they say they are German." One example of this is that of a twenty-two year old "punkfrau" from the GDR who was interviewed six months after having moved to West Germany. "Why did you leave the GDR" she was asked. "The GDR? Never heard of it." (Naimark 1992: 87).

Barbel Bohley bristles when I ask her if there has been "a shift in the general consciousness of what it means to be East German."

I think that there is an East German identity, and there are those that accept it and those that reject it. But it does exist. And even this rejection is a way of distancing oneself from it, of saying 'farewell.' We have lived here for forty years, and you cannot deny that. One can say ten times one is German,³ but Germany did not exist. There was the Federal Republic and there was the GDR and this formed the West Germans⁴ and the East Germans.

According to this explanation, the young punkfrau, quoted above, is merely trying to say "farewell" both to a country, and to a self, that are no longer. But the strategy she employs is not a very constructive one. In denying the existence of her country, she effectively deprives herself of a past. Why does she construct this amnesia? Hers is a conscious forgetting, an attempt to

erase that which was. She will construct a new past for herself which is better suited to this new present.

In contrast, some East Germans find refuge in holding onto an East German identity. For them, their national identity has become "a symbol of defiance hurled at the West Germans; 'eine Trotzidentität', an identity of defiance, as Jens Reich, one of the fathers of East German revolution, put it" (LeGloannec 1994:142). This is often accompanied by *DDR-Nostalgie* "a nostalgia for a rose-tinted view of the good old days... rooted partly in a sense of anomie" (Fulbrook 1994:224). Paradoxically, both the denial, or "forgetting" of the past, and the romanticization, or "misremembering" of the past, serve similar functions: they are the means by which individuals try to accommodate profound external changes into their psychic reality.

Ruth Reinecke comments on the distinction between normal forgetting, which, as discussed earlier, is and by necessity must be part of our daily life, and that which is enforced.

The human being is organizing for him or herself a natural system of forgetting, pushing things away. They will continue doing it. This is one thing. But if I want to forget, to push things aside in a deliberate manner, in the end I am destroying myself.

The critical element here seems to be that of volition. Desire to forget is itself a significant indicator that the memory in question will linger in some form, and suppression of it will come only at a cost to the essential self.

The young punkfrau is not alone in her attempt to submerge herself in a new identity, achieved by passing through a tunnel of historical amnesia. She and others like her will try to rewrite the past in order to meet the needs of the present. Although it is virtually inevitable that social and individual identity will be recast as a response to acute political change, there are greater motivations for some groups of people to actively change their past than for others. In the case of East Germany at the time of my interviews, many tried to portray themselves as having been part of the (minuscule) resistance movement under the old system. East German sociologist Marianne Schulz summarized this phenomenon. Speaking in 1992, she explained that of the East German population of 16 million, there were then 16 million resistance fighters, as well as 16 million victims. The incentive to portray oneself as having been part of the opposition, and/or a victim of the system was very powerful: it was the most highly valued past in the new Germany. Christa Wolf comments on this phenomenon:

I have the impression that many former GDR citizens, experiencing a new alienation and finding that if they are candid with others their openness is used against them, are employing this experience as a pretext to avoid any critical self-questioning and are even revising their life histories. I am sometimes amazed to hear normal, well-adjusted acquaintances of mine reveal what brave resistance fighters they have been all along. I know how hard it is to work yourself out of

feelings of injury, hurt, helpless rage, depression, and paralyzing guilt and soberly to confront the events or phases in your life when you would prefer to have been braver, more intelligent, more honest (1997:301).

In this environment, those who actually were part of the underground citizens' movement⁵ - and there were very few of them - could tell their stories and not be ashamed. They were the heroes that we in the west wanted to love. This very small sector of the population most probably experienced the highest degree of consistency between their pre- and post-revolutionary selves. What they were formerly jailed for, later brought them praise. But most citizens of East Germany were neither resistance fighters nor employees of the Stasi⁶; most people passively acquiesced with a system which they regarded with varying degrees of criticism. They were neither heroic nor demonic. But if individuals cannot tell stories about their past, they either remain silent or create a new past. East Germans have done both.

The New Blank Spaces

Although there seems to be a consensus amongst oral historians that "East Germany's harsh political structures had led to a general speechlessness: to a popular memory full of blank spaces" (Thompson 1990:20), in fact the changes of 1989 have produced another kind of "speechlessness". Ruth Reinecke describes the new blank spaces, particularly acute amongst older East Germans who dedicated their lives to the building of the GDR:

I believe that this older generation is the one which was punished most... To see now that these forty years were 'in vain' that they haven't brought anything ... and

the idea of socialist equality could not be applied in practice, this is a bitter experience... [They] are very bitter now, and they will be silent for the rest of their years. Their youth, their thoughts, their creativity has been invested in a life which is now nothing.

Although this speechlessness is perhaps most pronounced with the older, founding generation of East Germany, it is not limited to them. Many people who lived under state socialism found themselves, in the wake of its demise, in search of a new past.

There has been a very concerted effort amongst portions of the East German population to come to terms with their past; first to search out (and inwardly) and document what actually happened, and then to try to understand it. However, this effort has been hampered by the judgmental atmosphere in which the work has been carried out.

East Germans -- especially the intellectuals among them -- commonly argue that the West first muscled in politically and economically, and now it is trying to rob the East Germans of their history, to tell those who lived through it how it *really* was... Seeking to bolster an embattled sense of self, many have thus insisted, "This is our history, let us process it on our own" (Torpey 1992:6).

Christa Wolf writes: "... there is nothing more important than... self-critical analysis... It is made inexpressibly more difficult by attacks from ignorant or malevolent victors" (1997:62) Von Plato (1993) found that there existed amongst his East German interviewees a certain consensus: "Only East Germans have a realistic understanding of conditions in the GDR; only East Germans

can judge East Germans" (p. 41). But East Germans have had great difficulty in meeting this challenge of processing their history on their own, precisely because of the political dimensions of such a project. People cannot speak openly about a past that they know they will be damned for. Werner Fischer, one of the most prominent of the human rights activists in East Germany, was the person who was appointed to dissolve the Stasi. In the immediate post-revolution period, he and others worked very hard to create an atmosphere in which those who cooperated with the Stasi could come forward, in an effort to set in motion the necessary healing process for the whole country. At the time of our interview, his hopes had not been realized; in the two years that he had occupied his position, he had grown less tolerant of collaborators, not because of what they did before 1989, but because of what they failed to do after 1989.

Unfortunately, what I had expected from people did not happen, that they come clean about their actions. Of course, they can only do so if they are without fear.

And the atmosphere was, and still is today, not very conducive for that to happen.

I think that this is tragic not only for their personal future development but for the inner peace of the country. In human terms, I find this reprehensible.

Very few amongst the Stasi employees and informers chose to speak openly about what they had done; rather, most waited with silent hope that their collaboration would go undetected. Fischer characterized this hope as "a delusion," adding "If they have to be unmasked bit by bit on the basis of the Stasi files, then any reasonable understanding ceases".

Fisher elaborated on his view of how and where a more fruitful "working through the past" could

in fact take place.

...in the immediate environment, at work, at home, among friends or within the church, one must discuss the events of the last forty years, what part a person played in it... Then one listens to his story, analyses why somebody does it, has done it, has worked as an unofficial collaborator. And only then, when somebody has told his story, one begins to understand. This is the only way it can be done.

But this necessary openness proved to be very hard to create in an environment scrutinized by the rest of the world's judgmental gaze. One former Stasi employee who I interviewed, Jorg Seidel, expressed a strong reaction against what he perceived as the pressure to rewrite one's past. He and two of his colleagues created a group which they originally had called "Ministry for State Security [STASI] Working Through the Past Group" whose name they very quickly changed to "Insiders of the Activity of the Intelligence Service of the former GDR." Seidel explained why they changed the title of their group:

I do not want to apologize for the activities of the MfS which have taken place in the society... I don't call into question [my past], I am supporting what I have done...I reject that I should now bear the guilt of everything which has happened because I say you can't write history anew, and you can neither work it through.

You should really stand by history and you should give an evaluation of history...

In renaming the group, Seidel and his Stasi colleagues exhibited a determination to resist the pressure to "rewrite history anew" as they saw it. There were other MfS employees who adopted very different strategies, who saw themselves more as victims than victimizers. Most of the

informal collaborators of the Stasi tried to keep their former intelligence activities secret, fearing - with some justification - how they would be regarded and treated if their pasts became known.

However, the Stasi employees and informers represent only the most extreme cases of those persons who tried to hide their past after 1989.⁷ The pressure which was exerted upon East Germans, and which they exerted upon themselves, to fabricate an identity, existed with lesser intensity across the whole population. The problem of rendering East German life histories has two central components. First, as we have discussed, the political climate has changed, and is still changing, to such a degree that what constitutes the memorable -at both the collective and individual level- is itself in acute transformation. One can reasonably suggest then that the stories that people tell even, and perhaps most importantly, to themselves about themselves and their past, has been and continues to be in dramatic flux.

But there is another part of this dynamic which is important to address. Since 1989, when citizens of the former GDR have been asked to render their life histories, it has been to an 'outside' audience, people who, however well-intentioned, have only a very limited possibility of understanding that which they are told. Ironically, while East Germany has been flooded with western sociologists and oral historians⁸, enthusiastically documenting the lives which once were, their East German colleagues have lost their jobs.⁹ Eastern institutions have been effectively closed down, and West German agencies do not wish to fund East German academics to do this sort of work, reasoning that they cannot be objective about a situation in which they themselves lived and breathed. But amongst East Germans there is a real concern that their

stories cannot be understood by people who never experienced the conditions which characterized their lives; moreover, they argue, the past cannot be analyzed through the spectacles of the present. Von Plato states that there is "... a wide consensus [amongst East Germans]... that only the people of the former GDR can judge the conditions and the quality of life in the GDR, and the decisions and the political commitment of its citizens - not the West Germans" (1993:73).

At the time of our interview, East German human rights activist Barbel Bohley was deeply cynical about the one-sided nature of the communication which characterized much of the dialogue between those from the East and those from the West after 1989. In a piqued moment towards the end of our interview, she exclaimed "the people in the west have not yet comprehended that the wall is gone... an empire has collapsed. It has not fully penetrated people's awareness what this really means." It is not only people from Central Europe who must regroup the way they think about the world and themselves, but everyone."¹⁰

If you come here and ask me questions for two and half hours, that is meaningless. It is really I who should put the questions. I mean somebody from the west, somebody from the east... it should be more like a discussion. People from the west come and want to understand, but they do not want to understand themselves. They only ask us.

Ostow describes the history of biographical research in Germany, which has its roots in the early postwar years when Germans were systematically

'interviewed' by their occupiers.. Through testimony and the narration of biography, individual Germans created accounts of politics and the details of daily life under Hitler. These biographies - part denunciation and part confession, part fabrication and part exorcism - literally reformed the lives of the subjects and effected their personal metamorphoses from 'Nazis' to citizens of the 'democratic' or the 'socialist' Germany (1993:1-2).

Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose.

When people who are neither heroes nor villains in the current construction of the East German past tell their stories to an outside audience, their words are often interpreted through a meaning-making lens which is not their own. When East Europeans speak the unspeakable - i.e. the details of their non-heroic lives - their stories are rejected. Western academics often emerge from their projects in Central Europe totally baffled; when they do not hear what they think they should hear, they offer the explanation that their respondents cannot verbalize their true thoughts. In time, it is likely that the stories do change, not because respondents feel that finally they are able to speak of a past which really did happen, but rather because they have found ways of narrating their life stories for popular consumption and approval.

The oral history project carried out by Lutz Niethammer, exploring working class experience in the GDR, gives evidence of some of the problems discussed above. One aspect of this research was to examine the memory of June 17, 1953¹¹ in the lives of those who were old enough to have

lived through it. The initial interviews were conducted in 1987. Not surprisingly, the only people who claim to have been at a site of political turmoil, and who spoke quite openly about their experiences on that day, were members of the Socialist Unity Party (SED); they, of course, had been good socialists, had stood by the government, and had nothing to be ashamed of. But where were those thousands of workers who demonstrated on that fateful day? Was there really no one around who had participated in the strike, and could remember doing so? Interestingly, Niethammer's work is not a testament to straightforward governmental repression (though surely that existed in East Germany as well). For though his interviews were conducted in a still-communist East Germany (and interviewees might have been understandably fearful of repercussions for actions done nearly forty years before), when he attempted to re-interview participants after the changes of 1989, the majority of respondents declined. Niethammer comments "Even though people might now recollect their experience more freely than before, the impact of collective on individual memory is just as important now as before, but different, and most people were reluctant to show us both sides" (1992:69).

That is to say, his interviewees not only told him their particular story in the way they did because social conditions required that they did so, but moreover, those very social conditions were manifest not only externally but also internally. They had lived in an environment which favored one version of the past so strongly (and accordingly, one must assume, influenced them to reconstruct their own pasts in such a way as to be in accordance with that version) that even after that environment had been radically altered, and indeed a different version of the tale was now in vogue, they did not choose to re-amend their narrative. Long after the Communist Party

had ceased to exercise any significant political power, it continued to wield an influence on the way in which individuals structured the stories of their lives. And why wouldn't it? They had lived for forty years with certain social markers lending organization to their mental and physical beings; far quicker to destroy the gigantic statues of Lenin and Marx than to dismantle their influence on the collective memory of the population. When Niethammer asked participants if they would like to be re-interviewed, what he was implicitly asking was if they had changed their story - yet. There seems to be an underlying assumption that the story would at some point change; with the removal of external pressures, they would be able to tell what had really happened. But he himself is guilty of applying another kind of pressure, that to rewrite the story, according to principles which he believes should prevail. Niethammer explains that "most people were reluctant to show us both sides"; while that is one explanation, it is not the only one. Most people do not consciously manipulate their own memory. It is indeed possible that they were also reluctant to show their own selves "both sides." The transition, if it does happen, is bound to be more subtle, and a person might well avoid a situation in which she is confronted with, or indeed asked to produce, two starkly contrasting renditions of the same story, both as told by herself, about herself. Moreover, this particular date, June 17, 1953, has been the center piece of such varying "commemorative narratives" (Torpey 1993:20) it is not so surprising that the memory of the actual day is now, as Niethammer describes, opaque and fragmented.

Von Plato, who is part of the same research team as Niethammer, states that their research shows evidence of respondents trying "to change their biographies in the light of the new circumstances after 1945 - a process which has also been evident since the 'Wende' of 1989" (Von Plato

1993:38). But it seems that interviewees have failed to alter their biographies in the ways in which their researchers think that they should. Von Plato comments that "the same melodies [of retrospective reconstruction of the past] are sung in the East, and are as little understood, as in 1945" (p. 38). By whom, exactly, are these "melodies" not understood? Presumably the stories offered by the respondents connect through an internal system of meaning-making; if this system is not discerned by the researchers, that is not to say it does not exist.

Dorothee Wierling, the third member of the West German research team conducting oral histories in East Germany, offers evidence of the gap of understanding between western researchers and their eastern subjects. She describes an interview with Rudolf Kamp, Communist Party Secretary, in which Kamp is detailing for his audience the "rules of the game." Wierling comments:

To the Westerner listening to him, these rules may appear to be boring, confusing, or unrealistic. Yet, Kamp understands something about this and presents them indefatigably; defends and explicates them. Lovingly, he unfolds the system of 'socialist competition' -with its code numbers, funds, premiums, and commissions - ... spreading them out before his audience of uncomprehending Westerners for over half an hour (Wierling 1992:78).

Wierling observes the very real difference between speaker and listener, but she does not address the important question of what this difference might imply for her research. There is never any evidence that she tries to understand from what point of view the comments of her interviewee

might be anything other than "boring, confusing, or unrealistic." Indeed, she later states "It was my intention in the second interview, to lure Kamp from his inflexible defensive position" (p. 79) Clearly, the story he wants to tell is not the story his researcher wants to hear. Perhaps next time he will be a more accommodating interviewee.

As a society undergoes acute social and political upheaval, members of the community are presented with a challenge of rearranging their own identities, a challenge of recasting their pasts in a way that makes sense from the perspective of the present. Given that there are multiple versions of the past created and recreated by individuals and groups who stand in very different relations to dominant power structures, the researcher must develop a conscientious sensitivity to the question of precisely whose past she is recording. Often the life experience of an interviewee is evaluated not on its own terms, but rather according to how it compares to the researcher's previously held expectations. These expectations must be reassessed, but in order for this to happen, they must first be acknowledged. Central Europeans do not need western cassette players to liberate their memory. What they want, and need, and have created for themselves, is space to talk about their lives, both past and present, in the way that they perceive them.

Conclusion

Nearly a decade after the "revolutions" of Eastern Europe, former Soviet bloc countries are in the midst of rethinking, re-evaluating, and ultimately recreating their pasts. However, as "biography precedes history," the individuals of these societies must first make the transition in their identities from the old regime to the markedly altered present. Who were they then, who are

they now, and who do they now perceive themselves as having been then? These are the very probing questions which, through force of circumstance, many Eastern Europeans are now asking themselves, questions which are also relevant to the lives of people the world over. Hard questions demand hard answers, but unfortunately not everyone is in a position to reflect upon, and respond honestly to them. It is not a matter of whether or not they will remember their past, but rather which past they will remember, and which past they will feel at liberty to voice. The relationship between the forgotten and the unspoken is a fragile one. Those of us who cheer the "rediscovery of memory" in these post-communist times must be mindful not to assist in the replacement of one form of speechlessness with another.

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Endnotes

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from the data which I collected in 1992.

1. East Berlin First Party Secretary Schabowski's statement on November 9, 1989, announcing immediate free travel rights for all citizens later proved the death knell of East Germany. Historian Timothy Garton Ash describes the effect of this event:

the opening of the Berlin Wall on 9 November, and subsequently of the whole inter-German frontier, changed the terms of the revolution completely. The issue had been how this state - the German Democratic Republic - should be governed. The people were reclaiming their so-called people's state. The issue was whether this state should continue to exist at all (Ash 1990:69).

2. On November 24, Egon Krenz proclaimed the elimination of the leading role of the SED, and by December 3, the Central Committee and the Politburo collectively resigned. The following March, the first and only free elections were held in East Germany in which the pro-Western Christian Democratic Union received 40.9% of the vote. On October 3, 1990, unification between the two Germanys became formalized. Writing in 1994, German historian Jürgen Kocka observes: "Germany has changed more in the last four years than it has in the last four decades" (1994:173).

3. One of the questions I asked in my interviews was "When you are asked where are you from, what do you say?" Virtually everyone I interviewed used over their response, but gave some form of the answer "the GDR" - in the present tense, with comments such as "throughout my life I will remain a citizen of the GDR." This question provoked a strong response from Jens Reich, one of the most prominent leaders of the citizens' movement: "I am from the GDR. I've lived in the GDR, I was brought up in the GDR. I've no misgivings of any sort in saying it. I never use the word ehemalig [former, as in 'former GDR']... I find it ridiculous. The GDR is a fact, an historical fact. You don't say the ehemalig German Reich; it [simply] doesn't exist any longer. His emphasis on ehemalig and on the disassociation of yourself from it ... is a sign of psychic instability in those people [who use this word.] Later in the interview, Reich elaborates further on this point: "I've no inner drive to deny the GDR...[which] has proven its right of historical existence in '89. By our own activity we freed ourselves and made it a decent society, for some weeks and some months. We did it at least, so ... without any feeling of shame you can say "[I am from the] GDR."

4. Unification has also caused West Germans to review the meaning of their national identity. Albrook writes "It is not so much the visible boundaries as the invisible ones - those defining citizenship and immigration, who is welcome and who must be kept out - that West Germans are now being required to rethink" (1994:212)

5. For a discussion of the composition of East Germany's internal opposition, see John Torpey's *Intellectuals, Socialism, and Dissent: The East German Opposition and its Legacy* (1995).

6. Although statistics vary, approximately 85,000 people were officially employed by the Stasi, with an additional two million estimated as informal collaborators.

7. Von Plato refers to a "community of hidiers" (1993:75) which has developed as a consequence of these circumstances, not dissimilar to that which could be observed in post-war Germany.

8. Ostow states that "by early 1992, there was reason to suspect that citizens of the former German Democratic Republic had become the world's most interviewed population" (Ostow 1993:1). Elsewhere she refers to the "carnival of interviewing and biographical publications" which followed the revolutionary changes of 1989, stating that "Being interviewed played a part in the construction of the self that informed every GDR citizen's *Wende* (or turnaround); in the West this was called 'transition to democracy'"(1993:3-4).

9. Jürgen Kocka gives one example of this. Writing in 1994, he states "Of the twenty-nine professors of sociology in East German universities today, only four come from the East" (1994:183).

10. For a very thoughtful elaboration of this argument, see Zygmunt Bauman's "Living Without an Alternative" in which he states that "the current western form of life... [has] only adulators and imitators" and "has practically delegitimized all alternatives to itself" (p. 183). The implications of this are vast. "The world without an alternative," he argues, "needs self-criticism as a condition of survival and decency" (pp.185-186).

11. Before 1989, June 17, 1953 stood out in East German history as the single largest citizen uprising against the government. For two and a half days, workers throughout the country demonstrated. Ultimately, the Red Army came in, and order was imposed. Indeed, during the height of the demonstrations in the autumn of '89, Honecker is said to have asked one of his aides "Is this

iother '53?"