

Differences between East and West (November 12, 1990)

Abstract

With the help of a wide-ranging opinion survey, the magazine *Der Spiegel* sought to determine which attitudes were shared by East and West Germans and which differences of opinion needed to be reconciled if unification was to succeed.

Source

The Newcomers Lack Self-Confidence

Spiegel survey in the all-German Federal Republic: What unites and separates Germans in East and West

[...]

The *Spiegel* commissioned three institutes to determine what unites and what separates Germans in the old FRG and the ex-GDR, the ways in which they resemble each other and the ways in which they differ.

The Emnid Institute in Bielefeld interviewed 2,000 adult men and women in the East and another 2,000 in the West (and an additional 100 youths between 15 and 17 in both East and West). Here in the old FRG, Emnid used its own interviewers; over in the ex-GDR, the Westphalians tapped into a personnel network established by the East Berlin Usuma Institute for its own use. The institute was only founded this year.

Leipzig's Central Institute for Research on Youth, which was only allowed to conduct surveys as "confidential classified information," or even as "secret confidential information," for the state and party leadership during the Honecker years, interviewed an additional 1,200 East Germans.

Some of the Saxons' questions originated from the time before the *Wende*^[1]; others came from the seven surveys carried out by the institute afterwards, numerous new questions were added.

Interviewers from the three institutes were already at work when Germany was still split into the acronyms FRG and GDR (from mid-September until the beginning of October). The responses were tallied by computers in Bielefeld and Leipzig and then evaluated by institute experts at a time when the GDR no longer existed.

This study thus became the opening balance sheet, as it were, for the all-German Federal Republic, which has gained 16 million new citizens on top of its previous 63 million since October 3.

In the future, assuming that these survey figures are updated, politicians and contemporary historians will be able to determine if, how, and when that which belongs together actually grows together.

Approximately 100 subjects were addressed, interviewers sat for about an hour in the living rooms and kitchens of interviewees between Aachen and Görlitz, Rostock and Passau.

Most of the questions were identical or posed in analogous form in East and West; a dozen direct comparisons were asked for.

Other comparisons were drawn later in the institutes. It was thus determined, for example, that the united Germans' attraction to each other was not really as great as might be assumed, given the black-red-gold^[2] enthusiasm seen on *Bild* title pages and sometimes on television screens: West Germans

liked the French, and East Germans liked the Austrians just as much as the compatriots from whom they had been separated for so long.

[...]

Political questions predominated; they ranged from Hitler (“A great statesman if not for the war?”) to the so-called achievements of the GDR to current issues, such as how many former “nationally-owned” enterprises were doomed and how the legacy of the Stasi should be dealt with.

Interviewees were asked about foreign language skills and vacation destinations, about God and world opinion, about a Germany that might now be seen as too big and too powerful. Employed people were asked if they were satisfied with their jobs; other questions focused on how families spent their free time or the principles according to which people lived.

In order to get a snapshot of people’s everyday lives, interviewers asked about daily routines, drinking habits, and tobacco consumption.

Smoking rates are approximately the same in East and West. The low-grade tobacco of the GDR decades did not cause a decline in the number of East German smokers. West Germans consume alcohol somewhat more frequently than East Germans.

East Germans wake up earlier and go to bed earlier. On weekdays, most people over there are already flat on their backs by 10:30 p.m., whereas here a slight majority is still watching TV, talking, reading, or dozing. TV-viewing times differ slightly, but the number of hours spent watching television is more or less the same: almost three hours per person on weekdays.

One of the goals of the GDR leadership (which was loyal to Moscow up to the start of perestroika) was to see Russian replace English as the country’s primary foreign language. Five generations of schoolchildren considered this a burdensome requirement, and very few learned even a single Russian word in excess of what was deemed necessary to avoid attracting attention.

The end result of the attempt to force a foreign language onto a populace that simply did not want to learn it: Russian and English competency among East Germans is about the same.

Differences between Germans in East and West extend far into their leisure time activities.

Pastimes that cost little or nothing are just as popular here as there: Television in any event, as well as reading newspapers and books, visiting friends, and working in the garden.

Movies and discos in the East are visited roughly as frequently as those in the West, even though they became more expensive after the monetary union. But young people there seem to think that the ratio between enjoyment and price is still fair.

A far greater share of West Germans actively participate in sports, attend theater performances or concerts, or go out to eat. The state on the other side failed to offer its citizens sufficient options of this kind (regarding sports, the old men in the SED leadership were more concerned with top athletes than the masses). And for most East Germans, all of this is too expensive at the moment. There is probably a domino effect almost everywhere, with the result being that the average German in the East spends more evenings at home than his counterpart in the West.

With respect to weekends and vacation, the opposite is true. The relatively few cars in the ex-GDR are on the road more often than the many cars in the old FRG.

The addiction of East German car fans – who were condemned to drive Trabis all too long – to faster and

more comfortable Western automobiles is one of the most striking pan-German impressions of the year. But differences in car ownership will remain considerable over the long run. In the West, three of out of four households have a car on the road or in the garage (to be more precise: at least one car, since one in five households has a second car). In the East, barely more than half of all households have a car.

Their cars are also a lot older and less powerful. Half of all cars are at least eight years old (in the West only a quarter). In the West, only four percent of private cars have less than 45 horsepower; in the East that figure is 43 percent.

In terms of furnishings and household items, Eastern households still lag far behind Western ones. Very few of the sixteen consumer goods included in one Emnid list appeared in Eastern and Western households in roughly equal numbers: bicycles, electric drills, pianos, and second televisions. But the frequency of second TVs is also a result of the planned economy; the state-run sales system did not provide for the trading-in of old sets, so they ended up in children's rooms and bedrooms.

Quite a bit of time will pass before ex-GDR citizens will be as well off as the other Germans in the old FRG. When interviewees were asked to predict when this goal would be achieved, the responses varied greatly. The average prediction by respondents in the West was 9.4 years; in the East it was 7.3 years.

This is largely due to the fact that, despite the monetary union and political unity, there has hardly been any economic progress in the ex-GDR; rather, there has been almost nothing but standstill and decline. If West Germans were to fall from their mountain of prosperity into a valley of difficulties similar to that which presently exists in East Germany, there would be no end to the moaning and complaining. The situations in the old FRG and the ex-GDR are as different as day and night.

Seventy-seven percent of West Germans appraised the general economic situation in their part of Germany as "very good" or "good," whereas 78 percent of East German deemed their own situation "bad" or "very bad."

When it came to job security, 91 percent of working West Germans regarded their job as secure, whereas 52 percent of those in the East regarded theirs as insecure.

With prices being relatively equal, 46 percent of families in the East have a net [monthly] income of less than 1,500 marks, whereas the same is true of only 11 percent of families here. Thirty percent of people here earned top incomes of more than 4,000 marks per month, as opposed to only 1 percent there.

This contrast is hardly diminished by the fact that rents are extremely low in the ex-GDR: 86 percent of respondents pay less than 100 marks per month.

Although one side lives in daylight, the other in darkness, they have similar opinions in many – or even most – things, regardless of whether the interviewer posed questions on general subjects or current issues. That Germans lived under different systems for four decades, that they barely knew each other almost exactly a year ago, and that (before that) they only learned about each other through TV screens and letters and infrequent visits – all of this had hardly any effect at all.

Even in their attitude toward political parties, Germans in East and West differed only with respect to the SPD and the PDS.

Of the four old Bundestag parties, three have roughly the same percentage of voters in East and West. At the time of the survey, Emnid registered 43 percent for the Union [CDU/CSU] on both sides; 9 percent for the FDP here and 7 percent there, and 7 percent for the Greens here as opposed to 12 percent for the Greens/Alliance 90 there.

The only difference stemmed from the fact that the SED's successor party, the PDS, claimed 10 percent of voters in East Germany in late September/early October (the figure was only about 1 percent in the West). Because the SPD lacked these left-wing votes in the East, they had to be content with 24 percent as compared with 37 percent at this time in the West.

When asked who the "best chancellor" was, respondents in both East and West named [Helmut] Schmidt and [Willy] Brandt more often than [Helmut] Kohl. West Germans rated [Konrad] Adenauer higher than these three (of his five) successors^[3], but this was not the case among the East Germans. For them, the first chancellor was such a distant figure in FRG history that even unification did not bring him any closer.

The number of those who consider Kohl to be the best chancellor is twice as high in the East as in the West: 20 percent there and 10 percent here. Union voters almost entirely account for these percentages.

Two-thirds of citizens on either side of the Elbe are "proud to be German." Only one in four West Germans, and one in five East Germans, rejected such notions of national pride.

Demographers have long been studying the attitudes of FRG citizens toward so-called life questions. Here, too, differences between West and East proved minor; at most, the majorities were of different magnitudes.

For most, a higher income was more important than more leisure time (only academics felt the opposite to be true). When interviewees were asked whether they wanted to "achieve more in life" or "work no more than necessary," those in the East chose the achievement response more often than those in the West (75 versus 55 percent).

Despite Chernobyl, the majority of GDR citizens approved of the use of nuclear power even after the *Wende*, as was shown by a *Spiegel* poll from December 1989. When Emnid posed the same question recently, the majority expressed a different opinion – the same opinion as the majority in the West:

Most respondents in West and East felt that no new plants should be built and that existing ones should be closed, either over time (49 and 46 percent, respectively) or even immediately (16 and 12 percent).

On the question of abortion, the prevailing opinion in all of Germany is that the (still valid) GDR regulation allowing abortion in the first trimester is better than the Federal Republic's corresponding paragraph 218:

In East and West, the majority of men and women, and voters of all parties, advocated the first trimester regulation or even the complete legalization of abortion. Only among Christian churchgoers was the majority in favor of the present laws in the Federal Republic (legal abortion only for medical or social reasons) or even stricter legislation (legal abortion only when the mother's life is endangered).

There was pan-German agreement on current events, even when Eastern and Western interests might have collided.

Two-thirds of each group favored compensation for property owners who had been expropriated in the GDR.

The vast majority of people are convinced that more than half of the former nationally-owned enterprises "are no longer competitive and need to be closed" (West: 78 percent; East: 76 percent).

West and East Germans have similar or identical basic philosophies, although there is a significant difference in their worldviews. In a united Fatherland, a predominantly Christian population and a predominantly secular one come together.

In the West, only 7 percent of adults either were not baptized or left the church; in the East, that figure was approximately ten times higher (66 percent).

This difference was reflected in responses to related questions. Sixty-one percent of West Germans believe “there is a God,” whereas only 21 percent of East Germans do. In the West, one in two believes in life after death, whereas only one in seven does in the East (51 versus 14 percent).

Another question shows that the nonreligious Easterners take their convictions more seriously than the Western Christians. When asked if religion means something to them in their own lives, 91 percent of those without any declared religion in the East answered in the negative, as did 52 percent of Protestants and 40 percent of Catholics here.

Those who remained Protestant or Catholic in the GDR resisted manifold efforts by the state and the party to pressure them into turning away from their faith. Now it is the bishops – both Protestant and Catholic – who have undertaken to further reduce the number of Christians in the East.

They guaranteed the introduction of a church tax in the unification treaty, thereby prompting a wave of people to leave the church. Many who had voluntarily paid lots of GDR marks [to the church] for decades are unwilling to have extra Deutschmarks forcibly deducted from their wages or salaries.

Sooner or later, the East German bishops will follow the bad example of their West German counterparts in another respect, too: They want to have religious instruction introduced into public schools. This mission with state aid, and at state expense, is intended to warm children and adolescents to the faith that would presumably leave them cold as adults. As the Emnid poll shows, however, their plans will not fail on account of popular resistance. When interviewees were asked for their thoughts on the introduction of religious instruction, the most common response was “I don’t care” (42 percent; 29 percent were in favor and 26 percent opposed).

Almost any comparison with their compatriots in the West should actually fill the former citizens of the GDR with envy and impatience. But the *Spiegel* survey offers evidence not *for*, but *against* this presumption. East Germany is not a valley of moaners and complainers.

The Leipzig Institute provided the clearest demonstration of this. Its interviewers asked people with friends or relatives in the West to compare their own standard of living with that of the Westerners. The vast majority described their own standard of living as lower.

When these respondents were asked in a follow-up question if “this difference burdened them,” the answers were definitive; seventy-three percent did not feel burdened by their lesser situation.

When asked whether they were satisfied with their residence, 79 percent of West Germans, but also 72 percent of East Germans, said yes. It is no secret that apartments in the West are generally larger and better furnished and that they are also kept in better condition by their private owners than apartments in the ex-GDR, which are maintained by local governments.

In order to understand the East Germans’ contentment with less, one has to recall how gray and hopeless both the present and the future seemed for the GDR population in the middle of last year, before the people took to the streets and the Wall came down. Two long-term repercussions of the dismalness of GDR life emerged clearly in the results of the poll.

First, to a great extent, East Germans feel inferior to their Western compatriots when it comes to the traits they need in their new lives.

Second, there is a strong, virtually explosive reaction to the fact that many SED bigwigs are in the process

of establishing themselves as the men of the future.

When Emnid asked the 2,000 East Germans it surveyed to compare themselves with West Germans in certain respects, they were given three possible responses: they were superior, the West Germans were superior, or there was no difference.

The self-critical response was the most frequent one every time.

Forty-two percent felt that they were inferior as regards the “ability to solve problems”; 50 percent thought that they were less “motivated.” And 68 percent even felt that their “self-confidence” was lower.

The Leipzig Institute presented a list of twenty pairs of opposing traits (from “modest–conceited” to “enterprising–not enterprising”) and asked the respondents first to categorize West Germans and then East Germans. There were seven fields to choose from, in order to allow for differentiated responses.

In five points, the judgments were more critical of West Germans. They were considered more arrogant, less considerate, more selfish, more mistrustful, and less child-friendly.

Most also considered it negative that West Germans, in their opinion, were “more concerned about money.” With regard to one point, the East Germans saw no difference: neither group had a monopoly on humor.

But East Germans judged themselves inferior in no fewer than thirteen traits. A majority of East Germans felt that West Germans were more:

reliable

conscientious

thorough

disciplined

independent

decisive

cosmopolitan

flexible

industrious

self-assured

tolerant

imaginative

enterprising

The weaknesses that East Germans associate with themselves become even more obvious in closer considerations of the data.

In cases where the mean figures vary only slightly, the East Germans saw only a slight difference

[between themselves and Westerners]. Thus, the East Germans assume that the other Germans are only slightly more reliable, industrious, tolerant, conscientious, and disciplined.

In cases where the mean figures vary significantly, they consider the West Germans to be far superior; this is true for decisiveness and independence, even truer for business sense, and truest for self-assurance.

Only 34 percent of respondents consider the ex-GDR citizens “self-assured,” but 91 percent associate this trait with the West Germans.

The Honeckers, Mielkes, and comrades have destroyed the belief in one’s own strength. When East Germans were asked about the past, it is apparent that they lay great blame on the system and its functionaries for their weaknesses and the difficulties they are now experiencing.

The bigwigs’ slogan – that their Workers’ and Farmers’ State everyone could provide work for everyone “according to his abilities” – was viewed by most as pure cynicism. When asked about the decisive criteria for “professional success” in the former GDR, the East Germans most often answered “political activity” and “connections,” whereas they felt that success in the Federal Republic depended more on “performance” and “education.” Only 22 percent of the GDR’s former subjects believe that things in the SED and Stasi state “were just on the whole,” even though interviewees were asked to disregard “the relations and wrongdoings of the SED leadership for the moment.”

The term “communism” was disliked by the vast majority, and they decried “socialism” along with it. “Comrade” met with even more aversion than “planned economy.” In the workers’ movement, this form of address was never limited to communists and it is still used today in the SPD (West), but it has become an insult in East Germany.

Mixed in with the anger over the past, there is also lots of outrage at the attempts of many old die-hards to save their positions and sinecures.

When Emnid presented a list of seven occupational fields that were more connected with the SED system than others, a large majority felt that “as few as possible should retain their positions.”

The aversion to “heads of larger companies” and to persons “in charge of trade and supplies” was even greater than the antipathy toward judges and officers of the People’s Army and the People’s Police – presumably because the respondents had direct experience with, and had suffered from, the improper actions of many loyal functionaries in the companies and the stores, and thus mistrust them all the more.

There was no trust in the turncoats who “used to hold important offices and now declare their support for democratic renewal.” When asked how many of these people “might be sincere,” only 1 percent of respondents said “almost all of them;” 11 percent said “many;” 43 percent said “some,” and 36 percent said “hardly any.”

Whenever the questions of the Bielefeld and Leipzig institutes sounded like the discussion about the past could be brought to a close, a majority objected.

Seventy-three percent of the East Germans were opposed to “closing the chapter on these forty years now that the GDR no longer exists.” They demand that it must first be determined “who carried some blame.”

Even 80 percent were opposed to the destruction of the Stasi files.

Two thirds of ex-GDR citizens assume that they themselves were spied on and that their names appear in

the files; 27 percent were “certain,” 39 percent thought it was “likely.”

NOTES

[1] [ⓧ] The German term *Wende* refers to the events that led to the downfall of the Communist regime in 1989/90 – eds.

[2] [ⓧ] The colors of the flag of the Federal Republic of Germany – eds.

[3]

Source: “Den Neuen fehlt Selbstvertrauen”, *Der Spiegel*, November 12, 1990, pp. 115–28.

Translation: Allison Brown

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