

Western Impressions of the GDR as a Distant Country (1964)

Abstract

On a trip through East Germany after the building of the Wall, the West German editor of *Die Zeit* experienced the GDR as a kind of open-air museum of the German past. She failed to perceive the ongoing internal tensions that were simmering under the surface of firm SED control.

Source

[...]

This private world is embedded in a piece of Germany that is known to my generation of West Germans, people in their mid-thirties, mostly only from history class and wall calendars. Childhood memories of comfortable royal seats in Thuringia, pictures from the Prussian past preserved in East Berlin—what else did I still remember about it? Now I was suddenly driving through Fontane's Ribbeck and standing unexpectedly in front of the sarcophagus of Otto the Great in the Magdeburg cathedral, and then before the tomb of the reformer Martin Luther in the palace church at Wittenberg. The faded map that I carried in my head of the German world on the other side of the Elbe was suddenly filling up again with names, shapes, buildings.

Small, nestled county seats and farming villages rest in a dream-like haze; plaster flakes off beautiful facades; a car rumbles across the cobblestone pavement; nowhere has traffic become an all-consuming Moloch. In this respect, the GDR has become a kind of open-air museum of the German past: the Germany of yesteryear is preserved there; the era of pedestrians and beer wagons is not over yet.

This antiquated world of the GDR has its sentimental charm, yet it also has modern drawbacks. A dismal gray defines most of the cities; feeble streetlamps cast only a dim light. The growth of these places was forcibly halted at the end of the 1920s or beginning of the 1930s, and new buildings have not sprung up yearly around these villages and cities since then. Only where the war brought damage, it seems, have any new buildings been erected. Not that these are such bright spots.

Everywhere in the GDR, the Western visitor comes across avenues called "Stalinallee" built in the Moscow wedding-cake style. It is not just in East Berlin that these monstrosities are found; they also spoil the view of the old market square being reconstructed in Dresden or the rebuilt downtown in Magdeburg. In the meantime, to be sure, the government architects over there have departed from the confectioner's style and are now building de-frilled houses, friendlier, happier, and more colorful, but everywhere they build in prefab patterns. All over, the same standardized row houses are shooting out of the ground, and whoever regards variety as the spice of life will still find the post-Stalinist building style monotonous, indeed, even bleak.

[...]

Source: Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, *Reise in ein fernes Land*. Hamburg, 1964, p. 97 f.; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, eds., *Das gespaltene Land. Leben in Deutschland 1945–1990*.

Munich, 1993, pp. 40–41. Republished with permission.

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