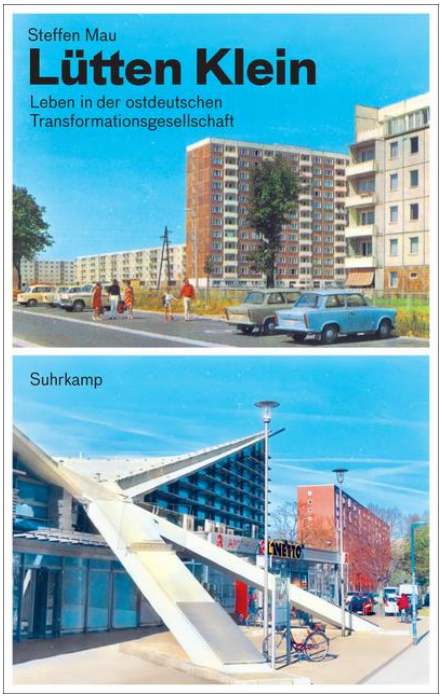

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Lütten Klein

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Content

[...]

II. Transformations

1. Collapse and Transition

The Mortality of a Social System

Nobody had guaranteed that the GDR would last forever, but over the course of forty years everyone had gotten used to its existence. Its sudden collapse, therefore, seemed unthinkable. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* – that was the title Alexei Yurchak, born in 1960, gave his book about the last Soviet generation published in 2005. The implosion of a system as a collective shock that demonstrates the mortality of a societal structure to all parties involved, rips them from their familiar tracks and exposes collective certainties as illusions is a good way of describing the experience of most citizens of the GDR as well. Even though there was an awareness for the economic stagnation, the wind of change coming from Moscow and the slow crumbling of the authority of the party and of state leadership, none of us could have fathomed that the entire system could collapse like a house of cards overnight. People were hoping for small reforms, for measures towards *glasnost* and democratisation following the example set by Gorbachev, but nobody was thinking about a drastic systematic change. The Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev describes this experience very aptly in his essay *After Europe*:

> The experience of the sudden and nonviolent end of something that we were confident was permanent (until it was no more) is the defining experience in the life of my generation. We were overwhelmed by the opportunities that were suddenly opened up and the newly discovered sense of personal freedom. But we were struck as well by the newly discovered sense of the fragility of all things political.[1]

It is disputed whether the end of the GDR was the result of a revolution or whether it was a simple collapse and there are good arguments to be made on both sides. The term »revolution« is emphatically charged and pays tribute to the achievements of those who took to the streets and demanded political change. The terms »collapse« and »implosion« paint a picture of the GDR as an exhausted society that was no longer viable without external stabilisation.[2] In retrospect, the defects of the system naturally appear more pronounced than they did back then. Even experts who were critical towards the communist system and considered it to be inefficient

[1] Krastev 2017: 12.
[2] Joas/Kohli 1993a.

assumed that the GDR was stable in the medium and long run.[3] A few prognoses of an impending collapse of the Soviet empire were already circulating the academic sphere[4], but hardly anyone possessed the prognostic gift to predict the abrupt end the GDR was heading towards in 1989, let alone to set an exact timeframe for it. Yet there certainly were signs of an accumulation of problems for which no institutional solutions were available and which the political leadership was not equipped to solve.

For one, there was the continuing economic stagnation of the GDR and the entire Eastern bloc that made it harder and harder to improve material living conditions. Shortly before the end of the GDR, productivity was at a third of the Western level, the real gap between incomes was at fifty percent, retirees only received thirty percent of their West German counterparts.[5] Even though the GDR hailed itself as a progressive industrialised country, the exertions necessary to keep up with the scientific-technological advance of the West were becoming more and more strenuous and from a certain point, they could no longer be managed. Despite the great efforts taken to invest in microelectronics, the production of microchips stagnated. As apprentices in electronics, we were still soldering valve radios as part of our training. We got to practice programming on simple computers only once a week. It was possible to hide the growing gap to the West for a while – also thanks to an increase in external debt – but the dissatisfaction with the material living conditions was mounting. Since the leadership was no longer able to trade consumer goods with political loyalty, and since upward mobility was blocked, the implied social contract disintegrated.[6]

Fig. 10: Our computer lab at the trade school of the VEB (Publicly Owned Enterprise) Marine Electronics (1986)

[3] Brzezinski 1989.
[4] Z.B. Collins 1986.
[5] Federal Ministry of Intra-German Relations 1988.
[6] Reißig 1933: 52 ff.

On the other hand, the fact that the system had also gone broke ideologically must be added to the autopsy findings. In its early days, the GDR had fed on a future vision of a new beginning for the society, which was indeed able to foster allegiance, yet this source slowly dried up.[7] The reproduction of political consent, which had made use of the communist ideology of salvation, the achievements in construction and the mythologization of the GDR's antifascism, lost its credibility. The ideological formulaic language and the doctrinaire ban on thinking and speaking were increasingly met with reservations. Now, more and more citizens demanded freedom of speech and human rights, they rejected the rule of the organisations or circumvented expectations of conformity in the privacy of their everyday life. This also chipped away at the SED's claim to leadership.

Albert O. Hirschman, the famous US-American social scientist of German-Jewish background, differentiated three strategies with which people react when they are no longer satisfied with a system: *exit* (emigration), *voice* (dissent) and *loyalty*.[8] Even though only a small part of the citizens of the GDR practiced active opposition at first, the willingness to express dissatisfaction and doubts (*voice*) increased overall. In the summer of 1989, a wave of refugees and emigrants started to leave via Hungary and the embassy in Prague (*exit*), but even this didn't significantly slow down the emergent spirit of contradiction. Hirschman, who visited the Berlin Institute for Advanced Study in 1990/91 and familiarised himself with the German case on site, found himself compelled to put his simple (hydraulic) model to the test in face of the events in the GDR. He found it particularly remarkable that in the final phase of the GDR, and even after the opening of the Wall, emigration and protest occurred simultaneously, indeed even increased, as though the growing freedom to choose was encouraging the ones who had stayed behind.[9] The loyalty of the masses was disappearing rapidly and at first the system reacted with a combination of harsh defence and the rhetorical idealisation of distant socio-political goals, then with concessions and promises of reform. However, this melange wore itself out over time. Even those who could still warm to the socialist idea in theory could no longer avoid stating the glaring weaknesses in its implementation. They were torn between the GDR as it actually existed and the socialist ideal of a society of equals that would not rest on exploitation and private property. Against this backdrop, there was a certain spirit of perseverance among the well-disposed which was strengthened even further by the insistence that the coexistence of socialism and capitalism brought certain developmental problems with it. But even this spirit

[7] Srubar 1991.
[8] Hirschman 2004 [1970].
[9] Hirschman 1992.

of perseverance became shaky over time, the overall mood unravelled and the political system with it.

Signs of Decay

The reforms initiated by Gorbachev had weakened the geopolitical stability of all the Eastern bloc countries since the Soviet Union was redefining its role as a protecting power on the one hand and imposing on their satellite states a moderation towards powers willing to change on the other. If they let tanks roam the streets, they could no longer be assured support from Moscow and this did not just affect military matters but also the economic dependence of many Eastern bloc countries. Since the 17th of June 1953 there had been no more mass protests in the GDR and the system had by and large managed to keep critical voices in check. In light of the thaw in Moscow, however, many now felt encouraged to ask questions and voice dissent. It was about the freedom to travel, the possibility to openly express one's opinion, to level criticism at the falsified local elections of 1989, about the democratisation of the GDR. On the surface, these objections only touched upon individual aspects of the system, but at the same time they were shaking its foundations.

The protest movement in the autumn of 1989 has been described as a »spontaneous revolution«[10] that brought many people to the streets at once. The wave emanating from the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig quickly engulfed the entire country. More and more people were willing to march through the city centres, some in silence, others chanting. »Spontaneous evolution« doesn't mean that this mobilisation came out of nowhere; after all, apart from the pent-up dissatisfaction, numerous smaller opposition groups and networks had sprung into existence, usually under the cover of church roofs, and made up the organisational core of the protests. The fact that the standing jump from the oppositional back rooms onto the stage of global politics succeeded in the autumn of 1989 can be ascribed to a dynamic escalation of the protests, a kind of spontaneous cooperation. The more people participated in the demonstrations and the more apparent it became that the regime would react somewhat restrained, the lower were the personal risks if one decided to join the expression of discontent. The spirit of resistance spreading through the circles of family, acquaintances and colleagues was downright infectious. In addition, many of those who had stood by curiously could now switch back and forth between the role of spectator and participant without much fuss, whereby the difference between participating and watching was blurred. My father had been ordered to go to the first

[10] Opp et al. 1993; Opp 1991.

demonstration with his Combat Group to enact »security measures«; one week later, he went to the St. Mary's Church in Rostock as a civilian participating observer. After a certain point, many felt like it was indeed possible to wrest concessions from the leadership with silent protest marches through the city centres.

I experienced this switch from intimidation and assimilation to open dissent – exciting to every sociologist – first-hand as a soldier of the NVA when I was doing my basic military service at the Werder Barracks in Schwerin. The mobilisation spilled over from the streets and into the barracks rather quickly, we created soldiers' councils and confronted the officers with lists of demands. The regime of orders that called for total subordination turned into an arrangement by negotiation overnight. Basically, nothing had changed in our barracks – not the actors, not the uniforms, not the laws and orders –, but in light of the events before the gates everything had changed nonetheless; the hitherto unimpeachable power had been pulverised, so to speak. Some members of our unit even staged a spontaneous sit-in on the parade grounds – the superiors reacted with utter helplessness. Routines and military obedience could barely be upheld, sometimes they broke down entirely. Overnight a stony-grey manoeuvring mass was transformed into subjects with agency. Now the order of the day was dialogue instead of command.

For us, it wasn't political demands that were in the foreground but the easing of military life and the abolition of rules we perceived to be harassment. At the top of the list were items such as the deregulation of soldiers' haircuts or the waiver of mandatory marching and early-morning exercise. This sounds mundane from today's perspective, but at the time it was outrageous, the officers struggled to retain their composure. Early on we contacted the people of the New Forum in Schwerin so as to avoid a violent confrontation between protesters and the army. Together with them and a few prudent NVA superiors we organised a guard for a secret underground Stasi property that was located in a completely ordinary bungalow estate by a lake. If you rolled back the carpet, you could open a hatch in the floor. A ladder led to a converted command post with a radio station, conference rooms, sleeping facilities along with food rations for several weeks, which was designed to serve as a command centre in case of a »counterrevolution«. Together with another soldier I was ordered there to ensure that no one could enter and use the telecommunication technology. We sat like holidaymakers in the middle of an estate of weekend houses, looked out over the lake and ate toast with jam for breakfast. During the second night, teenagers from the nearby village, who had heard that the Stasi was maintaining a property there, came and threw stones at the bungalow. Only after a heated

discussion were we able to convince them that despite the uniforms we were working with the New Forum.

For soldiers, every absence from their unit was still considered desertion and was met with draconian punishment, so we used the few passes and holidays we had to follow what was happening on the outside. Those who returned were assailed with questions and one time even I brought some important news with me. On December 3, 1989, a Sunday, human chains were formed all across the GDR to protest for further democratisation of the country. It was a cold, rainy and foggy day that I, on short leave, spent on a tree-lined road south of Rostock with some friends. From there it was only a stone's throw to Kabelstorf where the GDR, as we learned via Chinese whispers, was maintaining a secret weapons depot from which it sold military goods to conflict areas all around the world. Led by human rights activists and locals we set off. We confronted the civilian Stasi employees guarding the compound and urged them to open the depot. When the gate opened, the crowd surged in. Amazed and shocked the people walked along the rows of shelves with thousands of boxes filled with weapons, ammunition and other NVA equipment. »Unbelievable« was the most commonly whispered word, sometimes it was screamed with rage. The IMES GmbH, which operated the depot with direct a railway siding to the international port, was part of an empire shrouded in mystery that belonged to the foreign buyer Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski. After this discovery, which soon became public, many of those who were still well-disposed towards the GDR also realised how Janus-faced its leadership was. I took several pictures which a friend of mine who worked at a photo laboratory developed overnight and that we hung up in the barracks as a wall newspaper. Some officers were calling this »undermining of military morale«, because it would cast doubt on the ideology of the »peacekeeping mission« of the NVA, but by now they had even lost the courage to make someone take down the wall newspaper. What a stark contrast: At the 40th anniversary of the GDR on October 7, 1989, we had been sitting in the barracks ready for combat, hoping and worrying that we wouldn't have to move out like the Chinese soldiers who had crushed the uprising on Tiananmen Square in Beijing by force of arms in June that same year. Now the instruction system had been eroded. After a visit to our barracks, the newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* put it aptly: »The army of the GDR, once the pride of the SED, broke down in a matter of a few months, a lost group of insubordinate soldiers and frightened officers.«[11] A few weeks later we were discharged early. The exciting life on the outside began, starved and wide awake we entered the fray.

[...]

[11] N.N. 1991: 48.