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Epistemic Nostalgia:

Associations of Former GDR Cadres in Post-Socialist Germany

After German reunification in 1990, former GDR functionary elites united in the East German Board of Associations (OKV). This network of 26 legal and social support action groups, with several thousand members, still defends a positive image of the former state. While the bigger OKV member organizations were established to further pragmatic goals (like the elimination of pension reductions for Stasi officers), its smaller associations aim to preserve socialist heritage, and protest against the destruction of GDR buildings and monuments that have symbolic value to them. By combining an analysis of the personal narratives of 30 OKV members and sympathisers with a detailed study of the activities conducted by individual OKV associations, this study seeks to explain why and how a positive image of the GDR *as a political project* is perpetuated and even reinvigorated within the OKV, and how this view is upheld in the context of a wider society which by and large regards the GDR as an emanation of injustice. OKV's specific GDR memory allows for a positive evaluation of personal activities in the former state. Their adherence to a positive political interpretation of the GDR also provides OKV activists with a framework for making sense of the ruptures in their lives since 1989, which they interpret as the outcome of capitalist aggression. This alleviates them from the burden of investigating what was wrong in the GDR – and their own share thereof.

The narratives of individual OKV members are shaped by nostalgia, which I define not only as a “longing for past longing” but as a longing for a lost sense of political and social mastery, that they once derived from GDR ideology. This ideological competence was reinforced by the experience of personal upward mobility in the GDR. The discreditation of their GDR-based understanding of the world is therefore experienced as a devaluation of their entire lives. Accordingly, what OKV members long for is the time in which their way of making sense of the world had to be accepted by society as a whole. This nostalgia derives from what Andreas Glaeser called “political epistemics”, the meaning-making practices of the bygone state in which they were deeply implicated. For this reason I propose to conceptualize this OKV political memory as “epistemic nostalgia”: only through maintaining the meaning-making practices of the GDR they can fight for a full validation of their lives. I argue that also OKV members had negative experiences in the GDR, but that they do not attach any meaning to them by rendering them “un-political”.

After a discussion of the concept of epistemic nostalgia, the thesis investigates characteristic biographies of OKV members (which often come from the Hitler Youth generation that found redemption in the GDR project). The history as well as the functions of the various OKV member organizations are then analysed in chapter 3, followed by an in-depth case study on ISOR, a major OKV member association that fights against pension reductions for former Stasi members. Here I explain OKV strategies in post-unification Germany against the background of GDR practices (chapter 4). The final chapter demonstrates that OKV's epistemic nostalgia severely limits its attempts at linking up with other radical left movements in post-1989 Germany, and even with the SED successor party PDS/Linkspartei/Die Linke.

The OKV must therefore above all be seen as an identity organization that offers its members stability and orientation by upholding a shared worldview, not without success but at the price of self-isolation. It does so through the maintenance of a specific collective memory, through shared commemoration rituals of the past, but also through social and political activism in the present. As an epistemic community based on shared memories and identity, it provides its members with a new “homeland” (*Heimat*) after the loss of the GDR.