

GDR 2.0 – or where do we live today?

[Andrea Drescher](#) in dialogue with Andreas Peglau¹



Many alternative online media outlets claim that we are living in GDR 2.0—an assertion that I find questionable. Journalists from mostly conservative media outlets often refer to the socialist policies of today's governments. How accurate is this comparison?

I am still searching for a source in Karl Marx or other socialist or communist literature that states that under socialism, the rich must become richer and the poor poorer. Nor am I aware that the Communist Manifesto promotes public-private partnerships, a concept that has had a massive impact on economic development in Germany and Austria. But perhaps I am not well-read enough.

To make my search for sources easier, I spoke to Andreas Peglau, with whom I had already discussed the topic of [“How to find your way out of your comfort zone”](#) at length and who, as a “trained” GDR citizen, was able to contribute more to the topic than I, who grew up in the West. The psychologist and psychotherapist was born in the GDR in 1957 and has a critical view of both worlds. He was therefore once again an ideal contact for my question.

Andrea Drescher: You were a GDR citizen and experienced or suffered through “real existing socialism” – depending on your point of view. So I would first like to ask you for your personal assessment of the GDR.

Andreas Peglau: Perhaps I should start by saying that I have sometimes been told that I cannot assess the GDR correctly because I was “close to the state.” As I like to point out time and again, I was not only a member of the Free German Youth, but also, at the age of 19, a member of the SED, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, until 1990. And, among other things, I worked for the GDR radio station [Jugendradio DT64](#) from 1985 onwards.

If you want to find out more from authors who also lived in the GDR but who were demonstrably not close to the state, I recommend Daniela Dahn's book [“Wehe dem Sieger! Ohne Osten kein Westen”](#) („Woe to the victor! Without the East, there is no West“). You can read about much of what I say in it.

In your opinion, what were the downsides of life in the GDR?

It's good to start with the downsides.

In the GDR, there was a widespread slogan, which, however, was not used as often when I got older: „Vom Ich zum Wir“ (“From I to We”). I believe that there is a very decisive downside hidden behind this.

Why?

Contrary to [some views, including those held by Marx](#), that individual development must form the basis for social development, we turned the tables in the GDR and undervalued, blocked, and often suppressed the individual. The group, the social, the class, the state, the socialist world system—in other words, ever larger entities—were presented as much more important or decisive.

As a result, we were often unable and not allowed to develop our individuality as we would have needed to. I believe that was also one of the decisive factors in the collapse of the GDR. It disappointed and frustrated many people who were unable to contribute their creativity, even though they wanted to—not least in order to actually achieve something like true socialism in the GDR.

Another downside that many rightly refer to was the suppression of dissenting opinions, at least when they were expressed publicly. Prescribed ideological dogmas applied, especially “Marxism-Leninism,” and in a rather narrow interpretation at that. This control of opinion, as well as the rigorous prevention of opportunities to join together and represent alternative, dissident, or oppositional views, were clearly downsides of the GDR that many suffered from to a greater or lesser extent.

But then there was also the Stasi?

From the outset, the GDR was indeed under threat and did what every other state in the 20th century did: namely, secure itself as a state. To do this, it needed an institution, an organization. As is the case with all secret services, this then took on a life of its own, not least in an inhumane way. As a result, many people's lives were disrupted or destroyed. This was particularly bitter because it contradicted fundamental socialist beliefs and ultimately did not secure the state, but caused it massive damage.

In the West, there was the BND, which was set up by former Nazis. Members of the Communist Party, the Association of Victims of Nazi Persecution, and other “left-wing” organizations that were classified as a threat to the state were monitored, in some cases persecuted or imprisoned. For a long time, they were not allowed to be civil servants, not even as mail carriers, under the [“Radikalenerlass”](#) (Radicals Decree). Or think of the [„Notstandsgesetze“](#) (“emergency laws”) passed by the Bundestag at the end of the 1960s.

Nevertheless, the snooping on people's beliefs, and state control in general, was certainly much less pronounced than in the GDR. The aim was to demonstratively grant people in the West more freedom in order to make society more attractive. But it's not as if this control didn't exist.

To what extent was the GDR threatened?

In the FRG, there were several plans in the pipeline for how to overrun the GDR militarily. In addition, it was a permanent part of Western policy to ideologically undermine and thereby dismantle the GDR. In my opinion, the Wall was necessary because the GDR was really threatening to bleed itself dry economically in the early 1960s. People educated in the East were lured en masse to the West with better offers. Overall, the West had better material opportunities thanks to support from the Western powers, especially the US.

Some politicians in the West, including [Egon Bahr](#), Willi Brandt's long-time colleague, also saw the Wall as an element that prevented possible escalations leading to World War III. But at the same

time, of course, it was a way of locking up GDR citizens and preventing any kind of uncontrolled contact with the West.

Are there any other downsides?

Much can be deduced from what I have said. [It extended to all areas, to science, culture, rock and pop music, and art.](#) Everywhere there were senior officials who somehow knew everything better because they had supposedly read Karl Marx.

Although the GDR also achieved some great things in art, science, culture, and economics, it could have achieved much more and been stronger in competition with the West if it had allowed and encouraged more individuality.

Freedom of travel was also restricted, of course. But we were able to travel, not only within the country, but also in the Eastern Bloc, which was a fairly large area of the world.

The huge Soviet Union, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, even Cuba, if you had enough time and money. Of course, Westerners had more opportunities, but we didn't have to stay at home all the time either.

Then let's move on to the other side of the coin. What were the positive aspects of life in the GDR?

Not least that there was a secure material basis for the development of individuality. No one had to fear going hungry, thirsty, homeless, or unemployed. People who had applied to leave for West Germany often lost their jobs, but then perhaps started somewhere as a janitor or night watchman, which was of course very frustrating. But even they didn't have to go hungry.

Rents in the GDR were incredibly cheap by today's standards. For example, my apartment cost 50 GDR marks when I had an income of about 800 GDR marks.

This material security is really very important. But surely there are more positive aspects?

Well, one point is that the GDR demonstrably dealt with its fascist past in a completely different way. Although never as consistently and as 100% successful as was suggested, it was still miles ahead of the FRG.

Until the mid-1990s, Western research institutes proved that the attitude of GDR citizens toward fascism was much more critical than that of Western citizens. This only changed in 1995, apparently with the realization of how frustrating life in the West was compared to the colorful illusions we had been presented with. The more people became unemployed and lost their sense of purpose in life, the more "right-wing" attitudes spread in East Germany.

However, [anti-fascist attitudes were much more deeply rooted among us than in the West](#), even if they were partly imposed on us. We dealt intensively with National Socialism at school, saw films about it at the cinema, went on school trips and youth trips where we visited concentration camps and memorials. Visiting [Sachsenhausen](#), or „[Buchenwald](#)“ near Weimar was part of that and had a significant impact on us as children and young people.

These topics and discussions also existed in the West, at least during my school days.

With the same intensity? Did you watch these films and read books that reflected on this?

We definitely watched the films. I will never forget the Anne Frank film about [Bergen-Belsen](#). For family reasons alone. So yes, we had that too. But what are the other advantages from your point of view?

I believe that the GDR pursued a more consistent and sustainable peace policy than the FRG. Its own army, the NVA, was only established in response to the Bundeswehr.

Even if, for example, the ideological support of the Soviet Union in suppressing the Prague Uprising in 1968 was certainly not pacifist or peaceful, I still think that the diplomatic and foreign policy signals of the GDR were much more permanently oriented towards peace. And that certainly has a lot to do with the anti-fascist orientation of the state. In the FRG after the war, a large number of former Nazi officials held high positions, even in the government. That was not the case in our country.

The [list of Nazis in FRG politics](#) can even be found on Wikipedia.

And they had a say in the FRG's domestic and foreign policy, logically enough. In our country, politics was controlled by the Soviet Union. Where Stalin's regime of terror only ended in the 1950s. Nevertheless, from the very beginning, there was a clear orientation towards peace in the GDR, and this continued until its end.

Something else, but equally important, comes to mind. Even if equal rights for women were not fully implemented in the GDR, they had progressed much further than ever in the FRG. Divorces also cost almost nothing, especially since you only needed a lawyer in the event of a dispute. The fact that a woman was left without financial support afterwards was not an issue: everyone got a job. Women received equal pay for equal work, and more women were employed in skilled positions. At the radio station, I actually only had female bosses. At the SED Politburo, the highest level of leadership, however, this came to a complete end; there was never a female full member.

The GDR, and this also plays an important role, did not adopt the civil code of old Germany, but created its own. Many paragraphs that existed in the FRG for a long time were missing, for example, that the man was allowed to rule over the woman. Or the right of parents to discipline their children, which was only abolished in the FRG in 2000, after it had been extended to women in the 1960s – supposedly in the name of equality! So children could be beaten by *both* parents. Teachers were also not allowed to use the cane in the GDR. Many more examples can be found in the book by Daniela Dahn mentioned above.

Do you have any other examples?

In the GDR, as the flip side of what was also known as the “economy of scarcity,” there was no consumerism. We didn't produce 100 types of yogurt that all tasted the same and only looked different, but only two or three types. The packaging was plain, but cheap.

Today, it is large and elaborate – and always thrown away.

The slogan “from road to rail” was much more of a reality in the GDR than it is today. In this respect, there was a much more ecological transport policy. However, I must add a downside to the topic of ecology.

What is it?

The denial of ecological problems. Ecology was largely ignored in the GDR. Our politicians acted as if the Wall could stop all ecological problems and that we ourselves were not creating any. Accordingly, in Leuna, Bitterfeld, and other economic conurbations, the extent of air pollution, for example, was never officially examined in detail. But the life expectancy of those who lived there was reduced.

Now I have a few more direct questions, which I would like you to answer with a simple yes or no, even if some of them have already been addressed. I just want to emphasize these points.

Was it difficult for financially disadvantaged people to survive economically in the GDR?

No.

Was there a significant number of homeless people in the GDR?

No. Not even an insignificant number.

Were wealth and means of production concentrated in fewer and fewer hands?

No.

Were industries relevant to the common good, such as hospitals, energy supply, and road construction, in private hands?

No.

Were there private-public partnership structures?

No.

Was there a segment of the population in the GDR that was becoming increasingly wealthy?

No.

And the last yes/no question: Were there extreme income disparities between officials and ordinary citizens?

No.

Were there no differences at all?

Yes. The gap was gradually widening in the GDR as well. In the 1950s, it was much less pronounced than in the 1980s. From the early 1970s onwards, the motto was: "Those who achieve more should also be able to afford more."

So consumerism also increased in the GDR, but never to the extent that it did in the FRG.

In the fall of 1989, the media made a big fuss about how the GDR government lived in isolation in their Wandlitzer settlement outside Berlin. They showed: "They have gold-plated faucets!" But the houses of every Western corporate executive at that time were probably larger and more luxurious. Even though the members of the GDR government had completely different opportunities to obtain consumer goods, including from the West, than normal skilled workers, the difference in material quality of life was by no means as huge as it is now between corporate managers and employees or between high-ranking politicians and lower income groups.

Looking at these points, how can anyone equate today's society with the GDR 2.0?

There are aspects such as the suppression of dissenting opinions, the control of individual development, or the intrusive work of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, where similarities certainly exist.

But that has little to do with the socialism of the GDR, does it? You can find that in any form of dictatorship. Or am I wrong?

No, I see it that way too.

Do you have any idea what might motivate people to make this comparison?

What we both know is that the FRG never stopped more or less demonizing the GDR in the official media. In this respect, there has been a long tradition in the FRG since 1949 of disparaging the GDR and thus also socialist ideas.

After 1945, there was initially a pan-German discussion, even within the CDU/CSU, that capitalism as the basis of fascism and war had to be abandoned. However, that soon came to an end. Socialism was declared evil in the West – and with it the GDR.

Then came a phase in 1989/90 in which West German politicians courted East German citizens as voters: “You also contribute something to unity, you are also important, you also have experience.” But that quickly came to an end after the annexation had been successfully completed. And soon after that, the socialist world system collapsed. But this “real socialism” – with all its weaknesses and shortcomings – was an alternative system to the West. To ensure that no one would think of repeating this experiment and doing it better, this alternative now had to be further discredited or destroyed, ideologically, culturally, and also architecturally – for example, by demolishing the [“Palace of the Republic” in East Berlin](#).

The message was constantly repeated: “The GDR and socialism are simply shit: inhumane, totalitarian, economically ridiculous concepts.” The GDR was now nothing more than wall deaths, the Stasi, dictatorship – nothing more. Well, if that was the GDR, then there was really no need to discuss it anymore, right? This image has become ingrained in people's minds and is no longer questioned.

Is that why the comparison with the GDR 2.0 is automatically so negative? Is that intentional?

You can compare anything, but outside of mathematics, you can't equate anything. We should take a look at what today resembles the negative aspects of the GDR system and to what extent. But anyone dealing with “GDR 2.0” should first urgently research and try to understand what “GDR 1.0” was. And in many respects, it was a completely different concept. The GDR was never a project controlled by nationally or globally organized oligarchs. At no point did it engage in warmongering, as is now happening with the policy of rearmament. With its peace policy and anti-fascism, it also provided a point of reference for the peace movement in the FRG. There was also never a healthcare system in the GDR that was even remotely as hostile to the population as the “corona” measures have been since 2020.

The differences are really obvious. To equate the two is truly absurd. Orwell sends his regards. Thank you very much for the exchange!

¹ DeepL-Translation of „DDR 2.0 – oder wo leben wir heute?“, published on August 12, 2025, by TKP (<https://tkp.at/2025/08/12/ddr-2-0-oder-wo-leben-wir-heute/>). Image source: [Origin/rights: DDR Geschichtsmuseum im Dokumentationszentrum Perleberg / Ruth Bergmann](#)

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Tip for further reading:

