

**Ostalgia:- Ain't what it used to be? An Ossie writes.**

**Beyond the Wall**

**East Germany, 1949-1990**

**by Katja Hoyer**

Katja Hoyer, described as a German-British writer, was born in 1985 in Guben (then Wilhelm-Pieck Stadt) on the Oder-Neisse River line which separated post-war Germany from Poland where her father was a serving officer in the East German Air Force. After *Die Wende* or the Change which followed the collapse of the Soviet bloc, her father left the military and the family moved to the former West Germany in 1990. Despite being arguably something of a marginal Ossie, both in geographical and temporal terms, she picked up the gauntlet flung down by the retiring Chancellor Angela Merkel, herself a fully-fledged Ossie, who declared “East Germany is impossible to describe.” Choosing to write in what she describes as her second language of English; Hoyer’s book has enjoyed huge international success with translations in 15 languages. With a neat symmetry, her previous foray into German history had been a study of the architect of an earlier German unification, Bismarck.

At the end of the European war in 1945 the 4 Allied powers, (USSR, USA, Britain and France) sat round the cadaver of the former Third Reich, stretched out on the dissection table and agreed to divide it into 4 zones, each administered by a different Allied power. The Allies declared an ambition to operate by consensus. As the new lexicon of Cold War, Iron Curtain, Marshall Plan, Berlin Airlift and Korean War was pressed into diplomatic service it also became clear that the 2 sides viewed their respective German clients differently. For the West the objective was to have the Federal Republic (BRD) up and running as a functioning liberal democracy with a strong economy as soon as possible, conveniently an ambition shared by the BRD’s first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer. Rearmament followed swiftly in the 1950s and only a French veto blocked the transfer of nuclear weapons. The Soviets had a different attitude to their charges. Stalin slowly came round to proposing a unified, demilitarised and neutral Germany but the West was well ahead and was creating facts on the ground. The Democratic Republic (DDR) and the Soviet Union were like a couple forced into a loveless marriage. Far from building up their clients, the Russians were intent on ensuring the DDR paid reparations for the industrial carnage visited on them by the

Wehrmacht and began a programme of dismantling factories to reassemble them in Russia and generally viewing East Germany as somewhere to be economically plundered and exploited. This exacerbated the Eastern Zone's existing weakness of only having 25% of Germany's 70 million people and the less industrialised and more underdeveloped territory. As the DDR slid towards being effectively a one-party state, the men given the task of running the country emerged. These were primarily German Communists who had chosen exile in the USSR during the Hitler years but had fared badly there with fewer than 25% of the political refugees surviving that dystopian era of purges, show trials and the general suspicion that the asylum seekers were operating as a 5<sup>th</sup> column. Hoyer's thesis is that these men owed their survival to adopting an attitude of total subservience to Stalin which meant the subsequent wellbeing of the DDR was always a secondary consideration. The Ossies, many themselves refugees from present day Poland, knew from the outset that their state was coming from a long way back, knowledge implicit in the surprisingly Christian overtones of their new anthem *Auferstanden aus Ruinen*, (Risen from Ruins) with the hope for a future Resurrection from the Golgotha of crushing military defeat replacing the misplaced arrogance which put Germany above everything else.

The author works her way systematically through her chronicle breaking it down into batches of a few years each and introducing the sections with the journalistic artifice of drawing the reader in by using vignettes of person or place which makes the book both comprehensive and very readable. We are taken through the popular uprising of 1953, the rationale for the Berlin Wall, the oppressive surveillance by the Stasi legions and the generally modest provision of material goods. Less celebrated in the West were the educational and employment opportunities for women, facilitated by good childcare, and for the traditional working class as well as a less pressurised lifestyle which afforded opportunities for other social activities out of working hours. The West Germans made it clear from the outset that unification was their victory and was essentially a takeover rather than a merger so there were many losers among the DDR's professional and academic classes whose qualifications were widely disparaged.

East Germany was generally presented in Britain as a grim, sinister place – think films like *Funeral in Berlin*, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* or *Die Leben den Anderen* – but Hoyer recalls lighter ones like *Goodbye, Lenin!* and the idiosyncratic Ostrock scene. Even in the 1950s, in the Western camps housing Ossie refugees, surveys showed that 75% of these

had left for economic reasons. 25% of East Germans have left since unification and only 10% would like to see the state restored although 70% think it had something going for it.

Although very successful both in commercial terms and in raising the author's profile spectacularly, Hoyer's balanced and broadly sympathetic account of East Germany has been criticised by some as an exercise in reputation laundering. I felt she gave a balanced, nuanced account bringing out the complex texture of life behind *The Wall* and would unhesitatingly recommend it to any BDHS members whose political or historical antennae are set aquiver by events in Central and Eastern Europe.

***Bill Doherty***