

VAIZEY, Hester – *Born in the GDR: Living in the Shadow of the Wall*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp 224.

Was the German Democratic Republic (GDR) a Stasiland or a socialist utopia? In her new book, *Born in the GDR*, Hester Vaizey suggests that while this either/or dichotomy dominates popular discourse, the reality is far more complicated. Each of the eight chapters in Vaizey's book relates the story of one individual who was born in the GDR after the Berlin Wall was built in August 1961. Their experiences range from a Vicar's daughter to a party official's son, from a PhD student to an attempted escapee who is captured and imprisoned. In relating these eight stories in detail, Vaizey is adamant that they are not a representative sample of the East German population as a whole. They are unrepresentative because they were all young, ranging in age from 25 to 10 when the Wall fell, and because Vaizey deliberately chose stories that were "particularly striking" in that they contrasted each other and contradicted popular portrayals of the GDR (18). This produces a tension between Vaizey's acknowledgement that these stories are not representative and her desire to make them so.

The considerable strength of this book lies in the nuances and insights into life in the GDR provided by the eight individual stories. Vaizey's research focuses on three areas: life under the regime, experiences of the fall of the Wall, and life after reunification. In each of these three areas the reader is exposed to both the familiar and the unfamiliar. When describing life in the GDR, certain interviewees tell familiar stories such as being approached by the Stasi to inform on their acquaintances, wanting to travel to forbidden places like Paris or London, or the status acquired by owning a pair of Buffalo jeans. What is especially valuable about these stories is the unique information gleaned, such as the fact that while Buffalo jeans were a status symbol, their obvious "Westernness" also potentially marked a person as an enemy of the state. Perhaps the richest passages refer to smells associated with the East and the West. While one interviewee wistfully remembers the smells of the East German shops, another recalls that West Germans smelled like "good things such as perfume, chocolate, and coffee." (100) Recollections like these provide dimension to our understanding of life in the GDR.

This same blend of the familiar and the unexpected is apparent in the interviewees' reactions to the fall of the Wall. Many reacted in predictable ways such as fearing unemployment, or taking a hurried trip to the West lest access be denied once again. But the familiarity of these stories is contrasted with experiences such as Mario's. Having been imprisoned for over three months and then released to the West, when the Wall fell, Mario feared his Stasi captors would come looking for him. In contrast to common portrayals, for Mario, the Wall between East and West meant security whereas its fall meant vulnerability. The Wall as protector is a rare perspective indeed.

When interviewees assess their lives after the Wall, again, the reader encounters familiar sentiments commonly characterized as *Ostalgie*, such as those who regret the fact that in the early days of reunification so many West Germans took advantage of the naivety of East Germans to turn a profit. Many of

the interviewees also lament the lost sense of community, or relate stories of loved ones who suffered unemployment after reunification because their skills were no longer relevant. This conception of *Ostalgie* is complicated, however, by those interviewees who point out that their fond memories of the GDR do not mean they wish for the return of the GDR—quite the contrary—but that many of them had happy youths and feel alienated in a Germany that trivializes those memories. Poignantly, several of the interviewees point out that while in theory they now enjoy more freedoms—the most often cited is the freedom to travel wherever they want—in reality, the ability to exercise that freedom depends upon financial feasibility. The West is politically free, but restrictions of another kind exist.

Each of Vaizey's carefully chosen stories remind the reader that the fall of East Germany was complicated and defies easy categorization as either positive or negative. It is with this realization that the reader confronts the book's inherent tension. Vaizey is careful to acknowledge that these stories are not representative, but that they still contain inherent value as individual experiences of the former GDR. The tension arises from the fact that, despite this claim, Vaizey actually uses these stories as if they are representative. Rather than provide a simple narrative of each of the eight stories, Vaizey instead skillfully interweaves eight 'main' stories with information gleaned from an additional 27 testimonies she collected, as well as testimony excerpted in other published sources. She relates the experiences of Katharina, a Vicar's daughter, to other individuals who belonged to religious communities and were persecuted by the regime as a result. Likewise, she relates 10-year-old Peggy's experiences of collective community to other schoolchildren who similarly experienced and valued this characteristic of the GDR. This technique suggests the author is not assessing the individual value of these stories but is instead tying their value to how they confirm or contradict other experiences. In suggesting that these eight stories help to challenge the popular Stasiland versus social utopia conception of the GDR, Vaizey is in fact implying their representativeness. Eight stories out of 16 million cannot challenge a dominant discourse unless those stories can claim to represent a significant element of the broader population. This is not to say that these stories do not have historical value, just that they cannot be used to challenge a dominant narrative.

In the end, these eight stories contain information and insights that are unique to these eight individuals and therefore cannot be found anywhere else. They are full of rich detail that helps the reader to imagine what certain individuals were smelling, seeing, eating, wearing and talking about in the GDR. They also serve as an important reminder that the GDR was the background of many memories—happy, sad, and everywhere in between—that had nothing to do with the politics of the regime, but were simply the product of human beings living their lives. For all of these reasons, while *Born in the GDR* sometimes overstates its evidence, this short book is well worth the read.

Karen Priestman
The University of Western Ontario