

TRANSLATING THE GDR: NARRATIVE AUTHORITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY IN UNIFIED GERMANY

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the historiography and memory politics surrounding the German Democratic Republic (GDR), using the concept of ‘narrative translation’ to analyse how dominant post-unification frameworks have recontextualised the socialist past. Drawing on Hayden White’s theories of historical narrative and cultural translation, the study investigates the dominant narratives surrounding the GDR alongside counter-narratives such as *Ostalgie* and personal testimonies. Oral history interviews with East German translators and interpreters provide the main empirical focus, offering insight into how these professionals experienced the reevaluation of their expertise and values during the *Wende*. By integrating translation studies, cultural memory theory, and oral histories, the paper explores how certain representations of the GDR have become more privileged while others have been marginalized. In doing so, it considers the value of more plural translations of the socialist past and reflects on the relevance of this framework for other post-socialist or post-colonial contexts.

KEYWORDS: German Democratic Republic, History as Translation, Historical Narratives, Memory Studies, Oral History Interviews, Translation and Interpreting

1. Introduction

More than three decades after unification, Germany’s social and political landscape remains marked by the divide between East and West. This divide persists not only through economic and political asymmetries, but also through competing narratives of how the GDR (German Democratic Republic) is remembered. A particularly entrenched binary continues to structure both public and academic discourse: on the one hand, the GDR appears as a repressive, isolated, and ultimately failed dictatorship; on the other, it is recalled through the register of everyday life, social stability, and lived socialist experience – an outlook often dismissed under the label *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for aspects of East Germany). This binary view has been reinforced since 1990 through memory-political infrastructures shaped by the institutional frameworks of unified Germany, which were predominantly influenced by West German perspectives. The result is a narrowed horizon of interpretive possibilities: rather than enabling critical engagement with the GDR as a complex historical formation, the binary tends to reproduce ideological camps and foreclose more processual, comparative, and multi-perspectival accounts. In this sense, the *Wende* (the ‘turn’ referring to the events around 1989–90 after the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification) is not only a political rupture but also a narratological and epistemological one, which raises the question of how histories can be written without merely reproducing the terms of past conflicts.

This article takes that situation as a starting point and asks how such narratives gain authority – and what is lost when they become the default ‘translation’ of the socialist past

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for unified Germany. It proposes that the GDR's history can be reconceived by treating history-writing itself as a translational practice: historians, like translators, select, edit, and reframe past experiences in line with particular political and epistemic demands. The focus of this article is on the *Wende* and its aftermath, and on how the lives of people who worked as translators and interpreters have been rendered either invisible or suspect within dominant accounts that emphasise repression, isolation, and failure. Empirically, the study combines close readings of influential German-language histories of the GDR with oral history interviews of former non-literary translators and interpreters. The historiographical corpus comprises widely used academic publications on the history of divided Germany. These texts are analysed for recurring narrative structures, governing metaphors, and the positioning of GDR citizens within the historical plot. Particular attention is paid to how concepts such as repression, isolation, and failure are mobilised, how everyday life is represented, and how memories that deviate from the dominant frame are addressed or dismissed. The oral history corpus builds on semi-structured interviews with GDR interpreters and translators in non-literary domains such as technical or academic areas. These interviews are treated as narrative performances in which participants translate their own pasts into stories that negotiate professional and private identity, political change, and the moral vocabularies available after 1990. Oral histories have the potential to counter epistemic violence by centering lived experiences rather than abstract categories (see e.g., Smith, 2012), which can highlight the agency of East German translators in reshaping historical memory. Analytically, the two corpora are read side by side: canonical histories are approached as top-down narrative translations of the GDR past, while interview narratives are examined as bottom-up translations that may confirm, complicate, or resist the dominant scripts. This dual perspective makes it possible to reconstruct not only *what* is said about the GDR, but also *how* certain translations of the past come to count as authoritative history while others are relegated to the realm of nostalgia.

2. Theorising history as translation: narrative translation

In recent decades, scholars of history and memory have emphasised that the past is always mediated through language and narrative. In other words, history is never simply 'what happened' but is shaped by how it is told (White, 1973, 1987). Historians do not merely assemble neutral facts; they choose particular plots, metaphors, and genres through which those facts become intelligible as 'history'. For Hayden White, historical writing is a way of translating reality into a story, such that the historian effectively acts as a translator of the past, transforming knowing into telling for a given audience and context (1973, pp. 128–130, 1987). This view does not deny historical facts, but it recognises that facts are placed into narrative frameworks that are constantly subject to reinterpretation and rewriting. Each narrative gives meaning to the same events (White, 1987, p. 1). Historical writing is thus always an act of interpretation, not mere representation: the historian "translates" reality into narrative form and must decide which elements to foreground and which to

marginalise in the telling (White, 1987, p. 130). Barthes (1967, p. 120) argued that the apparent transparency of “realistic” historical narrative is itself an effect of discourse: by effacing the presence of the narrator, historical writing produces a referential illusion of direct access to the past, concealing the interpretive labour that underpins it. In other words, what seems like an objective chronicle is in fact a carefully crafted narrative that hides its own storytelling devices. Alun Munslow and other post-foundational historians have radicalised this insight into a broader critique of conventional historiography. Munslow (e.g., 1997, 2012) questions the assumption that even with perfect methods and complete sources one could produce a narrative that mirrors the past ‘as it really was’. Drawing on thinkers like Frank Ankersmit, he points to a fundamental incongruity between the present and the past: the language and concepts with which historians describe events are irreducibly shaped by the conceptual resources and political vocabularies of their own time (Munslow, 2012, p. 150). On this account, every historical narrative is conditioned by the historian’s position and cannot escape its own horizon. When historians speak about “objectivity” (Munslow, 1997, p. 6), they are therefore not stepping outside discourse but rather negotiating which translations of the past count as legitimate within particular professional and political settings (Munslow, 2012). In sum, the writing of history is a process of choosing and framing, so to say a translational act that inevitably leaves things out, highlights certain themes, and imposes a particular storyline.

This is where translation studies offers a particularly suggestive vocabulary. Scholars such as M.^a Carmen África Vidal Claramonte and Michael Cronin have argued that the tasks of historians and translators are structurally similar: both must take an existing text, archive, or experience and “give it new life” (Cronin, 2006, p. 254) for a different audience, often by retelling it in new words and from a different perspective. From this angle, historical knowledge is always mediated and recontextualised rather than simply transferred. Vidal Claramonte (2025, p. 6) stresses that translating history involves telling stories in the voices of those who have until now been silenced, while also recognising that each retelling is constrained by the translator-historian’s context. Cronin urges historians to ask not only what gets translated into the authorised version of history, but also why so much is not translated and why certain experiences, actors, or temporalities are systematically omitted or pushed to the margins (Cronin, 2006). Historian and translator Luigi Alonzi has gone so far as to argue that every act of translation, including historical writing, grants an old text “new life” by inscribing it into a different temporal and cultural horizon (Alonzi, 2023, p. 12). This broad view of translation has inspired scholars to extend the term beyond interlingual transfers, to cover any shift of content between contexts or modes: from oral testimony to written archive, from local memory to national narrative, from one disciplinary discourse to another.

Building on this framework means moving beyond metaphor into concrete questions: *what* is being translated in each account, *who* does the translating, under what constraints, and with what social effects. For this purpose, I introduce the term ‘narrative translation’ as a socio-epistemic process by which past events are reorganised into narratives that are

legible and acceptable within a given ideological and institutional order. This definition foregrounds the idea that history-writing follows a kind of brief: it is shaped by purpose, audience, and context, and it responds to explicit or implicit demands about what must be foregrounded, how moral clarity should be achieved, and which interpretive frame should dominate. In this view, 'narrative translation' is not only interpretive but also a form of epistemic re-organisation, namely one that can render alternative narratives illegitimate or invisible.

3. Translating the GDR: dominant narratives after 1990

Post-1990 GDR historiography in unified Germany can thus be read as a large-scale translation project: it selects, structures, and communicates meanings that serve identifiable social and political functions, especially the legitimisation of the unified liberal-democratic state and the construction of a 'shared' national identity (see e.g., Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999). In this translation, dictatorship and repression anchor dominant narratives of GDR history. However, this focus can sometimes overshadow the plural and heterogeneous everyday experiences of GDR citizens, including ambivalent or positive memories, which are at times framed as nostalgic or less relevant. The consequence is not merely a selective history but an illustration of how narrative authority is generated: what survives as 'history' is shaped by the translational filters of institutional memory, academic discourse, and public pedagogy.

The concept of 'narrative translation' highlights the selective, power-laden character of this process. In the German context after 1990, a well-established divide can be observed between accounts that foreground surveillance, censorship, and authoritarian rule on the one hand, and those that emphasise everyday agency, social stability, and lived experience on the other. Importantly, these narrative structures did not arise organically. They have served political and cultural functions in Germany since 1990, when historical interpretation became instrumental in legitimising the newly unified German state (Beattie, 2011, p. 24; Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999). Historiography, memory politics, and public discourse converged in presenting liberal democracy as historically normative and inevitable, while positioning the GDR as the negative foil against which the new state could narrate itself. At the same time, the process renders other translations of the GDR past, especially those that foreground ordinary lives, suspect or invisible, often by labelling them as apologetic or nostalgic. By using 'narrative translation' as an analytical lens, we can trace how these hierarchies between authorised and disqualified stories are produced and maintained, and how they might be opened to revision.

A distinctive feature of the GDR is the mode of its demise: rather than negotiating an internal transformation, East Germany was absorbed by an already existing West German state. The process of unification, marked by the absorption of East Germany into the existing West German state, resulted in an uneven distribution of epistemic authority, which reflects the challenges of integrating two distinct political and social systems. The absorbing FRG not only took over administratively but also gained the power to

institutionalise dominant historical narratives. Within this configuration, West German historians and institutions placed strong emphasis on the GDR's undemocratic nature, often framing it through the lens of the *Unrechtsstaat* ('illegitimate state') that highlights systematic rights violations and the absence of rule of law (Gieseke, 2014; Kunze, 2010, p. 402). Scholars and state bodies have underscored the SED regime's repressive tools: the Stasi secret police, the Berlin Wall, and the denial of basic freedoms (Horten, 2020, p. 50; Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999). As historian Konrad Jarausch notes, such accounts typically contrast the SED dictatorship with the democratic legitimacy of the Federal Republic and interpret GDR rule largely through the building of the Wall and the pervasiveness of the secret police. GDR society is thus frequently described as "thoroughly politicized," organised via party-affiliated mass organisations such that no space remained for a "normal" private life (Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999, p. 4). While the analytical importance of dictatorship and repression is undeniable, the narratological effect of this framing is often totalising: once *Unrechtsstaat* becomes the master narrative, other dimensions of lived reality tend to be translated as either morally irrelevant, politically tainted, or signs of false consciousness (Beattie, 2011, p. 30; Wolle, 1998, p. 10).

Post-unification memory policies further entrenched these patterns. Post-unification memory policies further reinforced these patterns. In an effort to avoid the fragmented and delayed *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ('coming to terms with the past') that followed National Socialism, the confrontation with the GDR past was made a federal project, with a strong emphasis on dictatorship as a central feature of interpretation (Haag, 2017, p. 47; Sabrow, 2009). One effect of this institutionalisation was the standardisation of public memory of the GDR: it came to be defined in official discourse as the 'second German dictatorship,' often explicitly linked to an anti-totalitarian narrative that positioned 1989/90 as a triumphant escape from tyranny (Sabrow, 2009). This produced a moral clarity useful for national integration but also marginalised the heterogeneity of lived experiences, especially those not easily told in terms of repression and resistance (Beattie, 2011, p. 29). Within this standardised narrative, several sub-plots recur with striking consistency. One is the framing of the GDR as a *Mauerstaat*, a walled-in society, functioning not only as a literal reference to the Berlin Wall but as a metaphor for social inwardness and intellectual stagnation (Horten, 2020, p. 78; Wolle, 1998, p. 8, 2011). Another is the depiction of the GDR as a Stasi-state, a society riddled with informants, which has reinforced the idea of a stagnant, fearful social sphere (Horten, 2020, pp. 60–62). Efforts to move outside these paradigms are often treated as suspect: intense public controversies have arisen when scholarship has challenged the dominant frames, for example, when highlighting everyday life or public opinion in the GDR in ways that complicate the tyranny narrative (see e.g., reactions to Hoyer's *Beyond the Wall*, 2023). Additionally, the motif of the "failed experiment" is regularly invoked: the collapse of the GDR is portrayed as the inevitable outcome of its systemic deficiencies, rather than as a contingent historical process with multiple possible outcomes (Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999, pp. 9–11; Kowalczyk, 2015).

These dominant narratives were widely promoted through official channels and continue to shape public knowledge. Federal commissions, museums, school textbooks, and popular media all echoed the story of the GDR as a totalitarian SED regime (Beattie, 2011, p. 28; Sabrow, 2009; Müller-Zetzsche, 2020). For instance, the first federal commission on the “history and consequences of the SED dictatorship” explicitly cast its mission in anti-totalitarian terms, aiming to strengthen “democracy and German unity” by highlighting the GDR’s undemocratic nature (Beattie, 2011, p. 24). Museums such as the Berlin Wall Memorial or former Stasi prison sites emphasise surveillance and oppression, while dissident testimonies and West German media reports reinforce this interpretive frame (Horten, 2020, pp. 85–88). In effect, a master narrative of the GDR was translated into the political language of the Federal Republic: The East German past was rendered as the antithesis of democratic West Germany, a cautionary tale that justified the post-1990 order. From this perspective, the GDR appears monolithic and self-evidently deficient. And because historians have typically presented such accounts with a great deal of archival evidence and factual detail, the narrative can seem ‘objective’, even though, as Barthes reminds us, such realist histories are achieving an effect of reality through discourse, not offering unmediated access to the past (Barthes, 1967, p. 69). For West Germans and others unfamiliar with everyday life in the GDR, ‘history’ thus came to mean a story that foregrounded repression above all, supporting an immediate post-unification agenda: reconciling and legitimising the new Germany by depicting East Germany as fundamentally flawed and by contrast highlighting the West’s ostensibly superior freedom and democracy.

Within these broader developments, the *Wende*, the tumultuous period of 1989/90, occupies a central yet contested place. In early public discourse, the term *Wende* (‘turning point’) gained enormous popularity as shorthand for the break between ‘before’ and ‘after’ 1990 (Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999; Sabrow, 2009). Yet the term was politically loaded from the start: On the one hand, the *Wende* served as the triumphant endpoint of a teleology running from dictatorship to freedom, with the FRG as the normative model against which the GDR is measured (Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999, p. 3; Beattie, 2011). At the same time, other strands of scholarship have emphasised the ‘ambiguous revolution’ of 1989 and pointed out that neither the revolutionary nor the reformist scripts were fully realised, that key turning points were shaped by miscommunication and contingency, and that the rapid shift from revolution to unification produced feelings of both liberation and loss (Sabrow, 2009; Grunow, 2020). These divergent framings underscore that the *Wende* itself is an object of narrative translation: was it primarily a story of civic revolution, of attempted self-reform, or of externally driven annexation by the West? Each interpretation translates the same sequence of events into a different story.

In recent years, the field of GDR studies has become increasingly self-reflexive about how 1989/90 is narrativised. Some commentators note that research on the GDR now extends ‘beyond 1989/90’, which treats the tumultuous transformation period and its long aftermath as part of the history of the GDR itself rather than as a post-socialist epilogue

(Fulbrook, 2023). Others have analysed how different media have staged unification as various kinds of story, thereby blending historical reconstruction with affective narratives that help forge a post-Wall national identity (see e.g., Mascha, 2012). Political scientists and memory scholars have highlighted the multi-directionality of memories of 1989, which shows that references to the ‘revolution of 1989’ can be mobilised by actors across the spectrum, from liberal democrats to the far right, each claiming to inherit the mantle of popular resistance or to defend the ‘true’ legacy of the *Wende* (Grunow, 2020). In all these cases, 1989 appears less as a fixed event and more as a repertoire of narrative resources that can be translated into different plots depending on contemporary needs.

4. Everyday life and *Ostalgie*: counter-narratives

One important counterpoint to the official historiography has been the emergence of everyday memory narratives. Since the late 1990s, oral histories, memoirs, and ethnographic studies have increasingly drawn attention to *Alltag* (‘everyday life’) in the GDR and to the personal experiences of ordinary East Germans that do not fit into the *Unrechtstaat* narrative. These approaches ‘retranslate’ the GDR past in a more plural key and try to recover voices and perspectives that had been marginalised. Studies of post-unification memory culture note that by the 2000s, *Ostalgie* had become a visible phenomenon: from films and consumer memorabilia to internet forums, many East Germans (and some West Germans) began commemorating everyday aspects of GDR life, often in a semi-nostalgic or ironic mode, as a way to reclaim parts of the past that were flattened or vilified in the official story (Boyer, 2006; Cooke, 2005). While some observers dismissed *Ostalgie* as a trivial longing for “GDR oddities” or a whitewash of dictatorship, others argued that it expressed a genuine need to remember community ties, social security, and identities that were lost or devalued after 1990 (Boyer, 2006, pp. 364–366). In the first two decades after unification, insecurity and social dislocation were very real for many East Germans: industries collapsed, unemployment spiked, and familiar social structures vanished virtually overnight. Oral histories and sociological surveys show that people felt an emotional need to remember aspects of the GDR, from childhood communities and workplace camaraderie to social benefits like guaranteed employment and healthcare, that had abruptly ceased or radically changed after 1990 (Boyer, 2006, p. 370; Hodgin, 2013). Such memories do not ignore the repressive or dysfunctional aspects of the GDR, but they insist that other aspects need to be considered as well. Cooke (2005), for example, critiques the framing of *Ostalgie* as mere nostalgia, arguing that it often functions as a counter-narrative to the colonising discourse of unification, to reclaim East German identities that were marginalized in post-1990 Germany.

In relation to the *Wende* specifically, everyday-life and *Ostalgie* narratives have played a crucial role in replotting 1989/90. Oral histories and biographical studies demonstrate that for many East Germans, the *Wende* was experienced less as a clear-cut “revolution” or ecstatic liberation, and more as a dense period of uncertainty, upheaval, and the rapid devaluation of prior life courses (Boyer, 2006, p. 374; Engler, 2019). People

describe the excitement of new freedoms and travel alongside the disorientation of economic displacement and cultural alienation. Berdahl (1999), for example, argues that the experience of the *Wende* varied significantly depending on regional and personal contexts, with some communities reclaiming GDR identities as an act of cultural resistance. This more ambivalent narrative complicates the triumphalist view of 1989 as simply the victory of freedom. It shows that the *Wende* also entailed losses, of social status, of identity, of a sense of security, that the master narrative of ‘dictatorship-to-democracy’ tended to downplay. Some scholars have noted that by the late 2000s, even museum representations and public discourse began cautiously incorporating everyday perspectives to present a more nuanced view of GDR history. The Wende Museum in Los Angeles, for instance, deliberately collects everyday artifacts to portray East German life beyond just oppression, which illustrates a growing Anglophone interest in *Alltagsgeschichte* (‘everyday-history’) of the GDR (Mascha, 2012). These developments underscore that the meaning of 1989/90 is not fixed; it is still being translated and retranslated in cultural memory.

This sustained plurality of memory suggests that the issue at stake is not a lack of evidence, but a contest of narrative frames. For some, the dominant frame – GDR as a repressive failure – remains imperative to uphold. For others, that frame is too limiting and needs to be revised or expanded to include everyday truths. The persistence of such divergent translations of the GDR past indicates that history-writing itself has become a battleground: whose translation of the past will be accepted as ‘history’? It is against this background that the present study incorporates oral history interviews with former GDR translators and interpreters. Such first-person narratives offer a bottom-up perspective that can counterbalance top-down archival or policy narratives. The interview component is not used here as mere illustration; it functions as a kind of counter-translation of the GDR past and actively engages the question of narrative authority. If post-1990 public narratives have translated the GDR into a repertoire of repression, isolation, and failure, oral history allows us to ‘retranslate’ that past by foregrounding experiences and agency that the dominant narrative left out. In this sense, the method aligns with the article’s thesis: it makes visible how alternative narratives became illegible under the hegemonic translation, and how they can be reclaimed and re-inscribed into history without devolving into nostalgia or apology. As Cronin notes the marginalisation of local voices in translation history (Cronin, 2000, pp. 45–47), we must ask why certain stories were *not* translated into the official history. These interviews attempt to bring those untranslated stories to light.

5. Translators’ testimonies as retranslations of the past

The following section presents selected extracts from interviews¹ with non-literary translators and interpreters who lived through the *Wende*. These quotations are not

¹ The testimonies discussed here come from a corpus of currently 32 oral history interviews conducted between 2020 and 2025 with people who worked as (literary) translators and/or interpreters in the GDR. This corpus is growing steadily. The interviewees’ professional profiles are diverse: four worked exclusively as literary translators, five combined literary and technical translation as freelancers, ten were specialised

intended to represent all interviewees in the corpus, nor to stand in for GDR citizens in general. Instead, they foreground a set of perspectives that often remain marginal in post-unification public narratives and illustrate that alongside standardised accounts of 1989/90 there are alternative experiences and interpretive frameworks in circulation. These translators' and interpreters' accounts are shaped by personal memory and by the time that has passed. As Aleida Assmann (2008) notes, recollection is filtered through present contexts, so retrospective narratives may be inflected by nostalgia or disillusionment. This study therefore does not seek to establish a definitive truth about GDR life, but to add nuance by foregrounding individual narratives.

For readability, the excerpts are arranged in a broadly chronological and thematic sequence, from the moment of the *Wende*, through the immediate post-unification adjustments, to later reflections on freedom and cultural change, and each is followed by analysis that connects the testimony to the paper's framework of 'narrative translation'.

5.1 Anticipating rupture

One translator recalled their² uneasy prescience in late 1989: "When the Wall fell, we knew that things were going to change – not necessarily for the better. We knew that many of us would lose our jobs and that it would be much harder to find work in the West." (Interview A, my translation). This recollection is representative of what most interviewees remembered about the immediate period of the *Wende* as a very precarious time, and it captures a strikingly cautious, even pessimistic, expectation at the very moment often celebrated as a triumph. Rather than narrating November 1989 as pure euphoria, the translator emphasises foreboding and professional insecurity. Their use of "we knew" suggests that among East German citizens, there was a collective realisation that unification would be a double-edged sword. This perspective complicates the dominant 'liberation' script of 1989. It foregrounds what the master narrative largely omitted: the fear of displacement felt by citizens who understood that the opening of borders also meant the collapse of existing structures and the influx of new competition regarding their

technical translators, seven worked as both translators and interpreters, and six were interpreters employed by Intertext, the GDR's largest translation agency. Literary translators were based at various publishing houses, while technical translators and interpreters worked for Intertext (on permanent contracts or as freelancers), other VEBs (Volkseigene Betriebe, publicly owned enterprises), or the military. Participants entered the profession at different times, from the 1960s to the 1980s, bringing perspectives shaped by distinct historical and institutional contexts. To explore their work, identities, and self-understandings, I conducted semi-structured interviews. After a few initial questions on education and career trajectories, the interviews shifted to open-ended prompts that invited participants to speak freely about their professional and private lives in the GDR. Interview lengths ranged from 38 to 312 minutes, depending on availability and willingness to share. All interviews were audio-recorded and accompanied by field notes, with participants giving informed consent through signed forms and verbal explanation. Recordings were transcribed using the GDPR-compliant software aTrain (University of Graz) and analysed thematically in MAXQDA to identify recurring patterns and distinctive narratives across areas such as work, finances, education, and political or social influences. Transcripts and audio files are stored securely on University of Graz servers, with access limited to the interviewer to ensure confidentiality.

² To keep the interviewees as anonymous as possible, any gender-specific pronouns are replaced by they/their.

professional lives. In terms of ‘narrative translation’, this quote reveals an alternate reading of 1989: not as an immediate happy ending, but as the uneasy beginning of a difficult transition. It shows how GDR citizens translated the event in real time: not into the West’s story of victory, but into their own story of uncertainty. By including this voice, we restore part of the historical texture that the celebratory translation of 1989 flattened out.

5.2 Experiencing the aftermath

Another interviewee described the immediate post-*Wende* period in jarring terms: “I really felt like I was schizophrenic because I had a lot of work, and during the day I was around people who always had work... But then, in the evening, I would come home and most of the people – friends and neighbours – were unemployed. It was strange. And I had two small children, and many will tell you that it was difficult for families back then, much harder than in the GDR. [...] It was an exhausting time, both mentally and physically.” (Interview B, my translation). This testimony reverberates the previous statement and paints a vivid picture of social dislocation and personal strain in the early 1990s. The interviewee’s feeling of being “schizophrenic” points to the extreme contrasts they navigated: in their professional sphere, they were overworked, yet in their personal life they were surrounded by friends and family facing sudden unemployment and hardship. Such a scenario was common in eastern Germany after unification: After the shift from a planned to a market economy, many East German firms collapsed under western competition, and unemployment surged in the early 1990s, especially in industry, where more than two-thirds lost their jobs. By 1996, around 40% of eastern workers had been unemployed at least once, women more often than men, and roughly three-quarters experienced major career disruption through retraining, occupational change, or early retirement, often accompanied by lasting insecurity and shame. Unemployment only began to decline from 2005, and by 2018 it stood just two percentage points higher in the East than in the West (Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung, 2025). The quote highlights an aspect of the transitional turmoil often overlooked in high-level histories: the emotional and physical exhaustion of those trying to bridge two worlds. For this translator, the *Wende* narrative was not one of seamless integration but of living in two realities at once: one prosperous, one precarious. In the language of translation, they were caught between two ‘target texts’: the West German world of work with its new expectations, and the East German social world with its collapsing certainties. Their story underscores what a top-down narrative of economic ‘progress’ glosses over: the human cost of rapid systemic change. It resonates with Mary Fulbrook’s observation that many GDR-trained professionals had to “become [professionals] anew” (2023, p. 288) under radically altered norms, essentially retranslating their lives and qualifications into a Western framework. This translator’s experience confirms that the *Wende* was not simply a joyous opening of opportunities, but also a period of profound loss and adaptation. Including such accounts in our history is an act of retranslation that brings into focus the uneven distribution of gains and losses during the transformation.

5.3 Professional upheaval and devaluation

Several interviewees commented on how their profession itself was transformed, and in many ways devalued, by unification. As one interviewee explained, “In the GDR, we had clear fee structures and a strong professional network. After the *Wende*, everything was uncertain. Suddenly, we were competing in a free market that valued speed over quality.” (Interview C, my translation). Another noted: “In the GDR, translators were respected. We were seen as important cultural mediators. In unified Germany, we became just another service provider.” (Interview D, my translation). These observations reveal a profound shift in professional culture. Under the socialist system, translators and interpreters enjoyed regulated pay scales, institutional support, and considerable prestige as cultural bridge-builders. The collapse of the GDR meant not only the loss of many translation posts but also the imposition of a Western market logic on translatorial work. The first quote highlights the chaos and precarity of that new market: established norms were replaced by open competition where quick turnaround and cost-cutting trumped the careful, deliberative approach that had been fostered in the GDR. The second quote underscores the loss of social status experienced by translators and interpreters. What had been an esteemed profession, became, in the interviewee’s words, a commodified service in a larger and more impersonal marketplace. This echoes broader analyses of eastern professionals’ fate post-1990 – many felt that their cultural capital evaporated or was discounted once Western structures took over (Grunow, 2020). From a narrative perspective, these quotes serve as counter-narratives to the celebratory story of market liberalisation. Instead of focusing on the efficiency and dynamism of a free market, these insiders translate that development as a story of uncertainty, loss of quality, and loss of respect. In the dominant translation of history, the GDR’s planned economy is depicted as inefficient and restrictive, and the shift to capitalism is framed as a necessary correction. These testimonies draw attention to what was lost in the process: professional solidarity, clarity of standards, and a sense of purpose beyond profit.

5.4 Rethinking ‘freedom’

One theme that emerged strongly from the interviews is a critical reflection on the meaning of ‘freedom’. An interviewee offered a nuanced perspective: “Most people see freedom in terms of travel and consumerism. [But] freedom is really about having the ability to make conscious decisions—deciding what you do with intention. There’s a difference between freedom and freedom of movement, and most people equate freedom with freedom of movement. But it is also freedom to live a life in safety, in a country where you could rely on the state.” (Interview E, my translation). The interviewee’s distinction between freedom and freedom of movement resonates with broader philosophical debates about liberty, particularly Isaiah Berlin’s differentiation between negative and positive liberty (Berlin, 1969). While the GDR restricted negative liberties such as freedom of movement and political expression, it provided certain forms of positive liberty, such as guaranteed employment and social security. The interviewee’s critique of post-unification Germany’s

focus on freedom of movement and consumerism reflects a broader tension between individual and collective freedoms. This perspective invites us to consider how different political systems prioritize and constrain these freedoms, and how these priorities shape citizens' lived experiences. The interviewee's reflection on freedom highlights the trade-offs inherent in both systems. In the GDR, the state's provision of social security and stability came at the cost of personal autonomy and political freedoms. Conversely, post-unification Germany's emphasis on freedom of movement and consumer choice has expanded individual liberties but often at the expense of social cohesion and economic security. This tension underscores the complexity of freedom as a lived experience, shaped by both structural conditions and individual agency. The interviewee's critique of freedom of movement must be understood within the historical context of the Wende and its aftermath. The rapid transition from socialism to capitalism not only redefined economic and social structures but also imposed new cultural and ideological frameworks. For many East Germans, the emphasis on mobility and consumer choice as markers of freedom felt alien and even disorienting, as it clashed with their lived experiences of security and solidarity under the GDR. This perspective reflects a broader critique of the unification process as a form of cultural and ideological colonization, in which East German values and experiences were marginalized in favour of West German norms. While the interviewee critiques the post-unification focus on freedom of movement, other testimonies in the corpus reveal a more ambivalent relationship to this form of freedom. For some, the ability to travel and access consumer goods represented a profound liberation from the constraints of the GDR. These differing perspectives suggest that freedom is not a monolithic concept but a contested and context-dependent one, shaped by individual circumstances, generational experiences, and social positions.

5.5 Speaking and belonging

Another translator, reflecting on life decades after unification, offered a poignant observation about communication and social acceptance: "I have to be honest, I felt freer then [in the GDR] in the sense that people perhaps thought things through more with each other back then. Today, I often feel that when I say something that's a bit out of the ordinary, I get stared at, but I'm not understood." (Interview A, my translation). This remark is striking because it upends the conventional expectation: one would assume that free speech and open dialogue are far greater in unified (West) Germany than in the GDR, where censorship and conformity were enforced. Yet this individual's experience suggests a paradox: within the GDR's close communities (perhaps within the relatively safe confines of private circles or professional cohorts), they found more genuine exchange of ideas, whereas in today's ostensibly free society, they feel socially alienated when expressing an unconventional thought. We should be careful in interpreting their point: it does not mean the GDR had more freedom of speech in any formal sense. Rather, it highlights a difference in social norms and shared understanding. In the GDR, East Germans often communicated through a kind of 'reading between the lines', developing implicit trust and intellectual

camaraderie within small groups, in part because official discourse was untrustworthy. After unification, East Germans entered a public sphere dominated by West German norms and topics, and many have described feeling like second-class citizens whose perspectives were unwelcome or ridiculed (Müller, 2001; Ahbe, 2005). The translator's comment that they are "not understood" when they go "out of the ordinary" speaks to this sense of exclusion. It suggests that the terms of discourse in unified Germany remain subtly different from what they were used to; that there are unwritten rules about what can be said or how, and that their instincts honed in a different system now sometimes lead to social friction. In terms of 'narrative translation', this speaks to the idea that East Germans have had to translate themselves into a West German discourse that did not fully accommodate them. It also sheds light on why some East German memories became inarticulate: if voicing a certain positive memory of GDR life gets you "stared at," people may simply stop voicing it publicly. This translator's experience puts that in personal terms. Analytically, their quote shows how hegemonic narratives can silence dissenting memories without the need for formal censorship: social disapproval does the job. This dynamic is precisely what a narrative translation approach seeks to uncover: the ways certain narratives make others untranslatable or inconceivable. By reintroducing their voice into our narrative, we perform a kind of restorative translation – we acknowledge that the unified Germany's story of itself has not readily "understood" or incorporated everything that East Germans might want to say. This resonates with Spivak's notion of epistemic violence – how some voices are not heard or are misheard in the writing of history (Spivak, 1988). The translator's quiet lament about not being understood hints at the emotional toll of having one's experience 'partially untranslated' in the new collective memory.

5.6 Value changes and moral dissonance

One lengthy interview passage delved into the moral and social upheaval during the early 1990s. Here we summarise its key points: The interviewee recounted how, at their workplace post-1990, two colleagues became rich by privatising major state-owned firms, which was a stark contrast to the original plan of the Modrow government that every GDR citizen would receive a share of public property. "That idea was completely pushed aside by the de Maizièrre government," they noted, "and then it was only about privatisation. They [those colleagues] became millionaires with what should have been my share." (Interview F, my translation) The interviewee described this outcome as a fundamental betrayal of what had been promised, leaving a lasting sense of injustice. The interviewee continued to express that the hardest impact was on the children – "they had to experience that teachers from one day to the next taught something completely different, completely different values. The students were totally disoriented. Which values apply now? What are the true values? The teachers, of course, totally lost their credibility, because from one day they were saying the opposite of what they'd said before." They then described the "complete revaluation of values" that had been upheld in the GDR – such as mutual help, solidarity, and collective decision-making – "all that didn't count anymore, and instead

everyone was encouraged to use their elbows, [to adopt] individualism, which to me is basically just concealed egoism at the expense of others. That collapse of values was enormous,” they concluded (Interview F, my translation).

This testimony is remarkable for its blend of economic, educational, and moral dimensions. It conveys a profound sense of disillusionment with how unification was carried out. The reference to the *Treuhandanstalt* (the agency that privatised GDR assets) and the lost ideal of public shares touches on a common East German critique: that unification amounted to a sell-off of the people’s property, benefiting a few and disenfranchising the rest. In historical narratives authored by the victors, the aspect of the unfulfilled promise of economic participation is often a footnote, if mentioned at all. But for those who lived it, it was a foundational trauma of the unification period. Narratively, it represents a translation failure: the story of unification told by West German leaders was one of restoration and renewal, but many East Germans experienced it as expropriation and broken promises.

Even more striking is the interviewee’s depiction of the moral upheaval. The imagery of teachers overnight having to repudiate their previous teachings vividly illustrates the collapse of an ideological world and its replacement by another. For the students, and indeed for society at large, this was deeply destabilising. The immediate post-*Wende* years were marked by the delegitimisation of everything associated with the GDR, including its moral language. Values like solidarity or collectivism were suddenly disparaged as naive or even reprehensible, while Western values of individualism and competition were lauded. The interviewee calls the latter *verdeckter Egoismus* (‘covered-up selfishness’) – a sharp rebuke indicating they perceive the new ethos as morally inferior, just cloaked in respectable terminology. They describe the result as an enormous collapse of values. This perspective aligns with what some East German intellectuals have termed the ‘colonisation’ narrative of unification: the notion that the West not only took over East Germany politically and economically, but also imposed its value system, invalidating East Germans’ life histories and ethical frameworks (Mascha, 2012). Indeed, references to unification as a form of internal colonialism, with Easterners as colonised subjects, emerged in the 1990s and have since entered academic analysis (Mascha, 2012, p. 50). This interviewee’s account clearly resonates with that interpretation.

For the purpose of narrative translation, this testimony is like a rich, untranslated text that is brought into the target narrative. It reveals how drastic and disorienting the translational process of unification was on the level of values and identities for some citizens of the former GDR. The dominant historiography may note economic difficulties and ‘transitional challenges,’ but rarely does it capture the lived experience of moral vertigo that this interviewee describes. We see that people who had sincerely believed in certain socialist values like equality, solidarity experienced unification not as liberation into moral truth but as a mandated conversion and even moral collapse. This has direct implications for collective memory: it helps explain why even decades later, some East Germans remain defensive of the GDR’s memory or express *Ostalgie*; it’s not just nostalgia

for consumer goods, but a response to the feeling that their moral universe was delegitimised (Boyer, 2006, p. 373). As this interviewee implies, when such value transitions are forceful and uncompensated, people may seek alternative ways to 'reclaim what was omitted' (Grunow, 2020). The continued emotional charge around GDR history, e.g., arguments that East Germans were 'second-class' citizens or that unification was a Western *Anschluss* ('annexation'), can be traced to these experiences of broken continuity and disrespect. In essence, this account underscores the emotional and ethical consequences of the one-sided translation that took place in the 1990s.

Taken together, these interview excerpts illustrate how the *Wende* could be narrated in registers that sit uneasily with the dominant success story. Across different themes, such as employment insecurity, social fragmentation, professional revaluation, competing understandings of freedom, and experiences of being unheard, the accounts make visible the biographical and semantic work required to 'translate' oneself into post-1990 institutions and public discourse. Read as 'narrative translations', these testimonies do not function as representative evidence for 'the' East German experience; rather, they show the availability of alternative interpretive frameworks that are often marginalised when the GDR is narrated primarily through repression and failure. In this sense, the interview material operates as a counter-translation: it reintroduces textures of experience that complicate, qualify, and sometimes resist the standardised plots through which the socialist past is commonly made legible.

6. Conclusion: towards plural translations of the socialist past

Post-1990 narratives of the GDR can be read as 'narrative translation': they reorder events, assign moral vocabularies, and stabilise plots that make the socialist past legible within the institutional and political order of unified Germany. In much canonical historiography and public pedagogy, the interpretive centre of gravity lies in dictatorship, surveillance, and illegality, frames that are routinely condensed in concepts such as *Unrechtsstaat*, *Mauerstaat*, and the Stasi-state, and often closed by a teleology of inevitable failure. Read through the lens of translation, these recurring structures function as filters: they do not merely describe repression but also delimit which other experiences can be narrated without appearing naive, apologetic, or 'nostalgic.'

Placing oral-history interviews with non-literary translators and interpreters alongside these top-down accounts clarifies what such filters leave untranslated. The interview narratives do not negate repression; rather, they foreground additional dimensions of the *Wende* and its aftermath: anticipatory insecurity, social dislocation, professional devaluation, moral and semantic conflict over terms like 'freedom,' and long-term struggles over voice and belonging. Taken together, these testimonies show how unification was experienced not only as political transition but as an enforced recontextualisation of biographies and value systems, in which prior forms of expertise and ordinary life were reclassified in new hierarchies of legitimacy.

This study is interpretive rather than representative: the interview corpus reflects a specific professional group, and retrospective accounts are shaped by memory and later contexts. Even so, reading historiographical and testimonial narratives side by side demonstrates the analytic value of treating history-writing as translation. It offers a method for specifying how narrative authority is produced and for expanding GDR historiography beyond a binary in which dictatorship becomes the only meaningful plot and everyday experience becomes either irrelevant or suspect.

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