

Lucie Raynaud

Experiences During the Cold War


From 1961-1989 Germany was divided into two different sections, West Germany and East Germany. After the Berlin Wall “came down” in 1989 Germany still felt divided because of the country’s various cultures and history. That divide can still be seen today as many people still refer to themselves as either East Germans or West Germans. Many people say that after the Berlin Wall “came down”, there was a beautiful reunification of Germany, but others believe that there is still lingering division from being apart for almost thirty years. Although Germany is less divided in terms of their land, the cultures on both sides of the wall are still very different, creating significant division between the people.

East Germany:



The Soviet Union’s sector of Germany was in the East with East and West Berlin in the middle. “Almost half of Germans are convinced that there are more differences than similarities between citizens in the East and the West,” Claudia von Salzen said. The Soviet Union’s control over East Germany and East Berlin was a lot more rigid, strict, guarded and closed off than the lives of people in West Germany and West Berlin. According to a journalist from East Germany named Rob Olver, “When I wanted to go to the next higher school, the Gymnasium they call it - I wasn’t allowed for political reasons.” This is one of the many examples of how the lives of the people were controlled in East Germany. For context, the people who lived in East

Germany were not allowed to go to school past the age of sixteen, unless they were in the communist party or went to the military. Many people did not want to join the



military just to get a few extra years of education. Katharina Lehmann's life in Leipzig, East Germany, was very guarded as she was a fourteen year old girl when the wall came down and her family would keep a lot of the information of the war a secret from her.

In the East everyone lived rather bland lives; they were not allowed to watch TV from the West nor were they allowed to watch news that was not from the Soviet Union, according to Katharina Lehmann. In the eastern parts of Germany, the citizens were not allowed to travel outside of Eastern Europe; they could only visit Poland, Russia, Ukraine, and all the other countries in the Soviet Union, but only with very specific visas allowing them to do so. The people were not allowed to visit their family in West Berlin and West Germany even though they were able to visit them. The people living in East Germany were often not aware that their lives were any different than they would be if they lived in the West. They grew thinking that their lives were normal and there could be anything done about it. Lehmann expressed that when going to school in Germany, in order to continue school after you turn sixteen, you had to be a part of the Socialist Party or go into the army. Because of these requirements, her older brother was not able to get the higher education that he deserved (Lehmann).

West Germany:

In West Berlin and West Germany, the lives of the citizens were greatly different than the lives of the people living in East Germany. Caroline Raynaud, someone who lived in West Berlin during the Cold War, reflected on some of her experiences during the division of Germany. She grew up in a place that was surrounded by East Germany and their rules. Unlike the people in the East, they could watch whatever they wanted and travel around the world (other than the Soviet Union.) When she was eight years old, while attempting to visit East Berlin to see her family, they went through the normal checkpoints as usual but had forgotten to take out the newspapers from that morning. "We were immediately escorted into an interrogation room. And I was super scared because they took my mom away. They left me there for a moment... I thought she would go to jail and we would get arrested," Caroline Raynaud reflected. This story shows one of the greatest differences between West and East Germany: the West was able to consume news from around the world, while in the East they were only allowed to look at news from the Soviet Union.

Other than being surrounded by the USSR, people who lived in West Berlin had rather normal lives.

Fall of the Berlin Wall:

On November 9th of 1989 the Berlin Wall “fell”, marking the physical end of the division of Germany. “More than 2 million people from East Berlin visited West Berlin that weekend to participate in a celebration that was, one journalist wrote, ‘the greatest street party in the history of the world.’” History.com editors said. This is important as it shows that when the Berlin Wall “fell” Germans were very excited to be back together and Both Lehmann and Raynaud agreed on the fact that after the Berlin Wall fell, there was a sense of community between the two sides. Raynaud said that “They were all cheering. There were these little German, East German cars, quite trabbies driving over and everyone was clapping. And they had their windows open. They were giving people a high five.” Lehmann agreed with the



fact that everything felt very euphoric and connected after the fall of the Berlin Wall. She commented on the fact that being able to visit her family and talk freely—which had been impossible up to that point—was a very liberating feeling. That night many people got to see their family without restrictions for the first time.

Division After:

“Even now that we are 30 years after the wall came down, it’s a very, very long time. But I still have the feeling that you have people that are East Germans and people that are West Germans ... They don’t say, ‘Okay, I’m German,’” Lehmann explains. After the wall “fell” the people who lived through it still believed themselves to be East vs. West, and there is some truth to that. John Gramlich, a journalist, explains that even now Eastern Germany remains economically below Western Germany: “people in the former East Germany earned 86% the after-tax income of their West German counterparts in 2017.” This is important because it shows that the division in Germany still visibly has a lot of effects today. Since East Germany was more cut off from the world and did not participate in capitalism, they needed some time to figure out how the new

economy worked. This caused a lot of setbacks compared to West Germany so their economy is still behind. Although there have been a lot of negative setbacks, there are still a lot of positive changes as well. As a different perspective in the article “How West and East German views compare 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall”, John Gramlich states that “Large majorities in both areas say the changes that have unfolded in Germany since 1989 have had a good influence on living standards, health care and national pride, and most also see improvements in areas including family values, spiritual values and law and order.” takes an interesting approach as he looks at the overall happiness and emotions of the people living in Germany now and how the fall of the Berlin Wall helped make their lives better. After the events of the division, returning to a normal life helped people feel a lot more united and have more of a sense of a “German Identity.” East Germany also had a lot of overall improvements even if they are still falling behind West Germany as they had more catching up. This meant that there was significant improvement in things like healthcare, the law, and family from being able to be in a form of government that allowed them to speak their mind, see their family, do whatever they pleased, and become more creative in their way of living and work life.

Conclusion:

Although Germany is now reunited and free, there are lasting effects from the many years of their division. While in the Western part of Germany the people were free and colorful with creative lives, the people of East Germany were forced to live in a system in which they had to be extremely careful of what they said or did so as to not be thrown into Jail. In East Germany they also had a lot of things hidden from them as well as propaganda. However, even though there are still many things such as years of the government being secretive and no freedom of speech that East Germans and West Germans apart, the overall happiness and growth of the now united country have made it certain that one day they will be fully united with fewer economic and cultural differences



of the now united country have made it certain that one day they will be fully united with fewer economic and cultural differences

About the Author



Lucie Raynaud is half German and half French. They enjoy learning about history and bringing awareness on topics that are not talked about enough. They enjoy making films, painting and photography. In their free time they foster kittens, watch movies and play video games.