

Teacher's prompt:

German children who grew up before 1989 had very different childhoods based on whether they were born in the Western or Eastern part of their country. The general perception of West Germans is that childhood must have been troublesome in the East. True, East German kids did generally have fewer toys and fewer opportunities to go on holiday. Whether that really made them unhappier remains hard to prove.

“I was born in 1978 and spent most of my childhood in Penig, East Germany. My father worked in a factory, my mother in a shop. We lived in a typical Eastern German apartment block, just like most other 'normal' people at the time.”

The Pioneer Movement (A)

“Thinking back, it’s easy to notice that **socialism was deeply rooted in the educational system**. Schools in East Germany were not just educational centers in the narrow sense of the word. Beside regular classes, they also organized ‘pioneer afternoons’ with different themes. On some, kids could bring their pets. On others, we would be talking about holidays. We also spent many a pioneer afternoon playing outside in the forest. **The pioneer activities served as the first preparation for children to become ‘good socialists’**. On special occasions like the first of May, we wore scouting-like uniforms that were different for each age group. I remember wearing a white shirt and a blue tie, which belonged to the youngest pioneers. The next higher group, ‘Thälmann-pioneers’ had white shirt and red ties.”

“Older pupils were dressed in blue shirts. They were members of the [FDJ](#): Freie Deutsche Jugend (Free German Youth). The FDJ-ers sometimes organized events for us younger kids or they took care of us during the afternoon breaks. They were older and wiser than we were, and we greatly admired them. I couldn’t wait to become one of them, but that never happened: the regime collapsed before it was my turn.”

“Beside the pioneer movement, each class in school also had a ‘class council’, each of which had a president and a vice-president. Everybody was involved in the domestic tasks that had to be organized in school and **everybody was made feel like they were a part of the system**. It was also at school where we learnt basic East-German etiquette, including proper greeting practices. At the beginning of each day, we would stand up when the teacher entered the class room. He or she would ask us ‘Seid bereit?’ (Are you willing?), which was responded by ‘Immer bereit’ (Always prepared). We only had one teacher who broke the rule: our arts teacher simply greeted us by saying ‘Guten Tag’. We thought that was quite cool of him.”

Work and travel (B)

“Before 1989, not only schools but **also companies were closely involved in social life**. It was companies who sponsored sports clubs – hence the names Motor, Dynamo and Traktor as football club names – but also the ones organizing package deal holidays for their employees. It was also them organizing youth camps for the kids of their employees, which in my case meant that I would spend my holidays with the children of my father’s colleagues. We usually did not travel far, as **international travelling was heavily regulated**. My family and I traveled to Czech Republic a couple of times and once to Hungary. Destinations further than that seemed to be reserved for party sympathizers, some of whom were allowed to travel as far as Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria.”

“The **’Freie Korper Kultur’** or **’FKK’** (Free Body Culture) was the East German response to our limited possibilities to travel abroad. FKK basically meant that people would bare it all to express and live their freedom. My parents, like most East Germans, were keen to practice this kind of public nakedness but I personally never managed to like it a lot. Most of the FKK tradition disappeared after the reunification, even though East Germany still has designated FKK-beaches on the Baltic Sea coast.”

“Although normal people could not travel to Western Europe - with scarce exceptions for athletes, artists and diplomats - **the idea that East Germans knew nothing about West Germany is a myth**. Even before 1989, most households could capture West German channels. Many people did that - my parents too, but they would be careful not to talk about it in public by fear of getting into trouble. Nonetheless, East Germans knew that West Germans had bigger cars and prettier houses. But they also had unemployment and poverty. **We had none of those extremes: neither on the good side, nor on the negative side.**”

Die “Wende” (C)

“In 1989, I was 11 years old. The **reunification of Germany** coincided with other changes I was going through at the time. To me, the change from primary school to secondary school left a much more of an impression, pushing the political changes in the country to the background. I think the impact of the system change was much bigger for people who were halfway something: halfway secondary school, halfway their studies or just past the first years of their career. **For me, the political changes just blended in with the more natural transition from child to teenager.**”

The general motto of those years was that life had started anew.

“Many people of my age nevertheless remember the reunification of Germany as one of their most memorable and most exciting childhood memories, especially children who lived in Berlin at the time. The years following that magical event are much more difficult to describe. Since 1989, **East Germany has gradually adopted West German living standards.** Not just in terms of buildings and cars, but also by people’s approach to life. East Germans massively went after material wealth, wanting to buy stuff that they had only seen on TV before. At the same time, they seemed to get increasingly unhappy about their pre-1989 standard of living. Me and my family moved away from the grey block of flats we lives in, as soon as it was reasonably possible. Many others did the same: they rapidly got rid of everything reminding them of the East German era. The general motto of those years was that **life had started anew.**”

Present and future (D)

“The **Wende** boosted East German with new energy, but also brought about a wave of fear. Former state-owned companies were overtaken by bigger corporations from West Germany, and reformed to fit the capitalistic model. Thanks to massive support from West Germany, changes were implemented much quicker and much more effectively than in other Eastern European countries, but the **measures taken were often drastic**. Under socialism, a job used to be close to a lifetime project as well as a lifetime certainty. The changes left hardly any part of that idea alive. Newspaper headlines featured mass lay-offs that easily involved several hundreds of people at a time. My dad was lucky to keep his job in a company manufacturing gear boxes. He is one of the few East Germans who have kept, up until today, the same employer they had before 1989.”

“People initially swallowed the job cuts as a cost of progress. More recently however, **East Germans who have not been able to benefit from the changes have started to actively call for a return of the socialist value system**. Many East Germans, especially those who have not managed to escape the Plattenbau (grey block) areas feel betrayed by capitalism. The changes promised them lots but delivered little. Their **'East nostalgics'** go as far as negating the dark sides of the regime and focusing entirely on its only partially realized ideals: equality and financial security, with small differences between the different layers of society.”

“I prefer to look at the situation from the positive side. **The course of history has equipped East Germans of my generation with a valuable mix of qualities**. We have inherited a sense of community. We can entertain ourselves without needing any distractions. The changes have taught us to take responsibility for our decisions and to be flexible. We know that there's no value in taking life for granted. My own best example of this is how I have been able to study political sciences and travel all over Europe. I even lived abroad. I've been able to make choices that my parents have never had. **It's not the system deciding on my way forward, it's me! And I am ready to embrace the benefits of this freedom.**”