

## **Katja Hoyer**

**Andrew:** Hello and welcome to Bristol Ideas. I'm Andrew Kelly. Our Festival of the Future City, which is back this October, looks at how cities and countries recover and rebuild after war and crisis. As part of this, we're looking at Berlin and other German cities. To help us with this, and to discuss more widely the history of East Germany, I'm joined by Katja Hoyer. Katja is a German British historian, a journalist and the author of the widely acclaimed *Blood and Iron: The Rise and Fall of the German Empire*, a visiting research fellow at King's College, London, and a fellow of the Royal Historical Society. She's a columnist for *The Washington Post* and hosts the podcast *The New Germany* with Oliver Moody. Her latest book is *Beyond the Wall: East Germany 1949 to 1990*, which has been widely praised. Thank you for joining me today, Katja.

**Katja:** Thanks for having me.

**Andrew:** For many now, East Germany, the GDR, is a history lesson if that. When I was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, the GDR was both the stuff of espionage films and books but also, and critically, the front line of the Cold War for decades. And all this was tied up with the fear of nuclear attack. Your book covers some of these areas but provides a very different view of East Germany.

**Katja:** I've tried to provide a view from the inside, from the perspective of the people that lived there. I think one of the issues with the historiography so far, with the stuff that we know or have been exposed to as people who live in the Western world, is that all of this is from the outside. So you've got people imagining what it was like and seeing it also from the perspective of an enemy, of course, during the Cold War. So things like spies or like the wall itself play a huge role. Also, the fact that people largely talk to East Germans who have chosen to leave East Germany – around, under and over the wall – at a huge risk to their own lives also means that

there is a very particular narrative that has stuck with us. And I think if my book seems different from what's out there already, it's because I've spoken to lots of East Germans to try and create a story that is understandable for people who are not part of it, told by those who were.

**Andrew:** And the book, just so listeners and viewers know, weaves these stories throughout with stories you picked up from existing biographies but people you've spoken to directly as well.

**Katja:** Yes, and that was important to me too. I think with any given topic, if you tell people that a certain law was passed or a certain economic trend was underway, it's very hard for most people to imagine what the reality of that actually looks like on the ground.

How did this actually impact real life people? I've turned this traditional way of writing history on its head and start most of the chapters with a short anecdote by somebody who experienced something that is often a result of a decision taken elsewhere. And I think that makes it more understandable and hopefully more relatable to what people's lives would have been like in the GDR without dehumanising the experience as often happens.

I think that's already been done a lot when it comes to the wall, because people do talk about individuals who were trying to flee, their stories as to why they wanted to get away from the GDR, and what they did afterwards. These things have been explored through the eyes of individual people. But what it was actually like, say, for a farmer whose farm was collectivised, or how somebody would have felt when they were forcefully resettled from the wall, or how a young mother felt when she started working and at the same time trying to look after a small child. You could talk about the big policy of getting women into work but what this actually looked like in reality is quite difficult to understand unless you can see it through the experiences of somebody who went through that experience.

**Andrew:** There's tragic stories you write about, but there's also some uplifting ones as well, particularly the one you mentioned there about women going into the workforce. That's something I'll come back to later on. But these were significant changes for people, weren't they, that changed their lives after the Second World War?

**Katja:** It's very much an unprecedented political, social and economic experiment and also one that is particularly interesting because you've got its counter image, so to speak, in West Germany. You've got the same country almost like a big open field experiment, the same country, people with a similar background. You draw an artificial line in the middle and see what happens if you expose one side to a socialist ideology and a socialist system and the other side to a capitalist one. And that in particular interested me because quite often the GDR, the eastern side, is treated as the anomaly. We look at this now in hindsight and it failed, it collapsed in the end. And therefore it almost became the case in 1990 people didn't think it was worth looking at because it had lost in that competition between the systems and between the two states. I find from that angle alone as a historian, it's absolutely fascinating. It's 41 years of different politics, different economic systems, a different way of living or structuring a society. And that alone, I think, is worth taking seriously and studying seriously.

**Andrew:** I want to take you back to 1914, because although the main focus of the book is the post-war period, particularly 1949 to 1990, you do situate the German experience within that whole lengthy, awful 20th century that it's gone through. So tell us about that period, about that violent half century before 1945 and what that meant.

**Katja:** That was really important. It is important to take the time to do that. On the whole, I think people treat the GDR as a thing that almost came out of nowhere. It was just there because for most

people who are alive today and remember it, it was already there before they were born. So it's a thing that just existed. It was just a given. But actually, it is a direct result of the Second World War.

When you think that line drawn in Germany, that separated the country, is it one that grew out of historical roots or evolved over time? It's completely artificial. It's simply based on troop movements and how Germany was occupied and where the occupation lines were drawn after the Second World War. So that's one side I wanted to highlight, but also the experiences of those German communists who are tasked with building up the state. I think they are incredibly important. They form and shape the state all throughout its history, even all the way up to 1989. You still have people like Erich Honecker, the leader, the general secretary at the time, who sat in a Nazi prison for most of the time that Hitler was in power. We've got people like Erich Mielke who hone their skills in in Soviet Russia and were trained as Soviet-style checkers, the secret police of the Soviet Republic to start with. He was trained in the same style, same methodology, and then was deployed in the Spanish Civil War and then later in France during the war. All of these experiences stay with people.

That's why I think the violence, the extreme political climate, particularly during the Weimar Republic, but also during the First World War, that they were exposed to shaped them, particularly also the experiences that a lot of them made in Russia itself. You've got people Walter Ulbricht, the first major leader of the GDR, who spends the entire Second World War in Russia and most Germans that did that were killed. You end up with the Stalinist purges that happened in the 1930s, particularly targeting foreigners, but also particularly Germans, because Stalin becomes absolutely paranoid about the idea of a fifth column for Hitler in the Soviet Union. These Germans had quite often fled persecution because they were socialists or social democrats or communists who were now targeted by Hitler, and ended up in the Soviet Union trying to become part of

this real communist experiment that they were all very excited about. And then Stalin turns against them because he's afraid that secretly they're all spies for Hitler.

Because of that, if you take the Politburo, for instance, of the German Communist Party that existed before Hitler came to power, nine of them go to Soviet Russia and only two of those nine are still alive by the end of the war, Walter Ulbricht and Wilhelm Pieck. So the first two leaders of the GDR get sent back with all of that baggage. They never stop being suspicious. They never stop looking over their shoulder. They never stop being deeply suspicious of their own people as well, because they led a completely different life during the 12 years of Nazism, and they weren't part of that. And they come back to a highly Nazified, very suspicious public. So that doesn't bode well to start with. I think it's really important to understand all of that baggage of the first half of the 20th century, if you want to understand the second half.

**Andrew:** I think that's a critical part of the book, and it certainly comes through very strongly. I always think it quite remarkable when you think that if you were German in 1914, 18 years old, within 30 years you've gone through the First World War, the Weimar Republic, the rise of the Nazis, the Second World War, the Holocaust, and then the beginnings of the Cold War, all in three decades. And that's if you survived those years.

The stories about those Germans who escaped the country, the socialists and the Communists who went to what they thought was the promised land – and this story is replicated by other communists who went to the Soviet Union – is how disillusioning they often found it. These were large numbers of people, thousands of people, the Germans who went to the Soviet Union.

**Katja:** We're talking about 8,000 adults who left and try to work there. It's a really varied field as well. So you've got political figures

like Walter Ulbricht. He was really involved in the Communist Party beforehand. But people forget it's also, for instance, the Bauhaus enclave. So these people were involved in the Bauhaus movement and artist movement effectively, and architects, who had previously already struggled with the left leaning ideology in Weimar Germany, and many of them actually left even before Hitler came into power with the idea that now Stalin is in power, when he emerged out of the power struggle towards the end of the 1920s and said, 'Let's modernise, let's industrialise, no matter what the cost might be', that of course most people will associate with agricultural and industrial policies.

There was also a huge building boom, and this was something that these architects got very excited about, creating new living settlements for the workers. There were entire new cities like Magnitogorsk, for instance, being literally raised from the ground and they thought they could help with that. Equally, you had medical professionals – or all kinds of different areas – who thought that they could help build this brave new world that they were entering. And as you say, they became disillusioned very quickly, not just with the violence but also with the lack of building materials, the cultural differences. They also hadn't realised, I don't think beforehand, just how bad the living standards were in Russia, how far behind Western Europe it still was in terms of its economy and its state of development. All of that clashes. And then of course the paranoia by Stalin kicks in and it becomes a matter of survival, whether you'd actually still be there at the end of the war or not.

**Andrew:** And then there was the immense confusion about the Nazi-Soviet pact, wasn't there? Those who had survived the purges up to then suddenly saw the place they'd escaped from now negotiating and having an agreement with the place they'd gone to.

**Katja:** It's very interesting how they respond to that as well. So you've got people like Walter Ulbricht who just shrug their shoulders

and go, 'OK if that's the line now, fine. We'll go along with that.' And they actually go to quite some lengths to make that work ideologically. Suddenly words like 'Hitler', 'Germany' and 'fascist' get dropped from the rhetoric and it's all about forming a peace alliance to keep the peace in Europe. And then all of that goes back again just shortly after when the Soviet Union is being invaded by Hitler and he breaks the pact. Others find this change very disillusioning. So there are many communists that look at that and think, 'OK, maybe this isn't what we wanted', particularly because they have such pacifist leanings as well, and Hitler was already talking about war, even if it's not against the Soviet Union. He's already talking about it, of course, building up a massive military in the open so people can see the writing on the wall. And many people become very disillusioned, especially those who'd gone into Western exile in Paris and London, for example.

**Andrew:** I'm going to come on to 1945 now, but just before that, tell us about your history with Germany. You were born there?

**Katja:** I was born in East Germany and was a very small child when the wall fell. So I have vague memories of it. One is actually very clear, which is also in the book. But on the whole, I wrote this book as a historian, so this isn't a personal history of the GDR as such.

I think it really helped having that background because I was able to, first of all, understand where people are coming from, because you grow up with the people who had experienced the system. Your own parents, grandparents, neighbours, the people around you, teachers and so on were all shaped, trained and had gone through their early life experiences in the system and they're not going to suddenly become different people in 1990 and do things completely differently. And on the other hand, it allowed me to get hold of people with particular experiences very easily, which isn't normally the case. So I could just put the word out there to friends, family and communities to say that I wanted to speak to a border guard say, or

somebody who was there during the Berlin blockade, and made very specific requirements and say, 'Can somebody find me someone who's experienced this particular thing?'

I was able to find these people. And people trusted me with their stories. This is a huge amount of trust at times where, say, somebody gives you their Stasi file, the secret police file that was collated on them, and it has literally got their life and details about their life in it. And for somebody to trust you with this thing that narrates their life in somebody else's voice, you need that atmosphere where they feel you're on their side and you want to tell a story that doesn't catch them out. And that's very difficult to do if you come from an outside perspective, perhaps even not speak the language, for example, or coming in with an accent that sounds unfamiliar. Those kinds of things really helped.

**Andrew:** So we get to 1945 and the war comes to an end. Much of Germany is destroyed, particularly the cities. And coming out of the rubble is this new country. A separate East Germany wasn't part of Stalin's plan, was it, in 1945?

**Katja:** No. To start with, in fairness, it wasn't part of anybody's plan. The idea was really to keep Germany as one country. Stalin did actually previously push to break it up and so had the French right in the beginning in the early negotiations, because they figured Germany has done this twice now, and if we leave Germany in one piece that's not going to be a good idea. But very quickly, it's decided that, no, actually, we'll leave it together, we'll just rebuild it, de-Nazify it and democratise it, and then it can start becoming a peaceful country again under very careful leadership.

The problem was that in 1945 and unlike 1918, the country was completely destroyed and it had absolutely no legitimacy, no political class that could take over at this point, anybody who had anything to do with politics was, of course, heavily Nazified, and, therefore,

neither morally nor in any other shape or form acceptable to carry on with public office. And you transfer that to the medical profession who had been heavily incriminated with racist Nazi schemes that they had conducted themselves. And you can do that on almost any level if you want to.

If you want to de-Nazify, you can't run the country at the same time. And so the allies basically decided to split for administrative purposes and – to make this a bit easier – split the country into four zones so that each of the occupying powers would only have to look after one part of Germany, not the whole thing. But they were still supposed to talk to each other and agree on big policies, currency being one example. The Reichsmark's completely collapsed and wasn't worth anything. You had huge amounts of inflation. You really couldn't buy anything with it. And so it was decided that if any new currency is going to be introduced, which it will have to be eventually, all four of the powers will have to agree on that.

These are the kinds of things that become increasingly difficult when you have opposing ideologies and opposing systems behind these occupational powers that are working together. All sides initially, particularly Stalin, just wanted to keep Germany running, build it back up with the idea that you could then withdraw reparations and resources from it.

**Andrew:** One of the things that I think is very difficult to understand sometimes is how you deal with those people who were associated with the previous regime, some who have been involved in atrocities. You can have your war crimes tribunals and trials. But in the end, some of these people just go back to work in the place. And one of the lessons I learned from looking at Germany, but also other places, is how some of those people go back into civil society. There was a split between how the GDR and how the Federal Republic of Germany dealt with this in terms of de-Nazification.

**Katja:** Yes, there are loads of differences between the two. Initially, the Americans, I would say, were the harshest judges of the German character. They initially had this idea that because this happened twice, Germans must have an intrinsic militaristic strand and one that can turn very nasty – almost like an ethnic thing that's part of the very soul of Germans. While Stalin initially comes in and famously says that 'The Hitlers come and go, but the German people, the German state remain.' So there's this idea that the German people had been either seduced or oppressed into following the Nazis. And then therefore, de-Nazification can happen on a large scale because the German people themselves could be reformed, they are reformable and can redeem themselves.

That's something that gives lots of East Germans or the people that end up in Stalin's zone initially hope, because this was printed in large letters on posters, but also in the early newspapers, the Stalin quote that I just said, and it gives people this idea that he is somebody who's trying to help us build up. Of course, the reality on the ground is completely different. But that's the attitude.

Stalin has this very strange love/hate relationship with Germany. He's got this deep fear of it because of this existential war that he's just had to fight and just about won at great cost. But on the other side, he does have a huge admiration for German culture, music, he's looking at people like Beethoven and has really got this idea that the Germans are the most cultured and civilised people out there and somebody to look up to, and he can't ever find any middle ground between the two. He seems to go back and forth depending on what mood he is in on the day.

But this helps them rebuild because the idea is that if you take all of these people, civil servants, teachers, judges, policemen, take them out and replace them with people, it doesn't matter if they don't know what they're doing, just replace them. You end up with very strange scenarios where people who had literally just come from,

say, East Prussia, for example, in the Far East, where Germany has lost all of their territory, they come with nothing and they were previously a farmer, say, or a farmhand, and suddenly they get told 'Here's an A-level class, teach them some physics.' And they get a few weeks training. It was even worse for the legal profession. You had judges and people like that sitting there not having a clue what they're doing, making decisions based on instinct.

That was supposed to be better than having the people back in, while in West Germany the decision was almost exactly the opposite. When they decided that it was impossible to de-Nazify on that scale because the society had been so intrinsically tainted by Nazi-ism that you just can't do that, they decided to leave these people in and then try and reintegrate them into a new system and hoping that would de-Nazify them. So out of nowhere they quite openly passed a restitution law to say all the civil servants can come back and that's all fine. You ended up with a society where people just picked up their jobs, and it was deemed to be safer to have them in the system and democratise them that way as opposed to punishing them and excluding them. So these approaches are almost polar opposites of each other.

**Andrew:** Do you think that's reflected in how the two Germanys came to terms with the Holocaust? Because from what I understand, the eastern side, the GDR, were very clear about this from the start, whereas it took many years for the Federal Republic to begin to come to terms with what had happened in Germany, particularly how they remember it and to memorialise it.

**Katja:** It's a tricky subject. In East Germany people did talk about Nazi crimes, but it was focused on the socialists who were targeted by it. So when you go to German concentration camps, say Sachsenhausen just outside of Berlin, for example, there's almost like this shrine to the socialist martyrdom there at the time, same in Buchenwald, the largest one on German soil, just outside of Weimar.

They were built up earlier as museums and those sites to go to and remember how horrific fascism is, because in the socialist logic that's the highest form that you will get to with capitalism. So the idea is you have a free market economy that turns into outright laissez faire capitalism because markets are needed and it needs to expand, it will turn into imperialism. And then from there you get to fascism. So this is the natural progression in the socialist logic. To them it made perfect sense to build up Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen as memorial sites so that people could go there and see the horrific crimes that were committed. But the focus was never on the genocide of Jews. It was never on the Holocaust. It was always on the socialists.

In the West, meanwhile, you get a complete 'let's just not talk about it' for the first 20 years or so and then, throughout the 1960s, it's beginning to really change where again, you get places like Dachau outside of Munich, for example, set up as memorial and museum sites. It's made compulsory in schools, the topics of the Second World War and the Holocaust specifically, and particularly Willy Brandt with his famous falling on his knees in front of the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial, that really was a turning point in that respect as well. But it's a very different way of dealing with that.

West Germany later almost makes that its *raison d'être* I would say to some extent, and it still is today. So reparations are paid to Israel specifically, and it becomes this 'never again' logic or this idea becomes part of the very essence of what the German state is today. That doesn't happen in the same way in the East, but for different reasons because, as I say, the focus is very much on socialism and how socialism has always fought fascism. And if you don't want these horrible things to happen again, then we need to prevent this cycle going up from capitalism to fascism. That was the logic behind that.

**Andrew:** The only concentration camp I have visited is Buchenwald and that's certainly the impression I got. How you deal with the

horrific past some places have is a lesson for us in Bristol that we're trying still to grapple with in terms of the trade in enslaved people, and I'll come back to the lessons of history at the end. Let's move on to post-war East Germany. East Germany was formed when?

**Katja:** Both Germanys are formed in 1949. I think you can see again how reluctant Stalin was to go down that route by the fact that it takes half a year nearly between the formation of West Germany in the spring of 1949 as a state which he was absolutely outraged about because he wasn't really privy to the discussions, even though, as I said earlier, they were supposed to work together as an allied control council. West Germany gets founded in May 1949. And then you have East Germany founded in October 1949.

**Andrew:** Another lesson I've learned from reading about the two Germanys, but particularly from your book (and I've heard this said about other conflicts as well), is how important for people in East Germany and other places which have suffered like this is this need for stability, and often that overcomes the things that we cherish in democracy in a way, and in terms of pluralist politics. How important was this this need for stability among East Germans in particular?

**Katja:** Hugely. In West Germany, you also have the so-called 'without me generation', people became quite passive. Konrad Adenauer – no other West German chancellor achieved a dream election result in a system of proportional representation – actually managed to get an outright majority, which has never happened again.<sup>1</sup> I don't think it will again. People said we don't really care that he's got quite an authoritarian leadership style. There were all of these caricatures in the left wing press and in West Germany of him standing on a plinth that still said 'Adolf Hitler' underneath and the statue had been removed. And then you got Adenauer standing on top. So there is this mockery of his very authoritarian style. He has parties banned.

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<sup>1</sup> Adenauer was elected the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany on 15 September 1949 by an absolute majority of 202 of 402 votes.

The Communist Party gets banned, for example, in West Germany, even though it's quite small and not really a threat. Socialist youth organisations get banned. The Free German Youth, which becomes the major mass movement in East Germany, also has a branch in West Germany that gets banned. It's still illegal today, by the way, which is interesting, not the East German version but the West German version, but with all of its insignia. So all of that happens. The police get sent out on demonstrations. People actually get shot.

It's something else often forgotten is that these early years of the West German democracy are also not particularly democratic. But then on the flipside, in East Germany, it's the same thing. People are really after stability, after just having a job, having somewhere to live.

The problem is that the West can provide all of these things. You basically have this economic miracle in the West where Adenauer is able to keep people happy and satisfied because they are well off, they're prosperous. And then on the flip side, you've got East Germany, which is really struggling to get going and it can't provide these things. So people are angry because, not necessarily I would say, because they haven't got immediate democracy. It's the fact that the shelves are empty, they're working too much, nothing seems to be going forward and the regime is completely obstinate and there's no way of actually talking to them or making things change, holding them to account. And it's a combination of those things that makes people unhappy.

**Andrew:** What you had is the creation of the state of East Germany. You had the people in charge were the ones who had survived Stalinism in Russia, where they obviously had to be subservient somewhat to Stalinism. But you also had this remarkable growth of what we now would call social mobility. You had people, particularly women, going into the workforce, a staggeringly large number of women going into the workforce in East Germany, the growth of

childcare, the growth of mass education. And that's before we come on to consumer goods growth. What was the shift like at this time? We have to remember this took place over a number of decades, didn't it?

**Katja:** It was a real struggle to start with, to get anything going. The aspiration was always there but it took quite a while, when you have bombed out cities. On top of that the Soviets took a lot of reparations. This didn't happen in the West at all. You ended up basically with the Western economy allowed to recover while the East was struggling. So providing even these basics like new flats for people to live in, childcare facilities, those kinds of things, it did happen, but it did take a while for people to be able to make use of these facilities. But when it did, people were genuinely very grateful for those. And also they felt that they'd worked for them themselves. This was something that they felt they had achieved because of the way that the GDR was so isolated, that it was cut off from the West completely through something called the Hallstein Doctrine, which is a West German policy decision to say that anybody who trades with the GDR or has any diplomatic relations with it will not enjoy the same thing with West Germany. And nobody is going to snub the powerful West German export economy. So it was effectively a trade embargo and a diplomatic embargo.

Therefore, all of these achievements that happened, people felt they achieved with their own hands. It was their achievement and therefore not something that they were given or handed out. And the model that was Walter Ulbricht in particular in the first 20 years was trying to set up is one of modest prosperity. Maybe this is a phrase that might work. So the idea that you have all of these things, you have somewhere to live, you can heat your home, getting food isn't a problem, you've got childcare, you can go to university if you want to because that's funded, the same with apprenticeships. All of that's there. But in exchange you haven't got a consumer society where luxury goods are available.

It's a typical socialist model in the sense that you have low absolute poverty at the bottom. You don't have things like homelessness or unemployment, or you can't fall off the grid because it's impossible. But at the upper end, you also then don't have luxury and anybody above the spectrum. And that's also causing a lot of people who are middle-class upwards basically to say, 'I don't want to live in this society because you can't better yourself.'

Equally, the people who were working-class and felt that for the first time somebody was taking them seriously and helping them out of this abject poverty that they've been living in for most of the period beforehand, living on really precarious job scenarios and then these horrible tenement flats that existed in all of the big cities, people find these prefab blocks that were put up hideous, but they were warm, they were centrally heated, they had running water. To somebody who'd lived in one of those horrible flats in the working-class district in, say, Berlin, where there were no regulations whatsoever in terms of what they should actually look like and you lived with your extended family in one small flat, this was good. People liked those and thought they were good places to live. So it depends on who you ask, how this unfolds. But for the lower social classes, anybody below the average, it was a system that worked in many ways.

**Andrew:** One of the most interesting museums I've ever been to is the DDR Museum in Berlin, because not only do you see the Trabant, for example, the car, but also there's a mock-up of an apartment there. And not only was it surprisingly spacious, for one thing, and it was exactly as you described.

You give a staggering figure in the book about the percentage of net income that a four-person household in West Germany spent on rental costs, which was around 21%, compared to what an East German family spent, which was 4.4%. When you think about the amount of money that particularly younger people have to devote in

this country to rental costs, having that more disposable income, even in a place like East Germany, I think would have been incredibly valuable.

**Katja:** And as a security alone, you don't have to worry about whether you can scrape together the rent for the next month. And if you can't, you're not going to get chucked out. You don't have to look at your rental contract every month in the hope that it hasn't gone up because of regulation lacking or whatever. So it's just the sheer security of it as well. You really haven't got to worry about the basics in life, and living somewhere warm and dry is one of those. It took a long time for those to go up.

I spoke to lots of older people who said, 'Look, the living conditions are really quite atrocious to start with in these older houses that were decaying or that had been damaged by the war because building materials were always lacking.' It took quite a long time for those flats, but once it got going and they were building millions of these, as you say, they're reasonably spacious as well when you compare [this] to the way the people in London live. I'm sure it's a similar problem in Bristol as well. You had two or three bedrooms and the space that you needed. Of course, initially it was again done by priority. So if you had children or you were married, it was much easier to get a flat because it took a while for there to be enough for everybody to move into. My grandparents, for instance, only moved into one in 1986 or 1987 when they just put a new block of flats up in their village. And before that they lived in an old farmhouse, which was, as I recall in my really early memories, very dilapidated. But people, once they moved in, they were quite happy with that.

And it's also easy to forget that these aren't like council flats in the sense that they only cater to communities that need them, but everybody lived in them. So you'd have an architect living there. Then next door there'd be the factory workers. These weren't socially segregated spaces in that sense. They had lots of community

space built into them. In between you had green spaces with washing lines that everybody was using, or there was always a party room that people could use for birthday celebrations. The washing machines were all in one room downstairs. You had a lot of meeting spaces as well where people were interacting with one another. And that also really appealed to lots of people.

**Andrew:** Certainly the work we've done on the council estates in Bristol, and we did a big project a few years ago, that kind of vision for a place where mixed groups of people can live together with good communal facilities and public open air spaces is an important model for housing.

As the years went by and as people became a bit more wealthy and the economy improves, you did get the growth of consumer society, didn't you, from the washing machines and the fridges, the cars, right through to the growth of the music industry and so on. And then the growth of culture in East Germany.

**Katja:** The society or the politicians had the perpetual problem that they were looking at a comparable state on the other side of the wall. So this is something that people often forget is that those two Germanys, they talked to each other. You've got people that you know, your friends or family members or just other communities in West Germany who will tell you that they have a fridge or that they have just bought a new Mercedes or whatever. And that creates expectations. People look at these things and they want them. On top of that, people could watch West German television or listen to West German radio. There were only two small areas in East Germany where you couldn't get them. They were known as the Valley of the Clueless, because people joked that they were the only people who couldn't watch West German television.

If you imagine you're trying to look at the society through the lens of commercial television alone, you're looking at TV adverts and things

and you get a completely slanted idea as to what life's like. Like everybody has everything that is advertised in these TV adverts. And so it created a situation where there was a lot of pressure on the government to try and do something about that, and the government tried to cater to it. You got a degree of consumerism that was introduced into the GDR.

My favourite example doing the research was probably jeans. People were absolutely obsessed with them because they were the ultimate symbol of Western freedom, cowboy, daring and things like that. People wanted original American jeans, ideally. Levi's was the go-to brand. And quite often people would get the discarded jeans that their relatives would send them. They were expensive in the West as well. People forget that now. It wasn't really the case that everybody just walked into a shop and bought an original pair of Levi's jeans. But when Western relatives had worn theirs or their children had, they often sent them over to the Eastern relatives and they were absolutely delighted and treasured them for years. The general secretary, Erich Honecker, realises the potential and actually goes to Levi's and orders one million. Think about this, 60 million people in the GDR, one million jeans ordered for them in one go. It caused an absolute frenzy in the shops when this happened to the point where the next time they imported a batch, they said that they would give them out individually to companies or universities or individual branches of the government. Even the Stasi got its own contingent of Western American jeans.

That in itself shows that the government is trying to catch up with a trend it can't catch up with, because it's basically operating in an extremely expensive welfare system where it's trying to provide everything on a basic level in exchange for not having these luxuries, but now is providing the luxuries at the same time or trying to, creating an expectation that this will always be the case and they can somehow catch up with the highest echelons of the Western economic system.

It created an economic situation that was just completely unsustainable and also expectations that weren't sustainable because during the early years and the Ulbricht years, people just accepted that life was what it was. They accepted that they had a roof over their heads, but they wouldn't drive a Mercedes. That's fine. And many people I spoke to – and I also looked at their documents and records – that seems to have been the case. People, especially shortly after the war, they just appreciated the stability. But in the 70s and 80s, once you have this expectation of having a consumer culture at the same time, it became completely unsustainable. There are economic advisors who say to Honecker, 'Well, look, even if we get one Walkman into the shops, we won't have ten or 12 or 15 models on there. We just can't do that.' So whatever you do, you're going to lag behind. You're going to look like the junior partner in this. And that I think became part of both the economic but also perhaps psychological problem of the GDR.

**Andrew:** It's also worth pointing out how small in population terms the GDR compared to the Federal Republic?

**Katja:** People like to think of the two Germanys as direct counterparts. But West Germany, I think, was 60 million in the end, round about that sort of figure. But you have 16 million in the GDR. Even today, East Germans make up about a fifth of the population. So it is a much smaller country.

**Andrew:** At the same time as you have this growth of social mobility and the slow but increasing consumerisation of society, you had a lot of people leaving East Germany, often very valuable people who wanted to move to the West, wanted to be with their families. You had the wall go up and you also had quite a repressive regime in East Germany, you had the Stasi, which we know about particularly from films in recent years. How did this work? How did you contrast between the satisfaction that a lot of people had with East Germany,

the stability it provided, but also the repressive nature and the overuse of surveillance?

**Katja:** Starting with the wall itself, the regime felt it had to put this up because it had a brain drain effectively, people who were above average in their income and their social standing were suddenly asked to live in a classless society and didn't want to do that. They left and this caused a lot of problems, particularly in the countryside, for example, where doctors and nurses were lacking, dentists, but also engineers to rebuild the cities.

Eventually the wall goes up and these people get locked in and, by and large, and people forget that as well when we look at these spectacular stories about hot air balloon escapes and these things and tunnels, the vast majority of these people decide that if they can't leave legally anymore and they're having to literally risk their lives, they're not going to do that. They make do, they stayed in the GDR and arraigned themselves with the system and tried to live their lives there.

But at the same time, of course, it is incredibly oppressive and becomes oppressive to those people who are desperate to leave, for example, because they have family on the other side or because, as an example I have in the book as well, where somebody works in West Berlin and then suddenly loses his job and decides to – perhaps in sort of youthful naivete, what's the worst that can happen – and wants to go.

The Stasi itself is in large part a remnant or symptom of this paranoia that I described earlier. The background that people came from, their experiences during the war in particular, and then under the Stalinist purges, becomes a part of their psyche. So there's this constant idea that people have got it in for them, people constantly plotting things.

Then you have the 1953 uprising in East Germany, which is a mass uprising of one million people, mostly against living conditions. You've got the uprising in Hungary in 1956. You got the Prague Spring. So they're looking constantly at their own population with the sense of suspicion. I found a really telling passage that I also quote in the book by Erich Mielke the long term leader of the Stasi, who is trying to identify types of enemies of the state – or types of people, rather – and he comes up with five or six types of people who are different types of enemies, ranging from outright hostiles who want to bring down the state tomorrow to they may look OK at the moment but if he's listening to any more Western music he's going to become an enemy sooner or later. And there's only one type that is positive and that I think just tells you so much about the way that he thinks about East German society. They just didn't trust people and they went totally over the top in terms of surveying them.

I would go so far as to say that for the vast majority of people, if you grant them reasonable living conditions and you give them a life worth living, they would have carried on with their lives without trying to bring down the state. That happened in 1989 for a lot of reasons, not least the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also the intransigence. Precisely this paranoia and the idea of not working together with their own people, that if they hadn't done this mass surveillance – and quite often they didn't even know what to do with the data that they collected – it wouldn't have made any difference as far as I'm concerned. So if anything, I would say the anger that you see later is in part actually caused by the Stasi trying to prevent that or trying to oppress that particular anger. Had they given it a vent earlier and allowed some reform and things it might have looked completely different.

The Stasi is an interesting phenomenon, it is more result of the regime's thinking and the internal paranoia than any real direct threat to the state.

**Andrew:** They collected so much material that it was hard to work out what they would do with it all?

**Katja:** Yes, and also in advance. So if one of your enemy types is a 'potential could become an enemy in the future', is currently a model citizen but might eventually be a problem, then you end up in a situation or in a logical twist whereby you have to monitor what people are doing so that you can find the precise moment at which point somebody becomes slightly critical of the state. But what do you do with the information that, I don't know, somebody is married, has got two children, helps his wife in the household, doesn't go to the bar too often, so-and-so's his friend at work? You get all of these random details in there that make absolutely no sense.

What are you ever going to do with this? It just gets collected because somebody gets told to monitor your life and write up what they find. People's affairs are listed in there, which is one of the many reasons why people don't want to see their Stasi files quite often, these personal, private details. But what's the Stasi ever going to do with these things? So of course it gets used for political enemies. Where people are, for instance, meeting up in groups and trying to mount opposition, that is quite often very effective in the sense that they find out before this happens where people are going to meet and then arrest them and put them in prison under terrible prison conditions. And it works as a form of deterrence because people know just how horrific these prisons are. Stories are going around deliberately being spread by the Stasi to some extent about the conditions and about the types of things they're going to do to you. So that works as the deterrence to some extent.

But the vast majority of ordinary citizens have got very little contact directly with the Stasi. They know that this is happening and it also to a surprising degree they accept that this is happening, but at the

same time it doesn't interfere with their lives, and it doesn't stop them from doing what they're doing.

**Andrew:** Before I come on to the collapse of the GDR, just some general questions about lessons we can learn. The first is about cities. Many German cities were destroyed in the Second World War. Are there any general lessons you would draw from how cities were renewed in the GDR post Second World War?

**Katja:** Well, one thing I found interesting was that because they were destroyed largely, or many of them were, it was like a blank canvas. In many ways, there was deliberate thinking behind the way that the cities were structured. So one extreme example perhaps is Dresden, where the efforts were split between rebuilding. So in fairness to the GDR, a lot of stuff was rebuilt. The opera was a classic example, the famous opera in Dresden, which it to an astonishing degree was rebuilt. More money was ploughed into it afterwards again in the 90s. But those people I spoke to who were there in the late 80s, shortly after it opened, said it was absolutely amazing, all of the baroque details on it and everything. So that happened.

At the same time, there's also a lot of thought about how can we make these spaces work in a more efficient way, but also in a more socialist way. Large squares are a big feature so that you can have mass demonstrations on the 1st of May, for example, and large displays of mass demonstrations. You have these great big Soviet style boulevards that are even today still a very overt feature of Berlin, a very iconic feature of Berlin, something a lot of people notice is what are now four or six lane roads going in and out of Berlin. And these are all there because Berlin was razed and then rebuilt specifically with these large trunk roads in place.

Alexanderplatz in Berlin is an interesting example because it's functional as a great big square, where demonstrations and festivals and things can happen, like the Youth Festival in 1973. But you've

also got really interesting features like a world clock, for example, that was designed by an artist, which shows you the different times around the world. It's still a very popular meeting place today for people in Alexanderplatz, it's quite often 'Let's meet there.'

Fountains, mosaics, there's a lot of public art being displayed. For instance, one of the things I really personally like about East Germany, even today, is the amount of public art you've got almost everywhere you go. You've got mosaics and stained glass windows showing different scenes. And yes, of course, a lot of it is propaganda, but not all of it. At the East Berlin Zoo, there's one in the East and one in the West Berlin. In East Berlin, it has got lots of little statuettes of the different animals in there and different scientific explanations about how things work and the ecosystem.

I think there's something interesting about destroyed cities and that you've got a completely blank canvas. Nobody complains because that's already gone. And you can have a think about how to rebuild these depending on what kind of city and society you want to live in.

**Andrew:** The second one is about collective trauma and guilt and how you deal with that. You've got a country here, both Germanys, dealing with scars of history going over many decades. One of the most troubling books I ever read, which you mention in yours, is *A Woman in Berlin*, which told the story of the horrific rapes that took place, for example, as the Russian troops advanced into Germany. Are there lessons about how countries can deal with this and what they might do for the people of those countries?

**Katja:** There are probably lessons there as to how not to do it. It wasn't done particularly well in the GDR either. So that's one example that you just gave there of the Soviet advance into Germany at the end of the war. And this, of course, hit East Germany in particular because that's where the Soviets ended up. And there was no attempt whatsoever to rein the soldiers in with their

understandable hatred and anger, given that Hitler's war in the East was also horrific and existential and based on ethnic grounds of complete annihilation. So there's a degree there. Of course, that's understandable, but that doesn't help somebody who is a mother waiting for the Soviet advance at home.

It's estimated that around two million women were raped, although we don't really know the figures because nobody reported them. And then when men came home from the frontlines and from prisoner of war camps, often after years, this wasn't something that they wanted to hear to start with, which is also somewhat understandable given their own horrific experiences. They'd often come home and find a new child and wonder whether that's theirs or not. Or their wives had remarried and found new families because they didn't even know that they were still alive.

All of that happens and it destroys entire family structures and communities. And that's not something that fits in nicely with the idea of liberation, which the government was trying to build up. So the idea that Germans had fallen to Nazism, and they should be grateful that the Soviets had not only beaten Hitler, but then also gone out of their way to liberate Germany or East Germany in particular. So it's a suppression more than a dealing with this trauma because people weren't allowed to talk about it.

One of the early efforts of the newspapers that are beginning to spring out of the ground in the 1940s and early 1950s, they make a concerted effort to say to people, 'Stop moaning about this. What you've gone through is nothing compared to what they've experienced. You've brought this on yourself. We should take a lesson from this. Be grateful that the Soviets let you live and are rebuilding your country. Let's move on.' And it became this collective trauma that literally millions had gone through one way or another without anybody ever talking about this. I find that quite striking, even now, talking to people who were there, who were saying to me,

'You can't ask that question.' Or suddenly became angry when I asked them a question when they've been perfectly fine for me to do the interview with them previously, when you suddenly hit onto something that was such a deep and buried trauma that they've been told all their lives not to talk about. So that's perhaps a lesson how not to deal with national and collective trauma.

**Andrew:** I think there are important lessons of where things have gone wrong that you learn as well as where things have gone right. There are many lessons to learn from the overall German experience, as I mentioned earlier, particularly as we in Bristol try and come to terms with some of the past of our own city. And that links to how you work through history, how you work through the past. The Germans have done this particularly well in recent years. I was struck very much in your book about two points you made. The first was about no longer making history, but owning history, that the East Germans had a right and a need to own their history. And the second was linked to the Martin Luther 500th anniversary you talked about, the nation finding its roots and how rootedness is so important if you're going to grow.

**Katja:** Yes, that's an interesting realisation by the GDR because previously everything that they did regarding their own history was based on this foundation myth of anti-fascism helped by the Soviets. They finally rid themselves of fascism and here we go with our utopia. And there was nothing before that. And so at some point they realised that actually people need history. They do need to feel that they're part of something larger, that what they do isn't just gone when they die, but they are indeed a small part of a much bigger thing that's worth living in and living for. And that's, I would say, quite a basic human need to feel that you come from somewhere and you're going somewhere beyond yourself.

The GDR realises that and eventually it needs to find ways of telling its own story without just tapping into all German things because

that doesn't really work. So you can't build up, say, a Bavarian king as your own king because he's no longer in your own country. They have to find East German figures geographically, East German figures and legacies to make that work. They find, too, that a particularly useful one is Prussia. Because Berlin and Brandenburg in particular, the area around it, was the Prussian heartland where the Huns had the powerbase. And also in general, that's where Prussia was based. So that was suddenly rediscovered when it was previously a militaristic and proto-fascist system. Suddenly people looked at Frederick the Great and Immanuel Kant, and then all of this liberal, educated, enlightened side of Prussia as well.

And the other figures Martin Luther where you think, he's a church figure in a Protestant region. He sided against the peasants in the wars with the aristocracy, with the old regime, previously was completely dismissed as somebody who just panders to the aristocracy and then gave in immediately and all of that. And obviously, of course, as a church figure in an atheist state, he wasn't ideal either. But suddenly he was rediscovered for his role in shaping the German language. By translating the Bible, he'd not only made religion accessible, but actually shaped German language and culture with it as well.

When the anniversary came around, the 500 year anniversary, there was a huge amount of effort put into renovating the castle where he transcribed the Bible. There was a famous scene where Luther is supposed to have smashed a glass of ink against the wall as he was writing, and the ink stain on the wall was actually repainted during the GDR years so that tourists could go there and see and say, 'This is where it is.' I remember a few years ago, I went back, and I was staring at the wall for half an hour before some member of the museum staff came along and said, 'We don't really paint that spot anymore.' Because that was also part of the legacy that GDR was trying to build, to make these things authentic and make people realise that actually there's 500 years of East German history there if

you want to look at it, but only selected strands of it. So it's a really peculiar little strain of the GDR; it felt a little bit insecure about only being a few decades old and was trying to look at these longer term things.

**Andrew:** The impression I get from the book is that few wanted the end of the GDR to happen, that more freedom would have actually strengthened East Germany as against destroying it. Is that right?

**Katja:** Ideologically and psychologically, yes. I've spoken to loads of people and when you look at the placards that were held up at demonstrations early on, as things were building up across the summer and early autumn of 1989, people are still asking for reform. Indeed, many of the intellectuals of the GDR, who had previously been incredibly critical of the regime, mainly for its intransigence and its being stuck in this old way that there wasn't any way to change that, were now actually warning of reunification because they were worried that East Germany would just be absorbed in what they perceived to be an entirely capitalist system. So initially you get all of that.

Whether that was ever realistic is a different thing. I think because of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the way that other states who had a much bigger problem with their national sovereignty and with the idea of regaining that – thinking particularly of Poland and Hungary as the two most extreme examples who were really hostile in many ways to the Soviet connection that their country had, because they felt that this was taking their own national identity away – this is something that never really happened in East Germany to the same degree. When they were all going down the same route and much quicker than initially anticipated, it had that pull effect basically.

I'm not entirely sure economically, politically, where there would have been a way out for the GDR to still exist. I think that was

unrealistic the moment that the Soviets took their foot off under Gorbachev and said, 'Do what you want'. Because it put so much pressure on the GDR government to do the same thing. And then on top of that, the fact that you have the same people still within two states, there was always this idea of the so-called magnet theory where you basically have the two German states as magnets. They always want to go back together because they're one people. And it's just a question of which magnet gets drawn to which. And by 1989, the die is cast.

**Andrew:** You take the story to 1990. But there is a further part of the book which looks at what's happened since then. Obviously sometimes it's difficult to get lessons from more recent history. But are there any general lessons of reunification that you'd point to in terms of how this might work better in the future?

**Katja:** I think one problem, perhaps the main problem, was that it was very one-sided. So once East Germans had voted overwhelmingly to say, yes, they want reunification and they want it done quickly because they were promised that there wouldn't be unemployment, for example, or that any economic fallout would be made up for by state subsidies. Kohl promised a lot. He didn't manage people's expectations particularly well. The West German chancellor needed this to save his own political career as well – he and his party, the CDU, were in a lot of political trouble. Reunification was a great project for them to save themselves as well. He wanted to get this done as quickly as possible while other people in the Social Democratic Party, for example, argued for a more considered and more two-sided process whereby East Germans would have had an input on this, which they didn't.

The West German negotiators were very open about the fact that this is a one-sided process as well. They said 'We've got a system that we like. Our state hasn't just collapsed. What we do is you join us and then we can talk about how that happens. But you are joining us.'

We're not making a new constitution or creating some new Germany out of the two.' And I think while East Germans did vote for that, that's caused a lot of problems, resentment not least, on both sides. West Germans grumble to this day that they're having to pay a so-called solidarity tax, which East Germans pay as well, which they tend to forget. But if you are a taxpayer, you pay the same tax, which was also used to fund the Gulf War, by the way, Germany's involvement in that.

It's a bit murky, but that's always blamed on East Germany per se. And against that isn't really countered the fact that you're denationalising or privatising an entire state's economy at blinding pace. So the amount of corruption and mistakes that were made in the process were just staggering, people's entire livelihoods, the companies and things that they built up, the identities that they built up with it, just suddenly vanished overnight. And people were asked to partake in that process by dismantling factories and machinery and whatever, just so they could be sold off for one mark through to Western investors. And those things created a lot of resentment. And that's still very much around.

There wasn't enough empathy in the process and there wasn't enough of an understanding that if you create a situation where one side feels like the loser, it ends up very badly and that resentment lingers to this day.

**Andrew:** There's many important lessons to learn from Germany and East Germany from 1949 to 1990 and reunification onwards. And there's so much more in this important book, too, that we haven't covered here. I do urge you to read it. It's a wonderful read. *Beyond the Wall: East Germany 1949 to 1990* is published by Allen Lane. I recommend it strongly. Thank you, Katja, for joining us today.

**Katja:** Thank you very much.

