HANDOUT 2.3.4

The Losers of Unification

IN SOME CASES MAYBE COMMUNISM WAS NOT SUCH A BAD IDEA

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On October 3, 1990, the five former East German states formally joined the eleven states of the FRG, forever changing the lives of women in Germany. From a western viewpoint changing from a communist dictatorship to a republic form of government should bring greater freedom and economic opportunity. In reality, East German women became the greatest losers in the transformation process. Not only would most of them lose their jobs, but they would also lose the freedom they personally had over abortion and the relative free day care option they possessed for their families.

Prior to unification GDR state records revealed that there was zero percent unemployment among women. Integrating women into the labor force in the GDR fit the government's socialist ideology. It also eased the chronic labor shortage in a country struggling to rebuild in the aftermath of World War II. And the money women earned helped families get by in a low-wage socialist state.

At the same time, West German women accepted a more submissive role in society. Traditionally, they had a strong orientation toward traditional family relations. West German society generally frowned upon women (especially married women with children) who chose to work full time. West German women generally became homemakers and mothers and stayed out of the male breadwinner workplace. Only 55 percent of Western German women were in the workplace in 1988. The unemployment rate was 12.3 percent for women at this time.

Once unification occurred, East German women were the first to lose their jobs in record numbers. By 1991, 60 percent of the unemployed East Germans were women. Women were less likely than men to be retained on short-time working arrangements. Women have clearly had worse chances than men of finding employment in a new field of expertise. Things have gotten better with time. Since 1991, unemployment for women in the former is down to 9 percent. This statistic can be attributed to women taking over many of the new services oriented jobs that have come to the new eastern states. As a whole these jobs pay far less than manufacturing jobs and are less secure. With the ongoing rebuilding of the former East Germany it still may be a long time before East German women see near 100 percent employment.

While a job is something that can eventually be acquired through economic growth or retraining, losing government granted freedom without consent, like the right to abortion, can be heartbreaking. In East Germany, women were given by the government the right to decide on an abortion and made abortion free on demand within the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. Other liberal provisions included no required counseling and a little later, free birth control pills. The allowance of abortion by the East German government was used as an incentive to get more women to work. These women would keep this right until 1990.

In West Germany, abortion was illegal until 1974, when, reacting to public pressure, the Bundestag legalized abortion for the first time under the stipulation that each procedure be performed only after a physician was consulted. After some court intervention this law was amended to state that abortions could be granted only if one of four specific criteria (such as rape/incest, danger to the mother's life, severe deformities of the fetus, or social hardship) were met. This amended act would have stayed in effect until 1993.

Reunification changed abortion policy throughout all of Germany. In 1991 calls for change in the total policy were supported by the fact that 57 percent of West Germany and 69 percent of East German women thought that abortions should have been legalized altogether or at least within the first three months of pregnancy. Many in government saw the right to abortion as a potential stumbling block to unification. Only by coming up with a compromise could all roles be content with unification. Section 4, Article 31 of the Unity Treaty became the temporary fix to the abortion battle. The article introduced regulation that would ensure better protection for unborn life and provide a better solution in conformity with the constitution of conflict situations forced by pregnant women. The new German government was also supposed to set up a network of advice centers run by various agencies. East German women were now starting to feel abandoned by the false promises of the Bonn government. Coupled with the dramatic rise in unemployment, East German women were feeling like scapegoats in this whole process. Anger could be heard far and wide. "I don't see one single instance where unification benefited women. Not one. It's only been negative," declared Alliance 90 Party member Chris-

tina Schenk. Berlin teacher Katrin Fleischer agreed: "As East German women, we simply had more rights."

Over the next two years the various political parties attempted to propose legislation that would allow women the right to choose whether or not to have a child, and decided when abortion should be permitted. SPD, FDP, and the liberal wing of the CDU supported this vision. The conservative CDU actually wanted to toughen the existing law on abortion even further but had to wait for the SPD/FDP plan to become law before they could challenge it. The CDU challenge was heard in mid 1993 by the German Constitutional Court. The Court decided against this new law. The court ruled that a woman seeking abortion must receive counseling that is not merely an informational recital of available options, but an active effort to dismay her. Stephen Kinzer tells us what became of abortion for East German women: "In practice women who can afford an abortion will continue to do so, and neither they nor their doctors will be punished if the abortion is performed in the first three months of pregnancy and if they have gone through the required counseling."

Representing the losing side of the decision were many East German women who for the first time in over 21 years had to answer to a restrictive abortion law. Regine Hildebrandt, Minister for Social Affairs in the state of Brandenburg, called the ruling "a return to the middle ages" and felt that "this (decision) is just impossible at the end of the 20th century."

In comparison to abortion, day care is one area where East German women lost nearly as much because of reunification. As early as 1950, East German law promoted the care of children for working mothers through legislation. With the start of the 1970s, the East German government created initiatives for women in order to expand their place in the workforce. Besides a shorter work week, East German women acquired paid leave for their private housework, family illness, and extended leave depending on the amount of children in the family. The GDR government allowed parents four weeks of time off for one child, six weeks of time off for two children, eight weeks for three, ten weeks for four, and thirteen weeks off for five or more children per year.

Additionally, given the low income levels of many jobs, most East Germans realized that in order to make ends meet, both parents of the household had to work full time jobs. The crèche or kindergarten became a necessity to the parents and the government. Eva Kolinsky tells us this: "The employer, not the women, was obligated to provide child care facilities throughout the year. Fees were normal, and care provision was on a daily basis from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm for mothers, and the use of public childcare facilities became the rule rather than the exception." In 1960, 14 percent of children up to the age of three were looked after in a crèche; in 1989, 80 percent. On the eve of unification, 95 percent of all preschool children between the ages of three and 6 attended a kindergarten; in 1960, 46 percent had done so. In 1989, 81 percent of school children between the ages of six and ten received all-day care after school. The GDR government further alleviated burdens on working mothers and fathers by providing hot meals to their children and by running servicehouses where dirty laundry could be dropped off in the morning and clean laundry could be picked up at the end of the day.

In contrast, West German society provided little in day care options for the families. The general rule until unification was that the mother of the children or selected grandparents of the children would provide the needed day care. If a child became sick during the year, West German regulations only allowed parental leave for that child (up to eight years old) for five days. After the birth of a child, parents (mother or father) would get a subsidy of 600 DM per month for one and a half years. This means-tested procedure forced one of the parents to stop working, or at least reduce their working hours to below half their weekly average.

The kindergartens were run by public authorities, the churches, or private groups, and rarely by companies. When reunification arrived, West German women were in a quandary over the childcare question. Other more liberal women envied the East German system and demanded improvements. Experts foresaw East German women becoming unemployed in record numbers due to the shrinkage of the economy. Because of this unemployment record and a lack of government funds, day care facilities in both private and public enterprises were being forced to close. Some kindergartens began to charge a monthly fee of $17, plus lunch money to stay open. Ilka Gatke of Potsdam, 36, states "If the one in our neighborhood closes, then my opportunities will be deeply limited ... I can't burden them with that. It creates this existential worry that I won't be able to climb back in (to society)." East German women who were seeking to reenter this new German labor market now had to deal with finding a way to pay for and provide day care for their children if they wanted to see employment. This new German economy considered single mothers to be a great risk. Abine Nopens, a single mother from the East, complains that she is "asked all the time if I have children" when she applies for a job.

With the problems of unemployment and having to now pay for childcare, many East German women are now being forced economically to accept the old way of staying at home with their children and accepting total financial support from husbands, fathers, or grandfathers. Reunification, instead of bringing promised prosperity, only presented immediate hardships to most East German women. Things have changed relatively slowly. Today, in eastern Germany, 36 percent of the children under the age of three have a daycare spot, while in the west, the percentage drops to a meager

2.7 percent. This lack of day care may be one reason why German couples are having fewer and fewer children every year. Only by witnessing firsthand what was happening to individual families did the German government realize that their child care system based on individual families paying for their own child care expenses needed revamping.

It took nearly five years to get the German Bundestag to agree on a legislative promise guaranteeing a kindergarten spot for all children between the ages of three and six by 1996. All parties in the Bundestag, regardless of their abortion stance, now realize that day care is a necessity in both East and West Germany. Recently, the German government passed a bill that allocated 1.5 billion Euros to create more than 200,000 additional full-day care spots for young children by 2010. Some say this bill has not gone far enough. Many in Germany want a law guaranteeing parents the right to day care for children of all ages, regardless of socio-economic background. This prospect will be difficult to finance as long as the eleven western states continue to pay for the rebuilding of the five eastern states and the German economy continues to sputter along.