

4.3 OSTALGIE — REMEMBERING LIFE IN THE GDR

? FOCUS QUESTIONS:

- Can two different countries easily become one?
- What issues may remain unsolved after the political and economic integration of two nations?

STANDARD #1 CULTURE.

STANDARD #2 TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE.

LESSON OVERVIEW:

This series of lessons explores the effects the reunification of Germany had after October 3, 1990 on the former residents of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) or East Germany. Although efforts to integrate the two Germanys—politically and economically—were undertaken by the German Federal Republic (or West Germany), remaining residual divisions are often referred to as *die Mauer im Kopf* (the Wall in the head). Through the exposure of the contemporary German film *Goodbye, Lenin!* the memoirs of a young woman reflecting on her life in the GDR, contemporary German poetry, and articles from various publications on *Ostalgie* (a combination of the German words for “east” and “nostalgia” referring to a cultural phenomenon present in the former GDR), students will gather information for their culminating project, whereby they are asked to create an exhibit for a GDR Museum. By the end of these lessons, students should be able to understand the difficulties which Germany has faced in reuniting two similar—yet distinctly different—countries and the need for people to reminisce about the past, even if aspects of it were marked by hardship.

TEACHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Commonly referred to as *die Wende* or the turning point, the world witnessed the euphoria of the West and East German people atop the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, celebrating the collapse of the structure that had been the best-known symbol of the Cold War. This event marked the end of the East German communist dictatorship (GDR). “What belongs together, will now grow together,” said former German Chancellor Willy Brandt on November 10, 1989.

It is estimated that 4.3 million people visited West Germany in the first four days after the *Mauerfall* (fall of the Wall). “Wir sind ein Volk” (We are one people) was heard throughout Germany. On October 3, 1990 Germany was officially reunified. However, the jubilation was soon overshadowed by some uncertainty about how the reunification would be implemented and which side would benefit and which would be disadvantaged. Decades-held values and ideologies on both sides took time to evolve and change. The reunification was not formed through cooperation by equal parties, as the West German government had merely arranged for East Germany to be



annexed under West Germany's existing constitution. Moreover, an almost exclusively "West-to-East" transfer of currency, ideology, regulations, and institutions occurred. In the past 20 years, the process of integration has therefore been more challenging for East Germans. It left no political room to keep any positive aspect of life in East Germany, even though there are arguments that can be made in favor of East Germany's accommodating childcare systems and its fostering of gender equality.

Instead, some people still have the *Mauer im Kopf* (wall in the head) today. Despite high expectations after the reunification, Germany still remains somewhat culturally divided. Especially during the 1990s, East Germans were often derogatorily referred to as *Ossis* ("Easties") accusing them of being provincial, unintelligent, and lazy, while West Germans were referred to as *Wessis* ("Westies") stereotyping them as arrogant, selfish, and obsessed with materialism.

With the revelation of the disastrous economic and ecological legacy left behind by the GDR regime, work began to rebuild the East German infrastructure and economy. The *Aufbau Ost* (rebuilding the East) program has so far totaled 1.6 trillion euros. Nevertheless, inequalities still remain. Political issues like immigration laws, xenophobia, and the definition of citizenship are deeply tied to a sense of national identity. Fighting unemployment in East Germany (in 2012 it was 9.9 %, as opposed to 5.7 % in the West) remains one of the main challenges dividing the country today. Nonetheless, there are many symbols testifying to the potential of former East Germany, such as Germany's eighth chancellor, Angela Merkel, and eleventh president (since reunification), Joachim Gauck, who grew up in East Germany. In addition, former East Germans peacefully brought about the end of a dictatorship (*Friedliche Revolution*), the only example of a successful democratic revolution to take place in German history (*Tatsachen Über Deutschland*, 2011).

While formidable aspects of the GDR, such as the role of the *Stasi*, continue to be examined (refer to Lesson 4.4), one can identify a shift toward a nostalgic view of the East German past. The release of Wolfgang Becker's 2003 film *Goodbye Lenin!* sparked the *Ostalgie* craze in Germany which is still apparent today. The establishment of the GDR Museum in Berlin, the prevalence of certain former East German symbols, such as *Ampelmännchen* (little traffic light man) and *Sandmännchen* (little sandman), and the reappearance of certain food products, such as *Spreewälder Gurken* (pickled cucumbers) are examples of the phenomenon of *Ostalgie*. Long the object of affection as well as frustration in East Germany, the *Trabi* (or Trabant), a small boxy car made of fiberglass and pressed cotton, quickly became a key symbol not only of the German Democratic Republic, but also of socialist inefficiency and backwardness. In the mid-1990s, however, the Trabi reemerged as an evocative symbol of East German distinctiveness and post-socialist nostalgia and has achieved the status of a cult automobile.

For background information, teachers may want to read the comprehensive article, *Germany: Ostalgie for the GDR* by Peter Linden, Dominique Vidal and Benjamin Wuttke to comprehend the differing perspectives on this complex topic. Another important source for teachers is a collection of essays by Daphne Berdahl, *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany*.

TIME:



(8-9) 45 minute class periods

INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES:

- Jana Hensel Handout (**Handout 4.3.1 on Instructional Resource Disc**)
- *Goodbye Lenin!* Reflective Questions Handout (**Handout 4.3.2 on Instructional Resource Disc**)
- *Ostalgie* PowerPoint (**PowerPoint 4.3.3 on Instructional Resource Disc**)
- *Ostalgie* Research Articles (**Handout 4.3.4 on Instructional Resource Disc**)
- Poetry Activity (**Handout 4.3.5 on Instructional Resource Disc**)

**PROCEDURE:****Jana Hensel's *After the Wall***

Jana Hensel's *After the Wall* is a memoir that focuses on the generation who spent their childhood in the GDR and the rest of their lives in the Federal Republic. Born in Leipzig 1976, Jana Hensel attended elementary school (1983-1990) studying the curriculum set by the SED regime. Following the reunification in 1991, she progressed to a university preparatory track in high school. Her graduating class was the first to use textbooks that came from West Germany. In 1995 she matriculated at Leipzig University, where she studied French and German literature. After spending a year in Marseilles, France, Hensel transferred to the Humboldt University in Berlin. In the meantime, she published an Internet literary magazine and worked as a freelance editor for a major publisher. Having completed her studies in 2002, she spent a year in Paris where she began her work on *After the Wall*, which became a best seller. Like many of her generation, she has successfully "assimilated" into mainstream German society, whereas her parents and their contemporaries have continued to face difficult transition.

The original German title of the book is *Zonenkinder*, which means "children of the zone," a reference to the origins of the GDR in the Soviet occupation zone. Hensel uses this colloquial expression to describe a state of mind among her generation, a "twilight zone" of sorts, in which daily life seems arbitrary, provisional, and somewhat unreal.

DAYS 1-2:

ANTICIPATORY SET: What four or five products would you have a hard time living without? What items do you use the most? What would it be like if your world was turned upside down overnight? What if none of these items were available? How would your life be different? What changes in your personal life would you like least or most?

Before the lesson, the teacher should prepare students by presenting an overview of the events in Germany following World War II, the establishment of West Germany (from the British, American, and French occupation zones) and East Germany (from the Soviet zone), the unique situation of West Berlin and the construction of the Berlin Wall, and a brief chronology of the events leading up to the ultimate collapse of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe. The teacher may also show the 24-minute-long *Field Trip to Berlin* DVD (with its accompanying Instructional Guide) also provided by the Transatlantic Outreach Program (TOP). The teacher should distribute the Jana Hensel Handout (**Handout 4.3.1 on Instructional Resource Disc**), a timeline of the German Democratic Republic and Jana Hensel's life, and "That Warm Fuzzy Feeling of Togetherness: On Growing Up in the GDR," a chapter from Jana Hensel's *After the Wall: Confessions from an East German Childhood and the Life that Came Next*.

Before the students read the handout, the teacher should review the characteristics of a *memoir*:

- A memoir is a specific type of autobiographical writing. Like an autobiography, a memoir is about the author's personal experiences. However, a memoir does not necessarily cover the author's entire life.
- A memoir is written from the first person point of view, using first-person pronouns, such as *I*, *me*, and *we*.
- A memoir is an account of actual events from the writer's life.
- A memoir includes the writer's feelings and beliefs about his or her family and community. In some cases the message or main idea is only implied by the details the writer provides.

As the students read the handout, they should identify and take notes on the following:

*Leipzig**Völkerball (Dodgeball)**Karl Marx Square**Lenin**Erich Honecker**Freie Deutsche Jugend (Free German Youth)**Junge Pioniere (Young Pioneers)**Korbine Früchtchen**St. Nicolas Church**Warsaw Pact**Spartacus Track and Field Competitions**Manne Mummelauge**Begrüßungsgeld (Welcome Money)*

In the discussion that follows, the teacher should ask the students to review their notes and consider the following questions:

- a. Describe what you have learned about Jana Hensel and her experience?
- b. Can you identify the idea Hensel is trying to communicate?

The teacher should point out to the students that in this memoir, the main idea is closely related to the central conflict between Hensel's desire to reconnect with her GDR childhood and the fact that the GDR system has disappeared.

In a memoir the writer's heritage, traditions, attitude, and beliefs are often reflected in his or her writing. Working with a partner, the students should go back through the selection and find examples that reveal Hensel's attitudes toward herself and her heritage, traditions, and belief system. When they have finished, they should discuss how her perceptions of herself and her GDR childhood have changed.

- c. Describe Hensel's feelings about her childhood.
- d. Analyze the ways in which her past experience defined who she is.

The students should think of their own past experiences—joys and sorrows, accomplishments and failures, family traditions and values—events that have taught them a valuable lesson or shaped their personality. What are their most memoir-worthy experiences? As a follow-up, the teacher could ask the students to write a section of their own "memoirs." Students who might be interested could read the rest of *After the Wall*.

DAYS 3-5:

***Goodbye, Lenin!* Movie**

Wolfgang Becker's movie *Goodbye, Lenin!* is a satire about one young man's efforts to make history and time stand still so he can protect his ill mother from the political upheaval of 1989-1990 in Germany. When the movie begins, 20-year-old Alex Kerner and his sister Ariane Kerner are living with their mother Christiane in an apartment block in East Berlin. Their father had defected to the West ten years earlier; their mother is a life-long member of the Socialist party and a strong political activist, so when she sees Alex participating in an anti-government demonstration, she suffers a heart attack and falls into a coma. During the eight months Christiane is comatose, Germany dramatically changes as a result of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the imminent official reunification of the two Germanys (East and West) into one country. Their life also changes as aspects of the newfound capitalism infiltrate their personal world. When Christiane awakens from her coma, her health is still tenuous. According to her doctor, any shock she experiences could possibly trigger another heart attack and certain death. So, to protect his mother, Alex is determined not to inform her of the changed Germany in which they now live. With the reluctant support of his family and friends, he feels he can better protect her at home, where he can control what she is exposed to. It is this decision that creates the comedy as the family desperately tries to explain and keep secret the new westernized world of fast food, fashion and flashy advertisements by recreating the increasingly fake world of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) inside Christiane's bedroom.

Goodbye, Lenin! is a feature-length film which was released to international acclaim in 2003. It is available in DVD in German with English subtitles. It is approximately 121 minutes in length and has an "R" rating. For many schools, this rating may be problematic and require administration approval and special advance notification to parents. Teachers may desire to show the entire film or may be more inclined to show selected scenes which relate more directly to the theme of the fall of the Wall, the transformation of East Germany, and *Ostalgie*. (Dugdale, 2003).

The teacher should distribute the *Goodbye Lenin!* Reflective Questions Handout (**Handout 4.3.2 on Instructional Resource Disc**) as the basis of a class discussion or a writing assignment. Suggested scenes to be shown and discussed are as follows:

- Scene 3 Forty Years
1. What is so special about October 7, 1989?
 2. How was this day celebrated in East Berlin?
 3. How does Alex Kerner react to his mother writing letters?
- Scene 4 Protest
1. What event does Alex participate in?
 2. Who greets the marchers?
 3. What does Christiane Kerner witness after she leaves the taxi?
 4. What happens to her after she sees Alex? What does Alex attempt to do?
- Scene 6 The New World
1. What happened on November 9, 1989?
 2. How does Alex commemorate the date?
 3. Who was Helmut Kohl?
 4. Where does Ariane Kerner work? Who does she meet there?
 5. What do Ariane and Alex do to the apartment?
- Scene 9 Back Home
1. How do Alex and Denis prepare the apartment for Christiane and why?
 2. What is Ariane's comment about the old clothing?
- Scene 10 Turning Back Time
1. What does Alex discover when he goes to the supermarket?
 2. Why does Alex look through the garbage?
 3. What happened to the East German currency the *Ostmark*? How did the East Germans react?
 4. What does the new supermarket offer?
 5. What is meant by a "colorful consumer paradise?"
- Scene 13 The Birthday Party
1. Who does Alex gather for his mother's birthday party?
 2. Who were the *Jungen Pioniere* (young pioneers)?
 3. What presents does Christiane receive? Why is this important to her?
- Scene 14 The Money
1. How does Alex explain the large CocaCola advertising sign?
 2. What happens when Alex attempts to exchange *Ostmark*?
- Scene 18 Goodbye, Lenin
1. What happens when Christiane leaves the apartment?
 2. What does she see outside that puzzles her?
- Scene 19 The Truth
1. What explanation does Alex provide for the changes that Christiane observed?
- Scene 26 Sigmund Jähn
1. Who was Sigmund Jähn and how does Alex use him to explain the "historic events" that had occurred in Germany?

Follow-up Activity

As the film concludes, Alex and his family face a new and exciting life. But what might the future hold for them? Where will they live and work? Write a synopsis for a sequel to *Goodbye, Lenin!* Include information on how the characters adapt to the new political order and the western way of life.

DAYS 6-8:

Ostalgie—Creating A GDR Museum

After the students have read and discussed the excerpt from Jana Hensel’s *After the Wall: Confessions from an East German Childhood and the Life that Came Next* (**Handout 4.3.1 on Instructional Resource Disc**) and viewed and discussed *Goodbye, Lenin!*, the teacher should re-introduce the idea of *Ostalgie* [a new German word which is a combination of the words “Ost” (east) and “Nostalgie” (nostalgia)]. The teacher should ask the students to identify those items from both the memoir and the film which illustrate this concept.

Before assigning the project that the students will complete, the teacher may want to show the *Ostalgie* PowerPoint (**PowerPoint 4.3.3 on Instructional Resource Disc**).

The teacher should introduce the group project, which the students will create to demonstrate their comprehension of the idea of *Ostalgie*—a museum showcase:

- Students will create a classroom museum exhibit. Museum exhibits are usually designed to educate and inform the public about the subject of the exhibit in a balanced and usually unbiased way (Walbert, 2011). Students will work in groups to design an informative museum exhibit about one aspect of *Ostalgie* or aspects of German reunification.
- The three components in a museum exhibit are artifacts, pictures, and text. Artifacts are objects from the time period being portrayed or recreations of sample objects. These artifacts help bring the story to life. The pictures in a museum exhibit typically portray people, items, or events central to the topic of the exhibit. These artifacts and pictures are often accompanied by explanatory exhibit text and object captions to help the viewer make sense of the exhibit. The text might identify and give the background of an artifact, or it might explain how a specific person is related to the topic.

Students can choose from the many topics mentioned in the memoir, movie, on the web, or in magazine articles. Some of the products include: Rotkäppchen Sekt, Vita Cola, Spreewälder Gurken, Mocca Fix Gold, Tempo Bohnen, Globus Erbsen, Pitiplatsch, Ampelmännchen, Sandmännchen, Trabant, Perlodent.

Students will research their topic using Internet resources as well as the articles *Ostalgie* Research Articles (**Handout 4.3.4 on Instructional Resource Disc**).

Once they have completed their research, the students need to design and assemble their exhibit. The exhibit can be assembled on a piece of poster board, white foam board, or corrugated display board (tri-fold). This task can be done in class or as a homework assignment.

The actual museum might be created in the classroom or a larger area where tables can be set up to display the materials, including artifacts. Once the museum has been created, each student group should explain the meaning of their exhibit to the rest of the class as part of a “museum tour.”

Method Variations & Additional Teaching Options

1. The teacher might want to establish the concept of a juried exhibition and have a panel of other teachers, the principal, etc. serve as a jury to award prizes to the best exhibits.
2. The teacher might show a video of a Trabant commercial from the following website:
http://www.archive.org/details/Werbung_Trabant_601
3. The students may want to create an advertisement for their product for their museum. This could be a video or a PowerPoint presentation or a magazine-style advertisement.



WHOLE GROUP REFLECTIONS:

- As a means to bring closure to this unit, the teacher may assign the students to write an essay on the concept of *Ostalgie* based on their readings, the viewing of scenes from *Goodbye, Lenin!*, and their Museum Exhibit.
- The teacher may want to facilitate a final class discussion with the help of the aforementioned focus questions.

MODIFICATIONS:

- Teachers who do not have sufficient time, may want to select from the variety of activities in this lesson.
- The teacher may also need to create specific questions for the different readings to accommodate students' varying reading and comprehension levels. However, the activities should accommodate the participation of students with special needs.

EXTENSION:

- Another approach to teaching the concept of *Ostalgie* is through poetry. Teachers may ask students the following two questions:
 - How can poetry expand and deepen one's understanding of historical and cultural events?
 - What insight do the poems "Property" by Volker Braun and "Berlin Encounter" by Yaak Karsunke (**Handout 4.3.5 on Instructional Resource Disc**) provide into the effects of the fall of the Berlin Wall on the residents of former East Germany?

Sources:

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Dugdale, H. (2003). *Goodbye Lenin!*. *Film Education*. Retrieved July 2011, from <http://www.filmeducation.org/pdf/film/GoodbyeL.pdf>

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