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Analysis of the GDR's Socialist Childcare System and Its Legacy



Headnote

Abisag Tüllmann (1935–1996) was a German photojournalist and theater photographer known for her moving depictions of political events, urban life, and human vulnerability. She published her photos in major newspapers and magazines. Tüllmann's photograph *Playing and Learning in a "Children's Collective"* provides a glimpse into the state-run childcare system of the GDR, designed to facilitate mothers' entry into the workforce and instill socialist ideology.

While the system dissolved after reunification, it left a complex legacy, influencing childcare policies and gender roles in Germany today.

Narrative

In 1970, Abisag Tüllmann photographed *Playing and Learning in a "Children's Collective."* The photograph captures children playing with their caregiver in a children's collective in Frankfurt am Main.¹ This scene is representative of the extensive state-run childcare system in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) that included nurseries for children aged one to three years old, kindergartens for children aged three to six years old, and other secondary schools and youth organizations. It was designed to free mothers from childcare responsibilities during the day, so they could join the workforce and contribute to the economy. It was also designed to indoctrinate children with a socialist ideology. Studies have revealed no significant correlation between this system of prolonged separation from family with serious mental health impacts. However, some individuals have reported weaker relationships and a low sense of individuality and creativity. After reunification, this system dissolved, thus creating another challenge for East German families who were adapting to new social, economic, and political realities. In the long term, this change contributed to a decline in birth rates and increased disparities in childcare access based on income. In the twenty-first century there have been more recent reforms to expand and equalize childcare services across Germany.

Throughout her career, Tüllmann used photography to interpret the time's most pressing political events and the conditions of everyday life from a variety of perspectives. Specifically, she focused on the vulnerability of human existence. Her work encompassed the urban landscapes and culture of the 1960s, the student movement and the political impulses of 1968, and liberation movements in Algeria, Rhodesia-Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the Israeli Palestinian conflict.² Tüllmann died on September 24, 1996, at age 60. Her collection has since

¹ Tüllmann, Abisag. *Playing and Learning in a "Children's Collective."* 1970 Photograph. German History in Documents and Images (GHDI). https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1205.

² Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu. "Museum Für Fotografie." Abisag Tüllmann 1935-1996. Photojournalism and Stage Photography II. Accessed November 20, 2024. <https://www.smb.museum/en/museums->

been inherited by the Prussian Heritage Image Archive, and the Abisag Tüllmann Foundation was founded in Frankfurt in September 2008.³

About 20 other photographs taken by Tüllmann are also featured in the Germany History in Documents and Images collection, many of which capture other elements of the socialist state. *A Non-Traditional "Family"* (1978) is representative of the commune movement of 1968, another practice that collectivized care work. In this photograph, Tüllmann captured three families sitting around a table in front of their shared farmhouse.⁴ *"Establish Abortion Clinics Here"* (1975)⁵ features one of the car signs the Frankfurt Women's Center decorated for a group trip to Holland, where abortion was legal. The abortion rights movement has a strong positive correlation to the autonomy and the agency that childcare collectives afforded women. Tüllmann's photography shows the socialist regime in the GDR should not only be remembered for stagnating economic growth and stifling political dissent. It should also be remembered for being one of the first nations to collectivize and fund care work, thus freeing women to fulfill a more equal role in society.

³ ("Die Frau Mit Der Kamera - Portrait Der Fotografin ABISAG Tüllmann (the Woman with the Camera) Germany 2015." KinoCritics.com Review of Die Frau mit der Kamera - Portrait der Fotografin Abisag Tüllmann. Accessed November 20, 2024. http://www.kinocritics.com/film_review.php?f=2352.

⁴ Tüllmann, Abisag. *A Non-Traditional "Family."* 1978. Photograph. German History in Documents and Images (GHDI). https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1111.

⁵ Tüllmann, Abisag. *"Establish Abortion Clinics Here"*. 1975. Photograph. German History in Documents and Images (GHDI). https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=624.



Figure 1: A Non-Traditional Family (1978)⁶



Figure 2: "Establish Abortion Clinics Here" (1975)⁷

⁶ Tüllmann, Abisag. A Non-Traditional "Family." 1978. Photograph. German History in Documents and Images (GHDI). https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1111.

⁷ Tüllmann, Abisag. "Establish Abortion Clinics Here". 1975. Photograph. German History in Documents and Images (GHDI). https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=624.

Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order

Ittenbach, Max. Nursery in Vetschau. 1970. Photograph. <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/nursery-in-vetschau-1970>.

The GDR built up a network of day nurseries and kindergartens so that both mothers and fathers could go to work. The day nurseries were overseen by the Ministry for Health, and children between the ages of one and three received care all day. In 1970, there were already enough spaces available in day nurseries to cover 29% of the children in that age group. Kindergartens were overseen by the Ministry for National Education and were intended for children ages three to six. The Ministry for National Education ensured alignment with socialist principles and Marxist-Leninist ideology in schools. In 1970, 65% of children in this age group were enrolled in kindergarten. The photograph shows children from a day nursery located near the brown coal power plant in Vetschau in the district of Cottbus.



Rothmaler, Susanne. "The Impact on Child Care." *German Politics & Society*, No. 24/25 (1991): 106-10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23734944>.

Rothmaler, one of the founding members, gives a first-hand account of the establishment of the first free and independent kindergarten in East Berlin after the fall of the Berlin

Wall in November 1989. First, Rothmaler describes the previous childcare system in the GDR. The GDR had a comprehensive state-controlled system of kindergartens and nursery schools that allowed 73% of women to have a full-time job and work 8.75 hours each day. During these hours, children were brought up in an education program designed to produce clean, well-behaved, adjusted, and uncreative children. This education led to symptoms in children such as a lack of emotional ties and abnormal destructiveness. Next, Rothmaler describes the struggles and notifications behind creating an alternative to the state-controlled system. In her opinion, it is more important for a child to come together socially and to have traits such as tolerance and conflict resolution. Ultimately, she argues that although the former GDR's rigid socialist system appeared more egalitarian, it also stifled children's creativity and individuality through its emphasis on political indoctrination and conformity.

Conrad, Christoph, Michael Lechner, and Welf Werner. "East German Fertility After Unification: Crisis or Adaptation?" *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1996): 331-358. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2137438>.

This paper focuses on the significant decline in marriages and births that occurred in East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The authors track the birth rates of the East German population past, present, and future, and propose a model of the future cohort's fertility. The authors argue that this decline was a means of adaptation to the new social and economic conditions. The authors hypothesize that East German couples attempted to rapidly westernize their family size to match the West German cohort. They also hypothesize that the change in childcare played an important role. Childcare in the GDR that provided an overwhelming majority of East German parents with cost-free day care and the one-year leave for the mother after birth with full compensation of earnings and the guarantee of keeping her job. Family policy was an important part of the GDR. These social policies did not continue to the same extent after reunification; thus, it became more time consuming and expensive to have children.

Dodds, Dinah. "Five Years after Reunification: East German Women in Transition." *GDR Bulletin* Vol. 25, No. 1 (October 17, 1998): 31-37. <https://doi.org/10.4148/gdrb.v25i0.1246>.

This article explores the experiences of eighteen East German women from diverse backgrounds five years after unification. Dodds first interviews the women in East Berlin in 1990, then she returned twice to talk with the same women, the last time during 1995. Women from the GDR reported mixed feelings. Many felt the profound loss of state-supported social services like childcare, and many women lost their jobs much more quickly than men with similar qualifications. But, many women saw the gains in other areas of their lives as equally or more important. For example, they had increased opportunities for work and travel and freedom from state control. Overall, Dodds asserts that it is impossible to generalize about women's experiences. She also pushes back against the continued narrative of "winners" and "losers". She claims this narrative perpetuates the perception of East Germans as victims of the unification process and of West Germans as superior which ultimately obscures a more authentic discussion of unification.

Anhert, Lieselotte, and Michael E. Lamb. "The East German Child Care System." *American Behavioral Scientist* Vol. 44, No. 11 (July 2001): 1843–63.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00027640121958186>.

In this study, Anhert and Lamb examine the impact of the East German childcare system, that is rooted in socialist ideology, on children's early development and attachment. The study compares caretaking practices and beliefs in both East and West Germany before and after reunification. The authors find that although the East German childcare system attempted to influence early development, it did not significantly alter German culture or parenting practices. There are more similarities than differences in attachment patterns between East and West. Instead, Anhert and Lamb assert that parental attitudes had a greater influence on early development. Specifically, Easterners felt betrayed by the years they had spent in a collapsing system and thus aggressively tried to catch up, while Westerners felt threatened by the invasion from the East and tried to protect their privileges. The inability of some parents to adapt to sociopolitical changes during and after reunification was responsible for adverse effects on children, rather than the childcare system itself.

Schober, Pia S., and Juliane F. Stahl. "Childcare Trends in Germany— Increasing Socio-Economic Disparities in East and West." *DIW Weekly Report* Vol. 11 (2014): 51-58. https://www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw_01.c.491964.de/diw_econ_bull_2014-11-7.pdf.

This research report examines the use of childcare facilities in Germany. The authors explore long-term trends in formal, daycare centers, and informal, relatives or babysitting, childcare arrangements. In East Germany, before unification, daycare was widely available to encourage mothers to return to work soon after giving birth. Conversely, in West Germany, there were few childcare facilities for children under three. After reunification and since 2005, Germany has seen a significant expansion in daycare services, primarily to help parents balance employment and family responsibilities; however, there are still major disparities between East and West Germany for childcare for one- to three-year-olds. The authors also use data from the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP study) to emphasize a significant rise in the probability of children with single mothers attending a daycare facility in West Germany, although this increase is less pronounced for children whose mothers have a low level of education or at risk of poverty. In East Germany, considerable growth was observed in daycare attendance among children with single mothers and with mothers at risk of poverty, probably because cost is less of a barrier.

Gesley, Jenny. "Germany: First Agreement to Implement 'Good Day Care Act' Concluded." Retrieved from the Library of Congress (2019). <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2019-04-30/germany-first-agreement-to-implement-good-day-care-act-concluded/>.

This article from the US Library of Congress shows the current state of childcare in Germany. On April 25, 2019, the German federal government and the state of Bremen signed an agreement to implement the "Good Day Care Act" to further improve day care quality, achieve uniform standards in all German states, and partially relieve parents from the costs of day care. The German states of Saarland and Brandenburg signed the agreements within a few weeks, and the other German states followed. The federal government allocated an annual €5.5 billion (about US\$6.1 billion) to the German states to this end by 2020. This agreement is the first of sixteen agreements that the federal

government will conclude with the German states over the next several months. The German Federal Ministry for Families, Seniors, Women, and Youth monitored and evaluated the measures taken in the states annually and publish a report.

Schmidt-Sondermann, Volker. "From Cradle to State Care - East Germany's Socialist Nursery System." 2021. <https://www.autentic.com/65/pid/1789/From-Cradle-to-State-Care-East-Germanys-Socialist-Nursery-System.htm>.

This video shows the scope of the childcare system. In the GDR in the 1950s, a six-day week was in force, and the young socialist republic needed workers, especially women. So, the GDR created the weekly nurseries. Anyone could drop their child off at one of these facilities starting at 5 a.m. on Monday morning and leave him or her there until 6 p.m. on Friday. Some facilities even cared for children overnight. At least one hundred thousand children were accommodated in these weekly childcare centers between 1950 and the end of the GDR. The video shows testimonies from the former nursery children, mothers, and nursery teachers describing the long-term consequences they still face thirty years later. For example, one former nursery child grew into a stubborn teenager. She believes this happened because she did not experience love and closeness during her upbringing. It is also worth noting that few mothers were willing to talk openly about the choice to hand their children off to the state at such a young age.

Braunheim, Lisa, Ayline Heller, Claudia Helmert, Christoph Kasinger, Manfred E. Beutel, and Elmar Brähler. "Early Childhood Care in the Former East Germany and Mental Stress in Adulthood." *Deutsches Ärzteblatt International* (March 22, 2024). <https://doi.org/10.3238/arztebl.m2023.0276>.

This study investigates the potential association between early childcare outside the family in the GDR and mental stress in adulthood. The authors studied 1575 persons who were born and socialized in the GDR who were classified into four care groups according to the age at which they were first cared for outside of the family. The authors found no significant association even for those cared for outside of the home before age three. However, the study observed that individuals who received long-term care outside the family exhibited higher rates of depression and somatization disorders which suggests that prolonged separation from the family environment may have been the cause. The

data from this group should be interpreted with caution because the groups was small and the reasons for prolonged care outside of the family, such as an illness or death in the family, may have influenced the results. The authors suggest further investigation with a larger sample size.

Ariana. "Interrupted Emancipation: Women and Work in East Germany." *Tricontinental* (May 19, 2024). <https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-74-women-in-the-german-democratic-republic/>.

This article examines the progress and setbacks of women's emancipation in East Germany from 1945 to 1990. It highlights the socialist childcare and elderly care system that allowed citizens to take a more active role in building a socialist society. Right after World War II ended, women accounted for 60% of the German population, and a considerable number of men were wounded, permanently unable to work, or still prisoners of war. Out of pure necessity, women joined the workforce and formed anti-fascist women's committees that took up important social welfare tasks in communal settings such as setting up sewing and laundry rooms and providing meals. Women were also directly involved in drafting, implementing, and enforcing laws that abolished their subordination. This resulted in the Family Code in 1965 that established the rights of women, men, and children as equal members of society and equal members of the family unit that share household tasks. However, during reunification, these groundbreaking laws were scrapped, and it became clear that there would be no continuity of the GDR's egalitarian, socialist policies in the new capitalist society.

"Education and Ideology in the GDR." *DDR Museum Blog* (August 28, 2023). <https://www.ddr-museum.de/en/blog/2023/education-and-ideology-in-the-gdr>.

This analysis argues that the GDR's education system was a critical tool for the ruling Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) in achieving its ideological and economic objectives. The system aimed to instill socialist values in children at a young age. After nursery and kindergarten children attended the state-controlled Polytechnic Secondary Schools (POS). The curriculum and educational content were controlled by the Ministry of National Education and strongly influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideology. For example, Marxist theory was a mandatory subject. POS emphasized technical and

scientific subjects to prepare students for the socialist workforce and provide insight into everyday working life. Any student who wanted to go on to university had to be a member of the Free German Youth (FDJ), the youth organization of the GDR that was closely linked to the SED. It served as a social network and as a sign to the authorities that a student was committed to the socialist state and the ideals of the collective. A voluntary commitment to three years of service in the National People's Army was equally favorable to university admissions offices.

"Abisag Tüllmann 1935–1996: Bildreportagen und Theaterfotografie II." 2024. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin. <https://www.smb.museum/ausstellungen/detail/abisag-tuellmann-1935-1996-bildreportagen-und-theaterfotografie-ii/>.

Abisag Tüllmann (1935-1996) was one of Germany's most important female photographers. Tüllmann used her photography to interpret political events and the conditions of everyday life from different perspectives. In addition to this photograph of the children's collective in Frankfurt am Main, she captured urban landscapes and the culture of the 1960s, the student movement of 1968, and liberation movements in Algeria, Rhodesia-Zimbabwe, South Africa and the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Topics like social marginalization and the vulnerability of human existence were central in her work. Since 1958, her photographs appeared in many major newspapers and were displayed in books and exhibitions. In 1963, Tüllmann published a portrait of her adopted home city of Frankfurt in the photo book *Großstadt*. In the following years she created oeuvre of photographs of the protagonists and events of the protests of 1968, of the Frankfurt school philosophers, and of the theater world in Germany and abroad.