



# The Question of Legacies: Socialist Elites in Post-Socialist Transformations—East Germany’s Elites from a Comparative Perspective (1990–2020)

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## I INTRODUCTION

The research on elites in East Germany following the regime change in 1989/90 has evolved over the last three decades. Originally, the literature on post-socialist transformations regarded the continuity of socialist elites as one of the major obstacles to the establishment of democratic and

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market economy institutions. Accordingly, in the early 1990s, this literature presented the special case of the GDR, where elites were replaced on a large scale, as a success (Derlien 2001). However, attention soon shifted to perceived problems in the unification process. Focusing on state governance and social integration, researchers started to examine whether the democratic elite consensus was endangered, how well the East German elite was integrated into German politics and society and to what extent it had converged with its West German counterpart (Bürklin and Rebenstorf 1997; Martens et al. 2012). The assumption of early transformation research, guided by modernisation theory, that this convergence would happen quickly and automatically was strongly criticised. This led to the recognition of the cultural factor, of non-Western potential and of multi-variant, open-ended, own-logical developments (Waschkuhn and Thumfart 1999, 15–18; Kollmorgen 2001). Despite some exceptions (Damskis et al. 1996; Damskis 1997), this mostly did not prevent elite researchers from using the West German situation as the benchmark for assessing the development of East German elites (Maier and Schmitt 2008; Jaeck et al. 2013). More recently, in reaction to critical assessments of the state of democracy in East Germany, the focus of elite research has shifted to the issue of the underrepresentation of East Germans in Germany's national elite (Kollmorgen 2021; Vogel 2017; Vogel 2020).

Overall, today's knowledge about elites in East Germany since 1990 continues to be shaped by the convergence perspective. The aim of this chapter is to broaden the debate on post-socialist elite change. First, we compare the development and characteristics of East Germany's elites not to West Germany but to three Central East European countries that also underwent a post-socialist transformation. Second, we argue that it is fruitful to position the question of experience at the centre of further investigation. We think that quantitative elite research is a good starting point for such an endeavour, as it can suggest promising new questions while revealing some general patterns and trends.

The results presented in this chapter are derived from an original dataset compiled by the authors in collaboration with a larger team. The dataset includes the incumbents in a predefined sample of political elite positions in East Germany, Czechia, Hungary and Poland across seven reference years (based on five-year steps from 1990 to 2020) categorised according to their sociodemographic characteristics (such as age, gender, professional background) and role during socialism (namely, old elite or regime followers, opposition/dissenters, newcomers after socialism).

A member of the old elite is defined as any person who held any leading political position (including at the local level) in the Communist Party (or a “bloc party”) or the state executive during socialism. The status of follower is given to any person who held an ordinary position without any responsibility for personnel or decision-making powers (including active party membership). Opposition/dissenters are those who were visibly opposed to the socialist regime prior to the onset of political regime change.

Based on a positional approach (see, e.g., Hoffmann-Lange 2018), the dataset covers a broad range of institutions, namely, leading positions in the state executive, legislative and judiciary as well as further state institutions, such as audit chambers, mayors of major towns, chief executives of public media, state companies and universities as well as leaders of the major trade unions and business associations. The resulting dataset covers office holders for 2439 position/years and includes 1479 persons (i.e., different office holders). A full description of the data collection has been published as Chorna et al. (2022). The political “practitioners” of the transformation in East Germany covered in our dataset mostly gained their position as a result of state-organised selection processes. Accordingly, our results are only valid for this subpart of post-socialist elites. Moreover, as the dataset includes the holders of specific positions at specific points in time, it does not allow us to reconstruct the life courses of elites. Instead, it provides snapshots of elite composition at seven reference dates ranging from 1990 to 2020.

## 2 SHIFTING RESEARCH PARADIGMS

Since its inception, post-socialist elite research has largely agreed that in East Germany a comprehensive elite replacement took place during the early years of transformation. The Bamberg publications of the 1990s on post-socialist elite transformations argued that becoming a part of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), that is, the former West Germany, made the GDR a special case in terms of elite transformation, as this entailed both a reduced need for local elites and an external reservoir of West German elites. Such studies also highlighted the far-reaching and systematic political lustration (Derlien 2001). The ruling party in the GDR, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), employed party removal and expulsion procedures from October 1989 onwards. In newly emerging political arenas, reform-oriented socialists and reform activists outside the SED now occupied elite positions (Waschkuhn and Thumfart

1999, 78–79). In 1989/90, enquiry commissions were set up to assess and dismiss political personnel (Krüger 2011, 132–133). The democratic elections in spring 1990 completed the change of party, parliamentary and executive elites, while the elites in the state administration, judiciary, military, economy and societal associations changed only a little later, largely through elite transfer from West Germany (Derlien 2001, 55–64, 74; Martens et al. 2012, 25). The state's personnel policy after October 1990 promoted this development (Böick and Lorke 2022, 49–50; Statista 2021). Thus, from the perspective of revolution and elite theory, which mostly guided empirical studies in the early 1990s, the question of elite reproduction in East Germany could be ignored. The only exceptions to this were a few studies on the survival of the former upper service class (Solga 1996). While the thesis that former socialist cadres quickly returned to power is still virulent among the German public today (Knabe 2021), in academic research, the question of socialist elite reproduction had already been settled by the mid-1990s.

In the wake of worsening social transformation crises in Germany, however, the issue of elite reproduction became a relevant question from the perspective of democratic theory. In the large Potsdam study on German elites in 1995, Wilhelm Bürklin and his research team examined elite consensus, in line with the West German tradition of the Mannheim studies. They placed the question of the integration of the East German elite into a coherent national elite at the centre of their investigation (Bürklin 1997, 11–13). They examined whether recruitment, self-images and political attitudes, as well as value orientations, differed between East and West German elites. A substudy then explored to what extent the same group characteristics remained advantageous for upwards mobility before and after 1989 (Welzel 1997). The result was that not only elite composition but also recruitment patterns had changed fundamentally. However, in comparison to their Western counterparts, as another substudy showed, the East German elite's members cultivated a more interventionist concept of state and a more concordance-democratic (as opposed to competitive) style of leadership (Machatzke 1997). The author simply stated that these political ideas of the East German elite members emerged from their “socialization in the socialist-planned economy culture” (Machatzke 1997, 349). In a later article, two other project members elaborated further on the question of socialisation and political world view, but their study nevertheless remained at a rather generalising level (Kaina and Sauer 1999, 98–103). However, the basic finding of the Potsdam studies with

regard to the supposed danger to elite consensus was that the new domestic East German elites were almost entirely composed of people who had supported the democratisation of the GDR. This research emphasised that their political concepts meant anything but a categorical rejection of West Germany. Their concepts suggested only gradual changes in the West German model, concerning, for example, the intensification of democratic mechanisms and the limits of neoliberal policies (Welzel 1997, 236–237).

The last major research project on regional elite transformation after 1989/90 in Germany, “Delegation Elites after the Upheaval”, ran from 2001 to 2012 at the University of Jena within the framework of the Collaborative Research Centre “Social Developments after System Change”. It dealt with the question of the recruitment patterns, career paths and political orientations of parliamentarians at the national and regional levels—first of all, in an intra-German comparison. Their major finding was that a convergence from East to West had occurred (Martens et al. 2012). Only in reaction to the widespread thesis of delayed elite reproduction in some East Central European countries did a member of the project address the topic of elite reproduction since the 1990s (Edinger 2004). Using a very broad concept of socialist elite, the Jena researchers arrived at an initial reproduction rate of 25% (Edinger 2004, see p. 89). Based on this empirical evidence, one cannot talk about comprehensive elite replacement. It is important to note, however, that the concept of elite reproduction had implicitly changed. It had shifted away from the personal and structural reproduction of the high- and mid-level socialist elite. Now, the main question was whether the East German elite members had been attached to the SED regime via a former position.

A major objection to the Jena study could concern its external validity, that is, representativeness; in this study, the analysis had been limited to a sample of regional parliamentarians. As members of the representational elite, they were less affected by elite transfer from West Germany because of their representative and legitimising function (Derlien 2001, pp. 65–70). However, our broader elite dataset, where East German parliamentary deputies comprise a share of less than a third, confirms this finding. In our dataset, former regime elites and followers, that is, “regime supporters”, account for 27% of all surveyed position holders in 1990 and 14% of the whole sample from 1990 to 2020. The limits of elite replacement become even more visible if elite transfer from West Germany is excluded from the dataset. Among those elite members who had been living in the GDR before 1989, the proportion of former “supporters of the socialist regime”

amounts to 35% for 1990 and to 21% for the whole period from 1990 to 2020. Our dataset also shows that for East Germany, this is a debate about the past. In the reference year 2020, only 4% of elite positions were held by people who could be described as former supporters of the socialist regime.

A comparison to East Central European states shows some variation but does not present East Germany as an outlier, as Table 9.1 demonstrates. However, in Hungary and Poland, in contrast to East Germany and Czechia, approximately half of the former supporters of the socialist regime had previously held top positions (and not just minor ones). By 2020, East Germany and Poland had the lowest share of former supporters of socialist regimes among their political elites, as covered in our dataset.

Thus, concerning elite continuity, in the post-socialist context of Eastern Central Europe, East Germany was not a special case in quantitative terms. This may reflect how in East Germany in the 1990s, the influence of the Stasi, the GDR's state security service, was perceived to have been overwhelming. As a result, informal cooperation with the Stasi, the much-discussed work as an informal member (abbreviated as IM), was sufficient for political exclusion, while "normal functionaries" largely managed to avoid the focus of public interest (Krüger 2011, 134). However, to understand the relevance of former supporters of the socialist regime in East Germany after 1989, it is important to examine their actual positions and, thus, the decision-making power they acquired after 1989 and the role they had played in the GDR.

Among the "socialist regime supporters" identified in our East German sample for the full period from 1990 to 2020, only a minority ever acquired a position in the state executive after the end of the socialist regime. Only 26% of them were members of one of the five regional governments in one of the reference years, thus accounting for only 10% of all selected ministerial positions. The absolute majority of "socialist regime supporters" (79%)

**Table 9.1** Share of "former supporters of the socialist regime" among elites

	<i>GDR—full sample</i>	<i>GDR—only East Germans</i>	<i>Czechia</i>	<i>Hungary</i>	<i>Poland</i>
1990 (1993)	27%	35%	22%	23%	39%
1990–2020	14%	22%	16%	26%	16%
2020	4%	7%	18%	10%	4%

Note: for Czechia, the first reference year is 1993

were active as part of the representation elite, with 48% holding a position in one of the five regional parliaments as a committee or faction chair and 21% heading a political party represented in parliament. Only from 2010 onwards did a “former socialist regime supporter” become mayor of a major city, a trade union district chairperson or the CEO of a major state-owned company, as covered in our sample. It can thus be concluded that although former “socialist regime supporters” have been present among the East German elites, their numbers have been too small and the positions they have held too dispersed (across regions, institutions and time) to allow them any joint influence on political decision-making. This assessment comes with a qualification regarding the very early phase of transformation. In 1990, former “socialist regime supporters” still held 24% of all ministerial posts, but this number was already reduced to 9% in 1995 and has been gradually decreasing since. This pattern of a sharp decrease in the share of “former supporters of the socialist regime” during the first half of the 1990s and a slow decline afterwards also represents the overall picture as covered in our dataset.

While lustration in the GDR did not reduce the share of former supporters of the socialist regime to an extraordinary degree, it clearly impacted their distribution among institutions. While in post-socialist East Germany, only a quarter of them ever joined the state executive, nearly 80% held a position in a political party and parliament at some point in time, if we look at the whole period under study. In contrast, in Czechia, slightly more than half entered the state executive, and only a third ever joined the legislature, while very few occupied elite positions outside government and parliament. In Hungary, the distribution of former supporters of the socialist regime is the most diverse: 13% are in leading positions in academia, mostly as rectors of the largest universities. Slightly smaller numbers gained positions at state-owned companies and trade unions. Former supporters of the socialist regime were also, in different reference years, the head of a public TV station or the national bank. Again, in the case of Hungary, the share of those joining the state executive (37%) is higher than the share of those in the legislature and party system (23%). In Poland, the picture is also diverse, with supporters of the old regime present among the judiciary, mayors, trade unions and business associations. Approximately half have joined the state executive in at least one reference year and a quarter political party leadership and parliament.

The thesis that first of all, “second rank professionals” (Andorka 1993) or “deputy heads of departments” (von Beyme 1993) of the socialist

regime managed to join the post-socialist elite is only partly valid for East Germany. Stefan Hornbostel, who calls this group “survivors”, argues that the political purge in the top positions ensured that the chances for mid-level leaders at the regional and local levels to continue their career paths were comparatively good (Hornbostel 2000, 132–133). Our data lead to a more differentiated picture. Most importantly, the majority of former supporters of the socialist regime in our dataset who gained a position were merely “followers of the old regime” (75%). That is, they did not have any personal leadership responsibility in their previous function in the GDR. Moreover, only 18% were employed at the national level. The absolute majority of former supporters of the socialist regime in our dataset (60%) had only been politically active at the local level. Additionally, approximately half of them had been members of a bloc party (46%), not of the Socialist Unity Party (SED). These are important differences, as recent historical research has shown. Functionaries from nearly all levels and sectors, especially in the economy and the planning apparatus, did not just follow the guidelines from above. They had a scope for action and had to be able to react, relatively flexibly, to problems (Hübner 1999, see. 26–28). The bloc parties certainly pursued their own interests within the system (Triebel 2019). Local party and state functionaries of the SED acted mostly as paternalistic caretakers and crisis managers on the ground (Bahr 2015; Ganzenmüller and Triebel 2022).

These findings turn less attention to the simple question of whether elite members had been active at all in the socialist political system but more to their specific socialist experiences and their lasting impacts during the 1990s. This legacy has often been perceived as a nearly self-explaining factor. The automatic attribution of mentalities, qualifications or attitudes to a homogeneous schematic GDR socialisation ignores the trajectory of individual former regime supporters in GDR society and its processing in their mindset. Concerning their potential “socialist legacy”, it is also important to note that two-thirds of the “former supporters of the socialist regime” were below the age of 40 in 1989. Thus, many had not been long employed in socialist institutions. Moreover, a third of them had not simply “survived” the end of the regime but had become heavily involved in the democratic reform processes and institutions that Thomas Großbölting has called “schools of democracy” (Großbölting 2020, 309–310).

This broader approach to a “socialist legacy” also works in reverse. Socialisation in the GDR influenced those who did not assume any



position in the regime, either because they remained passive or because they were too young at the time. Such re-perspectivisation thus sheds light on all East Germans—not only the “survivors” but also the “newcomers” (Hornbostel 2000). This also requires an assessment not only of their experience in the GDR but also of their engagement during the period of protest, reform and regime change.

### 3 ELITES SOCIALISED UNDER SOCIALISM

To present a broad picture of the possible impact of the socialist past on East German elites during the three decades after regime change, we look at key features related to their political socialisation, again in comparison with the elites in three formerly socialist Central East European states. Accordingly, the figures in this part, unless indicated otherwise, do not refer to the whole elite of East Germany in our dataset but only to those who were socialised in the GDR. We start with an exploration of political affiliation and system-specific knowledge and then examine generational difference as well as the gender dimension and the role of professional background, including academic education.

#### 3.1 *System-Specific Knowledge and Party Affiliation*

In the GDR, support for the political system was a requirement for any elite position. Moreover, many elite positions were available only after training that provided knowledge specific to the ideology and governance of the socialist regime. Thus, membership in one of the parties of the National Front, that is, the SED or one of the bloc parties, was a necessary prerequisite for any political elite position. For promotion in the state hierarchy and appointment to a higher leadership position, the nomenclature system required attendance at party trainings and educational institutions in addition to SED party membership (Wagner 1999, 53–56; Welsh 1999). A government position required the conclusion of political-ideological training tailored to the GDR’s ideology as well as the system of planning and management.

After 1989, such training was not only devalued but even became an obstacle for promotion to any elite position. Similarly, professional training and work experience in the state administration, judiciary, and, to a large degree, company management gained in the GDR were no longer relevant qualifications after 1990. As a result, university graduates from

the natural sciences and engineering dominated among the East German elite members in the 1990s (Welzel 1997, see p. 208–209). This was in stark contrast to West Germany, where degrees in political science and economics were most common among elite members (Martens et al. 2012, 29).

The situation was more complex in the case of party membership. Following the introduction of West Germany's party-based competitive democracy, after 1990, party membership was, *de facto*, still needed for joining parliament and an important aspect for appointment in the state executive and beyond. Accordingly, our dataset shows that in 1990, almost all East Germans in elevated regional elite positions, concentrated in the legislature and to a lesser degree the state executive, were members of a nationwide political party. The parties of the GDR in 1989/90 had almost all merged with their West German nominal counterparts (Neugebauer 2002). While in the GDR, party membership was a prerequisite for any leading position in the regime, after 1990, it lost relevance in the judiciary, public media, state companies or academia. In summary, for those elite positions that were generally available to East Germans with a prior career in the GDR, membership in an all-German political party was very important.

The party affiliation of members of the post-socialist elite in Poland exhibits more variation. In contrast to East Germany, approximately 39% of Poland's political elite in our sample for 1990 do not belong to any political camp. Even 13% of the people in the sample for 1990 with an active role in socialism, as supporters or oppositionists, did not join any party. The general share of people without political affiliation increases to 48% in 2010 and remains at a comparatively high level, 43%, in 2020. Elite members without political affiliation hold a variety of positions: mayors, CEOs of state-controlled companies, the president of the supreme court, heads of business clubs and trade unions (incl. *Solidarność*) as well as university rectors. Most importantly, in every government covered in the sample, several ministers do not belong to any party.

These findings might be explained by the reduced importance of party membership in Polish socialism for elite recruitment (Wasilewski and Wnuk-Lipiński 1995, 683) as well as the high volatility of the party system and low esteem of parties in society, especially after the transformation (for a general description of [early] Central East European post-socialist party systems, see Enyedi 2009). As Raciborski (2007, 38) adds, recruitment for government positions is a rather open process and is

not limited to candidates from the political sphere. These factors may entail that party membership is of much less importance in Poland than in unified Germany.

Similar to party membership during socialism, training and academic education received in the Polish People's Republic do not seem to be criteria for exclusion from elite positions. Throughout the whole period under study, there are a rather stable proportion of engineers and architects (approximately 12%), lawyers (approximately 15%) and life, physical and social scientists (approximately 22%). The shares of professions in business and finance decreased from 18% in 1990 to 11% in 2010. In a study by Wasilewski (2000, 198) concerning the elites in 1998 with a focus on their academic degrees, the author finds that a share of 32% of the political elite had graduated in the humanities, social or natural sciences. For the administrative elite, this value decreases to 20%, but the share of lawyers increases from 22% to 34%. The share of lawyers, social scientists and humanities scholars exceeds the share of engineers by approximately a third. These findings support the conclusion of our study that an education received during socialism, even in fields such as law, social sciences and humanities, did not function as an obstacle to becoming a member of the post-socialist elite in Poland.

Concerning the role of supporters of the opposition to socialism, there is again a stark contrast between East Germany and Poland. The new East German elite after 1990 hardly included any members of an oppositional counterelite or dissidents who had challenged the socialist regime. In our dataset, for East German regions, their share stands at a mere 5% for the entire period from 1990 to 2020 and at approximately 10% for the 1990s. These results contrast with the findings of the Potsdam Elite Studies, which count 24% of former opposition members among East Germans in the German national elite (Welzel 1997, 219). This difference can be explained by the fact that the Potsdam Study also includes high-level positions in culture, church and civil society organisations, which our dataset of political elites does not cover. Moreover, in the former, opposition to the socialist regime is identified via self-evaluation and only assessed in terms of coherence with the broader political stance, while our dataset evaluates "visible opposition" during socialist times. Moreover, our findings are in line with those historical studies that argue that civil rights activists in the GDR lost their influence swiftly in the course of events during 1989/90. (Großbölting 2020, 296–301; Eckert 2021, 273–274, 277–279.)

This means that the majority of the East German elite after 1990 had neither been “supporters” nor been “visible opponents” during socialist times. In Poland, however, visible supporters of the opposition to socialism comprise a third of the full country sample of our dataset and in Hungary 28%. This means in both countries, the post-socialist elites in our dataset comprise more opponents of the former socialist regime than supporters. For Czechia, however, the figure of opposition representatives is closer to that in East Germany, 8%. These differences can be traced to the history of dissent in their respective socialist state and to the role of their representatives in regime change (Dietrich 2002).

For the East German case after 1990, the group of “transition politicians” who were politically and actively involved during 1989/90 was especially relevant. Directly after 1990, they made up 60% of the parliamentarians in East Germany (Martens et al. 2012, 36–37). According to our dataset, the active promoters of political reform in 1989/90 even accounted for 71% of East German elites in 1990. Their share declined, but only slowly, standing at 64% in 1995 and 57% in 2000, then dropping below 25% in 2020—a development that is largely due to the long time span since 1990 and the resulting retirements. Regarding transition politicians in East Germany, it is indicative that according to our dataset, 39% of all transition politicians became involved in politically institutionalised contexts for the first time in 1989/90. They thus had their first politicisation experiences during the period of regime change. Moreover, 1989/90 was a (re)learning phase for numerous previous regime supporters, who joined protests, democratic grassroots movements and newly democratic institutions.

Whether and to what extent the political culture of East German elites, their self-images and their political concepts were shaped by this experience requires further investigation. However, it should be noted that large parts of the East German elite had political experience not only, if at all, in the socialist regime but also during the regime change in 1989/90, when the socialist top elite was forced to resign.

### 3.2 *Age*

The top elites in the GDR, as in the other socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe, usually only retired for health reasons and, as a result, stayed in office far into old age. In the late 1980s, the average age of the GDR’s elite members was over 60 years (Welzel 1997, 208). Accordingly,

the GDR's top leadership mainly consisted of so-called old communists, who had high prestige because of their experience with resistance and repression under National Socialism. The next ranks in the hierarchy were occupied by younger functionaries, the so-called Hitler Youth generation born between 1925 and 1935. They had experienced national and ideological decline after 1945 as well as both deprivation and the possibility for social mobility during the socialist build-up phase (Epstein 2003). The elite transformation in East Germany that began in the autumn of 1989 brought with it the end of their political careers.

The 1989/90 break thus meant that the elite in East Germany as a whole became younger and that members of new generations joined it. In our dataset, for the full period from 1990 to 2020, the vast majority (approx. 85%) of the new East German elite was born after 1942. They were all educated in the GDR but had only started their careers—if at all—in the reform phase of the 1960s or during the late socialism of the 1970s and 1980s. For the older ones, advancement to a higher elite position in the GDR had hardly been possible because their upward mobility had been blocked by older incumbents (Welzel 1997, 203–204). The generational change in 1989/90 was much more abrupt than any age-related biological replacement process. In 1990, 25% of the East German elites and 22% of the whole sample for Eastern Germany, including those not born in the GDR, were between 30 and 40 years of age. At that time, 60% of these East Germans had been born after 1942.

The intensity of the generational change in East Germany was not exceptional in regard to post-socialist transformations in 1989/90. In 1990, a quarter of the East Germans covered in our elite dataset were not older than 40 years. The same figure stands at 22% for Hungary, 14% for Poland and 25% for Czechia (with the reference year 1993). In later years, the share of those who were too young for a full professional career in socialist times, that is, newcomers, increased more for East Germany than for Central East European countries. In the full country sample covering the period from 1990 to 2020, approximately 37% of the elites in East Germany were not older than 30 years in 1989. The same figure stands at a third in Czechia and at approximately 20% in Hungary and Poland.

### 3.3 *Gender*

In the GDR, formal equality and measures to promote women had consequences for women's self-image and recognition. However, the issue of

gender emancipation was primarily linked to the recruitment of female labour. Little changed in the traditional notion of two, binary gender characters or in the accompanying gender-specific division of labour inside and outside private space (Harsch 2015). Nevertheless, the socialist postulate of equality had an impact on the composition of parliament. While women comprised 15% of the lower house in the West German parliament, the Bundestag, from 1987 to 1990, their share in the East German Volkskammer in 1986 stood at 32% (Feldkamp and Sommer 2003; Patzelt 2002, 393). The elections to the Volkskammer in spring 1990 initially led to an adjustment to West German conditions, with the share of women falling to 20% (Tüffers 2016, 66). The first all-German Bundestag election later in the same year resulted in a similar gender distribution (Feldkamp and Sommer 2003).

However, outside parliament, the GDR elite was strongly male-dominated, with women accounting for a mere 5% (Welzel 1997, 208). The regime change in 1989/90 did not lead to a strong adjustment in the gender balance among elites. In our dataset, the share of women in the elite of East Germany stands at slightly over 10% in 1990. Compared to the GDR's nomenklatura, the proportion of women in regional elite positions had thus risen slightly overall, but it had fallen in regional parliaments. There was no positive effect of elite transfer from West Germany on female representation. The women who were now in higher positions in East Germany had almost all grown up in the GDR. Because of the marginalisation of gender in transformation research, the role of women as agents of change and the transformation of the hegemonic masculinities and structures promoting them from patriarchal socialism to capitalism remain largely neglected in academic research (Bock 2019). The concept of co-transformation (Ther 2018), thus far applied mainly to economic policy phenomena, could lend itself to an examination of the mutual relationship of change in East and West. How far the imported Western democratic and economic model perpetuated or changed, exacerbated or improved the structural and ideological sexism of state socialism is still open for investigation (Bock 2019).

Our dataset shows that especially in comparison to the other Central East European countries, East Germany has seen a substantial increase in the proportion of women among political elites. In our broad sample of political elites, the share of women rose above 20% in 1995—again, not as a result of elite transfer from West Germany. Increasing gradually, it reached 32% in 2020. By 1995, when the share of women had risen slightly

above 20% in East Germany, the respective figure was 8% for Hungary and 5% for Poland. By 2020, when the share of women among the East German elites amounted to a third, in Czechia and Poland, it stood at approximately 15%, while in Hungary, the share of women in our elite sample reached 10% for the first time.

In East Germany, the comparatively strong increase in the share of women among political elites was part of a national development, namely, the introduction of quotas for women in several parties and the Women's Advancement Act of 1994 (Schnapp 1997, 95). However, given that the social crisis after the regime change affected women in East Germany the hardest (Hoffmann 2020, 29), their entry into politics, rather than an increased share of women as part of the elite transfer from West Germany, requires an additional explanation. It can be hypothesised that socialisation prepared the ground for a woman in the GDR to participate in the new political institutions introduced by the West German model. This is supported by our data, which show that women in the East German elite were overrepresented among those who had officially participated politically in GDR society (32%) and who had been involved in the transition (22%). Hence, a question arises for future research: whether and to what extent the presence of more women in leading positions in East Germany in the 1990s changed the political culture in specific institutions or sexist dynamics during the transformation process or vice versa.

Female representation in the Polish economic and political elite followed similar patterns as in the GDR, although with lower shares of women throughout the researched period. In the last legislative period in the People's Republic (1980–1985), 23% of MPs were female (Fuszara 2019, 690), while women were underrepresented to an even higher degree in executive bodies (Wasilewski and Betkiewicz 2014, 86). In the direct aftermath of the transformation, Fuszara (2019, 691) observes a “consent for masculinization” regarding political representation, which matches our identification of only two women (heads of parliamentary committees) in our whole elite sample for Poland in 1990. Some possible explanations for the strong decline in women's participation in politics at that point in time are preserved conservative gender stereotypes, a lack of feminist activism, a turn away from the superficial engagement of women in socialist parliaments, new election schemes and the internal recruitment structures of political parties (Galligan and Clavero 2008, 151–154).

Voluntary quotas from governing parties and a binding quota for men and women of 35% as candidates in proportional elections led to a strong

increase in female representation after 2000 and 2011, respectively (Gwiazda 2015, 683–689). These rates reached 24% for the parliament and 32% for executive bodies in 2015 (Musiał-Karg and Lesiewicz 2016, see p. 33–35) and thus reached a considerably higher value than the share of women in our whole sample for Poland (16% for 2015). Throughout the whole period from 1990 to 2020, at least half of the women in the Polish political elites held positions in parliament and government; in 2020, this share even cumulated to two-thirds. Studies on Polish elites from the 1990s exhibit higher values for female representation than in our dataset, most likely because they based their results on far larger samples extending beyond the leading positions in the political sector including larger parts of the administrative and private business sectors. Wasilewski finds a share of 12% of women in 1993 (Wasilewski and Wnuk-Lipiński 1995, see p. 680) and 1998 (Wasilewski 2000, 198), while our sample shows respective values of 6% in 1995 and 3% in 2000. In any case, all these values point to rather low shares of women among elites, while our study underlines the extremely low representation of women across highly ranked positions.

How can this situation for Polish elites, also in contrast to the GDR, possibly be explained? Similar to female representation in political institutions, the initial conditions for women's participation in elites outside the public sector were lower in socialist Poland than in the GDR, with the labour market participation of women in the People's Republic of Poland reaching only 68% in 1985, while the value for the GDR was 88% (ILO and INSTRAW 1985, 137). Additionally, though similar to East Germany, a cut in childcare provisions, the retrenchment of the welfare state in Poland that caused more job losses for women than men and the ongoing and legal practice of filling certain vacancies exclusively with men increased unemployment among women more strongly than among their male counterparts (Kleinmann 2022, 267; Matysiak and Steinmetz 2008, 332; Watson 1993, 475). Furthermore, the sociocultural context and the strong influence of the Catholic Church produced stereotypes that increased the probability of women giving up a job to focus on caring work for their children (Matysiak and Steinmetz 2006, 13–15; for images of women in the Catholic Church, see, e.g., Stegmann 2005). These factors may have led to fewer women being present during selection processes as potential candidates and may have influenced recruiters' decisions when filling a post.



### 3.4 *Academic Education*

The GDR elite was marked by a very high degree of members with a university degree, especially in the political administration. In the central and regional state organs and ministries, this proportion was approximately between 80 and 95% (Hornbostel 1999, 194–195). The share of Central Committee members with university degrees stood at 91% in 1986 (Schneider 1994, 81). These findings point to system-specific knowledge, since the degrees issued by universities of the socialist party were widespread among elite members. Nevertheless, regime change did not have a strong impact on the share of political elite members with a university degree. The Potsdam elite study gives a share of almost 80% for elite members after 1990 with an academic education (Welzel 1997, 208–123). Our dataset shows very similar figures, with over 75% of East German elite members in 1990 and 1995 holding a formal academic degree. The academic disciplines in which these degrees were earned by East Germans were—as explained above—mostly, supposedly, ideology-neutral. Accordingly, approximately one-third of the East German elite members from 1990 to 2000 were engineers. In our dataset, however, another field of education also stands out strongly: 30% had received training in the field of “Care, Education and Social/Community”. In addition to the technocratic concept of politics among East German elite members, which is often associated in the literature with education in STEM subjects but rarely empirically verified (Martens et al. 2012, 48–49), the influence of fields related to care and education thus suggests itself.

A comparison to Eastern Central Europe demonstrates that the dominance of engineers and of people with training in “Care, Education and Social/Community” makes the East German case exceptional. In our elite samples, engineers account for approximately 15% in Czechia and Poland and slightly less than 20% in Hungary. For “Care, Education and Social/Community”, the numbers are even lower, in the extreme, accounting for only 8% in Poland. Instead, in Eastern Central European countries, people with a business or legal background, that is, qualifications that had been devalued in East Germany if gained during socialist times, are strongly represented among the elites, with a combined share of 42% in Czechia, 41% in Hungary and 36% in Poland.

#### 4 ELITE TRANSFER AND WEST GERMAN SOCIALISATION

Together with formal institutions, many elite members were also transferred from West to East Germany. This was because systemic knowledge was seen as an advantage for building these new institutions. Thus, elites trained in West Germany became an important part of East Germany's elites (Kowalczyk 2019, 170–176; Böick and Lorke 2022, 47–48). Originally, this was expected to smooth the transformation process, leading to swift acculturation. Regarding the impact of meritocratic selection processes, it was assumed that the representation of East Germans in the regional elites would quasi-automatically increase with a new generation (Solga 1996, 105; Kollmorgen 2021, 231). However, it was soon evident that these assumptions were not correct (Kollmorgen 2001). In empirical terms, our dataset shows that the share of people with migration biographies from West Germany among East Germany's elite actually increased by a third from 1990 to 2010. Reacting to the perceived democratic scepticism and elite rejection among the East German population linked to the experience of external domination, the permanent underrepresentation of East Germans among both regional and national elites has become a novel research topic (Böick and Lorke 2022, 48; Kollmorgen 2021; Vogel 2020).

Elite researcher Raj Kollmorgen has identified a threefold pattern concerning the relevance of elite transfer from West Germany since 1990 (Kollmorgen 2021, 236–238). First, the higher positions are, the less likely they are to be occupied by East Germans. This is true except for some fields in the state policy sector (regional governments and parties represented in the national parliament). Second, the chances for East Germans increase in the case of recruitment via democratic election and, third, decrease in the case of an institutionalised career structure or if the ownership of capital is a precondition, with the latter not being relevant for the political elites covered in our study. This leads to a higher representation of East Germans in parliaments and political parties and a lower representation in the state executive, judiciary, business and mass media. Our data confirm these patterns. They also show that there has been no reversal over time. Rather, of the 55 ministerial positions included in our dataset, 34 were occupied by East Germans in 1995 and only 28 in 2020. Our dataset also provides information about further spheres. In academia, East Germans headed some of the largest universities after 1990. However, this was no longer the case after 2005. The East German branches of major business associations and trade unions have mostly been led by West

Germans since 1990. Only in the mid-2010s did an East German become head of an East German trade union branch (in the DGB-district Saxony).

While the East Germans among the regional elites have been studied more intensively, the research on the West German members of East Germany's elites has focused on their numbers and the positions they have obtained, not on their characteristics. Historians who reflect on the historicisation of post-socialist transformations have suggested examining the asymmetrical network of relations between East and West at their locations of encounter (Bösch 2015; Großbölting and Lorke 2017). Recently, there have been an increasing number of historical studies on specific political institutions in East Germany, which also take the Western actors in transformations and their socio-structural positions, motives and cultural concepts of interpretation into account. For example, Markus Böick's (2018) study of the Treuhand, the state privatisation agency in East Germany, shows that while the majority of its staff tended to be East German, female and trained in institutions of the GDR's planned economy, its leadership positions were dominated by male industrial managers, administrative experts and junior staff from the West. According to both their own and others' perceptions, a Western frontier idea played an essential role, whereby they understood the capitalist transformation of the East as a patriotic task, a personal challenge and an ideological mission. According to their self-image, they were decision- as well as solution-oriented practitioners of economic transformation, "strong male doers" (Böick 2018, 96). However, these results are clearly case specific. Accordingly, Böick and Lorke (2022, 48–52) cite curiosity, financial improvement, biographical-emotional attachment and pure careerism as some possible further motivations for West Germans to be actors in this administrative transformation.

These historical case studies are essential for understanding the experiences of both East German and West German elite members in East Germany and for examining them as interpretive and narrative actors in their interactions and exchanges (Böick 2018, 79). In this context our dataset adds information about the broader characteristics of the West Germans among East Germany's elites. From our dataset, it emerges that they were not a homogeneous group, except for their dominant, culturally white-German background. It also becomes clear that the average West German in East Germany's elite was markedly different from the prototypical "East German": he tended to be old, male and to possess specifically West German systemic knowledge. For example, West German

position holders were on average 55 years old in 1995. Over the entire period surveyed, they were approximately 90% male. The majority of the West German members of the elite were educated in Western, system-specific fields: approximately 37% of them were trained lawyers, followed by those trained in the field of “business/economics” (approx. 15%). The third largest group (12%) was academics—mainly with a degree in political science. Their age and education could indicate that their understanding of state and society as well as their political ideas was already firmly established when they moved to East Germany.

Based on these characteristics, the West German elite members in East Germany were not representative of the West German population or elite, which raises the question of whether East or West German socialisation and experiences per se might have played less of a role than other social categories in forming the political elite in East Germany. Our dataset generally confirms the picture of West Germans among East Germany’s elites presented in academic research thus far. However, it also provides some evidence showing that the assumption that most West Germans either no longer or never had political career opportunities in the West (Rödger 2009, 347; Eckert 2021, 276–277) is not correct. Apart from the well-known exceptions of Prime Minister of Saxony Kurt Biedenkopf and Prime Minister of Thuringia Bernd Vogel, only one further member of West Germany’s aged, ex-top elite could be found in our dataset; a large group of West Germans instead came from local politics. In line with the recruitment and career patterns of Germany’s major political parties, joining East Germany’s political elite was, most likely, a rather ordinary career step.

## 5 RESULTS AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

Overall, our findings show that a more differentiated picture of experiences in GDR society is needed to understand the East German practitioners of transformation. Their high degree of academisation, for example, might indicate a great ability to learn and adjust. The development of women’s political participation could be partly an after-effect of the GDR’s postulate of equality. Generational change makes it necessary to ask about social and biographical experiences during late socialism and the reform phase of 1989/90. The political experiences of many members of the new East German elite, both in the GDR and in 1989/90, do not so much point to their obedience to authority and loyalty as to their improvisation, search for innovation, democratic ideals and spirit of resistance.

Moreover, including elite change in other post-socialist countries in an analysis offers relevant avenues for comparison. For example, such a comparison demonstrates that the low share of supporters of the former socialist regime among East German elites is not extraordinary but rather similar to figures for Czechia, Hungary or Poland. At the same time, although a majority of East German elite members joined prodemocracy movements and activities in 1989/90, the East German elite lacked representatives from oppositional movements in socialist times. Therefore, one might argue that at least in terms of state governance, elite transfer from West Germany was the functional equivalent of the opposition to socialism that dominated the state executive in some Central East European countries in the early phase of transformation.

The prominent role of elite transfer makes the East German case unique among post-socialist transformations. As has been shown, it is not useful to draw a simple East-West dichotomy. Further qualitative research should examine elite recruitment and elite interaction in more detail with a focus on social positions, motivations and self-images. Were most West Germans too prejudiced against East Germans to recognise their qualifications (Kowalczyk 2019, 176)? Were they animated by a market euphoria, since their knowledge can be located in the neoliberal discourses of the 1980s and 1990s (Holzhauser 2019)? Or, were many of them simply not flexible enough (Böick and Lorke 2022, 48–52), too fixated on familiar Western structures, following only their own private or institutional interests, thereby preventing institutional innovation (Dietl 2022)? To answer these questions, it is also worth examining the changing political ideas and concepts of transformation. There was diversity among West German institutions and practices at the regional level. Thus, institutional transfer included different options and possible adjustments to specific contexts (Reulen 2004). Moreover, the idea of what constitutes the ideal “West” was anything but undisputed among West German elite members. In addition, it is important to note that while they may have occupied more powerful positions on average, they were not the only ones with agency during East Germany’s transformation and in regional politics (Müller 2017; Großbölting and Lorke 2017).

While East Germany’s regional elites are, in many aspects of their social profiles, very similar to the national elites in Eastern Central Europe, we have identified two strong differences. The share of women among elites is comparatively high in East Germany, and only in East Germany are professions related to care, education and social/community represented

strongly among elite members. Both features potentially point to important aspects of elite recruitment and its societal context. At this point, quantitative research has obviously reached its limits.

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