

# Women's biographies from the Gdr in the international interview project Women's Memory

KARIN ALEKSANDER, HEIKE SCHIMKAT

Economically and legally, we are equal to men [...] and now we learn to what degree history [...], the patriarchy, has deformed its objects and what periods of time will be required for people – men and women – to become subjects.

The opportunity that our society gave them to do what men do [...] led them to ask: what do men do at all? And do I actually want that? Women [...] signal a radical claim: to live as a whole person...

But we will have to get used to the fact that women are no longer just looking for equal rights, but for new ways of life.

Christa Wolf<sup>1</sup>

## *Introduction*

Christa Wolf's sentences epitomize the literary discourse on Gdr women shaped by writers (such as Irmtraut Morgner, Brigitte Reimann, Helga Königsdorf and others) with visionary perspectives for women's lives under socialism. Maxie Wander's interview-based portraits<sup>2</sup> also gave a voice to Gdr women from different walks of life and generations by talking about their everyday lives. In contrast to these literary texts, the narrated memoirs in the German project *Frauengedächtnis* (Women's Memory/ La memoria delle donne) are uncut diamonds in the sense of authentic individual voices that report on their lives under socialism and the transformation since 1989. This article aims to make the project *Frauengedächtnis* known as an oral history project, especially for researchers in history, social

<sup>1</sup> C. Wolf, *Berührung*, in C. Wolf (ed.), *Fortgesetzter Versuch*, Reclam Verlag, Leipzig 1977, pp. 312-322.

<sup>2</sup> M. Wander, *Guten Morgen, du Schöne*, Buchverlag Der Morgen, Berlin 1977.

science and transformation research. Feminist oral history is a counter-movement to a form of historiographical representation that primarily drew on written, institutionally legitimized sources and reproduced mainly male-coded perspectives. It places individual memories, subjective narratives and marginalized voices at the center of historical debate. This memory project is not understood as a mere reconstruction of factual events, but as a performative, dialogical and always context-dependent process.

The project is presented in three consecutive versions: firstly, as an international European collaboration of women's researchers at the turn of the millennium, who developed the methodological foundations of interviewing for the East European *Women's Memory Project*, secondly, as the German *Frauengedächtnis* Project as part of this European project, and thirdly these materials were archived in the Gender Library of the Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies (*Zentrum für transdisziplinäre Geschlechterstudien, ZtG*) at *Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin* for the Digital German Women's Archive (*Digitales Deutsches Frauenarchiv*, in the following Ddf). Therefore, they are available as a resource for the analysis of contemporary historical topics, which processed the interviews with Gdr women for research years later and linked them to current debates in social science, Gdr, transformation and democracy history research.

Theoretically, the *Women's Memory Project* draws on central concepts such as narrative construction<sup>3</sup> and communicative memory<sup>4</sup> in order to make visible not only individual experiences, but also collective ruptures and social ambivalences. Remembering, understood as a social and cultural process, is always characterized by current struggles of interpretation and women's memory stands in the field of tension between East-West historiography and collective memory formation in times of Cold War.

*The international project Women's Memory. Interviews with three generations of women on the upheavals of 1989 and life under socialism*

In the European Women's Memory Project, interviews were conducted in parallel in eight countries from the end of the 1990s: Czech Republic, Poland, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovakia, Ukraine and East Germany. The project arose from the experience that Western European and Us feminist theories and methods cannot be transferred one-to-one to the reality of women's lives in post-socialist countries. In particular, their ideas of the 'socialist woman', which they either idealized or saw as not emancipated enough, led to the conception of *Women's Memory*:

<sup>3</sup> M. Beyer, *Tagungsbericht über die internationale Konferenz „Frauengedächtnis“ - Zukunft braucht Erinnerung. Women's lives of the reconstruction generation in Central and Eastern Europe after the Second World War*, «Berliner Journal für Soziologie», 2001, n. 1, pp. 109-113; W. Fischer-Rosenthal et alii, *Biographien in Deutschland. Soziologische Rekonstruktionen gelebter Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen 1995.

<sup>4</sup> A. Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, C. H. Beck, München 1999.

[...] that could serve as a source for knowledge of gender issues not only in the Czech context but in the entire Region of the former Soviet bloc. [...] The aim of this project was to grasp the history of women under socialism, in all its complexity. We wanted to challenge the established myths and clichés about 'socialist woman' [...] We wanted to document the life experiences of women of three generations born between 1920 and 1960. We were interested above all in their life strategies and in their personal culture of survival<sup>5</sup>.

The European *Women's Memory* Project was developed in the mid-1990s by Gender Studies, o.p.s. in Prague<sup>6</sup>. From 1997 onwards, the center in Prague cooperated with the German women's project East-West European Women's Network (Owen) e.V. in East Berlin, which was founded in 1992 and has been methodologically co-developing the international education and research project since 1998.

Furthermore, with its interdisciplinary approach to researching the complex relationship between socialism and gender, the *Women's Memory* Project aimed from the outset to go beyond the academic sphere and get involved on the ground in the eight countries and help shape social processes, "[that] hopefully will have an impact on a society as a whole"<sup>7</sup>. In order to ensure the comparability of the interview statements, a binding methodology was agreed in joint workshops. All interview results were to be collected in a joint archive in Prague.

The project provides the basis for future transnational comparative research<sup>8</sup> and can be linked to international historical transformation research. With a temporal distance to the events, East German authors wanted to leave behind the German-German "navel perspective" in order to make the universality of East German experiences and particularities visible<sup>9</sup>; in the sense of a European contemporary history of source-based research, to look beyond the "national horizon"<sup>10</sup> in order to find a different methodological heuristic approach to the transformation period around 1989 beyond the addition of parallel national histories.

This international research perspective, which makes life realities visible in their diversity, is already established in the European *Women's memory* Project within the framework of biographical research. The field of research (Doing Biography, Doing Gender)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Gender Studies, o.p.s., *More about the project. Chronology*, 2003. <<http://www.womensmemory.net/english/project.asp>> (last accessed: 7 May 2025).

<sup>6</sup> <<http://www.womensmemory.net/english/project.asp>> (last accessed: 20 May 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Gender Studies, o.p.s., *More about the project. Chronology*, cit.

<sup>8</sup> There was an international comparison for interviews with the 1920s generation because they are the last contemporary witnesses of the Second World War see Beyer, *Tagungsbericht "Frauengedächtnis"*, cit.

<sup>9</sup> F. Peters, *Der Westen des Ostens. Ostmitteleuropäische Perspektiven auf die postsozialistische Transformation in Ostdeutschland*, <*Zeitgeschichte-online*>, March 2019, <<https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/themen/der-westen-des-ostens>> (last accessed: 14 May 2025).

<sup>10</sup> A. Siebold, *1989 und die Herausforderungen einer transnationalen, globalen Geschichte*, in <*Zeitgeschichte-online*>, March 2019, <<https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/themen/1989-und-die-herausforderungen-einer-transnationalen-globalen-geschichte>> (last accessed: 14 May 2025).

<sup>11</sup> B. Dausien, „*Biographie*“ als rekonstruktiver Zugang zu „*Geschlecht*“. *Perspektiven der Biographieforschung*, in D. Lemmermöhle et alii (eds.), *Lesarten des Geschlechts. Zur De-Konstruktionsdebatte in der erziehungswissenschaftlichen Geschlechterforschung*, Leske & Budrich, Opladen 2000, pp. 96-115. B. Dausien, *Biographie und Geschlecht. Zur biographischen Konstruktion sozialer Wirklichkeit in Frauenlebensgeschichten*, Donat, Bremen 1995.

appears to be compatible with aspects of intersectionality analysis<sup>12</sup> and the material lends itself to intersectional biographical research in order to examine dominant and non-dominant articulations in the self-representation of the biographers as Doing Intersectionality<sup>13</sup>. For example, Tuider advocates not setting categories of difference in advance, but rather, with a "research attitude of deconstructive vigilance, first looking at the empirical material [...] to see which differences are made meaningful and how – and what remains excluded"<sup>14</sup>. As early as the 1990s, Beyer argued that the special nature of the period of upheaval, "with one leg already slipped into the West and the other still hanging deep in the East", should be consciously exploited and understood as a "stabilizing opportunity" instead of an "obstructive limp"<sup>15</sup>.

Owen employed and experimented with the analysis methods of global analysis, résumé and sequencing. The global analyses are particularly interesting: alongside the reconstruction of a short biography and the analysis of the narrative, initial typifications were developed and pertinent research questions emerged. For example, particular attention was paid to the biographers' accounts of the system changes they experienced in 1945 and 1990. Their actions in situations of social-political upheaval were analyzed and interpreted, and research questions were derived in relation to themes concerning the history of dictatorship and democracy.

Despite great interest in the regional expansion of *Women's Memory*, there were often no funding opportunities. For this reason, the national projects were responsible for acquiring project funding on their own, and they also worked autonomously regarding the further use of the material. The planned international archive in Prague has also not yet been realized due to a lack of funding<sup>16</sup>.

Only the East German project of Owen e.V. received funding in 1999 and 2001 from the Berlin Senate's Women's Studies funding program<sup>17</sup>. In the following years, the project was funded by EU programs and applied for cooperation and funding opportunities for educational programs. Between 2002 and 2008, interview material was further analyzed, and curricula for biography work as well as a methodology for conducting history and biography workshops were developed<sup>18</sup>. After 2008, no further evaluation of the interviews was possible without funding.

<sup>12</sup> Lutz on intersectional biographical research, which discusses methods, approaches and open questions, as there is no elaborated method to date. H. Lutz, *Intersektionelle Biographieforschung*, in Ead., M. Schiebel, E. Tuider (eds.), *Handbuch Biographieforschung*, Springer, Wiesbaden 2018, pp. 139-150.

<sup>13</sup> Ivi, p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> E. Tuider, *Dem Abwesenden, den Löchern und Rissen empirisch nachgehen. Proposal for a deconstructivist discourse-analytical intersectionality analysis*, in M. Bereswill, F. Degenring, S. Stange (eds.), *Intersectionality and Research Practice. Wechselseitige Herausforderungen*, Westfälisches Dampfboot, Münster 2015, p. 177.

<sup>15</sup> Beyer, *Ost-West-Europäisches FrauenNetzwerk*, cit. p. 64.

<sup>16</sup> Grasse, *OWEN. Auf der Suche nach dem Leben und der Identität von Frauen im Sozialismus*, 2019, cit.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> International conferences, documentary films and radio broadcasts were produced based on biographical interviews from the project. (see Gender Studies, o.p.s. 2003, OWEN e.V. 2021).

The Gender Studies, o.p.s. Praha<sup>19</sup> currently holds around 171 interviews from the Czech Republic, Poland, Serbia and Croatia, including protocols and transcripts, although only the Czech interviews have been digitized in recent years.

*The genesis and women's political strategy of the German Frauengedächtnis Project*

In East Germany, the project was coordinated by Marina Grasse (formerly known as Beyer) for the East-West European Women's Network (Owen e.V.). In the German research and education project *Frauengedächtnis. Auf der Suche nach dem Leben und der Identität von Frauen im Sozialismus* (Women's Memory. In search of the life and identity of women under socialism), a research pool of 130 biographical interviews with women from the Gdr was created between 1998 and 2003<sup>20</sup>.

This project examined the interrelations between broader social developments, individual life trajectories, and the identities of women who had spent the majority of their lives under socialism. The interviews (approx. 360 hours) were conducted with women of different generations from the Gdr, born between 1920 and 1960. The *Frauengedächtnis* Project by Owen also includes transcripts, biographies, protocols, global analyses and accompanying materials for the reconstruction of contemporary historical backgrounds, such as fiction, films, women's magazines, brigade diaries, etc.

The 130 German biographical interviews were part of the international women's political strategy of "change"<sup>21</sup>. The European project women thus responded to the specific experiences with the upheavals in the transforming socialist states to "take the issue of women's lives under socialism and the development of an emancipatory consciousness of citizenship into their 'own hands'"<sup>22</sup>.

In the European *Women's Memory* Project, women are defined as active subjects of both their life stories and their biographical memories. It is based on the "idea of the subjective reconstruction of life and contemporary history from the perspective of three generations of women"<sup>23</sup>. This was also illustrated by a radio program by the German Owen interviewers, which presented three generations of women in East Germany under the title *The Emancipated*<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> <<https://www.genderstudies.cz/en-library>> (last accessed: 20 May 2025).

<sup>20</sup> <<https://www.owen-berlin.de/projekte/frauengedaechtnis-zukunft-braucht-erinnerung>> (last accessed: 20 May 2025).

<sup>21</sup> M. Beyer, *Ost-West-Europäisches FrauenNetzwerk. Ein Projekt zwischen Vision und Wirklichkeit*, «ZiF/Bulletin», 1993, n. 7, p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> M. Grasse, *Auf der Suche nach dem Leben und der Identität von Frauen im Sozialismus*, Digitales Deutsches Frauenarchiv, <<https://www.digitales-deutsches-frauenarchiv.de/themen/das-internationale-forschungs-und-bildungsprojekt-frauengedaechtnis>> (last accessed: 5 May 2025).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> R. Mieder, G. Schwarz, *Die Emanzipierten. Drei Frauengenerationen in Ostdeutschland*, Deutschlandfunk 2014, <<https://journalistinnenbuero-berlin.de/mieder-und-schwarz-hoerfunk>> (last accessed: 14 May 2025).

The women reflected on how they organized their lives under the respective social conditions, the strategies, attitudes, and value systems they adopted, and how they perceived and experienced political developments. According to Grasse, it is important to pay attention to how stories are told, what is told and what is not told. "The form of the biographical narratives and the biographical data documented in the life stories are intended to reveal connections between 'objective' contemporary historical events and developments, individual biographies, and subjective biographical reconstructions"<sup>25</sup>.

The generational classification in the German *Frauengedächtnis* Project was derived from the interviews, analogous to the Gdr generational sequence defined by Bernd Lindner<sup>26</sup>. In this context, narratives of historical events and emancipation processes were analyzed. Each generation of women (1920-1930, 1930-1940, 1940-1960) exhibited distinct experiences in the unfolding of their emancipation processes, in their reflections on historical events, and in the ways they were affected by and responded to social and political upheavals, depending on their age.

### *Researching interview narratives. Temporalities of life stories and media discourses*

The interviews with German women were conducted in the years 1998-2003. Research with the fundus (especially a biographical and discourse-analytical approach) must include the political events, the (media) discourses and publications about East Germany as well as women's and gender studies of the 1990s and early 2000s. What public and media discourses existed regarding both transformation and gender relations? What interactions were there between the memories of contemporary witnesses and "thematic cycles in the media" and what "crystallization points" should be "taken into account in the research process"?<sup>27</sup>

Future research based on the interviews will need to consider not only the time of recording but also the discursive conjunctures surrounding the Gdr and East German women, the history of democracy, the 75th anniversary of the Basic Law, and more broadly the discourse on the asymmetrical history of German-German interdependence.

The interviews were conducted in the framework of biographical research on East German women, which addressed both methodological-theoretical questions and phenomena of social transition<sup>28</sup>. The *Frauengedächtnis* Project primarily aligned with the substantive

<sup>25</sup> Grasse, OWEN. *Auf der Suche nach dem Leben und der Identität von Frauen im Sozialismus*, 2019, cit.

<sup>26</sup> Lindner sees three formative generational units for the generational succession from 1945 to 1989 in the Soviet Occupation Zone/GDR. B. Lindner, *Die Generation der Unberatenen. Zur Generationenfolge in der DDR und ihren strukturellen Konsequenzen*, in A. Schüle, T. Ahbe, R. Gries (eds.), *Die DDR aus generationengeschichtlicher Perspektive*, Leipziger Univ.-Verl., Leipzig 2006, p. 96.

<sup>27</sup> U. Bretschneider, *Individuelle Umbruchserfahrungen und Transformationsgeschichte(n)*, Zeitgeschichte-online, March 2019, <<https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/themen/individuelle-umbruchserfahrungen-und-transformationsgeschichten>> (last accessed: 20 May 2025).

<sup>28</sup> Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Frauenforschung (ed.), *Unter Hammer und Zirkel. Frauenbiographien vor dem Hintergrund ostdeutscher Sozialisationserfahrungen*, Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, Pfaffenweiler 1995; K. Bast-

aim of documenting the effects of the state-socialist system on the life contexts of women from different generations<sup>29</sup>, thereby mapping and analyzing both generational specificity and diversity. A defining feature of the project was the purposeful selection of interview partners from diverse regions, urban and rural milieus, and varied social backgrounds, in order to capture the heterogeneity of Gdr society.

The 2019 debate on East German women, in particular, brought the interviews with the younger generation into dialogue with broader discussions on how women socialized in the Gdr shaped social developments and what they contributed to a unified Germany<sup>30</sup>. Previously, the discourse on East German women was characterized by topics such as the “gender equality advantage” of Gdr women, the problems of “women who lost out at the opening of the Berlin Wall (*Wendeverliererinnen*)” (loss of jobs, childcare, Paragraph 218) and the “childbirth strike” (as well as education, qualification opportunities, social mobility).

With a temporal distance, a generational specificity retrospectively emerged in the interviews with women born between 1940 and 1960, which can be characterized as an East German women’s discourse *in the making*. The interviews provided the narrators with a space to reflect on their experiences of transformation and the opportunities for shaping their lives since 1989. For many women of this younger generation, it is characteristic that even ten years after the upheaval, they subjectively connoted being East German in a positive way, albeit more in terms of difference<sup>31</sup>, and not yet explicitly linked to what they have contributed to a united Germany. It is hardly a coincidence that their way of telling the story is reminiscent of the 2019 media discussion, in which the construct of the East German woman was used to highlight the special life achievements of East German women in the transformation process.

Especially for the younger generation (1940-1960), the upheaval in 1990 constituted a pivotal moment of reflection within their life stories. It provided an opportunity both to narrate their experiences under socialism and to critically reassess gender relations and gender concepts. In this process, they sought to integrate certain aspects of everyday life in the Gdr – previously taken for granted – into the framework of the new system. In addition to “socialization in a system that only existed for 40 years, [there was] the socialization of the upheaval in the 1990s and 2000s as a space of experience”. This is not a socialization space that continues to exist through families and parents who still live in the social system, but rather “a memory space; and memory spaces can be persistent”<sup>32</sup>.

Haider, *Kultureller Kontext der Forschenden und Methodik der Transformationsforschung*, in A. Diezinger (ed.), *Erfahrung mit Methode. Wege sozialwissenschaftlicher Frauenforschung*, Kore, Freiburg 1994, pp. 201-217.

<sup>29</sup> H. Trappe, *Handlungsstrategien von Frauen unterschiedlicher Generationen zur Verbindung von Familie und Beruf und deren Beeinflussung durch sozialpolitische Rahmenbedingungen*, in Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Frauenforschung der Humboldt-Universität Berlin (ed.), *Unter Hammer und Zirkel*, cit. p. 116.

<sup>30</sup> Brandes, Decker, *Ostfrauen verändern die Republik*, cit.

<sup>31</sup> H. Bomke, *Erleben, Erzählen und Erforschen oder: Von der noch anhaltenden Suche nach den „Eigenartigen Ostfrauen“*, <Freiburger FrauenStudien>, 1999, n. 2, pp. 41-67. DOI: doi.org/10.25595/1948.

<sup>32</sup> A. Gröschner, P. Mädler, W. Seemann, *Drei ostdeutsche Frauen betrinken sich und gründen den idealen Staat*, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich 2024, p. 91 footnote 15.

The generational discourse surrounding the “children of reunification and post-reunification” is also a media-effective reflection on the extent to which the generation that spent their childhood in the Gdr but grew up in the Federal Republic can be characterized as the “Third Generation East”<sup>33</sup>. This Third Generation East made itself heard with a series of publications and a website<sup>34</sup>. They actively engaged with their parents’ generation and narratives about the West German-influenced narrative in unified Germany<sup>35</sup>.

The diversity of life in the Gdr is currently more evident in fiction than in academia. It contributes to the fact that multi-perspective everyday topics are entering the public consciousness and discussion, supplemented by current non-fiction books<sup>36</sup>, which address life in the Gdr and the period of upheaval in intergenerational dialog between grandparents and grandchildren<sup>37</sup> or illustrate the complexity of imprints<sup>38</sup>. These publications were very popular among East Germans, as evidenced by countless letters to the authors.

Over the last eight to ten years, the interest in the history of the East German experience has been accompanied by the emergence of the “anti-discrimination discourse”, which has once again changed the view of the children of the post-reunification period and of the East in general. In society, more perspectives have become public in the last ten years, e.g. with migrant or working-class perspectives<sup>39</sup>.

### *The archival Ddf project of the Gender Library*

A significant opportunity for engaging with and processing sources on Gdr women’s history emerged in 2016 with the establishment of the i.d.a. project *Digitales Deutsches Frauenarchiv* (Ddf)<sup>40</sup>. Funded by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, it was commissioned by the federal government’s coalition agreement

<sup>33</sup> <<https://www.mdr.de/geschichte/zeitgeschichte-gegenwart/politik-gesellschaft/generation-wende-kinder-100.html>>, 2019 (last accessed: 6 May 2025).

<sup>34</sup> E.G. M. Hacker *et alii* (eds.), *Dritte Generation Ost. Who we are, what we want*, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (bpb), Bonn 2012, <<https://netzwerk.dritte-generation-ost.de/>> (last accessed: 6 May 2025).

<sup>35</sup> J. C. Enders, M. Schulze, B. Ely (eds.), *Wie war das für euch? The Third Generation East in conversation with their parents*, Ch. Links Verlag, Berlin 2016. See also J. Nichelmann, *Nachwendekinder. Die DDR, unsere Eltern und das große Schweigen*, Ullstein Verlag, Berlin 2019. P. Fürstenberg, *Weltalltage*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Cologne 2024. „Ich feiere Nie-Wieder-Vereinigung“, Interview with Paula Fürstenberg in *taz* from 28.4.2024, <<https://taz.de/Autorin-ueber-Nachwendekinder/!6004834/>> (last accessed: 15 May 2025).

<sup>36</sup> D. Oschmann, *Der Osten eine westdeutsche Erfindung*, Ullstein Verlag, Berlin 2023. K. Hoyer, *Beyond the Wall. East Germany, 1949-1990*, Allen Lane, London 2023.

<sup>37</sup> S. Michel, D. Grimm, *Es ist einmal. Ostdeutsche Großeltern und ihre Enkel im Gespräch*, BeBra Verlag, Berlin 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Gröschner, Mädler, Seemann, *Drei ostdeutsche Frauen betrinken sich und gründen den idealen Staat*, cit.

<sup>39</sup> Ivi, p. 232.

<sup>40</sup> i.d.a. = informieren, dokumentieren, archivieren, name of the umbrella organization of German-speaking lesbian/women’s archives, libraries and documentation centers, <<https://www.ida-dachverband.de/>>; The Digital German Women’s Archive (DDF) is a specialist portal on the history of German women’s movements, <<https://www.digitales-deutsches-frauenarchiv.de/>> (last accessed: 6 May 2025).

to promote the academic reappraisal of the German women's movement, with a particular focus on the women's movement in the Gdr and the new federal states. To this end, selected collections from archives and libraries were to be digitized and published in the Ddf together with thematic and protagonist essays. This particular focus favored the expertise and holdings of the Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies's Gender Library<sup>41</sup>. Another important reason for the digitization of the selected sources was to contrast the "focus on [...] what is currently booming in terms of remembrance politics (i.e. anniversaries)", because: "Much less present are sources relating to people's everyday lives, which enable a history from below"<sup>42</sup>. The Gender Library therefore successfully applied for two Ddf projects between 2018 and 2019. For the first project, interviews from the East-West European Women's Network (Owen) *Frauengedächtnis* were digitized and transcribed for the Gender Library's collection<sup>43</sup>. In the second project, the journal *Informationen des Wissenschaftlichen Beirates/Rates Die Frau in der sozialistischen Gesellschaft* was completely digitized<sup>44</sup>. This means that interviews with women from the Gdr, as well as an original study on the situation of women in the Gdr, are now available online, whereas they were previously accessible only to a limited extent.

The materials from the *Frauengedächtnis* Project were transferred to the Gender Library by Owen due to necessary relocations. Almost 20 years after their audio recordings, the opportunity arose to archive the 130 interviews. Since 2019, they have been made available in anonymized form to all interested parties through the Meta catalog of the i.d.a. umbrella organization, in compliance with the applicable terms of use<sup>45</sup>.

The 130 interviews within the *Frauengedächtnis* Project, originally recorded on cassettes, were digitized in audio format at Humboldt University in Berlin. The titles of the anonymized audio recordings in the Meta catalog correspond to the biographers' so-called "golden rule of life"—their personal wisdom, which was typically elicited toward the end of each interview.

<sup>41</sup> K. Aleksander, *Projekt der Genderbibliothek des ZtG im Digitalen Deutschen Frauenarchiv*, «ZtG-Bulletin Info», 2019, n. 59, pp. 13-15. H. Schimkat, *Bericht über das DDF-Projekt im Zeitraum Oktober 2018 März 2019*, «ZtG-Bulletin Info», 2019, n. 58, pp. 24-28; <<https://www.gender.hu-berlin.de/de/publikationen/gender-bulletin-broschueren/bulletin-info/info-58/bulletin-58-final-mit-deckblatt.pdf/view>> (last accessed: 20 May 2025).

<sup>42</sup> M. König, *Geschichtswissenschaft und Archive im digitalen Zeitalter*, «Der Archivar», 2020, n. 3, p. 246, <[https://www.archive.nrw.de/sites/default/files/media/files/Archivar\\_2020-3-\\_Internet.pdf](https://www.archive.nrw.de/sites/default/files/media/files/Archivar_2020-3-_Internet.pdf)> (last accessed: 15 May 2025).

<sup>43</sup> In addition, an essay with documents from the Gender Library on the local history of the movement in the 1990s was written: H. Schimkat, *Sundine revisited. Vom DFD-Beratungszentrum in der DDR zum Frauentreff im vereinten Deutschland*, Digitales Deutsches Frauenarchiv, 2020, <<https://www.digitales-deutsches-frauenarchiv.de/themen/sundine-revisited-vom-dfd-beratungszentrum-der-ddr-zum-frauentreff-im-vereinten-deutschland>> (last accessed: 5 May 2025).

<sup>44</sup> From 1965-1990, it published 149 issues of research findings on the status of equal rights for women in the GDR and the factors that promoted and slowed down this process. R. Ullrich, *Die Grünen Hefte. INFORMATION. Die Frau in der sozialistischen Gesellschaft*, Digitales Deutsches Frauenarchiv 2020, <<https://www.digitales-deutsches-frauenarchiv.de/themen/die-gruenen-hefte-informationen-die-frau-der-sozialistischen-gesellschaft>> (last accessed: 8 maggio 2025).

<sup>45</sup> META catalog, <<https://www.meta-katalog.eu>> (last accessed: 20 May 2025).

Furthermore, each interview contains information on the scope of the audio carrier and transcript, the additional material such as protocol, biogram, global analysis, résumé, sequencing. Keywords and special Gdr descriptors facilitate the thematic search. The interviewer and the transcribers are documented.

In addition, there is a printed transcript of each interview as well as a biogram and a protocol<sup>46</sup>. The biographies contain biographical data that was asked following the interview, such as family of origin, own family, education and vocational training. For each interview, a protocol describes the interviewer's personal impressions of the interview situation, the atmosphere and the course of the interview. As the interviews usually took place in the biographer's home, the respective situation, including the home furnishings, the presence of other people, e.g. the husband, as well as the biographer's appearance and clothing are often described.

The archival *Frauengedächtnis* Project at the Gender Library represents a rich resource for East German and international research in the fields of biography, gender, and social transformation, which still holds untapped potential for new insights. Moreover, the interviews allow for 'fact checks' regarding the development of structural conditions for women in the Gdr, as they provide empirical evidence on the participants' accounts of equality and life under socialism.

For the Ddf, one essay was devoted to each of the three generations of women in the Gdr, complemented by a further essay addressing issues of old-age security for women in both the Gdr and the subsequent period of socio-political transformation. The four overview essays<sup>47</sup> offer insights into the ways in which generation-specific life-historical memories were articulated and into the political contexts of women in which these memories were embedded. Given the character limitations of the Ddf essays, it was not feasible to elaborate on the relevance and conceptualization of generations, nor on the attendant challenges of interpretation and analysis<sup>48</sup>.

The essays on the three generations of women delineate how experiences of systemic upheaval and the repercussions of social and cultural transformations in gender rela-

<sup>46</sup> The transcripts comprise 32-137 pages. The conversations recorded on audio media lasted from one to eight hours; some were conducted over two days. Grasse, *OWEN. Auf der Suche nach dem Leben und der Identität von Frauen im Sozialismus*, 2019, cit.

<sup>47</sup> H. Schimkat, *Frauen im Sozialismus. Generation 1920-1930*, Digitales Deutsches Frauenarchiv 2019b, <<https://www.digitales-deutsches-frauenarchiv.de/themen/frauen-im-sozialismus-generation-1920-1930>> (last accessed: 5 May 2025). Ead., *Frauen im Sozialismus. Generation 1930-1940*, Digitales Deutsches Frauenarchiv 2019c, <<https://www.digitales-deutsches-frauenarchiv.de/themen/frauen-im-sozialismus-generation-1930-1940>> (last accessed: 5 May 2025). Ead., *Frauen im Sozialismus. Generation 1940-1960*, Digitales Deutsches Frauenarchiv 2020a, <<https://www.digitales-deutsches-frauenarchiv.de/themen/frauen-im-sozialismus-generation-1940-1960>> (last accessed: 5 May 2025). Ead., *Alter(n) und Alterssicherung von Frauen in der DDR und im Transformationsprozess*, Digitales Deutsches Frauenarchiv 2020c, <<https://www.digitales-deutsches-frauenarchiv.de/themen/altern-und-alterssicherung-von-frauen-der-ddr-und-im-transformationsprozess>> (last accessed: 5 May 2025).

<sup>48</sup> This gap is filled by a chapter in H. Schimkat, *Selbstbilder als Forschungsressource. Interviews mit drei Frauengenerationen zu den Umbrüchen von 1989 im Projekt Frauengedächtnis*, in K. Aleksander et alii (eds.), *Feministische Visionen vor und nach 1989. Geschlecht, Medien und Aktivismen in der DDR, BRD und im östlichen Europa*, Budrich, Opladen 2022, pp. 227-230.

tions were inscribed into their narratives of memory. In addition, certain historical events seemed particularly relevant. For the 1920-1930 generation, the Second World War is formative and the basis of their historical understanding. Hardly any other generation has experienced so many system collapses and new beginnings: the Weimar Republic in 1933, the fascist state in 1945 and the socialist state in 1990. For the 1930-1940 generation, the Second World War and the construction of the Gdr are formative, while for the younger generation 1940-1960, the upheaval of 1990 set a new course for a (professional) life in two systems.

Over the course of nearly thirty years, approaches to these interviews and their interpretations have evolved, shaped in each instance by the prevailing media and professional discourses. Since 1990, Gdr women have, for example, initially been characterized as 'Wende losers', later as East German women who contributed to German reunification, and more recently as East German women possessing "transformation competence". The interviews demonstrate how the medium of oral history can serve not only to document individual biographies but also to open up new collective spaces of memory – as a counter-archive, a research practice, and a form of feminist historical politics.

### *Changes in contemporary history research*

The historian Christina Morina states the following about the changes in contemporary history research: Since "2019/20, the social and academic debate about recent German contemporary history has reached a new quality"<sup>49</sup>. Since then, the field of contemporary history research has been characterized by productive restlessness, increasing multi-perspectivity, precision and problem awareness. According to her, however, this positive development "cannot hide the fact that the East German side of history is still routinely left out of the currently popular historiography of democracy"<sup>50</sup>. An example of this is the debate on 75 years of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany and its Article 3, which guarantees that all people are equal before the law. The fact that the Gdr constitution also had a principle of equality was ignored here, Article 7: "Men and women shall have equal rights. All laws and regulations that conflict with the equal rights of women are repealed". Ursula Schröter traces the development of the respective legislation in the two German states<sup>51</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> C. Morina, *Tausend Aufbrüche*, Siedler, Munich 2023, p. 21.

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, p. 24.

<sup>51</sup> U. Schröter, *Über Privates und Politisches. Eine ostdeutsche Sicht auf das geteilte Deutschland*, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Berlin 2020, p. 70 ff., <[https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/images/Themen/Geschichte/Manuskripte\\_28\\_Ueber\\_Privates\\_web.pdf](https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/images/Themen/Geschichte/Manuskripte_28_Ueber_Privates_web.pdf) 1930> (last accessed: 8 May 2025).

Along with a multi-perspectivity, the focus has shifted from macro to micro history/politics. In other words, the everyday life of "normal people" is of interest, of "people [...] who [...] neither held a prominent public office nor bore a responsibility that could be considered historical."<sup>52</sup> Morina argues that the history of the Gdr should be understood and described as a "history of democratic claims". In doing so, she intends to write an "integrated German post-war history". The concept of an "asymmetrically intertwined parallel history" of the FRG and Gdr was introduced by Christoph Kleßmann in 2005 to capture the dual statehood between 1949 and 1990<sup>53</sup>, while deliberately retaining its inherent tensions and contradictions. Since 2024, the term has experienced a notable resurgence in contemporary historiographical debates and public discourse.

As an example, Weidenfeld's non-fiction book *Das Doppelte Deutschland. Eine Parallelgeschichte 1949-1990* highlighted that the two systems were interconnected from the outset, creating a unique situation of competition and rivalry. However, Weidenfeld leaves women's history as a parallel narrative largely unaddressed. Similarly, Morina does not include the history of the women's movement as part of the civil movement in the Gdr. These issues remain comparatively underexplored, although Kleßmann 2014<sup>54</sup> had already discussed the role models of women in family and society in a lecture.

Ursula Schröter provides a retrospective of post-war history with her detailed analysis of German-German interdependencies, especially women's and family policy. She uses five topics to show the impact of feminism on both sides: Abortion, domestic division of labor, education, 'mommy politics' and violence against women<sup>55</sup>.

Others, such as Peggy Piesche, point out what is being ignored in German history when she criticizes from a feminist perspective that feminist struggles, such as sexual self-determination and the right to abortion, are often only told as West German history, although they are "things for which we had much more liberal legislation in the GDR"<sup>56</sup>. This is an indication to look for asymmetries in social policy (especially women's and family policy) under the opposite sign. Where did the West look to the East or feel compelled to catch up in the competition between the systems?

<sup>52</sup> Morina, *Tausend Aufbrüche*, cit. p. 17.

<sup>53</sup> C. Kleßmann, *Arbeiter im „Arbeiterstaat“ DDR. Deutsche Traditionen, sowjetisches Modell, westdeutsches Magnetfeld (1945-1971)*, Verlag J.H.W. Dietz Nachf., Bonn 2007.

<sup>54</sup> C. Kleßmann, *Was bleibt von der Mauer? Gemeinsame Nachkriegsgeschichte in Deutschland, in Europa?* Vortrag am 11.12.2014, <<https://www.bpb.de/themen/deutschlandarchiv/197550/was-bleibt-von-der-mauer-gemeinsame-nachkriegsgeschichte-in-deutschland-in-europa/>> (last accessed: 20 May 2025).

<sup>55</sup> Schröter, *Über Privates und Öffentliches*, cit., see also K. Aleksander, *Rezension. Einblicke in das DDR- und BRD-Patriarchat*, «Ariadne», 2022, n. 78, pp. 204-206.

<sup>56</sup> P. Piesche, Interview. *Peggy Piesche über den CSD. Eine entpolitisierte Geschichte. 68, 89 und das Erinnern von Stonewall. Die Wissenschaftlerin und Aktivistin Peggy Piesche über die Leerstellen im kollektiven Gedenken*, taz 2019, <<https://taz.de/Peggy-Piesche-ueber-den-CSD/!5608995/>> (last accessed: 8 May 2025).

*The interviews*

The interviews in the *Frauengedächtnis* Project reflect this German-German interrelatedness, including observations on East-West relations and system comparisons. The following are examples of excerpts addressing equal rights, the compatibility of work and family, and perspectives on equal opportunities that were transmitted to the youngest generation. To this end, a biographer of the 1920-1930 generation of women, a female worker of the “*Aufbaugeneration*”, that built-up the country, will be presented as an example of three themes: First, a part of asymmetrical German-German intertwined history in the everyday life of a company that produced for export to the West. Secondly, a “sense of community”, which is typical of the stories told by the biographers of this generation of women, who mostly described themselves as part of a community, whether in the family association, in the agricultural production cooperative, in the village or company, in the society in which they lived, which Morina characterizes as follows: “[...] in the Gdr, over the decades, a strong sense of community developed in many places at local and regional level, a civic sense of responsibility for one’s own living environment and immediate surroundings in both social and geographical terms”<sup>57</sup>. Thirdly, despite active social involvement in organizations and institutions (independent of party membership), a behaviour described in the literature as an ‘anti-party reflex’ can be found in several interviews.

Gitta Holz (1926) Brush worker<sup>58</sup>:

I’ve been with this company for over 40 years [...]. I say: Leave me alone with your party. I’ve had enough of the Nazis, [...] I was in the Bgl [company union leadership] for years. I represented my company, our small company. [...] Because I was in the Bgl, I said: Listen, I’m not leaving here today until you tell me, we have exports and we had, our small company had mainly West German exports. [...] That had to be delivered and I have to tell you one thing quite honestly: (takes a deep breath) This West still lived off the East. First of all, our products were sold cheaply to the West. And they were resold two or three times over. So they got rich through us. That’s how it was. (T-I/20/Hol, p. 22 f.).

Due to her experience of the fascist dictatorship until 1945, she refused to join a party. Nevertheless, she was active in the company union leadership in the Gdr. She describes her commitment to the trade union while at the same time rejecting party membership and consciously foregoing advantages: “Why don’t you go to party school [...] I did without it. I could have been in a different position.” (T-I/20/Hol, p. 23)

Despite her anti-party reflex, she stood up for the smaller community (company) and larger society (Gdr) compared to the West. Her words make it clear how the German-German interdependencies presented themselves in the everyday life of a worker in the Gdr and how she perceived the East-West relationship, namely as asymmetrical.

Another example of the interconnectedness of the systems:

Bärbel Honigmann (1929), teacher, deputy principal, answers the question, “Why didn’t it actually work out with the Gdr?”

<sup>57</sup> Morina, *Tausend Aufbrüche*, cit. p. 40.

<sup>58</sup> The shelfmark after the transcript excerpt refers to the location in the Gender Library archive.

There were various reasons: [...], it depended on the whole socialist camp. [...] Something had to change in the Gdr; we knew that. [...] and that was: The democratic relationship and the economic basis. Capitalism was much stronger than it was perceived to be. And in Germany in particular, it was boosted after '45, with the Marshall Plan and all those things. I experienced how the currency reform was carried out overnight in West Berlin. That was the day Germany was divided, not the Wall. (T-I/20/Hon, p. 21)

The active involvement of citizens in organizations and institutions, sometimes independent of party membership, led to an identification with the Gdr and an interest in shaping the socialist path: "The history of the Gdr is not limited to its description as a dictatorship; it is also the history of an unfulfilled, but nevertheless effective promise of democracy."<sup>59</sup> Morina therefore proposes the reading of a "history of claims to democracy".

In a similar view of women's emancipation, Gdr sociologists assessed that women's double burden of work and family had "increasingly become a double demand, that women were not concerned with paid work per se, but with favorable working hours and short commutes, because family life was usually of equal importance to professional life for women"<sup>60</sup>. Women's policy in the Gdr created a framework for women's employment. Based on the 1961 Women's Communiqué<sup>61</sup>, numerous laws were passed to promote qualifications, flanked by programs in the companies. At the same time, more women were to be recruited for management positions, so that "in the last years of the Gdr, around a third of all management positions were held by women"<sup>62</sup> – at lower and middle levels.

The biographer Bettina Feuer (1937), a fashion buyer in a senior position, believes that women in the Gdr

[...] had every opportunity. But when you reached a position, it wasn't the same as the position a man reached. I had to prove again and again that I could do something. Again and again. I was in a collective with five men, including a director, as the only woman. [...] And I think it wasn't just me, [...] So equality, uh, wasn't quite so equal [...] (T-I/30/Feu, pp. 47 ff.

The biographer Brunhilde Lengstett (1933), factory director at the clothing factory and manager of women and men, assessed how the socio-political measures affected the generations differently and what scope for action was possible for her within the system:

When the last measure came, I don't remember what it was about, but they asked me something, [...] And then I said that if they do something just for young people again, then it's no longer in line with my convictions. I said: We have women who have worked hard all their lives, who only get a few pennies in pension; we have to do something for our older women who will soon be retiring, so that they can live reasonably well and say, yes, our work in the Gdr was worth it. [...] This was also presented to the Politburo committee, all our opinions, but they ignored it and decided something else. (T-I/30/Len, p. 29)

<sup>59</sup> Morina, *Tausend Aufbrüche*, cit., p. 28.

<sup>60</sup> Schröter, *Über Privates und Öffentliches*, cit. p. 36.

<sup>61</sup> M. Deichsel, *Zum Inhalt und zur Bedeutung des Kommuniqués des Politbüros des Zentralkomitees der SED vom 23.12.1961 „Die Frau - der Frieden und der Sozialismus“*, Mitteilungsblatt der Arbeitsgemeinschaft Geschichte des Kampfes der deutschen Arbeiterklasse um die Befreiung der Frau, Dresden 1976, No. 6, pp. 30-36.

<sup>62</sup> U. Schröter, *Die DDR-Frau und der Sozialismus – und was daraus geworden ist*, in E. Kaufmann (ed.), *„Als ganzer Mensch leben“*. Lebensansprüche ostdeutscher Frauen, Verlag, Berlin 1997, p. 20.

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Another biographer of this generation, Tina Blass (1932), head of a kindergarten and member of the Democratic Women's Federation federal board, talks about reconciling work and family in private life:

[...] the Federal Executive Committee of the Democratic Women's Federation wanted to prepare its congress anyway, [...] the World Congress of Women [...] so the Federal Executive Committee needed a few more employees. And I was offered it and we talked in the family and my husband then said "Well, you've always gone with me and now I'm going to follow you". (laughs) It was a matter of course. [...] It wasn't an easy decision for him, but he was also very much in favor of women being able to take advantage of their opportunities. (T-I/30/Bla, p. 14)

Examples of ideas of equal opportunities that were passed on to the next generation can be found in the mother-daughter interviews with mothers of the 1940-1960 generation of women, such as Sabine Kluge (1956):

So I would tell my daughter that she should always learn a profession, that she should always be independent, that she should look for a partner who respects her as a woman, even with a profession [...]. And my son should look for a woman who is mentally equal to him, because otherwise the relationship will break down and he should always try to build a good family and not wander the world as a loner. [...] That [they] basically do it the way we've modeled it for them. (T-I/50/Klu, p. 36)

Heidi Karlstedt (1941), Academy of Sciences, then on an integration program at the Free University of Berlin, one child, divorced. She speaks out on socialism and equality:

I've never liked the Red Front and stuff like that here, [...] I would have liked really good socialism and I actually want it, [...] to this day, if I didn't doubt whether it's even possible. I think that's the utopia, but maybe you can still do something better than what you have, right. (T-I/40/Kar, pp. 22-24)

I'm not a feminist, by no means, [...] I'm in favor of gender equality, I'm in favor of women being promoted tremendously, because I've experienced that myself and I have to say it was a good thing that it happened that way, I'm in favor of quotas, I think it's all quite right [...] (T-I/40/Kar, p. 32)

Ingrid Hartmann (1952) reports on her experiences with university equality policy in unified Germany: She was a member of a Christian congregation in the Gdr and worked at the music academy. As a married mother of three daughters, she was involved in the Peace Circle, which disintegrated after reunification. She works at a university and becomes the women's representative for her department:

[...] there are only Eastern women on the women's advisory board at the university, there are no Western women at all who are interested in that sort of thing, it's amazing. The women's movement wasn't invented here, wasn't it? It's noticeable, they just do their thing and try to advance their careers as quickly as possible, [...] but I do hope that it will change, yes, that at some point it will all come to an end after ten years (laughs). It's already been twelve years. That it will change. (T-I/50/Har, pp. 37-39)

### Conclusion

Through its life stories, the German *Frauengedächtnis* Project provides extensive material for research on the history of dictatorship and democracy. Morina's new terminology offers a conceptual framework for understanding the experiences of women who recount their everyday lives in the Gdr, the period of upheaval, and their first ten years in a unified Germany. Her notion of the "Gdr as a history of claims to democracy", which generations of East Germans have negotiated, allows for a more nuanced understanding of behavior and agency. In this perspective, socialist democracy in the Gdr is interpreted as a simulation – a democracy existing in appearance, postulated by the state, yet 'stubbornly' appropriated by the population. Consequently, the analysis of these women's biographies contributes to an integrative German-German historiography.

The documentation of Gdr women's own experiences provides a valuable opportunity to examine historical forms of gender relations from a contemporary perspective. In this regard, the *Frauengedächtnis* Project is of particular significance for social science research, the study of Gdr history, and research on transformation and democracy, especially with respect to the effects of social upheaval on women's life trajectories<sup>63</sup>.

<sup>63</sup> B. Übel, *Tagungsbericht. Frauenleben in europäischen Demokratien des 20. Jahrhunderts*, <<https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-150216>> (last accessed: 20 May 2025).