



Ostalgie and *Ostpolitik*:
Exploring Germany's Complicated 'Special
Relationship' to Russia

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Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Scholarship
August 2024

Words: 2990

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“Can’t you take your CIA study elsewhere?”

When I read this reply to my post inviting people to participate in my research, I thought I had made a translation mistake. As it turns out, this person sincerely thought that my research was for the CIA. Despite being born over a decade after the end of the Cold War, I faced the same suspicion of being a spy that many anthropologists studying the era have experienced (McGranahan 2010;Price 2016).

At first, I was baffled, but upon receiving more refusals, I noticed continued mistrust from potential participants: in particular, no one wanted to talk about Russia. Even as I explained that I would only ask about memories of East Germany, the mere mention of Russia in my title was enough to be met with a polite, but firm, refusal.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has been a prevailing silence about Russia from Germans. Beyond repeating the official State position, few now feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, afraid of being labelled a *Putinfreunde* (friend of Putin). Consequently, most German institutions have distanced themselves from Russia: one museum believed working with me could lead to a backlash from visitors, and many cultural exchange websites are now inactive, with stock statements condemning the invasion being the only recent content. Elsewhere, content about Russia has been erased: links to the *Körber Stiftung*’s “Russland in Europa” project now lead to the general projects or error page, and none of the reports remain available on their website.

While the silence was frustrating during research, it drew my attention to the centrality of Russia for Germans: Russia is not *now* and has *never* been a marginal issue for Germans. Through a shared history of being “mortal friends and best enemies”(Wallander 1999), the German-Russian relationship has become ‘special’. Their shared history has created a *Seelenverwandschaft* (relationship of souls)(Chivvis & Rid 2009:117): for example, former

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German President Herzog proclaimed “the destiny[s] of our peoples are closely bound together” on Russian television (quoted in Wood 2017:341).

However, while history forges the special relationship, it also corrodes it from within. This is because Germany's relationship to its history is informed by *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past)(Jesse 2021) and atonement for Nazi crimes. Consequently, the nation has internalised the idea of “never again” with national values focused on human rights and democracy. Increasingly, these values are incompatible with those of the Russian state.

Germany is caught in a vicious cycle in which *valuing* history prescribes a special relationship to Russia, but the *values* of German history require condemnation of Russian actions. This essay will explore how history *pulls* Germany towards a special relationship with Russia, arguing that it is due to guilt, gratitude and nostalgia. First, *guilt* and *gratitude*, which are tied to specific historical moments in the German-Russian relationship, provide historical ‘reminders’ to maintain the relationship. Second, mirroring the division of Germany, I argue there are two branches of nostalgia pulling Germany towards Russia: first, *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for life in the former East Germany), and second, nostalgia from (West German) political elites for *Ostpolitik*, the “traditional policy of cooperation vis-à-vis Russia” (Siddi 2016:668). Of the two, I argue that nostalgia for *Ostpolitik* is most significant in maintaining the special relationship. Overall, Germany struggles to unequivocally end the special relationship to Russia due to history evoking guilt, gratitude and nostalgia.

Research was conducted over six-weeks, including one week of fieldwork in Berlin. During fieldwork, I used ethnographic research methods including participant observation to explore how the Cold War remains visible in the city, and visited museums to consider how history is remembered. Moreover, to explore *Ostalgie*, I conducted an interview with a former East German citizen, watched German films depicting East Germany, and visited multiple sites

in Berlin that present themselves as ‘*Ostalgic*’, such as an East German-themed restaurant. To research the relationship at the State level, I analysed publicly available government documents, reports, speeches and press releases, as well as reports by German political foundations and news articles published in Germany and internationally.

On 22nd June 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the USSR. By the time of the unconditional surrender, 26.6 million Soviets had died (Russian Ministry of Defence 2012). The loss of millions of Russian lives because of German aggression haunts bilateral relations and within German culture there remains a profound sense of guilt (*Schuld*)(Chivvis & Rid 2009:114;McMillan 2016:6;Newnham 2017:43).

In the German-Russian relationship, this guilt translates into “responsibility” (*Verantwortung*) in which Germany “is committed to sincere remembrance...[recognising] in particular the suffering of civilian[s]”(Auswärtiges Amt 2023). Guilt, and the responsibility to remember, requires Germany to “show understanding” to Russia, even as their values become more opposed, because criticism would indicate “insufficient sensitivity”—and thus inadequate “remembrance”—to Russia’s suffering due to German actions (Wood & Henke 2018:703). Guilt is therefore a dominant emotion for the German political class when considering Russia: for example, former Member of the Bundestag Marieluise Beck argued that “Historical guilt vis-à-vis Russia makes it an imperative for us to be markedly restrained”(Chivvis & Rid 2009:115). Interestingly, Beck is a member of *Die Grünen* (The Greens), the most anti-Russian German political party, with 95% of its voters seeing Russia as a “threat”(Dienes & Katsioulis 2022:4–5). Personally, Beck has also strongly criticised Russia resulting in *Der Spiegel* describing her as “a woman despised by the Kremlin”(Schepp 2012). Yet, Beck still takes the issue of guilt seriously, demonstrating that guilt is a significant pull from history to continue a special relationship with Russia.

While the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification now seem inevitable, Germans continue to appreciate the contingency of the entire process: while the protests in 1989 were certainly significant, it was not necessarily *expected* that the government would make concessions. Tiananmen Square happened only a few months before the protests in East Germany, and the government had endorsed the Chinese government's actions in suppressing the dissent (Neues Deutschland 1989), leading many protesters to fear that their government would follow "die chinesische Lösung" (the Chinese solution) (Shen 2019).

The German awareness that the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification were not guaranteed manifests in gratitude towards Russia that Soviet leaders, particularly Mikhail Gorbachev, allowed these processes to happen. Instead of the bloodshed of the Prague Spring, Gorbachev explicitly ruled out "military force by the Soviet troops" (Gorbachev 2019). Moreover, it was Gorbachev's reforms in the USSR that inspired the protest movements throughout the Eastern bloc (Kolesnikov 2022; Mason 1988). Consequently, many in eastern Germany argue that Gorbachev brought about reunification (Bernhard 2022) and for this, Russia deserves "everlasting thanks" (Wood & Henke 2018:703).

However, the extent to which *foreign policy makers* in Germany feel this gratitude towards Russia is less clear. With politics still dominated by West Germans, credit for unification is often given to Helmut Kohl rather than Gorbachev. While there seems to be an abstract appreciation for Moscow facilitating the reunification process, this gratitude does not create an *obligation* to be favourable to Russia among foreign policy makers. Nevertheless, gratitude towards Russia remains significant in the German population, particularly among East Germans. Thus, it can be considered a historical pull that promotes the continuation of a special relationship to Russia.

The third emotion that acts as a historical pull to maintain the German-Russian special relationship is *nostalgia*, and I argue that it is nostalgia that makes the relationship so difficult to break. One way to conceptualise nostalgia is seeing it as homesickness: “a longing for...home”(Boym 2001:xiii). This view draws on the word’s etymological roots from the Greek *nóstos* (return home) and *álgos* (longing)(Nadkarni 2010:193), and the original diagnosis of nostalgia as an *illness* occurring when people are far from home (Anspach 1934). A further approach adds a *temporal* dimension that explores nostalgia for “a home that no longer exists”(Boym 2001:xiii). This conceptualisation has nostalgia positioning “a ‘once was’ in relation to a ‘now’” and acting as a “cultural practice” of meaning-making (Stewart 1988:227).

Throughout Eastern Europe, there has been widespread nostalgia for socialist times. This nostalgia rarely indicates a desire for the return of socialism itself (Mckee et al. 2013:1467), but instead is a way to *understand a present* that has undergone massive political and cultural changes in reference to a past to which they could never return. Thus, post-socialist nostalgia is conceptualised *temporally*, “predicted by the negative present”(Prusik & Lewicka 2016:691) and coalescing around particular cultural objects that act as time travellers to remind people of better times (Bartmanski 2011;Nadkarni 2010;Oushakine 2007).

In the former East Germany, however, nostalgia also takes on the initial conception as homesickness. Since reunification involved the territory of East Germany becoming “neue Länder” (new states) under the constitution of West Germany, Germany today is the continuation of West Germany. Thus, East Germany ceased to exist, becoming a historical “anomaly”(Hoyer 2023) and leaving East Germans feeling like they “emigrated without leaving home”(Berdahl 1999a:202). Beyond the legal and political structures, reunification also meant society was completely transformed as West Germany overhauled the socialist

Ostalgie and Ostpolitik: Exploring Germany's Complicated 'Special Relationship' to Russia economy, and, as one East German told anthropologist Daphne Berdahl during her fieldwork in the early 1990s, "everything simply disappeared"(Berdahl 2009:120).

Nostalgia for the former East Germany has been termed *Ostalgie*, a portmanteau of the German words *Ost* (east) and *Nostalgie* (nostalgia). It has become a "catch-all term" in Germany (Hoyer 2023), covering personal memories of youth, an acknowledgement of the advantages of socialism, and a way to reclaim a devalued identity and past (Allan 2006;Berdahl 1999b,2009;Boyer 2006;MDR 2022;Hoyer 2022;Longo 2023;Ponzi 2019). At its heart, *Ostalgie* is an assertion that East Germany "was not only about Stasi files and barbed wire"(Stregel, quoted in Berdahl 1999a:206). Even those who view East Germany overall negatively still occasionally follow *Ostalgie* rhetoric when discussing memories of their past. For example, Anna, who fled the East with her family as a child, emphasised to me how she missed the sense of community that existed in East Germany: "If [there is] anything [I miss], it would be how the people...supported each other".

One consequence of *Ostalgie* is close identification with Russia among East Germans. Since the USSR was the most important State in the socialist "brotherhood of nations"(Ozawa 2023:53), Russian culture was very present in East Germany (Knight 2022): Russian was taught in school and German workers were sent on work exchanges in the USSR (Hoyer 2023). East Germans thus struggle to see Russia as the enemy precisely because they grew up in a society "steeped" in Russian culture and had connections with regular Russian people (Chu 2023): for example, former Chancellor Angela Merkel grew up in East Germany and spoke fluent Russian, even winning the national Russian Olympiad in 1970 (Shore 2013). Thus, "Russia is close to [East Germans]" due to their historical experiences in a way that just isn't the case for West Germans (MDR 2021;Koschyk & Davis 2019). While the Russian invasion of Ukraine is seen as a break in the German-Russian relationship, the East German

affinity for Russia has not disappeared: only 56% of East Germans view Russia as a “threat”, in contrast to 83% of West Germans (Dienes & Katsioulis 2022:5).

However, while *Ostalgie* explains the affinity many regular Germans feel for Russia, it cannot adequately explain why German foreign policy makers have continued to seek the special relationship to Russia. The reason for this is simple: former East Germans have very little impact on foreign policy making, even three decades after reunification. In the current cabinet, only one of the 17 Ministers was born and lived in East Germany; since Kohl’s reunification cabinets, the number has never been higher than three (a number which includes Chancellor Merkel). Moreover, Kintz (2023) found that East Germans are underrepresented in parliamentary leadership positions, especially in “parties that exercise governing power”. Due to foreign policy making in Germany being an elite domain rather than responsive to public opinion (Siddi 2018:39), the underrepresentation of East Germans in political leadership positions results in a lack of power to significantly impact foreign policy.

Nevertheless, German foreign policy makers have cultivated the special relationship with Russia. For example, even after numerous Russian actions that violated German values, Germany repeatedly reverted to ‘business as usual’ following the initial crisis (Siddi 2016, 2018; Wood & Henke 2018). Moreover, communication between Russian and German leaders always remained open and frequent (Kundnani & Pond 2015:173; Yoder 2015:50). This, I argue, is due to feelings of nostalgia on the part of West German political elites for the Cold War policy of *Ostpolitik*, which has remained a central pillar of German foreign policy post-reunification.

West German Chancellor Willy Brandt created *Ostpolitik* to seek rapprochement with Russia through economic cooperation, hoping that this would contribute to policy changes that would enable reunification (Forsberg 2016:21; Stent 2022:28). Despite being initially controversial, it is now deemed a remarkable success, and post-reunification governments

Ostalgie and Ostpolitik: Exploring Germany's Complicated 'Special Relationship' to Russia have continued following *Ostpolitik* to maintain and develop the relationship with Russia. This was done through “*Annäherung durch Verflechtung*” (Rapprochement through Entanglement), which involved creating extensive economic, trade and energy links (Rahr 2007:137;Stelzenmüller 2009;Strategic Comments 2021).

In 2008, this culminated in the German-Russian Partnership for Modernisation (PfM), which sought to deepen political, business, scientific and cultural ties, with the hope from the German side that this would lead to greater democracy in Russia (Steinmeier 2008). The PfM would later be elevated to the European Union level after extensive promotion by the German government (Council of the European Union 2010;Steinmeier und Fraktion 2010;European Commission 2010). Few concrete actions seem to have arisen from the PfM and after 2010, it is rarely present in official discourse. However, it is emblematic of the nostalgia for *Ostpolitik* among political elites since the PfM hoped that “economic cooperation would have positive spill-over effects on Russian domestic political and economic developments” (Siddi 2016:667), a clear continuation of Brandt's intention with *Ostpolitik*.

Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, after which Germany condemned Russia and imposed sanctions, many journalists and academics claimed that *Ostpolitik* had ended (Forsberg 2016:23;Newnham 2017:54). And yet, once the crisis subsided, the discourse of *Ostpolitik* returned (Siddi 2018:37). For many this was an example of Germany's naivety about the efficacy of *Ostpolitik* and prioritisation economic interests. However, I would argue that it goes deeper and is instead because *Ostpolitik* is the Germany foreign policy *par excellence*, embodying all of Germany's foreign policy values and traditions.

In the international realm, Germany sees itself as promoting the balancing of interests, peaceful conflict resolution, justice and the rule of law, human rights, and sustainable economic models (Auswärtiges Amt 2014). Moreover, since 1945, Germany has focused on using *Zivilmacht* (civil/soft power) instead of military force (Blumenau 2022;Crawford &

Olsen 2017:592; Kagan 2019;Maull 2018), meaning the German government places extensive value on *diplomacy* achieving results in the *long-term*. Finally, despite other States wanting Germany to become more involved in international affairs, the German government explicitly limits their role to being “in and through Europe” (Auswärtiges Amt 2014).

Ostpolitik covers all these key aspects, with its practices of long-term diplomacy and cooperation with Russia to bring about gradual change in Russian politics, while creating a system of mutual economic benefits.

Thus, *Ostpolitik* is an archetypal example of German foreign policy, meaning it is inherently attractive to German policy makers. However, I argue another significant draw of the policy is that it has been *successful*: *Ostpolitik* did what was commonly thought was impossible and brought about German reunification. Consequently, West German political elites learnt that ensuring continued diplomatic dialogue is the key to the Russian relationship (The Economist 2014;Karnitschnig 2024). Time and again, German leaders have actively taken on a role of mediator with Russia, because of their nostalgia for the successes of *Ostpolitik*. While outsiders accused Germany of inaction in response to Russian aggression, I argue that German foreign policy makers believed that they *were* acting, and moreover that they were doing so in a way that could provide positive results. Therefore, I argue that nostalgia for *Ostpolitik*, and the successes it had at change during the Cold War era, encourages German foreign policy makers to maintain the German-Russian special relationship.

In his speech promoting the PfM, then Foreign Minister Steinmeier told a Russian audience: “Together we have hitherto unimagined opportunities if we overcome the mindsets of the Cold War” (Steinmeier 2008). I argue it is in fact the opposite: the opportunities and existence of a special relationship arise *because* of the persistence of nostalgic Cold War

Ostalgie and Ostpolitik: Exploring Germany's Complicated 'Special Relationship' to Russia mindsets. Since WWII, German and Russian history have been deeply intertwined, leading to both States viewing the relationship as 'special'. However, the values of Germany and Russia have increasingly come into tension, culminating in the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

However, I have argued that history continues to exert a significant pull on Germans, leading to a complicated relationship where German values encourage them to condemn Russia but the historical forces of guilt, gratitude and nostalgia continuously pull them back towards a special relationship.

Guilt and gratitude both arise from specific historical moments in which the actions of Germany and Russia towards each other have created perceived obligations in the relationship. Nostalgia for the Cold War period also exerts a significant pull towards a special relationship. First, *Ostalgie* creates a generally positive view of Russia among East Germans due to a sense of affinity. However, the continued underrepresentation of East Germans in government limits this form of nostalgia to public opinion. Therefore, I argued that it is nostalgia for *Ostpolitik* that has the most significant impact on the relationship as foreign policy makers follow the tenets of long-term diplomatic engagement to enact change.

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Germany has apparently abandoned its special relationship to Russia, however, I have argued in this essay that guilt, gratitude and nostalgia act as powerful pulls from history to maintain the relationship. Therefore, I wonder if, after the eventual end of the war in Ukraine, Germany will succumb once again to these emotions and revert to its special—though always complicated—relationship to Russia.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Anna and her granddaughter for participating in my research and sharing her stories with me. I would like to thank my research supervisor, Dr Stavroula Pipyrou, for her invaluable support, guidance and mentorship throughout the project. Finally, I would also like to thank the Laidlaw Foundation and Lord Laidlaw for funding my project through my participation in the Laidlaw Scholars Leadership and Research Programme.