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

Sophie Cooper, Supervised by Dr Stavroula Pipyrou
School of Philosophical, Anthropological and Film Studies

Introduction

Through a shared history of being "mortal friends and best enemies"[1], the German-Russian relationship has become 'special'. However, Germany is increasingly 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 project explores how history *pulls* Germany towards a special relationship with Russia, arguing that it is due to the emotions of guilt, gratitude and nostalgia. There are two forms of nostalgia: 1) nostalgia for life in the former East Germany and 2) nostalgia for the foreign policy tradition of *Ostpolitik*.

Guilt **Gratitude** **Nostalgia**

Methodology

Fieldwork in Berlin: participant observation; visiting museums, exhibitions, and numerous 'Ostalgic' sites; interview; watching German films depicting East Germany.
Researching the relationship at the State level: analysing publicly available government documents, speeches and press releases; reading reports by political foundations and news articles.

Guilt and Gratitude

Guilt and gratitude provide Germany with historical 'reminders' to maintain the relationship as they are tied to specific historical moments in the German-Russian relationship.
Guilt: within German culture, there remains guilt over the millions of Russian lives lost in WWII. This translates into a "responsibility"[2] to "show understanding" and not heavily criticise Russia[3].
Gratitude: Germany feels gratitude towards Russia because Soviet leaders, particularly Gorbachev, allowed reunification to happen peacefully. While limited among foreign policy makers, gratitude is strong in the general population, especially in eastern Germany[4].

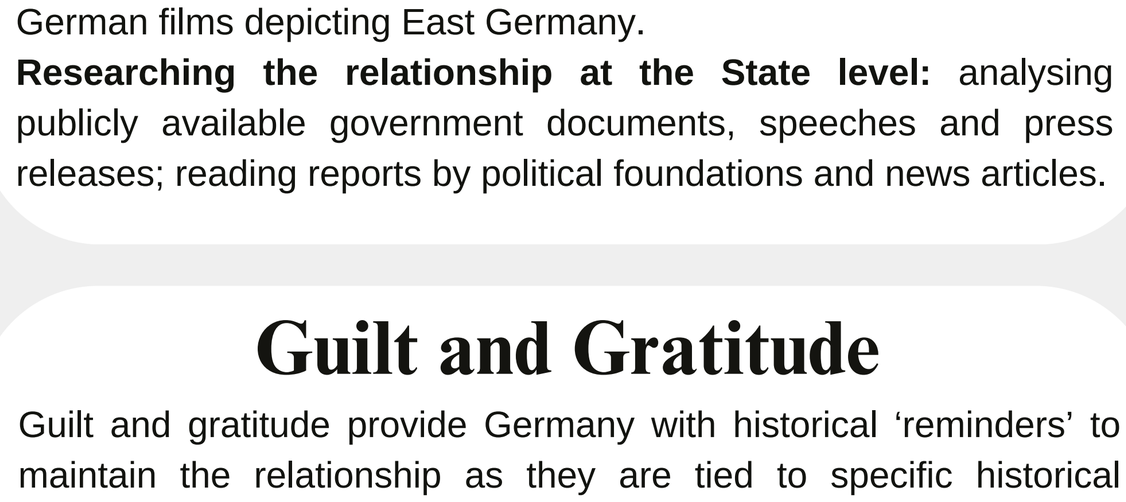

Figure 1. Timeline of key events in Soviet Union/Russia (top) and Germany (bottom)

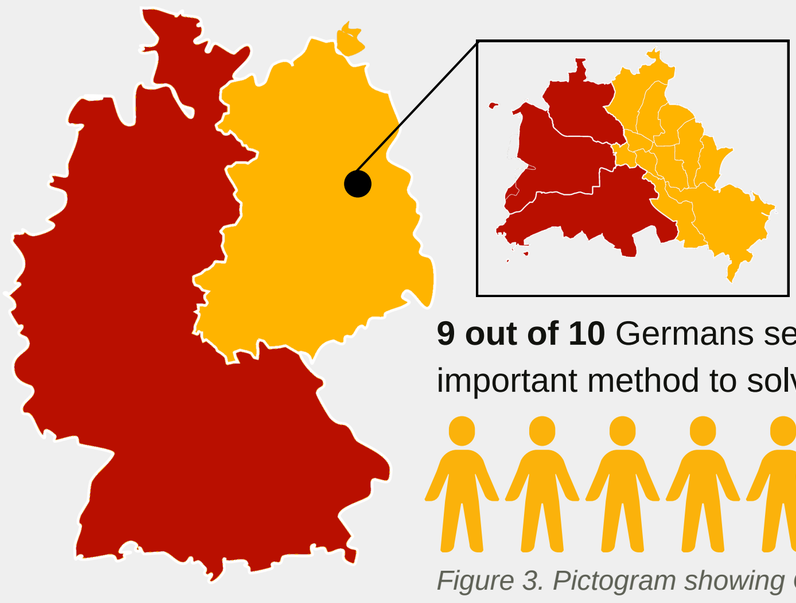

Figure 2. Map of East and West Germany and map of East and West Berlin

Credits:
Map of Germany: Location_European_nation_states.svg: Ssolbergj, East-west germany, Colours by Sophie A. Cooper, CC BY-SA 3.0
Map of Berlin: Stefan-Xp Remix by Momocalbee, Only East Berlin Map, Colours by Sophie A. Cooper, CC BY-SA 3.0

9 out of 10 Germans see **diplomacy** as the most important method to solve international crises[5].

Figure 3. Pictogram showing German attitudes on diplomacy

Ostalgie

Nostalgia for the former East Germany has been termed *Ostalgie*, a portmanteau of the German words *Ost* (east) and *Nostalgie* (nostalgia). At its heart, *Ostalgie* is an assertion that East Germany "was not only about Stasi files and barbed wire"[6].

One consequence of *Ostalgie* is an **affinity with Russia** among East Germans. Consequently, they 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[7]. However, former East Germans have very little impact on foreign policy making[8]. Therefore, *Ostalgie's* impact on the relationship is **limited to public opinion**.

Ostpolitik

Ostpolitik is the "traditional policy of cooperation vis-à-vis Russia"[9]. Originally *Ostpolitik* was created in West Germany as a path to reunification[10], but it has remained a key foreign policy post-reunification. German foreign policy makers continuously return to *Ostpolitik* because the policy embodies the German foreign policy traditions of **long-term diplomacy** and **cooperation**[11].

I argue that *Ostpolitik* is persistent because it was **successful** at bringing about reunification, and they believe they learnt that ensuring continued dialogue is the key to the Russian relationship [12]. **Nostalgia** for the success of *Ostpolitik* encourages the continuation of the relationship.

Conclusion

In a speech, then-Foreign Minister Steinmeier told a Russian audience: "Together we have hitherto unimagined opportunities if we overcome the mindsets of the Cold War"[13]. 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 mindsets. History continues to exert a significant pull on Germans, leading to a cycle in which German values require condemning Russia but the historical forces of guilt, gratitude and nostalgia continuously pull them back towards a special relationship with Russia.

References

[1] Wallander, C. A. 1999. Mortal Friends, Best Enemies: German-Russian Cooperation after the Cold War. Cornell University Press.
[2] Auswärtiges Amt 2023. Deutschland und die Russische Föderation: bilaterale Beziehungen (available on-line: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/service/laender/russischefoederation-node/bilaterale-beziehungen/201542).
[3] Wood, S. & O. Henke 2018. The Salisbury Poisoning Case and German-Russian Relations: Ambiguity and Ambivalence. The Political Quarterly 89.
[4] Bernhard, H. 2022. Ostdeutschland, Russland und der Angriff auf die Ukraine. Deutschlandfunk, 19 July (available on-line: https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/einstellung-ostdeutsche-russland-putin-100.html).
[5] Dienes, A., & Katsioulis, C. (2022). Zeitenwende - Russlands Krieg als Wendepunkt in der öffentlichen Meinung Deutschlands. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/19435.pdf
[6] Stregel, quoted in Berdahl, D. 1999a. '(N)Ostalgie' for the present: Memory, longing, and East German things. Ethnos 64, 192–211.
[7] Chu, L. 2023. In Germany's east, a hard rethink of relations with once-close Russia. The Christian Science Monitor, 6 June.
[8] Kintz, M. 2023. Beyond Merkel– East Germans' Recruitment to Leadership Positions in the German Bundestag. German Politics 32, 127–148.
[9] Siddi, M. 2016. German Foreign Policy towards Russia in the Aftermath of the Ukraine Crisis: A New Ostpolitik? Europe - Asia Studies 68, 665–677.
[10] Forsberg, T. 2016. From 'Ostpolitik' to "frostpolitik"? Merkel, Putin and German foreign policy towards. International Affairs 92, 21–42.;Stent, A. 2022. Germany and Russia: Farewell to Ostpolitik? Survival 64, 27–38.
[11] Auswärtiges Amt 2014. Review 2014 - Aussenpolitik Weiter Denken: Krise, Ordnung, Europa. Berlin.
[12] Karnitschnig, M. 2024. Germany's Ukraine policy is incoherent for a reason. Politico, 7 March (available on-line: https://www.politico.eu/article/germanys-ukraine-policy-is-incoherent-for-a-reason/#:~:text=The%20German%20chancellor%20is%20driven,as%20a%20%E2%80%9Cpeace%20chancellor.%E2%80%9D). ; How very understanding 2014. The Economist, 8 May (available on-line: https://www.economist.com/europe/2014/05/08/how-very-understanding).
[13] Steinmeier, F.-W. 2008. Time for a German–Russian Modernization Partnership. Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs. Speech at Department of International Relations of the Urals State University in Yekaterinburg May 13, 2008. (available on-line: Steinmeier, F.-W. 2008. Time for a German–Russian Modernization Partnership. Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs.)

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my research supervisor, Dr Stavroula Pipyrou, for her invaluable support, guidance and mentorship throughout the project. 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.

FIND OUT MORE