

East and West Germans in Berlin 15 Years After the Fall of the Berlin Wall

Ossies¹ and Wessies² in a Worldwork Group Process

Max Schupbach Ph.D.

Introduction: Background and Personal History

In November 1989 I was teaching a public seminar on Process Work in Berlin. I had been looking forward to it for many reasons. First, I have always had a close relationship to Berlin. I was born after World War II, on June 17, 1946. I remember on my seventh birthday, my parents were upset after listening to the radio. They told me that there had been an up rise in Berlin, and they were nervous about the consequences. (*On June 17th, there was a violent uprising in East Germany, unexpected by the allied forces and political spectators, which finally lead to a brutal rejection. If you speak German, check out the [June uprising website](#), which has many documents and radio broadcasts from that period.*) Because my father had always been very interested in politics, political themes were often governing our lunch conversations. This was the first time however, that a political event intruded directly into my personal life. It created a numinous relationship with Berlin and an interest in European politics ever since. Berlin had been considered a fulcrum of European politics, already then, in 1946, 10 years before Kennedy said "[Ich bin ein Berliner](#)". Over the years, it had been considered by many the place where the Iron Curtain had been reduced to a thin aluminum foil, with people from both sides sitting so close to one another that they could touch, - and explode.

That November of 1989, during the time that I was working with a group of individuals out of a studio in Kreuzberg, an area of Berlin, I was not only to be excited to be in Berlin, I was also especially excited about the recent development around Glasnost³. What would be the resulting changes in terms of the relationship between East and West Germany? Would the Berlin Wall ever fall? Then, on the second day of the seminar, November 9th, we heard that the [wall had come down](#). We were all delirious with joy! This was the single most significant event in German history since the ending of World War II.

On the fifth day of the seminar, however, some of the seminar participants (who were all West Germans) began mentioning additional feelings. "Now they are all coming over here - I couldn't get this and that at my corner store yesterday. How is this all going to end?" Those were some of the questions that were raised. Many acted as if they were

¹ Ossie, a slang word for someone from the former East Germany. Originally it had a derogatory connotation, yet today is often used as a term of endearment, as in this subtitle.

² Wessie, a slang word for someone from the former West Germany, see above footnote number 1

³ A Russian term, literally meaning "public voicing.". This was a term coined by Mikhail S. Gorbachev in the beginning in 1987 to encourage public discussion of issues that concerned political and economic reform.

delighted to see the poor relatives that had been kept away from them by the wall, but three days into the visit, they wondered who would have to pay for all of these changes, how their own lives would be influenced by them, and when the new “visitors” would go back to where they had come from. It was the beginning of a collective journey between East and West Germany. Although governments, businesses, social activists, and national and international politics played a large role in this journey, the large majority of the endeavor was undertaken by the individuals on both sides of the once dividing line.

In the years that followed the collapse of the wall, I have worked consistently in Germany (at least once a year, often more) in Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Munich and other cities. I feel at home in the country, with some of my best friends living there. Germans, in my view, have suffered through many difficulties since the end of the war, the majority of which they have used to heighten their awareness around diversity issues, power distribution and democracy. The merging of the two Germany cities, East and West Berlin, has been an epic journey, which I have had the privilege and good fortune to witness in part not only as a visitor and politically and historically interested observer, but also as a facilitator of countless groups, in which Germans worked on the Wiedergutmachung⁴ in groups of authentic individuals, and their unification after the fall of the German wall (often referred to as "Die Wende" - the turnaround).

World Work Group Process; Ossies and Wessies

Out of the many group processes that I have witnessed in which people have cried, fought, laughed, loved and hated together, the most recent one that I will describe here was especially moving to me. With the background of the war in Iraq, magnifying the problems that we all face about how to get along with threats and power, I feel inspired as rarely before to look at the human fate, and to discover how to deal with these issues while maintaining some sense of optimism. I am grateful to the magnificent people and participants who made this possible as a result of the group process of some 40 people in the fall of 2004 in Berlin, in a seminar organized by the [Milton Erickson Institut Berlin](#), entitled “Deep Democracy in Organizations and the Public Space.” Some participants were from the world of organizational development and citizen empowerment, and others had a background in psychology or personal growth. This was a three day seminar. On the second day, the group decided to focus on the East West Conflict.

Negotiating the Theme

The decision to focus on that theme did not come easily. The same instant that the topic was suggested, a participant stood up and said he believed that the East West issue was no longer present in Germany. The East West issue, he argued, was around class and other issues. These same issues were present in other countries as well, but German history added spice to an otherwise boring topic; both the national and international press

⁴ A German term referring to the restitution of the war crimes - and the Vergangenheitsbewältigung, another German term referring to the collective process of dealing with the guilt and wrongdoings of the Holocaust

could make a big deal of the East West collaboration. “Why work on it and further support this conspiracy”, he challenged.

Another participant supported him. “The problem with us Germans is our national identity”, she claimed. “While others have a country that they can be proud of, we are ashamed to be Germans. Come to the US, and the general feeling is, ‘the US is great, come be American with us, join us here in this wonderful American experience.’ If you come to Germany, the feeling is more like, ‘sorry that we are Germans. If you can overlook that fact, you might be able to have a somewhat good time here.’ We have to work on how to become more proud of our identity.”

There was diversity among the group. Others believed that there were serious issues that needed to be worked on, and they wanted to focus on the topic. Finally, a decision was made to flip a coin between the East West Issue and German identity, and the coin favored the East West issue.

The Opening; Praising Past Achievements

As the group process opened, some participants began right away by praising what has already been achieved in relation to this issue. A woman spoke out about having enjoyed walking under the Brandenburger Tor⁵ the previous day during the lunch break. The woman talked very authentically about the relief she felt when the wall first came down



at the possibility of enjoying the freedom to walk through the gate and to go wherever she wanted. Fifteen years later, she said, she still loves it, and appreciates the experience every time she gets a chance to walk there. She added that she does hear through talking to the cabbies that there is tension and resentment between East West, however she wanted to particularly emphasize the amount that has been achieved in this regard.

Other participants agreed and added their sentiments about how wonderful it is to now be able to connect. One man spoke about the experience of growing up on the East German border, and the predominating feeling during his entire youth that there would never be a possibility to cross the boundaries, or to connect with the relatives on the other side. He was very moved by the fact that this is now possible.

Another woman reiterated this sentiment, acknowledging the achievement and the work and effort that brought about the change. She said that there is nothing to complain about. “Look at us now. We are in a great place here in this wonderful hotel, enjoying so many privileges, we should be thankful and stop whining.”

⁵ The Brandenburger Tor has more symbolic value than just about any other building in German history. Built in the 18th century, it is the last city gate of Berlin still intact and remaining closed because of the wall. In the beginning of the eighties, Richard von Weizsaecker said, “the German question is open as long as the Brandenburger Tor is closed.”

Conflict Emerges

This statement created a polarity and catalyzed a response from the other side:

“It's because you are a rich Wessie”, someone interjected, “or you couldn't afford to be at this seminar.” “Yes”, another person chimed in, “you came and used us. You come into the East and start up companies and buy real estate. You hire cheap manual labor and blue collar workers from us, but then the better jobs - the executive and leadership positions - go to Wessies that you import. We had hoped that we could develop together, but instead we are being exploited, and you are thriving even more.”

“Thriving even more!!!!” a West German person screamed on the other side. “Thriving even more!!! When my neighbor in West Germany remodels his house, he uses East German contractors who undercut all of our contractors by an unbeatable margin. We are forced to watch our own people go without work, while you guys bring in your cheap labor and live well on our account.”

Another person answered from the other side, seething: “Obviously, you have no clue about what is going on, or you would know that in many areas we have an unemployment rate of 80 %. You have taken away not only our employment, but also our sense of pride and our identity.”

“And home” someone else added. “Where I spent my childhood, there was a smell that was home. In the midst of all the problems, we had a sense of cohesion and belonging together, which is now gone.”

“Oh no”, replied a person on the other side, “You called us and we came. In the beginning, I was open and liberal, and wanted your integration. I live in Berlin, and your stupid East German bureaucracy attitude has ruined the schools in the area that I live. It's the Ossies with their attitudes that has brought Germany economically to the crises that it is facing now.”

In a tone of furious sarcasm, another person came back, “Oh yes, that's exactly like the rumor that the Jews are responsible for wanting to take over the world financial markets. You guys are bunch of fascists, that is all there is to it.”

“I was a progressive socialist”, someone answers, “but now after all of this, it's true, I sometimes find myself on the side of the fascists who want the Ossies limited.”

Up to this point, the arguments had been flying back and forth. Everyone was trying to get an opinion in. The temperature had risen substantially and several people seemed to have become very agitated. The detached, logical, linear atmosphere that had been present around the question of, “is there an issue, isn't there an issue”, laid the ground for a dramatic shift; “o.k., now you wanted to talk about it, let me tell you how it really is.”

A Turning Point

A woman now came forward. Although ostensibly she was playing a role that she sensed in the field, the urgency with which she spoke stopped the back and forth of opinions. She said: "We tried so hard. We did everything to make the past go away. On the Potsdamer Platz there used to be only Wall and barbwire. Now there is an ice rink and a movie theatre. We tried so hard to make the past go away, to make it all look pretty. If this kind of talk comes up, I want to make it go away. I was one of the people who said let's not focus on the East West issue, it doesn't really exist – because if we focus on it, we don't appreciate all the effort it took to make it all go away. But now that we are talking about it, let's go slower and deeper with it."



Potsdamer Platz then and now

Many of us were moved by how she spoke, and we began to focus on what one side had to say: "Although I want to make the past go away, I notice at the same time that in spite of all my efforts, in a strange way I miss the past. Before we had no luxury, and we were oppressed, but we all had each other. I had an education, but now suddenly my East German education is worth nothing. I had a somewhat orderly and predictable life before, and some strange sense of security, which is now gone. We who grew up in the East lost everything, and paid for you guys over and over again. First, we paid your moral debt from your past, living with the Russians for years.⁶ Now you are coming and saying that you are paying for us to be reintegrated. We have close to 300,000 people unemployed in Brandenburg (Land Brandenburg: the region around Berlin.) You are talking facilitation and system thinking. All we know is we are in dire straits. We pay the price for your unification and on top of that are being cursed as the stupid Ossies.

One the other side, some answered angrily; "You wanted that. Did you forget, we practically had to lock you all up to avoid your coming over here (*allusion to the Berlin wall*). You couldn't wait to leave your paradise and come over to us and consume. You showed no solidarity with our own people but took advantage of all the western products. You called us and we came and now you complain."

⁶ The person is alluding to the time after the war. After World War II ended, Germany was occupied by the four victory powers. However, the first gaps between the 4 allies became visible with the first and also the last free elections of the city council in post-war Berlin on 10/20/1946. The results which granted the SED merely 20% of the votes did not match the high expectations that it would be the favorite of the "Ostzone". Following the unification of the western sectors in an economic federation called "Trizone", the USSR left the control council. This event marked the beginning of the Cold War in Berlin. In the view of the speaker, the East Germans had to suffer the Russian oppression as payment for the war crimes of the whole of Germany. Unlike the West Germans, who profited from the US Marshall plan and reached economic and democratic independence, their Eastern cousins had to sit out the "punishment" for all.

The First Temporary Resolution; Finding Home

There was a moment of silence in the midst of the heated argument. The opposing side became quiet. The facilitator picked up this change in tone and asked this side to speak to the silence before searching for another comeback.

Out of this awkward silence, one of the East Germans spoke quietly: “Yes, we wanted that, but we didn't know the price we were going to have to pay for it. We gave it all up, spat on what we had, and then only realized what was good about it when we had lost it. We didn't know how hard it would be to relate.”

Now on the West German side, some people had tears in their eyes. “Me too”, answered another soft voice. “I had no idea how hard it would be, and I partially hoped that you would bring cohesion and national pride. We had luxury, but we were disjointed and had no national identity. We hoped we could find our common German roots and find an identity that we could finally be proud of. But then it all happened so fast that we never got to notice it. We should have learned from you that at times, community can be better than profit, and social thinking is important. We should have learned from you.”

“Well”, replied the Ossies, “Your stuff is better, your lifestyle is more fun, and who wants to learn from losers? We were obviously the losers, and therefore we should learn from you.”

With this clear statement of the rank difference came an ominous silence. Out of this silence came the soft voice of another woman; “My family came here just before the wall came down. They had left everything behind and tried to create a new existence. They never succeeded. We moved around like nomads, always on the move, and always looking for a place to settle. I grew up without a home in the West and without a home in the East. I would have given everything to belong to something, to have a home.” Other voices shared the same sentiments of being bound to both sides, and feeling the need to now make a home on both.

An Additional Upheaval; Where are the Perpetrators?

Everyone was quiet and touched. All could relate to the feeling of belonging to a place, being proud of your origins, and having an identity that guarantees a place on the planet. At that moment we were united as one in the knowing that we had all given up different things in the hope of realizing a high dream. In the recognition of our collective need to be one with others, we were momentarily united. It was a special moment, in which many people felt close, when a man burst out:

“Wait a moment, this is getting too peaceful for me. I have a major issue that is not resolved yet. Where did all the perpetrators go? Where did the people go who shot the refugees on the Wall?⁷ My uncle fled, but they kept one of his kids back in the last

⁷ Between the August 13th, 1961 when the Berlin Wall was erected, and November 9th, 1989, 255 people were killed in the attempt to cross the wall.

moment. Where is the person now, who kept this kid back? Now you are all victims of oppression, but where are the perpetrators?"

Someone shouted from behind: "And you, how did you make your money during that time? Where you always following the law, and never did anything wrong?"

"Not by a far cry", that man answered, "but this is not what I am talking about. Tell us, which one of you was a perpetrator?"

On the Eastern Side, someone said: "Don't talk to us about confessing these kinds of things. We will start to talk about our stuff if some of you come forward and admit that your relatives were involved in the holocaust."

The man shouted back angrily: "Don't give me this bullshit. Now you act like we were the Nazis and you were the antifascists. You had as many people involved in Nazi crimes as we did. This is one thing we have to deal with together."

Finally from the Wessie side emerged another voice: "We would like to admit where we were wrong, but we don't know how. Can someone on your side start?"

The Path to a Temporary Resolution; Discovering One-ness

In the midst of this standoff, an amazing woman came forward. With a trembling voice, she stated: "I was perpetrator and victim. I was shifting back and forth, and still today I find myself torn between these roles. I learned as a child that it is fun to direct others and push them around. I was in a position as a youth that I had power from the system. On the one hand, I thought that this was morally ok, since I believed in the system and liked it. Yet at times I secretly wondered if this meant that if I would have grown up in Nazi Germany, I would have been part of the Hitler Jugend. But I never dared to ask the question out loud", she said, now crying. "I enjoyed being powerful."

A woman from the West German side answered. "I can understand that. We had a grandfather who was called the family tyrant, and we were not allowed to protest or show our anger. At the same time, I realized that I was completely dominating my sports club and pushing everyone around. I loved it."

There was total silence in the room. The two people speaking so openly and directly about their love for power, their self-hate for liking it, and their resentment for being on the receiving end of it, transformed all of the faces. Tears were present everywhere. There was not a person in the room who didn't recognize her or him self in this process. One person stated that the need for power and the difficulty of dealing with it is an experience that unites us all. There was nothing left to say for the moment. At this point, lines of separation had disappeared. There were no more East and no more West Germans, no more victims and no more oppressors - only human beings, united in their struggle to come to terms with their historic fates and personal sufferings.

Spontaneously, one person held the hand of his neighbor, and spontaneously, others followed. Silently we stood in a circle, for the moment, as One.

Follow-up Exercise

After the break, the facilitators gave the participants the following exercise.

- a) Remember a time when you were at the receiving end of someone or something powerful. Note the energy connected to it and make a hand movement that expresses that energy.
- b) Is there a way of walking that expresses this hand movement/energy?
- c) Take a few steps in a way that represents that power/force that you were a victim of, and think of an area of your life in which you can use that power creatively.