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**“...and then we said, man, it can’t be true that it’s all over!” An Ethnography of Communication of an East German Commemorative Community. PhD Project.<sup>1</sup>**

In June 1974, delegates of former COMECON member states<sup>2</sup> signed the general agreement on economic collaboration to tap natural gas resources near Orenburg in the Soviet Union. This case study is concerned with current communicative practices of former GDR contract workers and delegates of the FDJ<sup>3</sup> who were involved in the construction of a transnational pipeline in the former Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. For many years two *Trassenvereine* (pipeline commemorative associations), founded by former pipeline workers, have developed cultural practices leading to a shared group identity. Negotiating the past at diverse communicative events, former pipeline employees constitute a vivid narrative community. Inside the communicative infrastructure of the group, a variety of topics are addressed such as career paths after the breakdown of socialism, the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine, transformations in East Germany after the *Wende* in 1989, and their work and life in the Soviet Union to name only a random selection.

Building upon the ethnography of communication the project raises the question of which technical, biographical, socio-cultural and political features and circumstances have had an impact on the formation, maintenance and segmentation of the community of former GDR pipeline workers since the mid 1990s. The study focusses on social and cultural practices to cope with the process of social change and to establish meaningful linkages between the socialist past and the transforming respectively transformed East-German society. The case study is located within the social sciences, yet the findings have to be contextualised historically.

**The ideological entanglement of an economic venture: pipeline builders as GDR’s labour heroes.**

The first pipeline section was built between 1974 and 1978 in the Ukraine. This section was named “Drushba-Trasse”, a combination of the Russian word for friendship and an explicitly East German term for pipeline. A second pipeline section starting in the Ural Mountains near the city of Perm was built between 1982 and 1993. Altogether, approximately 15,000 mostly young, male workers were mobilized<sup>4</sup> and worked in the Soviet Union for up to 10 years. People applied voluntarily for a contract within the framework of pipeline construction that also included affiliated obligations such as the development of the general infrastructure and dwelling places along the pipeline for the future Soviet operators.

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<sup>1</sup> Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Jörg Bergmann (Bielefeld University).

<sup>2</sup> The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, the People’s Republic of Bulgaria, the German Democratic Republic, the People’s Republic of Poland, the People’s Republic of Hungary and the Soviet Union.

<sup>3</sup> *Freie Deutsche Jugend* (Free German Youth), official youth organisation in the GDR.

<sup>4</sup> Katharina Belwe: Zentrales Jugendobjekt der FDJ “Erdgastrasse”, Bonn, Gesamtdeutsches Institut, Bundesanstalt für Gesamtdeutsche Aufgaben, 1983. (Analysen und Berichte. 20/1983).

The whole project was officially realised under the patronage of the FDJ. For this reason the economic venture was declared a “Youth Project”<sup>5</sup> by Klaus Siebold, Minister of Coal mining and Energy in the SED, the East German ruling party. Hence, the majority of the pipeline workers were FDJ members who were “delegated” to the pipeline project by their home factories. Older employees also came, mainly experienced construction supervisors and engineers but also doctors, economists and police officers. In general, these workers were either members of the SED or were functionaries of the SED, which had a permanent office at the construction sites.

Most of the former pipeline workers state today that they applied for a job with the venture because of the alluring prospects of high earnings, access to rare consumer goods by means of an exclusive shopping catalogue (*GENEX*) or simply the allocation of an apartment or university admission. They also refer to the fact that the “Youth Project” offered them the opportunity to see another country and to experience a great adventure. Even if all this was subjectively true, it is also obvious that it was nearly impossible to escape from the symbolic and ritual performance of the socialist mass organisations. It can be assumed that for many of them, their individual motives clashed with the elite’s interests, whereas others undoubtedly were convinced of the political and ideological principles of the FDJ and the SED.

The transnational economic operation was set in an all-embracing ideological campaign launched by the SED and carried out by its sub-institutions. The pipeline construction was declared to be the “Economic Event of the Century” that could provide a substantial technical basis for a joint communist future<sup>6</sup> and to bring about world peace by standing up to the imperialist USA and at the same time integrating West Germany into the venture.<sup>7</sup> Given the fact that the political elites of the GDR conceived of and discursively constructed the East German state as a labour state, the young “hero worker”<sup>8</sup> constituted the core of this campaign. Pipeline-builders were invited by school classes and factory brigades to report on their lives and work in the “brother-state”, and individual pipeline workers or whole brigades were awarded a range of national honours by the head of state, Erich Honecker.<sup>9</sup> While the political propaganda of the 1970s and 1980s in the GDR generally proved to be lacking in appropriate heroes for the cause<sup>10</sup>, pipeline builders served the media as protagonists in the promotion of socialism. Thus, the economic venture was turned into an issue which caught the headlines in the East German media, a campaign synchronized on behalf of the SED and FDJ, and the young pipeline workers were put centre stage.<sup>11</sup> Within the course of

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<sup>5</sup> From the very foundation of the FDJ, the organisation was also conceptualised as an economic reserve at the Socialist Party’s disposal for mobilisation in order to undertake economic and constructional ventures. (Ulrich Mähler: *FDJ 1946-1989*, Erfurt, Landeszentrale für Politische Bildung Thüringen, 2001; Alan McDougall: *Youth Politics in East Germany. The Free German Youth movement 1946-1968*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Gerd Eggers, Horst Matthies, Margarete Neumann, Ulrich Völker: *Abenteuer Trasse*, Berlin (Ost), Verlag Neues Leben, 1978, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Zentralrat der FDJ (ed.): *Das Bauwerk des Jahrhunderts*, Berlin (Ost), Verlag Neues Leben, 1985, p. 167.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Sampson: Is there an Anthropology of Socialism? In: *Anthropology Today* 7 (1991), 5, pp. 16-19.

<sup>9</sup> Zentralrat der FDJ: *Das Bauwerk des Jahrhunderts*, p. 215.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Rainer Gries, Silke Satjukow: *Wir sind Helden. Utopie und Alltag im Sozialismus*, Erfurt, Landeszentrale für Politische Bildung Thüringen, 2008, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Regarding the political discourse as well as the social and economic organisation, the railway project *Baikalo-Amurskaia Magistral’ (BAM)* across Siberia in the years 1974-1984 was a comparably outstanding flagship construction in the former Eastern Bloc. Cf. Victor Mote: *BAM, Boom, Bust. Analysis of a Railway’s Past, Present, and Future*. In: *Soviet Geography* (1990), 31, pp. 321-331; Christopher J. Ward: *Brezhnev’s Folly. The Building of BAM and Late Soviet Socialism*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009 (Pitt Series in Russian and Eastern European Studies).

Germany's unification the venture had been taken over by West German companies and was finally completed in 1993.<sup>12</sup>

### Research Design

Since the mid 1990s former pipeline workers have regularly met in small private circles. In September 1997, the core of that initial group founded the first officially registered association, a few years later a second association was registered.<sup>13</sup> Today, a vivid culture of remembrance exists among former pipeline workers. Memory of the pipeline construction does not remain on a private oral level. Instead, it is kept alive by *Trassenvereine* whose members organise reunions, maintain web pages, provide a discussion forum and run a small museum. Moreover, a few pipeline workers have published memoirs and one of them co-directed a documentary film. Last but not least, the historical event is mentioned on numerous web pages, including Wikipedia and YouTube.

The community of former pipeline workers sets itself apart from an "out-group"<sup>14</sup> by strong reference to a shared biographical event. For many former pipeline employees, their period of life and work in the former Soviet Union represents one of the key points of their lives, and thus still connects them to other people who share the same life experience.

Combining biographical approaches with the perspective of the ethnography of communication, this project traces the contexts and linguistic devices that constitute the "network specific discourse conventions"<sup>15</sup> within the process of community building since the 1990s until today.

The data corpus comprises of biographical narrative interviews, web pages, internet forums that have been maintained since the year 2000, participant observations and informal conversations at reunions as well as telephone conversations. The study heavily relies on "natural data", i.e. data that were generated without the influence of a researcher, for example web pages and Internet forums. With regard to the history of the associations since the mid 1990s it can be safely said that the increasing spread of internet access has had a significant impact on the emergence of the community. Only by means of the World Wide Web and by establishing corresponding communicative strategies have former pipeline builders been able to bridge geographical distances between a range of different places of residence. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the occupation of virtual spaces has enabled former pipeline workers to reclaim publicity. Former pipeline employees notably struggle with an immense loss of prestige that they once enjoyed on an ideological as well as on a material level. Likewise, "many marginalized groups of identity formation have been re-appropriating the technological spaces of expression such as [...] the internet to disseminate their own knowledge and specificities"<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, the West German energy company *Ruhrgas AG*, known as *Eon Ruhrgas* today, had signed a contract as early as 1970 with the Soviet state, according to which the company delivered the pipes for the venture and obtained gas in exchange.

<sup>13</sup> The splitting up of the community into two associations reflects the structure of the economic event. The association *Erdgastrasse e.V.* targets former employees of the state owned companies that were in charge of the implementation of the affiliated duties of the venture, i.e. the development of the general infrastructure and dwelling places along the pipeline. The association *Erdgastrasse-LT e.V.* addresses to former employees of those companies that were in charge for the construction of the pipeline as such.

<sup>14</sup> John J. Gumperz: *Discourse Strategies*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Boulou E. de B'éri: *The New Practices of Memory. The Case of Atanarjuat and Indigenous Peoples Council of Biocolonialism*, URL <http://mokk.bme.hu/centre/conferences/reactivism/submissions/ebanda>. [last consulted: 01.04.2009].

The notion of biography used in this study is based on three essential premises: First, life courses have to be distinguished from biographies.<sup>17</sup> Second, biographies are inextricably linked with memory and retrospective interpretations emerging from socio-cultural exchanges, i.e. communication.<sup>18</sup> Third, biographical research primarily performs narrative analysis.<sup>19</sup> Correspondingly, enquiry into biographical data deals with accounts that convey “pragmatic knowledge” constructed through “ongoing time-space specific encounters with other (...) actors and bodies of knowledge”.<sup>20</sup>

The ethnography of communication “looks at communication from the standpoint of interest of a community itself” and considers “its members as sources of shared knowledge and insight.”<sup>21</sup> It is based on the premise that every community has developed a set of “linguistically distinguishable settings”<sup>22</sup> that allow a conclusion to be reached about the structures of the group and the social function of their communicative performance, in addition to the underlying social norms and needs. Thus, the ethnography of communication investigates the relation between activities of speech and social life by aiming at a “theory of language use”<sup>23</sup>. In addition, it assumes that shared linguistic performances of a community or society are historically shaped. Communities are distinguished as to styles of speaking that have to be interpreted in relation to their history.<sup>24</sup> Concerning the history of linguistic competences, facets of social change, which frequently occur with the expansion of new or alien practices of speaking, are of special interest. Social transformations create a climate in which linguistic routines, conventions and imprints lose their appropriateness<sup>25</sup> and consequently ought to be adjusted. This is especially true if transitions follow a radical historical break, as in 1989. Philologists and linguists have comprehensively investigated the relationship between semantic congruence and conflict of post 1989 East German.<sup>26</sup> However the connection between language use and social cooperation has been commonly overlooked.

In his work, linguist anthropologist Dell Hymes clarified that the basic unit of analysis is a community rather than a language. Accordingly, language is not taken as a linguistic system in its own right but as a social institution. Nonetheless, the study of linguistic features goes beyond a mere content analysis of accounts sought to gain insight into the structural and

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Gabriele Rosenthal: *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte. Gestalt und Struktur biographischer Selbstbeschreibungen*, Frankfurt a.M., Campus Verlag, 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Harald Welzer: *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis. Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*, München, Beck, 2002, p. 222.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Cathrine Kohler Riessmann: *Narrative Analysis*. Newbury Park-London-New Dehli, Sage Publications, 1993. (*Qualitative Research Methods*. 30).

<sup>20</sup> Graham Gardner: *Unreliable Memories and other Contingencies. Problems with Biographical Knowledge*. In: *Qualitative Research* 1 (2001), 2, pp. 185-204.

<sup>21</sup> Dell H. Hymes: *Foundations in Sociolinguistics. An Ethnographic Approach*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> John J. Gumperz, *Discourse Strategies*, p. 43.

<sup>23</sup> Dell H. Hymes: *Models of Interaction of Language and Social Life*. In John J. Gumperz, Dell H. Hymes (eds.): *Directions in Sociolinguistics*, New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972, pp. 35-71.

<sup>24</sup> Dell H. Hymes, Florian Coulmas: *Soziolinguistik. Zur Ethnographie der Kommunikation*. Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1979, p. 177.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Patrick Stevenson: *Language and German Disunity. A Sociolinguistic History of East and West in Germany 1945-2000*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002; Manfred W. Hellmann, Marianne Schröder (eds.): *Sprache und Kommunikation in Deutschland Ost und West*, Hildesheim, Olms, 2008. (*Germanistische Linguistik*. 192-194); Armin Burkhardt, K. Peter Fritsche (eds.): *Sprache im Umbruch. Politischer Sprachwandel im Zeichen von „Wende“ und „Vereinigung“*, Berlin-New York, de Gruyter, 1992 (*Sprache, Politik, Öffentlichkeit*, 1); Ulla Fix, Dagmar Barth (eds.): *Sprachbiographien. Sprache und Sprachgebrauch vor und nach der Wende von 1989 im Erinnern und Erleben von Zeitzeugen aus der DDR. Inhalte und Analysen narrativ-diskursiver Interviews*, Frankfurt am Main, Lang, 2000. (*Leipziger Arbeiten zur Sprach- und Kommunikationsgeschichte*. 7).

social characteristics of the field. Rather, communicative features such as utilization of codes, genres, channels as well as conventions in respect of settings and participants are supposed to be an essential component of social understanding, negotiation, and cooperation<sup>27</sup>. Thus, the exploration of the field is guided by a systematic analysis of the linguistic repertoire of the community. Conventionalised idiomatic expressions or distinctive syntactical structures not only refer to self-image or worldviews but also often index social institutions or characteristic spaces of social cooperation. Therefore, Hymes described the ethnography of communication as “a semantic analysis embedded in ethnography”.<sup>28</sup>

The purpose of the case study is to discern which reality of the GDR past in general and the economic venture of pipeline construction in particular is created and propagated through diverse communicative means. Thus the overriding research question aims at the logic behind the production of historical, social and political knowledge in transition societies in addition to related concepts and structures of agency.

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<sup>27</sup> Dell H. Hymes, Florian Coulmas: Soziolinguistik, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 35.