From Old to New Inequalities: The East-West Gap in Post-Unification German Higher Education

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I. Introduction

On October 3, 2025, Germany celebrated its 35th Day of German Unity. To mark the country's national holiday, political leaders usually emphasize the successful integration of East Germany – the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) – and West Germany since their reunification in 1990. In the Western German city of Saarbrücken, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz (CDU) declared that "German unity has been a success," a sentiment he said was shared by the country's European neighbors. Nevertheless, he also reflected on "mutual misunderstandings," "experiences of neglect," and a "devaluation of East German biographies." One of his examples was the relative absence of East Germans in leadership positions despite the fact that East Germans make up 20 percent of the population. This imbalance had fostered feelings of unequal treatment and West German dominance. Merz called for "a new unity in our country" through a "joint effort" in view of the growing challenges posed by autocratic regimes, economic structural change, and the ongoing digital revolution.[1]

1 "Der Staat, das sind wir alle," speech by Federal Chancellor Friedrich Merz at the German Unity Day ceremony on October 3, 2025, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/bundeskanzler-merz-zum-tag-der-deutschen-einheit-2387076, accessed March 2, 2026. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.

Bulletin of the German Historical Institute 78 (Fall 2026): 107-132
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Figure 1. German Federal Minister for Research, Technology, and Space Dorothee Bär (CSU, second from left) and Thuringia's Minister-President Mario Voigt (CDU, left) visit the Fraunhofer Institute for Ceramic Technologies and Systems in Hermsdorf, Thuringia, March 2026. Photo: Steffen Prößdorf, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Just a few weeks after Merz's appeal for unity, however, the federal government cancelled a previously approved innovation hub in Eastern Germany, the *Deutsche Agentur für Transfer und Innovation* or DATI [German Agency for Transfer and Innovation], which was supposed to be established in Erfurt, the capital of Thuringia, by 2029. With the explicit aim to promote innovation in a structurally disadvantaged region, the previous federal government had deliberately chosen an East German location in 2022. At the end of October 2025, however, Federal Minister of Research, Technology and Space, Dorothee Bär (CSU) announced that this project "would not be pursued further."[2] The originally earmarked €700 million was apparently needed elsewhere. East German members of the Bundestag and representatives of the city of Erfurt denounced the decision. They said that the rejection showed "once again that the East pays the price when things get tight in Berlin."[3]

Although the Erfurt DATI debate is only one example, it illustrates how the relationship between Eastern and Western Germany is often discussed. Research on the years since reunification in 1990, the so-called transformation period, has highlighted the unequal social impact of reunification on East and West Germans. Yet, historical research is still only beginning to assess how the unification process and the implementation of West German laws and procedures have affected individual social groups.

The impact of the unification process on academia, for instance, has become an increasingly important subject of historical research since archival access restrictions for documents from this time period expired in the 2020s.[4] Referring to East German professors, recent research speaks of "forgotten inequalities" that have led to

2 Steffen Winter, "Wie Dorothee Bär pünktlich zum Tag der Deutschen Einheit den Osten in Wut versetzte," *Der Spiegel*, October 24, 2025, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/forschung-dorothee-baer-stoppt-innovationsagentur-in-erfurt-wut-im-osten-a-d98c0193-9257-4dcd-a09c-8a328225f324, accessed March 2, 2026.

3 Ibid.

4 Mitchell G. Ash, "Higher Education in the United States and Europe since 1945. Multiple Transformations and the Current Crisis," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 77 (Spring 2026): 59–90, here 73–80.

the systematic disadvantaging of East Germans in German society as a whole.[5] Today, an East-West asymmetry is particularly evident in the German academic system and in the personnel structure at German universities. When sociologist Julia Reuter and her co-authors published a book about biographical success stories titled *Vom Arbeiterkind zur Professur* [From Working-class Child to Professor] in 2020, it did not contain a single East German biography.[6] Professors who were born in the GDR or on the territory of the former GDR represent a minority in the German academic system. East German academics are underrepresented in academic leadership positions compared to their West German colleagues.[7] In an updated 2025 study, the German Center for Higher Education Development (CHE) found that 61 university rectors were born in Western Germany, while only five stated that they were from Eastern Germany.[8] With only around 7.5 percent of elite university positions held by scholars who were born in the GDR or grew up in Eastern German states after 1990, they are significantly underrepresented relative to their share of the population. The sociologist Raj Kollmorgen argues that the terms "East German" and "academic elite" appear as mutually exclusive to the German public.[9]

The background to this East-West gap is the post-socialist change in leadership at Eastern German institutions in the 1990s. At universities, this process primarily affected academics in disciplines that were subject to strict state control and high pressure to legitimize party-political ideology during the GDR era. In subjects such as philosophy, history, economics, cultural studies, and the humanities in general, which were known to be highly ideological due to the large number of SED party members among teaching staff and the systematic infiltration of these disciplines by the Ministry for State Security (MfS), a comprehensive personnel restructuring took place in the wake of German reunification. Due to the political and structural reorganization of these subjects based on the Western model, there was an urgent need for personnel with the necessary knowledge and experience in the West German system. In this comprehensive process, numerous professors at East German universities were replaced after 1990. Appointment committees

5 Laura Behrmann, Markus Gamper, and Hanna Haag, eds., *Vergessene Ungleichheiten. Biographische Erzählungen ostdeutscher Professor*innen* (Bielefeld, 2024).

6 Julia Reuter et al., eds., *Vom Arbeiterkind zur Professur. Sozialer Aufstieg in der Wissenschaft. Autobiographische Notizen und soziobiographische Analysen* (Bielefeld, 2020).

7 Behrmann, Gamper, and Haag, *Vergessene Ungleichheiten*, 11–16.

8 Centrum für Hochschulentwicklung, DataCHECK 5/2025, Hochschulleitungen in Deutschland Update 2025, https://hochschuldaten.che.de/hochschulleitungen-in-deutschland-update-2025, accessed March 3, 2026.

9 Raj Kollmorgen, "Ostdeutsche Wissenschaftselite – noch immer ein Oxymoron?," in Behrmann, Gamper, and Haag, *Vergessene Ungleichheiten*, 41–73.

were established to assess the suitability of candidates following a political and academic review. In the humanities in particular, these committees were composed almost exclusively of West German experts.[10]

This article addresses the question to what extent the history of the GDR and the process of adaptation to the West German system after 1989/90 led to the production of new social inequalities. It addresses continuities and ruptures and applies the concept of a "long history of the *Wende*."[11] According to this notion, coined by the historian Kerstin Brückweh, change did not begin with the upheavals of 1989/90 but emerged from longer lines of development. Against this background, the first section of this article examines the relationship between higher education and social inequality in the GDR in order to understand the preconditions for the process of transformation. It then looks at the long attempt to adapt to the West German system, focusing on student financing, in order to finally examine the question of the production of new inequalities on the basis of academic staff and developments in various subjects.

II. From Counter-Privileging to Socialist Elitism

In the "real, existing socialism" [*real existierender Sozialismus*] that the GDR claimed to offer, education was highly ideological. The political leadership propagated an image of the GDR as a workers' and farmers' state in which a newly formed socialist intelligentsia was to overcome the traditional connection between education and social origin. Particularly during the reconstruction phase in the 1950s, there were political efforts to break the educational monopoly of the middle classes and to provide greater support to less affluent groups.[12] With this form of countering existing privileges, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) proclaimed the goal of creating equal opportunities for workers and farmers to access higher education. It also made efforts to achieve gender equity by actively integrating women into higher education, which distinguished the GDR from West Germany. While this integration

10 A prominent example is the restructuring of the history department at Humboldt University in Berlin; see Krijn Thijs, "Die „Ritter-Kommission" und ihre Mitglieder. Asymmetrische Erneuerungspraktiken am Geschichtsinstitut der Humboldt-Universität (1991–1993)," in Franziska Bomski, ed., *Inventur. Der Personalumbau in den ostdeutschen Wissenschaften nach 1989* (Halle-Wittenberg, 2024).

11 Kerstin Brückweh, Clemens Villinger, and Kathrin Zöller, eds., *Die lange Geschichte der "Wende". Geschichtswissenschaft im Dialog* (Berlin, 2020).

12 John Connelly, *Captive University. The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945–1956* (Chapel Hill/London, 2000).

was successful in terms of raising the number of female students and research assistants, women still encountered a glass ceiling at the professorial and leadership levels.[13]

The ideological motive behind counter-privileging measures was to prevent the self-reproduction and recruitment of the educated middle classes in favor of a larger working-class enrollment. In the long term, the SED hoped that this policy would produce loyal, well-trained cadres from working-class backgrounds in the leadership levels of administration, law, business, and science.[14] The most important instrument of this project was a type of preparatory school called "*Arbeiter- und Bauernfakultäten*" (ABF) [Workers' and Farmers' Faculties]. These institutions, which were affiliated with universities but remained independent, were intended to enable educationally disadvantaged groups to obtain their high school diplomas, thus allowing them to attend university. An important prerequisite for this was the political reliability of the applicants. Potential students were therefore obliged to undergo politically charged aptitude tests to determine their suitability for university studies.[15]

The educational historian Ingrid Miethe characterized this development as a "major educational policy experiment aimed at reducing social inequality."[16] The SED's goal was far from altruistic, however. Rather, this policy of counter-privileging served as a means to an end in the party's political agenda.[17] In terms of content, the ABF courses were broadly based and thus resembled the general education provided in the extended secondary schools (EOS), the GDR high schools, which were the prerequisite for admission to academic studies. The subjects ranged from biology, physics, and mathematics to German and Russian. Specialization in a particular subject only took place at the beginning of university studies after successful completion of the preparatory schools. So-called Marxist-Leninist teaching, which introduced students to key communist concepts such as dialectical and historical materialism, formed an integral part of higher education and was also included in the curriculum at the workers' and farmers' faculties.

13 Gunilla Budde, *Frauen der Intelligenz. Akademikerinnen in der DDR 1945 bis 1975* (Göttingen, 2003).

14 Ingrid Miethe, *Bildung und soziale Ungleichheit in der DDR. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer gegenprivilegierenden Bildungspolitik* (Opladen, 2007), 12; Peer Pasternack, "Das Hochschulwesen," in Jakob Benecke, ed., *Erziehungs- und Bildungsverhältnisse in der DDR* (Bad Heilbrunn, 2022), 270–290, here 277.

15 Guidelines for admission to the Workers' and Farmers' Faculties at universities and colleges in the GDR, dated March 29, 1950 (excerpt), Hochschulbestimmungen Nr. 10: Zulassungen zu den ABF / Ministerium für Volksbildung, Berlin 1950; Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, *Geist im Dienste der Macht. Hochschulpolitik in der SBZ/DDR 1945 bis 1961* (Berlin, 2003), 145.

16 Miethe, *Bildung und soziale Ungleichheit in der DDR*, 14.

17 Ibid., 337.



Figure 2. Study course at the Workers' and Farmers' Faculty of Dresden Technical University in the 1950s, TU Dresden archive, photo collection.

However, the children of workers and farmers were not necessarily actively involved in the SED's political agenda and did not always prove to be the loyal target group that the state leadership had hoped for. After only a few years, the policy of counter-privileging appeared inefficient and too expensive.[18] While the SED continued to publicly advocate the targeted promotion of working-class academics and exaggerated the proportion of workers' and farmers' children at universities in its official communications,[19] it actually turned away from its counter-privilege education policy at an early stage and once again recruited young academics from the middle classes.[20]

Even though there was a temporary de-bourgeoisification of professors in some academic fields and the rates of habilitation declined,[21] starting in the 1970s the self-reproduction of the academic intelligentsia increased once again. At the end of the GDR's existence, only 22 percent of students came from working-class and farming families, while 73 percent had parents with university degrees.[22] In fact, in the years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, East German universities were far more exclusive than their West German counterparts. In West Germany, academia had become more socially diverse since the late 1960s. The fact that the proportion of children of workers and farmers fell to the level of the 1940s in the GDR also meant that its universities developed into "socialist elite universities."[23] This completely contradicted the

18 Ibid., 338.

19 Peer Pasternack, *Das Hochschulwesen*, 284.

20 Vertrauliche Kollegiumsvorlage 2/8/54 zur politischen Lage an den ABF und über Maßnahmen zur Verbesserung der politischen und erzieherischen Arbeit. BArch, DR 3/I. Schicht/149, quoted from Ingrid Miethe, "Der Mythos von der Chancengleichheit. Die Bildungspolitik der DDR zwischen Gegenprivilegierung, Machtsicherung und Reproduktion von Ungleichheit," *Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat* (2007): 35–54, here 47.

21 Ralph Jessen, *Akademische Elite und kommunistische Diktatur, Die ostdeutsche Hochschullehrerschaft in der Ulbricht-Ära* (Göttingen, 1999).

22 Peer Pasternack, *Das Hochschulwesen*, 284.

23 Ralph Jessen, "Massenausbildung, Unterfinanzierung und Stagnation. Ost- und westdeutsche Universitäten in den siebziger und achtziger Jahren," in Michael Grüttner et al., eds., *Gebrochene Wissenschaftskulturen, Universität und Politik im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2010), 261–278.

political leadership's claim to ensure equal opportunities. Nevertheless, academic elitism secured the SED's position of power, which had increasingly focused on politically loyal circles since the 1970s and 1980s.

III. "Are We to Live in Tent Cities?" The Westernization of Student Finances

Although university enrollment in the GDR was reserved for a politically loyal elite and the coursework remained highly ideological, many East German students believed that their system was more socially just than West German academia. This perception resulted primarily from the social security provided by the state and from political propaganda. The GDR largely paid for the education and training of young people. An aspiration for a socially equitable society was reflected, at least officially, in the GDR's system of grants and scholarships. In the GDR, every student received a monthly scholarship of 200 East German marks, regardless of parental income, throughout the entire duration of study. The state provided further subsidies for rent, public transportation, and food. Bonuses were paid out for good academic results. Although these sums appear relatively low by today's standards, in a 1993 documentary two Berlin Student Council representatives recall that dormitory housing in the GDR cost 10 marks per month and a one-room apartment cost 30 marks.[24] The cost of living was therefore significantly lower than in West Germany, and a scholarship of 200 marks plus supplements sufficed for many. The SED's subsidy policy underscores that in socialist countries it was not the family but the state that was responsible for financing the education of children and young adults. This also meant that East German students lived rather independently of their parents. At the same time, the state's assumption of responsibility for schoolchildren and students was regularly staged in a publicity-effective manner.[25] However, as mentioned above, university education was reserved for a relatively small and exclusive group due to limited capacity and political admission criteria. Financial support thus functioned as a subsidy for the politically loyal.

24 Malte Sieber and Ronald Freytag, *Kinder des Systems. DDR-Studenten vor, um und nach dem Herbst '89* (Berlin, 1993), 162.

25 Ibid., 161f.

State support enabled East German students to complete their studies in a relatively short period of time. Unlike in West Germany, students in the GDR did not have to take on part-time jobs to support themselves. They could, however, be assigned to harvest crops or work in industrial jobs during the summer break. In West Germany, Willy Brandt's social-liberal government coalition had created an instrument for promoting equal opportunities with the 1971 Federal Training Assistance Act [*Bundesausbildungsförderungsgesetz*]. German students still receive financial support in accordance with this law today. Abbreviating the law's name, the subsidy is universally referred to as BAföG. The West German model for financing studies differed significantly from the GDR model in that it was based on individual eligibility. BAföG funding depended on parental income. It was not granted unconditionally to every student, as it was in the GDR. Also, BAföG rates were initially paid out as partial loans and therefore had to be partially repaid after graduation.

In West Germany, the situation changed with the new conservative administration led by Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU) in 1982. The economic crises of the 1970s and the steadily growing number of students had exacerbated systemic problems. During the negotiations to form a coalition government between Kohl's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), cutting BAföG funding was seen as a way to reduce the state's high spending. Following tough negotiations between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education, the coalition partners agreed to convert BAföG into an interest-free full loan starting in the summer of 1983. From then on, student loans in West Germany had to be repaid in full. This decision drew considerable criticism, particularly from education policymakers on the left wing of the governing parties and from the SPD, which publicly interpreted the cuts as a measure to reduce social welfare.[26] Funding was now also linked to a fixed standard period of study. If this was exceeded – for example, because the student had to work alongside their studies to cover the cost of living in metropolitan university cities such as Cologne, Munich, or Hamburg – their entitlement to BAföG funding was reduced or expired altogether.

26 Hendrik Böttcher, *Die Atempause. Das wirtschaftspolitische Sofortprogramm der Wende von 1982* (Berlin/Boston, 2023), 192–200.

Against this backdrop, the euphoria of the revolutionary autumn of 1989 gave way to concerns among East German students as early as spring 1990. The first free general election of the *Volkskammer*, the GDR parliament, on March 18, 1990, saw a landslide victory for the CDU-led multi-party "Alliance for Germany." The Alliance was a coalition between the East German CDU, the *Deutsche Soziale Union* (DSU), and the newly formed *Demokratischer Aufbruch* (Democratic Awakening, DA), whose shared political goal was German reunification. Their election victory resulted in the last *Volkskammer* of the GDR under the leadership of Lothar de Maizière (CDU) and set the course for rapid reunification – or, more precisely, the incorporation of the GDR into the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany. This process would bring with it the adoption of the West German economic and social system, including the introduction of the BAföG system to the GDR, tying students' eligibility for financial aid to their parents' income. A month before the *Volkskammer* elections, East German students were already pushing for an increase in financial aid due to rapid inflation following the fall of the Berlin Wall. With the prospect of unification, or at least a potential economic and social union between the GDR and the FRG with a common currency, many students felt that their financial security was fundamentally threatened. Not only was the future of basic scholarships for East German students uncertain, but dormitory rents and other living expenses were also gradually rising.[27]

In order to unite the students' interests and establish a legitimate representative body to deal with the GDR government, a National Student Council [*Republiksprecherrat*] was founded in March 1990 at a nationwide meeting of GDR students in Karl-Marx-Stadt (Chemnitz).[28] This council presented the students' demands for an increase in scholarships to the subsistence level and the provision of affordable dormitory housing to the GDR Ministry of Education and published the results of the meeting in *UnAufgefordert*, an independent student newspaper of Berlin's Humboldt University.[29] According to the report, Deputy Minister of Education Eberhard Kallenbach (NDPD) had assured the Council of Representatives that he would take the students' interests into account in government

27 "Die Ruhe vor dem Sturm," *UnAufgefordert. Unabhängige Zeitung von und für Studenten*, No. 5 & 6, February 29, 1990, 1.

28 "Republiksprecherrat der Studenten gebildet," *UnAufgefordert. Unabhängige Zeitung von und für Studenten*, No. 8, March 27, 1990, 10.

29 "Mehr Stip in Sicht? Neues aus dem Bildungsministerium," *UnAufgefordert. Unabhängige Zeitung von und für Studenten*, No. 9, April 10, 1990, 4.



Die Berliner Studentenzeitung

№14

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Endlich WIEDER Ansicht

Das Fragezeichen hat sich erledigt Foto: Kracheel

Das war's dann?

19.000 Studenten auf der Straße, eine Woche lang Mahnwache vor der Volkskammer, Resolutionen, Briefe an Abgeordnete, Gespräche mit Ministern - und am Ende: eine Entscheidung des Ministerrates, die weit hinter unseren Forderungen zurückbleibt. Und das gar nicht so sehr wegen der Höhe des Stipendiums: auf exakt 495,- Mark wäre es wohl niemandem angekommen. Vielmehr ist es das PRINZIP der Elternabhängigkeit, das nun per Dekret in der DDR (wieder) eingeführt wird.

Denn auch wenn es sich zunächst nur um eine vom Einkommen der Eltern abhängige Aufstockung des Grundstipendiums handelt, ist klar: Dies ist nur eine Übergangslösung, die Weichen für spätere Regelungen stellen soll, welche dann dem BaFöG immer ähnlicher sein werden. (Warum sollte man sich hier mehr Mühe geben als mit den „zig anderen einfach übernommenen Gesetzen...) Und ganz egal, wieviel Stip beim einzelnen Studenten letztlich ankommt: das PRINZIP schreibt fest, daß er noch lange nach Erreichen der Volljährigkeit seinen Eltern auf der Tasche liegt. Und das ist selbst dann, wenn man "vom Normalfall familiärer Beziehungen ausgeht"

(O-Ton Minister Meyer) - was man ja nicht tun muß - wohl nicht sehr angenehm und hat wohl auch kaum etwas mit dem Recht auf Emanzipation und Selbstbestimmung zu tun.

Was's das jetzt? Das Semester neigt sich, der Urlaub lockt, Massenaktionen sind nicht mehr drin, Streiks würden nur noch die eigenen Prüfungen treffen... Resignation ist verständlich, aber nicht angebracht. Immerhin haben unsere Aktionen nicht nur die Studentenschaft, sondern auch die Öffentlichkeit für das Thema sensibilisiert. Und: Neue Bedingungen erfordern neues Herangehen. Wenn die für den 21. Juni nach Berlin einberufene außerordentliche Konferenz der Studentenräte ein solches beriet, sollte sie auch über neue Bündnispartner nachdenken, mit denen man im Herbst neue, größere Aktionen starten kann. Unternehmer und Politiker basteln schon lange an gesamtdeutschen Lobbys - für ein Zusammengehen der Studenten in Ost und West ist es höchste Zeit. Nur so haben wir am Ende - und nicht nur gegen BaFöG - wirklich eine Chance.

MALER

Die Aktionswoche - Photos, S. 3,10
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Figure 3. *UnAufgefordert* No. 14, June 21, 1990. Title page.

policy. Specifically, this meant an increase in scholarships by 150 marks (to 350 marks) effective from June 1. However, timing became a political variable as this concession was a decision made by the outgoing government. With the *Volkskammer* election on March 18, the cards were reshuffled. Although Kallenbach recommended that his successors implement the scholarship increase, it was entirely unclear to what extent the new government would take this recommendation and the students' interests into account.[30]

30 Ibid.

To publicly reinforce their demands, East German students regularly wrote open letters to the new government of the GDR and encouraged their fellow students to write to politicians and university officials. One recipient of these letters was Hans Joachim Meyer, an adjunct professor of English at Humboldt University. In April 1990, Meyer became the GDR's new Minister of Education and Science. Following a student congress in Dresden, representatives pointed out to Meyer that the cost of living in the GDR had demonstrably risen in recent months while the basic stipend remained the same. The students did not feel their interests were represented

in the new government's policy and demanded an increase in the stipend.[31] Meyer addressed these demands by giving an exclusive interview to Berlin's leading student newspaper. In the interview, he affirmed his intention to enshrine student representation in law and to advocate for their interests politically. Yet he also reminded students that "I'm not the finance minister. I don't have the money; I have to get it."[32]

The student protest campaign culminated in an open letter to Lothar de Maizière, Prime Minister of the GDR, and Walter Romberg (SPD), the GDR's Minister of Finance. Mockingly, the student council of Berlin's Humboldt University announced that they would transfer a basic stipend of 215 marks each (including the Berlin supplement) to the ministers. For one month, Romberg and de Maizière should make do exclusively with this money, "so that their decision regarding the amount of the stipends is based on professional expertise and an intimate understanding of the situation."[33] To cushion the additional burden of high rent costs, both would be provided with a bed in a Berlin student dormitory for 10 marks. While provocative and satirical in tone, the letter demonstrates how urgent this situation was and how creatively student advocacy was organized and communicated during the unification process.

Yet the GDR economy was already in a state of decline at that time, resulting in a massive slump in tax revenues which left the state budget with hardly any resources for scholarships. Meyer therefore sought close coordination with the West German federal government in Bonn.[34] He found a "competent partner"[35] in Fritz Schaumann, a state secretary and education politician from the Free Democratic Party (FDP). Schaumann proposed extending the Federal Training Assistance Act in a modified form to the GDR as early as July 1, 1990, when the monetary union came into effect that made the West German Deutsche Mark the official currency of the GDR. East German students would still be entitled to a base amount of 280 marks, slightly higher than before, regardless of their parents' financial situation. The stipend could be increased to a maximum of 450 marks if their parents' income was deemed

31 Letter from the Dresden Student Congress to Minister Meyer, *UnAufgefordert. Unabhängige Zeitung von und für Studenten*, No. 11, May 8, 1990, 6.

32 "Ich bin nicht der Finanzminister," Exklusiv-Interview mit Bildungsminister Hans Joachim Meyer, *UnAufgefordert. Unabhängige Zeitung von und für Studenten*, No. 11, May 8, 1990, 14.

33 Open letter from the HU Student Council to Walter Romberg and Lothar de Maizière, June 4, 1990, *UnAufgefordert. Die Berliner Studentenzeitung*, No. 13, June 6, 1990, 4.

34 For an autobiographical account, see Hans Joachim Meyer, *In keiner Schublade. Erfahrungen im geteilten und vereinten Deutschland* (Freiburg, 2015), 132–135.

35 Ibid., 133.



Figure 4. "Student housing of the future, like this?? A tent city on Herder Square?!" Student protest in Weimar against the poor conditions in student dormitories in the GDR, April 1990. Photo: Heinz Hirndorf. Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-1990-0426-025.

to be too low to allow them to support their child at university. The GDR Ministry of Finance preferred a socially differentiated solution based on parental income. In his autobiography, Meyer emphasizes that this option would have likely been effective for most GDR students due to their parents' low incomes compared to those of parents in West Germany.[36]

Since this measure meant students would become more financially dependent on their parents, a large student protest took place in front of the GDR's *Volkskammer* on June 7, 1990. Students from universities across the GDR participated, traveling to Berlin on chartered trains from Leipzig, Halle, Erfurt, and Jena. The protesters' main demand was a guaranteed basic allowance of 495 marks per student, regardless of parental income. Around 10,000 demonstrators initially gathered for a sit-in in front of the parliament building. The protest was largely supported by Heinrich Fink, the rector of Humboldt University in Berlin. Fink's support became a key factor, as some lawmakers and ministers were willing to engage in dialogue with the demonstrators solely because of his presence. Despite intense discussions with members of parliament, GDR Finance Minister Romberg stuck to the measure already agreed with Bonn: a basic scholarship of 280 marks with possible increases depending on social circumstances.[37]

36 Ibid.

37 See "Der D-Day! Eindrücke von der Demo am 7. Juni," *UnAufgefordert. Die Berliner Studentenzeitung*, No. 14, June 21, 1990, 3–4; Sieber and Freytag, *Kinder des Systems*, 166–169.

Disappointed by Romberg's decision, a small group of students stormed the *Volkskammer*, disrupting a parliamentary session. From the visitors' gallery, the students unfurled a banner and showered the members of parliament with leaflets listing their demands. Despite their protest and the critical attitude of some GDR ministers toward BAföG,[38] the Council of Ministers [*Ministerrat*] approved the new scholarship regulations only a few days later, on June 13. Students succeeded in forcing an *Aktuelle Stunde*, a parliamentary procedure used by the *Volkskammer* to discuss pressing issues on short notice. However, the students lacked the standing to speak in parliament and instead had to have their concerns presented by parliamentarians of the PDS (the successor party of the SED) and the Green Party. A few days later, one of the students present described the debate as empty talk and concluded that it dragged on as a mere formality "until all parties had fulfilled their duty and Minister Meyer delivered the closing remarks."[39] Although Meyer was not satisfied with the outcome, he felt the 280 marks plus socially differentiated increases were "what was feasible at the time."[40] The activists were far from pleased with this outcome. In a symbolic vigil, they camped in front of Berlin Cathedral across from the *Volkskammer* for one week, until June 21, 1990.[41]

Since this solution combined established elements from both the GDR (basic student grants) and West Germany (parental income-dependent supplements), this piece of education policy differed significantly from other decisions made as part of the transformation process. In areas such as economic policy, for example, so-called "third way" initiatives combining East and West German models were quickly abandoned. During the summer break of 1990, protest activity subsided, while preparations were underway to extend the West German BAföG system to the territory of the former GDR following German reunification on October 3. Nevertheless, the collective struggle for social security provisions for students in the GDR had a strong community-building effect. The practice of collective protest was mobilized again at later stages of the transformation process, for example in 1991 against the closure of individual departments and entire institutions of higher

38 Meyer, *In keiner Schublade*, 134.

39 "Palaver im Hohlen Haus. Aktuelle Stunde in der Volkskammer zur Lage der Studenten," *UnAufgefordert. Die Berliner Studentenzeitung*, No. 14, June 21, 1990, 7.

40 Ibid.

41 Sieber and Freytag, *Kinder des Systems*, 170.



Figure 5. Students storm the visitors' balcony of the *Volkskammer* in East Berlin, June 1990. Photo: Bernd Settnik. Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-1990-0607-024.

education (referred to as *Abwicklung*), and toward the end of the decade in protests against the introduction of tuition fees – by then an issue affecting Germany as a whole.[42]

When the transitional arrangement providing GDR students with a basic allowance independent of parental income expired in early 1991, the BAföG system was fully extended to the East German states and East Berlin. That students gradually came to accept their situation is evident in the fact that the Berlin student newspaper *UnAufgefordert* launched a recurring column during this period providing information on the key provisions of the BAföG system – with specific calculation examples and tips on how to get the most out of financial aid.[43] The transfer not only changed eligibility for student funding, but also imposed an enormous bureaucratic burden on the budding local authorities in East Germany. For this reason, West German student service organizations offered training and counseling programs for East German municipalities in order to transfer knowledge about the application, review, and approval processes as quickly as possible. Since around 80 percent of those

42 "Studentischer Protest gegen den Studiengebührenputsch der CDU," *UnAufgefordert. Die Studentinnen- und Studentenzeitung der Humboldt-Universität*, December 1999, 8.

43 "BAföG – keiner will's und 's kommt doch. Ein UnAuf-Supersonderspezialservice," *UnAufgefordert. Die Studentenzeitung der Berliner Humboldt-Uni*, No. 16, October 31, 1990, 6–7.

eligible for BAföG in the former GDR depended on this source of funding alone, there was considerable time pressure to establish an effective administrative system.[44]

One key aspect of social inequality in the transformation of higher education in Eastern Germany was that initially higher rates of financial aid were paid to West Germans compared to East Germans. This was due to several factors determining the calculation of support rates for East German recipients of BAföG. To determine parental income levels, earnings from October to December 1990 were used as the basis from which an annual average was extrapolated. But this method distorted the actual economic situation and thereby produced unequal treatment. Unlike in West Germany, incomes of East German parents had deteriorated rapidly, primarily as a consequence of rising unemployment and reductions in work hours resulting from the deindustrialization and privatization of the GDR economy. In addition, income levels during these months appeared higher because of temporary social compensation payments, making them unrepresentative as a basis for calculating support rates for 1991. These arguments were advanced in the German *Bundestag* by members of the SPD and the PDS.[45] The governing CDU-FDP coalition, on the other hand, justified the differences by pointing to lower costs in the East, particularly for student housing. Furthermore, members of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group feared that the student financial aid administration recently established in Eastern Germany might be overwhelmed by yet another revision of the calculation criteria and support rates.[46]

However, the cost of living and housing in the East also rose rapidly after German reunification, gradually approaching Western German levels. For students, the price increase was most noticeable in dormitory rents, as these facilities had to raise rents to cover the costs of substantial renovation and maintenance projects.[47] In addition, other living expenses, such as the cost of public transportation, food, and clothing, rose sharply in the months that followed. This was primarily due to the monetary union that had come into effect the previous year and the sudden introduction of the capitalist economic system. As a result, living costs appeared to

44 "BAföG gibt's ab 1. Januar auch bei uns. Etwa 80 Prozent der Studenten darauf angewiesen," *Dresdner Universitätsjournal* 1 (1990), No. 18, 3.

45 German Bundestag, 12th Legislative Period, Plenary Minutes, 25th Session, May 14, 1991, 8126.

46 German Bundestag, 12th Legislative Period, Plenary Minutes, 31st Session, June 13, 1991, 2384–2385.

47 "Mietwucher im Wohnheim. Studenten klagen gegen Mieterhöhung," *UnAufgefordert. Die Studentenzeitung der Berliner Humboldt-Uni*, No. 22, April 17, 1991, 9.

be rising more rapidly than could be offset by the projected BAföG rates for East Germany, even with the planned gradual increases. Also, opportunities for student employment were more limited in Eastern Germany compared to Western Germany due to structural changes in the labor market. By contrast, living costs in the West remained relatively stable after 1990. Many East German students therefore felt that their lower BAföG rates were a clear social disadvantage. Inequality proved particularly controversial in the case of educational commuters from the GDR, which can be illustrated by the following example: If a student lived in East Berlin but was enrolled at a university in West Berlin, he or she received the West German BAföG rate.[48]

This inequality even became a topic at the first all-German CDU party conference in December 1991 although the party had itself argued for different BAföG rates in the *Bundestag* just a few months earlier. The conference took place in Dresden under the slogan *Einheit leben* [Living Unity]. The Federal Ministry of Education submitted a corresponding motion at the request of the CDU-affiliated *Ring of Christian Democratic Students* (RCDS).[49] In response to this inquiry, Parliamentary State Secretary Norbert Lammert stated that the cost of living in Eastern and Western Germany was becoming increasingly similar, so students in the former GDR should be granted the same BAföG rates as students in the West. Since BAföG is a means-tested financial aid program, this was required by the principles of equality and fairness. Lammert also noted that the current rule could easily be circumvented by studying at a university in Western Germany. He feared that this could initiate a "brain drain" from Eastern Germany and further strain the already overcrowded Western universities. As the necessary funds were expected to be available in the 1992 federal budget, the motion for material equality for students in Eastern German states was accepted at the party conference with only one abstention.[50]

Although the government decided at the beginning of 1992 to increase BAföG by 6 percent, the difference between East and West remained: while the maximum rate for students in the West rose from 890 to 940 marks, students in East Germany were to receive

48 German Bundestag, 12th Legislative Period, Plenary Minutes, 80th Session, February 21, 1992, 6640.

49 Minutes of the 2nd Party Conference of the CDU Germany, Dresden, December 15–17, 1991, 232.

50 Ibid., 233.



Figure 6. Rainer Ortleb (FDP), the first Federal Minister of Education and Science from East Germany after German reunification (1991–1994). Photo: Elke Schöps. Bundesarchiv Bild 183-1990-0309-322. CC BY-SA 3.0

only 825 marks instead of 690 from July 1992 onwards. East German students therefore referred to it as "BAföG light" starting in the fall of 1992.[51] In a two-stage process, the East German rates were then to be adjusted to the West German level by 1993. Originally, Federal Minister of Education and Science Rainer Ortleb (FDP) wanted to implement the adjustment between East and West all at once. As the first East German minister in this post, Ortleb argued against discriminating against students for the sake of saving money. But his plans were rejected by Finance Minister Theo Waigel (CSU), who cited several reasons for postponing the adjustment: on the one hand, rent subsidies were not included in the basic BAföG amount that would be affected by the increase; on the other hand, the federal government would incur considerable costs in connection with a revision of the abortion law [Article 218], which was to make abortion eligible for state-subsidized general health insurance coverage. These expenses would mean cuts elsewhere.[52]

From an East German perspective, BAföG remained confusing: The lack of knowledge about eligibility, the tedious application process, and the limited financial aid available posed a problem for many students. The situation they had been accustomed to in the GDR, where they did not have to work alongside their studies and could therefore focus fully on their education, was now a thing of the past. East German students were dissatisfied with this situation and feared that the tight financial constraints would prolong their studies – an issue familiar to West Germans.

51 "WS 92: wie aus mehr BAföG weniger Geld wird," *UnAufgefordert. Die Studentenzeitung der Berliner Humboldt-Uni*, No. 37, May 20, 1992, 4.

52 "Kabinett beschloß BAföG-Erhöhungen. Häppchenweise im Osten," *Sächsische Zeitung*, January 9, 1992; "Sechs Prozent mehr BAföG ab Juli. Erst 1993 gleiches Geld im Osten," *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, January 9, 1992.

For some of the politicians involved in the decision-making process, such as the SPD politician Doris Odendahl, the dispute over "BAföG East" turned into an "endless story."[53] In a plenary session of the German Bundestag, the Social Democrat argued that this case once again demonstrated how tapping into BAföG funds had become common practice in order to compensate for financial shortfalls elsewhere.[54] Dietmar Keller, an East German member of the Bundestag for PDS/Linke Liste, likewise renewed his criticism of the de facto disadvantages faced by East German students, which, he argued, already began with the use of flawed survey and assessment methods to calculate basic financial need. As a result, the percentage increase in BAföG support fell far short of the substantially higher rise in living costs. Moreover, the structural transformation of the labor market in Eastern Germany had significantly reduced opportunities for students to engage in paid employment alongside their studies.[55] At the very least, the Ministry of Education had succeeded in introducing a hardship regulation intended primarily to account for rising rents and to permit increases in housing allowances in justified cases.

Meanwhile, the governing coalition continued to insist on the existence of structural differences between East and West resulting from divergent income and price levels in Eastern Germany.[56] However, the assumption that lower price levels necessarily entailed lower living costs proved to be mistaken. Partly in response to concerns raised in the Bundesrat, in which the new federal states were represented after German reunification, a public hearing with experts was held in March 1992. The experts concluded that there was no substantive difference in the basic financial needs of students in Eastern and Western Germany, prompting the federal government to revise the draft legislation. Ultimately, in May 1992, in response to mounting criticism from politicians, student representatives, and the broader public, it was decided that the basic student allowance [*Grundbedarf*] would be equalized in Eastern and Western Germany in a single step from autumn 1992 onward, rather than gradually, with full equalization only in autumn 1993 as originally envisaged. This did not yet apply to all components

53 German Bundestag, 12th Legislative Period, Plenary Minutes, 80th Session, February 21, 1992, 6640.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., 6643–6644.

56 See the parliamentary speech by FDP Member of Parliament Margret Funke-Schmitt-Rink, German Bundestag, 12th Legislative Period, Plenary Minutes, 80th Session, February 21, 1992, 6644–6645.

of BAföG, however, as the housing allowance continued to differ between East and West.[57]

Although the basic BAföG allowance in Eastern and Western Germany was now formally equalized, substantial disparities persisted in practice. East German students continued to face structural disadvantages resulting from different income conditions, methods of parental income assessment, and the broader economic crisis accompanying post-socialist transformation. As a result, the term "BAföG East" remained in circulation throughout the 1990s. In the following years, various models and solutions were discussed at the federal and state level, with the student body also being represented institutionally by the *Deutsches Studentenwerk*.[58] As a neoliberal shift in education and research policy became apparent in the mid-1990s, leading politicians such as Minister of Education Jürgen Rüttgers (CDU) even considered charging interest on loans and shortening the funding period.[59] However, his proposal was not signed into law. Instead, in 1996, the federal government and the states passed a BAföG amendment that further adjusted funding rates nationwide from the winter term 1996/97, while some East-West differences – notably in housing allowances – remained. The separate rules for assessing parental income in the new federal states were subsequently abolished from autumn 1997.[60] Nevertheless, important forms of East-West inequality in the BAföG system persisted until the turn of the millennium, with the remaining differences in funding being fully eliminated in 2001. This made East-West inequality in student financial aid a long-standing issue of the German unification process in higher education. In this respect, a policy that was designed to promote equal opportunity deepened social inequality between East and West German students.

IV. New Inequalities: Gap Professors

Political decisions not only created social inequalities among students but also influenced the dynamics among academic staff. Due to the political indoctrination of teaching staff in the GDR,

57 German Bundestag, 12th Legislative Period, Plenary Minutes, 91st Session, May 7, 1992, 7439–7453.

58 Meyer, *In keiner Schublade*, 398–402.

59 See the speech by Jürgen Rüttgers, German Federal Minister of Education, Science, Research, and Technology, German Bundestag, 13th Legislative Period, Plenary Minutes, 98th Session, April 18, 1996, 8688–8691.

60 18. BAföG-Änderungsgesetz (BAföGÄndG) of July 17, 1996, *Bundesgesetzblatt*, 1996, Part I, No. 36.

East German universities underwent a comprehensive personnel turnover after 1989/90. The humanities and social sciences were particularly affected by this process, as ideological indoctrination had been a reality in these fields in the GDR, particularly in subjects closely tied to Marxist-Leninist doctrine. The question of who would teach these disciplines in the future, and how they should be taught, therefore became a significant issue for a unified Germany confronted with the legacies of two dictatorships. Quantitative studies on professorial appointments between 1990 and 1995 show that around 50 percent of new chairholders in the natural sciences and engineering came from West Germany, while fully 86 percent of positions in the humanities and social sciences were filled by West German academics. In disciplines such as political science and philosophy, only West German scholars were considered for professorships. In electrical engineering, by contrast, the proportion of West German professors was the lowest, at 23.1 percent.[61] Simply belonging to a particular academic department was therefore a decisive factor in determining the extent to which scholars who had made their careers in the GDR were affected by the restructuring of the academic workforce and the social consequences they could expect. Thus, scholars in the humanities faced far less favorable prospects for a professional future in the unified German academic system than their colleagues in the natural and technical sciences.

To evaluate the political integrity and professional competence of academic staff, the East German states and East Berlin established personnel review commissions, which were elected by the university members and appointed by the state. In Germany, most university professors are civil servants. Academics who received a positive evaluation were deemed qualified for continued employment in the Federal Republic of Germany's public service. However, a positive evaluation did not guarantee continued employment. Positions or entire institutions could be eliminated through liquidation based on Article 13 of the Unification Treaty.[62]

To keep teaching and research activities going during this extended period of transition, scholars who were deemed to possess political

61 Ho Fai Chan et al., "Science after Communism: Why does Westernization Correlate with Productivity?," (July 1, 2022), https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3961712, 13.

62 Treaty between the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany on the Establishment of German Unity – Unification Treaty, August 31, 1990, https://www.verfassungen.de/ddr/einigungsvertrag90-i.htm, accessed March 13, 2026.

integrity and the professional qualifications to lead the internal restructuring of the universities were appointed to professorships through an expedited process that exempted them from the regular application process.[63] The state of Saxony made particularly extensive use of this option, filling approximately 25 percent of newly established professorships with scholars from Saxony or the former GDR.[64] For the reasons already mentioned, these positions were primarily filled by East German academics from the natural sciences and engineering fields. Since the universities were to be restructured and rebuilt around these positions, these posts were referred to as *Aufbauprofessuren* [developmental professorships] or *Lückeprofessuren* [gap professorships]. As the *Vorläufige Hochschulordnung* [Provisional Higher Education Ordinance] of September 18, 1990 reorganized GDR higher education and the East German states drafted their own higher education laws, the term *Professoren neuen Rechts* (professors under the new law) became established for this group of professors. In total, this group comprised approximately 950 individuals across all East German universities. These academics were tasked with restructuring East German universities from within and assuming leadership responsibilities, for example, by coordinating the hiring for staff positions in their departments or administrative posts at the universities. This included, for instance, the medical director of Leipzig University Hospital, Manfred Schönfelder, or the materials scientist and future rector of the Freiberg University of Mining and Technology, Ernst Schlegel.[65]

Although these East German professors had undergone a rigorous personal and professional vetting process and subsequently performed the same work as their West German colleagues, they were not treated equally in financial terms. Rather, they were initially paid less because they were denied status as *Beamte*, a German civil service position with special pension benefits. The majority of the *Aufbauprofessoren* were between 49 and 59 years old at the time of their appointment. Since each German state has a legal age limit for entry into the civil service (ranging from age 40 to 50), most East German *Aufbauprofessoren* had exceeded the age limit. In Saxony,

63 Gertraude Buck-Bechler et al., eds., *Hochschulen in den neuen Ländern der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Ein Handbuch zur Hochschulerneuerung* (Weinheim, 1997), 340f.

64 Peer Pasternack, *Die vier Dimensionen des ostdeutschen Wissenschaftsumbaus. Strukturen und Personal, akademische Kultur und wissenschaftliche Inhalte* (Halle-Wittenberg, 2025), 226.

65 See the detailed documentation by the affected East German professors in Hartmut Enderlein, Wolfgang Merbach, and Jürgen Stritzke, eds., *Zur Altersversorgung der Aufbauprofessoren in Ostdeutschland* (Chemnitz, 2025), 9f.

for example, civil service status was ruled out if the individual had passed the age of 50. This legal provision caused considerable irritation at the time, as professors in Germany were typically appointed as civil servants for life and were thus entitled to public sector benefits and a pension. Accordingly, the affected scholars from East Germany perceived this as unequal treatment and a social disadvantage compared to their West German colleagues.[66]

The administrative rationale behind this social differentiation was the challenging process of transferring pensions and other retirement benefits from the GDR into the West German pension system. Initially, periods of prior employment in the GDR's public service were not officially recognized because the Federal Republic of Germany regarded itself as a separate state. Furthermore, if retirement occurred after the cutoff date of June 30, 1995, the entitlement to the *Altersversorgung der Intelligenz* (AVI) acquired in the GDR was forfeited due to the economic, monetary, and social union of the two German states effective July 1, 1990. Since the pension insurance scheme of the *Versorgungsanstalt des Bundes und der Länder* (VBL) – which was standard in West Germany – was not introduced for public sector employees in East Germany until 1997, after a considerable delay, it did not apply to those East German professors who played a key role in shaping the restructuring of higher education between 1990 and 1995.[67] As a result, upon retirement, they received the pension benefits of a laboratory engineer or a research assistant[68] while West German professors who joined the university after reunification could expect the higher pension benefits of a civil servant as long as they did not exceed the age limit.

The fate of the East German professors who were entrusted with rebuilding the universities in the former GDR is especially bitter considering that they were prevented from having an academic career in the GDR since they had refused to join the SED and participate in the political indoctrination of the universities. Although they finally secured a professorship after the political transition of 1989/90, they were now once again subjected to unequal treatment compared to their West German colleagues while performing the same duties, bearing the same responsibilities, and working the same hours.

66 Ibid., 3.

67 Ibid., 10–12.

68 Ibid., 3.

East German professors subsequently engaged with policymakers with great dedication and perseverance to end this unequal treatment.[69] In 2000, they created their own association – the *Verein zur Altersversorgung für angestellte Professoren und Hochschuldozenten neuen Rechts* (VAV)[70] – and organized themselves in various professional societies.[71] In June 2012 – more than twenty years after reunification – the presidents of the German Chemical Society, the German Mathematical Society, and the German Physical Society addressed a joint letter to the state premiers of the Eastern German states and the governing mayor of Berlin regarding pension inequality.[72] In it, they urged that this "social injustice, which has existed for years, be addressed quickly, before it becomes impossible to rectify due to demographic changes."[73] What they meant was the passing of this group of individuals due to the advanced age of many former university professors. Because the *Aufbauprofessoren* had served for a shorter period of time, the federal government could, under current law, pay out only about 30 to 35 percent of their former salaries, which amounted to a monthly sum in the low three-digit range.[74]

In October 2012, Reiner Haseloff (CDU), Minister President of Saxony-Anhalt and chair of the Conference of Minister-Presidents of the Eastern German States, responded to the professional associations and stated that he had raised the matter directly with the German federal government. He requested that the necessary conditions be promptly established to grant a monthly compensation payment that duly recognized the lifetime achievements of the affected group.[75] Haseloff received a personal response from Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU). Having worked as a scientist in the GDR herself until 1989, Merkel was aware of the exceptional contributions made by East German professors after reunification and could understand that the low retirement benefits were perceived as a personal hardship by those affected. Nevertheless, she noted that "difficult questions"[76] – above all legal issues – needed

69 "Ernüchterung zum Ruhestand. Wie SED-kritische Forscher nach der Wende benachteiligt wurden," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, September 13, 2010.

70 Association for the Pension Provision of Professors and University Lecturers under the New Law.

71 See https://www.vav-web.com/vereinsziele.html, accessed March 13, 2026.

72 The letter was made available to the author from the private archive of Prof. Otto Wienhaus, who served as an *Aufbauprofessor* in plant chemistry and ecotoxicology at Dresden University of Technology beginning in 1990.

73 Letter from the presidents of the German Chemical Society, the German Mathematical Society, and the German Physical Society to the state premiers and the governing mayor of the federal states, dated June 28, 2012; from the private archive of Otto Wienhaus.

74 Ibid.

75 See the letter from Reiner Haseloff, Minister President of Saxony-Anhalt, to Barbara Albert, President of the German Chemical Society, dated October 26, 2012, from the private archive of Otto Wienhaus.

76 Letter from Angela Merkel, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, to Reiner Haseloff, Minister President of the State of Saxony-Anhalt, dated February 5, 2013, from the private archive of Otto Wienhaus.

to be clarified in this context, a task assigned to the Federal Government Commissioner for the New Federal States [*Beauftragter der Bundesregierung für die neuen Länder*], who was to find a solution in consultation with the individual ministries.

Despite the efforts of the Commissioner, Christoph Bergner (CDU), attempts to find a fair solution for East German professors repeatedly failed in the years that followed due to the issue of (financial) jurisdiction. Basically, it could not be legally determined whether the federal government or the individual states were responsible for any potential compensation payments to the *Aufbauprofessoren*. In response to this stalemate, the *Deutscher Hochschulverband* (DHV) – an association of German university faculty – developed a realistic proposal for a solution to the issue of social inequality. Under this proposal, universities affiliated with the DHV would establish a foundation supported by state governments to provide additional retirement benefits to the affected individuals.[77] However, due to the tight budgetary situation in the new federal states, the problem repeatedly bounced back and forth between the federal government and the states. As a result, no satisfactory solution has been implemented to this day.

The eastern German states have adopted different approaches to retirement benefits for their *Aufbauprofessoren*. Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania completed the restructuring of its higher education system in the 1990s by granting professors civil servant status. In contrast, Saxony only granted civil servant status to professors who had not yet reached the retirement age under federal law. Thuringia, on the other hand, made a one-time payment of €12,000 in 2021 after a lengthy political and legal battle by East German professors as a "political gesture with symbolic significance."[78] In Saxony, a similar proposal had failed two years earlier due to opposition from the governing CDU and SPD parties in the state parliament. In an open letter, the VAV association described this decision by the Saxon state government in 2019 in the following terms: "This effectively denied and rejected, in a discriminatory manner, the legitimate claims to equal treatment in pension provision to this occupational group."[79] The *Deutscher Hochschulverband*

77 See Hans Joachim Meyer, "Nach 30 Jahren. Die ostdeutschen Hochschulen im Vereinigungsprozess," *Forschung und Lehre* 8/2020: 668–670.

78 "DHV kritisiert Umgang mit Lückeprofessoren," *Forschung und Lehre* 11/2022: 845.

79 Open letter from the VAV regarding the vote on motion Drs. 6/12233 in the Saxon State Parliament on August 15, 2019, https://www.vav-web.com/presse.html, accessed March 16, 2026.

(DHV) referred to a "failure of state policy" and a "grave injustice in terms of provision."[80]

80 "DHV kritisiert Umgang mit Lückeprofessoren," *Forschung und Lehre* 11/2022: 845.

V. Conclusion

More than 35 years after German reunification, social inequalities between East and West persist. A historical examination of the changes in academia following 1989/90 has revealed the extent to which the ideal of creating equality has been undermined by the emergence of new, often unintended inequalities. Under socialism, higher education was initially geared toward empowering socially disadvantaged groups and granting them access to universities through affirmative action – for those loyal to the ruling party. For a time, this policy led to discrimination against the middle classes, whose educational monopoly was to be broken for ideological reasons. However, these efforts failed to create the ideologically motivated group of loyalists from the working classes that the SED had hoped for. In the late socialist period of the 1970s and 1980s, students were therefore increasingly recruited from middle-class, politically loyal circles. The government's policy to grant an unconditional basic stipend to all students enabled students in the GDR to achieve a high degree of independence from their parents and obtain an academic degree in a relatively short period of time.

With German reunification and the extension of the West German social welfare system to East Germany, financial aid programs such as BAföG were implemented in the territory of the former GDR. For students, this meant that their parents' socioeconomic status determined how they could finance their studies. Furthermore, East German students received a lower rate of financial aid than their West German peers due to their supposedly lower housing and living costs. This social inequality persisted for some time, even though the gaps in cost of living between Eastern and Western Germany narrowed after reunification. Due to the uncertainty surrounding higher education, economic structural change, and high unemployment in Eastern Germany, a college education increasingly became a privilege that one had to be able to afford.

Partly because of this inequality in the higher education system, the number of East German academics eligible for academic leadership positions remains relatively small. The structures that have developed since reunification have exacerbated this inequality in two ways: First, German national unity itself has led to social inequalities between East and West, one manifestation of which can be empirically observed in the pay and pension provisions for university professors as well as in the initially lower rates of financial aid for East German students. Second, the East-West gap in the higher education system is not merely a question of pay, but also one of recognition of lifetime achievements and of belonging to a social system. The history of the gap professors and the persistent underrepresentation of East Germans in academic elites illustrate how long such social structures can outlast changes in political systems and governments.

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