

# Old *Volk*: Aging in 1950s Germany, East and West\*

James Chappel

Duke University

Perhaps the greatest transformation of the twentieth century is one that has received almost no attention from historians of that troubled period: the dramatic expansion in life expectancy. The age of extremes was host to new extremes of age, as the average life span in developed countries roughly doubled.<sup>1</sup> Innovations in public health and sanitation, alongside declining fertility rates, led to a transformation in the shape of human life itself, with dramatic consequences for political economy and political ethics. As our world becomes hotter and grayer, the imagination and administration of old age will be increasingly pivotal. After all, some of the most baleful and persistent features of our present and future—grinding civil war, hurricanes, and heat waves—disproportionately affect the elderly. (Seventy-five percent of those killed by Hurricane Katrina were over the age of sixty, for example.) This is not to say that old age is more important than race or gender as a category of exclusion, but that old age interacts with and compounds those categories far more than historians have recognized.<sup>2</sup>

While the youth have been lavished with historical attention, the elderly have been comparatively ignored. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the social history of old age was rather in vogue, but in the years since it has been neglected (this is especially true in the English language, and in studies of the twentieth century). The children are our future, and it appears that they are our past, too. Histories of the

\* I would like to thank Christina von Hodenberg, Stephen Milder, Annemarie Sammartino, William Sharman, Noah Strote, and four anonymous reviewers for detailed feedback, as well as audiences at Columbia University, the Freie Universität Berlin, the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, and the University of Graz. Felix Czmok provided invaluable research assistance, while Heidi Madden assisted with image permissions. Ursula Lehr, Gunnar Winkler, and Klaus-Peter Schwitzer kindly agreed to be interviewed. The research for this article was funded by the Josiah Charles Trent Memorial Foundation at Duke University.

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the data, and the problems in interpreting it, see Peter Laslett, “Necessary Knowledge: Age and Aging in the Societies of the Past,” in *Aging in the Past: Demography, Society, and Old Age*, ed. David Kertzer and Peter Laslett (Berkeley, 1995), 3–80.

<sup>2</sup> Vincanne Adams et al., “Aging Disaster: Mortality, Vulnerability, and Long-Term Recovery among Katrina Survivors,” *Medical Anthropology* 30 (2011): 247–70, 249. For more on the connection between immobility and disaster, see Richard C. Keller, *Fatal Isolation: The Devastating Paris Heat Wave of 2003* (Chicago, 2015); Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (Chicago, 2002).

*The Journal of Modern History* 90 (December 2018): 792–833  
© 2018 by The University of Chicago. 0022-2801/2018/9004-0002\$10.00  
All rights reserved.

family, often without comment, presume the two-generational unit that may have prevailed at the level of the household but has never fully captured the multigenerational experience of modern living.<sup>3</sup> Even the dead have fared better. Theorists like Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, and Achille Mbembe have granted immense significance to death, leading to interdisciplinary discussions that presume a binary of life and death rather than one of youth and old age.<sup>4</sup> Partially for this reason, the study of dead bodies has flourished. In the last decade at least four historical volumes have appeared in English on dead bodies in twentieth-century Germany, while none have appeared in English—ever—on the elderly in the same time and place.<sup>5</sup>

Historical studies of aging have certainly been written, generally taking one of two forms. On the one hand, many historians and policy experts have focused on the development and management of pensions—a deeply important topic, given that they make up a staggering proportion of domestic spending in many countries. These studies tend to be policy histories, focusing on the trade union leaders, state bureaucrats, and employer interest groups who waged war over the intricacies of the pension system.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, social and cultural historians have focused on the *longue durée*, telling the history of aging over the centuries, following the

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the magisterial Paul Ginsborg, *Family Politics: Domestic Life, Devastation and Survival, 1900–1950* (New Haven, CT, 2014). While “family” is never defined, the analysis presumes as a matter of course that one is referring to reproductive-aged individuals and their offspring, with grandparents making occasional appearances.

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto, CA, 1998); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1990), pt. 5; Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 11–40. Significantly, it was Simone de Beauvoir who pointed toward a different binary, arguing that “it is old age, rather than death, that is to be contrasted with life.” Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O’Brian (New York, 1996), 539.

<sup>5</sup> Monica Black, *Death in Berlin: From Weimar to Divided Germany* (New York, 2010); Alon Confino, Paul Betts, and Dirk Schumann, eds., *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York, 2008); Christopher E. Mauriello, *Forced Confrontation: The Politics of Dead Bodies in Germany at the End of World War II* (New York, 2017); Felix Robin Schulz, *Death in East Germany, 1945–1990* (New York, 2013). See also Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: The Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, NJ, 2015). I am not counting, here, works that cover the pension system alone.

<sup>6</sup> For a sample, see Robert L. Clark, Lee A. Craig, and Jack W. Wilson, *A History of Public Sector Pensions in the United States* (Philadelphia, 2003); Hans Günter Hockerts, *Sozialpolitische Entscheidungen im Nachkriegsdeutschland: Alliierte und deutsche Sozialversicherungspolitik 1945 bis 1957* (Stuttgart, 1980); Michael A. McCarthy, *Dismantling Solidarity: Capitalist Politics and American Pensions since the New Deal* (Ithaca, NY, 2017); Alfred C. Mierzejewski, *A History of the German Public Pension System: Continuity Amid Change* (Lanham, MD, 2016); Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 1995).

model of Philippe Ariès's seminal *Centuries of Childhood* (1960).<sup>7</sup> Illuminating as they have been, these works have not generally been in dialogue with broader methodological trends in the discipline. This might explain why the stand-alone research article, the standard vehicle for disciplinary progress in the historical profession, has almost never been used to study aging. Neither the *American Historical Review* nor the *Journal of Modern History*—flagship journals for the profession at large and for the history of modern Europe—has ever published an article on the topic of old age, broadly construed.

While old age has not been a persistent theme of historical inquiry, the work that has been done is enough to disprove the prevailing narrative. According to that account, the elderly once upon a time were venerated at the center of multi-generational households, before industrial modernity cast them, shivering and alone, into the nursing home. This story is an old one. Rousseau delivered a version of it in the eighteenth century, as did Atul Gawande in his massively influential *Being Mortal* (2015). Nonetheless, it is misleading. As Peter Laslett and others have shown, the nuclear household has been the norm in many places since well before the industrial revolution. And as Brian Gratton, Carole Haber, and others have shown, the depiction of the elderly as penniless and isolated is more of a cultural construct than a social reality. Many remained in close touch with their families, and many benefited from the onset of industrialization. The experience of old age, that is, has been just as diverse as the experience of youth.<sup>8</sup>

The rejection of this modernization theory of old age opens the door to a crucial new question, but one that has seldom been asked. If the elderly were not actually disenfranchised by industrialization, then why did the twentieth-century state enlist such massive resources to address inequality across the life course? This is

<sup>7</sup> For German examples, see Josef Ehmer, *Sozialgeschichte des Alters* (Frankfurt, 1990); Gerd Göckenjan, *Das Alter würdigen: Altersbilder und Bedeutungswandel des Alters* (Frankfurt, 2000). More generally, see Patrice Bourdelais, *L'Age de la vieillesse: Histoire du vieillissement de la population* (Paris, 1997); Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (New York, 1992); Jean-Pierre Gutton, *Naissance du vieillard: Essai sur l'histoire des rapports entre les vieillards et la société en France* (Paris, 1988); Pat Jalland, *Old Age in Australia: A History* (Melbourne, 2015); Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (New York, 1966); Peter Stearns, *Old Age in European Society: The Case of France* (New York, 1976); Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (New York, 2000). For counterexamples, see Brian Gratton, *Urban Elders: Family, Work, and Welfare among Boston's Aged, 1890–1950* (Philadelphia, 1986); Gregory Wood, *Retiring Men: Manhood, Labor, and Growing Old in America, 1900–1960* (Lanham, MD, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> David Troyansky, *Old Age in the Old Regime: Image and Experience in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY, 1989), 2 for Rousseau; Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (New York, 2014), 14–17. For a cogent introduction to the literature of the 1980s and 1990s, focusing on its rejection of the modernization theory of old age, see the introduction to Carole Haber and Brian Gratton, *Old Age and the Search for Security: An American Social History* (Bloomington, IN, 1994).

true even and especially for welfare states since the 1970s, supposedly in thrall to neoliberal austerity but in fact pouring money into healthcare and pension delivery for the elderly. What we call the welfare state is largely or even essentially a mechanism for intergenerational wealth redistribution. It has ever been thus, and change in this regard has been minimal.<sup>9</sup> Why have so many modern states embraced this task while largely rejecting interclass versions of the same? Why, when, and how did care for the elderly become so obviously a task for the state, while other kinds of care and risk are borne by individuals or families?

These questions can only be understood by folding the history of aging into broader histories of political economy, welfare, and citizenship. While much work on the history of aging has conceptualized the elderly as a caste apart, an integration of aging into larger histories of social reproduction could help to place age on the map as a “useful category of historical analysis.”<sup>10</sup> The process of defining and managing the populations of the “old,” in other words, is indistinguishable from the process of defining and managing the population as a whole. The most insightful guide to this process, in theoretical terms, might be the German sociologist Martin Kohli and his notion of the “institutionalization of the life course.” The theory, which will guide the analysis to follow, is that the creation of a normative and age-defined life course is central to the process of social legitimation in industrial or postindustrial societies. Societies do not tackle old age as a specific “problem,” in other words, but in the context of broader efforts, by various actors, to institutionalize an appealing vision of the good life, encompassing every stage of the life course, that might lead people of all ages to support a given set of political, social, and economic arrangements.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This point was made by the sociologist John Myles in his classic *Old Age in the Welfare State: The Political Economy of Public Pensions*, rev. ed. (Lawrence, KS, 1989). For a more recent account and guide to the literature, see Nancy Folbre and Douglas Wolf, “The Intergenerational Welfare State,” *Population and Development Review* 38 (2013): 36–51. Historians of old age have not cast much light on this because their analyses almost invariably end before dramatic welfare reform. See, for instance, Christoph Conrad and Hans-Joachim von Kondratowitz, eds., *Zur Kulturgeschichte des Alterns* (Berlin, 1993). In some ways the capstone of the first wave of histories of age, the collection contains vanishingly little exploration of old age after welfare. For a recent historical analysis that does take this seriously, see Gabriel Winant, “A Place to Die: Nursing Home Abuse and the Political Economy of the 1970s,” *Journal of American History* 105 (2018): 96–120.

<sup>10</sup> For more thoughts on this, see Steven Mintz, “Reflections on Age as a Category of Historical Analysis,” *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1 (2008): 91–94.

<sup>11</sup> The classic text is Martin Kohli, “Die Institutionalisierung des Lebenslaufs,” *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 37 (1985): 1–29. For an important reconsideration of the idea and its fate, see Martin Kohli, “The Institutionalization of the Life Course: Looking Back to Look Ahead,” *Research in Human Development* 4 (2007): 253–71. The crucial argument there, and one to be pursued here, is that the life course should be studied in its entirety, and that the relationship between the different elements should be considered. For examples of analysis along these lines, see Gerd Hardach, *Der Genera-*

Old age has not become a useful category of historical analysis in this way, nor has the projection of a healthy old age been adequately investigated as a source of legitimation in modern societies. One reason might be that the scholarship on old age, while rejecting teleological modernization theory, ends up reiterating its basic logic. Historians have paid little attention to competing visions for old age, which grants an aura of inevitability to the ones that succeed. At the same time, most studies of old age look at only one nation, which has the same result. Comparative work has been done, but as in Gøsta Esping-Andersen's field-defining *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, it has restricted itself to asking how different varieties of capitalism generate different policy environments for the elderly.<sup>12</sup> By abjuring comparison with noncapitalist societies, and by focusing almost solely on pension policy, these analyses give the impression that modern societies operate within a narrow band of possibilities. The truth is different, and more interesting. After all, the history of the twentieth century does not belong to capitalism alone.

This article will pursue a comparative history of old age and the life course in capitalist West Germany and Communist East Germany. Germany is an especially useful site to research aging for several reasons. For one thing, it has been at the center of global debates about aging ever since it introduced the world's first state-delivered pensions in 1889. As such, its historians have produced a rich historiography on the theme.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Germany has played host to such a stunning array

---

*tionenvertrag: Lebenslauf und Lebenseinkommen in Deutschland in zwei Jahrhunderten* (Berlin, 2006); Lutz Leisering and Karl F. Schumann, "How Institutions Shape the German Life Course," in *Social Dynamics of the Life Course: Transitions, Institutions, and Interrelations*, ed. Walter R. Heinz and Victor W. Marshall (Hawthorne, NY, 2003), 193–209; Simone Scherger, *Destandardisierung, Differenzierung, Individualisierung: Westdeutsche Lebensläufe im Wandel* (Wiesbaden, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> There is no point in citing examples here of national studies, given that almost every work cited elsewhere falls into that category. For comparative ones, see Peter Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Bases of the European Welfare State, 1875–1975* (New York, 1990); Peter Hennock, "Public Provision for Old Age: Britain and Germany, 1880–1914," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 30 (1990): 81–103; Cornelius Torp, *Gerechtigkeit im Wohlfahrtsstaat: Alter und Alterssicherung in Deutschland und Großbritannien von 1945 bis heute* (Göttingen, 2015). The master text of this approach is Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ, 1990). There have been, it should be said, some global histories of old age in recent years: Kavita Sivaramakrishnan, *As the World Ages: Rethinking a Demographic Crisis* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); David Troyansky, *Aging in World History* (New York, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> For accounts focusing on the twentieth century, see, among others, Christoph Conrad, *Vom Greis zum Rentner: Der Strukturwandel des Alters in Deutschland zwischen 1830 und 1930* (Göttingen, 1994); Benjamin Möckel, "Nutzlose Volksgenossen"? *Der Arbeitseinsatz alter Menschen im Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin, 2010); Annette Penkert, *Arbeit oder Rente? Die alternde Bevölkerung als sozialpolitische Herausforderung für die Weimarer Republik* (Göttingen, 1998); Torp, *Gerechtigkeit im Wohlfahrtsstaat*. Two overviews of the field have appeared in recent years: Bettina Blessing, "Die Geschichte des Alters in der Moderne:

of regimes and ideologies in the twentieth century that it allows for rich comparative study. This article will not pursue the entangled or transnational stories that have been emphasized in recent years. Without a doubt, East and West Germans were engaging with one another and with global forces, too, but that will not be the focus here. The goal, instead, is to show how the two states arrived at surprisingly different accounts of age, embedded in different figurations of the normative life course.<sup>14</sup>

Germany in the 1950s provides one of the best “natural experiments” in modern history to help us explore diverse approaches to old age. In the late 1940s, two states emerged from the wreckage of Nazi Germany and embarked on dramatically different forms of modernization. In West Germany, Konrad Adenauer and his dominant Christian Democratic Union (CDU) oversaw the birth of a “social market economy,” embedding Germany into an Atlantic political and economic community under the nuclear umbrella of the United States. In East Germany, Walter Ulbricht and the Socialist Unity Party (SED) sought to forge a socialist Germany under the stewardship of the Soviet Union. Both new states confronted the realities of an aging citizenry in the 1950s. Both states pioneered novel concepts

---

Stand der deutschen Forschung,” *Medizin, Gesellschaft, und Geschichte* 29 (2010): 123–50; Josef Ehmer, “Das Alter in Geschichte und Geschichtswissenschaft,” in *Was ist Alter(n)? Neue Antworten auf eine scheinbar einfache Frage*, ed. Ursula M. Staudinger and Heinz Häfner (New York, 2008): 149–72. There have been comparative analyses of this sort focusing on pension policies and law. Christoph Conrad, “Alterssicherung,” in *Drei Wege deutscher Sozialstaatlichkeit: NS-Diktatur, Bundesrepublik, und DDR im Vergleich*, ed. Hans Günter Hockerts (Munich, 1998), 101–16; Gisela Helwig, *Am Rande der Gesellschaft: Alte und Behinderte in beiden deutschen Staaten* (Cologne, 1980); Mierzejewski, *A History of the German Public Pension System*.

<sup>14</sup> In their defense of the form, Jürgen Kocka and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt list four different purposes for comparative history. The one pursued here is primarily the fourth: comparison can help us to “de-familiarize the familiar,” transforming “one case into one among many possible cases.” Jürgen Kocka and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, “Comparison and Beyond: Traditions, Scope, and Perspectives of Comparative History,” in *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives* (New York, 2009), 1–32, here 4. Comparison across German regimes has been a fruitful optic for many historians. See, for instance, Hockerts, ed., *Drei Wege deutscher Sozialstaatlichkeit*; Elizabeth D. Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make? Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany* (Berkeley, 1999); Christoph Lorke, *Armut im geteilten Deutschland: Die Wahrnehmung sozialer Randlagen in der Bundesrepublik und der DDR* (Frankfurt, 2015); Ute Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, 2000); André Steiner, ed., *Preispolitik und Lebensstandard: Nationalsozialismus, DDR und Bundesrepublik im Vergleich* (Cologne, 2006). The closest model to the analysis provided here, which attempts to link welfare outcomes with different accounts of the family, might be Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914–1945* (New York, 1993).

of old age between 1954 and 1956, and both states crafted a new policy environment for the elderly between 1956 and 1958. In the West, pensions were dramatically increased, and for the first time aimed to provide all the income a senior might need (instead of supplementing other sources of income, as pensions had been designed to do since Bismarck's day). The mechanics of care, meanwhile, remained in the hands of subsidiary and confessional organizations. In the East, in contrast, subsidiary organizations were sidelined as the SED tried to cultivate a politicized integration of the elderly through labor, politicized sociability, and the mobilization of party-aligned care providers—without significantly increasing pensions, and without creating an image of old age freed from labor.

Why did East and West Germany follow such different paths? Why, in other words, did one modern society decide to make “retirement” a public priority while another did not? This question has not been directly posed before, perhaps because the answer seems too simple to be worth the effort. West Germany must have pursued “capitalist” forms of eldercare while East Germany pursued “socialist” ones in the name of its “welfare dictatorship.”<sup>15</sup> Crude ideological analysis, however, does not get us very far. After all, it was West Germany that dramatically expanded its welfare programs, interfered with the free market, created dependency, and embarked on a spree of state spending that turned out to be unsustainable. And it was the East Germans who created a system based around charity and self-help. Eldercare was embedded deep into the ideological fabric of the two state-building projects, but not in simplistic ways. It is, in other words, no easy matter to clarify what a liberal-capitalist or a socialist old age looks like. The master categories of economic and political analysis, after all, were forged before the demographic transition was theorized. Karl Marx was convinced that capitalism would shorten life spans, not lengthen them, and a conceptual tool kit built around class (or nation) is not ready made to think through the realities of age.<sup>16</sup>

This article will attempt to link the diverse treatments of old age in East and West Germany to diverse understandings of citizenship, gender, and the family—in other words, it will interrogate the divergent meanings of old age in the normative life courses pursued by the two regimes. It will do so by drawing on a broader source base than those normally utilized by historians of old age. Historians of aging, in Germany as elsewhere, have lavished attention upon medical experts, social scientists, and the various interest groups that haggled over pension policy. Those sources are invaluable, and they will be mined here, but they operate at some distance from old age as it is experienced and reproduced on the ground. This article, therefore, will draw especially on the publications and archives of welfare or-

<sup>15</sup> Konrad H. Jarausch, “Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship,” in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (New York, 1999), 47–69.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York, 1976), 376.

ganizations charged with organizing the care and free time of elderly citizens (in West Germany, these were subsidiary and normally religious organizations; in East Germany they were centralized by the state). By placing social policy into a broader discursive context, this approach allows us to see how it emerges from, and eventually shapes, a broader discussion about what it means to age, and to age well, and how the family unit relates to the body politic. These sources do not provide a social history of old age. It is indisputable that this evolving discourse, and the policies it authorized, affected the lived experience of millions—the elderly themselves, in addition to their caretakers (Ian Hacking has called this the “looping effect”).<sup>17</sup> All the same, this lived experience is not primarily at issue here.

The purpose of this article is not to recommend one of these regimes of age over the other: each had its flaws, and neither is retrievable. It is, instead, to use comparative methods to cast new light on each of them, and especially on the contingency of the welfarist model of pension expansion that has come to represent the horizon of aging policy today. While its most obvious contribution is to the historiography of 1950s Germany, it comes to three conclusions that might enrich the historical study of aging more broadly. The first is simply that the expansion of pensions is not, historically or theoretically, the only conceivable response in a modern society to an aging population, and that it rests upon a particular understanding of the life course that is not the only one possible. West Germans expanded their pension system in 1957 not because the logic of industrial modernity required it (it does not), or because German tradition dictated it (it did not). They mobilized, instead, a quite specific set of social-scientific principles, married to a particular form of familialist citizenship and a particular ideological critique of mass industrial society. These resulted in a massive government program that was specifically designed to enshrine class inequality in the name of ensuring intergenerational equity. Just next door, in East Germany, an equally modern and industrial society arrived at a significantly different policy outcome, tied to a significantly different normative life course.<sup>18</sup>

The second conclusion is that ageism has a history. The standard story is that the denigration of old age is a baleful consequence of industrial modernity, and therefore that prejudice against the elderly, unlike other forms of prejudice, is historically unremarkable. This is incorrect. Just as increased pensions are not the only way to imagine old age in a modern society, ageism is neither a predictable

<sup>17</sup> Ian Hacking, “The Looping Effects of Human Kinds,” in *Causal Cognition: A Multi-disciplinary Debate*, ed. Dan Sperber, David Premack, and Ann Premack (New York, 1995), 351–83.

<sup>18</sup> This might provide historical ballast to the argument in Ai-Jen Poo, *The Age of Dignity: Preparing for the Elder Boom in a Changing America* (New York, 2015). Poo suggests a revamped approach to old age issues in the United States that relies on expanded social security payments as only one prong of her approach.

response to observable characteristics of elderly people nor one that is generated by novel conceptions of property and status in a postfeudal age. Specifically, in this case, the expansion of West German pensions involved the mobilization of “ageist” prejudices against the elderly, while the alternative approach of the East did not. Unlike racism or sexism, ageism has received almost no historical treatment, even as it adversely affects the lives and employment prospects of millions around the world (it even appears that negative stereotyping of old age correlates positively with the onset of Alzheimer’s<sup>19</sup>). It matters, therefore, that ageism is a historical construction, emerging in tandem with kindred ideas about youth, family, welfare, and political economy.

The third conclusion concerns the relevance of history to the study of aging. Neither West nor East Germany started from scratch, nor did they pursue “capitalist” and “socialist” styles of aging in any simple way. East and West German approaches to aging, instead, should be viewed as a selective appropriation of earlier German approaches, as inflected by the global context of the emergent Cold War. The analysis to follow, therefore, will focus on the period from 1954 to 1958, but it will root its findings in Germany’s longer grappling with the question. The approach to age, in other words, is conditioned by history, but that history is polyvalent and can provide diverse resources. As numerous scholars have shown, a history that interrogates conceptions of the human, the body, or the life course can explore continuities that span dramatic ruptures in the political system.<sup>20</sup> This is as true for aging as it is for death or sexuality. In the coming decades, global realities will necessarily lead to a burgeoning interdisciplinary discussion about aging and age policy. Historians deserve a seat at that table. The elderly are often venerated as witnesses to history, but this should not distract us from the fact that the very notion of old age, and its attendant policy apparatus, is a product of history, too.

#### WEST GERMANY, THE “PROBLEM” OF AGE, AND PENSION REFORM

West German intellectuals and politicians in the 1950s were obsessed with the question of age. Never before in German history—or in East Germany at the same time, for that matter—had such a volume of commentary appeared on the status, fate, and social meaning of the elderly. In 1954, the sociologist Leopold von Wiese mused that the great fad for studying and discussing aging would probably prove

<sup>19</sup> Becca R. Levy et al., “A Culture-Brain Link: Negative Age Stereotypes Predict Alzheimer’s Disease Biomarkers,” *Psychology and Aging* 31 (2016): 82–88.

<sup>20</sup> For some examples, see Black, *Death in Berlin*; Moritz Föllmer, *Individuality and Modernity in Berlin: Self and Society from Weimar to the Wall* (New York, 2013); Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia, 2015); Camille Robcis, *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (Ithaca, NY, 2013).

temporary.<sup>21</sup> He was wrong about this: aging became a central topic of German intellectual and political life for decades to come. It did so not only, or even primarily, for demographic reasons, but also because the fate of the elderly came to take on immense significance for a new democracy seeking to legitimate itself to its citizens. Presuming as a matter of course that the elderly had no place in either the labor market or the nuclear family, the discourse and policy of old age promised to integrate the elderly into the nation.

The fulcrum of any analysis of old age in 1950s West Germany must be the pension reform of 1957, which for the first time tasked the state with providing something like a livable income for the nation's seniors. A prosperous retirement, that is, was added to the normative life course of the nation, whose political economy was changed forever (Germany now spends about 10 percent of its GDP on old-age pensions). The reform is normally viewed as a piece of electoral strategy, and as the explanation for the Christian Democrats' crushing electoral victory of the same year—an interpretation that has recently been called into question.<sup>22</sup> In this section, I will try to provide a new way to narrate the reform. Instead of focusing on interest groups and parliamentary intrigue, I will address the pension in light of, first, the social science of old age, and, second, the representations of old age in the publications of the subsidiary welfare organizations. In essence, the West German public sphere imagined old age to be a major "problem" generated by modernity, which allowed the reform to be cast as the state's "solution" to it. This analysis allows us to see how the creation of a generously funded retirement served to create a new normative life course and a new source of legitimacy for the fledgling West German democracy.

The fundamental fact of West German aging discourse in the 1950s is that old age was viewed as a "problem" to be solved by the social body. It was, in other words, widely accepted that German modernization was leading to the exclusion and isolation of the elderly, who therefore constituted a problem that needed solving. This framing of the demographic shift, ubiquitous today, had a relatively short history. The old-age pensions of Bismarck's day were not designed to address the "problem" of an aging population: welfare experts had no concept that they were living in a rapidly aging Germany, and those pensions were addressed far more at invalidism than they were at old age. (When the program was reformed in 1900, "old age" was even removed from the name.)<sup>23</sup> It was not until the 1920s that "the

<sup>21</sup> Leopold von Wiese, *Spätlease* (Cologne, 1954), 29. For a remarkable quantitative analysis of the prevalence of articles about the elderly in a wide range of periodicals, see Birgit Baumgartl, *Altersbilder und Altenhilfe: Zum Wandel der Leitbilder von Altenhilfe seit 1950* (Opladen, 1997), 17–82.

<sup>22</sup> Mierzejewski, *A History of the German Public Pension System*, 204.

<sup>23</sup> The 1889 *Gesetz betreffend die Alters- und Invaliditätsversicherung* (Invalidism and Old Age Insurance Law) became the *Invalidenversicherungsgesetz* (Invalidism Insurance Law).

elderly” were construed as a coherent demographic group that had its own needs and interests, irrespective of the gender or class status of the individual. And it was only in the late Weimar period, and especially during the Third Reich, that sociologists, public health experts, and demographers came around to the idea that Germany was getting older and that this was a problem. While works of demographic alarmism were common in the 1920s, their authors worried primarily about the decline in fertility rates supposedly brought on by alcoholism, irreligion, and sexual laxity. This changed in the 1930s when population scientists began to worry specifically about the “over-aging” (*Überalterung*) of the population, which is demographically related but conceptually distinct. Friedrich Burgdörfer, a demographer who would become an expert in Jewish affairs for the Nazi party, was the poet laureate of *Überalterung*, and his *Nation without Youth* (1932) put the topic on the map. Six years later, another Nazi party member named Max Bürger founded the German Society for Aging Research in 1938, marking the origins of gerontology in Germany. It was only in 1938, that is, that the elderly were deemed unique enough to merit their own medical subdiscipline, a central step in the framing of the elderly as a unique problem. By the time *The ABCs of Population Politics* appeared in 1940, the notion that “over-aging” was one of the greatest crises facing Germany had become ubiquitous.<sup>24</sup>

The earlier notion of “over-aging” as a social problem returned with a vengeance in the 1950s, as the elderly began to be referred to with stigmatizing terms like “social baggage” (*Soziales Gepäck*). Burgdörfer returned after the war to make his familiar points in social welfare journals. Konrad Adenauer spoke to the Bundestag about the *Überalterung* of the German nation in 1953 as part of his concern to raise the German birthrate. Municipalities began to prepare studies on the “problem” of the elderly, while journals like *Social Work* began to address the same issue in earnest. In 1954, a sociologist named Sepp Groth published the most extensive study of aging ever to appear in Germany, in which he discoursed at length on the burden of the elderly and the “problem of collective security and welfare” they posed

<sup>24</sup> Möckel, “*Nutzlose Volksgenossen*”?, 23, for the “problem” of aging in the 1930s. For demographic considerations in the 1920s, see Franz Hitze, *Geburtenrückgang und Sozialreform* (Mönchengladbach, 1922), 9–12; E. H. Stoll, *Aufgaben der Bevölkerungspolitik* (Jena, 1927). On the 1930s and the concerns about aging, see Friedrich Burgdörfer, *Volk ohne Jugend: Geburtenchwund und Überalterung des deutschen Volkskörpers* (Berlin, 1932); P. Danzer and H. Schmalfuß, *Das bevölkerungspolitische ABC* (Berlin, 1940), 21–22; Otto Helmut, *Volk in Gefahr* (Munich, 1937), 16–18. The notion of aging as a “problem” had international resonance. See, for instance, Edmund Cowdry, ed., *Problems of Ageing: Biological and Medical Aspects* (Baltimore, 1939), and the discussion in W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Crossing Frontiers: Gerontology Emerges as a Science* (New York, 1995), chap. 2. For a critical discussion of this framing, see Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (Charlottesville, VA, 1996). For more specifics on the German case, see Stefan Schmorrtte, “Alter und Medizin: Die Anfänge der Geriatrie in Deutschland,” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 30 (1990): 15–41.

for West Germany and other modern societies. His study marked the beginning of a veritable flood of literature on what study after study called “the problems of aging,” focusing on both the burdens to the nation and the misery of the supposedly isolated and depressed elderly themselves.<sup>25</sup>

“Why,” one sociologist asked in 1959, “has age, understood here as advanced age of those over 65, become a sociological problem?”<sup>26</sup> Any answer must include demographic transformation, to be sure.<sup>27</sup> It is true that, since about 1910, the average life expectancy for Germans had been climbing quickly, and it was also true that this was increasingly public knowledge. All the same, demography is not destiny, and this fact does not explain why this process was framed the way it was. Data were already available showing how partial the standard declension narrative was. According to the famous L-Survey, whose results became available in 1956, the number of “isolated” elderly was far lower than that story suggested, and old people continued to be integrated into their extended families as they always had (as both uncompensated caregivers and unpaying care receivers).<sup>28</sup> At the same time, if demography were truly the issue, social scientists would have focused on the loss of a generation of young men at the front. This subject remained, however, taboo.<sup>29</sup>

The West German obsession with the “problem” of aging derived instead from the nation’s new conception of citizenship, which promised liberty and dignity to

<sup>25</sup> The new shape and velocity of the discussion has been discussed in Torp, *Gerechtigkeit im Wohlfahrtsstaat*, 78; Göckenjan, *Das Alter würdigen*, 364. For the examples in this paragraph, see Friedrich Burgdörfer, “Altern, Altersgrenze, Altersfürsorge,” *Blätter der Wohlfahrtspflege* 99 (1952): 341–46, here 342; Adenauer’s remarks are available at <http://www.konrad-adenauer.de/dokumente/erklarungen/regierungserklarung12>; Stuttgart Bürgermeisteramt, *Die Probleme der Altenhilfe und der Versuch ihrer Lösung in Stuttgart* (Stuttgart, 1961); Sepp Groth, *Das Alter im Aufbruch des Daseins* (Frankfurt, 1954), 14; Lieselotte Lenhartz, *Altersprobleme des selbständigen grossstädtischen Mittelstandes* (Stuttgart, 1958); *Die Altersfrage: Soziale Augabe der Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1958), 6; Rudolf Tartler, “Gesellschaft und Alter,” in *ibid.*, 9–23, esp. 15–21 for a discussion of the grim purposelessness of old age in modern West Germany.

<sup>26</sup> Helmut Schelsky, “Die Paradoxien des Alters in der modernen Gesellschaft,” in *Auf der Suche nach Wirklichkeit: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Düsseldorf, 1965), 198–221, here 198.

<sup>27</sup> For an introduction to the demographic data, see Conrad, *Vom Greis zu Rentner*, pt. A.

<sup>28</sup> For one recognition of this, see Heddy Neumeister, “Nicht alle Rentner sind arm,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 23, 1956, 1. For the raw data from which these conclusions were calculated, see Peter Deneffe, “Die wirtschaftliche Verhältnisse der Rentnerhaushaltungen,” *Wirtschaft und Statistik* 8 (1956): 500–510, here 502. The L-Survey received its name from its method, which involved surveying Germans whose last name began with L.

<sup>29</sup> This was occasionally uttered in the early postwar, but seldom thereafter. See, for instance, Maria Bornitz, “Unsere alten Leute,” *Caritas* 49 (1948): 140–47, here 141; Hermann Strebel, “Wandlungen im Altersaufbau der Berliner und ihre Auswirkungen auf die Rentenversicherung,” *Soziale Arbeit* 1 (1951–52): 241–72.

all while tying these qualities in practice to the heteronormative, nuclear family.<sup>30</sup> In postwar West Germany, among socialists and conservatives alike, the nuclear family as an ethical unit emerged as a bulwark against the moral dissolution endemic to modernity—a dissolution that reached its pinnacle with National Socialism. Totalitarianism, it was believed, thrived on the isolation and ennui of the modern condition, and antitotalitarianism therefore required some form of moral integration, ideally at the family level.<sup>31</sup> In addition to the moral appeal, consistent with Christian Democracy's vision of a traditionalist reconstruction, this kind of family received a social-scientific imprimatur through the new discipline of family sociology. This view was identified above all with Helmut Schelsky, a former Nazi who emerged as a prominent sociologist and supporter of the Social Democratic Party in the 1950s. In his blockbuster *Changes in the German Family* (1952), he argued that the multigenerational household was collapsing due to the natural rhythms of industrialization, accelerated in Germany by the mass dislocation of the war. In other words, the hegemony of the nuclear family, in fact a long-standing reality, was understood functionally as a result of modernization, which changed the character of labor and turned the household from a multigenerational unit of economic production into a two-generational one of consumption and moral education.<sup>32</sup>

The cultural and economic investment in the nuclear family generated a corollary displacement of the quintessentially modern problems of rootlessness onto those figures that had no place in the nuclear family—homosexuals and single women, to be sure, but also the elderly. The aging and isolated citizen represented an inconvenient telos, one with little place in a social imaginary structured by nuclear families. A West German speaker at the 1955 United Nations congress on aging provides the logic: “The elderly man, once secure in the natural three-generation-

<sup>30</sup> This was contested at the margins, as some were already drawing attention to the authoritarianism of the family and its psychic costs. However, in mainstream social-scientific and political thought, the nuclear family reigned supreme. The literature on this theme is massive, but for an introduction see Erica Carter, *How German Is She? Post-war West German Reconstruction and the Consuming Woman* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1997); Robert Moeller, *Protecting Motherhood: Women and the Family in the Politics of Postwar West Germany* (Berkeley, 1993); Merith Niehuss, *Familie, Frau und Gesellschaft: Studien zur Strukturgeschichte der Familie in Westdeutschland, 1945–1960* (Göttingen, 2001); Elizabeth D. Heineman, “The Economic Miracle in the Bedroom: Big Business and Sexual Consumption in Reconstruction West Germany,” *Journal of Modern History* 78 (2006): 846–77; Till van Rahden, “Fatherhood, Rechristianization, and the Quest for Democracy in Postwar West Germany,” in *Raising Citizens in the “Century of the Child”: The United States and German Central Europe in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Dirk Schumann (New York, 2010), 141–64.

<sup>31</sup> This is explored more fully in James Chappel, “Nuclear Families in a Nuclear Age: Theorising the Family in 1950 West Germany,” *Contemporary European History* 26 (2017): 85–109.

<sup>32</sup> Helmut Schelsky, *Wandlungen der deutschen Familie in der Gegenwart* (Dortmund, 1954).

union of the family (grandparents–children–grandchildren), in which he could make his reduced powers useful, has become a rootless individual in the city. He has sacrificed his powers to an anonymous society [*Gesellschaft*] and has therefore become himself anonymous.”<sup>33</sup>

Social scientists, therefore, addressed a so-called crisis of aging, brought about because the elderly were the remainder left behind by the new hegemony of the nuclear family as both an economic and a moral agent. The pathway to solving that problem was blazed by theologians and developmental psychologists, who conspired to revalorize age, providing a common understanding of what it might mean to age successfully. They too tapped into a longer German history. In response to the earliest elaborations of old age as a life stage beyond production, a number of authors in the Wilhelmine period had begun to link it with noble and even spiritual processes of transcendence and virtue.<sup>34</sup> In the work of Charlotte Bühler, this insight began to be expressed in the language of developmental psychology. Her *The Human Life Course as a Psychological Problem* (1933) was the first scientific text to outline special psychic problems among the elderly.<sup>35</sup> Despite its origins in the work of a Jewish theorist, this approach crystallized in the Nazi period. A swell of aging literature appeared, written by enthusiastic National Socialists like Paul Herre, Wilhelm Spohr, and Erich Rothacker. The idea, as Herre explained, was to show that “there are old men who are healthy enough to remain creative.” Herre celebrated the creative and spiritual accomplishments of the elderly, concluding that the “biological-constructive labor” of the Nazi regime would, in the long run, create a particularly creative generation of the aged.<sup>36</sup> The most influential version appeared in Rothacker’s 1938 *The Levels of Personality*, in which he argued that the ego can continue to develop until death, and that, therefore, the “maturation” of the self need not correspond with the physiological “aging” of the body.<sup>37</sup>

These positions were minority views in Nazi Germany, where policy makers and experts were more concerned with squeezing military or industrial labor from the elderly than in ensuring a spiritually profound old age. They flowered, how-

<sup>33</sup> Hertha Balling, “Plane Dein Alter!,” *Ausländische Sozialprobleme* 6, no. 1 (January 1956): 6–8, here 6. On the relationship between German theories of the family and the elderly, see also Baumgartl, *Altersbilder und Altenhilfe*, 93–94.

<sup>34</sup> Göckenjan, *Das Alter würdigen*, 267–72, 282–84.

<sup>35</sup> Charlotte Bühler, *Der menschliche Lebenslauf als psychologisches Problem* (Leipzig, 1933).

<sup>36</sup> Paul Herre, *Schöpferisches Alter: Geschichtliche Spätkalterleistungen in Übersicht und Deutung* (Leipzig, 1939), 355; Wilhelm Spohr, *Glorie des Alters* (Berlin, 1940).

<sup>37</sup> Erich Rothacker, *Die Schichten der Persönlichkeit*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1941), 127–31. On Rothacker as a Nazi theoretician, and on his postwar career, see Volker Böhnigk, *Kulturanthropologie als Rassenlehre: Nationsozialistische Kulturphilosophie aus der Sicht des Philosophen Erich Rothacker* (Würzburg, 2002).

ever, in West Germany. The continuity with past traditions was most apparent in the case of Hans Thomae. A student of Rothacker and Alfred Bäumler, the Thomae of the 1930s was a convinced National Socialist who used his teachers' theories to celebrate the racialized unfolding of the German personality.<sup>38</sup> After the war, his pathbreaking *Personality: A Dynamic Interpretation* (1951) continued to rely on Rothacker's model of the self, affirming that personality was not fixed in childhood, or even in adulthood, and that meaningful change could happen well into old age.<sup>39</sup> That book's section on aging was lifted almost wholesale from Rothacker's 1938 book, and it argued similarly for a distinction between "aging" and "maturing."<sup>40</sup> In the decade after that book appeared, Thomae became the founder of social gerontology in Germany. Exposed in America to longitudinal studies, and primed by Rothacker's already stated belief that such a study would be the only way to grasp the human person wholly, he founded the Bonn Longitudinal Study of Aging (BOLSA) in 1965. (It still exists today.) BOLSA led to many studies dedicated to showing the adaptability and meaning of old age, while Thomae's research partner (and later wife), Ursula Lehr, held the first-ever ministerial post devoted to senior citizens.

Thomae at the time believed that the special task of old age was to integrate one's personality aesthetically and existentially in order to be prepared for death. He viewed old age, therefore, as a time for the cultivation of virtue and spiritual preparedness. This rhymed with the more general West German concern for moral integration, existentialism, and psychology. If the nuclear family provided the matrix for postfascist sociability, the integrated personality defined the postfascist self. The philosopher Karl Jaspers, above all, gave voice to this aspiration, and he was highly influential for Thomae and other postwar theorists of old age.<sup>41</sup> A. L. Vischer's ubiquitous *Old Age as Fate and Fulfillment* (1942) made just this point, as did the many experts who clogged the radio waves and newspapers on this topic.<sup>42</sup> Even if the elderly can no longer produce, the argument went, they could craft some kind of meaningful life. "Very old men," explained a Catholic moralist, "have a dignity that comes from their *being* rather than from their *achieve-*

<sup>38</sup> Hans Thomae, *Ruf des Lebens: Gedanken großer Deutscher der Vergangenheit* (Potsdam, 1939).

<sup>39</sup> At the time, this was still a dissident approach, as developmental psychologists tended more toward Heinz Werner's theories privileging childhood and early adulthood as the key to the psyche. Author interview with Ursula Lehr, March 11, 2016, Berlin.

<sup>40</sup> Hans Thomae, *Persönlichkeit: Eine dynamische Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Bonn, 1955), 9, 111–12. This approach is reiterated in Hans Thomae, "Ageing and Problems of Adjustment," *International Social Science Journal* 15 (1963): 366–76, which presumes that adjustment and integration are the key axes of elder welfare.

<sup>41</sup> On Jaspers's postwar career, see Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 1997), chap. 4.

<sup>42</sup> A. L. Vischer, *Das Alter als Schicksal und Erfüllung*, 3rd ed. (Basel, 1955).

ment.”<sup>43</sup> Sepp Groth’s aforementioned *Old Age and the Emergence into Existence* (1954) drew, like Thomae, on Jaspers to argue that the elderly required “recognition and integration” to save them from the “naked existence” into which they were thrust by their purposelessness.<sup>44</sup>

Thomae and others presumed that the elderly did have a social function—but that it could not come through labor or workforce participation. Instead, the “ripening” and “integration” they sought could provide moral guidance to a still uncertain national project (a moral guidance that the young generation, worryingly attracted to American popular culture, might not provide). This helps us to understand the appeal of Jaspers, in his seventies at the time, and also of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, popularly known as “The Old Man” (*Der Alte*), who served as chancellor for the entire decade of the 1950s (celebrating his eightieth birthday in 1956). A more theoretical defense could be found in Theodor Litt’s 1958 radio address “The Veneration of Old Age.” Litt, nearing eighty himself, was one of the nation’s foremost experts in pedagogy: a former rector of the University of Leipzig, he had assumed the leadership of Bonn’s Institute for Educational Sciences after the war. His lecture began with the typical concerns about demographic transformation and feared that the elderly would become “useless eaters of bread.” This development could be stopped, he argued, by recognizing that the problem of aging was a spiritual and ethical one that struck at the heart of the West German experiment. Old age, Litt judged, should not be venerated in itself, but only insofar as the elderly earn their laurels. They were to do so not through labor, or even through consumption, but through the hard work of memory. The elderly, for Litt, were a repository of German experience and suffering, and were therefore duty bound to communicate that experience to upcoming generations.<sup>45</sup>

Sociologists, pedagogues, and developmental psychologists in 1950s West Germany, therefore, shared an image of the problematic and purposeless elderly in need of psychological integration—an integration that might allow them to serve as moral guides to a new nation. This ideal can be tracked as well in the publications of the subsidiary welfare organizations that have, throughout Ger-

<sup>43</sup> Romano Guardini, *Die Lebensalter: Ihre ethische und pädagogische Bedeutung*, 5th ed. (Würzburg, 1959), 54. This much-loved pamphlet was dedicated to uncovering the values specific to each life phase. For similar sentiments from secular sources, see “Der alte Mensch in der heutigen Gesellschaft,” *Ausländische Sozialprobleme* 6, no. 1 (January 1956): 6; K. H. Stauder, “Über den Pensionierungsbankrott,” *Psyche* 9 (1955): 481–97, here 493.

<sup>44</sup> Groth, *Das Alter im Aufbruch des Daseins*, 49. Groth hoped to restore some form of multigenerational family, a position that most sociologists (including Schelsky, Rudolf Tartler, and Ludwig von Freideburg) judged to be impossible.

<sup>45</sup> Theodor Litt, “Lob des Alters,” in *Der alte Mensch in unserer Zeit*, ed. Paul Althaus (Stuttgart, 1958), 7–19.

man history, played such an enormous role in defining the normative life course.<sup>46</sup> The German welfare state has traditionally been reluctant to deliver care directly, and tended instead to devolve on-the-ground operations to the Red Cross, confessional organizations (the Catholic Caritas, the Protestant Inner Mission, and the Central Welfare Office of the German Jews), and the social-democratic alternative Arbeiterwohlfahrt (Workers' welfare, or AWO). As they had for decades, these organizations in 1950s West Germany organized nursing homes, home visits, social events, clubs, and transportation help for the local elderly. As such, they played an important role in crafting both the ecology of care and the culture of aging in postwar West Germany.<sup>47</sup>

When it came to the realities of eldercare, the subsidiary organizations continued much as they had done before. They publicly conceptualized their activity, however, in a new way, as their propagandists quickly adopted the existentialist and quasi-spiritualist account of successful aging that had become commonplace in the scientific literature. "Service to the elderly," one Protestant official privately mused, "is properly speaking a preparation for death." That grim sentiment had a more cheerful public-facing version. One advertisement for a Protestant eldercare facility declared it a space for mature moral completion, apart from the devils of modern youth culture: the perfect "antechamber to eternity." For confessional organizations, the link between their own spirituality and the spiritual inflection of the psychological approach was seamless. When Caritas published a special issue on aging in 1954, for instance, it seemed perfectly natural to include secular experts like Sepp Groth alongside theologians like Romano Guardini.<sup>48</sup>

The most influential text on aging from Christian welfare circles was Lilly Zarncke's *Aging as a Task: Elder Psychology as the Foundation of Elder Welfare*

<sup>46</sup> On the role of these organizations in Germany, see Thomas Adam, *Philanthropy, Civil Society, and the State in German History, 1815–1989* (Rochester, NY, 2016); Jürgen Kocka, *Civil Society and Dictatorship in Modern German History* (Lebanon, NH, 2010). My analysis here dovetails with that of Comelius Torp, who focused on newspapers. Torp, *Gerechtigkeit im Wohlfahrtsstaat*, 67–79.

<sup>47</sup> For one account of what the organizations actually did, see "Altenhilfe—eine dringende Zeitaufgabe. II," *Vinzenz-Blätter* 38 (1955): 29–31, esp. 30. For an early club for the elderly, see "Altenklub in Düsseldorf," *Caritas* (1954): 145–46.

<sup>48</sup> Superintendent des Kirchenkreises Reinickendorf an das Evangelische Konsistorium Berlin Brandenburg, April 3, 1964, in Evangelisches Landeskirkliches Archiv in Berlin (ELAB) 1/6256; Walter Götzger, *Unser Dienst am alten Menschen* (Nuremberg, 1957), 3; Sepp Groth, "Das Alter," *Caritas* 55 (1954): 99–104 (selection from the *Aufbruch* volume); Romano Guardini, "Der reife und weise Mensch," *ibid.*, 104–5. For other examples, see "Altenhilfe—eine dringende Zeitaufgabe," *Vinzenz-Blätter* 38 (1955): 8–10; Friedrich Münchmeyer-Bethel, "Umschau auf die Arbeit der Inneren Mission im Bundesgebiet," *Die Innere Mission* 42 (1953): 1–10; E. Schnydrig, "Mut zur Selbstkritik," *Caritas* 59 (1958): 18–20.

(1957). In it, she discovered perfect homology between her Christian beliefs and the existential, Jaspers-inflected approach of her peers. Like Thomae, her interest in social integration had roots in the Nazi period, when she thought through ways to integrate “asocial families” into the “national community” (*Volksgemeinschaft*). She too was concerned with integration of the personality to stave off psychological distress. She observed “apathy,” “anxiety,” and a “loss of self-esteem” in the elderly, which she believed could be overcome through a conscious attempt to find meaning. And as with the others, she was convinced that this search was fundamentally an individual and spiritual task. “Age,” as Zarncke put it, “is assigned to *each individual* for her *own development*,” and each individual is tasked with discovering and recognizing “the meaning of her own life.”<sup>49</sup>

Even the secular and social-democratic AWO participated in this hegemonic discourse. While its leaders chastised confessional eldercare for its overemphasis on purely spiritual matters, their general vision of successful aging hardly differed.<sup>50</sup> The main AWO expert on aging, Emma Steiger, drew from the same well as Zarncke. She presumed that aging was a problem, to be solved through a proper understanding of the “essence of the elderly” and their “psychological characteristics.” Aging, she explained, was a process of crisis and psychological distress, as the aged dwelt on guilt for their lives and faced the reality that they could not change anything essential. The only possibility was to help the elderly prepare for death and reach a properly “mature” old age by integrating their memories and experiences into a “meaningful whole.” The AWO agreed with the confessional organizations that some kind of commitment to eternal and even spiritual values was necessary for successful aging—they simply did not think that those values were necessarily Christian, given that the modern elderly had been born in a time of secularization.<sup>51</sup>

The normative life course circulated through images as much as through texts. West Germans were buffeted with images that largely replicated the discourse of aging outlined above. The omnipresent and wrinkled image of Adenauer, for instance, reminded viewers of the wisdom that came with age; the newspaper portrayals of impoverished pensioners reminded them, too, that this wisdom had little place in the traditional labor market. The visual culture of aging in the welfare organizations’ publications expressed the same ideals. Three images—one each

<sup>49</sup> Lilly Zarncke, *Zur Unterbringung asozialer Familien* (Frankfurt, 1941), and Zarncke, *Alter als Aufgabe: Alterspsychologie als Grundlage der Altersfürsorge* (Freiburg, 1957), 23, 30, 210.

<sup>50</sup> For their critique, see Lotte Lemke (AWO head), “Unser Brief,” *Unsere Arbeit*, special attachment to *Neues Beginnen* 3 (December 1955): 194.

<sup>51</sup> Emma Steiger, “Vom Wesen des alten Menschen,” *Neues Beginnen* 2 (1954): 17–19. The article was an extract from Emma Steiger, *Altersprobleme: Wesen und Stellung des alten Menschen mit Beispielen aus der Altershilfe in zahlreichen Ländern* (Bonn, 1954), 4–6.

from socialist, Protestant, and Catholic sources, all printed between 1955 and 1957—are emblematic. Figure 1, depicting an isolated elderly woman, was the cover image of a special issue of the AWO's magazine devoted to the elderly. The accompanying text was ghastly: "Can she even still laugh?" "Countless" elderly, the text continued, "live tired and resigned" in the "background" of the "neon" cultural life of West Germany, "pushed into a zone that is neither life nor death." This rhymed with the ageist accounts of functionless elderly that had grown prominent in recent years. Both of the next two images function by juxtaposing the old and the young, and each displays one facet of the hegemonic discourse of age. Figure 2 is taken from an Inner Mission pamphlet on Protestant nursing homes (the text reads "The Happiness of Youth, the Grace of Age"), and, like images of Adenauer, reminded viewers that old age came with its own specific values that, however much they might lack in fashion and vitality, represented important sources of quiet dignity and meaning. Figure 3 comes from a Catholic women's magazine, and it served to remind viewers that, in the absence of some kind of transformation, the elderly were doomed to recede into the background in the face of a new culture of youthful and Americanized consumption.

This discussion of the scientific and popular discourse on old age is an unfamiliar but illuminating introduction to an analysis of the 1957 pension reform: the legislation that for the first time clarified that care for the elderly was a responsibility of the state, above all, and not of the seniors themselves or their families. Most of the sources discussed thus far appeared between 1953, when Konrad Adenauer announced pension reform as a policy priority, and 1957, when reform legislation was passed by the Bundestag. During these years, an intense discussion was taking place inside the government, with input from trade unions and other interest groups, about how old age should be administered. This story has been told many times, and there is no need to rehearse it here.<sup>52</sup> My goal, instead, is to make the more novel point that this discussion was inflected by, and had the same presuppositions as, the broader discussion about old age traced above. The policy apparatus that makes a normative life course into a reality, therefore, carries with it the contingent presumptions about the shape of a good life that are forged outside the space of ministerial expertise and political compromise.

This is not to say that policy history is irrelevant. As with other aspects of aging discourse in the 1950s, the pension reform of 1957 emerged from a long German tradition. The elderly had been receiving some sort of benefits from the state since 1889, when under Bismarck's stewardship Germany elaborated a welfare system based upon a system of insurance rather than entitlement (the principle is that only those who have participated in the labor force are covered).

<sup>52</sup> See especially Hockerts, *Sozialpolitische Entscheidungen im Nachkriegsdeutschland*.



FIG. 1.—An old woman, as presented on the cover of *Unsere Arbeit*, a special attachment to an issue of *Neues Beginnen*, the house journal of Arbeiterwohlfahrt (December 1955).

Those early pensions are often overvalued in retrospect: the invalidism and old-age pensions were focused very much on the former, as policymakers had no inkling that the (small) elderly population of the Reich was about to explode. Moreover, benefits were very low and were meant to provide supplemental income



FIG. 2.—“The Happiness of Youth, the Grace of Age.” Walter Götzger, *Unser Dienst am alten Menschen* (Nuremberg, 1957), 19. Image courtesy of Diakonie Bayern.

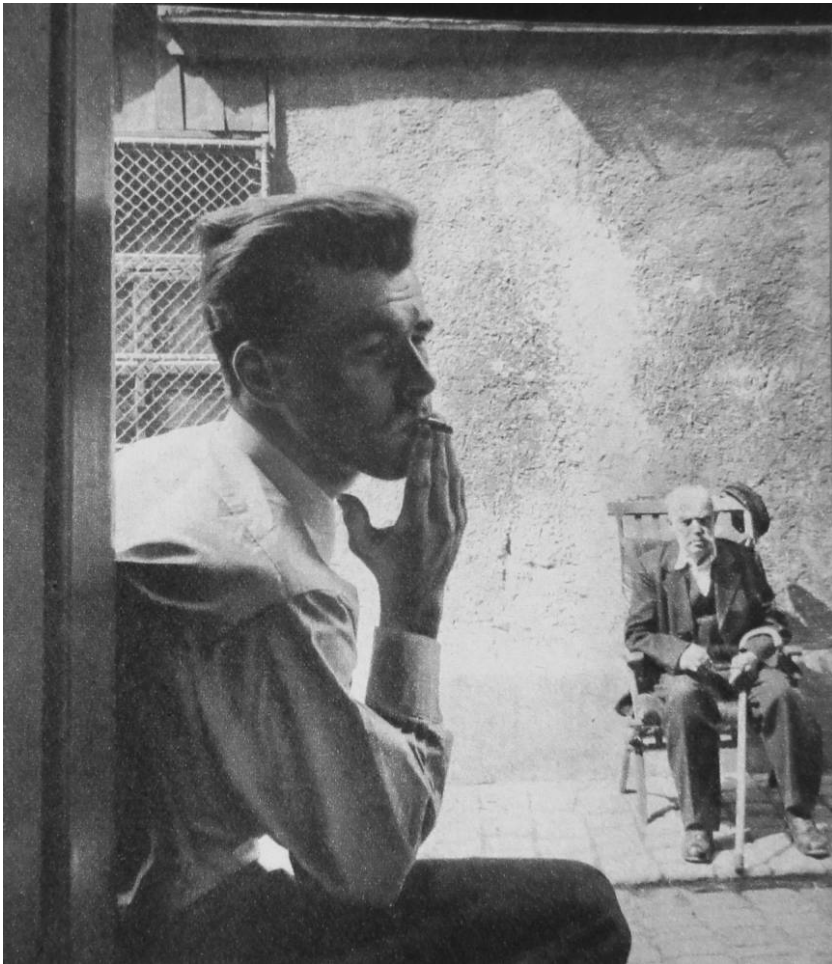


FIG. 3.—Intergenerational relations as portrayed in a Catholic women's magazine. "Alt und Jung seid gut zueinander," *Frau und Mutter*, no. 11 (1956): 7.

rather than income replacement. This began to change in the Weimar era, when pension funds were devastated by inflation and pensioners emerged, in response, as a distinct interest group for the first time. With some success, they pressured the state and, more commonly, municipal governments to provide more relief. All the same, it was not yet a principle that care for the elderly was, in general, a social obligation, nor that the pension should itself allow the aged citizen to enjoy a life of leisurely consumption. The 1924 National Welfare Decree, for

instance, insisted that care for the elderly was first and foremost a responsibility of relatives.<sup>53</sup>

From 1925 onward, policy experts began to argue that the pension system should be dramatically reformed such that pensions would be paid by the current generation of workers. (Known as PAYGO, referring to its “pay as you go” logic, this is the basic form of most modern pension systems.)<sup>54</sup> In the Weimar era, this was partially adopted as a matter of pragmatism, but as a matter of principle it was still viewed by most welfare experts as too risky. This began to change during the Nazi period. Experts at the Arbeitswissenschaftliches Institut (AwI), Nazi Germany’s leading social policy think tank and an arm of the German Labor Front (DAF), were especially interested in the PAYGO system, especially after Hitler asked them to think through a reform of the social insurance system.<sup>55</sup> Theodor Bühler and Robert Ley both advocated PAYGO using racist arguments. Elderly Aryans, they reasoned, were part of the *Volksgemeinschaft* and deserved a share of its spoils. Ley, head of the DAF, pursued an extraordinary media campaign to popularize PAYGO pensions. Previous forms of social policy, Ley explained in a Berlin newspaper, had been a blatant attempt to buy off the working classes, not to create security for all Germans who had paid their debt to the fatherland. “Work,” he admitted, “is the keystone of social order,” but the *Volksgemeinschaft* must care for “life in its totality.” “The elderly farmer takes part in the prosperity of the farm when it is run by his son,” Ley explained, adding that the same principle should hold for the *Volk* as a whole (keeping in mind the racial and political restrictions the term had for him). “In the future,” he concluded, “every old or disabled person should take part in the prosperity of the income-producing generation.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> David Crews, *Germans on Welfare: From Weimar to Hitler* (New York, 1998), chap. 5 generally, and here p. 96. For an overview of the shape of Weimar welfare, see Young-Sun Hong, *Welfare, Modernity, and the Weimar State, 1919–1933* (Princeton, NJ, 1998). On pensions specifically, see also Karl Christian Führer, “Für das Wirtschaftsleben ‘mehr oder weniger wertlose Personen’: Zur Lage von Invaliden- und Kleinrentnern in den Inflationssjahren 1918–1924,” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 30 (1990): 145–80.

<sup>54</sup> Mierzejewski, *A History of the German Public Pension System*, 189.

<sup>55</sup> This became known after the war as the Mackenroth thesis, but it has since come to light that it was originally an interwar, and especially a Nazi, ideal. See Winfried Schmähl, “Über den Satz ‘Aller Sozialaufwand muß immer aus dem Volkseinkommen der laufenden Periode gedeckt werden,’” *Hamburger Jahrbuch für Wirtschafts- und Gesellschaftspolitik* 26 (1981): 147–72. For Hitler’s request, see Mierzejewski, *A History of the German Public Pension System*, 133.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Ley, “Gedanken zur Altersversorgung. II,” *Der Angriff* 264 (November 1, 1940): 1–2, here 1, and Ley, “Der Staatssozialismus setzt sich durch,” *Der Angriff* 238 (October 2, 1940): 1–2, 4, here 4. On Ley’s propaganda efforts, see Mierzejewski, *A History of the German Public Pension System*, 133–35. For Bühler’s take, see Theodor Bühler, *Deutsche Sozialwirtschaft: Ein Überblick über die sozialen Aufgaben der Volkswirtschaft* (Berlin, 1940), esp. 158–62.

Ley's plans went nowhere at the time, stymied by resistance from the Labor Ministry and from the Nazi leadership's unwillingness to take on new social expenses in a moment of total war. It was only in 1957 that a reform remarkably like Ley's came into existence, and one that set a new global standard for the delivery of pensions. It retained the same basic structure introduced in 1889: pensions remained a form of social insurance, and because benefits were linked to previous payments into the system, they served to reproduce class structure in old age. In other respects, the 1957 reform was revolutionary. First, West Germans for the first time embraced a formal PAYGO system, in which benefits for retirees are funded by contributions from the current generation of workers. Second, benefit levels were indexed to economic growth, which allowed for current generations of seniors to take advantage of productivity growth that transpired after they left the labor force. This was the famed "dynamic" element of the program. Third, the benefits were remarkably high—designed to provide something like a full income replacement (they were higher than comparable social security programs in the United States and elsewhere in the Cold War West).<sup>57</sup>

Much commentary on the reform has focused on the ways in which it served to cement class inequality into old age by linking pension levels to past contributions. This was not new, although the expanded size of the program did grant this feature more significance. The more novel features of the reform were rooted specifically in the presumptions about old age that had become commonplace in West German social-scientific and popular culture—each of which, as we've seen, was linked with a highly ideological account of industrial civilization and its discontents. First, the reform presumed, as previous pension plans in Germany had not, that "the elderly" constituted a specific class of people defined by their age and their removal from the workforce. This biopolitical determination was absent from Germany's policy history, but it was fully present in the social-scientific literature and the popular culture of the 1950s. Second, the reform presumed that the elderly were in crisis and that only a dramatic policy shift could save them. Third, it presumed that families would not care for the elderly the way they once had, and the way that they continued to care for children. This, too, was a novel assertion, absent from policy debates even in the 1920s but commonplace among family sociologists in the 1950s. These first three presumptions belong to the conjuring of the elderly as a "problem" in West German culture. The fourth concerns the solution: integration into the national project. Ley had hoped to do this under the rubric of race, but that was no longer on the table. The new West German national identity was

<sup>57</sup> For an excellent study of the plan as a moral and political project, see Cornelius Torp, "The Adenauer Government's Pensions Reform of 1957—a Question of Justice," *German History* 34 (2016): 237–57.

founded, instead, on economic growth and material well-being. The fourth connection between the reform and aging discourse, therefore, concerned the “dynamic” element of the plan, which attempted to integrate the elderly into the prosperous household of the nation as an antidote to their putative expulsion from families and workplaces.<sup>58</sup>

None of this is surprising, because the plan emerged from experts embedded in the social science of the era. The plan that eventually became reality had two proximate intellectual sources. The first was the so-called Rothenfelser Memorandum, prepared by four experts hand-picked by Adenauer in 1955 to explain the CDU’s social vision. The section on pensions and the elderly, drawing directly from public discussions about the issue, essentially foretold the shape of the reform. The elderly, in the memorandum’s telling, had been abandoned by nuclear families in the industrial age, and only through self-help and well-earned pensions could the “problem” of aging be solved.<sup>59</sup>

The memorandum also drew attention to the second, and more significant, source: the ideas of an economist and social Catholic intellectual named Wilfrid Schreiber. Schreiber, a former Nazi party member and radio official, had spent the 1930s trying to imagine a properly nationalism form of radio production, which envisioned the radio as a sort of pulmonary mechanism circulating the wisdom of the *Volk* back to itself, rather than didactically feeding a message.<sup>60</sup> After the war, Schreiber underwent training in economics and authored a 1955 pamphlet called *Security of Existence in Industrial Society*, which greatly intrigued Adenauer and became the basis for the reform. Schreiber’s scheme retained vestiges of his earlier nationalism. In a formal sense, for instance, the logic of the PAYGO plan was similar to his earlier account of the radio. Moreover, it relied on a continuously increasing population. More than most, Schreiber was willing to admit this, and he stated explicitly that his plan would only work if it were tied to “a pronounced, conscious element of population politics.” This demographic zeal led him to pathologize those who stepped outside the normative family ideal. According to his pamphlet, “whoever enters old age without children or with only a few and, with the pathos of the self-righteous, demands and receives the same

<sup>58</sup> On the political and cultural salience of economic growth at this moment, see Mark E. Spicka, *Selling the Economic Miracle: Economic Reconstruction and Politics in West Germany, 1949–1957* (New York, 2007).

<sup>59</sup> Hans Achinger, Joseph Höffner, Hans Muthesius, and Ludwig Neundörfer, *Neuordnung der sozialen Leistungen: Denkschrift auf Anregung des Bundeskanzlers* (Cologne, 1955), 102–6.

<sup>60</sup> Wilfrid Schreiber, “Der Westdeutsche Rundfunk im ersten Jahr der Nationalsozialistischen Revolution: Rückblick und Ausblick” (TS of 1934 report, available at Universitätsbibliothek München).

pension for the same contributions, feeds parasitically on the superior effort of those with many children.”<sup>61</sup>

While it is tempting to view Schreiber as a closet Nazi, it is more accurate to see him as a participant in a deep vein of German aging discourse, one that had a significant inflection point in the 1930s but an even greater one in the 1950s. His residual nationalism, in other words, is less striking than his commitment to the new shibboleths of family sociology and developmental psychology, which were taken for granted in his pamphlet. Unlike his Bismarckean predecessors, for instance, Schreiber believed in aging as a “problem” of functionlessness generated by the logic of “industrial society.” And since the aged could not work, they were burdened with psychological issues. As the first sentence of his brochure explained, he wanted to solve the problem of “anxiety” (*Lebensangst*) generated by their modernity-induced purposelessness and their dependence on the welfare state. This dependence created a “psychosis” among some of the elderly, many of whom “want to be ill.” In place of that psychosis, he wanted to give workers and the elderly alike the “pride of self-responsibility, the consciousness of independence, and the feeling of security.”<sup>62</sup>

Each of these keywords, it should be clear, riveted Schreiber to a broader discourse of aging and citizenship in 1950s West Germany. While the pension reform was often presented as a technocratic response to a crisis endemic to industrial modernization, it was in fact a more political and ideological policy, rooted in the specific West German approach to the normative life course and the specific West German imagination of citizenship and labor. As perceptive social scientists like Hans Achinger and Charlotte Bühler pointed out at the time, the reform was a grand experiment in social engineering that ended up creating the problem of elder isolation and functionlessness as much as it addressed them.<sup>63</sup> If it is true, as I have suggested, that one major purpose of the reform was to institutionalize a normative life course that would grant legitimacy to the post-Nazi democratic experiment, then these observations would point to its success rather than its limits. Achinger and Bühler are certainly right, though, that other responses were possible. They did not have to look far to find them.

<sup>61</sup> Wilfrid Schreiber, *Existenzsicherheit in der industriellen Gesellschaft* (Cologne, 1955), 33–34; on his mockery of the fear of *Bevölkerungspolitik*, see Hockerts, *Der deutsche Sozialstaat*, 297 (and 11–12 for Hockerts’s own thoughts on the relationship between Schreiber’s plan and his nationalist past); for Schreiber on women and the family, see Moeller, *Protecting Motherhood*, 12–13. Interestingly, given Martin Kohli’s insistence that analysts of the life course keep the entire life span in mind, Schreiber originally meant for his plan to address the elderly and the youth at once in a three-generational contract. In this case, his policies were not enacted, and the isolation of the problematic elderly won out.

<sup>62</sup> Schreiber, *Existenzsicherheit in der industriellen Gesellschaft*, 7, 5, 38, 13.

<sup>63</sup> Achinger’s speech at the Wirtschaftspolitische Gesellschaft, reported in “Die Isolierung des Alters,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 4, 1957, 39; Charlotte Bühler, *Psychologie im Leben Unserer Zeit* (Berlin, 1968 [original 1962]), 300.

## EAST GERMANY AND THE MOBILIZATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

In the German Democratic Republic (DDR), a different regime of aging emerged at just the same time. This modern and industrial nation, like its neighbor, engaged in a broad discussion about aging and citizenship in the mid-1950s before elaborating a new set of responses to old age around 1957. East German elites, like their counterparts in the West, were laboring to create a new culture of legitimacy around their new state, and this involved again the elaboration of a new normative life course. That life course, however, looked very different, and therefore privileged different imaginaries of age. If West Germans imagined citizenship around the healthy nuclear family, which created the elderly as a problematic remainder, East Germans instead imagined citizenship around labor and the workplace, which did not necessarily have the same result. An investigation of the East German case allows us to answer the question: what does a life course look like in which life spans are long but old age is not considered a “problem”?

For many years, historians have portrayed the East German welfare state as a shoddy and ramshackle system with shallow roots in German history. This has been especially true in discussions of aging, where criticism has focused on two issues. First, and most importantly, pensions remained miserably low. Second, the East German pensions, which bestowed privileges on politically significant groups, lacked the putative fairness of the West German system.<sup>64</sup> These scholars have focused overwhelmingly, then, on the pension system, rather than asking about the role and creation of old age in the normative life course. This has two negative consequences. First, it naturalizes the West German approach by presuming that pension policy is the only relevant response to old age. (It also naturalizes the moral economy of the West German model by presuming that to link pensions to past earnings and class standing is transparently just, while more “political” considerations are suspect.) Second, it reinforces the familiar but increasingly dubious notion that social problems in East Germany were addressed inadequately and by a small cadre of experts.

<sup>64</sup> Manfred G. Schmidt and Gerhard A. Ritter, *The Rise and Fall of a Socialist Welfare State: The German Democratic Republic (1949–1990) and German Unification (1989–1994)*, trans. David R. Antal and Ben Veghte (New York, 2013), 86, 206. For more extended critiques, see Dierk Hoffmann, *Am Rande der sozialistischen Arbeitsgesellschaft: Rentner in der DDR, 1945–1990* (Erfurt, 2010); Mierzejewski, *A History of the German Public Pension System*, chap. 9. On the politicization of pensions, see Ernst Bienert, “Die Altersversorgung der Intelligenz in der DDR,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialreform* 39 (1993): 349–61. A more positive account, interestingly, appeared in West Germany in the waning days of the DDR: *Rentner in der DDR: Altsein im ‘Sozialismus,’* ed. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Bonn, 1987). For a balanced account, written by a veteran of the system, see Klaus-Peter Schwitzer, “Senioren,” in *Sozialpolitik in der DDR: Ziele und Wirklichkeit*, ed. Günter Manz, Ekkehard Sachse, and Gunnar Winkler (Berlin, 2001), 337–56.

Scholars of East German aging, that is, have not caught up with recent trends in the study of East Germany. East Germans, it now appears, broadly accepted the legitimacy of the regime—which, in turn, proved surprisingly responsive to their needs. This is not to discount the political repression and daily privation that were ubiquitous in these years. It is, though, to put them in the context of the regime's successes, and to view the regime itself as a German one, rather than a Soviet puppet. Socialism and Communism, after all, were homegrown ideologies, and the leaders of East Germany came from that tradition, not from the Kremlin. Matthias Willing, a scholar of socialist welfare, has drawn the corollary for East German social policy: it might not have been as lavish or generous as its West German opponent, but the East Germans did mobilize with energy and enthusiasm behind a uniquely socialist vision of social policy.<sup>65</sup>

The critical scholars of East German aging are right that the regime focused on labor, rather than the family, as the matrix of citizenship. They are wrong, though, to conclude that this could not yield a normative life course in which old age had a part. A leisure and consumption-filled “retirement” was not on the table for most East Germans, given the lack of lavish pensions to make it possible.<sup>66</sup> By placing pension policy in the context of the broader discourse of age, this section will present a more robust account of what it meant to age as a socialist. This differed from its West German counterpart in two major and related ways. First, old age was not presented as a “problem” generated by modernity, but as a laudable success of socialist policy. Second, old age was not addressed via pension expansion, but instead by state-sponsored forms of mobilization and care. These efforts aimed to integrate the elderly into the nation not through education or consumption, but through labor: the labor, however meager, of the elderly themselves, and the labor of youth and women's groups that were mobilized to care for them as part of building a new socialist Germany.

The primary site for any exploration of aging discourse in East Germany was, typically, an official body: Volkssolidarität (People's Solidarity, hereafter VS), a mass organization that centralized and publicized the regime's efforts at elder-

<sup>65</sup> Matthias Willing, *“Sozialistische Wohlfahrt”: Die staatliche Sozialfürsorge in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone und der DDR (1945–1990)* (Tübingen, 2008). For overviews of the new approach in general, see Jan Palmowski, “Between Conformity and *Eigen-Sinn*: New Approaches to GDR History,” *German History* 20 (2002): 494–502; Paul Betts, “Socialism, Social Rights, and Human Rights: The Case of East Germany,” *Humanity* 3 (2012): 407–26.

<sup>66</sup> The East Germany of the 1950s was not a consumer paradise—if anything, the elderly struggled to spend whatever money they did have, given the paucity of goods available and the ubiquity of price controls. Mierzejewski, *A History of the German Public Pension System*, 283.

care.<sup>67</sup> While confessional organizations and the Red Cross continued their work, they were increasingly sidelined by the VS, ideologically and practically.<sup>68</sup> This is convenient for the historian but also presents problems of its own. The VS was, like other East German mass organizations, a propaganda apparatus. Sources should be read with care, and should not be taken to map onto social reality in a straightforward way. And yet, since our concern here is less with the social history of aging than with ideology, the “propagandistic” nature of the sources is not necessarily a problem (West German sources were propaganda in their own way, after all). And since this section will also draw on the largely unexplored archives of the VS, the internal correspondence of its leaders and members can provide access to concepts and categories deployed in private.

For the East, as for the West, I will begin with the social-scientific conceptualization of the elderly before moving on to popular culture and, finally, the policy apparatus. The VS, like East German politicians and experts more generally, did not begin from the presumption that the elderly were a “problem,” or that society was “over-aging.” Both of those concerns, like the kindred imagination of the elderly as a coherent social class in the first place, belonged to a tradition of social insurance that Communist experts rejected out of hand.<sup>69</sup> There was no social gerontology in the East, and no sociological survey of aging; there was no discussion of *Überalterung*, *Altersprobleme*, or *Altersfragen*, nor were there psychological accounts of existential meaning for the aged.<sup>70</sup> The East German welfare system did not have a separate fund for old-age pensions, instead covering all risks from a common revenue source. This makes it challenging to calculate the exact cost of the program, but also makes an ideological statement about how

<sup>67</sup> For an excellent overview of the VS, see Philipp Springer, *Da kommt' ich mich dann so'n bißchen entfalten: Die Volkssolidarität in der SBZ/DDR 1945–1969* (New York, 1999). Jan Palmowski has argued that the SED made a habit of subsuming everyday practices of service into state-building projects, with mixed degrees of success. Jan Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945–1990* (New York, 2009), chap. 5.

<sup>68</sup> The VS largely took over the Train Station Service (Bahnhofsdienst), for instance. Willing, “Sozialistische Wohlfahrt,” 234.

<sup>69</sup> This can now be confirmed through full-text searches of the DDR’s leading newspapers, now digitized at <http://zefys.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/ddr-presse/>. The notion of *Überalterung* as a problem of an over-aged population was simply absent (whenever the word did appear, it tended to refer to the aging of industrial machinery). For the DDR rejection of traditional Bismarckean conceptions of *Sozialpolitik*, which would be nuanced in later years, see Peter Caldwell, *Dictatorship, State Planning, and Social Theory in the German Democratic Republic* (New York, 2003); Gunnar Winkler, “Ziele und Inhalte der Sozialpolitik,” in *Sozialpolitik in der DDR*, 13–34.

<sup>70</sup> The transnational statistics apparatus of international gerontology simply ignored East Germany, and the familiar demographic tables simply left it out. This is true in, for instance, Steiger, *Altersprobleme*.

old age was construed at the time.<sup>71</sup> Of course, the increasing presence of aged bodies was noticed. It was not, however, viewed as a problem generated by modernization. It was instead interpreted politically—either as a result of two world wars or of improved socialist hygiene (any mention of the flight of thousands of young people across the border was taboo, just as wartime losses were in the West).<sup>72</sup>

East German social scientists and experts had a considerably less tragic view of industrial modernity than did their Western counterparts. Eastern experts were reluctant to conceive of millions of German citizens as flotsam generated by the intrinsic logic of a capitalist process whose eventual arc, the socialist tradition taught, bent toward justice. The SED, that is, argued that the expansion of the life course was a socialist victory, and that the newly added years would naturally be cared for by the state. “The improvement of old workers’ last years,” one editorial in a party newspaper put it, “is one of the most beautiful humanitarian goals that a nation can set for itself.”<sup>73</sup> This animated the VS’s internal discussions, too: in its 1957 “Guidelines for Cultural-Political Work,” the Secretariat of the VS emphasized that “care for men, especially for old men, is the noblest duty of the state.”<sup>74</sup>

West Germans made aging a state concern, as well, but in a different way. While West Germans explicitly isolated the problem in order to solve it, East Germans tended instead to link it explicitly to broader questions of civic and even global emancipation. In VS literature, the elderly were never considered as a problem in isolation from others: just as pensions were paid from the general coffers, the VS drew little distinction between its work for the elderly and its work for international socialism. VS publications were filled with pleas to help the North Koreans, for instance. And in 1954, the VS director’s fundraising letters to the SED top brass defined it as “an organization for humanitarian aid, which collects funds for Korea, takes care of incarcerated West German freedom fighters and their families, and through the open promotion of members in nearly all house-

<sup>71</sup> Mierzejewski, *A History of the German Public Pension System*, 169.

<sup>72</sup> See, for instance, *Einsam?: Die Veteranenklubs der Volkssolidarität bieten Geselligkeit, Wissen, Freude und Frohsinn!* (1960), in VS Archive, DY 67/67, 1; “Unsere Veteranen Gilt die Anerkennung, Fürsorge und Liebe Aller Bürger,” Beschluss des Präsidiums des Nationalrates vom 20. August 1963, 4, VS Archive 67/60; M. Zetkin, “Arbeit erhält jung,” *Solidarität* 7, no. 8 (August 1957): 4–5, here 4 (originally published in *Deutsche Gesundheitswesen*); “Was eine Statistik verrät,” *Solidarität* 2, no. 8 (February 1958): 12–13. All VS archival materials come from Volkssolidarität der DDR, DY67, Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv, Berlin.

<sup>73</sup> “Helfende Hände!,” *Berliner Zeitung* 20, no. 248 (October 24, 1954): 1.

<sup>74</sup> *Richtlinien für die kulturell-politische Arbeit der VS* (1957), VS Archive, DY 67/67.

holds helps to rally the nation in the struggle for peace and freedom.”<sup>75</sup> This rubric for thinking about old age seems to have filtered into everyday life: old age, no less than youth, was imagined to be a politicized category, and a phase of the life course with definite contributions to make to the building of socialism. A few years later, for instance, one hundred elderly citizens sent a hand-written thank-you card to the VS. “In our state,” they explained, “care for the people” is a guiding principle, “and even we elderly are diligently included and never forgotten in its implementation.” “We will all do that is in our power,” it concluded, to aid in the “creation of a peace-loving, democratic, and unified German state.”<sup>76</sup>

East Germans tended not to isolate the problem of the elderly because they imagined that the workplace, and not the nuclear family, would be the birthplace of the postfascist self. This generated a different normative life course because, unlike the nuclear family, the workplace did not in principle exclude the elderly. This opened the door for a grappling with age that prioritized integration into the labor market rather than the expansion of pensions. This approach had a long history, and not always a socialist one. In the Weimar era, the “right to work” had been announced in article 163 of the constitution, notably without any age restriction. For many experts and organizations in the 1920s, including an umbrella organization called *Altershilfe des deutschen Volkes* (Aid to the German Aged), the main goal had been to aid the elderly through employment.<sup>77</sup> The consolidated organization of pensioners’ organizations seemed to agree, publishing in their house journal an article entitled “Work Is Better than Pensions,” which argued that labor might allow the elderly to avoid a “useless pensioners’ existence.”<sup>78</sup> The National Socialists had the same idea, and their preferred method to grapple with aging was to mobilize science and medicine to squeeze as much labor out of the aging *Volk* as possible. “Aging,” a physician announced at the Nuremberg Party Congress of 1936, “is not defined by biological age, but by the presence or absence of productivity.” Given this attitude, National Socialists were not especially concerned with extending life in the absence of productivity, and a number of German physicians and public health experts recommended that the optimal life span was one that concluded just as the ability to labor ceased. Nazi physician Georg Kaufmann suggested in 1939 that the optimal average was sixty years old—a milestone already reached, so in effect he was calling for the life

<sup>75</sup> Helmut Lehmann to Dr. Bolz, March 31, 1954, VS Archive 67/3 (there are many letters in this folder, mostly identical). He seems to have been right, as those replies that survive in the file praise the VS primarily for their ability to raise funds for Korea.

<sup>76</sup> “Solidarität ist das Unterpfand für den Sieg des Sozialismus,” October 1959, VS Archive, 67/4.

<sup>77</sup> Göckenjan, *Das Alter würdigen*, 322–7; Penkert, *Arbeit oder Rente?*

<sup>78</sup> “Arbeit ist besser als Rente!,” *Deutsche Arbeitsopfersversorgung* 15 (1933): 85–86, here 86.

span to decrease.<sup>79</sup> This approach reached macabre heights in Nazi euthanasia programs, which included the disabled elderly among its victims.

The East Germans, and the VS in particular, put a socialist spin on this long-standing hope that the elderly could be encouraged to labor. When it came to social science, they looked, as the Nazis had, to medicine and occupational therapy rather than to developmental psychology or family sociology. They shared a similar goal, too, and a similar reason to avoid pension reform or the legislative creation of retirement. East Germany was hemorrhaging young laborers to the West, and it was not in the SED's interest to theorize a new life stage that would remove many citizens from the labor force. And yet it would be inaccurate to view the East German articulation of old age as warmed-over Nazism. The reason is that, more than in Nazi Germany and even in West Germany, the SED announced that the care of the elderly was a public priority. A public VS appeal, for instance, argued that "a carefree old age requires not only material improvement [through pension increases], but the cultural and social care of our aged citizens."<sup>80</sup> If the Nazis conceptualized labor as a form of militarized service to the *Volk*, the East Germans tended to portray labor as itself a form of care. As Peter Caldwell has explained, East German economists like Fritz Behrens, backed up by authorities like Josef Stalin himself, sought to reconceptualize labor in the interests of the concrete, human needs of the workers. Labor, in other words, did not mean the same thing in Nazi Germany and in East Germany, so a labor-inflected approach to old age carried different meanings, too.<sup>81</sup>

The social science of aging, insofar as such a thing existed in East Germany, focused on what we might call humanitarian labor for the elderly (meaning that it focused on their well-being and on socialist expansion simultaneously). One example was the theory of what the VS called "easy labor"—a wide-ranging project involving public health officials, the VS, and eventually a state commission convened in 1963 to think about "easier conditions of employment" for the elderly.<sup>82</sup> The idea was that socialism, unlike capitalism, could provide relaxed forms of la-

<sup>79</sup> Möckel, "Nutzlose Volksgenossen"?, 33–35. For Nazi *Leistungsmedizin* in general, see Norbert Frei, ed., *Medizin und Gesundheitspolitik in der NS-Zeit* (Munich, 1991).

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in "Die Alten werden nicht vergessen," *Neue Zeit* 13, no. 148 (June 29, 1957): 2.

<sup>81</sup> Peter C. Caldwell, "Productivity, Value, and Plan: Fritz Behrens and the Economics of Revisionism in the German Democratic Republic," *History of Political Economy* 32 (2000): 103–37.

<sup>82</sup> "Veteranen in Produktionsangebot," *Der Volkshelfer* (April 1962): 26–27, here 26; on the commission, Hans-Joachim vom Kondratowitz, "Zumindes organisatorisch erfaßt . . . Die Älteren in der DDR zwischen Veteranenpathos und Geborgenheitsbeschwörung," in *Die DDR in der Ära Honecker: Politik, Kultur, Gesellschaft*, ed. Gerl-Joachim Glaessner (Opladen, 1988), 514–30, here 519; on the theorization and political employment of labor productivity standards in the DDR, see Caldwell, *Dictatorship, State Planning, and Social Theory in the German Democratic Republic*, 32–41.

bor suitable for elderly bodies.<sup>83</sup> In the place of a dichotomy of young and old, Siegfried Eitner, the leading aging expert in postwar East, put together a five-stage scale of labor readiness in which every stage but the last indicated a state of readiness to help build socialism. The binary of young and old, in other words, was replaced with a more subtle scale.<sup>84</sup> Maxim Zetkin, a German-Russian surgeon and the son of feminist icon Clara Zetkin, reasoned that socialism should make work shorter, easier, and therefore open to the elderly. Until that time came, he suggested that the elderly be allowed to do untaxing work, voluntarily, for a small number of hours (he pointed out that the same system could be used for housewives: here, again, the elderly were not considered a class alone).<sup>85</sup> In the 1959 *Textbook of Social Hygiene* a similar scheme was floated, which the authors believed was only possible under socialism: “the capitalist firm has no interest in workers operating at half strength” because it hurts the all-important bottom line.<sup>86</sup>

As in West Germany, the social-scientific construction of age dovetailed with the image of the elderly in popular culture—a culture that will be accessed, here as in the preceding section, mainly through the print culture of the welfare organizations themselves (in this case, the VS alone rather than the panoply of organizations in the West). This can be traced, among other places, in vocabulary. In the West, an elderly person was normally referred to as a “pensioner” (*Rentner*), a term that emphasized dependence. This was uncommon in the East. In its place, the VS developed a unique term that encompassed both those too old to labor and those who were disabled: “veterans” (*Veteranen*). Here again, the long tail of the German tradition is apparent, as the VS was actually returning to the Wilhelmine era, when social experts classified old age as one form of invalidism rather than as a separate category altogether. Unlike invalidism, however, the notion of “veteran” status presumed completed service rather than incapacity. This honorific, which came into use around 1954, was elastic enough that, while normally referring to the elderly, it could also refer to vet-

<sup>83</sup> There was some plausibility to this. In Emma Steiger’s work for the AWO, she insisted that the elderly could not continue to work because their waning powers of adaptability would not allow them to deal with the increased tempo of work. Steiger, *Altersprobleme*, 4. And yet it should be noted that some in the West wanted to give easy jobs to the elderly, too. See, for instance, “Halbtagsbeschäftigung für Rentner,” *Soziale Arbeit* 6 (1957): 233.

<sup>84</sup> Siegfried Eitner, “Erfahrung bei Planung und Durchführung von Dispensairemaßnahmen,” *Das Deutsche Gesundheitswesen* 14 (1959): 689–95, and Eitner, “Der adäquate Arbeitseinsatz des alten Arbeiters,” *Das Deutsche Gesundheitswesen* 19 (1964): 1512–17. He would go on to publish *Gerohygiene: Hygiene des Alterns als Problem der Lebensgestaltung* (Berlin, 1966), the first book of its kind in the DDR.

<sup>85</sup> M. Zetkin, “Arbeit erhält jung.”

<sup>86</sup> “Das Alter,” in *Lehrbuch der Sozialhygiene* (Berlin, 1959), 241–45, here 242.

erans of the party or even the disabled (the term did not carry the military connotation that it does today).<sup>87</sup>

The VS, and East German aging discourse more generally, insisted that older citizens constituted an eager labor force, even if they had formally retired. So while the elderly in the West were surrounded by a visual and literary culture that emphasized their economic usefulness and moral necessity, East Germans were socialized in quite a different way by the media. From its beginnings the VS portrayed itself as “no welfare organization in the old sense,” as “the provision of labor is the best welfare.”<sup>88</sup> This was made especially apparent in an address by Helmut Lehmann, one of the leading policy experts of the SED, and one with a long history in the SPD. “The social misery in our nation,” he explained, “cannot be banished through the frumpy [*tantenhafte*] delivery of welfare.” It could only come about through the improvement of the economy, which will lead to a higher standard of living. If the VS were a “petit bourgeois welfare organization trying to alleviate the worst outgrowths of the capitalist social order,” it would be dissolved.<sup>89</sup> Instead, it was an organization that would attempt to aid the economy as a whole. This sensibility was ubiquitous. “Our pensioners have no desire to isolate themselves,” one regional newspaper article declared, “and they help out wherever they are needed.”<sup>90</sup> Or, as a resolution of the National Council of the National Front put it, “Work is the content of life, in which even our old citizens find life’s meaning.”<sup>91</sup> The 1957 VS guidelines promised “to incorporate invalids and the elderly more strongly into the general social development,” while the 1959 version was even more developmentalist. “Everything,” it chided, “must be considered from the standpoint of development.”<sup>92</sup> This notion seems to have

<sup>87</sup> “Verschöñht ihre Lebensabend,” *Solidarität* 5, no. 4 (May 1954): 10–11, here 10. On the term, see Präsidium der VS, “Vorlage für das Zentralkomitee der SED,” 24.3.55, VS Archive, DY67/4. Before 1954, SED publications tended to refer to “old people” or “inmates” of nursing homes. See, for instance, “Wie alte Menschen glücklich werden,” *Das Leben* 9 (March 1951): 8; “So recht nach den Herzen unserer Alten,” *Solidarität* 4, no. 3 (March 1954): 8–9. On its spread to non-VS publications, see “Solidarität ist nationale Verpflichtung,” *Neues Deutschland* 9, no. 249 (October 23, 1954): 1.

<sup>88</sup> “Wesen, Aufgaben und Aufbau der Gemeinschaft Volkssolidarität,” *Das Leben* 3 (September 1950): 13–14, here 13.

<sup>89</sup> Helmut Lehmann, “Einheit-Frieden-Solidarität,” *Solidarität* 1 (May 1950): 1–9, here 2. For Lehmann’s views on social insurance, see Helmut Lehmann, *Die Sozialversicherung in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone Deutschlands* (Berlin, 1949).

<sup>90</sup> Adelheid Böhme, “15 Jahre Volkssolidarität,” *Heimat-Echo* 7, no. 9 (December 1960): 1.

<sup>91</sup> “Unsere Veteranen Gilt die Anerkennung, Fürsorge und Liebe Aller Bürger,” Beschluss des Präsidiums des Nationalrates vom 20. August 1963, VS Archive, DY 67/60, 4.

<sup>92</sup> *Richtlinien für die kulturell-politische Arbeit der VS* (1957), in VS Archive 67/67, 1; *Richtlinien für die politische-kulturelle Arbeit der Volkssolidarität* (1959), in VS Archive 67/67, 7.

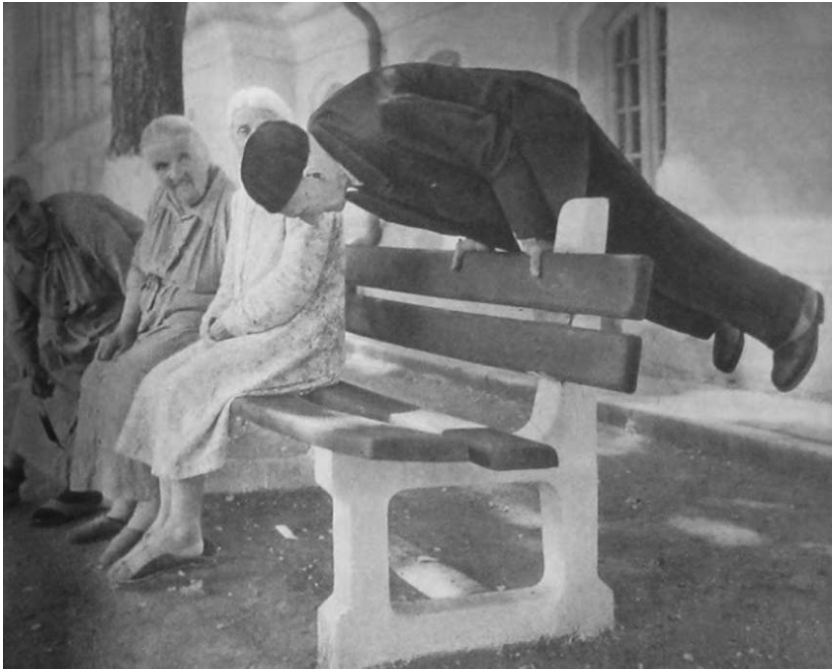


FIG. 4.—An acrobatic old man in Romania. Horst E. Schulze, “Methusalem war jung dagegen,” *Neue Berliner Illustrierte* 49 (1956): 14.

pervaded the organization and the veterans themselves. One low-level official argued at a VS conference that “the pace and extent of the improvement of old age is entirely dependent on the successes of our economy,” while internal guidelines for VS volunteers urged them to think about the possible contributions of the elderly to the socialist project.<sup>93</sup>

The VS pioneered a unique visual culture of old age that represented the sorts of active, laboring, and productive citizens that were being imagined by welfare officials and social scientists. The Western portrayal of elder isolation and frailty was hard to find in the East—which may have resulted from the SED’s reluctance to publicize social problems, but nonetheless had an impact on the popular culture of age. The three images reproduced here all appeared between 1956 and 1958 and are representative of a visual culture in which the elderly were almost never portrayed alone or unoccupied. Figure 4 comes from the popular *Neue*

<sup>93</sup> Franz Schaffarsch, “Wir errichten ein Klubhaus für Rentner,” *Solidarität* 6, no. 9 (September 1956): 6; Volkssolidarität Zentralsekretariat, “Anleitung für Volkshelfer,” January 1, 1959, VS Archive, 67/3.

*Berliner Illustrierte*, which sent a photographer to visit the Institute for Geriatrics in Bucharest. (Romania, like East Germany, was embarked upon a socialist experiment that involved a considerable disruption of traditional family forms.) That institute was pioneering anti-aging treatments that, in the photographer's awed account, made ninety-five-year-olds seem like strapping sixty-year-olds (as exemplified in the acrobatic image of an old man balancing on a chair). The other two images come from the VS press, and like the many other images that studded its journals, these portray happy, laboring elderly in communion with one another and with the youth. Figure 5 shows a group of women per-



FIG. 5.—Elderly women enjoying their labor. “Arbeitsveteranen als Ausbauhelfer,” *Solidarität* 8, no. 11 (November 1958): 6. Photograph courtesy of Volkssolidarität Bundesverband e. V.

forming industrial labor with looks of glee on their faces. Figure 6 is typical of the East German conception of intergenerational relations as oriented around service and labor instead of emotional and sartorial differentiation.

In the East, as in the West, the social-scientific and popular culture of aging found resonance in the policy framework. Since old age was not conceived of as a “problem,” social policy was not leveraged to solve it. In contrast to the West, pensions in the East were both low and universal. They were not meant to provide an income replacement, but rather to protect beneficiaries from outright



FIG. 6.—Intergenerational relations as portrayed in the official periodical of the Volkssolidarität. Cover of *Solidarität* 6, no. 10 (October 1956). Photograph courtesy of Volkssolidarität Bundesverband e. V.

destitution.<sup>94</sup> The expansion of other forms of state-sponsored care was moderate, too. In 1956, the SED passed a “Decree on Universal Welfare,” promising the “best welfare” to all citizens, elderly included.<sup>95</sup> This did lead to increased spending on nursing homes and other end-of-life facilities, but they remained marginal to the ecology of eldercare—in the East, as in the West, most of the elderly continued to live in their own homes.

If the West Germans integrated the elderly into a community of economic growth through pensions, the East Germans integrated them into a community of labor through the VS. This involved a vast mobilization of the citizenry, including the youth, who were meant to help the veterans of labor lead meaningful and dignified lives. As one VS functionary put it, “there are endless cases where we can help our old men without providing money.”<sup>96</sup> This too had its precedent, most notably in National Socialist People’s Welfare (NSV). West Germans gleefully pointed out the similarities between the NSV and the VS, and with some justice.<sup>97</sup> Both organizations, in defiance of German welfare traditions, were entwined with the state; both politicized the delivery of welfare; and both took over previously nonstate charitable actions like the Winterhilfe (charitable drives aimed to prepare the poor for the winter) and the Bahnhofsdiens (Train Station Service).

If the SPD was right to find parallels between the NSV and the VS, they were wrong to argue that this uniquely tarnished the latter. For one thing, as we have seen, the West German approach to old age had a Nazi genealogy, too. And for another, the VS was more concerned with the well-being of the elderly than the NSV had been. As was the case with the focus on labor, the formal parallel masked a substantive difference. By the end of the 1950s, the VS had become primarily an eldercare organization, of a sort entirely unknown in Nazi Germany. (The NSV had focused on racially useful women and children, leaving elder-

<sup>94</sup> Mierzejewski, *A History of the German Public Pension System*, 275–76.

<sup>95</sup> Willing, “Sozialistische Wohlfahrt,” 191.

<sup>96</sup> Adeline Wick, “Die Betreuung unserer Veteranen,” *Solidarität* 6, no. 9 (1956): 14.

<sup>97</sup> The relationship between the VS and the NSV was first broached in a remarkable pamphlet prepared by the West German SPD: “Von der NSV zur Volkssolidarität,” issue 8 of *Tatsachen und Berichte aus der Sowjetzone* (Bonn, 1953). For more temperate considerations of the issue, see Wilfried Rudloff, “Öffentliche Fürsorge,” in *Drei Wege deutscher Sozialstaatlichkeit*, 191–230, esp. 224–26; Willing, “Sozialistische Wohlfahrt,” 233–24; Springer, *Da kommt’ ich mich dann so’n bißchen entfalten*, 132–41. On the NSV itself, see Mark Alan Siegel, “The National Socialist People’s Welfare Organization—1933–1939: The Political Manipulation of Welfare” (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 1976). The more relevant comparison is probably the Communist Rote Hilfe, on which see Sabine Hering and Kurt Schilde, eds., *Die Rote Hilfe: Die Geschichte der internationalen kommunistischen “Wohlfahrtsorganisation” und ihrer sozialen Aktivitäten in Deutschland (1921–1941)* (Opladen, 2003).

care to the traditional subsidiary organizations.)<sup>98</sup> By the time the Berlin Wall went up in 1961, the VS had established itself as the major deliverer of eldercare in East Germany, a position it would maintain until that wall fell almost three decades later.

Much of the activity of the VS, as with the confessional organizations it was trying to supplant, concerned everyday eldercare. VS functionaries, known as “helpers of the people” (*Volkshelfern*), were in charge of a neighborhood and tasked with keeping an eye on the elderly who lived there. One central role of the VS and its “helpers,” of whom there were almost one hundred thousand by 1955, was to ensure that the elderly were not isolated on their most important temporal milestones. On birthdays, the VS sent a card, flowers, or sweets, sometimes accompanied by visits from Young Pioneers (the DDR’s youth organization). And on Christmas, the VS was proud to host yearly parties across East Germany, which seem to have been popular even if a bit shabby (one surviving invitation instructs guests to bring their own coffee cup).<sup>99</sup> The VS also organized social events throughout the year, sometimes by way of its relationship with the Free Trade Union Federation (FDGB), which promised to include veterans in the cultural and social activities of the workplace.<sup>100</sup> It was not that pensioners in the West lacked these opportunities: the confessional organizations and the AWO performed similar tasks. The difference lay in their institutional location and their meaning, both of which conspired to politicize eldercare in the East more directly than was possible in the West.

Between 1956 and 1958, just as the West Germans were implementing their own pension reform, the VS ramped up its activities, expanding beyond the provision of care and toward a more full-fledged and totalizing administration of elderly life. The paramount activity of the VS—the one that dominated its propaganda from 1956 onward and that shaped East German neighborhood life until reunification—were the “Veterans’ Clubs.”<sup>101</sup> These clubs were the pride and joy of VS, and hundreds of them had sprung up by the mid-1960s. The Veteran’s Clubs were sites not of leisure but of socialist education (*Bildung*). Clubs

<sup>98</sup> The NSV’s journal provided a breakdown of which communities deserved aid (families of soldiers) and which did not (Jews, most prominently). The elderly do not appear on either list. “Was muß der Betreute vom WhW. Wissen?,” *Ewiges Deutschland* (October 1936): 30–31.

<sup>99</sup> Willing, “Sozialistische Wohlfahrt,” 234, for number of Volkshelfern; “Die VS ladet ein,” VS Archive, DY 67/67. For an account, see “Festliche Nachmittage,” *Solidarität* 6, no. 2 (February 1956): 6–7. For an outline of Volkshelfer duties, see “Arbeitsanleitung für die soziale Betreuung der Veteranen,” *Der Volkshelfer* 4, no. 7 (July 1954): 1.

<sup>100</sup> “Auszug aus dem gemeinsamen Beschluss des Bundesvorstandes des FDGB und des Zentralausschusses der VS zur Verbesserung der kulturellen und sozialen Betreuung der Rentner vom 3. November 1954,” in VS Archive, DY 67/67.

<sup>101</sup> “Erstes Veteranen-Klubheim geöffnet,” *Solidarität* 6, no. 11 (November 1956): 4.

featured inexpensive daily lunches and opportunities to relax with a book or television, or to attend a wide variety of cultural and political events (lectures from veterans of Adenauer's prisons, safety sessions from local policemen about new traffic signals, opportunities to mingle with Young Pioneers, and so on).<sup>102</sup> In the clubs, as one pensioner wrote into a VS journal, veterans discovered a new "family."<sup>103</sup>

This emphasis on labor bore fruit in a wide variety of schemes. "Pensioner brigades" performed a great deal of labor for factories, from making small repairs to tidying up.<sup>104</sup> This dovetailed in some ways with the clubs, insofar as the physical spaces were often constructed by the "brigades" themselves.<sup>105</sup> VS publications trumpeted the initiative of veterans who worked with local economic and political leaders to help the DDR reach its economic goals in whatever small ways they could. In Brandenburg, to take one representative example, over 100 veterans took part in a three-hour *Arbeitseinsatz*, helping to clear rubble from city streets. They worked for free but were rewarded with alcohol-free drinks, waffles, and cigarettes—and the oldest participant received a bouquet of flowers. "Nobody is too old to fight for peace, construct socialism, and beautify our city," one veteran reported.<sup>106</sup>

While not denying the centrality of nuclear families, the East Germans also thought creatively about ways to reintegrate three generations in the pursuit of one socialist project.<sup>107</sup> One strategy was to reframe the relationship between the elderly and their children's families. As in the West, adult children continued to do a great deal of eldercare, which deprived them of hours in the workforce. Socialists saw this as irrational. The elderly, one DDR textbook informed its readers, can be "a hindrance to the development of the young, particularly the young married couple."<sup>108</sup> The network of *Volkshelfern* was meant to relieve this burden. In addition, the VS tried to get the youth to participate in eldercare by partnering with the Young Pioneers. VS publications featured many images of the pioneers helping out the elderly with shopping, while the house journal of the youth movement itself celebrated their activities on behalf of the elderly (bringing

<sup>102</sup> See, for instance, *Einsam?* (as cited in n. 73).

<sup>103</sup> "Stimmen der Betreuten," *Solidarität* 7, no. 10 (October 1957): 12.

<sup>104</sup> Willing, "Sozialistische Wohlfahrt," 293–94.

<sup>105</sup> "Sie gehören noch nicht zum alten Eisen!," *Der Volkshelfer* (October 1960): 18–19.

<sup>106</sup> "Arbeitsveteranen als Aufbauhelfer," *Solidarität* 8, no. 11 (November 1958): 6–7.

<sup>107</sup> The nuclear family may not have been as central to identity formation in the East as in the West, but it was nonetheless an important institution, and the claims for the DDR as a utopia of feminism, sexuality, and orgasm seem to be overblown. On this see Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic* (Princeton, NJ, 2008); Josie McLellan, *Love in the Time of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR* (New York, 2011).

<sup>108</sup> "Das Alter," in *Lehrbuch der Sozialhygiene*, 242.

flowers, remembering birthdays, helping out around the house, and so on).<sup>109</sup> Through an alliance with the Democratic Women's Union (Demokratischer Frauenbund), the VS sent female veterans to perform housework, provide child care, or mend clothes for busy families.<sup>110</sup> *Wunschoma* (desired Grandma) stations cropped up in some East German cities. Families in need of assistance with their children could contact their local VS representative and be put in touch with elderly women who would volunteer to help out and, in some cases, even spend the night. This was understood, by the VS and by the "grannies" themselves, as noble and affective care work, not as drudgery. It was purely voluntary: as one participant huffed in an interview, she was willing to play with children but not at all to perform housework.<sup>111</sup>

It is doubtless the case that elderly women did child care in West Germany, too. And yet the women participating in this program were engaged in a political project that was central to the policy making and the normative life course of her nation, in a way that her West German counterparts were not. East German women who performed this role, in other words, were linked up with the state and with the women's movement; they might even have their picture printed in a VS magazine. The point here is not to romanticize this possibility, or this moment. If this were a social history, the weaknesses of the model would be apparent. Pensions were low and healthcare was poor due to both chronic underfunding and the flight of doctors to the West. VS clubs and activities did not reach all, or even most, of the East German elderly, and care remained largely in the hands of extended families.<sup>112</sup> All the same, the image presented here was not a chimera, nor was the normative life course to which it provided a capstone. In the East Germany of the 1950s, we find one of the best and most coherent examples of what it means to age as a socialist, and to age amid noncapitalist forms of welfare.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis in this article is not meant to privilege one regime of age over another—each had benefits and drawbacks. While the East German solution ran into problems first, this should not lead us to shortchange it. For one thing, the troubles of the East German elderly between the 1960s and 1980s stemmed

<sup>109</sup> Ursula Werner, "Wirst noch staunen Großmutter," *Der Junge Pionier* 9, no. 37 (September 15, 1956).

<sup>110</sup> Ilse Thiele and Jenny Matern, "Hilfe für die werktätige Frau," *Der Volkshelfer* (April 1960): 8–9.

<sup>111</sup> "Wunsch-Omas," *Der Volkshelfer* (August 1961): 14–15.

<sup>112</sup> For a balanced appraisal of healthcare in the GDR, see Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, CT, 2005), chap. 5.

more from the SED's skewed priorities and from economic depression than from the insufficiencies of the VS and its ideals. And for another, the West German solution was not sustainable, either. In recent years, the pension system launched in 1957 has been fundamentally retooled, as the demographic and macroeconomic presumptions at its heart proved to be flawed.<sup>113</sup>

In lieu of normative recommendations, this article had, to recap, three fundamental arguments. The first was that old-age policy should be understood as part of a broader political and social attempt to construct a normative life course, and that pension expansion was only one possible way to do so. The second was that ageism, like pensions, emerges from a particular intellectual and cultural framework and is not rooted in the logic of modernity as such. This leads to the third point, which concerns the value of history to aging studies. While the global response to aging tends toward technocratic or bureaucratic thinking, the archive of the past has seldom been explored. It turns out that the historical record is full of exciting and innovative approaches to old age, and by uncovering them historians could provide a service both to aging studies and to policy innovation.

A turn to aging has benefits for historians, as well. Twentieth-century Germany was a time of genocide, aesthetic revolution, economic calamity, and economic miracle, and it is no wonder that the realities of care for the elderly have escaped the interest of historians. And yet, as this article has shown, a consideration of old age has the possibility to open up new perspectives on the past—ones that de-center the middle-aged and familial subjects who continue to be the implicit protagonists of most historical narratives, even as they represent an increasingly narrow slice of the population. Societies can be judged not only for how much they grew, or how many they imprisoned, but also for how they cared: how they conceptualized and governed bodies that were no longer (re)productive. As with gender, age is an axis of empowerment and oppression that can be traced in every fiber of the social body. It is one that historians would do well to acknowledge. After all, the elderly constitute the only marginalized group that we all hope, one day, to join.

<sup>113</sup> Mierzejewski, *A History of the German Public Pension System*, chap. 11.