

# Naming Differences in Divided Germany

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This article analyzes differences in *naming* between East and West Germany. After World War II, Germany was split by the allied forces. Two Germanies emerged: the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The country's division lasted about forty years (1949–1989), a time span in which vastly different geo-political frameworks — eastern bloc versus western bloc — shaped people's lives and eventually their name choices as well. The results of this complex relationship are addressed here with the following questions: to what extent can different naming patterns and name preferences be observed in the two parts of divided Germany, regardless of their common language and cultural heritage? Can differences in taste be identified, and how did these differences develop over time? These questions are answered here using the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP). The SOEP offers the rare opportunity of examining patterns of occurrence of first names among a representative sample of 56,000 individuals born since 1900. Moreover, this study includes a wide range of variables revealing the social and economic backgrounds of the “name givers”: the parents.

**KEYWORDS** Socio-onomastic, Social change, East Germany, West Germany, Name distribution

## Introduction

Our point of departure is the assumption that naming one's child is a *social act*, as understood by Max Weber. Choosing a name is a selection process that is crucially influenced by the social setting in which the parents are located. Hence, comparative name studies can shed light on the historical and societal circumstances in which name selections have taken place. The political and societal differences between East and West Germany from 1949 to 1989, which became particularly acute in the 1960s (with the erection of the Berlin Wall), led us to ask whether the differences between the two German societies are reflected in different name choices. We have anecdotal evidence that Germans make a relatively good guess whether someone comes from East or West Germany based on their first name. Many Germans believe, for example, that names like "Mandy," "Cindy," or "Mike" (sometimes creatively spelled "Maik" or "Meik") are typical of East Germans. This is remarkable, since both parts of Germany share the same history and culture and very similar naming traditions, and both use the same language, with absolutely no variations in grammar or orthography except a few minor regional deviations, as everywhere in the world.

In this article, we use representative social science survey data to analyze empirically whether different societal settings in East and West Germany really did lead to different naming behavior, and, if so, how these differences developed over time. We first analyze name frequency distributions and general naming patterns. Do we find differences in the frequency-rank distributions of names? Is there a greater polarization in East Germany and broader dispersion in West Germany, suggesting more individualized naming patterns in the West as a result of greater individualization in diverse areas of social life?

In the second part of our analysis, we look at concrete name types. We ask whether people in the two parts of Germany used *different names* (name types). Then we compare these names and their origins. Did parents in East and West Germany choose the name for their children out of the same "name reservoir"? What types of names were preferred in each part of the country? Finally, we analyze naming differences over time to test the hypothesis that the divergent cultural paths in East and West Germany led to different sets of cultural preferences in each.

## Hypotheses on naming differences between East and West Germany

In most Western societies, naming is legally regulated, although these regulations are generally not binding, and the use of original names is usually permitted. Similarly, in Germany there are few legal restrictions on the selection of first names.<sup>1</sup> During Germany's division, these regulations did not differ between East and West Germany.<sup>2</sup> People in both parts of the country were able to choose from thousands of possible names, which were the same given the shared language and (naming) traditions. These identical starting conditions in East and West Germany make it particularly interesting to test if and when differences began to evolve in the two societies, exerting an influence on choices of first names.<sup>3</sup>

There is a broad sociological literature on the different paths of societal development in East and West Germany. Within the forty years of their existence (1949–1989), the two German states evolved in distinctly different directions due in

part to their opposing geopolitical relationships. This led to different social settings and structures, points of reference, values, and personal preferences — and, as we hypothesize here, to different name choices as well. Before presenting the results of our analysis, we describe some basic characteristics of the two German societies that might have had an impact on their respective naming practices.

### ***Ideologies, societies and naming***

In 1949, after the end of World War II, two German States were founded: the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG = West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR = East Germany). Very early, thanks to the “Wirtschaftswunder,”<sup>4</sup> West Germans were able to improve their living standards and quality of life dramatically. Individualism and personal style took on new importance, and North American culture and society set the standards, not only for democracy and a prospering market economy, but also for individual tastes and lifestyles.

East German society — or at least the image thereof presented in the official propaganda — was much more oriented towards social uniformity. The official ideology propagated the idea of a “classless” society, or at least the goal of reducing the differences between classes. However, certain products were hard to come by in the East, which reduced East Germans’ possibilities for outwardly expressing their tastes, styles, and individuality. Partly due to these limitations on consumption, the living conditions among East Germans were relatively uniform. The fact that the prevailing ideology of uniformity and equality did indeed become a social reality can be seen when looking at the East German labor market and analyzing historical income distributions.<sup>5</sup> Our hypothesis is that the differences between the dominant ideologies and social structures in East and West Germany affected the distribution of names through differing motivations for name choices.

### ***Role models, reference points and the media***

We expect that not only general naming patterns but also concrete name choices differed between East and West Germany. We know from other studies that the political regime of a country and its embeddedness in geopolitical power structures has an impact on first names (see Wolffsohn/Brechenmacher, 1999). West German society became part of the Western sphere of prosperous, democratic states, and was profoundly influenced by the US after World War II, while East Germany was integrated into the Eastern bloc of countries that were controlled by the Soviet Union and oriented towards a “communist way of life.” The building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 sealed East Germany off almost completely. Not only did it prevent regular family visits between East and West; it also limited information exchange and brought with it the censorship of both private correspondence and public media in the East, ensuring that there, only state-sanctioned views could be expressed publicly. This limited the exchange of ideas about naming between East and West, and as a consequence hampered the development of common naming tastes and trends. Easterners were indeed cut off from the Western world almost entirely: they could travel to Poland and Bulgaria and other socialist states, but not to Western countries.

In addition, the naming examples set by intellectual elites and pop stars differed dramatically between East and West Germany. Whereas West Germans often named

their children after international writers and philosophers, East Germans could do this to a limited degree only. The heroes and heroines of official GDR ideology were mainly fighters, members of the Nazi resistance, and communist activists. It was of course not forbidden to *like* pop stars, singers, or actors — not even American ones — but it certainly raised suspicion. In fact, the many social and political obstacles prevented fan cultures from developing in the East around Western pop stars. Neither did fan cultures emerge around East German singers and intellectual leaders, who were unable to cultivate the same glamorous image.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, name choices may have also been affected by different media structures in the two societies. Movies, TV, and the press played an important role in transmitting ideas and in providing ideas for names. The radically different media landscapes that developed in the two German states — at least in the early years of the country's division — provide a strong explanation for the emergence of differing name tastes between East and West.<sup>7</sup>

Given the different political cultures and media landscapes, one might expect an increase in Slavic and Eastern European names in the East and an increase of Anglo-American names and names from the Romance languages in the West. We also hypothesize that the emergence of a specific East German taste in naming follows a constant development trajectory. Milestones of the country's division, such as the construction of the Berlin Wall, should be reflected in accelerations in different naming developments.

Up to now, there has been only one empirical study of the overall social and societal dependence of naming in Germany: a case study by Gerhards (2003, English version: 2005; Gerhards and Hackenbroch, 2000) on two German towns, one in the East and one in the West, based on data drawn from birth registers, with supplemental information about parents. This data enabled him to test hypotheses on the influence of social setting on naming and socio-structural dependencies. He found that the degree of societal secularization has an impact on naming. Moreover, he showed that societal processes of individualization have produced a greater number of names in use over time. He proved the existence of divergent naming habits between social strata and East and West Germany. The data used by Gerhards are not representative samples of the East and West German populations, however. With our data, *representative* analyses for both East and West Germany can be carried out to mirror how the social and societal reality in the two parts of the country impacted naming choices.

### **Our data — the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP)**

To make valid comparisons between societal sub-groups (which East Germans and West Germans would be called today), one needs a database that covers these sub-groups representatively. In other words, all social strata contained in the sample and the proportions in the sample are identical to those in the total population (sample universe). If the sample is large enough (which ours is), the data mirrors different social groups: well-educated and uneducated people, religious people and atheists, rich and poor, residents of urban and rural areas, and so on. Beyond this basic requirement of establishing a representative sample, analyses of given names are

burdened with several methodological and statistical difficulties that occur in particular when comparing *differently sized* subsamples.

In this study, we analyzed data from the German Socio Economic Panel Study (SOEP), one of the world's largest household panel studies for a single country (Wagner *et al.* 1993). The SOEP is used widely for the analysis of the changing social situation in Germany (see <http://www.diw.de/gsoep>). It includes diverse social indicators covering wide-ranging aspects of social and economic life. The sample fully represents the German population (Schupp and Wagner, 2002). In 1989 after the fall of the Berlin wall, the West German SOEP was expanded to include East Germany as well. Up to the present day, over 56,000 individuals have been surveyed — about 4000 of them annually since 1984, i.e., every year for more than twenty years. SOEP is a household survey, so every member of a household over the age of sixteen is surveyed. In many cases, the households include (adult) children and various gatherings of parents. Because naming is a singular event and we know each respondent's year of birth, we have been able to reconstruct accurately the relevant information for our analysis retrospectively for a time span of about a hundred years. Thus the full time period in which the two German states existed (1949 to 1990) is included.

Additionally we faced the task of cleaning, recoding, and classifying the given names in the sample. We developed a code system consisting of up to four codes for each given name.<sup>8</sup> One of these codes refers to the regional roots of a name. What we tried to capture with it is the regional origin that the name-givers (parents) probably had in mind when choosing the name: this is basically the country or area of the world where the name was typically used when chosen by our respondents. For instance, Andy is coded as English/American, while Peter, Maximilian, and Maria are coded as German, although they are not originally German but “Christian” names. German parents, however, consider them German names because they have been common in Germany for centuries. Thus, they are, from a German perspective, commonly considered autochthonous names today.<sup>9</sup>

Another technical point should be mentioned. A given name can be written in different ways. For instance, the German name Klaus can be spelled with either a “K” or a “C,” but the pronunciation is always exactly the same. On the other hand, the pronunciation of identically spelled names can differ. There is no variation in the spelling of the name Kathleen, no matter whether the parents meant the name to have a German or English pronunciation. Therefore, we might encounter difficulties in determining whether people had the same name in mind. With our data, it is impossible to clarify this issue because the names in the SOEP were surveyed in written format and we thus have no idea what the actual preferred pronunciation is or was. Thus we can only use these names as one name type, and we decided to unify the differences in spelling (in case of alternative spellings) to minimize artificial variance.<sup>10</sup>

After excluding all persons from the sample who were born before or after the parallel existence of the two German states, or who have a migration background from outside Germany, we are left with a total of 17,293 persons and 1101 different name types to be used in our analysis: 11,615 persons born between 1950 and 1989 in the old Federal Republic of Germany, sharing 906 different names (name types), and another 5678 persons born in the GDR, sharing 678 different name types.

## Naming practices in East and West Germany

### *Individualization and distribution patterns of names in East and West Germany*

Due to the differences in the dominant ideologies and social structures of the two German societies, we expect the level of individualization to be higher in the West than in the East. The Latin root of the concept “individualization” is “in-dividuum.” It means “the indivisible,” and in this sense the less someone has in common with others, the more individuality should be attributed to him. Hence, the fewer people who share the same name, the greater the level of individualization (Gerhards, 2005: ch. 6). Accordingly, we have sought to determine how many different names were in use. If we calculate the ratio of population divided by the number of name types, we get 8.4 for East Germany and 12.8 for West Germany. This means that, statistically, more newborns share the same names in our West German sample. If we plot a graph — with the percentages of name types on the horizontal axis and the percentages of people bearing these names on the vertical axis — to describe the frequency/rank distribution of the names in East and West Germany, we get two lines: a more steeply rising one for West Germany and flatter one for East Germany. These lines suggest that, surprisingly, naming in East Germany is more individualized since, not only on average but also at nearly all points of the distribution curve, fewer people share the same names. But does West Germany really show more uniformity, a phenomenon we had expected to find in East Germany? The answer is *no*. Our application of the measure of individualization is invalid because of the unequal sample sizes and the special distributions of naming behavior within these unequally sized samples.

Name types and their distributions in samples are difficult to compare in a meaningful way because differences in sample sizes produce misleading results if not taken explicitly into account.<sup>11</sup> From a certain sample size upwards, the weight (share) of the very popular names increases steadily (in relation to the share of population covered by rarely used names) with each individual being added to the sample. Of course, bigger samples always include more people with rare names, but more people with popular names as well. It is fairly obvious that the larger a sample, the greater the necessary increase in sample size to include a person with an additional name type. Thus, all the people who would be added to the sample, until the person with a new name type, appear to have names that are already in the sample, which increases the percentages of those with the more popular name types. This does not mean that it is impossible to draw inferences from samples, but that comparisons of frequency distributions are valid only if the samples being compared are equal in size.<sup>12</sup>

Comparing East German and West German respondents in SOEP means dealing with great differences in sample size, since the West German sample is twice as large as the East German one.<sup>13</sup> The best way to handle this problem in a statistically reliable manner is to reduce the West German sample to the size of the East German sample through random sampling, i.e., drawing a subsample from the larger sample.<sup>14</sup> To improve the statistical robustness of our results, we drew not just one but thirty random “West German subsamples.” The differences between the thirty subsamples gave us a hint as to the precision of our calculations.<sup>15</sup>

What are the results? The results dividing the population by the number of different names (population/name type ratio) is almost the same in East as in West Germany using the new reduced West sample: the statistical artifact of very different ratios when using samples of very different sizes for East and West Germany is corrected from 12.8 (see above) to 8.3 for West Germany, which is now as high as the East German ratio (8.4). The mean number of different names found (based on the average of thirty random samples) is 687 for West Germany, and thus only slightly higher than in East Germany (678). The corrected numbers show that East Germans were not more individualized than West Germans. But, nevertheless, our hypothesis of more individualized naming behavior (in terms of more different name types) in West Germany than in East Germany was wrong.

To test how name types were distributed across the population, we plotted the frequency-rank distribution curves for East and West Germany. We see in Figure 1 that the distribution curves present the typical picture that has been identified for other countries in other publications (see, e.g., Tucker, 2001; Eshel, 2001).

On the horizontal axis we entered the name types (expressed as percentage). We began with the most popular names on the left. The vertical axis shows the

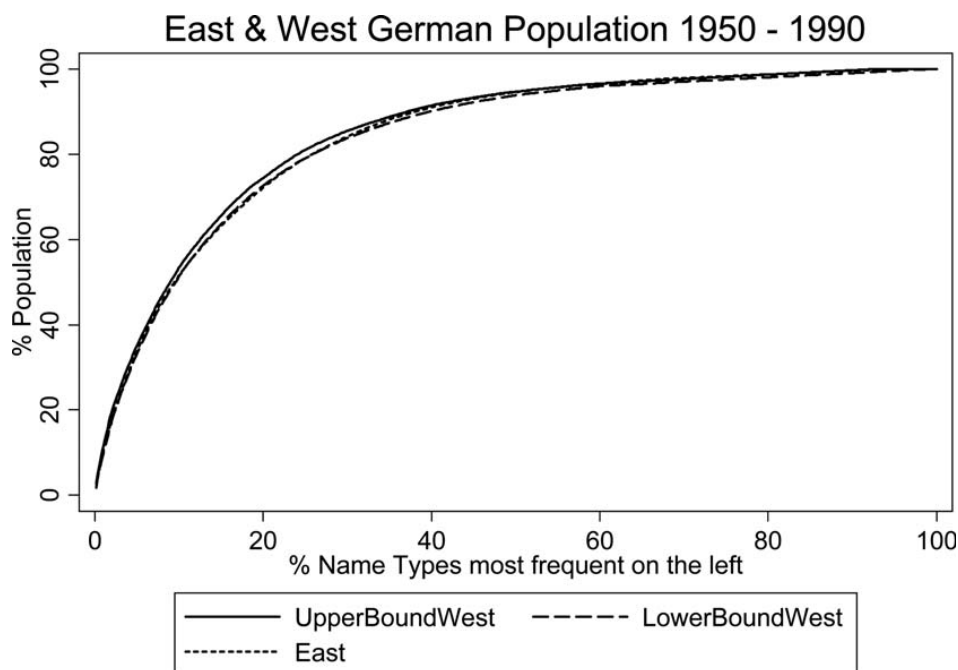


FIGURE 1 Frequency-rank distribution curves of name types for East and West Germany. For West Germany there is not one curve but two: the so-called “Upper Bound West” describes the curve of the highest shares of persons covered by the respective percentage of name types found within thirty subsamples, whereas the so-called “Lower Bound West” shows the lowest shares found. The difference between the two estimates is called “confidence interval.” This procedure ensures statistical robustness of our results.

*Data source: German Socio-Economic Panel Study*



population. The line(s) describe how many different names are used by how many people, i.e., the distribution of names throughout the population. The distribution curves for both parts of the country rise very rapidly to about 80:25 and 90:38, and then, slowly up to 100:100. That is to say, 80 percent of the population has 25 percent of the names found in our samples, or 90 percent has 38 percent of the names. As a result, 50 percent of all name types found in East and West Germany cover 95 percent of all newborns in both parts of the country.<sup>16</sup> However, the more important comparative result is that there are absolutely no significant differences between the name distribution patterns of newborns between East and West Germany. In each part of Germany, newborns were just as likely as those in the other part to receive an extremely popular, moderately popular, or rare name. Furthermore, all individuals in East and West were equally likely to share their names with the same number of people if the positions of their name types in the popularity rankings were the same in East and West Germany. Thus there is absolutely no indication of one part of the country showing more individualized naming habits, neither when looking at the numbers of different names in use, nor when looking at the overall distribution of these name types among the persons born between 1950 and 1989.

Our first substantial finding is a lack of support for the hypothesis that West Germans showed more individualized name choices than East Germans, suggesting the deliberate creation of social distinctions in that society during the country's forty-year division into two states.

### ***Differences in concrete name preferences***

The fact that the name distributions in East and West Germany followed exactly the same pattern does not necessarily mean that East and West Germans used the *same* names. In our data we found 195 out of 678 name types given to East Germans that were not used in the West at all. There are 423 names that have only been found in the West German sample. But this information is not very useful for comparisons since the West sample is larger than the East sample, thus there is a higher probability of having more different name types in the West sample.<sup>17</sup> However, the crucial piece of information here is that in each part of the country, names were found that had not been given to children in the other part.<sup>18</sup> Hence the question arises whether people in East Germany developed different tastes although the name distribution pattern was the same as in West Germany. After all, almost every third name type used in East Germany was not found in the West German sample. But how many of the East German newborns were given such uniquely "Eastern" names? In other words, were the names found only in East Germany *widespread* among newborns there, or were they chosen by only a few parents? It turns out that on average about 7 percent of East German babies were given one of the names only found in the East and not at all in the West. Obviously these unique name choices were not very popular among the "average" East Germans. For the sake of completeness, we report that the name types that are unique to the West also cover only about 8 percent of the West German newborns. In both parts of the country, nine out of ten people have names that are found to be prevalent in the other part of Germany. Clearly an overwhelming majority of parents drew names for their newborns from the same name repertoire.



But does that mean that there were no or only very minor differences at the level of concrete names as well? Again, we hypothesize that the answer is no. Obviously the two countries shared cultural and naming traditions as well as a common language: factors that promote similarities in tastes and hinder the emergence of completely divergent preferences for certain names. The main difference in naming between East and West Germany might not be the appearance of certain names exclusively in one or the other part of the country, but different levels of popularity for the same names. We can thus assume that people classify certain names as typically “eastern” or “western” because they are very rare in one part but very popular in the other but actually do exist in both parts of the country. To approach a test of naming differences, we must focus (a) on the roots of names and (b) on differences in the popularity of names with these roots.

- (a) We analyzed the origins of the name types found in East and West Germany, and plotted a graph of their distribution among the populations.

The majority of newborns in both parts of the country were given German names: almost 70 percent in East Germany and about 80 percent in West Germany. Romanesque, English, and Nordic names were apparently more fashionable in East Germany than West. Again, this is a surprising finding: we expected a higher proportion of Slavic names in East than in West Germany, but the reverse is the case. We also expected a higher proportion of Western names (English and Romanesque) in West Germany, yet here too the opposite is the case. Although East Germany was part of the East European world, expecting parents did not adopt names from their socialist friends but rather oriented their choices towards the Western hemisphere — and especially across the Atlantic.

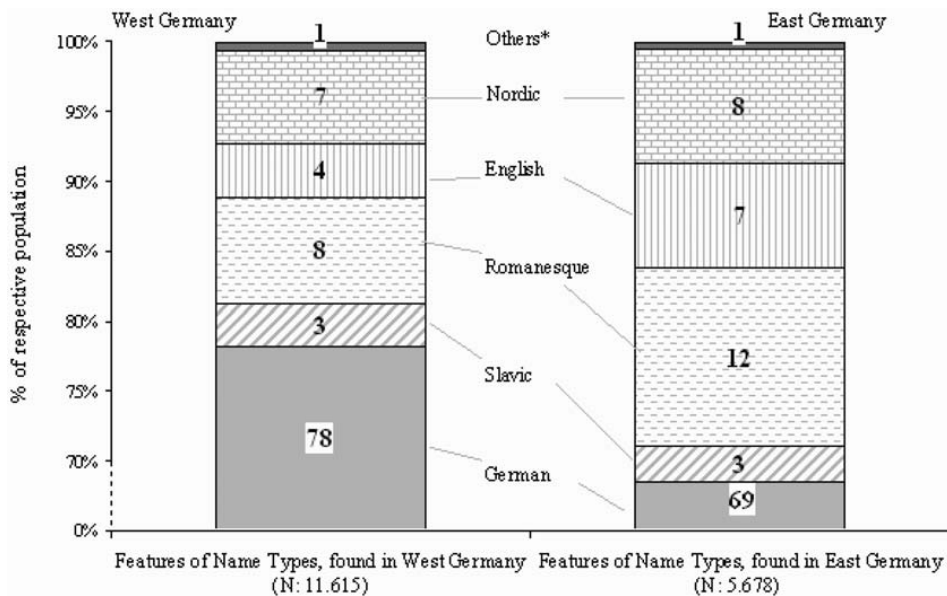


FIGURE 2 Origins of name types.  
 Data source: German Socio-Economic Panel Study

Further calculations provide evidence of developments that occurred over time: in East Germany, German names decreased constantly in popularity over the years, and revived around the middle of the 1980s. Names with Slavic or Nordic roots showed constant popularity over time in the East, whereas Romanesque names reached a distinct peak in popularity in the mid-1970s. Only English names increased constantly in popularity over time in East Germany. In West Germany as well, German names diminished constantly in popularity, whereas Romanesque and English names increased in popularity, but at a lower overall level than in East Germany.

- (b) To find out more about different popularities of names, we concentrated on the 20 most popular name types in the two parts of the country. These top-scoring names were given to approximately a quarter of the newborns in both samples. To assure the robustness of our results, we drew out of the larger West German sample 500 random subsamples for West Germany. From each of these 500 equally sized subsamples, we then extracted the top 20 name types. We found a total of 46 different name types in the respective top 20 name types lists of all 500 West German subsamples, but only 29 names appeared in at least 10 percent of the lists. Again, to assure robustness, we decided to focus on names found only in at least 10 percent of the lists of the top 20 names. Hence, the West German top-20 list contains 29 different name types. With these we compared the top 20 East German name types. All in all, we then found a total of 38 different name types, belonging either to the East German or to the West German top-20 list.<sup>19</sup>

First we examined the geographical roots of the top-scoring names. There is no doubt that in both parts of Germany parents preferred German names. In East Germany we found one Romanesque name type and two Nordic names among the top 20. In the West German top-20 list — which contains names found in at least 10 percent of the 500 subsamples' top-20 lists — there is only one Nordic name, and all of the other 28 names are German. (If we look below the 10 percent line, however, we find more foreign names: three Romanesque, one Slavic, and another Nordic name. Nevertheless, the majority of the most popular names in Germany are German in both East and West Germany.) One could conclude that West German parents had a stronger preference for German names than East German parents: one explanation for this might be the higher degree of secularization in the socialist world. However, in interpreting these findings, it is important to bear in mind the results reported above from larger samples.

Looking at Table 1 we see clear differences in taste: nine names in the East German top-20 list did not occur in the West German top-20 list.

The names Thomas, Michael, and Andreas were clear leaders as the top three names in both East and West Germany. They appeared in every one of the 500 West German subsamples, along with Christian, Stefan, and Petra. There seems to be a broad consensus that these formerly Christian names have become (timelessly) fashionable German names. Interestingly, in both parts of Germany, the prevalence of the top female names is lower. That is, male newborns have a higher chance of receiving one of the top-scoring names, and thus more men than women share the same name.

TABLE 1  
TOP 20 NAME TYPES

Top 20 Most Popular Name Types in East and West Germany 1949–1989					
East Germany			West Germany		
Rank	Name Types	Geographic Roots	Rank*	Name Types	Geographic Roots
1	Thomas	German	1	Thomas	German
2	Michael	German	1	Michael	German
3	Andreas	German	1	Andreas	German
4	<b>Kathrin</b>	German	1	Petra	German
5	<b>Kerstin</b>	Nordic	1	Stefan	German
6	Peter	German	2	Christian	German
7	Stefan	German	2	<b>Sabine</b>	German
8	Frank	German	3	Peter	German
9	Heike	German	4	<b>Klaus</b>	German
10	<b>Jens</b>	Nordic	5	Frank	German
11	Petra	German	6	<b>Hans</b>	German
12	Matthias	German	7	<b>Monika</b>	German
13	<b>Steffen</b>	German	8	<b>Jürgen</b>	German
14	<b>Sebastian</b>	German	9	<b>Martin</b>	German
15	Christian	German	10	<b>Claudia</b>	German
16	Uwe	German	11	<b>Andrea</b>	German
17	Silvia	German	12	<b>Markus</b>	German
18	<b>Mario</b>	Romanesque	13	<b>Birgit</b>	German
19	Ute	German	14	Wolfgang	German
20	Wolfgang	German	15	<b>Angelika</b>	German
			16	<b>Stefanie</b>	German
			17	Heike	German
			18	<b>Susanne</b>	German
			19	Matthias	German
			20	<b>Karin</b>	Nordic
			21	<b>Christine</b>	German
			21	<b>Ulrike</b>	German
			22	<b>Brigitte</b>	German
			23	<b>Rainer</b>	German
				<b>Gabriele</b>	German
				<b>Jörg</b>	German
				Uwe	German
				<b>Sandra</b>	Romanesque
				<b>Ursula</b>	German
				<b>Nicole</b>	Romanesque
				<b>Dirk</b>	German
				<b>Elke</b>	German
				<b>Heinz</b>	German

Bold indicates names not found among the top 20 in the respective other part of Germany.

\* The West German top-20 name list contains 29 different name types, depending on the coincidence of the 500 random subsamples of the West sample, which have been drawn to assure comparability. Therefore some ranks can be occupied by more than one name.

Grey names in the West top-20 list show names not having reached the ten percent line.

Data Source: German Socio-Economic Panel Study

TABLE 1  
CONTINUED

Top 20 Most Popular Name Types in East and West Germany 1949–1989					
East Germany			West Germany		
Rank	Name Types	Geographic Roots	Rank*	Name Types	Geographic Roots
				<b>Martina</b>	German
				<b>Anja</b>	Slavic
				<b>Bernd</b>	German
				<b>Marion</b>	Romanesque
				Silvia	German
				Ute	German
				<b>Simone</b>	German
				<b>Torsten</b>	Nordic

Furthermore, none of the foreign name types were on the top-20 list(s) of the other part of the country. The two Nordic names are both female names: Kerstin (East) and Karin (West). In East Germany, the name Kerstin ranks fourth whereas the name Karin (West Germany) ranks much lower.

In conclusion, we can state that differences in taste between East and West Germany do exist, even when looking at the most popular names.

Looking now at the nine names that appear on the top-20 list in the East but not in the West, how popular are these names in West Germany? The answer is: they appear in the West's lower ranks, between about 50 and 200 of the more than 900 possible positions. Also all the names that made it into one of the 500 top-20 lists in West Germany are occasionally found in East Germany as well. Eleven of the names within the 500 top-20 lists appear in the East German top-20 list, and the remaining 18 hold positions between 21 and about 550 of 678 possible names in East Germany.

To learn more about these popularity differences and not just differences between the top-20 lists, we calculated a measure that can be described as "popularity distance." Here, we simply took all 483 name types that have been found in both parts of the country and subtracted their East German ranking from their West German ranking. The results show the East/West rank or popularity distance.<sup>20</sup>

In our calculations, huge rank distances were found for a considerable share of the samples. If we define a distance of at least 50 ranks as a significant popularity distance, almost 38 percent of West German newborns possessed a name that had a very different popularity level in East Germany. These names were, therefore, much more popular — or unpopular — in the respective other part of the country. In the East, almost 57 percent of newborns received names that were either much more or much less popular in West Germany. If we use an even more restrictive definition of popularity distance as more than 100 ranks, we are still dealing with about every third newborn in both East and West. This suggests that, while the majority used the same name types, East and West Germans had very different ideas about how elegant

or fashionable specific names were. On the other hand, we also find an average of 25 percent of the newborns in East and West Germany possessing a name that was equally popular in both parts (with a popularity distance of less than 20 ranks). Only 51 of 483 name types cover this quarter of the population, whereas 230 of the name types found in both parts have a popularity distance of at least 100 ranks.

These findings support our assumption that the anticipated East/West differences in naming can be characterized as popularity differences between the large majority of names given to the large majority of newborns. In addition to the names with large popularity distances, we still have to deal with the 7 to 8 percent of children with names representing the greatest popularity distance possible: those names that do not occur at all in the other sample.

In order to find out what these differences look like, we compare the origins of names with large popularity distances with the origins of names with low or no popularity distances between East and West Germany.

Let us first look at the graphs in Figure 3. On the vertical axis we entered the different origins of name types. The bar on top (“all”) shows the distribution of all names in East or West Germany. The horizontal axis shows the percentages of the name popularity distribution subdivided into the three categories “high popularity distance” (popularity distance greater than 100 ranks), “medium popularity distance” (popularity distance from 25 to 100 ranks), and “low popularity distance” (popularity distance lower than 25). Since the point of view matters, separate calculations were made for East and West Germany. The results show the percentages of more popular names in each part. For example, the percentages of “medium popularity distance” in Figure 3a show the percentage of names that were more popular in West than in East Germany. The figure for East Germany (Figure 3b) shows the shares of names

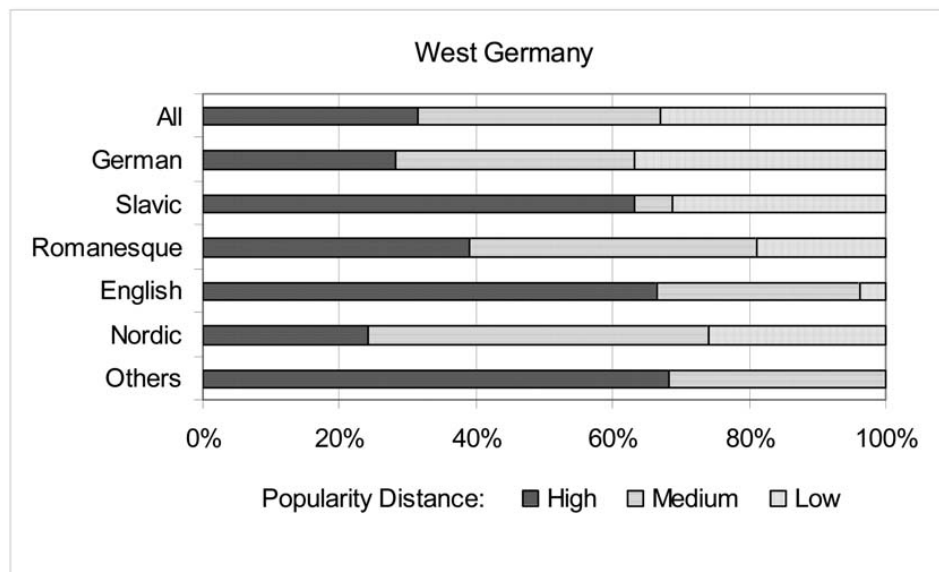


FIGURE 3a Popularity distribution of names by origin: West Germany.

Data source: German Socio-Economic Panel Study

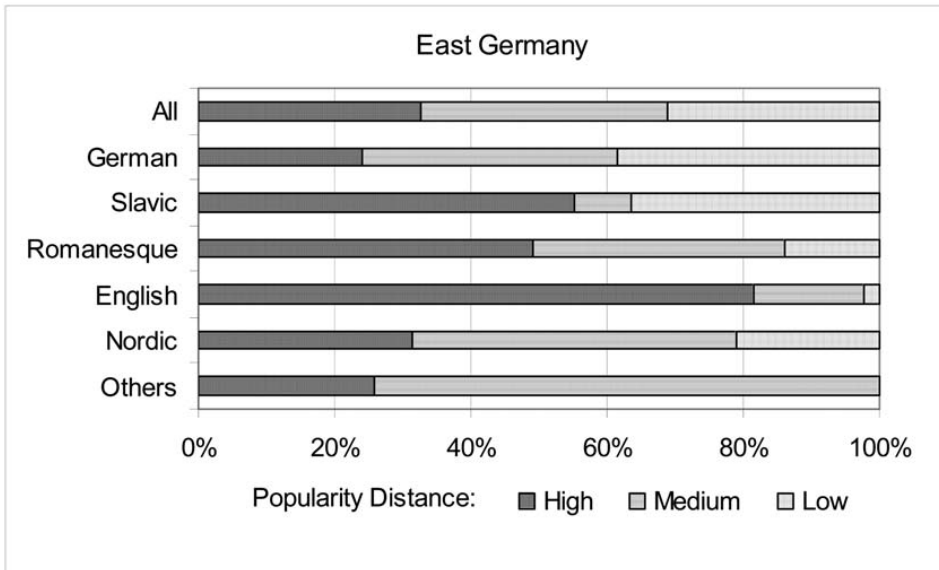


FIGURE 3b Popularity distribution of names by origin: East Germany.

Data source: German Socio-Economic Panel Study

that were more popular in the East than the West. Corresponding relationships hold for the other categories. Moreover, in both parts of Germany, names were found that did not appear in the other sample. Hence, in both cases, the names not found in the other part were put into the group of high popularity distance. The category “low popularity distance” is regarded as equally large in both parts of Germany.

The shares concerning the origin of names among the equally popular names vary between 39 and 2 percent. The exotic group “others” is a pool of names derived from a variety of origins. Not surprisingly, the percentage of “East/West agreement on popularity” is zero. Names in this group were obviously chosen by a small, very particular group of parents for the purpose of drawing deliberate distinctions. With name choices like these, the likelihood of another child bearing the same name seems extremely low. Interestingly, in East Germany, “others” has a “medium popularity distance” of almost 75 percent from names that were more popular in the East, whereas in West Germany, this category has a “high popularity distance” of 68 percent. This is at least partly because the West German list contains more names than the East German list. Nevertheless, it is also because in East Germany parents did not choose such unique names for their children as parents in West Germany did.

The results suggest that there is no significant popularity agreement about most of the names used in East and West Germany, no matter what their roots. The names shared most by East and West Germans are German and Slavic names, followed by Nordic names. The percentage of Nordic names is much lower in East Germany than in West Germany, where there is a five percentage point difference between German, Slavic, and Nordic names, respectively. But even when looking at German names, the shares of newborns with names that are similarly popular in both parts of the country are only 39 percent in the East and 37 percent in the West.

Focusing on the names rated differently in the two parts of the country, an astonishing 82 percent of English names given to East German newborns appear to have been rated significantly differently by West German parents. The same is also true as well for 55 percent of the Slavic and almost 50 percent of the Romanesque names. The picture for West Germany follows the same pattern.

To sum up, we can say that even when it comes to the same name types, East and West Germans held extremely different ideas about which names were fashionable. West Germans generally stuck to German names, although they also used Romanesque and Nordic names. East Germans used Romanesque and English names to a greater extent than their West German counterparts. They did not orient their choices toward the Eastern hemisphere, with which they were affiliated politically. Obviously, name choices gave people the opportunity to express personal tastes transcending all political boundaries — or even to express visible but silent opposition. Thus, the special tastes that developed although the naming patterns were the same in terms of individualization in both parts of Germany.

### ***Developments over time***

What we know so far is that, even if there were some exceptions in naming patterns, East and West German parents drew the names for their children from the same reservoir. There are some significant differences in popularity at the level of concrete names (types) when looking at the roots of names. But the main differences between East and West Germany are different ideas about the stylishness of concrete names.

In order to complete our picture of naming differences we have to answer the following question: when did the two parts of Germany diverge from each other in terms of naming practices? To find an answer, we must examine the extreme categories from the figure above: the shares of East German newborns with names that were equally popular in West Germany (popularity distance of less than twenty-five ranks) and the shares of East German newborns with names that were used very differently in the West (popularity distance more than 100 ranks, including names not found at all in the West German sample). The respective shares are shown on the vertical axis as percentages (of newborns) in Figure 4. Furthermore, we need to examine this data from a historical perspective; therefore, the years of birth (point of naming) are shown on the horizontal axis.

The crucial information provided by the graph above is the divergent development in East Germany between equally popular names in East and West, and those names that were much more popular or unpopular in the East than in the West. In 1950, half of East German newborns received names that were equally popular in the West. This share drops towards the mid-1950s, increases for a period of about ten years, and then drops significantly from 1964 on to stabilize at a level of between 25 and 29 percent from 1981 on. The names that are only found in East Germany or have a popularity distance of at least 100 ranks cover about 17 percent of East Germans born in 1950. Since then, this share has risen significantly and, with a small break in the late 1950s, constantly. In 1989, almost half of East German newborns were given names that were not used for West German newborns or that differed widely in popularity among West German parents. In any case, the rise in popularity of the group of names given to East Germans and rated very differently in popularity in



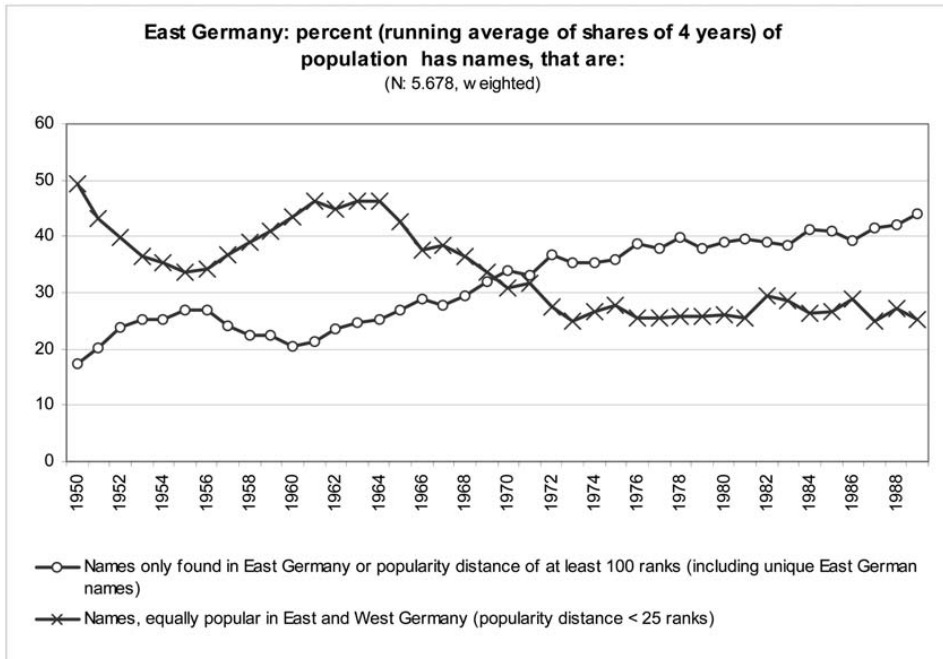


FIGURE 4 Popularity distance between East and West German names.  
Data source: *German Socio-Economic Panel Study*

West Germany proves that what we could call a specifically East German taste in names really did emerge. This emergence was not limited to a few isolated pockets but rather covered a significant swath of East German society.

## Conclusions

We can summarize the main results of our study as follows.

1. We hypothesized that differences in the dominant ideology, lifestyles, and social structures of the two German societies had an impact on the distribution of names. Thus, the level of individualization was expected to be higher in West Germany than in East Germany. This hypothesis is not verified by our data. There are absolutely no significant differences between the name distribution patterns of newborns in East and West Germany. West Germany does not show more individualized naming habits than East Germany, either when looking at the numbers of name types or when looking at the distribution of these name types among persons born between 1950 and 1989. This is extremely interesting, given the fact that the degree of individualization in naming grew over the last few decades within the overall German sample (cf. Gerhards, 2005; Huschka and Wagner, 2008).
2. We expected to find a higher share of Slavic and Eastern European names in East Germany as a result of its being part of the socialist bloc under Soviet

domination, as well as a higher share of Anglo-American and Romanesque names in West Germany. This second hypothesis is not verified by our analysis either. Although East Germany was part of the East European world, parents did not adopt names from their socialist friends but rather oriented their choices Westwards — and particularly across the Atlantic. This may be due to a widespread rejection of Communist ideology on many levels of society. Russian names were extremely unpopular, which can be regarded as a form of silent (but visible) protest. The 7 percent average share of newborns given English names in East Germany was indeed not overwhelming, but it rose to 20 percent from the late 1970s onwards.

3. East German and West German parents developed increasingly different ideas about appropriate names for their children. From the 1970s on, the percentages of East German children with names rated very differently in the West was consistently higher than the percentages of names rated similarly in the West. Not even the increased reception of Western television in the East, particularly from the 1980s onwards, reversed this trend. It can be surmised that the short period of convergence in naming in the late 1950s and early 1960s was a result of the West German *Wirtschaftswunder*, which was observed closely, and no doubt with some amount of longing, by East Germans. Furthermore, during this period, people living in the GDR were still able to travel across the border to visit relatives in the West, where they could personally experience the “good life” and get a taste of the Western world. There was still an exchange of personal information, which included style issues and certain cultural adaptation mechanisms. The opportunities for personal contacts between the people in the two German states plummeted with the erection of the Berlin Wall. From that point on, naming patterns in East Germany diverged starkly from West German patterns. On the one hand, the numbers of East German newborns with “Eastern” names followed a relatively linear path from the 1960s onwards. On the other, the popularity of names considered similarly fashionable in both parts of the country diminished dramatically starting in the early 1960s, but this development stabilized in the mid-1970s at a level of 25 to 29 percent. This stabilization can, in fact, be an outcome of the improved opportunity for East Germans to receive West German TV signals. The mid-1970s were also the period when English names experienced a dramatic leap in popularity, not only in the East but also in the West, albeit on a much lower level.

We believe that two more general conclusions can be drawn from our empirical evidence. First, we conclude that naming patterns underscore other sociological evidence that shows a widespread rejection of communist ideology by the vast majority of East Germans. Russian names were extremely unpopular, and silent (but visible) protest was expressed in the choice of alternative name types. Second, naming patterns seem to follow a “hidden” law in societies that share a common history, as the two German states did. Although the two societies developed different tastes for concrete name types, the degree of concentration and individualization remained the same. This is particularly interesting because the degree of individualization in naming increased over recent decades within the overall German sample (Gerhards,

2005; Huschka and Wagner, 2008). Thus, naming patterns are not stable at all. This underscores the importance of future onomastic research, which should try to answer the question of why basic naming patterns remained the same in divided Germany over forty years.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In Germany, parents are generally free to choose their children's names. Only the use of completely original names is more strictly regulated here than in other countries (e.g., the US), especially if these names are not merely variations in the spelling of other existing names. However, the reservoir of possible names has always been vast. Tens of thousands of names have emerged throughout the long history of Europe.
- <sup>2</sup> The legal regulation of naming in Germany does not take place through actual laws. The procedure in both parts of the country, even during Germany's division, was always for parents to register the names of their children at the local registrar's office. Common names are registered without any problems, but it is up to the registrar to decide on original names according to general guidelines. One example of such a guideline (used in both East and West Germany) is: "Das Kind hat ein Recht darauf, nicht mit einem anstößigen, lächerlichen oder sonst wie unpassenden Vornamen belastet zu werden, der ihm die Selbstidentifikation erschweren oder zu herabsetzenden Reaktionen seiner Umwelt Anlass geben könnte" ("The child has a right not to be burdened with a name which is offensive, ridiculous, or in any other way inappropriate, and which could impede his self-identification or give cause for disparaging reactions from those around him", cf. Duden, 2004). It was thus left mainly up to the registrar whether to accept a name or not. On the question of whether East German registrars prevented the registration of Western-sounding names, such as those adopted from American actors or singers, Gabriele Rodriguez, one of the leading name experts from the "Namensberatungsstelle Leipzig" (the highest conciliation authority for controversial name issues) answered that this prejudicial treatment would have been most likely prior to the significant liberalization that took place in the 1980s — in particular during the 1960s.
- <sup>3</sup> There is significant evidence that naming is deeply rooted in social contexts. Names serve as powerful social indicators, for instance when looking at cultural tastes, societal secularization, processes of individualization (see, e.g., Lieberman and Bell (1992), Lieberman (2000) for the US, Gerhards (2003; 2005) for Germany, or Besnard and Desplaques (2001) for France), and chances on the job market (see Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2003, Fryer and Levitt, 2004; Arai *et al.*, 2004. and Aura and Hess, 2004).
- <sup>4</sup> "Wirtschaftswunder" denotes the rapid reconstruction and ongoing economic revival of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) after World War II as a result of the currency reform in 1948. It was also supported by the vast amount of economic aid provided to West Germany by the United States (Marshall Plan).
- <sup>5</sup> Economic inequality was lower in the GDR, which is proven, for example, by the lower Gini Coefficients (a measure to describe income inequality). Whereas the Gini Coefficient was about 0.24 in West Germany, it was 0.19 in East Germany. An empirical value of zero for the Gini Coefficient indicates total equality (everyone having the same income), whereas a Gini Coefficient of 1 would indicate extreme inequality. As a reference for comparisons: the US as well as the UK have a Gini Coefficient of about 0.34 (all Gini values for 1991, German values: SOEP calculations, values for the US and the UK taken from the Luxembourg Income Study project's website: [www.lisproject.org/keyfigures/inequitable.htm](http://www.lisproject.org/keyfigures/inequitable.htm), September 2005). For more details, and a view on some hidden inequalities within the GDR, see Bird *et al.* (1998). However, even if there was more equality, average living standards and individual material living situations in East Germany were much lower than in West Germany.
- <sup>6</sup> Wolffson and Brechenmacher (1999) showed that the first names of two of the early East German communist leaders became very unpopular a few years after they had taken office, although their names had previously been quite popular.
- <sup>7</sup> However, from the early 1970s onwards, it became increasingly easy to receive West German TV signals in the East (Linke, 1987). The West German "yellow press" and other print media, however, were very difficult to obtain in the East.
- <sup>8</sup> For detailed information, see the project documentation (Huschka *et al.*, 2005), currently available on the Internet in German. An English language version will follow soon.
- <sup>9</sup> The three other codes refer to the cultural-historical background — the "real" background of a name, so to speak, as found in dictionaries. It is worth mentioning that we did not code the meaning of names, but their cultural heritages. For instance, the name

- of one of the three kings from the New Testament, “Melchior,” would be coded as “Hebrew” in our system because this is the cultural heritage, even if the meaning of the two name parts would be “Mälāk” (King) and “-or” (brightness or light).
- <sup>10</sup> One side effect of standardizing spelling is that we minimize privacy protection problems, which are most severe in cases of unique or rare names. For special research questions, the original spelling can be analyzed as well.
- <sup>11</sup> See Baayen (2001) for a general discussion of these general issues, and Huschka and Wagner (2008) for a discussion of frequencies of names.
- <sup>12</sup> This methodological problem is very important when contrasting countries, birth cohorts, or different points in time (see Huschka and Wagner, 2008). One can try to overcome the problem of sampling by simulation measures (see Baayen, 2001: chs 3–6). But in the case of names, the best method is simply to make sample sizes equal.
- <sup>13</sup> The actual population size of West Germany is more than three times larger than the East German one. In the SOEP, East Germans (as well as labor immigrants) are over-represented to increase statistical power. So weights are used to correct proportions and to assure a representative database.
- <sup>14</sup> In the case of differences in the length of text corpus (different numbers of words), sampling is a problem, because different parts of a text have different styles. This is the reason why linguists try to overcome the problem of the “LNRE Zone” (Zone of Large Number of Rare Events) with simulation techniques. In the case of names, sub-sampling is the optimal instrument.
- <sup>15</sup> To ensure statistical correctness, we have drawn 1000 random subsamples for some calculations. This is a very time-consuming procedure, and it turned out that 30 subsamples produce statistically robust results.
- <sup>16</sup> At this point we must warn against using the figures above for direct comparisons with other data on other countries. Such comparisons are not valid if the sample sizes and sample probabilities of people within the units of comparison differ substantially (see Huschka and Wagner (2008) and Baayen (2001) for a general discussion of rare word frequencies). For the same reason, the comparisons between Israel, the US, and Germany done by Eshel (2001) are not valid, although his conclusions point in the right direction. Tucker (2001) compares differently sized but very large samples (in the US and Canada) as well, so this comparison is not strictly correct. However, it is no more than a footnote to his otherwise very impressive article.
- <sup>17</sup> The numbers of name types are calculated using all Germans in the SOEP, born 1950–1989. To compare these numbers directly, we would have to draw equally sized subsamples from West Germany as above, but then we would lose information. The focus of our conclusions here is not on directly comparing these numbers but rather comparing certain name features like being uniquely “western” or “eastern.”
- <sup>18</sup> To be precise: these names may be found in the other part of the country but are so rare that they do not show up in the small samples commonly used in the social sciences.
- <sup>19</sup> Although we decided to cut off the western top-20 name lists at the 10 percent line of occurrence among the 500 subsamples, it seems important to mention that three names found within the East German top-20 list occurred in the West German top-20 list as well, but beneath the 10 percent line: Uwe (5%), Silvia, and Ute (each name less than 1 percent).
- <sup>20</sup> The highest popularity distance is the exclusive occurrence of a name type in one part of the country. For these names no popularity distance can be found (in terms of numbers). The highest value of our measure is the maximum number of name types that are shared in both parts of the country. If names are found at the same positions in East and West, the popularity distance is zero.

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