Since the demise of the German Democratic Republic in 1989/90 East Germans have produced a flood of autobiographical writing. Literary figures, academics, politicians and ordinary citizens have felt compelled to give an account of their lives in the GDR. The chapter examines the specific features of the autobiographical genre and its contribution to our understanding of the past. A study of the collective habitus of groups and the range of individual responses to political pressure indicates how autobiographical writing can provide valuable insights into the complex reality of life in the GDR.

After the collapse of the GDR a sense of dislocation and a need for reorientation were apparent not just among those East Germans who physically relocated to the West. East Germans who stayed put found that everything had changed in their old environment, and they had to find their way in a new post-socialist present. This present in turn generated competing master narratives about the GDR’s past that required individuals to reassess their role within that past. Public versions of this reassessment were to be found in the vast body of autobiographical writings that emerged after the Wende: literary figures, academics, politicians and ordinary citizens felt compelled to give an account of their lives in the GDR. There also emerged a great body of related work including fictional autobiographies, diaries, memoirs, interview literature, as well as sociological and historical studies which took the individual as their starting point. They attracted much attention and public debate, not least because they addressed the key issues of freedom and responsibility, complicity and moral compromise, private and public roles in an authoritarian society, and these were issues that had either been dealt with in a perfunctory manner by the media or not at all in the legal sphere where the trials of the old political elite were frequently abandoned due to the ill-health of the accused.

The following analysis takes a broad definition of autobiography that has emerged from discussions of the genre over the past two decades, looking not just at literary autobiography but also memoirs and interview material. The aim is to demonstrate how autobiography
and related sources reveal a complexity and subtlety of experience that can deepen our understanding of life in the GDR.

The case for autobiography in general has been made by Gabriele Jancke who argues that reading autobiographical texts changed her view of history:


Jancke’s point about multiple perspectives tends to work against the construction of generalisations, and, although her point is not made with reference to the GDR, it is a useful corrective to much public debate after the end of the GDR: early reassessments of the GDR were marked by the preoccupation with locating responsibility for forty years of socialism, and these reassessments often explicitly or implicitly separated out the population into perpetrators and victims.

At the level of historical interpretation it has been suggested that the GDR was primarily a product of political interests and only secondarily a ‘social entity’: ‘East German society owed many of its basic characteristics to the establishment of a particular political regime, and indeed one which in principle was not willing to grant autonomy to any area of society’. East German society, it has been argued, was totally controlled by the state, and to this extent it was a ‘shut down’ society.²

If this is true there seems little point in delving into East Germany’s social history. Yet research quickly established that interpretative models of the GDR based on a simple division into perpetrators and victims or on total control did not do justice to a more complex reality. In his highly acclaimed study of East Germany, Die Ostdeutschen: Kunde von einem verlorenen Land Wolfgang Engler argues that dismissive terms such as ‘unjust state’ and ‘command economy’ are just as incapable of explaining the East German