

# Driven into Suicide by the Communist Regime of the German Democratic Republic? On the Persistence of a Distorted Perspective

Q1

*Udo Grashoff*

**ABSTRACT.** The assumption that the Communist dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) drove many people to suicide has persisted for decades, and it is still evident in academic and public discourse. Yet, high suicide rates in eastern Germany, which can be traced back to the nineteenth century, cannot be a result of a particular political system. Be it monarchy, democracy, fascism, or socialism, the frequency of suicide there did not change significantly. In fact, the share of politically motivated suicides in the GDR amounts to only 1–2 per cent of the total. Political, economic, or socio-cultural factors did not have a significant impact on suicide rates. An analysis of two subsets of GDR society that were more likely to be affected by repression—prisoners and army recruits—further corroborates this: there is no evidence of a higher suicide rate in either case. Complimentary to a quantitative approach “from above,” a qualitative analysis “from below” not only underlines the limited importance of repression, but also points to a regional pattern of behavior linked to cultural influences and to the role of religion—specifically, to Protestantism. Several factors nevertheless fostered the persistence of an overly politicized interpretation of suicide in the GDR: the bereaved in the East, the media in the West, and a few victims of suicide themselves blamed the regime and downplayed important individual and pathological aspects. Moreover, state and party officials in the GDR unintentionally reinforced the politicization of suicide by imposing a taboo on the subject, which only fueled the flames of speculation about its root causes.

Seit Jahrzehnten besteht im wissenschaftlichen und öffentlichen Diskurs die Annahme, dass die DDR-Diktatur viele Menschen in den Suizid getrieben habe. Doch die hohen Suizidraten in Ostdeutschland, die bis ins 19. Jahrhundert zurückverfolgt werden können, können kein Ergebnis eines bestimmten politischen Systems sein. Ob Monarchie, Demokratie, Faschismus oder Sozialismus—die Häufigkeit von Selbstmorden änderte sich kaum. Tatsache ist, dass der Anteil an politisch motivierten Suiziden in der DDR lediglich zwischen 1–2 Prozent liegt. Politische, ökonomische oder soziokulturelle Faktoren hatten keinen wesentlichen Einfluss auf Suizidraten. Dieser Befund wird auch durch eine Analyse zweier Teilgruppen der DDR Gesellschaft, nämlich Häftlinge und Rekruten, die aller Wahrscheinlichkeit nach von Repression betroffen wurden, bestätigt: In keinem Fall gibt es Beweise für eine höhere Suizidrate. Komplementär zu einem quantitativen Ansatz „von oben“ unterstreicht eine qualitative Analyse „von unten“ nicht nur die eingeschränkte Bedeutung von Repression, sondern zeigt darüber hinaus ein regionales Verhaltensmuster auf, das in Verbindung zu kulturellen Einflüssen und der Rolle von Religion steht—insbesondere der des Protestantismus. Mehrere Faktoren haben nichtsdestotrotz das Fortdauern einer übertrieben politisierten Interpretation von Suizid in der DDR gefördert: die im Osten Zurückgebliebenen, die westlichen Medien

I would like to thank Andrew I. Port and the two anonymous readers for their thought-provoking help in improving this article. Many thanks to George Bodie and Thomas Lorman for improving earlier versions of this article.

und einige Selbstmordopfer, die das Regime beschuldigten und wichtige individuelle und pathologische Aspekte herunterspielten. Hinzu kommt, dass der Staat und die Partei in der DDR unbeabsichtigt die Politisierung von Suizid bestärkten, indem sie das Thema tabuisierten, was Spekulationen über die Ursachen von Selbstmord nur weiter anstachelte.

MYTHS stemming from political taboos can have a long-lasting legacy. The history of suicide in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) provides an excellent example of this. East Germany consistently had one of the world's highest suicide rates. Some 5,000 to 6,000 people took their life every year, amounting to an annual rate of 30 to 35 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants. Compared to the Federal Republic of Germany, the suicide rate was about 50 per cent higher throughout the GDR's existence from 1949 to 1990. Unusually high suicide rates were also registered in other socialist countries, such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Some scholars have therefore attributed high suicide rates to the prevailing totalitarian atmosphere, namely, political repression, surveillance, confinement, and limits on the freedom to travel abroad.<sup>1</sup> One statistical survey appears to support the myth that suicide rates in Communist countries are generally higher than those in democratic countries.<sup>2</sup> One analyst even managed to identify specific links between high suicide rates and totalitarianism "traits."<sup>3</sup> But these findings constitute a misleading hypothesis. After all, suicide is a complex phenomenon with psychological, socio-cultural, political, economic, pathological, criminal, philosophic, religious, and gender implications. Unicausal explanations should thus be taken with a grain of salt.

The topic has not received much systematic scholarly attention. Almost three decades after German reunification, there is little knowledge about suicide under socialism, at least in the English-speaking world.<sup>4</sup> The works of German scholars such as Reinhard Cordes, Werner Felber, Hans Girod, Ehrhart Neubert, and the present author others have received

<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., Ehrhart Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR 1949–1989* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 1997), 282–84; Rolf Degen, "Ex-DDR: Hohe Selbstmordrate," *Psychologie heute* 18, no. 2 (1991): 14–15; H. Hoffmeister, G. Wiesner, B. Junge and H. Kant, "Selbstmordsterblichkeit in der DDR und in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland," *Münchener medizinische Wochenschrift* 132, no. 39 (1990): 603–9; Georg Siegmund, "Die Selbstmordhäufigkeit als Index für den Stand der seelischen Gesundheitslage," *Hippokrates* 32 (1961): 895–99.

<sup>2</sup>Steven Stack, "Culture and Suicide: An Analysis of 35 nations," paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Association of Suicidology, St. Louis, April 1996, cited in Armin Schmidtke et al., "The Impact of the Reunification of Germany on the Suicide Rate," *Archives of Suicide Research* 5, no. 3 (1999): 233–39.

<sup>3</sup>Steven Stack, "Durkheim's Theory of Fatalistic Suicide: A Cross-National Approach," *Journal of Social Psychology* 107 (1979): 161–68. The author estimates the degree of political totalitarianism based on the total number of government sanctions enacted from 1948 to 1967.

<sup>4</sup>Two recently published books do not mention suicide: Paul Betts, Alon Confino, and Dirk Schumann, eds., *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York: Berghahn, 2011); Felix Robin Schulz, *Death in East Germany, 1945–1990* (New York: Berghahn, 2013). For a study that deals with suicide in earlier periods but not in the GDR, see Monica Black, *Death in Berlin: From Weimar to Divided Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). On the conceptualization of suicide as an artistic device, see Robert Blankenship, *Suicide in East German Literature: Fiction, Rhetoric, and the Self-Destruction of Literary Heritage* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2017).

minimal attention.<sup>5</sup> Mary Fulbrook is the only British historian who has delved into the problem so far. But her discussion of suicide in the GDR is grounded in very few sources. She offers a mélange of shrewd observations and unsubstantiated speculations, which serve as a starting point for further inquiries.<sup>6</sup>

This article scrutinizes the impact of politics on suicide rates. It also identifies the main factors that hampered and still prevent a nuanced understanding of why suicide was more prevalent in the GDR than, for example, in the neighboring Federal Republic. The following argument is based on comprehensive discourse analysis and an examination of several thousand suicides that occurred over the forty years of the GDR's existence. Suicide is discussed, accordingly, as a statistical phenomenon at the macro-level of society and as an individual event at the micro-level. The findings are based on a variety of sources, including files from the police, the military and the Ministry for State Security (Stasi); reports by education and health authorities; published and unpublished medical studies, interviews with experts and with bereaved people; as well as farewell letters and newspaper articles. The abundance of available quantitative and qualitative sources makes it possible to go beyond unsubstantiated claims and to establish meaningful links between micro- and macrohistory, thus allowing for a nuanced explanation of the origins and persistence of Western (mis-)perceptions about suicide in Eastern Germany.

### A Specter is Haunting the West: Academic and Popular Perspectives

The assumption that political repression drove many East Germans to suicide influenced the West for decades. The specter surfaced occasionally, temporarily became invisible, then returned time and again. In 1959, population scientist Roderich von Ungern-Sternberg claimed, without providing any details, that “more difficult living conditions” were the main cause of the GDR's high suicide rate.<sup>7</sup> In 1963, the West German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* placed blame on the East German regime in particular for the high suicide rate of elderly people.<sup>8</sup> The governing Socialist Unity Party (SED) stopped the publication of suicide data that same year, which meant that authors could only allude to the “high but unknown” suicide rate in the GDR.<sup>9</sup> Over the following decades, several authors nevertheless expressed strong views about the subject, despite the lack of sound evidence. In 1977, for example, Konstantin Pritzel suggested that “burdens caused by the Communist rulers’ coercive and terrorist measures” contributed to East Germany’s high suicide rate. The author, a former member of the West Berlin Untersuchungsausschuss Freiheitlicher Juristen (Investigative Committee of Free Jurists), which was partly financed by the CIA, even manipulated statistics to support his misleading claim.<sup>10</sup> Somewhat more cautiously, a West German

<sup>5</sup>One exception is Peter Grieder, “East German Totalitarianism: A Warning from History,” in *Totalitarianism on Screen: The Art and Politics of The Lives of Others*, ed. Carl Eric Scott and F. Flagg Taylor IV (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 203–28.

<sup>6</sup>Benita Blessing, review of Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*, on *H-German* (June 2006), (<https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11883>).

<sup>7</sup>Roderich von Ungern-Sternberg, “Die Selbstmordhäufigkeit in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart,” *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik* 171 (1959): 200.

<sup>8</sup>“Selbstmord. Krankheit zum Tode,” *Der Spiegel*, Jan. 30, 1963.

<sup>9</sup>F. Unger, “Das Gesundheitswesen der DDR,” *Deutschland Archiv* 3, no. 10 (1970): 1141. Cf. Jonathan Steele, *Socialism with a German Face: The State that Came from the Cold* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), 196.

<sup>10</sup>Konstantin Pritzel, “Der Selbstmord im sozialistischen Paradies,” *Berliner Ärzteblatt* 90, no. 24 (1977): 1114.

journalist asserted in 1986 that “totalitarian Marxism-Leninism, coupled with the tradition of Prussian statism,” could have generated “considerable suicidogenic factors.”<sup>11</sup> After German unification, some scholars continued to argue that political circumstances affected the suicide rate in the GDR. In 1998, for instance, Ehrhart Neubert, a sociologist of religion, blamed the Communist regime for suicides in an essay he published in the German edition of the *Black Book of Communism*. Neubert listed a number of suicides that, he claimed, were a result of the political situation in the GDR; he also identified supposedly specific “suicidal structures” there.<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein in their study of unofficial literature in the GDR, Ines Geipel and Joachim Walther downplayed the private suffering of the few East German authors who committed suicide, stressing political maltreatment instead.<sup>13</sup>

Many East German dissidents took a comparable tack in the writing they published before 1989. Jürgen Fuchs, for instance, subtly alluded in the late 1970s to the army’s supposed responsibility for the prevalence of suicides among its recruits.<sup>14</sup> More generally, Hermann von Berg, the author of an opposition manifesto published in 1978, asked why the German Democratic Republic had “some of the highest rates of divorce, suicide, and alcohol abuse.”<sup>15</sup> By keeping suicide statistics secret and by practicing censorship, the SED unintentionally fueled speculations about the apparently strong correlation between suicide and Communist dictatorship. Neubert, a former member of the GDR opposition group Demokratischer Aufbruch (Democratic Awakening), captured the fears of many East German dissidents in his bold claim that there was “no other country in Europe where so many suicides” were a result of official Communist policy.<sup>16</sup>

Several films and television series from the period made similarly misleading claims. In 1966, for instance, the West German television series *Die fünfte Kolonne* presented an episode, “Das verräterische Licht,” in which an office assistant commits suicide after being forced to spy for the Stasi. The secretary, Beate Zöllner—employed by a Munich-based enterprise that carried out research for NATO—has an East German brother who has been sentenced to ten years imprisonment for helping a friend escape from the GDR. Exploiting his ill health, the Stasi approaches Fräulein Zöllner with a promise that her brother will be released if she takes pictures of secret documents. Several mishaps occur, and the deal does not work out; West German intelligence intervenes and discovers her guilt. Ashamed about deceiving her boss, who trusted her unquestioningly, and scared by the prospect of being convicted, Zöllner throws herself under a train. The episode’s message is banal: the only reason for this desperate deed was blackmail by the Stasi.

Forty years later, the box-office hit *The Lives of Others* revived the totalitarian framing of East Germany’s suicide rates. It is worth closely examining how the movie presents suicide—

<sup>11</sup>Michael Haller, ed., *Freiwillig sterben—freiwillig?* (Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1986), 32–33.

<sup>12</sup>Ehrhart Neubert, “Politische Verbrechen in der DDR,” in *Das Schwarzbuch des Kommunismus*, ed. Stéphane Courtois et al. (München: Piper, 1998), 859. Neubert’s view implied Galtung’s concept of structural violence, which has been criticized for its lack of nuance and potential for confusion. See Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91; C. A. J. Coady, *Morality and Political Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Mark Vorobej, “Structural Violence,” *Peace Research* 40, no. 2 (2008): 84–98.

<sup>13</sup>Ines Geipel and Joachim Walther, *Gespernte Ablage* (Düsseldorf: Lilienfeld, 2015).

<sup>14</sup>Jürgen Fuchs, *Gedächtnisprotokolle* (Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1977), 22.

<sup>15</sup>Manfred Wilke, “Wieslers Turn to Dissidence and the History behind the Film,” in *The Lives of Others and Contemporary German Film: A Companion*, ed. Paul Cooke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 49.

<sup>16</sup>Neubert, *Politische Verbrechen*, 859.

in this case, the suicide of theater director Albert Jerska, who hangs himself after being banned for years from his profession. The vast majority of the film's audience apparently considered suicide to be a representation—and result—of suffering in a world deprived of artistic freedom. In an exemplary comment along these lines, film scholar Mary-Elizabeth O'Brien commended the movie because it "does not shy away from showing the cost in human lives for defying the SED dictatorship, especially in its depictions of suicides."<sup>17</sup> It should nevertheless be noted that the fictional Jerska belonged to the milieu of privileged state artists, who had a good chance of escaping the regime's narrow-minded cultural policies. His occupational ban dated back to the time when dozens of prominent artists had unsuccessfully protested against the expatriation of singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann in November 1976. Disappointed about the hardline attitude of the SED, many artists left the GDR or negotiated temporary exit visas. These options did not seem to exist for Jerska because he still felt strongly connected to Communist ideology and never envisaged leaving the country he considered to be the better Germany. Reducing his suicide to political repression disregards Jerska's personal issues and his other problems, which are also portrayed in the film.<sup>18</sup> More important, the reality for most East German dissidents was different: although many had to work in undesirable jobs, some chose to emigrate when all other options had been exhausted.

It is possible, of course, that suicide, inspired by opposition to the regime, did occur in the GDR. But the film becomes utterly misleading when Jerska's individual case is linked to the elevated suicide rate. In a eulogy he gives at the funeral, the fictional playwright Georg Dreyman does not blame the regime directly for his friend's death, but he does accuse the East German state of coldheartedly ignoring people who commit suicide. It might be, as one scholar claims, that Dreyman was "drawn first to investigate and then to expose in the West the high incidence of suicide in East Germany," but the film suggests a different story.<sup>19</sup> There is no indication that Dreyman had access to suicide figures, which would have been unrealistic. Dreyman's embittered words of farewell become source material for an essay that he manages to have smuggled to West Berlin. Following its publication in *Der Spiegel*, it is West German television news that connects the East German suicide rate to the recent suicides of artists living there. By making this choice, the film unintentionally shows how the Western media transformed individual despair in the East into a political reproach.

The film does contain a number of subtle details that mitigate against such an overly simplistic interpretation. But the film as a whole conveys a fatalistic impression of life in the GDR. The totalitarian atmosphere of the film, as well as the clear distinction between victims and perpetrators (with one fictional character, Stasi officer Gerd Wiesler, being the only exception), create empathy with the victims and convey an implicit message: "Suicide is, of course, a metaphor for the tragic loss of vitality and life under totalitarianism; and underlying the film, heavy as a basso continuo, is this tragic sense of loss and waste—the repression, squandering, and death of talent, productivity, pleasure, and hope."<sup>20</sup> The film's

<sup>17</sup>Mary-Elizabeth O'Brien, *Post-Wall German Cinema and National History: Utopianism and Dissent* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012), 158.

<sup>18</sup>His friends offer =help but he refuses, presumably because of depression. His high levels of alcohol consumption must have further encouraged his suicidal tendencies.

<sup>19</sup>Joye Weisel-Barth, "Voyeuristic Pleasures and Complexity Theory: The Lives of Others," *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2008): 115.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

emotional effects apparently had a stronger impact on audiences than its authentic details did. The film's subtleties notwithstanding, its plot seems to suggest a link between political repression and suicide.<sup>21</sup> A similar kind of reductionism is characteristic of the public discourse about East German suicides that has persisted for decades.

There were nevertheless scholarly debates about East German suicide rates that challenged such Cold War stereotypes. East and West German medical statisticians and psychiatrists discussed the issue in and around 1961, the year the Berlin Wall was built. In 1956, the GDR had begun publishing yearly suicide rates, and, in light of the high numbers, East and West German experts adopted Emile Durkheim's theory of anomie to argue that social and political changes in East Germany might have been responsible for the elevated suicide rate.<sup>22</sup> But this claim was quickly challenged, with an eye to the fact that the GDR's geographic territory had a long history of high suicide rates.<sup>23</sup>

Since the beginning of statistical surveys in the nineteenth century, the ratio of suicide rates in those areas that later constituted the GDR and the Federal Republic was roughly three to two, respectively. Political factors are thus very unlikely to have had a significant impact on this figure, given the relative constancy of suicide rates under monarchy, democracy, and dictatorship. Under the German Empire, the Weimar Republic, and the Third Reich, it was not the political system but rather long-term regional differences that determined the frequency of suicide over the "longue durée." In the 1960s, that insight was accepted, to some extent, among experts in the East and West, but this consensus had minimal impact on public perceptions. That held true for West Germany politicians and journalists, as well as for the leadership of the SED. The Politburo avoided any discussion of the problem for fear that high suicide rates would damage the international reputation of the GDR, a fear compounded by a slight increase in suicide rates in the 1960s. That was why statistics on suicide were classified beginning in 1963—a typical reaction.<sup>24</sup> Nine years later, as a result of a sudden rise in crime, the SED also stopped publishing annual crime rates in the official yearbook of statistics.<sup>25</sup> Attempts by East German experts to convince party officials that "the high suicide rate [was] not connected to the building of socialism" went unheeded. Psychiatrist Helmut F. Späte admonished the authorities in vain that

<sup>21</sup>Nick Hodgin, "'Screening the Stasi': The Politics of Representation in Postunification Film," in *The GDR Remembered: Representations of the East German State since 1989*, ed. Nick Hodgin and Caroline Pearce (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 83.

<sup>22</sup>von Ungern-Sternberg, "Die Selbstmordhäufigkeit"; W. F. Winkler, "Über den Wandel in Häufigkeit, Bedingungen und Beurteilung des Suicides in der Nachkriegszeit," *Der öffentliche Gesundheitsdienst* 22, no. 4 (1960): 135–45; Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>23</sup>For persuasive evidence that the GDR inherited regions with higher-than-average suicide rates, see Reinhard Cordes, "Die Selbstmorde in der DDR im gesamtdeutschen und internationalen Vergleich," *Zeitschrift für ärztliche Fortbildung* 58, no. 9 (1964): 985–92; Hans Harmsen, ed., *Sozialhygienische Analyse der unterschiedlichen Selbstmordverhältnisse unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, der "DDR" und West-Berlin* (Hamburg: Akademie für Staatsmedizin, 1966).

<sup>24</sup>There were two exceptions: after a delay, the GDR reported the suicide rates for 1968 and 1969 to the World Health Organisation. See Statistisches Bundesamt, ed., *Statistisches Jahrbuch für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1973): 34\* (sic).

<sup>25</sup>Johannes Raschka, "Für kleine Delikte ist kein Platz in der Kriminalitätsstatistik." *Zur Zahl der politischen Häftlinge während der Amtszeit Honeckers* (Dresden: Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung, 1997), 15.

“we cannot settle the problem by locking away the documents.”<sup>26</sup> The ban nevertheless remained in effect until 1990.

That said, research into the causes of suicide in the GDR was not entirely impossible. Scholars produced dozens of regional and sectoral studies. The classification of epidemiological investigations nevertheless thwarted the accumulation of greater knowledge about the phenomenon and open debate. It is therefore hardly surprising that, at the time of German reunification, the very same discussion began all over again. Medical scientists reiterated the assumption that factors such as political stagnation and social isolation might have caused higher suicide rates in East Germany.<sup>27</sup> Empirical research rejected such simplistic views, but, once again, just as in the 1960s, that discussion was confined to academic circles and thus had little impact on public perceptions.<sup>28</sup>

### Fact Check: Politically Motivated Suicides in the GDR

Before dealing with the reasons that have led to the persistence of a politicized framing of suicide rates, it is necessary to determine as precisely as possible the actual impact of political factors on suicide rates in the GDR, and there is sufficient data to do so. Continuing a Prussian tradition, the criminal police and medical examiners both investigated unnatural deaths in the GDR, and the results of their investigations allow for rough conclusions about the impact of social factors. Police investigations found that conflicts in personal relationships were the main cause in 11–22 percent of all cases, whereas East German medical studies found that mental health issues were the main cause in up to 30 per cent of all suicides. Most sources attributed more than a third to serious physical diseases. By contrast, investigations found that conflicts between individuals and society were evident in a far lower percentage of cases: “fear of punishment” (for political or criminal offences) was considered a main motivation in only 5 to 10 percent of all cases, and problems at work were recorded in only 1 to 3 per cent of all cases.<sup>29</sup> Only a very small percentage of suicides recognizably related to social factors had clear political causes as well.

There was another procedure, however, for investigating politically motivated suicides. The Stasi was responsible for all unnatural deaths with possible political implications. To that end, it established in the 1960s homicide squads in all East German districts (*Bezirke*) to investigate all deaths that had a possible political cause. These so-called special commissions (*Spezialkommissionen*) worked independently of murder investigations carried out by the police.<sup>30</sup> In East Berlin, the Stasi investigated an average of thirteen suicides per year; in other districts, the number was lower, between five and ten—which meant that

<sup>26</sup>Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv (BLHA), Rep. 401, BT/RdB Potsdam, No. 8072, 171, letter from Dr. Helmut Spaete, Bezirkskrankenhaus für Neurologie und Psychiatrie Görden to Dr. Krüger, Stellvertretender Bezirksarzt Potsdam, Dec. 1, 1968.

<sup>27</sup>Hoffmeister, *Selbstmordsterblichkeit in der DDR*, 609. See also Degen, Hohe Selbstmordrate.

<sup>28</sup>R. Wegener, “Suizidalität in Ost und West: Daten vorschnell interpretiert?,” *Münchener medizinische Wochenschrift* 132, no.13 (1991): 21–22.

<sup>29</sup>Grashoff, *Selbsttötungen in der DDR*, 124.

<sup>30</sup>Bundesbehörde für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR (BStU), MfS, JHS 001, Nr. 228/78, Egon Neubauer, *Probleme des operativen Zusammenwirkens der Spezialkommission der Linie IX des MfS mit den Militärstaatsanwälten, den Kommandeuren der NVA, den gerichtsmedizinischen Sachverständigen und den Morduntersuchungskommissionen der Abteilung Kriminalpolizei der BdVP während der Aufklärung und Untersuchung von operativ bedeutsamen unnatürlichen Todesfällen in Dienststellen der Nationalen Volksarmee* (Potsdam, 1978).

approximately 1.4 to 2.5 per cent of all suicides had a possible political cause—in theory. But these investigations found that private causes had led to the vast majority of suicides, with functionaries—just like ordinary East Germans—typically committing suicide because of family problems or illness.<sup>31</sup>

Because the results of the Stasi investigations were kept top secret and were only accessible to a handful of top functionaries, there was little reason to manipulate entire case files. Some conclusions and reports denied political motivations, but some documents in the extant files—e.g., the minutes of interrogations, informer reports, recorded phone calls, various internal reports, and so-called action plans—allow for a critical reading and alternative conclusions. But even if read against the grain, they do not contain many hints suggesting political conflicts as the roots cause.

Working in parallel to the special commissions, the Stasi's so-called Hauptabteilung I investigated unnatural deaths in the army. For example, a noncommissioned officer who served as a border guard shot himself in 1988 after having found out that his girlfriend intended to apply for an exit visa: he also wanted to apply to emigrate from the GDR, but knew that his chances were slim because of his status as a person who had been granted access to secret information.<sup>32</sup> As this example underscores, suspicions that the Stasi might have ignored the political motivations underlying some suicides are incorrect. Because the organization's main task was to identify possible threats to the dictatorship, Stasi officers were eager to detect even miniscule hints of oppositional thought or ideological conflict.

The Stasi often presumed that political factors had led to suicide before an ensuing examination debunked that supposition. A striking example in this regard was the suicide of a Polish student in the autumn of 1980, which the Stasi initially considered to be politically motivated. It based this on the fact that the suicide had coincided with the rise of the Polish opposition movement Solidarity (*Solidarnosc*), even though there was no specific evidence to support this assumption. In fact, the Stasi found out that the suicide was mainly caused by emotional turmoil and jealousy following a night at a disco.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, there are records elsewhere of suicides that indeed had political implications. The police did not contact the Stasi in all cases involving political motivations, as suicide reports compiled by criminal police in the districts of Dresden and Potsdam suggest. There were, for example, some cases of young men who had committed suicide for fear of being conscripted into the army.<sup>34</sup> The police sometimes also investigated suicides by political prisoners. But all in all, such cases suggest that politically motivated suicides barely exceeded 1 percent of all suicides. An unofficial estimate by East Berlin's chief public prosecutor, who cited "weariness of the state" (*Staatsverdrossenheit*) as the motivation in a mere 0.4 percent of all suicides between 1975 and 1981, supports this conclusion.<sup>35</sup>

Over the long term, the suicide rate of the GDR remained relatively constant but there was nonetheless some fluctuation, which is why the possible impact of historical events on

<sup>31</sup> Because the victim's political role or function (e.g., a state official as opposed to a supposed enemy of the state) determined Stasi involvement, the relevant files contain few politically motivated suicides.

<sup>32</sup> BStU, MfS, HA I, Nr. 14957/3, MfS-Hauptabteilung I (HA I)/Grenzkommando Nord, to HA I Berlin, Chiffriertelegramm, Aug. 23, 1988.

<sup>33</sup> BStU, MfS, HA XX, Nr. 3700, MfS-Abteilung XX, Information, Karl-Marx-Stadt, Dec. 3, 1980. <sup>34</sup> For examples, see the suicide reports from March 25, 1981, and Nov. 1, 1982, in BLHA, Rep. 471/ 15.2, BdVP Potsdam, 1272 and 1285.

<sup>35</sup> Prof. Hans Girod, telephone interview with the author, Jan. 28, 2002.



suicide also requires careful scrutiny. According to Mary Fulbrook, “suicide rates very clearly correlated with political events.” In fact, oscillations in the suicide rate can only rarely be attributed to specific historical developments.<sup>36</sup> The failed uprising of June 1953 did not lead to an increase in the suicide rate, for example, and the liberalization of economic and youth policy after 1963 did not bring a decline in its wake. Fulbrook’s misleading claim that historical changes explain the fall in suicide rates around 1968 and then again around 1989 is a particularly clear example why changes in the suicide rate should be interpreted with extreme caution. With Durkheim’s social theory of suicide in mind, it is tempting to interpret the drop around 1968 to political disturbances, most notably to Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia and its suppression.<sup>37</sup> But there is another explanation—an administrative one: the international classification of suicide changed in 1967–1968. The introduction of new official documents created uncertainty that no doubt led to underreporting; a shortage of new printed forms must have also played a role.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, it might seem obvious to attribute the decline of the suicide rate in the second half of the 1980s to the positive expectations ushered in by Michael Gorbachev’s reforms in the Soviet Union. Statistical analysis has shown, however, that the drop was actually the result of a demographic shift that gave more weight to age cohorts born after 1949: that was significant because they had a lower inclination to commit suicide than previous cohorts had.<sup>39</sup> This example also usefully reminds us that overall statistics are aggregated data. Big numbers can conceal hidden trends—for instance, a high suicide rate among a specific subgroup. The forced agricultural collectivization campaign that took place in the East German countryside in the spring of 1960 provides one example. It encouraged dozens of farmers to take their own lives, but such incidents were still too infrequent to cause a steep increase in the overall suicide rate.<sup>40</sup>

Only in extreme situations did the coercive policies of the SED cause a statistically relevant number of additional suicides. Most notably, as Fulbrook rightly highlights, it was the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 that coincided with rising suicide rates. The increase in the average annual rate from 28.8 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants (from 1956 to 1960) to 31.6 (1961 to 1965) represents a 10 per cent increase. There were, moreover, more suicides in and around East Berlin and among young people, reinforcing the idea that those directly affected experienced the sudden border closure as a major shock.<sup>41</sup> The months of harsh repression that followed, as well as the introduction of conscription at this time, no doubt exacerbated some suicidal impulses. The West German perception of an “epidemic” was nevertheless an exaggeration.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 107.

<sup>37</sup>According to Durkheim, suicide rates normally drop during times of war and political crisis. See Durkheim, *Suicide*, 160–67.

<sup>38</sup>Ivett Merkel, “Zur Epidemiologie der Suizide auf dem Gebiet der DDR und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von 1950 bis 1992” (PhD thesis, Humboldt University, Berlin, 1996).

<sup>39</sup>Reiner Hans Dinkel, Edmund Goertler, “Die Suizidsterblichkeit der Geburtsjahrgänge in beiden Teilen Deutschlands,” *Sozial- und Präventivmedizin* 39, no. 4 (1994): 198–208.

<sup>40</sup>Udo Grashoff, “Suizidales Klima” während der Zwangskollektivierung im Frühjahr 1960,” in *Klassenkampf gegen die Bauern. Die Zwangskollektivierung der ostdeutschen Landwirtschaft und ihre Folgen bis heute*, ed. Michael Beleites et al. (Berlin: Metropol, 2010), 33–45.

<sup>41</sup>Dietfried Mueller-Hegemann, *Die Berliner Mauer-Krankheit* (Herford: Nicolai, 1973).

<sup>42</sup>Martin Pfeideler, “Tragedien im geteilten Berlin—Hoffnung für Alte und Kranke—Keine Hoffnung für Liebende,” *Deutsche Fragen* 9, no. 1 (1963): 18–19.

Apart from these exceptional situations, certain submilieus in the GDR have been linked to high suicide rates. Ehrhart Neubert has claimed, for example, that there were remarkably high numbers of suicides on the part of prisoners in East German jails. But he relies on absolute numbers, which do not allow for an accurate assessment. A calculation of the annual suicide rate per 100,000 inmates reveals, in fact, that Neubert's claims are inaccurate. It was, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, not only close to the average of the GDR population as a whole, but also three to four times lower than in the Federal Republic. Apart from a poor use of statistics, the flaw in Neubert's reasoning stems from his equation of political repression and suicide. A random sample of a Stasi prison, where 20 per cent of prisoners showed suicidal tendencies but not one took his or her own life, underscores the complexity of the relationship between suicide and repression.<sup>43</sup> Whereas strict and inhumane measures in East German prisons made it almost impossible to take one's own life, the relative leniency of West German prisons facilitated the "success" of such acts of despair.<sup>44</sup> In addition to the strict controls there, several social factors prevented East German prisoners from committing suicide, such as collective accommodation in large cells and a requirement to work. There were statistical "effects" as well, such as the more rapid handling of criminal proceedings: this resulted in a smaller share of prisoners awaiting trial—a group generally at the highest risk of committing suicide.<sup>45</sup> As for "political prisoners," the prospect of being released to the West helped many stay alive, despite the harsh nature of their current conditions.<sup>46</sup>

Another submilieu with supposedly high suicide rates was the National People's Army (NVA), a site of many serious conflicts related to political repression, as well as to bullying by one's peers. Here one could expect many self-inflicted fatalities because of the availability of lethal weapons. Yet, the suicide rate of soldiers was no higher than that of the corresponding male age cohort in civilian society. Internal military statistics buttress the conclusion that the NVA was not responsible for driving more young men to suicide. This applies to the border guard as well. Dietmar Schultke believed that soldiers stationed directly at the Iron Curtain were particularly prone to Stasi terror, but he does not calculate the frequency of suicides, which leads him to argue that there was a high number of suicides.<sup>47</sup> In fact, border guards did not commit suicide more frequently than those in other units of the armed forces—or than East German civilians of the same age.<sup>48</sup>

Several factors help explain this surprising outcome. Soldiers who attempted suicide were not allowed to serve at the border. The Stasi—rather than causing suicides—were at pains to

<sup>43</sup>BStU, MfS, BV Halle, Abt. XIV, Nr. 863, Tätigkeitsbuch MfS-Untersuchungshaftanstalt Halle, April 26 to Oct. 15, 1984.

<sup>44</sup>Udo Grashoff, "Suizide in Haftanstalten: Legenden und Fakten," *Deutschland Archiv*, Sept. 10, 2015 (<https://www.bpb.de/geschichte/zeitgeschichte/deutschlandarchiv/211769/suizide-in-haftanstalten-legenden-und-fakten>).

<sup>45</sup>C. H. Eikenbusch, "Anomie als Ursache des Selbstmordes in den Haftanstalten," *Suizidprophylaxe* 4, no. 3 (1977): 181–87.

<sup>46</sup>See, e.g., Ellen Thiemann, "Protokoll der 69. Sitzung," in *Materialien der Enquete-Kommission "Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland,"* ed. Deutscher Bundestag (12. Wahlperiode des Deutschen Bundestages), vol. VII/1 (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1995), 364.

<sup>47</sup>Dietmar Schultke, "Das Grenzregime der DDR. Innenansichten der siebziger und achtziger Jahre," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* B 50/97 (1997): 43–53.

<sup>48</sup>Udo Grashoff, "In einem Anfall von Depression..." *Selbsttötungen in der DDR* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2006), 99.

identify suicidal soldiers, and subsequently sent them to other units. In August 1976, for example, an informant reported that a drunken border guard had attempted suicide. He was already under surveillance because he wanted to quit the SED, and also because he had expressed sympathy for his brother, who had been sentenced for “slandering the state.” The Stasi directed the regimental commander to reassign the “unreliable” soldier away from the border.<sup>49</sup>

The findings of medical research shed light on the relatively “normal” suicide rate in the army: psychopathological disposition, often stemming from mental stress in early childhood, is a graver suicidogenic factor than a temporary life crisis resulting in acute internal conflict.<sup>50</sup> This is not to deny the restrictions on personal freedom, pressure for conformity, or forms of repression that were all evident in the GDR’s armed forces. Yet, discipline was apparently only rarely brutally enforced, i.e., to a degree that led to the consideration of suicide. The finding that situational factors are largely of secondary importance for suicide may also help explain the negligible correlation between political repression and the overall suicide rate in the GDR.

If not repression, what effect did social factors such as poor living conditions and the short-age economy have on suicide rates? Scholars such as Ursula Baumann consider the East German elderly to have been victims of a society that lauded youth and neglected those no longer needed for the workforce.<sup>51</sup> The suicide rate of pensioners was, in fact, extraordinarily high.<sup>52</sup> Whereas the suicide rate of the entire GDR population was approximately 1.5 times higher than that of the Federal republic, the suicide rate of East German pensioners was slightly more than twice as high. *Der Spiegel* was not alone in blaming the SED regime for this discrepancy.<sup>53</sup> But the matter was more complex than this, as the example of Saxony shows. The suicide rate of women aged sixty to eighty in the Saxon regions of the GDR was almost double that of the former Kingdom of Saxony shortly after 1900. The suicide rate of the corresponding male age group underwent a sharp decline, however, from 163 to 78 per 100,000. As a result, the gender difference diminished and the overall suicide rate of elderly people in Saxony slightly decreased from roughly 1900 to 1980.<sup>54</sup> Advantages such as the privileged ability to visit the West—and thus gain greater access to scarce goods and other items—might have offset disadvantages such as poor living conditions and inadequate health care.

### Behavior Patterns

After having used the critical potential of quantitative methodology, one might ask whether such a somewhat abstract approach risks overlooking something important. Or, to put it

<sup>49</sup>BStU, MfS, HAI, Nr. 13723, 198–200, HA I/Grenzkommando Mitte/Abwehr, report, Sept. 3, 1976.

<sup>50</sup>Heinz Katschnig, “Lebensverändernde Ereignisse als Ursache psychischer Krankheiten—Eine Kritik des globalen Ansatzes in der Life-Event-Forschung,” in *Sozialer Stress und psychische Erkrankung*, ed. Heinz Katschnig (Munich: Urban und Fischer, 1980), 1–93.

<sup>51</sup>See “‘Das Phänomen des guten Sterbens wird zunehmend an Bedeutung gewinnen.’ Interview mit der Berliner Sozialhistorikerin und Suizid-Forscherin Dr. Ursula Baumann,” *Ärzte-Zeitung*, May 24–25, 2002.

<sup>52</sup>Werner Felber et al., “Old-Age Suicide in 40 Years Former GDR,” in *Suicidal Behaviour*, ed. Klaus Böhme et al. (Regensburg: S. Roderer, 1993), 146–50.

<sup>53</sup>“Selbstmord. Krankheit zum Tode,” *Der Spiegel*, Jan. 30, 1963. For a more recent example, see Alexander Burdumy, “Reconsidering the Role of the Welfare State within the German Democratic Republic’s Political System,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 4 (2013): 882.

<sup>54</sup>See Oscar Kürten, *Statistik des Selbstmords im Königreich Sachsen* (PhD thesis, University of Leipzig, 1913); for age-specific suicide rates of the GDR, see Statistisches Bundesamt ([www.gbe-bund.de](http://www.gbe-bund.de)).

differently: is there a qualitative way to relate suicide to the political culture of the GDR? In fact, suicidal behavior in the GDR was not just a continuation of nineteenth-century practices; it was also influenced by developments and experiences under “real existing socialism,” with many suicides clearly mirroring the GDR’s specific political, economic, and social context. A qualitative analysis of suicides reveals a number of specific conflicts that existed only under Communist regimes.

The files of the education authorities, for instance, contain a number of suicides caused by political repression. Even if these suicides were not always recorded as political in nature, the files contain clear evidence pointing in that direction—as in the 1984 suicide of a female teacher. The report by education authorities that placed the blame on family problems was not entirely wrong, but the primary cause of her suicide was another, namely, that her husband had emigrated to the West. After recovering from a nervous breakdown, she pledged to file for divorce, but then decided, a couple of months later, to apply for an exit visa for herself and her two children. The authorities did not accept her private wish to reunite the family and instead considered the application to be a political provocation: she was dismissed from her job and then decided to take her life.<sup>55</sup>

The suicide of a fourteen-year-old pupil in 1982 was similarly linked to political conflict. The boy, who wanted to become a teacher, appeared to be a role model, based on his performance in school and his allegiance to the regime. As a good student and as a secretary of the Free German Youth, his career was as good as secure—if not for the somewhat conflicting worldviews of his parents. Whereas his father supported the official party line and was actively engaged on the school’s parents’ committee, his mother was affiliated with the church. This was why the pupil participated in both the preparation course for the secular coming of age ceremony (*Jugendweihe*, or Youth Consecration) and for confirmation classes provided by the church.<sup>56</sup> As a concession to the mother’s religiosity, his parents decided, in the end, that the son would only take part in the religious confirmation ceremony and not in the *Jugendweihe*—even though his father had helped prepare the local state ceremony. The extant documentation sheds little light on the ensuing discussions and conflicts. On the day of the suicide, the only conspicuous sign of internal turmoil was that the pupil had behaved in school in a “provocative manner” that was, for him, unprecedented. He criticized, for instance, the GDR’s refusal to allow citizens to choose their place of residence freely.<sup>57</sup>

Conflicts within the SED leadership itself caused suicides as well. In 1958, Gerhart Ziller, the economics secretary of the Central Committee, committed suicide after being accused of involvement in a conspiracy against the head of the party, Walter Ulbricht. Seven years later, in 1965, the head of the state Planning Commission, Erich Apel, shot himself dead on the day that a trade agreement with the Soviet Union, which he had opposed, was ratified. Because both officials felt mortally offended by such explicit or implicit criticism, one may consider their suicides to have been a result of the dictatorial climate that prevailed within the SED. But one should not forget, of course, the role of personality. The reportedly sensitive and

<sup>55</sup>Staatsarchiv Chemnitz, BT/RdB Karl-Marx-Stadt, Abt. Volksbildung (30413), Nr. 113414, letter from Bezirksschulrat Karl-Marx-Stadt to Ministerium für Volksbildung, Sept. 6 and 12, 1984.

<sup>56</sup>For conflicts about *Jugendweihe*, see chapter 2 of Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>57</sup>BLHA, Rep. 401, BT/RdB Potsdam, Nr. 27294, report on a suicide in Potsdam, April 21, 1982.

emotional Ziller did not “fit the apparatchik mold,” and Apel was “an extremely ambitious man who found defeats difficult to bear.”<sup>58</sup>

In a similar vein, the suicides of several factory managers were linked to the pressures of the command economy, which they internalized. For example, the manager of a sugar factory hurled himself off a silo in the autumn of 1978: he had done everything he could to improve the poor performance of the factory, but some organizational and technological problems proved to be unsolvable. Despite his efforts, the district council criticized him in severe terms for the serious shortcomings. The factory manager was, by all reports, a selfless, conscientious, modest but also optimistic and humorous person. The police could not find any personality or mental health issues that would explain his suicide, apart from a tendency to ask too much of himself.<sup>59</sup>

The stern and hostile atmosphere of the dictatorship might have “driven to suicide” people who were unlikely to have taken their life under different political circumstances. Such incidents were rare, however, and the GDR hardly created new types of conflict. After all, most suicides that could be attributed to the political culture of the GDR had counterparts in the earlier monarchic and democratic societies that had existed on the same territory occupied by the East German state. One can legitimately accuse the GDR of having created conditions that preserved the high frequency of suicide, of having provided a socialist version of old conflicts, and of having failed to establish a more humane society. But the fact remains that the dictatorship did not increase the overall suicide rate.

A qualitative approach nevertheless provides some clues pointing to a “culture of shame” as one factor that helps explain East Germany’s consistently high suicide rate.<sup>60</sup> For example, a police officer in Leipzig took his life in 1974 after his wife threatened to inform the SED about his love affair with another woman.<sup>61</sup> And a party official in the Magdeburg district committed suicide in 1976 because of the shame he felt about his undignified behavior during a drinking spree.<sup>62</sup> In both cases, there was little specific evidence of an impact by the political system as such. But these cases can nevertheless be associated with more general patterns of behavior that might have increased the likelihood of suicide. Leaving aside stereotypes about the supposedly “depressive-obsessive” character of Saxons, the extraordinarily high suicide frequency in that southern region of the GDR suggests the need for a focus on specific behavioral patterns there.<sup>63</sup> It is promising to consider unique aspects of regional mentalities, notably prevailing concepts of guilt, as research on

<sup>58</sup>Peter Grieder, *The East German Leadership 1946–73: Conflict and Crisis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 135, 165.

<sup>59</sup>BLHA, Rep. 471/15.2, BdVP Potsdam, Nr. 1202, Kriminalpolizei Nauen, interrogations of workmates, wife, and party secretary, Oct. 29 to Nov. 4, 1976.

<sup>60</sup>Haller, *Freiwillig sterben*, 43.

<sup>61</sup>Staatsarchiv Leipzig, BdVP Leipzig, 24.1, Nr. 2353, Bezirksbehörde der Deutschen Volkspolizei (BdVP) Leipzig, report on a suicide, Feb. 26, 1974. See also Andrew I. Port, “Love, Lust, and Lies under Communism: Family Values and Adulterous Liaisons in Early East Germany,” *Central European History* 44, no. 3 (2011): 478–505.

<sup>62</sup>BStU, MfS, BV Magdeburg, Abt. IX, Nr. 1259, letter from BdVP Magdeburg to MfS-Kreisdienststelle [redacted], May 17, 1986.

<sup>63</sup>Bernhard Honnigfort, “Die wenigsten Freitode gab es zur Wendezeit,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Sept. 27, 1993.

Scandinavia has demonstrated.<sup>64</sup> Particularly relevant to the GDR is the finding that high suicide rates in Denmark can be attributed to the frequent use of guilt arousal as a childrearing practice.<sup>65</sup> Several scholars concur with the theory that a predominantly Protestant “culture of shame” in East Germany led to more suicides there than in West Germany.<sup>66</sup> The more restrained attitudes of East Germans contributed to a more “consensus-oriented culture of conflict,” and, according to Oliver Bieri, suicide rates tend to be higher in societies where aggressive behavior is frowned upon.<sup>67</sup>

Since the nineteenth century, Protestant regions have had higher suicide rates than Catholic parts of Germany did. Given that most of the areas “inherited” by the GDR were Protestant—in contrast to the Federal Republic, which contained many large Catholic regions, such as Bavaria and the Rhineland—it is worth exploring the possible role that denominational differences may have played in the frequency of suicide. One explanation for such differences is the Catholic Church’s practice of confession, which can help unburden a Catholic’s conscience. Protestants (and atheists), by contrast, are supposedly left alone to deal with feelings of guilt and responsibility. Another possible explanation is that different denominations have very different attitudes toward suicide. Whereas the Catholic Church considered suicide to be a mortal sin until 1983, the Protestant Church developed a more empathetic attitude. One might question the applicability of religion to the atheistic GDR, given that the percentage of believers dropped from 91 to 30 percent over the four decades of Communist rule.<sup>68</sup> But there were nevertheless signs that denominational attitudes exerted a persistent influence on suicide in the GDR: whereas suicide rates in the country’s Protestant regions remained high, they were 25 percent lower in Catholic regions, such as the Eichsfeld.<sup>69</sup>

Denominational differences were less relevant for the younger generations, who tended to be more atheist. But they do help explain the notable difference in the suicide rates open-pensioners in East and West Germany. It is likely that their Christian faith mattered in particular for elderly people as they approached the possibility of dying. Felix Robin Schulz’s finding that a substantial proportion of East Germans still preferred Christian funerals supports this conclusion.<sup>70</sup> An additional factor—also linked to religion, to some extent—was divorce: as Durkheim has shown, high suicide rates correlate with high divorce rates, and both tend to be higher in Protestant regions.<sup>71</sup> Saxony, East Germany’s suicide “hotspot,” had

<sup>64</sup>Herbert Hendin, “Suicide: The Psychosocial Dimension,” *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 8, no. 2 (1978): 99–117.

<sup>65</sup>Jeanne Block and Bjorn Christiansen, “A Test of Hendin’s Hypotheses Relating Suicide in Scandinavia to Child-Rearing Orientations,” *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 7, no. 4 (1966): 267–88.

<sup>66</sup>As examples, see Andreas Schulze, *Selbstmord und Selbstmordversuch in Leipzig. Zur Erklärung suizidaler Handlungen in der DDR* (Regensburg: S. Roderer, 1986); also see the poster by Steffen Heide and Erich Mueller, “Suizid—Sachsen bleibt seiner Tradition treu,” in Heide’s private archive.

<sup>67</sup>Oliver Bieri, *Suizid und sozialer Wandel in der westlichen Gesellschaft* (Zürich: Editions à la Carte, 2005), 183.

<sup>68</sup>Detlef Pollack, *Kirche in der Organisationsgesellschaft. Zum Wandel dergesellschaftlichen Lage der evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994), 373. A global survey has even challenged general correlations between denominational differences and suicide, which underscores the importance of scrutiny. See Steven Stack, “Religion and Suicide: A Reanalysis,” *Social Psychiatry* 15, no. 2 (1980): 65–70.

<sup>69</sup>Heinz Peter Arndt, “Suizide bei psychisch Kranken im Krankenhaus und nach ihrer Entlassung” (PhD thesis, Humboldt University, Berlin, 1981), 62.

<sup>70</sup>Schulz, *Death in East Germany*, 186.

<sup>71</sup>See David Childs, *The GDR: Moscow’s German Ally* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 267; Durkheim, *Suicide*, 220–39.

long had particularly high divorce rates. In 1910, for instance, the divorce rate there was three times higher than in mainly Catholic Westphalia, and 50 per cent higher than the average for the German Empire as a whole.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, the divorce rate in the GDR was approximately 50 percent higher than in the Federal Republic.<sup>73</sup>

The plausibility of these arguments depends, however, on the reliability of the relevant statistics. Hans Girod, a professor of criminalistics in the GDR, has claimed that higher suicide rates in East Germany were merely a result of the fact that there is a greater cover-up of suicide in Catholic regions.<sup>74</sup> The East-West difference was indeed arguably somewhat smaller than official figures indicate, especially given the fact that several vague categories, such as “sudden death” or “age and infirmity,” made up an extraordinarily high percentage of the causes of death in West German statistics. Moreover, the frequency of such dubious causes of death was most pronounced among older age groups, where the East-West-difference in the suicide rate was most dramatic.<sup>75</sup> It should also be noted that the coincidence of statistical inaccuracy and denomination was no accident. A case study in Catholic Aachen, which found that the actual number of suicides was twice as high as official figures, is an extreme example. The relatively high number of unrecorded suicides in Catholic regions is nevertheless still irrefutable, even if Girod overexaggerated its impact on overall numbers.<sup>76</sup> Still, the tendency to cover up the number of suicides in the Federal Republic does not provide a full explanation for the difference between official suicide rates in East and West Germany.

Many of the political and social factors suggested by Western authors—most notably, political repression and poor living conditions—can largely be ruled out, then, as the cause for higher suicide rates in the GDR. The number of people who would likely have chosen not to kill themselves, had political circumstances been different, was certainly small—and the factors underlying even those suicides that can be considered to have been politically motivated were often much more complex. In short, tensions resulting from the SED’s dictatorial rule increased the number of suicides only slightly. By contrast, secular differences related to mentality and denomination (e.g., the concept of guilt) are worthy of greater consideration.

### The Persistence of a Misperception

If neither quantitative nor qualitative approaches support a strong correlation between dictatorship and suicide, why has there been such a long-lasting misperception of suicide in

<sup>72</sup>Hans W. Gruhle, *Selbstmord* (Leipzig: Georg Thieme, 1940), 61.

<sup>73</sup>Bernhard Klose, *Ehescheidung und Ehescheidungsrecht in der DDR—ein ostdeutscher Sonderweg?* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1996), 289.

<sup>74</sup>Hans Girod, *Leichensache Kollbeck und andere Selbstmordfälle aus der DDR* (Berlin: Das Neue Berlin, 2000), 23. The numbers presented are incomplete.

<sup>75</sup>See Statistisches Bundesamt ([www.gbe-bund.de](http://www.gbe-bund.de)); Armin Schmidtke and Bettina Weinacker, “Suizidraten, Suizidmethoden und unklare Todesursachen alter Menschen,” *Zeitschrift für Gerontologie* 24, no. 1 (1991): 3–11.

<sup>76</sup>Armin Schmidtke, “Probleme der zuverlässigen Erfassung, Reliabilität und Validität von Suizid- und Suizidversuchsraten als Indikatoren ‘psychischer Gesundheit’,” *Psycho* 17, no. 4 (1991): 237. Michael Zientek, “Suizide und Suizidversuche. Eine Untersuchung der Einflußgrößen und Erscheinungsformen im Gebiet der Stadt Aachen auf der Basis der Dokumentation des Notarztdienstes und weiterer Ermittlungen im Zeitraum vom 1. Januar 1978 bis 31. Dezember 1982” (PhD thesis, University of Aachen, 1985).

the GDR? In the first place, there is a long tradition of understanding suicide as a “sign of the times,” a tradition that goes back to the beginnings of systematic statistical registration in the nineteenth century.<sup>77</sup> Most notably, Durkheim’s conceptualization of suicide as a result of destabilized social ties influenced subsequent generations of scholars and also many publicists. During the Weimar Republic, for instance, contemporaries quickly associated suicide with a variety of factors, including national weakness, mass culture, authoritarian pedagogies, and capitalist exploitation. Both left- and right-wing organizations exploited individual cases to berate the existing political and economic order.<sup>78</sup> To some extent, the debate on the GDR’s suicide rate—though less intense—echoed this earlier discourse.<sup>79</sup>

One should not overlook, however, the differences between the discourse on suicide in the GDR and during earlier periods of German history. The main focus of the Cold War discourse was on people supposedly driven to suicide by the SED regime. This pattern of thought emphasized “fatalistic” suicide, which appears only in a footnote in Durkheim’s study, in contrast to the prevalence of “anomic” suicide in previous debates.<sup>80</sup> From the scattered instances of suicide among dissidents, would-be émigrés, or SED officials who had fallen out of favor, the Western discourse established a slim but influential connection between suicide rates and the GDR’s totalitarian character.

This politicized interpretation of East German suicides was not completely farfetched. There were, in fact, several tragic, individual cases that lent it credence—cases where the individuals involved can indeed be considered as victims of repression. The suicide of Matthias Domaschk offers a prominent example. The young dissident hanged himself in a Stasi prison after being arbitrarily arrested, undergoing two days of interrogation with threats of blackmail and sleep deprivation, and signing a commitment to work as a Stasi informant. This was not the only politically motivated suicide that became well known in the West. In 1976, the Protestant clergyman Oskar Bruesewitz protested against the Communist indoctrination of the youth by carrying out an act of self-immolation. And, the following year, Western media featured a case somewhat reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet: a couple committed suicide after the young man, who had left the GDR, was not allowed to return to visit his girlfriend.<sup>81</sup>

Western journalists who overestimated the level of everyday terror in East German society considered such individual cases to be just the tip of the iceberg, and three main factors—an exaggerated politicization of suicides, limited knowledge about mental disorders, and the SED’s treatment of suicide as a taboo subject—all contributed to this misperception. In fact, it was often an interaction between West and East German actors wishing to level criticism at the SED dictatorship that led to a simplification of the causes of suicide. In 1977, for instance, the dissident writer Reiner Kunze—who just had left the GDR for good—gave an interview to the Hessischer Rundfunk radio station in which he mentioned the suicide of a

<sup>77</sup>Moritz Foellmer, “Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin,” *Central European History* 42, no. 2 (2009): 220.

<sup>78</sup>Ursula Baumann, *Vom Recht auf den guten Tod* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2001); Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>79</sup>One scholar’s work that mentioned the nexus of the GDR’s high divorce, alcoholism, and suicide rates is indicative of the long-lasting influence of Durkheim’s concept of anomie. See Roland Smith, “The Church in the German Democratic Republic,” in *Honecker’s Germany*, ed. David Childs (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 81.

<sup>80</sup>Durkheim, *Suicide*, 239.

<sup>81</sup>Pritzel, *Selbstmord im sozialistischen Paradies*.



friend of his daughter after he had been interrogated and blackmailed by the Stasi. The young man's forced collaboration with the Stasi, Kunze claimed, had led him to commit suicide.<sup>82</sup> Yet, as his actual Stasi file clearly documents, this was not the case. The young man had been under surveillance since 1975. After breaking with his father, who was loyal to the regime, he joined the Junge Gemeinde, a rebellious youth organization of the Protestant Church.<sup>83</sup> From the Stasi's perspective, the young man and his hippy attitude appeared to be a security risk. He had hitchhiked all over the country and had talked about becoming a conscientious objector. In addition, his housemate, an unofficial informant (IM), told the Stasi that he had purloined some goods from work. When called out for this petty crime, he quit his job as a driver and worked in a nursing home run by the church, where he had a confrontation with the conservative staff. He also suffered from undesirable living conditions and was unhappy in love. All this prompted him to apply for an exit visa but then, on the advice of a clergyman, he decided to withdraw his application.

In November 1976, the young man spent some time in Jena, coinciding by chance with the expatriation of the dissident singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann—which some of his friends had protested by filing a petition (*Eingabe*). The Stasi responded harshly, arresting dozens of suspects, including some of his friends. This almost literally scared the young man to death: he responded by trying to commit suicide but was rescued. Two days later, the Stasi interrogated him, an experience that seriously intimidated the young man. He was afraid of being rearrested and also had vague suspicions that he was under surveillance. Yet, he never suspected that his housemate had betrayed him, and that two Stasi informers had followed him when he moved to East Berlin in January 1977.

Most of the fresh problems he faced after his arrival in the East German capital had nothing to do with the Stasi, however. Rather, a private quarrel thwarted his plan to obtain a residence permit by marrying a friend, for the sake of appearances. The disillusioned twenty-year-old then decided to live in a shared apartment, and his roommates recommended a church cemetery where he could be employed as a gardener. Before that, the secret police had prevented him from working as film projectionist—the only provable Stasi intervention in this case.<sup>84</sup> But that Stasi intrigue was just one in a series of mishaps he suffered. It certainly did not trigger his final act of despair. Much more important was the suicide of a friend: returning from the funeral in a depressive state, the young man slashed his wrists because, as he told his flatmates, he wanted to suffer in the same way his suicidal friend had. Later on, he gassed himself. The interrogations and clandestine actions of the Stasi no doubt aggravated the young man's difficulties. But his restlessness, his pessimism, and his unhappy existence could not be attributed to this alone. To blame only the regime for his suicide, as Reiner Kunze did, was clearly an oversimplification.

It is worth noting that some East Germans who committed suicide similarly politicized their suffering themselves. According to Jean Baechler, they did not misrepresent their

<sup>82</sup>"SSD trieb Freund der Familie von Reiner Kunze zum Selbstmord," *Berliner Morgenpost*, April 4, 1977. It is ironic that the person who put Reiner Kunze on the wrong track was Stasi informer Manfred Böhme. For Böhme's biography, see Christiane Baumann, *Manfred "Ibrahim" Böhme. Das Prinzip Verrat* (Berlin: Lukas, 2015).

<sup>83</sup>Ehrhart Neubert and Thomas Auerbach, *'Es kann anders werden.' Opposition und Widerstand in Thüringen 1945–1989* (Köln: Böhlau, 2005).

<sup>84</sup>BStU, MfS, BV Gera, AOP 508/77, vol. 1, 9–17, MfS-Kreisdienststelle Saalfeld, Abschlussbericht, Feb. 8, 1977.

motivations intentionally. Rather, they projected their very private drama onto a political situation, rewriting their inner thoughts and feelings as a public performance.<sup>85</sup> Examples for this kind of individual “identity management” include the suicides of imprisoned offenders who blamed the political system for their misery.<sup>86</sup> In the autumn of 1982, for example, an inmate of the Bautzen I political prison set himself on fire. Before doing so, he tore a sheet in half, wrote political protest slogans on each section, displayed one of them in the window of the cell, rubbed floor polish into his skin, and then pressed the alarm button. A year earlier, he had displayed another political slogan outside his cell in support of the Polish Solidarity movement—which led to him being sentenced to an additional sixteen months for “slander against the state.” His immediate reaction was to go on a hunger strike, where upon he was transferred from a prison in Cottbus to Bautzen, where his behavior was largely unobtrusive—in contrast to his prior lack of discipline and refusals to work. Only on the day of his self-immolation did he refuse to fulfil his quota; the authorities sent him back to his cell.<sup>87</sup>

After the transfer of the severely injured man to a hospital, where he died the next day, the Stasi searched the prison cell and found a suicide note behind a mirror. Some historians who believe in the authenticity of suicide notes draw far-reaching conclusions from them.<sup>88</sup> But in this case, it would be naïve to take the contents of the note seriously. The letter refers to a protest leaflet that the prisoner claims to have distributed. But extensive interrogations and investigations by the Stasi did not find any evidence of this. It is more likely that the protest action never took place and that the prisoner used this false claim to scare the Stasi. In any event, the suicide note adopts a very aggressive tone, accusing the GDR regime of Bolshevik terror and criticizing it as social-fascistic. The names of West German organizations active during the Cold War, such as the Kampfgruppe gegen Unmenschlichkeit (Combat Group Against Inhumanity), are mixed in with all kinds of fascist vocabulary, including terms such as *Führer* and *Endlösung* (Final Solution). The note even asks compatriots to commit acts of sabotage and to assassinate members of the SED. It was nevertheless more an act of political protest than an explanation for the suicide.

To what extent, however, can his suicide be attributed to political factors? Two days before the prisoner died, fellow inmates had attacked him physically because of monetary debts that he could not or was not willing to repay. On the morning of the suicide, two prisoners insisted that he settle the debts immediately. A closer look at his biography further supports the argument that the prisoner’s political provocations downplayed other factors that had led to his suicide. He had been a political prisoner since 1980, of course, and had even attempted to leave the country; this was considered a political crime in the GDR. But the unusual harshness of his sentence—four years and eight months imprisonment—resulted from the fact that he had already been imprisoned twice for fraud and robbery. In fact, his life before 1980 was more or less a sequence of professional and private failures. After failing to complete his vocational training as a locksmith, he began a

<sup>85</sup>Jean Baechler, *Tod durch eigene Hand* (Frankfurt/Main: Ullstein, 1981), 124.

<sup>86</sup>For other examples, see Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, BdVP Dresden (MUK), Nr. 5257; BLHA, Rep. 471/15.2, BdVP Potsdam, Nr. 1260.

<sup>87</sup>BStU, MfS, BV Dresden, AP 2957/88, 34–36, BdVP Dresden, Dezernat I/4 Bautzen, Sachstandsbericht, Oct. 25, 1982; also see the handwritten suicide note from Oct. 25, 1982, in this file.

<sup>88</sup>Baumann, *Vom Recht auf den eigenen Tod*, 340; Christian Goeschel, “Suicides of German Jews in the Third Reich,” *German History* 25, no. 1 (2007): 22–45.

professional career in the army—but, because of serious discipline violations, the NVA demoted and then discharged him. He got divorced, changed jobs frequently, and committed a series of petty crimes. Released early during a general amnesty at the end of 1979, he decided to move to West Germany, where he hoped to earn more money and have more freedom. It is pointless to speculate about how he might have lived after a successful move to the West, but it is not unlikely that new kinds of conflicts would have arisen in the Federal Republic, based on the experience of a few East German mavericks who moved to West Germany and then committed suicide.<sup>89</sup>

It is not known why the prisoner was not released to the Federal Republic, as he had hoped. Since the 1960s, there had been clandestine ransom deals, resulting in the release of almost thirty-four thousand political prisoners to the West.<sup>90</sup> His disappointment about not being considered for this was likely the main reason for the political provocations contained in the prisoner's suicide note. This attempt to present his suicide in political terms obscured his criminal past and created the impression that he was a victim. That was how the West German media presented his case, and it did so without delving further into the man's background.<sup>91</sup> Western journalists had no access to reliable information, of course, which meant that they could not verify the statements made by East German refugees. But their eagerness to exploit suicides in the GDR for propaganda purposes prevented them from taking a more critical stance.

A second factor that led to misinterpretations was limited consideration of the pathological aspects of suicide. In March 1977, a West Berlin newspaper quoted the fiancé of a twenty-two-year-old nurse who had committed suicide in East Berlin. The fiancé, who had escaped over the border one year before, attributed his partner's suicide to the Stasi interrogations she had been forced to endure.<sup>92</sup> After the fiancé had arrived in the Federal Republic, he tried in vain to arrange for his partner to be smuggled across the border at the same time that she had applied for an exit visa.<sup>93</sup> In any event, her application was rejected in November 1976. This blow may have affected her mental health, but it was not the direct cause of her suicide four months later. In fact, the absence of an immediate trigger provoked widely differing interpretations. Her fiancé accused the East German regime, whereas colleagues and members of her family blamed it on her personal issues: she had suffered from depression.<sup>94</sup> In other words, even if she had left the country, she still may have taken her own life.

Admittedly, for outsiders it is extraordinarily difficult to disentangle the complex set of inner (mental) and outer (socio-political) factors that accounted for many suicides. The case of a so-called brigadier at a Berlin-based concrete plant illustrates this. Because the man's enterprise considered him to be an exemplary and conscientious worker, he

<sup>89</sup>As examples, see St., "Fehlende Wärme," *Berliner Morgenpost*, April 7, 1985; Ursula Gaerber, "Das vertane Leben des Peter H.," *Schweriner Volkszeitung*, May 27, 1987; Helfried Schreiter, "Hoffentlich finde ich nun endlich Ruhe," *Stern*, Nov. 5, 1987.

<sup>90</sup>Ludwig A. Rehlinger, *Freikauf. Die Geschäfte der DDR mit politisch Verfolgten 1963–1989*, rev. ed. (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2011).

<sup>91</sup>Bernd Hummel, "'DDR' treibt Häftlinge zum Selbstmord," *Die Welt*, Dec. 20, 1984.

<sup>92</sup>"Aus Liebe in den Tod," *Berliner Zeitung*, March 17, 1977.

<sup>93</sup>BStU, MfS, AP 4267/78, MfS Berlin, Abteilung IX, Information, March 14, 1977.

<sup>94</sup>BStU, MfS, AKK 16534/77, letter from Prof. Dr. [redacted], Information, March 17, 1977; letter from Bereich Medizin [redacted] to Parteileitung des Bereichs [redacted], March 15, 1977; letter from MfS-Bezirksverwaltung Berlin, Abt. XX, Informationsbericht, March 16, 1977.

unexpectedly received the opportunity to buy a Russian Lada automobile—something for which consumers normally had to wait ten or more years. Getting a rare and expensive Lada was an extraordinary privilege, but the man realized that he did not have the money to exchange his East German Trabant for a Lada. This disappointment triggered a nervous breakdown: he suffered from crying fits and odd delusions—such as walking through Berlin with Lenin, who showed him heaps of dirt that were to be removed. He returned to work after spending two months in a psychiatric hospital, but still showed signs of depression. His subsequent transfer to another workplace did not ease his situation. He told colleagues there, for example, that he had sold his dacha in order to improve his financial situation, and that he regretted this decision. Becoming heavily agitated after a foot operation was scheduled for his son, the man went to the property of a neighbor, where he slashed his wrists and died.<sup>95</sup> A detailed Stasi report based on a two-week investigation revealed that the unexpected offer of an attractive car had triggered the man's suicidal feelings—but these were not the actual cause. There had been conflicts within the family for years, and the man was plagued with feelings of guilt because of his mentally handicapped daughter. After returning from the psychiatric hospital, the man's pathological fears led him to believe that his son suffered from a malignant tumor. His wife assured him that their son would only undergo a harmless operation, but he nevertheless panicked and committed suicide. This case was one of many suicides caused or aggravated by family conflicts and mental health issues while political aspects remained superficial and non-essential. Available statistical data suggests that it was representative of a large percentage of suicides in the GDR.

A third factor that helped sustain incorrect suspicions about the correlation between the political system and suicide rates in the GDR was the dictatorship's own decision to treat both individual suicides and statistics on suicide as taboo—a choice that often had unintended consequences. The fact that investigations of suicide were considered a state secret not only aroused suspicions but also encouraged misleading interpretations—as, for example, in the case of the American singer and actor Dean Reed. The left-wing artist had lived in the GDR since the 1970s and had married one of East Germany's best known actresses. He committed suicide in 1986, and the SED officially declared Reed's death to be a “tragic accident.” The concealment of the actual cause of his death aroused suspicions of murder among his friends and relatives. The Western media circulated claims that the prominent singer had died after his car had plunged into a lake, and that he was found with a rope around his neck.<sup>96</sup> That graphic account was a combination of half-truths and errors, but a more complete picture of what had occurred failed to emerge because the Stasi homicide squad that investigated the death kept all the details secret. The rumors that circulated about his death were completely wrong—including one that Reed was a Western agent of, or that the Stasi had murdered him to prevent him from returning to the United States.

The rumors could not be debunked before the opening of the Stasi archive after 1990. The file on this case provides clear evidence of the role played by a private conflict. After a serious argument with his wife and a first attempt to slash his wrists, Reed drove his car to a lake, and damages made to the car were a strong indication of the man's excited mental state. A rope was found nearby, suggesting that he had likely intended to hang himself. He chose instead to take an overdose of drugs, plunged into the water and went

<sup>95</sup>BSStU, MfS, HA IX, Nr. 4590,21–25, Hauptabt. Untersuchung, Information zum Suicid, March 12, 1985.

<sup>96</sup>Peter Michalski, “US-Popstar von ‘DDR’-Geheimdienst ertraenkt,” *BILD*, June 24, 1986.

swimming—until he became unconscious and drowned. There is not the slightest hint that any other person was involved. The investigation also failed to detect any political influence on his decision, a conclusion supported by Reed’s suicide note. Though hastily written, the fifteen-page letter highlighted Reed’s state of mind at the time he committed suicide. Suggesting that he had suspected the erroneous suspicions his death would arouse, the letter emphasizes his unshakeable belief in communism, and instead offers an extended criticism of his wife.<sup>97</sup>

Twenty-five years earlier, the tabooing of the suicide of an East German army officer had provoked similar suspicions. General Vinzenz Müller died of self-defenestration on the May 12, 1961. He received a state funeral to maintain a pretense of normality, but that did not prevent the West Berlin media from claiming that East German police officers and the Stasi had driven him to suicide. According to an eyewitness account publicized in the West, a prison transport vehicle had driven up in front of the retired general’s house: shortly thereafter, several officers entered Müller’s house and the general jumped out the window. The details of the report were close to the actual course of events, but the interpretation as a whole was erroneous.

During World War II, Müller was one of the few high-ranking Wehrmacht officers who joined the anti-Nazi National Committee for a Free Germany during his time as a Soviet prisoner-of-war. He later became chief of staff of the East German National People’s Army, as well as deputy minister of defense. As part of SED efforts to purge former Nazis following the foundation and consolidation of the NVA, Mueller was forced to retire in 1958; he was no longer invited to state ceremonies, and he was even kept under surveillance. Yet, his permanent fear of arrest resulted from unjustified paranoia resulting at least in part from a series of personal conflicts. Müller’s wife had committed suicide in the late 1950s, and he had an uneasy conscience because of his affair with a young woman. To escape this embarrassing situation, the retired general prepared to leave the GDR at the beginning of 1961, but, at the very last moment, he decided to cancel his plans because of revelations in a West German newspaper that he had been involved in mass shootings during World War II. Müller’s situation now appeared to be precarious in both German states; he increasingly developed signs of ill health and was temporarily hospitalized. On the day of his suicide, a black ambulance arrived at his home; it was to bring him to the psychiatric ward of a Berlin hospital reserved for government officials. Müller’s children had arranged for this under the pretense that he would receive “treatment” for his kidneys. Müller was presumably suspicious and misinterpreted the situation, believing that he was about to be arrested.<sup>98</sup>

The SED had good reasons for silencing this suicide. Attention on a leading military figure allegedly involved in war crimes was the last thing the GDR needed in its ideological battle for recognition as a true “antifascist” state. Once again, however, the efforts to conceal the suicide did not proceed smoothly: constant denial and the distribution of false

<sup>97</sup>BSStU, MfS, AU 12332/86, vol. 1, 20–21, Präsidium der Volkspolizei Berlin, “Selbsttötungsversuch eines Staatsbürgers der USA,” June 11, 1986; BSStU, MfS, AP 2278/92, vol. 1, 72–86, Dean Reed, handwritten suicide letter to Eberhard Fensch, June 12, 1986, and MfS-Hauptabteilungen IX/7 and XX/7, Bericht zu den Umständen des Todes der Staatsbürgers der USA Dean Reed, Berlin, June 18, 1986; Wolfram Schröder, “Popstar Dean Rees Tod bleibt voller Geheimnisse,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, June 29, 1986; Gunther Geserick, Klaus Vendura, and Ingo Wirth, *Zeitzeuge Tod* (Leipzig: Miltzke, 2003), 205–15.

<sup>98</sup>Peter Joachim Lapp, *General bei Hitler und Ulbricht. Vinzenz Müller—Eine deutsche Karriere* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2003).

information backfired.<sup>99</sup> Treating the suicide of prominent East Germans as taboo was, of course, grist to the mills of those in the West who were eager to attribute suicides to political conflicts—even when no reliable information was available.<sup>100</sup> Censorship, conjecture, rumor, and other factors exacerbated this tendency to politicize suicide, and, for the sake of political expediency, public discourse in the West tended to neglect the long-term cultural and pathological factors.

## Conclusion

The Cold War stereotype of a suicidogenic totalitarian regime has persisted in public discourse for decades, and academic debates have had little impact on this perception. The SED regime helped fuel such suspicions by making the topic political taboo. Many of the victims and the bereaved framed suicides in political terms as well, thereby providing the Western media with just the stories they were looking for. Political repression was certainly an important factor in some individual cases, but it was not the reason for the high frequency of suicides in the GDR. Contrary to superficial statistical surveys and anecdotal evidence, political conflicts played only a marginal role.

Both statistical data and individual case studies strongly support this conclusion. The dictatorship had no substantial influence on suicide rates in the submilieus of GDR society that were the most likely to be affected by repression—such as prisoners and military conscripts. In short, the policies of the SED regime did not significantly increase the number of people who committed suicide. Even when dozens of farmers committed suicide during the forced collectivization campaign in 1960, the effect on the overall rate was barely detectable.

In order to understand East Germany's high suicide rates, one has to acknowledge longterm differences between East and West Germany that are tied to *regional* patterns of behavior that existed long before 1945. Socio-cultural factors such as mentality, religious beliefs, and divorce rates played a much more important role than political repression did. Moreover, the very fact that state socialism failed to bring down suicide rates—despite full employment, low crime rates, and comprehensive social welfare—only highlights the limited extent to which a state with totalitarian aspirations was able to penetrate society and affect social developments.

The Western misperception of suicide in East Germany did not vanish with the end of the GDR in 1990. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was tempting to interpret the drop in suicide rates as a success of liberalization and democratization—especially since suicide rates are now almost at the same level in the eastern and western parts of Germany. But the rapid fall of East German suicide rates after 1990 was hardly a result of reunification.<sup>101</sup> A close consideration of the available statistics debunks the enticing idea that freedom lessens the tendency to commit suicide. A generational breakdown of these figures reveals a creeping convergence of suicide rates that began in the 1950s. Whereas the recorded suicides of elderly

<sup>99</sup>“Vincenz Müller, Tod im Paterre,” *Der Spiegel*, May 24, 1961.

<sup>100</sup>For several examples of many, see Rainer Hildebrandt, “Grausame Schicksale in den Strafanstalten der ‘DDR’,” *Tagespiegel*, Aug. 25, 1956; Henk Ohnesorge, “Wollte Pfarrer Günther in die Bundesrepublik?,” *Die Welt*, Sept. 21, 1978; Franz-Josef Rickert, “Selbstmord: Jacob-Sisters trauern um ihren Pfarrer,” *BILD am Sonntag*, Sept. 24, 1978; “Selbstverbrennung aus Verzweiflung,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, Aug. 27, 1986.

<sup>101</sup>See, e.g., Thomas Bulmahn, “Modernity and Happiness,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 1, no. 3 (2000): 375–400.

people differed widely in the GDR and the Federal Republic, there was almost no difference for those born after 1949. This fundamental development remained hidden for decades because the relevant statistics were dominated by suicides committed by the elderly. The downward trend only first became visible during the 1980s, when those age cohorts with lower suicide rates began to have a greater demographic influence on the overall rate. It is ironic, of course, that regime-imposed restrictions on research prevented SED leaders from becoming aware of this positive trend. At the same time, anti-Communist sentiments in the West led to a similarly distorted view as well. In any event, the remarkable decrease in suicide rates in East and West Germany after 1990 has been finally recognized, at least—if not yet completely understood.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON