Constructing Socialism at the Grass-Roots: 
The Transformation of East Germany, 1945-1965

by

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Abstract

The thesis examines how the socialist transformation of East Germany during the two decades following the defeat of the Third Reich was received, implemented, refashioned and adapted at the grass-roots.

Concentrating on the region of East Berlin and Brandenburg, it focuses on a selected number of points where the personal lives and interests of 'ordinary' people intersected most closely and were confronted most immediately by the ruling Socialist Unity Party's (SED) attempt to refashion society in the Soviet Occupation Zone/German Democratic Republic: 1.) increasing industrial productivity in raw materials and heavy industry, which meant mobilizing and disciplining workers to produce more; 2.) dispossessing old agrarian elites and later coaxing and coercing farmers into large collective farms; and 3.) protecting these 'achievements' through the creation of armed forces, which meant recruiting East German youths into the army.

The popular reaction towards these three ambitious policies, the manner and extent of their realization at the grass-roots level and the role of local officials form the subject of three chapters of the thesis. The fourth substantive chapter examines the problem of Republikflucht ('fleeing the republic', or illegal emigration to the West), a unique and most conspicuous popular response to the transformation of East Germany which typified many of the problems the regime had in exerting control at the grass-roots and which placed certain constraints on the entire process of 'constructing socialism'.

Together, these chapters argue that what was a radical social and political transformation of East Germany at the macro-level was more a slow, patchy and inconsistent transition at the grass-roots. East German socialism was not just a new 'totalitarian' construction, but rather a mixture of different structures and mentalities inherited from German past, various Soviet imports, occasional dictatorial intervention as well as unplanned human actions by 'ordinary' East Germans.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

‘Der Aufbau des Sozialismus ist in erster Linie eine Erziehung der Menschen.’

- Walter Ulbricht, 33rd SED Central Committee Convention

a.) East Germans and the History of the GDR

The East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) had a remarkably ambitious social and political agenda. This included not only revolutionary changes in the macro-structures of society — in patterns of ownership, wealth distribution, social hierarchy and political organization — but also, in accordance with Leninist theory, revolutionary changes at the grass-roots, even in the very people themselves, their attitudes and values. The Soviets and German communists wasted little time in working towards these goals after the end of the war. Former elites in industry and agriculture, especially those with Nazi ties, were rapidly dispossessed, the state administration and economy were within only a couple of years brought into line with SED and Soviet goals, and there was a massive ‘re-education’ and propaganda campaign to try to convince Germans that the future lay with socialism. The two decades after the end of the war was a period of extraordinarily rapid social change east of the Elbe, during which the SED attempted
within a generation to realize the basic elements of its social-political programme, forcing East German social structures into a new and in many ways ill-fitting mould, coaxing and coercing East Germans themselves into accepting the roles the SED had assigned to them and at the same time trying to 'win them over' and turn them into 'socialist personalities'. How 'ordinary' East Germans reacted to this ambitious attempt of social engineering and how it was implemented at the grass-roots level are the central questions of this study.

Despite the huge popular and scholarly interest in the history of the Soviet Occupation Zone (SBZ) and German Democratic Republic (GDR) since 1989, these questions have as yet received relatively little attention. For a number of reasons, there has been a tendency in the wake of the regime’s collapse to concentrate on the history of the regime per se, on processes of political decision-making, dictatorial control and the organs of coercion that helped sustain party rule. First of all, there has been an understandable curiosity finally to cast a glance 'behind the scenes' of the East German dictatorship on the basis of the radically improved availability of sources and to fill in the many 'blank spots' so long hidden by their inaccessibility. More importantly, the fact that the regime collapsed so unexpectedly and so rapidly once the Soviet props were pulled out almost inevitably led to a re-emphasis on repression and control in order to explain its longevity. Certainly the political-moral mood in Germany since 1989 has tended to represent the history of the GDR in terms of the unchecked power of Ulbricht, Honecker and especially the Stasi vis-a-vis the East German populace — an interpretation that not only serves to legitimate the democratic and capitalist order of its erstwhile western rival, but which also makes it easier for at least some East Germans to remember the years before 1989 as a passive history of victimization and to avoid the
unpleasant question of what part they played in constructing and sustaining the East German dictatorship.

To be sure, there are good reasons for emphasizing repression, control and the unchecked power of this dictatorship. In the pursuit of its social and political agenda, the SED’s self-styled exclusive understanding of the course of history did not allow for significant digressions from the official line, whether based on older traditions, a different ideology or on the contradictions and wayward effects of its own policies. The claims it made on East German society and individuals were therefore unlimited and absolute: a new society, a new morality, a new Mensch. These claims and their consequences have been described in numerous variants of the theory of totalitarianism, which has witnessed a renaissance in academic debate since the dramatic events of 1989. The essence of the modern ‘totalitarian’ regime, so the classic argument runs, lies precisely in its claims to absolute, universal validity, in its total control of communication, production, and the institutions of violence, whatever residual ‘islands of separateness’ there may have been.¹ Scholars have recently applied this basic model in different ways to explain the history of the GDR, some stressing the SED’s ‘unlimited and exclusive access to power’, and others the ‘post-democratic’ attempt to mobilize the masses through a mixture of indoctrination and control.² Sigrid Meuschel has offered a more systems-theoretical and flexible concept of the total claims of the East German state which stresses the lack of socio-structural autonomy in the GDR.³ The end result of the claims of the total state was, in this view, a far-reaching shut-

down (Stillegung) and functional non-differentiation (Entdifferenzierung) of social institutions and a de facto fusion of politics, economics, law, art, even leisure as the state extended and consolidated its control over these various areas of what is commonly called 'society' in western liberal polities. Common to all these views is the tendency to portray the relationship between 'regime' and 'populace' basically as a smoothly-paved one-way street. What got decided at the 'top' was quickly put into practice on the ground by a mixture of supervision and seduction, indoctrination and repression, and was forced on to a populace too scared or fragmented to do much about it. Hence the focus on the regime per se and the leaders who controlled it as the dramatis personae in the history of the GDR.

This thesis examines the socialist transformation of East Germany from the opposite direction. It is about the popular reception and implementation of policy instead of its formulation. It is about how political intervention 'from above' into the structures of East German society was converted and realized at the grass-roots. Above all it is about how ordinary East Germans responded to the various politically-induced intrusions into their lives during the construction of East German socialism, and about how their responses in turn affected the actual outcome of what was decided in the halls of power. As I will attempt to show at length throughout this thesis, when one looks more closely at what was happening 'on the ground' in the GDR during its formative years, there emerges a rather different picture from that of the one-way street just mentioned. The long-standing image of the streamlined East German regime and its legendary Prussian efficiency is rapidly displaced by one of unreliable local functionaries, petty corruption, informal 'arrangements' and internal contradictions. The common contradictory image of the East Germans themselves — on the one hand of a wholly disaffected population held in check only through force or on the other of
quiescent, obedient and 'apolitical Germans' complicit in their own domination — also gives way to a more complex picture of ordinary people trying to utilize various regime policies to their own advantage, not so much resisting or complying (to use the conventional dichotomy) as extracting what they could from the circumstances. As Jürgen Kocka has enjoined historians: 'What will matter is to explore the changing interrelations between dictatorial authority and the manifold ways in which people dealt with it — from supportive cooperation to apathy and retreat into the private sphere all the way to resistance and opposition'. It is precisely this interplay between regime policies and popular responses, this overlap between political and social history, which this study deals with. How were political decisions made at 'the top' realized on the ground? What was the popular response to the constant political interventions of the SED into the lives of East Germans, how did this affect their concrete realization, and (how) did this differ in different groups or on different issues? Simply put, what happened at the grass-roots when the regime tried to mobilize, control and 'win over' ordinary East Germans for the 'construction of socialism' in the SBZ/GDR?

b.) Subjects of Enquiry, Methods, Aims

These questions are of course very broad, and various aspects have been dealt with in studies on topics ranging from industrial relations to the land reform. Yet the question of popular responses to central SED policies has not actually been a central focus of

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study. The bulk of work to date on popular responses and opinions towards the regime has focused almost exclusively on major political flashpoints — 17 June 1953, autumn 1956, the Prague Spring — whereby the emphasis inevitably, and somewhat one-sidedly, is placed on discontent and conflict. A number of studies have also taken popular opposition as their subject, which has had the highly beneficial effect of drawing attention to the fact that ‘dissent’ in the GDR was not merely confined to a few critical intellectuals already well known in the West before 1989, but which has also tended to paint a somewhat one-sided and static picture of popular political behaviour in the GDR, obscuring both the scope and effects of indifference and apathy as well as the very important modes of interaction between rulers and ruled.

This thesis does not focus exclusively on major political flashpoints (although they do feature in it) and intentionally does not take opposition and dissent as a starting point, but rather focuses on precisely this interplay and overlap. In so doing, however, it does not make the attempt to achieve a ‘thick’ description of how authority was exerted and reproduced in everyday life in the GDR. To attempt this with any degree of empirical detail would involve an examination of a number of issues too extensive to be covered in one study. While this thesis is thus in some ways narrower in focus than these ‘everyday-historical’ approaches, it is at the same time broader in seeking to pull together, compare and contrast some of the ways in which ordinary East Germans (which included many low-level functionaries) perceived, dealt with, conformed to

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6 This is particularly the case with Armin Mitter, Stefan Wolle, *Untergang auf Raten: Unbekannte Kapitel der DDR-Geschichte*, (Munich, 1993).


8 Moreover, it would duplicate the aim of a current research group on ‘Herrschaft als sozialer Praxis’ at the Zentrum für Zeitgeschichtliche Forschung in Potsdam. On this concept, see Alf Lüdtke (ed.), *Herrschaft als sozialer Praxis. Historische und sozi-anthropologische Studien*, (Göttingen, 1991).
and/or opposed the regime’s attempts to mobilize them for the creation of East German socialism, and what effects these had for the face of East German socialism. In other words, while it does not deal with the functional question of ‘Herrschaft als sozialer Praxis’, it is very much about the closely related issue of ‘Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn’. Or put another way, this thesis is not about how SED authority was maintained and reproduced on an everyday basis, but rather about what happened at the grass-roots when the regime tried to force major changes by exerting it.

It does this by focusing on a selected number of points where the personal lives and interests (broadly defined) of ordinary East Germans intersected most closely and were confronted most immediately by the total claims of the SED. The bulk of the thesis deals with what I view as the three principle thrusts of the ‘construction of socialism’ in East Germany during the first two decades after the war: 1.) increasing industrial productivity, especially in raw materials and heavy industry; 2.) dispossessing old agrarian elites and gaining state control of agriculture; and 3.) protecting these ‘achievements’ through the creation of armed forces. The effects of these policies on the lives of ‘ordinary’ East Germans were manifold and profound. Increasing work-productivity meant disciplining workers to produce more, as well as a concentration of investment in heavy industry at the expense of consumption and wages. Farmers were asked to expropriate the land of traditional rural elites and were later coaxed and coerced into amalgamating their land into large collective farms. And finally, East German youths were to perform their ‘patriotic duty’ of protecting the GDR and its ‘socialist accomplishments’ from the perceived military threat of the West by joining the armed forces. The popular reaction towards these three ambitious policies, the manner and extent of their realization at the grass-roots level and some of the main points of friction and conflict which they called forth form the subject of three separate
chapters of the thesis. These are followed by a chapter examining the problem of 
Republikflucht ('fleeing the republic', or illegal emigration to the West), that unique 
and most conspicuous popular response to the transformation of East Germany which 
placed certain constraints on the entire process of 'constructing socialism'.

These are of course only some of the themes that could be addressed. A number 
of other aspects of the attempt to transform East German society at the grass-roots — in 
particular popular religiosity and the church, as well as the attempt to create a 'new 
intelligentsia' to administer the schools, hospitals and factories — have been largely 
left out, and others that could bear more detailed research — such as the social and 
political profile of local functionaries and officials, who they were and how this 
changed over time — are dealt with only briefly throughout the text. Such a study 
inevitably necessitates a certain selection of topics for emphasis. The broad approach I 
have chosen is thus intended to be illustrative, not definitive. Yet I believe that it 
nonetheless sheds some important new light on developments in the SBZ/GDR even 
beyond the primary aim of situating 'ordinary' East Germans in the socialist 
transformation of East Germany.

First, and most importantly, there are a number of reasons why the focus is on 
the grass-roots — that is, not on either 'the regime' or 'the populace', but somewhat on 
both. As I have already remarked, there has been a general tendency in the literature on 
the history of the GDR to treat regime and populace separately, or at the very least 
conceptually to keep the two clearly divided. While this cleft is of course undeniable, 
much of the material I present suggests that an equally important cleft in the GDR was 
that between leadership and grass-roots, or put another way between 'centre' and 
'periphery'. Unreliable factory managers, local officials and low-level functionaries 
were, if not exactly the rule throughout the entire period covered, by no means
exceptional. Often there was precious little to distinguish them from ‘ordinary’ East Germans in terms of their political opinions and loyalties, especially during the early years. Because these people represented ‘the regime’ at the grass-roots, their reliability or otherwise was of central importance to the attempt to create a new socialist society. Yet their role in conveying policies to the grass-roots has as yet received little attention. The common distinctions between ‘regime’ and ‘populace’ or between ‘regime’ and ‘society’ are, although to some extent linguistically necessary, often rather misleading. Such dichotomous concepts inevitably overlap and run into each other. Where does the ‘regime’ end and ‘populace’ begin? At the level of local functionaries, bloc-party members, low-level police officers? In terms of the issue of the regime’s ability to control society and push through its plans for a ‘new Germany’ at the grass-roots, this kind of focus seems more useful than one that keeps ‘regime’ and ‘populace’ rigidly separate.

Second, this grass-roots emphasis also offers new perspectives on the substantive issues covered by the various chapters. The material in some of these will be more familiar to students of GDR history than that in others. The literature on industrial workers and shopfloor disputes in the GDR has grown especially rapidly in recent years. Although I draw quite explicitly on this literature, this study places particular emphasis on the interaction between workers, managers and local

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functionaries in the factories and also attempts to go beyond the prevailing emphasis on material interests and economic disputes to discuss also various non-economic sources of friction on the shopfloor. Processes of social transformation in the countryside have also attracted considerable scholarly attention, though the rather heated debates in the wake of German unification about the question of restitution for those who were dispossessed in the land reform has led to a certain concentration of recent research on these early years that has tended to eclipse the process of agricultural collectivization that followed. The few published studies to date on agricultural collectivization have in any event tended to focus on the political decisions that led up to it and Soviet influence on these decisions. This thesis examines both of these developments in terms of how they were received, refashioned and implemented in the villages, and lays particular emphasis on the role of rural functionaries in conveying official policies to the grass-roots. By contrast, the recruitment and responses of would-be rank-and-file soldiers has not as yet been a subject of research at all. Studies to date on the East German military have tended to focus on its organizational history, its role within the Warsaw Pact and its activities during the Prague Spring and revolution of 1989, with...
investigations of recruitment basically confined to Soviet and SED policies vis-a-vis military cadre and returning POWs during the 'hidden rearmament' before 1952. And as for the problem of Republikflucht, most recent research has dealt with refugee and immigration policies in the Federal Republic — not surprising given the ongoing debates about this issue in Germany. I focus instead on various aspects of Republikflucht within East Germany: from motives for flight to rifts between local functionaries and central authorities over the treatment of former refugees to the ways ordinary East Germans used the threat of flight to extract concessions from state authorities, as well as patterns of popular responses towards the abscondence of friends, colleagues and neighbours.

Third, there has been a tendency in historical research on the GDR to limit the focus of individual studies to rather small thematic topics or to brief spans of time. There are of course good reasons for this, above all the huge amounts of documentation


produced by the East German bureaucracy which itself tends to gravitate against broader studies. It also has to do with the general reluctance to take on broader themes before the empirical basis is more fully developed, as well as with the current aversion among many social and cultural historians towards ‘megatheories’ and larger structures of interpretation in principle. Fully aware of the problems of taking on as wide an array of themes and social groups as is done in this thesis, I nonetheless think that the forest is gradually being eclipsed by so many trees in GDR historiography, and that any attempt, however provisional, to pull various histories together and trace broad developments over a substantial stretch of time is a worthwhile venture.

Finally, the thesis also attempts to draw some connections between the ongoing conceptual and theoretical discussion on the GDR and the empirical basis available — two distinct discourses which have tended to run parallel to each other since 1989 but whose paths have rarely seemed to cross. By its very focus on the ‘periphery’ of the communist dictatorship, where the inevitable social proximity of ‘ordinary’ East Germans and local representatives of the regime often hindered the leadership’s attempts to transform East German society as it wished, the thesis inherently questions the limits of such notions as the ‘undifferentiated’ and ‘durchherrschte’ society of the GDR. It also enquires into the relationship between the formal ‘system’ and the many informal relations and ‘arrangements’ on which it rested, how these functioned in symbiosis or conflict and how this changed over time.

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This separation of empirical research and conceptual discussion on the GDR was a particular focus of criticism and concern at the recent annual conference of the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Studien in Potsdam: ‘Die DDR — eine moderne Diktatur? Herrschaftsstrukturen und Erfahrungsdimensionen’, 10-12 Dec., 1997.
c.) Argument and Structure of Portrayal

The basic argument is straightforward. The socialist transformation of East Germany was an extremely difficult and conflict-ridden process at the grass-roots, where the SED's ambitious attempts to create a 'new society' and 'new Mensch' were restricted, diluted and refracted by a range of problems. Quite obviously, it could not carry out all of its plans unchallenged, as if the society and people over which it governed were a mere tabula rasa awaiting organization into a new social system. 'Ordinary' East Germans had their own interests and concerns — most commonly referred to in recent years as 'Eigen-Sinn' — which sometimes overlapped and often collided with the SED's policies of social transformation. Most tried to extract what they could from the circumstances of East German socialism, which, depending on the particular situation, could mean protest, opposition or conformity, but which for most of the populace most of the time did not mean positive political support. Making use of the circumstances was often made easier by the fact that the policies that constituted the socialist transformation of East Germany were in many cases not completely converted at the grass-roots in the first place, largely for three reasons: 1.) the persistence of older structures, mentalities, and social networks that survived the supposed socialist Stunde Null and which proved remarkably resilient, 2.) the inner contradictions of official policies and between different elements of the regime, and 3.) resulting from both of these factors, the unreliability of many local representatives of the regime. The general unwillingness of most East Germans to assume the social roles the SED had assigned to them, the resilience of local social networks and the inertia of traditional mentalities —

15 On this concept, see Alf Lüdtke, Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus. Ergebnisse, (Hamburg, 1993).
together with the unreliability of many local functionaries and the inner contradictions of official policies themselves — meant that the SED's various political interventions into East German society were often so reshaped when applied at the grass-roots as to become at least partially compatible with traditional social structures, with the wishes of the broader populace and with the interests and capabilities of local officials. Yet it was arguably this very reshaping and dilution that made the rapid socialist transformation of East Germany a viable project at all by allowing for a certain degree of social autonomy at the grass-roots. From the more heavy-handed 1950s to the less ideological 1960s there developed a kind of pragmatic, if rather unenthusiastic coexistence between the party leadership which had learned to tolerate this and a populace that increasingly came to take its authority for granted.

The separate chapters do not so much develop this argument in stages as they offer different perspectives on it. Though the above problems feature throughout the entire thesis, the different chapters emphasize their relative importance on different topical issues as well as the varying degrees of success the party leadership had in overcoming them. Whereas the attempt to transform the East German shopfloor was plagued above all by workers' opposition towards the ever-increasing regimentation of work and the willingness of many managers and local functionaries to succumb to it — a problem that was never satisfactorily solved — in the villages of the East German countryside the problems were related mostly to the resilience of local communities and older mentalities, as well as the social proximity of functionaries and other rural residents in village life. By contrast, recruiting youths for the armed forces was plagued more by the internal contradictions of the SED's own policies — namely, raising an army and living standards at the same time — and the resulting rhetorical inconsistencies and conflicts of interest between different elements of the regime at the
grass-roots — conflicts that could be used as a means of escaping recruitment, at least until the introduction of conscription. Finally, the chapter on *Republikflucht* emphasizes a number of the themes already encountered — the disjunction of official discourse at the ‘centre’ from realities on the ground, the unreliability of local representatives of the regime when dogmatic and unrealistic policies clashed with these realities, how ‘ordinary’ East Germans could use the problem for their own purposes — and argues explicitly that although the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 helped the regime overcome the various obstacles hindering its control of East German society at the grass-roots, its effects were neither as immediate nor as direct as is often assumed.

**d.) Geographic Scope, Sources**

Although this study is intended to address issues and developments affecting the GDR as a whole, it is nonetheless regionally based in order to achieve a higher degree of analytical detail than would otherwise be possible by examining sources from all three levels of the regime’s information apparatus: *Kreis, Bezirk* and centre. It concentrates on East Berlin and Brandenburg (after 1952, the three administrative *Bezirke* Potsdam, Frankfurt/Oder and Cottbus)*a*, though not exclusively and to varying degrees in the different chapters. The regional focus is far more exclusive in the chapters on constructing socialism in the factories and villages than in the other two, primarily because of the sheer volume of material on these topics, but also because the actual places themselves — the factories and villages — play a more integral role to these

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*a* Although the cumulative area of these three districts does not correspond precisely to that covered by *Land* Brandenburg, it is nevertheless similar enough to refer to them collectively as ‘Brandenburg’ after the dissolution of the *Länder* in 1952.
chapters than to the others. In other words, the regional focus here is not intended as an analytical confinement, but rather as a means of examining how directives from the centre were received at the grass-roots. Of course no regional or regionally-based study can claim to be wholly representative of the entire GDR. Despite being a truncated 'half-nation-state', East Germany still possessed a hearty measure of the regional diversity so characteristic of Central Europe — from the vast expanses of lakes and plains in Mecklenburg to the quaint Fachwerk towns of the Harz mountains to the industrial centres of Saxony. Clearly, a local or regional study of any one area of the GDR would invariably run up against the problematic issues of typicality and representativeness. But it is not at all certain that a study executed at the level of the entire GDR would necessarily be preferable or even, for that matter, more 'representative'. Regional variations undoubtedly existed, but variations on a common theme.

For a number of reasons, East Berlin and Brandenburg together seemed a sensible region to focus on. Its socio-economic structure was quite diverse, presenting a fairly even balance between urban/industrial and rural/agricultural milieux.\(^\text{17}\) The region as a whole boasted both long-established urban industrial centres with a commensurately 'traditional' working-class milieu (above all in East Berlin and the industrial penumbra surrounding it) as well as a number of provincial industrial centres such as the steel and chemical plants in Brandenburg/Havel and the extensive collieries of the Niederlausitz region near Cottbus. It was also the site of some of the largest

\(^\text{17}\) This was also reflected in the remarkably diverse political landscape of the region before the Nazi takeover of power in 1933. The electoral spectrum ranged from 'Red' Berlin, a traditional stronghold of the workers' parties, to the strongly conservative eastern electoral district around Frankfurt/Oder (some of whose territory was lost to Poland after the war), where the DNVP was the strongest party throughout the 1920s before losing its constituency almost entirely to the Nazis. In 1932 the NSDAP gained an unusually high 48% of the vote in the district (Reich average = 37.8%) and in March 1933 55.2% of the vote, which ranked Frankfurt/Oder third overall out of the 35 electoral districts in Germany in support for
industrialization projects of the 1950s and 1960s — most notably the steel works at Stalinstadt/Eisenhüttenstadt and the petrochemical plants at Schwedt — that radically changed many rural areas and that attracted hundreds of thousands of expellees from the former eastern territories of the Reich into the world of the industrial worker with relatively high wages and the promise of housing. Yet Brandenburg was still predominately rural and its economy overwhelmingly agricultural at the end of the war. In 1950, approximately 33% of Brandenburg's population was still engaged in agriculture.\textsuperscript{18} Of the five initial Länder of the GDR, only Mecklenburg-Vorpommern had a more agrarian economy or was more strongly characterized by the traditional Prussian — or better, Junker — pattern of large aristocratic landholdings. In 1939, large estates with more than 100 hectares comprised merely 1.1% of the total number of agricultural enterprises in Brandenburg, but 31% of the land.\textsuperscript{19} Yet within the region itself there were important differences. Whereas the northern and eastern areas of Brandenburg were dominated by Großgrundbesitz, the southern area around Cottbus was characterized more by mid-sized (5-20 hectares) and large (20-100 hectares) peasant farms, accounting respectively for 25% and 38% of agricultural acreage in Brandenburg as a whole.

Before proceeding, a brief word on the sources seems necessary. The primary sources I have used are the internal reports — above all the 'situation- and mood-reports' (Lage- and Stimmungsberichte) — of the SED, mass organizations (especially the trade union league, or FDGB) and East German state (Volkpolizei and various ministries), all of which present a number of methodological problems. The internal


reports of the East German party-state apparatus are politicized through and through, and by no means can be taken to 'speak for themselves'. The ideologized language and categories in which they increasingly came to be couched over the years present a curious mixture of German bureaucratic euphemism and SED jargon in which such vague terms as 'ideological unclarities' and 'hostile arguments' could denote either insignificant digressions from the party line or seething beds of discontent. The problems run in two different directions. The inflationary use of such terms as 'enemy elements' and 'reactionary forces' must be taken with a pinch of salt if one wants to avoid overemphasizing signs of conflict and dissent. At the same time, there was also a certain tendency towards Schönfärberei — i.e. watering-down or beautifying reports to one's superiors. The party leadership thus often only heard what lower-level functionaries wanted them to hear — after all, what they reported reflected on their performance. However, once one reads through the formulaic slogans and obvious political bias, these reports contain a wealth of information on popular opinion, the activities of local functionaries, as well as social and economic conditions more generally speaking. Despite the tendency towards 'beautification', most seem to attempt to describe the situation on the ground more or less soberly or even pessimistically after a customary paragraph or two on 'positive' developments. Moreover, the voices of 'ordinary' East Germans frequently come through loud and clear: expressions of dissent in particular are often conveyed quite fulsomely and in fascinating detail. So despite their obvious shortcomings, these reports — in

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39 SBZ-Handbuch, op. cit., p. 81, 104, 169. For the sake of comparison, such large estates accounted for 62% of agricultural acreage in Mecklenburg and less than 1% in the dwarf-agricultural economy of Thuringia.
conjunction with letters of complaint, petitions, oral history and survey information — are highly useful in evaluating popular responses to various regime policies.

Reports were produced at a number of levels in the party, mass organizations and state apparatus, from the individual factory to the local Kreis-, Bezirk- and central levels. It has been suggested that, because of the problem of Schönfärberei and filtering at each level, reports from the Kreis level present the most accurate picture of ‘reality’ at any given time. Although this may often be the case, and although I draw quite extensively on SED Kreisleitung reports, I would argue that this assertion is overstretched for two reasons. First, in reading through reports at the different levels, it becomes clear that most beautification that takes place begins at the source and often does not change considerably on the way to the top unless edited as part of a summary. There is therefore not so great a difference between reports at the local and central levels as one might at first think. Secondly, because the party leadership was arguably more interested in receiving accurate information than local functionaries were in producing it, and was in any event fully aware of the problems of report-beautification, it regularly deployed its own Instrukteure (instructors, or plenipotentiaries) from the Central Committee to report directly on special problems or matters of interest. These reports, written by true party professionals, are often the most informative of all.

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20 For oral interviews conducted before 1989, see Lutz Niethammer, Dorothee Wierling, Alexander von Plato, Die Volks eigene Erfahrung. Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR. (Berlin, 1991). Dagmar Semmelmann has also conducted numerous oral interviews, both before and after 1989: ‘Zeitzeugen über ihren 17. Juni 1953 in Berlin’, in: hefte zur ddr-geschichte, no. 7, (Berlin 1993), p. 26-55; idem, Schauplatz Stalinstadt/EKO. Erinnerungen an den 17. Juni 1953, (Potsdam, 1993). I have used two different kinds of survey material: the ‘Infratest’ surveys conducted in the 1950s and 1960s on GDR refugees in West Germany and to a lesser extent the formerly classified opinion surveys conducted by the Institut für Meinungsforschung in the SED Central Committee. Both have their problems: for the former that of self-selection and for the latter that of self-censorship under dictatorial conditions. Yet both are nonetheless very useful sources on particular aspects of popular opinion in the GDR.

Internal reports in any state bureaucracy, especially dictatorial regimes, tend to focus on problems, difficulties and failures, and the historian who uses them as sources runs the risk of overemphasizing these at the expense of what did work and what was successful from the regime's point of view. The same is of course true of petitions and letters of complaint, which tend to give a one-sided view of any particular situation. Because of this emphasis on problems in the internal communication of the regime, no news can to a certain degree be regarded as good news. I have tried to keep these dangers in mind while reading through stacks and stacks of files in the East German archives. But in the process what struck me most about these reports, petitions and letters of complaint is their sheer and overwhelming profusion. Insofar as no news was good news, the GDR had a lot of problems. While one of course cannot simply extrapolate from the particular to the general — for instance, take a complaint about corruption involving the land reform in a particular village or a report on poor work-discipline in a particular factory and claim that it was a general phenomenon — the huge volume of such reports, together with the fact that not all such problems could possibly be registered in the first place, conveys the very strong impression that they were more the rule than the exception. Thus the examples I use throughout the text are, unless otherwise noted, illustrative of fairly common occurrences.

East Berlin and Brandenburg, like the other regions of the SBZ, were not very attractive places to live at the end of the war. At the time, few places in Germany were. The task facing the Soviets and East German communists were immense: building up a disjointed and war-torn economy, integrating hundreds of thousands of refugees, constructing a new apparatus of power and generating a modicum of popular approval.
for their authority. Let us now turn to what happened when the regime tried to mobilize, control and 'win over' ordinary East Germans for the 'construction of socialism' in the SBZ/GDR.
Chapter 2

‘Socialist Work’: Transforming the East German Shopfloor

At the end of the war, the SBZ was a shambles. Food and fuel were scarce, and much of its housing had been either destroyed or seriously damaged by Allied bombing. A large proportion of its infrastructure and industrial stock had also been destroyed, and much of what was left was either worn out from around-the-clock war production or being dismantled and hauled off to the Soviet Union as reparations. It was clear from the outset that reviving industrial production in the SBZ was a must for both the German and, perhaps more importantly, for the Soviet economy. However, the Soviets and German authorities were finding it hard enough simply to feed, clothe and house the civilian populace, and there were precious few resources left over for investing in new industrial stock. Further hampering economic recovery in the Zone were the dire supply problems resulting from the zonal division of Germany and the policy of reparations in kind from running production. The expropriation of large factory owners and the creation of ‘Soviet Joint Stock Companies’ (SAGs) and ‘People’s Own Enterprises’ (VEBs) may have succeeded in revolutionizing patterns of industrial ownership in the Zone, destroying the economic foundations of bourgeois power and securing production for key Soviet needs, but it did little to improve the health of the economy. In effect, workers themselves would have to be more efficient.

Towards this end, the solutions devised by the Soviets and German communists all ran in the same basic direction: the self-defensive inclinations of the working-class
under capitalism had to be overcome through the introduction of a new culture of work and new structures on the shopfloor, most of them imported from the Soviet Union. There were both ideological as well as economic aspects to this task of transforming the shopfloor. It was not merely a matter of creating new material incentives geared towards enhancing productivity and work-discipline. There was also the broader attempt to secure the political loyalty of the industrial workforce, to transform them into ‘socialist personalities’ and mobilize them via various forms of ‘socio-political activity’ (gesellschaftspolitische Tätigkeit). To be sure, the idea of building a socialist future was attractive to many German workers after the horrors of the war, the experiences of mass unemployment during the Weimar years and the heavy-handed labour relations under the Nazis. But under the circumstances of acute material deprivation after the war, it was asking a lot of industrial workers’ ‘class consciousness’ to work harder in the here and now for an occupying power that removed the country’s wealth and for an uncertain future that still existed only in the promises of communist political leaders. And combined with the unorthodox opinions and self-interests of many local functionaries and factory managers, workers’ aversion towards both the ever-increasing regimentation of work as well as the constant efforts to mobilize them resisted and refracted the SED’s attempts to transform and gain control of the industrial shopfloor.
Dare to Discipline? Workers and the Problem of Productivity after the War

a.) The Shopfloor Reshaping of Order 234

Though the goal of winning the hearts and minds of the industrial workforce was never entirely disregarded, given the state of the Zone after the war purely material considerations were the most pressing at first. Despite the widespread destruction in eastern Germany, it was generally assumed that the SBZ had certain advantages over other areas of Soviet-occupied Europe. Not only was it a highly industrialized region, it also possessed a highly skilled workforce blessed by the traditional 'German' virtues of diligence and discipline, an image widespread in the Soviet Union itself. Whatever the truth or otherwise of this picture for the period before 1945, the orientation and behaviour of German workers was a far cry from this ideal under the impact of post-war deprivation and the Soviet plundering of German industry. In the years following the war, discipline was lax and productivity well under half its prewar level. This had far less to do with any conscious opposition to Soviet occupation or labour policies than with far more basic problems, foremost among them sheer hunger. The average daily caloric intake of manual labourers hovered at around 65% of the recommended daily requirement during the first two years after the war, increasing only gradually in the two years that followed.\(^1\) This not only sapped workers of much of their strength, it also led to high rates of absenteeism through illness. To make matters worse, the lack of goods available for purchase rendered monetary wages rather ineffective as a means of raising productivity or labour discipline. Under the circumstances, it was often far more

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profitable for workers to spend several hours trading on the black-market or several
days roaming the countryside for food than to go to work, let alone to be more
productive. A group of East Berlin workers explained to a SED functionary 'that they
have no desire to work under the current circumstances. If they go foraging (hamstern)
merely once a month they have more than if they worked the entire month'.

Getting workers to be more productive was thus only part of the problem. As
the economic impact of dismantling, reparations and the land reform sent workers’
morale spiralling during the excessively harsh winter of 1946-47, rates of absenteeism
soared out of control, even surpassing 20% in such basic industries as coal, machine
building and metallurgy. Soviet data from the summer of 1947 reported absentee rates
of 24% in factories working for reparations, 14% in the SAGs and 19% in factories
producing for domestic consumption. During the initial years after the war much of
the problem was to get workers to show up at all. But even when they did show up, the
deleterious effects of hunger and the lack of a wage incentive — coupled, of course,
with factory damage and shortages in supply — meant that worker productivity was
still some 50-70% below the pre-war level. By 1947 at the latest the initial Soviet
image of the legendary German work ethic had all but completely dissolved. Up until
then they had been too busy with the land reform (which we will examine in the next
chapter), the expropriation of industry and the SED merger to do much about it, but all
of this began to change with the downturn in East-West relations. By 1947 it looked as
if the SBZ might remain in the Soviet orbit for some time to come and that some form
of economic integration into the ‘socialist camp’ therefore seemed necessary. There

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2 LAB BPA IV/4/06/403, undated report, around May 1947.
was no real master plan as to how to do this, and in the absence of one the Soviets went about it the only way they knew how.⁴

Basically, then, the answer to the productivity and indiscipline impasse was to transfer Soviet-style labour relations to the factories of the SBZ. The main tool used to accomplish this was SMAD Order 234 on ‘Further Measures for Increasing Work-Productivity and for the Further Improvement of the Material Situation of Workers and Angestellte’, what the unions subsequently referred to as the Aufbaubefehl (construction order). The purpose of the order and the reasoning behind it were clear in its preamble: ‘The increase of work-productivity and the conscious unfolding of the independent initiative of the workers for the economic upswing in the SBZ presently comprises the main link in the economic system and the key to solving all other economic problems’.⁵ It called for a range of social measures to address the most immediate needs of workers, such as improved housing, better wages for women workers, factory clinics and industrial safety. But the principle aim of Order 234 was to get workers to produce more, and towards this end it established a set of incentives to improve productivity in key enterprises, such as differential wages, promises of clothing, shoes and a hot lunch above and beyond one’s rations, accompanied by various sanctions aimed to punish unexcused absenteeism and so-called ‘slackers’ such as the withdrawal of ration cards or deployment for rubble-clearing at bomb sites.⁶ Soviet-style ‘socialist competitions’ were also to be employed as a means of raising production, and those workers who performed best were to be honoured as ‘activists’ and also receive monetary awards.

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⁴ See generally ibid., ch. 3.
⁵ BAP DC15/759, DWK, bl. 92.
⁶ There was even some talk within the Central Committee during the summer and autumn of 1947 as to whether or not ‘work shy’ elements could be arrested by the police and forcibly taken to employment offices. This was in the end deemed beyond the mandate of the police. SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/2027/22, bl. 12-13.
Most important of all, it called for the reintroduction of piecework-wages and other forms of productivity-enhancing remuneration throughout industry.

It was one thing to decide to discipline workers, but it was quite another to put these new measures into practice on the shopfloor. The actual implementation of Order 234 in the factories ran into a host of problems right from the start. Some of these were essentially technical in nature: confusion over who was responsible for administering the measures, managers drowning in a 'flood' of uncoordinated questionnaires sent out from various bureaucracies and mass organizations, inability to assess progress at the centre, etc. But the greater problem, and one which promised further difficulties in the future, was the icy reception that met it in the factories.

The idea of raising work discipline and productivity in the current material circumstances of the SBZ understandably found little resonance among the bulk of workers with far more immediate concerns. A Brandenburg SED report on the initial reception of Order 234 in the factories clearly shows that raising work-productivity was the last thing on most workers' minds at the time: 'In all enterprises, meetings of functionaries took place and were followed by employee meetings. It is as yet impossible to speak of a positive discussion in these employee meetings. The discussion revolved first and foremost around the question of provision with potatoes, which was undoubtedly one of the primary concerns of the workers. The provision of work-clothing, durable shoes as well as the necessary material for repairs, bicycles and tires for them [...] these were the main features of the discussions. The attendance rates at the assemblies can be estimated at 40 to 50% at best, only a few could report

7 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/2027/22, bl. 66-7.
attendance rates of 60 to 70%’. Although FDGB chairman Herbert Warnke himself addressed the employee meeting at the Rüdersdorfer Kalkwerke, still only around 40% of the workers showed up, and even among them ‘one sensed at first a kind of passive resistance (passiven Widerstand)

Another hindrance to the ‘positive’ reception of Order 234 in the factories apart from immediate material concerns was the unique culture of work that had developed in the factories after the war. The widespread hunger and deprivation — the same things that made increasing industrial production so imperative — had produced a kind of ‘Notgemeinschaft’, a heightened sense of solidarity and mutual assistance on the shopfloor. This ‘Gleichmacherei’, as frustrated economic officials called it, was not so much a romantic holdover of self-defensive egalitarianism under capitalism as it was a logical response to the challenges of survival after the war. The idea of individual workers being singled out of the ranks for extra pay, food and other benefits not only led to the predictable wave of envy and resentment, but also offended this cooperative ethic. What is more, although the older independent workers’ organizations were precluded from organizing after the war, the Betriebsräte, or shop councils, that supervised production in many factories across the GDR proved a significant hindrance to raising work-productivity. Up until 1947 they were grudgingly tolerated by the Soviet authorities so long as they were useful in helping to expropriate ex-Nazis and keep production running. But it was simply not realistic to expect shop councils comprised overwhelmingly of Social Democratic and Communist workers to
implement differential pay rates and other means of increasing labour discipline that they had opposed for decades.

Getting rid of piecework, punch clocks and other instruments of work acceleration from the Nazi and capitalist past was in fact one of the first things many of the enterprise councils had done after the war.\textsuperscript{11} Whereas 80\% of German workers had been on piece-work wages before 1945, by 1947 the number had decreased to merely 25\%.\textsuperscript{12} Reversing this trend not only offended the egalitarian ethic on the shopfloor, it also fuelled feelings of exploitation — no longer at the hands of capitalist entrepreneurs, but at the hands of the Soviet authorities. Despite the official SED argument that piecework and wage differentials were not the same in a ‘democratic economy’ as in a capitalist system ‘because the piecework system can no longer be used as a means of exploiting the workforce and because the increase in production that is its aim will be used for the benefit of all’, workers remained sceptical, demanding ‘Let’s eat first, then we’ll produce’ and even resurrecting the old working-class slogan ‘Akkord ist Mord’, or ‘piecework is murder’.\textsuperscript{13} Many workers also argued that because of the constant shortages in supply and consequent down time, an hourly wage system was the only fair one. Moreover, even among those workers who were in principle in favour of increasing productivity, ‘the general opinion and discussion is that producing more through working more “only benefits the Russians”, and that it therefore makes no sense for the German populace’.\textsuperscript{14}

Viewed in purely economic terms, the Soviet insistence on raising productivity was quite correct, and might have been more convincing under different circumstances.

\textsuperscript{11} S. Suckut, \textit{Die Betriebsrätebewegung}, op.cit., p. 196.
\textsuperscript{12} SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/2027/22, bl. 119.
\textsuperscript{13} ibid., bl. 121; SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/2027/27, ‘Entschliessung zur Lohnpolitik des FDGB’, 10 Apr. 1948.
But it was introduced into a broader political and social context that prompted widespread resentment and gravitated against its implementation on the shopfloor. For one thing, the absence of truly independent interest representation meant that any wage and productivity settlement would be regarded by workers as suspect, in the worst case as a 'Russian' imposition. Moreover, the continued dismantling and reparations to the Soviet Union were also a crucial backdrop to the introduction of Order 234. Because of the hunger and scarcity, which was particularly acute in 1947, the continued removal of equipment and production was viewed by many Germans as downright life-threatening. Though many Germans assumed that they would have to pay reparations for the immensely destructive war that had been launched from German soil, and therefore grudgingly accepted the first wave of reparations in 1945 and early 1946, the Soviet failures to keep its promises regarding the end of dismantling in 1946 and 1947 were arguably more irritating than the deed itself, and only added fuel to the fire. As an opinion report from Berlin put it: 'One asks how it happens that, in spite of Marshall Sokolovski’s declaration that the dismantling is finished, factories are still being dismantled. One cannot believe a thing the Russians say when one sees how their promises are “kept”'.\(^\text{15}\) Combined with the often careless and sometimes brutal 'smash and grab' tactics of the trophy brigades, such broken promises nourished a broad and diffuse anti-Soviet attitude among many Germans, in particular the industrial workers most immediately affected.\(^\text{16}\) Indeed, the very ‘Sovietness’ of Order 234 was recognized by the FDGB leadership as a potential hindrance from the start. Herbert

\(^{14}\) SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/2027/22, bl. 27.
Warnke, then chairman of the commission on the implementation of Order 234 in the FDGB Bundesvorstand, was concerned enough to instruct union functionaries to stress the point to workers that the German authorities were intimately involved in formulating Order 234, even adding that one 'should not speak of an order at all, but rather of a measure per se for increasing work productivity and improving the situation of workers and salaried employees'.

Judging from the opinion reports at the time, Warnke had good reason to be concerned. The hope cherished by many Germans that it would be possible to overcome the post-war misery through hard work was undermined by both a widespread fear of Soviet reparations making this impossible as well as the more general prospect of a Soviet-style dictatorship being installed in the zone. A report of 7 July from Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg quoted the following as typical of a broad swathe of popular opinion: ‘One thing we cannot understand is why one so often reads in your (SED) press of the fulfilling and overfulfilling of such huge plan targets in industry, agriculture, etc.. How then is it possible that we don’t get to see even the smallest trace of it? Where is it all? Sometime we eventually ought to see something of it! [...] There are only two possibilities: either your figures are pure illusions or what is generally spoken around is true, namely that the Russians are hauling it all out of Germany!’ This latter suspicion was almost universal. As another report from April explained: ‘... they tell themselves that things will only get better with us once the Russians are out of Germany again [...] The number of people who think this is

also N. Naimark, The Russians, op. cit., p. 178-189. Despite Soviet promises to end dismantling in both 1946 and 1947, it was only finally stopped in 1948.

17 SAPMO-BA DY34/20738, Warnke to Landesvorstand FDGB Brandenburg, 1 Nov. 1947, unpag., underline in the original.
immense (\emph{riesengroß})\textsuperscript{18}. SED officials were in little doubt about the ramifications Soviet actions had on the political sympathies of industrial workers, however much support there may have been for socialism in principle: 'It is downright tormenting to have to realize what deep aversion not only women, but also workers have vis-a-vis the Russian occupying power. The workers characterize the American occupiers as gangsters, the Russians as plunderers. The workers are above all scared of a Russian dictatorship, and already claim to see Russian conditions arising in the eastern zone. For the masses institutional food, uniforms and official culture, for the few of course everything good and lovely in abundance. The parties are only shoved into the foreground in order to disguise the foreign control. The workers are very much for socialism and are also convinced that the new form of society will prevail, but not under Russian authority'.\textsuperscript{19}

Dislike of the Soviet occupation and of performance-related wages were not the only problems. The policy of singling out productive workers with extra food and privileging certain key enterprises with additional deliveries of scarce consumer goods was also broadly resented. While the distribution of extra goods and hot lunches was understandably welcomed and reportedly had positive effects on morale in the enterprises that benefitted (above all energy and raw materials), there was also, predictably, considerable bitterness among those workers left out of the social measures of Order 234. Construction and transport workers in particular were angry that they

\textsuperscript{18} LAB BPA IV/4/06/402, 'Stimmungsberichte aus der Berlin Bevölkerung!', 7 July 1948; LAB BPA IV/4/06/403, 'Betr.: Abzug der Westmächte aus Berlin etc.', 4 Apr. 1948.

\textsuperscript{19} LAB BPA IV/4/06/402, report of 6 Apr. 1948, unpag.
received neither extra food nor extra clothing despite working outside; the pressure on the unions for improvements was described as ‘naturally extraordinarily strong’. Criticism and disapproval of the productivity-increasing measures of Order 234 were by no means limited to workers. Many of the local union functionaries who were supposed to be helping implement the measures often spent more time criticizing working conditions in their factories and arguing that their own branches of industry — especially transport, construction and textiles, the lowest-skilled industries with the highest percentage of refugees and women — should not be left out of the social measures of Order 234. At the shop council conferences in the textile enterprises in Forst, Cottbus, Brandenburg and Luckenwalde, it was reported that ‘there was very strong criticism of the topics “London Conference” and especially “Order 234” which one can almost characterize as direct opposition and which cannot be left unheeded. [...] The arguments that were offered were the most inauspicious and stupid ones conceivable. [...] “You should be ashamed of yourselves for explaining Order 234 like that, with the additional provision (for other factories) we have less in our pot than before”, “We’re not going to have anything more to do with it”, “Why are we working at all anymore?” [...] Unfortunately, it is clear that it is precisely our SED functionaries who offer this kind of criticism, while the politically unorganized do not get so carried away’. Another report similarly complains of every imaginable ‘ideological unclarity’ among local union functionaries — open and implicit resistance to performance-related pay and to raising work-productivity, hostility towards the

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20 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/2027/22, bl. 140-1. In the event, however, receiving extra clothing allotments probably would have made less difference than many of them thought, for as local functionaries complained, the extra deliveries were often comprised mostly of women’s and children’s clothing of little use for a predominately male workforce. See BAP DC15/776, bl. 159.

21 BLHA Ld. Br. Rep. 332, Nr. 535, IG Textil to SED Landesvorstand, 20 Jan. 1948, bl. 122. It was reports like this that prompted the introduction of monthly ‘training days’ for union and factory
factory management (the 'new exploiters'), antagonism towards the technical intelligentsia (the old 'class enemy') — and concludes that they 'do not recognize the dialectical interaction that raising production at the same time means more to eat'.

The problem with this assessment, however, was that from the perspective of the factory floor there was no 'dialectical interaction' taking place. The food situation did not improve as was originally promised, and with the continuing removals of grain and sugar to the Soviet Union it remained to be seen whether higher work-productivity would lead to an improved living standard.

Against this backdrop of removals and reparations, the increasing regimentation on the shopfloor elicited widespread grumbling and shirking in factories across the Soviet Zone. Factory directors thus found themselves in an impossible position. Pressured on the one hand by the Soviets and German authorities to implement Order 234 and by their own workers to ignore it, they could, as Jeffrey Kopstein has recently shown, do little else but steer a middle course. At the time, many industrial managers, even in the VEBs, felt a greater obligation towards their workers than towards the occupying powers, and did what they could for their employees. The fact that many of the new managers were more or less 'workers' themselves, and that the divide between management and employees was rather fuzzy during these early years makes their unreliability in carrying out productivity-enhancing measures even less surprising.

functionaries 'for the strengthening of the ideological schooling of the broad masses of union members'. See SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/2027/16, protocol of 5th meeting of FDGB-BV, 12-13 Jan. 1948.


There was widespread foot-dragging, most clearly manifested in the fact that by April 1948, six months after Order 234 was announced, there had been only a 3% rise in piecework and performance-related pay.\textsuperscript{26} Despite press reports of rates of performance-related pay reaching 70-80%, party investigations in the factories found that the percentage was more like 25-30% (in Brandenburg 26%).\textsuperscript{27}

Of course managers were eventually forced to introduce performance-related wages in some form or another, but even when it was successfully introduced it accomplished little except for raising wages. Without a pool of unemployed, and operating in a system in which enterprises were under pressure to produce as much as possible regardless of the cost, managers in effect found themselves in competition for scarce labour: hence it was only logical to regard the transition from hourly to piece-rate pay as a chance to raise wages and make their enterprises more attractive on the flush labour market. The welfare measures of Order 234 presented certain opportunities to do this, and within months of its introduction, the Soviets and SED began worrying out loud that the so-called ‘Aufbaubefehl’ was being turned into an ‘Essenbefehl’ (eating order). But the easiest and most common way to attract and retain an adequate workforce was to fudge work norms. A June 1948 investigation of wage trends in 208 Brandenburg factories found that most of the firms that had already gone over to piece-rate wages had based their wage calculations on outdated productivity averages that kept norms low, resulting in a pattern of wage rises which ‘could not be reconciled with Order 234’.\textsuperscript{28} The payment of extra bonuses was also common. In June 1948 the SMAD complained to the Brandenburg authorities that ‘every possible bonus

\textsuperscript{26} SAPMO-BA DY30/TV2/2027/22, report to Ulbricht, 6 Apr. 1948, bl. 151.
\textsuperscript{27} SAPMO-BA DY30/TV2/2027/22, ‘Bericht über die bisherige Verwirklichung des Aufbauplans 234’, 8 Apr. 1948, bl. 119.
has been introduced' in a number of factories. At Deko-Pneumatik, for example, workers were not only paid the standard 15% piece-rate bonus, but also an extra 10% for dirty work. At the Sugar Refinery in Thöringswerder bonuses amounted to around 50% of total wages. Instead of seeking the reasons for the problems in their own planned economic system, the effects of reparations and the lack of a wage incentive, the Soviets instead blamed the German administration: 'All of these facts show that neither the Ministry for Labour, nor the Ministry for Economic Planning, nor the Head Administration of the people's own enterprises are earnestly dealing with the wage question'.

In its year-end report on the implementation of Order 234, the recently established German Economic Commission took these criticisms on board: 'Through the failure to draw up work norms or intentionally setting them too low, the existing work in the enterprises is drawn out and labour is hoarded, mostly resulting from a shortage of raw materials'. This tendency to raise wages without raising norms, it complained, needed to be countered by stronger controls on the shopfloor. In other words, it was no longer just a matter of managing workers, but also managing factory managers. But this, too, proved more easily said than done, above all because of the difficulty in finding appropriate personnel. As the Economic Commission complained: 'The necessary revisers of Department IIIa of the Office for Work and Social Services who are responsible for promoting the introduction of performance-related pay at the Kreis level are in many areas either not available or not suitable. In Brandenburg, for instance, revisers who were rejected as unsuitable by the employment offices were

nonetheless deployed with low pay, low ration cards and without a travel allowance. It is thus understandable why in Brandenburg only 18% of the employees in the industries examined are on performance-related pay.\footnote{BAP DC 15/776, DWK Year-End report on Order 234, 27 Sept. 1948, bl. 123.} Officials in Potsdam were also concerned that the poor provisioning and pay of the revisers opened up the problem of bribery, and called for swift steps to improve their remuneration.\footnote{ibid., bl. 118.} But efforts up to that point to raise the training and pay of revisers promised little for the future, and as the Economic Commission lamented one year after Order 234 was launched, ‘For the necessary inspection of the enterprises in this regard, only a completely insufficient total of 65 revisers... have as yet been trained in the entire zone’.\footnote{BLHA Ld. Br. Rep. 332, Nr. 433, bl. 83.}

While there is some evidence that Order 234 did in fact help improve overall discipline in the factories in terms of decreasing rates of absenteeism and ‘loafing’, by December 1948 the Soviets were nonetheless complaining of the ‘indiscriminate introduction of progressive performance-related pay and bonus systems’ by German factory directors despite the fact that such systems raised wages faster than productivity and were only intended for a tiny circle of the most important enterprises.\footnote{BAP DC 15/776, DWK Year-End report on Order 234, 27 Sept. 1948, bl. 123.} With hindsight it is clear that SED secretary Paul Merker’s subsequent letter to the provincial party leaders and chief newspaper editors calling for an immediate end to such practices had little effect in the factories.\footnote{SAPMO-BA DY30/IV/2/2027/27, letter from Perelivchenko to DWK chairman Rau, 23 Dec. 1948, bl. 47-52.} Although the initial plan was for production to rise twice as fast as wages, workers’ indifference and opposition to increasing regimentation

\footnote{Absentee rates in the VEBs reportedly decreased from 21.1% in August 1947 to 10.7% in January 1948, ‘loafing’ from 1.8% to 0.6% over the same period. There also appears to have been a drop in illness rates from 7.27% in January 1947 to 4.4% in July 1948, not least because of the improvements in food provision in the factories. BAP DC15/777, bl. 5, 35.}
in the factories and the willingness of local functionaries and managers to succumb to it ensured that just the opposite was the case.36

b.) Workers and the Hennecke Movement

This left the Soviets puzzled for a time, but never at a loss for ideas they again looked to their own experience of industrialization for a solution and found it in the invigoration of the activist movement and so-called ‘socialist competitions’. Although formally initiated under Order 234 for the purpose of raising norms and overall productivity, these had made little or no progress among East German managers and workers who were unfamiliar with them and who were in any case less than enthusiastic about norm-raising ploys.37 The movement clearly needed a new push. Above all, it needed a face, and Adolf Hennecke’s fitted the bill.38 By mining 387% of his normal coal quota in one shift (under specially prepared conditions), Hennecke and the movement named after him were supposed to inspire other workers to fulfil their potential by demonstrating how easy it was to overfulfil one’s quota. Here the SED’s parallel economic and ideological goals vis-a-vis the German working-class intersected. This was simultaneously an organizational measure for increasing productivity as well as a more ideological and erzieherisch attempt to raise the political consciousness of workers by presenting to them a model of sound socialist behaviour.

37 A report to the SED Central Committee in April 1948 complained that the activist conferences staged by local Soviet commandants were little more than ‘functionary and member assemblies’, and that many factory directors and union secretaries considered the activist movement a mere ‘improvisation’. SAPMO-BA DY30/IV/2/2027/22, ‘Bericht über die bisherige Verwirklichung des Aufbauplans 234’, 8 Apr. 1948, bl. 113-4. A contemporary report describes the competitions as mere formalities agreed between the managers of different enterprises, usually without consulting the workers and occasionally without even informing them. ibid., report to Ulbricht, 6 Apr. 1948, bl. 152.
Informed well in advance, party and union propagandists launched a massive and well coordinated campaign to popularize Hennecke and his ‘heroic deeds’. Within days of his feat, Hennecke’s face and name were seen everywhere. Newspapers were filled with unbelievable statistics and reports of local activists’ feats. Workers in other industries supposedly emulated him, and telegrams poured in announcing amazing new production records all across the SBZ. Activist posters were pasted everywhere, billboards were covered with activists’ faces, pins and medals were produced, even schools and streets were named after Hennecke. There was also a spate of embarrassingly puerile poems and songs about him, which one can only imagine hindered the movement more than helped it. One example offers a taste of their iconographic flavour:

Hennecke! Du bist der Mann, der uns begeistert!
Hennecke! Mit Dir wird unsere Not gemeistert!
Hennecke! Wir schwören Dir, wir wollen uns bemühen!
Hennecke! Durch Dich wird unsere Wirtschaft wieder blühen!
Hennecke! Du bist ein Held von unserer Klasse!
Hennecke! Du bist mit uns die starke Masse!
Hennecke! Wir wollen stets von Dir als Vorbild sprechen!
Hennecke! Du wirst der Brüder Knechtung auch im Westen brechen!

In spite of (or perhaps because of) such propagandistic efforts, reports from the factories offer little evidence that the movement worked, as most workers remained

\[39\] SAPMO-BA NY 4177/3, Nachlaß Hennecke, bl. 43.
sceptical of production increases so long as the problems of supply continued. In the words of a construction worker in Potsdam: ‘Yes, if we all wanted to work like Hennecke and were in the position to do it... I often wait hours for sand because there is none, or the other way around for lime because I don’t have any. It’s the same with my colleagues as it is for me. See to it that we don’t just stand around because there is no material, then Hennecke wouldn’t even be necessary in the first place’. Furthermore, the vast majority of workers correctly doubted the verity of Hennecke’s heroic performance and knew good and well that a normal work day simply did not allow for such production increases. As one retired worker put it: ‘I’ve worked in factories and know what one can manage to do. But the idea that a worker nowadays triples his performance or even increases it sixfold seems impossible to me as long as everything happens in a normal way. In my opinion the Henneckes prepare everything hours in advance, pick out the best tools for themselves and get provided with the necessary materials. In short, it’s actually just a big song and dance (ein Theater) that is being performed. I know what it’s all about. We’re supposed to produce more, the workers are supposed to work more, but one cannot do this like the Hennecke movement is doing it. That way you won’t find any sympathy among the really honest workers’.

And indeed it did not. Despite their occasional successes, the Henneckists gained little influence — either moral or political — over their fellow workers. In fact, their efforts won them more anger and hostility than admiration, as Hennecke himself had feared and quickly found out: ‘When I came to the shaft the next day the mates (Kumpel) did not look at me anymore. That’s anything but a nice feeling when you

look them in the eyes and say “Glückauf” and they nod, yes, but you don’t hear anything anymore. I used to be just Adolf, a miner like any other. But now there was a wall between us’. 42

Opposition arose on a number of levels. Given the grim material circumstances, there was an understandable aversion to working harder. A report from the VEB Siemens-Plania in Berlin-Lichtenberg describes the scene thus: ‘There were earnest and bitter faces, passionate discussions and vicious heckling. One worker pulled off his completely shredded shoe and placed his finger through the hole in the sole. “We’re supposed to walk around like this! This is how we’re supposed to stay healthy in order to work, to work even more?!” Turbulent heckling: “What did you actually have in mind?” — “At least give us shoes first!”’ 43 The fact that the management cadre often participated in the first Hennecke-shifts hardly added to their attractiveness, and where Hennecke shifts were pushed through against the will of employees, would-be activists often found themselves supplied with the poorest material, sometimes even finding their machines damaged or tools missing. 44 There was also widespread resentment towards the lack of solidarity the activists were showing their colleagues. Not only were they separating themselves from the social framework of the work collectives and being singled out for special bonuses and perquisites, they also ruined the energy-saving tricks of other workers; little surprise, then, that activists were often derided as ‘norm breakers’, ‘slave drivers’, ‘wage cutters’ and ‘traitors to workers’.

41 ibid.


recalled that even party and union functionaries at his mine reproached themselves ‘for having produced a norm-breaker like me’. 45

What seems to have repelled German workers from the Hennecke-Movement most, however, was again its ‘Sovietness’ — not in the sense of being modelled on the Stakhanov movement, but in its apparent display of acquiescence to Soviet rule and what many viewed as the Soviet exploitation of Germany. The numerous denunciatory letters and threats sent to Hennecke bear ample testimony to this: ‘For a whole year now you’ve sold the sweat of your comrades to the Russians and taken your blood money (Judasloh). You won’t live another year, you scoundrel!’; ‘You shabby rascal, you pimp of Soviet exploitation of German workers, you traitor to the German working people, you won’t escape your well-deserved punishment!’; ‘If you ever go to Russia again, take our advice and stay there, because someday you’ll have to take to your heels anyway or else you’ll hang from the nearest tree’. 46

Under widespread scepticism and worker opposition, the Hennecke-Movement and socialist competitions quickly degenerated to little more than empty rituals. Even the thin layer of activists it managed to produce was highly volatile and the activist-shifts generally no more than sporadic one-offs, as such ‘heroic performances’ immediately confronted the realities of the production process and sank back to normal levels. 47 While Alf Lüdtke and Peter Hübner are clearly correct in asserting that the reaction in the factories towards the activist movement cannot be characterized as a solid front of opposition or simply be reduced to a question of willing participation or

46 SAPMO-BA NY 4177/3, bl. 64, 66, 69.
47 See Klaus Ewers, op. cit., p. 952.
many of those who participated did so out of pressure or simply for material reasons, while many who refused did not reject it out of hand, but thought it either unnecessary or impossible given the raw materials situation — either way, the movement fell well short of its goal of inspiring East German workers to produce more and raising 'socialist consciousness' on the shopfloor.

By the time the GDR was founded in 1949, the activists' movement had essentially become a matter of bureaucratic number crunching and there was little more to be heard of the once all-important Order 234. But the need to raise productivity and discipline on the shopfloor remained a central problem. In 1951 the SED tried yet another ploy: the so-called 'enterprise collective contracts' (Betriebskollektivverträge, or BKVs), which were essentially an attempt to integrate the production of individual factories into the extraordinarily ambitious first Five-Year Plan of 1951-1955 and to decrease the overall wage expenditure in the state-run industries via the renewed introduction of performance-related pay. As one might expect, they soon ran up against many of the same problems that confronted Order 234 in 1947-48: widespread resentment among workers (especially towards those aspects of the contracts that anchored performance-related pay), coordination problems, unreliable local functionaries and factory managers, even isolated work stoppages. The implementation of Order 234 had set an important precedent in East German labour relations — or rather had in some ways marked the continuation of certain labour practices from the Third Reich: namely, local functionaries and factory managers often distorted official

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49 A. Bust-Bartels, Herrschaft, op. cit., p. 44.
wage policies for the benefit of workers in order to retain a sufficient labour supply.\textsuperscript{50} The campaign for the BKVs witnessed much the same phenomenon. In order to avoid any serious or potentially dangerous conflict between managers and employees, the disputes over BKVs were often settled \textit{en locale} in the factories via the kinds of informal mechanisms of conflict regulation that Peter Hübner has recently examined in detail.\textsuperscript{51} From their previous experience with the introduction of performance-related pay, managers, low-level party and union functionaries as well as workers themselves had learned that it was easier to settle disputes over wages, norms and working conditions informally on the shopfloor without the interference of higher levels of the state, party or union apparatus that were unfamiliar with local conditions and less in tune with the everyday concerns of production and the exigencies of the labour market.

In other words, the fault lines in the conflict-ridden effort to raise productivity and worker discipline on the shopfloor ran not so much between 'regime' and 'workers' as between the party leadership and state ministries on the one hand and the logic and needs of the factories on the other. It was easiest for many factory officials and local functionaries simply to 'muddle through' and pay lip service to official wage policies without giving them too much attention. Thus by the time the SED officially announced the accelerated 'construction of socialism' in the GDR in July 1952, it was clear that neither workers nor factory managers were strictly adhering to the BKVs. Well after the creation of the GDR in 1949, the SED leadership still had not gained complete control of the shopfloor, much less the hearts and minds of East German workers.

\textsuperscript{50} For all the differences between the Third Reich and GDR, it is striking how this tendency towards 'Tarifpolitik auf eigene Faust' under the Nazis was repeated under the SED. See Detlev Peukert, \textit{Volksgenossen und Gemeinschaftsfremde. Anpassung und Aufbegehren unter dem Nationalsozialismus}. (Cologne, 1982), p. 134.
The Origins and Effects of 17 June

With the rejection of the second Soviet ‘Germany note’ and West German signature to the European Defence Community, the Cold War took a new turn in 1952, and as a product of the Cold War, so, too, did the GDR. The announcement of the accelerated ‘construction of socialism’ at the fateful Second Party Conference in July not only marked a new era for the GDR in terms of its foreseeable longevity and international standing, it also marked a new departure on the domestic agenda: above all a new emphasis on investment in defence and heavy industry as well as the collectivization of agriculture, all financed by cuts in social spending and tax hikes (especially on the remaining private sector).

What was the initial reaction to the announcement of the ‘construction of socialism’ on the shopfloor? While many workers, especially the low-paid in relatively unskilled branches, were basically uninterested, their apathy producing little sediment in the archives, the picture painted by the internal reports is one of a wide array of responses ranging from excitement at the prospect of realizing what sounded like a decades-old goal of the workers’ movement to a deep-seated scepticism of the type of ‘socialism’ the Soviet-style SED intended to construct. Among older workers, especially those who had been organized in the workers’ movement before the Nazis took power and especially in the ‘core’ branches such as steel, coal and machine-building, the reports often posit a ‘positive attitude to the construction of socialism in general’: ‘We’ve been fighting for this for years. An old dream is finally becoming reality’.\(^{51}\) But even among these veterans of working-class politics, there were still

\(^{51}\) See P. Hübner, Konsens, op. cit.
'great unclarities' regarding precisely what the 'construction of socialism' meant. Many took this as an endorsement of greater self-regulation and worker-participation in the factory decision-making process — in direct contrast to the intention of increasing work discipline. Moreover, it was regarded as axiomatic among most workers, and not just the politically engaged, that the construction of socialism should mean the construction of a system of greater social equality. But this seemingly obvious notion seemed to stand in direct contradiction to recent government legislation, most notably the June 1952 Council of Ministers decree on the improvement of salaries for _Meister_ and the intelligentsia. Reports from summer 1952 show that this decree caused widespread indignation among workers: 'One shouldn't hand everything to them on a plate. They get everything immediately and we have to wait for years'; 'we pay the state millions in taxes and don't get anything ourselves'; 'we just work so that the _Meister_ and intelligentsia get their high salaries'; 'why are there special dining rooms for the intelligentsia?'

The fact that such egalitarian attitudes were deemed 'unclear' by the SED leadership also did not escape notice, least of all among the party rank-and-file. As one older comrade at the Volkswerft Stralsund succinctly put it: 'If Karl Marx

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51 SAPMO-BA DY34/15/61a/1191, 'Instrukteurbericht', 28 June 1952, p. 5-7; also DY30/IV2/5/302, 'Vorläufige kurze Zusammenfassung...', 14 July 1952. Despite the deliberate recruitment of manual labourers into the new professional elite, such feelings of injustice were a perpetual problem. The surveys conducted in the mid-1950s on workers who fled to the West quite clearly show widespread resentment towards the intelligentsia and their privileges. Whereas only 19 of the 76 industrial workers questioned in 'intensive interviews' by Infratest thought that the contributions of the intelligentsia must be acknowledged, 31 were critical on the whole and/or thought the intelligentsia was overpaid and 19 evinced strongly negative, even aggressive anti-intelligentsia attitudes. Interestingly, it appears that these workers made little distinction here between the 'old' and 'new' intelligentsia, despite the latter's being drawn predominately from former workers and peasants. In response to the question of whether upwardly mobile workers remained workers at heart, 52 offered an unambiguous 'no' (27 said most think they are better, 25 said most forget they had been workers) compared to only 19 who thought that at least most remained 'good colleagues'. V. G. Blücher, _Industriearbeiterschaft_, op. cit., p. 25-27. The introduction of the new bonus scheme in 1957 and _Gesetzbuch der Arbeit_ in 1961, both of which were widely perceived as benefiting the intelligentsia more than workers, aroused similar feelings of anger in the factories. See SAPMO-BA DY34/22673, 'Information Nr. 28/57', 21 June 1957, p. 6; SAPMO-BA DY34/22231, 'Einschätzung der bisherigen Ergebnisse der Diskussion des AGB Entwurfs', 10 Feb. 1961, p. 13.
knew how his teachings are being interpreted, how an *asiatic* (my italics - CR) socialism is being made out of them, he'd roll over in his grave*.54

Whatever the initial response towards the announcement of the 'construction of socialism', it did not take long for most workers to feel the detrimental effects of this turnabout in the overall thrust of SED social and economic policy. From 1949 onwards, the improvement of the material living standard had been a central feature of SED policy.55 By contrast, the bundle of measures announced at the Second Party Conference essentially amounted to a new austerity regime, as the government began systematically to pare what little fat there was on the economy and invest it into the expansion of the armed forces, heavy industry and subsidies for the new collective farms — all of which inevitably came at the expense of consumption and wages. Although the adverse effects of the new austerity regime were far worse for most other social groups (especially the lower-middle classes of farmers, artisans and small shopkeepers) this was little consolation, for the average East German industrial worker also saw his/her living standard deteriorate rapidly throughout the remainder of 1952 and the first half of 1953.56 The problems associated with the agricultural collectivization, coupled with a poor harvest in 1952, led to a significant increase in food prices. Prices for textiles and shoes also rose with the end of rationing, as did the costs of travel after the hitherto generous state subsidies for commuters were cut. By spring 1953 many consumer goods began to disappear from store shelves. At the same time, factories were forced to clamp down on overtime, as the high wage bill was proving too expensive within the tightened budget. Thus while the cost of living was

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rising, the take-home pay of many workers who depended on overtime hours to make ends meet was shrinking. The resulting price-wage scissors represented the first clear downward trend in the living standard since the hunger crisis of 1947. A slogan painted on the door of the party office in the Pump and Compressor Works in Brandenburg asked a question that was on most workers' lips at the time: 'Why is the worker today still being bled white?' By November 1952, sporadic food riots had broken out in a number of the major industrial centres in the south, including Leipzig, Dresden, Halle and Suhl, and throughout the following spring the internal reports show an unmistakable increase in signs of shopfloor discontent from all across the GDR — 'rabble-rousing', anti-SED graffiti and even alleged sabotage.

To make matters worse, by May 1953 the government realized that it could no longer afford the accelerated 'construction of socialism' and had little choice but to attack the perpetual problem of wage inflation in the factories, announcing an across-the-board norm increase of 10% in the factories. This had its own logic, in that norms were so low in many factories that they were commonly overfulfilled by 75-100%. But because wages were generally quite low and the cost of living relatively high, overfulfilment was a crucial factor in many workers' wage calculations and for many was the only way to achieve a modestly comfortable living standard. Taken together, these norm increases and the concurrent rise in prices amounted to roughly a 33% drop in real wages for most workers, which — and this was important — was simply too much to be compensated for at the factory level. Meanwhile, the Soviets had been inundated with reports on the strain these measures were causing on East German society, and finally saw it necessary to intervene with a series of 'suggestions' for

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58 P. Hübner, Konsens, op. cit., p. 150.
economic recovery — the so-called ‘New Course’ announced on 11 June. Although the SED immediately responded by steering a softer course vis-a-vis the middle classes and farmers, it curiously did not rescind the increased industrial work norms, which resulted in a wave of worker indignation as well as a number of isolated strikes.59

It was only on 16 and 17 June that the depth and extent of shopfloor anger at the increased norms and decreasing living standard were truly revealed. The tumultuous events of 17 June have been the subject of a plethora of studies, so there is no need to offer more than a very brief recapitulation here.60 On the 16th, workers at several construction sites in Berlin downed their tools and walked off the job, heading for the government quarter and demanding the reinstatement of the old norms. By the next day the protests and demonstrations — overwhelmingly comprised of manual workers — spread to 272 cities and towns across the GDR. Demands for immediate improvements in wages, working conditions and the availability of consumer goods quickly mushroomed into more explicitly political demands for democratic elections and unification with the West. Shouts of ‘we want more to eat’ and ‘where are all the swine?’61 intermingled with cries for ‘freedom’ and workers chanting ‘down with the Hunger-government!’62 Demonstrators ransacked SED regional and district headquarters in several localities and in a few instances physically assaulted functionaries and soldiers. In the end only the intervention of Soviet tanks could restore public order and SED rule.

Reports from factories all across the GDR speak of a diffuse dislike of the government (especially the 'goatie' Ulbricht), the SED, the Russians and the entire ‘red riff-raff’. Indeed, the fact that most local functionaries and party members thought it better not to wear their party pins in the days preceding and following the uprising offers a telling gauge of popular opinion at the time. This is not to say that the thousands of demonstrators were all convinced democrats opposing an authoritarian regime as a matter of principle. Comments such as that made by a Berlin worker to a DFD representative — ‘Back then (in the Third Reich) we at least had something to eat and here we still can’t get full after eight years’ — revealed a substratum of much more pragmatic concerns. The slogans of demonstrators in Stalinstadt likewise reveal a curious ideological mix: ‘Down with the Government!’; ‘We’re supporting Berlin!’; ‘We want free elections!’; ‘Throw the polacks out of Germany!’; even fascist songs like ‘Siehst Du im Osten das Morgenrot’ could reportedly be heard. Nor should one assume that workers spoke with a single united voice on the issue of wages and norms. By this time the oft-cited solidarity on the shopfloor after the war was gradually eroding under the constant pressure of differential wages, bonuses and perks. Calls for higher wages were especially loud among many lower-paid workers in relatively unskilled industries such as textiles, food preparation and paper, many of them women relatively new to the world of the industrial worker, who also complained about what they saw as the unfair privileges enjoyed by workers in larger enterprises which received special

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62 Cf. generally the numerous reports in the file SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/304.
63 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/544, DFD ‘Stimmungsbericht von den Ereignissen des 17.6. in Berlin’, undated, p. 3.
deliveries of basic foodstuffs and other commodities. And it should not be forgotten that the numerical majority of workers did not demonstrate at all. The massive upheavals in Berlin, Bitterfeld, Halle and a number of other industrial centres stood in marked contrast to the very minor disturbances in industrial towns like Brandenburg and Calbe, where production never even halted. In Bezirk Cottbus, most people were reported to have 'distanced themselves' from the strikes, at least publicly, though few were prepared to make any overly pro-regime statements or condemn them as the work of agents and provocateurs. Most simply kept their heads down, wishing to be viewed as neither party stooges nor 'enemies of the state'.

But whatever the particular grievances expressed by different groups of workers, and whatever differences between responses in different localities, the fact of a large workers' uprising, its forceful suppression and the lack of support from the West were key experiences for everyone involved and carried with them a number of consequences for the further 'construction of socialism' in the factories of the GDR. In the years that followed, the spectre of 17 June assumed downright mythical dimensions on both the shopfloor as well as among the party leadership. It immediately became a cultural icon synonymous with workers' discontent, a point of reference which could be invoked in order to give additional emphasis to expressions of anger and to make an implicit threat to functionaries if the regime was seen to be failing to 'deliver the goods'. During the 1950s, reports around the anniversaries of the 17 June uprising

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65 Given the current scarcity of fats, the extra provision of butter and margarine in key enterprises was a primary source of envy, and crops up in numerous reports. Cf. SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/544, 'Stimmungsbericht über die Lage in den Stadtbezirken', 18 June 1953, p. 1; SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/549, 'Bericht über auftretende Argumente und Stimmungen unter der Bevölkerung', 25 June 1953, p. 2.


invariably report various ‘provocations’ from workers such as moments of silence on
the factory floor, drinking bouts in the canteen, high rates of absenteeism, the increased
distribution of hostile leaflets and the daubing of slogans such as ‘Give us more to eat,
or have you forgotten the 17th of June?’ (the slogan rhymes in German: ‘Gebt uns mehr
zu fressen, oder habt ihr den 17. Juni vergessen?’).68

The party leadership learned two principal lessons from 17 June. First, it
became more wary of workers’ discontent and was determined to keep it from
mushrooming into any broader conflict. Surveillance in the factories was heightened as
a means of keeping tabs on the mood of the workforce, and any signs of possible
organized protest were thereafter swiftly dealt with by the improved security forces.69
This was illustrated no more vividly than on the anniversaries of 17 June: on 16 and 17
June 1955 the Bezirksleitung Berlin produced in its paranoid vigilance no fewer than
twelve reports outlining the ‘preventative measures’ taken by the police against possible
‘provocations’.70 Secondly, on a more conciliatory note, the party leadership learned
that it could not risk such a venture again, and in fact moved swiftly to defuse the
situation. None moved faster than Ulbricht, who, after all, almost lost his job because
of the uprising and who was, according to the testimony of some of his colleagues in
the Politbüro, haunted throughout the 1950s by the thought of a repetition of 17 June.71
What makes this important for our purposes here is that this fear of its own industrial
workforce effectively crippled the regime on the shopfloor, where circumstances

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68 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/660, Bezirksleitung Frankfurt/Oder to ZK, ‘Wochenbericht vom 3.6 -
p. 7.
69 See esp. T. Diedrich, Der 17. Juni in der DDR, op. cit.; Mary Fulbrook, Anatomy, op. cit., ch. 5, 6; I.
Kowalczyk et al (eds.), Der Tag X, op. cit..
70 SAPMO-BA DY30/TV2/5/975, Bezirksleitung Berlin to ZK.
Arbeiterbewegung, no. 3 (1990), 350-78.
quickly returned to the *status quo ante*. The norm increases that triggered the uprising were rescinded, including the ‘voluntary’ increases that some workers were coerced into accepting from April 1953 onwards, and in contrast to the SED’s original intentions, there was a general levelling of wages in industry. The overall living standard also improved as investment was diverted from heavy industry into consumer goods, housing and price and travel subventions (though none of this could bring about an immediate end to the discontent that had been building up over the previous year).^2

Workers, for their part, also learned that there was little to be gained from open confrontation. This is not to say that there was any real change of heart or that they became more quiescent and resigned in the face of the regime after 1953, as is often implied in historical accounts. It is rather that their dissatisfaction and assertion of interests (broadly defined) thereafter tended to be channelled in different directions and expressed in different ways. The brutal crushing of the demonstrations by Soviet tanks left few illusions about the effectiveness of open protest. Even as early as 18 June some workers were openly wondering why they even bothered to join the demonstrations. As one worker in a Prenzlauer Berg factory put it: ‘It was senseless. I’ve spoken with my colleagues and they don’t even know any longer why they went out into the streets’.^3  In the following years, open confrontation seemed even less promising. As one worker in Cottbus put it in 1961: ‘We can’t strike, no one supported

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^2 For a neat listing of the ‘successes’ of 17 June, see A. Bust-Bartels, *Herrschaft*, op. cit., p. 63-64. The wave of strikes only gradually abated into a surface calm over the summer of 1953. In the words of one report from September 1953, although the ‘frankly irritated mood’ of the previous months had subsided with the ‘extraordinarily improved delivery’ of consumer goods and the lowering of prices, the ubiquitous ‘enemy’ was still propagating the argument that 10 DM for a pound of butter, 8 DM for chocolate and 100 DM for a pair of shoes was too much for ordinary workers to afford. LAB-BPA IV2/4/06/381, ‘Einschätzung der Lage im Kreis Prenzlauer Berg’, 26 Sept. 1953, p. 1.

us either on 17/6'. But as we will see below, avoiding open conflict was not tantamount to submission on all fronts.

This points to what was probably the most important long-term consequence of 17 June on the SED’s attempt to control the East German shopfloor. The government never again attempted to introduce arbitrary blanket norm increases in such a way as it did in May and June 1953. In a sense, decisions over these issues had been displaced to lower levels of the regime apparatus in any event. By 1953 the kinds of local arrangements and informal ‘deals’ between factory managers and workers that developed in the latter 1940s and early 1950s were firmly established and due to expand further. After the shock of 17 June, even the most hard-nosed factory directors learned to bargain with workers, usually via the key figure of the brigadier or work-collective leader, in disputes over questions of pay, norms and working conditions. Thus the practice of ‘grass-roots-negotiation’, reinforced after the experiences of 1953, undermined the party leadership’s ability to implement its policies in the future. As we will see, by the time the government attempted to introduce a second general wage stop in the form of the Produktionsaufgebot in 1961-2, it found itself largely incapable of actually carrying it out at the grass-roots.

‘Erziehung’, Protest and Indifference on the Shopfloor

As the foregoing discussion makes clear, many East German workers resented the policies of the ruling communist party that claimed to govern on their behalf. Throughout the GDR’s history there were various signs of shopfloor protest indicative
cited in M. Fulbrook, Anatomy, op. cit., p. 158.
of economic or political discontent — critical graffiti, jokes, anonymous threats, poor workplace discipline, etc.. Many of these acts of defiance and non-conformity recalled forms of working-class protest under the Third Reich — not surprising given the elimination of independent unions for representing workers' interests and the build-up of repressive security apparatuses under both regimes. Because of the repressive nature of the regime and its tendency to politicize all behaviour, it is important not to overemphasize the extent of opposition in the factories. As was also the case under the Nazis, much of life on the shopfloor was characterized more by indifference than open protest or active opposition. Moreover, many of the apparent manifestations of anger or dissent in the factories (which were often inextricably interrelated) were rather ambiguous. Attributing what appear to be signs of shopfloor protest to political or economic discontent is not as straightforward as it might at first seem.

Of course some signs of shopfloor discontent were unmistakable. For instance, workers adopted a variety of strategies for opposing or escaping the periodic attempts to raise norms and reassert control over wages in the 1950s. Most drastic among these were the periodic strikes and work stoppages throughout the decade, though most remained purely local affairs and were usually quite quickly and effectively dealt with at the local level. It is impossible to say with any certainty whether the number of strikes rose or fell over this period since many minor work stoppages or threats of stoppages undoubtedly were not reported in the first place. Despite the relative calm on the shopfloor since June 1953, the FDGB still reported 166 work stoppages or strikes in 1960, the vast majority triggered by a sudden decrease in wages resulting from
arbitrary, unnegotiated norm changes or poor organization of supply or production.\textsuperscript{76} As Peter Hübner has shown, the result of these unspectacular work stoppages was often a compromise solution — for example returning to work in exchange for retraction or dilution of the cause of grievance, usually either with remuneration for the period of the work stoppage or the opportunity to make up for lost wages with extra overtime.\textsuperscript{77}

But given their politicization by the regime and the threat of punishment or arrest for participating, strikes were the exception and not the rule, and workers often did not need to strike in the first place. Because of the threat of sanctions or, in extreme cases, even imprisonment, most expressions of discontent and methods of asserting interests were more subtle and indirect. Given the shortage of labour, one of the most common and effective means of avoiding a cut in one’s wages or working conditions short of downing one’s tools was simply to switch jobs, or at least threaten to do so. Systematic statistics on fluctuation in the GDR are apparently unavailable for the 1950s, but a report on the third quarter of 1958 gives an idea of the scope of the phenomenon. During these three months alone the rate of fluctuation was 5.1% in state-run industry as a whole, ranging from 3.6% in the relatively well-paid coal and energy branches to 14.7% in construction.\textsuperscript{78} Many, though by no means all, such cases of job-switching represent a kind of hidden conflict between workers and employers in which one simply sought a different position that more closely met one’s expectations instead of protesting or negotiating with managers — a practice not all that uncommon.


\textsuperscript{78} BAP, ZStA E-1, Nr. 8773, ‘Bericht über die Fluktuation der Arbeitskräfte in der sozialistischen Wirtschaft’, 30 Jan. 1959, bl. 73-84.
in the West either. The introduction of new norms in the foundries of Brandenburg offers a case in point. When union functionaries tried to switch from the ‘provisional work norms’ to ‘technically determined norms’ (TAN) at the VEB Patent-Lineal in 1955, the result was a worsening staff shortage. What made the workers so angry was that the new norm agreement they were being asked to accept seemed simply unfair. Whereas they normally had to fetch their own material, on the day of the examination this was done for them. Moreover, they were timed about ninety minutes before lunchbreak, which was generally considered the period of the fastest work tempo in the factory. In the final analysis, they now earned around two Marks less per day than before. Although most of the workers grudgingly signed the new norm agreement, few were genuinely willing to accept it. On the next day, 32 of the 80 employees in the tin section called in sick, and even many of those who came to work openly told the section manager that they would look for other jobs if the new norms were not rescinded. It is hardly surprising that workers took advantage of full employment in these ways given that they had also done so under the Third Reich.

Reports throughout the 1950s are full of complaints of ‘loafing’ (Arbeitsbummelei), ‘work restraint’ (Arbeitszurückhaltung), and various other forms of ‘insufficient work discipline’ such as feigning illness, arriving to work late, going home early, drinking on the job, taking unscheduled breaks, refusing to carry out certain tasks, etc. This was by no means unique to the GDR; labour historians have long interpreted such behaviour as subtle ways of expressing discontent or opposing

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79 This was a decades-old aspect of working-class life, and there were of course a variety of reasons for switching jobs. In the mid-1960s, Dieter Voigt found that 25% of the workers at the large construction sites in Bezirke Cottbus and Halle had left their previous jobs to escape shift-work and the assembly line, while 50% wanted more vacation and 32% higher wages. D. Voigt, Montagearbeiter in der DDR, (Darmstadt, 1973), p. 126-27.

unpopular measures on the shopfloor. There are certainly many cases where such
behaviour was quite clearly motivated by a desire to oppose the ever-increasing
regimentation in the factories: for instance, workers sometimes consciously held back
labour reserves as a means of maintaining low norms.

But it is problematic to interpret such behaviour as a clear sign of protest or an
unambiguous indication of discontent, for it was generally motivated by a variety of
factors. Those who arrived to work late or left early often did so in order to procure
scarce consumer goods that were rationed and/or in short supply. This practice was by
no means limited to the years of scarcity after the war, and was especially common
whenever word spread of the arrival of a delivery of coveted goods at a local store.
Likewise, elevated illness levels were not always indicative of poor discipline at all, but
often resulted from sheer physical exhaustion or poor nutrition, especially in the early
years and in the wake of various ‘competitions’ in which some workers drove
themselves into the ground in order to take advantage of enhanced income
opportunities. Moreover, even when calling in sick was a matter of poor work
discipline, it was often not a sign of protest. ‘Blue Mondays’ seem to have been
especially common, during harvest season, and in particular among workers who also
owned small plots of land or gardens: for instance, at the large construction sites near
Cottbus, which drew much of their workforce from the farming villages of the region
where workers retained small plots.81

Workers constantly took advantage of the GDR’s generous sickness
compensation, which annually allowed for six weeks’ sick pay at 90% of one’s base
wage plus extra illness compensation that, taken together, sometimes even exceeded

(Berlin, 1995).
one’s normal income. Reports occasionally suggested that workers sought out ‘unconscientious doctors’ to give them a sickness certificate despite being in good health. Investigations in individual enterprises or of individual workers — which were not above asking neighbours about the activities of supposedly ill workers — sometimes revealed rates of feigned illness as high as 50-60%.

But because of the labour shortage, lax work discipline was generally dealt with rather leniently in the factories, as Central Committee officials occasionally complained. Dismissals on the basis of poor discipline were rare; the most common forms of punishment of alleged ‘ slackers’ were moderate economic sanctions — for instance the retention of a year-end bonus — or the ‘shame tactic’ of publicly scolding them on the factory bulletin board or in the local newspaper. Designating poor discipline as opposition — let alone political opposition — would be far too simplistic, and would be essentially to make the same mistake as many SED officials.

These were the kinds of problems facing the SED’s practical attempts during the 1950s to raise productivity and discipline in the factories. But diligence at work was not the only expectation placed on East German workers, and acts of non-conformity were by no means limited to economic issues. The related ideological attempt to transform them into ‘socialist personalities’ and ‘win them over’ to the SED’s cause also demanded active ‘gesellschaftspolitische’ participation. These efforts fared little better, and workers’ indifference towards the regime’s various overtures for...

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participation remained one of the greatest disappointments among officials throughout
the 1950s — indeed throughout the entire history of the GDR.

The widespread indifference on the shopfloor was clearly manifested in the
consistently low turnout at factory assemblies, party and union meetings (the poor
results we have already seen in the context of Order 234 did not significantly change in
the years that followed) as well as in the level of discussion at many such meetings
even among those who attended. Try as they might, party functionaries were singularly
unsuccessful in steering the 'political discussions' with workers in the directions they
wanted — indeed, in keeping them focused on what the SED considered 'political'
issues at all. More often than not, they became completely bogged down in everyday
complaints. In the rather paranoid words of a 1955 union report from Berlin, 'the class
enemy is trying to divert attention away from the Paris accords and their consequences
for Germany and to exploit the dissatisfaction with the shortage of consumer goods for
his own purposes'.

This was even the case at many of the political forums convened
during the turbulent autumn of 1956 for the purpose of discussing the evils of the
'counter-revolution' in Hungary and the 'imperialist aggression' of Britain and France
in the Suez. One local party secretary in Berlin-Köpenick summed up his impression of
these discussions as follows (and probably not without some opening beautification):
'Our press is eagerly read and people are paying attention to our argumentation. The
positive discussions are prevailing. However, time and again they end with our own
circumstances, whereby questions of production, difficulties regarding raw materials,
problems with the provision of goods, the bonus system, the abolition of ration cards,

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64 SAPMO-BA DY34/20772, 'Information Nr. 111', 2 Apr. 1955, p. 2.

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the pension question and sectarian attitudes towards the intelligentsia take up the majority of the discussion’.\footnote{LAB-BPA IV2/4/02/256, ‘Betrifft: Einschätzung der politischen Situation im Kreis Köpenick’, 16 Nov. 1956.}

Besides low turn-out, workers’ disinterest towards the regime’s efforts at political mobilization and ‘Erziehung’ was also manifested in a number of other ways, including switching off political broadcasts at one’s workplace, demonstrative coughing during political presentations, refusals to sign resolutions endorsing specific domestic or foreign policies, refusals to participate in any of the various competitions or ‘movements’ devised by the SED or to make contributions in support of striking workers in capitalist countries. No doubt voicing the sentiments of countless colleagues across the GDR, one worker at the VEB ‘Elizabeth Hütte’ in Brandenburg justified his refusal to make a donation to striking West German workers by drawing a comparison to the GDR: ‘For me there is always only employer and employee. In West Germany there is still a union to represent workers’ interests — we don’t have one. Strikes in the West are called when employers carry out wage decreases. And what do we have here?’\footnote{BLHA, Bez. Pdm. Rep. 530, Nr. 836, ‘Informationsbericht’, 8 Feb. 1955, p. 2-3.} After the Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956 there were numerous examples of workers refusing to sign a resolution of support for the action, which many equated to ‘supporting murder’.\footnote{SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/574, ‘13. Informationsbericht’, 7 Nov. 1956, bl. 88-9.} Refusals to take on party or union functions or to participate in factory elections were also a constant source of frustration for local officials. As union officials in Berlin complained in 1955, even when they managed to persuade SED members or positively-disposed unaffiliated workers to run as candidates
for functions, they were often shouted down at election assemblies with such remarks as ‘He talks too much politics’. 88

Yet refusals to participate were not merely motivated by a dislike of ‘politics’. For one thing, the apparent unwillingness of many East German workers to discuss political issues in a public forum did not necessarily reflect a lack of interest. Silence was often more a manifestation of caution than apathy, of the desire to avoid making incriminating comments that might lead to trouble. Even when it clearly was a sign of apathy, there were a number of factors at play. Certainly one reason for the disinterest even in assemblies dedicated specifically to production issues was the widespread impression that making suggestions for improvements did not lead to any changes in any event. As one worker in Potsdam complained: ‘Once again there is a little Heine up there at the controls and everyone has to dance to his flute. But no one listens to the opinions of workers...’ 89 Moreover, as we will see in the following chapters, there was a variety of reasons for workers’ refusing to join the East German armed forces or to volunteer for a stint of work in agriculture — poor pay, lack of accommodation, family considerations and the like.

The campaign for ‘brigades of socialist work’ in 1958-59 offers a vivid illustration of the many obstacles facing the SED’s efforts to mobilize industrial workers. This campaign has recently received considerable attention for the role these brigades eventually assumed in offering their members a structural framework for articulating their material interests to management officials — completely contrary to intentions. 90 The fact that most of the difficulty of getting this movement started in the

first place had to do with precisely the type of non-economic unwillingness to participate on the part of workers described above has, however, received little notice. As a 'higher form' of collective organization, the brigades of socialist work were supposed to offer a more suitable framework for the development of the 'new man' than the production brigades introduced in 1950. What made the 'brigades of socialist work' qualitatively different from their forerunners were their educational functions outside the realm of work — not just 'sozialistisch zu arbeiten', but also 'sozialistisch zu leben und zu lernen'. Even the families of members were to be involved in the life of the brigade, which might include weekend trips, recreational activities, sporting events, and the like.

By far the greatest hindrance to the movement was this new emphasis on one's behaviour and activities away from the factory. It was one thing to declare oneself willing to be more efficient or diligent at work, but it was quite another to play the role of upstanding 'socialist worker' at home as well. Even among groups of workers well-disposed to the idea of founding or joining a 'brigade of socialist work', few had any idea what 'socialist living' would entail. As one report put it: 'It appears that the call "sozialistisch lernen und leben" (especially leben) presents greater problems than the call "sozialistisch arbeiten"'. Among younger workers in particular, union functionaries again and again heard comments such as 'Do we have to become a

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This was particularly visible in their prescribed practice of 'self-education', which consisted for the most part of a system of mutual control, above all in the form of brigade meetings at which members regularly commented on the behaviour and performance of colleagues.
socialist brigade? We can fulfil our economic tasks and can arrange our private lives however we like!’ Women workers in Berlin often asked about shopping in the West: ‘They say that if one forbids them to do this, they would not work in a socialist brigade’. Some workers refused to join because they feared that their religious activities would be curtailed, above all that their children would have to undergo the secular Jugendweihe. A number of very religious workers even went so far as to declare that ‘joining a brigade of socialist work is a profession of atheism’. Even SED members by and large refused to join socialist brigades because ‘there would be too many stipulations for one’s personal life and they therefore feel hindered in their personal matters’. Worse still, even when workers agreed to form ‘brigades of socialist work’, they hardly functioned as the models of politically-conscious behaviour they were intended to be. The ‘brigade evenings’, for instance, were in practice little more than traditional Stammtische, and attempts to instrumentalize such social gatherings were often utterly futile. As one brigadier in Brandenburg exclaimed: ‘If there is going to be a political talk and I have to pay for my own beer, I’m not coming!’

Again, it would be far too simplistic to interpret such behaviour in its entirety as political opposition — that is, opposition to the East German regime as such. Motives are not always easily discernable from behaviour. While some of the above refusals to comply with party and state demands were no doubt intended as subtle, partially disguised expressions of discontent, quite often they came about simply because one was overwhelmed by the sheer number and frequency of these demands. Reports often complain, for instance, of a weariness of discussions and demonstrations: ‘we’re sick

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92 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/422, report of 8 July 1959, bl. 54.
94 ibid., bl. 47, 54, 60, 84.
and tired of demonstrating' was a common refrain on 8 May, 'Liberation Day', which always came only one week after the annual May Day demonstrations." Nonetheless, there were plenty of signs of political discontent that were not so subtle and disguised. Workers often expressed their dissatisfaction with the regime by daubing 'enemy slogans', swastikas or other critical graffiti on factory walls, bathroom stalls or in public places, by defacing political posters (especially those with leading party officials, and in particular Ulbricht) or by inventing clever witticisms, neologisms and even subversive secret greetings such as 'SALEM' (Soldaten aller Länder erstürmen Moskau) or 'KONSUM' (keine Oder-Neisse, sondern unsere Memel). Popular graffiti themes included demands for democratic elections, the dissolution of the government, the ousting of the Soviets and unification with the West.

Although workers' criticism at factory assemblies and other public gatherings was generally limited to economic grievances, and although most expressions of specifically political dissent were anonymous, workers did not always draw these lines so precisely, especially when drinking in pubs, riding in public transportation, when among one's mates on the shopfloor or during moments of political instability. This came through loud and clear in reports on the mood and situation in the factories during the politically explosive autumn of 1956, when thousands of Polish workers went on strike, far-reaching reforms in Hungary were eventually crushed by Soviet tanks and the Suez crisis heightened the threat of another war. Conventional wisdom prior to the opening of the East German archives in 1990 was that political dissent in 1956 was largely confined to the intelligentsia, above all in the universities. We now know this

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96 SAPMO-BA DY34/20772, 'Information Nr. 120', 5 May 1955, p. 2.
was not the case, and the internal reports clearly paint a picture of widespread political
ferment in the factories as well. 98

As always, the political discontent on the shopfloor in 1956 had numerous
overlapping bases and forms of expression. The party reports distinguished a number
of different strands of ‘enemy arguments’: the abolition of the Oder-Neisse border
(especially in factories with a predominance of former refugees), anti-Soviet slogans
(above all regarding the ‘occupation’ of both Hungary and the GDR) and speculation on
the ‘conclusions that must be drawn for the situation in the GDR’ — generally to the
effect that the SED-government should be dissolved. There were also numerous
references to it being better in the West or under the Nazis, widespread daubing of anti-
SED slogans, swastikas or SS runes and even the occasional round of drinks toasting
Adenauer or Hitler. 99

But even here it is hard to determine the extent to which such behaviour and
expressions of dissent were indicative of fundamental political opposition to the
regime, dislike of certain aspects of it, if it was simply a spill-over from economic
discontent or merely a way of aggravating the authorities — indeed, how indicative it is
of the opinions, values and motivations that underlay it at all. The references to the
Nazi period, for instance, could just as easily represent a desire to antagonize the
communist authorities via symbols to which the SED was opposed as any real belief in
Nazism. This certainly seems the case when favourable references to Hitler and the
daubing of swastikas were accompanied by favourable references to Adenauer and
demands for political freedom — or when Nazism and political freedom were curiously

98 For an overview, see Mitter, Wolle, Unter gang, op. cit.; M. Fulbrook, Anatomy, op. cit.
99 See generally the file SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/574; see also DY34/22672, ‘Anlage zur Information
Nr. 48’, 17 Nov. 1956; ‘Anlage zur Information Nr. 47’, 10 Nov. 1956.
combined in slogans such as that painted on a wall at the Synthesewerk Schwarzheide: 'SS, liberate us'.

The same holds true for the anti-Soviet and anti-SED comments. In the autumn of 1956 there was a general and diffuse desire for far-reaching change, probably best captured by the comment of one Berlin worker: 'One should start cleaning things up here as well, because it stinks up there at the top'. But as often as not, such comments were, as in June 1953, directed more against the Soviets, the SED leadership and Ulbricht personally than against the party per se, let alone the idea of socialism. In the factories of Bezirk Cottbus, it was reported that whenever 'hostile discussions' to the effect that 'things have to change here as well' were countered by the question of who should be in power (which the report parenthetically notes was only seldomly done) most workers said they did not want to have capitalism again either. Infratest interviews conducted on East German workers emigrating to the West in 1956 also suggest that there was broad support for socialism in principle, whatever one thought of the party leadership and GDR. In terms of the 'influence of communism on those questioned', the interviewers concluded that 35% were 'entirely or predominately Marxist-Leninist minded' (of whom 6% were classified as 'convinced communists', 12% as 'unreflective carriers of communist ideology' and 17% as 'predominately, but

100 SAPMO-BA DY34/22672, 'Anlage zur Information 48', 17 Nov. 1956, p. 5; 'Anlage zur Information Nr. 47', 10 Nov. 1956; see also ibid. It is worth noting, however, that the unmistakable wave of anti-Semitic vandalism, anonymous phone calls and verbal utterances during the Suez crisis suggests that in at least some cases there was more to these Nazi references than mere bloody-mindedness. A report to the SED Central Committee on popular opinions about the Suez crisis reports 'anti-Semitic discussions... from all Bezirke', ranging from disturbingly hateful comments such as 'The Jews are to blame for everything, Hitler should have gassed more of them' to more 'traditional' anti-Semitic notions of greedy Jewish capitalists and a Jewish world conspiracy: 'The cause of the war in Egypt is the Jews. They've filled up their money-sacks again and want a third world war'; 'The Jews of all people have started the war, they have high positions everywhere, all the way to the UN'. SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/574, 9. Kurzinformation', 2 Nov. 1956, p. 5. See also LAB-BPA IV/4/06/333, 'Stimmungen von Genossen und aus der Bevölkerung zur politischen Lage', 2 Nov. 1956, p. 4.


102 SAPMO-BA DY34/22672, 'Anlage zur Information Nr. 47', 10 Nov. 1956, p. 9.
not consciously Marxist’), 26% ‘partially, but not predominately Marxist’ and 35%
‘free of communist ideology, unreflective Western to consciously anti-communist’.103

Clearly, one must be careful in attributing certain motives to signs of discontent
— not just to protest on the shopfloor, but to protest of all kinds in the GDR. While the
famous strikes in and around Magdeburg in autumn 1956 may indeed have captured the
imagination and reflected the wishes of millions of workers all across the GDR, they
remained singular at the time in both their scope and in their relatively clear
combination of both economic and more specifically political criticism.104 Most of the
strikes occurring during the autumn of 1956 were small, revolved around local issues
and do not seem to have been affected, much less motivated, by broader political
developments at all. A strike at the BKW ‘Freundschaft’ in Bezirk Cottbus, for
instance, was triggered by a simple case of underpayment for unloading a truck. Another strike at the VEB Preßwerk revolved around the common issue of norm levels,
as did the threat of a work stoppage at the steel works in Brandenburg. Most banal of
all was the cause of a strike in a factory in Bischofswerda, where workers complained
of inadequate heating.105

Whatever the motivations underlying it, most worker protest in autumn 1956,
like most protest in the GDR in general after 1953, remained limited to individual
actions or to individual brigades, sections or factories. This is not to say that worker
protest was rare, but rather that it rarely occurred in the form of large scale collective

of what the interviewees considered the ‘ideal state’ offered similar results: 16% for ‘ideal communism’
(state intervention, unlimited communal property); 33% for a planned economy (co-existence of
communal and private property, far-reaching state control); 22% for state ownership of raw materials
industries, partial planning of the economy and room for private initiative; 26% for the primacy of private
property (moderate state control, intervention only in cases of emergency); and only 12% for unlimited
private property. See ibid., p. 58.
action. After June 1953 the security apparatus at least managed to preclude that. But these countless small acts of non-conformity and self-interest on the shopfloor — the sick days, slow-downs, refusals to participate in production competitions, etc. — were nonetheless both politically and economically important. For their sum total was not only a discrediting of the SED's self-stylization as a party that represented workers' interests, but also an ever-inflating wage-bill and insufficient productivity gains, a 'chipping away at the state' that the regime was unable or unwilling to try to change, at least as long as the border was open.

**Undermining the Produktionsaufgebot: Subtle Opposition and Shopfloor Arrangements**

With the border to West Berlin finally sealed after 13 August 1961, much of the cause for the aggravating labour shortage in the GDR was eliminated. Workers could no longer simply leave for the West if in search of a better living standard or if they got into trouble at work. It did not take long for the party leadership to make use of its enhanced position vis-a-vis the industrial workforce, and it did so in two ways. First, in the immediate wake of the 'measures' of 13 August there was a general crackdown against supposed 'internal enemies' of all kinds, including so-called 'work shy' elements. But more importantly, it took the bold step of trying once again to raise industrial work norms in a blanket fashion, something which it had not dared since June 1953. Thus what had been only tentatively and periodically attempted in the intervening years via such devices as the production brigades and the so-called

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106 Taken from J. Kopstein, 'Chipping Away at the State', op. cit.
‘technically determined norms’ was now to be quickly taken care of in the shadow of the Wall.

The campaign, known as the *Produktionsaufgebot*, began in typical fashion with a somewhat less than spontaneous resolution by a brigade of workers at the VEB Elektro Kohle in Berlin-Lichtenberg to raise their own norms by some 15% (which was less difficult than it sounds, as norms at this factory were at the time overfulfilled by an average of 195%), and soon became a carefully staged and widely publicized movement. But no matter how the FDGB tried to package it, the *Produktionsaufgebot* essentially amounted to a centrally-directed wage freeze, as the slogan ‘to produce more in the same time for the same pay’ clearly indicated. Loafing, absenteeism and all other forms of industrial indiscipline were to be swept out of the republic on a tide of 15% norm increases.

As one could only expect, the *Produktionsaufgebot* was poorly received in the factories, as both party and union reports show: ‘the *Produktionsaufgebot* is just a wage scissors’; ‘now come adminstrative wage-cuts’; ‘here they come with their norm-scissors’. The reports also clearly show that workers themselves were no less aware than the party leadership of the direct connection between their virtual house arrest and this latest campaign to boost work productivity. A reportedly ‘common argument’ in Cottbus was that ‘they’ve closed the border on 13 August in order to revamp the norms and carry out a wage freeze’. In Berlin-Treptow a lathe-operator was overheard by a union functionary comparing the situation to June 1953: ‘Another 17 June will have to come so that the measures of 13 August will be undone. What couldn’t be pushed through back then is now supposed to happen through the *Produktionsaufgebot*’. One

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107 For the appeal by the Lichtenberg brigade, see LAB-BPA IV-2/6/843-844.
worker in Potsdam was even more to the point: 'For years you were too cowardly to change the norm, and now you come up with this ploy'.

Coming so close on the heels of the exceedingly unpopular ‘measures’ of 13 August, the *Produktionsaufgebot* created a potentially explosive situation. The discontent in the factories had reached its highest level since at least 1956, and probably since 1953, the last time the regime had introduced a blanket norm increase by fiat. The sheer number of reports keeping track of the situation in the factories clearly testifies to the nervousness of the party leadership. Yet there were, despite all the invocations of 17 June, few signs of mass protest among workers beyond mere verbal rejection. There were no large-scale strikes, indeed no significant change in the number, scope or nature of work stoppages at all. The total number of strikes reported by the FDGB had actually decreased from 166 in 1960 to 135 in 1961, to rise again only slightly to 144 in 1962. And of these, the vast majority were still small, spontaneous and unorganized, involving on average only slightly over ten participants per strike. Why?

The conventional explanation is two-sided. First, as I have already noted, after the experience of June 1953 the improved security forces intervened rapidly to deal with industrial unrest before it could escalate into any wider protest. And secondly, the flip-side of this was that workers were commensurately less willing or able to stage large-scale strikes than in 1953, not least because they could no longer escape to the

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West if things went awry. While both of these assertions have their merits, they tend to reduce the question merely to one of repression and therefore do not capture the complexities of the situation. There were a number of important structural factors hindering collective action besides simple repression. The most obvious, of course, was the lack of any large-scale independent institutional framework for worker representation in the GDR. A less obvious, but no less important, factor were the ever-growing divisions within the East German workforce created by the widespread use of performance-enhancing bonuses and perks, the constant competitions, generational tensions, resentments between skilled and unskilled, the distortions of the brigade system and above all the policy of wage differentiation across industrial sectors and geographic regions.

Two of these factors deserve particular emphasis. First, as regards the brigades, these have been predominately portrayed as small structures of solidarity, with the emphasis on their role as miniature interest-representing bodies under the otherwise rather monolithic formal framework of East German industrial relations. Yet by their very existence, these small pockets of cohesion arguably only serve to underline the lack of broader networks of collective action. Moreover, the tensions they caused in many factories hardly promoted worker solidarity. Since individual workers’ wages were often tied to the productivity of their brigade as a whole, quite often they served to maintain and accentuate the pre-existing social and economic distinctions within the factories: the most productive workers forming brigades to the exclusion of others, youth brigades refusing older workers because they were not as fit, all-male brigades

\[\text{\footnotesize\cite{29}}\]

There were reportedly a total number of only 1,400 participants in the 135 strikes in 1961. ibid., bl. 29.
excluding women. And in any event, it seems that most economic disputes in the factories were not characterized by involvement by the brigades, but rather by individuals or small groups trying to be placed in a higher wage category, to get larger bonuses or lower norms, etc..

This points to the second factor: the effects of wage differentiation. We have already seen that both the introduction of Order 234 and the events of June 1953 revealed feelings of resentment and envy on the part of the unskilled and poorly-paid vis-a-vis their relatively privileged counterparts in key industries. By the mid-1950s this wage-jealousy was widespread, as was clear in many of the ‘political discussions’ during the autumn of 1956. Although the official wage improvements of 1956-57 which tended to level out incomes across various branches of industry and wage categories were at least partially intended as a concession to complaints about income differences, their introduction hardly mitigated such resentment at all. In fact they only added new voices to it, since the levelling tendencies were widely resented by many skilled workers who felt they were being treated unfairly. Among skilled production workers there were reports of ‘strong discussions’ of the so-called ‘soft’ norms which unfairly, in their view, allowed some unskilled workers to earn as much, and in some cases more, than they did. Among the relatively well-paid Cottbus coal miners, whose wages during the mid-1950s had gradually fallen behind that of workers in the metal and chemical industries, the FDGB reported widespread concerns that ‘wage corrections’ for the low-paid should also run in the opposite direction — i.e. that miners should return to the top of the pay system because of the difficulty and economic

112 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/422, bl. 71.
importance of their work. Such concerns are hardly indicative of broad working-class solidarity.

Yet even the lack of independent representative bodies and the breakdown of broader networks of solidarity — or more accurately, continued breakdown since the 1920s\textsuperscript{115} — do not fully account for the conspicuous absence of collective protest among workers against the \textit{Produktionsaufgebot}. The fact that the \textit{Produktionsaufgebot} only managed to keep wages down very slightly\textsuperscript{116}, combined with bits of evidence in the internal reports on its implementation, suggest that it was often gutted \textit{en locale} — in other words that, much as with Order 234 and the BKVs, a plethora of informal deals at the factory level were also crucial in keeping the potential for conflict below the threshold of open protest. Whatever the inflated reports of success in the official press, it seems that for a number of reasons the \textit{Produktionsaufgebot} was never fully implemented on the shopfloor in the first place.

One reason for this was that workers \textit{did} broadly oppose it, if not in as spectacular and large-scale a fashion as in 1953. Despite the absence of broader strikes in autumn 1961, union reports nonetheless posit a sharp increase in ‘sloppiness and breaches of the work ethic and work discipline’, especially on the perennially problematic construction sites.\textsuperscript{117} There was also a wave of alleged industrial sabotage in the third quarter of 1961 (though no doubt much of it was motivated by the construction of the Berlin Wall and not by the \textit{Produktionsaufgebot} specifically): there

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\begin{enumerate}
  \item SAPMO-BA DY34/22673, ‘Information Nr. 50/57’, 21 Dec. 1957, p. 5-6.
  \item A number of studies on worker protest and resistance in the Third Reich have emphasized the divisions within the working-class that developed as a result of mass unemployment, the Nazi destruction of the workers' movement, the individualistic wage system during the armaments boom as well as the other factors that I have mentioned. See esp. Tim Mason's influential essay, ‘The containment of the working class in Nazi Germany’, in: Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class, (Cambridge, 1995), p. 231-273.
  \item According to official statistics, in 1962 wages were indeed down to 99.5\% of the previous year, but levelled off again in 1963 and already in 1964 reached 104\% of the previous year, SJHR 1965, p. 227.
\end{enumerate}
were 83 cases of sabotage and 17 fires in factories across the GDR compared to only six cases of sabotage and three fires during the second quarter of the year.\textsuperscript{118} Granted, the definition of ‘sabotage’ was significantly broadened during the crackdown after 13 August, but the heightened discontent in the factories that cases of ‘sabotage’ were seen to reflect nonetheless comes through clearly in internal reports.

There were numerous other ways of expressing discontent and subtly opposing the \textit{Produktionsaufgebot}. The reports complain time and again of workers refusing to pay their union dues, making resolutions only in the context of brigades in the hope of escaping into the anonymity of the collective, of high illness rates and lax observance of work time. At the BEV Druckwalzen und Gummiwaren in Berlin, cheating on work time was so widespread and well-established that there was reportedly a ‘silent agreement’ in the factory to the effect that anyone who wrote down more than 1,500 minutes per day had to pay a five Mark penalty. In the autumn of 1961 there were even cases of workers writing down minutes for days on which they failed to make it to work: ‘In the discussion about this fraud the workers behaved very passively...‘\textsuperscript{119} The minority of ‘norm breakers’ who actively supported the \textit{Produktionsaufgebot} were still held in contempt and their efforts thwarted wherever possible. When the tellingly named brigade ‘13th of August’ at the VEB Walzlagerfabrik ‘Josef Orlopp’ tried to set an example to others by voluntarily raising its norm by 3\%, the other workers in the factory derided it as the ‘barbed-wire brigade’ and cursed the brigadier as a ‘wage-cutter’. Similarly, when one woman comrade in a Potsdam textile factory wanted to establish a concrete norm-time and have a TAN calculated on it, ‘she was thereafter

\textsuperscript{117} SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/6.11/39, FDGB analysis of ‘Feindtätigkeit’ in III. Quarter 1961, bl. 478-82.
\textsuperscript{118} SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/6.11/65, bl. 294.
cut-off by the arrangers; that is, she was forced to wait longer for work etc. than the other employees'.

These subtle forms of opposition to the Produktionsaufgebot on the shopfloor hardly diminished in the early months of 1962, and if anything got only stiffer with the growing shortages of consumer goods after the harsh winter of 1961-2. This was more the case in the provinces than in relatively well-supplied Berlin. By the spring of 1962, union functionaries in Bezirk Cottbus reported that many of the miners in the region simply refused to discuss raising work productivity until the questions of consumer provision were cleared up, and angrily complained to their superiors in the FDGB leadership that they had no convincing argumentation or explanations as to why there was no meat or eggs or even milk. By the summer, the connection between poor work morale and the continuing shortage of goods even found expression in a popular slogan in the region: 'Wie die Verpflegung, so die Bewegung' (‘As the provisions, so the effort’).

But subtle opposition on the part of workers was only one side of the problem in implementing the Produktionsaufgebot on the shopfloor. The other was that many factory managers and local union functionaries themselves were little more enamoured with it than the workers for whom they were responsible. Many were well aware that it was a risky venture, and there is plenty of evidence of managers afraid or unwilling to introduce it in undiluted form. There were any number of potentially detrimental consequences, not least among them the loss of workers to other enterprises. Although the end of the mass population drain to the West helped mitigate the overall labour

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shortage in the GDR, the labour market was still flush enough for dissatisfied workers to find jobs quite easily elsewhere.\textsuperscript{122} In the context of the \textit{Verteidigungsgesetz} and latest recruitment drive for the NVA, the 50,000 additional workers whom the SED claimed to have won for the economy overnight through the ‘measures’ of 13 August made little difference. Diluting the \textit{Produktionsaufgebot} on the shopfloor was also motivated by a simple dread of having to sell an exceedingly unpopular policy to one’s employees. Many managers and local functionaries considered the central thrust of the \textit{Produktionsaufgebot} (to produce more in the same time for the same pay) a ‘hot potato’ \textit{(heißes Eisen)}, and were often accused in instructors’ reports of ‘insufficiently dealing with’ the lax observance of shift-starts and -ends, keeping breaks within prescribed limits and other general matters of work discipline.\textsuperscript{123} Fairly typical was the situation at the VEB LTA in Berlin, where the production management was reportedly ‘governed by the principle “not to tackle it so sharply right away”’. In the key industrial conglomerates of \textit{Bezirk} Cottbus, it was reported that there were only isolated examples of individual engineers willing to help carry out the \textit{Produktionsaufgebot}, while the broad mass of technical personnel tried their best to ignore the regime’s latest overtures.\textsuperscript{124} The situation was little different at the VEB Volksbau in Berlin, where ‘the discussion was badly hindered through the passive behaviour and reticence of


many Meister and construction foremen. Most of the Vertrauensleute also have not yet gone on the offensive by speaking out. The leading economic functionaries in the management (of the factory) have left the political discussions with the brigades to the societal organs’. Yet the ‘societal organs’ (the party and MOs) were often no better themselves. At the VEB Elektroprojekt Berlin, it was reported that, ‘In spite of numerous instructions for the comrades in the party organization and the union functionaries, they nonetheless remained silent at the assemblies in their departments. We regard this as a sign of insufficient ideological steadfastness and insufficient knowledge of the issues being discussed, which leads to fear and to a shying-away from discussions’. There were even cases here of SED functionaries failing to appear at all at the assemblies dealing with the Produktionsaufgebot.125

Eventually, of course, the Produktionsaufgebot had to be introduced in some form or another, though this meant little in practice. Caught between the demands of the party leadership to implement it and the imperative of retaining workers and maintaining the peace on the shopfloor, many managers once again steered a middle course as with Order 234. The result was numerous manifestations of what the reports critically called ‘formalism’: going through the motions and maintaining appearances without really observing the intended spirit of the campaign — in other words simply muddling through as best as they could. Without wanting to descend too far into the realm of speculation, it seems that there was a kind of tacit understanding on the shopfloor that the Produktionsaufgebot should not be allowed to upset the existing modus vivendi any more than necessary. Here again we see a fault line of conflict

running not so much between ‘workers’ and ‘regime’ as between the needs of the individual factories and the demands of the central economic authorities.

The *Produktionsaufgebot* was diluted on the shopfloor in a number of ways. Probably most common was the evasion of definite figures and plan targets in introducing new norms and uncovering elusive ‘reserves’. As I have already noted, workers as a rule offered only vague resolutions concerning working hours, production targets, and the like, usually making them only under the anonymity of the brigade and often with little intention of observing them in any event. For instance, although the brigade ‘Free Cuba’ was the first at the VEB Ziegelkombinat Bad Freienwalde to declare its participation in the *Produktionsaufgebot*, this did not keep its members from staging a short work stoppage on 6 November when their norms were *actually* changed. The reports often accuse workers of not honestly divulging all of their efficiency ‘reserves’ for scrutiny. A reportedly ‘typical’ attitude was that of a group of workers at the Brandenburger Traktorenwerk: ‘We simply cannot lay everything on the table now, we have to retain something because... you’ll certainly want to have something more again’. This kind of ‘formalism’ was often complemented, and indeed made possible in the first place, by that of the managers and local functionaries themselves. There were occasional complaints of managers simply organizing the *Produktionsaufgebot* ‘from their desks’ without actually analyzing time and costs, and with apparently little intention to implement new measures in any event. One such

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128 ibid.,

functionary at the Meister Neuholz firm in Potsdam simply added up figures himself for
saving work-time and costs before handing them in to the regional union executive.\textsuperscript{130}
There were also cases of managers avoiding a confrontation with their employees by
succumbing to worker demands to analyze and determine their work norms themselves — i.e. by giving them a blank cheque. And there were even instances of functionaries
organizing this so-called ‘Selbstnormung’ themselves by simply putting a stopwatch in
workers’ hands and letting them take care of it.\textsuperscript{131}

Even when definite figures and specific resolutions were established, they were
often little more than a means of avoiding what one feared might be even greater wage
losses. Many workers were, it is true, grudgingly willing to raise their norms by a
certain percentage or give back a few minutes from their ‘reserves’. But as a rule, this
was less an expression of support for the campaign than a strategy for being left in
peace without actually sacrificing any more than necessary. Events in the VEB
Lederverarbeitung in Berlin offer an illustration. The employees there were advised by
the factory functionaries to change their norms voluntarily, ‘otherwise your norm will
be examined next year’. The fact that the workers assented was primarily due to a fear
of the consequences if they did not: it was well known in the factory that one worker in
the satchel section who had agreed to produce three more clasps per day ended up
having to produce twelve more after a visit by a TAN examiner.\textsuperscript{132} Moreover, the fact
that the managers and union functionaries generally presented the \textit{Produktionsaufgebot}
to workers in terms of giving back a small percentage of their norm time — economic

\textsuperscript{130} SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/425, report from BL Potsdam, 4 Oct. 1961.
\textsuperscript{131} SAPMO-BA DY34/22677, ‘4. Information über den Stand, Inhalt und die Ergebnisse des
functionaries in Nauen were speaking openly of a 'Minute-Movement' by October 1961\textsuperscript{133} — suggests that they, too, recognized this danger. As one party instructor in Potsdam concluded from his investigations: 'In carrying out the crux of the matter, it is important to make it clear in all factories that the point of the \textit{Produktionsaufgebot} is not to exchange mutual gifts (this tendency is especially visible in the practice of returning norm-time), but rather not to demand any more from society than one contributes to it through one's own work'.\textsuperscript{134}

The purpose in focusing on these problems of implementation and subtle worker opposition is not to portray the \textit{Produktionsaufgebot} as an unmitigated failure. It did succeed in modestly raising work-productivity, if indeed far below the targets originally envisioned. Rather, the point is that its principal aims — the centralized regulation of wages and norms and the rapid increase of work productivity without corresponding wage increases — were at best only partially realized at the grass-roots, and foundered on the needs of individual enterprises to retain their manpower — a need which, even after the construction of the Wall, could only be met via precisely the decentralized mechanisms of wage regulation that it sought to end — and on the unwillingness of many managers and local functionaries to push it through against the wishes of their employees. It is difficult to pinpoint precisely how this happened in the factories, as such informal 'arrangements' left no paper trails. One catches only occasional glimpses, such as a work stoppage and compromise solution being unsuccessfully covered up by the party organization and factory management at the VAZ Schrott Brandenburg; the SED \textit{Kreisleitung} in Berlin-Lichtenberg discovering in July 1962 that


workers at the VEB Herrenbekleidung were still overfulfilling their old norms by 200%; or the matter-of-fact report from the regional union leadership in Cottbus: 'Distortion of the Produktionsaufgebot: in the BMK Lübbenau work norms were administratively reduced by 5-20% by the labour department. Regional union functionaries put a stop to this'. It is also difficult to say precisely how widespread they were. But if the initial reactions of managers, local functionaries and workers we have seen above are any indication, they were arguably more the rule than the exception.

Scepticism and Passive Consensus: the NES and Outlook onto the 1960s

Summing up the attitude towards the Produktionsaufgebot on the shopfloor, a Meister at the RAW Brandenburg-West said that '...the colleagues declare themselves willing to produce more in the same time, but only for more money'. While this attitude presented an obstacle to the SED's policies in the autumn of 1961, by 1963 it held some promise. For in the meantime, the approach to constructing socialism in the factories had changed with the advent of the 'New Economic System' (NES), whose basic idea was to increase efficiency and productivity through greater flexibility and through the use of a new system of 'economic levers': prices, profits, credit, wages and bonuses. The binding principle was that of 'material interest': profits and bonuses were to serve as an incentive for greater performance. Among other things, this meant a new conceptualization of how to mobilize East German workers to increase productivity.

134 ibid.
The emphasis shifted from working harder for the glory of socialism in the future to working harder for more money in the here and now. In a sense, it was less a matter of bringing the circumstances on the shopfloor into line with official policy than of bringing policy into line with circumstances on the shopfloor. This was clearly a new tack. But was the response at the grass-roots any different than before?

Not at first. Reports on the preliminary discussions of the NES with workers read like a paraphrase of those we have already seen. Again, there was widespread scepticism on the factory floor, as most workers quite understandably saw it merely as another attempt by the state, not unlike the Produktionsaufgebot, to reassert control over costs and ultimately to lower wages. Party agitators in Bezirk Potsdam reported making little headway against the almost universal argument that ‘the increase of work-productivity is a never-ending spiral’. The main point of contention was the new wage scheme proposed by state planners. It was extremely complex, and most workers understandably regarded it with suspicion. It seems that the most vehement opposition was encountered on the perennially problematic construction sites. In Königs-Wusterhausen the anger among construction workers came through loud and clear in the reports: ‘What does the FDGB say to the new wage form? If it represents our interests, it has to intervene so that we don’t get exploited. Take our last shirts off our backs, then you’ll have what you want!’ On construction sites in Oranienburg the reception was so poor that union functionaries in the IG Bau/Holz even felt obliged to invoke the spectre of 17 June in advising caution to state planners: ‘It would be better

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138 It has been calculated that there were 1,473 different tariff levels in the mid-1960s. See A. Bust-Bartels, Herrschaft, op. cit., p. 105.
not to change the existing wage and bonus scheme. The comrades of the Office (for Industry and Construction - CR) should think of 17 June 1953'. Given these initial responses, it can come as no surprise that when the new wage forms were actually introduced on construction sites in Bezirk Potsdam in June, the result was widespread and demonstrative work-restraint. As the party secretary at the Montagebau Teltow complained, ‘Good brigades that used to fulfil their norms by 230-250% are now only mustering up 101-102%’. The workers, for their part, made no secret of the reason for this: ‘Get rid of the new wage-forms, then we’ll give you the old performance’.

But such knee-jerk opposition was only short-lived since wages, bonuses and even vacation time generally improved with the new payment scheme. In fact, reports during the latter half of 1963 posit a discernable improvement in workers’ attitudes towards the government’s economic policies, especially towards the principle of ‘material interest’. A 1963 study on the ‘consciousness development’ of the populace in Berlin-Lichtenberg put this in rather abstract terms, reporting that workers were ‘applying themselves with all their strength towards solving the economic tasks’ — though there were still, of course, numerous ‘unclarified questions’ concerning the ‘nature of the state border’ and the ‘Wall’. A report of November 1963 was more to the point, positing that workers’ attitudes towards the perpetually thorny issue of raising work-productivity had begun to transform from an instinctive, reflexive hostility into a more open-minded questioning of how it might benefit them personally in terms of

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higher wages and lower prices for consumer goods. By 1964 the reports were even more sanguine. Party functionaries in growth areas like the chemical industry not only claimed to discern a 'greater willingness to cooperate', a 'new attitude to work' and a 'vastly improved' work-morale, but also reported that work-time was becoming more productive, workers were tending to 'intervene more and more' in cases of shoddy work-discipline, and that criticisms and proposals from workers were 'more concrete' and 'less tolerant'. The opportunity of significantly improving one's personal economic position proved to be an attractive feature of the new reform concept, and no doubt goes a long way towards explaining its relative popular acceptance in comparison to previous campaigns to raise work productivity. With the NES, personal material interest now finally seemed to overlap with the state's new economic goals. Even so, during the 1960s the economic planners were still unable to achieve the kind of productivity gains needed.

Did this growing consensus on the wages and norms front have any appreciable effects on more specifically political attitudes among industrial workers? It is difficult to say. Certainly many reports around this time posit a connection between the improving economic situation and workers' 'socialist consciousness'. The 'secure prospects' of the chemical industry had, in the words of one report, brought about a 'visible transformation' in the attitudes of many workers, even to 'the basic questions of our policies'. A November 1964 study in Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg similarly reported that the NES was increasing workers' 'trust' in the party and that the improvements in

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145 ibid.
work-morale were the result of a gradually crystallizing 'socialist consciousness'.

Yet such assertions must be taken with a hefty pinch of salt in view of the continuing stream of reports on ‘enemy activities’ and ‘hostile attitudes’ among workers towards the party leadership, the high pay of the intelligentsia, the FDGB’s political dependence on the SED and the sealed border to the West. The sheer volume and frequency of these ‘negative’ reports leaves little doubt that such improvements as were perceived in workers’ morale and the general mood on the shopfloor had more to do with the rising living standard or even the increasing ritualization and decreasing quality of internal reporting than with any changes to workers’ ‘consciousness’. In fact, despite its assertions about a gradually crystallizing socialist consciousness among workers, the report from Prenzlauer Berg nonetheless suggests precisely this point in its more differentiated conclusions: whereas the ‘most progressive’ workers found their previous political opinions confirmed in the successes of the New Economic System, others simply saw in it the application of economic levers and material interest.

By the mid-1960s, the basic structures of authority on the shopfloor — the informal framework of industrial relations, the party and union organizations at the factory level and the attitudes and expectations of East German workers — were in place. Apart from the gradual expansion of shift-work and improvement of social facilities, this changed relatively little until the collapse of the regime. In a sense, the ‘construction of socialism’ in the factories of the GDR was largely complete by the mid-1960s. But before closing this chapter it seems appropriate to ask what, more concretely, had been constructed.

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147 ibid..
In terms of constructing a new structure of consent in the factories, it was less the creation of positive approbation than the containment and fragmentation of shopfloor discontent. This is not to say that workers were hopelessly alienated from the regime; most rather exhibited what Alf Lüdtke has called a ‘mißmutige Loyalität’, a mixture of conformity, grumbling and defending their social interests against the demands of the state when and where this was possible. Getting rid of the regime was not on many workers’ minds, at least not after June 1953; securing better wages and working conditions was. Simply put, they were not as interested in the regime’s ideological pronouncements as in its ability to ‘deliver the goods’ and foster good working conditions.

Clearly, the SED did not manage to control workers’ minds, but could it at least control their bodies? Only partially. Although the communist regime indeed managed to refashion the culture and structures of work in the factories in a number of ways, for the most part these were contrary to intentions. The work ethic and culture on the East German shopfloor had changed considerably under the impact of Soviet industrial practices, post-war scarcity and the entry of a new generation into the workforce — many of them women and refugees from the East new to the world of the industrial worker. In the absence of a capitalist labour market, the egalitarian impulse that developed during the crisis years after the war proved remarkably persistent, at least in smaller groups, despite gradually breaking down in the 1950s. Without a clear wage incentive, many of the other ‘traditionally German’ virtues of diligence and discipline dissolved. As a result, the regime still had to wrestle with the problem of substandard productivity, industrial indiscipline and wage inflation in the mid-1960s and beyond. Recent research suggests that this had long-term political ramifications and was an
important contributing factor to the ultimate demise of the regime, which found itself unable to respond to these problems effectively in the years that followed.\textsuperscript{148}

In this context, managers and local functionaries at the grass-roots also developed distinct orientations, habits and expectations which influenced the manner in which — indeed, the very extent to which — the 'construction of socialism' and SED authority on the shopfloor happened. Despite significant improvements in the reliability and training of union and party officials by the 1960s, most factory managers were still anxious to keep workers’ discontent beneath the threshold of conflict even if this came at the expense of the planned economy (it is worth noting that this was the essence of social and economic policy later on under Honecker). In economic terms, the result was an uneasy, and ultimately unviable compromise between the desires and expectations of workers and the needs of the economy. In political and organizational terms, the result was a fabric of local arrangements that ultimately had to be tolerated as crucial to maintaining the social peace, and thus also to upholding the appearance of a healthy and ideologically sound relationship between the workers and ‘their’ state. This problem was never solved, and ‘actually existing socialism’ in the factories of the GDR was a far cry from what communist party leaders had initially envisioned. The best they could hope for, even twenty years after the end of the war, was widespread political indifference, incomplete control of the shopfloor, insufficient productivity gains and ultimately containing the potential for worker unrest.

\textsuperscript{148} See generally J. Kopstein, The Politics, op. cit.
Chapter 3

Constructing Socialism in the Villages

If the SED was only partially able to control the factory floor and refashion the East German industrial workforce as it wished, its attempt to transform the villages and farms of the East German countryside faced even greater difficulties. Some of these were essentially technical in nature. The logistical problems of maintaining authority in the countryside in the chaos of the immediate post-war years were legion, and the collapse of the zone’s infrastructure tended if anything to favour a localization, not centralization, of political control. Despite the massive social and demographic upheavals during the closing stages of the war, the close-knit web of rural social relations had not collapsed along with the Reich, and if anything had gained in importance during the years of scarcity as local solidarity had to take over where state services no longer existed. Even the dissemination of information in the countryside was relatively difficult; the rural populace was less likely to own a radio or television, had less access to the cinema or theatre and were also far more difficult to reach via visual propaganda — posters, billboards, etc. — than their urban counterparts. But the greatest obstacle was the character of rural society itself. On the whole, the rural populace remained the least educated and most religious segment of East German society. Farmers tended to be more closely bound to the church than to any political party, and the old networks of kinship and social relations in the villages were difficult
to penetrate. The resilience and impenetrability of what might be called this ‘traditional village social milieu’ had proved an irritating hindrance to the Nazis’ attempts to mobilize peasants, who by and large were uninterested in the Volksgemeinschaft so long as it did not directly affect their religious sensibilities or farming interests. By comparison, the SED was further handicapped by the fact that most farmers saw the single greatest threat to these interests in the prospect of expropriation under a socialist regime — an apprehension which had helped the Nazis in rural areas in the first place. As the following case of Brandenburg shows, mobilizing farmers for the socialist transformation of the countryside proved to be an extremely difficult task.

The Land Reform and its Effects

Though neither the Soviets nor German communists had any master plan for rural society in 1945, it was generally agreed that patterns of land ownership in the countryside had to be reformed. Worked out over the summer of 1945 and officially launched in Brandenburg on 6 September, the land reform was the first major intervention by the Soviets into the social structure of Eastern Germany. Its aim was not just to punish supporters of the Third Reich, but also to help integrate the flood of refugees (approximately 620,000 of whom had reached Brandenburg by the summer of 1946), create a more egalitarian structure of land ownership and thereby to gain a rural clientele and expand the influence of the KPD in the countryside. The land reform statutes mandated the expropriation of the Junker landlords, viewed by the victorious Allies and the German Bloc parties alike as the major social bulwark of German

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1 The focus in this chapter is on farmers: i.e. those directly involved in agriculture. Though of course not all of the rural populace were farmers, most were in related trades and all were affected in some way by the land reform and subsequent collectivization.

2 SBZ-Handbuch, op. cit., p. 80.
militarism, as well as Nazi war criminals and any other large landowners with Nazi ties. The confiscated land was to be distributed above all to land-poor peasants, landless farm labourers and refugees from the eastern territories — the so-called ‘new farmers’ — in plots of five to ten hectares, depending on its quality. The land reform was thus basically a two-sided process: first, to get rid of the traditional rural elites and their estates, and secondly to establish a patchwork of small new farms in their place. Although clearly communist-inspired, the transformation of the countryside was also supposed to have a popular and spontaneous character, as the expression of the will of the rural populace. For both legitimatory and organizational purposes, it was necessary to enlist the help of German farmers themselves in carrying out both of these steps at the grass-roots. But farmers had their own interests, agendas and ideas about the land reform which only partially overlapped — and partially collided — with those of the Soviets and German communists. This affected not only how the land reform was carried out at the grass-roots, but also what it accomplished. And as we will see, all of this was more easily said than done in the political collapse and economic chaos of the post-war years.

a.) Confiscation, Redistribution and the Village Milieu

To be sure, many of the initial signs were promising. The land reform quickly led to a fundamental transformation of the structure of land ownership in the Soviet Zone as a whole and in Brandenburg and Mecklenburg in particular. According to official statistics, by November 1945 41% of all agricultural land in Brandenburg had been confiscated and distributed to some 82,810 families, with smaller amounts going to a
number of local communities and state enterprises.¹ During the course of the autumn of 1945 the centuries-old dominance of large-estates in the Brandenburg countryside was largely replaced by a new agrarian structure characterized by small- and mid-scale enterprises. The Junker landlords who had dominated Germany east of the Elbe for centuries and who played such a dubious role in German history indeed lost the social and economic basis of their power — some even lost their lives at the hands of Soviet soldiers, former Russian and Polish forced labourers or in miserable detention camps on the Baltic.⁴ But the official statistics on the land reform tend to hide the many difficulties and distortions of the process at the grass-roots, where older social relations and mentalities remained largely intact despite the chaos and destruction during the closing stages of the war.

In many local communities, older habits of social deference proved a persistent obstacle to the drive to dispossess the large landlords. Although the land reform clearly corresponded to the needs and wishes of most land recipients to secure an economic existence in the scarcity and chaos of the months immediately following the war, in many villages the communists found it difficult to mobilize the landless farm labourers and refugees to expropriate the local Junker suzerains. While the re-distribution of land in some areas was indeed carried out in a spirit of spontaneity and even occasionally accompanied by festivities, most often the would-be new farmers were rather reluctant to take land from local elites whose authority had rarely been challenged up until then. According to a 1946 year-end report on the land reform in Brandenburg ‘the new farmers only went about their work hesistantly during their initial period of getting settled, and did not show absolute trust that the political circumstances would not

³ ibid., p. 92. This included 2,357 enterprises with a total of 733,621 hectares (609,000 from Großgrundbesitz).
change'. Little wonder, for there are numerous reports complaining of former estate owners frightening the new farmers from taking control of their plots by telling them that the land reform would be overturned later on. Local land commissions responsible for the re-distribution of land and inventory were only very slowly organized in the autumn of 1945, and many of the landowners whom these commissions were charged to expropriate managed to retain small portions of their property well into 1946. Moreover, many of the refugees expelled from the eastern provinces of the Reich hoped that they would quickly be able to return to their homes and for this reason were hesitant about applying for land.

The reluctance to accept land expropriated from Junker estates was not based solely on fear. The paternalistic orientation of many former farm labourers and small tenant farmers and their persisting loyalties vis-a-vis their former landlords — not to mention the deeply-rooted orientation towards large estate farming prevalent especially in the northern and eastern areas of Brandenburg — also hindered the confiscation and re-distribution of land from the very start. Many new farmers needed little dissuasion from breaking up the large estates given the grim prospects of farming such small plots with little livestock, equipment or — especially among former farmhands and industrial workers who had received land — little agricultural expertise. Especially in the formerly Junker-dominated northern and eastern areas of Brandenburg there were numerous cases of former landowners managing to retain a piece of land or drifting back to their estates in the course of the winter of 1945-46 and hiring their former employees to the satisfaction of both parties. According to a January 1946 report from

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the Brandenburg provincial administration, 'In a number of cases the distribution of
confiscated estates to land-poor, landless farmers, farmhands and refugees exists only
on paper. [...] In some cases the applicants for land are still treated like farmhands and
still work for wages or payment in kind. [...] The commissions or authorities often
refuse to distribute sown land in order to maintain the unity of the large estates. They
justify this failure with the intention to continue working cooperatively or collectively'.
Local disregard or transformation of directives against amalgamating plots or
distributing amounts of land over 10 hectares was the only way to sustain the new farms
at all in some areas.' In fact, in many previous manorial villages the new farmers only
began working their plots individually in the autumn of 1946, after numerous Soviet
threats of sanctions for non-compliance. That these were not merely isolated cases is
indirectly evidenced by the Soviet Order 6080 of August 1947 removing all former land
owners at least 50 kilometers from their previous estates. According to statistics from
the Brandenburg Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, of the total of 2,080 families
whose property had been expropriated through the land reform, 798 still had to be
expelled from their estates in 1947 on the basis of Order 6080.

The carrying-out of SMAD Order 209 in 1947, which called for the demolition
of the old manor houses — in the Soviets' and German communists' eyes the very
embodiment of Junkertum — and their replacement with new farming settlements,
faced many of the same 'difficulties that emerge as a consequence of the insufficient

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7 Boris Spix, Die Bodenreform in Brandenburg 1945-47: Konstruktion einer Gesellschaft am Beispiel
8 Not even these threats could bring about a complete stop to the collective working of the new farms. A
letter of 27 November 1948 to Edwin Hoernle complains that 'In view of the fact that many of the larger
smallholdings (Siedlerstellen) are based on wage labour and constitute an obstacle to... the consolidation
of the land reform, it seems appropriate to examine the general reasons for the the formation of oversized
smallholdings (over 8 ha.) and take corresponding measures against it'. BAP DK1/8189, bl. 12.
ideological education of the populace'. As one might expect, many locals, even ranking SED members, thought they were of too great historical value to be pulled down or thoroughly altered. But more problematic was the fact that the new farmers themselves were less than enthusiastic about it. Most were still afraid that if the political circumstances changed they would be blamed by the owners of the houses and possibly punished; there were still reports of agitators allegedly sent across the border by former estate owners threatening new farmers with revenge should they tear down their houses. Furthermore, many former refugees still hoped to be able to return to their previous homes east of the Oder/Neisse border and therefore showed little desire to take permanent ownership of new buildings. As one report complains, 'for these reasons the farmers can only be persuaded to change the estate character of the houses with great difficulty or with coercion'. This presented not only a political problem, but also a material one; without the construction material acquired from the demolition of the stately homes there was no chance of fulfilling the construction plans for new houses and barns. Eventually, the demolition of some 2,000 manorial buildings in Brandenburg in 1948 was carried out only against the wishes of many new farmers and local functionaries.

Even with the estate owners gone and their property confiscated, however, the old networks of social relations in the villages presented a number of problems to the grass-roots transformation of rural society, above all in lending themselves to widespread corruption in the distribution of land, livestock, buildings and equipment. The Soviets and German authorities had recognized early on the potential for local distortions of the land reform measures and introduced a number of controls against it.

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The local land commissions (Gemeindebodenkommissionen) responsible for confiscating and distributing land were to be comprised solely of landless labourers and farmers with less than five hectares of land, thus supposedly ensuring their political reliability. Furthermore, the commissions' expropriation plans had to be ratified by a district commission (Kreiskommission), which was in turn controlled by a regional land commission. Nonetheless, the sheer volume of complaints of petty corruption in the archives strongly suggests that minor abuses were more the rule than the exception.

For one thing, the loose definition of who was a Nazi and who was not presented immense opportunities to settle old scores in the villages, and a number of local land commissions confiscated land from persons whom they rather arbitrarily designated as Nazis. Far more common, though, were cases where members of local land commissions tried to enrich themselves, their relatives or their friends over newcomers or rival families in the distribution of confiscated property. One rather spectacular case of corruption was uncovered in 1948 in the village of Kattlow in Kreis Cottbus, where the former manager of the estate ‘Schönigsche Stiftung’, Herr Hendrisch, had distributed the entire estate to members of his family, each of whom received 10 hectares under the land reform statutes. The fact that two of these family members had been members of the SS and three of them still lived in the western zones was, curiously, no hindrance to their receiving land or even to the cultivation of their plots. As the report notes, the ‘new farmer’ Hendrisch was no new farmer at all, but was actually running the estate much as he always had in his former capacity as estate manager, hiring 25 to 30 seasonal workers from Cottbus for harvesting and sowing. As

was often the case in such instances of petty corruption, the entire situation was apparently made possible by the fact that Hendrisch had the ‘best support from the side of the authorities’, namely the local council chairman Schuster, who spent his holidays at the estate and who vouched for Hendrisch as an active anti-fascist, which had led to earlier complaints about Hendrisch being brushed aside. Schuster was also apparently instrumental in allocating 100 tons of lime (in desperately short supply at the time) to Hendrisch, putatively for revitalizing the fish stock in the estate’s lake, but which was actually used to renovate the villa.\(^{14}\)

Though perhaps an extreme case, Kattlow was by no means the only instance of corruption and collusion with local authorities. There were literally thousands of cases of what one report called the ‘peculiar application of the land reform ordinance’, usually in the form of family members working the land of a relative who actually lived and worked elsewhere, several members of the same household acquiring land with the tacit approval or indifference of local officials, etc..\(^{15}\) Indeed, Kattlow was not even the only instance in \textit{Kreis} Cottbus. There was a similar incident in Laubsdorf, where the former manager of an estate, Herr von Schoen, had managed to distribute 400 acres of land exclusively among his family. Nor was simple greed the only motive. In yet another case in \textit{Kreis} Cottbus the former refugee Seifert was given two young cows, one good milk cow, a hog and some field equipment by a suspiciously generous local agricultural official, Herr Böttcher, who reportedly had ‘very close relations with the daughter of this new farmer’ and was apparently trying to ingratiate himself with the father of his sweetheart. As the report notes, the other new farmers in the village had


\(^{15}\) Quote from BAP DK1/8189, bl. 67; see also ‘Zusammenstellung der Landzuteilungen, die nicht den gesetzlichen Vorschriften entsprechen’, undated, 1948, bl. 7-11.
nothing against a new farmer being helped, 'but this case shows that acquaintances and
d friends are privileged and enjoy certain advantages from the local council. This is not
taken to be the only case; rather, it is said that this department is one big swamp of
corruption'.

Herr Seifert was fortunate, for in the majority of cases it was new farmers, and
especially former refugees and single women, who suffered most from such local
nepotism and collusion. As outsiders to the villages in which they lived they were often
given the poorest plots from the land-fund, and there were even a number of isolated
cases of land commissions refusing to grant land to refugees at all. Even when
refugees acquired decent plots of land, they were generally dependent on the native
farmers, who often resented their presence in the villages and were of little help. The
local VdgBs (Vereinigungen der gegenseitigen Bauernhilfe, or Associations for Mutual
Farmers’ Assistance) that were originally set up in 1945 to support the new farmers by
coordinating the use of scarce equipment and storage space were usually taken over by
the more established farmers, especially the powerful big farmers, who often
manipulated the VdgB resources to their own advantage. According to the 1946 year-
end report of the German Administration for Agriculture and Forestry: ‘The relations
between the old farmers and new farmers in the Province Mark Brandenburg are

16 ibid., bl. 147-8. The ‘Kattlow case’ was partially resolved in December 1948. Chairman Schuster was
expelled from the party, and Böttcher, whose own indiscretions were not yet the subject of investigation,
assisted a DWK instructor to serve a 24-hour eviction notice to the ‘Hendrischk (sic!) Clique’, though not
without some trouble. Upon being served the eviction notice, Frau Hendrisch reportedly ‘violently
attacked’ Böttcher, and threatened him with the words ‘Just you wait, our time will soon come again’.
After confirming the description of the situation in the earlier report, the DWK instructor added that an
investigation of the estate’s inventory showed that Hendrisch had also been involved in smuggling and
recommended to the Central Control Commission that Hendrisch be arrested. SAPMO-BA
report, bl. 124-6.

17 In Kreis Calau-Senftenberg, only one of every eight refugees received land, and even they were poorly
provided with equipment, fertilizer and draft animals. Cf. P. Ther, ‘Die Vertriebenenpolitik in der
SBZ/DDR 1945-1953 am Beispiel des Kreises Calau-Senftenberg’, in: Jahrbuch für brandenburgische
generally characterized as **not good**. The new farmers do not assert themselves enough because of their labile economic situation, the old farmers exploit their economic predominance to create for themselves a dominant position in the local executives of the VdgB. The **old farmers have recognized that the VdgB** is an excellent instrument for realizing their **own interests**. [...] Mutual assistance is often only given from old farmer to old farmer. The new farmers reconcile themselves to this situation because they are dependent on the old farmers for many of their daily requirements'.

To be sure, the antagonism between natives and newcomers had to do with more than material interests. Cultural, confessional and even linguistic differences between Brandenburg villagers and refugees were also important factors behind the poor relations in many villages. Refugees from the eastern territories were often looked down on as quasi-racial-inferiors, and were frequently subjected to such epithets as **'Polacken'**, **'Spitzbubenbande', 'verlaustes Russenpack', or 'polnische Sau'** — insults that were all the more infuriating to people expelled from their homes precisely because they were 'German'. The relatively high percentage of Catholics among the refugees also inevitably led to a clef between newcomers and natives in the predominately Lutheran Brandenburg countryside, a region where the word **'katolsch'** was a synonym for 'bogus' or 'treacherous'. But as far as material interests and cases of corruption were concerned, the social and cultural front between newcomers and natives was only as impermeable as seemed profitable. One need not trawl the archives for long to find

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reports of unscrupulous new farmers also involved in petty corruption, though even this, too, was usually at the expense of other new farmers. To offer merely one example, in the village of Gersdorf, Kreis Oberbarnim the VdgB chairman Balitz, a former refugee and new farmer, saw to it that the VdgB assisted the old farmers in the village first and foremost in return for tacit approval from the native Bürgermeister Peter to work several acres of land illegally and sell the produce for profit. Another former refugee in the village, Bruno Rostock (who spoke better Polish than German, the report notes), had also apparently managed to acquire land illegally and ran two or three farms through land-pooling. Rostock, who according to the other new farmers in the village was a kind of ‘untouchable’ whose activities were covered up by the local authorities, was furthermore heavily involved in illegal slaughtering that had been taking place in the village, having allegedly butchered three pigs, two cows and a bull between November 1947 and March 1948. As the report concludes, ‘this village is dominated by a nepotism that pushes more or less weak refugees and farmers against the wall and produces a level of dissatisfaction that results in constant letters of complaint’.

b.) From Hope to Disappointment: The New Farmers

Despite all of these hindrances, setbacks and distortions associated with the confiscation and redistribution of large landholdings, the land reform met, at least initially, with approval by the majority of farmers, especially the new farmers who directly gained from it and the many refugees for whom a plot of land meant nothing

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less than a new home and a fresh start. It was hoped — indeed, assumed — that these new farmers would give the communists a popular basis in the countryside. The results of elections to the regional parliaments, district and local councils in September and October 1946 do suggest that the land reform helped the SED build up its support in the Brandenburg countryside (although recent evidence showing that many older ‘native’ farmers also voted for the SED suggests that the land reform was not the only factor,\textsuperscript{22} and it should also be noted that the Soviets gave the SED certain advantages in terms of campaign resources). In the communal elections it received 59.8% of the vote (which translated into 1,611 of 2,228 \textit{Bürgermeister}), and in the regional elections 43.9% (compared to 47.5% in the SBZ as a whole). As for party membership, the vice-president of the provincial administration estimated that by 1946 the SED had some 2,000 active local groups, although it is clear that farmers remained underrepresented in the party rank-and-file, constituting only 9.8% of its membership. In winning the allegiance of farmers the SED’s toughest opponent was the CDU. The Christian Democrats were particularly strong in Brandenburg, especially in the eastern regions where the DNVP (\textit{Deutsch-Nationale Volkspartei}, or German National People’s Party) and regional farmers’ parties had been dominant in the 1920s and early 1930s.\textsuperscript{23} In the regional elections in 1946 it received 30.6% of the Brandenburg vote compared to only 24.6% in the SBZ as a whole.\textsuperscript{24} But these election results, however interesting in their own right, do not fully capture the political landscape in the villages of the SBZ. For one thing, after the war the communists were confronted with the daunting political task of trying to ‘win over’ the many small- and mid-sized farmers who had been ardent

\textsuperscript{22} B. Spix, op. cit., p. 87.


\textsuperscript{24} \textit{SBZ-Handbuch}, op. cit., p. 397.
Nazis. There were numerous villages in which 95% and even 100% of the farmers had been members of the NSDAP, among them also land-poor and landless farmers applying for plots. More importantly, whatever the short-term political credit the SED extracted from the land reform, it was not long before the good feelings about it dissipated.

The new farmers, around one quarter of them trying their hand at farming for the first time, suffered particularly from the economic chaos and shortages in the countryside, and above all from the lack of farm labour. Most small and mid-level male farmers had been drafted into the army and many were not able to return home immediately after the cessation of fighting. In May 1946 there were still only 100 men to 170 women in the Provinz Brandenburg as a whole, and in the countryside the ratio was even lower. Only 20% of the refugees from the eastern territories of the former Reich, most of whom were housed in rural areas, were men capable of physical work.

A high proportion of ‘farmers’ in Brandenburg, and especially new farmers, were thus women, many of them single and without adequate help on the farm. The Polish and Russian forced labourers who had kept the farms going during the war had already left for home in their thousands in the summer of 1945, many of them further compounding the problems in the East German countryside by looting villages and taking livestock on the way. The rapid break-up of the large estates also meant that many of the new farmers’ plots had no houses, barns or machinery. Circumstances were particularly bad in the eastern areas of Brandenburg, where large swathes of countryside had been

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22 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/227, bl. 70.
destroyed during the Red Army’s drive for Berlin. While roughly 9% of the houses and flats registered in Brandenburg in 1939 had been damaged and 20% destroyed, in some eastern Kreise well over 30% had been destroyed, in Kreis Lebus even 44%. What little accommodation that could be found for the new farmers was often extremely rudimentary. In the autumn of 1945 many of the new farmers in these eastern areas of Brandenburg resorted to making huts out of clay and any other discarded material they could find. There was also a general shortage of seed and livestock, which meant a further shortage of natural fertilizer. Even when the new farmers managed to get livestock they often had to sell the animals again because they were not able to produce enough to feed them through the winter. Requests for aid sent by new farmers to the state administration and mass organizations portray the conditions in the new settlements in the starkest of terms. One such request from a new farmer in Altzechdorf, Kreis Lebus, speaks of a profound sense of ‘despair’ (Mutlosigkeit), of children without milk living merely on potatoes and salt and of women pulling farm machinery because no draft animals were available.

Much of this could not be helped given the destruction and massive population movements resulting from the war. But in a number of ways Soviet actions only worsened the new farmers’ problems, and in the process turned many formerly sympathetic refugees and farmhands against the occupation forces that had been so instrumental in giving them land. The insistence on the break-up of the large estates, against the arguments of many Soviet requisitions officers and German communists, inevitably led to a decrease in agricultural productivity, which the Soviet reparations

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31 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV27/231, report to the Kreissekretariat VdB in Burg, 15 July 1948, bl. 131.
brigades in turn only exacerbated by hauling off what little chemical fertilizer and farm machinery there was left in the countryside. The forced requisitioning of grain and animal products by the Soviets embittered many German farmers, who occasionally found themselves forced to thresh wheat when they should have been harvesting potatoes, to turn over valuable bread grains in order to fulfil their feed grain quotas or in some cases even to slaughter breeding cattle to fulfil meat quotas. Delivery quotas often seemed to take little account of soil or weather conditions such as the floods on the Oder in 1946 or the droughts of 1947 and 1948, and, given the stiff penalties for failure to fulfil them, were a source of profound bitterness and constant complaint.

 Corruption and abuses by local commandants were rife, and to make matters even worse, the Soviet authorities were unable to keep their own soldiers from illegally raiding chicken coops and curing-houses in search of meat.

 The German authorities, for their part, were in little doubt about the direct connection between Soviet requisitioning and the ever-increasing numbers of new farmers abandoning their plots. In its 1946 year-end report on the land reform in Brandenburg, the German Administration for Agriculture and Forestry complained that, "Through the actions of the commandants of the Red Army, who have undertaken mass penalties and incarcerations of new farmers without regard to the actual circumstances, a situation has emerged which places the very livelihood of the new farmers in question. [...] A portion of the flight from the fields is due to the actions of the agencies of the Red Army in charge of requisitioning'. But as the report goes on to note, the German authorities were of little help to the new farmers, and by and large failed to

32 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/231, Wilhelm Schneider to FDGB Vorstand, 25 May 1946, bl. 84-5.
33 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/231, report of July 1948, bl. 131. See also Naimark, op. cit., p. 159-60.
34 See, for instance, the numerous complaints in the file SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/231; also BAP DKI/8189, bl. 204.
confront the Soviets on the issue: 'It is noteworthy that the entire German administration from the provincial administration down to the Bürgermeister puts up no resistance to the harmful manner of enforcement of the orders of the occupation agencies, but rather carries out all of these orders to the letter and without any objection whatsoever'.

In some villages the local German authorities were themselves part of the new farmers' problems, and the fact that most positions in the state structure were filled by SED members hardly gravitated in the party’s favour. The countless complaints among the upper echelons of the SED of incompetence, corruption and inappropriate behaviour on the part of local officials highlights how tenuous was the control of the central authorities at the edges of the regime during these early years. In Batzlow, Kreis Bad Freienwalde, the SED Bürgermeister Böhm and his wife reportedly ruled the village as miniature 'dictators', alienating the other villagers from the SED. According to a SED instructor's report: 'Because B. threatened to have the villagers “locked up” every time he wanted to push something through, the complainants sought protection and found their way to the CDU, which wanted to help them. This development was confirmed to me on 17 January by the local councillor Herr Dr. Althoff of the CDU. He told me verbatim: “Herr Jahnke, believe me, it is thanks to the SED mayor Böhm that the CDU has a local group here”.’

The situation was hardly better in Löwenbruch, Kreis Teltow, where the SED mayor Scheu, a new farmer, was neither immune to corruption nor much of a socialist. According to an SED instructors' report, Scheu had apparently managed to procure for

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himself enough lime and cement (again, both in desperately short supply) to repair his livestock stalls to a condition better than that of most houses in the village. When asked by party instructors where he had acquired it and why he had not allocated it for housing repairs, he merely responded that he had ‘got the lime and cement himself’. Scheu was also farming six acres which he had registered as Neuland (previously uncultivated land, for which there was no delivery quota) that the other farmers in the village swore had been cultivated for at least 30 years. To make matters worse for the SED in Löwenbruch, the local party chairman, Herr Gotsch, was even less respected than the mayor. Gotsch was not only farming four acres of bogus ‘Neuland’ himself, he had also already been fined 300 Marks for illegal distilling, had been the subject of a police search for stolen geese and was currently suspected of illegal slaughtering. As a direct result of the behaviour of these two SED functionaries, nine of the 27 local party members had recently left the SED. As the report concisely notes, ‘The CDU has the majority in the village. When functionaries of this sort are active, the regrettable decline is understandable’.

Though a particularly bad case, Löwenbruch was not a spectacular exception in terms of the immense personnel problems the SED faced in building up its grass-roots organization in the countryside during the years following the war. As late as 1949 the SED Kreisvorstand in Oberbarnim complained that, ‘The greatest weaknesses are presented by the insufficient ideological clarity of the functionaries. This is the case in general in the entire party organization. [...] From time to time it is hardly possible to find functionaries who are in a position to perform the functions conferred upon them’.

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While the problem in many villages consisted of finding enough interested persons, in others it consisted rather of keeping out political trimmers, drunks (generally referred to in the reports as 'morally depraved elements') and other characters with questionable intentions. A report on the collapse of the local SED group in Görlsdorf, Kreis Angermünde, illustrates just how difficult this could be: 'The local group in Görlsdorf, which from the beginning was a rather small one because the overwhelming majority of the populace supports the CDU, had in fact essentially fallen apart. After committing a number of thefts, the chairman of the local group disappeared to the West and took all of the party files and catalogue cards with him. We next tried to set up the local group again via the shop-group Landesgestüt Görlsdorf. This seemed to be crowned with success at first, but as it transpired the chairman of the shop-group was also involved in a corruption affair and the shop-group has also fallen apart'. In the end it was decided that the nine remaining members in the village be placed provisionally under the special supervision of the Kreisvorstand.\footnote{BLHA Ld. Br. Rep. 332, Nr. 413, 'Vorläufiger Bericht über die Ortsgruppe Görlsdorf', 4 July 1949, bl. 33; 'Auszug aus dem Bericht des Kreises Angermünde vom 10.5.49', 29 May 1949, bl. 35.}

Given this backdrop it is little wonder that the SED was widely perceived as corrupt in the countryside, much as the NSDAP previously. Little wonder as well that by 1947 at the latest, many new farmers — at the mercy of local Soviet commandants, with little help from the German provincial authorities or, in many villages, from local SED functionaries — felt forgotten and left in the lurch by the Soviet and German communists who had promised them so much in 1945. Returning from a trip to Kremmen, a SED functionary in Berlin reported that, 'All (of the new farmers) make no bones about their dissatisfaction. They showed me their houses, and I must say that I
can understand their dissatisfaction. [...] They pointed out that their potatoes and turnips had frozen, but that the nearby distillery is constantly making schnapps and that there must be potatoes there. There isn’t enough feed for the livestock. [...] All in all they are very disappointed with the land reform, they had pictured it much better to themselves. The discussions culminated in their blaming the Russians for everything. The women said that the Russians only act as if they want to help us’.

Yet the SED came in for its own share of the blame as well. As one Brandenburg farmer put it in a letter to the SED Central Committee, ‘One can only be amazed that the new farmer can muster up the energy to stick at it. But that is because from time to time a party functionary appears in the villages and new-settler assemblies and encourages him to do it. Promises are made that remain only empty phrases, because for the most part the new farmers’ situation does not improve. How long will things go on like this? he asks himself’. By the time the GDR was founded in 1949, thousands of new farmers in the SBZ had already stopped asking themselves this question and left their small, unviable plots untilled, many of them to engage in more profitable black market activity.

41 LAB BPA IV/4/06/403, undated report, around May 1947, unpag.
44 Many new farmers had already made their principal living on the black market. An instructors’ report to Edwin Hoernle of 15 November 1948 complained that ‘the number of unsuitable new settlers, the scope of indirect and direct damage that they cause to both agricultural production as well as agricultural policy is so great as to require a thorough investigation of this question. It is not only that most of these enterprises are behind in fulfilling their quotas, that their productivity is equal to zero. As the most outstanding suppliers of the black market, they are a burden in more than one way...’ BAP DK1/8189, bl. 3.
c.) The New Village Elite and the Path to Collectivization: the Großbauern

The upshot of these various problems associated with the land reform was that, contrary to all intentions, it effectively benefitted the old farmers, especially the powerful Großbauern, more than the new farmers. The old farmers largely controlled the local VdgB executives. In November 1948 there were 6,179 established farmers compared to only 4,476 new farmers on the local executives in Brandenburg. Moreover, the economic strength of the Großbauern had escaped the land reform essentially unscathed, and to a certain extent was even augmented by the dissolution of the aristocratic estates. Many possessed relatively large livestock herds and most were well-equipped with outbuildings, tractors and other agricultural machinery. Most therefore had little trouble producing more than their compulsory delivery quotas which they could sell at higher market prices — the so-called 'freie Spitzen'. Furthermore, because many of the smaller farmers were still dependent on them for machinery and storage space, Großbauern were able to achieve a considerable addition to their incomes through lending out buildings and equipment. While the small new farms created by the land reform were struggling to make ends meet, and while thousands of refugees from the former eastern territories were still living in miserable conditions on makeshift settlements or in lice-ridden barns, most Großbauern were able to secure a comfortable income and if anything were getting richer. Worst of all from the perspective of the SED leadership, the unpopularity of Soviet requisitioning and the many cases of corruption and misuse of office by local SED officials were enhancing their political influence in the villages. As we have just seen, by 1947 both of these factors had driven many formerly sympathetic farm labourers and refugees into the
arms of the *Großbauer*-dominated CDU or the church. The introduction of the DBD (*Demokratische Bauernpartei*, or Democratic Farmers’ Party) in the spring of 1948 did little to dilute the influence of either in the countryside, and even the carefully controlled VdgB elections in the spring of 1949, accompanied by a massive campaign against the *Großbauern*, only achieved a 12 percent decrease in the number of positions they held on the local VdgB councils in Brandenburg.44

By this time it was clear that the land reform had crippled agricultural production and hampered the economic recovery in the SBZ. Even many higher SED agricultural functionaries had begun to think that it had been managed poorly.45 But instead of admitting their mistakes and policy shortcomings, the Soviets and SED again — as with the failures of carrying out Order 234 in the factories — blamed others for the problems of the land reform. The *Großbauern* were the obvious scapegoats, and in 1948 and 1949 the ‘class struggle in the countryside’ was extended beyond the large landholders to include them as well. This campaign consisted of a number of measures designed to weaken the political and economic power of the large farmers (who were now redefined from anyone possessing more than 50 hectares to anyone with more than 20 hectares of land) and to drive a wedge between them and their poorer neighbours. Taxes and delivery quotas were differentiated more stringently according to farm sizes in 1948 and 1949, *Großbauern* were forced to pay higher fees for equipment and spare parts and were also, as was often the case, only given the opportunity to borrow

44 In April 1949, 91% of the *Großbauern* in the GDR were members of the VdgB (159 had still been elected to the local executives), compared with 83% of mid-sized farmers and merely 56.2% of small farmers. Arnd Bauerkämper, ‘Transformation or Transition? Rural Elites under the Impact of Land Reform and Collectivisation in the GDR’, (Ms. 1997), p. 7.
45 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/231, bl. 3-7.
equipment at the MAS after all other classes of farmers had done so. When the compulsory delivery quotas for large farms were once again increased in the early 1950s, the economic burden for many became unsustainable as debts mounted and net profits dropped. To make matters worse, anyone not fulfilling his or her quota ran the risk of being accused of ‘sabotage’ and subjected to arrest and punishment under SMAD Order 160.

All of this contributed to a steadily increasing number of big farmers simply giving up their farms, many of them leaving for the West. From 1950 to 1952, a total of 5,000 Großbauern in the GDR abandoned their farms, which amounted to approximately 10% of all agricultural enterprises between 20 and 100 hectares in size. Thousands of small- and mid-sized farmers also left for the West, since the increased delivery quotas meant added burdens for them as well. This of course entailed a further decrease in agricultural production, and in order to counter the losses the state began in 1951 to confiscate abandoned farms and hand them over to small farmers or to the state-run VEGs. This process was given added impetus in March 1952 by the ‘Verordnung über devastierte landwirtschaftliche Betriebe’, which extended the definition of ‘devastated’ farms to include not only those abandoned by their owners, but also those with exceptionally low production levels. Farms in this category were initially given over to state trusteeship, and most were later confiscated and allotted to LPGs. Yet it was still difficult to maintain production levels as the overall shortage of

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47 F. Werkentin, Politische Strafjustiz, op. cit., p. 57
labour in agriculture did not allow for efficient usage of the abandoned and confiscated land. And despite the weakening of the economies of the Großbauern via punitive taxes and discrimination at the MTS, the fact remained that without an all-out attack their influence would continue to be felt in the villages.

It was in this context of a looming agrarian crisis that the SED leadership announced the formation of collective farms, or 'agricultural production cooperatives' (LPGs) at the Second Party Conference in July 1952. The new LPGs were to fall under three separate categories ranging from Type I, in which only land was tilled and equipment used collectively, to Type III, in which everything including land and machinery was used and owned collectively. Although a small number of LPGs had already been established earlier that year, the sudden move to agricultural collectivization caught many farmers by surprise. Only seven months earlier, at the Third German Farmers’ Congress in December 1951, Grotewohl himself had stuck to the position maintained by the SED since 1945, proclaiming that the government still had no intention of collectivizing agriculture in the GDR. Whether or not this assurance was given in good faith at the time, in the summer of 1952 the government made its new intentions known in no uncertain terms. A mass publicity campaign was launched in support of the formation of LPGs and on 24 July the Council of Ministers decreed a package of tax-breaks and lower delivery quotas for anyone who joined them. The ‘construction of socialism’ in the GDR meant collectivization for farmers.


The 'Unforced' Collectivization, 1952-53

To the SED leadership in Berlin, agricultural collectivization represented a necessary escalation of the 'class struggle' in the East German countryside. It was the central feature of the SED's agricultural policy throughout the remainder of the 1950s and early 1960s and was an essential component of the broader attempt to build a new socialist society. But what did the collectivization of agriculture look like in the villages and hamlets of the GDR? What was the role of local functionaries and officials in helping to carry it out? How did East German farmers respond to the foundation of LPGs and how did those who opposed it try to defend their farms against the claims of the state?

a.) Farmers and Functionaries

The initial reactions to the foundation of LPGs clearly reflected the social and economic profile of the East German countryside, varying immensely between, on the one hand, new farmers who for years had been calling for moves towards collective farming as a means of more efficiently utilizing the scarce equipment and barns of divided Junker estates and, on the other, the predominately 'native' owners of larger, more productive farms who viewed collectivization as a threat. In July 1952 the Office for Information in Bezirk Potsdam conducted an opinion survey of 78 farmers in four Kreise, 22 of

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Though it seems the SED leadership was rather unwillingly pushed by the Soviets into collectivizing in 1952, and thus were apparently serious about voluntary entry in 1952, by the beginning of 1953 at the latest this was the centrepiece of SED agricultural policy, and the 'principle of voluntarism' gradually gave way to the use or toleration of force. See J. Piskol, 'Zum Beginn der Kollektivierung', op. cit.
whom were new farmers. Only 18 of the 78 farmers interviewed approved of the foundation of LPGs ‘without reservation’, seeing in them the opportunity to increase yields and improve their financial positions. All 18 were new farmers. Of the nineteen who said they approved of LPGs in principle, all demanded more information before considering joining one and most expressed unease about the possible problem of stronger farms having to ‘carry’ the weaker ones. Forty-one — i.e. over half — rejected LPGs out of hand, not least because of doubts about promises of increased yields and the ability of the MAS to provide enough new equipment for ‘mechanized production’. Twenty-five of these forty-one farmers openly declared that LPGs would merely lead to Soviet-style kolkhozes and eventual expropriation of their farms regardless of whether or not they fulfilled their delivery quotas. That the ‘positive’ reception of LPGs was limited primarily to new farmers is broadly confirmed in other reports as well. As with the land reform, older orientations and frameworks of perception — traditional habits of work and notions of private property — presented an immense obstacle to the collectivization campaign.

This is not to say, however, that the social and political fronts in the villages were so simple as pro-LPG/anti-LPG or that the decision to join was so straightforward. For one thing, there were, of course, exceptions to the rule, such as the new farmer Ernst R. who was quoted as saying that he would rather slaughter all of his livestock than join an LPG. Moreover, the decision whether or not to join an LPG involved a variety of different considerations. The problems of social stigmatization and injuring

old friendships in the village were undoubtedly primary factors in keeping some farmers from joining. According to one report from Kreis Seelow, although many farmers in the region were 'by no means opposed' to collective farming in principle, anyone expressing the wish to join an LPG was 'looked down on' by others. Furthermore, joining an LPG was not an individual decision, but also involved other family members. One could hardly ignore the opinions of one's spouse or children, as they too had a stake in the management of a farm which they themselves might eventually inherit. There were in fact reports of parents refusing to bequeath their farms to their children for fear that the latter might enter them into an LPG and thereby forfeit the family property.

Whatever the complexities of the decision to join an LPG, it is clear that the SED faced a daunting task in selling its collectivization plans to the vast bulk of independent East German farmers. The opposition to LPGs in the countryside is clearly reflected in the rise in so-called 'enemy work' throughout the autumn and winter of 1952-53. This assumed many forms, and in the internal party reports one finds a wide range of improvised strategies with which farmers tried to defend their interests from the state and to express their disapproval of its collectivization policies. There were myriad diffuse symptoms of protest. The painting of anti-collectivization slogans and swastikas and the distribution of subversive flyers and other 'Hetzmaterial' were

56 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/S687, Bezirk Frankfurt/Oder, 'Informationsbericht für den Zeitraum 10.1.56 bis 24.1.56'.
57 Cf. J. Osmond, 'Konflikt', op. cit., p. 151. Of course such reports must be treated with caution. Blaming one's family (usually men blaming their wives) or friends for refusing to join an LPG seems too convenient an excuse to be taken at face value. It is as impossible for historians to be certain of the validity of such claims now as it was for party agitators and functionaries at the time. But considering the social proximity of village life and the interwovenness of rural social relations, not to mention the very poor treatment of LPG farmers in some villages, it seems likely that the desire to maintain the peace in
So, too, were cases of apparent sabotage against LPGs, such as driving iron spikes into the ground in order to damage reaper-binders, infecting livestock and mixing glass or poison into feed. Arson against LPG members was also a growing problem in the eyes of the authorities, although it is difficult to know how many cases of alleged arson or sabotage were actual premeditated crimes and how many were merely assumed to be crimes because they happened at LPGs. By contrast, there can be little doubt about the intentions behind most of the threats and cases of physical violence against functionaries and LPG members. VdGB functionaries campaigning for LPGs were frequently told by angry farmers that there was ‘a tree waiting for them’ in the village; some functionaries were even pelted with rocks. The chairman of the local people’s control committee (Volkskontrollausschuss) in Mechow, Kreis Kyritz, received a pair of menacing letters with threats to ‘bash in his skull’ and ‘take revenge on his daughter’ if he tried to ‘introduce the kolkhoz’, in addition assuring him that he ‘would not see another Christmas’ if he did so. On the day before an LPG founding in Rodensleben, Kreis Neuruppin, threats were circulating throughout the village to the effect that whoever joined the LPG ‘will have his bones broken’. On the following night ‘kolkhoz-farmer’ signs were hung on the doors of all the members of the LPG founding-committee.

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one’s village and family prevented at least some farmers from joining LPGs who otherwise might have done so.

Pritzwalk, offers a taste of both the hostility between established farmers and newcomers as well as the divided loyalties of many less than reliable local officials. Seventy new farmers were invited to an assembly to discuss the experience of collective farming in the Soviet Union and to found a local LPG. In the event, around 120 farmers with enterprises of various sizes attended the meeting, some of whom the report describes as 'anti-democratic'. Once inside, the gate-crashers periodically interrupted the presentation with boisterous laughter about the putative performance of Soviet agriculture and with occasional comments to the effect that 'now they’re taking away the land they handed out in the land reform'. Once this ‘negative discussion’ had reached a certain point, the mayor explained to the assembly that some of the new farmers had already agreed to found an LPG. As he read out their names they were assailed with threats from the others present: 'you should start building your casket soon', etc. Before he finished reading out the list someone switched off the lights in the meeting hall and a far less formal meeting reconvened on the street outside. There followed an angry, passionate discussion about the LPG between the village farmers, during the course of which the mayor himself began to waver on the issue, eventually concluding that if the village were to collectivize at all there would have to be two LPGs: one for the weak farms and one for the prosperous. As the report remarks, the events in Garz were by no means isolated occurrences, but rather 'give insight into the escalating class struggle in the villages'.

The problems of overcoming older mindsets and orientations extended well into the rural periphery of the party-state apparatus. Police and party investigations found that many rank-and-file SED members, local functionaries and state officials were

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themselves less than enthusiastic about the party's new collectivization drive. The rural elite in many villages — mayors, members of village councils and VdgB committees — were often the same people or members of the same families who occupied such positions under the Nazis, and in some cases no doubt even farther back.⁴⁹ Many local officials, functionaries, Bürgermeister and police also had close social and even familial connections with the farmers whose enterprises they were supposed to be helping the state collectivize. More than in other social milieux, this social proximity in the village and regular contact between representatives of the regime and 'ordinary' farmers time and again hindered the smooth and complete realization of the party leadership's political measures at the grass-roots. Moreover, the lower levels of the regime had to be built out of the wood that was available, and a sizeable minority of local officials were independent farmers themselves. In 1953, 18 of the 124 department managers on the district councils (Kreisräte) in Bezirk Potsdam were independent farmers or their offspring, nine of them 'small-farmers' (under 10 hectares) eight 'mid-sized' (10-20 hectares) and even one Großbauer — most of them in the agriculture departments of the councils. A further 15 were self-employed artisans who were also unlikely to welcome the onset of collectivization. At the level of the local councils (Gemeinderäte), one step lower down the state apparatus, the personnel situation was even less auspicious for the collectivization campaign. Even the social profile of those at the top of the local council hierarchy, the Bürgermeister, showed significant potential for conflict between one's personal interests and official duty to support the collectivization campaign. Of the 792 Bürgermeister in Bezirk Potsdam, 139 were

independent farmers or their offspring (102 small, 25 mid-sized and 12 Großbauern), and a further 52 self-employed artisans.\textsuperscript{64}

It is therefore not overly surprising that many local officials were less than reliable representatives of the party line as far as agricultural collectivization was concerned. The party leadership was well aware of the problems local officials presented in carrying out its decisions in the villages. As Ulbricht himself instructed the ‘special plenipotentiaries’ sent from the SED Central Committee into the countryside: ‘Where Bürgermeister help Großbauern, they are to be removed from office immediately. The secretary is to take care of the work until another Bürgermeister is there’.\textsuperscript{65} But the sheer scale of this problem meant that such measures were unworkable. A state investigation of local authorities in Bezirke Potsdam and Rostock found widespread evidence of local officials ignoring and in some cases even actively undermining the LPG campaign: ‘Generally speaking, the local councils and village aldermen support the founding and development of LPGs either insufficiently or not at all’.\textsuperscript{66} In not one of the localities investigated did local authorities expend much effort on collectivization. Bürgermeister in particular were accused of not supporting the LPG campaign, which the report attributed not only to their ‘ideological unclarity’ and ‘insufficient qualification’, but also to their ‘status’ (Stand), social background and connections to Großbauern. Mayor H. of Peusin, Kreis Nauen, a DBD member, was ‘rather disposed to help the wealthy farmers than to support the LPG’, and indeed even went so far as to dissuade one struggling farmer from joining one: ‘Don’t sacrifice yourself to that rubbish cooperative, you’re lost in any case’. While mayor S. of


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Lützow was reportedly trying to convince local farmers that it was too early to found an LPG because the stronger farmers were against it, his assistant was busy pointing out to these stronger farmers that they would be worse-off financially if they joined one. Equally notorious for both their inactivity and their unorthodox views on LPGs were the village SED party organizations. Of the forty party members in Öhna, Kreis Jüterbog, only fifteen to twenty were described as ‘active at all’, and even most of them openly disapproved of LPGs. Such inactivity and ‘unclarities’ at the party basis were hardly helped by the apparent heedlessness one level up the party hierarchy. The secretary of the party organization in Gussow, Kreis Königs-Wusterhausen, complained in the summer of 1952 that they had not even seen a Kreisleitung functionary since 1946. When one finally came to the village in the autumn and ordered an assembly, he himself failed to appear at it.

In many villages the SED could hardly compete with the church in terms of either its organizational capacity or command of village loyalties. Although an SED analysis on the influence of the church in Bezirk Potsdam in 1953 estimated that only around 10% of the rural populace regularly attended religious services, it emphasized that the established church influenced a far greater portion of the populace than church attendance figures suggested. In the words of the report, by ‘praising the bourgeois-capitalist state and especially the Kaiser and kings and other rulers who seek strength through God’, most village pastors were successful in further propagating ‘political
passivity' in the countryside. Village pastors were reportedly most influential and respected whenever they spoke out against the injustices of the delivery quotas, the 'unfree elections', the arrested farmers and the coercion involved in the collectivization campaign. As regards the mobilization of young people, the SED-sanctioned FDJ (Freie Deutsche Jugend, or Free German Youth) was often no match for the Junge Gemeinden in Protestant areas. If anything it was even weaker in the Catholic areas of Calau and Cottbus, especially the Wendish area around Burg, where it reportedly stood no chance of competing with the traditional and very popular 'Spinnabende' (spinning evenings) which 'take place under the influence of the village priest'. It hardly helped matters that so many rural functionaries still had church ties. Even as late as 1958, 24.4% of all local SED secretaries in Bezirk Frankfurt/Oder were still members of the church (whatever their actual beliefs), ranging from only 1.2% in Stalinstadt (the model socialist city) to 42% in Kreis Fürstenberg and an astounding 70% in the very rural Kreis Angermünde.

Given this backdrop of widespread popular disapproval, unreliable local functionaries and the continued influence of the church, it is scarcely surprising that the collectivization campaign proceeded sluggishly. By the end of 1952 there were only 1,906 LPGs with 36,000 farmers in the whole of the GDR. Although the pace of collectivization accelerated somewhat during the winter, the number of LPGs had still risen to only 3,789 by March 1953. But even these statistics exaggerate the support for the principle of collective agriculture at the grass-roots. Party ideologues were well

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aware of the purely economic motivations upon which many farmers’ decisions to join LPGs were based, and piously hoped that the experience of working in a collective farm would go some way towards rectifying the ‘ideological shortcomings’ of many of the new collective farmers. But as they were to discover throughout the winter and spring of 1952-53, this ‘ökonomisches Denken’, as they called it, was not only a major factor in the decision to join an LPG, but also determined the very functioning of many LPGs once they had been established.

A rather sobering report to the Ministry of Agriculture in April 1953 offers an insight into what it called the ‘principal shortcomings in the consolidation of the agricultural production cooperatives’ across the whole of the GDR. The basic problem, it maintained, was that most LPG farmers were still bound by old-fashioned ‘economic thinking’ and were not working ‘cooperatively enough’ (zu wenig genossenschaftlich). Although most LPGs were indeed operating according to the letter of the LPG statutes, many were not observing their intended spirit. This was manifested in a number of different problems.

First of all was the admission of new members. The report cites numerous cases of LPGs intentionally admitting ‘Großbauer eleménts’ in order to strengthen the economic base of the cooperative while rejecting weaker applicants. As the report laments, ‘this does not correspond with the principles of the (LPG) statute’. Secondly, in a fairly blatant attempt to use the LPG to their own personal advantage, some farmers secretly established what the report called a ‘cooperative within a cooperative’. According to the statutes of most LPGs, individual members were allowed to retain

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private plots of up to five hectares for their own use that were to be fertilized and worked by their owners. In a number of LPGs, the members not only worked the collective fields and livestock in common, but also combined their private plots and worked them at the expense of the LPG as well. In other words, the private plots were being illegally subsidized by the state through the cooperative. Thirdly, many Type I LPGs, especially those with livestock, wanted to transform immediately into Type III cooperatives. Although this might at first glance appear to be a sign of a healthy 'socialist consciousness', the report complained that in most cases it came too soon, for the wrong reasons and without the 'necessary preconditions' — more specifically, that LPGs which found themselves in financial difficulties should not transform into Type III simply in order to acquire additional tax breaks and state entitlements. Within only a few days of transforming itself into a Type III, one LPG in Bezirk Gera demanded 'substantial funding' for the construction of cooperative stalls and additional feed because its livestock was in poor condition. Members of the LPG Heldrungen in Bezirk Halle declared a Type III in spite of specific directives to the contrary from the SED Kreisleitung and local council, and on the very same day made an application for a special allocation of feed. Another group of financially strapped farmers in Suckow, Bezirk Schwerin, bypassed the Type I altogether and immediately founded a Type III. Only a few days later the LPG chairman sought help from the local council: 'We are now a cooperative Type III and all of us have an 8,000 liter milk delivery debt as well as a sizeable grain arrears... Help us now so that we will see joyful faces in the village

7 BAP DK1/5539, report from Erwin Neu to SED Central Committee, 'Betr.: Materialien über die wesentlichen Mängel bei der Festigung der landwirtschaftlichen Produktionsgenossenschaften', 22 Apr. 1953.

7a ibid., p. 1, 8.
again". Clearly, the decision to transform into a Type III was by no means a simple matter of overcoming 'ideological shortcomings' and 'ökonomisches Denken'. On the contrary, self-interested pragmatism was a primary motivation.

b.) 'New Course', Old Problems

By the spring of 1953 it was apparent that the 'construction of socialism in the countryside' was causing a tangible decrease in agricultural production and an alarming increase in the numbers of farmers leaving for the West. But instead of backing down from its confrontational course, the government systematically tightened the screws on the self-employed, including independent farmers, with a series of harsh austerity measures against these so-called 'reactionary' elements. Independent farmers were effectively forced to choose between joining the LPGs or incurring drastic financial loss. Most farmers still chose not to join, despite the devastating effects of the economic pincers. Many rapidly sank into debt, unable to keep up with the delivery quotas and increased taxes that the government was demanding from them. To make matters even worse, East German courts were sentencing growing numbers of farmers to jail for failure to fulfil delivery quotas, even though in the vast majority of cases this was not intended as any kind of opposition. The period from February to May 1953 also marked the peak in the number of indebted and 'devastated' farms confiscated by

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75 ibid., p. 2, 4-7.
76 The measures included a substantial increase in insurance payments and income-taxes as well as the withdrawal of ration-cards from all self-employed citizens and their dependents over 15 years of age. Cf. D. Staritz, Geschichte der DDR 1949-1985, op. cit., p. 79.
77 From 1 Aug. 1952 to 31 Jan. 1953 legal proceedings were initiated against 583 big farmers, 311 mid-sized farmers and 353 small farmers in the GDR, mostly due to failure to fulfil quotas and pay back tax debts. SAPMO-BA DY30/TV2/13/409, 'Bericht über die Tätigkeit der Justizorgane im Kampf gegen feindliche Tätigkeit', 8 Apr. 1953, cited in F. Werkentin, Politische Strafjustiz, op. cit., p. 81; see also Dieter Schulz, 'Ruhe', op. cit., p. 105-107.
the state. By the end of May, 22,773 farms had fallen into state trusteeship — the majority of them large farms — 17,589 of which were confiscated during these four months alone. With mounting debts and the menacing threat of arrest, a swelling wave of farmers simply left the GDR. Both the absolute and relative numbers of farmers leaving for West Germany leapt in spring 1953; in March a disproportionately high 20,000 out of a total of 58,000 emigrants were farmers and their families.

This heightened pressure on farmers during the spring of 1953 did produce some dividends: by June 1953 the number of LPGs had risen to 5,074 with 146,900 members. But such success as was achieved on paper carried a terrible cost in terms of refugees, state subsidies and political credit for the SED. As events after the announcement of the ‘New Course’ on 9 June 1953 show, the SED had deeply alienated most independent farmers through its actions during the preceding eleven months. Although the New Course did redress the main grievances of farmers — rescinding the harsh tax and insurance measures, offering abandoned farms back to those who had fled and announcing a general moratorium on tax and produce-delivery debts — the damage was already done and it was not so easily forgotten. There was naturally widespread relief among independent farmers that the government was defusing the intolerable situation that it had created. Some reports even posit a ‘Stimmungsumschwung’ among independent farmers: ‘There is still a Lord God in heaven, thank God I managed to keep my livestock’; ‘We can keep everything, we

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77 Calculated from figures in Bundesministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen, Die Flucht aus der Sowjetzone und die Sperrmaßnahmen des kommunistischen Regimes vom 13 August 1961. (Bonn/Berlin, 1961). There was little clear pattern in the social profile of those farmers who were leaving. One report from summer 1952 acknowledged that many were model farmers, some deeply in debt, some fulfilling their quotas and others not, some ‘new’ and ‘old’, but the majority economically weak. BAP DOI/11/961, ‘Anlage’, 2 Aug. 1952, bl. 118-120.

don’t need to join the LPG, we’re free!* Indeed, the mood in many villages was one of celebration. In the days following the announcement of the ‘New Course’, village pubs were inundated by Großbauern toasting Adenauer, heaping abuse on the government and jeering at LPG farmers. One ecstatic Großbauer in Wredenhagen even rode his horse all the way up to the bar in the village pub, ordered a beer while still mounted and exclaimed, ‘Now we’re the bosses again!’* Rumours of the imminent collapse of the GDR were rife; one woman in Havelberg, for instance, reportedly walked about waving flowers and shouting ‘Heim ins Reich’. There were even reports of independent farmers who had not yet plowed or fertilized their fields out of a fear of losing their investments in fuel and fertilizer suddenly beginning to work again after hearing the news of the government’s turnabout. Yet this widespread relief was still accompanied by a certain scepticism and unease: ‘Who will guarantee us that this communiqué will be kept?’; ‘...don’t be fooled, it’s all just a trick to find idiots to speak out against the West German elections. When these are over they will start back with what they’ve been doing even more sharply than before’. *

The news of the events of 16 and 17 June only heightened the political ferment in the villages. Although most rural areas in Brandenburg were reported as quiet, and though most farmers — however sympathetic with the striking workers — were not inclined to leave their own work undone at their own expense, there were isolated instances of considerable unrest. The most serious was that in Jessen, where on 17 June around 200 demonstrators gathered at the marketplace demanding the release of

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imprisoned farmers and an immediate 40% reduction of delivery arrears. After talks between demonstrators and local authorities broke down, the crowd set off through the town and quickly swelled to around 1,800 participants. The demonstration was eventually successful in freeing the imprisoned farmers, and the crowd could only be dispersed at around 3:30 p.m. with the help of a Soviet tank.*^  

Even in the 'quiet' villages the SED's rapid about-face and rumours of an impending change of government emboldened many farmers to demand more thoroughgoing changes to the agricultural economy. The 'New Course' was, after all, only a partial corrective to the SED's previous agricultural policies, and simply was not 'new' enough to satisfy most farmers. A particular target of scorn was still the rigid and bureaucratic nature of the quota system. Farmers in Oranienburg complained that overzealous bureaucrats with little idea of farming occasionally took their Freie Spitzen in order to fulfil their own registration quotas: 'Every farmer does his best to fulfil his quota quickly, but when the cows are dry and the authorities come and demand that you must fulfil your quota anyway, what can one do?'** Actually, not every farmer was doing his best, as the reports clearly show a sharp rise in the number of refusals to deliver produce and a general 'disorganization of (produce) registration'.*** Though the government's reduction of the compulsory delivery quotas on 25 June was widely welcomed, it satisfied almost no one — little wonder, since by early July there were already signs of officials in the district and local councils arbitrarily raising quotas for certain goods which basically rendered the central government's quota reductions

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** SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/544, 'Diskussion mit werktätigen Bauern Oranienburg-Tiergarten am 18.6.53', undated, p. 2.
meaningless." On the contrary, a July 1953 analysis of the petitions (Eingaben) sent to President Pieck's office posited 'increasingly far-reaching demands' regarding delivery quotas, generally to the effect that all delivery arrears should be abolished." Situation and mood reports from all over the GDR speak of widespread demands for 'a free market and free delivery, abolishment of the delivery quotas'. Sometimes farmers combined these demands with the release of imprisoned farmers into a form of blackmail. The SED Bezirksleitung Cottbus reported a number of cases in which open demands for the release of imprisoned farmers were backed up by threats not to deliver any milk if the authorities did not comply. In Radensdorf, Kreis Lübben, there were even posters hung up to this effect. While some of these threats were apparently only rhetorical ploys designed to scare local officials, many were entirely earnest: one woman even threatened to pull out the hair of a neighbour who wanted to deliver her milk anyway."

Meanwhile, within the LPGs the announcement of the 'New Course' and the news of the events of 17 June also caused disquiet among the collective farmers. Many were afraid that the tax breaks, lower delivery quotas and other special entitlements for the LPGs would be withdrawn and were angry that some of the land and buildings they had been using would now be returned to their previous owners, effectively leaving many of the LPGs economically unviable." There were also grave concerns that they

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88 SAPMO-BA DY30/7/354, 'Die Lage in den Landwirtschaftlichen Produktionsgenossenschaften und die Vorbereitungen zur Durchführung der Ernte', 7 July 1953, bl. 7. See also A. Mitter, 'Am 17. 6', op. cit., p. 113.

89 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/354, 'Die Lage in den Landwirtschaftlichen Produktionsgenossenschaften und die Vorbereitungen zur Durchführung der Ernte', 7 July 1953, bl. 10-11. The report lists several examples of villages where feed grain quotas were indeed lowered, but bread grain quotas raised such that the total grain quotas were even higher than before.


93 BAP DK1/5895, 'Analyse über die Vorkommnisse in der Zeit vom 16.-18.6.53', 1 July 1953.
would be forced to work for the Großbauern again, that they would not be compensated for improvements made to the farms of emigrant Großbauern and that the creches and club rooms they had set up in the houses of farmers who had fled could no longer be used. By 1 July, 2,097 confiscated farms were in fact demanded back and 1,649 returned to their previous owners, many of whom refused to reimburse the LPGs that had taken them over for the costs of seed, fertilizer and other expenses incurred during their absence. The result was a spate of work-stoppages in LPGs across the GDR. In Kreis Seehausen, where the situation appears to have been particularly drastic, it was reported that in many villages 'the populace is referring to the collective farmers as rogues and rascals. It is not possible to get the (LPG) members to work. Comrade Richard H., chairman of the LPG Kriden explained on the telephone that the members refuse to work because the Großbauern are returning to their farms. The chairman of the LPG Neukirchen explained to the instructor, comrade L., that he could no longer say anything to the collective farmers or else they would strike him dead. The collective farmers in Böhmertin likewise refuse to work. What is sketched here is visible in the entire Kreis'.

As this report suggests, the government’s retreat also exacerbated the pre-existing social tensions between members and opponents of the LPGs. As independent farmers regained a measure of confidence about their economic prospects, demands for ‘equality for independent farmers vis-a-vis collective farmers’ (especially regarding the distribution of seed and fertilizer by state authorities) got louder and the social

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stigmatization of LPG farmers swelled in many villages. In Lindenau, Kreis Senftenberg, members of the LPG complained of constant derision from their neighbours with such ironic comments as ‘your weeds are looking nice’ and ‘if one of you ever needs a piece of bread you can come to me’. Apparently this had been going on for some time, but the recent escalation of the taunting reportedly drove the wife of the village LPG chairman to the brink of suicide. She wanted out of the LPG ‘in order to be left in peace’. Thousands of other LPG farmers did as well, and a wave of withdrawals and LPG dissolutions continued throughout the remainder of 1953. Reports to the Ministry of Agriculture cited a number of reasons for the dissolutions: the return of ‘devastated’ farms to their former owners, poor organization and morale and above all the argument that founding an LPG was not truly voluntary in the first place, but was rather based on ‘economic coercion’. Whatever the reasons, by February 1954 a total of 564 LPGs with 33,000 members had been dissolved.

In sum, during the first big collectivization push of 1952-53, relatively few East German farmers had been coaxed into joining LPGs, and even fewer had actually been convinced of the virtues of collectivized agriculture. Part of this obviously had to do with the continued inability to overcome older habits of individual work and notions of private property. There was little that could change this, and the majority of independent farmers either opposed or at least remained indifferent to the formation of LPGs. So, too, did a significant proportion of local officials; hence it also had to do with the inability of the party leadership to fully control its own apparatus at the grass-

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97 Figure from Arnd Bauerkämper, ‘Von der Bodenreform’, op. cit., p. 136.
roots. Contrary to widespread popular and even scholarly views, the choices facing East German farmers in 1952-53 were not as simple as joining an LPG, going to jail or fleeing to the West. Such an assessment emerges if one limits the analysis merely to the central authorities and what they would have wished, and under the circumstances the party leadership seemed in any event somewhat reluctant to force such stark alternatives. More importantly, though, it is doubtful that its actual control in the villages was strong enough to do so had it even tried. The thicket of social relations and contacts between rural functionaries and farmers acted as so many snares for the implementation of collectivization policies at the grass-roots. In many villages it was, so to speak, an 'unforced' collectivization. For in the event there was a fourth alternative which the majority of independent farmers, not to mention many local functionaries, adopted: namely 'muddling through', dragging one's feet and avoiding the step to collectized farming where and how one could in the hope that the campaign would soon blow over. And it did blow over, for a while.

The 'Coercive Economy': Material Discontent and Popular Opinion in the Countryside

On the whole, East German farmers were even more dissatisfied with life in the GDR than industrial workers. While angry and grumbling farmers were nothing new in German history or confined to the eastern side of the inner-German border, the discontent in the East German countryside of the 1950s was widespread and deep-seated indeed. Much of it was economically based. East German farmers in the 1950s had long been accustomed to a tightly regulated agricultural economy. Under the Nazis

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* This view is even represented in Norman Naimark's excellent account of the Soviet Zone. See idem, The Russians, op. cit., p. 166.
they had been forced to render fixed surpluses to the state, and during the Soviet occupation they were forced to turn over fixed quotas of specific goods. But even after decades of chafing against the ‘coercive’ German agricultural economy, many independent East German farmers in the 1950s still found the SED’s punitive agricultural policies towards uncollectivized farms intolerable, above all the despised delivery quotas. A police report summed it up thus: ‘...all of the laws and measures of our government run up against a complete lack of understanding among the farmers. Again and again they talk effusively about the free market economy in West Germany. The reports also show that our state organs have almost no connection to the farmers and completely neglect their educational work (Aufklärungsarbeit).’

Though valid for a minority of small farmers, the notion that this system of compulsory delivery was ‘accepted by most farmers’ because it ‘guaranteed purchases of produce, privileged small and mid-sized enterprises and thereby entailed elements of social security’ seems overstretched.¹⁰⁹

In the words of a farmer from Walchow, Kreis Neuruppin, the problem in a nutshell was that ‘it simply is not good here agriculturally... The most capable farmers leave because the compulsory delivery quota is too high and the prices too low. Anyone who cannot sell Freie Spitzen cannot make ends meet’.¹⁰⁰ One strategy of trying to have one’s delivery quotas and delivery arrears reduced was to hide a portion of one’s produce and sell it privately on the black market. Most often this was done in collusion with state buyers in the VEABs (Volkseigene Erfassungs- und

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⁹⁹ BAP DO1/11/963, bl. 84
¹⁰⁰ Dieter Schulz, ‘Ruhe im Dorf?’, op. cit., p. 104.
Aufkaufsbetriebe, or state registration and buying agencies). There is of course no way of ascertaining how many farmers did this, as only an unknown percentage were ever caught. Certainly the practice was extremely widespread during the black-market years immediately following the war, and judging from the reports during the 1950s it seems safe to assume that the practice was still fairly common. Another way of trying to lower quotas was simply to point to reductions in other regions. The reduction of quotas or debts often triggered a wave of demands for similar treatment in neighbouring Kreise. When farmers in Kreis Königs-Wusterhausen discovered that arrears in the Kreise Lübben, Beeskow and Fürstenwalde were being lowered by up to 75%, several simply refused to continue paying back their own debts.

There were numerous other focal points of economic complaint, including soil classification (according to which delivery quotas were set), problems with the supply of feed, seed and fertilizer — which one police report admitted sometimes made the farmers' work ‘downright impossible’ — as well as the very designation of farmers with over 20 hectares of land as ‘Großbauern’. But apart from the quotas, the greatest complaint of all was the dire labour shortage in agriculture. This was particularly burdensome for mid-sized and large-scale independent farmers with small families or young children. The problem for many such farms was that they simply could not fulfil

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102 T. Lindenberger, 'Der ABV als Landwirt', op. cit. Though most cases apparently involved the cooperation of VEAB officials, in some it was a matter of hiding produce from them. Typical of an unsuccessful attempt was an instance in Herbersdorf, Kreis Jüterbog, where one farmer told the local state buyer that his potato harvest was so poor he could not even feed his livestock. The buyer, with the help of the village mayor, searched his premises and soon discovered that L. had stashed 840 one-hundred-kilo sacks of potatoes in pits in the woods behind his barn. BLHA, Bez. Pdm. Rep. 530, Nr. 822, 'Informationsbericht', 30 Oct. 1954.


their delivery quotas — much less produce any lucrative *Freie Spitzen* — without additional help, which was often unavailable. Smaller enterprises under 10 hectares had certain advantages in the context of the labour shortage and the SED’s discriminatory policies against larger farms. Their smaller size not only had the advantage of lower taxes and delivery quotas, but also of allowing one or two members of the family to work outside of the family farm and thereby receive ration cards as dependent providers. Owners of mid-sized farms with an insufficient supply of labour could neither find the time to work away from the farm nor easily keep up with the high taxes and delivery quotas they were forced to render. This was precisely the problem for Lieselotte F., who, like hundreds of other farmers in a similar position, wrote a formal petition to President Pieck in the hope of mitigating her plight. As she explained in her letter, those farms ‘with the bad fortune of being larger’ than 10 hectares were ‘poorer than ever before’. Working alone, she and her husband could not fulfil the delivery quota for their 17 hectare farm. ‘Do you know what it means to try to feed a family of five the whole year with one pig and half of a calf?’ Eventually they had to consider joining an LPG as a way of escaping their plight, but found that it was nearly impossible to get accepted into one without a sufficient contribution of labour to accompany the land. Thus her petition, like so many others, represented a last-ditch effort to keep the farm viable.

The SED tried to mitigate the labour shortage by recruiting industrial workers for agricultural service. This campaign, known as ‘industrial workers into the countryside’ (*Industriearbeiter aufs Land*), began in earnest in 1954, and by 1955 had managed to bring some 16,000 workers into the agricultural sector, at least for a short

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while. It was hard enough getting volunteers to go: most workers refused with arguments such as they were too old, knew nothing about agriculture or could not be separated from their families. But even when workers were deployed in the villages, problems with inadequate accommodation, poor food and low pay prompted many to return home as soon as possible. In many cases they were also rejected by villagers as intruders, especially party enthusiasts who also went around the villages as political agitators. And in any event, these additional labourers were of no help at all to independent farmers, since they were deployed only on collective farms, state-owned estates and MTS. 106

Farmers were well aware that the SED’s militarization and concentrated industrial investment policies merely exacerbated the labour shortage in agriculture. The opportunity to escape the boredom of the village and see something new drew a disproportionately large number of rural youth into the KVP and NVA. The armed forces were, as under the Nazis, broadly resented by farmers as a waste of state resources more profitably invested in agricultural machinery and a waste of young men’s energies more usefully deployed on their undermanned farms. There were numerous cases of farmers — even SED members — refusing to allow their sons to enlist. 107 They also resented the better pay and shorter working hours in industry, which attracted increasing numbers of rural youths and farmworkers into the cities. Here the interests of East German industrial workers and farmers were at odds, and the latter

106 These were precisely the same problems that thwarted previous and subsequent attempts to recruit agricultural cadre from among the industrial workforce. See BLHA Ld. Br. Rep. 332, Nr. 765; BLHA Bez. Pdm. Rep. 530, Nr. 1371.
overwhelmingly felt that they were losing out.\textsuperscript{108} The introduction of the 45-hour week in several branches of industry in 1956 triggered widespread demands for increased wages and reduced working-hours for farmers as well: ‘No one thinks of us farmworkers. The industrial workers who already have it easier anyway now only need to work 45 hours per week to get the same pay they used to get for 48 hours. We, on the other hand, have to work 60 hours and more and under more difficult conditions than in industry’.\textsuperscript{109} Instead of strengthening the heralded ‘alliance of workers and farmers’, the SED’s own economic policies were rather serving to undermine it. Decades-old peasant feelings of having to ‘shoulder the burden’, of being exploited for the benefit of the urban masses, continued throughout the 1950s, sustained not only by memories of the hoardes of hungry urban pilferers roaming the countryside during the second half of the 1940s, but also by a deep-seated dislike towards the ‘coercive’ planned agricultural economy that kept down prices for their produce.

This economic discontent could not help but have a bearing on more specifically political attitudes. As was also the case with the complaints and grumbling among industrial workers, it is difficult to separate the two. The exceedingly broad definition of political dissent adopted by the SED — which included such time-honoured farming practices as venting spleen on whatever government was in place — makes distinguishing them on the basis of internal reports rather problematic. In any event, it seems unnecessary to do so since the vast majority of East German farmers did not separate economic grumbling from political dissent themselves. A party report of September 1954 cited the remark of one farmer in Brandenburg as typical of the mood


in the countryside at the time: 'I shit on the entire government. We farmers used to live better. Today they take everything away from us and we are forced to shop in the Ho..." Fortunately for the SED, such hostility did not form the basis of any sustained or organized rural opposition during the 1950s. Although the reports give the impression that farmers were on the whole more forthcoming than industrial workers in expressing their discontent with the regime as such, the general rule of thumb that protest of all kinds tended to be fragmented and basically ineffective applies to them as well. If anything, given the deep divisions in the villages, rural protest was even more fragmented, which partially explains why the internal reports seem less concerned about its possible ramifications than about the prospect of industrial protest. After the collectivization push of 1952-53, most farmers simply contented themselves with heaping verbal abuse on the government and party leadership while trying — generally as individuals — to get their delivery quotas reduced however they could. Armin Mitter's recent argument that the SED leadership had to find measures to counter a 'rebellion of the Green Front' in the 1950s is rather exaggerated."

Yet the problems confronting the SED's attempt to 'win over' farmers to the socialist cause and mobilize them via 'socio-political' participation were, if anything, even more daunting than in the industrial sphere. This was most clearly visible at election time. Internal reports during the 1954 and 1958 elections complain that most farmers felt ignored, like second-class citizens, and for this reason saw no reason to participate in political life. In the words of one despairing farmer from Königs Wusterhausen, 'what use is it to go to the elections? They don't change the question of

the delivery quotas! The result of such feelings of powerlessness was a profound political apathy that was manifested in the often extremely poor attendance figures at election assemblies in rural areas. Many farmers refused to vote because it would be tantamount to a statement of support for the LPGs. As one group of farmers succinctly put it in 1954: ‘One cannot vote for one’s own dispossession’. What the bulk of independent farmers still feared and hated most was the prospect of expropriation of their farms. Although there were occasional signs of principled political criticism from farming circles, such as demands for separate election lists, a government that represented farmers’ interests and the introduction of a free-market economy, the political attitudes of independent farmers remained for the most part characterized by a self-defensive hostility towards the SED and a stubbornly conservative, phlegmatic indifference to most other issues not directly related to their farming interests. There was remarkably little change in this regard over the previous several decades. The remarks from a group of farmers near Potsdam in 1954, which can serve here as an illustration of a broad swathe of peasant opinion across the GDR during the 1950s, could just as easily have originated from reports on the mood of farmers under the Weimar and Nazi governments: ‘We shit on the elections. We don’t care who governs here — it can just as well be the Kaiser — the main thing is that things go well for us’.

Against the backdrop of such stubborn self-interest, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that the more subtle pressure for collectivization after the shock of June 1953 managed to achieve what it did. By the end of 1954 the number of LPGs in the GDR as a whole had already surpassed the level of summer 1953, rising slowly and steadily throughout the 1950s and accounting for 37% of all arable land by 1958. But this did not satisfy the SED leadership, and by the latter half of the 1950s patience was running out. It seemed that the combination of discriminatory economic pressure against independent farmers and privileges for collective farms had reached the limits of its effectiveness. So long as farmers were left to join LPGs ‘voluntarily’, further substantial growth in the collective sector seemed unlikely. The poor economic performance of most LPGs only confirmed this general aversion to collective farming. As late as 1959, 14% of the LPGs in Bezirk Neubrandenburg still produced no profits of their own, surviving instead solely on state subventions. Moreover, even when LPGs managed to achieve profits the incomes of their members rarely exceeded 5,000 DM per annum. Under these circumstances it was essentially impossible to attract economically strong farmers, some of whom earned over 20,000 DM. Despite assurances of differentiated remuneration within the LPGs according to the amount and quality of land contributed, wealthier farmers still had to reckon with a substantial decrease in income for which the vacation provision and child-care facilities of the LPG system were little compensation. The prospect was simply not alluring. If ‘socialist relations of production’ were to...

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prevail in the countryside, only one solution remained: the exertion of still greater pressure.

a.) Coercion, Opposition and LPG-formation in the Villages

The switch to a harder line began in October 1957 at the 33rd Session of the Central Committee, where Ulbricht called a second time for the ‘construction of socialism in the countryside’. The change of tack was confirmed at the Fifth Party Convention in July 1958, where the SED leadership publicly declared its intention to bring about a complete socialist transformation of agriculture. The announcements at the Fifth Party Convention and the dispatching of hundreds of agitation troops into the East German countryside managed to persuade a wave of farmers to join collectives in the summer of 1958 — not least because of widespread rumours of an impending forced collectivization and fears of having to join later under less attractive terms.106

Although the ‘principle of voluntarism’ was still putatively adhered to, there were numerous abuses by local officials eager to impress their superiors. In the coal areas of Bezirk Cottbus, for instance, there were attempts to get miners possessing small plots of land to join LPGs by having them fired from the mines with the remark that they would get their jobs back when they joined.107 In other areas local officials refused to sell even the simplest of equipment and supplies such as plowshares or seed to independent farmers. The use of agricultural equipment in particular became an

106 Some farmers refused to fertilize their fields out of fear of not being properly reimbursed for the costs of fertilizer should they soon be forced into an LPG: SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/443, ‘Information über die Weiterführung der Wahlarbeit’, 28 Oct. 1958, p. 16. For evidence of rumours about forced collectivization in 1958, see, for example, SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/664, Bezirk Frankfurt/Oder, ‘Tagesinformation Nr. 5’, 11 July 1958, p. 4; ‘Tagesinformation Nr. 6’, 12 July 1958, p. 3.

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increasingly powerful weapon against them. The MTS had long received all new machinery and spare parts, thus making independent farmers, who were not able to buy their own equipment, increasingly dependent on them. The June 1958 Council of Ministers decree on the expansion of the MTS effectively heightened the already discriminatory policies against independent farmers regarding access to machinery, spare parts and the level of rental fees. Whereas 64% of the total deployment of MTS machinery in 1955 was on LPGs, in 1958-59 this figure quickly rose to between 80-90%. Again, overzealous local officials occasionally applied such central directives extremely harshly. Farmers were also required in 1958 to have their own equipment inspected by the police, and the result in many cases was arbitrary confiscation, which rather predictably resulted in a wave of organized smuggling rings stealing parts from MTS or from scrap heaps and selling them to independent farmers.* As Erich Mückenberger complained to the regional party secretaries, ‘Such measures achieve precisely the opposite of what is intended. The independent farmers feel pressured and stir up the entire village against the collective movement and against the local party leadership’.

The thought of even greater difficulties in procuring equipment was itself enough to drive some farmers, such as Herr S. of Steinbach, Kreis Seelow, into an LPG in the summer of 1958: ‘I entered the LPG because the Fifth Party Conference will probably decide that the MTS can no longer work with independent farmers’. But most were still unmoved. Fairly typical of the attitude among self-employed farmers

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*SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/354, letter from Mückenberger to agricultural secretaries of Bezirksleitungen, 8 Sept. 1958, bl. 351.
119 ibid., bl. 351.
was that of Herr F. of Dobberzin, *Kreis* Angermünde: ‘They should come around here once, my cudgel is constantly at the ready. I’d rather cut my grain with a scythe than join an LPG’. Interestingly enough, this is precisely what some did. In a number of villages farmers tried to solve the equipment problem their own way by establishing what one report called ‘certain forms of mutual assistance’ in order to become independent of the increasingly discriminatory MTS. This generally entailed coordinating the usage of privately-owned machinery among a group of independent farmers, sometimes on a village-wide basis. In cases where privately-owned machinery was still insufficient, determined LPG opponents even organized brigades to cut grass and grain with hand-held scythes. In Glienecke, *Kreis* Beeskow, even the village pastor was enlisted in the local scything operation.

Yet despite such isolated instances of local solidarity, the increased pressure in 1958 was producing dividends for the SED. By the end of the year the total number of LPGs in East Germany had risen from 6,691 at the end of 1957 to 9,637, an increase of over 40%, with most of the new foundings occurring in the second half of the year. But this second push in the drive to full collectivization soon reached the limits of its effectiveness as well, as the number of LPGs once again levelled off during 1959. By the end of that year the reinvigorated collectivization campaign could boast only just over 800 new LPGs, with a total number of only 10,465 — a meagre rate of increase compared to 1958. What is more, it seems that some of the ‘success’ of 1958 was the result of fudged figures: functionaries in *Bezirk* Frankfurt/Oder were even putting VEG...
land into LPGs in order to pad out their statistics.\textsuperscript{124} The slower pace of LPG formation also had to do with widespread, albeit vain hopes that the agitation for collective farming in summer and autumn 1959 was merely window dressing for the upcoming tenth anniversary of the GDR in October. Official celebrations in East Germany were always preceded by the deployment of agitation troops seeking ‘positive’ statements, declarations of loyalty and other forms of approval — in this case joining LPGs — as grist for the SED’s propaganda mill. According to some reports, this was a central focus of ‘many discussions’ with independent farmers: ‘resist the temptation to give in to the SED offensive, the tenth anniversary will soon be over and then we will be left in peace’; ‘one has to hold out against the offensive of the SED, because the brigades will leave the Kreise again after the tenth anniversary’.\textsuperscript{125}

The only solution for the SED was to increase the pressure on the remaining independent farmers yet again. In the autumn of 1959 swarms of agitators were dispatched into the countryside, armed with a new, more uncompromising message. Joining an LPG had always been presented as a contribution to the strengthening of the peace-loving GDR. Now the emphasis was placed on the logical correlate of this assertion: namely, that refusal to join was tantamount to an act of sabotage against peace and the East German state. This new, more aggressive line of argumentation was given teeth by the Council of Ministers decree of 29 October 1959, which legally authorized the arrest and detention of farmers for precisely such forms of ‘sabotage’. Any illusions about a softer course after the tenth anniversary quickly dissipated as the SED turned to increasingly intimidating methods of ‘persuasion’ in the countryside. In

\textsuperscript{124} SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/354, letter from Mückenberger to agricultural secretaries of Bezirksleitungen, 8 Sept. 1958, bl. 350.
the first three months of 1960 the collectivization campaign reached a feverish pitch. As the *Stasi* arrested scores of resisting farmers on the basis of the Council of Ministers decree, villages were literally overwhelmed with the sheer numbers of agitation brigades.

What did this agitation and pressure in the villages look like more concretely? What role did the local officials and functionaries play and why was the campaign more successful than in 1952-53? While there were still plenty of passive and unreliable representatives of the regime at the grass-roots, the establishment of party-controlled agricultural training colleges throughout the GDR in the mid-1950s and the constant replacement of older officials by new cadre more generally meant this was somewhat less of a problem than during the first collectivization push. Moreover, the kind of pressure that was exerted was more economically severe, more individualized and more threatening. Despite official claims that joining an LPG was still voluntary, it is clear from internal reports that some local officials made use of the threat of arrest and punishment as a means of ‘persuading’ farmers to join. In most such cases it was not so much a matter of threatening to haul someone in on trumped-up charges as it was to convict them on some previous offence — usually tax debts, failure to fulfil a quota, or other forms of so-called ‘sabotage’. As the state attorney’s office in Cottbus explained in a report to the SED Bezirksleitung: ‘In the *Kreise* we visited, Forst, Luckau, Lübben and Herzberg, there was a tendency among the local councils to use the cooperation of the local state attorney in order to achieve a stronger effect in discussions with farmers with delivery debts [...] With this method the farmers must have been under the impression that they either had to join an LPG or reckon with criminal proceedings’.\(^{126}\)

Such was the case of Herr Winzer, for instance, who was summoned to appear at the state attorney’s office in Forst to discuss his delivery debts. Upon arrival Winzer was told he was punishable by law for his debts and should reckon with prosecution. Not surprisingly, when urged by the local council to join an LPG he immediately did so because, as the report put it, ‘there was nothing left for him to do’. On 13 November, only one day after Winzer had officially joined the LPG, initial proceedings against him were stopped.

This was by no means an isolated incident in Bezirk Cottbus, though in some Kreise it was clearly more common than in others. Whereas the local state attorney and party leadership in Kreis Finsterwalde had early on decided against such tactics, there were reports of similar cases in Kreise Luckau, Lübben and Herzberg. In fact, the state attorney’s report goes on to complain that instances of criminal proceedings against farmers being quashed upon joining an LPG were so well known in the villages that many farmers were actually under the impression that punishable offences were simply not pursued if they did so. In Spremberg, one farmer who had illegally withheld 50 kilograms of butter took the bargaining initiative himself by informing the local state’s attorney that he would join an LPG if the proceedings against him were quashed. While it is true that in most cases it never had to come to such overt threats and that it sometimes was not even necessary to have a ‘discussion’ with a farmer in order to convince him/her to join, this does not mean that pressure by the state authorities was not being exerted. The vast majority of those who had not been personally threatened knew or had at least heard of others who had been, and many deduced that there was little point in resisting. Indeed, the repeated appearance of a Volkspolizei car in the
village — or even worse, a black Soviet-made sedan from the local MfS office — was itself enough to persuade some farmers to join an LPG.  

As village after village was reported as ‘vollgenossenschaftlich’, or completely collectivized, agitation troops increasingly turned their attention to the remaining centres of opposition (Schwerpunkte) within their jurisdictions — often those villages that had witnessed little change as a result of the land reform — sometimes having to go to extraordinary lengths to ‘persuade’ these most steadfast LPG opponents. The agitation campaign in Kreis Senftenberg, which stood at the bottom of the table in Bezirk Cottbus, may serve as an example of the massive scale of the operation in these more problematic areas. After ‘severe criticism’ from the Bezirksleitung, the local party leadership in Senftenberg reportedly decided to ‘take the Schwerpunkte into its own hands’. In his 16 February report to the Bezirksleitung the party secretary self-critically conceded that the ‘older methods’ of dispatching brigades comprising three to five agitators were clearly no longer appropriate for the task at hand. The ‘great deployment’ had failed to achieve a correspondingly ‘great success’. In reviewing their strategy for the collectivization campaign, the Kreisleitung therefore decided to use the proven methods of the ‘comrades in Kreis Eilenburg’. This entailed no great revision to the overall approach of pressure and threats, but rather consisted simply of even ‘greater forces’ for the ‘task of persuasion’. In concrete terms this meant expanding the operation beyond the small 3- to 5-member brigades into ten brigades each comprising

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127 ibid., The SED Central Committee was itself made aware of such methods by the State Attorney’s office: SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/415, report of 5 Dec. 1959, F. Werkentin, Politische Strafjustiz, op. cit., p. 96.

128 This seems to have been the case in Frauendorf, Kr. Senftenberg, where MfS personnel appeared twice in two weeks to question residents about recent cases of alleged ‘seditious agitation’ (staatsgefährdende Hetze) and arson. Mitter, Wolle, Untergang, op. cit., p. 310-311.

forty to fifty agitators recruited from the ranks of the police, state institutions, factory managers and representatives of mass organizations. According to a follow-up report the number of brigades in *Kreis* Senftenberg eventually reached eleven, with 'a few more' in the making by the beginning of March.\textsuperscript{131} It was deemed important that these inflated brigades thenceforth be led by 'experienced comrades'. Indeed, the entire *Kreisleitung*, with the single exception of the secretary for economic matters, were 'out in the villages' during February and March; the first secretary himself led a brigade in Bühlen. In order to hinder the growth of any form of solidarity among aggrieved farmers, the brigades also began spending the night in villages in order to have 'constant contact and uninterrupted influence' on the local inhabitants. In response to reports from other areas of the 'consolidation of enemy forces' after the departure of the agitation brigades, they eventually began leaving two or three agitators behind in newly collectivized villages for the purpose of 'consolidating' the fledgling LPGs.\textsuperscript{132}

The immense deployment in *Kreis* Senftenberg of some five hundred of the 'best and most experienced comrades' in the agitation brigades quickly paid off. By 25 March the *Kreis* was proudly declared to be 'vollgenossenschaftlich' apart from a few isolated farms. But besides making a mockery of the putative 'principle of voluntarism', the massive scale of the agitation campaign also clearly reveals — probably more vividly than anything else — the stubborn opposition of many independent farmers to the policy of collectivization. According to official census statistics, there were a total of 3,531 farmers in *Kreis* Senftenberg in 1964.\textsuperscript{133} Even if we


\textsuperscript{131} SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/408, Abt. Landwirtschaft, 'Bericht über die sozialistische Umgestaltung der Landwirtschaft im Kreis Senftenberg', p. 29.


\textsuperscript{133} *Volks- und Berufszählung der DDR*, (Berlin, 1964), p. 100.
assume that this figure had dropped slightly since 1960, this means that there was a ratio of one agitator for every seven or eight farmers in the entire Kreis during February and March 1960. However, as around one half of all farmers had already joined LPGs by the beginning of 1960, the ratio between agitators and the remaining independent farmers during these two months was actually closer to one for every four. Given the duration of this most acute phase of the collectivization campaign in the Kreis — around seven weeks — it is clear that the agitation brigades were able to visit recalcitrant farmers for considerable amounts of time and on many occasions. And given the looming threat of arrest for failure to comply, it only seems surprising that there were still a handful of independent farmers left as of 25 March. Granted, such a huge operation was not necessary in all Kreise. But the example of Senftenberg clearly illustrates the excessive pressure that the SED was prepared to exert, and did exert, in order to achieve the ‘complete socialist transformation of agriculture’.

How did independent farmers react to this unprecedented onslaught? As in 1952-53, there were many different symptoms of protest and opposition. Most noticeable was the wave of emigration to the West (see figure 1). In the first quarter of 1960, 1,682 farmers (not including their families) left the GDR; in April alone the number was 1,304.” There were various jokes and slogans pertaining to the flight of farmers westwards: ‘We’re founding an LPG Type IV, the farmers over there and the land here’ (the slogan rhymes in German: ‘Wir gründen eine LPG Typ IV, die Bauern drüben, der Boden hier’).

Throughout 1960 the Volkspolizei also regularly reported on what appears to have been an epidemic of ‘criminal activity’ in agriculture, although it is, again, difficult to determine how many of these supposed ‘crimes’ were intentionally committed or were direct expressions of protest. A Volkspolizei analysis of criminality during the first half of 1960 posits a marked increase in serious crimes in the agricultural sector including arson, injuring, poisoning and neglecting livestock, sabotage against LPGs, ‘diversion’ of machinery and equipment, slandering the state, and rabble-rousing (Staatsverleumdung, Hetze). Others signs of an ‘increase in enemy activity’ in the countryside similarly recalled those of 1952-53: the spreading of rumours (the imminent closure of the border, preparation for war, a reversal of collectivization as in Poland, a freeze on farmers’ savings accounts, even the end of religious freedom for LPG members), physical attacks against agitators, sending anonymous threats, destroying propaganda posters and disrupting LPG founding

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assemblies. In the first half of March alone there were 41 cases of 'anti-democratic crimes' (especially destroying posters and sending anonymous threats) in the GDR directly connected to agricultural collectivization, and no fewer than 8 cases of suspected arson against LPGs totalling hundreds of thousands of Marks in damage.137

Yet the unrelenting pressure and threat of sanctions or even imprisonment resigned most farmers to their fate. In the words of one despondent farmer in Kreis Zerbst: 'one cannot swim against the current forever'.138 By March there were even cases of farmers cheerlessly forming LPGs themselves without the 'assistance' of the dreaded agitation brigades. But in most cases, it should be noted, this was an angry resignation born of frustration at one's own powerlessness. As one farmer in Kreis Weißwasser put it, 'don't think that things will remain like this. One day you (functionaries) will pay for this'.139

The official view that joining an LPG was still voluntary was quite understandably a source of widespread righteous anger. In an assembly at the LPG 'Einigkeit' in Reitwein, Kreis Seelow, the vast majority of farmers who had recently joined angrily insisted that they had been forced to do so and were under the impression that they 'would have been picked up by the police if they refused'. Like many other farmers across the GDR they demanded that the word 'voluntary' be stricken from the LPG statute and replaced with the words 'on the orders of the local council'. The

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137 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/367, HVDP 'Information Nr. 1/60', 18 Mar. 1960, p. 1-3. Three of the eight cases were clearly arson, five were suspected, and there were a further four fires whose cause was not yet determined. Preliminary proceedings were initiated against all 41 cases of 'anti-democratic crimes'; 19 persons had already been arrested by mid-March, nine of whom were handed over to the MfS. The number of such 'crimes' increased in the second half of March: by the end of the month there was a total of 109 cases. SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/367, HVDP 'Information Nr. 3/60', 1 Apr. 1960, p. 2. Such rumours as those mentioned can be found in numerous reports in this file.


139 SAPMO-BA DY30/2023/61, 'Bericht über die Brigadetätigkeit im Kreis Haldensleben vom 22.3 bis 14.4.60', p. 2; SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/408, 'Information', 23 Mar. 1960, p. 54.
attempt to win subscriptions for the VdgB magazine ‘Der freie Bauer’ (the free farmer) likewise only added insult to injury. In Bezirk Potsdam a ‘large number’ of farmers — in the village of Zootzen all but two — refused to buy it or cancelled their subscriptions with the argument that ‘there are no free farmers anymore’.

There thus seems precious little to recommend Siegfried Prokop’s recent argument that ‘from the Baltic to the Fichtelberg the vast majority of independent farmers declared themselves willing to join an LPG. The majority did this voluntarily. Others felt coerced and for a long time could not get over the fact that from now on they had to work on an equal footing with the former maid or farmhand’. While many previously self-employed farmers no doubt resented their loss of status, it is simply impossible to believe that the majority of the 450,000 farmers and their families who had withstood the collectivization campaign for eight long years suddenly changed their minds in the spring of 1960. Moreover, despite Prokop’s careful attempt to discern those farmers who were not coerced in the sense of ‘feeling’ coerced, there can be little doubt that the vast majority not only were coerced, at least indirectly, but also felt that way. There also seems little to recommend the idea that the party leadership was absolved from responsibility for the many ‘administrative excesses’ on the ground because of its constant calls for moderation and admonishments to respect the principle of voluntarism. The reports streaming into the Central Committee unambiguously showed that collectivization simply could not be accomplished at the grass-roots.

141 Siegfried Prokop, Unternehmen ‘Chinesischer Wall’ — Die DDR im Zwielicht der Mauer, 2nd ed. (Fr./Main, 1993), p. 113.
142 Ibid., p. 97.
143 Ibid., p. 115.
without coercion, regardless of what the ‘top’ preached. At best such calls for moderation were a case of self-deception on the part of the party leadership, at worst a case of sheer hypocrisy.

b.) ‘From Paper into Practice’: Continuity and Change in the ‘Socialist Village’

There is no doubt that coercion was necessary to transform the patterns of ownership in the villages of the GDR. The willingness and improved ability of the party leadership to exert it produced results. By the time the last East German village officially declared itself vollgenossenschaftlich on 14 April, only around 7% of agricultural land in the GDR remained in private ownership. But the ‘socialist transformation of agriculture’ still existed for the most part only on paper. As one report put it, proclaiming a village to be vollgenossenschaftlich was relatively easy; the hard part was to convert the LPGs ‘from paper into practice’. This process was by no means completed during the ‘socialist spring’ of 1960. Actual collectivization at the grass-roots entailed more than coercing farmers into signing LPG statutes. Furthermore, the SED had used so much force in reshaping East German rural society into its new mould of collective ownership that in the process the mould itself got bent out of shape. The rather curious and distorted result was not precisely what the party leadership had envisioned.

Certainly the greatest problem was getting the new LPG farmers actually to farm collectively. Joining an LPG was, as we have just seen, often more a matter of resignation than a sign of willingness to work in a new way according to its statutes, and in the main farmers simply wanted to be left alone to manage their farms as they
had before. As one brigade report from Bezirk Cottbus succinctly put it, ‘Among the farmers there is a great reluctance to begin working collectively’. The agitation brigades left behind in the villages for the purpose of ‘consolidation’ could do little to change this. Though clearly an indispensable tool during the acute phase of the collectivization campaign in the first months of 1960, over time they became plagued with problems of their own, including high rates of fluctuation, agitators reportedly being scared to discuss the LPGs with farmers and what one report described as an ‘extremely low level of political-ideological education’. As one party instructor deployed in Bezirk Cottbus lamented: ‘The constant exchange of responsible comrades leads to no one being held responsible, not even leading functionaries. [...] The authority of the (SED) Kreisleitung is insufficient. This is shown by the fact that out of the 90 comrades from the factories, mass organizations, etc. who were deployed in order to strengthen the brigades in the villages, only one-third appeared’.

The weaknesses of the ‘consolidation brigades’ were further compounded by the continuing unreliability of local party and state organs in the villages, which the reports commonly castigated for ‘passivity’ in the effort to consolidate fledgling LPGs. Though the political education and selection of local officials had improved considerably since the first collectivization push of 1952-53, there was still significant potential for conflict between one’s personal interests and professional duties in early 1960. In Bezirk Potsdam 17 of the 221 section directors in the district councils were

still farmers, most of them directors of the agricultural sections involved in
collectivizing.\textsuperscript{147} As for the \textit{Bürgermeister}, 90 of 776 were still farmers or their
offspring, many not yet in LPGs.\textsuperscript{148} But this was only a small part of the problem, for
many local officials, regardless of their social background, simply did not support the
principle of collectivized agriculture, at least not wholeheartedly, and were especially
repelled by the coercion that was involved. In many villages these local officials
undertook little or no effort towards formulating statutes or organizing collective
methods of work after the initial agitation brigades had left. In the neighbouring
villages of Cammer, Damelang and Freienthal, \textit{Kreis} Belzig, ten days elapsed between
the founding-assembly of the local LPG and the introduction of ‘further measures’.
This ‘breathing space’, according to party instructors deployed from Berlin, allowed an
‘increase of enemy influence’ in the villages, which was expressed in a growing number
of complaints of coercion, claims of promises from agitators to be allowed to ‘work
individually’ until the summer, demands for lower delivery quotas as well as ‘various
types of passive resistance’ to the actual organization of the LPG.\textsuperscript{149}

Such ‘passive resistance’ continued for a remarkably long time. There are
numerous reports throughout 1960 and 1961 of farmers continuing to work
‘individually’ (i.e. like they always had) under the guise of the LPGs and essentially
refusing to abandon their old ways of work: ‘We have not yet taken up collective work,
and if one wants to push it through it will be with force and with poor results because
there would be no personal interest...’ It was widely hoped that the LPGs would soon

\textsuperscript{149} SAPMO-BA DY30/2023/62, ‘Zu einigen Problemen der Führungsstätigkeit der Partei im Kreis Belzig,
Bezirk Potsdam’, 13 April 1960, p. 5-6. According to other reports, many farmers had in fact been
promised by agitators that they could work individually until the summer of 1960. In some areas the
National Front even printed flyers to this effect. Cf. in the same file, ‘Ergänzung zum Bericht über den
be dissolved again, as they had been in Poland. In the village of Hohenleibisch, Kreis Liebenwerda, newly collectivized farmers were even going out in the evenings and laying stone border markers in order 'to know immediately where things stand, when the times change'. In a number of villages in Bezirk Cottbus it was proving difficult merely to elect an executive board for the new LPG — in some villages even months after officially becoming 'vollgenossenschaftlich'. In Freiwalde, for instance, persistent threats against anyone who would attend an election assembly had up until July 1960 made it impossible for the local LPG to produce a member turnout of over 10% despite trying five times since March. In Byhlen, where farmers were reportedly trying to bring in their first harvest as soon as possible so that the next harvest could also be done individually, the local LPG chairman's pressure for the organization of collective methods in the village resulted in little more than his barn being burned. Reports from Bezirk Potsdam likewise complained that 'many farmers' continued to plow their fields individually through October, and in mid-1961 there were still entire villages that still had not begun to work collectively. Despite the formal 'completion of socialist relations of production' in the countryside, 'muddling through' and doing things like they were always done was still a viable alternative for many farmers, at least for a while.

The 'socialist spring' of 1960 did not, therefore, put an immediate end to individual farming practices. Even less did it signal an immediate end to the older

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Einsatz im Kreis Brandenburg-Land, Bezirk Potsdam'; SAPMO-BA DY30/2023/61, 'Bericht über die Arbeit der Brigade des IGW Beelitz'.

SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/405, 'Probleme in den LPG Typ I im Bezirk Cottbus Frankfurt (Oder)', undated, summer 1960, bl. 124.

SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/376, 'Bericht über den Einsatz im Bezirk Cottbus vom 20. - 23.7.60', bl. 28-34.

social mentalities and values in the countryside that had plagued the land reform and first collectivization push. The social hierarchies in the countryside as they had emerged in the later 1940s proved remarkably tenacious, and in many villages Großbauern continued to dominate village life and advance their own interests as best they could under the new circumstances. No longer in control of the VdgBs, but duly elected to the executive boards of many LPGs, it was from these new positions of authority that they commonly hindered the development of collective methods of farming and in some cases managed to maintain the traditional social and economic distinctions in the village.\textsuperscript{19} There were, for instance, numerous cases of new LPGs functioning essentially as exclusive Großbauer clubs denying membership to weaker farms. But even in villages where all the farmers belonged to a single LPG, the division between rich and poor, between bosses and farmhands, often remained intact. In the village of Wendemark, the traditional social hierarchy passed all but unscathed into the new, supposedly collective form of farming that apparently existed only on paper. One LPG in the village was composed of only one ‘reactionary’ Großbauer and two small farmers, and in the words of a party report was run essentially as an ‘estate’ (Gutsbetrieb) under the big farmer’s supervision. There were similar threads of social continuity reported at the LPG in Neulingen, where the wealthier and more influential members even set up a ‘wage-fund’ for day-labourers.\textsuperscript{14} To be fair, this continuity of village hierarchies was not merely attributable to the Großbauern. The reports clearly show that the social mentality of many small farmers and farmhands had also changed very little over the years. Some small farmers who depended on their wealthier

\textsuperscript{19} J. Osmond, ‘Konflikt’, op. cit., p. 158.
neighbours for machinery and who performed seasonal work for them failed to see what
the SED called the ‘hidden exploitation’ in this relationship, but rather tended to
perceive an advantage that they would lose upon joining an LPG. In fact, many had
actually made their own entry into an LPG contingent upon that of the farmers for
whom they occasionally worked. As one party official in Cottbus remarked with
frustration during the height of the collectivization campaign, such attitudes hindered
the entry of some of the wealthier farmers who, because they were thus able to retain a
sufficient supply of labour, had no pressing reason to join.\textsuperscript{154} Simply put, the ‘class
struggle in the village’ failed to materialize in many quarters.

In other quarters, however, the class struggle ran out of the SED’s control. Only
against this background of a continuing cleft between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in the
countryside does the resentment of a large minority of collective farmers towards the
forced entry of the powerful \textit{Großbauern} — ‘sectarianism’ in SED parlance — make
sense. Although the entry of the wealthier farms represented on the one hand a
desirable economic boost to the struggling LPGs, on the other it also entailed a loss of
influence for their long-standing members. Especially among LPG farmers who had
contributed only small parcels of land there was a growing fear that ‘we will now have
to work more than before — we do not want to work for the \textit{Großbauern’}.\textsuperscript{156} In some
villages this ‘sectarianism’ was based merely on practical considerations, consisting of
little more than an insistence that newcomers first show that they actually wanted to
work for the LPG before taking over any administrative functions, or of distributing the

\textsuperscript{154} SAPMO-BA DY30/2023/61, ‘Bericht über die Brigadetätigkeit im Kreis Seehausen/Altmark’,
undated, Mar./Apr. 1960, p. 4-6.
\textsuperscript{155} SAPMO-BA DY30/2023/61, ‘Bericht der Brigade des Instituts für Gesellschaftswissenschaften’, 11
\textsuperscript{156} SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/376, ‘Die Entwicklung der genossenschaftlichen Arbeit in der
Landwirtschaft’, undated, spring/summer 1960, p. 2. SAPMO-BA DY30/2023/61, bl. 5.
LPG’s reserve funds among the old members before any newcomers arrived. In other villages, though, it took on more antagonistic forms. In Neukirchen, Kreis Seehausen, long-standing LPG members actually created a separate herd for the cows of newcomers to be kept on more sparsely grown meadows. Relations between the long-standing LPG Type III and the newly-formed Type I in Petershagen, Kreis Angermünde, were so poor that the Type I members had to cut their grain with hand-mowers and scythes because the Type III refused to loan them any machinery.

Whether such hostility was simply a matter of economic self-interest, revenge for earlier poor treatment at the hands of established farmers or perhaps, ironically, due in part to the very success of the SED’s constant ‘class enemy’ rhetoric about the Großbauern no doubt varied from village to village and from individual to individual, and can hardly be answered conclusively. But it is in any event clear that many collective farmers were no more enamoured with the consequences of forced collectivization than were their recently self-employed colleagues. And as for the latter, whose nagging fears of expropriation had now become reality, the experience of being coerced into a dreaded ‘kolkhoz’ engendered anything but a desire to help build socialism in the countryside. In summer 1961, over a year after the forced collectivization, the anger was still almost palpable at an assembly at the LPG Krachsheide, Kreis Beeskow: ‘We don’t want to hear the word socialism any more, leave us alone. Enough people have already cleared out (for the West), and there’s still

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157 SAPMO-BA DY30/2023/61, ‘Bericht über die Brigadetätigkeit im Kreis Haldensleben vom 22.3 - 14.4.60’, p. 3.
room for us'. Though there may have been room in the Federal Republic, by now there was precious little time left to get there.

From Collectivization to Rationalization: Passivity and Pragmatism in the 1960s

The construction of the Berlin Wall undoubtedly augmented the SED leadership’s ability to push through its socialist agricultural policies. Only twelve days after the barbed wire went up around West Berlin the ‘Verordnung über Aufenthaltsbeschränkung’ came into force, which mandated ‘work education’ for the so-called ‘work-shy elements’ in the countryside. The object was not so much to arrest large numbers of ‘reactionary’ farmers as it was to scare them into toeing the line. The few convictions to which it led were widely publicized for effect, such as that of Oskar Stern from Potsdam-Bornim who was essentially charged with failing to cooperate with the rest of his LPG. As a December report from the MfS and Volkspolizei in Bezirk Potsdam euphemistically put it, ‘the struggle for the establishment of cleanliness, order and collective work as the basis of the LPG economy received a boost after the measures of 13 August’.

But it is easy to overestimate the impact of the Wall and the legislation that followed it, as many have done. Despite such scare tactics the situation in the countryside remained unstable and the LPGs were only gradually consolidated over the

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140 The Berliner Zeitung reported his trial on 30 August under the headline ‘No Place for Loafers’; the National Front even prepared a flyer to publicize the verdict. Cf. F. Werkentin, Politische Strafjustiz, op. cit., p. 106-7.
142 See, for example, the otherwise convincing study by F. Werkentin, Politische Strafjustiz, op. cit., p. 92ff.; also the rather one-sided work of A. Mitter, S. Wolle, Untergang auf Raten, op. cit., p. 305ff.
following years. In fact, the very same MfS report that initially posits a 'boost' after the construction of the Wall goes on to leave little doubt that the continued unreliability of many local functionaries, widespread disaffection with the SED's collectivization policies and the myriad ways this was manifested — sabotage, arson, refusal to work collectively, rumours — could not be immediately changed by locking farmers in or threatening them with work-detention. The 'political mass-work' of rural functionaries was still deemed 'by no means satisfactory', the majority of local SED organizations were still 'ideologically insecure' and the village VdgB associations remained 'completely unsatisfactory' — indeed, most existed merely on paper. The LPGs' economic performance in Bezirk Potsdam was none too impressive either: 315 (53%) were still operating in the red at the end of the year. As for the farmers themselves, most still had 'no interest in collective development' and were deeply alienated from the regime. Farmers in Pessin, Kreis Nauen, summed up the mood thus: 'if the border were open the whole village would be empty in 24 hours, including the party secretary and the mayor'.

Such sentiments are anything but surprising given the bleak situation in the countryside at the time. The problems associated with collectivization were compounded by the unusually harsh winter of 1961-62. Many LPGs needed bridging-loans to stay financially afloat, and some were even decreasing the sizes of their livestock herds because of a shortage of feed. Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that the Produktionsaufgebot was essentially a non-starter in the East German countryside. Most farmers understandably felt that there was simply nothing more to be squeezed out of agriculture. LPG incomes remained low throughout 1962. Although

ibid., bl. 189.
the introduction of a minimum annual salary of 3120 Marks for LPG members (accompanied by a maximum salary of 8,000 Marks, over which one was forced to reinvest one’s income at a progressively increasing rate) guaranteed a subsistence income, it did little to improve the overall economic standing of many struggling LPGs, as the small wave of farm withdrawals in late 1962 amply illustrates. So long as the situation in agriculture remained poor, so too did the prospects of any substantial improvement in the attitudes of most farmers towards the regime.

Not about to revert to individual farming methods as the Polish communists had done, the SED leadership looked instead to the ‘rationalization’ of East German agriculture as the key to overcoming the disjunctures and unsatisfactory growth of the agricultural economy, and hence also as a means of convincing farmers of the correctness of the socialist course, of binding them more closely to the party and state. This rationalization, or ‘industrialization’ of agriculture had both ideological and practical motives. Ideologically, the further expansion of industrial methods and collective structures in agriculture was seen as a virtue in itself, a means of helping to abolish the differences between town and countryside and thus facilitating the heralded alliance of workers and farmers. In practical terms, the idea was to improve yields with increased mechanization and specialization. This was to be made possible by the amalgamation of several LPGs into one, which would not only allow for a more efficient use of machinery, but also would have the desirable side-effect of forcing recalcitrant and ‘uncooperative’ (in every sense of the word) Type I LPGs to develop collective forms of organization. It was all part and parcel of the general economic re-

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164 See esp. SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/40.1.
165 This was clearly reflected in the changing structure of LPG farming during the 1960s. Whereas in 1960 the average size of LPGs was 300 hectares and two-thirds of all LPGs were Type I, by 1970 the average LPG size had doubled to around 600 hectares and two-thirds had either transformed or were
thinking associated with the NES, and concomitant to the ‘rationalization’ of agriculture was a re-emphasis on efficiency, inward investment and the profit incentive: the abolition of different prices for quota deliveries and *freie Spitzen* (crops in 1964, livestock later in 1969), bonuses for increasing production and lowering costs, subventions for fuel and fertilizer and low-interest finance for investment plans.

With hindsight it is clear that the SED’s rationalization plans led to a rapid growth in agricultural output, which was a crucial prerequisite for the general rise in living standards in the GDR during the 1960s. At the time, however, East German farmers were still recovering from the massive upheavals of 1960, and were by and large sceptical of any new changes in agriculture. For most, all of this added up to yet another tightening of the state’s grip on their lives, and there was, at least initially, an overwhelming desire simply to be left in peace. The emphasis on increased work productivity at the Sixth Party Convention in early 1963 found extremely little resonance among farmers, many of whom borrowed a page from the book of industrial workers’ complaints by arguing that any rise in productivity would only be achieved ‘on their backs’ and that they would not benefit from it personally in any event. The first attempts to integrate LPGs in 1963 were scarcely more popular; even official East German accounts spoke of ‘no appreciation’ (*kein Verständnis*) for them among farmers. On the contrary, most were still convinced that the way to increase production was to return to traditional individual farming methods, and that further integration was thus going in the wrong direction. This was — ominously from the

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SED's point of view — not least the prevailing opinion in a number of the first large conglomerate LPGs, where in the summer of 1963 party functionaries were concerned that discussions with farmers about splitting them up into small units in order to make them more efficient 'should not take on an all-too-broad character — at least in terms of a wave of LPG separations being precipitated'.

But rationalization in general and the principles of the NES in particular soon gained some acceptance. The principle of material interest was not at all unpopular among farmers, and was in fact viewed as a slight return to older market principles which most still espoused. The new emphasis on investment, development and the use of new machinery was also greeted with qualified approval, as it promised to yield income dividends in the future. In 1964 the whole idea of 'industrialized agriculture' gained increasing currency among farmers after being a central focus at the Eighth Farmers' Congress. Generally speaking, 'industrialized methods' and mechanization met with interest and qualified approval, above all because they offered the prospect of mitigating the continuing labour shortage in agriculture. The drain of youth to the cities and consequent age imbalance in the LPGs remained one of the main worries of farmers in the mid-1960s. The average age of Type III LPG members in Bezirk Potsdam was generally between 50 and 60 years; the average percentage of members under 25 was only 6.9% in Type IIIIs and a mere 4.8% in Type Is. The dire prospects of securing an adequate supply of labour in the future was one of the primary reasons why, despite certain reservations and a lingering desire to return to older individual

methods of farming, most farmers were showing an increasing openness to the SED’s plans for agriculture.

In August 1964, the Department for Ideological Work in the Office for Agriculture conducted an in-depth study of farmers’ opinions, questions and ‘unclarities’ towards the government’s agricultural policies in 6 LPGs in Kreis Nauen, just north of Potsdam. The resulting document, though inevitably couched in SED-speak, clearly represents a self-critical attempt to gain a realistic picture of the situation on the ground — not only in these six enterprises, but in LPGs in general — and as such offers a unique insight into farmers’ opinion during a period of ever-decreasing quality of internal reporting. On the whole, the report gives the impression of piecemeal approval for certain aspects of government policy against the overall backdrop of an essentially unchanged picture of political apathy and resignation mixed with self-defence of one’s economic interests and a lingering bitterness about being forced into the LPGs.

Even in 1964, much of the problem facing the SED was how to overcome farmers’ stubborn conservatism and scepticism towards any innovation that entailed any risks or that did not bring them obvious and immediate advantages. The report complains that the farmers in Nauen had certain ingrained characteristics and opinions that would conflict with the transition to industrial production: in particular a ‘lack of creative initiative’, a general scepticism about any claims to increase productivity — especially if levels were supposed to surpass that of individual farming methods — and a pronounced ‘brigade-egoism’, or disregard for developments at other farms or in other departments with no direct bearing on themselves personally. One might add to this list

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a deep-seated disapproval among many male farmers of female colleagues (who by the end of 1961 constituted 46.6% of all LPG members\textsuperscript{175}) gaining advanced qualifications and occupying leading positions in the LPGs, which came through loud and clear during discussions about the 1961 communique ‘Die Frau, der Frieden und der Sozialismus’ and the women’s advancement plans of 1963-64.\textsuperscript{176} Yet at the same time the report acknowledges that most did not reject the principle of industrial production out of hand. While many felt anxious about the possibility of losing their jobs to mechanization and about the risks of specialization, especially monocultural farming, such fears co-existed with broad approval for using the existing technology to the fullest in order to raise production and incomes.\textsuperscript{177} This cautious fear of the financial risks of specialization also appears in numerous other reports around this time, and farmers understandably demanded ‘good preconditions’ (i.e. improved buildings, credits and income guarantees) before taking such a step. As another report from Bezirk Potsdam put it: ‘Farmers are, after all, realistic-thinking (realdenkend) people... They tell us “what you say about industrial production is completely correct for the future. But if we go over to special branches of production under the current conditions, what do we do if we have low yields in our special branch?”’\textsuperscript{178} But by and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/359, bl. 99-101.
\item As one report put it: ‘Among the men — especially also among many functionaries in the villages, there is the opinion that it is enough if they are members, the women should run the household and rear the children, and can simply help during peak times’. SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/7/359, ‘Einschätzung über die Arbeit mit den Bauerinnen in Auswertung des Kommuniques “Die Frau — der Frieden und der Sozialismus”’, 29 June 1962, bl. 328; See also SAPMO-BA DY30/902/6, ‘Argumente aus den Blockparteien’, 2 Mar. 1962; SAPMO-BA FDGB-ZV Land- und Forstwirtschaft 10/356/7927, reports of 4 Jan. 1964, 7 Feb. 1964.
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large this ‘realistic thinking’, this self-interested pragmatism, eventually led farmers to adopt the regime’s plans for specialization and mechanization, not to reject them.

Convincing farmers of the advantages of industrial farming methods was one thing; ‘binding’ them more closely to the party and state and generating a modicum of loyalty to the regime was another matter entirely. In the mid-1960s it seems that East German farmers were still by and large indifferent to any matters not directly affecting their economic interests. As the 1964 Nauen report put it, ‘a large proportion of the farmers judge the results of their work merely according to the level of their personal income’, adding that this had traditionally been the case with farmers. The authors of the report could not help but notice that the farmers with whom they spoke were far more open to discussions about this issue than about ones from which they could discern no direct use to themselves. These same proximal economic criteria also formed the basis of farmers’ opinions about the difference between the GDR and the Federal Republic: ‘The distinction is in the main measured not according to the structures and relations of society, but rather by the fact that in the West there are more cars, “one can buy everything”, the “authority of the West-Mark is greater”, etc.’, an attitude that was, of course, only reinforced by the occasional difficulties in the availability of basic goods, spare parts and other necessities.176

This immovable pragmatism was all but impervious to the party’s attempts at political mobilization. Reports during the 1963 Volkskammer elections still complained of a general ‘lack of influence on the village population’, which was usually attributed to the fact that the party organization was still the ‘least developed in the agricultural

Despite a broad attempt in 1963 to invigorate the party organization and enhance its influence in the countryside to match that of the towns and cities, reports in the summer were still forced to concede that 'there are no satisfying results to report', and in fact complained of regression in many areas. Remarkably little progress had been made in this regard since the late 1940s. It was estimated that still only around one-half of all rural SED members actually participated in party life in 1963, and member assemblies were not regularly convened in most villages. This situation had not changed at all by 1964, and reports still complained of inactivity in rural GPOs (Grundparteiorganisationen, or basic party organizations), of the 'greatest unclarities' among farmers and of a broad range of factors and attitudes hindering the expansion of the party ranks: 'I'll become a socialist when I can travel where I want!'; 'leave us alone about the party... we'd have to go to more meetings'; 'I'd just be avoided by a whole string of people in the village'. The vast majority of rural party members still had little political experience or party education, and members often would not act in their role as SED members because they could not — or would not — offer answers to other people's questions. While the vast majority reportedly showed a great willingness and enthusiasm as regarded their farm work, 'in political questions they often differ little from those unattached to a party'. A year later in 1965 the picture still looked the same in Kreis Kyritz, where a party investigation on farmers' 'political consciousness' was forced to conclude that 'the farmers are moved by a number of

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questions, but really only economic ones', adding that this was especially true among the 'good farmers'. The report optimistically notes that the situation was better among younger farmers, who tended to have more faith in the underlying principles of collective farming. But as we have seen, there simply were not that many young farmers around.

Yet the situation in the countryside was not all bleak from the SED’s point of view. The party leadership could take some consolation in the fact that the church was also finding it increasingly difficult to maintain its influence over the rural populace. The conflicts of the 1950s had taken their toll in terms of church membership and attendance, especially with the increasing pressure on individuals since 1958 to sever their ties with the church, which were increasingly viewed as hindrances to one’s educational and career advancement. The proliferation of non-church-affiliated clubs and organizations also meant that the church no longer had a monopoly on social life in the village. More importantly, however, a new generation of agricultural experts trained in the agricultural colleges established in the 1950s and for the most part committed to the communist regime were rising to positions of influence in the countryside. By the mid-1960s they had largely stabilized the collective farms and were poised to take control of them in the years that followed. The state apparatus was also becoming more professionalized and reliable with the influx of these ‘new men and women’: of the 259 members of the Ratskollektive in Bezirk Potsdam in 1965, 198 were

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183 See A. Bauerkämper, ‘Transformation’, op. cit.; see also BLHA Rep. 401, Nr. 4276, on the June 1962 Council of Ministers resolution for the further qualification of agricultural cadre.
SED members and 118 possessed a university degree. The previous rift between the party and state leadership and their subordinates in the countryside was no longer so pronounced.

On the whole, there was by this time little evidence that farmers would present the regime serious difficulties. There was still a certain nominal identification with the party among some of those, particularly Neubauern, who had profited from its policies of land distribution and collectivization. The political attitudes and behaviour of even the most anti-SED farmers was not so much characterized by resolute opposition as by resignation to their fate and making the best of the circumstances in the GDR — circumstances which, it should be noted, were slowly but steadily improving by the mid-1960s. There were also, of course, the lessons drawn from the 'socialist spring': the threat of coercion in the countryside remained sufficient in the early- and mid-1960s to dissuade almost anyone from sticking his or her neck out. In any event, so long as farmers were grudgingly willing to cooperate with the main thrust of SED agricultural policies, their political attitudes were without much significance in terms of the stability of the regime. They had no alternative parties or organizations to represent their interests and fight their battles' with the state. Perhaps more importantly, in many areas the tight web of social bonds in the village that had resisted and refracted the attempt to transform the countryside for so long were gradually breaking down under the force of migration to the cities and LPG conglomeration. There were, to be sure, still older tensions between 'new' and 'old' farmers and between rival families that passed into the LPGs in some villages, but these hardly constituted a problem to a regime that was just as interested in keeping broader networks of solidarity from developing in any

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event. With no easy alternatives, and with the shorter hours, vacation provision and child-care facilities of the LPG system, most eventually saw less to gain from opposition than from compliance with the rules of the game. Passivity and pragmatism thus became mutually reinforcing characteristics of life in the 'socialist village'.
Chapter 4

Protecting the Accomplishments of Socialism: East Germans and the Armed Forces

In its drive to transform East German society, the SED saw itself confronted by numerous internal enemies that threatened the success of East German socialism: Großbauern, pastors, saboteurs, loafers, etc. But the greatest perceived threat of all was external: namely, the militaristic ‘war-mongers’ in the West. According to Marxist-Leninist doctrine, militarism, war and imperialism are the unavoidable outgrowths of capitalism, with its logic of ruthless competition, ever-expanding markets and the constant striving for ever-greater profits inevitably bringing different peoples into conflict. Just as capitalist states function to secure and advance the interests of the capitalist ruling class, so too do their military forces fight against any perceived obstacles to sustaining the capitalist hegemony and to achieving the highest possible profits for the ruling elite. In this scheme of things, the working-classes are duped by notions of national honour and patriotism into fighting and dying in the interests of the very people who oppress them. So it was in both world wars, and significantly, so it would be again in the capitalist West. As a consciously socialist state that functioned instead in the interests of the common people, the GDR was a primary target for capitalist aggression. It was only a matter of time, so the argument went, before the ruling classes in the West would unleash yet another war of imperialism against the enemies of capitalist exploitation. When that war came the GDR had to be prepared to
defend itself, and in order to do so it needed armed forces. In short, the SED argued that militarization in the GDR was necessary to defeat militarism.¹

As we shall see, in a society still acutely feeling the effects — both material and emotional — of the last war, the establishment of armed forces and in particular the recruitment of young able-bodied soldiers constituted not only an unpopular task, but also one riddled with internal contradictions — political, propagandistic and organizational. This chapter will examine the grass-roots reception of the three primary thrusts of the regime’s rearmament programme: the expansion of the ‘garrisoned People’s Police’ (Kasernierte Volkspolizei, or KVP) in 1952-53, the founding of the National People’s Army (Nationale Volksarmee, or NVA) in 1955-56, and the recruitment push beginning in 1960 and ending with the introduction of conscription in 1962. The focus throughout is on the problem of mass recruitment of ‘ordinary’ soldiers under the particular circumstances of the GDR in the 1950s and early 1960s — having to raise a ‘volunteer’ army in order not to be the first post-war German state to introduce conscription, but in a society where relatively few people were willing to join of their own accord and departure to the West was relatively easy.

¹ I distinguish here between ‘militarism’, which denotes either the predominance of military over civilian authority, or more generally the prevalence of warlike values in a society, and ‘militarization’, which Michael Geyer has broadly defined as the ‘social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence’. ‘The Militarization of Europe, 1914-1945’, in: John Gillis (ed.), The Militarization of the Western World, (New Brunswick, 1989), p. 65-102, this quote p. 79.
The Kasernierte Volkspolizei

a.) ‘National Armed Forces’ for the GDR: Mobilizing East German Youth

The period from early summer 1952 to the New Course in June 1953 saw the strongest militarization push in eastern Germany since the end of the Second World War. Although the Soviets and SED had already established a sizeable quasi-military ‘police force’ in the late 1940s numbering around 20,000 men whose arms, uniforms and organization resembled those more of soldiers than policemen; explicit plans for the establishment of ‘national armed forces’ for the GDR were first publicly announced at the Second Party Conference in July 1952, in the context of the accelerated ‘construction of socialism’. The campaign actually began a few months earlier. In connection with developments in the international situation in central Europe in early 1952 — above all the consolidation and strengthening of the western military alliance and the confusion wrought by the famous Stalin-note of March — the Soviets forced a mobilization of the various military forces in the eastern camp. As Wilhelm Pieck recalled from talks with Soviet leaders in Moscow on 1 April 1952, the object for the GDR was to ‘create a People’s Army without a big fuss’ (‘Volksarmee schaffen ohne Geschrei’) by expanding its existing paramilitary forces. This immediately became a policy priority, and only weeks later Ulbricht impressed upon local party secretaries that recruitment for the armed forces was one of the ‘most pressing tasks of the party and

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2 See generally, Bruno Thoß (ed.), Volksarmee, op. cit.
FDJ' and that agitation for the popular acceptance of an East German army would be of primary importance in the months to come. On 8 April the HVA (Hauptverwaltung Ausbildung, the forerunner to the KVP) ordered that recruitment be the 'exclusive focal point' of its efforts during the month of April, and that the directors of local police precincts devote at least half of their time to it over this period.

Thus began, at the Soviets' behest, the comprehensive programme for the establishment of 'national armed forces' in the GDR. The nucleus of the incipient army was the Kasernierte Volkspolizei — so named in order to hide its decidedly military character before the establishment of a West German army — which comprised the bulk of the GDR's ground forces, including infantry, tank and artillery units. Complementing the KVP were the newly-founded Volkspolizei-See and -Luft units, which in every way apart from their names resembled naval and air defence forces, as well as the so-called Betriebskampfgruppen (Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse after 1959) which were initially intended as a paramilitary force for the protection of factories but which eventually took on broader functions of civil defence.

The scale of the militarization programme was immense, and necessitated a correspondingly aggressive recruitment campaign. The planned overall strength of the KVP was approximately 160,000 troops. If one includes the marine and air units this figure increases to around 200,000. Although these perhaps unrealistically optimistic recruitment targets were not completely fulfilled in 1952-53, the armed forces did manage to meet their minimum requirements. To give a general idea of the scale of recruitment, KVP personnel altogether numbered 90,250 by December 1952 and 113,000 by summer 1953, which amounted to a total of around 60,000 new recruits in

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less than twelve months following the Second Party Conference. In planning out the methods and strategies of its ambitious recruitment campaign, the East German government could already draw on a considerable amount of experience gained from the previous difficulties of recruiting a sufficient number of acceptable troops for the various police and paramilitary units that already existed before 1952. The first prerequisite was to coordinate the vast organizational machinery of the GDR for the purpose of recruitment, including both the state and party apparatus as well as the MOs ('mass organizations': FDGB, FDJ, National Front, etc.). As an initial step, the government expanded its pre-existing registration capacity by establishing 225 local registration offices all across the GDR, in all of the larger towns and principalities. By summer 1952 all local Volkspolizei authorities with jurisdictions of up to 150,000 residents were instructed to assign at least two officers to recruitment for the armed forces, those with over 150,000 at least three, and the larger Kreise such as Leipzig and Dresden up to eight officers. Various bonuses were also established as an incentive for winning recruits. In October the various regional registration offices were placed under the authority of the central Recruitment Office (Verwaltung für Rekrutierung) of the KVP within the Interior Ministry, which was responsible for coordinating the entire recruitment campaign.

The FDJ played an important role in the campaign by providing a forum for the recruitment of young people, who would naturally comprise the rank-and-file of any East German fighting force. In May 1952, the SED leadership commissioned the FDJ

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7 ibid.
9 ibid., p. 262.
to embark on a systematic programme for educating the East German youth about the 'great importance of the People's Police as the protector of the people's interests'. Thenceforth two of its main tasks were the so-called 'Wehrerziehung', or military education, of all East German youths and the recruitment of as many as possible into the armed forces. From July to September 1952, some 37,000 youths were supposed to be recruited for the KVP and Border Police via so-called FDJ 'Aufgeboten', or summonings. Among these were some 5,000 SED members who were to be either persuaded or 'delegated' into the KVP. The new emphasis on the virtues of military vigilance was clearly expressed at the FDJ's Fourth Parliament in Leipzig at the end of May, when thousands of young people carried rifles in strict military formation on their marches through the city. It was also plainly visible in the official press organ of the FDJ, *Junge Welt*, as a number of headlines around the end of May 1952 demonstrate:

- *Unsere Volkspolizei stärken, heißt das Friedenslager stärken*
- *Wir fordern Einführung des Schießsports in der FDJ*
- *Mädchen wollen Funk lernen*
- *Motorsportler fordern Ausbildung mit der Waffe*
- *Bewaffneter Schütz der Heimat — wichtige Aufgabe der deutschen Jugend*

In August 1952, two new organizations were introduced to aid the FDJ and recruitment offices in mobilizing the East German youth for the defence of the republic. The so-called *Gesellschaft für Sport und Technik* (GST, Society for Sport and Technology) was officially founded on 7 August, and despite attempts to hide its paramilitary nature, it is clear that the organization was intended from the outset to attract youths into the armed forces and serve as a kind of preparatory school for subsequent military training. The

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The protocol of the 6 May 1952 Politbüro meeting could hardly be less ambiguous about the party leadership's plans for this new 'mass organization': the most important task of the GST was 'the education of the youth and populace in the spirit of patriotism and the heightening of their readiness for the protection of the homeland', which included physical fitness, a technical knowledge of aviation and water-sports, anti-aircraft defence (mandatory for all members), shooting, parachuting, map-reading, tactics, sailing, radio communications, driving and even training dogs (!). The other was the Dienst für Deutschland programme (DfD, Service for Germany), which consisted of a six-month period of service at one of several 'main sites of the construction of socialism' ('Großbaustellen des sozialistischen Aufbaus'); in less dramatic terms, building barracks for what the government hoped would be a rapidly expanding KVP. Although the DfD did manage to attract 6,000 volunteers, the scheme was an overall failure, and seems to have resulted in more unwanted pregnancies than KVP barracks. By late autumn 1952 there were already mounting problems in supplying adequate provisions for the volunteers, as well as serious complaints about conditions in the camps and the treatment of those working in them.13

But building barracks and teaching young people how to operate a field radio were only of secondary importance in mobilizing young East Germans to the defence of their fledgling republic. The main objective was to provide personnel for the KVP, and

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13 Junge Welt, vol. 6, no. 84, p. 1-2; no. 85, p. 3; no. 90, p.1
14 SAPMO-BA JIV2/2/210, p. 9. The GST quickly enjoyed a certain popularity, attracting around 250,000 youths and adults within one year, though this was largely due to the fact that the GST offered essentially the only opportunity in the GDR for practicing rather expensive hobbies such as shooting, not to mention the opportunity to acquire one's driving license or pilot's license for free and without queuing up in long waiting lists. See Gunter Holzweißig, Militärwesen in der DDR, (Berlin, 1985), p. 18-20; Infratest GmbH, Jugendliche Flüchtlinge aus der SBZ, (Munich, 1957), p. 32.
15 Cf. generally Michael Buddrus, Die Organisation 'Dienst für Deutschland', (Weinheim, 1994). One letter sent home by a girl in a DfD camp portrayed such wretched conditions that it was deemed important enough to be sent to Ulbricht himself. SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/303, Abschrift, 8 Oct. 1952; see also DY30/IV2/5/267, report of 13 Nov. 1952.
in the final analysis the recruitment campaign would succeed or fail on this criterion alone. As we have just seen, the organizational machinery enlisted for the campaign was immense, including the police, party, state recruitment offices and several of the 'mass organizations'. This is significant in that it allowed for an almost total coverage of all the recruitment opportunities in the GDR, a kind of saturation approach only possible in a formally ‘durchherrschte Gesellschaft’ like the GDR and which few young people, many of whom belonged to more than one ‘mass organization’, could possibly avoid. Not even those who did not belong to any of the MOs could easily escape the all-encompassing net of the regime’s recruitment overtures. If one missed the recruitment presentation at school or at work, one still might be visited at home by a police officer or representative of the local Wohnparteiorganisation (WPO). In some cases the pressure was even exerted via family members. The SED Secretariat in Potsdam stipulated that party members who forbade their sons to join were to be summoned before the party control commission, and if this did not work, then subjected to a party trial (Parteiverfahren). In short, the recruitment campaign came at young people from all sides — in the workplace, at school, in the FDJ — and in a number of different forms, ranging from the more common ‘mass deployments’ into factories to more personal (and less escapable) ‘individual conversations’. But as we will see below, getting this sprawling network of state, party and affiliated agencies to recruit young people effectively at the grass-roots was not as easy as this makes it look.

All broader organizational questions aside, persuading a young man or woman (primarily man) to enlist in the KVP, GST or DfD still depended on a face-to-face encounter. At some point the vast might of this organizational machinery had to

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confront young people as they were, with all their various interests and plans for the future, and attempt to convince them to enlist. As has already been mentioned, by 1952 the East German government could draw on considerable previous experience with the difficulties of recruiting. Undoubtedly the most important lesson it had learned to date was that as long as the principle of voluntarism was adhered to, raising the necessary numbers would not be an easy task in a society still feeling the effects of the last war and still by and large unconvinced of the necessity of East German armed forces. Reports on recruitment during these early years present a broad array of problems ranging from the 'catastrophic automobile situation' to unhelpful party and FDJ functionaries to the widespread unwillingness of youths to give up their jobs in the rather uncertain economic circumstances in the zone.\textsuperscript{17} The expansion of police and paramilitary units in 1948 and 1949 thus had already necessitated some rather drastic recruitment techniques. At that time, employment offices were instructed to funnel young unemployed males to the police forces by emphasizing the comparatively good pay. Prisoners in Soviet POW camps were also allowed to 'buy' their freedom by agreeing to a stint of service in the paramilitary-style Alert Police and in some cases POWs already on their way home at the transfer station in Frankfurt-Oder were given the unattractive choice of joining the police or working in the uranium mines of the Erzgebirge.\textsuperscript{18} Eventually the stark choice between the uranium mines or police was also presented to youths and unemployed men — and most not surprisingly found the latter the lesser of two evils.


It seems almost needless to say that such tried-and-proven techniques were retained during the great recruiting push of 1952-1953. There was a general atmosphere of pressure at recruitment sessions; cooperation was declared a test of loyalty to socialism and the GDR — an ‘Einstellungsfrage’ — so it was hard to refuse membership in the KVP, DfD or GST without being suspected of being ‘staatsfeindlich’. Effective recruitment was thus not merely a matter of appealing to one’s sense of patriotism or to young men’s sense of manliness. It also included making the would-be recruit believe that his current job or future educational opportunities depended on a ‘positive’ response. This is not to say that recruitment techniques consisted solely of generating a feeling of pressure and fear; there were also attractive promises of high wages, generous vacation, privileged consumer provision, as well as immaterial benefits such as opportunities for further training and professional advancement. Hence it was with a mixture of promises and pressure that the regime attempted to persuade its young people to defend what the SED called the ‘people’s own’ socialist accomplishments.

b.) ‘What about Peace and Bread?': Popular Opinion and the Contradictions of the Armed Forces

How did ‘ordinary’ East Germans receive the government’s rearmament campaigns? While a small minority of East Germans actively supported the project and a somewhat larger minority unenthusiastically accepted the argument that an East German military presence was necessary given developments in the West, what stands out most in the
internal reports throughout the 1950s are three interrelated strands of criticism: the high
costs, the widespread fear of war, and the concern of deepening German division.

From an economic standpoint, the SED could hardly have chosen a less
auspicious time to undertake a rearmament campaign of such vast proportions. The
forced 'construction of socialism' from summer 1952 was an extremely expensive
project, and as merely one part of this broader set of policies the expansion of the
armed forces had to compete for state funding with other priorities such as the
concentration of investment in heavy industry and agricultural collectivization. The
expansion of the armed forces alone required an initial expenditure of 1.5 billion DM.
Since this was not part of the current economic plan, it was clear from the outset that
rearmament would have to be financed by drastic cuts in other areas. These included
reductions in social services and social insurance of 420 million DM, increased
property and income taxes worth 350 million DM as well as a general decrease in
consumption amounting to 300 million DM. To make matters even worse, the initial
expenditure forecast of 1.5 billion DM proved to be a gross underestimate. One
historian has calculated that the costs had actually risen well beyond 1.5 billion DM as
early as mid-1953, by which time they already totalled around 2 billion DM.\footnote{T. Diedrich, Der 17. Juni, op. cit., p. 25.}

The soaring costs of rearmament, along with those incurred through concurrent
agricultural and industrial policies, led to a tangible deterioration in living standards for
the vast majority of the population. It is significant that this deterioration occurred
against the backdrop of rising popular expectations of improved living standards, which
the SED leadership had been promising for years. Whether or not it was even
theoretically possible to expand the armed forces at the same time as investing heavily
in raw materials industries and offering tax incentives to prospective collective farmers, it is clear that, in the event, expanding the armed forces and raising living standards were wholly incompatible goals in the overall economic and political context of 1952-53.

Although the actual financial inter-connections involved in the broader 'accelerated construction of socialism' in 1952-53 were, of course, a matter of strict confidentiality, they were quite rapidly figured out by a populace still living under the constraints of rationing and still acutely sensitive to changes in wages and the price and availability of consumer goods. The expanding KVP was quickly perceived as an unnecessary and, more importantly, unjust economic burden. The sheer costs of weapons and equipment were not the only issue; the relatively high wages of soldiers and especially officers were a far greater source of resentment. Whereas the average wage of an industrial worker in 1952 was around 318 DM/month and the average state pension between only 65 and 90 DM/month, the pay for KVP soldiers was around 300 DM/month (similar to the average pay for industrial workers of all ages, but far over the average pay of an apprentice or especially a young agricultural worker) and for a lieutenant anywhere between 500 and 1,500 DM/month, plus other perquisites such as child support, subsidized rent and an attractive retirement package.20 It therefore comes as no surprise that the mood reports from summer and autumn 1952 are full of complaints about the adverse effects that the expansion of armed forces and especially officers' pay had on living standards.

Much of the criticism referred back to the SED's own contradictory rhetoric. Given both the repeated promises of improving living standards and the recent

20 StJR 1955, p. 98; T. Diedrich, Der 17. Juni, op. cit., p. 25.
propaganda campaign against West German signature to the European Defence Community, the SED’s current attempt to drum up support for the KVP seemed blatantly hypocritical to most East Germans. During an assembly at the Houch factory in Berlin-Weißensee, workers even referred to Stalin to help prove this point: ‘Stalin himself says it is impossible to strengthen armed forces and raise the living standard of the people simultaneously. Isn’t then the strengthening of the KVP an attack on our living standard?’ Indeed, such sentiments appear to have been widespread even among the rank-and-file of the SED. At a party meeting in Prenzlauer Berg, for instance, the Kreisleitung was repeatedly confronted with angry comments from party members who were now essentially being asked to contradict their own previous argumentation: ‘For weeks now the party press has reported that the signing of the Atlantic-pact and the re-militarization in the West means a squandering of the people’s wealth, etc.. We can hardly talk. [...] Up to now we’ve preached “We shall not take up arms.” It only costs money, pensions and wages...’ Such sentiments were hardly ameliorated by the material shortages and general economic malaise that millions of East Germans endured over the winter and spring of 1952-53. When the so-called New Course was announced on 9 June 1953, it seemed merely to confirm the popular view that the expansion of the KVP was an unjustifiably expensive policy from the start. As one woman in Neuermarkt put it: ‘It’s high time that the officers and other louts work for once and don’t get so much money; those are all taxes that our workers have to pay’.

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22 ibid., p. 7.
Yet popular disapproval of the establishment of armed forces in the GDR was not based solely or even predominately on the deterioration of living standards that it caused. The prospect of another war was also a constant source of concern throughout the 1950s, and any military build-up along the inner-German frontier was quite understandably viewed with great trepidation, as it was in the Federal Republic as well. These fears were expressed in innumerable reports and myriad different ways: occasional runs on savings accounts, periodic outbreaks of Hamstern (stocking up on food and other essentials), erecting bomb-proof shelters in gardens and the like. One 1952 SED report from Berlin even complains of an unwillingness among worker-activists to move into flats in the Stalinallee because the area might be a potential bombing target.

With all due caution regarding the prejudicial gender stereotypes of report authors within the party apparatus, it seems that fears of another war were particularly widespread among women — or at least that women were more vocal about them. In factories with a predominately female workforce, political agitation on the question of recruitment often confronted outright hostility from working women, many of whom had already lost their fathers, husbands or brothers in the last war and were not about to risk losing their sons in a new one. In Brandenburg-Havel only 450 of the 6,000 local members of the DFD appeared at its specially-convened assembly dealing with the topic of the armed forces, and even among these women the reportedly ‘hard

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24 There were, of course, similar sentiments in the Federal Republic during the mid-1950s, especially after the Paris agreements of 1954, when the intensity and scope of anti-militarization were great indeed, ranging from the trade unions to important sections of the church to youths who howled down government speakers in Cologne and stoned the Defence Minister in Augsburg with beer mugs.


26 See, for example, SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/544, ‘DFD Stimmungsbericht von den Ereignissen des 17.6. in Berlin’, undated.
discussions' revealed that a 'large portion of those who appeared were not convinced of the necessity of national armed forces'.

There was also more or less universal disapproval of any action that might serve to deepen German division. Whereas militarization campaigns are often occasions for nationalistic fanfare, this was a case -- rather like that in the BRD -- of trying to excite people for a fighting force that ran against the grain of popular nationalist sentiments. Although with hindsight it seems unlikely that German unification was ever achievable in the 1950s, to most contemporaries it still seemed a viable prospect, and a highly desirable one at that. Moreover, hopes for reunification were particularly high during both recruitment campaigns: in 1952 they were raised by the immense publicity surrounding Stalin's note to the western powers in March, and in 1955 by the upcoming Geneva Conference. The expansion of the East German armed forces not only dampened these prospects, but also raised the spectre of German shooting on German in a future East-West conflict. Many East Germans, like their erstwhile compatriots in the West, were frustrated with their apparent inability to determine the future course of German affairs and felt like mere pawns in the broader military struggle between the superpowers: 'It's just a conflict between the Soviets and the USA. We Germans are merely a means to an end'. No one wanted war, and many still harboured hopes for German unification. The expansion of the armed forces seemed like a step in the wrong direction on both counts.

The SED's campaign to drum up popular support for its rearmament plans in 1952-53 was not much of a success. Of course the SED tried to portray the

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29 SAPMO-BA DY34/15/61a/1191, 'Bericht über die Arbeitsbesprechung am 24.6.52'.
establishment of armed forces as a deterrent to 'imperialist capitalist aggression' from the West, and therefore a contribution to maintaining peace in Europe. But just as in West Germany, few East Germans seemed assured, much less convinced, by the Cold War 'peace through strength' argument. In fact, such scepticism was widespread within the lower levels of the SED itself. At the Second Party Conference, Wilhelm Pieck openly demanded that 'every unclarity and vacillation within the ranks of our own party on the question of the armed protection of our Republic is to be completely eradicated'. Similar demands by the party leadership in 1955 plainly reveal that such 'unclarities' continued to pose a problem among the rank-and-file of the SED, which, as we will see below, presented a number of difficulties for the recruitment drive.

c.) Recruitment and Refusal: Pacifism, Disinterest and Evasion

To a large extent, however, it did not really matter what the broader East German populace thought. Although widespread support would of course have been desirable, it was by no means necessary for the execution of the government’s rearmament plans. Establishing a sizeable fighting force required above all a sufficient supply of young recruits who were willing to defend their new socialist homeland with force, if necessary. Towards this end, a successful propaganda campaign was not absolutely necessary; a successful recruitment campaign was. As we have already seen, the recruitment campaign came at young people from all sides and recruiters employed a number of different methods to coax and coerce young people into enlisting in the East German armed forces. But would-be recruits were often less well-disposed and pliable,

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and the circumstances of recruiting them at the grass-roots less propitious, than the party leadership would have wished.

The internal reports exhibit a wide variety of responses from would-be recruits, ranging from a marked eagerness to join to a conditional willingness to defend the GDR if it is attacked all the way to outright refusal to enlist in any military force regardless of the circumstances. Although they present certain interpretive problems both in terms of the sincerity of reported ‘positive’ reactions given the pressure to conform as well as the possibility of regime functionaries writing ‘schöngefarbte’ reports to their superiors, it nonetheless seems clear that the willingness to enlist — for whatever reason — was on balance far outweighed by refusals and by a general disapproval of rearmament, based on a range of different factors.

Given the deliberate cultivation of war-like values among children and youth under the Nazis, it is remarkable how much evidence of principled pacifism (by which I mean refusal to resort to violence under any circumstances) one finds in the reports. And considering the politically-charged, highly pressurized atmosphere in which the recruitment campaign often took place, it is also remarkable how forthright and unambiguous many of these pacifist refusals were. The reports are full of instances of young people refusing to take up arms against other human beings. There are of course any number of possible reasons for this, and pacifist arguments might just as easily have been self-serving as principled. But it seems that one important reason was that, in their campaign to produce a peace-loving ‘anti-fascist’ youth, the SED and FDJ had to a certain extent been too successful for their own good. Many young people saw in the SED’s current idealization of the virtues of military vigilance and unquestioning discipline some of the very values they were taught to associate with the fascist past,
not the socialist future. Disapproval of East German armed forces was by no means tantamount to support for NATO or the West, and pacifist criticism was often directed against what was perceived as a distortion of the values that the regime had preached for the preceding seven years. Consequently, many of those who refused to join the armed forces did so at least in part on the basis of the SED’s own prior teachings. Indeed, the FDJ’s new emphasis on ‘Wehrerziehung’ and its decidedly militaristic displays at its Fourth Parliament in Leipzig drove many pacifist youths from its ranks.\(^2\)

As one Berlin FDJ member who resigned his membership because he did not want to carry weapons put it: ‘it is unheard-of that Walter Ulbricht declares at the Fourth Parliament that young people should attain the Abzeichen für gutes Wissen and also become good sharpshooters. Shooting is against the goals of the FDJ’.\(^3\) In Kreis Loburg these sentiments even found organizational expression in the form of a clandestine group that called itself the ‘FDJ Action Committee against the National Armed Forces’.\(^4\)

The established churches in the GDR served as both promoters and sanctuaries for pacifist sentiments among would-be recruits. Although there were significant local variations and differences between individual clerics, by and large the churches, acting to some extent as social and cultural ‘islands’ in East German society, presented an obstacle to soldier recruitment at the grass-roots. The extent to which they hindered the campaign in a given locality depended to a large degree on the views and personalities

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\(^2\) Even many teachers openly disapproved of the Fourth FDJ Parliament: ‘We have no desire to give the children paramilitary training’. BLHA Ld. Br. Rep. 202G, Nr. 83, bl. 16. Unfortunately, there are not yet any reliable statistics that could offer an acceptably precise estimate of the number of resignations from the FDJ in 1952 and 1953. The FDJ’s membership statistics in the early 1950s are undoubtedly inflated, and statistics on the reasons for resignation were not systematically kept. See Edeltraud Schulze (ed.), DDR-Jugend: ein statistisches Handbuch, (Berlin, 1995).

\(^3\) SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/319, ‘Einige Diskussionen...’, p. 5,6. The Abzeichen für gutes Wissen was a badge honouring outstanding technical knowledge and skills.
of particular pastors, their support or otherwise by the regional church and especially on
the strength of the penumbra of church-affiliated organizations that they managed to
build up and sustain in their local parishes. On the whole it seems that communities in
which the church was strong proved more impervious and 'resistent' (in Martin
Broszat's sense of the term)\textsuperscript{39} to the new message of military vigilance than other areas.

It was arguably a case of poor planning on the part of the SED that the first mass
recruitment push should coincide with its first concerted attempt to break the hold of
the Protestant youth organizations over the younger generation. The decision to outlaw
the popular \textit{Junge Gemeinden} backfired as far as the recruitment campaign was
concerned. With many of their members discriminated against at school, in some cases
even expelled or blocked from entering higher education, the Protestant \textit{Junge
Gemeinden} not surprisingly proved to be a particularly impervious haven for young
Christian pacifists. This was clearly the case in the village of Schleife in \textit{Bezirk}
Cottbus, for instance, where the unusually energetic local pastor not only presided over
an active \textit{Junge Gemeinde}, but also reportedly undermined the local FDJ group by
persuading the young people in his church to resign. According to the \textit{Kreisleitung}, the
effects of his activities were manifested most conspicuously in terms of KVP
recruitment: 'We'd rather fly planes to West Germany' was reported as a typical
response from youths in the village. Generally speaking, schools in which the \textit{Junge
Gemeinden} had a strong presence often feature in reports as focal points for pacifist
refusals to join the KVP — for example, the secondary school in Weida, where pupils
unanimously and demonstratively expressed their refusal to carry weapons, as well as at

\textsuperscript{34} 'Aktionsausschuss der FDJ gegen die Nationalen Streitkräfte'. SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/16/84, bl. 173-4.

\textsuperscript{39} See Martin Broszat, 'Resistenz und Widerstand. Eine Zwischenbilanz des Forschungsprojektes', in:
the agricultural-vocational school in Weimar, where pupils declared that they would rather be shot than enlist.\textsuperscript{36}

Of course not all unwilling would-be recruits responded in such a courageous and forthright manner. Graffiti and defacement of recruitment posters were rife throughout 1952-53 and 1955. Fairly typical were the slogans painted in Kreis Sangerhausen: ‘We’ll tear up our draft papers, we don’t want fratricide, not us (ohne uns).’\textsuperscript{37} Nor were all expressions of refusal very edifying. At the other end of the spectrum from the principled pacifists, some young people met the prospect of recruitment with violence. The reports posit an alarming increase in the number of anonymous attacks on FDJ functionaries and Volkspolizisten during summer and autumn 1952, and explicitly draw a causal connection between most of the attacks and the victims’ recruitment activities. While many were simply attributed to ‘rowdies’ who seemed to despise all figures of authority regardless of their specific organizational affiliation, in some cases the causal connection is unmistakable. Returning from a recruiting trip to Patendorf, the loudspeaker-van from Leuna-Werk ‘Walter Ulbricht’ had to stop because of what seemed to be a badly imbalanced wheel. When the driver and passenger of the van got out to inspect it, they discovered that the lugs on the wheel had somehow worked themselves loose and bent the lug-bolts. Two cars full of young men that had been following the van from Patendorf soon pulled over to offer what initially appeared to be roadside assistance. What they gave the recruiters instead was a rather gruesome beating. Subsequent police inspection of the wheel confirmed that its

\textsuperscript{36} SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/302, reports of 24 June 1952, 10 July 1952, 25 September 1952.

lugs had been intentionally loosened in the village, and that the attack had therefore been planned in advance.³⁸

As one might expect, the majority of refusals to join the armed forces lay somewhere between these two poles of violence and principled non-violence. Probably the most common response, evident in more or less all the reports on recruitment, was again a Schwejkian reference to the regime's own 'peace and bread' rhetoric. The East German national hymn not uncommonly served as the point of reference for such refusals: 'What about the national hymn, that a mother will never again mourn her son? What about the Volkspolizei? The national hymn has now become superfluous.'³⁹ Most East German workers understandably felt they were more use to society in their factories than in the army, and the SED's constant rhetoric about economic reconstruction and improved living standards was also commonly used to lend legitimacy to refusals to enlist: 'Whatever happened to the slogan, "Peace is defended at the work-bench"?' Whereas skilled workers not uncommonly argued that only the unskilled should be taken out of industry for the purposes of military defence, unskilled workers for their part often pointed out that if they enlisted they would not be able to take advantage of opportunities for 'further qualification' in their trade — another of the SED's heralded 'socialist accomplishments' that needed defending from the West, but one which at the time constituted yet another contradiction in official rhetoric that offered would-be recruits a ready-made rationale for not joining the armed forces.

A fascinating report from Kreis Köpenick in Berlin offers an idea not only of the myriad reasons young men had for refusing to enlist, but also of the sense of exasperation felt by recruiters at the seemingly endless string of excuses and

³⁸ ibid.
³⁹ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/319, 'Einige Diskussionen...', p. 5.
Significantly, the report does not list a single positive response, but rather complains of the 'same old arguments' cropping up 'again and again': 'the pay is too poor'; 'what about peace?'; 'I want to further qualify myself'; 'only unskilled workers should be recruited', etc.. It also clearly demonstrates that, as one would expect, some factories -- especially those with a more skilled workforce and better pay -- presented recruiters with greater difficulties than others. Judging from the tone and space allotted to it in the report, the RFT Funkwerk was quite obviously the bane of local recruiters' lives. The candor of workers' comments from this factory indeed gives the impression of a particularly irreverent attitude towards recruiters. Colleague L., for instance, openly declared that he supported neither East nor West, and added that he would surely flee once the government eventually had to fire all young workers in order to recruit them. Others proclaimed that there was nothing to defend in the GDR anyway, that it was better in the West and that the East German government started the whole rearmament problem in Germany in the first place by being the first to establish armed forces. Varying the recruitment tactics did not seem to help. Large assemblies were of little use, as workers would merely break them up with calls to return to work: 'How long do you want to chat? Let's get back to work'. 'Individual conversations' also proved ineffective, as these were often met with cleverly evasive, yet insolent responses. One of the factory managers described the content of a typical 'individual conversation' thus: 'if the Amis (Americans) would ride their tanks into East Berlin they'd be greeted with flowers. So they hear from their colleagues, but of course it's not their opinion'. Whatever tactics recruiters used and whatever specific

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responses they received, it was clear that most workers at RFT Funkwerk were not willing to enlist.

The problems at RFT Funkwerk, like those in other factories, schools and villages across the GDR, lay not merely in the 'negative' attitudes of individuals, but also in group dynamics. Peer pressure was a crucial factor in many young men's decisions to refuse military service, and reports from the shopfloor often complained that workers were 'mutually stirring each other up' against enlisting in the KVP. The report from Köpenick cites a general fear among younger colleagues in particular of being ridiculed by their elders if they enlisted. One young worker at the Kodak factory, for example, told a recruiter that his colleagues would 'do him in' (ihn fertig machen) if he joined voluntarily. Of course such a response might merely be a strategic excuse consciously calculated to avoid putting the blame on oneself or anyone else for one's refusal to enlist. But one should not underestimate the social stigma attached to being in the KVP. At the RFT Funkwerk, workers had allegedly stirred each other up to such a degree that the general attitude in the factory was that the KVP was only suitable for 'unemployed good-for-nothings', 'smugglers' and 'asocials'.¹ The evidence gathered from interviews with East German refugees to the West in the 1950s clearly suggests that such disregard for soldiers and 'garrisoned police' in the GDR was widespread. In interviews with hundreds of white-collar workers who had fled the GDR during 1957, the Infratest institute found that over half of those under 25 years of age thought that soldiers in the GDR got little or no respect, and that approximately two-thirds thought there was little or no pride in being a soldier in the GDR. Moreover, the overall image of soldiers themselves was exceedingly negative; they were generally viewed by

¹ ibid., p. 1.
interviewees as 'uncultivated and stupid', the 'lowest kind of riff-raff' ("extrems Gesindel"). Given the horrible memories of rape and plunder at the hands of many Soviet soldiers in 1945, the KVP's Soviet-style uniforms, which replaced the previously modified Wehrmacht uniforms in 1953, did nothing to diminish this social stigma. These uniforms were so unpopular they were even a source of anxiety to some who joined the KVP. As one new recruit wrote to his girlfriend before holiday leave: 'We look like Russians in these uniforms... I don’t dare come home at all'. What the party leadership propagated as an 'honourable service' in the KVP seemed more like a disgrace to many East German youths.

Divided Loyalties: Motives for Enlisting and the Problem of Local Functionaries

Conventional wisdom has maintained that, whatever parallels one might draw between the responses of would-be recruits in the GDR and the 'ohne mich' movement in West Germany in the 1950s, the crucial difference was that in the GDR 'unwilling' youths faced far more pressure to join, sometimes in the form of being branded 'hostile to the state', sometimes various occupational or personal sanctions. Though the evidence in the East German archives supports this view in general, it also enhances and qualifies it in a number of ways. In reading the reports on youth's reactions to recruiters, what stands out most is the frankness and direct manner of many refusals, which suggests that most were not terrified of opening their mouths on this key 'Einstellungsfrage'.

43 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/303, report of 20 November 1952. As regards these uniforms, there were even fears that, in the event of a war, West German soldiers would mistake KVP soldiers for Soviets and therefore be more willing to shoot at them. See BLHA Bez. Pdm. Rep. 530, Nr. 2035, report of 23 Oct. 1952, unpag.
Throughout the entire period under consideration here — from the 1952-53 KVP campaign to the introduction of conscription in 1962 — instances of refusal, even if expressed very explicitly, were by no means universally punished. In fact, even the young emigrants attempting to gain refugee status in West Germany on the basis of being coerced into joining the East German armed forces often divulged during their interview proceedings (Anerkennungsverfahren) that friends, family and other acquaintances had continually refused to enlist and remained unmolested apart from repeated attempts to recruit them. But cooperation was declared a question of loyalty to socialism and the GDR, so it was hard to refuse membership in the KVP, NVA or GST without exposing oneself to accusations of being hostile to the state, which might carry with it any number of undesirable consequences. Why then did the KVP and NVA experience such difficulty in winning young recruits? And how did so many would-be soldiers in the GDR refuse military service without incurring any meaningful sanctions?

In the event, joining the armed forces was not necessarily a question of loyalty or a matter of 'Farbekennen' to either the would-be recruit or the 'regime' itself. As was so often the case, what the SED-leadership propagated in abstract black and white terms of 'positive' versus 'negative' attitudes, of 'loyal' versus 'staatsfeindlich' behaviour, looked far more complex at the grass-roots. Two points are important here. First, a refusal to enlist was not necessarily a clear rejection of either the GDR or socialism or, for that matter, armed forces in principle, just as willingness to enlist was not necessarily a sign of approval or support. Lower-level functionaries were well aware of this and often acted accordingly. Secondly, and more importantly, conflicts

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44 See V. Ackermann, Der 'echte' Flüchtling, op. cit., p. 178.
and contradictions between different elements of ‘the regime’ offered significant opportunities to avoid recruitment at the grass-roots.

Starting with the first point, young people’s reasons for joining or refusing to join were manifold, and could not automatically be construed as ‘political’ reasons, however hard the party leadership may have tried to define them as such. Many of the refusals described above reflect very basic human desires, and cannot be reduced to a simple question of loyalty: not wanting to be separated from friends, family or colleagues; a reluctance to leave a job which one enjoys or to put off one’s studies, not wanting to give up such cherished moments as Saturday night at the films, sleeping late on Sunday morning and going ‘boogy-woogy’ dancing in West Berlin. In any event, insofar as enlisting was perceived by young people as an Einstellungsfrage, this generally gravitated against the recruitment campaign. As one politically wary youth in Pritzwalk explained: ‘If the times should change again, then people would say, “Look there, he’s also one of the ones who went voluntarily”’.

By the same token, an agreement to enlist was by no means tantamount to a declaration of loyalty to the GDR. Whereas military service represented to some people the annoying interruption of a satisfying career, to others it represented a way out of a poorly paid, dead-end job or perhaps a temporary stopover before moving into another line of work. Of the dozens of KVP deserters questioned by West Berlin authorities during the second half of 1954, 63% admitted that they had enlisted voluntarily because they saw in the armed forces an alternative occupation that they could take up without any prior training once further advancement in their current occupation was no longer possible. Among the other desirable attractions of the armed forces mentioned by

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deserters were the relatively high wages, the opportunity to acquire a driving license free of charge and the opportunity of getting special training as an airplane mechanic, marine engineer or radar technician which was unavailable elsewhere. Though it is impossible to quantify, it seems that, as one might expect, factories with a high proportion of skilled and relatively well-paid workers were less fertile recruiting ground than agricultural areas or factories employing predominately unskilled labourers. The promise of occupational training was especially attractive to young men from rural areas, who saw in the KVP a chance to 'see a few things' outside of their sleepy villages or to 'finally escape the boredom of farming.' Judging from the opinion and morale reports, it would also seem that, on the whole, there was precious little difference in political outlook and opinion between rank-and-file soldiers and the general populace. As Willi Stoph complained to the Central Committee Convention in April 1955: 'the pacifist attitudes that are common among a certain portion of the working-class have a negative effect on members of the KVP [...] and we have determined that when on vacation, young soldiers spread the widest range of hostile opinions'.

As to the second point, 'the system', or 'regime', was more self-contradictory, had more conflicts of interest and offered more room for manoeuvre for those disinclined to enlist than the simplistic notion of 'Farbebekennen' allows. I place the term 'regime' in quotations here because it is crucial to realize that this singular linguistic label obscures the various components of the East German apparatus of power involved in or at least affected by the recruitment campaign and therefore masks

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46 Ackermann, p. 198.
47 See esp. the reports on inspections of individual KVP divisions in BA-MA DVH3/2683. See also BAP DO1/11/351, reports of 31 July 1952, 23 Dec. 1954.
48 Cited in Michael Buddrus, "'Kaderschmiede für den Führungsnachwuchs'?'", op. cit., p. 176.
some important disjunctures within it. We have already seen how the contradictions in official rhetoric could be used to legitimate a refusal to enlist. But far more important than the logical inconsistencies of official rhetoric were conflicts of interest and loyalty within 'the regime' itself — whether between different functionaries with conflicting assignments or between conflicting assignments given to an individual functionary.

Despite the inbuilt advantages for military recruitment in a formally 'durchherrschte Gesellschaft' like the GDR, there were nonetheless numerous organizational problems from the outset. Ambitious, and sometimes unattainable, recruitment targets were introduced in order to motivate functionaries in the various government offices and mass organizations. The recruitment targets were a perpetual source of headaches, and success at fulfilling them varied dramatically from place to place. The October 1952 success rates of the various Kreise in Bezirk Halle, for example, ranged from between 32% and 75%. Faced with reprimands from their superiors, functionaries in poorly performing districts often tried to show that the discrepancy lay in the erroneous calculation of the target figures, and not in any shortcomings in their own work. Figures were therefore occasionally reviewed and revised, much to the confusion of everyone involved.∗

Lower-level functionaries had a range of grievances pertaining to soldier recruitment. According to an SED Central Committee report on the activity of the FDJ, functionaries were failing to juggle their regular tasks with their additional recruiting duties, and often neglected one for the benefit of the other. Another problem was so-called 'Punktenjagd', which also led to a backlog in functionaries' regular duties.∗∗ As the SED secretary for Kreis Jena complained to the local FDJ secretary, 'it doesn't


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matter what you do. If you fulfil the recruitment target other tasks get neglected and you get it in the neck; if you solve your other problems and neglect recruitment you also get it in the neck..." Moreover, many did not like recruiting and wanted to get back to their old jobs as soon as possible. Among the SED Kreisleitungen in Bezirk Potsdam there was ‘moaning’ about the extra work, as well as reports that the ‘discipline and eagerness (to recruit) is none too strong’.

Little wonder, since recruiters encountered all kinds of problems in their dealings with other functionaries. Reports often complained that they got little or no technical or organizational support from either the party or mass organizations, which, as we have just seen, were often more concerned with their own regular duties. Local state officials and Bürgermeister were even less helpful. The mayor of Schnolde, Kreis Pritzwalk, even took it upon himself to advise youths that ‘whoever does not want to join the People’s Army should leave the republic, then when he returns he won’t be called up’ for cadre-political reasons. Least helpful of all were the managers and BPO (Betriebsparteiorganisation) secretaries in the factories. Given the unceasing pressure to increase production and efficiency, many were quite understandably reluctant to forfeit their young, productive employees for military service which many of them deemed unnecessary in any case. Like thousands of comrades across the GDR, the

50 For instance, the FDJ secretary for Bezirk Halle was reported to have told his subordinates that they could only begin preparing for the new school year after getting three KVP recruits.
party secretary at the Ziegelei Rädel near Brandenburg openly told recruiters to ‘leave our workers in the factory, we already have so few’. The Bürgermeister and local party-secretary in Stendal even organized a local counter-campaign against the recruitment of young farmers and farmhands. Most forthright of all was the director of the Zeiss optic works in Jena, who not only ordered that all recruiters be banned from the factory premises, but even got police support to enforce the order. As a Ministry of National Defence report of 1957 put it, ‘Serious discussions with factory directors, cadre directors, progressive Meister and brigadiers ... must be organized in the factories’.

One way of circumventing such problems in recruiting people at their places of work was to instruct local officials to send young men directly to the local recruitment authorities ‘for the purpose of discussion’. But even this method often foundered on the unreliability and conflicting loyalties of grass-roots functionaries, many of whom could sympathize with the arguments and refusals of their young colleagues because of the constant and largely unwanted pressure they themselves faced to sacrifice their weekends for paramilitary training sessions in the Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse. Some were downright emphatic in their refusal to cooperate, such as a director at the Kombinat Espenhain, who sent a 70 year-old employee to the local recruitment commission. But most tried to appear as if they were cooperating with party directives without actually doing so in the hope of keeping recruiters at bay until the current demand for new troops had passed. One particularly uncooperative BPO secretary of

54 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/397 ‘Wie ist die gegenwärtige Lage in der Abwanderung nach Westdeutschland?’, undated, p. 11.
the Ifa Tin Foundry sent nine workers of suitable age to the police authorities in Leipzig, all of whom had to be rejected because of various physical handicaps or chronic diseases. When the police discussed this uncanny coincidence with the nine men, they all admitted to informing the party secretary about their health conditions beforehand as well as pointing out to him that their disabilities would surely preclude any service in the armed forces. ‘That’s not so important’, the secretary reportedly answered, ‘the main thing is that you appear at the local recruitment commission...’

What the party leadership propagated as a coherent plan to raise a ‘volunteer’ army at the same time as raising productivity looked very different at the grass-roots. It was in this overlap between ‘regime’ and ‘society’, the articulation point where official policies were actually put into practice, that the contradictions of these two policy imperatives — not to mention of the SED’s own rhetoric — became unmistakably visible to both local representatives of the regime and would-be soldiers alike. In turn these contradictions caused cracks to open up between the central authorities that dictated ‘official’ policy and local functionaries confronted with realities on the ground. And it was in these narrow rifts, under the shelter of a sympathetic local functionary willing to ignore or at least dilute central directives, that one could often find temporary or lasting refuge from having to perform one’s ‘patriotic duty’ in the armed forces.

Continued Aversion, Increasing Coercion: Recruiting for the NVA, 1955-56

Despite broad popular disapproval and the myriad problems of recruiting outlined above, the KVP and associated paramilitary formations constituted a formidable

fighting force after the 1952-53 rearmament campaign. Yet as the Cold War deepened and the opposing military alliances of East and West expanded and crystallized in the mid-1950s, the Soviets and SED leadership soon agreed that it was necessary to upgrade the GDR’s military defences once again. Against the backdrop of an escalating arms race between the Superpowers, the East German government embarked on a second rearmament push lasting from around April 1955 through to the official deployment of the NVA in December 1956. There were a number of similarities to the first rearmament campaign of 1952-53. The decision to establish a ‘National People’s Army’ was publicly portrayed, as was the KVP, as a necessary response to developments in the Federal Republic: namely, its inclusion in NATO and the founding of the West German Bundeswehr. Many of the methods, problems and responses of this second recruitment campaign likewise recalled those of 1952-53. But as we will see, there were also a few new twists.

In terms of its popular reception, the establishment of the NVA on 18 January 1956 was little different from that of the KVP in summer 1952. Despite the switch from Soviet-style to more traditional German uniforms, which one Western news report erroneously claimed had ‘broken the ice’ in relations between the NVA and East German populace, it is clear that there was still widespread disapproval of an East

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58 ibid.

59 At its 23rd Convention on 15 April 1955, the SED Central Committee publicly announced its intention to transform the KVP into a ‘powerful, effective cadre-army filled with a high level of awareness’ and the Kampfgruppen into an ‘effective instrument of civil defence’. There followed a general re-emphasis in official rhetoric on the GDR’s need to defend itself against its enemies. As in 1952, the mass organizations (esp. FDJ) were soon to follow the party’s lead with new statutes on the virtues of patriotism and vigilance. This enhancement of the value of military service was even given expression in the East German constitution. On 26 September 1955, the People’s Chamber enlarged Article 5 to read that military service was no longer merely an honour, but an ‘honourable national duty’ of the citizens of the GDR. By the time the NVA was officially established in January 1956, the GDR had 120,000 men in uniform. At the same time, it should be noted, only the first 1,000 volunteers had been called up in the Federal Republic. T. Forster, Die NVA, op. cit., p. 25, 377.

60 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 3 Aug. 1957, cited in David Childs, The GDR: Moscow’s German Ally, (London, 1983), p. 274. The switch back to more traditional German military uniforms was
German army. The various sources at hand leave little doubt that those in favour of the founding of the NVA were still heavily outweighed by those against it, although it would seem impossible to arrive at any reliable numerical figures. For what it is worth, the Berlin regional union executive for local trade was prepared to hazard a guess that only about one-third of those in his constituency were for the NVA whereas two-thirds were either 'unclear' or expressed 'arguments of the class enemy'.

The connection between living standards and the costs of expanding the military remained a focus of disaffection — workers in Zossen and Teltow were reportedly worried that 'the creation of the NVA means that every price decrease planned for the next two years is now in question' — though it features less prominently than in 1952-53.

By contrast, concerns about German division and the threat of an inter-German war seem to have been significantly more prevalent in 1955-56 than in 1952-53. As we have seen, the KVP's official title as 'garrisoned police force' offered only the smallest fig-leaf for its army-like nature, and most East Germans seemed well aware that their government was establishing a regular military force that could only serve to deepen German division. Nonetheless, the official establishment of the NVA as a competing army to the West German Bundeswehr seems to have dispelled whatever residual illusions there still were about the consequences of opposing armed forces on chances for German unification. This was an officially-acknowledged expression of hostility between the two German governments. It institutionalized their strategic and military divergence and in the process seemed to place any chances of German unification in

actually quite unpopular among many workers and especially among party members: 'The traditions expressed by the uniforms are the traditions of the fascist Wehrmacht'; 'First there were war criminals in these uniforms and now others'; 'You've really messed it up with the uniforms'. SAPMO-BA DY34/22872, 'Information Nr. 10', 24 Jan. 1956, p. 5.


jeopardy. Although the final blow to East Germans' hopes for a unification with the Federal Republic may only have come, as some historians have suggested, with the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 or the mutual recognition achieved by Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik in the early 1970s, they were certainly frustrated by the events of 1955-56.

As a result, the seemingly growing threat of lasting division and an inter-German war gave a new sense of urgency to feelings of solidarity between Germans on both sides of the Cold War divide. Certainly the internal party reports offer ample evidence of this in the GDR: they are filled with such comments as 'We'll never shoot at our brothers in West Germany' and 'The West German workers won't shoot at our workers, but at the government'[^209], which seem to take up noticeably more room in the reports than in 1952-53. The SED's ardent efforts to portray the character of the NVA as fundamentally different from that of the 'aggressive' Bundeswehr were almost entirely unsuccessful: the NVA was commonly referred to as merely 'an old woman in a new dress' no different from the Bundeswehr, 'only that the child has a different name here'.[^210] It also seems that the response of most women to the founding of the NVA was even more negative than in 1952-53. At a clothing factory in Wusterwitz, the reception by the predominately female workforce was almost universally hostile. It was estimated that 90% openly rejected the NVA during discussions: 'most of us don't have our husbands any more, and we are not going to send our children into a new war'.[^211] The reception at the Weissensee clothing factory was even worse, its predominately female workforce invariably erupting into 'scenes of tumult' whenever the armed

protection of the GDR was discussed. As the head union representative spoke at an assembly about the creation of the NVA, one young ironer exclaimed 'we demand that the draft orders be torn up in West Germany and that we do the same here!' to the unanimous agreement and 'animated applause' of everyone present."

Pacifism also continued to be widespread, especially among youth, though there were a few new developments here as well. There is evidence that in 1955-56 it was slowly being replaced by a pragmatic careerism among many university students, the majority of whom reportedly showed a 'remarkable' lack of opposition to service in the NVA and obligatory participation in the GST after the initially cool reception of the KVP. Most students deemed it better not to stick out their necks in the tense atmosphere of the universities in autumn 1956, and in the midst of widespread rumours about an imminent introduction of conscription it seemed doubly prudent to get one's military service out of the way during one's studies so as to avoid interrupting one's career."

There is also more evidence of a generational divide in popular responses to the NVA. As one union report put it: 'The positive discussions presently seem to be in the minority. [...] (These) stem mostly from functionaries and party members and from a portion of older colleagues. The older colleagues mostly portray their own lives, their unemployment under capitalism and the years around 1918, when workers also took up arms but allowed the reactionaries to take them back away from them. [...] Moreover,
among the older colleagues there are sectarian attitudes that emphasize that it is high
time that young people finally get polished up." 

Much to the irritation of the leadership in Berlin, there appears to have been no
change at all in the attitudes of low-level functionaries, who by and large seemed no
more convinced of the wisdom of founding the NVA than they were of the KVP four
years earlier. This was particularly the case in the countryside, where the acute shortage
of labour in agriculture made the recruitment of able-bodied young men anything but
popular." As a report from Bezirk Frankfurt/Oder illustrates, there was little that the
party could about it. When a resolution supporting the NVA was rejected on 17
January at an employee-assembly at the MTS Seelow by a vote of 23 to 17 (with 10
abstentions), the regional SED office conducted an investigation the very next day. The
party instructors quickly discovered what they considered one of the reasons for the
rejection: at a meeting with the shop’s seven FDGB secretaries, only three came out in
support of the NVA, with three against and one abstention. It took a two-hour
‘discussion’ to get all seven to express their ‘agreement’ about the necessity of the
NVA, but even then they were ‘certainly not yet completely convinced’. ‘How’, the
report rhetorically asks, ‘can the character of our workers’ and peasants’ state be clear
to the employees if a hundred-odd questions are still unclear among the union
leadership?’

In terms of recruitment techniques, the recruitment campaign of 1955-56 —
which was actually composed of two more or less separate thrusts: the main one from

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63 BLHA, Bez. Pdm. Rep. 530, Nr. 836, ‘Stimmungsbericht über Äußerungen aus der DDR zur
politischen und wirtschaftlichen Lage auf dem Lande’, 16 Feb. 1955; ‘Informationsbericht zum
June 1953.
spring to autumn 1955 and the other from early 1956 to roughly autumn of that year — showed both certain continuities and significant changes from 1952-53. Although the mixture of promises and pressure was essentially retained, the balance tipped visibly towards the latter in 1955. After the curtailment of recruitment efforts in the wake of the events of June 1953, enlistment results in the second half of 1953 proved ‘completely unsatisfactory’.

At the end of 1953, KVP chief Hoffmann demanded a number of changes to the system of recruitment whereby the principle of voluntarism was thenceforth to be accompanied by the ‘organized drafting’ (organisierte Einberufung) of the ‘best segments’ of the working-classes as well as all SED and FDJ members over 18 years of age. Recruitment offices were secretly to register all men aged 18-50 in order to help guarantee yearly enlistment quotas of 30,000 to 35,000 men. The focus was on the most ‘politically conscious’ youths, which it was hoped would secure the political reliability of the armed forces after their less than convincing performance in the events of 17 June. Yet despite these changes, the KVP was still unable to retain a sufficient supply of new troops, and after the first push of 1952-53 the methods of recruitment appeared more and more like a thinly-veiled form of conscription.

Because the cohort of soldiers who had joined during the 1952-53 campaign were coming to the end of their three-year period of service in 1955, it was estimated that the KVP/NVA faced a 50% shortage in the number of troops in the mid-1950s. In March 1955, the KVP Security Commission concluded that ‘the existing (system of) recruitment can fill these gaps neither quantitatively nor qualitatively’, and proposed a number of measures to boost recruitment such as ‘obligating’ all party members aged

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18-22 to join and ‘delegating’ all party members and state officials with considerable military experience directly into the armed forces.\textsuperscript{72}

The tried-and-proven method of setting numerical targets as an incentive to recruiters increasingly led to what many young men called the ‘sledgehammer method’. Recruitment targets were raised dramatically in some Kreise; one local official who fled to the Federal Republic from Bad Doberan told West German interviewers that the local recruitment target was arbitrarily raised overnight from 20 to 200 ‘volunteers’.\textsuperscript{73} Such rapid increases inevitably led to excesses on the part of recruiters, who not uncommonly resorted to such coercive techniques as threatening someone with the loss of his job, ordering young men to a recruitment office ‘for a discussion’ followed by delivering them directly to a NVA unit, or even, in a few cases, getting a group of young men drunk in order to deliver them to the NVA.\textsuperscript{74}

As far as responses from would-be NVA soldiers were concerned, such crude tactics hardly won the armed forces many sympathetic supporters, as the rising numbers of young male refugees to the West plainly showed (see figure 2).\textsuperscript{75} The party leadership was well aware of this, and even sent admonishments to the Bezirks- and Kreisleitungen warning that the ‘methods of pressure, of commandeering and administrating [...] are not only unsuccessful, but on the contrary can cause dangerous damage’.\textsuperscript{76} Indeed, complaints about the repulsiveness of the ‘sledgehammer method’ led to the gradual adoption of new recruiting methods which became increasingly prominent in 1955 and especially during the recruitment thrust of early 1956. The basic

\textsuperscript{73} V. Ackermann, Der ‘echte’ Flüchtling, op. cit., p. 198.
\textsuperscript{74} ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} Though military recruitment was of course not the only factor behind young men’s emigration to West Germany, the fluctuations in the number of young men aged 18-25 who left the GDR are telling nonetheless.
concept was simple: divide and conquer. As early as 1954, the Central Recruitment
Commission of the SED Central Committee recommended to the Volkspolizei that, in
view of the number of instances of group refusals and colleagues’ ‘negative influence’
on potential recruits (such as at the RFT Funkwerk in Köpenick), recruiting should be
conducted primarily on an individual basis. Under no circumstances was it to be
conducted solely via assemblies or the deployment of large ‘recruiting columns’.
21 By early 1956 the massive campaigns and assemblies in factories, schools and villages
were largely displaced, or at least complemented, by new methods described by young
refugees as ‘nerve deadening’ and ‘attrition tactics’, whereby agitators would
systematically pester potential recruits, sometimes for weeks on end, in the hope that
they would give in and enlist simply in order to be left alone.22 As one pastor in
Potsdam complained to a party functionary: ‘Indirect coercion prevails here. The young

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76 cited in M. Buddrus, ‘‘Kaderschmiede für den Führungsnachwuchs’’, op. cit., p. 176.
1954, bl. 93.
78 V. Ackermann, Der ‘echte’ Flüchtling, op. cit., p. 198.
people are worked on so long by instructors at their places of work until they pull on the uniform.  

Of course none of these methods — the straightforward coercion of the 'sledgehammer method' or the more subtle psychological 'nerve-deadening' tactics — were very attractive to anyone subjected to them. In fact, it seems that they, too, were becoming somewhat counterproductive, and not only in terms of the flight of potential recruits to the West. As numerous reports show, many of the young men who were threatened with the loss of their jobs or strong-armed into 'discussions' at recruitment offices or constantly pestered by agitators at work were repelled more by these coercive recruitment methods than by the idea of enlisting itself. A report from the Synthesewerk Schwarzheide illustrates how even the comparatively subtle 'nerve-deadening' tactics could occasionally backfire. As recruiters (to use their own words) 'systematically led discussions and exhausted all possibilities to win the youth for honourable duty' in the NVA, the young men targeted by the campaign openly declared to the NVA major in charge of the forum that it was not right that recruiters 'never leave them in peace at all' and constantly exert such 'full-blown pressure' to join. One youth was so exasperated that he swore he would join the Bundeswehr if not left in peace immediately.*

The argument that 'I'll join the NVA if conscripted, but not voluntarily' was an increasingly common response to the high-pressure recruiting tactics of the 1955-56 campaign. If coercion was necessary to maintain a sufficient supply of recruits, so the argument went, why not be forthright and introduce conscription? Although such a response might be interpreted as merely a way of getting oneself off the hook without

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appearing too 'staatsfeindlich', the fact that such attitudes were commonly observed by Infratest interviewers among young male refugees to the West strongly suggests that it was not merely evasive rhetoric. The worst thing about recruitment in many young men's minds were the unpleasant methods combined with the idea that it was voluntary: 'Conscription is much better than the kinds of methods they have over there'; 'If universal conscription were introduced, then participation by everyone would simply be a matter of course (Selbstverständlichkeit)." As much as the party leadership and NVA generals would have liked to, it was still a while before it came to that.

The Demographic Crisis and the Effects of the Wall

The basic problem, then, faced by the East German armed forces in the 1950s and early 1960s was that it was exceedingly difficult to secure the necessary supply of suitable recruits without introducing conscription. It is telling in this regard that the government only introduced it in 1962, after the threat of a mass exodus of potential recruits to the West disappeared with the construction of the Berlin Wall. The massive recruitment operation launched at the end of August 1961, only two weeks after the construction of the Wall, speaks volumes about how the SED leadership viewed the problem of recruiting: as long as young people could, for whatever reason, avoid military service by fleeing to West Berlin (which had the added attraction of even offering exemption from the alternative military service in the rest of the Federal Republic), maintaining troop levels would remain difficult. Until the threat of flight was dealt with, the basic

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problem of recruiting volunteers for a military that relatively few East Germans — even in the lower levels of the party-state apparatus — approved of, or even deemed necessary, remained unsolved. In fact, in the meantime the problems only got worse.

For one thing, by the end of the 1950s the worsening labour shortage made most factory managers and other economic functionaries even less willing to cooperate with recruitment efforts. Fairly typical was the attitude of one section manager in the Stahl-und Walzwerk Brandenburg: 'We've got nothing for the NVA, we need labour, first of all the plan has to be fulfilled'. Managers at the Elisabethhütte agreed, pointing out that the main task as laid out at the Fifth Party Convention in July 1958 was an economic and not military one, and that the GDR needed every possible able-bodied male in order to fulfil it. There were still reports of managers and party secretaries sending unhealthy or over-age workers to appear at recruitment offices, making a kind of 'not for recruitment' list of their most productive employees in order to keep them in the factory or giving the most lucrative jobs only to those who would not interrupt their employment by joining the armed forces. Some economic functionaries even tried to change the minds of those who had already enlisted by offering them more money. As exasperated military recruiters in Bezirk Cottbus complained: 'The economic functionaries are a serious weakness. On repeated occasions and in a number of enterprises, youths who have pre-enlisted suddenly receive a considerable pay increase and then rescind their enlistment agreement'.

The result of the increasingly uncooperative stance of many economic functionaries were signs of growing resignation and frustration on the part of recruiters

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themselves. One manifestation of this was the high turnover rates on recruitment commissions. By the end of 1961, 27 of the 49 officials appointed to the Cottbus regional recruitment board in 1958 had quit; in Bezirk Potsdam even eight directors of the Kreis commissions had quit in 1960 alone. How did officials in the Ministry for National Defence account for the turnover? As a report to the SED Central Committee explained: ‘The motivations that cause colleagues to take this step are above all the high intensity of the work and the great nervous strain vis-a-vis the slim successes in recruitment. For these reasons many officers and officials prefer to take up work in the economy’.

The growing sense of resignation was also manifested in widespread ‘formalism’ on the part of both local recruitment commissions as well as FDJ functionaries who were supposed to be helping them. The unceasing pressure to get enlistments meant that recruitment commissions sometimes tended to recruit according to the ‘Tonnenideologie’, concerning themselves primarily with the quantity of recruits and not their quality. In the Ministry for National Defence there were constant complaints of insufficient consideration of hiring guidelines and of the string of other problems to which this led. There were numerous instances of local recruitment commissions carelessly enlisting youths under the age limit of 18 or individuals with extensive criminal records — there was even one case in Bernburg of a new recruit being dispatched with an outstanding jail sentence — many of which ended in

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As for the FDJ functionaries, according to an April 1960 report from the Ministry for National Defence: ‘In general it can be said that the regional and district executives of the FDJ compose good resolutions for the patriotic education of the youth. [...] Because of the insufficient control on their actual implementation, the resolutions have only a slight influence on the recruitment results’. Although Honecker had sent a letter to all local FDJ secretaries on 16 February admonishing them to support the recruitment drive, this reportedly had ‘no effects worth mentioning’. The comments of the FDJ secretary in Kreis Wanzleben were quoted as typical: ‘The main thing is that we have a lot of signatures, what comes after that is another matter’.

It would thus seem that the 1972 Ministry for National Defence internal study of ‘the problem of personnel acquisition for the NVA on the basis of the volunteer system’ was not quite self-critical enough in its conclusion that, despite the ‘untiring efforts of all members of the regional and district commandos under the leadership of the party organizations’, the reason why so many were ‘not in a position to realize the tasks put to them’ and why ‘the personnel quotas of many troop formations were only 55%-65% fulfilled for junior officers and 75%-80% for soldiers’ was first of all the ‘principle of voluntarism’ itself, and secondly the ‘underdeveloped consciousness’ of many youths regarding the necessity of service in the armed forces. Another major factor that this analysis leaves out was that many recruitment commissions were not working very ‘untiringly’ at all, and were plagued by high turnover rates, ‘formalism’ as well as the uncooperative stance of other local officials.

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Given the efforts of economic functionaries to retain their young employees and the widespread apathy of many of those who were supposed to be supporting the recruitment drive, it is little wonder that there were also signs of increasing ‘formalism’ on the part of would-be recruits themselves. At the end of the 1950s the reports posit a rising trend of youths not honouring their resolutions to join; in 1960 this came to 15% of all resolutions made. Promises of wage-hikes for rescinding enlistment agreements were not the only reason. The increase in international tension resulting from the disputes over Berlin — ‘the situation is coming to a head, wait until you are drafted’ — seems to have played a role, as well as the threats and ‘nerve-deadening’ tactics that apparently ever more recruiters were resorting to in order to meet their recruitment (or at least signature) targets, but which often merely resulted in insincere agreements to enlist. As a report from Frankfurt/Oder explained, many youths made a resolution simply ‘in order to escape the bothersome recruiters, then they rescind their resolution, change jobs, sometimes even move to another area in order to avoid further conversations with recruiters’. There were even reports of youths temporarily leaving for the West with the intention to return simply in order to be considered unfit for NVA service.

What happened when someone rescinded his resolution? While there was no legal obligation to honour them, recruitment commissions could threaten youths with any number of sanctions. The menacing letter sent by the local recruitment board in

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92 BAP DOI/11/967, bl. 80.
Cottbus to Wolfgang B. gives an idea of the kind of crude scare tactics that were sometimes used in order to pressure youths to abide by their agreements:

After a number of discussions at your factory, you have refused to perform your honourable duty in the ranks of the NVA. Every citizen of our state must be a conscious fighter for peace and for the defence of our homeland. [...] Many citizens are organized, are comrades-in-arms for peace, unity and socialism. But you set yourself in a stubborn and reactionary manner against our state. [...] We hope that you will still become a socialist citizen and that you will want to defend our homeland. If you do not follow our advice, we will then take other steps. We will investigate your place of work, whether or not you are influenced by reactionary circles there. We will arrange for your factory to transfer you to Cottbus (with your consent). Perhaps you are influenced by your sport friends. We remind you once again that you declared yourself willing to perform your duty of honour in the ranks of the NVA.93

Unfortunately, I have been unable to find out whether or not Wolfgang B. changed his mind upon receiving this letter, simply ignored it or became one of the 33,116 males between the ages of 15 and 25 who fled the GDR in 1960.94 But whatever the outcome of this and other similar cases, the difficulties of getting individual youths to honour their resolutions were dwarfed by those presented by demographic trends in the GDR. It was around 1960 that the effects of the dwindling birth-rate during the war and in the years immediately following it were beginning to be felt. Statistics on the number of young males in the GDR born during these years give an idea of the scale of the problem (see figure 3).

93 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/12/58, letter from Kreiskommando der NVA Cottbus, 15 Sept. 1960, bl. 129.
In early 1960 it was calculated that the NVA needed around 35,000 new recruits annually, the Border Police an additional 13,000, the Alert Police 6,500 and Air Defence 1,000. Up until then around 25% of youths were not considered fit for duty for ‘cadre-political’ reasons and a further 5-8% for health reasons. Factoring in the annual losses to the Federal Republic, these statistics alone painted a grim enough picture for recruiting over the years 1961-1965. But to make matters even worse, the plan was actually to raise the number of recruits over this period, from 193,000 to 275,000. Taken together, the smaller cohorts and higher number of recruits meant that whereas 1 in 5 young males between 18-24 years of age had to be recruited from 1956 to 1960, between 1961 and 1965 the ratio would skyrocket to 2 in 3. The reports convey a slight sense of panic, the upshot of which was the unfolding of a broad and purposeful recruitment campaign in 1961.

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The results of this last major recruitment drive before the construction of the Wall were by now fairly predictable. During the first half of 1961 the results were deemed 'completely insufficient'. The NVA had fulfilled only 55% of its recruitment plan (9,800 for 17,600) by the end of June, the border police only 31% (2,200 for 6,900), the alert police only 25% (1,400 for 5,600) and air defence only 31% (250 for 600). Although the Secretariat of the SED Central Committee responded on 12 July with a resolution on 'measures for securing the recruitment of youths for the armed forces of the GDR in the year 1961', which called for better coordination between the party, MOs and press, this effort, too, 'achieved no significant results up until 13 August 1961', by which time the NVA still had only fulfilled 73.7% of its plan and the various police forces only 36.7%.

Was there, then, as one report put it, a 'fundamental turnaround in recruitment' in connection with the construction of the Wall, the new FDJ campaign 'The Fatherland Calls — Protect the Socialist Republic' and the passing of the 'Defence Law' (Verteidigungsgesetz) on 20 September, the legal basis for the subsequent introduction of conscription? Certainly there was a widespread belief that conscription was just around the corner — many workers even thought that the Defence Law had actually introduced it. And certainly the number of 'declarations of willingness' to enlist leapt sharply: by the end of October 1961 the number of new resolutions had shot up to 242,048. But as it turned out, hopes for a sudden change in the fortunes of recruiters quickly proved illusory.

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97 This and the following two paragraphs are based on SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/12/58, 'Bericht über die Werbung von Jugendlichen für die bewaffneten Kräfte der DDR 1961', undated, bl. 262-73.
98 A copy of the Kampfaufgebot 'Das Vaterland ruft, schützt die sozialistische Republik' can be found in SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/16/90, bl. 98-103.
It did not take long to discover that the rapidly rising numbers of ‘Bereitschaftserklärungen’ were more a reflection of the increasingly coercive tactics of recruiters than of any change of heart on the part of East German youths. As the year-end report of the Central Committee’s Security Department remarked, ‘often the methods of administration, of coercion, of threats and defamation of youths were given priority over the methods of persuasion’. This was especially the case in Bezirke Potsdam and Leipzig, which reported by far the highest number of resolutions. In these two regions ‘it was not uncommon for youths who did not immediately declare themselves willing to perform their honourable service in the armed forces to be branded as “traitors to the Fatherland”, “supporters of the Bonner-Ultras”, “scoundrels”, etc., sometimes even to be removed from their trained occupations and deployed as unskilled labourers’. In Bezirk Potsdam it was reported that a number of party and state functionaries thought that, in view of the ‘measures’ of 13 August, they could ‘do away with the patriotic Erziehungsarbeit and give a new tone’. As the director of the SED Bezirksleitung Department for Security remarked, all youths should have to enlist ‘whether wooden leg or glass eye’. In a number of enterprises in the region, such as the Stahl- und Walzwerk Brandenburg, VEB Industriebau Brandenburg and RAW Brandenburg-West, some young workers were given the choice of signing up or being permanently laid off. In Oranienburg it was discovered that a number of youths who had refused to appear at the municipal offices for a ‘discussion’ about joining the armed

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99 SAPMO-BA DY34/22232, Anlage, 25 Sept. 1961, unpag. Young workers at the VEB Bergmann-Borsig even told their union secretary that the law should be formulated more clearly so that everyone could know when his year was to be called up.

100 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/12/58, ‘Bericht über die Werbung von Jugendlichen für die bewaffneten Kräfte der DDR 1961’, undated, bl. 270.
forces were sought out and delivered there by the police. There were also 'a number of Bürgermeister' who sent written summons to youths to appear at the municipal offices for a 'discussion' where they were threatened with fines or arrest if they failed to enlist. The result of such coercive tactics was predictable: many youths appeared before the local recruitment commissions and gave statements of their intention to enlist who actually had no intention of doing so. This was even the case in the regions with poorer results: in Bezirk Erfurt only 181 of the 1,432 resolutions made in October were honoured, and in Bezirk Magdeburg only 209 of 1,835.102

What did such cases of coercion look like more concretely, how did youths try to escape the pressure and how did higher levels of the party and state apparatus react when they discovered them? To offer an illustration, the 20-year old Rainer O. and eight other young men in Neu-Zittau received letters on 21 October 1961 summoning them to appear in two days at the local municipal council (Gemeinderat). The letter warned that if they failed to appear, they could be 'called to account' on the basis of the Verteidigungsgesetz. At the municipal council, they were all presented with NVA enlistment papers which the officials present demanded they sign immediately; otherwise, they were told, they would be 'picked up' and taken to Fürstenwalde or Frankfurt/Oder for a 'discussion'. If they refused to sign at all, they would have to work in an LPG. In the event, all nine refused. The next day Rainer told the whole story to the BPO secretary at his workplace in Berlin-Schöneweide, explaining that they refused not because they were against service in the NVA 'in principle', but rather because they rejected the appalling manner of recruitment. The secretary was obviously sympathetic to their plight, and brought the entire case to the attention of the Central

Committee in a letter requesting that such ‘methods’ (quotation marks from the original) be examined and that the young men’s case be quickly reviewed as they were due to be taken to Frankfurt/Oder within the next few days.109

On instructions from the Central Committee, the SED Bezirksleitung in Frankfurt/Oder indeed carried out an investigation of the local council in Neu-Zittau which both confirmed that such coercive tactics were being used and placed the blame on the ‘insufficient political and ideological clarity’ of the Bürgermeister and his deputy. Were Rainer and the others off the hook? Hardly. Despite giving the local councillors a slap on the wrist, the Bezirksleitung instructors nonetheless recommended that they redouble their efforts and improve their work with local youth, especially as regarded the ‘raising of their willingness to defend’ the GDR, and also that they carry out personal discussions with all the youths who had received such a summons and present to them again — only this time in more proper form — the ‘standpoint of the party and government’. The Bezirksleitung instructors tried but were unable to do this themselves with Rainer, who was at night school on the evening they visited his home. Speaking with his father, they emphasized that the local council’s actions were not approved of in higher quarters. Yet even in assuring him of this, and despite being unable to speak with Rainer himself, they nonetheless tried to drive home the message by ‘presenting to him (Rainer’s father - CR) our standpoint on performing one’s duty of honour in the armed forces of our republic’.104

Clearly, the problems of recruitment were not all solved with the construction of the Wall. The behaviour of would-be recruits did not change overnight from widespread refusal to resignation. Low-level party and economic functionaries

109 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/12/58, bl. 270.
themselves did not immediately metamorphosize into military enthusiasts. Coercive recruitment methods were not suddenly rendered unnecessary. In fact, they still backfired occasionally.

Conscription: Refusal, Relief and Resignation

Though the inability to leave for the West did not directly solve all of the problems of recruitment, it did finally create the basic preconditions for doing so. Put another way, it made it possible to put an end to 'recruitment' as such (i.e. obtaining volunteers) and hence many of the problems associated with it. When universal conscription was finally introduced on 24 January 1962, popular responses were more divided than they had been towards the expansion of the KVP or founding of the NVA. They were divided in two ways. First, however irrational it may seem, it seems clear in the reports that more people approved of conscription for the army once it was established than of the establishment of the army in the first place. Secondly, even among the majority who did not actively support conscription — in particular the youths whom it directly affected — responses were more ambiguous than before. To be sure, there were still many signs of disapproval, outright rejection and instances of refusal. But given the often appalling manner of recruitment up until then, by the time a compulsory 18-month period of service for all young men was actually introduced it seemed to many East Germans a vast improvement.

Conscription clearly found its greatest support among the older generations, and not just because they were not personally affected. In view of the constant talk of the
'youth question' throughout the preceding years, it is scarcely surprising that, as one report put it, 'A large portion of older citizens say that it should have come much earlier... They say that through (conscription) the youth problem will be better solved and the youth educated to greater order and discipline'. As welcome as such a 'positive' response from the older generation was for the party leadership, ironically it only made the task of winning support among young people more difficult. According to another report from Berlin: 'Remarks such as “a stint in the army is necessary to turn you into men”, which are primarily uttered by older colleagues, often only lead to opposition and strengthen false attitudes among youths'.

But for several reasons, conscription was not wholly unpopular among the younger generations either. A significant number of East Germans of all ages thought it would save the state money by making the high wages that had been used to attract recruits superfluous. There was also a pronounced sense of Schadenfreude among many of those who had already completed a stint in the NVA and who had 'very often been derided by other youths because of their supposed stupidity'. And of course many people, including some church pastors, found conscription preferable to the constant pestering and pressure. Fairly illustrative of the overall popular response was the vote taken at an assembly at the RAW Jena, where of the fifty employees present only five came out in favour of conscription, six against it and the rest (especially youths, the report emphasizes) abstained.

108 See SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/14/36, bl. 24-5.
Yet whatever the perceived advantages of conscription, most East Germans were anything but enthralled by it, especially the young men who now knew with certainty that they faced a period of military service. Many still rejected military service outright, for precisely the same reasons and in precisely the same ways as during the expansion of the KVP and foundation of the NVA. There was the predictable wave of 'provocations', hostile flyers, graffiti, and 'hostile arguments'. Notices of the new law were destroyed, smeared with graffiti or covered by other 'malicious posters'; there was widespread slandering of Heinz Hoffmann, the Minister for National Defence; signs were hung on the doors of draft boards proclaiming 'Caution! Danger to Life'; and at least one industrial work stoppage was motivated by the introduction of conscription.\(^{10}\) There were also numerous instances of youths openly declaring that they would never shoot at West Germans. One young electrician even warned a recruiter that 'once we all get guns we might just point them at you'.\(^{11}\) Against the background of such reports, concerns in army circles that conscription might put weapons into the wrong hands or dilute individual units' fighting ability are understandable.\(^{12}\)

But in the event such fears proved to be unfounded, for however much youths might have disliked the idea of compulsory military service, the vast majority complied

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\(^{10}\) SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/12/57, bl. 30-32, 35-39, 56-57. The strike took place on 23 January in the Gustav Thiele factory in Löbau, where ten youths of conscription age downed tools for two hours and categorically refused to resume work because conscription was being introduced. The incident was quickly cleared up, however, by union officials and 'state organs'. SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/6.11/66, bl. 22.


with the new law without making much disturbance. This was even true of the majority of active Christian youth, despite their concerns about being able to attend services while in the army and their misgivings about the incompatibility of the oath of allegiance and the First Commandment. The attempts of the church to place the question of conscientious objection on the agenda for political discussion, which were eventually successful in gaining conscientious objectors the status of Bausoldaten, or 'construction soldiers' in 1964, was on behalf of only a handful of committed individuals — no more than 1-1.5% of eligible conscripts after 1964.¹³ Draft boards reported precious few cases of 'provocations' upon induction and only minor difficulties in registering conscripts such as alleged 'rowdy-groups' trying to avoid registration by switching flats and jobs, isolated cases of recruits feigning illness or disability, and a brief wave of enquiries about signing up for the Volkspolizei as a way of avoiding military service.¹⁴ A March 1962 report from Bezirk Frankfurt/Oder summed up the situation thus: 'The conscripts appeared punctually and in a disciplined fashion before the draft boards, but showed great reservation, from which it was clear that they are indeed willing to follow the law, but in large measure do not recognize the necessity of the military strengthening of our republic. A number of conscripts responded to the effect that they were only prepared to fulfil their duty as citizens because they were forced to do so by the law on conscription'.¹⁵


¹⁴ BAP DO1/11120, '1. Bericht über Stimmungen und Meinungen der Bevölkerung sowie der Tätigkeit des Gegners zum Gesetz der allgemeinen Wehrpflicht', 27 Jan. 1962, p. 7-8; '2. Bericht über Stimmungen...', 30 Jan. 1962, p. 12; SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/12/57, bl. 99. Over the two days following the introduction of conscription on 24 January, a record 16 youths enquired about enlisting at police headquarters in Magdeburg, all of whom were sent to the local army recruiting board.

This lack of enthusiasm among the conscripts did not present a serious problem; mere compliance was enough. The greatest problem in filling out the ranks of the NVA and paramilitary forces in the months following the introduction of conscription were not presented by the conscripts at all, but rather by self-interested economic functionaries who reports complained were still showing a 'complete disregard' for military matters by applying for too many deferments and exemptions for their workers. Indeed, there were 7,943 such applications during the three weeks in the middle of March alone. In Bezirk Magdeburg the number of applications for exemptions reached a total of 35.4% of all conscripts (1,009 applications for only 2,848 conscripts). As one report succinctly concluded, 'This shows an underestimation of the necessity of strengthening the defence of the republic'.

Although compulsory military service still ran against the grain of national sentiment among the majority of East Germans and was hardly something most youths wanted to do, it quickly became a taken-for-granted aspect of everyday life in the GDR — even to factory managers, who eventually factored it automatically into their production plans. Leaving for the West was no longer an option, and few youths were prepared to jeopardize their career prospects by refusing to comply. Perhaps more importantly, military service did not seem as unattractive once everyone had to do it and it was no longer paraded as a matter of 'showing one's colours'. The one issue that was still considered an 'Einstellungsfrage' after the introduction of conscription was that of becoming a career soldier or officer. After ten years of rather disappointing

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116 SAPMO-BA D30/IV/21/257, 'Information über die durchgeführte Musterung in der Zeit vom 3.9.62 - 26.9.62', bl. 95-102; 'Abschlußbericht über die durchgeführte Musterung in der Zeit vom 15. - 31.03.1962', bl. 73-9
117 For a personal view, see Thomas Spanier, 'In Erinnerung an meine Dienstzeit. 18 Monate als Wehrpflichtiger in der NVA', in: Manfred Backerra (ed.), NVA. Ein Rückblick für die Zukunft, (Cologne, 1992), p. 27 ff.
recruitment experience since the initial expansion of the KVP it could thus come as no surprise to the party leadership when in February and March 1962 the NVA only managed to achieve 53% (6,479 of 12,225) of the plan target for these career soldiers.\footnote{\textit{SAPMO-BA DY30/IV/2/12/57}, 'Information über die durchgeführte Musterung der Wehrpflichtigen 1962', undated, bl. 42-9.} With the introduction of conscription it was possible to get the vast majority of young men to serve dutifully in the NVA, but not necessarily to believe in it.
Chapter 5

Fleeing the Construction of Socialism: 'Republikflucht' and the Wall

The preceding chapters have all examined various grass-roots responses to the construction of East German socialism. Among these responses, the mass migration to West Germany was arguably the most conspicuous of all. What is more, it was a unique popular response among all the socialist states of post-war Eastern Europe which in its huge scale proved an immensely burdensome problem to the East German communists. By offering a relatively easy way out for those who had had enough of the GDR, the porous border placed certain constraints on the entire process of constructing East German socialism. Until the erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, an unceasing haemorrhage of citizens served to characterize and caricature the problems of social and political transformation in East Germany. Between 1945 and 1961, it is estimated that over three million people left the SBZ/GDR for the West, many of them with skills and expertise sorely needed for the struggling East German economy. It was a snowballing problem: the exodus of skilled manpower only served to exacerbate the very problems that were its main cause in the first place. This was harmful not only to the GDR's economy, but also obviously belied its claims to popular approval. Yet the effects of Republikflucht, as the phenomenon was usually called, were not necessarily all bad from the SED's point of view. Those who left were clearly disaffected with at
least some aspects of life in the GDR, and as some scholars have argued, their departure may have served to stabilize the regime in the long term, representing not merely lost labour and expertise, but also a siphoning-off of discontents whose continued presence may have proved problematic in the future.

Whatever its precise effects, *Republikflucht* was clearly an important factor to both the political and economic stabilization of the fledgling regime during the period under analysis here. But it should not be forgotten that beneath these rather abstract questions of 'regime stabilization', *Republikflucht* was also a defining characteristic of everyday life in the early GDR, and moreover typified many of the problems the SED leadership had in controlling it. For most East Germans in the 1950s and early 1960s, it meant at some point the abscondence of a friend, colleague or neighbour. For some it represented an opportunity for gaining leverage with a local functionary or housing authority. As an aggravating and essentially intractable problem, it also exposed some of the contradictions and rifts within the regime itself. This chapter will examine the phenomenon of *Republikflucht* from a number of different perspectives, offering first a brief overview of some of the motives for flight, followed by an examination of the regime's problem-ridden attempts to combat it at the grass-roots and finally the responses of 'ordinary' East Germans to the departure of their fellow citizens to the West and their effective internment in the GDR after the construction of the Berlin Wall.

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1 Ralf Dahrendorf was the first to posit a 'latent stabilization' as a by-product of the mass emigration westwards, *Gesellschaft und Freiheit*, (Munich, 1965), p. 310f; see also D. Staritz, *Geschichte der DDR*, (Fr./Main, 1996), p. 172-3.
The Myriad Reasons and Motives for Flight

Why did so many East Germans leave the GDR for the West? What were their motives, and how did these relate to the changing social, political and economic situation in the GDR? These questions are as old as the phenomenon itself. Unfortunately, there is no precise empirical data that could offer a definitive answer to them. There are, to be sure, thousands of previously inaccessible ‘analyses’ of the motives of SED-members who left the GDR produced by the various regional and district party control commissions.¹ There were also numerous surveys conducted in West Germany on refugees from the GDR. But the results of both are of only limited value due to the impossibility of formulating categories of questioning capable of adequately capturing the amalgamation of reasons for fleeing, the problem of self-selection in the SED expulsion proceedings, as well as the fact that the interviewees in West Germany had an inbuilt interest to portray their flight as primarily politically motivated in order to receive the status of political refugees and thus be entitled to special compensation under the Federal Law on Expellees (Bundesvertriebenengesetz).

Further complicating the picture is the fact that the analysis of motives for Republikflucht has had a number of political implications. Given the overall context of competing systems between East and West Germany, it is not surprising that official portrayals of Republikflucht in the West tended to place political repression in the foreground, despite the fact that only 20% of the immigrants from the GDR were

granted the identification-card ‘C’ for political refugees. The same was true of portrayals by refugee organizations, which stressed political motives not least in order to elicit understanding and acceptance from their fellow citizens in the Federal Republic. Scholarly accounts have by contrast tended overwhelmingly to emphasize the importance of economic factors in the decision to leave the GDR. Not without justification did Ernst Richert describe the mass emigration from the GDR as an ‘internal migration to more favourable living conditions’.

Both views are too simplistic, for the motives behind Republikflucht were extremely complex and cannot be divided into a political vs. economic schema. For one thing, economic and political factors were often inseparable. Career prospects for individuals in the GDR were to a large extent tied to political factors such as involvement in various socialist organizations or to one’s social background, and many left for the sake of their children’s careers. Moreover, it was a thoroughly politicized economy, and many people, the technical intelligentsia in particular, fled out of fear of being held responsible for problems in the factories over which they had little or no control — for instance faulty planning, receiving plans too late or numerous changes to the production plans — or out of frustration with the bureaucratic nature the East German economy. *Familienzusammenführungen* also remained an important factor

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1 See, for example, Bundesministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen, *Die Flucht aus der Sowjetzone und die Sperrmaßnahmen des kommunistischen Regimes vom 13 August 1961*. (Bonn/Berlin, 1961); Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge und Kriegsgeschädigte, *Flucht aus der Sowjetzone*. (Bonn/Berlin, 1964). Figure from H. Heidemeyer, *Flucht und Zuwanderung*, op. cit., p. 54.
3 Ernst Richert, *Das zweite Deutschland*. (Frankfurt/M., 1966), p. 82.
4 See generally, SAPMO-BA DY30/9.04/668-669; also DY30/9.04/62, ‘Probleme, die in der Arbeit mit der wissenschaftlichen Intelligenz eine Rolle spielen’, 2 Dec. 1960, p. 1-2. As the director of the VEB Elektro-Ofen und Gerätebau in Meiningen wrote to his colleagues after leaving for the West, ‘All the initiatives that I developed in order to help the enterprise grow are stifled by the absolutely
until at least the mid-1950s, and many of those classified as ‘Republikflüchtige’ were merely children or dependents of those who had decided to leave. And there were also significant differences in terms of age and occupation. Young people were on the whole more likely to be motivated by a desire for adventure or individual fulfillment than those with established careers and families. People possessing significant amounts of immobile property — farmers, for instance — were on the whole less likely to leave than others. And even among them there were significant differences between native farmers who were loathe to sever ties with land that had been in their families for generations and ‘new farmers’ who were not as well-off economically and had less emotional attachment to their farms.

Probably the most satisfactory way to answer these questions is to ask another one: when did the greatest waves of exodus to the West occur, and how do they relate to broader political and economic developments in the GDR? The three highest peaks in the numbers of refugees to the West occurred in the first half of 1953, the latter half of 1955 and the summer of 1961 (see figure 4), which suggests that it was both internal economic and political pressure within the GDR and the changing international political context of German division that underlay the surges of refugees from the GDR.

In early 1953 there was a range of internal factors spurring East Germans to leave the GDR. The forced expansion of armed forces, intensified attacks against the church, increased pressure on the bloc parties and the collectivization of agriculture were all exceedingly unpopular, and led to the single greatest wave of emigration in the history of the GDR. Other, less dramatic increases in the number of refugees can also be traced to similar periods of internal pressure. In 1955 the government redoubled its
recruitment efforts, prompting many young men to leave in order to avoid military service. In spring and summer 1957, students were forbidden to travel to the West and attacks on the church were intensified yet again. Early 1960 witnessed the forced collectivization of agriculture and the ensuing wave of independent farmers to the Federal Republic.

![Figure 4: Emigration out of the GDR](image)

The effects of different policies on particular social or occupational groups can also be read from the statistics. For instance, the two collectivization pushes in 1952-53 and early 1960 led to rapid increases in the number of farmers leaving (see figure 1, ch. 3). As we have seen, the recruitment campaigns for the KVP/NVA in 1952 and 1955 resulted in similar increases in the number of young men leaving for the West (see figure 2, ch. 4), and the Hochschulreform of 1958 prompted many students and members of the intelligentsia to emigrate.
Turning to international political factors, in summer 1955 the Geneva Conference — which had raised hopes for a solution to the problem of German division — ended without any tangible results, and was followed shortly thereafter by the Soviet declaration of full sovereignty for the GDR. 1955 also saw the integration of both German states into their respective military alliances, and it seems only natural that some East Germans who were disenchanted with the GDR, who harboured hopes for reunification and who had seriously considered leaving for the West at some time would be prompted by such events into finally taking the big step. Again, other less dramatic peaks of emigration coincided with similar international political disappointments or moments of exceptional tension which might have meant a worsening of inter-German relations and travel opportunities. The curve in the number of refugees briefly spiked after both Kruschev’s declaration in March 1959 that the Germans could manage without reunification and after the abysmal failure of the Paris Summit in May 1960, which marked a general souring of East-West relations following the shooting-down of a US spy plane over the Soviet Union. Finally, the meeting between Kennedy and Kruschev in early June 1961, followed on 12 and 16 June by East German announcements of a solution to the West-Berlin problem by the end of the year and Kennedy’s announcement of his ‘three essentials’ on 25 July, generated an almost tangible sense of ‘Torschlußpanik’ over the summer of 1961.

Of course this is all merely circumstantial evidence, and admittedly some of these peaks of emigration to the West also coincided with periods of exceptionally grave shortages in the provision of consumer goods (most notably 1953 and 1960-61), which also undoubtedly played a role in prompting East Germans to leave the GDR.

7 There is more than ample documentation of such hopes in summer 1955. See, for example, the numerous opinion reports during the Geneva Conference in SAPMO-BA DY30/T/2/5/573 and
But the above sketch nonetheless serves to illustrate that the vacillations in the number of refugees fleeing the GDR cannot be explained monicausa1y. This is particularly clear in the crisis periods of early 1953 and 1961, when economic, domestic and international political factors all simultaneously spurred a wave of emigration to the West. To assign a specific relative weight to these different factors or to introduce other factors into the equation would be extremely difficult, and is in any event unnecessary for our present purposes. What is important to recognize here is that it was a broad range of overlapping, cross-cutting factors that underlay the mass emigration from the GDR — a fact which made the SED's attempt to stop the haemorrhage all the more difficult.

Battling Republikflucht: Responses at 'the Top'

What were the consequences of the emigration to the West for the East German state, and how did the party leadership react? Although the mass exodus of East Germans was eventually to become a nightmarish obsession of the government by the late 1950s, in the beginning it was not viewed as a serious problem — apart from desertions of police officers and the flight of crucial experts and administrators. In fact, until the economy began to pick up in the early 1950s, it was actually considered a relief from the problems of overcoming unemployment and providing basic necessities such as food, clothing and fuel that were still in relatively short supply. During the 1940s, a large portion of those who left for the West were expellees from the former eastern territories of the Reich. Their arrival in the SBZ/GDR only aggravated the already
grave shortages in consumer goods and adequate housing. Moreover, their irredentism vis-a-vis Poland, the Soviet Union and to a lesser extent Czechoslovakia constituted a potential political quagmire for the SED. For all these reasons the East German authorities were not unhappy to see as many of them as possible leave for the western zones. The same could be said of any other potential political opponents of the regime, who would only make the construction of a Soviet-style socialist state more difficult.

The first visible signs of a nascent concern about mass emigration to the West emerged in 1950. Around this time the state began to compile statistics on both the numbers of emigrants to the West and the most common motives for leaving. The fact that Ulbricht himself was kept informed of these developments clearly shows that emigration was gradually becoming a matter of importance. The 1951 ‘Order on the Return of German Identity Cards upon Emigration to West Germany or West Berlin’ represents the first attempt at least to keep track of emigration, even if it was not yet deemed possible or necessary to control it.

It was only in 1952 that the East German government and — perhaps more importantly — the Soviets became concerned enough about the potential problems posed by mass emigration to take decisive measures against it. The first and most obvious attempt to limit the population movement across the inner-German border was the closure of the demarcation line with West Germany in May 1952 and the construction of a five-kilometer wide prohibited zone on the eastern side of the border, after which West Germany was only reachable for most East Germans via Berlin. The fact that the SED leadership was prepared to face the political costs of such heavy-handed tactics — which included forcibly transporting people out of their homes in the

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prohibited zone — demonstrates a determination to keep emigration to the West within certain limits. But given the continued existence of the Berlin loophole, such tactics alone could not solve the problem.

On 9 September 1952, only several weeks after the fateful Second Party Conference (and perhaps in anticipation of the impending wave of refugees during the upcoming winter of discontent?), the SED Politbüro created a commission to deal specifically with the question of inter-German population movement. Franz Dahlem and Willi Barth were the key figures, and over the next several months they drafted a detailed proposal of ‘Guidelines on Measures against Republikflucht and on Recruitment of Qualified Employees in West Germany’ which the Politbüro passed on 6 January 1953, and which set the tone for the entire campaign against Republikflucht up until the construction of the Wall in 1961.

The final version of the guidelines cobbled together by Dahlem and Barth contained a number of propagandistic and administrative measures. Official propaganda sought to frighten potential emigrants via heavy publicity of the ‘misery of flight’ in western internment camps and of the difficulties experienced by refugees in finding suitable employment, as well as vilify them as ‘traitors’ and even ‘saboteurs’ to the principles of socialism, which also included portraying those who left illegally primarily as criminals or smugglers. Attracting skilled labour from West Germany — especially members of the intelligentsia — via promises of accommodation and suitable employment was also made a priority. Most important were the administrative measures establishing a comprehensive system of information on the population

9 See generally, SAPMO-BA JIV2/202/68, Büro Ulbricht.
10 In SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/393, Abt. Bevölkerungspolitik.
11 A number of letters and other pieces of correspondence between Dahlem and Barth pertaining to the document can also be found in the file SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/393.
movement. In every case of Republikflucht the motives for flight were to be carefully analyzed by the police. All information gathered was then to be collected into a central catalogue, which would include details about each refugee’s background, possible criminal record, actions during the Nazi period and, of course, behaviour in the SBZ/GDR. Such information would, it was hoped, aid in the accurate diagnosis of the reasons for Republikflucht, which would in turn allow for the formulation of appropriate policies to combat it.

This basic approach changed little over the years, though the flight of members of the intelligentsia became a source of increasing concern. Indeed, one can only fully understand the series of measures that sought to secure a more privileged position for the intelligentsia — differential pay rates, individual contracts, generous vacation provision — against the backdrop of the mass emigration westwards and failure to attract many Germans in the other direction. It was expensive to educate these people, and the SED understandably wanted a return on its investment in their education. The growing fear of a brain-drain to the West resulted in a series of measures introduced in the later 1950s. In May 1957 students were forbidden to travel to the West, and by 1958 the fear of an exodus of highly educated personnel had become so great that the Ministry for People’s Education prepared a regulation stipulating that students enter a kind of contract whereby the state could reclaim the entire costs of one’s education in

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12 It is telling that the Volkspolizei made regular special reports on Republikflucht among the intelligentsia, which it did not do for any other social groups. See BAP DOI/11/962-968, passim. This was true of all groups within the intelligentsia, but especially of the most highly-trained such as university teachers and researchers. See J. Connelly: ‘Zur “Republikflucht”’, op. cit. On teachers, see J. Hohmann, ‘Wenn Sie dies lesen’, op. cit.

13 According to official West German statistics, a total of 503,361 people emigrated from the Federal Republic into the GDR from 1950-1964. These figures only count those who ended their registration with the West German police, and the percentage of those who did not was likely quite high because many left in secret in order to escape debts or punishment. See DDR-Handbuch, 1985, p. 1368. Nonetheless, the population movement from East to West outweighed movement in the other direction by at least 12:1.
cases of *Republikflucht*. At the same time, the State Secretariat for Higher Education began in January 1958 to 'remove from institutions of higher learning such students whose relatives fled the Republic and to whom connections exist which might constitute a dangerous temptation (*Verleitungen*) for students to flee the Republic'.

More broadly, travel laws were also sharpened during the course of the 1950s. The so-called *Paßgesetz* of 11 Dec. 1957 sharpened the punishment for any unauthorized attempt to leave the GDR to up to three years imprisonment, and also outlawed both the preparation and assistance of *Republikflucht*. The biggest difference ushered in by this law, however, was the change in administration of property belonging to illegal emigrants. The rather draconian *Verordnung zur Sicherung von Vermögenswerten* of 17 July 1952 had been rescinded with the introduction of the ‘New Course’ in June 1953, after which the property of illegal emigrants could be administered by a trustee or state notary. After the enactment of the *Paßgesetz*, these trustees were often no longer acknowledged. Rather, the property generally went into state trusteeship, and was usually sold with the proceeds going to the state. Combined with the sharper punishment for attempted *Republikflucht*, this new confiscation practice was a fairly powerful deterrent for anyone possessing substantial property, and is often overlooked as a factor behind the decreasing numbers of illegal emigrants in the years 1958-59.

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Combatting *Republikflucht* at the Grass-Roots

Clearly, the party leadership was not at a loss of ideas about what the various state and party organs should do to combat *Republikflucht*. The crucial question was whether or not any of their ideas would actually be carried out at the grass-roots. They were problems in this regard from the very beginning. As early as 5 January 1953, just a day before the *Politbüro* passed the draft of guidelines against *Republikflucht*, Dahlem wrote to Barth expressing his concern about forgetting to include precise details as to who was responsible for controlling the execution of the guidelines: ‘If this does not happen, little will be done in practice’\(^8\). Though the Interior Ministry expanded the mandate of the *Abteilung Bevölkerungspolitik* for this purpose on 30 January,\(^9\) not even this clear delineation of responsibility could overcome the difficulties of mobilizing a vast, complex and not yet very well-oiled regime apparatus at the grass-roots.

Dahlem’s worst fears were in the event soon realized. As the number of refugees soared to record heights during the spring of 1953, little was done to curb it. The Soviets, who were fed a constant stream of reports on emigration from the *Volkspolizei*, reacted by sending a letter SED headquarters on 29 March harshly criticizing what it called the ‘monotonous and ineffective’ propaganda in the press, the ‘very weak’ efforts of the mass organizations and the failure of the police to complete the cataloguing system or to give serious attention to the underlying reasons for *Republikflucht*, most cases of which were still nonchalantly attributed to ‘unknown

\(^8\) SAPMO-BA DY30/IV/2/13/394, Dahlem to Barth, 5 Jan. 1953, unpag.
\(^9\) SAPMO-BA DY30/IV/2/13/394, bl. 27.
causes’. As the letter concluded: ‘as of the beginning of March 1953, those comrades made responsible by the (Politbüro) resolution have hardly done a thing worth mentioning’.

The pressure to implement measures against Republikflucht decreased somewhat after the ‘New Course’ led to a rapid drop in illegal emigration in June. But as the numbers steeply rose again from September onwards, the Soviets took matters into their own hands once more. By this time they clearly perceived Republikflucht as a grave problem for the future of the East German state. Just as the disadvantages it presented in terms of a drain of manpower and skills were becoming increasingly apparent, one of the few perceived advantages of the exodus — namely, the notion that mass emigration of potential enemies aided political stabilization — was obviously belied by the events of 17 June. In November they conducted their own analysis of Republikflucht, and once more vehemently criticized the mass organizations for ‘completely neglecting’ the problem, the police for failing to ‘deal with Republikflucht seriously’ and the party apparatus for ‘hardly observing’ the Politbüro guidelines. On the whole, it seems that the implementation of the guidelines was only patchy at best.

Though one might assume the Soviet criticisms were exaggerated for effect, this picture of widespread inertia at the lower levels of the party/state apparatus also comes through in internal East German reports. According a SED report from April 1953, ‘some of the Bezirk secretaries and a large portion of the Kreis secretaries handled the Politbüro resolution as only informational [...] Only in few cases was the

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implementation of the resolutions begun quickly'. And though one might also assume that this inertia was largely a product of the other problems of spring 1953 that required so much attention, and that it thus would pass relatively quickly once the worst was over, it in fact changed only very slowly over the following years. The abrupt political volte-face in the early 1950s on the question of mass emigration was not mirrored by an equally rapid change in the attitudes and activities of lower-level functionaries. Some simply did not view Republikflucht as a pressing problem. A SED Central Committee report of May 1954 complained that 'The regional and district councils and the Bürgermeister still act extremely passively towards Republikflucht. They often do not know what methods could be used to combat it effectively. Only in the rarest cases are the reasons for flight carefully analyzed. Many functionaries still view this task as the jurisdiction of our security organs'. The 1954 year-end report on illegal emigration describes the state apparatus as 'generally apathetic towards Republikflucht', with even the state secretaries merely keeping informed of the problem but undertaking no efforts to combat it. 'Many comrades' within the party, it complains, were also still 'unclear about the effects of Republikflucht'. At the Graphic-Design Studios in Leipzig, there was even a send-off party for one worker leaving for the West in which the BPO members themselves participated. The situation appeared much the same in 1957. As a brigade deployment in Bezirk Halle complained, local functionaries 'hardly deal with it, but merely register' cases, and special committees that were already supposed to be devising and implementing strategies for the return of refugees still 'exist for the most

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19 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/394, 'Einschätzung über den Stand der Republikflucht...', 22 Apr. 1953, bl. 156-7, 159. This impression from the party reports is confirmed by the internal reports of the Volkspolizei; see generally BAP DOI/11/961-962, passim.

part on paper'. In Bezirk Potsdam the situation appears to have been even worse. In Kreis Belzig the 'responsible comrades... have not yet concerned themselves at all', and in Kreis Brandenburg the deputy party secretary did not even know about the special committees.

A 1954 Central Committee investigation at the BFG Mining Equipment Works in Lauchhammer offers a particularly vivid illustration of the widespread apathy among Kreis-level and grass-roots functionaries concerning Republikflucht. Prompted by a report from the State Control Commission representative in the factory about indifference on the part of the BGL and the complete lack of knowledge about the reasons for the 21 cases of Republikflucht since June 1953, three Central Committee instructors were dispatched to Lauchhammer and Senftenberg on 21 May. Their first stop was the party Kreisleitung in Senftenberg, where they discovered that the director of the Department of State Organs, comrade F., was not in the least informed about Republikflucht in the district and undertook absolutely nothing against it, mistakenly assuming that it 'was a matter for the Economics Department'. The director of the Economics Department was no more informed than comrade F., and explained to the instructors that, 'Up to now I have only concerned myself with the plan fulfillment of the People's Own factories. I have only occasionally concerned myself by the by with the scope and circumstances of Republikflucht in the factories'. Another comrade in the Department of State Organs thought it was the business of a 'special instructor' directly seconded to the SED First Secretary, as he thought was spelled out a recent Central

Committee resolution (which prompted the reader of the report at Central Committee headquarters to scribble an indignant question mark in the margin). The second stop for the instructors was the Senftenberg District Council (Rat des Kreises), where the ‘overview and comments on the questions of Republikflucht (were) similar to those of the Kreisleitung’. By the time they arrived at the BFG Lauchhammer, what they discovered could hardly have come as a surprise. As comrade D., the secretary for agitation and propaganda, explained, the party organization in the factory had not as yet bothered with the issue because they thought the numbers of illegal emigrants were relatively low.\footnote{SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/395, ‘Gekürzter Bericht über die Überprüfung eines Hinweises der ZKK über die Republikflucht im VEB Bagger-Förderbrücken- und Gerätebau (BFG) Lauchhammer’, 3 June 1954, p. 1-5.}

Much of the reason for this inertia was the simple overburdening of grass-roots officials who had other priorities and other tasks to fulfil. But it also had to do with the narrow official understanding of the roots of the problem. From the very beginning, the reasons for Republikflucht were largely externalized and explained away by a kind of conspiracy theory of ‘organized Abwerbung’ (wooing-away) by capitalist businessmen or by the West German Federal Ministry for All-German Affairs (Bundesministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen, derisively called the ‘Kaiser-Ministry’ by the SED). According to countless internal reports, such Abwerbung was occasionally done via letters or illicit flyers, sometimes through discussions with western agents in the GDR or while the ‘victim’ was in the West, and on a broader basis via West German press and radio.\footnote{For typical examples, BAP DO1/11/963, bl. 70, 74. To be fair, the notion of Abwerbung was not complete fantasy when taken to include such factors as the influence of West German relatives and the efforts of West German firms to attract skilled labour. A bulletin of 26 August 1960 circulated by the West German government announced 524,300 vacant jobs; on 11 August Der Telegraph reported that the labour shortage was so severe that industrial firms were recruiting workers directly from the refugee camps with placards and glossy flyers; a radio broadcast of 21 July 1960 announced that 30,000} These methods were perceived to be so devious and effective that they
became an object of study in themselves. Already by the end of 1953, such notions and vocabulary had become the ritual centrepiece of official discourse on Republikflucht in the GDR, not only in official propaganda, where one might expect it, but also in internal classified correspondence. The narrow ideological parameters of interpreting Republikflucht affected not only the type of research conducted on the problem, but also the regime’s very ability to communicate about it internally.

Though there were critical voices within the upper levels of party and state that argued for a more impartial understanding of the reasons for the mass emigration, some even arguing against the very notion of ‘flight’ itself and in favour of the less loaded term ‘emigration’, they remained exceptions and had little practical effect. Moreover, even when the party/state apparatus acknowledged its own shortcomings — usually in terms of ‘heartless bureaucratic behaviour’ towards the intelligentsia on the part of local officials — its ‘self-criticism’ never extended beyond the formal methods of the exertion of its power. This not only nourished the comforting illusion that the problem was solvable within the parameters of the GDR as it existed, it also meant that the elusive solution was viewed not in the reduction of the presence of the state in

engineers were needed for the booming West German economy. As the West German government was well aware, such opportunities as conveyed by the West German media or relatives certainly constituted a powerful attraction to many East Germans, and the business community in West Germany quite naturally tried to take advantage of this as it could. BAP DOI/11/965, bl. 70.


27 BAP DOI/11/962, bl. 67; SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/566, ‘Durchführung des Beschlusses des Politbüros über weitere Maßnahmen gegen die Republikflucht vom 15.12.53’, 11 Feb. 1954. The ritualization of language in internal reporting in the GDR was of course a general phenomenon and has already been the subject of considerable scholarly attention, not just by linguists, but also historians. For an insightful overview and analysis, see Ralph Jessen, ‘Diktatorische Herrschaft als kommunikative Praxis. Überlegungen zum Zusammenhang von “Bürokratie” und Sprachnormierung in der DDR-Geschichte’, in: A. Lüdtke, P. Becker (eds.), Akten, op. cit., p. 57-75.

people's lives (which was undoubtedly one of the primary underlying causes of flight), but rather in its further extension. In the words of a 1961 Volkspolizei analysis: 'The main link in the chain is the improvement of work with the people and their integration into the leadership and steering of the state'. The 'real causes' lay not in a surplus, but rather a deficit of the state in people's lives. Thus a major element of the SED's anti-Repulikflucht policy was to correct this deficit through 'increased vigilance', heightened 'ideological struggle' and strengthening the 'educational and mass cultural work' within the populace.

Viewed from below, however, the problem appeared very different. Local officials and lower-level functionaries knew from daily experience that the very 'vigilance' and 'ideological struggle' that the party leadership was calling for was a large part of the problem in the first place — hence their merely 'formal' handling of the problem of Repulikflucht, as numerous Central Committee reports complained. These different perspectives between centre and periphery prompted frequent reproaches from the party leadership, as at a 1954 meeting where Central Committee officials upbraided the regional directors of the SED population policy (Bevölkerungspolitik) departments for failing to see the work of the ubiquitous enemy: 'In the reports that we receive from you there is not one single example of how, on the basis of uncovering the causes of Repulikflucht, the party organizations then turned to leading the struggle, above all the ideological struggle, against Repulikflucht, mobilizing the working people in the factories in order to expose the Abwerber and shatter the enemy rumours. Above all there must be an end to the fairy tale of Repulikflucht "for family reasons". In almost all cases the true reason is entirely

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2 BAP DO1/11/967, bl. 66.
different: incitement by the RIAS, promises of western Abwerber, enemy rumours. A worker in the GDR who is ideologically steadfast (gefestigt) does not move to his aunt or mother-in-law in West Germany for so-called “family reasons”, giving up his livelihood here and possibly even leaving the furniture standing. The functionary who believes in “family reasons” is politically blind’.

This rather blinkered and dogmatic view at the ‘centre’ not only obscured many of the reasons for flight and hindered the ability of local functionaries to deal with the problem practically, in many ways it only made the problem worse. For instance, in summer 1955 a group of SED instructors was deployed to investigate the alarming rate of illegal emigration among university personnel. The investigation was anything but impartial, and the question of enemy Abwerbung was again a foregone conclusion in the minds of the instructors. They complained that although party functionaries and staff at the universities agreed that enemy Abwerbung was organized and carried out ‘in a certain way’, there were never any clues that could lead to uncovering it. In any open-ended investigation the most obvious interpretation would be that ‘enemy activity’ did not play a significant role, which would also explain why party functionaries within the universities did not devote much attention to it. Nonetheless, the instructors blamed it on ‘extremely insufficient political-ideological work’ and insufficient research, which was ‘not carried out in the awareness that the class enemy is behind it’. In its conclusions the report punctuates this profoundly blinkered analysis by recommending intensified ‘political-ideological work’ at the universities, which in all likelihood would prove counterproductive.

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time and again in schools, factories and scholarly institutes all across the GDR. Every case of flight of an important individual prompted an inquisitorial investigation and tightening of political control which was in many cases one of the main reasons for leaving the GDR in the first place.  

Such recommendations were of little use to functionaries on the ground, and not surprisingly had little impact on their activities. Central Committee reports on the situation in the universities in 1959 still found similar problems: ‘The political evaluation of Republikflucht, the uncovering of deeper causes as well as the formulation and implementation of appropriate measures for the effective containment (Eindämmung) of flight and winning back scholars are criminally neglected...’ Cases of flight were merely ‘registered’, too often with hopelessly vacuous conclusions such as ‘presumed cause: political unclarity’. As usual, the report recommended intensified ‘political-ideological work’. But most local functionaries recognized that there was little they could do even if they tried. As the party chairman at the VEB VTA explained to Central Committee instructors: ‘We’ve carried out assemblies, held lectures against Republikflucht, even carried out differentiated discussions, but have not had any great success with it’.

Yet the problem with grass-roots functionaries was not limited to mere indifference. While the SED and Interior Ministry were trying to persuade former refugees to return and to attract skilled persons from the Federal Republic, many local officials, under pressure from the local populace, were doing just the opposite. The

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32 This was occasionally recognized by party instructors. For instance, the flight of one university librarian was intentionally not condemned in a resolution prepared by instructors because the letter she left for her colleagues listed these resolutions as one of her main reasons for leaving. SAPMO-BA DY30/9.04/669, ‘Analyse der Republikflucht’, 8 Aug. 1959, p. 3.
policy of attracting people with promises of prioritized accommodation was especially problematic. The local officials responsible for housing in their districts (Referate Wohnungswesen) were constantly swamped by irate letters from desperate families and individuals who had already waited years for adequate housing. From their perspective, official policy on Republikflucht was simply not consistent with the SED’s promises of improved living conditions for workers. In trying to redress the continuing housing shortage, they had no interest in either ‘winning back’ former refugees to the GDR or, for that matter, in keeping people from leaving. For them, every emigrant to the West did not so much represent a political embarrassment for the SED or a drain of skilled labour as it did another available flat. By contrast, every returning refugee or immigrant from the West was viewed less as a vote of confidence in the GDR than a ‘burdensome applicant’ for scarce housing. As a 1957 report from Bezirk Halle put it, large proportion of Bürgermeister were of little help in attracting Germans eastwards ‘because then they have to concern themselves with finding accommodation’.

There were similar problems in finding suitable employment for Zuziehende, who were often given the worst jobs available so as not to anger other workers or because of previous bad experiences with employees arriving from the West, who not infrequently showed poor work morale, committed petty thefts of materials and left after a short period of time. Such problems were common enough for the Interior Ministry even to propose in 1956 that the Labour Ministry create a central office responsible for finding appropriate work for returnees and immigrants, and that the

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34 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/397, ‘Niederschrift über die Überprüfung der Probleme des Kampfes gegen die Republikflucht im Bezirke Leipzig vom 26.-27.1. und vom 8.-10.2.1956, undated, p. 3.
office have the power to order factories to hire them." Ironically, such 'sectarian' behaviour among local functionaries towards returnees and first-time immigrants was only bolstered by official propaganda stigmatizing those who crossed the border illegally as smugglers and criminals. As one Volkspolizei report explained in 1958: ‘The comrades [...] are in part of the opinion that the only kind of people who return or come from West Germany to the GDR have done something illegal (etwas auf dem Kerbholz haben) and are of no valuable help to the construction of socialism in the GDR’.

**Popular Responses and the Uses of Republikflucht**

How did the majority of ‘ordinary’ East Germans who, for whatever reasons, chose to remain in the GDR react to the mass emigration to the West? How did they view the abscondence of their neighbours and colleagues at work — as well as their return in some cases? What opportunities did the possibility of leaving for the West present, and how did people exploit them?

The most valid generalization — and one which could just as well apply to the Federal Republic — is that there were mixed feelings. As was mentioned at the outset of this chapter, in evaluating popular responses to Republikflucht, it is crucial to bear in mind that this was not merely an abstract political phenomenon to East Germans in the 1950s and early 1960s, but rather an integral part of everyday life. The sheer scale of

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7 ibid.
8 BAP DOI/11/965, ‘Informationen über die Entwicklung der Behandlung von Rückkehrern in den Aufnahmestellen und Volkspolizeikreisämtern’, 24 Oct. 1958, bl. 91. The intentional cultivation of this impression by the SED and MfS was not without its effects, at least among the party basis. Judging from interviews with SED members in Halle after 1989, Henrik Eberle has found that many former SED-members still considered the majority of republikflüchtig party members criminals, despite the fact that
the exodus to the West before 1961 — a net loss of some three million people — meant that the vast majority of East Germans personally knew at least one person who left. The spectrum of opinion on Republikflucht was as broad and complex as the myriad reasons for leaving, which makes it rather difficult to generalize. In many cases there was widespread sympathy with those who left; comments such as ‘if I did not have my family and livelihood here, I would leave too’ can be found in numerous party and union reports. This was especially true in cases of undue economic hardship such as the loss of a family business, farm or sizeable decrease in one’s wages. For instance, when work-loads were arbitrarily increased in some of Leipzig’s textile factories, union officials reported a certain Schadenfreude among the discontented workers whenever any of their colleagues left. In discussions with union officials the workers could barely disguise their satisfaction that someone had the courage to leave the ‘so-called intolerable conditions’ in the factories.\(^\text{3}\)

However, under certain circumstances there also seems to have been a considerable disapproval or resentment of Republikflucht. Though frequently motivated out of envy towards those who were not tied down by family or business matters, more often this resentment emerged in cases where one felt personally disadvantaged or left in the lurch by someone’s departure. This was especially true when ‘big wigs’ left. For example, at the Gaswerk Dimitroffstraße in Berlin, workers were reportedly angry that so many of ‘die Großen’ were leaving for the West. Not only did the loss of engineers mean longer working hours for them, it also compromised safety. It would be no wonder, workers complained, if ‘the whole place

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\(^{3}\) SAPMO-BA DY34/22673, report of 9 Aug. 1957.
would blow up'. Expressions of disapproval were also more common when the values of a particular profession were seen to be breached. Although relatively few physicians were enamoured with life in the GDR, equally few appear to have approved of flight if it in any way jeopardized patients’ health.

There were, by contrast, no mixed feelings at all concerning the preferential treatment of Rückkehrer and Zuziehende. The practice of offering them prioritized housing (which, as we have seen, they did not always get) was, given the dire shortage, a particularly sore point. It was broadly viewed not only as unjust, but as patently absurd to effectively punish those who remained in the GDR by allowing a supposed ‘traitor’ to jump the queue. More than a few East Germans defiantly tried to point out the farcical logic of this practice to their local housing authority as a means of lending additional legitimacy to their requests for new housing. Gerda S. of Lautawerk, for instance, complained of a certain family B. who came from the Federal Republic in 1955, got a new flat and good work, even a loan to furnish the flat, but then left the GDR a little over a year later: ‘...large sums of money were paid out for nothing. We who haven’t left the GDR since 1945 are getting pushed up against the wall...’

Others adapted it for their own ends by threatening to use the policy as a means of acquiring a flat for themselves. At the Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz in Dresden, where three-hundred workers were in search of accommodation in 1954, such threats were reported as common: ‘First we will leave the GDR for the West and after we come back someone will have to give us a flat’.

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accommodation was so widespread that it even became the subject of a satirical verse for a show at the Erfurt Youth Theatre: ‘If you want a flat, I’ll tell you what is best, you travel to the West. As reward for coming back, you get yourself a flat’.44 There was also widespread Schadenfreude when returnees were given poor accommodation. Six months after the engineer K. and his five-member family returned from West Germany to Jena in 1955, triggering a storm of publicity in the local press, they were still in their provisional one-room flat. As a police report remarked, such incidents ‘do not help put a stop to Republikflucht or strengthen trust in the GDR’. On the contrary, ‘the populace is making fun of the case’.

Even apart from the issue of preferential treatment for returnees, threatening to leave for the West was a fairly common strategy in attempts to procure new housing. Such threats, which were fairly common at least as early as 1954, were usually conveyed via written petitions (Eingaben) to various levels of the state apparatus.45 It seems that most were bluffs. As an analysis of the petitions sent to President Pieck during January 1957 explained: ‘...in the majority of cases the threat is only made to underpin the demand...’, citing as an example the case of the family K. in Großlindow, who requested that their petition for an emigration permit be disregarded after receiving a new flat. But in other cases, it noted, the threats were to be taken seriously, such as that of a mining-brigadier’s wife who suffixed her desperate-sounding complaints about


45 BAP DO1/11/963, bl. 74.

46 See SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/251, ‘Monatsbericht der Korrespondenzabteilung für den Monat April 1954’, undated, bl. 472. Housing problems were by far the single greatest source of complaint in these petitions, comprising 30-40% of all those received by the state. On Eingaben generally, see the somewhat problematic overview by Felix Mühlberg, ‘Konformismus oder Eigensinn? Eingaben als Quelle zur Erforschung der Alltagsgeschichte der DDR’, in: Mitteilungen aus der kulturwissenschaftlichen Forschung, vol. 19, no. 37 (Feb. 1996), p. 331-345. For a more convincing
her miserable flat with the remark that, as a Meister, her husband could 'get work in West Germany any time he wished'.

The realities of the housing shortage meant, however, that most of the thousands of petitions simply could not be honoured. In fact, threatening to leave the GDR as a means of acquiring a new flat could be counter-productive. Fearing a kind of 'domino-effect', some local officials were determined not to give in to such blackmail. In Karl-Marx-Stadt, where requests for flats were reportedly accompanied 'almost without exception' by threats to leave the GDR, the chairman of the district VII municipal council refused to budge on the issue: 'if you allow one (such threat) to work, you immediately get three or four parallel cases, because these things get spoken around'.

Yet the success or failure of using the open border to one's advantage depended to a large extent on the person doing it. Emigration by members of the intelligentsia in general, and those in technical fields in particular, was considered no less than 'a great danger to society' and they, more than any other segment of the population, were well placed to exploit the open border to their own advantage. Although it was generally assumed that most complainants had no serious intention of leaving the GDR, it was recommended to be more careful with this group. As a report from early 1956 put it: 'Insofar as this deals with members of the intelligentsia, the problem requires special

\[\text{SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/252, 'Eingabenanalyse', 17 Jan. 1957, bl. 165-6.}
\[\text{ibid., bl. 166.}
\[\text{BAP DO 1/11/728, 'Halbjahresbericht', 30 July 1958, p. 99. It is telling that the Volkspolizei made regular special reports on Republikflucht among the intelligentsia, which it did not do for any other social groups. See BAP DO1/11/962-968, passim. This was true of all groups within the intelligentsia, but especially of the most highly-trained such as university teachers and researchers. See J. Connelly: "Zur "Republikflucht"", op. cit. On teachers, see J. Hohmann, ""Wenn Sie dies lesen"", op. cit. Incoming reports about the mass exodus of chemists to the West during the late 1950s were alarming enough for Ulbricht himself to oversee efforts to stem the tide, which merited the involvement not only of the usual state authorities, but also of Erich Mielke and his Stasi lieutenants. See SAPMO-BA DY30/9.04/669, 'Bericht über die Republikabgänge aus der chemischen Industrie', 23 Apr. 1959.}
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attention'. And although the outlawing of even planned *Republikflucht* under the *Paßgesetz* put a swift end to open threats of leaving for the West, the precarious labour market caused by the open border meant that complaints made by doctors, scientists and engineers were still frequently successful not only in acquiring accommodation, but also in unburdening them from excessive bureaucratic work, in obtaining permission to receive professional journals from the West, even gaining permission to travel west for professional conferences.

The clearest example were physicians, who were in especially short supply. Though there were grave concerns about the lack of doctors throughout the 1950s, the rapid increase in the flight of medical personnel to the West after the dual crackdown of the *Paßgesetz* and Third *Hochschulkonferenz* in 1958 led to a potential crisis situation in medical provision in the GDR (figure 5). This prompted the *Politbüro* to steer a more liberal course towards physicians, who were given special privileges in September 1958 and again in December 1960, including higher pay, the easing restrictions on travel and against doctors' children entering higher education, even the ability to bequeath medical practices to one's children. But the privileges failed to make much of an impact, as most doctors sceptically viewed them as mere stop-gap measures designed to keep them in the GDR until the party leadership could afford to treat them differently. A report from the outpatients' clinic in Senftenberg described the mood thus: 'In the People's Democracies doctors earn no more than their drivers. It is generally assumed that as soon as the Berlin-Question is solved in the interests of the

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GDR the position of doctors with be revised and all the privileges cancelled'. It was precisely such fears of an imminent change in their fortunes that prompted so many doctors to leave for the West. Though the westward drain of medical personnel slowed somewhat in 1959, it increased again considerably in 1960 and even further in 1961, as many were gripped by 'Torschlusspanik'.

![Figure 5: Emigration out of the GDR](image)

The *Politisbüro* was at an impasse. Cracking down in 1958 only drove up the numbers of emigrant doctors, and subsequent liberalization and granting of privileges had little appreciable effect. What is more, the open admission that physicians were precious commodities only amplified their demands for such things as automobiles, holiday accommodation and even written guarantees that they could retain their practices

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53 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/401, bl. 28.
permanently. In October 1958, officials in the presidential office reported that: ‘There has recently been an increase in the number of petitions from physicians demanding a change to their poor housing conditions with reference to the Politburo communique. The majority pertain to already long-standing poor conditions which could long ago have been remedied by the local authorities in view of the importance of the medical intelligentsia’. Even worse from the perspective of the SED leadership, the so-called ‘physician communiqués’ also raised expectations among other groups of the intelligentsia who resented the special treatment for doctors. A report from Bautzen summed up the mood thus: ‘You’ve made concessions to the doctors, now you’ll have to make some to us’. Although it is impossible to quantify, it seems from the attention given them in internal reports that demands for flats, better holiday accommodation, automobiles and other perqs increased considerably in the late 1950s.

To summarize the situation up to August 1961, the mass exodus out of the GDR was clearly a systemic problem for the East German regime that resulted from a general disaffection for the Soviet-style republic — or at least numerous aspects of it — that the SED was attempting to construct. As such, it was impossible for the SED leadership to formulate a clear, effective policy against Republikflucht short of either abdicating its political authority in East Germany or retaining its citizens by force. They were never willing to do the former, and only dared undertake the latter around ten years after first perceiving the population drain to the West as a problem. In the meantime they improvised to little effect.

57 See, generally, SAPMO-BA DY30/TV2/902/58; DY34/21500.
The open border and problem of *Republikflucht* clearly placed limits on the SED dictatorship at the grass-roots by giving 'ordinary' East Germans a power they otherwise would not have had, a kind of 'trump card' should the demands of the state go too far. It was not necessary to play the trump card — that is, leave for the West — in order to make use of it. Many East Germans who might never even have considered leaving for the West could find ways of profiting from the open border — perhaps a better flat, better working conditions, avoiding military service by making a quick trip westwards, the list goes on. Considering the myriad reasons for flight and these rather 'eigensinnig' ways people took advantage of the open border, it would seem that those who stayed in the GDR were not necessarily more pliable or less 'aufmüßig' than those who left. This old dualistic myth of the enterprising and freedom-seeking refugee and the hapless, indecisive East German who stayed is based more on processes of West German self-legitimation and the efforts of refugee organizations to cultivate understanding and tolerance in the Federal Republic than on any balanced judgement of the motives of flight and the socio-political landscape in the GDR. Undoubtedly many critics and discontents left the GDR in the 1950s. But many stayed as well, for a range of reasons: extended family, possession of a house or land, because one's spouse had a good job, not wanting to uproot one's children from their circle of friends, etc.. Whether or not one was a 'troublemaker' was therefore not the crucial factor. Moreover, the open border not only added to the discontent in the GDR through the loss of labour and related economic problems, it also gave rise to new points of friction in East German society: between regime and populace by giving the latter additional leverage, and between different social groups with varying abilities to exploit the open border for their own benefit. Whether or not patterns of popular political behaviour
changed after August 1961 as the possibility of flight vanished is another question, to which we now turn.

East Germans, the Wall and the Prospects of the 1960s

The construction of the Berlin Wall on the night of 12-13 August 1961 is more or less universally viewed as an important caesura in the political, economic and social history of the GDR. It is generally accepted that it marked the beginning of a period of greater domestic stability in East Germany as well as greater international stability in central Europe as a whole. It is likely that it rescued the regime in the short-term from economic collapse, and there can be little doubt that the economic growth and improving material circumstances of the 1960s were to a large extent predicated on the relative normalization of the labour supply after 1961. For all of these reasons, some historians have gone so far as to deem the erection of the Wall the ‘secret founding of the GDR’.38

But beneath the level of international politics and macro-economics, the construction of the Wall also had far-reaching effects at the grass-roots. This was arguably the single most invasive and brutal intervention into the lives of East Germans in the entire history of the GDR, profoundly affecting their ability to maintain contact with relatives and friends, as well as to travel, shop, and sample western culture. The

images of families waving to each other across no-man’s-land — literally, so close but so far away — number among the most memorable and saddening in post-war German history. The Wall was an unprecedented and shockingly bold political measure, not to mention a geographical absurdity and human rights monstrosity.

But as we have already seen, there were no major strikes, large-scale protests, demonstrations or any kind of broadly coordinated resistance to its construction within the GDR. Those strikes that did take place in the wake of the Wall were small, spontaneous and unorganized, and many were not primarily motivated by it in the first place. Instances of industrial sabotage, the classic form of anonymous protest, indeed leapt from only six in the second quarter of 1961 to 83 in the third quarter, and there were widespread rumours of a general strike.* As one person looking on at the Brandenburg Gate was overheard saying: ‘Just wait — today everything is quiet, in the next few days things will look different’. But things changed very little in the following days and weeks, and rumours remained just that.

Such opposition as emerged was decidedly small in scale and was generally confined to individual acts of protest or at the most small groups of young people. Internal reports more or less unanimously agree that youths were by far the most open in protesting against the sealing of the border. At the Wollankstraße crossing point in Pankow it was reported that there was a gathering of some 500-600 youths ‘provoking’ the guards with shouts and threats: ‘into the middle of the street, let’s make a forceful breakthrough, we’re all Germans, we just want to cross over to our brothers’; ‘it’s a

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9 SAPMO-BA DY30/6.11/65, bl. 294.
disgrace what you (guards) are doing... You're no Germans'. At other crossing points in East Berlin, groups of youths, some of them on motorcycles, were reportedly organizing onlookers for the purpose of hurling abuse and threats at guards. After being dispersed by Kampfgruppen, they simply relocated to another crossing point. There were also isolated cases of young 'rowdies' beating up party agitators or other individuals involved in carrying out the 'measures,' as well as attempts to stir up anger among people riding on public transport or in train stations. One youth, for instance, tried to provoke his fellow passengers on the S-Bahn by pointing to the rolls of barbed wire and proclaiming, 'Such is the democracy that is so clearly expressed today'. But such open criticism was the exception, not the rule, and moreover was essentially without practical effect. Although such 'provocations' occurred at a number of S-Bahn stations in East Berlin, it is characteristic of the popular response that the majority of those present were reported to have behaved 'quietly' and not responded either positively or negatively to the youth's overtures.

There have as yet been two different explanations of the remarkable quiet in the GDR in the wake of the construction of Wall. Emphasizing the legitimatory successes of the regime during the 1950s, Heinz Niemann has argued on the basis of East German opinion surveys from the latter half of the 1960s that only a 'majority acceptance of this measure' could explain why 'an unprecedented operation like 13 August 1961 came off so smoothly'. Judging from internal reports written at the time as well as countless

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62 ibid.; also '3. Kurzinformation', '5. Kurzinformation'. Such was reportedly the case at Brunnenstraße, Eberswalderstraße and the Brandenburg Gate. Similar 'provocations' were also organized in front of the district party headquarters in Berlin-Mitte.
anecdotes from East Germans, it would seem that this interpretation has little to recommend it. There is precious little evidence of ‘acceptance’ — even in the most passive sense of the term — apart from the declarations of support that SED agitation troops demanded from people and which only few were courageous enough not to sign. On the contrary, as a designer at the DEFA film studios in Babelsberg put it: ‘The most unpopular thing that could have happened has happened. These measures won’t go down well with 80% of the populace’.\footnote{SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/433, ‘8. Kurzinformation’, 15 Aug. 1961, bl. 24.}

The more common and convincing explanation emphasizes the massive apparatus of control and repression in the GDR. In this view, most East Germans only maintained their outward conformity under the pressure of the well coordinated security forces, which by and large intervened rapidly to deal with unrest of any kind before it could escalate into any wider protest. An important difference between the events of 13 August 1961 and 17 June 1953, so this argument goes, was that there were no longer any uncertainties and apparent splits of opinion within the apparatus of power to lame its organizational capacity and ability to control the situation.\footnote{See, for example, M. Fulbrook, Anatomy, op. cit..} In the event, the NVA troops, Kampfgruppen and party agitators carried out their duties in exemplary fashion. Even the Volkspolizei, which had largely failed the ‘test’ of 17 June, also proved itself a loyal and reliable instrument of coercion.\footnote{Despite isolated instances of drunkenness, hesitations about firing on would-be illegal emigrants and cross-border fraternizing with western police, most reports speak of an ‘exemplary readiness’ on the part of the police force deployed to guard the border. Cf. BAP DO1/11/322.} Certainly the crackdown after the sealing of the border was comparable in both scale and intensity to that following the June 1953 uprising. Whereas 6,171 persons were arrested between 17 and 30 June 1953, between
13 August and 4 Sept 1961 the number was 6,041, with 3,108 of them incarcerated. If anything, the crackdown was even more swift and thorough. Whereas it took five days for the first convictions after 17 June 1953, this took only two days after the construction of the Wall.

While repression, or more importantly the fear of repression, no doubt goes a long way towards explaining why the closing of the border met with no more grassroots opposition within the GDR than it did, this nonetheless overlooks other important factors. For one thing, it was not necessarily clear at first that the ‘measures’ would last very long. After all, there had been earlier attempts to control all movement to West Berlin, such as the so-called ‘Aktion Schiebertod’ (‘Operation Death to Smugglers’) on 13 October 1957, and the barbed wire that went up on the night of 12-13 August could, many East Germans hoped, be dismantled again quickly once the party leadership had made its point. Not untypical were the comments of one Berlin woman who was overheard saying that she regretted not being able to see her relatives in West Berlin for a while, but was certain that the measures were just temporary. Of course there were plenty of East Germans who took what appeared to them the last opportunity to leave for the West by jumping from windows or leaping over barricades. But for many East Germans, it seems that the construction of the Wall was soon remembered as more of a caesura than it was actually experienced at the time.

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+ F. Werkentin, *Politische Strafjustiz*, op. cit., p. 256, 268. There were over 18,000 convictions of ‘state crimes’ in the second half of 1961. This was as many as in all of 1960, which itself was the year of forced agricultural collectivization.

Secondly, a not insignificant minority of East Germans agreed with the official argument that Berlin's special status constituted a serious problem for the East German economy that had to be solved, and thus felt a certain sense of relief — however little one approved of the harshness of the measures — that the harmful effects of the open border were being eliminated. There is evidence of this in both internal reports as well as post-1989 survey results. As a pharmacist in Belzig put it: 'The West Berlin question had to be solved, otherwise the GDR would have been bled dry'. There was also a certain feeling of Schadenfreude that the much-maligned Grenzgänger — apart from those who had worked for many years in West Berlin — now had to work in the GDR like everyone else, though the fact that West Berliners were still allowed to travel East was totally inconsistent with official explanations about protecting the GDR from an attack and also caused considerable envy.

Perhaps most importantly, there seems to have been a kind of shock with the suddenness and brutality of the border closure. Unlike the implementation of measures against Republikflucht in the early 1950s, the sealing of the border was done with legendary Prussian efficiency, and most Berliners awoke on the morning of 13 August to find there was little they could do. Rolls of barbed wire guarded by armed sentries at close intervals offered little chance of escape, and many East Germans were too afraid of the possible ramifications of the measures to think of much else. There were widespread fears of the response from the West, rumours of an impending war (again, especially in enterprises with a high proportion of women) and a planned currency

71 For the latter, see Laurence McFalls, Communism's Collapse, Democracy's Demise?: The Cultural Context and Consequences of the East German Revolution, (Basingstoke, 1995), p. 31-32.
reform, as well as an epidemic of panic shopping over the following two weeks. The mood in the Gaswerk Dimitroffstraße on the morning of 13 August was hurriedly summed up by a union secretary thus: ‘Wait-and-see attitude, what will happen now? Main concern: hopefully (the situation) won’t explode’.

Once the initial shock had worn off, the vast majority of reported opinions were decidedly negative and concerned with the broader implications — both personal and political — of the newly sealed border. There were numerous overlapping strands of disapproval, ranging from objections against the abrogation of the principle of free travel to desires for German unification to the far more prosaic matter of no longer being able to visit relatives, shop, or go to the cinema in the West. Although the SED tried to portray the construction of the Wall as a sign of their strength, as a decisive victory for peace in Europe and a blow against the expansionist plans of the ‘war-mongers’ in the West, internal reports leave no doubt that the vast majority of East Germans were of a different opinion. Even those who agreed in principle with the necessity of stricter border controls viewed the Wall rather as a sign of weakness. As a doctor in Frankfurt/Oder succinctly put it: ‘The barbed wire was unrolled because we’re at the end of our tether’. Furthermore, the particular means chosen for closing the border were generally viewed as anything but ‘peaceful’. Comments such as ‘we’re against barbed wire, army and tanks’; ‘why are so many armed soldiers deployed?’ and ‘with tanks one cannot be for peace’ were extremely common and can be found in most

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74 Up until 26 August, shops in Bezirk Cottbus reported 8 to 10 times the normal turnover, and banks reported 10 times the normal rate of savings withdrawals. SAPMO-BA DY34/23769, ‘Informationsbericht’, 1 Sept. 1961. See also the series of reports in DY34/22232, 22677.
75 SAPMO-BA DY34/22677, ‘Informationsbericht von 8 Uhr’, p. 6-7.
of the mood reports during the days following 13 August.” The fact that the
Kampfgruppen stood with their backs to the Brandenburg Gate and weapons pointed
eastward also totally undermined the claim that these were ‘protective measures’
directed against western agents and smugglers. Instead, comparisons with a jail or
concentration camp were almost immediate.

It speaks volumes for the popular mood in the weeks following 13 August that
many low-level party and union functionaries were showing signs of ‘capitulation’:
suddenly falling ill, avoiding all discussions with employees and resigning from their
functions. Some union secretaries simply could not bring themselves to support the
‘measures’ in front of their non-affiliated colleagues or to mouth their approval to their
superiors, choosing to remain silent instead: ‘If I told you my genuine opinion, you
would not approve’. Other union functionaries found themselves unable to keep their
genuine opinions to themselves: ‘Our government can kiss my — ’. Many school
teachers, who were in a similarly unpleasant position of having to offer ‘clarifications’
of the ‘measures’ to their agitated pupils, also proved less than completely reliable.
Eight were eventually fired in Bezirk Berlin after ‘arguing negatively’ and asking
‘provocative questions’ in discussions with party and union representatives after 13
August: ‘If a pupil asks me, “do the masses stand behind us?”’, what am I supposed to
answer? Millions have gone (to the West) or were Grenzgänger. Do we really have
the masses behind us and haven’t we worked politically false in the past?”

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77 These quotes taken from SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/433, ‘2. Kurzinformation über die Lage in der Zeit
1961; DY30/IV2/12/107, ‘Information über die Tätigkeit der POen und über die Stimmung der
The internal reports unanimously agree that the greatest ‘unclarities’ and ‘RIAS-arguments’ were, at least in Berlin and the surrounding areas, to be found among young people. Comments such as ‘Leave me alone with that rubbish — are you still Germans at all?’; ‘You need not bother giving me those things (pro-SED flyers) at all. After all, we’re living in a jail’; ‘we want to go to West Berlin, because one can earn well there and here we get nothing’; ‘we want to go to West Berlin cinemas because the GDR does not offer us an attractive cultural life’ were reported time and again as characteristic of the mood among East German youth in the days following the erection of the Wall.* It is significant here that at least some of the reports suggest that this non-conformity among young people stood in marked contrast to the rapid change in political behaviour among most other segments of the populace — that there were almost immediately signs of a subtle, yet noticeable sea-change in popular political behaviour after the construction of the Wall that was least pronounced among young people. According to a Berlin FDGB report of 14 August, ‘It is sometimes surprising how politely and euphemistically different objections are voiced by colleagues who used to talk much more loudly against us’, especially older SPD-supporters and members of the intelligentsia. ‘By contrast’, the report continues, ‘youth often speak out more openly against our measures, and in the process one comes quite quickly from the alleged relatives (in the West) to the real reasons for this, their cinema visits in West Berlin’.*

Regardless of whether or not cinema visits were the only ‘real reasons’ for youth’s ‘unclarities’ about the Wall, this assertion of a sudden moderation of dissent

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deserves attention. Was this apparent change in behaviour on the part of broad segments of the populace merely the result of the current climate of fear the SED had generated with its campaign against so-called state enemies and loafers? Was it just a short-term reflex, or was it rather the beginning of a sea-change in political behaviour in the shadow of the Wall that some scholars have posited? 

Certainly the evidence we have seen in other chapters suggests that this was temporary and due above all to the increased fear of the police and justice system during the crackdown of the following weeks. At a number of points in this thesis I have argued that the construction of the Wall did not revolutionize the SED leadership’s ability to exert control at the grass-roots. To be sure, it ushered in a new relationship of power in the GDR; East Germans no longer had the ‘trump card’ of being able to leave. But this new relationship still had to be renegotiated, it could not simply be dictated. The Wall may indeed have enhanced the regime’s stability and ability to control matters at the grass-roots, but its power to do so was still limited. New ‘arrangements’ were necessary by all parties concerned. As we have seen, shoddy work discipline remained a problem, industrial workers and pliant managers continued to make their informal wage and norm deals, reluctant farmers continued for a while to work ‘individually’ in the LPGs and many would-be soldiers still tried to escape recruitment. Apart from a general keeping-one’s-head-down during the repressive atmosphere of the remainder of 1961, the dramatic overnight sealing of the border did not bring about a dramatic overnight transformation of popular behaviour in the GDR.

But by no means is this to say that it had no long-term consequences. There can be little doubt that the existence of the Wall affected patterns of behaviour in the GDR.

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The point is rather that the effects were more indirect than direct, and took some time to crystallize. The Wall fundamentally changed the outer parameters of social and political action for all 'ordinary' East Germans, which inevitably changed their expectations and frameworks of orientation. Over time, the inability to leave for the West tended to foster a greater willingness to work within the system from which there was no longer any escape. Whereas one could previously try to improve one's lot by leaving, after 1961 this was only possible within the GDR itself. With all due caution concerning the increasing ritualization and decreasing quality of internal reporting in the 1960s, it is nonetheless significant that internal party reports begin to posit precisely this development within a few years of the erection of the Wall.

According to a 1963 SED study of the 'development of consciousness' (Bewußtseinsentwicklung) among the populace in Berlin-Lichtenberg, despite continued criticism of a broad range of 'shortcomings' (mostly of a material nature), the bulk of popular discontent was slowly becoming characterized less by outright hostility and increasingly 'by a willingness to cooperate in overcoming such shortcomings' — in other words, popular criticism was becoming more systemimmanent, or geared towards improving the system rather than undermining it." Yet as we have also seen at length in the other chapters of this thesis, this was less a matter of genuine ideological conviction than of a simple desire to make the best of the situation. Indeed, the authors of the Lichtenberg report seem to make this distinction themselves in their rather restrained conclusions: '... the number of citizens of our German Democratic Republic who still remain on the sidelines (abseits stehen) has strongly decreased'. Among industrial workers it asserts that even the 'large portion' with 'political unclarities [...] invest all
their effort in carrying out their economic tasks’. As for engineers and technicians: ‘in general, one can say that the technical intelligentsia is truly endeavouring to fulfil their tasks as economic functionaries [...] On the whole it must be said, however, that for the most part they do not act enough as political educators of the people in their enterprises and often shy away from political discussions’. The majority of personnel in the state-controlled retail shops likewise ‘truly endeavour to do everything they can for the strengthening of the GDR, albeit in large part unconsciously’.

A 1964 follow-up study of popular ‘Bewußtsein’ in Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg paints a similar picture of what it calls the ‘contradiction between the economic results of the people’s work and the development of their consciousness’.

While the attitudes towards the SED among everyone from workers and artisans to pensioners were reportedly improving with the beneficial effects of the NES, there was still plenty of anger about the sealed border and about shortcomings in the provision of various daily necessities such as spare parts and other consumer goods. And although the majority of youths were reportedly becoming more and more ‘open’ (aufgeschlossen) to the party’s policies, there was nonetheless ‘little clarity on the basic issues’ — especially military service and the ‘reactionary’ character of the West German state. Many concepts and slogans such as ‘socialist democracy’ and ‘military education’ ‘are only superficially acquired in school, without having an inner connection to them’. The SED was not necessarily winning over any converts, but around the mid-1960s there was apparently a

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84 ibid., p. 1-2, 3, 5-6.
86 ibid., p. 5-12.
growing readiness to play along, however unenthusiastically, with the rules of the game.

The fact that this only finds expression in the internal reports some two years after August 1961 strongly suggests that the construction of the Wall was not the only or even the primary reason behind it. Whatever spread of political acquiescence, resignation or rapprochement between East Germans and the regime as took place in the following years arguably had less to do directly with the Wall itself — or, for that matter, with changes on the part of the populace — than with the material improvements that it helped bring about (especially associated with the NES), the opportunities for upward mobility enhanced by the population drain up until 1961 and, very generally, with the growing sense of normality that occurs with the passing of time.

Improvements in the economy were of paramount importance. Erich Apel, the chief architect of the NES, is alleged to have said that 'political consciousness is measured by productive output'.* Insofar as such a reductionist claim can ever be valid, the party leadership had grounds for optimism. It was around the mid-1960s that the availability of consumer goods was visibly improving. From 1960 to 1970, the number of households possessing a refrigerator rose from 6% to 56%, those with a washing machine from 6% to 54% and those with a television from 17% to 69%. The absolute number of flats also increased, as did the proportion with modern amenities such as central heating, warm water and balconies. Over the same period the average income also rose from 555 to 755 Marks with essentially stable prices for most basic goods.** Even if the living standard reached that of the Federal Republic in only a few

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*D. Staritz, Geschichte der DDR. Erweiterte Neuausgabe, op. cit., p. 212.
**ibid., p. 230.
areas such as basic foodstuffs, the rapid economic upswing which even West German observers dubbed the 'planned economic miracle' undoubtedly had a stabilizing effect.* Insofar as this helped neutralize political discontent, Apel's assertion was correct. But generating 'positive' political support was another matter. Three years after the Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg examination of popular 'consciousness' drew a distinction between these two issues, a similar study in Berlin-Weißensee in 1967 was utterly forthright about the difference: 'People often work hard, and great economic achievements are made; yet the open conviction to work hard in order to strengthen the GDR because one supports the policies of the party is often still lacking'.

There can be little better description of the pragmatic arrangements of the 1960s and the rudiments of the 'consumer contract' of the Honecker era than this. But just as it would be wrong to view this as resulting primarily from the existence of the Wall, it would also be wrong to interpret it as a wholly new development. It was as much a matter of continuity as discontinuity. Certainly many East Germans came to terms and 'arranged themselves' with the regime in the shadow of the Wall. However, for the vast majority it was not so much a matter of making their 'arrangements' after August 1961, as is so often implied, but rather extending and modifying those they had already made, still by and large grumbling and trying to make the best of the situation.

And importantly, many East Germans saw their personal situations improving considerably. The GDR under Ulbricht has quite aptly been called an 'Aufsteigergesellschaft'. As a result of the population drain to the West up to 1961, the exigencies of denazification and the system of positive recruitment and advancement of

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* For example, Joachim Nawrocki, Das geplante Wunder: Leben und Wirtschaften im anderen Deutschland. (Hamburg, 1967).

people from 'working-class' backgrounds, there was room for unprecedented social mobility in the early GDR. A few statistics offer an idea of the scale of the phenomenon. Although the precise number of refugees who stayed in the West is still unknown, with estimates ranging from 2.75-3 million for the period 1945 to 1961, the size of the population drain from the SBZ/GDR was in any event immense. It is clear that highly trained professionals were overrepresented in the stream of refugees to the West, which left tens of thousands of vacancies for those willing and able to replace them. In 1961, the percentage of former refugees in the FRG possessing a higher degree was 7.2% for men and 2.1% for women, compared to only 3.4% and 1.0% possessing higher degrees in the West German populace as a whole. Thus the highly educated were roughly doubly represented in the refugee stream, as were students in higher education, who comprised 0.7% of all refugees from 1952-61 but only 0.34% of the entire GDR population over the same period. But the drain of those with higher degrees was only one aspect of the mass population exodus that opened up opportunities for upward mobility. Many who left were also skilled workers whose places were vacated for others to fill — mostly women or expellees from the East without previous qualifications or special skills. Moreover, roughly half were young men under the age of 25 — i.e. those most likely to gain further occupational qualifications. This massive population movement alone would have offered enormous opportunity for upward mobility. But it is only part of the story, as the absolute number of places in higher education more than tripled during the 1950s.

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91 For a statistical overview of some of the demographic changes this involved, see Heike Solga, Auf dem Weg in eine klassenlose Gesellschaft? Klassenlagen und Mobilität zwischen Generationen in der DDR, (Berlin, 1995).
92 This figure from H. Heidemeyer, Flucht und Zuwanderung, op. cit., p. 50.
93 According to official East German statistics, the proportion of the populace in higher education rose from 17.2 per 10,000 in 1951 to 59.0 per 10,000 by 1960. StB 1973, p. 363.
It would be impossible to arrive at precise statistics on how many people achieved upward mobility in the GDR of the 1950s and early 1960s, not least because of the problems of adequately defining what 'upward mobility' would be. But the results of oral history projects in the GDR leave no doubt that rapid upward mobility was a key experience for both men and women (though for the former more than the latter) of the Hitler Jugend and especially FDJ generations, and especially among those with solid socialist political credentials. In fact, interviewers found it difficult in 1987 to find a man over 60 from a skilled working-class background who had remained a manual labourer. These generations experienced an adventure in upward mobility like no other. In ideal-typical terms, it was they who eventually became the functional elite, the regime-carrying 'professionals' of the GDR: the industrial managers, teachers and bureaucrats of the East German system. By the 1960s, millions of East Germans had personally benefitted from the population drain and the regime's education and recruitment policies. Whatever they may privately have thought about the SED and the Soviet-style socialism it espoused, many felt they had a stake in the system that was instrumental to their own social ascendency.

What about the notion that the mass emigration promoted the outward conformity and political stabilization of the 1960s and 1970s in the sense of a siphoning-off of discontents prior to August 1961? Contrary to assumptions about a 'latent stabilization' as a product of the mass emigration westwards, it is not at all clear that Republikflucht significantly diminished the potential for conflict in the GDR, either between regime and populace or between different social groups. While the chances for organized opposition could only be reduced by the departure of so many people

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disenchanted with life in the GDR (especially intellectuals and non-SED political figures who might have acted as crystallization points for dissent), as I have remarked above, the bulk of those who stayed were not necessarily less refractory or more politically pliant than those who left. Contrary to widespread popular and scholarly views, it is not at all clear that Republikflucht diminished the potential for conflict in the GDR. Insofar as the mass exodus to the West contributed at all to the growing political acquiescence of the following decades, this arguably had less to do with any inherent difference in political convictions or political courage between the two groups than with the fact that many of those who, for whatever reason, remained in the GDR gradually became more integrated into the system via the processes of social mobility and enhanced life chances that the population drain itself augmented. Or put another way, insofar as Republikflucht prior to the Wall had a stabilizing effect after it, this was based more on its social than supposed 'political' effects: on the improved life chances and material circumstances that had been partially created by the abscondence of others."

Yet in closing it is crucial to recognize that even this stabilizing effect was only temporary, and over time was actually undermined by the closed border. Though the Wall may have rescued the GDR from imminent collapse and perhaps was the single most important prerequisite for the further construction and survival of East German socialism, it also quite literally cemented in an array of problems for the future. Worst of all, the 1970s and 1980s were marked less by opportunities for social mobility than

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by a certain consolidation and crystallization of the East German social hierarchy. The benefits of the population drain were largely confined to the HJ- and FDJ-generations, and among 'ordinary' East Germans born in the 1950s and 1960s who did not have the same life chances as their parents, the very inescapability of the GDR only heightened the frustration and in the final analysis contributed to anything but stability.

* For an overview, see Dieter Voigt et al, Sozialstruktur der DDR, eine Einführung. (Darmstadt, 1987); see also H. Solga, Auf dem Weg, op. cit..
Chapter 6

Conclusions

The foregoing chapters have examined certain major aspects of the construction of East German socialism at the grass-roots in an essentially topical manner: that is, by telling parallel, yet interrelated stories. It therefore seems worthwhile in closing to pull these stories together briefly, to present the basic arguments of the thesis in a more chronological and comparative manner and to consider some of their theoretical and conceptual implications.

To recapitulate: the grass-roots transformation of East Germany faced a number of obstacles: 1.) the persistence of older social structures, mentalities, and local networks; 2.) the inner contradictions of official policies and conflicts of interest between different elements of the regime; and as a result of these, 3.) a regime apparatus which at its lowest levels was often less than fully reliable. In the early years, overcoming the legacies of the past naturally presented the greatest problems. Although this was particularly the case in the villages of the East German countryside, where older habits of social deference acted as a hindrance to the confiscation of local elites' property and local social networks often lent themselves to corruption in its distribution, overcoming the effects of the war in the factories also presented an array of difficulties — not just in terms of sheer physical destruction, but also of widespread indiscipline, absenteeism and low productivity on the part of hungry, tired workers. In both spheres the German communists had to build their local structures of authority out of the personnel available. Local functionaries and officials were notoriously unreliable
in rural areas, and many industrial managers and low-level union functionaries also seemed more committed to their factories or employees than to the official party line.

During the so-called 'accelerated construction of socialism' in 1952-53, the party leadership still found its ability to exert authority at the grass-roots rather limited. The drive for agricultural collectivization encountered not only stiff opposition from farmers unwilling to give up either their private property or individual farming methods, but also a rather lukewarm response from many local officials loathe to disturb the village peace by pressuring neighbours and acquaintances. The tendency for many local representatives of the regime simply to 'muddle through', to go through the motions in the hope that the hard line from above would soon soften, was also observable in the concurrent recruitment campaign. The contradictory aims of raising an army at the same time as raising living standards and industrial productivity prompted many economic functionaries to ignore or even undermine the recruitment drive in order to retain as many young, able-bodied men in their factories as they could — a practice that corresponded to the wishes of most would-be recruits who, after all, had for years been inculcated with the virtues of 'peace and bread' against the evils of militarism. The explosion of anger in the factories on 17 June and, more importantly, the abiding fears among the party leadership of another workers' uprising effectively paralyzed the regime on the shopfloor, where the gutting of productivity-enhancing measures via various informal 'arrangements' between managers and employees that had developed in the latter 1940s was grudgingly tolerated as a means of keeping industrial conflict beneath the threshold of open protest. And throughout these eleven months following the Second Party Conference of July 1952, record numbers of East Germans were simply picking up and leaving for the West. Although the swelling wave of emigration finally prompted decisive action on the part of the Soviets and SED
leadership, this had little practical effect in the lower ranks of what was already an overburdened regime apparatus.

Though the regime managed to survive the upheavals of summer 1953, most of the problems hindering the grass-roots transformation of East German society were still visible in the latter 1950s. The main difference was that this time, in contrast to 1952-53, the party did not turn up the pressure in all areas at once. Attention was focused first on agricultural collectivization and then military recruitment. The exertion of immense pressure in the villages in late 1959 and early 1960 — made possible in part by gradual improvements in the selection and training of rural officials — indeed achieved the 'completion of socialist relations of production' in the countryside, though the change was only on paper at first. Older social hierarchies, tensions between new and old farmers and even individual methods of farming continued for a number of years under the surface of the 'fully collectivized village'. The military recruitment campaign that followed did not even manage to achieve its aims on paper. The increasingly coercive methods resorted to by recruiters simply could not fulfil the plan quotas, partially because factory managers were tending to hold on more and more tightly to their ever-scarcer manpower, but also because so many young men were leaving for the West — a problem that was hardly helped by the fact that so many local officials were still simply ignoring central party directives intended to reduce Republikflucht and encourage immigration.

Although the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 stopped the flow of illegal emigration almost overnight, it did not immediately sweep aside the other problems. It still took a year or so to fully establish the LPGs and stamp out older 'individual' farming practices. The majority of young men still evaded recruitment until the introduction of conscription five months later, and many economic
functionaries were still trying to keep their employees of draft age in the factories even after that. Most importantly, the second major attempt to gain control over wages and productivity in the factories — the Produktionsaufgebot — was to a large extent gutted on the shopfloor by the grumbling and subtle opposition of workers and the wariness of many managers and low-level functionaries.

Yet over time the Wall did help the SED leadership to push through its policies at the grass-roots, or at the very least it fostered an increasing resignation and willingness to play along on the part of most East Germans. For one thing, the end of the population drain allowed for significant economic growth in the mid-1960s which tended to mitigate — though never eliminate — popular material discontent. Perhaps more importantly, the inability to leave for the West changed the external parameters of life in the GDR and prompted many East Germans to make the best of the situation there. In turn, this became easier as the regime became less heavy-handed during the mid-1960s. With the basic structures of East German socialism in place, vast improvements in the reliability and training of low-level officials, the change of generation and effects of social mobility among the intelligentsia — and of course with the continued existence of the regime guaranteed indefinitely with the Wall in place — the absence of complete control at the grass-roots was no longer such a grave problem, at least apart from the industrial wages and productivity front.

But as this last observation suggests, the regime was more successful at controlling developments at the grass-roots in some areas than in others. Quite obviously, the problems associated with mass emigration were rapidly brought under control in August 1961. The difficulties of military recruitment were also for the most part overcome with the introduction of conscription in January 1962. Although it was extremely difficult to recruit enough volunteers, most East German youths were
prepared to toe the line once it was no longer up to them. This had to do with more than simply surrendering to the inescapability of armed service; the prospect was not as disagreeable once one could no longer be held responsible for the decision or be personally singled out. It thus became a taken-for-granted aspect of life, though many economic functionaries remained loath to sacrifice the manpower.

By comparison, transforming the villages of the East German countryside was far more difficult. The dense thicket of social relations in rural communities presented a huge obstacle to the grass-roots transformation of East Germany, further compounded by the problems in finding reliable and competent functionaries and the patchiness of party life in the countryside. Although the resilience of these local communities resisted and refracted attempts to transform the villages for a remarkably long time, by the mid-1960s the web of village relations was clearly breaking down under the impact of LPG formation and conglomeration. In effect, the party leadership eventually had its way in the countryside, though the 'socialist village' was by no means a communist stronghold: complying with the LPG system was in most cases more a matter of resignation and pragmatism than conviction.

Although the task of constructing East German socialism in the factories did not face as many outright hindrances, it was nonetheless on the industrial shopfloor that the regime encountered its greatest difficulties. Workers' indifference towards the various productivity campaigns and other forms of 'socio-political' participation was indeed disappointing, but the main problem was gaining control over wages, norms and productivity. To be sure, there were plenty of signs of increasing passivity and the further breakdown of solidarity among the industrial workforce in the 1960s. But the party leadership never got around this problem of hollowing out norms and productivity-enhancing measures at the factory level, which was grudgingly tolerated as
a lesser evil than the prospect of widespread shopfloor unrest and which later constricted the range of plausible responses to the economic challenges of the 1970s and 1980s. The issue of industrial wages and norms thus presents a uniquely prominent case of the 'formal' system tolerating and to some extent even relying on 'informal' arrangements in order to function, at least so long as the latter remained localized, fragmented and unorganized. The fact that such shopfloor 'arrangements' were only seriously criminalized by the party leadership once they started assuming a more organized character in the form of the 'socialist brigades' movement — the so-called anti-'syndicalism' campaign of 1960 — goes a long way towards explaining why the leadership was more cautious in the factories than among other social groups: the fear that, as in 1953, industrial unrest might not remain localized and fragmented.

As was noted in the introduction, there has been a flurry of fascination with theories and models of 'totalitarianism' since the latter 1980s, especially since the collapse of the communist states of Central and Eastern Europe from 1989-1991, and the debate on the GDR is no exception. Although Eckard Jesse exaggerates in claiming that the notion of the GDR as a 'totalitarian system' has 'virtually canonical validity', the inflationary use of the term and the discussion of various models of 'totalitarianism' with reference to the history of the GDR since 1989 has been remarkable indeed. The debate has been wide and varied, ranging from adaptations of the 'classic' models of Carl Friedrich and Hannah Arendt to issues of the relationship between 'totalitarianism' and 'modernity' to questions of the comparability of dictatorships all the way to rather

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1 Focusing on the responses of politicians and economic planners, Jeffrey Kopstein has recently made this argument at length in The Politics of Economic Decline, op. cit., which my own findings on the difficulties of controlling these shopfloor arrangements generally confirm.

2 See P. Hübler, 'Syndikalistische Versündigungen?', op. cit.

3 E. Jesse, 'War die DDR totalitär?', op. cit., p. 12.
unreflected polemics. Though this study is not intended primarily as a contribution to these debates, it nonetheless has something to say to them, not so much by consciously setting out to test these ideas against the empirical evidence, but on the contrary by its very portrayal of the communist transformation of East Germany from a perspective that is missed by ‘totalitarian’ models and theories of all kinds.

In recent years, a number of objections to theories of totalitarianism have been raised with reference to the GDR: for instance, that the designation of any particular regime as ‘totalitarian’ is basically a matter of how one defines the term and that the concepts are static and do not adequately capture, let alone explain, processes of change in East Germany. Worst of all is their blindness vis-a-vis ‘society’, which appears as a dimension of reality wholly separate from ‘politics’, or at least one which is a mere object of dictatorial manipulation and construction. This tendency to focus on the apparatus of power as distinct from society more broadly speaking particularly obscures developments at the grass-roots, which have been the focus of this entire study. ‘Totalitarian’ models not only tend to gloss over these areas, they also, even when applied to the apparatus of power itself at this level, paint a too sleek and ‘top-down’ picture and in the process ignore the very real problem of unreliability, self-interest and

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* Arnold Sywottek has already tested the classic ‘six-point’ definition of Friedrich and Brzezinski for the GDR, and concludes that its utility is very limited. See idem, ‘“Stalinismus” und “Totalitarismus” in der DDR-Geschichte’, in: Deutsche Studien, vol. 30 (1993), no. 117/118, p. 25-38.

divided loyalties at the periphery of the apparatus, which, as we have seen, often hindered and distorted the communist transformation of East German society at the micro-level.

The portrayal of 'society' and social change as no more than a mere object of dictatorial manipulation is an inherent feature of the 'classic' models of totalitarianism developed by Carl Friedrich and Hannah Arendt and adapted and applied by others, which focus above all on the mechanisms of exerting authority and power in a narrow sense. Though Sigrid Meuschel's more flexible concept of totalitarianism as the arresting and reversal of the 'normal' process of modern functional differentiation of societal spheres (i.e. between politics, economics, law, leisure, etc.) has made the concept more useful for the analysis of society more broadly speaking, here, too, it appears as no more than an object of dictatorial political control. The problem with these various models is twofold: first, they all tend to take the caesura of the communist societal project for granted, thus overlooking important lines of continuity with the pre-communist past; and second, they miss how everyday socialist 'reality' in the GDR was actually an unplanned mixture of ideologically-derived intervention on the one hand and the unpredictable, unplanned actions of people on the other.7

As we have seen, the communist transformation of East Germany was not a smoothly-paved one-way street. It was not just a matter of formulating and implementing new policies and new social structures at the grass-roots and it cannot adequately be understood in terms of an all-powerful regime simply imposing its will on a hopelessly powerless and ultimately submissive populace. This is by no means to downplay the total claims of the regime, the limitations it placed on civil rights and the

public sphere, and the rejection of pluralism that distinguish it from liberal democratic polities. Obviously, decision-making in the GDR was highly centralized, the party leadership exercised formal control over most aspects of political and social life, and fundamental criticism of the official line — not to mention the possibility of viable alternatives to its rule — was largely prevented by the massive security apparatus. If we view the communist transformation of East Germany solely or even primarily as a matter of policy formulation and transformation of formal social structures — merely as a piece of political history — it is hard not to conclude that East German society was 'stillgelegt' by the total claims of the communist dictatorship. It is also hard in this view not to perceive meaningful human action as basically limited to those in positions of power and thus to dismiss the experiences and behaviour of millions who lived there as essentially irrelevant to this process.

Yet far beneath the rigid political and social macro-structures imposed by the party leadership there was still significant space at the grass-roots for contingency and relevant human action by 'ordinary' people, if only on a small scale and in an informal manner. This was made possible in part because of contradictions within 'the regime' itself. In attempting to control every aspect of society, the East German dictatorship did not solve society's contradictions and conflicts — this basically would have been to realize its own utopian goals — so much as it incorporated them into its own structures and rhetoric. In turn, these contradictions presented 'ordinary' East Germans with certain opportunities to pursue their own agendas: the conflict of interest between factory managers and military recruiters helped disinclined young men to avoid military service; industrial managers' concerns about retaining scarce manpower against party demands for raising productivity presented opportunities for local wage bargaining; reference to the regime's own 'peace and bread' rhetoric served as a justification for
refusing to join the army; complaining about the logical inconsistency of prioritized housing provision for returnees from the West — or even threatening to leave briefly and become one — could be used as a means of acquiring a new flat; the list goes on.

Of course all societies have their contradictions and conflicts, and we should not blow the GDR’s out of proportion. Any state that attempts to control and penetrate society to the same degree as in East Germany will incorporate some of them. As Ralph Jessen has insightfully observed: ‘The unique feature about this political-social system was not that society was “stillgelegt”’. Rather, it seems much more as if the ever-expanding, undifferentiated, unlimited state, precisely because it had lost its limits, in a certain sense became increasingly vergesellschaftet.8 Where state and society overlapped most is where this ‘Vergesellschaftung’ was strongest, and one thing that this thesis has tried to show is that the rifts in the SBZ/GDR did not run merely between ‘state and society’ or ‘regime and populace’, but also — especially during the early years — between the central party and state leadership on the one hand and the ‘grass-roots’ on the other, where the periphery of its own apparatus, the actual implementers of official policy on the ground, were themselves an integral part of ‘society’ with all the corresponding divisions and problems. East German society may have been formally ‘durchherrscht’, and the SED leadership may have made all the major decisions, but the manner and extent to which these decisions were actually carried out at the grass-roots often lay beyond the limits of its control.

Constructing East German socialism at the grass-roots was thus not merely a process of dictation, but also one of negotiation, however tentative, informal and one-sided it may have been. What is more, it was also a process of adaptation, for the

effects of popular responses and the problems associated with implementing policies at
the grass-roots amounted to more than merely slowing down the realization of some
'master plan'. As we have seen, the SED's various political interventions into society
and efforts to mobilize East Germans were for the most part neither immediately nor
completely realized on the ground, and in many cases only a more 'workable' version
could ultimately be implemented. This is not to underestimate the decisive influence of
dictatorial steering from the 'centre' in processes of social change in the SBZ/GDR.
The social networks in the villages, the unique post-war structures and culture of work
on the shopfloor, older notions of prestige and distinction, and the widespread aversion
to military forces showed a high level of 'Resistenz' to political intervention, but they
were not immune to it. Nor were the East Germans themselves immune to the
mobilization efforts: hardly anyone who lived in the GDR escaped the pressure to make
an arrangement, to participate and cooperate in some form with the 'contagion state'.
It is more that political intervention was so reshaped when applied at the grass-roots as
to become at least partially compatible with traditional social structures, with the
wishes of the broader populace and with the interests and capabilities of local officials.

It seems somewhat odd that notions of totalitarianism should have witnessed
such a renaissance after the very collapse of the regimes that they attempt to describe.
When viewing the history of the GDR 'vom Ende her', that is, through the lens of its
demise in 1989-90, what one sees is less the omnipotence of the communist regime —
the feasibility of the entire 'totalitarian project' of shaping and controlling everything
— and more the limits to its power. This is true not just of the external limits (i.e. the
good graces of the Soviet Union) but also the internal ones: low productivity, poor

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9 Martin Broszat, 'Resistenz und Widerstand', op. cit..
work discipline, a west-oriented and uncontrollable youth, retreat into domestic
‘niches’, corruption and the ‘shadow economy’, the overburdening of the regime
apparatus itself by its own profusion of competences, etc.. These unintended
consequences were at least as central to the face of ‘real existing socialism’ in the GDR
of the 1970s and 1980s as the plans and intentions of the SED leadership, and what this
study has attempted to show is how both continuities from the pre-communist past as
well as unplanned human responses at the grass-roots level helped shape East German
socialism during its two formative decades. Although it would be far too simple to
attribute the regime’s ultimate collapse directly to these unintended developments or to
characterize them as a form of ‘resistance’ or ‘opposition’, it seems clear that, at the
very least, they nourished and represented a widespread culture of disrespect for
authority and contributed to the difficulties of the party leadership in overcoming the
mounting political and economic problems in the GDR that together helped lay the
groundwork for the ultimate demise of the regime once the external guarantees were
abolished and internal political mobilization against it spread out of control.

What was a radical social and political transformation of East Germany at the
macro-level was in many ways more a slow, patchy and inconsistent transition at the
glass-roots. Given the ambitious programme, it arguably could not have happened
otherwise. In the final analysis, East German socialism was not just a new ‘totalitarian’
construction, but rather a mixture of different structures and mentalities inherited from
German past, various Soviet imports, occasional dictatorial intervention as well as
human responses — not only on the part of those in the halls of power, but also by
‘ordinary’ East Germans themselves.
**List of Abbreviations**

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>APuZG</td>
<td>Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte: Beilage zur Wochenzeitung Das Parlament</td>
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<td>BAP</td>
<td>Bundesarchiv, Abteilung Potsdam</td>
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<td>BGL</td>
<td>Betriebsgewerkschaftsleitung (FDGB)</td>
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<td>BL</td>
<td>Bezirksleitung der SED</td>
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<td>BLHA</td>
<td>Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Potsdam</td>
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<td>BPO</td>
<td>Betriebsparteiorganisation (SED)</td>
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<td>BV</td>
<td>Bundesvorstand</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDU</td>
<td>Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands</td>
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<tr>
<td>DA</td>
<td>Deutschland Archiv: Zeitschrift für das vereinigte Deutschland</td>
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<tr>
<td>DBD</td>
<td>Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDR</td>
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<td>GG</td>
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<td>GPO</td>
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<td>ND</td>
<td>Neues Deutschland</td>
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<td>NES</td>
<td>New Economic System</td>
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<td>Sowjetische Aktiengesellschaft</td>
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SAPMO-BA  Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR
im Bundesarchiv

SBZ  Soviet Occupation Zone

SED  Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands

SMAD  Soviet Military Administration of Germany

SPD  Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands

SPK  Staatliche Plankommission

TAN  Technically-determined norm

VdgB  Vereinigung der gegenseitige Bauernhilfe

VEAB  Volkseigener Erfassungs- und Aufkaufsbetrieb

VEB  Volkseigener Betrieb

VEG  Volkseigenes Gut

WPO  Wohnparteiorganisation (SED)

ZfG  Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft

ZK  Zentralkomitee der SED
Sources, Bibliography

Archives:

BA-MA Bundesarchiv, Militärarchiv (holdings of HVA, KVP, NVA)
BAP Bundesarchiv, Abteilung Potsdam (German Federal State Archives: Division with holdings of East German state ministries and police)
BLHA Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Potsdam (Regional Brandenburg Archive: regional and district SED, police and MO holdings)
LAB Landesarchiv Berlin (Regional Berlin Archive: regional and district SED, police and MO holdings)
SAPMO-BA Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (SED Central Party Archive, central archives of MOs)

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List of Corrections

p. 12, line 11: principal not principle
p. 22, line 21: Volkspolizei not Volkspolizei
p. 27, line 7: Soviet not Soviets
p. 30, line 8: ‘down’ after spiralling
p. 31, line 14: principal not principle
p. 32, line 21: attendance not attendance
p. 33, line 1: attendance not attendance
p. 67, line 15: accommodation not accommodation
p. 87, line 5: difficult not dificulat
p. 89, line 10: discernible not discernable
p. 141, line 11: hordes not hoardes
p. 196, line 7: national anthem not national hymn
p. 219, line 17: volunatarism not volutarism
p. 239, lines 12 and 16: Khrushchev not Kruschev
p. 240, line 9: haemorrhage not haemmorhage
p. 245, line 3: There not They
p. 250, line 11: should read ‘shortcomings and mistakes’
p. 250, line 12: should read ‘usually in terms of’
p. 283, line 7: loath not loathe
p. 286, line 5: loath not loathe
p. 296, line 1: Militärarchiv not Militarchiv