

**Compulsory Fun: Creating Legitimacy through Anniversary  
Commemorations in the GDR**

by

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## **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Jennifer Redler

July 2019

## Abstract

From the state's founding in 1949, East Germany's ruling SED engaged in an exhaustive campaign to remove doubts about the country's legitimacy as an independent state, doubts that not only existed abroad, but also at home amongst its own people. Although the Basic Treaty between East and West Germany in 1972 officially established diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1972, and did much to signal to the world the permanency of the state, the fact that the country abruptly dissolved 17 years later tells us much about the precariousness with which the GDR (German Democratic Republic) had existed. At no time was the GDR's existence certain, a fact which resulted in persistent efforts by the SED to encourage participation in anniversary commemorations in a desperate attempt to create legitimacy.

Using previously untouched archival documents, this dissertation explores three main facets of GDR anniversary commemorations that showcase the ways in which the SED attempted to convince the populace of their vision of a distinct GDR identity. The first and most important facet was the ideological theses the SED issued in honour of a particular anniversary, which not only guided the planning of all celebratory measures, but were also integrated into all cultural events, exhibits, group activities, and festivities themselves. The second facet sheds light on the ways in which national, regional, and local National Front organizations sought to educate the populace on these central anniversary theses by carrying out wide-ranging events, most of which were pedagogical in nature, including lectures, forums, publications, exhibitions, and festivals. The third facet involves the ways in which National Front organizations carried out "socialist competitions" at the national, regional, and local levels during the weeks and months leading up to the anniversary itself. Also vital to understanding these anniversary commemorations are the tensions between centre and periphery, especially the ways in which national and regional

National Front committees attempted to work with one another, despite often vast differences in opinion, understanding, and available resources.

Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to show that even though the National Front designed the anniversary commemorations to be enjoyable for East Germans, the state nevertheless went to great lengths to promote its monopolistic vision of East Germany. The SED sought to strictly control their message down to the individual East German: once the SED Politburo's propaganda wing had designed the theses, there was no room for an alternative narrative. While less-than-positive opinions often came up in these discussion forums, local National Front committees sought to counteract them as part of their efforts to convince East Germans of the state's point of view. In fact, the anniversary commemorations were so ubiquitous that there were virtually endless opportunities for the public to hear this point of view, as each GDR citizen could be simultaneously involved in local, regional, or national events, ranging from sporting events, to workplace competitions, to even neighborhood and apartment-level street festivals.

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## Introduction

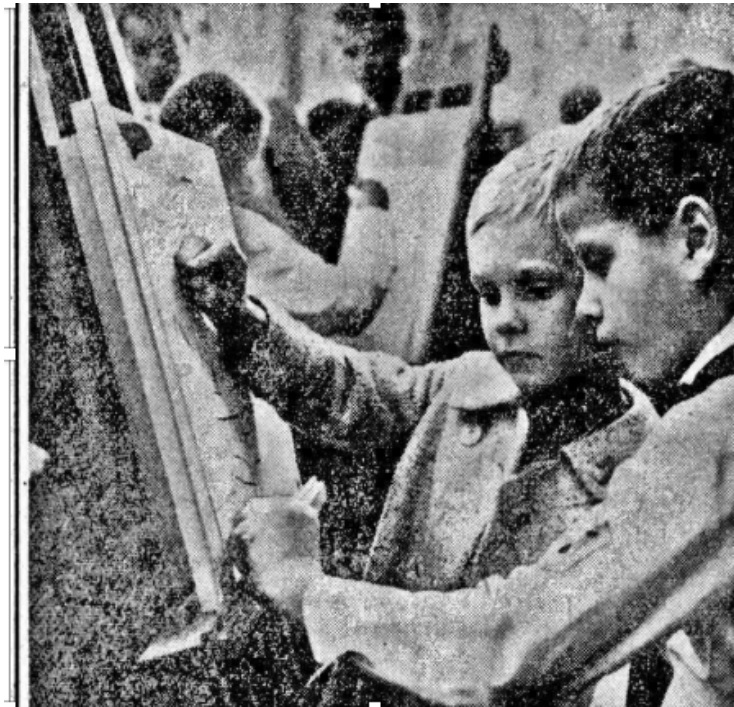


Figure 1. 7-year-old Marlies enjoying the Berlin festivities in honour of the 15th anniversary of the GDR while drawing with a friend (Heiner Hein, "Marlies' schönste Geburtstagsfeier," *Berliner Zeitung*, October 8, 1964, p. 8).

On the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GDR on October 7, 1964, a group of press officials from the Berlin daily the *Berliner Zeitung* explored Berlin's main popular street festival held on Karl-Marx-Allee alongside 7-year-old Marlies. In slowly making their way through the throngs of people gathered, the whole group saw the festivities through the eyes of a child, carefully noting her awe and wonderment at it all. On her journey, Marlies passed by the fairgrounds in front of the children's store, stopped at the food stands, and looked on at the dancing and performers singing beloved popular songs along the way. She also stopped to look at the seesaws, slides, and to mingle with other children. "She could not get enough of the many, many people, the orchestra and the singing groups on the stage of the *Feststraße*," the reporters commented, "Marlies wanted to join in everything!"<sup>1</sup> When asked if she knew whose birthday they were celebrating, Marlies

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<sup>1</sup> Heiner Hein, "Marlies' schönste Geburtstagsfeier," *Berliner Zeitung*, October 8, 1964, p. 8.

replied, “I know! Our republic is 15 years old! Our teacher told us that today we are all Geburtstagskinder! [birthday boys and girls]” Marlies exclaimed.

Marlies’ experience of the GDR’s 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary festivities makes clear the pure joy such events could bring the populace. Sociologist David Knottnerus explains how “ritualized practices” help collective social identities develop and create emotional impact. This emotion serves to create “a sense of collective dependence” amongst those participating.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly helpful when, as French Revolutionary historian Mona Ozouf points out, festivals are used to create a new beginning for a new revolutionary state and society by anchoring the state in new symbols and conferring a sense of identity, distinct from the old one.<sup>3</sup>

Marking its distinctiveness in the collective minds of the people and creating new collective memories was vital to the young GDR’s continued existence. In order to first create a distinct identity replete with new (revolutionary) holidays and ideologies, however, the ruling SED needed to develop core messages to communicate to the populace. As the following work explains, the themes they eventually chose pervaded all aspects of GDR anniversary celebrations over the years: the National Front<sup>4</sup> designed all manner of festivities from exhibitions, parades, events, forums, to public speeches, in order to collectively promote the ideological themes. The same message carried across in another vital piece of the GDR anniversary commemorations, that of the economic and socialist competitions. Unlike the parades and exhibitions, socialist

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<sup>2</sup> David Knottnerus, “Emotions, Pride and the Dynamics of Collective Ritual Events,” in Gavin B. Sullivan, *Understanding Collective Pride and Group Identity: New Directions in Emotion Theory, Research and Practice* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 46

<sup>3</sup> See Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution. Trans by Alan Sheridan* (Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> The National Front (NF) was a “collective movement of all parties, mass organizations and associations in the GDR under the leadership of the SED, and as such, a political institution that actively influenced sociopolitical processes.” See “Die Nationale Front der DDR (NF),” *Objekt- und Fotodatenbank Online der Gedenkstätte Museum in der „Runden Ecke,”* accessed July 7, 2019, [http://www.runde-ecke-leipzig.de/sammlung/pop\\_zusatz.php?w=w00097](http://www.runde-ecke-leipzig.de/sammlung/pop_zusatz.php?w=w00097).

competitions on the whole were not exactly glamorous. Rather, they were often extremely mundane “friendly competitions” where different organizations, individuals, or enterprises were pitted against one another in order to raise production efforts, cut inefficiencies, and increase economic output. These competitions were so important because much like other states with planned economies, the GDR lacked the inherently competitive nature of capitalist economies. Even though a main function of these “socialist competitions” was economic, the state still saw them as an important means of shaping the identities of GDR citizens, especially given the “educationally-focused” nature of the cultural competitions. Widespread participation in these competitions in the lead-up to the anniversaries was thus in many ways more important to the GDR leadership than the anniversary festivities themselves, as the immense preparation ensured East Germans were thoroughly exposed to the SED ideological themes – that is, the SED’s “anniversary theses” – for that year.

The themes of these “anniversary theses” reflected both domestic and international events. During the 1950s and 1960s in particular, the biggest threat to the GDR’s existence was its lack of both internal and external legitimacy, for, until 1969-72, only a handful of (Eastern-Bloc) countries recognized it as a separate state from the West. In addition, West Germany’s Hallstein Doctrine – which threatened to cut off diplomatic relations with any state that recognized the GDR – continued to undermine the GDR internationally. Thus, GDR rhetoric in these very early years could only claim legitimacy based on its adoption of socialism and the fact that it was following in the Soviet Union’s revolutionary footsteps. In an effort to create a more favourable contrast during these years, East German ideological rhetoric also attempted to undermine West Germany’s own legitimacy by arguing that the West was a warmongering, exploitative, dogmatic, Nazi-infected, imperialist state.

As a result of this hardline position, the GDR sought, for nearly its full 40 years of existence, to justify the necessity of the GDR's close relationship with the Soviet Union by encouraging GDR citizens to develop connections with Soviet citizens. The only problem with this was that much of the populace did not seem to have a favourable opinion of the Soviets, either in the early years or later on. This hostility did not deter the National Front, however, from creating competition after competition, year after year, that touted the benefits of a close German-Soviet relationship, even once the GDR began to achieve its own economic successes and international recognition.

With the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and the resulting closing of the border that stopped young, educated people from leaving for the West, the GDR was able to achieve a modicum of economic success. The anniversary theses reflected this change: instead of attempting to convince the people of the GDR to stay in the East, the theses switched to a focus on achieving internal legitimacy by convincing East Germans that they were part of a greater socialist ideal through instilling pride in the GDR's accomplishments and growing sense of identity. Following the "normalizing" of relations with West Germany in 1972 and the resulting international recognition of the GDR as a permanent, independent state, the GDR anniversary theses became more confident and emphasized the clear superiority of socialism – proven by not only their economic successes, but also by the very generous social policies that benefitted the entire population during this time. Despite imminent economic collapse by the 1980s, the SED's anniversary theses completely diverged from reality and the SED doubled down on their previous themes about their international acclaim and economic prowess, asserting the stability and prosperity of their state.

While it was the responsibility of the Berlin National Front to design events and competitions based on the anniversary theses, Berlin relied on its regional branch committees,



particularly mid-level officials, to transform their ideas into ground-level activities. These bureaucrats were vital to the functioning of the GDR dictatorship. For the ways in which they carried out the national campaigns at the *Bezirk* (state), *Kreis* (county) and local National Front committee levels were key to the ultimate success of the festivities and socialist competitions in the GDR, as it was through these competitions and festivities (events) that the populace interacted with the themes on a practical level.

Too often the focus in GDR historiography has been on those at the very top of the state apparatus or, more recently, those at the grassroots level. But that view does not fully capture how the GDR functioned. Neither the SED nor the National Front in Berlin designed the majority of commemorations in any detail and the anniversary celebrations and competitions were certainly not a spontaneous grassroots affair. A vast range of officials at the *Bezirk* or *Kreis* level could be counted as belonging to this important mid-tier, with everyone having varying degrees of responsibility – from those who belonged to the National Front and its constituent mass organizations in some leadership capacity, to those who were part of the National Front’s task forces created for the anniversary commemorations, to local officials who organized city district festivals, to officials who sat on subcommittees. All helped organize, popularize, and carry out the commemorations. It was these people who made decisions on how to design the commemorations as well as who assisted in overseeing and judging the locals on their decorations or submissions to a competition. Such officials were vital “cogs” in the SED machine, for it was they who kept it running. Thus, even though the top level of the state machinery was still very much in control, it does not seem quite as all-powerful as traditionally presented when one considers how completely reliant it was on these mid-level bureaucrats to implement its ideological goals at the lower levels.

This vital role of the intermediaries was a major feature of the tensions between centre and periphery, which plagued the organizational process of competitions through the years. In the early years, Berlin insisted on as much ideological uniformity in their message across the regions as possible, criticizing regional committees that diverged from their often-unrealistic instructions. Meanwhile, the regions complained about a lack of clear guidelines, support, and financial assistance. In later years, these goals changed ever so slightly: Berlin began to be satisfied to see popular participation in the competitions, no matter how the regions managed to achieve these results, as long as the ideological message was still present.

It is this question of how the SED continually tried to keep these themes first and foremost in the public imagination that this dissertation seeks to explore. Looking through the lens of the state trying to create a GDR identity, this work explores three main facets of GDR anniversary commemorations. **Chapter One** discusses the first and most important facet, which are the ideological theses the SED would issue in honour of a particular anniversary, intending for the theses to not only guide the planning of all celebratory measures, but also to be integrated into cultural events, exhibits, group activities, and festivities themselves. Core anniversary theses that the SED repeatedly made use of included the continued threat posed by West Germany, the necessity of the GDR's "friendship" with the Soviet Union, the East German citizens' thriving economic and social lives, as well as the GDR's ever-increasing international legitimacy. **Chapter Two** examines the second facet of GDR commemorations, which was how national, regional, and local National Front organizations sought to educate the populace on these central anniversary theses by carrying out wide-ranging events and activities, most of which were pedagogical in nature, including lectures, forums, publications, exhibitions, and festivals. **Chapter Three** investigates the third facet of GDR commemorations, which were the "socialist competitions" (*sozialistische Wettbewerbe*) at the national, regional, and local levels during the

weeks and months leading up to the anniversary itself. Although the main function of these competitions was economic – especially in achieving the state’s goal of “catching up without overtaking” the West – due to their occurrence at every level of society (from the national level all the way down to the apartment-complex association (*Hausgemeinschaft*) level), the competitions were also a means of reinforcing the anniversary themes to GDR citizens. Given their ubiquity, I have chosen to investigate a variety of cultural and economic competitions from the national to the local level. An additional consideration affecting the success of these events and competitions are the tensions between centre and periphery and how they attempted to work with each other, despite often vast differences in opinion, understanding, and available resources.

Using examples of GDR anniversaries that best showcase such a wide array of themes, this dissertation explores a great wealth of previously untouched archival material from the late 1950s to late 1970s, such as the 40<sup>th</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the October Revolution in 1957 and 1977; the 15<sup>th</sup> (1964), 20<sup>th</sup> (1965), and 30<sup>th</sup> (1979) anniversaries of the GDR’s founding; the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the “Liberation from Fascism” (the end of World War II) in 1975, as well as the theses from the 750<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Berlin in 1987. This study begins in 1957 with the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the October Revolution, the earliest anniversary that the GDR celebrated in a major way. If commemorations can be considered to be – as I argue in this work – a stabilizing and legitimizing force in which to recreate new national narratives, then during the uncertain 1950s, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution was simply the earliest largest commemoration that best served the SED’s goals. This anniversary served as an auspicious first commemoration with very few drawbacks, since it celebrated the overthrowing of capitalism in favour of a socialist system that had now endured for 40 years. In fact, celebrating the great beginning of the first socialist state made it clear to those at home and abroad that the GDR was a firm part of the Eastern Bloc. The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary also provided the ideal opportunity for the

SED to reinvent German history by proclaiming how long communism's roots in Germany were, while at the same time presenting the Nazi period as a diversion from Germany's original (correct) communist course – a diversion that West Germany was still a part of. Outside the purview of this study are the more focused celebrations that organizers designed around specific topics or themes, such as the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther in 1983,<sup>5</sup> the anniversaries celebrating the founding of the KPD (Communist Party) or the SED, the GDR's celebrations in honour of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kristallnacht in 1962, or even the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1848 revolutions in 1968. Neither does this study concern itself with the yearly May Day celebrations, which, as an annual occurrence, the National Front could not invest the same extensive and massive preparation into, such as by creating anniversary theses to be communicated to the populace.

At the end of their tour through the crowded Karl-Marx-Allee, Marlies pronounced the festival as “the best birthday party I've been to!” and told those accompanying her that “at school [tomorrow] I'll have so much to talk about!”<sup>6</sup> Although the National Front was very happy with such a result – especially in piquing the interest of such a young person – the real work for the reporters at the *Berliner Zeitung* was in crafting this scene to its readership afterwards. For example, the newspaper quoted Marlies as asking those accompanying her how many people were present, to which they estimated “hundreds of thousands.” Also woven into Marlies' story, as reported by the newspaper, was the fact that she walked by the area in which, “moments before,” a group of Pioneers, FDJ, and other children had just presented GDR leader Walter Ulbricht with a symbolic “Book of Good Deeds,” listing the achievements of ordinary GDR

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the Luther commemorations in 1983, see Jon Berndt Olsen, *Tailoring Truth: Politicizing the Past and Negotiating Memory in East Germany, 1945–1990* (New York: Berghahn, 2015), p. 148-163.

<sup>6</sup> Heiner Hein, “Marlies' schönste Geburtstagsfeier,” *Berliner Zeitung*, October 8, 1964, p. 8.

citizens in building up socialism. In thus describing everything that the *Feststraße* had had to offer, especially the awe and wonderment of a child's perspective, the newspaper was attempting to promote the Berlin festivities, to attract public interest in the remaining celebrations, and to create a memory of this event – one of “music, laughter and dancing everywhere” – that would stick in people's minds until the next anniversary celebration.<sup>7</sup> This role of the press or “work with the press” as the National Front often termed it, was something they expected of all newspapers in the GDR. The National Front committees large and small were always expected to be in connection with the press, promoting the work they had all done in creating not only festivities such as this, but also the far less glamorous socialist competitions in the weeks and months leading up to the anniversary. Far more important to the SED and National Front was that the East German populace went away having absorbed (on the surface at least) the ideological message presented to them that anniversary.

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<sup>7</sup> Heiner Hein, “Marlies' schönste Geburtsfeier,” *Berliner Zeitung*, October 8, 1964, p. 8.

## Historiography

This dissertation is built upon many different historiographies. It is most clearly a cultural history that explores the preparation, organization and implementation undertaken by the National Front in order to make the GDR's anniversary commemorations a success. In this respect, it follows the works of those who were writing after the cultural turn in the late 1970s and 1980s, most notably those in other fields such as the French Revolution. It is also a political history of the GDR due to its main primary source material: although public opinion is used wherever possible, all of the sources in this dissertation are state-based sources, mostly from the National Front, the GDR's Department of Culture, and the SED Politburo (such as the papers of Kurt Hager, chief ideologue of the SED), all of which are located in the German federal archives in Berlin-Lichterfelde. I supplemented these *Bundesarchiv* findings with some from the Berlin *Landesarchiv*, as well as from newspapers like the state-run *Neues Deutschland* and the Berlin daily *Berliner Zeitung*, and a few regional newspapers, such as that of *Freie Presse*. All of these sources provided this work with some useful additional perspectives.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, this is also a work of social history, one that looks at the GDR's organizing powers from the national level to the lowest of levels – that of the apartment-complex association (*Hausgemeinschaft*). In this regard, the dissertation has a dual top-down and bottom-up focus: while the sources are all indeed state-based sources, the voices represented within them are not just those of top officials like Hager; instead, they come from the very bottom of the state apparatus, the volunteer National Front organizers in the small villages and towns across the GDR, who translated Berlin's often rather lofty goals for its celebrations into much more manageable competitions and festivities. This means that this work is situated between political

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<sup>8</sup> While I located some of these newspapers in the federal archive, most of my access was made possible through the Zefys portal of the Berlin state library (the *Staatsbibliothek*).

and socio-cultural histories of the GDR, something which is entirely necessary given the former heated debates over whether the GDR had been an illegitimate dictatorial regime or whether East Germans were nevertheless still able to lead “normal” lives within.

## **Festival Historiography**

Although few works address festival commemorations in East German historiography, the approach taken by scholars of other time periods, especially the French Revolution, show the ways in which festivals can assist in creating a sense of identity and legitimacy in a new “revolutionary” state. For example, following the fall of the Ancien Regime, the French revolutionaries, much like the East Germans a century-and-a-half later, needed to construct an identity for their new revolutionary state and at the same time, underscore how this new state would constitute a complete break with the past, including the repurposing or abolition of the symbols of the old system.

Unlike other areas in memory theory, festival commemorations have been investigated by far fewer scholars on the whole. Nevertheless, there are some very important works that can be used to illuminate the issues in the field. These works came about as a result of interest in cultural history, beginning at the end of the 1970s. At the vanguard of this tradition are the scholars of the French Revolution, especially François Furet, Maurice Agulhon, and Mona Ozouf. Furet led the way with a focus on revolutionary rhetoric that helped to understand political ideology.<sup>9</sup> Agulhon focused on revolutionary symbols and how these shaped peoples’ political views, while Lynn

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<sup>9</sup> See François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Hunt wrote about how symbolic practices like language, images, and even everyday political activities established a break with the past and thereby created new social and political groups.<sup>10</sup>

One of the earliest and best works about the principle function fulfilled by festivals is by Mona Ozouf, who wrote about the French revolutionary festivals in her 1976 work *La Fête révolutionnaire (1789-1799)*. For the first time, Ozouf demonstrated how revolutionary festivals were important in their own right, especially how they could “recast space and time” in order to develop “a new community based on new values.”<sup>11</sup> These new revolutionary festivals were intended to create a new order in place of the fallen Ancien Regime, replete with new markers of identity and nation that could quickly take the place of the old ones. As Ozouf explains, erasing the particularly long-rooted Catholic rituals in favour of a completely new revolutionary symbolism was a difficult thing to do. The new rulers had to establish the Revolution as the beginning of a new republican era in order to break with the past and signal a new beginning. The goal was to use festivals to do this, which meant new symbolic objects and events needed to be chosen to celebrate. By marking the beginning of this new era with a festival, legislators would therefore be “plac[ing] the new time beyond dispute and [showing] that history derived from a founding act.... [in order] to have ‘a fixed point to which all other events might henceforth be related.’”<sup>12</sup> In this respect, Ozouf’s views are rooted in Durkheim’s theories on the function of religion in organizing society. On the collective and cohesive role of the festival, Ozouf comments:

By dint of repetition, the sacred, beneficent atmosphere of mythical times could be resuscitated. Through contemplation, recitation, or, better, by a miming of the glorious days that were the Revolution’s age of innocence, faith would be rekindled through

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<sup>10</sup> See for example, Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789-1880* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> Lynn Hunt, forward in Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*. Trans by Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 1988). x-xi.

<sup>12</sup> Ozouf, *Festivals*, 159.



contact with heroism. By transporting the past into the present, the historical rite conferred the virtues of the former upon the latter.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Ozouf points out that there were many different versions of the same festival that were performed: local ones in addition to the large national ones. All festivals, even those that differed, however, were still linked by revolutionary traditions and conceived of in an identical way.<sup>14</sup> The result is that scholars can use the revolutionary festivals as a measure for how the Revolution was progressing at that moment in time.<sup>15</sup>

As was the case with the festivals of the French Revolution, the organizers of early Soviet festivals had to find a way to mark the new era and both create and legitimize new revolutionary traditions. In his work on early Bolshevik festivals (1918-20) during the Civil War, James von Geldern confirms much of what Ozouf argues for the case of the French festivals: as a new revolutionary regime, the Soviets faced a variety of challenges in presenting their new ideas to a populace entrenched in the older traditions of the Orthodox Church and the fallen Romanov autocratic traditions. For example, a Bolshevik calendar of holidays existed for a time alongside a competing old Orthodox one.<sup>16</sup> Initially, the Bolsheviks looked to the festivals of the French Revolution and those of ancient Greek tragedy for their inspiration. However, this proved a miscalculation as the populace did not connect with such traditions. Besides unclear communication with the people, the propaganda lacked a central cohesive structure.”<sup>17</sup> A year later in 1919, the Bolsheviks corrected their course and attempted to work in some of the rich traditions of imperial Russia that were more familiar to the populace in combination with their

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<sup>13</sup> Ozouf, *Festivals*, 167.

<sup>14</sup> Ozouf, *Festivals*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Ozouf, *Festivals*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*, 7.

own new Marxist-based ideas.<sup>18</sup> Von Geldern argues that one particularly good way of incorporating both was in the area of theatre performances: an already strong tradition with which the Russian population was familiar and a good way to conspicuously insert propaganda.

Another feature of these festivals was that the Soviets presented their regime as being the culmination of a long tradition. In this way, they could present themselves as legitimate rulers instead of as usurping rebels, which, in combination with a stricter and better managed organizational festival structure created by 1920, lent Bolshevik rule even more legitimacy. In addition, a better centred and focused narrative helped establish the Revolution as inevitable.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, in light of the continued existence of political opposition, these early Soviet festivals were, according to Von Geldern, “a bid for political legitimacy, an attempt to lend the Revolution a sacred aura.”<sup>20</sup>

In her work on Soviet festivals of a slightly later time period, during the Stalinist terror of the 1930s, Karen Petrone provides an insight into the way that these celebrations helped create new identities such as that of the “New Soviet Man.” Petrone describes these identities as “highly variable, contingent, and constantly in the process of being reshaped.”<sup>21</sup> She argues that these celebrations were not always successful with all members of the population, being generally more accepted by the youth, as well as by those rising to prominence within the elite, but not generally with workers or farmers.<sup>22</sup> These celebrations, as part of everyday life in contrast to “‘circuses’ that would divert the population from the terror,” actually reinforced social power

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<sup>18</sup> Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*, 209; 7. An example is of the Soviets officially sanctioning workers’ demonstrations (which were banned under the Tsars) and incorporating them into the official celebrations by having them carry their banners.

<sup>19</sup> Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*, 210.

<sup>20</sup> Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*, 209.

<sup>21</sup> Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin*. (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2000), 204.

<sup>22</sup> Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous*, 204.

dynamics because they “supplied the raw materials out of which Soviet cadres constructed their own identities.”<sup>23</sup> While these identities could in theory be shared with others, this did not happen very often, particularly at the local level: local celebrations often diverged from the official plan, turning into “apolitical dances, a cover for religious practices or, worse, yet, drunken brawls.”<sup>24</sup>

Part of the reason for this lack of interest at the local level could have had to do with the fact that the main focus of attention was lavished on larger urban centres such as Moscow, which, as the centres of power, had more resources allocated to them and were thus able to host bigger and better celebrations. Indeed, officials at the centre did not have a lot of control over countryside celebrations or those in non-Russian areas.<sup>25</sup> It was in this way that the success at creating a Soviet identity decreased from centre to periphery. Also important for understanding how people perceived the celebrations were social hierarchies. Petrone writes that Soviet celebrations enabled elites to affirm their place in society through exclusive invitations to events or receiving expensive food and goods, while those of lower social standing had their inferior position affirmed through a lack of invitations or less access to key events.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike some of the other scholars, Malte Rolf investigates a much broader time period than some of the other studies, looking at the entire period of Soviet festivals from 1917 to 1991, with a particular focus on the years 1917 to 1941. Like the others, Rolf seeks to explain how the Soviets conceived and organized festivals in an attempt to gain control of the masses. In contrast to some of the other authors, however, in particular Von Geldern, Rolf focuses more on the repressive authoritarian nature of the festivals. He contextualizes Soviet festivals by comparing the ways in which they created authority and legitimacy with other authoritarian regimes of the

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<sup>23</sup> Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous*, 205.

<sup>24</sup> Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous*, 205.

<sup>25</sup> Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous*, 203-4.

<sup>26</sup> Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous*, 203.

time period, i.e. Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy, finding similarities in their aesthetics and methods. With his longer time frame, Rolf looks to answer how these festivals helped the Soviet leaders sustain power over time and legitimize their rule. An important aspect in asserting this control was the use of propaganda: the festivals helped the Soviets attempt to create their new order by making their message highly visible and easily disseminated.

Ultimately though, as also highlighted by Von Geldern and Ozouf, the initial problem Rolf identifies as facing the Soviets was how to successfully break with old tsarist traditions in order to create their own legitimacy: "The Soviet prazdnik [festival] had to alter traditional celebration customs, fuse with them, or replace them."<sup>27</sup> It was thus during the 1930s that the Soviet festivals became even more centralized and controlled, while opposing voices were stifled. Rolf comments that celebrations were "oppressive...social partitioning" that were "one of the important cultural tools of the formative power of the regime that assigned every participant his or her place in the social hierarchy."<sup>28</sup> Thus, the creation of a "well-developed planning apparatus," including a "network of commissions" to successfully communicate the message and execute the festivals in the regions was crucial.<sup>29</sup> Despite the increased centralized control, decision-making continued to be made at top levels, while the majority of the festival organization was left to the so-called "middle cadre," who made decisions both in Moscow and in the regions.<sup>30</sup>

Another advantage of his vast temporal range is that Rolf is able to examine the influence that these Soviet festivals had on the countries of the Soviet Bloc after 1945. He comments that

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<sup>27</sup> Malte Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals, 1917-1991*, trans. Cynthia Klohr (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals*, 93.

<sup>29</sup> Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals*, 11. Rolf comments that the identities of this group are generally unknown, as the documents drawn up are largely anonymous.

celebrations were a major part of “the total package of sovietization” that was given to the Soviet satellite states, including the GDR.<sup>31</sup> This was essentially part of the breaking with the old regime and the establishment of the new states as “part and parcel of Stalinist culture and, in the eyes of the propagandists, an aesthetically adequate expression of the ‘new times.’”<sup>32</sup> The occupying forces began this process by helping Sovietize national holidays, which in the end helped give the new states a degree of legitimacy when founding their own regimes.

Of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations of Petrograd in 1957, Emily Johnson argues much along the same lines as Rolf and Petrone regarding the relationship between centre and periphery. She shows how interconnected but yet separate the two were: the local offices inquired from top officials as to the plans for the celebrations, but they did not follow such instructions to the letter. Mid-tier officials would also have to enquire as to the correct ideology and terminology when creating the wording template to be used for the festivals.<sup>33</sup> Johnson also points out that the relationship between centre and periphery was not entirely top-down: there was quite a lot of “give and take.” The periphery could potentially benefit greatly from holding celebrations by receiving benefits from the centre, such as resources for construction/restoration projects, awards to distribute, and even a spotlight for local cultural and economic projects.<sup>34</sup>

However, more so than the others, Johnson’s work focuses on the influence that current events and political climate had on the development of large commemorative festivals. In describing the delay in holding anniversary celebrations in 1957 instead of 1953 (the year of the actual 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary), Johnson argues that 1957 was a greater opportunity from a political

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<sup>31</sup> Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals*, 183.

<sup>32</sup> Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals*, 183

<sup>33</sup> Emily D. Johnson, “Jubilation Deferred: The Belated Commemoration of the 250th Anniversary of St. Petersburg/Leningrad,” in Julie A. Buckler and Emily D. Johnson (eds) *Rites of Place: Public Commemoration in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 83-84.

<sup>34</sup> Johnson, “Jubilation Deferred,” 83.

standpoint, given the context of Soviet Premier Khrushchev's 1956 speech and the climate of de-Stalinization. 1957 was thus a better year in which to reinvent the political narrative of socialism and potential for the future, especially given that it was also the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the October Revolution.<sup>35</sup>

Although not a "revolutionary" state like the Soviet Union, West Germany also needed to establish a break with the recent (Nazi) past in order to legitimize its international position within the Western Bloc. In one of the few works examining West German commemorations, specifically those of the end of World War II (May 8, 1945), Jeffery K. Olick highlights the ways in which the international and domestic political situation intensely affected the form these anniversaries took. For example, Olick characterizes the 1950s as a time of "avoid[ing] the past by focusing on the future."<sup>36</sup> Reflecting on the past was very difficult for the West German state in these early years and there was no time for guilt; rather, the focus was on rebuilding the country. Then there was the fact that old narratives still existed, such as the 1918 stab in the back theory as well as Nazi rhetoric about the necessity of defeating Bolshevism.<sup>37</sup> Thus, it is unsurprising that even though there were achievements to celebrate such as working out reparations with Israel, integration into West, or even finally achieving sovereignty, there was no commemoration of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the War on May 8, 1955.<sup>38</sup>

By the 1960s, a new generation of West Germans who did not have their parents' same sense of loss or victimization began to demand a re-evaluation of German identity and responsibility.<sup>39</sup> It was these popular feelings that brought Willy Brandt and the Social Democrats

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<sup>35</sup> Johnson, "Jubilation Deferred," 95.

<sup>36</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick, "Genre Memories and Memory Genres: A Dialogical Analysis of May 8, 1945 Commemorations in the Federal Republic of Germany," *American Sociological Review* 64, no. 3 (June 1999), 386.

<sup>37</sup> Olick, "Genre Memories," 386.

<sup>38</sup> Olick, "Genre Memories," 387. Note: this was especially the case given the Nazis' heavy use of spectacle.

<sup>39</sup> Olick, "Genre Memories," 388.

to power in 1969 and enabled détente with the East by 1972 (known as *Ostpolitik*). It was in this new political climate in 1970 that West Germany's first official commemoration of May 8 took place on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II.<sup>40</sup> In examining President Heinemann and Chancellor Brandt's speeches on the day of the celebrations, Olick notes a major shift in tone from the politicians of the past: while Heinemann did consider Germans to be victims, he did not focus on the details of their suffering. Brandt's speech also highlighted the universality of victimhood, and while he considered 1945 a "tragedy," he importantly did not refer to it as an "injustice" as others had before.<sup>41</sup> As time went on, such "normalizing" elements began to grow stronger. Five years later, in his speech at the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in 1975, new Social Democratic Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, amid a global oil crisis, attempted to normalize West Germany by pointing out that they should be able to celebrate May 8<sup>th</sup> just as much as the Allied countries.<sup>42</sup>

This normalization narrative carried on into the 1980s, although conservative Chancellor Kohl also adopted stronger rhetoric towards the East than previous governments and included more language of patriotic pride. Olick writes that "Kohl pursued a symbolic rehabilitation of German identity and history that demanded from Western powers a gesture of forgiveness for the Nazi past (indeed, of forgetting it)."<sup>43</sup> While not invited to the Allied 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of D-Day in 1944 as he had hoped, Kohl gave his own speech in Bergen-Belsen that Olick describes as an "in-between solution," where Kohl attempted to "accept responsibility while emptying it of political content."<sup>44</sup> It was, however, President Richard von Weizsäcker's

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<sup>40</sup> Note: the GDR began celebrating the end of the Second World War five years earlier in time for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1965.

<sup>41</sup> Olick, "Genre Memories," 390.

<sup>42</sup> Olick, "Genre Memories," 390.

<sup>43</sup> Olick, "Genre Memories," 393.

<sup>44</sup> Olick, "Genre Memories," 394.

speech to the Bundestag on May 8, 1985 that proved historic for West Germany's memory politics. As Olick explains, what is significant here is that Von Weiszäcker directly confronted the "basic national memory myth" and distinguished between different types of guilt and responsibility. He argued that German guilt was individual, and not a collective guilt that would carry on with the younger generations. Von Weiszäcker did acknowledge, however, that the blame for Nazi atrocities lay not only with Hitler, but also with those ordinary Germans who claimed that they did not know.<sup>45</sup> Von Weiszäcker thus advised Germans that the task at hand was to view the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of May 8 not as day of celebration, but rather as a day for remembering *everyone's* suffering (including the minorities who perished, but were rarely acknowledged) and for reminding future generations to not close their eyes to current inhumanity as that would "risk infection."<sup>46</sup>

As we can see from these examples, festivals helped revolutionary societies establish their legitimacy, clearly demarcating how the new regimes were breaking with the traditions and regimes which they had overthrown. The newly-founded GDR had to break with the Nazi past as well, and even though it did so by attaching itself to the tradition that the Soviets themselves had fought to establish 30 years before, the GDR still needed to establish its own brand of German socialism and convince the populace that sovietisation was one way of achieving this. The East Germans also had to distinguish themselves from the West Germans and make clear that West Germany inherently lacked legitimacy, not only because it had failed to break with its Nazi past, but because of the inherently exploitative nature of its capitalist system.

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<sup>45</sup> Olick, "Genre Memories," 396.

<sup>46</sup> Olick, "Genre Memories," 396.



## The Debate over GDR Authoritarianism

Although East German rhetoric pointing out West Germany's failure to fully move on from its Nazi past was certainly exaggerated, a culture of silence surrounding German guilt did pervade German society for the better part of two decades following the end of World War II. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, there was great anxiety amongst politicians in the newly unified Germany to not repeat the same mistakes that had been made before; namely the fact that West Germans had insufficiently dealt with their Nazi past. This time, politicians, scholars, and indeed some of the public at large, placed great importance in the years following unification in 1990 on "getting it right," that is, correctly and thoroughly "working through" the darker aspects of the GDR past rather than "coming to terms" with them.<sup>47</sup> For "working through the past" (*Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*) in comparison to the more famous "coming to terms with the past" (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) that was undertaken in dealing with Germany's Nazi past, acknowledges the process to be an ongoing one that may never reach a definitive conclusion.<sup>48</sup>

The problem with this anxiousness of "putting things right" was that in many ways, this impulse to analyze and work through GDR history was undertaken too quickly and too soon, thus resulting in a charged political climate. In January 1992, barely two years after the fall of the Wall and only one year after the state's official dissolution, the archives of the GDR's secret spy service, the Ministry for State Security (more commonly known as the "Stasi"), were made available to the public.<sup>49</sup> As many former East Germans began streaming into the archives, they

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<sup>47</sup> See Helga A. Welsh, "When Discourse Trumps Policy: Transitional Justice in Unified Germany." *German Politics* 15, no. 2 (2006): 137–52.; Andrew H. Beattie, *Playing Politics with History: the Bundestag Inquiries into East Germany*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Welsh, "When Discourse Trumps Policy," 138.

<sup>49</sup> For more on this issue, see Gary Bruce, "Access to Secret Police Files, Justice, and Vetting in East Germany since 1989," *German Politics & Society* 26, no. 1 (2008): 82 -111.

were outraged to discover trusted friends and family who had worked informally for the Stasi. The media soon became fixated on such stories of betrayal and ended up over-emphasizing the role of the Stasi in comparison to that of the ruling party.<sup>50</sup> Time and again, person after person was “exposed” in public as having collaborated with the Stasi.<sup>51</sup> This negative view of the GDR was not only a construction of the media, however, as many German politicians also presented the GDR as now the second dictatorship of the twentieth century with which Germans would need to come to terms. As such, at this time, everyone from politicians to journals to the public at large, described the GDR using negative descriptors such as the SED dictatorship (*SED-Diktatur*), an unjust and illegitimate state (*Unrechtsstaat* or *Unrechtsregime*), or a tyrannous dictatorship (*Gewaltherrschaft*), all of which only further served to firmly link the GDR to the Third Reich.<sup>52</sup> As Andrew H. Beattie points out, “[t]he fact that the East German regime had not committed genocide was not to be allowed to prevent it being condemned as vigorously as the Nazi regime.”<sup>53</sup>

This debate within the public and political spheres spilled over into the historical profession during the 1990s, with countless number of academic works forcefully condemning the GDR as yet another totalitarian state of the twentieth century. Catherine Epstein characterizes the situation as one where, due to the charged political climate in which they were writing, scholars in Germany in particular felt a need to “stake out” the history of the GDR with the totalitarian model in mind much more so than those working elsewhere, such as in the US or

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<sup>50</sup> Beattie, *Playing Politics with History*, 54-55.

<sup>51</sup> People like Christa Wolf, for example.

<sup>52</sup> Beattie, *Playing Politics with History*, 199. In 1992 and 1995 the German Bundestag commissioned two separate Enquete Commissions (inquiries) into the history and consequences of the “SED-Dictatorship in Germany.” Beattie notes that the conclusions of the Enquete Commissions, while having done a very thorough exploration of the past, were still limited in some respects, namely in their focus on victim narratives to the neglect of a “normalized” view (232).

<sup>53</sup> Beattie, *Playing Politics with History*, 198.

Britain.<sup>54</sup> One of the most clear examples of this comes from Klaus Schroeder, who unequivocally defines the GDR as a totalitarian regime in his famous work *Der SED-Staat* (1999).<sup>55</sup> Klaus-Dietmar Henke takes a similar, yet more cautious view: he argues that the totalitarian paradigm, while very useful in identifying the characteristics and structures of such regimes, can sometimes be overly simplistic.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, however, Henke defines the GDR as an authoritarian regime, specifically of a “late-authoritarian” type.<sup>57</sup> Christoph Kleßmann also sees the usefulness in using totalitarianism to explain certain structural elements within both the Third Reich and the GDR.<sup>58</sup> Kleßmann observes certain similarities in these systems, such as the harsh penalties that people could suffer from merely grumbling about everyday life, and he argues that there was very little space for the existence of a private sphere free from the influence of the state.<sup>59</sup>

In line with Hannah Arendt’s definition of totalitarianism, Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle in their 1993 book, *Untergang auf Raten*, argue that the GDR had been in a state of continuous civil war. While Mitter and Wolle do address aspects of the GDR’s history from below, their main focus is on the state’s repressive qualities, especially the development of the state’s power mechanisms, which drew regular people into collaborating with state repression. As stated in the title, the authors focus on the GDR’s decline in stages, such as the Soviet tanks’ role in preventing the state’s collapse in the aftermath of the 1953 workers’ uprising; how the state dealt

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<sup>54</sup> Catherine Epstein, “East Germany and Its History since 1989,” *The Journal of Modern History* 75, No. 3 (September 2003), 638-39.

<sup>55</sup> See Klaus Schroeder, *Der SED-Staat: Partei, Staat und Gesellschaft 1949-1990* (München: C. Hanser, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> Klaus-Dietmar Henke, “Achsen des Augenmerkes in der historischen Totalitarismusforschung,” in *Totalitarismus: sechs Vorträge über Gehalt und Reichweite eines klassischen Konzepts der Diktaturforschung*, ed. Klaus-Dietmar Henke (Dresden: Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung e.V. an der TU Dresden, 1999), 16-17.

<sup>57</sup> Henke, “Achsen des Augenmerkes,” 16.

<sup>58</sup> Christoph Kleßmann, “Opposition und Resistenz in zwei Diktaturen in Deutschland,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 262, No. 2 (April, 1996), 458.

<sup>59</sup> Kleßmann, “Opposition und Resistenz,” 460.

with the 1956 and 1968 protests elsewhere; the 1961 building of the Wall; as well as the final collapse with the revolution of 1989.<sup>60</sup> Wolle continues this strand of thought in his later work, *Die Heile Welt der Diktatur* (1998). Here, Wolle further makes clear the Orwellian nature of the Stasi's web of interference into the private lives of citizens, describing a society that was "poisoned to the core" containing people who were essentially made of "glass."<sup>61</sup> In a rather dramatic fashion, Wolle compares the GDR's downfall to that of the Sphinx in Greek mythology, who, after losing her power to terrorize people once Oedipus solved her riddle, grew despondent and threw herself over a precipice.<sup>62</sup>

By the end of the 1990s, the tide began to turn against this authoritarian narrative.<sup>63</sup> Konrad Jarausch describes the problem with the totalitarian theory that scholars had been using to describe the GDR as relying too heavily on Hannah Arendt's definition of it. Jarausch criticizes Arendt's version of totalitarianism, arguing that it was based on a "Stalinist understanding of communism" stemming from observations of methods of rule in the early 1950s and 1960s, which did not take into account later developments in the Soviet states.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps most vigorously of all, Mary Fulbrook completely condemns the totalitarian approach, arguing that besides it stemming from a sense of "superiority" many in the West felt for having "won" the Cold War, it was nothing more than a reversion to Cold War discourses of the 1950s and 1960s where the West viewed the GDR as merely "a totalitarian dictatorship imposed by the

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<sup>60</sup> See Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, *Untergang auf Raten: unbekanntes Kapitel der DDR-Geschichte* (München: C. Bertelsmann, 1993).

<sup>61</sup> German original: "Der gläserne Mensch" in Stefan Wolle, *Die heile Welt der Diktatur: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR, 1971-1989* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1998), 152-3.

<sup>62</sup> Wolle, *Die heile Welt der Diktatur*, 343-44.

<sup>63</sup> Charles S. Maier explains that this original drive towards totalitarian theory had been part of an already ongoing neo-conservative international reaction "to what was perceived as a European left that had been too willing to make its peace with communist rule in eastern Europe." See Charles S. Maier, "What Have We Learned since 1989?" *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Aug. 2009), 262.

<sup>64</sup> Konrad H. Jarausch, "Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship" in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 53.

Communists on an unwilling populace.”<sup>65</sup> Others held a similar view, and a surge in scholars and even members of the German public began to feel that the totalitarian discourse had gone too far and failed to explain how average citizens had been able to lead very normal lives in spite of living in a dictatorship. After more than a decade of living in the capitalist West, many former East Germans, in particular, had become nostalgic towards certain aspects of their earlier lives. With the explosion in popularity of this discourse, the GDR past was often viewed during this time period in a nostalgic, rose-tinted fashion. In fact, this discourse came to dominate media discourses on the GDR — thus effectively “normalizing” the GDR and significantly swinging the pendulum in the opposite direction.

It was Mary Fulbrook herself who has been the main proponent of this so-called “normalization discourse.”<sup>66</sup> Fulbrook has argued that during the totalitarian discourse of the 1990s, the average former East German would have felt that their “perfectly ordinary lives” had been “drowned out by the narratives of power and oppression or, when heard, rapidly rejected as a form either of political apologetics or retrospective nostalgia.”<sup>67</sup> Fulbrook goes on to explain that “[o]f course [the GDR] was a dictatorship. But it was not only a dictatorship.”<sup>68</sup> Not only does Fulbrook argue that the totalitarian approach has done little to explain the complexities of life within the GDR, but she also sees the GDR as comparable to other modern industrial societies, reasoning that “[t]here is no modern society in which people’s individual lives... are not in some way affected by the political system in which they live.”<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Fulbrook

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<sup>65</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 225-26.

<sup>66</sup> In her first book on the GDR, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship* (1995), Fulbrook dealt with the GDR in a far harsher light. See Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>67</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), ix.

<sup>68</sup> Fulbrook, *People’s State*, 11.

<sup>69</sup> Fulbrook, *People’s State*, x; 11.

suggests that it is “a false dichotomy to suggest that states are based either on coercion or on consent,” preferring to classify the GDR as a “participatory dictatorship” that people took part in for a wide variety of reasons.<sup>70</sup> Aligned with Fulbrook in this view are those such as Esther von Richthofen, for example, who, in *Bringing Culture to the Masses* (2009) writes about cultural life in the GDR, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, and argues that citizens’ cultural life was not solely determined by politics or repression. Indeed, Richthofen cautions against defining GDR cultural life as having been a reaction that developed in response to oppression.<sup>71</sup> She states that while cultural life did have some “strong dictatorial overtures,” the people still had enough agency in this aspect of their lives, especially with respect to some grassroots organizations.<sup>72</sup>

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, other scholars attempted to find a middle ground within these polarizing normalization and totalitarian debates. As early as the mid-1990s, Bernd Faulenbach began to argue that while the political life of the GDR was not divorced from the everyday *Alltag*, there existed niche areas of life that were less influenced by the party and the Stasi, specifically an “Eigensinn” in consciousness and action.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, Faulenbach points out that while the GDR’s high-Stalinist phase in the 1950s did have some authoritarian traits, the state’s crimes simply did not compare to those of the Nazi regime.<sup>74</sup> Jarausch also suggests that totalitarian theory, which while useful for classification purposes, can lead to too much focus on state oppression.<sup>75</sup> Thus, while totalitarian theory can be a good first step in an analysis, using it after that runs the risk of “glossing over complex realities and of simplifying difficult ethical

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<sup>70</sup> Fulbrook, *People’s State*, 293;12.

<sup>71</sup> Esther von Richthofen, *Bringing Culture to the Masses: Control, Compromise and Participation in the GDR* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 1-2.

<sup>72</sup> von Richthofen, *Bringing Culture to the Masses*, 12-14.

<sup>73</sup> Bernd Faulenbach, “Geschichtserfahrung und Erinnerungskultur im vereinigten Deutschland,” *Gewerkschaftliche Monatshefte* 47 (1996), 235. For more on the concept of “Eigensinn,” see Thomas Lindenberger, ed. *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur. Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1999).

<sup>74</sup> Faulenbach, “Geschichtserfahrung und Erinnerungskultur,” 236.

<sup>75</sup> Jarausch, “Care and Coercion,” 53.

situations.”<sup>76</sup> Jarausch instead prefers to term the GDR a “welfare dictatorship” in order to fully capture what he sees as a contradiction of the benefits of social welfare with the reality of the political repression.<sup>77</sup> Jürgen Kocka also sees the problem as a misuse of definitions: according to Kocka, the GDR would certainly not be a totalitarian regime based on Arendt’s definition, however, the definition of Friedrich and Brzezinski, which focuses on the state’s *attempts* to control all aspects of life, *does* actually reflect the reality of life in the GDR in 1950s and early 1960s. Nevertheless, Kocka agrees that taking such an approach limits explanations of daily experience. Thus, Kocka ultimately prefers to categorize the GDR as a “modern dictatorship” as opposed to a “totalitarian dictatorship” – although he believes the latter term should not be dismissed outright as it is helpful for comparative purposes.<sup>78</sup>

In more recent years, some scholars have continued to take this middle ground: while not completely condemning the GDR as having been a totalitarian regime, they dispute the validity of the “normalizing” discourse by shedding light on some of the more repressive aspects of the GDR through case studies, micro-histories, and ground-level analyses. These works include Gary Bruce’s regional case study on the Stasi, *The Firm* (2010) and Stefan Wolle’s *Aufbruch nach Utopia* (2011) and *Der große Plan* (2013), which seek to emphasize the importance of the controlling nature of the regime and its infiltration down to the lowest levels and impact on ordinary citizens’ lives.<sup>79</sup> More recently, Andrew Demshuk, in *Demolition on Karl Marx Square:*

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<sup>76</sup> Jarausch, “Care and Coercion,” 54.

<sup>77</sup> Jarausch, “Care and Coercion,” 57-59.

<sup>78</sup> Jürgen Kocka, “The GDR: A Special Kind of Modern Dictatorship” in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 22-24. For a more nuanced approach to the benefits of using totalitarian theory, see Peter Grieder, “In Defence of Totalitarianism Theory as a Tool of Historical Scholarship,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8, no. 3-4 (2007): 563-589.

<sup>79</sup> See Stefan Wolle, *Aufbruch nach Utopia: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1961-1971* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2011); Stefan Wolle, *Der Große Plan: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR, 1941-1961* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2013); Gary Bruce, *The Firm: The Inside Story of the Stasi* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

*Cultural Barbarism and the People's State in 1968* (2017) has shown the “the limits of democracy” in the GDR by looking at the events surrounding the demolition of the university church in Leipzig.<sup>80</sup> Directly contradicting the participatory dictatorship thesis, this work demonstrates that despite fierce public opposition to the church’s demolition, the state did not comply with public pressure, leaving ordinary East Germans unable to affect the final outcome.

### **Post-Totalitarian Debates**

By the mid 2000s, scholars began to distance themselves from the polarizing totalitarian debates on the GDR. Andrew I. Port denounces such arguments as having become “the banalities of East German historiography” that is, “history as comfort food for those most interested in moralistic posturing.”<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, Port points out that: “The historiography of the GDR has...tended toward the provincial: [...] many investigations make little effort to relate their findings to developments outside of East Germany or to issues of greater historical and historiographical importance.”<sup>82</sup> For example, Charles S. Maier explains that he prefers to describe the GDR in terms of “late communism” in order to “really to avoid a generalising model and to restrict description to the unique characteristics of the east European regimes in the 1970s and 1980s – that is, to insist on the temporal dimension of analysis.”<sup>83</sup> Many works thus attempt to investigate previously ignored aspects of life in the GDR without first situating their works in

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<sup>80</sup> Andrew Demshuk, *Demolition on Karl Marx Square: Cultural Barbarism and the People's State in 1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>81</sup> Andrew I Port, “Introduction: The Banalities of East German Historiography,” in *Becoming East German: Socialist Structures and Sensibilities after Hitler*, edited by Mary Fulbrook and Andrew I. Port (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 14.

<sup>82</sup> Port, “Banalities,” 14. See also Port’s earlier work where although he acknowledges the importance of the GDR’s repressive aspects, he also argues that the SED in many ways failed to carry out many of their intended policies thereby allowing East Germans to live out their ordinary lives – which included protesting in spite of their fears of reprisal. Andrew I Port, *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>83</sup> Maier, “What Have We Learned since 1989?,” 262.



the continuum of the polarizing debates. For example, while he acknowledges Honecker's dictatorial rule of the GDR, Jonathan Zatlin, in his economic history of the GDR, *The Currency of Socialism: Money and Political Culture in East Germany* (2009),<sup>84</sup> describes the GDR's attempt at eliminating cash currency in favour of a "currency of socialism," that is, socialist consumer products. An important aspect here is that Zatlin is looking at how the Marxist view of money in the GDR was vital to understanding the economy. In the mind of the leadership, money equalled evil capitalistic exploitation. Despite this view, money never did disappear in the GDR. Paul Betts, in *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (2010),<sup>85</sup> argues against a black-and-white narrative regarding the existence of a private sphere for the GDR's population. Focusing in particular on the various experiences in Berlin, Betts points out that this private sphere was still able to exist, even despite the pervasiveness of Stasi interference. Furthermore, Betts argues that the SED indeed also protected the existence of the very private sphere that they also intruded upon and thereby heightened the importance of maintaining it. Taking an interdisciplinary approach in *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and the Frontiers of Power* (2009),<sup>86</sup> Patrick Major explores aspects behind the Wall such as the youth experience of western music, jeans, films, as well as their lack of travel options.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> See Jonathan R. Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism: Money and Political Culture in East Germany* (Washington, D.C: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>85</sup> See Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>86</sup> See Patrick Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and the Frontiers of Power* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>87</sup> Other recent works dealing with specific topics in East German culture and society include Scott Moranda, *People's Own landscape: Nature, Tourism, and Dictatorship in East Germany* (Ann Arbor Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2014); Alan McDougall, *The People's Game: Football, State and Society in East Germany* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Quinn Slobodian, ed. *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World* (New York Oxford: Berghahn, 2015); Mark Fenemore, *Sex, Thugs And Rock 'n' Roll: Teenage Rebels in Cold-War East Germany* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013); Felix R Schulz, *Death in East Germany, 1945-1990* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013).

In his 2008 work *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic* (2008),<sup>88</sup> Eli Rubin specifically positions himself between the totalitarian and ordinary life debates. Rubin highlights the importance of plastic during the 1950s-1970s and how it signified the GDR's technological superiority in the world for its population. He traces the design, mass production and consumption of plastics and how it became vital to the GDR's economy in the form of manufacturing and exports. In his later book, *Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space and Memory in East Germany* (2016), Rubin continues this socio-economic focus, exploring East German leader Erich Honecker's attempts to address the housing crisis in the 1970s as part of his "unity of social and economic policy." In this case study, which explores a specific housing development on the outskirts of Berlin, Rubin looks at how Honecker's policy of sacrificing the future in favour of answering peoples' present needs led to a reshaping of the public's memory of the capitalist past, but also ultimately led to the GDR's downfall.<sup>89</sup>

More emphasis on identity politics can be found in Jan Palmowski's 2009 work, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, a regional study of how the SED used the concept of "Heimat" to forge a sense of identity and contribute to the legitimacy of the state.<sup>90</sup> Palmowski states that "Heimat" resonated with the people, especially in comparison to other ideologies such as that of antifascism, mainly because locals were able to interpret "Heimat" in their own way. In the end, Palmowski argues that the state's main success was in strengthening already-existing regional ties, though not necessarily the creation of a cohesive national identity. However, he points out that East Germans' participation in this narrative did help to stabilize the regime. Also looking at

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<sup>88</sup> See Eli Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics & Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>89</sup> Eli Rubin, *Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space, and Memory in East Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>90</sup> Jan Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945 – 1990* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

GDR through the lens of memory and identity is Jon Berndt Olsen's *Tailoring Truth: Politicizing the Past and Negotiating Memory in East Germany*, which explores East memory discourses as presented in monuments, museums, exhibitions and some commemorations.<sup>91</sup> Olsen focuses on how the KPD and later SED used memory discourses to eradicate the memories left by the Nazis, create new narratives for public consumption, and thus legitimize the state. In order to see their new narratives succeed, Olsen argues, the SED drew on older working class traditions and tried to combine these with their newer discourses such as that of antifascism. Ultimately, Olsen characterizes this process of developing a new memory culture as a "complex and drawn-out affair" that had few immediate results, especially with regard to the public reception, which was difficult to assess.<sup>92</sup>

As shown by the trajectory of these works, GDR historiography in recent years has increasingly gone beyond the heated and often politicized debates over whether or not the GDR was an authoritarian regime or whether it was an entirely normal state. The focus has become more cultural and social, seeking out new ways of looking at the GDR without taking sides in this debate. In this respect, my dissertation also seeks to follow this trend, especially those investigating the GDR's identity and memory discourses, leaving aside the very polarizing totalitarianism debates. Although my work is a political top-down look at how the SED sought to get the public on side with its policies through its anniversary theses, it is also an interdisciplinary socio-cultural study that looks at the ways in which these competitions and festivities manifested themselves at the lowest of levels, and importantly, how those at the very bottom of the state apparatus attempted to carry out Berlin's wishes.

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<sup>91</sup> Jon Berndt Olsen, *Tailoring Truth: Politicizing the Past and Negotiating Memory in East Germany, 1945-1990* (New York: Berghahn, 2015).

<sup>92</sup> Olsen, *Tailoring Truth*, 45.

## Theories of Collective Memory, Rituals, and Transnational Myth-making

At the turn of the twentieth century, Emile Durkheim first wrote about a concept he called a “collective effervescence” in one of his most famous works, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. What Durkheim is describing here are so-called “primitive” societies and the universality that seemed to underpin their social interactions and rituals. In Durkheim’s view, social gatherings, especially those of a ritualistic or festive nature, helped communities of individuals develop collective “consciousnesses.” Durkheim wrote that:

collective consciousness is the highest form of the psychic life, since it is the consciousness of the consciousnesses. Being placed outside of and above individual and local contingencies, it sees things only in their permanent and essential aspects, which it crystalizes into communicable ideas.<sup>93</sup>

What he meant by this is that human experience is greatly affected and shaped by our experiences within a group. In particular, most of our knowledge and understanding of the world has been created outside of our own individual thoughts. For example, Durkheim pointed out that language is a product of “collective representations” because all people use words that pass “the limits of our personal experience.”<sup>94</sup> The same works for ideas, which Durkheim also considered to be collective representations that “surpass the knowledge of the average individual. They are not abstractions which have a reality only in particular consciousnesses.”<sup>95</sup>

It was while building upon Durkheim’s ideas decades later that Maurice Halbwachs coined the term “collective memory.” Importantly, Halbwachs pointed out how individual thoughts are affected by the collective societal view: for it is through people’s experiences within their societies that they develop their memories. It is also within society that people “recall,

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<sup>93</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, intro by Robert Nisbet, trans by Joseph Ward Swain (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976), 434-44.

<sup>94</sup> Durkheim, *Religious Life*, 434.

<sup>95</sup> Durkheim, *Religious Life*, 435.

recognize, and localize their memories.”<sup>96</sup> Halbwachs went on to say that this is indeed how the collective memory and social frameworks of memory come to be formed, for “it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection.”<sup>97</sup> Lewis A. Coser points out that Halbwachs’ work improves upon the limitations of Durkheim’s original theories, which do not provide an explanation for how social cohesion functions in ordinary life (as opposed to periods of effervescence, such as a festival or ceremony). Coser wrote that the theory of collective memory fills this void:

It is the collective memory, as an intermediate variable so to speak, that both commemorates the events through calendar celebrations and is strengthened by them. There are no empty spots in the lives of groups and societies; an apparent vacuum between creative periods is filled by collective memory in symbolic display or simply kept alive through transmission by parents and other elders to children and or ordinary men and women.<sup>98</sup>

Furthermore, Halbwachs explained that collective frameworks are the exact “instruments” collective memory makes use of to “reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society.”<sup>99</sup> This means that, for example, a nation’s memories are understood through the lens of the present situation in a given society. However, replacing one group of past collective memories with another is not necessarily straightforward, particularly if the memories were made by a very large number of people or groups, for even stronger “collective forces” would be needed to override the existing ones.<sup>100</sup> This is even more so the case if the old collective memory was particularly revered and entrenched, thus leaving

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<sup>96</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. by Lewis A Coser (London; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38.

<sup>97</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 38.

<sup>98</sup> Lewis A. Coser, “Introduction: Maurice Halbwachs 1877 – 1945” in Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 25.

<sup>99</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 39-40. Halbwachs defines collective frameworks as a combination of individual recollections in a society.

<sup>100</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 183-84.

behind very strong representations.<sup>101</sup> Converting long-held collective memories about topics such as the Soviet Union or the dangers posed by the West to new ones of the SED's making was one of the main challenges the National Front faced in each GDR anniversary commemoration, and why spreading the SED's ideological theses was such a difficult, yet important, task.

As Aleida Assmann explains, "the past cannot be 'remembered;' it has to be memorized. The collective memory is a crossover between semantic and episodic memory: it has to be acquired via learning, but only through internalization and rites of participation does it create the identity of a 'we.'"<sup>102</sup> The fact is that the personal memory of individuals, while unique and varied depending upon lived experience, has a relatively short temporal range. However, the memories possessed by a state or institution are different: when provided with the right kind of "symbolic support," these memories can be extended for a much longer time period. This symbolic support can take the form of anything from symbols, to images, to anniversary ceremonies, rituals, or monuments, and result in the creation of a strong group identity.<sup>103</sup> Vital in this process is the presentation of a strong mobilizing narrative via institutions of learning like schools, archives, museums or libraries, in the mass media, in monuments and memorial sites, as well as through commemorative rites that encourage collective participation.<sup>104</sup>

Falling under this category of "commemorative rites" are what David Knottnerus calls "ritualized practices," which he defines as social occurrences distinct from everyday life that have a fixed schedule and are linked to other social events. They also include "stylized activities"

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<sup>101</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 184.

<sup>102</sup> Aleida Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory," *Social Research*, Vol 75, No. 1 (Spring, 2008), 52. Assmann defines "semantic memory" as memory created through conscious learning, and "episodic memory" as the processing of autobiographical experiences. See also Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, eds. Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 212.

<sup>103</sup> Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective," 215-16

<sup>104</sup> Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory," 55-56.

and involve numerous participants.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, such rituals help “pattern our social behaviour and organize group dynamics in countless social settings.”<sup>106</sup> A major reason why rituals are able to do this, Knottnerus explains, is because of the way in which emotion impacts attendees:

The more individuals contribute to and are involved in the collective experience, the greater the emotional impact of the event, and the greater the number of activities and therefore complexity of actions, the greater the sense of collective dependence and co-participation among individuals, which heightens the impact of the ritual event on participants’ emotions.<sup>107</sup>

The key here is the participatory aspect. The effect is something that people would not experience in the same way in a more passive situation, such as by being a member of an audience merely listening to a speech. Further adding to the emotional intensity of the event is the presence of other people, who are also participating, which fuels the development of a sense of support and consensus, and “ultimately results in heightened feelings of confidence and satisfaction about the collective event.”<sup>108</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich points out that spectacles such as processions, colours, festive clothing and other symbolic objects like statues, together achieve the effect of holding peoples’ attention for long enough to be captivated. However, she states that the “objects of attention” – that is, whatever was designed to draw the eye of the spectator, is not the main point of the ritual. It is, rather, the collective act of attending the event as part of something bigger. Ehrenreich writes: “[c]entral to the experience is the knowledge that hundreds or thousands of other people are attending the same spectacle.”<sup>109</sup> These increases in emotions such

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<sup>105</sup> Knottnerus, “Emotions, Pride and the Dynamics of Collective Ritual Events” 44-45.

<sup>106</sup> David Knottnerus, “Emotions, Pride and the Dynamics of Collective Ritual Events,” in Gavin B. Sullivan, *Understanding Collective Pride and Group Identity: New Directions in Emotion Theory, Research and Practice* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 43.

<sup>107</sup> Knottnerus, “Emotions, Pride and the Dynamics of Collective Ritual Events” 46

<sup>108</sup> Knottnerus, “Emotions, Pride and the Dynamics of Collective Ritual Events” 46.

<sup>109</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 186.

as joy, satisfaction, exhilaration or reverence, result in an increased commitment towards the ritualized event and the beliefs communicated by the event.<sup>110</sup> Knottnerus warns, however, that the effects can be either negative or positive, depending upon various factors.<sup>111</sup>

Public holidays are also good examples of rituals that unite groups of people. Amitai Etzioni points out that holidays “serve to socialize members of a society as well as their commitments to values, and as such, serve to sustain the integration of society.”<sup>112</sup> Public officials’ awareness of how festivals unite and solidify groups of society can lead to the redesigning of holidays, Etzioni argues, “in order to change the beliefs of one or more member groups and their orientation to the encompassing society.”<sup>113</sup> In this way, holidays can play several distinct roles in a society: as “recommitment holidays” – holidays that encourage those who share similar beliefs to participate in the holiday and thereby develop a deeper dedication to those same beliefs and their communities than previously, or “tension-management holidays,” which reinforce beliefs in an indirect way by releasing any built-up tensions developed as a result of complying with a particular society’s ways and beliefs.”<sup>114</sup> Taking Etzioni’s categorizations into consideration, as we shall see in later chapters, GDR commemorations, in particular, can be said to fall under both of these types. During the months leading up to the celebrations, those months of all-important preparation (during which time everyone was expected to come together, whether in their apartment building, neighbourhood or even nationally), the GDR celebrations fit the first type, which indeed served to reinforce their commitment to shared beliefs and institutions. The actual day of the anniversary (the celebration), then, fits under the second

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<sup>110</sup> Knottnerus, “Emotions, Pride and the Dynamics of Collective Ritual Events” 46.

<sup>111</sup> Knottnerus, “Emotions, Pride and the Dynamics of Collective Ritual Events” 48-9.

<sup>112</sup> Amitai Etzioni, “Toward a Theory of Public Ritual,” *Sociological Theory* 18, No. 1 (Mar., 2000), 47.

<sup>113</sup> Etzioni, “Toward a Theory of Public Ritual,” 54.

<sup>114</sup> Etzioni, “Toward a Theory of Public Ritual,” 47-48.



holiday type, with the celebration serving to release the tension developed during the hard work of the preparations, which included extra “volunteer” work, as well as the periodic competitions.

This theoretical background helps us understand the ways in which collective identities and “consciousnesses” are formed through collective rituals or “rites” and how they can be used as an instrument of social control. As this work will demonstrate, the SED sought via the National Front to calculatingly insert political meaning into collective rituals (i.e. anniversary activities and competitions) and therefore the collective memory of that group. Furthermore, by targeting their messages and activities to specific communities and groups, the National Front was also hoping that already-existing connections amongst group members would encourage participation and enable that community to create new collective memories, which would then replace any old ones formed under previous governments. For as Assmann observes, political and cultural memory eventually becomes monolithic as individual memories converge over time.<sup>115</sup>

### **Myths in Transnational Perspective: Transmitting collective national identities**

It is important to recognize that however manipulative this wilful creation of a collective identity and memory might seem, the GDR was far from the only state to do so. Indeed, this is a transnational phenomenon, for all nation states create and reinforce myths. They have to – for myths help to legitimize their very existence. Myths can carry many different meanings for different countries: such as the feeding of identity narratives, by providing a feeling of security, or giving solace in times of defeat or energy in times of distress.<sup>116</sup> George Schöpflin states that a myth is one way in which “collectivities,” particularly nations, can “establish and determine the

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<sup>115</sup> Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory,” 55-56.

<sup>116</sup> Gérard Bouchard “National Myths: An Overview,” in Gérard Bouchard (ed) *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 277.

foundations of their own being, their own systems of morality and values.”<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, myths create an “intellectual and collective monopoly” on a particular narrative and seek to have this narrative established as “the sole way of ordering the world and defining world-views.”<sup>118</sup>

In contrast to conventionally accepted definitions of the term that refer to something untrue, Assmann defines a “myth” in the context of the field of memory studies as a completely “neutral description” that simply refers to “collectively remembered history.” More specifically, she defines a myth as “an idea, an event, a person, a narrative that has acquired a symbolic value and is engraved and transmitted in memory.”<sup>119</sup> While any community or group can construct a specific collective “myth” about their past, at the present time, the nation state happens to be among the best at creating and maintaining such myths.<sup>120</sup> As Benedict Anderson writes, the nation itself is merely “an imagined political community” where “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>121</sup> Part of this construction of meaning, as described in the previous section on the development of collective memories, is that each nation needs to create and maintain a sense of legitimacy by leaning on the use of collective symbols, experiences, identities, and the past. In order to be effective, these symbols also need to “enhance emotions of empathy and identification.”<sup>122</sup> This use of symbols to create identities is not a unique function to dictatorships, as all countries must do this in order to continue to exist.

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<sup>117</sup> George Schöpflin, “The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths” in Geoffrey A. Hosking and George Schöpflin (eds), *Myths and Nationhood* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 19.

<sup>118</sup> Schöpflin, “Functions of Myth,” in Hosking and Schöpflin, *Myths and Nationhood*, 19.

<sup>119</sup> Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory,” 68

<sup>120</sup> Assmann makes clear that despite being “constructed,” this does not mean that the traditions should be considered “fake.” Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory,” 67. This argument goes against the famous arguments made by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in the 1980s about the falseness in the creation of so-called traditions during the nineteenth century. See Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

<sup>121</sup> Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 2006) 6.

<sup>122</sup> Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory,” 66.

Using the example of national anthems, which are often performed on national holidays,

Anderson explains that:

No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance. Singing the Marseillaise, Waltzing Matilda, and Indonesia Raya provide occasions for unisonality, for the echoed physical realization of the imagined community. [...] How selfless this unisonance feels! If we are aware that others are singing these songs precisely when and as we are, we have no idea who they may be, or even where, out of earshot, they are singing. Nothing connects us all but imagined sound.<sup>123</sup>

The important fact about national anthems and other collective symbols and identities is that they must first be created and then successfully transmitted across space and time – that is, adapted and used again and again.

The extent to which states can create identities depend on several factors. For one, it has a lot to do with how good the political educational efforts are as well as the degree to which “patriotic fervour” has developed.<sup>124</sup> One obvious case is the presentation of history in educational institutions. Assmann points out that such attempts to rewrite history are common to all countries, because even in democratic systems, public education involves “a similar self-enforcing relationship between history, memory, identity, and power.”<sup>125</sup> Assmann argues that through learning specific national historical narratives, “the heterogeneous members of a population [are] transformed into a distinct and homogenous collective, conceiving of themselves as ‘a people’ with a collective ‘autobiography.’ In all cultures, history textbooks are the vehicles of national memory.”<sup>126</sup> Thus, rewriting history is of key importance in creating national myths.

Yet, it is not only the classroom that serves to instruct children on their national history. As Mona

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<sup>123</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 145.

<sup>124</sup> Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory,” 55.

<sup>125</sup> Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory,” 64.

<sup>126</sup> Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory,” 64.

Ozouf points out, festivals are “even better, for they do not provide exactly the teaching expected of the schools” because they are “addressed not to the intelligence but to the man as a whole and involve the entire community. Schools [are] for public education; the festivals [are] a form of national upbringing.”<sup>127</sup> For example, officials viewed pageant participation as an instructive method in educating children on the way in which the French Revolution unfolded. This is because festivals can serve the purpose of expanding education beyond the walls of the schools as “supplements” or even “substitutes” for regular education.<sup>128</sup> The end result, as Assmann argues, is that this education can then be transformed into a “collective memory” by being part of “shared knowledge and collective participation.”<sup>129</sup>

Another powerful function of myths lies in their ability to appropriate and “change” the past, for example transforming a high point in a nation’s/culture’s/people’s history, a so-called “historical golden age,” into a “foundational myth” that becomes vital to a nation’s unity and stability. The greater these founding myths appear, the easier it is to mobilize and unify people around a national idea.<sup>130</sup> Their power lies in how the past is perceived in contrast to the present: a founding moment can project unity, continuity and ultimately, identity.<sup>131</sup> In this sense then, foundational myths can play a decisive role in stabilizing fragile periods in a nation’s history. For example, in the case of France and the United States, the foundational myth can play a politically unifying role, as John R. Gillis points out: “For the left, it was a time of heroes, pure idealism, and perfect consensus. For the right, it remained a moment of villainy, degradation, and

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<sup>127</sup> Ozouf, *Festivals*, 198.

<sup>128</sup> Ozouf, *Festivals*, 198.

<sup>129</sup> Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory,” 65.

<sup>130</sup> Anthony Smith, “The ‘Golden Age’ and National Renewal” in Hosking and Schöpflin, *Myths and Nationhood*, 39.

<sup>131</sup> John R. Gillis, “Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994), 9.

disintegration. What they had in common, however, was their belief in national memory as well as national identity, something that... was evident in all subsequent political struggles.”<sup>132</sup>

The construction of the present-day American national identity has developed out of two important foundational myths: that of the American Revolutionary War and the Civil War.

Susan-Mary Grant describes how while victory in the Revolutionary War led to the founding of the country, including the establishment of national symbols such as the Great Seal, the eagle and the flag, and the Declaration of Independence as the “founding document,” there remained a certain lack of a sense of national unity and a distinctive identity.<sup>133</sup> Grant argues that the military victory over the British in the Revolutionary War thus only *began* “a lengthy process comprising philosophical, ideological, mythological, religious, and political constructions and reassessments.”<sup>134</sup> The process remained incomplete, however, because during the early-mid nineteenth century, there were contested meanings of freedom and equality amongst the populace that made developing deep-rooted myths difficult. Grant argues that these only really coalesced into a unified concept of national identity with the Civil War.<sup>135</sup> Important here in helping this identity form was President Lincoln’s reference to the existence of one “nation” in his Gettysburg address in 1863.<sup>136</sup> Out of the Civil War did not just come unity, but also the development of further myths, such as the central myth of “American exceptionalism.” Ian Tyrell characterizes the main pillars of this myth as the view of the United States as a distinctive harbinger of the values of egalitarianism, material abundance, a democratic mission, and of religious freedom.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Gillis, “Memory and Identity,” 9.

<sup>133</sup> Susan-Mary Grant, “Making History: Myth and the Construction of American Nationhood,” in Hosking and Schöpflin, *Myths and Nationhood*, 88-90.

<sup>134</sup> Susan-Mary Grant, “Making History” in Hosking and Schöpflin, *Myths and Nationhood*, 91.

<sup>135</sup> Susan-Mary Grant, “Making History” in Hosking and Schöpflin, *Myths and Nationhood*, 88; 100.

<sup>136</sup> Susan-Mary Grant, “Making History” in Hosking and Schöpflin, *Myths and Nationhood*, 105.

<sup>137</sup> Ian Tyrell, “The Myth(s) that will not die: American National Exceptionalism,” in Bouchard, *National Myths*, 53-55.

As a result of these myths, over time the reality of the country coming into being due to a military victory changed into something much more teleological and sacred: its founding became the natural end product of a unique populace created out of new ideals and experiences of the frontier.<sup>138</sup>

In contrast to the American myths of victory, the founding myth of post-war Austria takes the form of a “victim” narrative. Rather than acknowledge any guilt or responsibility for its role in the atrocities of the Second World War, Austria instead presented itself as a victim of Hitler – indeed his “first” with the Anschluss of 1938. This myth can be traced back to unfortunate wording of the Moscow Declaration of 1943, in which the Allies, in an attempt to assure Austrians that they would be treated fairly after the war, described Austria as Hitler’s first victim.<sup>139</sup> After the war ended, this idea of displacing responsibility onto the Germans since Austria did not exist as a separate entity from Germany during the war, took on a life of its own with many Austrians, ranging from the population at home to the soldiers who had been in battle, perceiving themselves as victims. According to this narrative, the Nazis had not been welcome and were only accepted in Austria because the people had no other choice in the matter.<sup>140</sup> This myth of victimization even featured prominently in the Austrian State Treaty of 1955 that established Austria once again as a sovereign state. David Art explains that politicians from all sides disseminated this narrative for several decades afterwards.<sup>141</sup> This focus on Austrian suffering of course ignored the suffering of the real victims, such as the Jews.

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<sup>138</sup> Susan-Mary Grant, “Making History” in Hosking and Schöpflin, *Myths and Nationhood*, 91-92.

<sup>139</sup> David Art, *The Politics of the Nazi Past in Germany and Austria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 105.

<sup>140</sup> Robert Knight, “Narratives in Post-War Austrian Historiography,” *Austria 1945-1955: Studies in Political and Culture Re-emergence*. Ed. Anthony Bushell. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>141</sup> Art, *Nazi Past in Germany and Austria*, 105.

This myth met with little opposition for 40 years, only first beginning to be seriously challenged in 1986 when former SS member Kurt Waldheim ran for president. It was during what became known as the “Waldheim Affair” that the issue broke wide open and became a topic of political debate. As President of the World Jewish Congress Edgar Bronfman stated, “The issue is not Kurt Waldheim. He is a mirror of Austria... The real issue is that Austria has lied for decades about its own involvement in the atrocities.”<sup>142</sup> In the years since the Waldheim Affair, the issue of dealing with the Nazi past has remained a polarizing one in Austria, with opposing discourses cropping up: on the political right, what David Art calls a “new victim frame,” claiming Austria to be “the victim of international forces [including foreign Jews] seeking to denigrate its history;” on the political left, another opposing discourse of contrition that proposes that Austria can and should deal with its own Nazi past.<sup>143</sup>

Despite the pervasive power of nationalistic frames of reference, powerful myths can also be located outside of the purview of a single nation state. As described by George Mosse in his ground-breaking work, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, the experience of the First World War was a turning point in the European collective consciousness. The groundwork for what Mosse calls “the myth of the fallen soldier” was initially laid during the French Revolution with its creation of the citizen army, as well as by the Revolutionary festivals that celebrated and symbolized the sacrifices for the nation.<sup>144</sup> But it was with the end of the First World War that the war experience came to be memorialized as “a sacred experience” imbued with deep religious feeling and associated symbols.<sup>145</sup> Mosse writes: “The cult of the

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<sup>142</sup> Art, *Nazi Past in Germany and Austria*, 118.

<sup>143</sup> Art, *Nazi Past in Germany and Austria*, 102; 130.

<sup>144</sup> George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York; Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1990), 35.

<sup>145</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 7.

fallen soldier became a centerpiece of the religion of nationalism after the war.”<sup>146</sup> Part of this appeal, Mosse argues, was the democratized nature of the myth: in previous wars, only the names of generals were made visible, but now the death and sacrifice of the ordinary soldier was celebrated across countries, including at memorials and sites of memory that were becoming places of pilgrimage.<sup>147</sup> While there were slight differences in these memorials across different nations, the main differences resulted from the incorporation of symbols important to that nation, for the “civic religion of nationalism used classical and Christian themes as well as the native landscape to project its image.”<sup>148</sup> This cult of fallen soldiers then changed after the Second World War. Mosse highlights Britain as a good example of this change in perception: there were debates as to the usefulness of traditional commemoration with national shrines to worship versus utilitarian commemoration with memorials in the form of libraries or parks, with a compromise of sorts between these two approaches eventually being reached.<sup>149</sup> In contrast, in West Germany after the Second World War, due the negative associations of a show of national pride, this same cult of the fallen did not take root, while at the same time in France, while there was slightly more national pride and commemoration, there was a more subdued level of “glory” than after the First World War.<sup>150</sup>

In the end, all states need to create myths to justify their existence. Thus, the East German leadership’s use of rituals, i.e. anniversary commemorations, to create new collective bonds, encourage their people to memorize new narratives, and present new symbols was not unique, but rather, an integral part of nation-building. What was unique about East Germany’s circumstances,

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<sup>146</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 7.

<sup>147</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 99.

<sup>148</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 105.

<sup>149</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 220.

<sup>150</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 222-23.



however, was that not only was the leadership seeking to create new memories and identities of its own, but it also had direct competition in the form of a competing state with the exact same past, also seeking to create new identities and narratives in order to move forward. Thus, the SED needed to ensure that its founding myths were based on an entirely different source from the West so that the SED leadership could underscore the necessity of the split between East and West Germany.

### **West vs East Germany: the “Anti-identity” vs Antifascism**

By the 1980s, nearly 40 years after the state’s founding, much academic and popular writing had been produced on questions about what and where exactly West Germany’s identity was – and who were they, exactly? Were they now their own entity, even though officially their constitution allowed for the joining of East Germany at any time? Had the West indeed developed its own “German identity” in the interim? The truth is not so easy to discern for West Germany presented a unique case. As pointed out by Hans Mommsen, a good way to create a national identity is usually by incorporating national histories into the myth-making process.<sup>151</sup> But as Jürgen Habermas has stated, the problem is that “after Auschwitz [Germany] lost its power to generate myths.”<sup>152</sup>

While East Germany was able to go forward by connect itself to the pre-existing communist legacy in Germany, West Germany’s task of successfully disassociating itself with its Nazi past was a much more difficult one. Part of the problem was that the Nazis had frequently used many traditional “Germanic” symbols, which rendered them impossible to use going

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<sup>151</sup> Hans Mommsen, “History and National Identity: The Case of Germany,” *German Studies Review* 6, no. 3 (Oct. 1983), 582.

<sup>152</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity: Remarks on the Federal Republic’s Orientation to the West,” *Acta Sociologica* 3, no. 1 (1988), 3.

forward. Another problem was that the West German government was not entirely able to completely cleanse itself of anyone who had held a position under the Nazis, as they needed experienced bureaucrats to ensure the country's recovery. In addition, Konrad Adenauer, West Germany's first Chancellor, was driven by a fear of being encircled by hostile communist powers and so was determined to integrate the Federal Republic into the West as much as possible, including through rearmament and joining the defence alliance pact, NATO, in 1955. Tied in as West Germany was in creating a place for itself on the international stage, it did not have an overt sense of national pride like other countries in the West. Indeed, it virtually lacked any sense of pride at all. Instead, West Germany was wary of its international reputation (especially with regard to other Western nations) and the historical "danger" that a strong united Germany posed for world security, especially for its European neighbours. Instead, as Mommsen and others<sup>153</sup> have pointed out, West Germany was more focused on the way it fit in internationally and on its strong regional identities. As Mommsen explained of the situation in 1983:

The existence of real psychological attachments to the Bismarckian nation-state tradition within the West-German population is virtually non-existent, except for conservative or neoconservative intellectuals and for a part of the older generation. Indicative of this lack of attachment was the failure of the Federal Republic to revive older national symbols, demonstrated by the reluctant acceptance of the national anthem or the national colors.<sup>154</sup>

A good example of this reluctant display of nationalism was in West Germany's unexpected 1954 World Cup victory over Hungary. As Arthur Sullivan writes, this "triumph of Bern" was a "moment of collective bliss," amidst the background of the economic miracle.<sup>155</sup> This victory was proof to the world that Germans had learned something and were on the right path, as it was

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<sup>153</sup> See Irene Götz, "The Rediscovery of 'the National' in the 1990s: Contexts, New Cultural Forms and Practices in Reunified Germany," *Nations and Nationalism* 22, no. 4 (2016).

<sup>154</sup> Mommsen, "History and National Identity," 576-77.

<sup>155</sup> Arthur Heinrich, "The 1954 Soccer World Cup and the Federal Republic of Germany's Self-discovery," *American Behavioral Scientist* 46, no. 11, (2003), 1493.

essentially “a re-entry into the world, this time in a civilized fashion.”<sup>156</sup> However, even in this moment of triumph, the press seemed consumed with downplaying the euphoria so as to avoid “a fresh outbreak of nationalism.”<sup>157</sup> Indeed to some more skeptical people, the cheering crowds who welcomed the players home were reminiscent of the crowds at Nazi rallies and thus signalled “a relapse” for the country.<sup>158</sup>

In some ways, however, West Germany did seem to develop a distinct identity. Margarete Myers Feinstein argues that West Germany did have an identity, one that was inherently part of its position in the Western bloc. She points out that West Germany positioned itself as heir to the “bourgeois liberal tradition” in contrast to East Germany’s positioning as heir to “German revolutionary history.”<sup>159</sup> The challenge was not only due to competing worldviews of anticommunism versus antifascism, but rather about a struggle between the two states to be *the* definitive German state and “a natural outcome of German history.”<sup>160</sup> In fact, the symbols the West eventually chose were intended to appeal broadly to a hesitant populace and unite different viewpoints. Thus, symbols like the national anthem, the *Deutschlandlied*, or the use of the Iron Cross effectively “portrayed the Federal Republic’s claim to be the legitimate German state, heir to the liberal German cultural and political traditions.”<sup>161</sup>

Due to the continued challenge to East Germany’s existence posed by the very existence of West Germany, East Germany for its part had to create a myth that would distinguish itself

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<sup>156</sup> Heinrich, “1954 Soccer World Cup,” 1493.

<sup>157</sup> Heinrich, “1954 Soccer World Cup,” 1496.

<sup>158</sup> Heinrich, “1954 Soccer World Cup,” 1496. See also Irene Götz, “The Rediscovery of ‘the National’ in the 1990s,” 803-04. Götz writes that it was only after reunification in 1990 that Germany could begin to rediscover its national identity. In particular, it was Germany’s hosting of the 2006 World Cup that provided proof of a new “national spirit.” For the German rediscovery of nationalism in 2006, see Gavin Brent Sullivan, “Collective emotions, German National Pride and the 2006 World Cup” in *Understanding Collective Pride and Group Identity: New Directions in Emotion Theory, Research and Practice*, ed. Gavin Brent Sullivan (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>159</sup> Margarete Myers Feinstein, *State Symbols: The Quest for Legitimacy in the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, 1949 – 1959* (Boston; Leiden: Brill Academic, 2011), 11.

<sup>160</sup> Myers Feinstein, *State Symbols*, 11.

<sup>161</sup> Myers Feinstein, *State Symbols*, 11.

from the West. Yet, the GDR also needed to maintain a connection to the Eastern Soviet Bloc states which rooted their own identities in distinct ethnicities. The result was that the SED leadership developed “a socialist ideal of nationhood that defined itself through class, local affinities, and the local and regional traditions that were specific to the GDR.”<sup>162</sup> The most important “creation myth” for the GDR was therefore the myth of “antifascism.” At the beginning, “antifascism” at first just referred to the legacy of communist Nazi resisters, but then later developed more into a collective identity that could integrate anyone who had opposed Nazism (including those who did not), and in the end, win support for the new state.<sup>163</sup> Alan Nothnagle refers to this myth as one “based upon the ideal unity of the oppressed.”<sup>164</sup>

The beginnings of this myth are debated by scholars. While Peter Monteath traces the beginning of this myth to fascist narratives formed in the Soviet zone of occupation, Jeffrey Herf argues that it first took shape during the Weimar Republic, was later refined by those who emigrated to the Soviet Union and elsewhere during the Third Reich, and then, finally, took on a life of its own as the official state ideology of the new East German state.<sup>165</sup> In this ideology, there was a conflation between the Nazis and capitalism in general as per the Marxist interpretation of class struggle. As Herf explains: “[b]y using the term ‘fascism’ in place of ‘National Socialism’ or ‘Nazi,’ Ulbricht presented the Hitler regime as one example of a general capitalist crisis rather than as a product of specific features of German history and society.”<sup>166</sup> The result was that throughout the history of the GDR, the official narratives associated the Nazis

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<sup>162</sup> Jan Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945 – 1990* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>163</sup> Peter Monteath, “Narratives of Fascism in the GDR: Buchenwald and the “Myth of Antifascism,” *The European Legacy* 4, no. 1 (1999), 101.

<sup>164</sup> Alan Nothnagle, *Building the East German Myth: Historical Mythology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 99.

<sup>165</sup> Peter Monteath, “Narratives of Fascism in the GDR,” 100. Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: the Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 13.

<sup>166</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 33.

as belonging to something specifically western and capitalist. Time and again, official SED narratives linked the West with this degradation of the capitalist system. Yet, individual and collective guilt for Nazi crimes was of lesser concern to the SED: for as per Marxist ideology, once the state was converted to socialism, the conditions for Nazism were considered removed. This would then be followed by a period of purposeful forgetting.<sup>167</sup> “In this way,” Herf remarks, “memories of Nazism fostered distrust of popular democracy and legitimated the ‘antifascist’ dictatorship.”<sup>168</sup>

There are also several possible additional reasons why this myth persisted. The first is that due to the redemptive Marxist narrative in which communism would succeed once other political systems had been destroyed. The fact that the Soviets were victorious over the Nazis seemed to be a prelude to greater victories that were surely to come and “appeared to confirm the Marxist-Leninist conviction that history was indeed unfolding along the lines of a bloody and tragic yet triumphant dialectical logic.”<sup>169</sup> This not only provided a coherent narrative in a transitional time, but deepened their communist, even Stalinist beliefs.<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, the experience of exile during the Nazi period was also a very powerful motive for how antifascism unfolded in the years following. As a result, the communists did not see themselves as responsible for the rise of Nazism, shifting the blame to stubborn Social Democrats who refused to join forces with them during Weimar.<sup>171</sup> Many were also bitter towards the Germans who had followed the Nazis and grateful towards the Soviets for saving them – emotions that had a great lasting effect.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Monteath, “Narratives of Fascism in the GDR,” 101.

<sup>168</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 37.

<sup>169</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 27.

<sup>170</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 38.

<sup>171</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 14. Herf points out that it was former KPD leader Ernst Thälmann himself who did not want to join forces with other parties.

<sup>172</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 27.

Given that in 1949 there were no existing sites of memory that were not shared with West Germany, the SED thus needed to construct its own separate sites of memory that would reinforce the antifascist narrative.<sup>173</sup> As a result, in July 1961, the former Nazi concentration camps of Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück were merged into one national memorial site called “National Sites of Warning and Memory” that told a heroic story of communist resistance during the Third Reich and gave a “tangible” form to the antifascist ideology.<sup>174</sup> For example, Buchenwald had been the site of several significant events: most importantly, it was the place where Ernst Thälmann, leader of the Communist Party during the Weimar Republic, had been martyred by the Nazis. Buchenwald also had a history of prisoner resistance which, in the cult of antifascism that later developed, became a larger concept that confirmed communist-led self-liberation narratives.<sup>175</sup>

Not only did these sites of memory act as sites of national unity, but they also gained international importance, for as William J. Niven explains, they placed the GDR within the context of the wider international struggle of the working class against capitalism, especially that of West Germany. The focus of this central myth on the communist resistance placed the human suffering that had gone on at these camps “within the narrative of man’s social and political journey from fascist capitalism to socialism, and the promise of paradise on earth,” in contrast to the West German Christian Democrats’ approach of placing the suffering in the camps “within

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<sup>173</sup>Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, 7. For more on this famous concept of “sites of memory,” see Pierre Nora and David P. Jordan, eds. *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Vols. 1-4. Translated by Mary Seidman Trouille. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1999-2010.

<sup>174</sup> These camps had a double past, as they were not only former Nazi concentration camps, but also Soviet “Special Camps.” 130 000 Germans were held in terrible conditions in 10 camps. These Soviet special camps were dissolved by 1950. Mentioning them was taboo in the GDR. Some of the inmates were transferred to GDR prisons when the camps were shut down. See William J. Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 41. See also Monteath, “Narratives of Fascism in the GDR,” 103.

<sup>175</sup> Monteath, “Narratives of Fascism in the GDR,” 104.

the narrative of man's difficult spiritual journey towards the promise of the after-life."<sup>176</sup> This allowed the construction of a different conception of victimhood from that of West Germany: instead of helpless and passive, victims in the GDR were portrayed as active, forward-looking, strong resistance fighters whose strength at Buchenwald helped the Americans liberate them. For as Niven writes, "The GDR's self-legitimation was in part based on the claim that it was continuing the struggle for which all anti-fascists in Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, not just the communists, had given so much."<sup>177</sup>

Thus, just like the Bolsheviks before them, and the French revolutionaries long before, the GDR in its early years developed a founding myth in order to create a unified sense of identity. This was a momentous task, especially given that the GDR could not base its new identity on any linguistic or national distinctiveness. Rather, it had to first establish new symbols and even celebrate achievements of the Soviet Union in order to help establish its own legitimacy in those early years.

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<sup>176</sup> Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past*, 20.

<sup>177</sup> Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past*. 20-1.

## Chapter One: The Anniversary Theses

In a meeting of the National Front's 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the October Revolution Commission in 1957, Hans Seigewasser of National Front President Correns' office complained to his fellow commission members that the SED appeared to have created "theses" (that is, important ideological themes) in honour of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary with only themselves in mind, as the turgid prose in which they were written was too out-of-touch and theoretical to be grasped by the masses.<sup>1</sup> In order for these ideological themes to be effectively understood by the populace, he argued, it was up to them – the members of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commission – to take every opportunity to "bring clarity and meaning to the goals of the commemoration."<sup>2</sup> Making this effort, Seigewasser pointed out, would ensure that the theses "do not just remain theses, but actually find their way to the masses and give rise to an independent attitude, to a reaction, to commitment, and ultimately lead to worthwhile activities."<sup>3</sup>

The dense tracts Seigewasser was trying to transform were the ideological treatises the SED released at the outset of every major anniversary commemoration. These so-called "theses" usually consisted of a detailed history of the occasion according to the SED, combined with important ideological points the SED wanted the public to understand through participating in commemorative activities such as socialist competitions, festivities, and other "cultural events" like exhibitions, lectures, or discussion forums. During the lead up to the day of anniversary itself, based on guidelines from the National Front's Central Committee in Berlin, all lower-level

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<sup>1</sup> Tellingly, the SED found it pertinent to publish the "Thesen" in *full* in Neues Deutschland in July, 1957, so that the everyday masses could read them for themselves.

<sup>2</sup> BArch DY 6/5642. Hans Seigewasser, "Stenografische Niederschrift 3. Sitzung der Kommission '40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution' beim Nationalrat der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland am 13. September 1957," p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> BArch DY 6/5642. Hans Seigewasser, "Stenografische Niederschrift 3. Sitzung der Kommission '40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution' beim Nationalrat der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland am 13. September 1957," p. 29.



National Front organizations (from the national to the most local) would design wide-ranging commemorative activities in order to expose the East German people to the central messages of the theses for that specific anniversary.

During the 1950s and 1960s in particular, the main theme the anniversary theses tried to communicate was the legitimacy of the GDR's existence and distinct identity as its own state, separate from the West. Another vital theme in the anniversary theses during these early decades was justifying the necessity of the GDR's close relationship with the Soviet Union. As time went on and the Berlin Wall closed off emigration, the GDR was able to finally achieve economic success, something which the SED mostly notably underscored in its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary theses from 1964. Following the "normalizing" of relations with West Germany in 1972 and resulting international recognition, the GDR anniversary theses became more confident and emphasized the superiority of socialism, as proven not only by the country's economic successes, but also by the very generous social policies that benefitted the entire population. Finally, despite imminent economic collapse in the 1980s and growing divergence from reality, the SED's anniversary theses doubled down on its previous themes of international acclaim and economic prowess, asserting the permanence of the state. This was particularly necessary given that, in the late 1980s its interests had diverged from the Soviet Union, which was undertaking major reforms under Premier Gorbachev.

### **Relations with the West: the Question of Legitimacy**

From the founding of the GDR, a major problem for the SED leadership was the GDR's lack of legitimacy and resulting precarious existence on the world stage. This instability forced the SED to use careful rhetoric to carve out its own unique identity that would justify the state's

continued independent existence. These attempts to educate the public were not only about the GDR creating an identity for itself within the Eastern Bloc, but also about fending off the continued challenges to its sovereignty launched by the West, especially the West's successful decade-long diplomatic isolation strategy, known as the Hallstein Doctrine.

As the theses released in honour of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GDR explain, the East German state's legitimacy was based on the continuation of traditions established a half-century before with the October Revolution of 1917. The Revolution heralded the beginning of new relationships between peoples, the theses argued, "fulfilled by the noble spirit of humanism."<sup>4</sup> The example set by the Soviet Union enabled other countries to likewise break away from "constant economic crises and war" and allow their citizens to live "free from exploitation and fear."<sup>5</sup> The GDR, by relegating capitalism to the past, was thus continuing down this path of new beginnings, ensuring the end of the "economic ruin of countless workers and peasants," as well as the end of "poisonous" and "amoral" capitalist evaluations of art and literature, and the willful misuse of research and science "for purposes hostile to humankind."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the establishment of the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" saved the working masses from continuing to be governed by those who exploited others (*Ausbeuterherrschaft*).<sup>7</sup>

The message the SED wanted to communicate to the population was that such a life was inherent in the old capitalist social order, which could not be reformed. The only solution was for

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<sup>4</sup> BArch DY 6/5641. Manfred Gerlach, Tagung des Nationalrats der National Front, "Die Aufgaben der National Front zur Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," 1957, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> BArch DY 6/5641. "Plan der Kommission 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," July 31, 1957, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> BArch DY 6/5641. Manfred Gerlach, Tagung des Nationalrats der National Front, "Die Aufgaben der National Front zur Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," 1957, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> This is a common description used, see for example, BArch DY 6/5641, Abteilung Agitation und Propaganda beim ZK der SED, "Thesen zum 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," 1957, p. 1.

the old system to be replaced by an entirely new system (their own socialist order).<sup>8</sup> The theses also make clear that the GDR would not just be following the Soviet Union's lead, but rather, continuing already-existing German traditions. For the country had been built on the legacy of the German workers' movement, with the GDR being "the most important result of the hundred-year struggle of the German labour movement since Marx and Engels."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the "democratic legitimacy" of the GDR was "deeply rooted in history" because it "embodied the historical teachings of the struggle of the working class and the best German patriots, and summed up the great revolutionary and humanist traditions of the German nation."<sup>10</sup>

One of these key legitimizing traditions was the story of Ernst Thälmann, leader of the Communist Party during Weimar, who was arrested by the Nazis and murdered at Buchenwald in 1944. SED propaganda portrayed him as a larger than life figure, a "disembodied, artificial symbol," who was "the symbolic figure of resistance against fascism in all of Germany."<sup>11</sup> Thälmann was resurrected as a mythical figure at the opening of the first Thälmann memorial in 1953, where Walter Ulbricht reimagined Thälmann's and the KPD's policies prior to 1933 as having been the right ones, in the same way that the SED's policies in relation to the West were correct.<sup>12</sup> Annette Leo points out that this creation of a continuous tradition effectively "legitimized the politics and claim to power of [Thälmann's] successors."<sup>13</sup> In addition, rewriting

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<sup>8</sup> BArch DY 6/5641. Manfred Gerlach, Tagung des Nationalrats der National Front, "Die Aufgaben der National Front zur Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," 1957, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Annette Leo, "Liturgie statt Erinnerung: Die Schaffung eines Heldenbildes am Beispiel Ernst Thälmanns," in *Ernst Thälmann: Mensch und Mythos*, ed. Peter Monteath (Amsterdam Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Leo, "Liturgie statt Erinnerung," 25-26.

<sup>13</sup> Leo, "Liturgie statt Erinnerung," 25-26.

the KPD's history also served to rewrite the background to the rise of the Nazis, laying the blame for it squarely on the Social Democratic Party's actions in the 1930s.<sup>14</sup>

This narrative enabled the GDR to positively define itself as everything the Federal Republic was not. The SED's theses boasted that their own rule in the GDR was entirely free of fascists, war criminals, Junkers (the old Prussian large landowning nobility), and in particular, of "corporate men" (*Konzernherren*). The theses argued that the GDR had instead taken the "democratic route."<sup>15</sup> In defining themselves as the only democratic German socialist state,<sup>16</sup> SED rhetoric during the 1950s and early 1960s thereby questioned West Germany's own legitimacy, arguing that the real historical truth behind the founding of West Germany was that the people in the western zones of Germany had "an illegitimate monopoly capital forced on them."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, in contrast to what Western German politicians claimed, their country was not built upon democratic foundations, but rather was created through the "rape" of "the German peoples' democratic rights and national interests."<sup>18</sup> The fact that many western Germans had actually been satisfied with the conduct of the western Allies in the immediate post-war period, especially with western financial support (which had also initially been extended to the East) as well as their assumption of governance, was not mentioned.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Detlef Kannapin, "Thälmann im Film der 50er Jahre," in *Ernst Thälmann: Mensch und Mythos*, ed. Peter Monteath (Amsterdam Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), 119-20.

<sup>15</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> The exact phrase used changed over time: before the mid 1960s, the SED rhetoric defined the GDR as a "German" nation. This changed later in the 1960 and early 1970s when the SED began de-emphasizing the "German" aspect and emphasizing the word "GDR" instead. See Joanna McKay, *The Official Concept of the Nation in the Former GDR: Theory, Pragmatism, and the Search for Legitimacy* (Aldershot, UK; Brookfield, Vt: Ashgate, 1998) for a more detailed take on the issue.

<sup>17</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> See Anna J. Merritt, (eds): *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany: The OMGUS Surveys, 1945 – 1949* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970).

One reason the East was so preoccupied with the West was due, in part, to the behaviour of Konrad Adenauer, West Germany's first Chancellor from 1949 to 1963. Adenauer hated the idea of a divided Germany and refused to acknowledge the loss of the eastern territories. He was also driven by the fear of being encircled by hostile communist powers. Not atypically for a Western leader at that time, Adenauer perceived the Eastern Bloc countries as dangerous because, as Jorst Dulffer explains, "one could not trust communists who employed subversive politics and propaganda techniques."<sup>20</sup> Adenauer was determined to integrate West Germany into the Western Bloc as much as possible, which meant rearming West Germany and joining the defence alliance pact NATO in 1955. Throughout this time period, Adenauer presented himself as a reliable leader who could guarantee a steady course in a divided world, capable of "steering the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) between the Scylla of Sovietization and Charybdis of permanent partition."<sup>21</sup> During the next two decades, easing the tense relations between East and West Germany was simply not an option for either Adenauer or his centre-right conservative party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU), largely because they refused to consider the GDR a legitimate state.

Following a trip to Moscow that established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1955, West German Minister Wilhelm Grewe drew up a plan that later became known as the "Hallstein Doctrine," which was to define German relations for the next decade. With the Hallstein Doctrine, West Germany staked its claim to being the one true German state, threatening to break off relations with any country that recognized East Germany. In a speech to the *Bundestag*, Adenauer declared that a "normalization of relations under any circumstance"

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<sup>20</sup> Jorst Dulffer, "'No more Potsdam!' Konrad Adenauer's nightmare and the basis of his international orientation," *German Politics and Society* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 25

<sup>21</sup> Dulffer, "'No more Potsdam!'" 20.

between East and West Germany was simply out of the question, especially the “legalization of the abnormal state of German division.”<sup>22</sup> At the same time, Adenauer affirmed that the integration of West Germany into Western Europe was an absolute necessity for the future of the country, taking the view that any European state which remained in isolation was politically and economically unviable. Integration was not only to be pursued for its own sake, but something which Adenauer claimed was in the whole world’s interest.<sup>23</sup> In a governmental bulletin of December, 1955, Minister Grewe confirmed that any state recognition of the GDR would be considered “an unfriendly act” against West Germany that would have serious consequences.<sup>24</sup>

While proving itself effective at isolating the East, the isolation campaign conversely provided the SED propaganda machine with “proof” that the West posed a threat to the East’s very existence, solidifying the SED’s claim that the imperialist West Germany, the successor state to the Nazi regime, was starting to show its true warmongering nature. The 1964 anniversary theses claimed that the West German government’s “revanchist policies” were responsible for maintaining the continued tensions that would eventually turn this “post-war period into a new pre-war period.”<sup>25</sup> The SED further argued that the western “imperialists” had been on this path ever since the end of the war, when the Western occupiers, particularly the United States, bonded together to form “an unholy alliance against the antifascist-democratic

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<sup>22</sup> “2. Deutscher Bundestag – 101. Sitzung. Bonn, Donnerstag, den 22. September 1955,” p. 5644. Photocopy of archival document located at [https://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder\\_dokumente/01366/index-2.html.de](https://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder_dokumente/01366/index-2.html.de).

<sup>23</sup> “2. Deutscher Bundestag – 101. Sitzung. Bonn, Donnerstag, den 22. September 1955,” p. 5644. Photocopy of archival document located at [https://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder\\_dokumente/01366/index-2.html.de](https://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder_dokumente/01366/index-2.html.de).

<sup>24</sup> Bulletin des Presse- und Informationsamtes der Bundesregierung. Bonn, December 13, 1957. No. 233, p. 1993. Photocopy of archival document located at

[https://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder\\_dokumente/01366/index-4.html.de](https://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder_dokumente/01366/index-4.html.de). Note: Even though the Soviet Union had diplomatic relations with East Germany, it was considered exempt due to its position as a former ally of World War II and Occupying Power.

<sup>25</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938. “Anlage Nr. 8a zum Protokoll 23 vom 14.7.1964. 2. Fassung. 15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik (Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik),” p. 4

movement.”<sup>26</sup> What was even more significant, according to the theses, was that the West failed to prosecute former Nazis and war criminals, thereby preventing the denazification of their economy and administration.<sup>27</sup> Although an exaggeration to claim that Nazi war criminals had not been prosecuted at all, there was a degree of truth in this as West Germany had indeed struggled with getting denazification right in those early years. Despite outlawing the Nazi Party and its associated laws or symbols, as well as holding the Nuremberg trials that began in 1945, the emphasis in the western sectors (and later West Germany) had always been on moving forward and creating a so-called “spiritual regeneration of the German people” which was, at its core, the re-education of Germans in western democratic ideals.<sup>28</sup> However, a later American report described this as “a torturous program,” one that had been “based on the premise that the German character needed uprooting and modification” while “German society at large required drastic alterations as well.”<sup>29</sup> The problem was that moving forward with western “regeneration” required experienced workers in administration and government, many of whom were not entirely untainted by affiliation with the Nazis. Such links to the banned and thoroughly denounced National Socialists, even if somewhat weak, were something that the SED reminded GDR citizens of for the next thirty years, especially in the anniversary theses.

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<sup>26</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 7. For more on the “judicial Cold War” between East and West Germany, see Gary Bruce, “From Perpetrator to Cold-War Pawn: The Atrocities and Trial of Heinz Barth,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 29, no. 3, (2015): 374-399.

<sup>28</sup> Kurt Jürgensen, “The Concept and Practice of ‘Re-education’ in Germany 1945-50,” in *The Political Re-education of Germany and her Allies After World War II*, ed. Nicholas Pronay und Keith Wilson (London und Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985), 83-91. See also Herf, *Divided Memory*.

<sup>29</sup> Paul W Gulgowski, *The American Military Government of United States Occupied Zones of post-World War II Germany in relation to policies expressed by its Civilian Governmental Authorities at home, during the course of 1944, 1945 through 1949* (Frankfurt a.M.: Haag und Herchen 1983), 333.

Despite the pervasiveness of this anti-western narrative, the populace remained unconvinced that the West actually posed such a great threat.<sup>30</sup> When National Front representatives sought out ordinary citizens' opinions on the subject, hoping to find evidence that its message about the West had been absorbed, the National Front often found evidence to the contrary. For example, one person stated that based on various individual conversations they had had, they were of the opinion that no one in West Germany was actually talking about war.<sup>31</sup> In another instance, a group of people pointed out the contradiction in the leadership's claim of attempting to ease tensions between the two Germanies, asking National Front representatives whether it was really necessary for the East German press, especially *Neues Deutschland*, to continue to use "such harsh language against the imperialists, especially the West German imperialists, as it could only deepen the division [between the two countries]?"<sup>32</sup> In Frankfurt (Oder), others wondered what was really going on with negotiations with the West. For one, ordinary people noticed how the state's opinion of West German Chancellor Adenauer appeared to change once he had been replaced by Chancellor Ludwig Erhard. One person commented that "based on what Willi Stoph is saying about his negotiations with the West, it now appears as though Erhard is even more dangerous than Adenauer, who now seems to be not bad at all."<sup>33</sup> On this point of government deception, someone else asked: "how is it that the governments publicly insult each other, but then negotiate in secret?"<sup>34</sup> Another East German was of the opinion that

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<sup>30</sup> Mark Allinson also argues that East Germans did not believe that the West posed a threat. See Mark Allinson, *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany, 1945-68* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 120.

<sup>31</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, "Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964," September 14, 1964, p. 2-3.

<sup>32</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, "Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964," September 14, 1964, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, "Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964," September 14, 1964, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, "Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964," September 14, 1964, p. 3.



the difficulties lay solely at the feet of the politicians, as “[w]e German citizens have been in agreement for a long time, it is ‘those at the top’ [die da oben] who are not yet in agreement.”<sup>35</sup>

That ordinary people were asking such questions clearly shows that many East Germans were neither fooled by the state’s official claims that the West posed a great danger to GDR citizens, nor interested in pretending to officials that they did not see inconsistencies with the official message in general. The complaint that neither ordinary East Germans’ own family members nor other Westerners were actually seeking war with the GDR was also a very common one, and *Bezirk* Dresden’s propaganda department actually published a direct response to be distributed in a pamphlet in 1964. Crafting its side of the argument in the form of a “Question and Answer” format, the propaganda department wrote:

You are undoubtedly right that your sister in West Germany and her family pose no danger to our GDR. There are hundreds of thousands of families between Hamburg and Munich, with whom we feel connected and whom we are certain are as interested in peace in Germany as we are. If these people were to hold the political and economic power in West Germany in their hands, then we are certain that there would be no aggressive NATO, no pursuit of nuclear weapons, and no claims on foreign territory, no military drudgery [*Soldatenschinderei*] in the Bundeswehr, no Nazi generals or Hitler-judges.<sup>36</sup>

However, the pamphlet went on, though “these millions of simple, peace-loving, reasonable Germans in the Federal Republic are working to the best of their ability, [they] have no legal power to determine the political path of that state.”<sup>37</sup> Ironically, neither could East Germans, for as Mark Allinson remarks, the state’s purpose in even inquiring about the ordinary person’s

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<sup>35</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, “Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964,” September 14, 1964, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2395. Bezirk Dresden National Front Committee, Kommission für Agitation, “5 Fragen – 5 Antworten zum Vertrag über Freundschaft, gegenseitigen Beistand und Zusammenarbeit zwischen der DDR und der UdSSR. Ein Offener Brief an Frau Else Walther,” 1964, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2395. Bezirk Dresden National Front Committee, Kommission für Agitation, “5 Fragen – 5 Antworten zum Vertrag über Freundschaft, gegenseitigen Beistand und Zusammenarbeit zwischen der DDR und der UdSSR. Ein Offener Brief an Frau Else Walther,” 1964, p. 3.

opinion was more about “equip[ping] state and party to react to difficulties which arose, not to take account of popular demands in the policy-planning process.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Close Relations with the Soviet Union: Necessity and Obsession**

In addition to creating legitimacy, the anniversary theses in the 1950s and 1960s also sought to underscore the necessity of the GDR’s close connection to the Soviet Union. In honour of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution in 1957, the theses justified the GDR’s following of the Soviet Union’s lead, given that it was the country that “show[ed] the others the way, by placing power in the hands of the working people” thus demonstrating how “every citizen can influence the shape of state policies.”<sup>39</sup> As such, the theses went on, it made sense for the Soviet Union to continue on in its capacity as the socialist world’s “guiding light,” especially for the young GDR, since:<sup>40</sup>

the interests of the Soviet Union are in complete accord with the class interests of the German workers and the national interests of the German people. Their experiences in the progressive development of society as well as in the struggle for peace, democracy and socialism are also entirely valid for the German people. The strengthening of the friendship between the German and the Soviet people is a matter of the heart of every upright German patriot as it serves the peaceful development of all of Germany.<sup>41</sup>

By closely following the Soviet Union down this righteous path, the SED proclaimed in their theses, the young GDR could identify itself as being part of the “socialist world system,” which,

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<sup>38</sup> Mark Allinson, “Popular Opinion,” in *The Workers and Peasants’ State: Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht, 1945-71*, ed. Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (Manchester University Press: Manchester, UK, 2002), 98.

<sup>39</sup> BArch DY 6/5641. Manfred Gerlach, Tagung des Nationalrats der National Front, “Die Aufgaben der National Front zur Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” 1957, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> BArch DY 6/5641. Manfred Gerlach, Tagung des Nationalrats der National Front, “Die Aufgaben der National Front zur Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” 1957, p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> BArch DY 6/5641, Abteilung Agitation und Propaganda beim ZK der SED, “Thesen zum 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” p. 16.

at the time, was preoccupied with overthrowing colonialism and fighting to achieve freedom in the world.<sup>42</sup>

The anniversary theses also highlighted the sacrifices that the Soviets had made on behalf of the Germans during the previous 40 years. For one, they reminded East Germans of what “loyal friends” the Soviet Communist Party had been to the German KPD in the 1920s.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, they reminded East Germans that the Soviets had sacrificed many men and a great amount of money during the war to defeat the Nazis, who had “left chaos and hunger in their wake.”<sup>44</sup> Through sacrifices such as these, the theses claimed, the Soviet Union was an example to others, for they had “pure” motives in wanting to “liberate” people instead of conquering them.<sup>45</sup> Holding up the Soviets as saviours and highlighting the sacrifices they made in this way not only justified the GDR’s closeness to them, but also sought to rewrite the negative experiences East Germans had had at the hands of the Soviets during the occupation. The GDR was also not only using this as a basis for its legitimacy, but also as a means for ensuring a closeness developed between the two countries so that the Soviet Union would continue to extend economic, military and political assistance far into the future. The theses stated that:

The German-Soviet friendship, the solid and extensive ties between the German Democratic Republic and the Union of the Socialist Soviet Republics, are a formidable historic achievement for the democratic forces of the German and Soviet peoples. The historical experiences of our people have shown that the close friendship between the German and the Soviet people is vital for the whole of Germany. If the German and Soviet people fight together for peace, then there will be no more war in Europe.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> BArch DY 6/5641, Abteilung Agitation und Propaganda beim ZK der SED, “Thesen zum 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> BArch DY 6/5641, Abteilung Agitation und Propaganda beim ZK der SED, “Thesen zum 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> BArch DY 6/5641, Abteilung Agitation und Propaganda beim ZK der SED, “Thesen zum 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> BArch DY 6/5641, Abteilung Agitation und Propaganda beim ZK der SED, “Thesen zum 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> BArch DY 6/5641, Abteilung Agitation und Propaganda beim ZK der SED, “Thesen zum 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” p. 16. The phrase “German and Soviet people” is repeated three times to underscore their unity.

Although this closeness to the Soviet Union (especially its military and economic support) was necessary to safeguard the GDR's existence during the GDR's early years, the extreme degree to which Sovietization occurred in the GDR was largely due to the obsessive nature of its leader. No one was more dedicated to maintaining these close ties to the Soviet Union than Walter Ulbricht, the first General Secretary of the GDR, who was enthralled with Leninism and the role the Communist Party played in the Soviet Union. He was described by a contemporary as a "half-Bolshevik," who, along with his authoritarian style of rule and personality cult, made him very much a "creature of the KPD apparatus."<sup>47</sup> Ulbricht managed to become General Secretary of the SED in 1950 following several years of power struggles. Although the SED was originally created as a "Marxist party committed to parliamentary democracy" with roots reaching back to both the socialist and KPD ideology in Weimar Germany, it was also highly influenced by the theories and practices of Marxist-Leninism, and by 1953, Ulbricht had successfully turned the SED into a Stalinist interpretation of Marxist-Leninism based on the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.<sup>48</sup> What this meant in practice was that the SED took over complete control of the country's "political, social, and economic machinery and infused it with a Marxist-Leninist ideology."<sup>49</sup> Or as Jürgen Kocka describes it, Ulbricht and his party "completely subjugated the state, sucked it dry as it were, and took its place."<sup>50</sup>

Walter Ulbricht's style of governing soon became one of "control, unassailable control," which he characterized as entirely necessary due to the existence of the aggressive imperialists on

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<sup>47</sup> Peter Grieder, *The East German Leadership, 1946-1973: Conflict and Crisis* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 55. Ulbricht did spend seven years in exile in the Soviet Union (from 1938 – 1945). See, for example, Norbert Podewin, *Walter Ulbricht: Eine neue Biographie* (Berlin: Dietz, 1995) and Mario Frank, *Walter Ulbricht: eine deutsche Biografie* (Berlin: Siedler, 2001).

<sup>48</sup> Grieder, *The East German Leadership*, 8; Manfred G. Schmidt, "Social Policy in the German Democratic Republic," in *The Rise and Fall of a Socialist Welfare State: The German Democratic Republic (1949-1990) and German Unification (1989-1994)*, ed. Manfred G. Schmidt and G.A. Ritter, (Berlin; Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 25.

<sup>49</sup> Schmidt, "Social Policy in the German Democratic Republic," 26.

<sup>50</sup> Jürgen Kocka, quoted in Schmidt, "Social Policy in the German Democratic Republic," 26.

the GDR's western border.<sup>51</sup> Yet, Ulbricht was also "slavishly" devoted to Soviet interests, and, as Joanna McKay puts it, he "personally embodied the fundamental dilemma facing the SED" of "convinc[ing] the population that it could serve the national interest and Soviet interests simultaneously."<sup>52</sup> Beginning in July 1952, at their second party conference, the SED decided to increase the pace of their so-called "building up of socialism." This came in response to the Soviet Union's decision to support the GDR's continued existence once Adenauer had taken the step of signing the Paris Treaties, formally anchoring West Germany to the Western Allies.<sup>53</sup> The SED started implementing increasingly draconian political, economic and social policies, such as policies of hindering private enterprise (like employing increasingly coercive tactics to promote agricultural collectivization), imposing stricter private property laws, as well as increasing the efficiency of factory working hours. As a result of the labour shortages caused by the masses of people who had already left for the West in combination with the increased movement of agricultural workers into the factories, the population that remained in the GDR suffered from food, goods, materials, and equipment shortages.<sup>54</sup> The SED and the trade union (FDGB) also tried to increase labour productivity and decrease pay: although resisted by the population, there was an increase in imposing (increasingly by coercive means) industry and agricultural quotas, such as a raise of 10% by May 1953. In addition, increases in taxes and prices caused workers' wages to decrease by one third.<sup>55</sup> Then there also were political changes such as converting the German *Länder* into smaller, Soviet-style "districts" (*Bezirke*), as well as educational system

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<sup>51</sup> Hope Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>52</sup> McKay, *The Official Concept of the Nation in the Former GDR*, 17.

<sup>53</sup> Gareth Dale, *Popular Protest in East Germany, 1945-1989* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 15-16.

<sup>54</sup> There were also harsher punishments for noncompliance, such as longer jail sentences for petty theft. See Dale, *Popular Protest in East Germany*, p. 16-17. Some of these measures were taken to prepare East Germany to be at the front line of the Cold War, for example, collectivization made sense by taking the labour out of the fields putting it towards building up industry and creating a military force. See also Grieder, *The East German Leadership*, p. 56-57.

<sup>55</sup> Dale, *Popular Protest in East Germany*, 17.

reforms, such as pressures to implement Soviet-style classes and to emphasize the role of the party; finally, the influence of religion and the churches was also curbed in schools.<sup>56</sup>

As a result of these oppressive “reforms,” the population soured on the leadership, and Peter Grieder describes the atmosphere in the GDR by early 1953 as one “approaching a state of civil war.”<sup>57</sup> The SED, however, refused to see the seriousness of the situation. Amidst a general feeling of instability in the Soviet Union following Stalin’s death that March, the SED leadership was summoned to Moscow in early June 1953 and informed that they needed to reverse their policies by implementing a so-called “New Course.” The Soviet Communist Party had decided that the SED’s build-up of socialism was happening too fast and recommended this change in course in order to avoid disaster. The SED was instead supposed to work towards establishing a democratic and united Germany.<sup>58</sup> Moscow argued that the conditions necessary in order to successfully build up socialism did not exist in the GDR at the time, as not only did they lack certain key material goods, but most importantly, they had not yet prepared enough of the ideological groundwork needed in order to attract certain social groups such as farmers, the intelligentsia, or artisans.<sup>59</sup> The “New Course” was thus intended to slow collectivization, the focus on heavy industry and the attacks on private enterprise; improve the availability of consumer products; protect human rights; stop the persecution of certain segments of society such as the religious and the intelligentsia; and increase the power of other mass organizations with respect to the SED.<sup>60</sup> Implementing these directives, however, confused the SED leadership

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<sup>56</sup> Grieder, *The East German Leadership*, 56-57.

<sup>57</sup> Grieder, *The East German Leadership*, 60.

<sup>58</sup> Whether the Soviets actually wanted a united Germany is debatable. See Grieder, *The East German Leadership*, p. 67-68 on the debates and disagreements over what was needed to correct the situation. See also Ilko Sascha Kowalczyk, *Endspiel: die Revolution von 1989 in der DDR* (München: Beck, 2009).

<sup>59</sup> Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall*, 28-29.

<sup>60</sup> Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall*, 28-29.

and caused heated debate.<sup>61</sup> Ulbricht was naturally opposed to all of these recommendations, particularly with regard to unifying Germany. Nevertheless, the so-called “New Course” was proclaimed on June 11, 1953. However, it was already too late and on June 16, near the large building site on Stalinallee in Berlin, major strikes began.<sup>62</sup> Construction workers were then joined by other workers, all of whom were protesting poor working conditions and low pay. The protests soon turned away from the issue of the remaining quota increase, and became increasingly political, with protesters demanding free elections. By June 17, the strikes had grown exponentially, turning into an uprising and spreading to other cities throughout East Germany. This was only brought to an end on June 18 with the arrival of Soviet troops and tanks.<sup>63</sup>

In the aftermath of the uprising, although Ulbricht came close to losing his position as leader and despite the likelihood he would continue his hardline attitudes, the Soviets chose to keep him in power. As Harrison explains, this was due to the struggles within the Soviet leadership at the time, particularly the fall and arrest of First Deputy Premier Lavrentiy Beria, who had advocated liberalization and a softer stance with regards to the West. Instead, the Soviets focused on providing the GDR with financial assistance, including the cancelling of their debts with the Soviet Union, in order to raise the standard of living, as Soviet Premier Khrushchev

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<sup>61</sup> Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall*, 32.

<sup>62</sup> Dale, *Popular Protest in East Germany*, 19.

<sup>63</sup> See Dale, *Popular Protest in East Germany*, 20; 33-34 for drawn out results and aftermath of the uprising. For further perspectives on June 17<sup>th</sup> see Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, Armin Mitter, and Stefan Wolle, eds. *Der Tag X, 17. Juni 1953: die “Innere Staatsgründung” der DDR als Ergebnis der Krise 1952-54* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1995); Gary Bruce, *Resistance with the People: Repression and Resistance in Eastern Germany, 1945-1955* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Richard Millington, *State, Society and Memories of the Uprising of 17 June 1953 in the GDR* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Christian F. Ostermann and Malcolm Byrne, *Uprising in East Germany 1953: The Cold War, the German Question, and the First Major Upheaval Behind the Iron Curtain* (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2001).

wanted the GDR to establish its own legitimacy and stability without relying on Soviet military intervention.<sup>64</sup>

In the years following, two of Khrushchev's main goals were to consolidate his own power in the Soviet Union while simultaneously easing tensions with the West.<sup>65</sup> During these years, the East Germans were granted increasing independence from Moscow, including the 1955 establishment of a friendship treaty and the granting of full sovereignty (which the Soviets also granted to West Germany in the hopes of pulling them away from the West). This era became known as the "Khrushchev thaw" in the Soviet Union and it remained a turbulent period in the Eastern Bloc. As had occurred in East Germany in 1953, strikes in Poland and a revolution in Hungary in 1956 required Soviet military intervention. Throughout these years of instability, Ulbricht remained steadfast in his policies, using the "SED apparatus" to his own advantage and the "authoritarian political culture" of the GDR to consolidate his hold over society.<sup>66</sup> In 1955, Ulbricht even declared that the New Course had been a bad move that had only given people wrong-headed ideas.<sup>67</sup>

Even though the Soviets were deeply concerned with the people fleeing to the West due in part to the lack of freedom, Ulbricht continued his authoritarian course of action, as well as his devotion to Soviet interests. This was reflected in the anniversary theses. As mentioned in the beginning of this section, the SED theses written in honour of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution in 1957 continued to present the Soviet Union as the vanguard that would continue to show the GDR the way forward. Despite the obvious contradiction with reality, the theses

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<sup>64</sup> Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall*, 8; 40-45.

<sup>65</sup> Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall*, 53-54.

<sup>66</sup> John Connelly, "The Paradox of East German Communism: From Non-Stalinism to Neo-Stalinism" in *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe*, edited by Vladimir Tishmaneanu (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2009), 81.

<sup>67</sup> Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall*, 50-51.



claimed this path was about placing power in the hands of the working people, thereby allowing every citizen to influence state policies. There were great social benefits to be had, the theses went on, as Soviets citizens' lives had been improved by policies that ensured full employment, women's rights, access to education and financial support for students, free healthcare, many holidays and sports, an ability to participate in the cultural life of the nation, freedom to conduct research, and the lowering of prices resulting in ever greater prosperity.<sup>68</sup>

Nonetheless, in spite of such claims, there is no evidence that the people were convinced of the necessity of their overly close connection to the Soviet Union, either in the 1950s or in the following thirty years. That the 1957 theses (or later ones, for that matter), did not convince the public of the necessity of the Soviet connection becomes clear when looking at ordinary East Germans' opinions on the anniversary theses in honour of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GDR. On June 12, 1964, the GDR signed a so-called "Friendship Treaty" with the Soviet Union, which the theses described as follows:

The treaty grants our Republic security against all external attacks and strongly supports the fight for peace and peaceful coexistence in Germany. It allows forces to take effect to such an extent that the imperialist system in West Germany has nothing equivalent with which to counter. Thus, on the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the GDR, more than ever before, it is not imperialism but socialism that will determine the fate and future of the German nation.<sup>69</sup>

In order to stop the spread of any misinformation and stem the development of further negative opinions, as previously mentioned, the National Front secretariat in Dresden had created an accessible pamphlet defending the newly-signed "friendship treaty," which the theses extolled as completely necessary.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, the pamphlet defended the treaty in economic terms: that

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<sup>68</sup> BArch DY 6/5641. Manfred Gerlach, Tagung des Nationalrats der National Front, "Die Aufgaben der National Front zur Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," 1957, p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 4-5.

<sup>70</sup> Again and again, any negative response from the populace was taken on board by the National Front as the populace "lacking a proper understanding" of a situation, or being "not yet aware of" a certain thing.

it would improve quality in exports and fix deadline delays, high costs, and lower production. It pointed out the Soviet Union was the GDR's largest trading partner with 11.2 billion MDN in trade in 1964 alone, and was also a major raw materials and consumer goods provider, supplying the GDR with technical assistance in return for the machines, materials, ships and chemicals produced by the GDR.<sup>71</sup> The pamphlet also claimed that "the stronger our republic is, the better a partner it will be for the Soviet Union in the next twenty years, and the greater its international reputation will become."<sup>72</sup>

In this pamphlet, the National Front also betrayed the SED's continuing insecurity about the GDR's international status, especially vis-à-vis the West, by stating that the friendship treaty had put East Germany in a better position to compete with West Germany.<sup>73</sup> For, as the theses claimed, a deeper connection to the Soviet Union, "the world's strongest peaceful power and the strongest socialist economy," would encourage the GDR's own "rapid technological development," increase its productivity, as well as increase East Germans' "work satisfaction."<sup>74</sup> The theses also underscored the necessity of the Soviet connection by using scare tactics, arguing that closeness to the Soviet Union was the GDR's only chance of preventing war and ensuring peace. For, according to the pamphlet, the German "capitalists" in the West – people like Thyssen, Siemens, Adenauer, Strauß, Erhard and Seebohm – wanted to prevent international

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<sup>71</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2395. Bezirk Dresden National Front Committee, Kommission für Agitation, "5 Fragen – 5 Antworten zum Vertrag über Freundschaft, gegenseitigen Beistand und Zusammenarbeit zwischen der DDR und der UdSSR. Ein Offener Brief an Frau Else Walther," 1964, p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2395. Bezirk Dresden National Front Committee, Kommission für Agitation, "5 Fragen – 5 Antworten zum Vertrag über Freundschaft, gegenseitigen Beistand und Zusammenarbeit zwischen der DDR und der UdSSR. Ein Offener Brief an Frau Else Walther," 1964, p. 3-4.

<sup>73</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2395. Bezirk Dresden National Front Committee, Kommission für Agitation, "5 Fragen – 5 Antworten zum Vertrag über Freundschaft, gegenseitigen Beistand und Zusammenarbeit zwischen der DDR und der UdSSR. Ein Offener Brief an Frau Else Walther," 1964, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 4.

recognition of the GDR because they were planning to expand onto Eastern territory.<sup>75</sup> In response to the question as to whether this new “friendship treaty” would now make German unification more difficult, the pamphlet asserted that the GDR leadership remained interested in reunification and had indeed been trying to ease tensions between the two countries. However, the pamphlet claimed that the problem lay entirely with the West: that West Germany had caused the division in the first place and was still trying to deepen it.<sup>76</sup>

Based on some of the anti-Soviet views they had already heard from the populace, Comrade Rogowski of Berlin’s central Agitation Commission remarked that it should be a top priority for their office to quickly respond and correct them. He said: “We must enable our friends, spokespersons, officials, and agitators to respond more concretely to what ‘flies through the ether’ into the heads of our people.”<sup>77</sup> The problem for the Agitation Commission was that people in the streets had been asking questions like: “Why do we even need a friendship treaty? It is not like it is going to change anything” and “We understand the treaty – why is there such great discussion around it? This is totally unnecessary.” Other East Germans were of the negative opinion that “as a result of this pact, we (the GDR) will become completely dependent on the Soviet Union,” which will certainly result in “at least twenty more years of [German] division.” Still others questioned Soviet motives, asking “Why does the Soviet Union even need us? We are such a small country.”<sup>78</sup> Others voiced the opinion that what the friendship treaty between GDR

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<sup>75</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2395. Bezirk Dresden National Front Committee, Kommission für Agitation, “5 Fragen – 5 Antworten zum Vertrag über Freundschaft, gegenseitigen Beistand und Zusammenarbeit zwischen der DDR und der UdSSR. Ein Offener Brief an Frau Else Walther,” 1964, p. 2-3.

<sup>76</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2395. Bezirk Dresden National Front Committee, Kommission für Agitation, “5 Fragen – 5 Antworten zum Vertrag über Freundschaft, gegenseitigen Beistand und Zusammenarbeit zwischen der DDR und der UdSSR. Ein Offener Brief an Frau Else Walther,” 1964, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> SED Ideological Commission members also belonged to Berlin’s central Agitation Commission. BArch DY 6/2396. H. Rogowski of Agitationskommission, “Bericht: Sitzung der Bez. Agit.-Kommission Leipzig am 8.7.1964,” July 9, 1964, p. 2-3.

<sup>78</sup> BArch DY 6/2396. H. Rogowski of Agitationskommission, “Bericht: Sitzung der Bez. Agit.-Kommission Leipzig am 8.7.1964,” July 9, 1964, p. 2.

and the Soviets really meant was that it would be “at least twenty years” before they could visit West Germany.<sup>79</sup>

Suspicion and distrust of the Soviet Union was to be found everywhere, with a group of people in Leipzig asking if the “revolution” the GDR was supposedly taking part in was really “of their own making,” as “it sounds more like it is the Soviet Union’s revolution.”<sup>80</sup> This same group of people went on to argue that, in direct contrast to what the theses were claiming, it did not appear to them that the goals of the Soviet Union and other socialist states actually intersected with those of the GDR, especially not in the way that the theses were claiming.<sup>81</sup> Rather, in spite of the genuine economic benefits the GDR enjoyed from being part of the Soviet economic system, ordinary Leipzigers actually suspected that the Soviets were taking advantage of them since “we are delivering high quality machines, but only receive bad quality metal and bad automobiles in return.”<sup>82</sup> This distrust extended to their other socialist “brothers” as well, as some East Germans expressed the view that other socialist states were not pulling their weight agriculturally.<sup>83</sup>

Overall, responses such as these show that there was a balance the state needed to strike between creating enough legitimacy (via their connection to the Soviets and their history) so as to create stability, and limiting its pro-Soviet rhetoric enough that a public already hostile to the Soviet Union would not be further alienated. Although the GDR was stable enough (due to the

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<sup>79</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, “Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964,” September 14, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, “Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964,” September 14, 1964, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, “Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964,” September 14, 1964, p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, “Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964,” September 14, 1964, p. 4.

<sup>83</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, “Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964,” September 14, 1964, p. 4.

building of the Wall) by the 1960s to prevent people protesting by fleeing, the SED was still invested in convincing people of its narrative.

### **Creating a new East German Identity through Economic Progress, 1960s-1970s**

The 1960s were a time when the SED was particularly intent on creating a separate identity from West Germany. Jan Palmowski characterizes this as part and parcel of the SED's attempt during the decade following 1958 at "creating a new socialist individual" by first creating a "socialist national culture" in economy and society.<sup>84</sup> With the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 making clear unification was nowhere on the horizon, the East German leadership was able to negotiate a distinctively German socialist identity. After changing the wording of GDR passports in 1964 to proclaim their holders as "citizens of the German Democratic Republic," in 1967, the GDR created an independent citizenship law that directly challenged the West's longstanding claim to represent all Germans living within the 1937 borders of the former Third Reich.<sup>85</sup> Other legitimization measures the SED undertook included rewriting the GDR constitution, first in 1968, and then again in 1974, to be "solely based on principles of socialist law," altering the original 1949 constitution's basis on the German people and "German nation."<sup>86</sup> As Sebastian Gehrig explains, the legitimacy of this new constitution and the concept of a GDR citizen was based on the idea of a people's free choice to self-determination.<sup>87</sup> In a sharp rebuke of the West, the National Front described the GDR as the first "truly democratically

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<sup>84</sup> Palmowski, *Heimat*, 66-67; Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 175.

<sup>85</sup> *The purpose of the West's law was to enable Staatsangehörige and former ethnic Germans (essentially those of German "blood") who may have been living outside of West German state's present borders, with a means of obtaining West German citizenship. This was, of course, problematic from the perspective of the GDR, as the West's claims encompassed the GDR's present-day borders. Sebastian Gehrig, "Cold War Identities: Citizenship, Constitutional Reform, and International Law between East and West Germany, 1967-75," *Journal of Contemporary History* 49, no. 4 (2014), 795; 799.*

<sup>86</sup> Gehrig, "Cold War Identities," 798.

<sup>87</sup> Gehrig, "Cold War Identities," 798.

legitimate German state” as determined by “the majority of the German people [who] want their own peace loving and anti-fascist, democratic Germany.”<sup>88</sup>

This attempt at identity creation pervades the GDR’s 1964 anniversary theses. In them, the SED explains what characteristics set the people of the GDR apart. They were a society of “educated people” who took part in research, especially in the sciences, math, medicine and agricultural disciplines.<sup>89</sup> The SED claimed it was dedicated to increasing education in all subjects while simultaneously connecting these to practical life experience in a so-called “unity of the classroom and productive work experience.”<sup>90</sup> The theses argued that socialism was dedicated to the youth, and provided both boys and girls with all the opportunities they would ever need, including learning about their responsibilities and how to work “creatively.”<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, through its antifascist-democratic school reforms, the theses claimed the state was “freeing” the youth from the influences of militarism and fascism and offering children of all socio-economic backgrounds the chance to be educated for the first time. In school in the GDR, these children would learn about “peace, friendship amongst peoples, and humanism.”<sup>92</sup> The SED was certain the schools teaching such principles would begin the transformation of ordinary people “into socialist human beings who look confidently into the future, and who serve the further development of society with all their talents and abilities.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. National Front Agitationskommission, “Leitfaden für die Auswertung der Thesen der Ideologischen Kommission beim Politbüro des ZK der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR: 15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik für die Bezirkspresse” August 24, 1964, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 32-34.

<sup>90</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 32-33.

<sup>91</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 31.

<sup>92</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 32.

<sup>93</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 28.

Ultimately, the theses were intended to demonstrate a sense of the country's progress: that the more difficult times were behind them, and that the socialist system would ensure a great future for everyone. In contrast to the West, the theses point out that all regions of the GDR were committed to ensuring women were valued in society and government, claiming that "for the first time in the history of Germany, the girls and women of the GDR have the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and talents and to take an active part in societal life."<sup>94</sup> The theses cite the fact that women made up 27% of the *Volkskammer* compared to only 8% of the West German Bundestag as "proof" of the growing power of women – even though the *Volkskammer* in actuality exercised very little real power.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, the Party was proud to say that 650 000 women were competing in production collectives for the title of "Socialist Work Collective," with 33 330 women awarded medals for their extraordinary work efforts.<sup>96</sup> The theses also pointed out how egalitarian high culture was in the GDR: "the arts, which in the capitalist society are accessible only to a small group of chosen people, can be taken in by all in the GDR."<sup>97</sup> In effect, the socialist GDR was a "true people's culture" with a variety of artists and genres of artistic culture that could serve all levels of society, with 100 000 workers belonging to artist movements in 1964.<sup>98</sup> Ultimately, the theses point out that the country's "spiritual foundation is the connection of art with life, the artist with the people, and the people with art."<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 30.

<sup>95</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 30.

<sup>96</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 31.

<sup>97</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 38.

<sup>98</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 38.

<sup>99</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 38.

The reason the SED leadership could finally begin to define what being East German meant was because of the massive changes that came about in the early 1960s. While the 1957 anniversary theses had celebrated the fact that, in 1955, Moscow granted the GDR full sovereignty, as well as the fact that the GDR had joined the newly-formed Warsaw Pact, thus better enabling them to defend “the building of our socialist state,” in reality, these were small victories that ultimately did not solve the main problem of the era.<sup>100</sup> What the leadership actually needed to do was overcome the economic and social issues that were causing hundreds of thousands of East Germans to flee to the West each year, amounting to millions by the end of the decade. While such a population loss certainly did not help with the state’s international reputation, even worse was the economic effect that it had on the already struggling economy. In comparison to West Germany, which grew by nearly nine million people between 1948 and 1961, the GDR’s population declined by two million, from 19.1 to 17.1 million people, during the same time span.<sup>101</sup> Many of those who left were young, educated and skilled, which caused a major problem not only for the country’s economy, but it also did not bode well for the GDR’s existence.

In response, during the late 1950s, the SED carried out some economic and social transformations more in line with Soviet Premier Khrushchev’s destalinization measures. At the SED V Party Congress in July 1958, for example, the Party decided to embark on a 7-year-plan that would “build up” socialism and increase consumption of basic consumer goods. During the first half of 1958, food rationing also finally ended, although prices rose slightly as a result. For

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<sup>100</sup> BArch DY 6/5641, Abteilung Agitation und Propaganda beim ZK der SED, “Thesen zum 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” p. 16.

<sup>101</sup> Patrick Major, “Going West: The Open Border and the Problem of *Republikflucht*,” in *The Workers' and Peasants' State: Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht 1945-71*, ed. Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (Manchester, UK; New York: Manchester University Press 2002), 191.



those who could not afford any higher prices, the SED promised wage increases, while necessities such as bread, cereals, potatoes, as well as utilities and public transportation would continue to be subsidized.<sup>102</sup> These social reforms were also undertaken partly due to Khrushchev wanting to flaunt East Germany as the most successful socialist state, “a vanguard in the struggle against capitalism.”<sup>103</sup> Further “reforms” included increased agricultural collectivization efforts, which inevitably led to food shortages and certain regions needing to begin rationing items such as butter again.<sup>104</sup> While the war had only ended a decade before and the quality of life had certainly improved since then, the reality was that just across the border, West Germany was booming as a result of its “economic miracle.” The contrast was stark.

As the 1950s wore on, the refugee crisis did not abate, but rather, grew progressively worse. In total, 2.7 million people escaped into West Germany between the founding of the GDR in 1949 and the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Of these, nearly one million had been gainfully employed in East Germany, amounting to 13.4% of the working population.<sup>105</sup> After 1953, the year of the June uprising (when over 330 000 people fled), the second highest volume of departures was in 1956 (with 1957 following a close third), during which almost 280 000 people left for West Germany. In fact, in 1956, more people were fleeing every month than the previous month.<sup>106</sup> This was due to the crises in Hungary and Poland that had caused shortages

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<sup>102</sup> Mark Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand: the Politics of Consumerism in East Germany* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005), 175. Landsman points out this continued rationing was embarrassing to GDR leadership because rationing had ended in West Germany back in 1950.

<sup>103</sup> Jan Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945-1990* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 66-67; Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 175.

<sup>104</sup> Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 199-201.

<sup>105</sup> Andre Steiner, *The Plans that Failed: An Economic History of the GDR*, trans. Ewald Osers (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 86.

<sup>106</sup> Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall*, 72.

for the GDR population, especially because industrial production was held back by a shortage of raw materials, including coal and steel.<sup>107</sup>

While there were many reasons that people fled, three of the most common reasons were political, economic and situational.<sup>108</sup> Economically, there was good reason to leave, especially for skilled workers, for due to its “economic miracle,” West Germany was growing very rapidly and offered opportunities for good and well paid work. There were also political reasons that ranged from disagreement with the SED’s political ideology to simply fearing instability and repression. Patrick Major points out that any changes in the political atmosphere increased the number of those fleeing, such as a surge in the aftermath of the June 1953 uprising, and a decline during more relaxed periods in international relations, such as following the Geneva conference in 1955.<sup>109</sup> For other people, leaving was more about reunifying with family members who had left previously, which resulted in so-called “chain departures,” where once one family member departed for the West, slowly other members followed.<sup>110</sup>

As can be traced in the theses, rather than see any deficiencies in their own system, the SED blamed this flood westward on external factors such as, for example, the West, which, “under the pretext of easing tensions, [was] using propaganda about a so-called ‘ideological coexistence’ to spread imperialist ideology in the GDR.”<sup>111</sup> In response, the SED attempted to combat this supposed problem through “‘increased vigilance,’ heightened ‘ideological struggle,’ and strengthening the ‘educational and mass cultural work’ within the populace.”<sup>112</sup> What this

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<sup>107</sup> Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 87.

<sup>108</sup> Patrick Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and the Frontiers of Power* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 191.

<sup>109</sup> Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 198-9

<sup>110</sup> Patrick Major, “Going West,” 191.

<sup>111</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, *Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik*, p. 56.

<sup>112</sup> Corey Ross, “Before the Wall: East Germans, Communist Authority, and the Mass Exodus to the West,” *The Historical Journal* 45, vol 2. (2002), 464. See also, Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 194.

meant was that, as Corey Ross explains, the SED wanted to present *Republikflucht* as resulting from East Germans either having been “seduced by western agents or [having] succumbed to empty promises of a better life.”<sup>113</sup> Another explanation the Party offered was a “lack of ‘ideological steadfastness’ on the part of people who were ‘betraying’ or ‘deserting’ the socialist project.”<sup>114</sup> Ross concludes that the way the Party dealt with these situations was essentially through a “tightening of political control” which, of course, was often a main reason that people left in the first place.<sup>115</sup> It was a self-defeating strategy.

The building of the Berlin Wall on August 13, 1961 finally solved the “problem” of the open border. Indeed, the GDR’s 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary theses boasted of having “secured the state border” (*Sicherung der Staatsgrenze*) against the dangers posed by the West.<sup>116</sup> Overnight, the Wall reinforced the GDR’s existence as a distinctly separate state from the West and made the division of the two countries much more permanent. Although Ulbricht had long desired a more secure border, it was only during a three-day meeting of the political consultative committee of the Warsaw Treaty Organization in early August 1961 that the decision was made to create a border wall.<sup>117</sup> It is likely that the decision to build the Wall was influenced in part by US President Kennedy’s televised speech in July 1961 from Washington, in which the president made clear to the world that the US would continue to defend West Berlin’s existence. It is also likely that the Soviets made this decision because they resented the economic drain that the GDR was on the Soviet economy, at essentially “supplying [the] bottomless pit of the GDR economy”

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<sup>113</sup> Ross, “Before the Wall,” 467.

<sup>114</sup> Ross, “Before the Wall,” 467.

<sup>115</sup> Ross, “Before the Wall,” 465.

<sup>116</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p.15.

<sup>117</sup> Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 204. See also Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall*. Major states that there are no explicit references in any surviving documents as to when this decision was made, though he affirms final decision was only made a few days beforehand, once the Soviets finally agreed to it. See Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 108.

whilst itself struggling with shortages.<sup>118</sup> As Patrick Major explains, the other alternative, that of organizing another blockade of West Berlin, was just too difficult to implement, especially as the Soviets failed miserably the first time in 1947-48.<sup>119</sup>

Once the border was closed, the SED could go about “building up” socialism without the constant threat of people fleeing in reaction to any unpopular measures. In the anniversary theses of 1957, pride and legitimacy in the state had been mostly based on the GDR’s membership in the great “socialist world system” led by the Soviet Union. However, the existence of the Wall slightly changed this messaging: it is clear from internal memos that the Party designed their 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary theses of 1964 to remind GDR citizens of their recent past in order to contrast it to their present successes. By the mid-1960s, the SED thought new opportunities would lead the economy to grow even stronger, which would in turn raise the living standard, as it claimed industrial production had risen a total of 344% from 1950 to 1963.<sup>120</sup> The SED also claimed the construction of the Wall resulted in increased investments in production from 1960 to 1963 by 108% and in individual consumption by 105%.<sup>121</sup> Impressive numbers like these were designed to encourage East Germans’ “pride in their own efforts,” as well as to develop confidence in their own abilities.<sup>122</sup> The truth was, however, that closing the border did not entirely solve the GDR’s economic problems. Initially, the supply of basic goods actually got worse, and by the summer of 1962, there were fewer supplies than a year before, with some regions having less butter and meat than when rations were still in effect, while fishmeal and water was being added to meat

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<sup>118</sup> Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 109-11.

<sup>119</sup> Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 109-11.

<sup>120</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 11.

<sup>121</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 15.

<sup>122</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. National Front Agitationskommission, “Leitfaden für die Auswertung der Thesen der Ideologischen Kommission beim Politbüro des ZK der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR: 15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik für die Bezirkspresse,” August 24, 1964, p. 2.

products elsewhere.<sup>123</sup> These food and manufactured goods shortages lasted into 1963 and it was only through raising prices to decrease demand while also increasing imports from the West that the SED was able to gain control of the situation.<sup>124</sup> Although the intensification of agricultural collectivization had seriously affected agricultural production, goods and food production did rise from 1963 onwards.<sup>125</sup>

Ulbricht was a main proponent of the New Economic System (NES) of 1963/1964, which aimed to modernize the economy and increase productivity and quality, all while lowering costs in an attempt to “simulate market mechanisms” without actually introducing them.<sup>126</sup> The way to achieve this increased productivity was through opening up to western technologies and increasing further scientific technological development.<sup>127</sup> Indeed, the SED described the NES as combining “the great goals of scientific and technological advances directly with the material interests of individuals and collectives of our society.”<sup>128</sup> The technological advances taking place “under the rule and leadership of the working class” included new blasting furnaces and steelworks, brown coal collectives, large chemical plants, modern shipyards, a deep-sea fleet, a capable mechanical engineering industry, and an electronic industry.<sup>129</sup> The closed border allowed a certain relief in the pressures of consumer demand: now the SED would have time to carry out improvements in order to increase the supply to the consumer.<sup>130</sup> In doing all of this, Andre Steiner argues that the SED was essentially “wooing” the populace “for acceptance.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 166.

<sup>124</sup> Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 210-11.

<sup>125</sup> Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 129.

<sup>126</sup> Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 109- 111.

<sup>127</sup> Major, *The Behind the Berlin Wall*, 166.

<sup>128</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 18.

<sup>129</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 16.

<sup>130</sup> Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 212.

<sup>131</sup> Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 112.

Indeed, the SED claimed that by 1963, huge gains had been made in the availability of consumer goods, amounting to 38/100 households owning a television set (up from 5/100 in 1958), 16/100 households having refrigerators (from 2/100 in 1958), while 18/100 households owned electric washing machines (up from 2/100 in 1958).<sup>132</sup> The National Front argued that continuing to strengthen the economy through the technical revolution and the NES was not only their best defence against the West, but would also result in them overtaking the West economically. Once this happened, the SED argued in the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary theses, it would prove that the modern socialist economy could stand strong on the international stage.<sup>133</sup>

However, these reforms ran into difficulties just a few short years later. In reality, simulating market mechanisms never worked because central control was only slightly and temporarily eased, prices were never reformed, and Moscow was never really supportive of them, especially after Leonid Brezhnev replaced the more reform-minded Khrushchev as Soviet Premier.<sup>134</sup> Other problems with the reforms included workers complaining about the continued use of outdated and substandard equipment and a lack of raw materials.<sup>135</sup> This was made worse when in 1964-65, the Soviet Union cut deliveries of raw materials and agricultural products, forcing the GDR to turn to the West.<sup>136</sup> During 1965/66, as a result of further difficulties, Ulbricht announced at the 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum meeting in December 1965 that there would be a partial return to the centralized economy.<sup>137</sup> Then, in 1967, a different “Economic System of Socialism” replaced the original New Economic System, involving long-term forecasts determining

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<sup>132</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 25.

<sup>133</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. National Front Agitationskommission, “Leitfaden für die Auswertung der Thesen der Ideologischen Kommission beim Politbüro des ZK der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR: 15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik für die Bezirkspresse,” August 24, 1964, p. 4.

<sup>134</sup> Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 211.

<sup>135</sup> Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 167.

<sup>136</sup> Steiner, *The Plans That Failed*, 115.

<sup>137</sup> Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 174.

production and consumption, with sectors such as chemicals, engineering, electronics, manufacturing of data-processing technology and automation given priority in resource allocation.<sup>138</sup> Despite all of the economic growth the GDR experienced in the 1960s, including importantly in investments, the gap between East and West continued to grow.<sup>139</sup> All economic reform came to an end when the SED reintroduced central planning after the events of the 1968 Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia and Moscow took a hardline position against any further liberalization measures.<sup>140</sup>

### **Public Opinion: Struggling to Adapt to State Policy**

An important aspect of disseminating the anniversary theses was for the National Front to find out what messages the populace had actually absorbed. During the 1960s in particular, officials were curious to see whether ordinary people believed the anniversary messaging that promoted the growing economic prosperity and the ever-expanding welfare state. In inquiring about the populace's thoughts on the theses, which likely happened at forums, discussions after lectures, and other gatherings, National Front representatives reported that for many East Germans, the most pressing issues were those of the travel restrictions and their frustrations with contradictions in the state's messaging vis-à-vis the West. As previously discussed, East Germans told officials time and again that based on their personal experiences with Westerners, the West was neither as dangerous nor as economically disadvantaged as the official propaganda made it out to be and thus the border need not be closed. But the National Front also discovered that many East Germans simply did not believe the anniversary theses' outlandish claims that eastern

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<sup>138</sup> Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 119-121. Eventually, however, the list of that which was classified as an important resource became too long and could not be supported.

<sup>139</sup> Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 126-7

<sup>140</sup> Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 212. Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 168.

economic prosperity exceeded that of the West, especially as they could not travel there to see for themselves.

One major result of putting up the Berlin Wall was that the GDR population's travel options during the 1960s became very limited to places within the GDR (Baltic resorts, Harz mountains, Erzgebirge) and also to certain areas within the Soviet Union and Soviet Bloc countries such as Czechoslovakia and Poland (opportunities that were reduced after 1968 and 1980 respectively) as well as Bulgaria. Even in these cases, there were bureaucratic delays in obtaining the necessary visas before visa-free travel was introduced in 1972.<sup>141</sup> Yet, opportunities to travel elsewhere, particularly westwards, were simply not available for most of the GDR population. Indeed, by the 1970s and 1980s, as Charles Maier comments, many young people would have preferred travel opportunities to even "abstract intellectual freedoms."<sup>142</sup>

While preventing a further drain on the economy, the SED's decision to limit western travel to the elderly was not a popular one amongst the rest of the population, as everyone wanted the chance to travel. Although most regions reported some people expressing the opinion that allowing the elderly to travel was a step in the right direction towards easing border tensions, others had many objections. Questions the public raised included those from young people from Halle, who asked: "Why are the travel restrictions not applied in the same way to all? Do they really not trust the younger citizens at all?" At the very least, these young people argued, the leadership could "loosen the restrictions in the event of a severe illness or death in the family" to all age groups.<sup>143</sup> Another option people wanted implemented included allowing the elderly who

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<sup>141</sup> Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 197.

<sup>142</sup> Charles Maier, quoted in Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 197.

<sup>143</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, "Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964," September 14, 1964, p. 7.



were overly ill or frail to be accompanied by younger caregivers.<sup>144</sup> Others pointed out that only allowing the elderly to travel was very convenient for the leadership because “if they were to stay over there, then the state will no longer have to pay them their pensions, and their apartments will then become vacant [and thereby help ease the housing shortage].”<sup>145</sup> In another instance, some young Berliners put it even more directly, commenting that “those who are retired are just a drain on the country, so we are giving them the opportunity to just take off.”<sup>146</sup>

Meanwhile, youth in *Bezirk* Gera, seemingly unafraid of posing difficult questions, asked the National Front representatives directly if it “was really necessary to shoot people at the Wall?”<sup>147</sup> Others in Gera cynically picked up on the National Front’s continuously evolving rhetoric and asked why those GDR citizens who had fled West had been previously denounced as “traitors” or “the enemy,” but were now suddenly being courted as “welcome guests” back in the GDR?<sup>148</sup> In Karl-Marx-Stadt, some people questioned why exactly the GDR’s border control “was so strict, even between other socialist nations?,” rightly pointing out that “this is not the case between capitalist countries like West Germany and Italy.”<sup>149</sup> Others, knowing that the SED was trying to entice West Germans to visit the GDR during their anniversary celebrations in order to get them to participate in the “demonstrations” that took place, asked why these West

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<sup>144</sup> BArch DY 6/2397. Agitationskommission, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “Bericht über die Thesen zum 15. Jahrestag der DDR,” September 25, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>145</sup> BArch DY 6/2397. Agitationskommission, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “Bericht über die Thesen zum 15. Jahrestag der DDR,” September 25, 1964, p. 2; BArch DY 6/2397. Kreissekretär Schipporeit of the National Front Kreisausschuß Schwerin-Stadt, “Informationsbericht Nr 3. Über die Vorbereitungen zum 15. Jahrestag der DDR,” September 21, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>146</sup> BArch DY 6/2396. Sekretariat des Nationalrates, Kommission für Agitation/Presse, “Presse Information Nr. 33,” (Kirchhof copy), September 21, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>147</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, “Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964,” September 14, 1964, p. 5.

<sup>148</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, “Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964,” September 14, 1964, p. 5.

<sup>149</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, “Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964,” September 14, 1964, p. 5.

Germans could not just visit their East German relatives instead?<sup>150</sup> In Pirna, in *Bezirk* Dresden, people even described the futility of expressing such opinions: “Since August 13, 1961 the citizens of the GDR have been living in a prison. We can make however many suggestions we want, but it will change nothing in the relationship between the two German states.”<sup>151</sup> Surely, these are not the comments of a public that was outside the state’s message. Feelings of mistrust, a “prison-like” atmosphere, a sense of unfairness amongst the younger segment of the population, and a generally cynical view towards official state policy point toward a public that was unhappy with – yet resigned to – the drudgery of their existence.

From the official perspective, Comrade Rogowski of the Agitation Commission in Leipzig was of the opinion that a major reason the populace was challenging the official version of events as laid out in numerous propaganda – the anniversary theses included – was due to the population’s access to Western media. People on the streets repeatedly cited their opposing opinions as having come from the West German press, what the National Front referred to as that “hostile” (*feindliche*) television and radio.<sup>152</sup> It is also clear from the markings in the margins of the regional opinion reports that officials in Berlin were indeed reading these reports and taking stock of the negative opinions. The Agitation Commission of Dresden stated that: “The question that is becoming more urgent is: How can we help our activist friends and helpers answer the many questions of our population in the enterprises and residential areas in a better and more convincing way?”<sup>153</sup> As a result, the National Front recommended the press and representatives

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<sup>150</sup> BArch DY 6/2397. Agitationskommission, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “Bericht über die Thesen zum 15. Jahrestag der DDR,” September 25, 1964, p. 3.

<sup>151</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, “Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964,” September 14, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>152</sup> Interestingly, the Agitation Commission concluded that East Germans seemed completely unaware of what the West German press was *printing*, however. BArch DY 6/2396. H. Rogowski of Agitationskommission, “Bericht: Sitzung der Bez. Agit.-Kommission Leipzig am 8.7.1964,” July 9, 1964, p. 3.

<sup>153</sup> BArch DY 6/2396. H. Rogowski of Agitationskommission, “Bericht: Sitzung der Bez. Agit.-Kommission Leipzig am 8.7.1964,” July 9, 1964, p. 3.

leading subsequent theses discussions to address any critiques by presenting counter-arguments.<sup>154</sup> What this continuing presence of negative opinions tells us is that many East Germans, at least in this time period, felt able to express their misgivings about state policy directly to National Front officials themselves (albeit lower-level ones) to the point where officials came to expect such responses.

Some East Germans were even willing to go beyond criticizing individual policies and cast doubt on the entire socialist project. In a few instances, several people directly contradicted the theses' claim about the GDR's current economic prosperity, questioning whether the GDR would actually "ever catch up and overtake the West." They pointed out that the GDR press itself had admitted that the GDR was still currently behind the West. One person in Schwerin made the point that "overtaking capitalism is not really possible because capitalism itself does not stand still in its development."<sup>155</sup> In Dresden, some people stated that while they found socialism in the GDR to be "okay," they did not much like the accompanying difficulties in obtaining and distributing goods, which seemed to them to be "a contradiction" (*Widerspruch*) of what socialism should be about.<sup>156</sup> In Karl-Marx-Stadt, people argued that the GDR was certainly not as strong economically as the theses were claiming and that other socialist countries were struggling as much as they were: "If we are as strong as the theses claim, then why does our East Mark not have the same international recognition as the West Mark?"<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> See, for example, BArch DY 6/2397. Bezirksekretär Klösel, National Front Bezirksausschuß Rostock, "Informationsbericht," October 6, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>155</sup> BArch DY 6/2397. Kreissekretär Schipporeit of the National Front Kreisausschuß Schwerin-Stadt, "Informationsbericht Nr 3. Über die Vorbereitungen zum 15. Jahrestag der DDR," September 21, 1964, p.1-2; 4.

<sup>156</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, "Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964," September 14, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>157</sup> BArch DY 6/ 2396. Horst Brasch to Paula Acker, Zentrale Agitationskommission beim ZK der SED, "Anlage zum Brief von 14.9.1964," September 14, 1964, p. 5.

Overall, negative opinions such as these are a strong indicator that many East Germans were not absorbing the anniversary theses in the way that the SED wanted. Access to western media certainly played a role in this rejection, but also, the inability of ordinary people to be heard by those in power in order to be able to effect change was also an important factor. Even though some East Germans were so cynical that they voiced some misgivings about the socialist project directly, such opinions indicate that while many had accepted the situation in the GDR, they nevertheless desired the ability to change specific policies they felt were unjust – such as the shooting deaths of those trying to escape over the Wall or the SED’s mischaracterization of the dangers of the West.

Although the peoples’ inability to effect substantial political change from within their own country would never change, a change in the international situation at the end of the 1960s led the East German leadership to begin to make changes of their own accord from within, such as replacing Ulbricht with Erich Honecker, as well as taking real steps on the outside towards achieving legitimacy on the world stage. As early as the 1964 theses, the SED had boasted that despite West Germany’s attempts to isolate the GDR, “the reactionary Hallstein Doctrine has been breached.”<sup>158</sup> Although such a claim was premature at that time, it became a reality just a few years later. While the conservative wing of the ruling western CDU/CSU had long been opposed to rapprochement with the East, beginning in the mid-1960s, the West German SPD became open to détente, with the process accelerating when it came to power in May 1969.<sup>159</sup> One of the main goals of the SED in pursuing rapprochement with the West was that of economic

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<sup>158</sup> BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938, Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, p. 41.

<sup>159</sup> For a more detailed discussion about the Western political parties’ differing approaches to détente with the East, see William Gray Glenn, *Germany’s Cold War: The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany, 1949-1969*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

benefit, as the leadership wanted “increased trade in desirable goods, easy terms of payment and credit, and direct financial transfers and payments.”<sup>160</sup> Both Ulbricht and later Honecker wanted to prove that the East could be made into “a model of socialist economic success” every bit as economically viable as the West.<sup>161</sup> However, as Mary Sarotte argues, détente was less about the two Germanies working it out amongst themselves, than it was about the relationship between the Soviet Union and the US. She describes SED negotiations during Ostpolitik as “a mixture of financial and political motives and constrained by the need to follow Soviet guidance” where the SED’s most important priority alternated between international recognition and financial gain.<sup>162</sup>

Despite the fact that the West ultimately refused to officially recognize the GDR, “normalized” relations were established between the two countries when the Basic Treaty was signed in 1972 (and the East conveniently accepted hundreds of millions of West German Marks worth of credit at the same time).<sup>163</sup> This meant increased movement of goods, representatives instead of ambassadors, reconnecting telephones between East and West Berlin, and importantly, a loosening of travelling restrictions for Western visitors to come see their close Eastern relatives.<sup>164</sup> In 1971-72, there was also a predictable rise in Western visitors, something which also helpfully increased the flow of West German currency into the country.<sup>165</sup>

### **The Superiority of Socialism: Improved Social Policies and International Legitimacy**

A month prior to the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Founding of the GDR in 1974, the National Front Central Committee told its regional counterparts to remind East Germans in the events for

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<sup>160</sup> Mary Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil: East Germany, Détente, and Ostpolitik, 1969-1973* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 164-5.

<sup>161</sup> Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil*, 164-5.

<sup>162</sup> Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil*, 166.

<sup>163</sup> Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil*, 166.

<sup>164</sup> Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 198.

<sup>165</sup> Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 190.

the upcoming anniversary that “during the years of the growth of the republic – our very successful years – socialist society has become much richer, and the social ownership of every citizen has become much more valuable. This is what is driving our growing prosperity.”<sup>166</sup>

During the same year, new GDR leader Erich Honecker echoed a similar idea when he told a regional SED delegate conference that: “Our country has successfully entered a new phase in the development of socialism. Great advances are as noticeable in people's everyday lives as they are in the economy and in the development of spiritual and cultural life.”<sup>167</sup>

The SED was proud of what it had achieved in just twenty-five years, arguing in its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary theses that the obvious vitality of socialism on German soil had proven once and for all “the superiority of their humanitarian (*menschenfreundlichen*) society over [an] inhumane (*menschenfeindlichen*) imperialist society.”<sup>168</sup> Also noteworthy was that the anniversary theses from the early 1970s onwards, such as those in honour of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II, the *Befreiung vom Faschismus* in 1975, began referring to the existence of “two states on German soil: the socialist German national state of the GDR and the mono-capitalist West German Federal Republic, an imperialist NATO-state.”<sup>169</sup> This new era also heralded important changes in rhetoric, where the Party dropped references to reunification and a reunited

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<sup>166</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 2987. Abteilung Agitation beim Sekretariat des Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “25 Jahre DDR-Entwicklung und Ergebnisse: Arbeitsmaterial für die Bezirks- und Kreissekretäre der Nationalen Front,” September 2, 1974, p. 16.

<sup>167</sup> Erich Honecker, Feb 10. 1974, quoted in BArch DY 6/ vorl. 2987. Abteilung Agitation beim Sekretariat des Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “25 Jahre DDR-Entwicklung und Ergebnisse: Arbeitsmaterial für die Bezirks- und Kreissekretäre der Nationalen Front,” September 2, 1974, p. 31.

<sup>168</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 2987. Abteilung Agitation beim Sekretariat des Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “25 Jahre DDR-Entwicklung und Ergebnisse: Arbeitsmaterial für die Bezirks- und Kreissekretäre der Nationalen Front,” September 2, 1974, p. 31.

<sup>169</sup> BArch DY 30 J IV 2 2 1280. Anlage 1. zum Umlauf-Protokoll Nr. 20/70 des Politbüros des Zentralkomitees, “Aufruf des Nationalrates der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland zum 25. Jahrestag der Befreiung vom Hitlerfaschismus,” April 20, 1970, p. 2.

German people and began reinforcing the GDR's separate and independent existence by replacing references to a "German nation" with simply "GDR."<sup>170</sup>

What had changed was that the international recognition of the existence of two German states through détente and West Germany's new policy of Ostpolitik had given the GDR the legitimacy and international recognition it had craved for so long. The GDR could now focus on establishing itself on the world stage by joining organizations such as the Helsinki Accord, as well as the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). However, it was its admission to the UN in 1974 that the SED counted as one of their greatest achievements, as was diplomatic recognition by a 100<sup>th</sup> state, Madagascar, in November 1973.<sup>171</sup> In addition, the Basic Treaty of 1972, by establishing "normalized" relations with the West, resulted in important domestic implications such as allowing the East greater access to the Western markets, hard cash flow, and most importantly, loans, thus enabling Honecker to improve social welfare programs available to the people of the GDR.

Fulbrook describes this period in the early 1970s as the GDR's "brief 'golden age'" in which "the early anger and repression of the 1950s was replaced by a more smoothly functioning if drab and oppressive system in the 1960s and 1970s."<sup>172</sup> Improvement to social programs had first begun under Ulbricht after the SED VII Party Congress in 1967, when the five-day work week was implemented, child benefits and pensions grew slightly, and the minimum wage rose from 220 to 300 East Marks monthly.<sup>173</sup> At the SED's VIII Party Congress in 1971, Honecker set the tone for his tenure by promising wage increases and more availability of consumer goods, as

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<sup>170</sup> McKay, *The Official Concept of the Nation in the Former GDR*, 99. See also Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 164.

<sup>171</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 2987. Abteilung Agitation beim Sekretariat des Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, "25 Jahre DDR-Entwicklung und Ergebnisse: Arbeitsmaterial für die Bezirks- und Kreissekretäre der Nationalen Front," September 2, 1974, p. 8.

<sup>172</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 172-173.

<sup>173</sup> Schmidt, "Social Policy in the German Democratic Republic," 65.

well as further increases in social services and basic material security.<sup>174</sup> It was also at this time that Honecker first established what would, by 1976, become the official “unity of economic and social policy” (*Einheit von Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik*) – that is, the creation of social policies and subsidization of consumer goods in the short term that would, Honecker believed, eventually result in long-term economic gain.<sup>175</sup> At its most basic level, the SED thought its social policies would “rouse workers to increased work discipline and performance and thereby lift labor productivity,” which would, in turn, create more revenue for the state to fund those same social policies.<sup>176</sup> For, as the National Front explained it, “the higher standard of living we are aiming for is, and remains, a commitment to higher performance.”<sup>177</sup>

Mark Landsman describes these years of “real existing socialism” as a time when Honecker was actually “expand[ing] consumption and material security in return for political quietude, if not loyalty.”<sup>178</sup> Improving the availability of and subsidizing the cost of consumer goods, as well as by heavily subsidizing public transit and housing, made it appear as though life had improved for the average citizen.<sup>179</sup> This was not entirely inaccurate, for while still not comparable to the prosperity of the West, East Germans’ “moderately comfortable material existence,” in spite of some material shortages, was at least superior to elsewhere in the Eastern Bloc, especially Poland.<sup>180</sup>

The emphasis Honecker placed on his new social policies and their positive impact on the economy translated directly into the anniversary theses discussions during the 1970s. For one, the

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<sup>174</sup> Mark Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 215.

<sup>175</sup> Schmidt, “Social Policy in the German Democratic Republic,” 35-37; 68.

<sup>176</sup> Schmidt, “Social Policy in the German Democratic Republic,” 35.

<sup>177</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 2987. Abteilung Agitation beim Sekretariat des Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “25 Jahre DDR-Entwicklung und Ergebnisse: Arbeitsmaterial für die Bezirks- und Kreissekretäre der Nationalen Front,” September 2, 1974, p. 32.

<sup>178</sup> Mark Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 215.

<sup>179</sup> Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 168.

<sup>180</sup> Fulbrook, *Anatomy*, 5.



National Front in Berlin told its regional committees to remind the populace that “we can afford more now than ever before because we are achieving more economically.”<sup>181</sup> The National Front also claimed that it had long been common knowledge that “the GDR is above the European average for all major consumer goods in terms of per capita consumption or stock per 100 households.”<sup>182</sup> The regional committees were also instructed to communicate to the populace that, by 1974, the state was offering 50% more social benefits than had existed between 1966-1970, benefits that were “an advantage for everyone,” including subsidies for education and health care, ensuring low prices of basic needs, and maintaining low and stable rents.<sup>183</sup> For a four-person family, these subsidies amounted to approximately 290 East Marks per month in 1965, grew to 360 Marks in 1970, and then grew even more to 470 Marks per month by 1973.<sup>184</sup> At the same time, the state also ensured that workers’ wages increased. The National Front reported the average monthly income for an “industry” worker as having increased from 310 Marks in 1949 to 846 Marks in 1973, while for someone working in the construction industry, the average monthly income rose from 300 Marks in 1949 to 901 Marks in 1973.<sup>185</sup> The minimum wage had also increased, to 350 Marks per month in 1971, and then up to 400 Marks per month

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<sup>181</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 2987. Abteilung Agitation beim Sekretariat des Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “25 Jahre DDR-Entwicklung und Ergebnisse: Arbeitsmaterial für die Bezirks- und Kreissekretäre der Nationalen Front,” September 2, 1974, p. 17.

<sup>182</sup> Of course, this omits further context, such as whether this figure refers to Eastern or Western Europe. BArch DY 6/ vorl. 2987. Abteilung Agitation beim Sekretariat des Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “25 Jahre DDR-Entwicklung und Ergebnisse: Arbeitsmaterial für die Bezirks- und Kreissekretäre der Nationalen Front,” September 2, 1974, p. 18.

<sup>183</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 2987. Abteilung Agitation beim Sekretariat des Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “25 Jahre DDR-Entwicklung und Ergebnisse: Arbeitsmaterial für die Bezirks- und Kreissekretäre der Nationalen Front,” September 2, 1974, p. 17.

<sup>184</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 2987. Abteilung Agitation beim Sekretariat des Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “25 Jahre DDR-Entwicklung und Ergebnisse: Arbeitsmaterial für die Bezirks- und Kreissekretäre der Nationalen Front,” September 2, 1974, p. 17.

<sup>185</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 2987. Abteilung Agitation beim Sekretariat des Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “25 Jahre DDR-Entwicklung und Ergebnisse: Arbeitsmaterial für die Bezirks- und Kreissekretäre der Nationalen Front,” September 2, 1974, p. 17.

by 1976, while working hours had lessened and vacation days had increased.<sup>186</sup> The regional committees were also to remind the populace of the next great building program that the SED had decided upon at their VIII Party Congress. The National Front pointed out that between the years 1949 to 1973, 1.6 million new apartments had already been built GDR-wide, while in Berlin alone, 127 535 new apartments had been constructed, with a further 163 292 being renovated.<sup>187</sup>

Overall, the National Front's theses characterized their jubilee year of 1974 as a culmination of years of successful efforts. The anniversary intended to make clear to the East German people that their years of sacrifice had resulted in a good standard of living, and that they now enjoyed a social safety net that was "better than the uncertainty offered by capitalism because no landlord or raising of prices can land us on the street."<sup>188</sup> It seems that the SED's goal went beyond merely trying to keep up with the West, however, and was more about ensuring that East Germans were able to realize the social advantages provided by their socialist system could not be found in the individualist capitalist West. Therefore, reminding East Germans of such benefits was intended to convince them that after years of hard work, their benevolent socialist state by the 1970s was not only a success internationally, but also domestically – and was a place where people could now flourish.

### **Diverging with Reality in the late 1970s and 1980s**

At a conference in honour of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GDR in 1979, prominent SED ideological strategist Kurt Hager proudly proclaimed that 127 countries had now recognized the

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<sup>186</sup> Schmidt, "Social Policy in the German Democratic Republic," 70.

<sup>187</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 2987. Abteilung Agitation beim Sekretariat des Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, "25 Jahre DDR-Entwicklung und Ergebnisse: Arbeitsmaterial für die Bezirks- und Kreissekretäre der Nationalen Front," September 2, 1974, p. 23.

<sup>188</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 2987. Abteilung Agitation beim Sekretariat des Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, "25 Jahre DDR-Entwicklung und Ergebnisse: Arbeitsmaterial für die Bezirks- und Kreissekretäre der Nationalen Front," September 2, 1974, p. 18-19.

GDR's statehood.<sup>189</sup> This widespread recognition of the GDR's legitimacy was something the SED had craved for so long, and yet, contrary to the anniversary theses' continued claims of prosperity, this time period at the end of the 1970s marked the beginning of the GDR's final period of instability and decline. Major describes the advances of the 1970s as having "merely created consumerist aspirations which could not be met in the shadow of the Wall."<sup>190</sup> The underlying problem was that Honecker and his close advisors, such as Günter Mittag, had chosen to maintain the GDR's "traditional Soviet centralized planning" despite it costing them heavily in the form of price subsidies, western goods imports, and expensive social benefits (of which they were so proud), all financed through loans from the West.<sup>191</sup> Although this plan of taking on more debt had initially improved living standards in the early 1970s, it eventually led to trade deficits, with the GDR consuming most of their imports, not making enough long-term investments, and thus requiring ever more loans (resulting in astronomical interest payments).<sup>192</sup> GDR exports were uncompetitive abroad as their "advanced" technology did not meet Western standards of quality, delivery, service and availability of replacement parts, resulting in the GDR even more heavily relying on expensive imports.<sup>193</sup> Worldwide oil crises in 1973 and 1979 and the resulting increases in prices for foreign goods and decreasing deliveries from the Soviet Union (especially in 1979), placed the GDR in an increasingly desperate economic situation.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> BArch DY 30/27098. Kurt Hager, "Unser Staat - unser Stolz," Speech at the Wissenschaftliche Konferenz zum 40. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR "30 Jahre DDR - ein Sieg des Marxismus-Leninismus," June 18, 1979, p. 3.

<sup>190</sup> Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 193. These social policies also came at the expense of infrastructural investment, see in Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 168.

<sup>191</sup> See Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 215.

<sup>192</sup> Zatlin, Quoted in Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 215-16. Zatlin describes the situation the GDR was in as "Eating oranges instead of buying equipment to boost exports and pay for the oranges."

<sup>193</sup> Steiner, *Plans that Failed*, 162. Ralf Ahrens, "East German Foreign Trade in the Honecker Years" in *The East German Economy, 1945-2010: Falling Behind or Catching Up?*, edited by Hartmut Berghoff and Uta A. Balbier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 169-170.

<sup>194</sup> Indeed, the second oil crisis of 1979 resulted in the Soviets cutting deliveries of oil, which forced the GDR to turn even more to brown coal. See Peter Grieder, *The German Democratic Republic* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 87.

Unsurprisingly, the anniversary theses made no mention of this economic situation and indeed claimed the opposite, proudly maintaining the rhetoric of the early 1970s describing the GDR as economically sound and still able to offer substantial social benefits. The theses thus continued to offer the now 30-year-old justifications as to why socialism was superior to capitalism – which betrayed the SED’s continuing insecurities. In a speech in honour of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GDR in 1979, Hager reiterated the now rote argument of the GDR as a nurturing and benevolent state that cared for its people, in stark contrast to the “old” system of capitalism that took advantage of its people. Hager repeated the narrative that it was the initiative and willingness of the workers that strengthened state power, “all for the benefit of the whole of society and every individual citizen.”<sup>195</sup> Even better for the people, Hager pointed out (as so many SED officials had done in the 1950s, itself an argument made by the Soviet Communist Party), was that the people’s “workers party” continued to run their state.<sup>196</sup> Worthy of pride, Hager went on, was the GDR’s great “modern education system, ” which, in combination with the state’s focus on science, technology, education, health, and culture, had made the GDR into a great socialist society and provided great potential for the future.<sup>197</sup> In such a country, all workers were useful, as they led to the creation of a “healthy and progressive democracy” – something which, as Hager made clear, demonstrated socialist culture’s complete superiority over capitalist culture.<sup>198</sup> Further demonstrating the superiority of the socialist state, Hager declared the GDR as

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<sup>195</sup> BArch DY 30/27098. Kurt Hager, “Unser Staat - unser Stolz,” Speech at the Wissenschaftliche Konferenz zum 40. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR “30 Jahre DDR - ein Sieg des Marxismus-Leninismus,” June 18, 1979, p. 43-45.

<sup>196</sup> BArch DY 30/27098. Kurt Hager, “Unser Staat - unser Stolz,” Speech at the Wissenschaftliche Konferenz zum 40. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR “30 Jahre DDR - ein Sieg des Marxismus-Leninismus,” June 18, 1979, p. 43-45.

<sup>197</sup> BArch DY 30/27098. Kurt Hager, “Unser Staat - unser Stolz,” Speech at the Wissenschaftliche Konferenz zum 40. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR “30 Jahre DDR - ein Sieg des Marxismus-Leninismus,” June 18, 1979, p. 15; p. 41-42.

<sup>198</sup> BArch DY 30/27098. Kurt Hager, “Unser Staat - unser Stolz,” Speech at the Wissenschaftliche Konferenz zum 40. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR “30 Jahre DDR - ein Sieg des Marxismus-Leninismus,” June 18, 1979, p. 43-45.

being the embodiment of the values of “true freedom and equality,” a state that “guarantees all citizens political freedom and social rights, including equality for all, irrespective of race or national identity, worldview, religion or social status.”<sup>199</sup> Despite the growing indications to the contrary, Hager concluded that “socialism was the future.”<sup>200</sup>

The reason the SED sought to continue to emphasize the superiority of socialism from a moral standpoint was because as the years went by, it became increasingly obvious to everyone that the GDR would never catch up to or surpass the West economically, even if the true nature of the state’s debt and impending collapse remained unknown to the public (or even most of the Politburo, for that matter). For example, in 1975, locals from *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt pointed out to National Front representatives the various inconsistencies in the information they had been given by official sources, specifically, the misrepresentation by the state of the level of unemployment in the West. They said that visitors who came to the GDR had assured them that: “In spite of the crisis, a good standard of living can still be seen in the Federal Republic of Germany.”<sup>201</sup> Not only did such opinions directly contradict the official Party portrayal of the West as teetering on the brink of catastrophe due to widespread unemployment, it also directly pointed to the fact that state efforts at painting the GDR as a more successful state than the West were not resonating. Other ordinary GDR citizens were even more critical of their state, arguing that the capitalist West actually had a better social welfare system than the socialist East, since the crises in the West “have brought no significant deterioration in peoples’ living conditions;

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<sup>199</sup> BArch DY 30/27098. Kurt Hager, “Unser Staat - unser Stolz,” Speech at the Wissenschaftliche Konferenz zum 40. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR “30 Jahre DDR - ein Sieg des Marxismus-Leninismus,” June 18, 1979, p. 34.

<sup>200</sup> BArch DY 30/27098. Kurt Hager, “Unser Staat - unser Stolz,” Speech at the Wissenschaftliche Konferenz zum 40. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR “30 Jahre DDR - ein Sieg des Marxismus-Leninismus,” June 18, 1979, p. 43-45.

<sup>201</sup> BArch DY 30/IV B 2/5/994. SED-Bezirksleitung Karl-Marx-Stadt, Abteilung Parteiorgane, “Information über typische Argumente,” April 21, 1975, p. 3.

even if they [the West Germans] are unemployed, they receive higher unemployment benefits than we earn in the GDR.”<sup>202</sup>

Despite SED Politburo Secretary Günter Mittag and SED State Planning Commission Chairman Gerhard Schürer’s best attempts to get Honecker to address the growing debt crisis,<sup>203</sup> Honecker did not wish to cut those social policies of which the SED was so proud and which provided some of the last pieces of real proof they could use to argue for the superiority of their system over the West. As early as 1974/75, SED banking experts had warned that this course of continuing to accumulate foreign debt without making sufficient investments would lead to disaster.<sup>204</sup> By 1977, Schürer and Mittag urgently wrote to Honecker, stating bluntly that “we are in acute payment difficulties,” and asking him to put in place austerity measures, but Honecker would hear none of it.<sup>205</sup> Meanwhile, officials like Hager worked to dismiss rumours of economic difficulties and the permanent “backwardness of socialism” as merely disinformation being spread by western propagandists, specifically originating in the Pentagon and NATO. Hager said: “If one wanted to believe the Western media, then the Soviet Union has remained hopelessly technologically backwards, torn apart by inner contradictions, without real economic growth, all while the remaining socialist countries have found themselves in a permanent state of crisis.”<sup>206</sup>

As was the case with the theses in the late 1970s, anniversary theses in the following decade continued to boast of the GDR’s almost 40 years of achievements, in spite of the looming

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<sup>202</sup> BArch DY 30/IV B 2/5/994. SED-Bezirksleitung Karl-Marx-Stadt, Abteilung Parteiorgane, “Information über typische Argumente,” April 21, 1975, p. 3.

<sup>203</sup> See Jeffrey Kopstein, *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945-1989* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1997.

<sup>204</sup> Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 162.

<sup>205</sup> Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 162-3.

<sup>206</sup> BArch DY 30/27101. Kurt Hager, Draft of Article for “Einheit,” “Der Sozialismus ist unbesiegbar (Zum 40. Jahrestag des Sieges über den Faschismus und der Befreiung des deutschen Volkes), March 4, 1985, p. 12-13.

insolvency of the country and despite growing opposition movements. By this time, as Fulbrook points out, the continued lack of material goods and the political restrictions, as well as the fact that East Germany had “a richer neighbour” that allowed Eastern citizens “automatic citizenship” contributed greatly to growing domestic instability.<sup>207</sup> Nevertheless, the Party’s approach remained that “the greater the difficulties, the more the central authority intensified its control.”<sup>208</sup>

In a radical departure from all anniversary theses past, the theses created in honour of the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Berlin in 1987 entirely omit the GDR’s close relationship in the past and present with the Soviet Union, which had been, at its core, about paying homage to the Soviet Union as not only the saviours of German socialism (through their defeat of the Third Reich), but as the template upon which the SED built its own state. This change was due to the GDR’s break with the Soviet Union over new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s implementation of the liberalization policies of Glasnost and Perestroika. As is clear from the tone of the 1987 theses, whose core messaging remained otherwise unchanged from the 1970s, for the first time in its history, the GDR was not about to follow the Soviet Union’s lead. Instead, Honecker sought to distance the GDR from any liberalization measures, which meant not looking to Moscow for guidance and legitimacy.<sup>209</sup>

In preparation for the upcoming 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Berlin in 1987, the SED Central Committee commissioned professors and researchers at Humboldt University to prepare a book of theses, highlighting the GDR’s achievements. As with the theses of previous decades, a large part of the focus was on re-telling GDR history, a teleological view that presented all of Berlin’s

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<sup>207</sup> Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, 240; 279-80.

<sup>208</sup> Steiner, *Plans that Failed*, 178.

<sup>209</sup> See McKay, *The Official Concept of the Nation in the Former GDR*, 126.

history as leading up to the moment when the GDR came into being.<sup>210</sup> With the goal to contrast East Berlin's festivities with West Berlin's own celebrations, the theses attempted to justify the SED's policies over the past four decades and explain how they had helped shape East Berlin into a world-class city, located in a country that was "a bastion of peace in Europe." The theses sought to convince GDR citizens of how proud they should be of themselves for having "built up" socialism and for having helped to facilitate Berlin's transition into a political, economic, cultural, and intellectual centre, "the powerful beating heart of our socialist German state."<sup>211</sup>

Certainly, the theses went on, none of these achievements could have occurred without the historical communist influence on the development of the city, from the workers' revolution in 1848 to the communists' ultimate defeat of the fascists in 1945. Featuring prominently in the theses were the years immediately following the Second World War, when the SED shaped Berlin into the great city of the present day (apparently singled-handedly, as the Soviet influence in the post-war period had been likewise erased from this history). Although the 1950s were recast as "a transitional period," the theses described the 1960s as a momentous time when the SED put in place the policies that built up socialism, as well as the city. Examples of this were the *Mach mit!* socialist competition initiatives and other "vital" building programs.<sup>212</sup> Another significant event, the theses noted, was the building of the Wall, which the theses referred to as the "protective measures" (*Schutzmaßnahmen*) taken by the SED on August 13, 1961 that "saved the threatened peace by reliably securing the borders of the GDR."<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Rather than being published in the newspaper (in full) for all to read (as in 1957), this was published in full-length book form including 60 pages of photos by Dietz Verlag, the party press.

<sup>211</sup> Komitee der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zum 750 jährigen Bestehen von Berlin, *750 Jahre Berlin: Thesen*, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1986, 81-83.

<sup>212</sup> Komitee der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zum 750 jährigen Bestehen von Berlin, *750 Jahre Berlin: Thesen*, 74-6.

<sup>213</sup> Komitee der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zum 750 jährigen Bestehen von Berlin, *750 Jahre Berlin: Thesen*, 71-72.



Featuring most prominently of all in the 1987 theses were the golden years of the early 1970s, when “the imperialistic blockade” of the GDR and its capital city (i.e. the Hallstein Doctrine) “definitively collapsed.”<sup>214</sup> This was a time when the GDR finally achieved the international standing that it had been looking for, as exemplified by the 100 countries who had recognized it by the end of 1973.<sup>215</sup> The theses laud the state for finally being able to establish “new embassies, diplomatic and trade agencies” as well as organize “state visits, international discussions, congresses, and acts of solidarity that underpinned Berlin’s growing international prestige.”<sup>216</sup> It was these kinds of international interactions that gave the GDR the legitimacy and world-wide perception of permanence its leadership so craved, especially the treatment of Berlin by outsiders as an official capital city, despite its fraught western status as merely the location of the East German government, not its capital. Furthermore, the theses declared with pride that after 40 years of hard work, Berlin was a thriving metropolis that stood “in the name of socialism and peace, as a politically stable, powerful and attractive cosmopolitan city, a city characterized by economic growth and social achievements, and a flourishing of science and art. This city is the work of its inhabitants, indeed the work of the entire population of the GDR.”<sup>217</sup>

Despite such bold claims, the reality was that by 1987, the GDR’s “golden years” were certainly at an end. Given the worsening economic situation, they were also unlikely to return, thus motivating the state to outright deny this fact, resulting in a theses’ narrative more divorced from reality than ever before. Thus, the 1987 theses looked to predict the future success of the

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<sup>214</sup> Komitee der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zum 750 jährigen Bestehen von Berlin, *750 Jahre Berlin: Thesen*, 79.

<sup>215</sup> Komitee der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zum 750 jährigen Bestehen von Berlin, *750 Jahre Berlin: Thesen*, 79-81.

<sup>216</sup> Komitee der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zum 750 jährigen Bestehen von Berlin, *750 Jahre Berlin: Thesen*, 79.

<sup>217</sup> Komitee der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zum 750 jährigen Bestehen von Berlin, *750 Jahre Berlin: Thesen*, 90.

GDR, declaring that although the Party would be continuing its fight against the “revanchist policies of the West,” it would be focusing more on expanding the GDR’s role in the world, while still maintaining its good relations with its communist allies such as the Soviet Union and more recently, Chile.<sup>218</sup> Also important in the future, the theses went on, was the preservation of the “relationship of peaceful co-existence” with West Germany, thus fulfilling East Germans,’ in particular East Berliners,’ desire for “peace and security.”<sup>219</sup>

Outwardly, it certainly seemed like the GDR’s legitimacy on the world stage could continue to grow. In fact, in the same year, Honecker made a successful state visit to West Germany, where it appeared as though he had been welcomed to the West as a foreign head of state, with the GDR national anthem playing in the background and with the GDR flag flying on West German soil.<sup>220</sup> However, appearances were deceiving, and the truth of the matter was that however stable the GDR appeared to be on the outside, this was not the case internally. The GDR was in an economic decline, and despite the 1987 theses attempting to convince everyone otherwise, their message of prosperity was shown to be sham just three years later when the GDR ceased to exist.

### **Anniversary Theses Conclusion**

Despite the fact that outside realities directly contradicted what the SED anniversary theses often declared, the Party managed to uphold many of the same core messages – that of the dangerous West, the importance of the Soviet friendship, and the superiority of socialism – and

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<sup>218</sup> Komitee der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zum 750 jährigen Bestehen von Berlin, *750 Jahre Berlin: Thesen*, 79.

<sup>219</sup> Komitee der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zum 750 jährigen Bestehen von Berlin, *750 Jahre Berlin: Thesen*, 80.

<sup>220</sup> McKay, *The Official Concept of the Nation in the Former GDR*, 130.

managed to maintain tight control of these messages. It had to, for in order to justify its own existence, the SED needed East Germans to at least half-heartedly believe the fictions of the social plight of the people in capitalist countries and the ongoing military threat posed by the West, despite the GDR's growing economic dependence on them in later years. The SED also thought it important for the populace to understand the "socialist ideals" that supposedly set the GDR apart from the West – their existence as a peaceful, anti-fascist society that upheld equal rights for women, championed youth, the arts, and culture, and which continued to demonstrate significant economic and scientific progress. In addition, the state offered generous housing, transport, consumer goods, and childcare subsidies to make life even better for their citizens. Throughout most of their history, but especially in the early decades, the theses also defended the country's connection to the Soviet Union for the protection it afforded its people (militarily and economically). It was this connection to the Soviet Union that gave both legitimacy to the SED's revolutionary ideas and a way to define the GDR in opposition to the West. At the same time, however, the SED used the theses to carefully establish legitimacy by highlighting socialism as a German phenomenon that had been brewing since the nineteenth century which, while improved upon by Thälmann and the KPD in the 1930s, was finally brought to fruition by the SED with the founding of the GDR in 1949.

Though the core messaging remained relatively static throughout the decades, a certain change in the tone of the theses can still be traced over the years. In 1957, a time when the GDR was young and relatively unstable, the theses are thick with slavish devotion to the Soviets: they were the saviours who showed the GDR the way to successfully "build up" socialism and without whom the Nazis would never have been defeated. By the late 1980s, however, the theses instead highlighted the success of the GDR's home-grown socialism – most notably its social progress – and left out the Soviets' role entirely. This change was not entirely unwelcome since the Party

was well aware of the less-than-enthusiastic way in which the populace had always viewed the Soviet Union. While the Party's change in tone was a direct result of its opposition to Glasnost and Perestroika, it also sought to show that over time, the GDR had developed its own identity: that of a very successful socialist state, one that had managed to persevere against all odds through the difficult years of the Hallstein Doctrine and which seemed poised to survive for centuries.

## Chapter Two: The Festivities

On the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the so-called “Liberation of Fascism” (*Befreiung vom Faschismus*) in 1979, Comrade Schilder, a driver at the VEB concrete factory in Röcknitz/Hohstädt, told National Front officials that from his perspective, “the festivities were a highlight of our evolution that will long be remembered not only by myself, but also by many other of our citizens, as well as those abroad.”<sup>1</sup> Comrade Schilder admitted that he was surprised that so many foreign delegations had arrived for the celebrations and was very impressed with Soviet Premier Brezhnev’s speech at the main festivities, which he said gave him great hope for the future. For another ordinary citizen, Comrade Sojca, a machine typesetter at the newspaper *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, the high point of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations had been the auspicious military parade, which convinced him that “no aggressor will succeed in invading our socialist states without being destroyed themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

While we cannot be certain whether these ordinary citizens’ opinions were completely truthful, there is no doubt that they were genuinely impressed by at least some aspects of the celebrations. It is for this reason that the National Front integrated the core themes of the anniversary theses – the threat of the West, the necessity of Soviet “friendship,” their thriving economic and social lives, and their world-established legitimacy – into cultural events, exhibits, group activities, and festivities of all kinds as a means of effectively communicating them to the East German population. Although likely lost on the SED Central Committee, the National Front

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<sup>1</sup> BArch DY 30 IV B 2/5/1142. A. Barth (Leiter der Abteilung Parteiorgane) and P. Kosiol (Sektor Parteiinformation). “Kurzinformation über die Stimmung und Meinungen zum Verlauf der feierlichkeiten anlässlich des 30. Jahrestages” October 8, 1979, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> BArch DY 30 IV B 2/5/1142. A. Barth (Leiter der Abteilung Parteiorgane) and P. Kosiol (Sektor Parteiinformation). “Kurzinformation über die Stimmung und Meinungen zum Verlauf der feierlichkeiten anlässlich des 30. Jahrestages” October 8, 1979, p. 4.

for its part astutely realized how ineffective the theses were in their original, static, turgid form. If the SED was to ever succeed in turning the East German people into “new citizens,” or teaching them the importance of the GDR’s place in the world, or of the importance of their tight connection to the Soviet Union, then creating events that showcased these themes stood a far greater chance of success than ordinary people attempting to read and interpret the densely-written pamphlets on their own. This way, the populace would not only observe ideological themes in action, but also, and far more importantly, participate in the carefully-crafted activities themselves. As discussed in the introductory chapter, the greater the participation in an event, the greater the emotional intensity of an individual’s experience of the event. This, in turn, fuels the development of a sense of consensus amongst those in attendance and “ultimately results in heightened feelings of confidence and satisfaction about the collective event.”<sup>3</sup>

GDR anniversary festivities had to begin well in advance of the actual anniversary. Not only did streets and shop windows need to be decorated and the cities cleaned, but the National Front always reminded the populace that in order for these practical considerations to be as successful as possible, “ideological work” was still required to go hand in hand with it. So, in the lead up to all anniversary celebrations, all National Front committees, political parties, organizations, and institutions would develop wide-ranging educational activities such as lectures, publications and exhibitions that local people could attend in order to learn about the anniversary theses.<sup>4</sup> While the theses themselves were laid out by the SED Politburo’s propaganda wing, the form that the activities took (including individual topics) was dictated by the National Front in Berlin, with the aim of getting across the central message of the theses for

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<sup>3</sup> David Knottnerus, “Emotions, Pride and the Dynamics of Collective Ritual Events” 46.

<sup>4</sup> DY 6- 5641. “Plan der Kommission 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” July 31, 1957. p. 3.

that anniversary in the most effective way possible.<sup>5</sup> All cities in the GDR were expected to prepare for the celebrations and follow the guidelines laid down by the National Front, as the celebrations usually drew considerable interest and participation from the GDR populace. So a large part of the festivities programs were dedicated to events that while designed to be fun, were simultaneously supposed to help “heighten the peoples’ patriotic consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> In addition, the festivals also provided the symbolic end to many of the socialist competitions (which will be discussed in depth in the following chapter) that also took place in the months leading up to the festivals, with many awards handed out over the course of several days at both the local levels as well as at the main festival in Berlin.

The purpose of the National Front holding these forums and lectures (especially at the local level) was so that residents could drop in and discuss the themes in the theses. However, dry theoretical lectures were not necessarily very effective pedagogical tools, as confirmed by functionaries who complained the attendees preferred to come to the meetings to discuss local issues of little national import, rather than the theoretical underpinnings of the theses. For example, over the course of four days in September 1964, the ideological wing of the National Front Committee of *Kreis* Leipzig-Land organized 52 seminars discussing the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary theses and had a mere 1425 people attend.<sup>7</sup> In another example from Erfurt in the same month,

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<sup>5</sup> For example, on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution in 1957, topics local organizers had to work with included: “Socialism is the future,” the German-Soviet friendship, “Socialism providing youth with glorious prospects,” “the realization of the directives of the Soviet Central Committee,” “women’s political and economic equality,” “Soviet literature and art criticism,” and “scientific and technological critiques in the Soviet Union.” All of these topics were created by the National Front in Berlin, using the anniversary theses as a guide. BArch DY 6/5641, “Hinweise für die Verwirklichung des Planes der Kommission ’40 Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution.” By the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Kommission 40. Jahrestag. Undated, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> BArch DY 6/2395, Ausschuß der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland der Hauptstadt. Berlin, “Zur Sekretariatssitzung: Information über die Vorbereitung des 15. Jahrestages in der Hauptstadt der DDR Berlin,” September 11, 1964. p. 29-30.

<sup>7</sup> BArch DY 6/2396. Sekretariat des Nationalrates, Kommission für Agitation/Presse. “Presse Information Nr 31. Fakten aus der Thesen-Diskussion,” September 11, 1964, p. 1-2.

the National Front's leading functionaries of the *Bezirk* held 21 forums attended by 1403 people, as well as 12 other discussion groups attended by 477 people. Predictably, the main issues that dominated these discussions were not the content of the theses, but rather, the conditions of the streets and housing, value retention of houses and repairs, availability of building materials, as well as questions of trade and daycare spaces.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, a more certain way to achieve its pedagogical goals was for the National Front to combine theory with some form of entertainment. For example, representatives of residential area (*Wohngebietsausschuß*) 2 in *Kreis Schwerin-Stadt* created an exhibition called "Come see how we've turned out!" which showed how the area had developed since 1949. This display piqued the interest of the locals, who were invited to come see the exhibit and while they were there, discuss the theses as well.<sup>9</sup> It was these latter kinds of activities, targeted to specific, usually local, groups that dominated the GDR anniversary landscape. These activities were indeed typically designed to be relevant to the area and to intrigue ordinary people enough to get them to participate in these events. The National Front hoped that the citizenry would at the same time absorb some of the ideological messaging from a lecture or in the form of the content of an exhibition. While people would come to enjoy themselves, the National Front could take solace in the fact that they were possibly "learning" and developing a sense of national identity, belonging, and pride at the same time.

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<sup>8</sup> BArch DY 6/2396. Sekretariat des Nationalrates, Kommission für Agitation/Presse, "Presse Information Nr. 34" (Kirchhof copy), September 25, 1964, p. 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> BArch DY 6/2396. Sekretariat des Nationalrates, Kommission für Agitation/Presse. "Presse Information Nr. 31. Fakten aus der Thesen-Diskussion," September 11, 1964, p. 1.



## Organizational Composition

It was the National Front's Central Committee in Berlin (or a more specialized temporary Anniversary Commission, if one had been created that year) that created and oversaw the anniversary activities. As we have seen, the SED Central Committee created anniversary theses with the intention that their central message be disseminated far and wide. However, they do not appear to have been particularly concerned with the practicalities of the implementation. Thus, the task of informing the populace of the central message of a particular anniversary's theses inevitably fell to the Central Committee of the National Front in Berlin, which was responsible for informing all constituent National Front political parties, organizations, committees, and institutions how to develop a wide variety of educational activities such as lectures, publications and exhibitions.<sup>10</sup> Although it did provide some guidance, the National Front ultimately expected the organizations themselves, such as the Society for the Preparation of Scientific Knowledge (*Gesellschaft zur Vorbereitung wissenschaftlicher Kenntnisse*), the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (*Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft*), or the Cultural Alliance for the Democratic Renewal of Germany (*Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands*), to take responsibility for organizing their own activities on the ground. It was also completely up to the chairs of these national organizations to support their own lecturers (for example, by publishing their materials). In addition, the organizations were required to report all of these activities back to their umbrella organization, the National Front Berlin Central Committee.<sup>11</sup> The Berlin National Front Central Committee was also the main organization to which all regional and smaller level National Front committees sent their own detailed reports for analysis. The

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<sup>10</sup> BArch DY 6/564, "Plan der Kommission 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," July 31, 1957, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> BArch DY 6/564, "Plan der Kommission 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," July 31, 1957, p. 3.

Central Committee used this information to compile its own final reports on what methods and events were successful, which were not, and how to implement better practices in future.

In addition to these myriad layers of national and regional committees, in at least two instances (the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the October Revolution in 1957, and the 750<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Berlin in 1987), there existed yet another extra layer of organizational bureaucracy. In both of these cases, the National Front's Central Committee created special temporary commissions to oversee the anniversary events. Rather than the Central Committee of the National Front's own secretariat sending the ideological directives and other materials to their regional committees, these tasks were undertaken by the National Front's Commission for the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Great October Revolution in 1957 and the Committee for the 750<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Founding of Berlin in 1987. As with the National Front Central Committee's secretariat, these special commissions also determined whether the regional committees were carrying out the celebrations in a manner acceptable to the SED.<sup>12</sup>

One example that provides insight into the intricate layers of accountability between different organizations and committees and how these worked together to create a year's worth of cultural activities is that of the temporary 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commission of the October Revolution in 1957.<sup>13</sup> This Commission maintained a very close connection to the centres of power: the head of the Commission was Prof. Dr. Dr. Erich Correns, the President of the National Front's Central Committee, while other important committee members included the Mayor of (East) Berlin Friedrich Ebert; President of the German Academy of Sciences Prof. Dr. Walter

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<sup>12</sup> As a result of the existence of the Commission, there are many more specific details and meetings and notes that have survived in the archives for 1957. In other years, details on the progress of commemorations are often buried in meeting notes of other organizations as simply another point of the agenda.

<sup>13</sup> There is a richness to these documents from the top that is simply missing in other years: the directives that were sent out in 1957 provide reasoning and explanations for how the organizations were to do this and that, even details of what titles to use in lectures, etc.

Friedrich; *Neues Deutschland* Editor-in-Chief Hermann Axen; Culture Minister Dr. Johannes Becher; as well as the general secretaries of the National Front's constituent political parties, such as General Secretary of the SED Central Committee Kurt Hager; the General Secretary of the CDU Gerald Götting; and General Secretary Manfred Gerlach of the LDPD.<sup>14</sup> In June 1957, five months prior to the anniversary, Mayor Ebert commented that since it was becoming increasingly "impossible" for their Commission to continue to oversee all small organizational details of the anniversary, he suggested the Commission divide up their work into five smaller "task forces:" "Agitation, Press and Propaganda," "Cultural Mass-work," "Science and Technology," "Art and Literature," and "German-Soviet Relations."<sup>15</sup> To provide more assistance at the ground level, in July, the Commission issued a further directive ordering the regions to create their own 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary commissions, which would include not only representatives from the state apparatus, but also eminent personalities, such as representatives of all political parties and mass organizations, as well as individual scientists, engineers, artists, teachers, and farmers.<sup>16</sup> The goal in doing so, according to this directive, was to mirror the national Commission and facilitate the growth of "a great political dialogue with all sectors of the populace."<sup>17</sup>

Vital to the effectiveness of the whole system was that these regional commission members already had connections to other committees and mass organizations in the country in order to ensure the best possible collaboration across organizations. So for example, the National

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<sup>14</sup> BArch DY 6/5641, "Abschrift: Mitglieder der Kommission '40 Jahrestag,'" Undated, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> These five task force types were created at the suggestion of Berlin Mayor Ebert. BArch DY 6/ 5641, "Beschlussprotokoll der konstituierenden Sitzung der zentralen Kommission zur Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," June 5, 1957, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> BArch DY 6/2569. Handout by the Nationalrat der National Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Kommission 40. Jahrestag, "Hinweise für die Verwirklichungen des Planes der Kommission '40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,'" undated, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> BArch DY 6/2569. Handout by the Nationalrat der National Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Kommission 40. Jahrestag, "Hinweise für die Verwirklichungen des Planes der Kommission '40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,'" undated, p. 2.

Front explained that the chairpersons of the National Front's standing regional committees (*Bezirksausschüsse*) also would have to chair the temporary 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary regional commissions.<sup>18</sup> Due to the heavy emphasis of the 1957 anniversary theses on developing and maintaining the GDR's connection to the Soviet Union, the chairs of the regional committees of the Society for German-Soviet Friendship were also to be the deputy chairs of each temporary 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary regional commission.<sup>19</sup> The functions of these commission members were not purely symbolic or ceremonial either: ordinary members of each regional commission were also expected to join in one of the "task forces" (*Arbeitsgruppen*) that would actually implement the work.<sup>20</sup>

It is these kinds of intricate, interlacing features of committees that demonstrate not only the collaborative nature of the commemorations in the GDR (such as the strong connection between the National Front and the Society for German-Soviet Friendship for the 1957 anniversary), but also the extensive layers of checks and balances between committees to ensure the events were carried out effectively. While some of these excess layers of temporary anniversary task forces and regional commissions did not exist in the case of smaller anniversaries, their main functions in organizing regional events were instead carried out as additional duties of the members of the standing regional National Front committees.

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<sup>18</sup> BArch DY 6/2569. Handout by the Nationalrat der National Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Kommission 40. Jahrestag, "Hinweise für die Verwirklichungen des Planes der Kommission '40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,'" undated, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> BArch DY 6/2569. Handout by the Nationalrat der National Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Kommission 40. Jahrestag, "Hinweise für die Verwirklichungen des Planes der Kommission '40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,'" undated, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> These five task force types were created at the suggestion of Berlin Mayor Ebert. BArch DY 6/ 5641, "Beschlussprotokoll der konstituierenden Sitzung der zentralen Kommission zur Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," June 5, 1957, p. 2.

## Popular Events and Activities

In October 1964, the Central Committee of the National Front in Berlin summed up the GDR's 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations across the country as having created "a zest for life ... with an array of political, cultural and sporting events in the city and countryside."<sup>21</sup> The usefulness of holding these smaller, localized events was that not only did they encourage communities to come together to celebrate a common purpose, but they also presented the anniversary theses – which in 1964 focused on creating pride in the GDR's economic success and closeness to the Soviet Union – through a locally-relevant lens. For example, in the city of Schwerin alone, about 200 different events took place during their main "festivities week" from October 3 to 10, 1964.<sup>22</sup> Schwerin's National Front secretariat described these *Wohngebiet*-level (residential) events as having been well organized overall, and most importantly, as having clearly shown how the area's appearance had changed over the years through essays, pictures, and small exhibits.<sup>23</sup> Such an activity was a way of confirming, the theses argued, that many localities had much to be proud of, something that was made possible not only through their own work, but also by the social advantages provided by their state. This was very typical of the way in which celebrations were organized: in every *Kreis*, *Gemeinde*, and village in the country, countless exhibitions were created to simultaneously entertain and educate the populace. Although main events were clustered more closely together in September and October 1964, activities were held throughout the year.

In September 1964, Berlin's *Stadtbezirke* reported to the National Front that their secretariats were making great strides in collaborating with all social organizations, even

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<sup>21</sup>BArch DY 6/2397, Author unknown, "Auswertung der Bezirks-Informationen über die Vorbereitung des 15. Jahrestages der DDR," October 1, 1964, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup>BArch DY 6/2397, Author unknown, "Auswertung der Bezirks-Informationen über die Vorbereitung des 15. Jahrestages der DDR," October 1, 1964, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup>BArch DY 6/2397 Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland, Bezirksausschuß Schwerin. Report to Kirchhof, "Euer Fernschreiben vom 3.9.1964." September 29, 1964, p. 6.

succeeding in involving people who had previously never been interested in any festivities. That year, the Berlin *Stadtbezirk* of Lichtenberg alone hosted 3 500 *Hausgemeinschaft* gatherings, 65 lectures with accompanying discussions, and 28 large “cultural events,” involving 65 000 attendees – numbers which did not even include attendance figures for the large “People’s festival of Eastern Berlin” (*Volksfest des Berliner Ostens*).<sup>24</sup> *Bezirk* Leipzig likewise reported that by October 1 (a week before the anniversary itself), it had already held 7400 gatherings attended by approximately 225 500 people, at which approximately 25 000 people had had a chance to speak their minds.<sup>25</sup> This last statistic was important because the National Front wanted the people to be able to discuss any questions the theses raised for them– which is exactly what they were able to do in the lectures and forums that accompanied many festive events. In Dresden, the National Front *Bezirk* secretary commented with pride that he could see how well “some of our citizens understood to connect the content-related questions from the theses with their own development and the development of our republic.”<sup>26</sup> This was of course entirely the point of the anniversary celebrations for the National Front, so for officials to sense that their message was being absorbed in this way was very significant indicator of success for them.

One way of ensuring the people were able to connect with the themes of the theses in such a meaningful way was by targeting certain groups with activities that addressed their concerns and interests. This was likely the chief reason why the National Front insisted localities and specific organizations ultimately create their own festivities on the ground, as it naturally ensured increased relevancy to that specific community. For example, *Kreis* Grimma in *Bezirk* Leipzig

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<sup>24</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Kirchhof, Ausschuss der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland der Hauptstadt Berlin, “Informationsbericht 4/64 zur Vorbereitung des 15. Jahrestages der DDR,” September 30, 1964, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Leipzig, “Information: Berichterstattung auf der Grundlage des Fs vom 3.9.1964,” October 13, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Sekretariat of the Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Dresden, “Informationsbericht,” October 13, 1964, p. 2

organized popular exhibitions called “15 Years of the GDR” and “15 Years of the GDR: 15 Years of socialist development in *Kreis* Grimma.” These were not just simple overviews highlighting noteworthy events, but rather, content- and ideologically-dense exhibitions providing local proof of the GDR’s economic success in the 1960s by carefully spelling out the economic development of the state and region over the past 15 years.<sup>27</sup> An exhibition in *Kreis* Riesa in *Bezirk* Rostock called “Flick’s block of shares: submarine parts, and seamless pipes” with accompanying lectures also proved very popular as it demonstrated the development of the GDR through the lens of the local steel works of Riesa. It ended up attracting 7 000 visitors from the area, a marked success.<sup>28</sup>

The National Front also aimed to create relevancy beyond that of geographic location: such as in *Kreis* Pirna in *Bezirk* Dresden, which put on an exhibition made by women for women on the theme “See how far we’ve come.” The Dresden National Front Secretariat described the purpose of such an exhibit as being useful “to, in particular, facilitate discussion amongst women.”<sup>29</sup> There were also enterprise-focused exhibitions: in *Kreis* Erfurt-Stadt, residential districts (*Wohngebiete*) IV, VI and IX ran exhibitions that showcased the region’s production, workers, and cultural groups, while the VEB Labor-Chemicals in the near-by town of Apolda organized an open house attended by 700 people.<sup>30</sup> Given the very localized relevance of such events, the National Front often turned to local cultural groups to help the regional National Front representatives create the exhibits and other activities. For example, in a town called Förderstedt, National Front representatives tasked the local “Village Club Photo Group” with creating an

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<sup>27</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Leipzig, “Information: Berichterstattung auf der Grundlage des Fs vom 3.9.1964,” October 13, 1964, (Version 2), p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Sekretariat of the Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Dresden, “Informationsbericht,” September 29, 1964, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Sekretariat of the Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Dresden, “Informationsbericht,” September 29, 1964, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Author unknown, “Auswertung der Bezirks-Informationen über die Vorbereitung des 15. Jahrestages der DDR,” October 1, 1964, p. 4.

exhibition showing the changes year by year in photographs, featuring the best and most active citizens in the area.<sup>31</sup>

In at least some instances, if the regional organizations did not design their activity programs with relevancy of both the community/audience (as well as that of the theses) in mind, there is evidence that their National Front superiors requested they redesign their anniversary programs. An example of this comes from *Kreis* Greifswald in Rostock, where the *Kreis*'s original festivities program was not approved by top officials (presumably at the *Bezirk* level), who required the *Kreis* representatives to create "better content." Greifswald later came up with a revised program that included film showings and accompanying talks in the *Haus-und Hofgemeinschaften* (apartment-complex groups), as well as more youth-focused sport and cultural festivities.<sup>32</sup> Greifswald also incorporated additional discussions about the development of the area over the past 15 years.<sup>33</sup>

### **Messaging content of the Festivities: Creating Closeness to the Soviet Union in 1957**

Piquing local interest and creating relevance was even more important to the National Front when there were signs of disinterest in a particular anniversary thesis theme. An excellent example of how the National Front tried to get its message across in these cases can be observed in their approach to emphasizing the GDR's connection with the Soviet Union for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution, a core message of that year's theses. As will be demonstrated in the next chapter on socialist competitions, the East German populace in 1957

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<sup>31</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Vorsitzender des Ortsausschusses der Nationalen Front & Vorsitzender des Rates der Gemeinde Focke "Program der politischen Massenarbeit der Gemeinde Förderstedt zur Vorbereitung des 15. Jahrestages der DDR," January 1, 1964, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> BArch 6/2397, Bezirkssekretuar Klösel, National Front des demokratischen Deutschland, Bezirksausschuß Rostock, "Infomationsbericht," September 29, 1964, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> BArch 6/2397, Bezirkssekretuar Klösel, National Front des demokratischen Deutschland, Bezirksausschuß Rostock, "Infomationsbericht," September 29, 1964, p. 6.



appears to have had neither very strong connections to, nor a strong awareness of, the Soviet Union. The National Front's solution was to assign the regional German-Soviet Relations task forces (*Arbeitsgruppen*) with reinforcing the GDR populace's current connections to the Soviet Union by rewriting the history of the German-Soviet relationship during the previous 40 years. For one, the task forces were expected to organize public lectures in which carefully selected speakers would talk at length about certain aspects of this "special" relationship. Possible lecture topics offered by the National Front were non-creative titles such as "Socialism is the future," "The German-Soviet friendship," "Socialism provides youth with glorious prospects," "Realizing the directives of the Soviet Central Committee," "Women's political and economic equality," "Soviet literature and art criticism," and "scientific and technological critiques in the Soviet Union."<sup>34</sup> The German-Soviet Relations task forces were also to ensure GDR citizens heard about the German connection to Soviet Union sports movements; the "great relationship" between the German government and Russian revolutionaries in 1917; the German aid sent to those starving in the Volga in 1921; and German protests in solidarity with the Soviet Union between 1927-29.<sup>35</sup> Re-interpreting history like this of course overstated the power the communist movement held during these years, but it served to create a longer, more venerable connection between the two countries, one that preceded the Soviets' arrival at the end of the Second World War.

The National Front's Central Committee was well aware that these general and possibly tedious history lessons would not necessarily seem relevant or interesting to the ordinary public, so they directed the German-Soviet Relations task forces and the Agitation, Press, and

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<sup>34</sup> BArch DY 6/5641. Nationalrat der Nationalen Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Kommission 40. Jahrestag, "Hinweise für die Verwirklichung des Planes der Kommission '40 Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution." Undated, p.11.

<sup>35</sup> Note: this is the history according to the Central Commission. BArch DY 6/5641, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Kommission 40. Jahrestag, "Hinweise für die Verwirklichung des Planes der Kommission '40 Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," undated, p. 9.

Propaganda task forces to organize gatherings at the most basic of levels – that of the *Haus* and *Hofgemeinschaften* (apartment/neighbourhood complexes) – so that personal stories and experiences could be shared. The goal of these gatherings was to remind the East German people of local connections their communities may have to the Soviet Union. Stories of import included those of older GDR citizens who had visited the Soviet Union in its early years (especially the so-called “worker veterans”—those who had taken part in the “brotherhood” at the Front in the First World War), as well as those who had belonged to early German communist groups such as the Society of Friends of the New Russia (*Gesellschaft der Freunde des neuen Rußlands*, founded in the early 1920s) or the Federation of Friends of the Soviet Union (*Bundes der Freunde der Sowjetunion*). The National Front believed bringing in such personal experiences could help ordinary people feel the Soviet Union was more relevant to their lives, especially for those who had never visited or had much contact with the Soviets previously.<sup>36</sup>

In keeping with their strategy at maintaining relevance, the National Front Central Commission also made clear in their instructions to the regional task forces that they were to ensure any group discussions/events would be tailored to the specific social strata of particular subsets of the population.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the task forces were to change the messaging they presented depending on whether the groups were made up of intelligentsia, housewives, youth, artisans/tradesmen, or merchants. One group the Central Commission wanted to reach in particular were more isolated rural populations, and they emphasized how important it was that

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<sup>36</sup> BArch DY 6/5641, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Kommission 40. Jahrestag, “Hinweise für die Verwirklichung des Planes der Kommission ’40 Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” undated, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> BArch DY 6/5641, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Kommission 40. Jahrestag, “Hinweise für die Verwirklichung des Planes der Kommission ’40 Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” undated, p. 3.

the regional task forces make concrete plans for those discussion groups.<sup>38</sup> To help with carrying out these and other tasks, the Central Commission assured the regional committees and task forces that they would be provided with appropriate materials such as brochures, flyers, and pamphlets. More specifically, the National Front promised to send organizers five nation-wide posters that could be used in any regional displays.<sup>39</sup>

The National Front also provided specific instructions to the local organizations on how best to produce their own materials. One suggestion was for regional committees to make exhibitions that showcased documents and photos showing the camaraderie between Russian and German soldiers beginning in the First World War and continuing to the present “building up” of socialism in the GDR.<sup>40</sup> In order to reinforce that more personal, local, relevant connection, the Central Commission instructed the task forces to ask any locals who had been to the Soviet Union to contribute any photos, trip stories or experiences to the display windows of National Front Meeting Points (*Treffpunkte der Nationalen Front*), co-operatives, private shops, or any other display cases.<sup>41</sup> The Central Commission also asked the task forces to collaborate with their fellow regional National Front organization chapters, such as the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (*Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft*), to promote various film showings in local cultural centres, such as that of the film series called “Leningrad: the Cradle of the Revolution.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> BArch DY 6/5641, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Kommission 40. Jahrestag, “Hinweise für die Verwirklichung des Planes der Kommission ’40 Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” undated, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> BArch DY 6/5641, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Kommission 40. Jahrestag, “Hinweise für die Verwirklichung des Planes der Kommission ’40 Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” undated, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> BArch DY 6/5641. “Plan der Kommission 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” July 31, 1957, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> BArch DY 6/5641. “Plan der Kommission 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” July 31, 1957, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> BArch DY 6/5641. “Plan der Kommission 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” July 31, 1957, p. 3.

## Preparing for the Anniversary: Beautifying the Streets

For ordinary East Germans, a major part of preparing for GDR anniversary celebrations was in readying the towns aesthetically to host these festivities. As evidenced by the surviving festivities program from the small city of Langewiesen in 1964, beautifying the city was something that the National Front took as seriously as the festivities themselves. Besides letting people know about the events taking place, the Langewiesen festivities program reminded the townsfolk to make a “worthy effort” in honour of the GDR’s birthday and

Grab brush and paint and give house fronts and fences a colourful coat!  
Decorate houses, enterprises, streets, and squares with flags, garlands and green from  
Wednesday, September 30 to Wednesday, October 7!  
Ensure the streets stay clean!  
Visit our many events!<sup>43</sup>

The purpose in people putting up such advertisements and decorations, as Secretary Klösel of Rostock explained, was so that the townsfolk would be made aware of the variety of festivities going on.<sup>44</sup> Klösel argued that not only was there “never enough” decorations in his area, but that many East Germans, “instead of thinking about how they can make decorations using their own resources and creativity,” were going into stores looking for ready-made placards, materials and decorations to put up.<sup>45</sup> The fact was that state officials preferred, above all else, that the populace be as hands-on as possible in any activities associated with the anniversaries, possibly believing that designing their own items would require a deeper concentration on the task and ideological messaging.

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<sup>43</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Langewiesen, *Veranstaltungen*, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> BArch 6/2397, Bezirkssekretär Klösel, National Front Bezirksausschuß Rostock, “Infomationsbericht,” September 29, 1964, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> BArch 6/2397, Bezirkssekretär Klösel, National Front Bezirksausschuß Rostock, “Infomationsbericht,” September 29, 1964, p. 8.

Tellingly, however, in many instances in 1964, the National Front's *Bezirk* representatives found that state-owned stores were the best-decorated buildings in any area of a city, with privately-owned stores less well-decorated, and private homes the most lacking of decorations overall.<sup>46</sup> This fact tells us about a certain lack of motivation from residents, likely resulting from either festivity-fatigue, simple disinterest, or even outright opposition to doing so. There were also late surges in interest, with residents only really getting into the festive spirit by decorating their houses with flags and garland in the last days before an anniversary.<sup>47</sup> Although these late bursts of effort could have been due to simple procrastination, it is extremely likely that they were influenced, at least in part, by the National Front representatives' monitoring of the decorating progress. For example, in Cottbus a week before the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary, *Bezirk* Secretariat member Beccard explained to his superiors in Berlin that there was no reason to be alarmed at the lack of decorations in their streets because "the checks we carried out have told us that regional committees and enterprises have begun to make preparations for the decorating of the streets and buildings."<sup>48</sup> That Beccard was able to make this judgement makes clear the expectations the state apparatus had for participation in these festivities, including the decorating of private homes. While it is unclear what the penalty, if any, for willful non-compliance was, it is very likely that, just as the assessments of public reaction to the theses (as explained in the previous chapter), this monitoring of decorating progress enthusiasm was mostly used by the

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<sup>46</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland, Bezirksausschuß Schwerin. Report to Kirchhof, "Euer Fernschreiben vom 3.9.1964." September 29, 1964, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Rostock, "Informationsbericht," October 13, 1964, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Comrade Beccard of the Bezirkssekretariat, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland, Bezirksausschuß Cottbus, "Wöchentlichen Bericht" September 29, 1964, p. 3.

National Front as a gauge of how much their propaganda work would need to be intensified in that area in future celebrations.<sup>49</sup>

Despite this occasional lack of interest, the National Front organizers did find other instances in which people in both state and privately-owned businesses made great efforts to decorate their windows in keeping with “the meaning” of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In some areas, city busses and street cars were covered in patriotic flags, posters, and even photographs that demonstrated how much the areas had recovered since the War.<sup>50</sup> The decorating skill of a single drugstore in *Kreis* Borna in Leipzig completely satisfied all that the National Front committee was looking for in a decorated storefront, as this drugstore had adorned its main display window with sixteen close-up images showing the economic development of the locality in the last 15 years.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The National Front does not seem to have kept detailed records about non-compliance or other aspects such as unruly or unacceptable public behaviour at the festivities, as it was more interested in receiving reports on the organizational abilities of its regional committees, as well as whether East Germans appeared to be engaging with the theses or not. Interest in public behaviour was something that would have been taken on by the Stasi, especially in later years. This aspect is, however, beyond the scope of the present work. For a look at the Stasi’s involvement in Perleberg’s 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in 1989, for example, see Bruce, *The Firm*, p. 170-76.

<sup>50</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Bezirkssekretär Klösel. Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland, Bezirksausschuß Rostock, “Informationsbericht,” October 6, 1964, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Author unknown. “Auswertung der Bezirks-Informationen über die Vorbereitung des 15. Jahrestages der DDR,” October 1, 1964, p. 5.

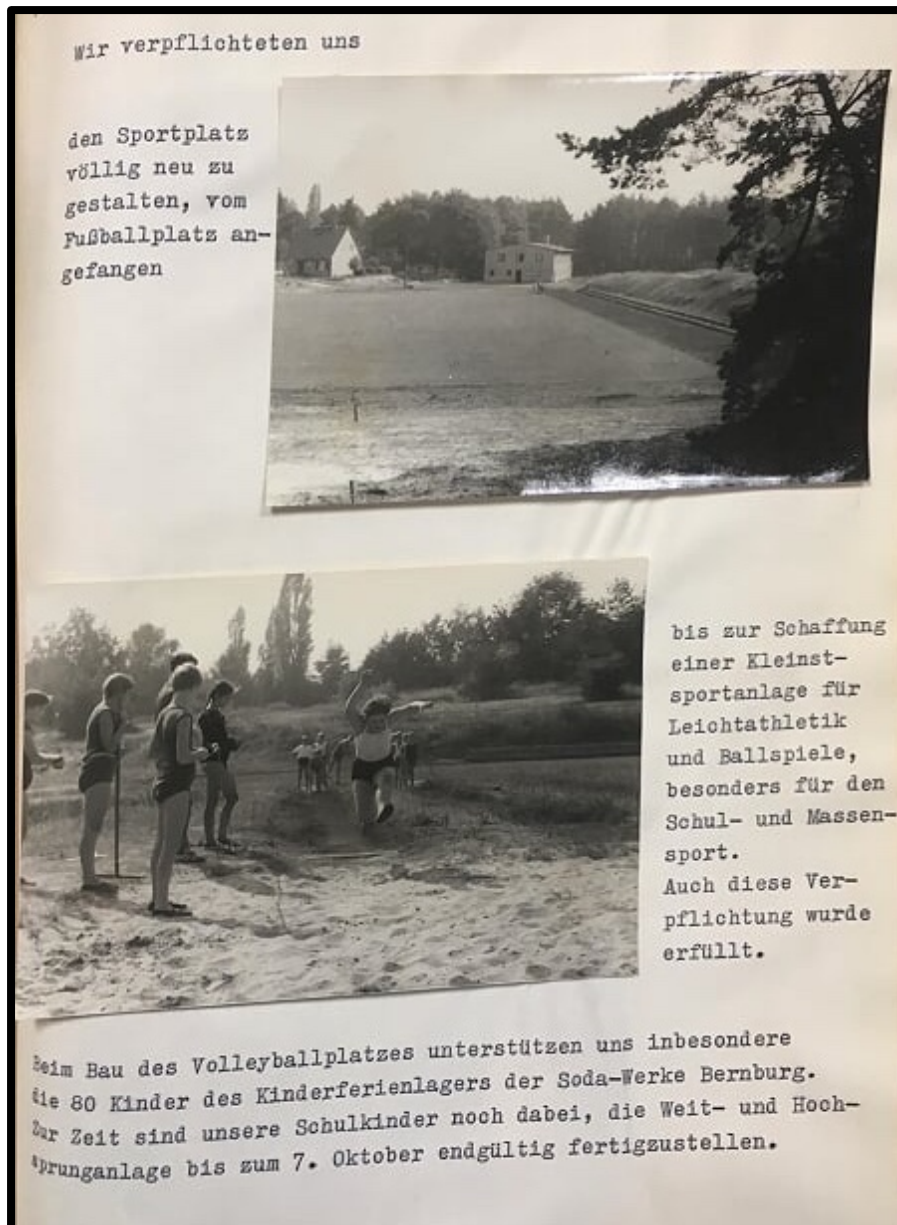


Figure 2. Scrapbook made by the Groß Glienicke in honour of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GDR. These were the kinds of pictures of progress the National Front would have wanted to see as part of any well-done festive “decorations.” Here, this scrapbook page clearly shows the development of a much-needed sporting area (BArch DY 6/ vorl 6974, Groß Glienicke “20 Jahre sozialistische Entwicklung unserer Grenzgemeinde Groß-Glienicke” (1949 – 1969)).

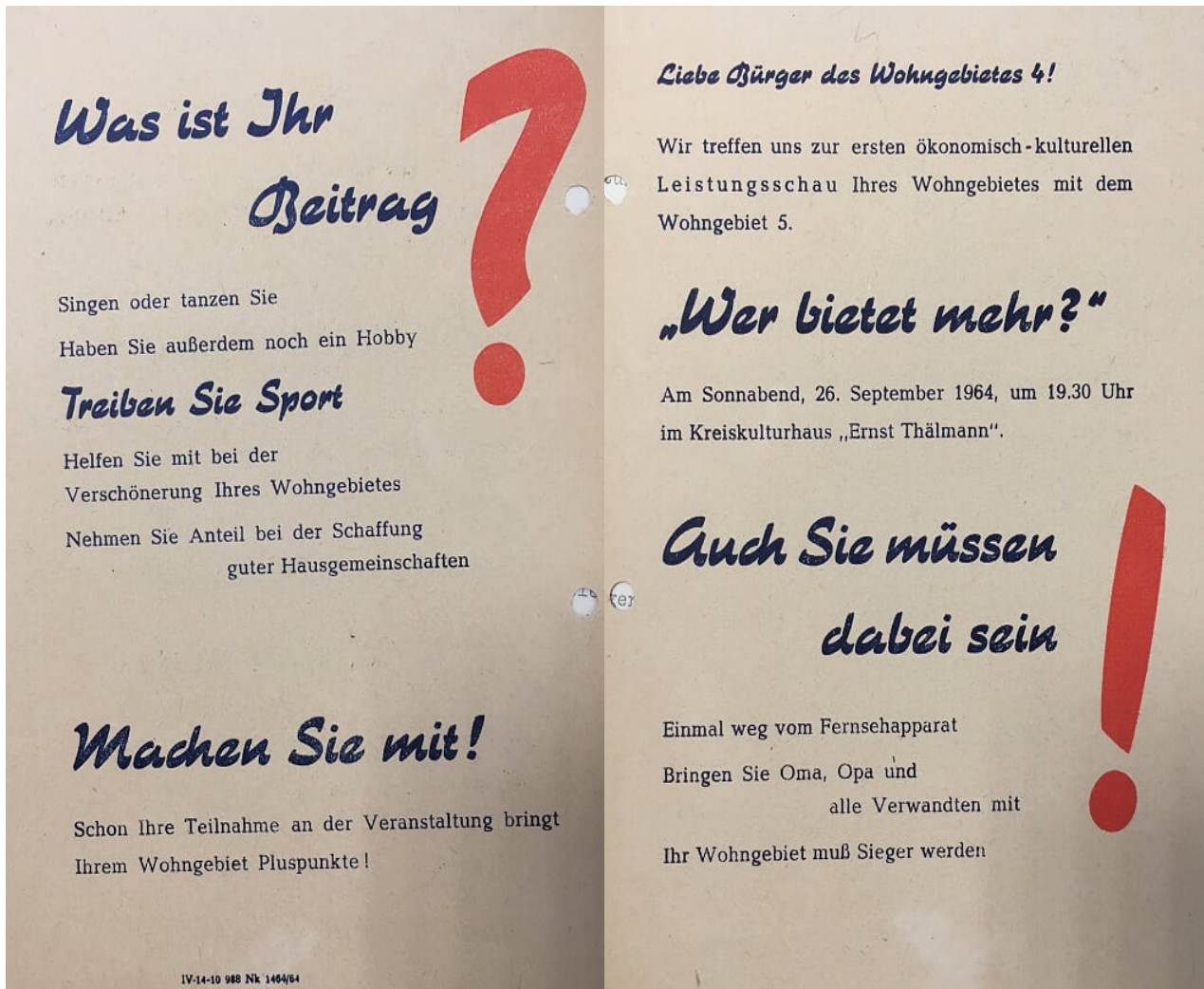


Figure 3. Advertisement asking people to participate in a talent competition on September 26, 1964 by showcasing whatever talents they possess, whether it is dancing, singing, in sports, or any other hobby. This advertisement is for the residents of a particular Wohngebiet (4) to join in the competition against the residents of a different Wohngebiet (5). (BArch DY 6/2397).

### The “Week of Festivities” (*Festwoche*) in Micro-View: Programming in *Bezirk Suhl*

At the ground level, the most important parts of an anniversary celebration were the festivities that ordinary people could attend along with their friends, family and neighbours, and in which they could relax and enjoy a day off work. This fits with what sociologist Amitai Etzioni has explained about how some festivities can be termed “tension-management holidays,” which reinforce particular ideologies indirectly through releasing any built-up tensions developed



as a result of complying with a particular society's ways and beliefs."<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, as pointed out in the beginning of the chapter, it was the grandeur and parades which caught ordinary East Germans' attention and that they remembered long afterwards. Surviving event programs from the cities of Sonneberg and Langewiesen in *Bezirk* Suhl give us a glimpse into what these festivals looked like at the lowest levels and allow us to compare the offerings of larger and smaller urban centres.

In the city of Langewiesen, which had a population of several thousand people, activities for the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the GDR began September 26 and lasted until October 18, 1964. The IX. Internationaler Leichtathletik-Fernkampf of 1964 launched Langewiesen's main festival week on Wednesday, September 30 at 2:30pm at the Kleinfeld-Sport arena. This was a youth-focused sporting event, in which Young Pioneers and children born between 1951 and 1953 competed against youth from other socialist countries.<sup>53</sup> This competition was followed in the evening by a youth-focused film at the local cinema, titled "We are young just like our Republic!" and included a talk by "worker veteran" Fritz Barth.

Other events held over the next few days included an opportunity for the townspeople to attend a Friday-evening showing of colour photographs of Langewiesen in the picture window of the trade commission. This event promised residents they would learn something by attending, asking them "Do really know your city?" Meanwhile, the local People's Solidarity (VS) chapter arranged a Saturday afternoon event for retirees that included a literary-musical program performed by a group from the local *Oberschule*.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, the city's local DFD (Democratic Women's League) chapter also arranged an evening for women. This event, called

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<sup>52</sup>Etzioni, "Toward a Theory of Public Ritual," 48.

<sup>53</sup>BArch DY 6/2397, Langewiesen Veranstaltungen, p. 2

<sup>54</sup>BArch DY 6/2397, Langewiesen Veranstaltungen, p. 2.

“What do our local women think about our trade organizations?” was open to all women of Langewiesen, who were invited to gather and talk about trade politics whilst enjoying a sampling of various fish dishes, a fashion show, as well as other activities that were to remain a “surprise.”<sup>55</sup>

Langewiesen’s numerous main events opened to great fanfare on October 4, the Sunday prior the Day of the Republic (October 7). That morning, local football teams competed at the sport arena, while the Langewiesen Industry Exhibition opened its doors, and officials ran lectures at the local *Gaststätte* on the development of the socialist agricultural sector, as well as exhibits put on by pigeon breeders, hunters and fishermen of the Association of Gardeners, Settlers, and Animal Breeders (the VKSK, *Verband der Kleingärtner, Siedler und Kleintierzüchter*).<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, the neighbouring Oehrenstöck Orchestra performed in Langewiesen’s music pavilion; the philatelic club opened their exhibitions on stamps documenting the political, economic, and cultural development of the GDR; and elsewhere an exhibition called “How does Dr. Kurt Zimmermann view our Heimat?” put on a display of the paintings, watercolours, and drawings of the local artist Kurt Zimmermann.<sup>57</sup>

More festivities occurred on the eve of October 7, including an open house at the *Oberschule* that allowed visitors to see lecture rooms, work projects, and an exhibition of essays and drawings for a 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary competition.<sup>58</sup> Events for party functionaries also took place on the evening of October 6, including a dance for visiting dignitaries. Wednesday, October 7, the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Republic, was a day off work for the people of the GDR, with festivities beginning early, at 9:00am, with the grand opening of the Kleinfeld-Sportplatz to launch the

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<sup>55</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Langewiesen *Veranstaltungen*, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Langewiesen *Veranstaltungen*, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Langewiesen *Veranstaltungen*, p. 2-3.

<sup>58</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Langewiesen *Veranstaltungen*, p. 2-3.

People's Sports Festival, where, among other events, pioneers and children took part in the 1<sup>st</sup> Langewiesen Pioneer and Children's Olympiad. All exhibitions were open for the entire day, as was the main music pavilion. In the afternoon, there was even more football, followed by a torchlit procession in the evening. Thursday, October 8, the day after the main events, meant the return to more ideologically-focused events, with a late afternoon trade union forum called "Do you know classical Langewiesen?" which included lectures, music, and even "freedom fighter" guests from West Germany.<sup>59</sup> Langewiesen's festival week came to a close on Saturday, October 10 with a closing concert performance of classical "revolutionary" pieces.<sup>60</sup>

The festival programs for the larger city of Sonneberg (approximately 30 000 people), also in *Bezirk* Suhl, make it clear that, as would be expected, they had more events on offer than the smaller Langewiesen, including large city-wide events, as well as events in individual city districts. Another difference was that the larger city was able to organize a much longer festival period of six weeks from September 12 to October 29, 1964. Sonneberg could even organize large-scale activities ranging from discussion forums with major economic figures and sports personalities, to larger sports festivities for all ages put on by the *Deutscher Turn- und Sportbund*, to grander talent and dance shows.<sup>61</sup> Another significant difference is that Sonneberg festivities drew more top functionaries, as well as saw greater involvement by the National Front committees in comparison to Langewiesen, which while technically still arranged and organized by the National Front, appeared to have been largely organized by the local chapters of diverse mass organizations.

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<sup>59</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Langewiesen *Veranstaltungen*, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Langewiesen, *Veranstaltungen*, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Zentrale Veranstaltungen im Stadtgebiet Sonneberg zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR, p. 2-3.

In addition, Sonneberg organized a greater variety of activities, such as *K-Wagen* (small one-person kart) races, book readings, puppet theatre, and more events grand openings such as the opening of a new children's playground by the National Front and the Mayor.<sup>62</sup> The National Front committee for residential areas (*Wohnbezirk*) 6 and 7 in conjunction with the DSF organized events such as demonstrations of new electric household items.<sup>63</sup> Sonneberg also offered more patriotic and ideologically-based exhibitions, demonstrating the achievements of the people under socialism, such as one called "Sonneberg, then and now."<sup>64</sup> On Wednesday, October 7, the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Republic, festivities began in Sonneberg at 9:00am in the *Kreis* cultural house with a gathering of SED and other local officials. Then, at 10:00am, the *Deutscher Turn- und Sportbund* held a marathon they called "Quer durch Sonneberg," followed by a football game between local teams Motor Oberlind and Motor Sonneberg at 3:00pm.<sup>65</sup> City-wide festivities in the days and weeks following comprised of a dance tournament, a wine festival, and a DFD-organized women's forum called "How do I say that to my child?"<sup>66</sup>

Besides this multitude of city-wide activities, even more events were held in Sonneberg at the residential (*Wohngebiet*) level. National Front officials organized the lecture and seminar events at this level as well. This was likely for reasons of pedagogical effectiveness, because as noted by officials across the country year after year, they found the citizenry was more engaged in the content when they were in smaller groups and also more likely to voice their opinions,

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<sup>62</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Zentrale Veranstaltungen im Stadtgebiet Sonneberg zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Zentrale Veranstaltungen im Stadtgebiet Sonneberg zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Zentrale Veranstaltungen im Stadtgebiet Sonneberg zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR, p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Zentrale Veranstaltungen im Stadtgebiet Sonneberg zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Zentrale Veranstaltungen im Stadtgebiet Sonneberg zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR, p. 5.

which the National Front was very interested in hearing. Beginning in early September 1964, well before Sonneberg's festivities began, many discussions took place in different places across the *Wohngebiete*, including in the club rooms of the National Front, the meeting rooms of the DSF, taverns, and local city offices. The forums that took place were on topics as varied as the theses: they included forums on raising children (*Wohngebiet II*) and the GDR-Soviet friendship treaty, as well as lectures on 500 years of festivities (*Wohngebiet IV*). The *Wohngebiete* of Sonneberg also held smaller week-long village festival games, grand openings of children's playgrounds, family-themed festivals, bowling, table tennis and billiard competitions, as well as lantern lighting and torchlit processions.<sup>67</sup> One forum in particular, held in *Wohngebiet II* on September 26, included a fashion show, exhibition, and music and singing put on by the local music school and the workers' opera club.<sup>68</sup> Another in *Wohngebiet IV* was focused only on the elderly, titled "How do I say that to my child?" and "Because I'm not a child anymore" and included a film.<sup>69</sup>

Elsewhere across the country that year, regional National Front committees repeatedly reported back to Berlin how much East Germans enjoyed their own local festivities. Secretary Klösel of Rostock characterized his *Bezirk's* 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations as having produced "a happy and festive atmosphere, particularly at the local festivities in all *Kreisen*, which were attended by representation from the city and *Gemeinde*."<sup>70</sup> In Rostock, on the day of the anniversary, thousands of locals attended a celebratory demonstration accompanied by a naval

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<sup>67</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Zentrale Veranstaltungen im Stadtgebiet Sonneberg zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR, p. 6-14.

<sup>68</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Zentrale Veranstaltungen im Stadtgebiet Sonneberg zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR, p. 6-8.

<sup>69</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Zentrale Veranstaltungen im Stadtgebiet Sonneberg zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR, p. 14.

<sup>70</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Rostock, "Informationsbericht," October 13, 1964, p. 1.

review and fireworks display. According to National Front reports, there was also “significant public participation” at all the major events like the torchlit processions, beginning the night before the anniversary.<sup>71</sup> In the small city of Klütz, 1000 people participated in a torchlit procession and demonstration, while in *Gemeinde* Selmsdorf, 400 people attended the same.<sup>72</sup> In the city of Schönberg, an estimated 500-600 people took part in a torchlit procession despite pouring rain, while in the *Kreisstadt* Grimmen, 2000 people took part in a torchlit procession the day prior.<sup>73</sup> Extremely high participation numbers were also reported in Leipzig, where officials estimated that while the cultural and sporting events held in the individual *Wohngebieten* were (mostly) well-attended, over 100 000 people came to visit the main *Feststraße* in Leipzig.<sup>74</sup>

A final high point in local GDR anniversary festivities were the award ceremonies, in which East Germans received placards or prestigious awards for all their hard work, such as the “Badge of Honour of the National Front.”<sup>75</sup> For example, Secretary Klösel of Rostock awarded 24 functionaries and other “deserving” citizens with these awards in October 1964.<sup>76</sup> It is worth noting that many of the people who received these various awards were not competition winners, however, but rather, SED members, various functionaries for the party or city councils, National Front *Kreis* committee volunteers, or even low-level National Front functionaries; such as

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<sup>71</sup> Note: no attendance estimates were given. BArch DY 6/2397, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Rostock, “Informationsbericht,” October 13, 1964, p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Rostock, “Informationsbericht,” October 13, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Rostock, “Informationsbericht,” October 13, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Leipzig, “Information: Berichterstattung auf der Grundlage des Fs vom 3.9.1964,” October 13, 1964, (Version 2), p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Rostock, “Informationsbericht,” October 13, 1964, p. 1.

<sup>76</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Rostock, “Informationsbericht,” October 13, 1964, p. 1. Mark Allinson argues that many of these functionaries were “wallet communists” out to benefit their own material interest and that carrying out orders was more about self-preservation than ideological commitment. See Allinson, *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany*, 162.

volunteer members of the *Wohnbezirksausschuß* or DFD representatives. Many of these people had been working in these roles since the founding of the state.<sup>77</sup>

What this great variety of festivities (designed for both people at large on the one hand, and specifically targeted groups on the other hand) in Langeswiesen and Sonneberg demonstrates is that while the themes of the anniversary theses were certainly important to the National Front, the organizers were pragmatic enough to know that ideology need not be the focal point at every step. While parades and fireworks are intrinsically appealing and draw crowds, organizers also made sure to serve the state's purposes by, for example, arranging a military review accompanying a parade, thus still reinforcing the GDR's legitimacy and distinctiveness from the West – major themes in the 1964 theses – while not detracting from the entertainment value of the spectacle. In another example, while activities such as showing films to youths served as a generally appealing form of entertainment, the National Front reinforced the event with ideology by bringing in a worker veteran to give a talk that would presumably demonstrate the Soviet connection and pride in the GDR's development. The fact that both cities had so many such participatory events (tailored to all ages and interests, from young to old), demonstrates how dedicated the National Front was to establishing and maintaining a sense of community. Indeed, in keeping with how Mona Ozouf defined other revolutionary festivals, the National Front was essentially attempting to “recast[ing] space and time” in order to develop “a new community based on new values.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Schwerin, “Beschluß des Sekretariats v. 15. 9.1964 zur Auszeichnung von ehrenamtlichen Mitarbeitern anlässlich des 15. Jahrestages der Gründung der DDR,” September 18, 1964, p. 1-4.

<sup>78</sup> Lynn Hunt, forward in Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*. Trans by Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 1988). x-xi.

## **Festivities in the *Hauptstadt* Berlin**

While all cities in the GDR were expected to prepare for the celebrations, there was a particular amount of pressure on Berlin as the GDR's capital city. Not only would local and regional celebrations be taking place there, but national celebrations as well – which would be attended by GDR party functionaries, as well as dignitaries from all over the (communist) world. It was thus very important, the Berlin city National Front Committee pointed out, that the image the capital projected of the GDR be impressive. They went on:

Since the capital of Berlin is in the foreground for the 15th anniversary, everything must be done to make the bond of our citizens with the German Democratic Republic and their achievements in building our state visible to the outside world. The focus here is on the involvement of all sections of the population in the preparation and promotion of good imaginative visual advertising, the cleanliness and friendly design of our city, and the dignified welcome of all guests.<sup>79</sup>

As in the periphery, residents of Berlin needed to clean and decorate the streets for the festivities. However, the difference for Berliners was the National Front's expectation that this would all be well-underway and "visible in the streets" by September 15, a full three weeks before the anniversary. The National Front also expected all stores to design attractive shop windows featuring a particular product line, while stores and restaurants were to emphasize a variety of food options "in order to make a worthy impression of the capital on their visitors."<sup>80</sup>

As was always the case, however, where there were anniversary events, there was ideological messaging to be found. This was particularly important given the number of visitors to Berlin, including people from elsewhere in the country, but also foreign guests from other Soviet Bloc countries, some guests from the West, and even some from West Germany. Berlin

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<sup>79</sup> BArch DY 6/2395 Ausschuß der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland der Hauptstadt Berlin, "Zur Sekretariatssitzung: Information über die Vorbereitung des 15. Jahrestages in der Hauptstadt der DDR Berlin" September 11, 1964, p. 30.

<sup>80</sup> BArch DY 6/2395 Ausschuß der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland der Hauptstadt Berlin, "Zur Sekretariatssitzung: Information über die Vorbereitung des 15. Jahrestages in der Hauptstadt der DDR Berlin" September 11, 1964, p. 29-30.



City National Front Committee recognized the momentous task that lay before them: that of helping to develop a sense of a unique GDR identity. The Committee pointed out that:

In preparation for the 15th anniversary of the GDR, the capital city of Berlin must pay even greater attention to ideological work, further expanding the role of the German Democratic Republic, and promoting the national consciousness (*Staatsbewußtsein*) of our citizens. The theses, the speech of Walter Ulbricht before the People's Chamber, and the appeal of the People's Chamber, must appear connected to the practical realities of each individual citizen.<sup>81</sup>



Figure 4. "An unforgettable day of festivities." Pictures from the *Berliner Zeitung* of the crowds and the military parade on October 7, 1964 (*Berliner Zeitung*, October 8, 1964, p. 1).

All of this diligent preparation resulted in what the newspapers described as "the greatest festival that the capital city has ever celebrated up to this point" with the "whole creatively-decorated city on its feet from early morning until late in the evening. At all events, the working people expressed their joy at the great successes that have come of their 15 years of hard work."<sup>82</sup> Festivities began at 9:00am sharp with the tolling of the bells from the *Roten Rathaus*. This signaled the commencement of the military parade followed by a demonstration in front of an

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<sup>81</sup> BArch DY 6/2395, Ausschuß der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland der Hauptstadt Berlin, "Zur Sekretariatssitzung: Information über die Vorbereitung des 15. Jahrestages in der Hauptstadt der DDR Berlin" September 11, 1964, p. 29-30. "Dabei müssen die Thesen, die Rede Walter Ulbrichts vor der Volkskammer und der Appell der Volkskammer verbunden mit der eigenen praktischen Tätigkeit jedes Einzelnen behandelt werden."

<sup>82</sup> Karl-Heinz Gerstner, "350 000 demonstrieren in Berlin, Tausende Westdeutsche dabei, Leistungsschau der DDR-Wirtschaft," *Berliner Zeitung*, October 8, 1964, p. 1.

audience that the *Berliner Zeitung* claimed numbered 350 000 people.<sup>83</sup> Many different groups marched past Walter Ulbricht and Soviet Premier Brezhnev, who were seated in the grandstands, but it was one group in particular who caught widespread attention: that of the representatives from all the *Bezirke*, showcasing GDR economic strength in the form of new industry products. The *Berliner Zeitung* continued: “Again and again, the audience – especially the amazed guests from abroad – were carried away in enthusiastic applause.”<sup>84</sup> Once these demonstrations and parades ended, the central People’s Festival in Karl-Marx-Allee began, totaling approximately 70 different events put on by 2700 professional and amateur artists. Even Ulbricht himself took the time to make an appearance at the festival during the afternoon. The Day of the Republic finally came to a close later that evening with a grand fireworks display.<sup>85</sup>

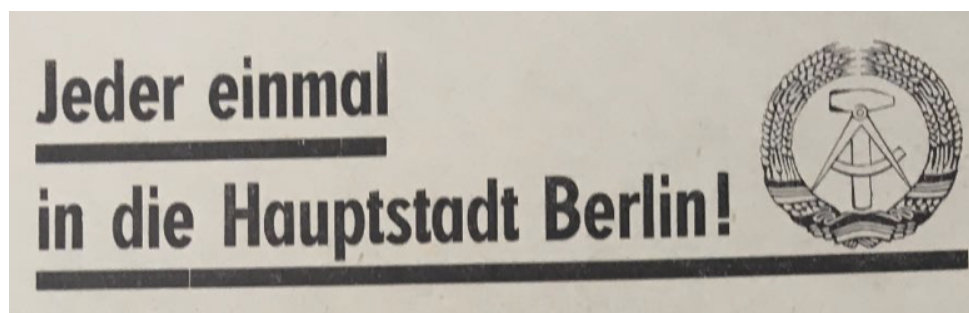


Figure 5. Example of an advertisement by the travel office of the GDR encouraging residents of Kreis Sonneberg (Bezirk Suhl) to take the trip to Berlin (BArch DY 6/2397)

Despite the great effort put into the local festivities elsewhere around the country, the National Front could not help but hold up these central festivities in Berlin as an example to the rest of the GDR (as well as to the West). Indeed, one of the National Front’s national initiatives for the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1964 called for “Everyone to experience the capital city once!” and involved partnering with GDR travel offices across the country to offer ordinary people the

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<sup>83</sup> Karl-Heinz Gerstner, “350 000 demonstrieren in Berlin, Tausende Westdeutsche dabei, Leistungsschau der DDR-Wirtschaft,” *Berliner Zeitung*, October 8, 1964, p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> Karl-Heinz Gerstner, “350 000 demonstrieren in Berlin, Tausende Westdeutsche dabei, Leistungsschau der DDR-Wirtschaft,” *Berliner Zeitung*, October 8, 1964, p. 1.

<sup>85</sup> Author unknown, “Berlin – Ein Festplatz,” *Berliner Zeitung*, October 8, 1964, p. 1.

chance to participate in 3-day trips to Berlin to see the capital's festivities.<sup>86</sup> The National Front believed that viewing the celebrations in Berlin would be a memorable experience that would bring home the importance of the anniversary to ordinary citizens and more importantly, give them a sense of national pride. Their advertisements promised that "all participants will be deeply impressed by this trip and will return to their work with renewed vigor" as the visit "will clearly demonstrate for whom and for what our working people are undertaking their great efforts at work."<sup>87</sup> So in all *Kreisen*, the National Front committees made serious efforts to get people to make the journey to Berlin. Secretary Klösel of Rostock described his own committee as making "increased efforts to ensure their scheduled special trains are booked full."<sup>88</sup> The fact was the advertisements were not just meant to appeal to single individuals, but also to groups, in particular workers' brigades and cultural groups. Besides receiving a group discount, large enough groups could even arrange their own transportation: such as a group of 28 "gold building medal" winners from Rostock, who decided to celebrate by booking their own bus to Berlin.<sup>89</sup>

Although they could visit at any time, East Germans were encouraged to take these trips between September 15 and November 8, when the majority of the Berlin festival events would be taking place. Aside from the choice in dates, the itinerary of this trip was very strictly planned. On the first day, the group would depart Sonneberg at 5am and arrive at 1pm in Berlin. After lunch, the groups would get the whole afternoon to view an anniversary exhibition that, it was explained, provided "concrete evidence" (new products, perhaps?) that proved and "meaningfully

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<sup>86</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Reisebüro der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik Zweigstelle Sonneberg & Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Kreissekretariat Sonneberg, *Jeder einmal in die Hauptstadt Berlin!*

<sup>87</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Bezirkssekretär Klösel. Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland, Bezirksausschuß Rostock, "Informationsbericht," October 6, 1964, p. 4.

<sup>88</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Bezirkssekretär Klösel. Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland, Bezirksausschuß Rostock, "Informationsbericht," October 6, 1964, p. 4.

<sup>89</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Bezirkssekretär Klösel. Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland, Bezirksausschuß Rostock, "Informationsbericht," October 6, 1964, p. 4.

describe[d] the growth of our republic in all areas.”<sup>90</sup> On the second day, following breakfast, the visitors would receive a city tour of the major attractions of Berlin such as the Brandenburger Tor, the newly-built state opera house, Karl-Marx-Allee, and the Treptow Memorial, with the highlight of the day being an afternoon boat trip down the Spree. Following this, the visitors would be granted a free evening to explore the city as they wished, however, the National Front highly recommended they attend a “cultural anniversary event.” On the third day, the group would begin their journey home via a short stop in Potsdam to see the palace and gardens at Sanssouci and the Cecilienhof. The total cost was 135 MDN per person including insurance, transportation, accommodations, tour guides, and activities.<sup>91</sup>

Ultimately, some National Front committees were more successful at attracting participants than others, such as Rostock’s, where 5246 people applied for the trip.<sup>92</sup> Others were less successful, as *Kreis Wollgast* only received 500 applications out of their original goal of 1000, while Dresden only managed to get 185 people to attend the celebrations in Berlin.<sup>93</sup> Those from Dresden who had gone, however, reported back later that the trip had provided an important perspective about the development of the country, while they described the atmosphere at the festival, demonstration, and the large festival in Karl-Marx-Allee as all “unforgettable experiences.”<sup>94</sup> The Dresden secretariat triumphantly declared that this reaction was exactly what

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<sup>90</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Reisebüro der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik Zweigstelle Sonneberg & Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Kreissekretariat Sonneberg, *Jeder einmal in die Hauptstadt Berlin!*

<sup>91</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Reisebüro der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik Zweigstelle Sonneberg & Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Kreissekretariat Sonneberg, *Jeder einmal in die Hauptstadt Berlin!*

<sup>92</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Bezirkssekretur Klösel. Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Rostock, “Informationsbericht,” September 29, 1964, p. 6

<sup>93</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Bezirkssekretur Klösel. Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Rostock, “Informationsbericht,” September 29, 1964. p. 6; BArch DY 6/2397, Sekretariat of the Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Dresden, “Informationsbericht,” October 13, 1964, p. 4.

<sup>94</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Sekretariat, Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Dresden, “Informationsbericht,” October 13, 1964, p. 4.

they had hoped, particularly in “convincingly dissipating ... the lies spread by the West German press.”<sup>95</sup>

### Top-level celebratory activities and events



*Figure 6. Official Program for the reception in the Werner-Seelenbinder Halle on October 6, 1964 (BArch DY 6/2398)*

In his welcome address to the assembled dignitaries and guests that included Soviet Premier Brezhnev at the official reception on the evening prior the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GDR, National Front President Erich Correns thanked everyone, especially all “our wonderful friends

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<sup>95</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, Sekretariat of the Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuß Dresden, “Informationsbericht,” October 13, 1964, p. 4.

and foreign guests,” and those who “feel very strongly connected to the GDR” for having made the journey to the capital to celebrate the GDR.<sup>96</sup> The experiences any domestic and foreign dignitaries would have of the anniversary, ranging from viewing the parades from the grandstands, to official receptions like this, were nothing like the festivities experienced by people on the streets. These high-level ceremonies instead involved passive entertainment and far fewer participatory options. This was in keeping with the goal of such events, which was to impress dignitaries with how far the GDR had come, and not to indoctrinate them on the content of that year’s anniversary theses (although demonstrations ideological of themes could still be found in even these events). For elites, festivities are always more about asserting their already-established social status in society, such as by receiving special access to events. In this sense then, GDR festivities can be said to have followed suit in helping reinforce social dynamics.<sup>97</sup> For example, many events held in honour of the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the GDR required special invitations, and one lower-level official, a Comrade Woischwill, discovered that while he himself obtained an invitation to the official grand reception in the Werner-Seelenbinder-Halle on October 7, his relatively inferior status meant that he could not also secure an invitation for his wife.<sup>98</sup>

The official top-level festivities began Saturday, October 3, 1964 at 9:30am with the opening of a visual art exhibition called “Our Contemporaries” in the National Gallery in Berlin, followed by an honours ceremony for the best competition efforts from all areas of the economy awarded by the *Staatsrat* (Council of State). On Sunday October 4, *Staatsrat* member Johannes

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<sup>96</sup> BArch DY 6/2398, Erich Correns, “Rede auf der Festveranstaltung zum 15. Jahrestag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik am 6.10.1964 in der Werner-Seelenbinder-Halle in Berlin.”

<sup>97</sup> This difference between the elite and ordinary experience of festivals is something that Karen Petrone explores with regard to Soviet festivals. See Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous*, 203.

<sup>98</sup> BArch DY 6/2398, Letter from Werner, Büro des Sekretariats des Nationalrats der Nationalen Front, to Woischwill, September 28, 1964.

Dieckmann honoured high-achieving citizens with the fatherland’s service medals of silver and bronze as well as the title “Best People’s Scientist.” With the arrival of foreign delegations the following day, larger ceremonies began, including a more important honours ceremony where Ulbricht himself handed out Karl Marx Orders, Fatherland Service medals in gold, as well as “Banner der Arbeit” honours and the special title “Hero of Labour” (“Held der Arbeit”). A torchlit ceremony of the FDJ then brought the evening to a close.<sup>99</sup>

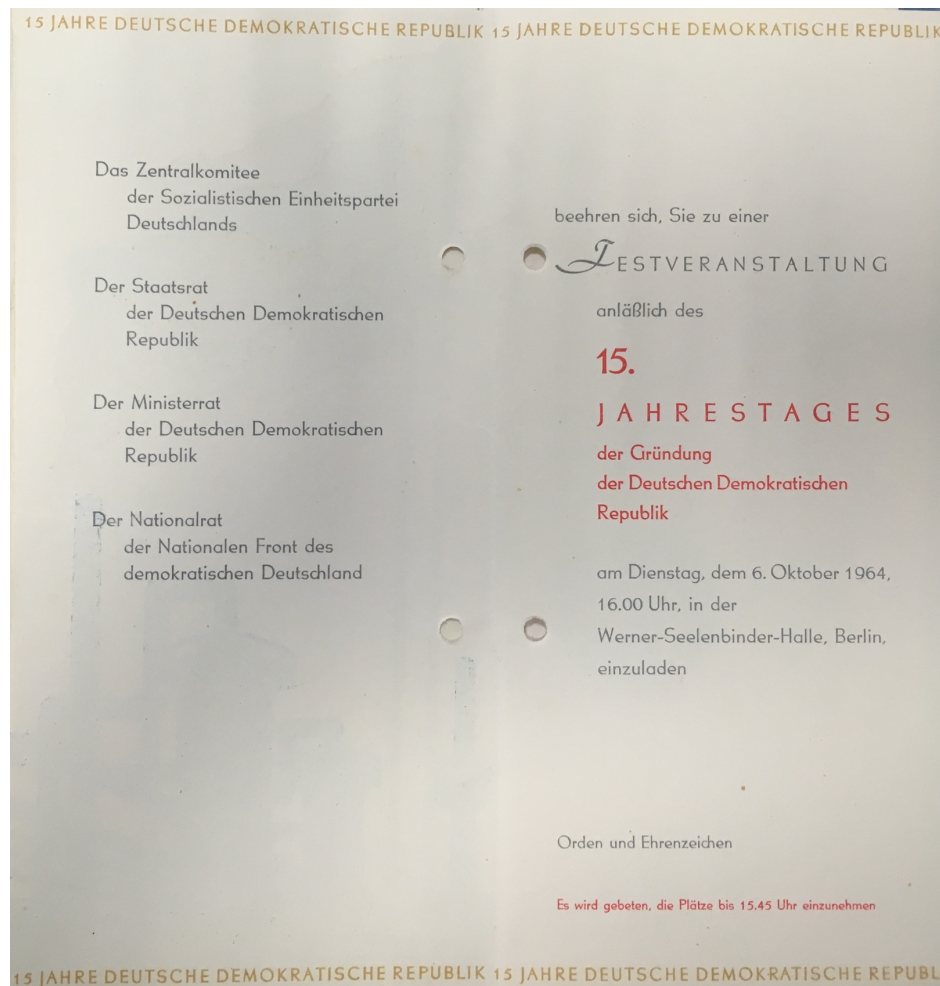


Figure 7. Official Program for the reception in the Werner-Seelenbinder Haale on October 6, 1964, hosted by the SED Central Committee, the Staatsrat, the Ministerrat, and the Central Committee of the National Front (BArch DY 6/2398)

<sup>99</sup> BArch DY 6/2398. Official Berlin program “15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik”

The main official ceremonies began on the morning of Tuesday, October 6 with an invitation-only wreath-laying ceremony at the Memorial of the Socialists in Berlin-Friedrichsfelde and also at the Soviet monument in Berlin-Treptow.<sup>100</sup> President of the National Front, Erich Correns, officially opened the celebrations by welcoming the foreign dignitaries at the Werner-Seelenbinder-Halle later that afternoon, at 4:03pm to be precise, to the tune of an orchestra playing marching songs. This was followed by a 1.5 hour speech by Walter Ulbricht, a full 30-minute speech by the Soviet Union's delegation, eight-minute speeches each by representatives of Poland and Czechoslovakia, with representatives of western communist parties in France, Italy, West Germany, Austria, and Denmark receiving a mere five minutes of time (each) for their speeches.<sup>101</sup> Following the speeches, which, at over three hours, took up the majority of the reception, a shorter period of entertainment followed from 8 to 10pm.<sup>102</sup> The entertainment included sixteen different musical performances including the music of Mozart and Verdi, a Moscow ballerina dancing to pieces from Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake," opera pieces, speeches by ordinary prize winners, some acrobatics, and a performance called "Nobody had yet thought of that 15 years ago" from a Russian folk choir. The evening was brought to a close with the orchestra playing a variety of patriotic "GDR melodies."<sup>103</sup>

The Day of the Republic, October 7, began at 9am with a military parade on Marx-Engels-Platz arranged by the SED Central Committee, the *Ministerrat*, and the National Front,

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<sup>100</sup> BArch DY 6/2398. Letter from Werner, Büro des Sekretariats des Nationalrats der Nationalen Front, to Woischwill, September 28, 1964.

<sup>101</sup> BArch DY 6/2398 "Ablaufplan für die zentrale Festveranstaltung des ZK der SED, des Staatsrates, des Ministerrates und des Nationalrates der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland am 6. Oktober 1964, 16 Uhr, in der Werner-Seelenbinder Halle," p. 1-2.

<sup>102</sup> BArch DY 6/2398 "Ablaufplan für die zentrale Festveranstaltung des ZK der SED, des Staatsrates, des Ministerrates und des Nationalrates der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland am 6. Oktober 1964, 16 Uhr, in der Werner-Seelenbinder Halle," p. 1-2.

<sup>103</sup> BArch DY 6/2398. "Festveranstaltung aus Anlass des 15. Jahrestages der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik am Dienstag, dem 6. Oktober 1964, 16.00 Uhr, in der Werner-Seelenbinder-Halle, Berlin"



with officials viewing the parades and demonstrations from the grandstands.<sup>104</sup> At the same time as the “People’s Festivals” were taking place in all the *Stadtbezirke* of Berlin and the main festivities were going on at Karl-Marx-Allee, officials once again had their own grand reception to attend that evening. At 8pm, Walter Ulbricht, Willi Stoph and Erich Correns hosted an event for 2000 people in the Werner-Seelenbinder-Halle, which included representatives of the SED Central Committee, the *Staatsrat*, and foreign delegations.<sup>105</sup> Besides the obligatory speeches and congratulatory toasts by Ulbricht and Brezhnev, there was a banquet, performances by the NVA orchestra, and finally, a dance at 9pm in the foyer.<sup>106</sup>

### **Evangelizing the Anniversary Message Abroad**

It was not just within the GDR’s borders that foreign delegations had the opportunity to celebrate the GDR, however, as the state wanted to spread the message of its theses to the Soviet Union as well. This is something that would have benefitted East Germans visiting the Soviet Union, as well as possibly creating interest in the GDR and its people among Soviet citizens, who perhaps might have joined a Soviet-GDR friendship organization and visited the GDR as result. In 1973, the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party ordered detailed plans be made in

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<sup>104</sup> BArch DY 6/2398, Letter from Werner, Büro des Sekretariats des Nationalrats der Nationalen Front, to Woischwill, September 28, 1964.

<sup>105</sup> BArch DY 6/2398. Official Berlin program “15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik”. BArch DY 6/2398 “Ablaufplan für den Empfang aus Anlass des 15. Jahrestages der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, gegen vom Ersten Sekretär des Zentralkomitees der SED und Vorsitzenden des Staatsrates der DDR, vom Vorsitzenden des Ministerrates der DDR und vom Präsidenten des Nationalrates der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland am Mittwoch, dem 7. October 1964, 20 Uhr, im Sitz des Staatsrates, Berlin, Marx-Engels-Platz.”

<sup>106</sup> BArch DY 6/2398 “Ablaufplan für den Empfang aus Anlass des 15. Jahrestages der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, gegen vom Ersten Sekretär des Zentralkomitees der SED und Vorsitzenden des Staatsrates der DDR, vom Vorsitzenden des Ministerrates der DDR und vom Präsidenten des Nationalrates der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland am Mittwoch, dem 7. October 1964, 20 Uhr, im Sitz des Staatsrates, Berlin, Marx-Engels-Platz” p. 2-3.

honour of the GDR's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>107</sup> In many ways, the GDR anniversary celebrations that took place on Soviet soil were a mirror of those held in the GDR itself. The communist central committees of all of the Soviet republics, including the city-level committees of Moscow, Leningrad, Volgograd, Irkutsk and others with existing friendship agreements with GDR cities and *Bezirke*, agreed to join forces in creating festivities, gatherings and exhibitions, concerts and film evenings in honour of the GDR's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Important partners in organizing these festivities included the Soviet Society for Friendship and Cultural Connections with Foreign Countries, as well as local and enterprise-based union and Komsomol (Soviet youth organization) committees and the collective members of the Soviet Society for Friendship with the GDR (SGDDR). Also heavily involved were the Embassy and the General Consulate of the GDR.<sup>108</sup>

The methods used to spread the message abroad echoed the National Front's method of spreading the message at home, as the party organs of the SED in the Soviet Union were responsible for distributing the anniversary message. A Comrade Goede led the task forces and provided other organizations with a framework from which to organize their own events. Other organizations were trained by GDR embassy staff, who oversaw the daily work and ensured they coordinated with other GDR groups.<sup>109</sup> As in the GDR itself, there was also strict control from the top, with the fulfillment of the anniversary plan being "regularly monitored" at embassy meetings.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. Botschaft Moskau, "Abschlußbericht über die Durchführung der Maßnahmen zum 25. Jahrestag der DDR in der UdSSR," October 10, 1974 p. 6-7.

<sup>108</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. "Maßnahmen in der Sowjetunion zum 25. Jahrestag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik," Henry Ott of the GDR Embassy in the Soviet Republics, report to SED Central Committee member Hermann Axen. July 11, 1974, p. 1-2.

<sup>109</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. Botschaft Moskau, "Abschlußbericht über die Durchführung der Maßnahmen zum 25. Jahrestag der DDR in der UdSSR," October 10, 1974, p. 4-5.

<sup>110</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. Botschaft Moskau, "Abschlußbericht über die Durchführung der Maßnahmen zum 25. Jahrestag der DDR in der UdSSR," October 10, 1974, p. 4.

That no less effort was put into these foreign celebrations is clear from the opinions of ordinary East Germans who attended these festivities in the Soviet Union. For example, a DSF member named Hildegard attended the GDR's 25th anniversary in the Soviet Union in 1974 with fellow DSF members. She commented that on this trip, she "made memories that would stay with her forever."<sup>111</sup> Hildegard found the Soviets to be a wonderful people who were excited to have East German visitors, but she was completely surprised to observe that in celebrating the GDR's 25th anniversary, the Soviets were so enthusiastic that she thought they were celebrating their own anniversary. Hildegard judged their myriad anniversary cultural programs and banquets to have been extremely well done, something which was a pleasant surprise to her fellow DSF members.<sup>112</sup> The fact that Hildegard and her group were so impressed shows how holding celebrations like these could be effective in creating bonds and maintaining the image of a close friendship existing between the East German and Soviet peoples.

One of the main highlights of these foreign anniversary celebrations was the "GDR Culture Days" week of events held in Moscow, Leningrad, and some of the capitals of the union republics. Organized by the Soviet Union's Ministry for Culture in partnership with the *Ministerrat's* Committee for TV and Radio, the *Ministerrat's* Committee for Films, as well as numerous other writer, theatre and other cultural groups, these events took place from October 1 to 10, 1974. The main events included festivals, concerts, theatre pieces, and exhibitions designed to show the GDR connection to Soviet culture, as well as their common "humanist heritage of world culture and achievements."<sup>113</sup> Other events included a book exhibition arranged by the

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<sup>111</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Submission to radio program Troika der Freundschaft. Hildegard Kießling. "Mit dem Freundschaftszug der DSF in Freundesland," February 18, 1975.

<sup>112</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Submission to radio program Troika der Freundschaft. Hildegard Kießling. "Mit dem Freundschaftszug der DSF in Freundesland" 18.2.1975.

<sup>113</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. Botschaft Moskau, "Abschlußbericht über die Durchführung der Maßnahmen zum 25. Jahrestag der DDR in der UdSSR," October 10, 1974, p. 10.

Ministry Committee for Publishing and Book Stores in Moscow and Odessa; a photo exhibition of the GDR called “The GDR Today” created by a Soviet journalist society; scientific conferences, symposiums, and scholarly exchanges with the GDR arranged by the Soviet education ministry; and a “GDR Film Days” organized by the State Committee of the *Ministerrat* of the USSR and the Filmmaking Association of the USSR in Moscow, Kiev, Leningrad, and Minsk.<sup>114</sup> Like in the GDR, the opening ceremonies of these anniversary celebrations included an official reception and grand opening in the Kremlin attended by numerous delegations and representatives.

Also, as in the GDR, the Soviet press was tasked with closely reporting on the development of jubilee preparations – those taking place in the Soviet Union as well as in the GDR.<sup>115</sup> TASS, the central editor for the newspapers worked with the Committee for TV and Radio, ensured that the anniversary events were widely publicized, including that bulletins for foreign and Soviet presses contained sufficient information honouring the GDR, like details about its quarter century of achievements.<sup>116</sup> Besides advertising, Soviet TV and radio also ran special programming such as an “Evening of GDR TV” and a “Day of GDR Radio” programs that highlighted the friendship and collaboration between the peoples of the GDR and the Soviet Union.<sup>117</sup> There were even live broadcasts from Berlin, including of Brezhnev’s visit there, as

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<sup>114</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. “Maßnahmen in der Sowjetunion zum 25. Jahrestag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,” Henry Ott of the GDR Embassy in the Soviet Republics, report to SED Central Committee member Hermann Axen. July 11, 1974, p. 4-5.

<sup>115</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. “Maßnahmen in der Sowjetunion zum 25. Jahrestag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,” Henry Ott of the GDR Embassy in the Soviet Republics, report to SED Central Committee member Hermann Axen. July 11, 1974, p. 6.

<sup>116</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. “Maßnahmen in der Sowjetunion zum 25. Jahrestag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,” Henry Ott of the GDR Embassy in the Soviet Republics, report to SED Central Committee member Hermann Axen. July 11, 1974, p. 6.

<sup>117</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. “Maßnahmen in der Sowjetunion zum 25. Jahrestag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,” Henry Ott of the GDR Embassy in the Soviet Republics, report to SED Central Committee member Hermann Axen. July 11, 1974, p. 3-4.

well as “an evening of GDR TV” with an interview by Honecker.<sup>118</sup> Overall, there were 300 films released and 12 “film weeks.”

Similarly, Soviet authors wrote many featurettes, articles and reports in honour of the GDR’s anniversary. Using sources such as information from the 12<sup>th</sup> plenum, Kurt Hager’s speeches, the theses, and documents of the 10<sup>th</sup> DSF (German-Soviet Friendship Society) Congress, over 20 main newspapers and journals honoured the GDR with entire issues, special features or prize competitions.<sup>119</sup> Some publications such as “Journalist” “Ogonjok” and “Friendship of the People” even held prize competitions about the GDR.<sup>120</sup>

As in the GDR, it was important that the information presented at these events be relevant to their audience. The problem though was that much of the information the DSF and the GDR’s Panorama program provided to the Soviet Union and the Soviet Republics was not actually always relevant. So while the Kiev embassy remarked that they found some of Panorama’s documents in particular to be very helpful for their presentations, they also found that other information simply did not make sense in the Soviet context: such as several issues from the journal *Aus erster Hand* on “Conditions in the Socialist Economy” (Russian), “How do people live in the GDR?” (German), “One hundred questions – one hundred answers” (Russian), and “How does a VEB work?” Also, while the Kiev Embassy found that one film called “Our Land” provided the people of Kiev with a “positive experience,” others, such as one called “In Our Own Interest,” did not resonate at all with the intended audience.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. Botschaft Moskau, “Abschlußbericht über die Durchführung der Maßnahmen zum 25. Jahrestag der DDR in der UdSSR,” October 10, 1974, p. 11-12.

<sup>119</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. Botschaft Moskau, “Abschlußbericht über die Durchführung der Maßnahmen zum 25. Jahrestag der DDR in der UdSSR,” October 10, 1974, p. 11-12.

<sup>120</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. “Bericht über den 25. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR,” Kiev, Oct 15, 1974, p. 6.

<sup>121</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. “Bericht über den 25. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR,” Kiev, Oct 15, 1974, p. 6.

After the festivities had concluded, the GDR embassy in Moscow reported their efforts in the Soviet Union as having been a success. The Soviet citizens had been informed to “a great extent about the relations between the GDR and USSR and about the GDR itself” and the embassy thought their message had found “wide resonance” with the population.<sup>122</sup> The Embassy in Moscow wrote:

The celebration of the anniversary turned out to be a real highlight in the brotherly relationship of our parties, states and peoples. At all events and in all Soviet mass media in all Union Republics, the anniversary was highly valued as a mutual holiday, that, in particular, reflected the further development of our collaborative relationship.<sup>123</sup>

The story was much the same in the Soviet republics, with the Embassy in Kiev reporting that all events and efforts that were popularized widely in the press and on the radio/TV received strong support from the general public.<sup>124</sup> The high point of the commemorations were the festive events (including a variety of “friendship gatherings” and exhibitions) in Kiev, Donesk, and Lvov, in which 5000 people took part. The official festivities in Kiev and Kischiniov had been led by the party secretaries and had included delegations from the Central Committee of the GDR, and included the usual topics such as the historical meaning of the founding and development of the GDR as a socialist state on German soil, the GDR’s success in building up socialism and improving societal life, the friendship between the Soviet Union and the GDR, the GDR’s “politics of peace,” and the close economic connection between the Soviet Union and the GDR in realizing the complex RGW economic program.<sup>125</sup> One unexpected outcome for the organizers, however, was that through arranging these activities, the GDR embassy personnel

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<sup>122</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. Botschaft Moskau, “Abschlußbericht über die Durchführung der Maßnahmen zum 25. Jahrestag der DDR in der UdSSR,” October 10, 1974, p. 3, 7.

<sup>123</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. Botschaft Moskau, “Abschlußbericht über die Durchführung der Maßnahmen zum 25. Jahrestag der DDR in der UdSSR,” October 10, 1974, p. 2.

<sup>124</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. “Bericht über den 25. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR,” Kiev, Oct 15, 1974, p. 1.

<sup>125</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. “Bericht über den 25. Jahrestag der Gründung der DDR,” Kiev, Oct 15, 1974, p. 2-3.

came to make important Soviet connections and developed good personal relationships with other organizations, such as with the SGDDR.<sup>126</sup> This was very helpful for their future work, as the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations across the Soviet Union and the Union republics were viewed by officials as laying the groundwork for the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Liberation of Fascism – a holiday equally important to all states within the Eastern Bloc – in six months’ time.<sup>127</sup>

## **Festivities Conclusion**

As explained in the previous chapter on the GDR’s anniversary theses, it was simply not realistic for the National Front to hand out dense information booklets filled with the state’s ideological goals, as this could not ensure that East Germans either read or understood them. Their solution was instead to hold events such as lectures and exhibitions that would be simultaneously entertaining (or at the very least, interesting) and “educational.” While there is no evidence that the National Front compelled people to attend any of the dry anniversary thesis lectures, there was actually no need for the National Front to do so in any case. Instead, they tapped into the pleasure-seeking desires of the populace and cleverly inserted their messaging right into popular celebratory events, which almost everyone was certain to attend of their own free will in some form. The sheer number of events tells us of the importance of these events for the state – clearly the SED and National Front believed in the important role they played in communicating ideology from the top down all the way to the lowest of levels.

The usefulness of holding such smaller events was that they presented the anniversary theses through a locally-relevant lens. Thus, the National Front could encourage local cultural

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<sup>126</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. Botschaft Moskau, “Abschlußbericht über die Durchführung der Maßnahmen zum 25. Jahrestag der DDR in der UdSSR,” October 10, 1974, p. 12-13.

<sup>127</sup> BArch DY 30/ IV B 2/20/648. Botschaft Moskau, “Abschlußbericht über die Durchführung der Maßnahmen zum 25. Jahrestag der DDR in der UdSSR,” October 10, 1974, p. 12-13.

groups to use their skills and creativity to help the regional National Front representatives carry out the activities. Event programs from the cities of Sonneberg and Langewiesen in *Bezirk Suhl* give us a glimpse into what these festivals looked like at the lowest levels and the differences and similarities in the offerings between larger and smaller urban centres. The example of Sonneberg shows how a larger centre could offer a higher number and greater variety of city-wide and individual district events over a longer time period than Langewiesen. Sonneberg could even count on higher attendance numbers from top functionaries as well as greater organizational involvement by the National Front committees in comparison to the events in Langewiesen, which appear to have been largely organized by the lowest of functionaries from local chapters of diverse mass organizations.

Furthermore, the National Front also ensured the type and content of the anniversary events were interactive and carefully targeted to specific strata of society. Thus, a “holiday” to Berlin, while framed in terms of an enjoyable festive trip, was actually functioning as a way of reinforcing a sense of identity, national pride, and of underscoring the messages of that year’s anniversary theses. Most other events and activities were framed in this same way: people were drawn in by the chance to have fun and they were impressed by the grandeur and/or entertainment value, all the while subconsciously taking in the message as it was presented in a speech in one place, or infused into the choice of photographs on display in another place. Though they could ostensibly be merely looking at a photo exhibition displaying the economic progress of building up an area in the last 15 years, people visiting any of the festivities in 1964 could actually have been taking in the message of hope for the future and thereby developing a distinct GDR identity, even if they did not entirely believe everything the state told them.



## Chapter Three: Socialist Competitions (*Sozialistische Wettbewerbe*)



Figure 8. A workers' brigade in a lightbulb factory working hard to meet their production target four days ahead of schedule in honour of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution in August, 1957 (*Neues Deutschland*, August 10, 1957, p. 11)

As demonstrated by the image above of a group of GDR workers trying to meet their production targets at a lightbulb factory, commemorating GDR anniversaries was not just about enjoying a holiday and fireworks: rather, most of it involved a great deal of less-than-glamorous work. Indeed, this particular workers' brigade's goal of meeting their yearly production target four days earlier than planned shows how mundane the contribution could be. Nevertheless, the National Front appreciated every small economic effort, for put together, these unpaid workers'

efforts helped stimulate economic growth in the GDR's planned economy and reinforced the anniversary theses' goal of encouraging workers to advance the GDR's position in the world. These contributions were known as "socialist competitions" (*sozialistische Wettbewerbe*) and while their main function was indeed economic, they were also a means of reinforcing the anniversary themes to GDR citizens, especially through the more culturally-focused competitions. Widespread participation in these competitions in the lead-up to the anniversaries was thus vital to the National Front, as the sheer number of competitions (ranging from the factory down to the smallest *Hausgemeinschaft*) ensured East Germans were thoroughly exposed to the SED's anniversary theses for that year.

Despite this important ideological role, socialist competitions were most useful to the GDR leadership economically, for as a state with a planned economy, the GDR lacked the competitive aspects inherent in a capitalist economy. This was a problem that likewise affected other communist states across the Eastern Bloc. As Aappo Kähönen explains, from the perspective of other Eastern Bloc leaders, "[t]his was not considered a problem until the lack of competition was linked to poor quality output and low productivity."<sup>1</sup> Another common problem among such planned economies (and from which the GDR also suffered, especially as time went on) was that the centrally regulated prices, combined with limited access to information, often resulted in a lack of innovation.<sup>2</sup> So the GDR (and other planned economies) needed ways to make up for these deficits by stimulating their economy. One way to do this was through holding periodic "socialist competitions" that pitted different organizations, individuals, or enterprises against one another in "friendly competitions" in order to increase economic output.

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<sup>1</sup> Aappo Kähönen, "Optimal planning, optimal economy, optimal life? The Kosygin reforms, 1965-72," in Katalin Miklóssy and Melanie Ilič, *Competition in Socialist Society* (London: Routledge, 2014), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Kähönen, "Optimal planning, optimal economy, optimal life? The Kosygin reforms, 1965-72," 23.

Holding socialist competitions was an idea that had originated in 1917 with Lenin, who wrote that an important task for socialist governments was to “organize competition.”<sup>3</sup> Lenin argued that in contrast to capitalist competition, which merely “crushe[s], suppress[e]s, and strangle[s]” people, socialist competition would instead create an opportunity for most working people to develop and display their abilities in their own field of work, for “there is a great deal of talent among the people. It is merely suppressed. It must be given an opportunity to display itself.”<sup>4</sup>

In order to overcome these capitalist “parasites harmful to socialist society,” Lenin argued that socialist governments needed to first rouse the “organising talent” of every worker and peasant, which he explained as “organiz[ing] the accounting and control of the amount of work done and of production and distribution by the entire people.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, Lenin thought competitions could be effectively organized on a national scale between communities and other worker associations.<sup>6</sup> He concluded that it was this rousing of suppressed talent, along with the support of the people, that would ultimately “save Russia and save the cause of socialism.”<sup>7</sup>

Katalin Miklóssy and Melanie Ilič point out that by the 1950s, as a result of Cold War tensions, a new kind of “socialist competition” had begun to develop. In the aftermath of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s reforms in the late 1950s and those following the XXII Communist Party Congress in 1961, the Communist Party developed the slogan of socialism “catching up without overtaking the West.”<sup>8</sup> Miklóssy and Ilič write that “[i]n this hard-edged race with the

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<sup>3</sup> V.I. Lenin, *A Great Beginning; Heroism of the Workers in the Rear; Communist Subbotniks; How to Organize Competition* (Moscow, Progress: 1971), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Lenin, *A Great Beginning*, 34; 39-40; 43.

<sup>5</sup> Lenin, *A Great Beginning*, 39-40.

<sup>6</sup> Lenin, *A Great Beginning*, 43.

<sup>7</sup> Lenin, *A Great Beginning*, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Katalin Miklóssy and Melanie Ilič, “Introduction: Competition in State Socialism” in Katalin Miklóssy and Melanie Ilič, *Competition in Socialist Society* (London: Routledge, 2014), 4.

West, the East started to learn from the enemy in order to ‘overtake’ it using its own means.”<sup>9</sup>

Essentially, this meant more emphasis on consumer goods and results, in contrast to merely increasing production and distribution as before. In so doing, the East was tacitly admitting that socialism had fallen behind the West’s more robust economies and could not fulfill their people’s desire for non-necessities.

In the GDR, these friendly competitions that would help the country “catch up and overtake the West” took place not only in anniversary years, but every year in one form or another, usually as a way of meeting pre-set production targets.<sup>10</sup> During the 1950s and early 1960s, GDR officials often referred to some of these competitions as “socialist obligations” – that is, extra duties (such as extra unpaid working hours in a factory or volunteering with the harvest) that people could do in order to help the GDR achieve its strategic economic plan faster and in a more efficient manner. Beginning in the late 1960s, and gaining increasing momentum in the 1970s and 1980s, another type of socialist competition the National Front began organizing were, in essence, beautification campaigns, where townspeople were encouraged to fix up their streets, neighbourhoods, even individual dwellings, all for the “betterment” of their socialist state. These socialist competitions were held at the individual and apartment complex association (*Hausgemeinschaft*) level, and were popularized under the slogan of “Join in! Make our Cities and Communities more Beautiful!” (“*Mach mit! Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden*”).<sup>11</sup> This unpaid labour was justified (and thus not “exploitative” like in capitalism) because it was framed

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<sup>9</sup> Miklóssy and Ilić, “Introduction: Competition in State Socialism,” 4.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the SED’s concept of “Überholen ohne einzuholen,” see André Steiner, ed. *Überholen ohne einzuholen: die DDR-Wirtschaft als Fussnote der deutschen Geschichte* (Berlin: Links, 2006). For a more succinct discussion of the concept, including an anecdote of how it worked, see Michael Harms, “Überholen ohne einzuholen,” *taz*, November 9, 2004, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> A *Hausgemeinschaft* was an association of residents living in the same apartment building. The *Hausgemeinschaften* were normally headed by a *Hausgemeinschaftsleitung*, a committee made up of five representatives that would send reports up the chain to the National Front. The *Hausgemeinschaften* also received stipends from the National Front to organize their activities. See Rubin, *Amnesiopolis*, 107-08.

under catchy slogans as a way of contributing to the building of a sense of community and state socialism in the GDR, as well as of strengthening the socialist world system overall, such as by “catching up without overtaking the West.” By convincing the people to undertake this work themselves, the state saved a great deal of money and staved off some of the criticism associated with crumbling infrastructure, especially as the years wore on and the GDR fell increasingly into debt.

During major anniversary years, such as every five-year increment of the so-called Liberation of Fascism in 1945 (“*Befreiung vom Faschismus*”) the anniversary of the end of the Second World War) or the Founding of the GDR in 1949, or even every ten-year increments of the Anniversary of the October Revolution, these economic competitions were merely one part of a broader group of initiatives or campaigns (*Gemeinschaftsaktionen*) initiated by the state. However, it was also important to the National Front in Berlin that the economic aspect of these activities not be its sole focus, as it hoped the year of activities would leave a deep ideological impression on the populace as well. Thus, the National Front also designed many cultural and educational initiatives to take place during anniversary years.

Some of these cultural initiatives (*Aktionen*) were national in scope and were advertised in all major newspapers, while others were smaller campaigns devised by the top Berlin committee of the National Front or other mass organizations (such as the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF), the Democratic Women’s League (DFD), or the Free German Trade Union Federation (FDGB) and carried out on the ground by the local boards/committees of these mass organizations. In still other cases, local officials designed and carried out even smaller campaigns that could either stand alone or be held in tandem with national campaigns. Sometimes, as in the case of the initiative “Drushba Klub” (“Friendship Club”) in 1975, a radio contest where everyone was encouraged to submit personal stories about their own connections to Soviet

citizens, the campaign was organized as a joint effort, in this instance by Radio DDR, the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF) and the National Front. In cases such that of the “Drushba Klub,” which was technically a national campaign, it was local DSF and National Front committees that were actually responsible for drumming up popular support. In this particular 1975 campaign, the local committees also judged peoples’ submissions, then forwarded the best examples on to Radio DDR to be broadcast on air. Unlike the economic competitions that were focused on increasing output and productivity, the main purpose of these cultural competitions was ideological and by taking part, the National Front hoped people would be thoroughly convinced of the underlying thesis in that competition – whether it was the necessity of the Soviet friendship or the GDR’s economic achievements.

Key to the ultimate success of all socialist competitions, whether cultural or economic, was the way in which the *Bezirk* (state), *Kreis* (county) and local National Front and mass organization committees carried out the national campaigns at the regional level. Any miscommunication between local committees and Berlin usually resulted in delayed or less than desirable results in that area. In fact, ongoing tensions between centre and periphery were a major feature of the organizational process of the competitions: Berlin insisted on as much uniformity across regions as possible, leveling criticism at regional committees that seriously diverged from their admittedly often-vague instructions. In later years, the Berlin National Front Central Committee even occasionally sent out representatives from their cultural department to personally meet with representatives in regions to correct any problems as they arose.

One common suggestion from Berlin in each anniversary year was for the *Kreis* or *Bezirk* committees to create specific task forces in order to carry out their work more smoothly. From Berlin’s perspective, the advantages of creating a task force were mostly to do with opening the lines of communication between regional and national organizing committees in order to

maintain better, centralized control of the messaging. Berlin thought that task forces made up of representatives from all the major organizing bodies, including the local presses, would thus be a better guarantee of the “success” of a specific competition (success meaning, of course, that participating in the campaigns resulted in public absorption of the SED ideology), than if the local National Front committees were carrying it out unaided. In practice, however, even the existence of a task force could not guarantee success if there were other organizational problems with the competition or even a lack of popular interest. The key here is that the National Front in Berlin could simply not compel cooperation from all local organizations, even if they were still technically part of the National Front. There are many instances of regional committees, such as those of the German-Soviet Friendship (DSF) committees, for example, contributing greatly to the organizing of an initiative in one region, such as Leipzig, while the same organizing work in Magdeburg was instead carried out by the regional People’s Solidarity (VS) committee as the local DSF committee was not interested in doing the work.

Ultimately, however, Berlin was most concerned with a region’s ability to maintain the ideological integrity of its message and to inspire popular participation in the competitions, no matter how the region managed to achieve these results. For example, there were occurrences where local committees (such as that of *Kreis* Hainichen one year) completely reinterpreted a national campaign to Berlin’s initial annoyance, but upon achieving impressive participation numbers with ideologically-sound initiatives, won back Berlin’s approval in the end. There were also instances when Berlin was so unhappy with preliminary competition results in a region (such as in 1957 in Neubrandenburg) that the National Front interceded to find a way to ensure the initiative gained some resonance amongst the people and did not fail completely. Importantly, there were no examples of Berlin accepting defeat: the National Front always at least tried to

remedy an unsuccessful regional interpretation of a national campaign, for it was just too important to it to lose an opportunity to achieve its pedagogical-ideological goals.



## The Soviet Friendship and the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the October Revolution

As pointed out in the introduction to the dissertation, a powerful function of myths, especially founding myths, is their ability to appropriate and “change” the past by transforming a high point in a history into a “foundational myth” that becomes vital to a nation’s unity and stability. The stronger the myth is, the easier it then becomes to mobilize and unify people around a founding national idea.<sup>12</sup> Its power lies in how it makes the past appear in contrast to the present: a founding moment can project unity, continuity and ultimately, identity.<sup>13</sup> This is precisely how foundational myths help to stabilize a fragile time in a state’s history. Such a powerful founding myth was something that the fledgling GDR desperately needed during its first decade in existence.

Aleida Assmann defines a myth as a “collectively remembered history” or more specifically, “an idea, an event, a person, a narrative that has acquired a symbolic value and is engraved and transmitted in memory.”<sup>14</sup> Along with the myth of antifascism, the GDR’s messaging in the first two decades of its existence was dominated by other important themes such as the connection between the East German and the Soviet peoples, as well as the East German state’s legitimacy vis-à-vis the West. It was through utilizing these narratives that the SED sought to rewrite the German past and provide more noble roots for their new state. Given that the National Front needed to first create a permanent positive opinion of the Soviets in the minds of East Germans – and make them forget their negative experiences of the brutal Soviet occupation – it is no coincidence that the first major anniversary commemoration and associated socialist competitions in GDR history was that of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the October Revolution in 1957.

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<sup>12</sup> Anthony Smith, “The ‘Golden Age’ and National Renewal” in Hosking and Schöpflin, *Myths and Nationhood*, 39.

<sup>13</sup> John R. Gillis, “Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory,” 68

This anniversary presented a golden opportunity for the National Front to re-educate the populace via thousands of local and national competitions on how the Soviet vanguards of the past had established a whole new world system. In addition, the SED drew on older working class traditions and tried to combine these with their newer discourses.<sup>15</sup> Of course, this is part and parcel of creating a new state, for organizers of early Soviet festivals had had to also find a way to mark the new era and create and legitimize new revolutionary traditions. As James von Geldern points out, the Soviets had likewise sought by using a centred and focused narrative, to help establish the Revolution as inevitable and thus present their young regime as being the culmination of a long tradition. This creation of a new narrative allowed the Soviets to reframe themselves as legitimate rulers instead of as usurping rebels and lent them political legitimacy.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 9. "Competition to Honour the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Great Socialist October Revolution – Who can write the best and most impactful experience of German-Soviet Friendship?" (BArch, DY6/5648)

<sup>15</sup> Olsen, *Tailoring Truth*, 45.

<sup>16</sup> Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*, 209-210.

**“Wir schreiben das Buch der deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft!” (“We will write the Book of German-Soviet Friendship!”) (1957)**

In September 1957, the National Front appealed to the public to join in a national cultural competition in honour of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the “Great Socialist October Revolution,” asking “Who can write the best and most impactful experience of German-Soviet Friendship?”<sup>17</sup> The appeal requested East Germans submit stories that detailed personal experiences or meaningful encounters that served to demonstrate the “warm and steadfast” friendship between the people of the GDR and of the USSR.<sup>18</sup> People were to submit their stories to their district-level (*Bezirk*) National Front committees for initial evaluation by a jury, who would then send their chosen finalists on to the central jury in Berlin. The *Bezirk* juries were made up of various local personalities such as journalists like Walter Bankel, cultural editor of local paper, *Das Volk*, in Erfurt; authors like Karl Otto of the Association for German Writers in Karl-Marx-Stadt; and cultural department officials such as a Herr Koschel in Cottbus.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the central jury in Berlin comprised of leading political officials from the National Front such as Herr Lewin from the SED Central Committee’s Department of Culture; Ernst Laboor from the SED Central Committee’s History Institute; Herr Schellenberger from the Writers’ Association of the GDR (DSV); Herr von Steuben from the German-Soviet Society for Friendship (DSF); and Herr Fühmann, a representative of the National Democratic Party of Germany (NDPD). It also included academics like Herr Grünberg from Berlin’s Education Department, Dr. Weise from the

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<sup>17</sup> Note: The competition was first conceived in August, 1957, and the first public appeal in the national newspapers appears in the *Berliner Zeitung* on September 15, with the first appeal in paper newspaper *Neues Deutschland* appearing on September 24.

<sup>18</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, “Wettbewerb zu Ehren des 40. Jahrestages der Grossen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution, 1957,” p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Büro des Präsidiums, Arbeitsgebiet 1. “Kurzinformation 07 zum Stand des Wettbewerbs ‘Wir schrieben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft,’” October 21, 1957, p. 2.

Potsdam-Babelsberg film school; and Herr G. Engel from Humboldt University's Institute for German History.<sup>20</sup>

In order to incentivize participation in this competition, the National Front offered substantial prizes for the top eighteen stories, with a further seventy-three submissions receiving smaller prizes.<sup>21</sup> The first-place prize was an 18-day trip for two to the Soviet Union and included stops in Moscow and cities along the Black Sea such as Tbilisi, Sokhumi, Yalta, and Kiev; the second-place prize was a TV cabinet (it is unclear if a TV was included); the third-place winner would receive a 14-day trip for two to Moscow, Stalingrad, Rostov, and Kiev. The rest of the prizes awarded to the top 18 winners included TV sets, a Großsuper radio, a mo-ped, various cameras (including an AK 8, Contax, Praktika, and Werra), tape recorders, shorter trips for one person only (a 10-day stay in Leningrad and Moscow for 8<sup>th</sup> place; 7 days in Moscow for 10<sup>th</sup> place), watches and other items.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the advertisement promised that the very best submissions would be compiled in book form and published at a later date.

That the National Front provided such substantial prizes shows how serious the SED was about attracting public attention and generating participation in this socialist competition. Significantly, rather than doling out collective prizes that could perhaps improve a community (given the collective benefit these competitions supposedly brought), these prizes were very “westernized” and individualistic. The National Front thus offered the people what they really wanted, which were trips to foreign lands (even if they could only send people to the Soviet

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<sup>20</sup> Likely written by Mallwitz, Secretary of Central Jury in Berlin. BArch, DY 6/5648, Section “Zusammensetzung der Jury – Organisation der Juryarbeit” in “Abschließender Bericht über den Wettbewerb, Wir schreiben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft, ’ausgeschrieben zu Ehren des 40. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution vom Nationalrat der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschlands,” p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Secretary of Competition's Central Jury in Berlin Mallwitz, “Protokoll der 4. Sitzung der zentralen Jury,” March 15, 1958, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, “Wettbewerb zu Ehren des 40. Jahrestages der Grossen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” p. 3-4.

Union) and consumer goods, both of which GDR citizens were sorely lacking in comparison to those enjoying West Germany's "economic miracle." It is important to recall that at this moment, the people of the GDR were suffering from even more shortages due to widespread strikes in Poland and the Hungarian Revolution of the year before. At this time, too, the border with West Germany was still open, and 1956 and 1957 marked the second and third highest number of GDR citizens departing for the West, with 279 189 people registering themselves as refugees in West Germany in 1956, and 261 622 in 1957, which amounted to a loss of 1.6% and 1.5% (respectively) of the total GDR population.<sup>23</sup> It is thus entirely logical that the National Front at this point in time would have wanted to reinforce how the socialist system could compete with the West – to a degree at least.

By mid-October 1957, a few weeks before the submission deadline, the Office of the President of the National Front started to become very concerned with the progress of the competition, commenting in a confidential memorandum that the competition had attracted insufficient attention in several *Bezirke*.<sup>24</sup> Herr Neumann, a member of the regional commission in Neubrandenburg, had written to the National Front in Berlin describing the situation in his *Bezirk* as a complete failure (or, as he tactfully put it, "not yet successful"), with only two people having made submissions in the entire district.<sup>25</sup> Upon personally investigating this situation in the region of Anklam (which included a city of 20 000 people), Neumann was only able to find

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<sup>23</sup> Andre Steiner, *The Plans that Failed: An Economic History of the GDR*, trans. Ewald Osers (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 86

<sup>24</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Büro des Präsidiums, Arbeitsgebiet 1. "Kurzinformation 07 zum Stand des Wettbewerbs 'Wir schrieben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft,'" October 21, 1957, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Büro des Präsidiums, Arbeitsgebiet 1. "Kurzinformation 07 zum Stand des Wettbewerbs 'Wir schrieben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft,'" October 21, 1957, p. 1.

fourteen people who had either direct contact with Soviets, anything to do with the October Revolution, or who had even been to the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup>

The problem went deeper than merely Neubrandenburg residents' lack of Soviet connections, however. As of October 17, the GDR's fourteen *Bezirke* had only received a grand total of 229 submissions. For example, the *Bezirk* Leipzig had received a total of six submissions, while *Bezirk* Cottbus had received four. The highest totals came from *Bezirk* Suhl, with forty-five submissions, and *Bezirk* Karl Marx Stadt, with thirty-six submissions. The *Bezirk* of Halle had received twenty-one submissions, but the average total for most *Bezirke* was between nine and eighteen total submissions.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the quality of the submissions received was highly variable. In *Bezirk* Suhl, only twenty-five (out of forty-five) submissions were good enough to be sent on to the final jury in Berlin. In *Bezirk* Potsdam, only three out of seventeen were considered acceptable enough to be included in the book, while in Gera, a mere two out of six total submissions were considered good. Only in *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt did the National Front believe the submissions' quality ranged from good to excellent.<sup>28</sup> Given that the first meeting of the Berlin jury was to take place in two days' time, on October 21, the National Front President's Office was naturally very dissatisfied with these interim results. Particularly in the disastrous example of Neubrandenburg, the President's Office blamed this failure on the fact that numerous local competitions had very similar themes and thus took peoples' attention away from the national one.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Büro des Präsidiums, Arbeitsgebiet 1. "Kurzinformation 07 zum Stand des Wettbewerbs 'Wir schrieben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft,'" October 21, 1957, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Büro des Präsidiums, Arbeitsgebiet 1. "Kurzinformation 07 zum Stand des Wettbewerbs 'Wir schrieben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft,'" October 21, 1957, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Büro des Präsidiums, Arbeitsgebiet 1. "Kurzinformation 07 zum Stand des Wettbewerbs 'Wir schrieben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft,'" October 21, 1957, p. 1-2.

<sup>29</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Büro des Präsidiums, Arbeitsgebiet 1. "Kurzinformation 07 zum Stand des Wettbewerbs 'Wir schrieben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft,'" October 21, 1957, p. 2.

Another problem in the eyes of the President's office was a lack of organization in certain *Bezirke*: although the first meeting of the central jury in Berlin was about to take place, *Bezirke* such as Halle, Magdeburg and Potsdam had not even managed to put their juries together yet.<sup>30</sup> As a result, Berlin extended the competition deadline by two weeks to November 15.<sup>31</sup> The President's Office recommended that in order to salvage the entire operation, the regional National Front committees make a concerted effort via the press and radio to attract more submissions.<sup>32</sup> From Berlin's perspective, the *Bezirke* were neither sufficiently advertising the competition nor making the competition's meaning clear to the masses.<sup>33</sup>

While the competition was ultimately successful with a final total of 1750 submissions, from the perspective of the National Front in Berlin, this was due to its own actions at the last minute which made up for the inefficiencies and generally poor efforts in certain *Bezirke*.<sup>34</sup> Members of the National Council of the GDR and Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF), but particularly the members of the National Commission for the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Revolution, had had to put in "a considerable amount of work" so that the campaign could still "achieve a good result" and did not fail outright.<sup>35</sup> According to Mallwitz, the secretary to the central jury in Berlin, some regions remained disorganized until the end, delaying the conclusion to the competition and leaving the central jury in Berlin with much more work than they had

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<sup>30</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Büro des Präsidiums, Arbeitsgebiet 1. "Kurzinformation 07 zum Stand des Wettbewerbs 'Wir schreiben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft,'" October 21, 1957, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> "Wettbewerb verlängert," *Neues Deutschland*, October 27, 1957, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Büro des Präsidiums, Arbeitsgebiet 1. "Kurzinformation 07 zum Stand des Wettbewerbs 'Wir schreiben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft,'" October 21, 1957, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, "Abschließender Bericht über den Wettbewerb 'Wir schreiben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft,' ausgeschrieben zu Ehren des 40. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution vom Nationalrat der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschlands," p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648. Karl-Marx-Stadt, the *Bezirk* that showed the most promise from the beginning, had a final total of 225 submissions; Potsdam was next with 195, Dresden at 181, and Berlin had 152 submissions. See Mallwitz (Secretary of Central Jury in Berlin), "Preis Ausschreiben 'Wir schreiben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft'" to Rogowski at the Pressestelle. September 1, 1958. p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Mallwitz (Secretary of Central Jury in Berlin), "Preis Ausschreiben 'Wir schreiben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft'" to Rogowski at the Pressestelle. September 1, 1958, p. 1-2.

originally anticipated. For example, even though the competition deadline had been extended to November 15, some *Bezirke* forwarded their finalists to Berlin as late as the end of December, 1957.<sup>36</sup> Other *Bezirke* like Potsdam, Gera, and Leipzig were so disorganized they only sent Berlin a few submissions at a time, which seriously impaired the amount of time and consideration the Central Jury could give to reviewing them. Mallwitz complained that:

After repeated requests, the main brunt of the manuscripts arrived four to six weeks after the central jury's last deadline. In addition to their usual year-end work, the publishers contributing to the manuscript will have to now work over Christmas and New Year in order to get the manuscripts organized thematically for an orderly transfer to the archive as well as to find substitute material to have close on hand to put into the book of German-Soviet friendship.<sup>37</sup>

Mallwitz pointed out that the *Bezirke* juries' selections would also need to be re-evaluated because their assessment standards varied so widely. Thus, the National Front's 40th Anniversary Commission concluded that "not only should the *Bezirke* juries forward the best manuscripts [submissions] to the central jury, but [it should send] all manuscripts [submissions] in order to eliminate any inaccurate scores, which has happened in several cases."<sup>38</sup>

Despite the good work that Berlin did in salvaging the competition, this did not solve the underlying problem of a general lack of willingness to participate in a competition that tried to forcibly create that which did not exist, which was a widespread sense of "connection" and friendship between the Soviet and German people. Although some people certainly had positive experiences to share about the Soviets (as we shall see more of in the section on the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the GDR in 1975), the reality was that lack of submissions in 1957 likely had more to do with the distrust with which much of the population viewed the Soviets, than with any

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<sup>36</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Mallwitz (Secretary of Central Jury in Berlin), "Preis Ausschreiben 'Wir schreiben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft'" to Rogowski at the Pressestelle. September 1, 1958, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Mallwitz (Secretary of Central Jury in Berlin), "Preis Ausschreiben 'Wir schreiben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft'" to Rogowski at the Pressestelle. September 1, 1958, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Mallwitz (Secretary of Central Jury in Berlin), "Preis Ausschreiben 'Wir schreiben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft'" to Rogowski at the Pressestelle. September 1, 1958, p. 3.



*Bezirk*'s inadequate advertising skills or clumsy organizational ability. Since much of the populace, especially many of the rape victims, would also have had very negative memories about the Soviets' actions during the end and aftermath of the war, it is no wonder that many were not at all interested in participating in a competition celebrating their former enemies and occupiers.<sup>39</sup> Seen in this light then, it seems obvious that the *Bezirke* would have struggled to command interest, no matter what prizes they had to offer.

The topics of the eventual winning submissions featured stories from the First and Second World Wars, trips of worker delegations to the Soviet Union in 1920s, tours of the Soviet Union, the help of Soviet specialists in the reconstruction and rebuilding efforts following the Second World War, as well as daily encounters with Soviets in the early 1950s. Despite the historically fraught relationship between the countries and the harshness of the Soviet occupation of Germany, the winning stories only discussed positive interactions between Germans and Soviets, and those which conformed to the SED's new ideological narrative and newly re-written history. First place in the competition was awarded to a woman named Martha who wrote about an incident during the Second World War that showed the solidarity of German and Soviet workers. Martha had befriended a female Soviet forced labourer while working together and she described an incident where they saved the life of a Soviet woman's child. Ever since, the two women had kept in contact, sharing their experience and culture.<sup>40</sup> Other submissions included stories of workers' trips to the Soviet Union in the 1920s to attend conferences/events and the feeling of solidarity and warmth the Germans encountered with the Soviet workers there. In one such

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<sup>39</sup> For discussions on the difficulties (and horrors) of the Soviet occupation, see Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995); Filip Slaveski, *The Soviet Occupation of Germany: Hunger, Mass Violence and the Struggle for Peace, 1945-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Ilko Sascha Kowalczyk, and Stefan Wolle. *Roter Stern über Deutschland: Sowjetische Truppen in der DDR* (Berlin: Links, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> BAArch, DY 6/5648, "Begründung für die Prämiiierung der besten Erlebnisberichte zum Wettbewerb 'Wir schreiben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft,'" p. 2.

example, a driver named Ernst wrote about a trip he made to Moscow in 1928 for the first All-Russian *Spartakiad* (sporting event). Attending this great event further convinced him about the justness of the communist cause, and influenced him to later join the KPD. The central jury thought this submission demonstrated very well the “essence of the Soviet state in practice.”<sup>41</sup>

Another particularly popular theme amongst the submissions was that of the tourist experience. The newspaper *Neue Zeit* published such an example from a man named Fritz. In a rather banal but very patriotic submission, Fritz wrote about a trip to the Soviet Union a few months prior. He wrote of how much Leningrad, “The Venice of the North,” had enchanted him. Particularly striking for Fritz was the friendliness and kindness of the Soviet people he met. For example, one day Fritz encountered a man and his daughter who spoke fluent German and who offered to take him on a boat ride on the river Neva. Later, his new friend and daughter came to his hotel to bid him farewell and to speak of the “peace and friendship,” between their countries, something which Fritz thought was wonderful and proper, showing what good communists they were. Fritz also wrote of another encounter with a woman working at a newspaper stand. Despite his lack of Russian, the woman was still very friendly towards him and they were nonetheless able to demonstrate their “communist” goodwill and friendship towards each other by gifting one other patriotic badges from their respective countries. Fritz therefore left the Soviet Union with a feeling of solidarity with the Soviet people.<sup>42</sup> It was tales such as these, mundane as they were, that the National Front wished to popularize, for they served to underscore the official narrative that the Soviets were a kind people from whom East Germans could learn how to become “good communist citizens.” It is clear that the National Front wished the lasting positive impressions

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<sup>41</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, “Begründung für die Prämiiierung der besten Erlebnisberichte zum Wettbewerb ‘Wir schreiben das Buch der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft,’” p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Fritz Boesel, “Völkerverständigung am Zeitungsstand,” *Neue Zeit*, November 2, 1957, p. 3.

reported by the authors of these stories to be disseminated amongst the populace at large and thus work towards achieving a main goal of the SED's theses, which was to maintain a close "brotherly" connection with the Soviet Union (which was, of course, vital to maintaining the country's continued existence, especially during the years before the GDR obtained its own legitimacy on the world stage).

### **"A Good Deed for our Common Socialist Cause" (1957)**

In June 1957, the SED's Central Committee described their plans for further initiatives following the "elections" of 1957.<sup>43</sup> These initiatives, the Central Committee wrote, would concern the implementation of the resolutions of the 30<sup>th</sup> plenary session of the SED. The slogan from the elections, "Eine gute Tat für den Sozialismus" ("A good deed for socialism"), was to be combined with a slogan from the FDJ (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*, Free German Youth) concerning socialist workers' brigades, "Eine gute Tat für unsere gute Sache" ("A good deed for our good cause"), to become "Eine gute Tat für unsere gemeinsame sozialistische Sache" ("A Good Deed for our Common Socialist Cause").<sup>44</sup>

While the "Book of German-Soviet Friendship" competition for the best story about German-Soviet relations served obvious ideological purposes for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Revolution, the National Front designed "A Good Deed for our Common Socialist Cause" to encourage the populace to volunteer their time in certain sectors of the economy in order to help meet and even surpass the goals of the yearly economic plan. The SED Central Committee specifically wanted this competition to achieve a 10-day lead on the industry plan by the 40<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> First mention of the competition appears in the national newspapers under the heading "Nach den Wahlen: Vom Zentralkomitee der SED wird geschrieben," *Neues Deutschland* on June 29, 1957, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> "Über die weitere Massenarbeit zur Durchsetzung der Beschlüsse der 30. Tagung," *Neues Deutschland*, July 14, 1957, p. 1.

anniversary of the Revolution (November 7). The SED appeal called on all workers and farmers and even the intelligentsia to “do more good deeds for socialism,” while at the same time calling on all party members to do their “self-evident duty” by being “at the forefront of this movement.”<sup>45</sup> The SED wanted every enterprise to increase their productivity: for example, workers were to overcome the shortfall in the energy (coal) and building/roadworks (NAW) sectors. The SED Central Committee cited as a good example of progress one organization in the building sector that had even created its own rhyming slogan “Spart Material, es wird sich lohnen — Ergebnis: schneller 100 000 Wohnungen” (“Save material, it will be worth it – Result: it will be quicker to build 100 000 homes”). Also not to be forgotten was the agricultural sector, as the SED asked for greater efforts to be made bringing in the harvest with as little loss as possible, as well as for the people to work to form new permanent agriculture and livestock collectives.<sup>46</sup>

“A Good Deed for our Common Socialist Cause” began in earnest at the end of July 1957, when the Agricultural Department in Berlin instructed the local-level National Front committees to discuss with their constituents how best to take part in this broad “production competition” initiative, including how best to get measurable results.<sup>47</sup> The resulting achievements would be celebrated in a ceremony on the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Revolution on November 7. Echoing the official line from the SED, the Agricultural Department reminded the local committees to inform the populace that their focus should be on bringing in the grain harvest with a minimum of losses; increasing livestock production (especially beef and milk); as well as on convincing any remaining independent farmers to form collective enterprises within

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<sup>45</sup> “Über die weitere Massenarbeit zur Durchsetzung der Beschlüsse der 30. Tagung,” *Neues Deutschland*, July 14, 1957, p.1.

<sup>46</sup> “Über die weitere Massenarbeit zur Durchsetzung der Beschlüsse der 30. Tagung,” *Neues Deutschland*, July 14, 1957, p.1.

<sup>47</sup> BAArch, DY 6/5648, Arbeitsgebiet Landwirtschaft Berlin, “Was muß die Nationale Front auf dem Gebiete der Landwirtschaft in Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages machen?” July 30, 1957, p. 1.

the VdgB (*Vereinigung der gegenseitigen Bauernhilfe*, the Peasants Mutual Aid Association) and other state apparatuses.<sup>48</sup> The National Front in Berlin agreed to provide additional workers to the localities to bring in the wheat, root crop and corn harvests. Berlin also told the regions it would help mobilize people from urban areas in order to get one million cubic metres of extra silo storage space.<sup>49</sup>



Figure 10. Newspaper article featuring collective farmers Robert Hauf and Otta Sodemann working to collect the grain harvest and doing their part to contribute to “A Good Deed for our Common Socialist Cause.” (“Eine gute Tat für unsere gemeinsame sozialistische Sache,” *Neues Deutschland*, July 16, 1957, p.1)

The ways in which the populace contributed to this competition in their localities varied widely in size and scope. For example, in the town of Sargleben (*Kreis Perleberg*), three farmers and twelve farm workers agreed to build a 17-member Type-III LPG (agricultural collective) of

<sup>48</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Arbeitsgebiet Landwirtschaft Berlin, “Was muß die Nationale Front auf dem Gebiete der Landwirtschaft in Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages machen?” July 30, 1957, p. 1-2.

<sup>49</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Arbeitsgebiet Landwirtschaft Berlin, “Was muß die Nationale Front auf dem Gebiete der Landwirtschaft in Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages machen?” July 30, 1957, p. 1-2.

140 hectares.<sup>50</sup> In Rubow, an agricultural collective promised to raise the milk production by 120 litres per cow and to get the hens to lay 130 instead of 100 eggs, while in the town of Schönermark, members of an agricultural collective promised to provide 4 000 litres more milk, 1 200 dozen more seed potatoes, and through use of local reserves, aimed to save 25 percent on overall building costs.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, members of the DBD (*Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands*, Democratic Farmers' Party) in Hettstedt promised to produce 50 000 more litres of milk, 14 000 kg more meat, 14 000 more eggs, 130 kg more wool, and 105 kg more poultry.<sup>52</sup> The Department of Agriculture in Berlin advised the localities to obtain reserves from the agricultural collectives to help achieve these increases in livestock production.<sup>53</sup>

Besides providing more food, East Germans also pledged to provide more hours of labour. For example, 700 future kindergarteners at a school in Schwerin agreed to work in the fields of 24 agricultural collectives in the surrounding area bringing in the harvest, while 1 100 other school children in Schwerin agreed to volunteer for 14 days to help bring in the root vegetable crop harvest.<sup>54</sup> In *Kreis Haldensleben* near Magdeburg, 142 administration and office workers said they would volunteer one day per week on an agricultural collective.<sup>55</sup> Although we cannot know for sure if these individual pledges were ever carried out, especially in the numbers listed above, the fact that these offers were made at all demonstrates that East Germans were well

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<sup>50</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Arbeitsgebiet Landwirtschaft Berlin, "Was muß die Nationale Front auf dem Gebiete der Landwirtschaft in Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages machen?" July 30, 1957, p. 18.

<sup>51</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Rogowski of the Büro of the President of the Nationalrates, Pressestelle, "Jeder eine Tat für unsere gemeinsame sozialistische Sache; Wie die Bevölkerung der DDR durch die große Verpflichtungsbewegung den 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution vorbereitet," p. 3-5.

<sup>52</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Rogowski of the Büro of the President of the Nationalrates, Pressestelle, "Jeder eine Tat für unsere gemeinsame sozialistische Sache; Wie die Bevölkerung der DDR durch die große Verpflichtungsbewegung den 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution vorbereitet," p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Arbeitsgebiet Landwirtschaft Berlin, "Was muß die Nationale Front auf dem Gebiete der Landwirtschaft in Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages machen?" July 30, 1957, p. 1-2.

<sup>54</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Arbeitsgebiet Landwirtschaft Berlin, "Was muß die Nationale Front auf dem Gebiete der Landwirtschaft in Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages machen?" July 30, 1957, p. 16.

<sup>55</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Arbeitsgebiet Landwirtschaft Berlin, "Was muß die Nationale Front auf dem Gebiete der Landwirtschaft in Vorbereitung des 40. Jahrestages machen?" July 30, 1957, p. 13.

aware of how much the National Front cared about the populace being involved in this volunteering work. For the National Front, it was both about the economic benefit, as well as the pedagogical usefulness in allowing ordinary people to feel connected to a bigger project beyond their own communities: that of “building up” the socialist state.

It was not only the agricultural sector that desperately needed volunteers – the building and roadworks sectors did as well. The problem was that even twelve years after the end of the war, many areas still needed to be reconstructed or rebuilt. In the urban district Mitte in Berlin, the problem was particularly bad, with huge heaps of rubble remaining. In July 1957, the *Berliner Zeitung* published an appeal for volunteers to clear out large areas of Mitte so that additional apartment complexes could be built. The appeal further explained that the volunteer work would effectively help the NAW save 15 million DM on costs by November 7, as well as help their socialist state in general by enabling the building of extra housing units.<sup>56</sup> Officials considered this building project “particularly urgent” and stressed saving on costs in every respect:

This task of the economical use of materials will also apply to housing construction as this can help reduce steel consumption. According to the district management’s decree, more building materials should be obtained not only from the increase in building material production, but also from clearing rubble and from local reserves. Last but not least, the citizens of Berlin will be interested in the suggestion that a commission in every district of the city will gradually restore the living space to proper use.<sup>57</sup>

It was not only areas of Berlin that still lay in rubble; building projects were very important elsewhere in the country as well. For example, residents of Woggersin in Neubrandenburg, along with some help from the army, planned to build a water pipeline so that the town could finally have running water. By using volunteer labour in combination with the town’s reserves, this group estimated they would save 90 000 DM on the project. Residents of

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<sup>56</sup> “Wichtige Aufgaben für ganz Berlin beraten,” *Berliner Zeitung*, July 19, 1957, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> “Planvorsprung von 10 Tagen für Berlin,” *Berliner Zeitung*, July 19, 1957, p. 9.

another village near Halle planned to build a street as their contribution to the competition, while in the region of Anklam, a group of twenty residents (mostly former construction workers) sought to create more housing in their town by building a four-family-house over the summer and fall of 1957.<sup>58</sup>

Other villagers fulfilled their “socialist obligations” by undertaking smaller tasks in their communities. One group of six in the town of Dörlau created several beautiful flower beds, which they said benefitted the community by acting as a peaceful space for townsfolk to congregate in and enjoy.<sup>59</sup> In another instance, a FDJ painting group from Peene Shipyard in Wolgast agreed to hold special evening painting sessions for youth and to donate the revenue from this to the expansion project of the port in Rostock.<sup>60</sup> In the region of Suckrow, farmers came together and built a “cultural room” worth 20 000 DM for all of the area to enjoy. In another example, SED members of the VdgB in the small city of Neustrelitz volunteered to get a minimum of 15 more subscribers to the party newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*.<sup>61</sup>

GDR citizens also responded to appeals for volunteer work in the energy sector, something that was critically important given the recent shortages in raw materials, especially coal and steel, due to the unrest in the East.<sup>62</sup> For example, the Art Union in *Bezirk Halle* ran a campaign called “Kunst hilft Kohle” (“Art helping coal”) that involved donating their artistic

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<sup>58</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Rogowski of the Büro of the President of the Nationalrates, Pressestelle, “Jeder eine Tat für unsere gemeinsame sozialistische Sache; Wie die Bevölkerung der DDR durch die große Verpflichtungsbewegung den 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution vorbereitet,” p. 13; 19; 21.

<sup>59</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Rogowski of the Büro of the President of the Nationalrates, Pressestelle, “Jeder eine Tat für unsere gemeinsame sozialistische Sache; Wie die Bevölkerung der DDR durch die große Verpflichtungsbewegung den 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution vorbereitet,” p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Rogowski of the Büro of the President of the Nationalrates, Pressestelle, “Jeder eine Tat für unsere gemeinsame sozialistische Sache; Wie die Bevölkerung der DDR durch die große Verpflichtungsbewegung den 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution vorbereitet,” p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Rogowski of the Büro of the President of the Nationalrates, Pressestelle, “Jeder eine Tat für unsere gemeinsame sozialistische Sache; Wie die Bevölkerung der DDR durch die große Verpflichtungsbewegung den 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution vorbereitet,” p. 12; 15-17.

<sup>62</sup> Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 87.



talents to those working in coal mining. In this respect, members of the Elbe-Elster-Theater in Wittenberg, including 10 actors, eight members from the musical division, and 12 members of the orchestra, volunteered to build an artists' group and to perform in coal mining areas.

Meanwhile, the "Cultural Orchestra" of the town of Ballenstedt volunteered on the eve of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary on November 7 to partner with the *Volkskunstgruppe* of the brown coal works in Bachterstedt, the elementary school in Aschersleben, as well as other neighbouring *Volkskunstgruppen*, to organize a festive program for everyone that included Soviet songs, poetry recitals, and dancing. In another example, the film collective group (KLB) and music school in Merseburg prepared several Soviet film festival days in the brown coal region of Geiseltal, while another film collective group from Saal offered to organize the showing of Soviet films during a festival week in their region, specifically in the nearby brown coal municipality of Teutschentha.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Secretary Vogt of the Gewerkschaft Kunst, Zentralvorstand, Kulturvorstand -- Kommission 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution, "Kunst hilft Kohle' Verpflichtungen zum 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," September 14, 1957. p. 1.

Zum 40. Jahrestag der Großen  
Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution

Zum 8. Jahrestag der Gründung der  
Deutschen Demokratischen Republik

***Eine gute Tat für unsere gemeinsame sozialistische Sache!***

**An alle Kumpel des Abraumes!**

Wir rufen zum **Wettbewerb ab 1. Oktober 1957**

**Das Ziel ist:**

- Bis zum 31. Dezember 500 000 cbm über den Plan
- Am 7. November den ersten Kohlenzug

Dafür stehen zur Verfügung:  
26 000 DM für Prämierung  
6 Urlaubsreisen in die Sowjetunion

**Das ganze Revier, die Republik wartet auf Kohle aus Haselbach!**

Die Leistungen der Bergarbeiter machen die Anstrengungen der Kriegstreiber zunichte und stärken unseren Arbeiter-und-Bauern-Staat.

**40 Jahre Große Sozialistische Oktoberrevolution – 8 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik**

*Figure 11. An advertisement calling on coal miners in the town of Haselbach to participate in “A good deed for our common socialist cause,” in honour of the 40<sup>th</sup> of the October Revolution and the eighth anniversary of the founding of the GDR. The ad called on “all our mining comrades” to increase their output by 500 000 cubic meters, reminding them that “The entire district and Republic is awaiting coal from Haselbach!” There were 26 000 DM’s worth in prizes available, including six trips to the Soviet Union (Barch DY 6/5648).*

## **Conclusion**

What these economic and cultural competitions of 1957 show us is the ways in which the National Front sought to create effective socialist competitions that would achieve the SED’s economic and ideological goals. While the success of the cultural competitions, such as convincing the populace of the necessity of their Soviet connection, was difficult to judge in the short term and were thus repeated in anniversary after anniversary, the economic competitions’

results were much more visible and measurable. Thus, the National Front considered a few hours of volunteering to bring in the harvest, working overtime to increase coal production in one mine, helping neighbours rebuild a town street, or even by simply arranging town flowerbeds, all to belong to the noble pursuit of “building up the socialist state.” Indeed, the state offered particularly dedicated villagers recognition for their strenuous efforts: One Frau Ingeburg Thiel from the city of Gera received a golden recognition badge for the 1250 volunteer hours she donated to building works in her neighbourhood.<sup>64</sup> Even though these acts were overwhelmingly prosaic in nature, they also required a great deal of collaboration between coworkers, neighbours, and friends. Indeed, practical work such as beautifying public spaces, rebuilding war damage, or offering free art classes, on the one hand, actually benefitted their own communities far more than the state at large by improving the quality of life in the villages and cities. On the other hand, however, this collaborative work certainly benefited the state as the work completed was used by the National Front as evidence of claim popular approval not only of the competitions themselves, but also of the state’s leadership. Finally, all of this volunteer work also helped the state manage any economic shortfalls by helping them gain ground in “catching up without overtaking the West.”

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<sup>64</sup> BArch, DY 6/5648, Rogowski of the Büro of the President of the Nationalrates, Pressestelle, “Jeder eine Tat für unsere gemeinsame sozialistische Sache; Wie die Bevölkerung der DDR durch die große Verpflichtungsbewegung den 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution vorbereitet,” p. 18.

## **Celebrating the GDR's Success: Anniversaries of the Founding of the GDR in the 1960s**

The anniversary commemorations of the 1960s, much like those of the late 1950s, took the form of both economic and cultural competitions. The international and domestic contexts in which the 1960s anniversaries took place were significantly different, however. With the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the GDR had finally stopped the flow of people to the West. This made the task of running the state a much easier one, as there was no longer any real threat of people leaving in protest. The Wall's existence also greatly aided the GDR theses' claims of legitimacy as it symbolized the state's permanency: while both East and West German officials continued to claim they sought German reunification, the reality was that the likelihood of this occurring in the foreseeable future was extremely unlikely.<sup>65</sup> The result of this was that the competitions of the 1960s were focused on creating internal legitimacy by enabling people to gain a sense of being part of something greater -- a socialist German ideal. This was comparable to the way in which the Soviets employed activities, where "the party-state intended state-sponsored popular culture to help build a socialist, alternative version of modernity."<sup>66</sup> For the SED, this new version of modernity involved the leadership undertaking reforms that would ultimately lead to economic growth during this time period – something which the anniversary theses of 1964 repeatedly underscored.

In April 1964, the SED Central Committee made resolutions that set in motion the preparations for the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the GDR. Since the SED was finally able to strategize without fear of further population loss, the New Economic System (NES) of 1963/4

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<sup>65</sup> See Joanna McKay, *The Official Concept of the Nation in the Former GDR: Theory, Pragmatism, and the Search for Legitimacy* (Aldershot, UK; Brookfield, Vt: Ashgate, 1998) on how the GDR's "goal" of reunification changed over time.

<sup>66</sup> Gleb Tsipursky, *Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption, and State-Sponsored Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1945–1970* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), 221.

attempted to modernize the economy and increase productivity and quality, while still lowering costs. Essentially, the leadership was still trying to catch up and overtake the West, though without introducing market mechanisms, and to provide the populace with the consumer goods they had lacked for so long.<sup>67</sup>

In honour of the anniversary, the SED asked industry workers “to do everything they can to implement the technical Revolution in the GDR, while achieving the highest quality and lowest costs possible, as well as meeting the deadlines of the 1964 economic plan.”<sup>68</sup> Since the GDR was only just beginning to recover from its recent food shortages (caused in part by aggressive collectivization), the SED instructed agricultural workers to follow the resolutions of the eighth German Farmers’ Congress, which recommended workers strive to increase productivity by ensuring that the spring seeding and autumn harvesting achieved maximal results.<sup>69</sup>

The 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GDR in 1964 was a very important milestone for the state, as it was also the first anniversary celebrating the GDR itself that included a number of international delegations and numerous festivities. To accompany these festivities, the National Front organized a number of socialist competitions in 1964, including an economic competition entitled “Dem Volke zum Nutzen – der Republik zu Ehren” (“For the benefit of the People – Honouring the Republic”) and a cultural one entitled “Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben” (“Experienced and Recorded”).

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<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Mark Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand: the Politics of Consumerism in East Germany* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005), 210-212.

<sup>68</sup> BArch, DY 6/2395, Vorlage 1 an das Sekretariat des Nationalrats, “Vorbereitung und Durchführung des 15. Jahrestages der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,” April 3, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> BArch, DY 6/2395, Vorlage 1 an das Sekretariat des Nationalrats, “Vorbereitung und Durchführung des 15. Jahrestages der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,” April 3, 1964, p. 2.

“Dem Volke zum Nutzen – der Republik zu Ehren” was an urban economic competition that involved the industrial, construction, and transportation sectors. Horst Brasch of the National Front claimed that the reason economic competitions like this were needed was because “the stronger the GDR is economically, the more certain lasting peace in Europe will be.”<sup>70</sup> A synthetic fiber enterprise called “Friedrich Engels” had first begun this competition in Premnitz near Berlin by appealing to other workers to “help fulfill the 1964 economic plan.” This enterprise appealed to workers in other enterprises, asking them to focus on “accelerating scientific and technical progress, improving the quality of synthetic fibers and radically reducing total production costs.”<sup>71</sup> Given that almost two-thirds of “Friedrich Engels” costs were attributable to the consumption of raw materials, the workers aimed to use all basic materials and auxiliary materials, as well as all types of energy, as rationally as possible. They hoped to reduce costs by seven percent, while maintaining overall quality.<sup>72</sup> These particular enterprise workers were very proud of what they had achieved over the past fifteen years, especially since they were anticipating their production for 1964 to be more than ten times more than that of 1949. They wrote in *Neues Deutschland* that achieving their goals would ultimately contribute towards their state gaining international recognition, explaining that: “We know that every success in material production, especially in science and technology, will support the struggle of our republic to secure peace and solve the German question, and further enhances the international reputation of our state.”<sup>73</sup> Without minimizing the real pride these workers likely did feel in their work, it is

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<sup>70</sup> BArch, DY 6/2395, “15 Jahre DDR – 15 Jahre Arbeiter-und-Bauern-Macht in Deutschland. Von Horst Brasch, Vizepräsident des Nationalrats der Nationalen Front des demokratische Deutschland,” Oct 3, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>71</sup> “Produktionskomitee des VEB Chemiefaserwerkes ‘Friedrich Engels’ Premnitz, schlägt vor Sozialistischer Massenwettbewerb anlässlich des 15. Jahrestages der Gründung der DDR,” *Neues Deutschland*, March 31, 1964, p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> “Brief der Chemiefaserwerker an alle Werktätigen der DDR,” *Neues Deutschland*, March 31, 1964, p. 1-2.

<sup>73</sup> “Brief der Chemiefaserwerker an alle Werktätigen der DDR,” *Neues Deutschland*, March 31, 1964, p. 1-2.

highly unlikely in reality that they were thinking about larger issues like their state's international reputation when working on improving their output (as *Neues Deutschland* would have the readers believe). But the larger issue is that, in context, each economic success helped improve the GDR's standing at home and abroad. Successes like these also lent support to the GDR leadership's plan to eventually overtake the West economically so they could, in the process, prove the superiority of the socialist world system.

### **“Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben” (1964)**

Building on the National Front's 1957 cultural competition that asked the public to write about their personal experiences with the Soviets, “Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben” (“Experienced and Recorded”) asked GDR citizens to reflect on their experiences within their own country. The National Front encouraged the public to “help write the history book of our Republic!” by submitting any original songs, poems, pictures, photos, or drawings inspired by personal experiences to their local National Front committees. This national appeal aimed to make East Germans aware that even the smallest, most banal aspects of their normal lives were of interest to the state and thus eligible for submission to this competition. The appeal explained that:

Each of us has witnessed and shaped a part of the history of the new Germany in the past 15 years; it has been filled with joyful events, varied experiences and exciting conflicts. Each of us witnessed events and encounters that have become indelibly imprinted upon us. Often such times – but often only long afterwards – do we realize how our personal small stories are intertwined with the greater ones of the community.<sup>74</sup>

The appeal went on to assure the public that although professional poets and writers had already written about the early years of the Republic “in an artistic way,” the National Front was now interested in the stories of ordinary people, asking “how many of our steps from yesterday to today, from the “I” to “we” are still shapeless and unknown?”<sup>75</sup> This was a request for citizens to

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<sup>74</sup> “Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben,” *Neues Deutschland*, July 1, 1964, p. 1.

<sup>75</sup> “Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben,” *Neues Deutschland*, July 1, 1964, p. 1.

reflect on the everyday details of their very ordinary lives and how these fit into the development of the country, an attempt at identity-creation. People were to make submissions to their local newspaper editors, who would then forward the submissions on to be judged by regional National Front committees. The best submissions would be made into a book and sold in bookshops.<sup>76</sup>

Even though the local National Front committees were ultimately responsible for judging the winners of the competition, the National Front in Berlin chose to devolve a great deal of the organizing and promotion of “Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben” to the editorial boards of regional newspapers. As a result, during the summer of 1964, members of the National Front in Berlin kept daily watch on approximately seventy different regional newspapers to discern how well they were promoting the competition.

The National Front had high expectations of the regional newspaper editors and expected the editors to keep as close as possible to their original advertisement. Supporting this competition, Berlin told the editors, would not only help top officials further develop their “political-ideological work,” but also assist in creating an atmosphere of excitement surrounding the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>77</sup> More bluntly, the National Front said that:

no *Kreis* newspaper editors are allowed to wait idly by until some testimonials arrive on their desks. The task is to work imaginatively and in a variety of ways with this appeal [advertisement] together with the National Front *Kreis* secretariat, to encourage many people to write down their experiences so that they can be published immediately. No issue of a *Kreis* newspaper should appear that does not contain well-placed contributions to this competition. Both urban and rural citizens are encouraged to think back on their lives over the last 15 years and write down the most interesting parts of them.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> BArch, DY 6/2396, “15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik, ‘Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben’” approx. July 1964. Likely written by the *Nationalrat* and sent to the *Kreiszeitungen*, p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> BArch, DY 6/2396, “15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik, ‘Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben’” approx. July 1964. Likely written by the *Nationalrat* and sent to the *Kreiszeitungen*, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> BArch, DY 6/2396, “15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik, ‘Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben’” approx. July 1964. Likely written by the *Nationalrat* and sent to the *Kreiszeitungen*, p. 3.



The National Front left the decision about providing prizes for the top submissions up to the individual newspapers. For example, the SED-run regional newspapers offered their readers prizes, money, and trips worth anywhere between 1 000 MDN or 10 000 MDN,<sup>79</sup> depending on what the individual publication was able to afford.<sup>80</sup> Across the country, the National Front estimated that, on average, individual newspapers were able to offer their top submission either a trip to the Soviet Union or a prize worth approximately 300 MDN.<sup>81</sup>

The Berlin National Front's Secretariat for the Commission for Agitation/Press informed the regional newspapers that they were expected to publish the national appeal (designed and written by the National Front) in its original form. In order to keep interest high, Berlin also advised the editors to make sure the competition was continuously advertised from July 1 through to October 7, the day of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>82</sup> However, only a few papers reacted immediately to Berlin's orders. Those who strictly obeyed and published the original advertisement were almost all the editors of SED-run regional papers, which advertised the competition for the first time as early as July 1 or 2. A handful of other papers, such as the *Magdeburg Volksstimme*, diverged slightly from the instructions and published long summaries of the advertisement, while papers like the *Ostsee Zeitung* and the *Sächsische Zeitung* published brief summaries of the campaign.<sup>83</sup>

The regional *Brand-Erbisdorfer-Zeitung* from *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt made an exceptional effort to pique the interest of their readers. As early as July 10 and on page 1, the

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<sup>79</sup> MDN = currency during this time in the 1960s.

<sup>80</sup> BArch, DY 6/ 2396. Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, "Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben" in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*," October 27, 1964, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> BArch, DY 6/ 2396. Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, "Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben" in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*," October 27, 1964, p. 3.

<sup>82</sup> BArch, DY 6/ 2396. Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, "Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben" in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*," October 27, 1964, p. 1.

<sup>83</sup> BArch, DY 6/ 2396. Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, "Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben" in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*," October 27, 1964, p. 3-4.

paper published its own advertisement for the competition, featuring a child holding a pen with the captions “What is Gudrun writing?” answering its own question with “On the occasion of the GDR's 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary, she is writing down the most meaningful experiences that made her aware that the GDR is her fatherland.”<sup>84</sup> Over the following ten issues, the *Brand-Erbisdorfer-Zeitung* published a selection of eight different submissions received from their readers. The National Front in Berlin was also impressed with the efforts of *Freies Wort* in Suhl, which had worked very hard to get their readers invested in the competition. *Freies Wort* invented a cartoon character for the readers to follow and also published the anecdotes, poems, and pictures people submitted as soon as they arrived. What the National Front thought was particularly effective about *Freies Wort* and *Brand-Erbisdorfer-Zeitung*'s approach was that they made the competition more accessible and appealing to their local readership. For example, *Freies Wort*'s goal was for their cartoon character to prompt participation in the competition by, other things, posing questions like: “In the last year, which changes in your residential area or workplace made you really happy?” or “In your region, do you remember who the first to drive a combine was?” and inviting people to submit answers.<sup>85</sup> Asking simple, yet explicit questions like these made an otherwise very dry and ideological exercise more accessible to the average member of the public. After observing these good examples and the public's positive reaction to them, the National Front in Berlin soon began to advise all newspapers to develop their own characters or fun ideas to promote the competition, something Berlin assured the editors would “deepen the friendship”

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<sup>84</sup> BArch, DY 6/ 2396. Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, “‘Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben’ in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*,” October 27, 1964, p. 1-2.

<sup>85</sup> BArch, DY 6/ 2396. Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, “‘Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben’ in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*,” October 27, 1964, p. 5.

between the newspaper and their readership, as well as help the people “develop connections” with their socialist state.<sup>86</sup>

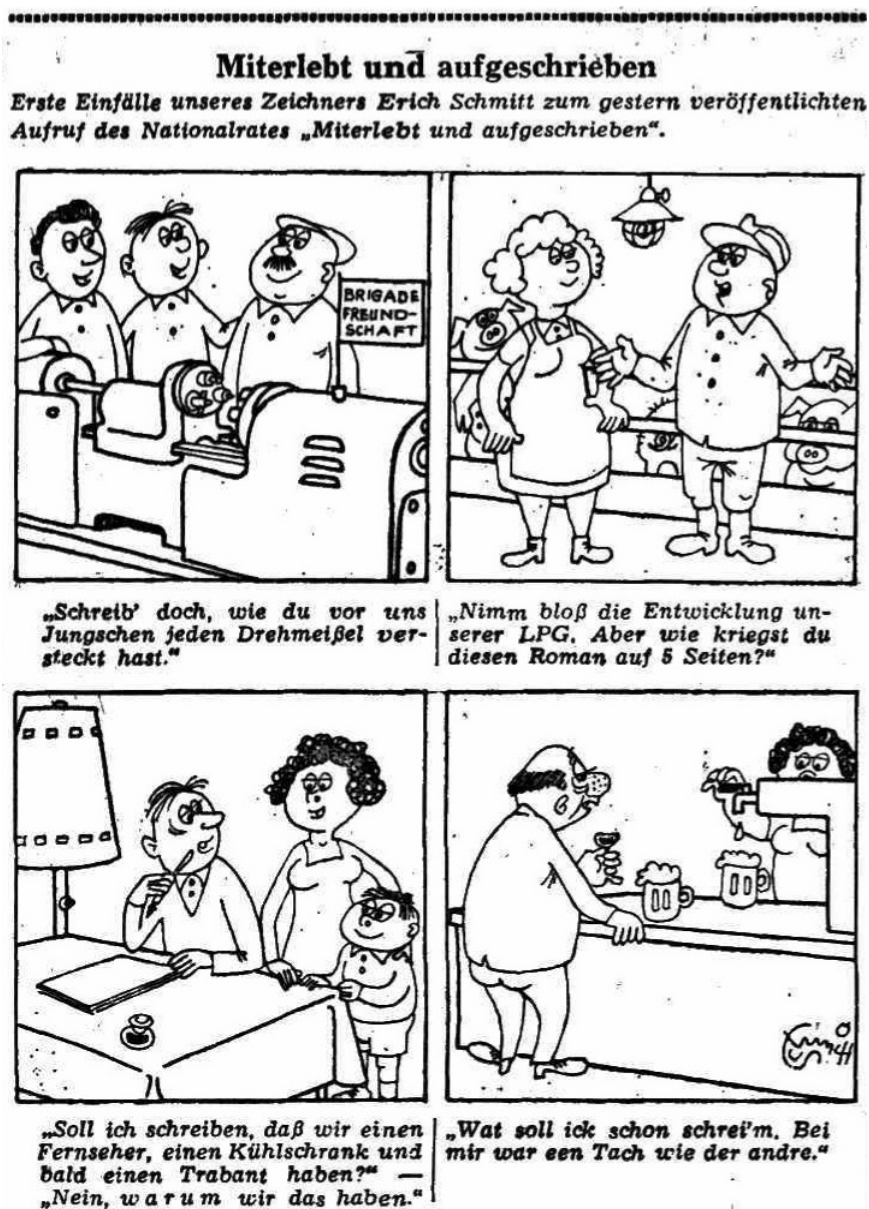


Figure 12. The Berliner Zeitung chose to advertise the competition in a very accessible manner. As can be seen here, there are cartoon characters prompting people to make their own submissions by giving examples of what these characters are writing about: for example, about new appliances the family has, what new machines are available at work, or just to tell about the history of the collective that that person works in. (Berliner Zeitung, July 2, 1964, p.2)

<sup>86</sup> BArch, DY 6/2396, “15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik, ‘Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben’” approx. July 1964. Likely written by the Nationalrat and sent to the Kreiszeitungen, p. 4.

While many papers embraced the exercise, the delayed and even disinterested approach of some other newspapers gave the National Front cause for concern. Examples like these came from the official regional party papers of other block parties<sup>87</sup> such as the CDU (Christian Democrats) and LDPD (Liberal Democratic Party), for example, which the National Front found were often either slow to advertise the competition, or simply failed to mention the competition at all. Many other regional newspapers also did not publish the original advertisement at the beginning of July as the National Front had instructed. Instead, these newspapers only began advertising the competition at the end of July or beginning of August. In Berlin's opinion, this late start resulted in quite a few editors scrambling to even publish the original advertisement, leaving them no time to develop their editorial "take" on the competition, which was an important part of striking the right tone with diverse groups of readers. Berlin thought that this "limited the effectiveness of the appeal (advertisement) because the readers did not feel like they were being personally spoken to."<sup>88</sup> Since Berlin viewed this lack of connection as negatively impacting popular interest in the competition, Berlin's National Front Agitation Commission decided to intervene by once again providing the regional editors with specific directions on how to go about publishing their advertisements. This time, the National Front admonished the editors for their tardiness, telling them that their delays had resulted in much "valuable time being lost" which they needed to "make up as fast as possible."<sup>89</sup>

The National Front was also annoyed with the ways in which many newspapers published their advertisements. In one instance, Berlin criticized a newspaper for only publishing their

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<sup>87</sup> The other, smaller political parties that were a part of the National Front were referred to as "block parties."

<sup>88</sup> BArch, DY 6/ 2396. Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, "'Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben' in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*," October 27, 1964, p. 1.

<sup>89</sup> BArch, DY 6/2396, "15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik, 'Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben'" approx. July 1964. Likely written by the *Nationalrat* and sent to the *Kreiszeitungen*, p. 2.

advertisement on page 5 rather than the front page, which made the competition less visible.<sup>90</sup>

Another problem the National Front had was that many newspapers altered the title “Experienced and Recorded” (“Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben”) to other titles, such as “The Republic and Me,” “Encounters with People of our Region,” “Thoughts between Yesterday and Today,” and “What were you doing in 1949?”<sup>91</sup>

Major deviations such as this only reaffirmed how disorganized the competition could be at the lower levels and that many *Kreis* committees and newspaper editors did not understand Berlin’s instructions, which clearly stated it was to be made clear to the populace these initiatives were all part of a centralized national campaign.<sup>92</sup> A specific example comes from the *Gebirge Echo* of *Kreis* Annaberg (in *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt), which angered the National Front because its advertisement on July 9 for “Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben” conflated two different competitions: that of a local *Kreis* competition, “Für Dich – für mich – für die Republik,” (For you – for me – for the Republic), with the national “Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben” competition. The National Front anticipated that the *Gebirge Echo*’s use of two sentences from the national competition in advertising their local competition would not only confuse the populace, but would also dilute and change the message of Berlin’s original advertisement.<sup>93</sup> Further problems with the Annaberg advertisement included that it was “much too narrow” and focused on

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<sup>90</sup> BArch, DY 6/2396, “15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik, “Miterlebt und aufgeschrieben” approx. July 1964. Likely written by the *Nationalrat* and sent to the *Kreiszeitungen*, p. 2.

<sup>91</sup> BArch, DY 6/2396, Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, “‘Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben’ in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*,” October 27, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> BArch, DY 6/2396, Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, “‘Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben’ in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*,” October 27, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>93</sup> The fact that someone in Berlin was paying that close attention is astounding and reaffirms how important tightly controlling the message was for Berlin in 1964. BArch, DY 6 /2396, “15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik, “Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben,” approx. July 1964. Likely written by the *Nationalrat* and sent to the *Kreiszeitungen*, p. 2.

“recognizing only the best deeds” of the people of the *Kreis*, as opposed to appealing for stories about even the most ordinary life.<sup>94</sup>

These annoyances were bad enough, but the National Front was infuriated with the 44 out of 77 regional editors who completely disregarded Berlin’s repeated direct orders to publish submissions as soon they came in – that is, months in advance of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Instead, the National Front found that the majority of newspapers only began to publish their readers’ submissions only about four weeks prior to the anniversary celebrations (in early September). A further problem was that the quality of these submissions was often poor. While *Bezirk Halle* received a total of 160 submissions from the papers in their region, many of them were not of high enough quality to be published in a newspaper.<sup>95</sup> In other instances, quite a few submissions came from elderly citizens describing their current lives in contrast to their lives prior the GDR and arriving at a balanced picture of the present and past. This was not the kind of story the National Front wanted to hear, noting that such stories left “the developments of the last 15 years ... colourless and too general.”<sup>96</sup> In other regions, editors disregarded popular submissions altogether and instead wrote their own reports on the lives of individual people. The National Front was not impressed with this approach and insisted this was not in the spirit of their competition – they wanted East Germans to write their own stories.<sup>97</sup>

Even more so than with certain newspaper editors, the National Front was often disappointed with their regional counterparts – the National Front *Kreis* secretariats. In Berlin’s

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<sup>94</sup> BArch, DY 6/2396, “15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik, “Miterlebt und aufgeschrieben”” approx. July 1964. Likely written by the *Nationalrat* and sent to the *Kreiszeitungen*, p. 2.

<sup>95</sup> BArch, DY 6/2395, National Front *Bezirksausschuss Halle*, “Bericht über den Stand der Vorbereitungen zum 15. Jahrestag der DDR durch die Ausschüsse der national Front im *Bezirk Halle*”, September 25, 1964, p. 6.

<sup>96</sup> BArch, DY 6/ 2396, Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, “‘Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben’ in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*,” October 27, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>97</sup> BArch, DY 6/ 2396, Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, “‘Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben’ in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*,” October 27, 1964, p. 2.

opinion, the *Kreis* secretariats “did not make enough of an effort to make these appeals [advertisements] a part of the political mass work and breathe life into them.”<sup>98</sup> Berlin believed that part of the problem was that the National Front *Kreis* secretariats often had far too little contact with and thus influence on, the editors of the papers.<sup>99</sup> The National Front in Berlin was deeply disappointed in their regional committees’ “aimless approach,” especially as this proved they had not been able to build on their experiences of the past few years in organizing smaller events.<sup>100</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

In 1964, the National Front organized its first major anniversary commemoration in honour of the GDR’s founding, seeking to underscore the GDR’s growing international legitimacy and economic prowess. One of the major challenges facing the National Front in Berlin in organizing these socialist competitions, however, was in implementing the competitions on the regional and local levels. While, in theory, the National Front *Kreis* committees were supposed to coordinate with and support the regional newspaper editors, in practice, the committees remained rather aloof from the process. This left the major burden of responsibility to the regional newspaper editors, who were not always able – or even willing – to implement what Berlin wanted for their national competition.

In their efforts to ensure “Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben” was successful, the National Front in Berlin kept close watch on how all 70 regional newspapers were promoting the

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<sup>98</sup> BArch, DY 6/ 2396, Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, “‘Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben’ in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*,” October 27, 1964, p. 2-3.

<sup>99</sup> BArch, DY 6 /2396, “15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik, “Miterlebt und aufgeschrieben”” approx. July 1964. Likely written by the *Nationalrat* and sent to the *Kreiszeitungen*, p. 2-3.

<sup>100</sup> BArch, DY 6/ 2396, Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, “‘Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben’ in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*,” October 27, 1964, p. 2-3.

competition. If Berlin saw any newspapers not following their strict instructions, such as not publishing the advertisements on front pages continuously from July 1 through to October 7, altering the name of the competition, or even by promoting the competition in a less-than creative way, they would directly inform the offending editors. However, many editors did not heed these repeated complaints. From the perspective of Berlin, the lesson learned was that this competition was most successful and had the most popular participation in the areas where the “the spirit of the National Front’s original appeal from July 1 had been continuously supported” meaning, of course, those newspapers that had most strictly followed Berlin’s mandate.<sup>101</sup>

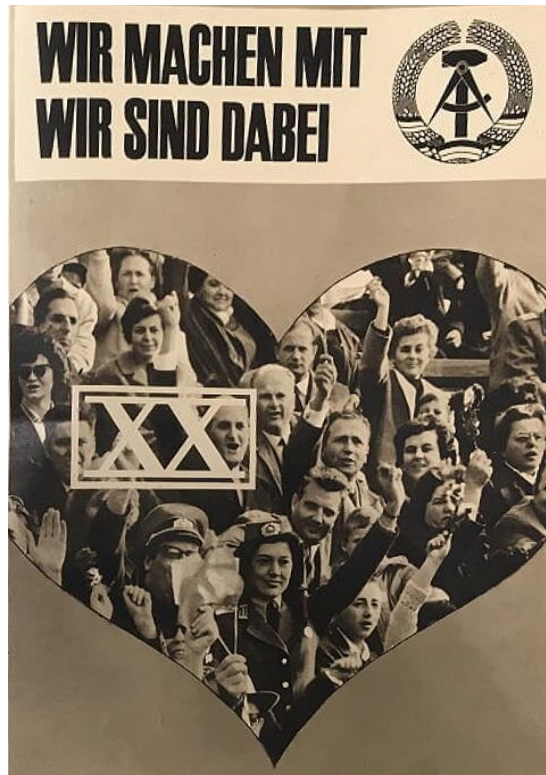
The close eye the Berlin National Front kept on its regional committees and newspaper editorial staff for this competition did set a pattern for future initiatives, however. For one, the committees had to learn to work closely with their regional newspaper editors in order to earn approval from Berlin. Another element that began to change as the years went on, however, was the fact that Berlin became more and more tolerant of regional divergences: although in 1964 they were very unhappy that some *Kreise* essentially “watered down” their orders, in competitions in later years Berlin grew to accept that complete uniformity was impossible and that the best way to garner participation from the population was to let the regions have some autonomy in their competitions.

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<sup>101</sup> BArch, DY 6/ 2396, Sekretariat des Nationalrates Kommission für Agitation/Presse, “‘Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben’ in der *Kreis* und *Bezirkspresse*,” October 27, 1964, p. 5.



**“Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!” (1969)**



*Figure 13. “We’ll join in, we’ll take part!” (BArch DY 6/ vorl. 3155b)*

Throughout the 1960s, despite real economic growth in the East, the economic gap between East and West Germany was widening.<sup>102</sup> Given events like Prague Spring in neighbouring Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union’s harsh crushing of all reform, and the SED’s flirtation with economic reform coming to an end, meant that the GDR would never catch up and overtake the West as they had hoped. Instead, there were consumer goods shortages and rising inflation in 1970, and a year later, the SED reintroduced central planning.<sup>103</sup> The leadership thus had to focus on achieving greatness for the country in other respects, such as developing a respectable standing on the international stage through normalizing relations with West Germany.

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<sup>102</sup> See Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 126-27; Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*, 212. Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 168.

<sup>103</sup> Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 168.

They also sought to continue their task of creating a unique East German identity, distinct from the West.

It was in this context that, in January 1969, the National Front undertook a very ambitious project for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the GDR, the ultimate success of which required remarkable coordination from the National Front's constituent organizations. The difficulty with this project was that it lacked a central focus on one anniversary theme, unlike previous competitions. In this competition, "Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!" "We'll join in, we'll take part!" and its 10 different constituent initiatives, the National Front instead wanted multiple ideological threads to be on display, including the German-Soviet friendship, GDR friendship with and support of fellow communist countries' struggles against the "imperialists," community pride, GDR legitimacy, the (literal) building up of the GDR over the past 20 years, and GDR national identity. In addition, these threads were marketed to a very wide selection of the populace, including children, the elderly, individual communities, cultural groups, and artists, to name but a few.

The National Front introduced the public to this competition in the form of a special issue of *Der Volkshelfer*, the illustrated journal of the People's Solidarity (*Volkssolidarität* (VS)) mass organization. The purpose of this competition's myriad constituent initiatives, the journal explained rather unrealistically, was that "many individual deeds will together create a vivid mosaic of our citizens' creative work that shows the colourful diversity of life in our socialist state."<sup>104</sup> In reality, creating these ten individual initiatives, referred to as "mosaic stones" in the journal, was the National Front's ambitious attempt to attract participation from nearly the entirety of the population. Organizers hoped that, with so many different options, there would be

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<sup>104</sup> BAArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b, "Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!" *Der Volkshelfer*, February, 1969, no. 2, p. 1.

at least one that every individual or group could join. The initiatives, or “mosaic stones,” included the following:

Mosaic Stone 1: Soviet greeting cards

Mosaic Stone 2: “Hello, young people!” (“Hallo, junge Leute!”)

Mosaic Stone 3: “The house in which we live” (“Das Haus, in dem wir wohnen”)

Mosaic Stone 4: “Solidarity with the Vietnamese people” (“Solidarität mit dem heldenhaft kämpfenden vietnamesischen Volk”)

Mosaic Stone 5: “The Book of Good Deeds” (“Buch der guten Taten”)

Mosaic Stone 6: A film project documenting participation in the Join In! initiative, “Make our cities and localities more beautiful!” (“Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – mach mit!”)

Mosaic Stone 7: The creative children’s project, “The GDR: Our Beautiful Socialist Homeland!” (“Die DDR – unsere schöne sozialistische Heimat”)

Mosaic Stone 8: East Germans taking pictures and videos of people in the present enjoying their Heimat, called “A Mensch – how good that sounds!” (“Ein Mensch – wie stolz das klingt!”)

Mosaic Stone 9: “Our children deserve all our love” (“Unseren Kindern gehört unsere ganze Liebe”)

Mosaic Stone 10: “Searching for young and old talent:” a “complete the sketch” project where one would create an original drawing using these few pre-designed lines.

This variety was a major departure from the National Front’s approach a mere five years previously in the 1964 competition “Miterlebt und Aufgeschrieben” – which had been a much more narrowly defined and monolithic competition. In order to carry out such a massive project, Berlin had advised their *Bezirk* and *Kreis* counterparts to create regional commissions. Berlin expected these commission members to include regional secretariat members, representatives from other National Front organizations such as the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF), the People’s Solidarity (VS), the Cultural Association (DKB), the Free German Youth (FDJ), as well as others such as teachers, representatives from the Department of Education and Culture, and members of the press.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, National Front der DDR, Kreis Ausschuß Hoyerswerda, Sekretär Haugk, “Wir machen mit – Wir sind dabei,” memo to Orts and Wohnbezirksausschüsse, February 25, 1969, p. 2.

Although all mosaic stones followed themes the National Front had used in previous anniversaries, this time, it was up to individual East Germans to pick which theme they would explore. For example, participating in Mosaic Stone 1 meant paying tribute to the Soviet-German connection by creating greeting cards to be sent to the Soviet Union detailing everyday life and activities in the GDR. Each *Bezirk* would then forward their 10 best greeting cards (to be determined by their political content and form) to Berlin to accompany a GDR delegation travelling to Moscow in October, 1969.<sup>106</sup> Mosaic Stone 8, “A Mensch – how good that sounds!” was meant to showcase the ways in which social life had positively developed in the GDR during the previous twenty years, with the National Front encouraging East Germans to submit their best photos featuring their community members studying or working, friends enjoying their free time at a club, or even photos of children playing.<sup>107</sup> Mosaic Stone 3 (fig. 14, below), “The house, in which we live,” encouraged individual *Hausgemeinschaften* or other groups to come together to create an original and colourful wall newspaper (*Hauswandzeitung*) that depicted the development of their group or their area.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, National Front der DDR, Kreisausschuß Hoyerswerda, Sekretär Haugk, “Wir machen mit – Wir sind dabei,” memo to Orts and Wohnbezirksausschüsse, February 25, 1969, p. 3.

<sup>107</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b, “Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!” *Der Volkshelfer*, February, 1969, no. 2, p. 5.

<sup>108</sup> Wall newspapers were usually newspapers pinned to bulletin boards. They were a popular option in the GDR and elsewhere in the Eastern bloc for getting around possible shortages of individual newspapers.



Figure 14. School children at the Oberschule Schönborn making a wall newspaper for their school (BArch DY 6/vorl. 3155b, *Freie Presse*, "Fotoausstellung und Wandzeitungen," 17 March 1969).

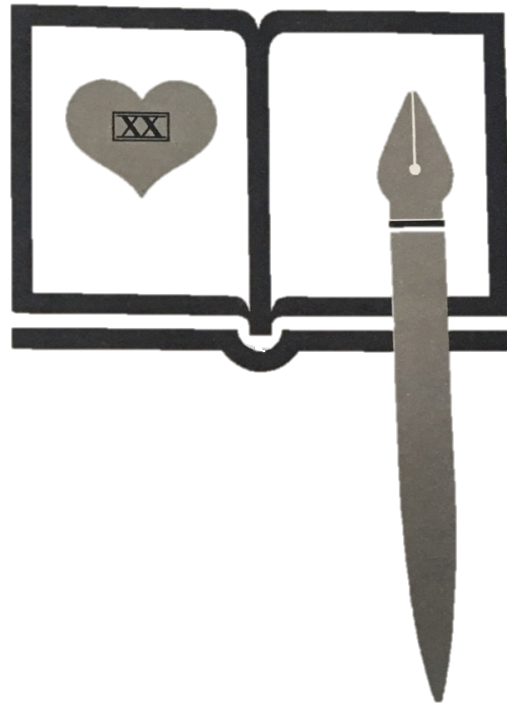
One obvious benefit of these initiatives was that they underscored the thriving daily life that existed in the GDR: anyone looking through old photos would be nostalgically reminded of the past, while anyone viewing them from outside would be forced to conclude that GDR citizens were leading happy, normal lives in thriving communities.<sup>109</sup> For example, Mosaic Stone 6, the film project, asked anyone who possessed a small film camera to film community members working on any of the local beautification campaigns with the purpose of creating small skits.<sup>110</sup> The intention was for this project to capture the sense of comradeship and community that existed in many neighbourhoods across the GDR, while at the same time extolling the value of volunteering one's time for the benefit of the nation (i.e. saving the state money on building

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<sup>109</sup> For more on this argument, see Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, 10.

<sup>110</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b, "Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!" *Der Volkshelfer*, February, 1969, no. 2, p. 3.

repairs). Mosaic Stone 5 (fig. 15, below) the “Book of Good Deeds,” asked the public to submit letters describing particularly hard-working community members who “make our lives richer, more beautiful and more pleasing.”<sup>111</sup> As can be predicted, the purpose of these letters was to acknowledge hard-working individuals – in other words, ideal pillars of the socialist community – and reward them for their efforts and encourage others to follow in their footsteps.



*Figure 15. Original National Front advertisement example for Mosaic Stone 5 (BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b).*

Through Mosaic Stone 9 (fig. 16, below), the National Front demonstrated its desire to educate the young on its ideology by asking East Germans to create a “pedagogically meaningful” toy for a small child.<sup>112</sup> The National Front envisioned this as a project for the elderly, veterans, or those belonging to handwork collectives within People’s Solidarity (VS)

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<sup>111</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b, “Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!” *Der Volkshelfer*, February, 1969, no. 2, p. 3.

<sup>112</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b, “Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!” *Der Volkshelfer*, February, 1969, no. 2, p. 9.

clubs, or for anyone who had the “love, talent experience and desire” to create a children’s toy.<sup>113</sup> The National Front *Kreis* committees confirmed they would accept the toy submissions for three months until June 1, and would present them to children on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GDR in October. Not wanting the pedagogical intent behind this project to seem too obvious (that of moulding impressionable young minds), the National Front commented that since young children had been contributing in small measures to the ongoing town beautification campaigns in honour of this anniversary, that they deserved to be “rewarded” for their efforts by receiving a toy. Berlin also suggested that, if unable to create a toy, people could instead volunteer to help beautify (that is, decorate or renovate) childcare facilities in honour of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>114</sup>



Figure 16. Advertisement for Mosaic Stone 9 “Unseren Kindern gehört unsere ganze Liebe” “Our children deserve all our love.” The advertisement asks: “Do you have an idea?” about how to create a “pedagogically meaningful” (i.e. ideologically-oriented) toy for a small child. Example shown in this picture is of two children adoringly playing with blocks built into the shape of a Soviet spaceship with a cosmonaut inside (BArch, DY 6/ vorl. 3155b).

<sup>113</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b, “Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!” *Der Volkshelfer*, February, 1969, no. 2, p. 9.

<sup>114</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b, “Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!” *Der Volkshelfer*, February, 1969, no. 2, p. 3.

Other Mosaic Stones designed to appeal to youth included Mosaic Stone 7, “The GDR – our beautiful socialist Heimat,” that asked children and youth to send in a drawing depicting themselves singing, laughing or playing, or even just “enjoying their beautiful homeland.” The National Front encouraged every youth, from kindergarteners to 18-year-olds, to participate in this Mosaic Stone using any technology they desired, as the National Front wanted them to simply recognize how wonderful their homeland was (and possibly diminish any desires to travel elsewhere). Taking into account that young people would not necessarily be reading this magazine, the advertisement addressed their older readers, asking them to tell the children around them about this particular initiative.<sup>115</sup> A related initiative, Mosaic Stone 2, “Hallo, junge Leute” (“Hello, young people!”), encouraged anyone turning 20 years old in 1969 (“along with their country”) to submit an account about growing up in the GDR and how their state helped them “discover their own personal happiness.”<sup>116</sup> Anticipating possible apathy on the part of the youth, the National Front appealed once more to the elderly to encourage their grandchildren or their nieces/nephews to make submissions. Since youths had neither experienced the war nor lived anywhere else, the advertisement encouraged their elders to explain to the children what they themselves had dealt with in the past and how life had become so much better in the last 20 years. If these stories from long ago still failed to pique youth interest, the advertisement went on, older people were invited to simply write in their own impressions about the past 20 years.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b, “Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!” *Der Volkshelfer*, February, 1969, no. 2, p. 5.

<sup>116</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b, “Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!” *Der Volkshelfer*, February, 1969, no. 2, p. 2.

<sup>117</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b, “Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!” *Der Volkshelfer*, February, 1969, no. 2, p. 2.



Participating in Mosaic Stone 4 (fig. 17, below) required the populace to show solidarity with the people of war-torn Vietnam by sending a personal gift, such as a drawing, photo, or craft, to a Vietnamese child.<sup>118</sup> The National Front reminded GDR citizens that having themselves lived through one (perhaps even two) wars in their lifetime, they were well-placed to empathize with those enduring war.<sup>119</sup> This was not only about creating a feeling of solidarity with another communist country, but given American involvement in the war, it was also a potent reminder of the state’s long-standing dismissal of the “imperialist” West being nothing but “warmongers.”



Figure 17. Homemade signed postcard to be sent to Vietnam. Caption: “Solidarity with Vietnam - Greetings from the GDR!” (BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b).

<sup>118</sup> For details about the GDR’s other acts of “solidarity” towards Vietnam during this time period, see Quinn Slobodian (ed), *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World* (New York Oxford: Berghahn, 2015).

<sup>119</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b, “Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!” *Der Volkshelfer*, February, 1969, no. 2, p. 3.

Finally, in Mosaic Stone 10, “Searching for young and old talent” (figs. 18-21, below) the National Front asked the populace to use their “talent and imagination” to create a “funny and colourful original drawing” from a sketch fragment and to submit these to the newspapers.<sup>120</sup> Although most submissions overwhelmingly sought to strike a positive note, such as the submission (fig. 19) that depicts the growth of Berlin over the past 20 years, one submission in particular (fig. 20), appears to be a protest against the recent Warsaw Pact invasion and resulting occupation of Czechoslovakia.<sup>121</sup> This drawing shows the author is clearly opposed to the crushing of the Prague Spring reforms, and it seeks to turn official rhetoric on its head by showing one of the Soviet Union’s proud sons, Soviet Cosmonaut Aleksei Yeliseyev, commanding a tank emblazoned by a swastika inside a communist five-pointed red star. This replacing of the usual hammer and sickle with a swastika not only shows the absence of proletarian solidarity (and therefore the support of the common people), but is also symbolically linking the present-day Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia to that of the Nazis in 1939. The illustrator is seeking to demonstrate how the Warsaw Pact invaders, much like the Nazis, caused much suffering – something made clear by the tears streaming down the cheeks of the drawing’s central figure, the martyr Jan Palach, who is shown here having been set ablaze (which depicts his real life act of self-immolation). The drawing also simultaneously shows the aftermath of the invasion: black ribbons of mourning on the tattered Czech flag and Palach’s tombstone with a wreath in front of it, on which the words “Wir verstehen Dich [“we understand”] —Smrkovski [sic.]” are written, symbolizing the solidarity of the rest of the protest movement with Palach, including popular reformer politician Josef Smrkovsky.

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<sup>120</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b, “Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!” *Der Volkshelfer*, February, 1969, no. 2, p. 5.

<sup>121</sup> Unfortunately, there is no information on what the National Front’s response to this anonymous protest submission was.

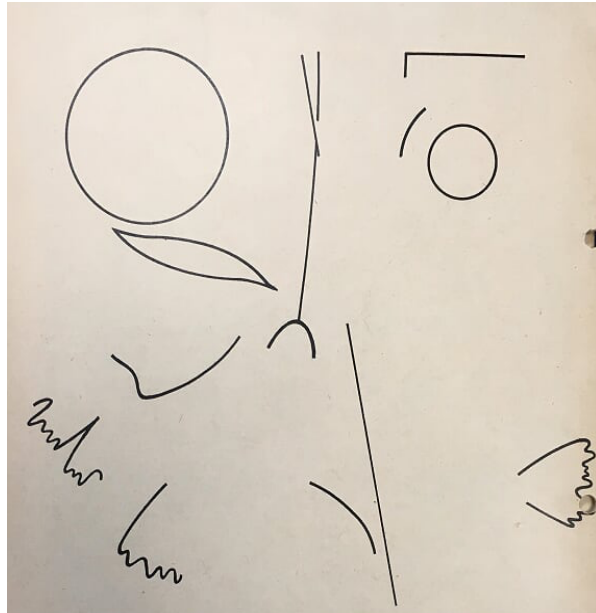


Figure 18. Sketch fragment basic outline for initiative "Searching for young and old talent" (BArch, DY 6/ vorl. 3155b)



Figure 19. Submission for "Searching for young and old talent" by Herbert Unglaube. Drawing depicting development of Berlin over the past 20 years, highlighting the rebuilding of homes, construction of the Fernsehturm, and growing industrial capacity. Caption reads "20 Years of the GDR: Wow, Berlin, how you have changed in 20 Years!" This is exactly the kind of sketch that the National Front was looking for as it was patriotic and reflective of the GDR's progressive achievements (BArch, DY 6/ vorl. 3155b, Berliner Zeitung am Abend, May 20, 1969).

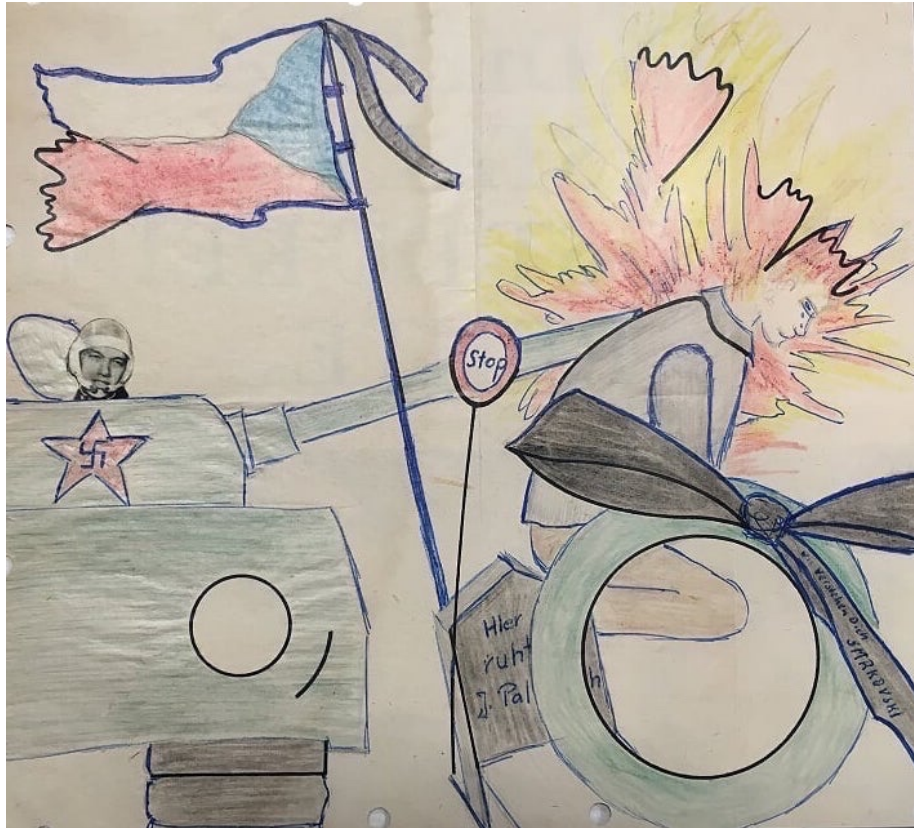


Figure 20. Submission by unknown author for “Searching for young and old talent” protesting the ending of reforms in Czechoslovakia. (BArch, DY 6/ vorl. 3155b)

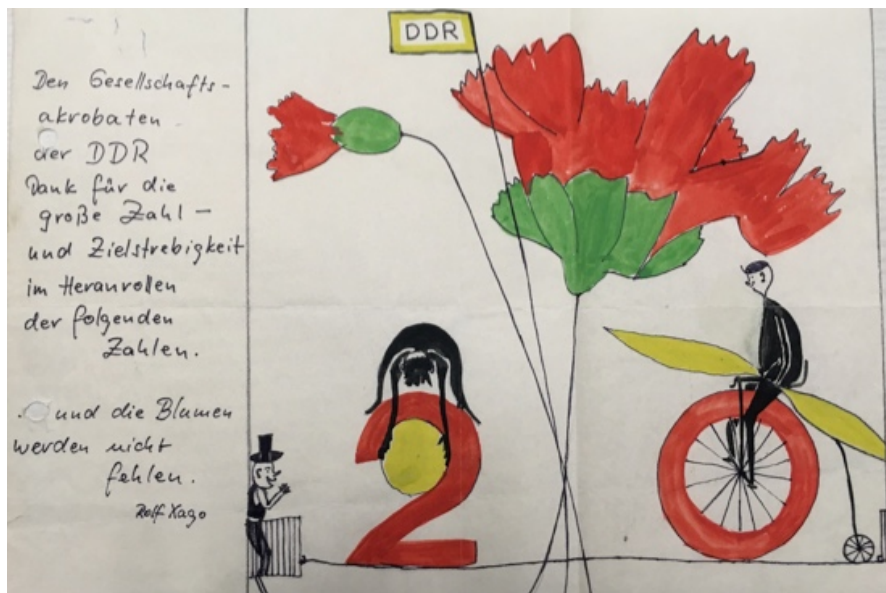
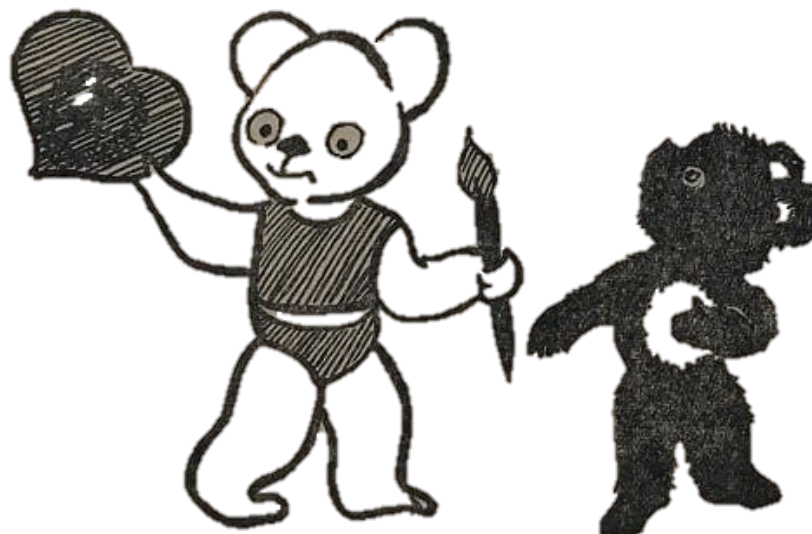


Figure 21. Another submission for “Searching for young and old talent” by Rolf Xago. This submission depicts GDR acrobats performing a show in honour of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the caption thanks them for their great determination and effort in doing so. (BArch, DY 6/ Vorl. 3155b).

## *Mixed Regional Results*



*Figure 22. Characters part of an advertisement for the competition in the regional Thüringer Neueste Nachrichten (February 7, 1969). Note: As is common with regional interpretations, this is a generic advertisement asking for participation in the entire competition and does not mention which “Mosaic Stone” competition these particular characters are associated with (BArch DY 6/vorl. 3155b).*

From the perspective of the National Front in Berlin, the purpose of the competitions was both economic and “intellectual-cultural,” meaning the goal of the training of minds was as important as the economic gains the state made from people volunteering their time.<sup>122</sup> Herr Seewald, a National Front *Kreis* secretary, wrote that he believed it was not even worth having beautiful cities (i.e. achieved through the continuous beautification competitions) if the citizens created them without an awareness of the ideological underpinnings.<sup>123</sup> This kind of ideological dedication was something that Berlin hoped would drive all regions to create effective and popular competitions.

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<sup>122</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a. “Die Aktion in ‘Aktion’: Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!” (Version 1), undated. Likely drawn up by the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, p. 2.

<sup>123</sup> Seewald quoted in *ibid.*, p. 3.

Of course, it was not so simple in reality: struggles in popularizing, organizing, and creating an understanding of the ideological underpinnings of the magazine initiatives were to be found across the GDR. By May 1969, with the submission deadlines for the initiatives looming, the National Front concluded that while a few initiatives and individual *Kreise* had been successful, such as those of the *Bezirk* of Karl-Marx-Stadt as well as the popular complete-the-sketch initiative (Mosaic Stone 10) in general, Berlin had to admit that “the work with the magazine has had a very difficult start.”<sup>124</sup> Upon visiting the regions, Berlin-based National Front representatives saw that many top-level suggestions were not being followed in many localities. Regional secretariats had not managed their extra workload very well, as many viewed their role as merely a passive one, even though Berlin had envisioned the *Bezirke* and *Kreise* taking a very active role in generating interest in the initiatives. In Berlin’s opinion, the *Bezirk* secretariats were just not sufficiently emphasizing these initiatives.<sup>125</sup> Compounding this difficulty were the regional presses, which Berlin believed were not properly explaining to their readers how the varied initiatives were all part of the same project.<sup>126</sup>

For their part, many *Kreise* protested that many of these problems were beyond their control. For example, that Berlin had not sent them enough magazines to distribute; that the magazine was just being used as a wall newspaper; that “the central press is not informing us all well enough;” that the prizes they were supposed to hand out were too expensive; and that the magazine was just “not popular enough.”<sup>127</sup> Another very common complaint was that the *Bezirk*

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<sup>124</sup> DY 6/vorl. 3155a, likely written by a representative of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, “Analyse der Bezirksberichte ‘Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei,’” May 22, 1969, p. 1.

<sup>125</sup> DY 6/vorl. 3155a, likely written by a representative of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, “Analyse der Bezirksberichte ‘Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei,’” May 22, 1969, p. 3.

<sup>126</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, likely written by a representative of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, “Analyse der Bezirksberichte ‘Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei,’” May 22, 1969, p. 3.

<sup>127</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, likely written by a representative of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, “Analyse der Bezirksberichte ‘Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei,’” May 22, 1969, p. 3.

and *Kreis* secretaries were being bypassed altogether because many people submitted their work directly to Berlin or directly to other smaller organizations.<sup>128</sup>

For example, in May, *Bezirk* Leipzig reported that its goal of making the magazine initiatives part of their “political mass-work” by winning over great sections of the populace had not been achieved, which they partly attributed to their own lack of oversight over their *Kreise*.<sup>129</sup> For one, the local committees found it very difficult to popularize all of the initiatives at once in the regional newspapers in a way that made this very complex magazine initiative clear and appealing to the populace. The *Bezirk* thought a lack of continuous advertising had caused popular interest to lag over time.<sup>130</sup> Another part of the problem was the magazine itself: although the populace had liked and read it with interest, afterwards it was often simply set aside or mounted as a wall newspaper. Although local National Front committees and organizations also held a multitude of events to inform the public about joining in the competition, *Bezirk* Leipzig concluded that these committee efforts were just not enough: the public was just generally not interested in making their own submissions to this competition.

The nature of the mosaic stone submissions posed another challenge. Many East Germans, unsure of where to send their submissions, sent them to obscure, small associations or even directly to Berlin, instead of sending them to their *Bezirk* or even *Kreis* secretariats. This then left the *Bezirk* and *Kreis* National Front committees without direct oversight over the local

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<sup>128</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, likely written by a representative of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, “Analyse der Bezirksberichte ‘Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei,’” May 22, 1969, p. 3.

<sup>129</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Bezirksausschuß Leipzig secretariat member A. Jacob, “Die Illustrierter ‘Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!’” Memo addressed to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Kultur, Berlin, May 12, 1969, p. 1-2.

<sup>130</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Bezirksausschuß Leipzig secretariat member A. Jacob, “Die Illustrierter ‘Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!’” Memo addressed to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Kultur, Berlin, May 12, 1969, p. 2-3.

results due to a lack of communication between these smaller local committees.<sup>131</sup> In an effort to combat this problem, the Leipzig *Bezirk* secretariat made an arrangement with the Leipzig *Bezirk* Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF) committee regarding the Soviet greeting card initiative, whereby the DSF would take over full responsibility for this initiative, including the printing and distribution of more advertisements. In order to centralize organization and ensure proper oversight, any further submissions were to be sent to the DSF to be judged.<sup>132</sup>

The results of the magazine initiative in Frankfurt (an der Oder) were similarly varied. The Frankfurt *Bezirk* and *Kreis* secretariats, as well as members of their agitation commissions, all sent out multiple flyers and other information to the *Hausgemeinschaften* and schools about the important political message behind these initiatives, as well as examples of how to carry out the initiative. However, the *Bezirk* secretariat concluded that it had not been enough.<sup>133</sup> *Bezirk* Frankfurt admitted that while they had begun advertising the Soviet greeting card initiative (Mosaic Stone 1) too late, their main problem, like with the other *Bezirke*, was that the populace was submitting other entries to a variety of sources unconnected to the *Bezirk* secretariat. Specifically, submissions for the “Hello, young people!” (Mosaic Stone 2) initiative were not being sent in to the FDJ or the *Bezirk* secretariat, but rather, to a youth magazine, while the completed sketches of the “Searching for young and old talent” (Mosaic Stone 10) initiative were being sent directly to the National Front in Berlin.<sup>134</sup> In the latter case, the Frankfurt secretariat

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<sup>131</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Bezirksausschuß Leipzig secretariat member A. Jacob, “Die Illustrierter ‘Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!’” Memo addressed to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Kultur, Berlin, May 12, 1969, p. 1-2.

<sup>132</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Bezirksausschuß Leipzig secretariat member A. Jacob, “Die Illustrierter ‘Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!’” Memo addressed to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Kultur, Berlin, May 12, 1969, p. 3.

<sup>133</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Sekretariat member Merk of the *Bezirksausschuß* Frankfurt (Oder), “Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!” Memo addressed to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Kultur, Berlin, May 19, 1969, p. 2.

<sup>134</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Sekretariat member Merk of the *Bezirksausschuß* Frankfurt (Oder), “Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!” Memo addressed to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Kultur, Berlin, May 19, 1969, p. 1-2.



was annoyed they were missing out on judging their own regional submissions, given that they personally knew of many art teachers who had put a great deal of effort into creating good drawings.<sup>135</sup> In an effort to correct these coordination problems, the *Bezirk* Frankfurt secretariat met with all their *Kreis* secretariats in mid-May, 1969 to make a concerted effort in tandem with the regional presses to not only remind the public to participate in the initiatives, but to also make clear the political ideological importance underpinning them, as well as to send the submissions to the *Bezirk*.<sup>136</sup>

*Bezirk* Halle also reported similar problems. As was the case elsewhere, the submissions for the “Hello, young people!” (Mosaic Stone 2) initiative were being sent to the youth magazine *Neues Leben*, while their region’s “Searching for young and old talent” (Mosaic Stone 10) submissions were going directly to Berlin.<sup>137</sup> Secondly, while their *Bezirk* had worked hard to make sure that the magazine project became a main talking point in the *Hausgemeinschaften*, a major stumbling block to spreading the word was that Halle had only received 7900 copies of the magazine from Berlin to distribute in total, which worked out to only two copies per 100 households.<sup>138</sup>

*Bezirk* Halle attempted to work through its coordination problems by asking its *Kreis* secretariats to narrow their focus to promoting just a selection (rather than all ten) of the magazine initiatives: for example, the Soviet greeting cards, the town beautification projects, the

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<sup>135</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Sekretariat member Merk of the *Bezirksausschuß* Frankfurt (Oder), “Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!” Memo addressed to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Kultur, Berlin, May 19, 1969, p. 2.

<sup>136</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Sekretariat member Merk of the *Bezirksausschuß* Frankfurt (Oder), “Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!” Memo addressed to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Kultur, Berlin, May 19, 1969, p. 2.

<sup>137</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Sekretariat of the *Bezirksausschuß* Halle, “Einschätzung und Schlußfolgerungen über die Führung der Aktion ‘Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!’” April 22, 1969, p. 2.

<sup>138</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Sekretariat of the *Bezirksausschuß* Halle, “Einschätzung und Schlußfolgerungen über die Führung der Aktion ‘Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!’” April 22, 1969, p. 1.

wall newspaper project, and the Vietnam solidarity letters.<sup>139</sup> In addition, the Halle secretariat suggested an even more targeted approach: that the *Kreis* secretariats make descriptive advertisements of each of these four initiatives and leave copies in places where the groups most likely to participate could see them, such as leaving advertisements for town beautification projects and wall newspaper projects for *Hausgemeinschaften*, giving advertisements for the Soviet greeting cards and Vietnam solidarity letters to retirement homes, and providing worker collectives with advertisements for beautification projects.<sup>140</sup>

A major reason for such difficulties in the regions was due to Berlin's decentralized approach towards this very complex group of initiatives, which was problematic because a competition of this scope had never taken place before.<sup>141</sup> Despite the regions' clear need for guidance, the Berlin was insistent that the regional National Front committees find ways to make it work on their own since implementation on the ground was ultimately the responsibility of these lower-level committees. The flaw in such a plan was that the local committees did not always have sufficient time, resources, or information with which to successfully carry out the initiatives in the uniform way that Berlin envisioned. For example, although there were many different local initiatives already underway in 1969, the National Front in Berlin did not think this was a good enough reason for local officials to put any less effort into the massive national campaign. Instead, the Berlin secretariat flippantly commented that the regional committees were to simply find any way possible in which to participate, telling them to inventively make use of

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<sup>139</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Secretariat of the Bezirksausschuß Halle, "Einschätzung und Schlußfolgerungen über die Führung der Aktion 'Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!'" April 22, 1969, p. 3-4.

<sup>140</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Secretariat of the Bezirksausschuß Halle, "Einschätzung und Schlußfolgerungen über die Führung der Aktion 'Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!'" April 22, 1969, p. 3-4.

<sup>141</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, draft of "Erfahrungen in der Arbeit mit der Illustrierten 'Wir machen mit – Wir sind dabei!'" approx. mid-March 1969, p. 1. Likely written for the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Berlin.

the whole “palette of possibilities” that their region possessed.<sup>142</sup> In doing so, Berlin explained to the regions that “there was no need [for the regions] to replace their already-existing initiatives with those of the magazine or to add new ones to them ... the various competitions advertised in the magazine should be meaningfully incorporated into existing initiatives.”<sup>143</sup> For example, Berlin pointed out that it would be easy enough for *Hausgemeinschaften* to make wall newspapers and put them up in their buildings in order to fulfil Mosaic Stone 3, “The house in which we live.” Berlin also reminded the regions that any old photos could be used to fulfill a variety of the initiatives. If that was not possible, the regions could simply put up some children’s drawings around town.<sup>144</sup>

However, organizing even the simplest of initiatives proved not as straightforward as Berlin made it sound. For one, Berlin’s instructions on combining events signalled a complete reversal of its previous approach. As explained in the previous sections on the socialist competitions of 1957 and 1964, Berlin heavily criticized the localities for doing the very thing they were now advocating: combining local and national campaigns and thereby “confusing” people. By this time in 1969, however, Berlin was less concerned with the presence of too many competing initiatives existing across the regions, and more focused on ensuring that their massive national magazine initiative worked as “a broad-based action within the framework of the National Front” which was “supported by all social forces.”<sup>145</sup> In other words, Berlin’s main

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<sup>142</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, “Die Aktion in ‘Aktion’: Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!” copy of Irene Weismann, member of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, undated, p. 4-5.

<sup>143</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, draft of “Erfahrungen in der Arbeit mit der Illustrierten ‘Wir machen mit – Wir sind dabei!’” approx. mid-March 1969, p. 4.

<sup>144</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, “Die Aktion in ‘Aktion’: Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!” copy of Irene Weismann, member of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, undated, p. 4-5.

<sup>145</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, draft of “Erfahrungen in der Arbeit mit der Illustrierten ‘Wir machen mit – Wir sind dabei!’” approx. mid-March 1969, p. 4.

concern was that all mass organizations and regions could come together to create a unified and cohesive campaign across the country.

One instance that caused concern for Berlin was when, after five months of popularizing the initiatives, the *Bezirks* of Suhl and Potsdam had received absolutely no submissions of Soviet greeting cards (Mosaic Stone 1).<sup>146</sup> Although not dissimilar from other competitions where organizers found it difficult to pique popular interest in the Soviet Union, Berlin preferred to ascribe such disinterest to a general lack of oversight and control on the *Bezirk* and *Kreis* levels, for it seemed to Berlin that schools and FDJ groups were simply organizing their own competitions with similar themes without any oversight at all.<sup>147</sup> The result, so Berlin thought, was due to the fact that people were too fatigued to participate in the national greeting card initiative. A similar issue occurred in *Kreis* Bernau (in *Bezirk* Frankfurt), where Berlin blamed the problem on the local and residential district committees not only beginning their preparations far too late, but also on the fact that the *Kreis* also lacked a concrete plan for the implementation and control of its planned initiatives.<sup>148</sup>

Given its oftentimes overly critical opinion of the *Bezirk* and *Kreis* committees, in an attempt to find out how the work was actually taking shape on the ground, Berlin, in at least one case, bypassed the *Bezirk* committees altogether and sent out inquiries directly to town clubs and other small-level organizations. One response they received was from Erhard Walther, a representative of his *Hausgemeinschaft* in Pirna-Copitz (in *Bezirk* Dresden). Walther wrote to Berlin that his *Hausgemeinschaft* had been particularly inspired by the ideas they had read about

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<sup>146</sup> DY 6/vorl. 3155a, likely written by a representative of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, "Analyse der Bezirksberichte 'Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei,'" May 22, 1969, p. 1.

<sup>147</sup> DY 6/vorl. 3155a, likely written by a representative of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, "Analyse der Bezirksberichte 'Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei,'" May 22, 1969, p. 2.

<sup>148</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, draft of "Erfahrungen in der Arbeit mit der Illustrierten 'Wir machen mit – Wir sind dabei!'" approx. mid-March 1969, p. 3-4. Likely written for the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Berlin.

in the magazine. Their group decided to first take on the Soviet greeting card option, which they thought would be a good opportunity to connect with old friends in the Soviet Union. Walther proudly reported that their involvement in this initiative encouraged the remaining six people of their group to become members of the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF). The next initiative they planned to join in was in submitting photos of the goings-on in their area, and their group was also planning to create a wall newspaper.<sup>149</sup> An example such as this, showing one of the smallest-level groupings of citizens excitedly carrying out the magazine project, was proof enough to Berlin that their ideas for this project were good ones and implementation was feasible, even if the *Kreis* and *Bezirk* secretariats did not always agree.

### ***Regional Comparison in Microview: Bezirk Cottbus vs. Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt***

#### ***Bezirk Cottbus***

While from Berlin's perspective it was mainly *Bezirke* that were not fulfilling their obligations, from the perspective of *Bezirke* like Cottbus, it was the *Kreise* that were not carrying out their "political mass-work" as they should have been.<sup>150</sup> *Kreis* Forst, for example, had explained to *Bezirk* Cottbus that the reason for their slow start was because they had received too few copies of the magazine to distribute. However, Frau Neumann of the *Bezirk* Cottbus's National Front secretariat disputed this, and argued that it was nothing more than a poor excuse. The fact that Forst dared to blame Cottbus for their own failings, showed, in Neumann's eyes, that *Kreis* Forst "did not really understand that every copy requires intensive [ideological] work

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<sup>149</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, "Die Aktion in 'Aktion': Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!" copy of Irene Weismann, member of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, undated, p. 2-3.

<sup>150</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, representative of the Bezirksausschuß Cottbus, "Protokoll der Sekretariatsitzung vom 21. April 1969," April 24, 1969, p. 2.

with the people, which has nothing to do with the number of copies of the magazine received.”<sup>151</sup> Thus, Neumann concluded that it was Forst’s own lack of ingenuity in popularizing the initiatives and making the project relatable to ordinary people that resulted in their initial loss of momentum. She pointed out that upon asking Forst representatives how involved they were personally with the preparations, they replied that they were not – thus proving her point that they were doing “gleich Null” or “essentially nothing.”<sup>152</sup>

Herr Döring, also a part of *Bezirk* Cottbus’s National Front secretariat, suggested the *Bezirk* respond to the problems their *Kreise* were having by creating a special commission to oversee the project. The commission would be responsible for assessing progress, while at the same time ensuring all social organizations would feel equally responsible for the magazine project.<sup>153</sup> Döring argued it was necessary because even their most successful *Kreis*, Calau (Berlin’s poster-child for excellent organization), was still reporting that few people were attending the events (such as lectures and meetings) being held to ensure the public understood the ideological underpinnings of these competitions. Döring further underscored that the *Bezirk* needed to find out the reasons why this was the case by examining the managing role of the *Kreis* committees and how much of an effort they were making to encourage participation by differentiating their message or events. Ultimately, Döring thought “the [*Kreis*] committees must become even more aware that the main task of the National Front is political-ideological work.”<sup>154</sup> Ironically, there is no suggestion that the *Bezirk* secretariat ever thought to enquire of

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<sup>151</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, representative of the Bezirksausschuß Cottbus, “Protokoll der Sekretariatsitzung vom 21. April 1969,” April 24, 1969, p. 2.

<sup>152</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, representative of the Bezirksausschuß Cottbus, “Protokoll der Sekretariatsitzung vom 21. April 1969,” April 24, 1969, p. 2.

<sup>153</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, representative of the Bezirksausschuß Cottbus, “Protokoll der Sekretariatsitzung vom 21. April 1969,” April 24, 1969, p. 3.

<sup>154</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, representative of the Bezirksausschuß Cottbus, “Protokoll der Sekretariatsitzung vom 21. April 1969,” April 24, 1969, p. 3.

East Germans themselves as to why they would not be interested in attending these kinds of ideologically-focused events. This failure to consider popular opinion was mostly likely due to the fact that the GDR was not really a “participatory dictatorship” since, as discussed earlier, the purpose of the National Front inquiring of ordinary peoples’ opinions was not to incorporate them into official policy, but rather, to get useful information with which they could better defend their original position -- the unalterable theses narrative created by the SED Politburo’s propaganda wing.

Ultimately, the Cottbus secretariat decided it would be best to create a commission for the specific task of controlling and leading this magazine competition. They tasked the commission with critically assessing the situation and reporting back to the secretariat about what was going on at the lower levels of the *Bezirk*, and proposing possible solutions.<sup>155</sup> As a result, many *Kreis* secretariats followed Cottbus’s lead and created their own commissions to help carry out the work, while Berlin even began to help by contacting the representatives of these commissions (even city mayors) to underscore the importance of these initiatives and the political meaning behind them. For its part, the Cottbus *Bezirk* secretariat decided to communicate directly with its press affiliates to try to get more coverage of the competition.<sup>156</sup> All the different local versions of the *Lausitzer Rundschau*, for example, began to publish more articles in an effort to drum up popular interest.<sup>157</sup>

One of Cottbus’s *Kreise* that was singled out for praise by the National Front Central Committee’s secretariat in Berlin and was held up as an example of what could be accomplished

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<sup>155</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, representative of the Bezirksausschuß Cottbus, “Protokoll der Sekretariatsitzung vom 21. April 1969,” April 24, 1969, p. 4.

<sup>156</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, representative of the Bezirksausschuß Cottbus, “Protokoll der Sekretariatsitzung vom 21. April 1969,” April 24, 1969, p. 4.

<sup>157</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, “Zur Arbeit mit der Illustrierten ‘Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!’” undated, approx. May, 1969.

was that of *Kreis* Calau. Herr Zimmermann, a representative from the Calau city secretariat, commented that, “We have had lots of fun and joy working on this magazine project, but it has also required lots of effort.” Zimmerman went on to say that it was all worth it, however, especially because “ohne Fleiß, kein Preis” (no pain, no gain).<sup>158</sup> Zimmermann pointed out that one of these “gains” was that these weeks and months of organizing had enabled the secretariat to make quite a few new contacts they would not have made otherwise, and that through organizing varied activities, the secretariat came to understand the populace better, especially in getting a sense of what their interests were.<sup>159</sup>

According to Berlin, the key to Calau’s success was that their organizers understood how to combine the magazine initiatives with the social and political events already going on in their own region. This was partially due to the fact that Herr Zimmermann, Calau’s National Front *Kreis* secretary, was particularly enthusiastic and personally involved in the preparations and was able to contribute many good ideas. Zimmermann’s approach in integrating the promotional and organization work of the competition with the other political and societal work of *Kreis* secretariat ensured that Calau was much more organized than the average *Kreis*. The fact that Calau’s secretariat was able to coordinate various events and initiatives with many different organizations allowed them to gain a good overview of all that was going on in the *Kreis*, and the reports sent back to them were especially informative.<sup>160</sup> According to the National Front, this “goal-oriented approach and emphasis on individual deadlines and work” was an important factor

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<sup>158</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, “Die Aktion in ‘Aktion’: Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!” copy of Irene Weismann, member of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, undated, p. 3-4.

<sup>159</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, “Die Aktion in ‘Aktion’: Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!” copy of Irene Weismann, member of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, undated, p. 3-4.

<sup>160</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, “Die Aktion in ‘Aktion’: Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!” copy of Irene Weismann, member of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, undated, p. 1.



in Calau's success, something not many other *Kreise* replicated.<sup>161</sup> A good example of Calau's outstanding efforts in carrying out the magazine initiative was the *Kreis* secretariat's partnering with the local police service to drum up interest in the "Hello, young people!" (Mosaic Stone 2) initiative. Calau's secretariat, using information provided by the police service, was able to target an advertisement for the initiative to all 800 people born in the year 1949 and who were celebrating their twentieth birthdays in 1969.<sup>162</sup>

It was efforts like these that allowed Calau to prove again and again it was able to cleverly harness its own activities and resources for Berlin's national projects. In another instance, Calau planned its own festival week for October 1969, and included a raffle draw in the festivities.<sup>163</sup> The importance of this was that everyone in the *Kreis* who had made a submission for any of the magazine initiatives (Mosaic Stones) was automatically entered into a draw to win prizes during the festival week. Calau then built up popular anticipation and excitement for months beforehand by arranging for stores in the region to display the prizes.<sup>164</sup> This strategy of tying the possibility of winning a great prize for participating in Berlin's magazine initiatives to a local celebration resulted in surprisingly high participation numbers.

Beyond its obvious enthusiasm, Calau's organizational prowess was second-to-none. The secretariat even used several large spreadsheets to keep track of which *Gemeinden* (localities) were participating in which initiatives— thus making it clear to the *Kreis* which areas

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<sup>161</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, "Zur Arbeit mit der Illustrierten 'Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!'" undated, approx. May, 1969.

<sup>162</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a. "Die Aktion in 'Aktion': Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!" (Version 1), undated. Likely drawn up by the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, p. 3; BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, "Notizen über die Kontrolle der Arbeit mit der Illustrierten in den Kreisen Calau, Spremberg (Cottbus) und Niesky (Dresden) sowie im Bezirkssekretariat in Dresden – 22/23 Mai," May 27, 1969, p. 2.

<sup>163</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a. "Die Aktion in 'Aktion': Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!" (Version 1), undated. Likely drawn up by the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, p. 2.

<sup>164</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a. "Die Aktion in 'Aktion': Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!" (Version 1), undated. Likely drawn up by the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, p. 2.

were lacking and which were not.<sup>165</sup> The National Front in Berlin saw these methods as clear signs that the *Kreis* officials were making a concerted effort to succeed.<sup>166</sup> As expected, Calau also did well advertising the initiatives in local newspapers, having a very good working relationship with their regional newspaper, the *Lausitzer Rundschau*, which continuously published advertisements to keep its readership updated on the progress of the competition.<sup>167</sup> The *Lausitzer Rundschau* even published a weekend special from the *Kreis* secretariat, including text examples, pictures, and drawings that introduced local participants with their submissions.<sup>168</sup>



Figure 23. Featurette of a Weißwasser (Bezirk Cottbus) resident's submission of various Soviet Greeting Cards (BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155b, *Lausitzer Rundschau*, July 5, 1969).

<sup>165</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, "Notizen über die Kontrolle der Arbeit mit der Illustrierten in den Kreisen Calau, Spremberg (Cottbus) und Niesky (Dresden) sowie im Bezirkssekretariat in Dresden – 22/23 Mai," May 27, 1969, p. 2.

<sup>166</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, "Die Aktion in 'Aktion': Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!" copy of Irene Weismann, member of the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, undated, p. 2.

<sup>167</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, "Die Aktion in 'Aktion': Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!" (Version 1), undated. Likely drawn up by the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, p. 3.

<sup>168</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, "Die Aktion in 'Aktion': Wir machen mit – wir sind dabei!" (Version 1), undated. Likely drawn up by the Secretariat of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, p. 3.

### ***Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt***

Much like *Bezirk Cottbus*, *Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt* also struggled with its own implementation and oversight problems. Unlike *Bezirk Cottbus*, however, *Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt* and many of its *Kreis* secretariats had immediately created their own *Bezirk* and *Kreis*-level commissions for the magazine project. However, by May 1969, Karl-Marx-Stadt had to conclude that they had not really been successful in achieving their political-ideological goals.<sup>169</sup> *Kreise* such as that of Gleichau, despite the existence of commissions, had proven unable to coordinate their efforts, eventually requiring the *Bezirk* to send their own representatives to Gleichau work out a solution.<sup>170</sup> The *Kreis* secretariats complained to Karl-Marx-Stadt that there were a variety of reasons for their difficulties, including that the magazine was not well-enough known, there was not enough assistance from the top, and that populace could not understand the ideological core of this *Aktion* – which was of course the main point, from Berlin’s perspective.<sup>171</sup>

Despite these problems, there were elements of real success in the magazine competition for *Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt*. The secretariat commented that they had been successful in places where “content [i.e. the ideology as presented in the anniversary theses] was the starting point of the work and where the National Front component organizations made a concrete contribution to the success of our project.”<sup>172</sup> In *Kreis Aue*, for example, many of the *Kreis*-level organizations had worked quite well together: the Pioneers and FDJ were working with the Department of Education and with schools to design extra-curricular activities related to the competitions, while those belonging to the *Kreis* “cultural house” had partnered with residential committees

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<sup>169</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Karl Marx Stadt *Bezirk* secretary Oehme and Bezirksausschuß member Süßmann, “Informationsbericht über den Stand der Arbeit mit der Illustrierten des Nationalrates,” May 9, 1969, p. 1.

<sup>170</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Karl Marx Stadt *Bezirk* secretary Oehme and Bezirksausschuß member Süßmann, “Informationsbericht über den Stand der Arbeit mit der Illustrierten des Nationalrates,” May 9, 1969, p. 2-3.

<sup>171</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Karl Marx Stadt *Bezirk* secretary Oehme and Bezirksausschuß member Süßmann, “Informationsbericht über den Stand der Arbeit mit der Illustrierten des Nationalrates,” May 9, 1969, p. 1.

<sup>172</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Karl Marx Stadt *Bezirk* secretary Oehme and Bezirksausschuß member Süßmann, “Informationsbericht über den Stand der Arbeit mit der Illustrierten des Nationalrates,” May 9, 1969, p. 1.

(*Wohnbezirksausschüsse*) to design their own drawing competition.<sup>173</sup> Similar cooperation was visible in *Kreis* Hainichen, which, while initially suffering from many problems with organization, was still able to find a creative solution to their problems without requiring intervention from *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt.<sup>174</sup>

*Kreis* Hainichen was a less-straightforward example of success, as the *Kreis* did not follow Berlin's direct guidelines yet still achieved good results. Despite serious initial problems with coordination, *Kreis* Hainichen managed to integrate the national magazine initiatives within their own *Kreis* initiative, "Roses for the Republic." Although precise details about the intricacies of "Rosen" are lacking, it appears that it took place in installments, with the *Kreis* issuing directions for new activities over time. In May 1969, the *Wohnbezirke* in Hainichen were in the midst of preparing for the sixth installment of "Roses for the Republic," in which participants were to 1) create a wall newspaper that answered the question "who is the most beautiful in the whole area?" and 2) demonstrate through various activities "our love for the elderly."<sup>175</sup> Even though combining these activities with the national magazine activities resulted in the *Wohnbezirke* creating well-made wall newspapers and greeting cards to be sent to the Soviet Union,<sup>176</sup> it was, nevertheless, a marked deviation from Berlin's plan.

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<sup>173</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Oehme and Süßmann, "Informationsbericht über den Stand der Arbeit," p. 2.

<sup>174</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Oehme and Süßmann, "Informationsbericht über den Stand der Arbeit," p. 2-3.

<sup>175</sup> What exactly these entailed is unclear. Based on other activities through the years involving the elderly, it is likely the initiative involved donating time to help an elderly person with everyday tasks, such as gardening, cleaning or running errands. BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Sekretariat member Schönfeld, National Front der DDR, Kreissausschuß Hainichen, May 6, 1969, letter addressed to Herr Bürger of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, p. 2.

<sup>176</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Oehme and Süßmann, "Informationsbericht über den Stand der Arbeit," p. 2-3.

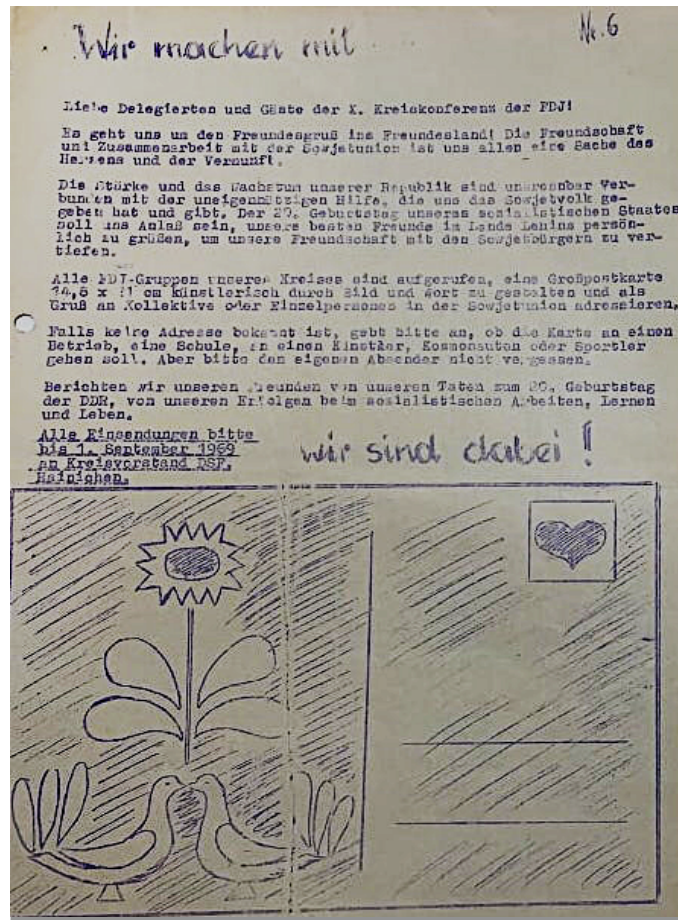


Figure 24. A preliminary sketch of an advertisement from Kreis Hainichen asking FDJ members to make submissions of postcards for Soviet citizens. The intended audience of this advertisement was much narrower than Berlin had envisioned. As was common in other regional appeals, this advertisement did not mention that this was merely one part (Mosaic Stone 1) of a much larger project. Indeed, the only reference to the larger project was in its identical title, “Wir machen mit, wir sind dabei!” (We’ll join in, we’ll take part!) (BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a).

The Berlin National Front, upon discovering Hainichen had not carried out its original magazine directive, immediately contacted the Hainichen *Kreis* secretariat directly, demanding an explanation. Secretariat member Schönfeld replied point blank that the reason was because “it was clear to us that we could hardly expect success” if they had followed Berlin’s guidelines.<sup>177</sup> Rather, the only way the secretariat thought they could carry out their “political-mass work” (that is, the ideological component of the competition) was by incorporating the content from the

<sup>177</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Sekretariat member Schönfeld, National Front der DDR, Kreissausschuß Hainichen, May 6, 1969, letter addressed to Herr Bürger of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, p. 1-2.

magazine initiative into their own projects planned in honour of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Believing they could not possibly get the populace to participate in all 10 magazine initiatives, Schönfeld told Berlin that the *Kreis* chose instead to focus on creating local wall newspapers, photos, drawings, and Soviet greeting cards to go abroad. Schönfeld boasted that the *Kreis* had decided to even create “a substantial small exhibition” at the end of the competition so the populace could view all the submissions.<sup>178</sup>

Although proud of what Hainichen had achieved, Schönfeld was very frank with Berlin about the *Kreis*'s past and current challenges. He explained that Hainichen's smaller level committees did not wish to forward their best local submissions onwards to national organizational branches or even to the Berlin National Front itself, as was expected. Instead, after judging the submissions, Schönfeld explained, these organizers wanted to keep them to be reused in exhibitions, projects and events throughout the *Kreis*!<sup>179</sup> Of course, reusing instead of remaking such material would have defeated the pedagogical purpose behind the material's original creation. Despite the enthusiasm from the *Kreis* organizers, Schönfeld complained of a lack of support from other National Front organizations. He wrote that:

Another problem with this magazine was that the ‘co-responsible’ did not feel ‘responsible’ at all. Neither the FDJ *Kreis* leadership, nor the People's Solidarity, let alone the *Kulturbund*, showed any initiative ... concerning this magazine. With regard to the commencement of the [Soviet] postcard initiative, “Greetings to the country of our friends,” even the DSF provided no support. That is just a fact. Now that we have something to show with our series of events, people are starting to regret their disinterest. There is a conclusion that has come out of this, however. [We discovered that] the good ideas and requests of this type of magazine will be successful if closely linked to the political mass-work objectives in their respective [geographic] areas. This will be a real help in interesting many people in completing the initiatives through creative self-affirmation.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Sekretariat member Schönfeld, National Front der DDR, Kreissausschuß Hainichen, May 6, 1969, letter addressed to Herr Bürger of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, p. 1-2.

<sup>179</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Sekretariat member Schönfeld, National Front der DDR, Kreissausschuß Hainichen, May 6, 1969, letter addressed to Herr Bürger of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, p. 2.

<sup>180</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Sekretariat member Schönfeld, National Front der DDR, Kreissausschuß Hainichen, May 6, 1969, letter addressed to Herr Bürger of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, p. 2.

Schönfeld was clearly very proud of the *Kreis* secretariat for what it had accomplished in spite of a lack of support from other committees, explaining to Berlin that the submissions they had received, although small in number, were of a very high quality, done in “good form” and with “good taste (for example, 27 apartment wall newspapers among other items).”<sup>181</sup> Schönfeld further assured Berlin that the goal for the *Kreis* by the time of the actual anniversary in October was to carry out perhaps even twice or three times as many activities as they had done so far.

Overall, this example of a small region defying Berlin’s direct orders demonstrates the limits of Berlin’s control over its lower-level committees, as well as the limits of the usefulness of centralized uniform directives. Ironically, Hainichen defied Berlin so as to be able to better achieve Berlin’s own goal – that of involving the population in a competition that had pedagogical meaning by reinforcing the themes of the anniversary theses. One can be reasonably sure that Hainichen would have fallen afoul of Berlin even if it had promoted the initiative with its original 10 options, however, for if it had then failed to achieve sufficient interest and participation, Berlin would not have admitted to any flaws in its own plan, but instead blamed Hainichen for a lack of proper organization and effort.

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<sup>181</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, Sekretariat member Schönfeld, National Front der DDR, Kreissausschuß Hainichen, May 6, 1969, letter addressed to Herr Bürger of the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Berlin, p. 2.

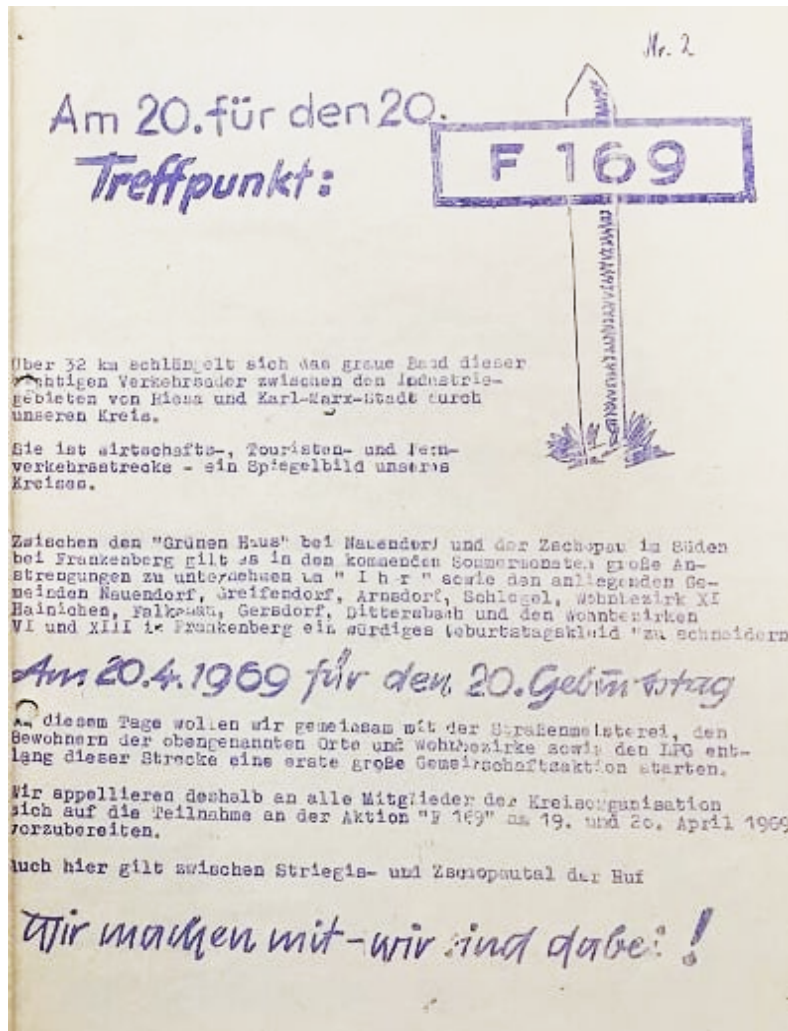


Figure 25. One of Kreis Hainichen's own initiatives for the anniversary, called "Aktion F 169." The original magazine title "Wir machen mit, wir sind dabei!" ("We'll join in, we'll take part!") appears here as well, although this particular activity was not actually part of the national magazine project (BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a).

### **Conclusions and Lessons for Berlin:**

What is obvious from this competition's organizational problems is that having so many themes under the large umbrella initiative, "Wir machen mit, wir sind dabei!" meant that the competition ultimately lacked a focal point – like simply underscoring Soviet friendship as in previous years—and was thus impossible to carry out very easily. Since we do not have the final numbers or reports for this competition, it is difficult to assess the ultimate outcome. However, the fact that this complex form was not repeated in later years suggests that the National Front



decided to return to its original model of having one focused theme per anniversary competition. What we can say for certain from the interim reports is that despite the success of *Kreise* such as Calau and Hainichen, this massive undertaking of ten different initiatives overwhelmed most regions, proving it was simply too ambitious a project to carry out. Berlin National Front representatives eventually realized that many regional committees were able to neither completely understand, nor follow, Berlin's detailed plans.<sup>182</sup> While Berlin recommended that the *Bezirke* and *Kreise* create individual commissions in order to ensure the successful coordination of this massive competition, as the example of Calau shows, this centralized control was not vital to success.<sup>183</sup> Indeed, the fact that many *Kreise* were still not able to coordinate the initiatives, despite the existence of a specifically dedicated commission, indicates that the project, while in principle a highly centralized one, in its execution resulted in the regions taking a very decentralized approach.

Ultimately, the responsibility for much of this disorganization did not lie with the regions alone, but was due to the decision-making process at the very top. It was the Berlin National Front, for example, that decided the submissions for the "Hello, young people!" (Mosaic Stone 2) initiative would be sent to the youth magazine, *Neues Leben*, instead of to the regional committees themselves.<sup>184</sup> As the *Bezirk* and *Kreis* secretariats pointed out time and again, it was precisely decisions like these that made their oversight attempts such an impossible task. Diverting the workload to other organizations did not always increase participation, but rather,

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<sup>182</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, "Notizen über die Kontrolle der Arbeit mit der Illustrierten in den Kreisen Calau, Spremberg (Cottbus) und Niesky (Dresden) sowie im Bezirkssekretariat in Dresden – 22/23 Mai," May 27, 1969, p. 2.

<sup>183</sup> The recommendation to create these commissions can be seen in the following memo: BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, National Front der DDR, Kreis Ausschuß Hoyerswerda, Sekretär Haugk, "Wir machen mit – Wir sind dabei," memo to Orts and Wohnbezirksausschüsse, February 25, 1969, p. 2.

<sup>184</sup> BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, National Front der DDR, Kreis Ausschuß Hoyerswerda, Sekretär Haugk, "Wir machen mit – Wir sind dabei," memo to Orts and Wohnbezirksausschüsse, February 25, 1969, p. 3.

seriously hampered the *Bezirk* and *Kreis*-level National Front committees' plans, for example, by not being able to view the final results (submissions). This is an important takeaway because it shows how seriously Berlin overestimated the ability of its constituent mass organizations (as well as regional counterparts) to communicate and collaborate on competitions.<sup>185</sup> In conclusion, Berlin badly misjudged the scope of this project: although its sprawling variety of initiatives and themes had the potential to invite a far greater variety of submissions, this very wide net actually proved its downfall, as it became far too complicated to coordinate and carry out on the ground.

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<sup>185</sup> Organs of the state apparatus like the "*Kreiskabinette für Kulturarbeit*" were disinterested elsewhere as well. See BArch, DY 6/vorl. 3155a, "Notizen über die Kontrolle der Arbeit mit der Illustrierten in den Kreisen Calau, Spremberg (Cottbus) und Niesky (Dresden) sowie im Bezirkssekretariat in Dresden – 22/23 Mai," May 27, 1969, p. 3.

## The Soviet “Friendship:” the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Liberation from Fascism



Figure 26. "Friendship with the Soviet Union: The beating heart of our lives." Drawing by Gerhard Vontra. Used by the National Front in honour of the 30th Anniversary of the Liberation of Fascism (BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6676)

The first (and only) East German President Wilhelm Pieck once wrote that the continued success of the GDR lay in “making the friendship with the Soviet Union close to our peoples’ hearts” in their everyday lives.<sup>186</sup> Although the GDR had been admitted as a full member of the UN in 1974, and had normalized relations with West Germany through the Basic Treaty of 1972, the National Front nevertheless still felt it necessary to use Pieck’s quote as inspiration to maintain their close-knit ties to the Soviet Union, especially for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the so-called “Liberation from Fascism” (the end of World War II) on May 8, 1975. The significance of this

<sup>186</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6676, Abteilung Kultur, “Großkonzeption: Erarbeitung einer Dokumentation zum 30. Jahrestag der Befreiung als Geschenk des Nationalrats,” November 5, 1974, p.1

anniversary was that, together with the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the GDR, it was the first major anniversary to occur following the establishment of the GDR's legitimacy on the world stage at the height of the country's "golden years." Going forward, celebrations would now take place in an entirely different context than those that had come before, as the GDR could exude a confidence it had previously lacked. The GDR attempted to underscore legitimacy internally as well, for in 1968, the SED created a new constitution that finally defined the GDR as its own distinct state. According to Joanna McKay, theorists finally made a distinction between the nation, nationality and citizenship, replacing "socialist nation" with "German socialist nation." People in the GDR were now to be first "citizens of the GDR" but also possess a German "nationality."<sup>187</sup>

Given this turn of events, the National Front's goal for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary was to strengthen the reach of socialism in the world, maintain the connections and friendship of the GDR and the Soviet Union, and ensure the GDR's continued integration into the socialist economic system.<sup>188</sup> As was the case in previous anniversaries, the GDR leadership saw success as contingent on the regional and local committees' ability to carry out a variety of celebrations in the months and weeks leading up to May 8. Examples of "cultural highpoints" that were celebrated included February 23, the day honouring the Soviet Army; the week of German-Soviet Friendship in the GDR at the beginning of May; and the third "Festival of Friendship" between

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<sup>187</sup> McKay, *The Official Concept of the Nation in the Former GDR*, 107-09. McKay quotes Honecker himself as defining the new situation as "Citizenship: GDR; nationality: German" (Cited in *Neues Deutschland*, Feb 15/16 1975, p. 10)

<sup>188</sup> BArch DY 6/6676, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR Sekretariat und Zentralvorstand der Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft Sekretariat an die AusschüÙe der Nationalen Front der DDR und Grundeinheiten der Gesellschaft für Deutsch Sowjetische Freundschaft, "Gemeinsame Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung des 30. Jahrestages der Befreiung vom Hitlerfaschismus durch die Ruhmreiche Sowjetarmee," Berlin, December, 1974, p. 1.

GDR and Soviet youth from May 14-19 in Halle.<sup>189</sup> The purpose here, as the National Front pointed out, was to continuously maintain the SED-prescribed “educational work” – that is, the spreading of the anniversary theses’ messages of the GDR’s economic prosperity and the continued need for closeness to the Soviet Union to the people, especially the youth. For this anniversary, the leadership had deemed it particularly useful for the regions to organize events that celebrated those GDR citizens who had had personal experiences of the Soviet Union, such as attending university or receiving other training there.<sup>190</sup> One very specific suggestion that the leadership gave to the regional committees was to hold events where workers in VEBs (*Volkseigenerbetriebe*, state-owned enterprises) could reflect on their particular enterprise’s history and how “unselfish” help in the beginning from the Soviet Union contributed to its present success.<sup>191</sup>

In keeping with its usual approach to the festivities, the kinds of events the National Front suggested to workers’ clubs, town clubs, houses of German-Soviet friendship, and other cultural residential organizations included Soviet film and theatre performances including lectures, book readings, and exhibitions showcasing Soviet works of art and literature. The secretariats of the National Front and Society for German-Soviet Friendship also asked their 17 000 and 36 000

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<sup>189</sup> BArch DY 6/6676, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR Sekretariat und Zentralvorstand der Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft Sekretariat an die AusschüÙe der Nationalen Front der DDR und Grundeinheiten der Gesellschaft für Deutsch Sowjetische Freundschaft, “Gemeinsame Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung des 30. Jahrestages der Befreiung vom Hitlerfaschismus durch die Ruhmreiche Sowjetarmee,” Berlin, December, 1974, p. 2.

<sup>190</sup> BArch DY 6/6676, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR Sekretariat und Zentralvorstand der Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft Sekretariat an die AusschüÙe der Nationalen Front der DDR und Grundeinheiten der Gesellschaft für Deutsch Sowjetische Freundschaft, “Gemeinsame Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung des 30. Jahrestages der Befreiung vom Hitlerfaschismus durch die Ruhmreiche Sowjetarmee,” Berlin, December, 1974, p. 2.

<sup>191</sup> BArch DY 6/6676, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR Sekretariat und Zentralvorstand der Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft Sekretariat an die AusschüÙe der Nationalen Front der DDR und Grundeinheiten der Gesellschaft für Deutsch Sowjetische Freundschaft, “Gemeinsame Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung des 30. Jahrestages der Befreiung vom Hitlerfaschismus durch die Ruhmreiche Sowjetarmee,” Berlin, December, 1974, p. 3.

respective committee members to organize forums, lectures, visits to memorial sites, and *Hausgemeinschaft* gatherings. They also arranged viewings of the film “Friendship: A matter close to the heart” (“Freundschaft—Drushba — Herzenssache”) about Brezhnev’s visit for the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the GDR.<sup>192</sup> Finally, the National Front reminded their local counterparts of the importance of organizing festivities for the evening of May 7 (the day before the anniversary) that involved music, cabarets, or singing groups.<sup>193</sup>

While these sorts of reminders from the National Front about the kinds of different cultural activities the regions were to organize were similar in tone to those of previous anniversaries, there was a noticeable increase in the apparent confidence that the Berlin National Front had in its regional committees. In contrast to the detailed directives they sent out in 1957 for the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the October Revolution, the Berlin National Front in 1975 left many decisions to the regional committees themselves, and merely recommended associations to which local organizations could turn if they required extra resource materials. What is significant is that the tone of language Berlin used made reaching out for these centrally-produced resources seem optional, in contrast to the anniversaries 20 years before, where the mass-produced materials were routinely sent directly to the regions, whether requested or not.<sup>194</sup>

In addition to these festivities and cultural events, 1975 once again saw the National Front organize major socialist competitions in honour of the anniversary. One competition from the

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<sup>192</sup> Editorial staff, “Foren, Vorträge und eine ‘Troika der Freundschaft,’” *Berliner Zeitung*, January 17, 1975, p. 2.

<sup>193</sup> BArch DY 6/6676, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR Sekretariat und Zentralvorstand der Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft Sekretariat an die AusschüÙe der Nationalen Front der DDR und Grundeinheiten der Gesellschaft für Deutsch Sowjetische Freundschaft, “Gemeinsame Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung des 30. Jahrestages der Befreiung vom Hitlerfaschismus durch die Ruhmreiche Sowjetarmee,” Berlin, December, 1974, p. 3.

<sup>194</sup> BArch DY 6/6676, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR Sekretariat und Zentralvorstand der Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft Sekretariat an die AusschüÙe der Nationalen Front der DDR und Grundeinheiten der Gesellschaft für Deutsch Sowjetische Freundschaft, “Gemeinsame Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung des 30. Jahrestages der Befreiung vom Hitlerfaschismus durch die Ruhmreiche Sowjetarmee,” Berlin, December, 1974, p. 4.

industry, building, and commerce sector was entitled, “To get greater efficiency from every Mark, use every working hour, every gram of material!” (“Aus jeder Mark, jeder Stunde Arbeitszeit, jedem Gramm Material einen grösseren Nutzeffekt”), while another city beautification plan was called “Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!,” which aimed to contribute to the economic plan in 1975 and make working and living conditions better.<sup>195</sup> The Society for German-Soviet Friendship also undertook several different initiatives under the motto of “Friendship Group” (“Aufgebot der Freundschaft”).<sup>196</sup> One of the largest competitions that took place that year was called “Drushba-Klub” and was the joint effort of three different organizations, taking place from February 17 to May 4, 1975.<sup>197</sup>

#### **“Drushba-Klub”/“Troika der Freundschaft” (1975)**

In an attempt to underscore the benefits the Soviet connection had brought GDR citizens over the previous 30 years, Radio DDR, the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF), and the National Front joined forces to create one of the largest cultural socialist competitions of the year, requesting ordinary citizens submit personal stories to a radio program called “Troika der

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<sup>195</sup> BArch DY 6/6676, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR Sekretariat und Zentralvorstand der Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft Sekretariat an die Ausschüße der Nationalen Front der DDR und Grundeinheiten der Gesellschaft für Deutsch Sowjetische Freundschaft, “Gemeinsame Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung des 30. Jahrestages der Befreiung vom Hitlerfaschismus durch die Ruhmreiche Sowjetarmee,” Berlin, December, 1974, p. 2.

<sup>196</sup> BArch DY 6/6676, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR Sekretariat und Zentralvorstand der Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft Sekretariat an die Ausschüße der Nationalen Front der DDR und Grundeinheiten der Gesellschaft für Deutsch Sowjetische Freundschaft, “Gemeinsame Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung des 30. Jahrestages der Befreiung vom Hitlerfaschismus durch die Ruhmreiche Sowjetarmee,” Berlin, December, 1974, p. 2.

<sup>197</sup> BArch DY 6/6676, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR Sekretariat und Zentralvorstand der Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft Sekretariat an die Ausschüße der Nationalen Front der DDR und Grundeinheiten der Gesellschaft für Deutsch Sowjetische Freundschaft, “Gemeinsame Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung des 30. Jahrestages der Befreiung vom Hitlerfaschismus durch die Ruhmreiche Sowjetarmee,” Berlin, December, 1974, p. 3.

Freundschaft” / “Drushba-Klub.”<sup>198</sup> The radio series aired on Radio DDR from February 17 to May 4, 1975 with radio show hosts reading out the personal stories. The competition aimed to demonstrate, in the words of the National Front, how “deep, positive and diverse GDR citizens’ connections with Soviets had become,” regardless of their socio-economic status and profession, whether “they were scientists, artists, youths, officers, or labourers.”<sup>199</sup> For their connection with the Soviet Union had been, and continued to be, “vital to their success in building a socialist state.”<sup>200</sup>

Addressing everyone from individual citizens, to regional and local committees of the National Front, as well as members of *Hausgemeinschaften*, the three organizations requested East Germans submit stories about “important people, encounters, or experiences” so as to give listeners an overall sense of what good people the Soviets were. Organizers were not only interested in people recounting momentous events, but also the smaller everyday experiences that would usually not be considered noteworthy. The advertisement told participants to keep in mind that “even the smallest stone is a fundamental building block that today guarantees the present and future of our socialist lives in the Land of Lenin.”<sup>201</sup> Participants were encouraged to use the blank reverse side of the advertisement to write their story, and to add a choice of music at the bottom of the page to be played. After making their submissions directly to the Berlin National Front Department of Culture by March 31, 1975, the advertisement read, East Germans were to

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<sup>198</sup> The official advertisement asking for submissions refers to the program as “Drushba-Klub” or “friendship club.” Some of the documents also refer to the competition by this name. However, at some point, the name of the program/competition began to be referred to in the documents as well as in the newspapers as “Troika der Freundschaft” or “Friendship of Three.”

<sup>199</sup> Ehrentraud Novotny, “Zeugnisse der Freundschaft über den Äther: Rundfunkkonferenz zu neuen Vorhaben,” *Berliner Zeitung*, January 16, 1975, p. 6.

<sup>200</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6676, Abteilung Kultur, “Großkonzeption: Erarbeitung einer Dokumentation zum 30. Jahrestag der Befreiung als Geschenk des Nationalrats.” November 5, 1974. p. 1.

<sup>201</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6676, Advertisement for submissions to “Drushba Klub” Radio DDR program. Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR “An den Ortsausschuss/Wohnbezirkssauschuss der National Front, an die Hausgemeinschaftsleitung; an die Grundeinheit der Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft.”



tune into Radio DDR on weekends from mid-February 1975 onwards to see if their story made it on the air.<sup>202</sup>

The submissions for this “Drushba-Klub” competition were many and varied.<sup>203</sup> Many of the stories submitted were about personal experiences, although some attested to how specific people in the community had dedicated themselves to maintaining relations with German-Soviet organizations over the years— which in some cases dated back to the 1920s. Another important facet to this competition was that all of the stories recounted positive experiences with the Soviets: whether in their role as occupiers immediately after World War II, or later as “friends” or travelling companions of GDR citizens. Although there is no evidence of any negative experiences, and many stories indeed cast the Soviets in a very admirable – even heroic – light, there were still hints of popular resentment in the stories, especially when the writers, recounting a particularly good experience, indicated that they treasured their Soviet interaction despite their previous views or the misgivings of others around them. While there is no reason to doubt the truth of these personal stories, they certainly do not reflect the truly awful experiences many Germans had with the Soviets, especially during the occupation following the war.

### *Connections in the past: tales of humanity and teaching in the post-war period*

In a particularly glaring contradiction with the lived experience of many East Germans, many submissions portrayed life under the Soviet Military Administration as a positive experience. In reality, the Germans, including millions of refugees from the East, faced a myriad of difficulties during these years. Since the Soviet Union wanted to be compensated financially

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<sup>202</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6676, Advertisement for submissions to “Drushba Klub” Radio DDR program. Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR “An den Ortsausschuss/Wohnbezirkssauschuss der National Front, an die Hausgemeinschaftsleitung; an die Grundeinheit der Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft.”

<sup>203</sup> There are several hundred surviving submissions of varying quality.

for their losses suffered during the war, it took any “wealth” that still existed in its zone by seizing factories and looting.<sup>204</sup> Norman Naimark describes this time period as a Soviet “feeding frenzy.”<sup>205</sup> Soviet dismantling of German factories seriously impaired the GDR’s ability to recover from the war to the point that even German communists were angry about it.<sup>206</sup> Workers were forced to dismantle and ship off factory parts without pay alongside Soviets who were completely careless in their dismantling and packing of factory parts.<sup>207</sup> Compounding the challenges around recovery was the issue of land reform. Immediately after the war, the Soviet plan had been to expropriate any land belonging to Nazis and large landowners (Junkers), and while many new smaller farmers were happy to receive land initially, this changed once they were confronted with serious economic hardship, such as a lack of horses and carts, stalls, seed, livestock, fertilizer, and machinery (which had been sent to the Soviet Union).<sup>208</sup> Without seed, they could not plant crops, and without horses and carts, they could not bring in the harvest. Abuses by local commandants were rife and included high quotas being set for an entire region with little regard for the disadvantages this posed the new smaller farms that had been carved out of the old larger landholdings.<sup>209</sup> This contributed an already precarious food situation in which Germans suffered widespread disease and malnourishment, especially due to their lack of fats, fresh fruits, and vegetables.<sup>210</sup>

The widespread rape of German women by Soviet soldiers also caused deep resentment of the Soviet occupiers. Anne Applebaum refers to the wave of rapes as Soviet “political rage”

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<sup>204</sup> Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 141.

<sup>205</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 170.

<sup>206</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 179.

<sup>207</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 180.

<sup>208</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 152-157

<sup>209</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 158.

<sup>210</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 155.

against the Germans,<sup>211</sup> while Norman Naimark explains that some Soviet soldiers saw raping German women as another way of conquering the enemy, especially as many of the rapes took place in front of family members, including husbands and fathers.<sup>212</sup> Many of the women caught sexually transmitted diseases, became pregnant, or suffered dangerous abortions. Some husbands abandoned their wives as a result, while still other women succumbed to the injuries they sustained. No woman was safe, as the Soviets would rape both young girls and elderly women. Indeed, anyone who attempted to help risked being beaten or killed themselves, so some villages even resorted to hiding their women in attics.<sup>213</sup> While some Soviet officials did make attempts to stop this—even as many others simply looked the other way—in the end, stopping it often proved difficult since the Soviet soldiers were steeped in anti-German propaganda and well-versed in the worst of the Nazis’ crimes and were, quite simply, out for revenge.<sup>214</sup>

The suffering the Germans endured by the end of the Soviet occupation had been immense: already enduring great hardship as a result of the war, the occupation made their lives even worse. The rapes, looting, the “wanton destruction” of the Eastern zone, and the violence in general<sup>215</sup> resulted in the Germans’ experience of the occupation being one of, as Naimark puts it, “hunger and want, misery and despair.”<sup>216</sup> Even though the Soviets officially denied this had taken place, and Ulbricht would neither admit nor discuss it, memories of this terrible time lived on in the population’s memory.<sup>217</sup> The result was the German population developed a deep mistrust, fear, and a generally unfavourable image of the Soviets.<sup>218</sup> Mary Fulbrook comments

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<sup>211</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956* (New York: Anchor Books, 2013), 28.

<sup>212</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 79-82.

<sup>213</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 79-82.

<sup>214</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 77-79.

<sup>215</sup> Applebaum, *Iron Curtain*, 27.

<sup>216</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 155.

<sup>217</sup> Applebaum, *Iron Curtain*, 33;45

<sup>218</sup> Applebaum, *Iron Curtain*, 33; Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 179.

that while many East Germans would later claim with pride they helped build up the state during these years, those who truly experienced joy in doing so were few: rather, “the large majority simply made the best of a bad job, grumbling and complaining and hoping somehow simply to be able to survive, with little thought for either past or future.”<sup>219</sup>

In stark contrast to this horrible reality, submissions to the radio competition recounting this time period instead recalled a benevolent, almost father-like Soviet military administration that was intent on helping Germans re-develop their industries and help “build up” the first socialist state on German soil. Again and again, these accounts tell of kindly Soviet officers and officials who, despite having (as the writers frequently phrased it) “personally suffered so much at the hands of the Germans” during the invasion of the Soviet Union, were able to put that behind them in order to help Germans rise above their Nazi past. These accounts posed the Soviet occupiers as providing educational instruction to a people who desperately needed guidance. From the writers’ perspective, their purpose in sharing these stories was about far more than simply reminiscing about an era they had experienced differently than the majority of Germans: Ernst Eutin, a former “propagandist” and mayor of Bergen in the immediate post-war years, pointed out how memories such as his could play a particularly important role in educating the younger generation, who had never experienced the aftermath of the war. Eutin pointed out that it would be useful for these Pioneers and FDJ members to know how much the Soviets helped the GDR “build up” socialism and recover from the destruction of the war.<sup>220</sup> Of course, another unspoken effect was to give credence to this competing narrative of the Soviets as kind and fair occupiers.

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<sup>219</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 29.

<sup>220</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Ernst Eutin, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Bergen/Rügen, March 5, 1975.

Another favourite topic of the writers was how personable the Soviet people seemed to be in general. There were countless stories of writers describing how taken aback they were at discovering their initial distrust of the Soviets to have been unfounded by simply interacting with them. These accounts therefore attest to the genuine warmth of the Soviet people. In one such account, Hildegard, from a town on the island of Rügen on the Baltic, bluntly described the Soviets as having provided vital support during the immediate aftermath of the war: “Without the help of our Soviet friends, we would not have survived the difficult time between May and November 1945.”<sup>221</sup> Hildegard’s account painted a desperate picture: upon returning to her hometown of Swinemünde on the Polish border in 1945, she had no way to get food for herself or her three children. At the time, she worked clearing rubble in the town, so one day she went to a Soviet soup kitchen looking for food for her family. Not only did she receive the food, but to her pleasant surprise, the Soviets even gave her children extra milk. Her takeaway from this interaction was that the Soviets loved children and that their welfare was “a matter close to their hearts.” The Soviets also assisted her older parents by paying them in food and provisions in exchange for their work for the town commanders. Overall, Hildegard described the Soviets’ consideration towards her family as “an example of proletarian internationalism.”<sup>222</sup> These experiences left Hildegard with such a positive impression of the Soviets that years later inspired her to join the DFD (the Democratic Women’s League of Germany, *Demokratische Frauenbund Deutschlands*), which led her to make even more contacts with Soviet women through organizing many collaborative events.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Hildegard Keüler, Submission “Erlebnisse mit Sowjetmenschen,” for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Rostock, 1975.

<sup>222</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Hildegard Keüler, Submission “Erlebnisse mit Sowjetmenschen,” for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Rostock, 1975.

<sup>223</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Hildegard Keüler, Submission “Erlebnisse mit Sowjetmenschen,” for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Rostock, 1975.

In an account that compared their American and Soviet occupiers, an elderly workers' movement "veteran" named Albert from the city of Plauen also recalled the life-saving assistance the Soviets provided in those first years after the war.<sup>224</sup> Since bombs had destroyed Plauen's piping networks, there was no gas, power or water. As a simple metalworker, Albert did not know how to begin to help the people who were struggling, as most workers in the city, including the engineers, had fled. Albert described how, during their seven weeks of occupation under the Americans, each person only received one ration card, with nothing additional provided for those who conducted physical labour. Albert commented that this changed immediately upon the Soviets' arrival. While he admitted that their Soviet occupiers also provided only a small number of rations, Albert felt their allocation was fairer as it was based on work type, which meant larger rations for those doing physical labour. Albert thought this change motivated workers who had previously left the city to return to help clear the rubble. Despite this extra help and food, Albert acknowledged that the rebuilding work was nevertheless very difficult and required much sacrifice. Albert spoke of a motto he and his fellow workers had during this time, which was "first work more, then eat more!," although keeping to this was extremely hard because of how hungry and exhausted they were. Years later, when people asked how they had had the strength and courage to get through those days, Albert answered that they had derived the strength from the belief that the early struggle was worth being able to later live in a state where the working class was in control. In July 1945, in recognition for all his efforts (and likely his ideological beliefs as well), Albert was chosen as his workplace representative for his local KPD group.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Albert Müller, Submission "Das Arbeiter-Seminar," for Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub" to the National Front, March 27, 1975.

<sup>225</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Albert Müller, Submission "Das Arbeiter-Seminar," for Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub" to the National Front, March 27, 1975, p. 1.

In a second submission to the competition, Albert provided an even more human account of individual Soviets. Albert wrote of his experience of coming into direct contact with some Soviet POWs while celebrating the end of the war on the evening of May 8, 1945.<sup>226</sup> Here, Albert callously claimed that the Soviets were able to distinguish between “two different kinds of Germans:” people like himself who welcomed the defeat of fascism, and those around him who did not.<sup>227</sup> As he belonged to the former group, that night a group of former Soviet POWs invited him to sit and share their borscht with them. This act of kindness touched Albert deeply, for he knew they were also suffering and had not had anything to eat. To his astonishment, they even insisted he eat his fill first. Albert remarked that he still remembered, 30 years later, how good that food and drink tasted and how the whole evening felt like a large family party.<sup>228</sup> As a result, maintaining contact with the Soviets became a matter close to his heart, and led him to become a member of his district board of the DSF.<sup>229</sup>

In another submission to the contest, a man named Rudolf from the small village of Tirschendorf near the Polish border wrote that his philosophy for enduring those difficult post-war years was, “First work more, then live better” (“Erst mehr arbeiten, dann besser leben”).<sup>230</sup> While Rudolf acknowledged that not everyone shared his point of view and that he had observed many of his coworkers grumbling about their work, he nevertheless attempted to negate their experiences by declaring that “worthy sacrifices” were simply part of creating a socialist state.

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<sup>226</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Albert Müller, Submission “Geschichten um Geschichte!,” for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front, March 27, 1975, p. 1.

<sup>227</sup> One would think that truly benevolent occupiers would not distinguish between people, but rather, take this opportunity to educate the group they did not agree with. Thus, Albert’s claim of “two different kinds of Germans” existing is an attempt to negate others’ claims who had had bad experiences of the Soviet occupiers. Essentially, the Soviets treated him well because he earned it, belonging as he did to the “good kind” of Germans.

<sup>228</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Albert Müller, Submission “Geschichten um Geschichte!,” for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front, March 27, 1975, p. 1.

<sup>229</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Albert Müller, Submission “Geschichten um Geschichte!,” for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front, March 27, 1975, p. 2.

<sup>230</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Rudolf Schlosser, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreis Ausschuss Oesnitz (Vogtland), March 24, 1975.

Rudolf righteously concluded that he had seen these nay-sayers ultimately proven wrong, for “time has since shown that our party was on the right path.”<sup>231</sup> For Rudolf, the proof lay in the fact that he had not observed anyone in his community suffering social plights such as unemployment since their socialist state came into existence (in comparison to how widespread it was before).<sup>232</sup> Thus, he firmly believed that their sacrifices during those hard times 30 years before had “laid the foundations for the march forward of socialism,” resulting in “the country’s current stability and the thirty-year peace in Europe.”<sup>233</sup>

Rudolf was not alone in this belief in sacrifice: Georg, the chairman of a residential district (*Wohnbezirk*) near Zwickau, believed that the only way forward for humanity was by joining in the fight against “exploitation and oppression,” “Ausbeutung und Unterdrückung.”<sup>234</sup> A long-time communist, having joined the KPD in 1931, Georg had served a three-year prison sentence during the Nazi era, something he felt was worth it because “our fight was the right one and would eventually be victorious.” In 1945, Georg was overjoyed at the arrival of the Soviet army because, as he saw it, their presence would enable them to rebuild a better Germany where the workers would hold power. Like the others, Georg thought Soviet assistance had been the key factor that had alleviated widespread hunger in 1945. According to Georg, it had been very important to the Soviets that the German people had enough to eat, even if that meant using up their own food supplies to feed them. Georg saw the Soviets as exemplary individuals who cared

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<sup>231</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Rudolf Schlosser, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Oesnitz (Vogtland), March 24, 1975.

<sup>232</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Rudolf Schlosser, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Oesnitz (Vogtland), March 24, 1975.

<sup>233</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Rudolf Schlosser, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Oesnitz (Vogtland), March 24, 1975.

<sup>234</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Georg Brüderlein, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Zwickau-Land, 1975.



deeply about others, which he felt was entirely logical, for “if one wishes to create a humane social order, then one has to love people.”<sup>235</sup>

Beyond their general benevolence, Georg also described the Soviet occupiers’ assistance with education and training. In 1945, Georg had worked inspecting enterprises, and the Soviet economic officials and local commander who helped him with his work taught him a great deal, “gifting us their great wealth of experience.”<sup>236</sup> Despite having been a lifelong communist, there was so much information Georg did not know, but which he said he was able to learn in those years working with the Soviets. He commented: “One could sense in their advice a real human warmth” towards others. For example, the Soviets helped him swiftly handle any bad situations that came up in the enterprises, such as the “hoarding” of goods.<sup>237</sup> Looking back, Georg wrote that he was “firmly convinced that without the help of these Soviet comrades, we would not have achieved our goals.” For, as Georg saw it, it was having the Soviet “trailblazers” at their side that enabled the GDR to go down the right path to socialism and communism, especially given that the Soviets had already laid the foundation for “a better order.”<sup>238</sup>

Unlike Albert, Rudolf, and Georg, who were long-time communists, Paul from *Bezirk* Cottbus formed his positive views on the Soviets based on personal experience alone. Paul wrote about how he had arrived back in Germany in September 1945 after having been a prisoner of war in Soviet hands.<sup>239</sup> Although he said he had wanted nothing to do with a uniform ever again,

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<sup>235</sup> “Wenn man eine menschliche Gesellschaftsordnung erreichen will, muss man den Menschen lieben.” BArch DY 6/1028. Georg Brüderlein, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Zwickau-Land, 1975.

<sup>236</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Georg Brüderlein, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Zwickau-Land, 1975.

<sup>237</sup> Georg does not seem to consider the Germans’ side: perhaps people were “hoarding” because did not want to give anything more over to the Soviets, who had already taken so much from the Soviet zone.

<sup>238</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Georg Brüderlein, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Zwickau-Land, 1975.

<sup>239</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Paul Melzer, Submission “Meine Begegnung mit sowjetischen Soldaten und Offizieren und welche Lehren zog ich daraus,” for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front, March 25, 1975.

especially given the political uncertainty at the time, the town mayor requested Paul join the local police force, the “Schutzpolizei” (soon to be *Volkspolizei*). During this time period, the police service was, as a whole, untrained and unprepared for their duties.<sup>240</sup> But what impressed Paul the most during this difficult time were the “patient” Soviet officers who trained them all. Despite the language barrier, the Soviet and German officers became very close to one another. It was these “excellent” officers who taught Paul (and indeed everyone else) how to, as Paul termed it, “think well.” Paul recalled asking the Soviet officers one day, why as Germans, they were required to learn the history of the Soviet Union instead of their own. Although he never received a satisfactory answer at the time, he later realized that the answer was that “lernen heißt siegen lernen” (“learning means to learn to be victorious”). Paul also pointed out to the present-day listeners that now that the working class had achieved victory, they should focus on doing all they could to keep and protect their power, especially given what they “owed” the Soviet Union.<sup>241</sup>

Former Mayor Walter Voigt of the small city of Glauchau likewise described the many selfless acts of the Soviets immediately following the war. For one, the Soviets themselves helped rebuild the streets of the towns, volunteering many hours of their time, something which Voigt said they “did not have to do” for the Germans.<sup>242</sup> He recalled how one day a bulldozer, attempting to clear up a large amount of rubble in the city, sunk into the dirt and could not be extracted. Mayor Voigt felt he had no other choice but to ask the Soviet garrison commander for help, who immediately arranged for a larger vehicle to arrive, which also became stuck. The

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<sup>240</sup> By 1947, Soviet administrators had set up a German police force. Even though did not trust the Germans fully, the Soviets lacked sufficient personnel and had few other options. See Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain*, 81.

<sup>241</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Paul Melzer, Submission “Meine Begegnung mit sowjetischen Soldaten und Offizieren und welche Lehren zog ich daraus,” for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front, March 25, 1975.

<sup>242</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Walter Voigt, Submission “Der Bürgermeister und die sowjetische Garnison,” for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreis Ausschuss Glauchau, February 14, 1975.

commander then arranged for an even larger tractor to help, but while waiting for it to arrive, some Soviet soldiers and officers came to the rescue and “with much humour and cheerful words,” assisted in extracting both vehicles.<sup>243</sup>

Another former mayor, Ernst Eutin of the city of Bergen on the island of Rügen in the Baltic Sea, recounted how important the Soviet administration had been to Bergen’s recovery after the war. Although Bergen was fortunate enough to have escaped serious damage, there were still serious problems to be solved in those early years, as city officials had to ensure order was restored and that the townsfolk had sufficient food and accommodations. Eutin was certain that, without the “outstanding and full support of the island’s commanders and staff,” it would not have been possible to have successfully rebuilt in the same way.<sup>244</sup> He described receiving daily “brotherly” advice from the Soviet commanders about how best to proceed. Indeed, he even remembered one person reminding him that the Soviets were not just “excellent soldiers” responsible for the defeat of fascism, but were also “good specialists” in administration, agriculture, industry, and education and thus could be turned to for help. For example, according to Eutin, the Soviet command helped alleviate widespread hunger in Bergen by ordering the confiscation of stocks of potatoes, grains and other foodstuffs that were being held by large landowners and other “fascists.”<sup>245</sup> In another instance, when typhoid broke out in Bergen, the Soviet medical services assisted with treatment, ensuring the hundreds of people who fell ill recovered.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Walter Voigt, Submission “Der Bürgermeister und die sowjetische Garnison,” for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Glauchau, February 14, 1975.

<sup>244</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Ernst Eutin, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Bergen/Rügen, March 5, 1975. p.1

<sup>245</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Ernst Eutin, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Bergen/Rügen, March 5, 1975. p. 1-2.

<sup>246</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Ernst Eutin, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Bergen/Rügen, March 5, 1975. p. 3.

Eutin further described how the Soviets helped organize other, less tangible, aspects of Bergen's recovery, such as its first post-war religious service. Eutin explained that in order for the town to fully recover, it could not just be the work of the German and Soviet officials, but that they needed the help of everyone in the city. Even though he was the mayor, Eutin at this time was not sure how best to get people to gather together for a townhall meeting. It was here that one of the Soviet commanders stepped in to assist: he reminded Eutin that since the following day was a Sunday, many people would already be assembled at the church, so he recommended Eutin request the priest ask his congregation (who would in turn tell their friends) to gather in the town square afterwards.<sup>247</sup> The significance of this suggestion for Eutin, besides being a helpful idea that solved his organizational problem, was the realization that the Soviets were prepared to allow religious services under the occupation. The officials standing beside Eutin who overheard this conversation were astounded that this would be allowed, but a Soviet superintendent told them that the idea that religion would be outlawed was nothing more than untrue anti-Soviet propaganda. Instead, he said the people would certainly be allowed to hold their religious services provided "anti-Soviet fascist propaganda" was not preached.<sup>248</sup> This successful first religious service, according to Eutin, marked the beginning of a collaborative relationship. Eutin also remembered that the first dance evening in Bergen occurred as early as the end of May 1945 – again, on the recommendation of the Soviet commander.<sup>249</sup> Eutin's final overall reflection of these years was that:

Despite many privations and difficulties, all the activists of those early years fulfilled their tasks with much joy, great zeal and confidence. Our path was the right one, because it was

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<sup>247</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Ernst Eutin, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub" to the National Front's Kreisausschuss Bergen/Rügen, March 5, 1975. p. 2.

<sup>248</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Ernst Eutin, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub" to the National Front's Kreisausschuss Bergen/Rügen, March 5, 1975. p. 2-3.

<sup>249</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Ernst Eutin, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub" to the National Front's Kreisausschuss Bergen/Rügen, March 5, 1975. p. 3.

the path to happiness, peace and socialism. On this path we always had our faithful friends and helpers beside us.<sup>250</sup>

### **Acts of Kindness**

Besides helping with recovery efforts, many competition participants also recalled simple acts of kindness shown to them by Soviet citizens in the past, sometimes in life or death scenarios. One example came from Frau Klotz, who was nominated for recognition by the *Kreis* secretariat in Zwickau for her tireless work for the National Front. Frau Klotz explained that her love for the Soviet people began one day in 1945, after she and her child had fled their home and had been walking for days. At one point she could not walk any longer and was approached on the side of the road by a Soviet soldier, who offered her a ride. As a German and “knowing what her people had done to the Soviets,” she felt apprehensive. However, she was exhausted and decided to accept the ride. To her surprise, the soldier was kind to her and spoke of Lenin and of his home. Hearing the many stories the soldier told her during this journey, she came away feeling his love for his country and for his people. Frau Klotz remembered, “His parents and siblings had been killed, he had nothing left, all his loved ones were dead. I was dying, I felt ashamed. It was my own people who had done this to him.” Despite this, he bore her no ill-will. She went on: “For him, I was only human, a mother who needed help. It was clear to me from that point on that I would work day and night to prevent such suffering from happening again.” Frau Klotz did keep her promise and thereafter dedicated herself to the Soviet cause, pointing out how much she owed to that man: “I am indebted to the Soviet soldier for being a sincere comrade today. Through his human greatness, he gave me confidence in myself. I owed it to him to become a different person. I will never forget him.” She also made sure that no one else did

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<sup>250</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Ernst Eutin, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front’s Kreisausschuss Bergen/Rügen, March 5, 1975. p. 3.

either, for she explained that she took every opportunity she could to tell other East Germans how wonderful the Soviets were.<sup>251</sup>

Stories of Soviet selflessness were also recounted by Irene, who remembered how in July 1945, she was a migrant staying at an estate in Mecklenburg with many other women, children, and elderly. One day, Irene saw that a young mother standing beside her had a very sick and malnourished infant, but had no food or medicine to give it. Suddenly, a Soviet soldier walked by their group and saw the infant. He looked at the mother and asked if the child was sick. Irene, the only Russian speaker in the group, communicated that this was the case. A while later, the same soldier, who turned out to be a doctor, returned with a bottle of liquid and told the mother it was “medicine for the child.” Hesitantly, the woman gave her child the medicine. The next day, a different soldier approached Irene and gave her a package, telling her to give it to the sick child. Upon opening it, she saw that it was bread and butter. Irene was overwhelmed as she soon realized that “the Soviet soldier had given a sick German child his bread ration!” Reflecting on all the harm the Germans had brought to the Soviets, Irene was astonished that it was “from these people that we received help!” She vowed that she would never forget this meeting with these “friends” or how “after years of inhumanity in the time of fascism,” she finally encountered “true people.”<sup>252</sup>

A SED party veteran named Paul in the *Bezirk* of Karl-Marx-Stadt similarly recounted his own experience of Soviet humanity. On a cold wet day in May 1945, in a small village near Chemnitz (as it was then known) that had been destroyed by bombs, a group of women with

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<sup>251</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Submission for recognition of party secretary of the Kreis secretariat for the Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub,” by the Kreissekretariat of the Bezirk Zwickau-Land to the National Front, March 31, 1975.

<sup>252</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Irene Vötz, Submission “Begegnung mit wahren Menschen,” for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the Kreisvorstand Hagenow of the National Front, March 14, 1975, p. 1-2.

babies and some elderly people were standing stranded in the cold rain. Paul was at work in an office building nearby when a Soviet soldier came in to get him to help this group of people. The soldier said he would get bread and tea for them, but instructed Paul to make some space in the office so that the group could come in out of the rain. After convincing the owner of the building that the people should be allowed in (as the owner was certain the people would bring in lice and dirt), Paul and the soldier eventually were able to get the people out of the rain. Paul found this soldiers' act of concern for others' welfare to be extremely kind-hearted, especially as he later found out that the German army had burned the soldier's hometown in Soviet Union to the ground. Paul was so impressed that he was determined to share this story on the radio show all these years later so that others could hear about it. "There are still countless more examples," he continued, "where the long-suffering Soviet people did not give tit for tat. They have proven this over and over again in the past 30 years." In contrast, Paul pointed out that he did not remember their American occupiers ever having concerned themselves with questions such as these (as the area was briefly under American occupation). Instead, Paul recalled an anecdote at the time of the Americans "dumping gasoline on foodstuffs while hungry children watched."<sup>253</sup>

Other accounts of the selflessness of Soviet soldiers include one story from a man named Rudi, who recounted how a neighbour's house caught fire during the summer of 1953. The first to respond to the burning house were Soviet soldiers. Rudi wrote that the neighbours' houses and barns would have been destroyed too if not for their quick thinking. One soldier even went beyond fighting the fire: he ran into the burning house to save a child's train set and brought it back to the overjoyed child.<sup>254</sup> In a similar story, a woman named Helene recalled a catastrophic

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<sup>253</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Paul Lindner, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub," March 25, 1975.

<sup>254</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Rudi Gerber, Submission "Es gibt Erlebnisse, die man nie vergißt," for Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub," March 25, 1975.

flood in Zwickau in 1954, resulting in hundreds of people needing to be evacuated. Many Soviets (and others) came to offer what help they could. One Soviet even died in the process of helping rescue residents. Helene commented that it was instances like these that made her fond of the Soviets, a feeling that persisted until the present day.<sup>255</sup>

Despite the impression that selfless acts such as those described above left on East Germans, everyday interactions were in some ways equally as important because they showed that regular day-to-day interactions alone could result in some ordinary Germans developing a favourable opinion of the Soviet people: it was not vital that they witness extraordinary acts such as rescuing people from floods or children's toys from fires, or saving a sick child. For example, Erna from Olbernhau in *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt came to appreciate the Soviets through a simple exchange trip where she once received a group of visitors from Irkutsk, Siberia. Later, Erna herself travelled to Siberia, and while there, a young teacher from the group who had visited Germany contacted her and invited her to a "friendship meeting" with the local chapter of the Society for the German Soviet Friendship (DSF), an event Erna enjoyed immensely.<sup>256</sup> In another instance, an anonymous *Hausgemeinschaft* representative described the importance of connections with Soviet people for the young people of their area. Their children, belonging to the Pioneers or FDJ, were pen pals with children in the Soviet Union, while at least one young person from their group was studying in the Soviet Union. The members of the *Hausgemeinschaft* also counted many Soviets as personal friends of theirs, who would occasionally attend their residential street festivals.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Helene Pfrötzschnier, Submission for recognition for the Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub" by the Kreissekretariat of Zwickau-Land of the National Front, 1975.

<sup>256</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Erna Gottschalk, Submission for the Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub" to the National Front, 1975.

<sup>257</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Submission "Freundschaft zur USSR ist Herzenssache aller Mieter in Block 313 Herder Strasse 2-6," for the Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub" to the National Front, March 3, 1975, p. 1-2.



A single serendipitous encounter with a Soviet was also enough to affect Germans' opinions of the Soviets for a lifetime. For example, someone named Reinhard described how a chance encounter as a youth with Soviet officers in 1949 changed his whole opinion on the Soviet Union. One day, while getting a drink in a restaurant after missing a meeting point with his friends, a small group of Soviet soldiers saw him and invited him to sit at their table and share lemonade and bread with them. As Reinhard pointed out, he had had no previous contact with the Soviets, and had indeed only heard negative stories about them. But, after speaking with these men for several hours about their children, families, and about how all they wanted to do was help "build up" the country, the young man formed a much different picture of them. This encounter had such an effect on Reinhard that it encouraged him to make more Soviet contacts, beginning with Soviets in the GDR, and then progressing to making his own visits to the Soviet Union. He remarked that this one occurrence had led him on a lifelong path where he was learning more about the Soviets all the time.<sup>258</sup>

In a very similar account, Ehrenhard from *Bezirk* Schwerin recalled how his early impressions of the Soviets had been tainted from the books he read in the Nazi school system, which had naturally painted the Soviets in a bad light.<sup>259</sup> However, his views changed shortly after the war, when one day his family needed horses to work their field, but had none. In response to this, the Soviet commander of the town ensured they obtained a horse. As a result of this kindness, Ehrenhard and his whole family from that point onwards sought to develop relationships with Soviet citizens: even thirty years later, they still received postcards, letters and souvenirs from Moscow, Tallin, Riga, and even from Alma-Ata [now Almaty], Kazakhstan. He

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<sup>258</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Reinhard Flechsig, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub" to the National Front, March 25, 1975.

<sup>259</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Ehrenhard Buschmann, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub" to the National Front, March 25, 1975.

and his family became close to these people, telling them about their joys and sorrows, while at the same time learning about these foreign lands.<sup>260</sup>

What this group of stories tells us in general was that there were many individual instances of humanity and kindness to be found during a very difficult period in time. While heroic instances like the ones described above were most likely the exception rather than the rule, a simple “normal” chance encounter with a kind Soviet could apparently also change an individual’s perspective. Of course, the fact that that perspective changed at all confirms that those people had already formed a negative opinion of the Soviets, proving the existence of widespread mistrust of the Soviet Union. It was certainly feelings such as these that this radio competition sought to counteract. For once again, the National Front was seeking to make its message as palatable as possible to the masses: listening to the personal stories of ordinary people would be far more likely to convince East Germans to give Soviet friendship a chance than would a dry lecture or another long article in the newspaper.

### ***Maintaining current connections to the Soviet Union***

The most ubiquitous topic of all in the submissions for this radio competition was of the benefits reaped as a result of maintaining personal ties to the Soviet Union and their citizens. Many people wrote of trips of a lifetime to the Soviet Union, with Moscow and Leningrad being favoured destinations. Given that they were experiencing a new culture and country for the first time, these people were understandably astounded at the beauty of the cities, the friendliness of the people, and the good lives people apparently led there. One young plastic factory worker from the town of Spremberg in *Bezirk* Cottbus described a trip to Moscow and Leningrad where “we

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<sup>260</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Erenhard Buschmann, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front, March 25, 1975.

were received everywhere as friends, almost as relatives.” He went on to report that, although “the Soviet Union is vast and hard to compare with our country, I felt at home, amongst friends.”<sup>261</sup> Other accounts echoed this sentiment, describing what good hosts the Soviets were and how many would often take their German guests to see important landmarks. As with the accounts of Soviet kindness after the war, a very important theme is the shame that many East Germans felt because of Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union. Many recount arriving in the Soviet Union, expecting the Soviets to resent them. However, to their great surprise, they were very well-received.

The purpose these trips served was multifaceted: on the one hand, they enabled East Germans the chance to experience life outside the GDR’s borders. As Patrick Major has said, young people by the 1970s would rather have been allowed travel, mostly to the West, over and above even possessing intellectual freedoms. These trips were thus designed to (somewhat) satisfy that thirst for travel in spite of the shadow of the Wall.<sup>262</sup> The other purpose these trips served was to make East Germans more familiar with Soviet culture and people. As was clearly demonstrated by the socialist competitions in 1957, many East Germans claimed to have had very little contact at all with Soviet people. By visiting the country for themselves, the Soviet people would become at once more familiar, but also relatable, which would make the National Front’s task of reinforcing the East German-Soviet bond (as set out by the theses) much easier every anniversary.

Horst, a worker from the VEB Mansfeld Kombinat in *Bezirk* Karl-Mar-Stadt recalled one such illuminating four-week multi-city trip to the Soviet Union in 1961. He described how he and

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<sup>261</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Klaus Kahlert, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front, March 11, 1975.

<sup>262</sup> See Patrick Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and the Frontiers of Power* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 193.

his tour group thoroughly enjoyed themselves whilst taking in the wonderful landscapes, the “interesting” lock system in the Volga, as well as the wonderful cities of Leningrad, Volgograd, and Donetsk. Despite his enjoyment, Horst, like so many others, spoke of the guilt he carried “as a German” and how this initially affected him on his trip. He was apprehensive about meeting Soviet people as he thought they would certainly be angry at him by association: “I was not directly involved because I was too young, but I still could not get rid of this feeling.” However, to his pleasant surprise, Horst was warmly received by the Soviet people – even though, as he pointed out, they had lost so much during the war because of the Germans. Horst soon learned that the Soviets were able to distinguish between the Germans “from then” and “those of the GDR today,” who were “honestly trying to find a better way.” A lasting effect of this trip for Horst was that his feeling of guilt as a German dissipated permanently after interacting with the “kind Soviet people.”<sup>263</sup>

Luise, a well-travelled woman from the *Bezirk* of Karl-Marx-Stadt, told a similar story. She described making many trips to the Soviet Union and consistently finding that the Soviet people greeted her in a warm and friendly manner. In reference to the ideological underpinnings of this radio contest, Luise also wrote that the Soviets’ friendliness was a testament to the deep bond between the GDR and Soviet peoples. She described how on one trip, her group’s tour guide took them to the Piskaryovskoye cemetery outside of Leningrad. Luise’s group was overwhelmed hearing their guide describe the 900 day siege of Leningrad (1941 – 1944) and about the 600 000 people who died there. It was clear to Luise that their guide loved her homeland, especially when she talked about the heroic fighting of the city’s inhabitants. Yet, despite her description of such a difficult chapter in history, Luise’s guide spoke without

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<sup>263</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Horst Seifert, Submission “Gedanken zu Begegnungen mit russischen Menschen anlässlich einer Reise in die SU,” for the Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub,” March 25, 1975.

levelling any judgement against the Germans, something the group found astounding. Upon being asked if this was not extremely difficult to do, he replied that “it is fascism we hate – we love the German people.”<sup>264</sup>

Other East Germans were impressed with their trips to the Soviet Union not just because of the kind people they encountered, but also because they seemed to have been overawed from an almost religious-like perspective: these GDR tourists described their “pilgrimage” to the “Land of Lenin” and the honour they felt from visiting such important sites of memory (which of course helped reinforce official narratives of Soviet sacrifice). Visiting the siege site outside of Leningrad was very popular amongst GDR tour groups, and many described being completely overcome when hearing about sacrifice made by the “Soviet heroes” in their struggle against fascism. Gertraute from Freiberg described her trip to the Soviet Union as having been mainly to celebrate the anniversary of the October Revolution, but upon arriving she found herself less concerned with the festivities and more overcome when seeing and experiencing the war memorials.<sup>265</sup> Similarly, Heinz and Herta from Hormersdorf greatly enjoyed their visit to “Heldenstadt” (city of heroes) Leningrad, particularly their visit to the Piskaryovskoye Memorial. They described the indelible impression this left on them, especially of all the suffering they realized those “heroes” had endured. Heinz and Herta wrote that they made sure to stand in silence to remember the fallen. This experience, combined with their warm welcome by the Soviet people, the couple said, allowed them for the first time to “fully understand what real friendship meant.”<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Luise Peeh, Submission to the Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub,” March 17, 1975.

<sup>265</sup> BArch DY 6/1028. Gertraute Wetzlar, Submission “Begegnung mit Freunden” to the Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub,” March 31, 1975.

<sup>266</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Heinz & Herta Freudenberg, Submission “Beim Aufenthalt unserer Delegation in die Heldenstadt Leningrad” to Gesellschaft für deutsch-sowjetische Freundschaft, Ortsgruppe Hormersdorf, March 9, 1975.

Despite the clear advantages of travelling themselves, receiving visitors from the Soviet Union in the GDR also had an impact on those East Germans who met them. One example of this came from a group of 25 VEB colleagues at the Stralsund shipyard, who signed a “friendship treaty” with the crew of the Soviet ship the Atlantik 7220 “Geroi Adzhimuskaya.” According to the organizers, for their VEB, “friendship with the Soviet Union [was] a matter of the heart.”<sup>267</sup> So the group explained that they hoped talking about their own interactions with the Soviets would help “dispel and disprove many false opinions and reservations” others had of them.<sup>268</sup> Further proving that these opinions commonly abounded, the group said they were very proud of their ability to “get all of our colleagues to joyfully participate in this friendship treaty.”<sup>269</sup> Part of the “treaty” involved the VEB members inviting the crew ashore so they could learn about one another. The group took their visitors to museums, toured the city with them, and organized an evening of bowling, dances, films, and even sporting events and a youth gathering.<sup>270</sup> For their efforts, the Society for German-Soviet Friendship had even awarded the VEB the silver badge of honour. Ultimately, the group wrote, they hoped that sharing their experiences on the radio would inspire more people to join the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF) and make their own “friendship treaties.”<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Materialbedarfsermittlung Abteilung des VEB Volkswerft Stralsund, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front, March 21, 1975, p. 1.

<sup>268</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Materialbedarfsermittlung Abteilung des VEB Volkswerft Stralsund, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front, March 21, 1975, p. 3. This language formulation is interesting as these constant references to “falsche Meinungen” and desire to show willing participation in GDR relations with the Soviets must mean that there was widespread dislike/distrust of them.

<sup>269</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Materialbedarfsermittlung Abteilung des VEB Volkswerft Stralsund, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front, March 21, 1975, p. 3.

<sup>270</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, “Freundschaftsvertrag zwischen der Besatzung des Schiffes Atlantik 7220 ‘Geroi Adzhimuskaya’ und dem Kollektiv der Abteilung Materialbedarfsermittlung und Materialverbrauchsnormung des VEB Volkswerft Stralsund,” Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front, March 21, 1975, p. 2-3.

<sup>271</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Materialbedarfsermittlung Abteilung des VEB Volkswerft Stralsund, Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion “Drushba-Klub” to the National Front, March 21, 1975, p. 2-3.

It was not only adults who claimed to have benefitted from Soviet connection, as children also were able to create and maintain friendship ties. For example, the teacher of a kindergarten class in the city of Plauen wrote in to the competition describing the many interactions her students had had with Soviet citizens in the area, especially celebrating local festivals with Soviet children. The teacher also commented that the children were always particularly excited to meet with Soviet soldiers. These contacts were made possible through a worker in the *Kreis* committee of the National Front of Plauen, who helped organize these cultural highlights. As the teacher explained, their main goal in doing all of this was to “deepen the love of our children for the Soviet Union and especially for other Soviet children.”<sup>272</sup> Of course, educating the young in this way was something that the SED and National Front always encouraged – for developing these

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<sup>272</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Waltraut Georgi of the Kindergarten “Der Sozialismus siegt,” Submitted to National Front Kreisausschuß Plauen im Vogtland, February 8, 1975. The teacher directly sent in submissions from the children to the radio station as part of the attempt of their entire collective (the Kollektiv der DSF des Kindergartens “der Sozialismus siegt” in Plauen im Vogtland) to get the silver honour badge of the DSF.

positive connections early on would help prevent the next generation from carrying the same dislike for the Soviets the older one did.



Figure 27. Picture submitted by a child at a kindergarten in Plauen for the competition (BArch DY 6/1028)

Another educator named Angelika at a children's home in Guben in *Bezirk* Cottbus also described how important she thought it was for her children to develop connections to the Soviet Union. She described how her group of children had maintained contact with a Moscow kindergarten for the preceding three years, while she herself had gone to the Soviet Union the year before to visit the kindergarten and its teachers. Although these Soviets educators were virtual strangers to her, they had absorbed the costs of Angelika's stay, and one even used his vacation time to act as her translator and to escort her and her group on a tour of Moscow.



Overall, Angelika enjoyed her visit immensely and took away many ideas that she hoped to implement in her own children's home.<sup>273</sup>

In other instances, children were able to experience the Soviet Union for themselves. One educator at another children's home in *Bezirk* Rostock recalled a trip during the summer 1971, when a group of Pioneers, FDJ and DSF members of the children's home went to the Soviet Union. They had a great time in Moscow and then in Odessa, and made "deep" and "meaningful connections" with the people who showed them around, especially their volunteer tour guide who told them about the ordinary life of the Soviet people. The group was able to spend time with groups of Komsomol (Soviet youth group) members from an enterprise in Odessa and even visit a Pioneer camp there too, where they made "friendship treaties" with a school near Odessa.<sup>274</sup> In another submission to the contest, two FDJ members, children named Kerstin and Eva, described a similar scene in their class trip to the Ukraine. They had been pen pals with children in a small Ukrainian village and had been invited to go to their pioneer camp, where the FDJ learned about the area's history and even laid a wreath at the town monument in honour of the 170 of 385 people in the town who had lost their lives "fighting fascism." In another moment of bonding, they then later sang the *Weltjugendlied* (an international communist youth song) in German and Russian with their hosts.<sup>275</sup>

The usefulness in promoting such stories from children lay in their potential to train young minds to see the connection to the Soviets as something natural. The SED leadership clearly hoped the children would thus avoid the negative opinion held by the older generation.

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<sup>273</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Angelika Nicklisch. Submission for Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub" to the Abteilung Kultur, National Front der DDR (Berlin). March 5, 1975, p. 1-2.

<sup>274</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Wolfgang Maier, Head of the Children's Home "Juri Gagarin" in Schönberg, Submission "Wir waren Gäste im Lande Lenins" for Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub," March 12, 1975, p. 1-2.

<sup>275</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Kerstin Dudek and Eva Titze, Submission "Kranz niederlegung in Olchow Rog," for Gemeinschaftsaktion "Drushba-Klub," 1975.

Even so, as evidenced by the stories of trips to the Soviet Union and other interactions, it appears as though some mistrust amongst even some older East Germans could be overcome through trips to the Soviet Union. Yet, it was not only the splendor and historical meaning that existed in certain places that convinced East Germans of what an important guiding role the Soviet Union had played in their country; rather, some East German visitors were also positively influenced by simply experiencing Soviet culture and people for themselves. Despite the existence of such stories, it is likely that such reversals of opinion were not representative of the norm – for if the Soviets were indeed very popular amongst East Germans, why would the National Front keep reiterating this theme in its competitions year after year? The National Front must have suspected the message was not truly being absorbed.

### ***Recognition of deserving individuals***

In addition to accepting personal stories, the “Troika der Freundschaft” competition also encouraged people to submit stories about certain individuals worthy of recognition – those who had served their community well or contributed in a major way to the “build up” of the socialist state. Most individuals who were nominated belonged to a mass organization, such as the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF) or the Democratic Women’s League (DFD), and usually played some kind of leadership role in it – even if it was on a small scale by advocating for their individual *Hausgemeinschaft* as part of their regional National Front committees.

One such example came from a local National Front committee in the *Bezirk* of Karl-Marx-Stadt, which nominated a National Front committee chairwoman named Erna from Annaberg-Buchholz, who had spent years mediating conflicts in eight residential districts,

successfully concluding an average of 30 conflicts per year.<sup>276</sup> Another woman named Gerda Köbernick was nominated by the National Front's *Kreis* Committee of Zwickau-Land. Gerda ran a kindergarten and belonged to her local National Front *Kreis* committee. She was also a representative for her very socially active and successful *Hausgemeinschaft*, which maintained a friendly relationship with another *Hausgemeinschaft* near Leningrad. For the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Liberation from Fascism, her *Hausgemeinschaft* decided to create its own competition, which they called the "Eternal friendship with the Soviet Union, strengthening the brotherhood with the land of Lenin – the heartbeat of our lives."<sup>277</sup> It was for this that Gerda won a trip to the Soviet Union so that she could finally meet her Soviet contacts.



*Figure 28. Gerda Köbernick showing off the gifts her Hausgemeinschaft received from a Hausgemeinschaft in Leningrad (BArch DY 6/1028, National Front's Kreisausschuss Zwickau-Land nomination of Gerda Köbernick, March 27, 1975)*

Besides nominations for very active community members such as Gerda, there were many nominations of "worker veterans" – that is, people who had joined the KPD in its early years in the 1920s and often had endured imprisonment or other hardships at the hands of the Nazis.

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<sup>276</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, National Front Stadtausschuß Annaberg-Buchholz, nomination of Erna Engelhardt, March 17, 1975.

<sup>277</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, National Front's Kreisausschuss Zwickau-Land nomination of Gerda Köbernick, March 27, 1975.

These “veterans” continued to work for the socialist cause later on by joining mass organizations in the GDR and often played a community leadership role well into old age. For example, the “Veteran Commission” of the SED *Kreis* leadership of Werdau nominated Ida, an early “worker veteran” in her 80s. Ida had joined the KPD in 1920 and from 1933-36 conducted illegal activities for it, was then arrested by the Gestapo in 1936 and imprisoned for two and a half years, then released but imprisoned again from 1944-45 in Ravensbrück until it was liberated. After getting her health back, Ida worked tirelessly to establish organizations in the young GDR. In 1975, Ida was still involved with the DSF and Soviet citizens in Werdau, despite her advanced age.<sup>278</sup> In a similar story, a group from the People’s Solidarity (VS) organization nominated Josef, the chairperson of their Schönau chapter. Although Josef had been in a Soviet POW camp from 1945-49, he nevertheless was impressed with the Soviets, and he recalled that those running the camps did what they could to be kind to him, and even secretly gave part of their own meagre rations to the prisoners. After his release, he worked his way up in various state organizations, first working as a Russian translator and making Russian friends and then working in the People’s Solidarity organization.<sup>279</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

“Troika der Freundschaft” was different than the anniversary competitions of other years: rather than focusing on results and creating a sense of competition amongst East Germans, this competition was much more about sharing individual stories and spreading the word to remind the populace of the past and present benefits of the GDR citizens’ connections to the Soviet people. By sharing recent travel stories and the testimonials of life-changing travel experiences,

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<sup>278</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Nomination of Ida Bueckler by the SED Kreisleitung Werdau's Veranenkommision A. Roessler, March 31, 1975.

<sup>279</sup> BArch DY 6/1028, Kreissekretariat Zwickau Land of National Front, Nomination of Josef Gralle, 1975.

from the National Front's perspective, these stories had the potential to quell desires (to an extent, at least) for travelling to the West by "selling" the people on the East. By describing the Soviet Union in such glowing terms, these stories also emphasized the theses topics of the era that sought to underscore the superiority of socialism through the example of the extremely prosperous Soviet Union. They also reinforced the GDR leadership's argument for a continued close connection with the Soviets.

These testimonials also educated East Germans of the many ways in which the Soviets assisted in building up the GDR in those early years, by providing education and material assistance, and by giving the people hope for the future. Sharing these individual positive anecdotes was a way for the National Front to remind the old and instruct the young on how many Soviets had showed humanity towards their people, even though the Germans had been their enemies. What none of these personal anecdotes mention, however, is that these moments of kindness are simply evidence of general human decency in the midst of great suffering, rather than concrete proof of the innate kindness of one particular national group.

Another glaring problem with the competition was that these stories of the early postwar years did not acknowledge the many people, especially women, who had suffered brutal treatment at the hands of the Soviets at the end of the war and during the occupation. These stories of the Soviets helping to rebuild completely sanitized the history of that era, conveniently reframing the dismantling of industry and harming of the region's future potential as a time of "re-education" and training. Neither did these stories acknowledge the brutal rapes that many German women suffered at the hands of the Red Army, nor the general misery, economic hardship, and intensification of hunger that resulted from Soviet land reforms. The benefit of broadcasting these stories was instead aimed at making the Soviets more familiar to those East Germans who had not previously had contact with them: by hearing stories of their kindnesses

and friendliness, it would work to counteract any popular stories of brutality, lessen any lingering resentment, and encourage people (especially any youth) to join a Soviet organization like the DSF, or even apply for a trip to the Soviet Union and thus continue to facilitate the close ties between the GDR and the Soviet Union that the SED believed were essential to the GDR's success.

## Deepening the Soviet Connection: the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the October Revolution



Figure 29: Advertisement template for an exhibition for the initiative “My best friend,” (BArch DY 6/1031)

### “Meinem besten Freund”/ “My best Friend” (1977)

In 1977, five years after signing the Basic Treaty with West Germany and three years after having joined the UN, the GDR was still basking in the glow of the international recognition which its leadership had craved for so long. In honour of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution, the National Front organized a cultural initiative for the population called “Meinem besten Freund” (“My best friend”). As was the case with 1975’s “Troika der Freundschaft,” due to the GDR’s recently acquired international recognition as a sovereign state, the National Front emphasizing the state’s legitimacy via their connection to the Soviet Union was not as vitally important as it had been, for example, during the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Revolution in 1957. Nevertheless, likely due to continued anti-Soviet feeling amongst the populace, the National

Front felt it was important for East Germans to continue participating in cultural competitions in honour of the Soviet Union, in the hopes that this general feeling would perhaps begin to abate and certainly not spread to the next generation.

Although the Soviet regime had allowed some freedom during the Khrushchev thaw, by the Brezhnev years, the Soviet peoples' initiative in cultural activities had changed a great deal, thereby making Soviet citizens "passive objects receiving and practicing whatever the cultural authorities offered."<sup>280</sup> While the people of the GDR were also participating in whatever commemorations the authorities prescribed, they were invigorated when they were able to participate on their terms, especially when not constricted by an overtly ideologically-focused anniversary competition. As we have seen, although in the late 1950s and early 1960s the National Front emphasized the importance of the lower levels' total commitment to following the top's instructions to the letter, by the end of the 1960s and even more so in the 1970s, Berlin became much more willing to allow the periphery room for maneuver when choosing and carrying out anniversary activities. Thus, as the following anniversary exhibition and competition will demonstrate, many *Kreise*, on their own initiative, simply told their residents they should start creating any items of their own choosing for the exhibition. This decision to be open to all manner of submissions, as opposed to only accepting items of a high artistic standard or ones that were visibly paying homage to the theses' themes for that anniversary (as recommended by Berlin), resulted in a populace far more enthusiastic about the state-designed competition than usual, as well as an unusually high number of participants.

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<sup>280</sup> Gleb Tsipursky, *Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption, and State-Sponsored Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1945–1970* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), 223.



## Bürger von Wilhelmsruh!

In diesem Jahr gibt es kein bedeutsameres Ereignis als den 60. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution. Sie ist das Hauptereignis in unserem Jahrhundert, das den Verlauf der Entwicklung der ganzen Menschheit grundlegend verändert hat.

Wie alle Werktätigen unserer Republik wollen auch wir uns auf dieses bedeutende Jubiläum würdig vorbereiten. Im Leninschen Sinne wollen wir – wie Erich Honecker auf der 5. Tagung des Zentralkomitees der SED sagte – den Roten Oktober ehren, indem wir die Beschlüsse des IX. Parteitages erfolgreich verwirklichen, unsere Deutsche Demokratische Republik, die sozialistische Staatengemeinschaft stärken und dadurch die Ausstrahlungskraft des Sozialismus weiter erhöhen.

Wir danken allen Wilhelmsruher Bürgern, die sich mit großer Tatkraft im Zeichen des Oktober-Jubiläum im sozialistischen Wettbewerb in ihren Betrieben und im Mach-mit-Wettbewerb im Territorium für die Erfüllung und gezielte Überbietung des Volkswirtschaftsplanes 1977, für die weitere Verschönerung unseres Ortsteiles einsetzen.

Wir rufen Sie darüber hinaus auf, sich auch an der Vorbereitung der „Ausstellung der Freundschaft“ zu beteiligen, die zum Ausdruck bringen soll, wie stark sich auch die Bürger von Wilhelmsruh mit der Sowjetunion verbunden wissen, wie gut sie verstehen: Der Bruderbund mit dem Lande Lenins ist eine entscheidende Grundlage für unseren bisherigen und unseren künftigen Erfolg.

Wir bitten Sie, dem Klub der Nationalen Front in Wilhelmsruh, Hauptstraße 15, Fotos, Zeichnungen, Geschichten, Gedichte, Andenken und andere Gegenstände zur Verfügung zu stellen, die davon künden, wie diese Freundschaft und Verbundenheit zwischen den Völkern und den Menschen der DDR und der Sowjetunion gewachsen ist.

Sie sollen im Klub der Nationalen Front in der Hauptstraße zur „Ausstellung der Freundschaft“ zusammengestellt werden.

Gleichzeitig bitten wir besonders alle Bürger und Jugendlichen unseres Ortsteiles, die sich volkskünstlerisch betätigen oder die Kunst zu ihrem Beruf erwählt haben, unter dem Leitgedanken

### „MEINEM BESTEN FREUND“

ein persönliches Geschenk für einen Bürger der UdSSR zu gestalten. Diese Geschenke werden in die Ausstellung der Freundschaft einbezogen und später als Präsente der Freundschaft sowjetischen Bürgern übermittelt.

Die Ausstellung wird am 17. 5. 1977 um 19.00 Uhr eröffnet und bis zum 22. 5. 1977, jeweils in der Zeit von 14.00 bis 18.00 Uhr zu besichtigen sein. Wir laden Sie schon heute dazu herzlich ein.

Die besten selbstgefertigten Exponate und Geschenke werden prämiert. Über die Prämierung entscheidet unter Ausschluß des Rechtsweges die Jury, die sich aus den Leitungen des Ortsausschusses der Nationalen Front und des Klubrates zusammensetzt. Es stehen 5 Hauptpreise und 20 weitere Anerkennungen zur Verfügung.

Bitte, reichen Sie Ihre Exponate und Geschenke bis spätestens 30. April 1977 an den Klubrat des Klubs der Nationalen Front, 1106 Berlin-Wilhelmsruh, Hauptstraße 15, ein. Vom 25. bis 28. April 1977 können sie täglich in der Zeit von 17.00 bis 19.00 Uhr im Klub abgegeben werden. Sie können aber auch per Post übersandt werden. Wichtig ist, daß sie mit Angabe von Beruf und Alter mit dem Absender des Einreichers deutlich gekennzeichnet sind. Nach der Ausstellung erhalten Sie die uns überlassenen Exponate zurück.

Ihre Beteiligung erwarten:

Der Ortsausschuß  
der Nationalen Front  
in Wilhelmsruh

Der Klubrat des  
Klubs der Nationalen Front,  
Hauptstraße 15

Die Wohnorganisation der Gesellschaft  
für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft,  
Wilhelmsruh

152 Bn 329/77 5 407

Figure 30: Advertisement from Wilhelmsruh for “Meinem besten Freund” (BArch DY 6/1031)

As shown in the above advertisement from the residential district of Wilhelmsruh (in the Berlin district of Pankow), in this competition, the National Front wanted East Germans to create a personal work of art for a Soviet “friend,” and then submit it to their local National Front committee to be put into an exhibition. The advertisement went on:

We are calling on you to participate in the preparation of the ‘Exhibition of Friendship,’ which will demonstrate how strong the connection of the citizens of Wilhelmsruh to the Soviet Union is! This brotherly connection with the Land of Lenin is a crucial foundation for our past and future success.<sup>281</sup>

<sup>281</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1030, Advertisement “Bürger von Wilhelmsruh!” for “Meinem besten Freund,” by Ortsauschuß der Nationalen Front in Wilhelmsruh, Der Klubrat des Klubs der Nationalen Front, Die Wohnorganisation der Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft, Wilhelmsruh, 1977, p. 1-2.

The National Front specifically targeted their advertisements to all residents and youth of the locality, asking all “who are active in folk art or who have chosen art as their profession” to make submissions to the contest.<sup>282</sup> The objects could consist of handworks, photos, drawings, stories, poems, or even prose – all that mattered was that these objects above all demonstrate how the friendship between the German and Soviet peoples had grown over the years. The best self-made objects of each local exhibition (decided upon by juries made up of local National Front representatives), were to be forwarded to the regional, then district, and finally, the national exhibitions to held in Berlin for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution. There were prizes at every level: for example, the National Front in Wilhelmsruh gave out five top prizes and twenty smaller ones.<sup>283</sup> Following their display at the “Exhibition of Friendship” in Berlin, the objects were then to be presented as “gifts of friendship” to Soviet citizens.

While this 1977 exhibition ultimately was a successful one with more objects created than the National Front could have imagined, organizing the exhibitions in the first place proved a struggle, especially for the top National Front organizers in Berlin. Unlike in the 1975 “Troika” competition, this was a much more complex competition that required considerable coordination among many levels of the National Front. As had been the case in the 1960s competitions, a major stumbling block to success was Berlin’s inability to exercise as much control and impose as much uniformity across the regions as it would have liked. Part of this was because Berlin did not immediately send out specific instructions to the regions on how to conduct their own local exhibitions, something which exacerbated the lack of uniformity. Coordination between organizations could also be poor, with organizations such as Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF) frequently writing Berlin asking for help in determining which other

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<sup>282</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1030, Advertisement “Bürger von Wilhelmsruh!” p. 1-2.

<sup>283</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1030, Advertisement “Bürger von Wilhelmsruh!” p. 1-2.

organizations they could turn to for assistance with creating their own exhibitions.<sup>284</sup> In other instances, some local National Front committees complained to Berlin of their difficulties in contacting workers' enterprises (*Betriebe*), while other National Front committees protested that they lacked the money to put on the expected exhibitions, desperately requesting Berlin provide them with a source of funding.<sup>285</sup> As a result of this multitude of concerning reports from the regions in the spring of 1977, the Berlin National Front decided to send out several representatives, including Inge Kießig and Kurt Pfister from the National Front's Cultural Department, to personally visit different *Kreise* and *Bezirke* to investigate precisely how the lowest of levels were organizing their exhibitions.



Figure 31: Example painting that was submitted for the exhibition (*Neue Zeit*, "Dem besten Freund: ein Zeichen der Verbundenheit," May 7, 1977, p. 7).

In April, on a visit to the *Bezirk* of Karl-Marx-Stadt, Inge Kießig reported back to Berlin that while local officials thought the people in the *Bezirk* were excited about the initiative, the secretariat was nevertheless proceeding to create task forces to better manage their

<sup>284</sup> BArch DY 6/1030, author unknown, "Fragen, Probleme, Hinweise," Report from Berlin, May 20, 1977, p. 1.

<sup>285</sup> BArch DY 6/1030, author unknown, "Fragen, Probleme, Hinweise," Report from Berlin, May 20, 1977, p. 1 -2.

exhibitions. In addition, Kießig noted that the *Bezirk* was still struggling to find the funds to rent the exhibit spaces they needed to put on the exhibition. Karl-Marx-Stadt officials also complained that they lacked a direct way to contact Berlin in order to clear up questions about which other mass organizations were involved in this initiative. On a positive note, Kießig saw that the *Bezirk's* connection to their regional presses was very strong, which she thought boded well for their ability to spread the word about the initiative and the exhibitions. In May, in the locality of Schneeberg in Karl-Marx-Stadt, representatives had even invited the local editors of *Aktuelle Camera* (the GDR's main television newscast) to report on the preparations of their residential exhibition.<sup>286</sup>

In July, Kießig visited the more successful *Kreis* Wernigerode in *Bezirk* Magdeburg. Overall, she thought the Wernigerode *Kreis* secretariat had made good efforts to reach a wide variety of people by popularizing the initiative through word of mouth, placards and posters, as well as at residential committee (*Wohnbezirkausschuß*) meetings. Wernigerode's exhibition had taken place over ten days, between July 7 and 17, and showcased 230 objects ("gifts"): 180 of these were made by folk artists, and 50 by artists in collectives. While some residents designed their gifts with specific Soviet citizens in mind, others did not. Many artists were instead inspired by local Harz folklore to create stone figurines, bell-pulls, and cowbells. Kießig believed that these types of designs not only showed the great creativity of the locals, but also gave this exhibition a unique regional flavour. Kießig thought these items were so good they should be used as handmade souvenirs for the region in the future.<sup>287</sup> Since Wernigerode's large number of

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<sup>286</sup> BArch DY 6/1030, Report from Inge Kießig to the Department of Culture in the National Front in Berlin, "Operativer Einsatz in Karl-Marx-Stadt /Stadt, Aue und Schneeberg für die Aktion Meinem Besten Freund," April 7, 1977, p. 1.

<sup>287</sup> BArch DY 6/1030, Report from Inge Kießig to the Department of Culture in the National Front in Berlin, "Bericht über die Kreisausstellung Meinem Besten Freund in Wernigerode," July 15, 1977.

“gifts” outnumbered the number of Soviet citizens in the area, Wernigerode even offered to forward any extras to any neighbouring *Kreise* who may have not had enough for their own exhibitions. In the end, the National Front’s Wernigerode jury chose 30 gifts to be sent to the *Bezirk* exhibition in Magdeburg in September.<sup>288</sup>

Kießig also attended Magdeburg’s exhibition opening on September 9, 1977 at the Cultural Historical Association Museum of Magdeburg. On display here were the best gifts from the *Kreis* exhibitions, numbering 700 objects. Of these, the 30 “best” had already been chosen by the jury and were on display in their own room, ready to be sent on to Berlin’s national exhibition. While Kießig found the *Bezirk* exhibition to have been excellent overall, she thought the choice of the “30 best” to have been flawed: for her, these “gifts” neither represented much variety nor the breadth of cultural ability in the *Bezirk*. For example, the locally-inspired objects she had signalled out earlier –cowbells, figurines made of local spruce, stone men, and even a complicated model train made by a kindergarten in the region– were not among the chosen few.<sup>289</sup>

It is obvious that the objects the juries chose as the “best” in the *Bezirk* were the objects which were of a more overtly political nature. This becomes clear in Kurt Pfister’s reports, as he describes how many objects dutifully showcased the GDR-Soviet connection. For example, at the opening of Neubrandenburg’s *Bezirk* exhibition on September 15 at the House of the German-Soviet Friendship Society (DSF), Pfister describes being particularly impressed at how certain objects deftly combined political content with aesthetic appeal. Even though the exhibition had 265 diverse objects, displaying a wide breadth of talent, Pfister thought one of the best “objects”

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<sup>288</sup> BArch DY 6/1030, Report from Inge Kießig to the Department of Culture in the National Front in Berlin, “Bericht über die Kreisausstellung Meinem Besten Freund in Wernigerode,” July 15, 1977.

<sup>289</sup> BArch DY 6/1030, Report from Inge Kießig to the Department of Culture in the National Front in Berlin, “Bezirksausstellung Meinem Besten Freund Magdeburg,” September 12, 1977, p. 1-2.

was a large exhibit that took the form of a living room that contained a meter-high Russian nesting doll with 15 “sisters” (representing the 15 Union republics), a bust of Lenin, and portrait of Ernst Thälmann. Another object on display that impressed Pfister included a poster protesting American nuclear weapons.<sup>290</sup> Meanwhile, in Potsdam’s *Bezirk* exhibition, out of the 110 objects on display, Pfister was likewise most fascinated with the Red Army Civil War Commander Vasily Chapayev-themed objects, mainly because he thought they represented the political meaning of this initiative so very well.<sup>291</sup>

### ***The Perspective from the Regions:***

As a result of the lack of initial coordination from Berlin, the individual *Kreis* and *Bezirk* exhibitions were quite varied. For example, *Bezirk* Leipzig decided to hold their exhibition during their sport festival (*Turn-und-Sportfest*) in order to encourage higher attendance numbers at their exhibitions since athletes and visitors were already visiting the city. Indeed, the only difficulty this presented was in finding an adequately-sized exhibition hall able to accommodate the extra attendees.<sup>292</sup> Despite this creative way of increasing attendance numbers, however, Berlin still criticized Leipzig for failing to adequately promote the exhibition in the newspapers, as officials in the capital had only counted two advertisements in Leipzig as of May.<sup>293</sup> Meanwhile, in *Bezirk* Schwerin, most *Kreis* officials struggled a great deal with coordination and organization. Although *Bezirk* Secretary Smolni acknowledged that larger *Kreise* with larger populations did require greater preparation time for their exhibitions—especially if there were many different activities that needed to be organized—he was nonetheless very critical of the

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<sup>290</sup> BArch DY 6/1030, report from Kurt Pfister to the Department of Culture in the National Front in Berlin, “Eröffnung der Ausstellung ‘Meinem Besten Freund’ in Neubrandenburg,” September 21, 1977, p. 1.

<sup>291</sup> A Red Army hero of the civil war, popular in Soviet propaganda.

<sup>292</sup> BArch DY 6/1030, author unknown, “Fragen, Probleme, Hinweise,” Report from Berlin, May 20, 1977, p. 2.

<sup>293</sup> BArch DY 6/1030, author unknown, “Fragen, Probleme, Hinweise,” Report from Berlin, May 20, 1977, p. 2.

management ability of the National Front *Kreis* officials on the whole. Smolni did at least acknowledge, however, that the *Kreis* secretariats themselves had had to deal with many incompetent smaller local committees that simply did not understand the task at hand and thus hampered the *Kreis*'s ability to achieve good results.<sup>294</sup>

In contrast, *Kreis* Rudolstadt (within *Bezirk* Gera) organized a massively popular exhibition, which included 16 local exhibitions that involved 39 different committees, 1050 amateur artists, 120 folk artists, and 630 artists from societal organizations and institutes, with a grand total of 1800 people working on the exhibitions. In fact, the exhibitions were so popular in Rudolstadt that many people wanted to take part even though they had no particular artistic skill, resulting in many simply purchasing objects to be added to the exhibitions. In one instance, a Königsee resident even baked a huge cake to be put on display.<sup>295</sup> Rudolstadt National Front *Kreis* secretariat Mühlmann found that the overall content of the objects on display at their local exhibitions not only featured the GDR-Soviet friendship quite prominently, but was also clearly connected to the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution.<sup>296</sup>

#### *Kreis* Perleberg (*Bezirk* Schwerin)

Despite the prevailing organizational struggles in *Bezirk* Schwerin, *Kreis* Perleberg was a good example of a *Kreis* that managed to overcome initial difficulties to succeed in putting on a great exhibition. As quality control checks<sup>297</sup> undertaken by local officials indicated, the initiative was neither widely known nor popular at first. Part of the problem, the Schwerin *Bezirk*

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<sup>294</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, Schwerin National Front Bezirksekretär Smolni to "Abteilung Information" at the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, "Abschlussbericht zur Gemeinschaftsaktion 'Meinem besten Freund,'" November 23, 1977, p. 5.

<sup>295</sup> BArch DY 6/1030, report from Mühlmann, Kreissekretär Rudolstadt, July 1977, p. 1-2.

<sup>296</sup> BArch DY 6/1030, report from Mühlmann, Kreissekretär Rudolstadt, July 1977, p. 1-2.

<sup>297</sup> "Operativen Kontrollen." It is unclear which organizing level undertook these quality control checks. They could have been undertaken centrally by Berlin, the *Bezirke* or even by the *Kreise*.

secretariat observed, was that even after receiving instructions from the Berlin National Front on how to begin organizing their exhibitions, many DSF, DFD, FDJ *Kreis* committees had wasted quite a bit of time waiting for further instructions from their *own* national DSF, DFD, and FDJ committees in Berlin.<sup>298</sup>

Another difficulty was the grumbling the Perleberg *Kreis* secretariat heard from ordinary people. Although this was challenging for the organizers, from *Kreis* secretary Wedel's perspective, he was consoled by the fact that these complaints at least did not constitute any completely "hostile" arguments about the exhibition.<sup>299</sup> Residents had mainly complained that they lacked the raw materials required to make the objects and that it was also not clear what exactly they could submit to the exhibition. Some residential representatives even argued that their areas did not have any art collectives or people with the artistic talents necessary to put together an exhibition.<sup>300</sup> Another common complaint was that the people did not have enough time to create quality work. One young professional artist couple commented that as artists they needed at least 18 months to merely conceptualize a good work of art, let alone plan and execute it. Thus, any exhibition that did not give them that kind of time "was not worth their contribution."<sup>301</sup>

The situation in Perleberg improved by June, especially after organizers changed tactics and decided to tell the public they would accept every gift presented to them, not just those of a certain artistic skill or made according to a specific theme. Secretary Wedel wrote that once this

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<sup>298</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, Kreissekretär Wedel of National Front Kreisausschuß Perleberg to National Front Bezirksausschuß Schwerin, "Bericht zum Stand der Vorbereitung von Ausstellungen 'Freizeit, Kunst und Lebensfreude' unter dem Motto: 'Meinem besten Freund,'" April 21, 1977, p. 2.

<sup>299</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, Perleberg Kreissekretär Wedel report to Bezirk Schwerin, "Bericht zum gegenwärtigen Stand der Gemeinschaftsaktion 'Meinem besten Freund,'" August 22, 1977, p. 2.

<sup>300</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, Kreissekretär Wedel, "Bericht zum Stand der Vorbereitung von Ausstellungen," April 21, 1977, p. 2.

<sup>301</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, Kreissekretär Wedel, "Bericht zum Stand der Vorbereitung von Ausstellungen," April 21, 1977, p. 2.



had been made clear to the people, the *Kreis* received a flood of submissions.<sup>302</sup> In addition, after a lot of effort, Wedel could also report that the secretariat had finally convinced the FDGB, DFD, DSF, and other mass organization committees to fall into line and assist with the exhibitions. The *Kreis* secretariat representatives had even convinced local mayors to help them spread the word about the initiative, which helped to further increase interest among residents.<sup>303</sup> By August, the organizational difficulties had entirely disappeared, as the efforts of individuals and collectives together had resulted in a total of 1796 personal “gifts” being featured at Perleberg’s seven *Wohnbezirk* (residential) exhibitions. The most common types of gifts included textiles, wood and metalworks, paintings, as well as ceramics and leather items.<sup>304</sup> The jury chose 146 of these objects to appear in their central *Kreis* exhibition, with the 20 best forwarded to Schwerin’s *Bezirk* exhibition.<sup>305</sup>

#### *Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt*

In *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt, there was immense public interest in “Meinem besten Freund” in most *Kreise*, which was largely attributable to effective communication on the part of the *Kreise*. In April 1977, shortly after preparations began, the *Bezirk* secretariat of Karl-Marx-Stadt reported to Berlin that its *Kreis* secretariats had already commenced preparing the exhibitions, with 18 *Kreise* and their National Front mass organization counterparts (that is, members of the

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<sup>302</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, *Kreis*sekretär representative Rieckhoff of *Kreisausschuß* Perleberg, “Bericht zum Stand der Vorbereitung von Ausstellungen ‘Freizeit, Kunst und Lebensfreude’ unter dem Motto,” to the *Bezirksausschuß* National Front Schwerin, June 7, 1977, p. 1.

<sup>303</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, *Kreis*sekretär representative Rieckhoff of *Kreisausschuß* Perleberg, “Bericht zum Stand der Vorbereitung von Ausstellungen ‘Freizeit, Kunst und Lebensfreude’ unter dem Motto,” to the *Bezirksausschuß* National Front Schwerin, June 7, 1977, p. 2.

<sup>304</sup> BArch DY 6/1031. *Kreis*sekretär Wedel of National Front *Kreisausschuß* Perleberg to National Front *Bezirksausschuß* Schwerin, “Bericht zum gegenwärtigen Stand der Geeminschaftsaktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” August 22, 1977, p. 2-3.

<sup>305</sup> BArch DY 6/1031. *Kreis*sekretär Wedel of National Front *Kreisausschuß* Perleberg to National Front *Bezirksausschuß* Schwerin, “Bericht zum gegenwärtigen Stand der Geeminschaftsaktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” August 22, 1977, p. 3.

DSF or DFD) even creating task forces to better coordinate the activities.<sup>306</sup> Given that *Kreis*-level directives would need to pass through many channels before the people at the residential or *Hausgemeinschaft* level would hear about the initiative, many of Karl-Marx-Stadt's *Kreise* made the wise decision to use the regional press, *Betrieb* newspapers, and radio to inform ordinary citizens about plans for the initiative.<sup>307</sup> For example, in *Kreis* Aue, 17 press articles about the initiative were published by April and the press in Freiberg obliged the *Kreis*' orders and printed 12 000 flyers.<sup>308</sup> Many *Kreis* committees also informed the public of what was going on by holding advisory sessions with the *Ort* and *Wohnbezirk* (local and residential) committees, as well as with mayors of larger urban centres like Freiberg or Glauchau. In *Kreis* Werdau, the secretariat even made contact with the school council (*Schulrat*), while in *Kreis* Glauchau, the secretariat (with the help of the FDGB) connected with the directors of various *Betriebe* (enterprises). The *Bezirk* believed such methods constituted effective ways of informing the population about the exhibition and encouraging participation.

The reason that Karl-Marx-Stadt's *Kreise* needed to invest so much effort into communication was largely to make up for the Berlin National Front's tardiness in communicating with them. Karl-Marx-Stadt pointed out that Berlin had sent out too few master versions of national advertisements too late to be useful. Even Berlin's organizational suggestions arrived much too late. Without the relevant information from above, many local

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<sup>306</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt *Bezirk*sekretär Oehme to Department of Culture, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, "Information über die Durchführung von Ausstellung 'Freizeit - Kunst und Lebensfreude' zum 60. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution unter dem Motto 'Meinem besten Freund,'" April 22, 1977, p. 1.

<sup>307</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt *Bezirk*sekretär Oehme to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in Berlin, "Information über die Aktion 'Meinem besten Freund,'" July 4, 1977, p. 1.

<sup>308</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, *Bezirk*sekretär Oehme to Department of Culture, "Information über die Durchführung von Ausstellung 'Freizeit - Kunst und Lebensfreude'" April 22, 1977, p. 1.

organizations and institutes were thus hesitant to commence their preparations.<sup>309</sup> While Berlin eventually did send out these advertisements, nowhere did it indicate which mass organizations were involved in this initiative, leaving local organizers unsure of which local-level organization committees they could reach out to for assistance. Local officials were also unsure of what types of objects they were to request the populace make for the exhibitions. In order to get around this and show the public what their options were, some *Kreis* members of the DFD (Democratic Women's League) took it upon themselves to set up small demo exhibits on the main street in Karl-Marx-Stadt during the annual May Day festivities.<sup>310</sup>

Once it finally became clear what was required, as in other areas of the country, people in *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt complained that they did not have enough time to create the kinds of "gifts" they wanted to submit to the exhibition. Some grumbled that it would have been far better to have run this competition during the winter months when there was less to do outside and more people could have taken part.<sup>311</sup> Since professional artists also proved less interested in contributing because of the lack of time to produce high quality works, the *Bezirk* planned for the majority of objects to be created by semi-professional artists and folk artists already in art groups.

Despite all of these organizational difficulties, after a concerted effort by the regional National Front committees with considerable organizational assistance from the regional committees of the Democratic Women's League (DFD) and People's Solidarity (VS), as well as the GDR Cultural Association (*Kulturbund*) and the Association of Gardeners, Settlers, and Animal Breeders (VKSK), by July 1977, *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt could report that the initiative

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<sup>309</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, *Bezirk*sekretär Oehme to Department of Culture, "Information über die Durchführung von Ausstellung 'Freizeit - Kunst und Lebensfreude'" April 22, 1977, p. 2.

<sup>310</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, *Bezirk*sekretär Oehme to Department of Culture, "Information über die Durchführung von Ausstellung 'Freizeit - Kunst und Lebensfreude'" April 22, 1977, p. 2.

<sup>311</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt *Bezirk*sekretär Oehme to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in Berlin, "Information über die Aktion 'Meinem besten Freund,'" July 4, 1977, p. 4.

had finally found wide resonance with the population at large.<sup>312</sup> The DFD and People's Solidarity took on the task of helping the National Front with organizing most of the smaller exhibits and meetings, arranging 383 exhibits (185 urban, 200 in rural districts) with 400 urban and 337 rural committees involved in the planning (41.6% of all urban and 41.9% of all rural committees).<sup>313</sup> In *Kreis Aue*, the trade union (FDGB) committees were the National Front committees' best collaborators. Indeed, the trade union committees not only succeeded in winning over many workers' collectives to participate, but their idea of linking the creation of objects for the exhibitions to already-occurring collective enterprise festivals (*Betriebsfestspiele*) proved very useful.<sup>314</sup>

In the end, *Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt* could report that "Meinem besten Freund" had been a huge success overall, giving a large amount of credit to their regional press connections for having piqued the interest of a higher proportion of first-time participants. While 147 000 people attended *Kreis* exhibitions across the *Bezirk*, attendance varied widely by *Kreis*, with Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land's exhibition only receiving 650 visitors, while Zschopau's exhibition had 6000 attendees. *Bezirk* Secretary Oehme thought the best attendance could be found in areas where the exhibitions were put on as part of a *Volksfest* in the *Wohngebieten*. Indeed, when combined with *Volksfest* attendance figures, the *Bezirk* estimated that 450 000 people attended some variety of this initiative. Following the close of the exhibitions, the "gifts" not sent on to the *Bezirk*

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<sup>312</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt Bezirksekretär Oehme to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in Berlin, "Information über die Aktion 'Meinem besten Freund,'" July 4, 1977, p. 1.

<sup>313</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt Bezirksekretär Oehme to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in Berlin, "Information über die Aktion 'Meinem besten Freund,'" July 4, 1977, p. 2.

<sup>314</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, Aue Kreissekretär Fitzthum, "Kurze Einschätzung der Aktion 'Meinem besten Freund,'" July 1977, p. 1.

exhibitions were given to Soviet people living in the region: some personally and some via “friendship delegations.”<sup>315</sup>

The Karl-Marx-Stadt *Bezirk* secretariat believed that this exhibition had allowed the talent of *Bezirk* residents to be put on full display and that it would be highly beneficial to repeat such an initiative for future anniversaries. After the initial organizational difficulties, the majority of the *Kreis* secretariats never expected such a positive response from the public and the great number of “gifts” presented to the exhibition.<sup>316</sup> Oehme thought the exemplary *Kreise* in Karl-Marx-Stadt included Aue, Plauen, Werdau, and Zschopau. The most successful *Kreise* in the *Bezirk* were Zschopau, which produced 2100 objects and Annaberg, which had 3000 objects for its exhibition. *Kreis* Zwickau-Stadt also produced 1000 objects, although two-thirds were produced by *Betrieb* (enterprise) collectives and DFD and People’s Solidarity residential organizations.<sup>317</sup> What made these *Kreise* so successful, Oehme speculated, was that they were areas in which people understood the “work” as a whole and where all mass organizations were working together.<sup>318</sup> The Aue National Front *Kreis* secretariat, for example, was able to overcome the initial communication problems by utilizing their already-existent connections with their local *Kreis* committees and contacting them directly with their plans for organizing *Kreis* activities.<sup>319</sup> With further help from the regional editors of the *Freie Presse*, the in-house

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<sup>315</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt Bezirksekretär Stellvertreter Franke to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in Berlin, “Abschlußbericht zur Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund’ im Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt,” August 29, 1977, p. 4.

<sup>316</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt Bezirksekretär Stellvertreter Franke to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in Berlin, “Abschlußbericht zur Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund’ im Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt,” August 29, 1977, p. 3-4.

<sup>317</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt Bezirksekretär Stellvertreter Franke to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in Berlin, “Abschlußbericht zur Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund’ im Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt,” August 29, 1977, p. 3.

<sup>318</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt Bezirksekretär Oehme to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in Berlin, “Information über die Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” July 4, 1977, p. 4.

<sup>319</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, Aue Kreissekretär Fitzthum to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Abteilung Kultur, “Bericht des Kreissekretariates Aue über die Vorbereitungen der Ausstellungen ‘Meinem besten Freund’” April 25, 1977, p. 1.

newspapers of certain collective enterprises (*Betriebe*), and airtime on a radio program, the Aue secretariat was able to effectively communicate their plans about the exhibitions for “Meinem besten Freund” to the public. In addition, many city and town mayors assisted with spreading the word about the initiative as well.<sup>320</sup>

What the *Bezirk* learned overall from this initiative was that residents were generally very interested in these kinds of creative projects. *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt thought that by showcasing their best examples at the exhibitions, they could make initiatives of this type a permanent part of their day-to-day mass political work. In fact, in Aue, organizers had been taken aback at the “deep love” with which people of all ages crafted the objects they submitted, thereby displaying the great variety of talent in the *Kreis*. Organizers estimated some objects were even likely worth hundreds of Marks.<sup>321</sup> The Aue organizers were extremely proud of their meaningful initiative, dutifully reporting to Berlin that behind every object submitted lay the requisite political support – even if they had no proof that this was actually the case.<sup>322</sup> Oehme himself wrote that the huge interest in this project was due to the public’s backing of the underlying political message of showing the bond between Soviet and GDR citizens, and that designing more projects of this nature would bring this feeling of connectedness ever more to the surface going forward.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, Aue Kreissekretär Fitzthum, “Kurze Einschätzung der Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” July 1977, p. 1; BArch DY 6/1031, Aue Kreissekretär Fitzthum to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Abteilung Kultur, “Bericht des Kreissekretariates Aue über die Vorbereitungen der Ausstellungen ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” April 25, 1977, p. 1.

<sup>321</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, Aue Kreissekretär Fitzthum, “Kurze Einschätzung der Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” July 1977, p. 1.

<sup>322</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, Aue Kreissekretär Fitzthum, “Kurze Einschätzung der Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” July 1977, p. 1.

<sup>323</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt Bezirksekretär Stellvertreter Franke to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in Berlin, “Abschlußbericht zur Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund’ im Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt,” August 29, 1977, p. 6.

*Kreis Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land*

Despite the success of “Meinem besten Freund” in *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt as a whole, not all *Kreise* were successful. For example, *Kreis* Auerbach only produced 600 “gifts” for its exhibition while *Kreis* Schwarzenberg only came up with 559, which from *Bezirk* Secretary Oehme’s perspective, was far fewer than they were capable of.<sup>324</sup> However, it was the rural *Kreis* of Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land that represented one of the most difficult cases within the *Bezirk*. As was the case with other *Kreise*, this *Kreis* secretariat initially had difficulties communicating with other mass organizations. Unlike other *Kreise* however, Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land was not able to overcome this difficulty. As the *Kreis* secretariat lamented to *Bezirk* Secretary Oehme, the trade union (FDGB) and Cultural Association committees (*Kulturbund*) did not even bother appearing at any of the *Kreis* meetings despite repeated requests to do so, while the local FDBG committees treated the initiative as an exercise of simple gift-giving and nothing more.<sup>325</sup>

However, Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land encountered further problems that contributed to its lacklustre results, resulting from its organizers’ entire approach to the exhibitions. Although the National Front in Berlin requested the objects submitted to be of high quality, Berlin wanted above all else to make the entire endeavour as pedagogically effective and inclusive as possible. As such, Berlin did not wish to deter anyone from submitting even the most homemade of kitsch to the local exhibitions. The Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land *Kreis* secretariat, though, did not feel the same way, and repeatedly complained about how unprofessional the submissions were: that these were more “hobby works” than representations of real artistry and not worthy of display. Upon

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<sup>324</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt Bezirksekretär Stellvertreter Franke to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in Berlin, “Abschlußbericht zur Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund’ im Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt,” August 29, 1977, p. 3.

<sup>325</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land Kreissekretär Zais to Bezirksausschuß Karl-Marx-Stadt, “Abschlußbericht Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” August 5, 1977, p. 3.

asking professional artists in the area to make submissions instead, they came up against real resistance and the professionals gave them a variety of excuses for their lack of participation. Some claimed their type of work was not well suited to an exhibition display (for example, the works of musicians and playwrights); another claimed illness; others protested that the time frame was too short; while still others argued that spring and summer was just too busy a time and that winter would better suited to an exhibition of this nature. One professional painter who did agree to make a submission would only offer print copies of previous works, citing time constraints on creating new original works.<sup>326</sup> Thus, this insistence on “high-quality” submissions is likely one of the main reasons why submissions were so low in this *Kreis*.

The *Kreis* secretariat of Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land ultimately advertised their exhibition as having been a “success,” though it did admit that its total of 609 visitors to the *Kreis* exhibition could have been higher.<sup>327</sup> The secretariat also noted, however, that 15 local shop windows had featured partial exhibits – which the secretariat estimated could have been seen by up to 40% of the *Kreis* population (though these could hardly have compared to the full exhibitions the *Kreis* was supposed to organize).<sup>328</sup> In the end, the *Kreis* jury chose 34 objects to be sent on to the *Bezirk* exhibition.<sup>329</sup> A further complication was that once all the exhibitions were over, the *Kreis* secretariat found that instead of gifting their handmade objects to Soviet citizens (which was of course the entire purpose of the initiative), many participants requested the return of their “gifts”!

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<sup>326</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front *Kreisausschuß* Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land to *Bezirksausschuß* Karl-Marx-Stadt, “Info-Bericht 1.6.77 zur Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” June 1, 1977, p. 2.

<sup>327</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front *Kreisausschuß* Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land to *Bezirksausschuß* Karl-Marx-Stadt, “Info-Bericht 1.6.77 zur Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” June 1, 1977, p. 2.; BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land Kreissekretär Zais to *Bezirksausschuß* Karl-Marx-Stadt, “Abschlußbericht Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” August 5, 1977, p. 2.

<sup>328</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land Kreissekretär Zais to *Bezirksausschuß* Karl-Marx-Stadt, “Abschlußbericht Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” August 5, 1977, p. 1.

<sup>329</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land Kreissekretär Zais to *Bezirksausschuß* Karl-Marx-Stadt, “Abschlußbericht Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” August 5, 1977, p. 3.



(perhaps because they were of such high quality?)<sup>330</sup> Despite such issues, the *Kreis* secretariat stated that it had collaborated quite well with many collective enterprises by the end, including cultural houses, schools, as well as with the DSF.<sup>331</sup> Nevertheless, the *Bezirk* was not fooled by the *Kreis*'s claims of success, for in the margins of the *Kreis*'s final report to the *Bezirk*, someone at the *Bezirk* secretariat placed a large question mark in the margin beside the word "success," making clear how the *Bezirk* actually felt about this *Kreis*'s efforts.<sup>332</sup>

### *The Perspective of Berlin*

#### **Geschenke der Freundschaft aus Weißensee**



Figure 32: Photograph showing a selection of the gifts chosen for display in the Wohngebiet Weißensee, including wall hangings, knitted items and drawings. Contributed by local artists and members of enterprise collectives. ("Geschenke der Freundschaft aus Weißensee" *Neues Deutschland*, September 16, 1977, p. 8)

Once the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution had passed, the Berlin National Front concluded that the "Meinem Besten Freund" initiative had been a resounding success, with 1.4

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<sup>330</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land Kreissekretär Zais to Bezirksausschuß Karl-Marx-Stadt, "Abschlußbericht Aktion 'Meinem besten Freund,'" August 5, 1977, p. 3.

<sup>331</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front *Kreisausschuß* Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land to *Bezirksausschuß* Karl-Marx-Stadt, "Info-Bericht 1.6.77 zur Aktion 'Meinem besten Freund,'" June 1, 1977, p. 2; BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land Kreissekretär Zais to Bezirksausschuß Karl-Marx-Stadt, "Abschlußbericht Aktion 'Meinem besten Freund,'" August 5, 1977, p. 2.

<sup>332</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land Kreissekretär Zais to Bezirksausschuß Karl-Marx-Stadt, "Abschlußbericht Aktion 'Meinem besten Freund,'" August 5, 1977, p. 1.

million people having attended 62 859 exhibits, which had approximately 300-450 presents per exhibit. In total, there were with 266 695 presents on offer from 23 138 people.<sup>333</sup> Surprisingly, the visitor totals were not merely comprised of repeat visits from the people who made the objects, but rather, represented a large swathe of people from across the country. Berlin was entirely pleased with the results and thought these numbers demonstrated the achievement of the political-ideological aspect of this initiative and that the popularity of these exhibitions were a clear sign of the populace's excitement and desire to show their dedication and connection to the Soviet Union. Whether this was truly the case or not cannot be determined. Certainly many of the objects did lack any overt political content. Nevertheless, the Berlin National Front chose to believe that creating gifts in this way provided East Germans with a new way of thinking about their relationship to the Soviet Union, thus allowing them to "reconstruct the 'historic station' of our brotherhood, display our political, economic, cultural and military connections, and portray political achievements of our countries and personal experiences."<sup>334</sup> After seeing these outstanding results, Berlin was satisfied that its ideological and pedagogical goals had been achieved.

From a creative perspective, Berlin thought the artistic standard of many of these exhibits had been very high overall. The objects submitted encompassed all genres: from fine arts to applied arts, textiles and metalworks, carving and woodworks.<sup>335</sup> The only criticism Berlin ventured about the artistry was that in many different *Kreise*, ideology did not seem to feature as prominently as it could have in many of the works. Specifically, Berlin complained that "the

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<sup>333</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1031, "Information über die Kreisaustellungen 'Meinem besten Freund' anlässlich des 60. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," undated (likely Nov 1977), p. 2- 4.

<sup>334</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1031, "Information über die Kreisaustellungen 'Meinem besten Freund' anlässlich des 60. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," undated (likely Nov 1977), p. 3.

<sup>335</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1031, "Information über die Kreisaustellungen 'Meinem besten Freund' anlässlich des 60. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," undated (likely Nov 1977), p. 3-4.

ideas of the October Revolution and our relations with the Soviet Union are often portrayed superficially and are not completely mastered artistically.”<sup>336</sup> Nevertheless, the competition was an unparalleled success in that it had attracted people of all ages and of all social classes. The only real drawback in this regard from Berlin’s perspective was that professional artist groups had not been as interested in participating because of the lack of time that they would have had to prepare a good work of art. Many professionals ultimately felt their artistic abilities would have been wasted on this exhibition.<sup>337</sup> Despite such concerns, the exhibition juries ensured that the kitsch was weeded out as the art and craftworks moved up through the levels of the competition. Those “gifts” that were judged as not adequate enough for the *Bezirk* and *Kreis* exhibitions were distributed directly to Soviet citizens on trips to the Soviet Union, sent to pen pals, given to members of the Soviet army stationed nearby, or even given out by delegations to partner cities like Pskow in the Soviet Union.<sup>338</sup>

The National Front was of the opinion that if the people had been given even more time to prepare for the exhibitions, they would have been able to create even better objects of even higher quality.<sup>339</sup> For National Front organizers learned that an artistic project like this had the potential to uncover the previously untapped potential of ordinary people. This discovery came as a surprise to many organizers, especially for Schwerin *Bezirk* Secretary Smolni, who commented that he was particularly surprised at the creativity in his area despite the absence of the traditional

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<sup>336</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1031, “Information über die Kreisaustellungen ‘Meinem besten Freund’ anlässlich des 60. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” undated (likely Nov 1977), p. 5.

<sup>337</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1031, “Information über die Kreisaustellungen ‘Meinem besten Freund’ anlässlich des 60. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” undated (likely Nov 1977), p. 6.

<sup>338</sup> BArch DY 6/1030, report from Mühlmann, Rudolstadt Kreissekretär, July 1977, p. 1-2.

<sup>339</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1031, “Information über die Kreisaustellungen ‘Meinem besten Freund’ anlässlich des 60. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” undated (likely Nov 1977), p. 7-8.

hand-working traditions that were common in other regions.<sup>340</sup> Smolni also felt that this competition had resonated so well amongst the people due to its accessible title of “Meinem besten Freund,” which had encouraged people to feel personally compelled to join in.<sup>341</sup> Indeed, many people actually crafted their “gifts” for specific Soviet people and requested that they personally participate in the objects’ distribution after the exhibition was over in order to maintain that level of personal contact. This does not mean that they were in any way convinced of the ideological underpinnings, however: these participants may have merely wanted to make a handcraft for friends who happened to be Soviets. Still, others claimed to have felt compelled to participate out of a sense of patriotism or loyalty to the Soviet Union (which was of course the real motivator the National Front hoped people would have in participating). As one woman from the town of Frohnau in *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt told organizers: “although such a gift is by no means comparable to all that the Soviet Union has done for the liberation and rebuilding of our country, it is an expression of our most sincere thanks.”<sup>342</sup>

One undeniable achievement of this initiative was that it helped further develop the connections between different mass organizations and committees. Many National Front committees, in particular, were excited about this initiative and held many talks discussing the underpinnings of this *Aktion*, which piqued the interest of many people, collectives, and clubs. Furthermore, by involving this large a number of people and committees, Berlin thought the end

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<sup>340</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1031, Schwerin National Front Bezirksekretär Smolni to Abteilung Information at the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “Abschlussbericht zur Gemeinschaftsaktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” November 23, 1977, p. 2.

<sup>341</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1031, Schwerin National Front Bezirksekretär Smolni to Abteilung Information at the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “Abschlussbericht zur Gemeinschaftsaktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” November 23, 1977, p. 2.

<sup>342</sup> BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt Bezirksekretär Oehme to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in Berlin, “Information über die Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” July 4, 1977, p. 3. See also BArch DY 6/1031, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt Bezirksekretär Stellvertreter Franke to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in Berlin, “Abschlußbericht zur Aktion ‘Meinem besten Freund’ im Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt,” August 29, 1977, p. 1-2.

result could be seen as one of extending the reach and political effectiveness of the National Front committees in general.<sup>343</sup> Thus, the conclusion to which the Berlin National Front came was that maintaining these connections would ensure a strong influence on the aesthetic training of the citizenry, especially if they organized similar initiatives in the future.<sup>344</sup> Furthermore, the National Front saw a way capitalize on this huge public interest by creating more residential hobby groups to ensure ordinary people could contribute to larger creative projects in their spare time, without having to join one of the larger associations (which they had complained required great time commitments).<sup>345</sup> It is likely that the benefit the National Front saw here was pedagogical: with even more people involved in producing cultural works, the National Front believed they stood a chance at maintaining their strong momentum in the lead up to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GDR (in two years' time) and beyond.

### ***Conclusion***

The high level of public interest and the high quality of the objects submitted for “Meinem besten Freund” in such a small space of time surprised everyone, organizers and the public alike. As always, organizational skill varied by region and even within the *Kreise* themselves. Although Berlin was quick to blame the *Kreise* for any lackluster participation results, if certain organizations or individuals did not want to participate, the National Front in Berlin did not compel them to do so. As was the case in other competitions, the example of “Meinem besten Freund” in 1977 tells us that the National Front, while a great organizing force,

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<sup>343</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1031, “Information über die Kreisaustellungen ‘Meinem besten Freund’ anlässlich des 60. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” undated (likely Nov 1977), p. 3-4.

<sup>344</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1031, “Information über die Kreisaustellungen ‘Meinem besten Freund’ anlässlich des 60. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution,” undated (likely Nov 1977), p. 6.

<sup>345</sup> BArch DY 6/ 1031, Schwerin National Front Bezirksekretär Smolni to Abteilung Information at the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “Abschlussbericht zur Gemeinschaftsaktion ‘Meinem besten Freund,’” November 23, 1977, p. 6.

ultimately did not have as much control over its constituent mass organizations (such as the DSF, People's Solidarity) as it desired. Indeed, communication between organizations was often spotty or even absent, and as a result, the lowest level organizing committees (often at the *Hausgemeinschaft* level), had no idea what they were supposed to be organizing or to which higher up committees they should be reporting.

Something that was within the *Kreis* secretariats' purview to control, however, were their responses to difficult situations and many showed impressive initiative. For example, *Kreis* Aue in *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt began directly communicating with the local mass organization committees as soon as it became clear the national organizational committees had left them in the dark. In another stroke of ingenuity, *Kreis* Perleberg discovered that by lowering its expectations and telling the populace it would accept any objects, it effectively changed the perception of the exhibition from one meant for professional artists into an exhibition accessible to all and spurred an outpouring of submissions. This demonstrates the mistake that some *Kreise* like Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land made in not recognizing the advantage in changing their frame of reference, as they continued to insist on receiving semi- or professionally-made works. However kitschy or poorly-made some of the initial submissions might have been, Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land should have realized that the *Kreis* juries were in place for this very reason: to ensure the poorest quality were not chosen to be forwarded on to represent the *Kreis* at the regional, state or national exhibitions, but also to ensure that everyone felt welcome to participate. Ultimately, decisions such as these show how vital the *Kreis* organizational committees were to the overall success of these competitions: they were a powerful enough organizing body that they often had direct contact with the Berlin National Front and Department of Culture, yet a small enough body that they still had enough direct oversight of the organizational efforts in the residential areas in order to affect the outcome of a competition.

## Celebrating GDR Socialism: the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the GDR



Figure 33. Badge with the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the GDR Logo, “Du, unsere Republik,” “You, Our Republic” (BArch DY 6/1039)

### “Du, Unsere Republik” “You, Our Republic (1979)

In May 1978, a mere six months after the end of the celebrations in honour of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution, National Front Vice-President Walter Kirchhoff began laying the groundwork for the next large anniversary in October 1979, the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Founding of the GDR. Kirchhoff wrote to the representatives of various National Front organizations such as the FDGB (the trade union), the DFD (Democratic Women’s League), SED Central Committee (ZK)’s Culture Department, the *Verband Bildender Künstler* (Association of Visual Artists) as well as the secretary of the Free German Youth (FDJ)’s central committee, Egon Krenz, asking them to meet and help organize this new *Gemeinschaftsaktion*. In his letter, Kirchhoff referenced the role each mass organization had played in the ultimate success of “Meinem besten Freund,” and asked that they participate again with a new initiative in the same vein, called “Du, unsere Republik,” “You, Our Republic.” This would be considered part of the economic plan for the year, falling under the general initiative umbrella of the “Mach mit!” (Join

in!) initiatives that asked people to donate time to building and creating beautification projects in their residential areas.<sup>346</sup>

The reason that the “Mach mit!” initiatives were necessary was due to the economic climate of the time: by now the GDR’s “golden years” were over and the state was massively in debt to the West. This became worse in the late 1970s, in part due to international events such as the world oil crises, but also because of the SED’s continued refusal to reform its ways and its strict adherence to its planned economy. Contributing to the growing crisis were Honecker’s generous social policies, through which the state subsidized everything from public transport, to housing, and even simple household items. Due to this focus on the present, there was little money left over to invest in infrastructure and the upkeep of cities and towns.<sup>347</sup> As a result, the National Front, framing it as an exercise in showing one’s pride in their socialist state, designed “Du, unsere Republik” in a bid to ensure towns and cities kept up appearances and decorated over the more fundamental problems, despite crumbling infrastructure.

The “Mach mit!” initiatives also served as evidence of identity creation. Having first been organized in 1968, at the same time as the new GDR constitution, Palmowski argues that the initiatives could be described as a training ground or “school” (as Ulbricht called it) that would demonstrate “socialist democracy in action” which would, in turn, help underscore the existence of the “new socialist citizens” in the new socialist nation. Palmowski writes that, “Join in! thus enabled a new quality of citizenship to emerge, which in turn led to a deeper love of Heimat and the socialist fatherland.”<sup>348</sup> In this sense then, participating in “Mach mit!” also allowed GDR citizens to develop feelings of responsibility “for society as a whole,” which of course a direct

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<sup>346</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Werner Kirchhoff, letter to Johanna Töpfer, Stellvertreter des Vorsitzenden des Bundesvorstandes des FDGB, May 31, 1978.

<sup>347</sup> Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 168.

<sup>348</sup> Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, 150-51.



attack on the “unhealthy individualism” of the capitalist West.<sup>349</sup> For, as Palmowski concludes, the SED wanted East Germans to “ensure that individual commitment to the socialist Heimat went beyond the public transcript and was appropriated in behaviour, thought, and attitude.”<sup>350</sup>

The appeal for public participation in “Du, unsere Republik,” in July 1978 asked East Germans to come together to creatively decorate social institutions such as veterans’ clubs, youth rooms, health clinics, kindergartens, house clubs, restaurants and small galleries, as well as recreational areas such as green spaces in residential areas, parks, sport fields and playgrounds. The appeal also asked visual artists, landscape designers, architects, artisans, and designers to play a leading advisory role in bringing these projects together. The reward for East Germans who helped with this initiative, in addition to “brightening” up their socialist state as a whole, would be the receipt of honorary distinctions at the competition’s closing ceremonies in Berlin on October 6, 1979.<sup>351</sup>

The reason the state highlighted the possibility of a reward for participating in the competition was due to the complicated issue of finding skilled volunteers for the projects. Although, as Molly Johnson points out, “the state appealed to its citizens to inspire their participation, often downplaying socialist ideology and relying instead on familiar appeals to civic and historical pride, material desire, and individual and group psychology.”<sup>352</sup> However, this did not always work out because it was difficult to find materials, tools, and volunteers. For example, collectives did not want to share their already overused equipment, while skilled

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<sup>349</sup> Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, 151.

<sup>350</sup> Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, 152.

<sup>351</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Pamphlet by the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in partnership with Zentralrat der FDJ, Ministerium für Kultur, et al. “Volkskunstinitiative IX. Parteitag ‘Du, unsere Republik.’ Aufruf zur künstlerischen Gestaltung von Objekten des ‘Mach mit!’ Wettbewerbs zu Ehren des 30. Jahrestages der Gründung der DDR,” July 1978.

<sup>352</sup> Johnson, Molly Wilkinson. *Training Socialist Citizens: Sports and the State in East Germany* (Leiden; Boston Brill, 2008), p. 133.

tradesmen did not want to volunteer their time because they were already overworked and underpaid, while those workers in cooperatives wanted to be paid for their time.<sup>353</sup> Oftentimes, volunteers were expected to donate their own materials as well or try to raise money to buy the materials.<sup>354</sup> For reasons such as these, Palmowski writes that in early years of the beautification campaigns in the late 1960s, there was more focus on cleaning projects because it was cheaper than finding construction materials and would cause less shortages elsewhere in the economic plan. By the 1970s, while the competitions did shift to more expensive construction projects, the state was not always pleased as many people wanted to create spaces like swimming pools, which were expensive to maintain.<sup>355</sup> In the end, both Johnson and Palmowski conclude that volunteering for these building projects “reinforced pre-existing communal, local and regional ties”<sup>356</sup> which resulted in “heightened local pride ... rather than the greater loyalty to socialism that the state desired.”<sup>357</sup>

One reason Walter Kirchoff began the planning for this *Aktion* so far ahead of time was in response to the common criticism that professional artists had had of the “Meinem besten Freund” initiative of 1977: that in order for them to produce high-quality objects that met their professional standards, they needed, in some cases, up to eighteen months to prepare. Accordingly, the 1977 *Aktion*’s one-month preparation timeline had proven itself better suited to amateur artists. The National Front repeatedly reminded their *Bezirk* and *Kreis* level committees this time around that, “Du, unsere Republik,” was to be about emphasizing quality over quantity. In order to create projects to this standard, the *Kreise* were thus to begin planning and organizing

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<sup>353</sup> Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, 161.

<sup>354</sup> Wilkinson, *Training Socialist Citizens*, 132-33.

<sup>355</sup> Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, 161.

<sup>356</sup> Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, 179.

<sup>357</sup> Johnson, Molly Wilkinson. *Training Socialist Citizens: Sports and the State in East Germany* (Leiden; Boston Brill, 2008), 133.

throughout the summer and fall of 1977, a full year before the GDR's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Kirchhoff and others at the National Front had clearly read and absorbed the lower level committees' critiques of the previous anniversary.

Despite the long lead time, the National Front in Berlin was determined to keep up general interest throughout the entire year and a half of planning and eventual execution. As with the 1977 initiative, in order to ensure regional committees were preparing adequately, the Berlin National Front continuously sent out high-level representatives to observe their progress. After assessing the efforts in all of the *Bezirke*, Kurt Pfister of the Cultural Department concluded in September, 1979 that all of them had indeed forwarded the appeal from Kirchhoff to the relevant lower-level organizations. In addition, Pfister found that most *Kreise* had created task forces to help their secretariats with organizing the projects and sharing responsibilities. In the case of the *Bezirke* of Magdeburg, Halle and Rostock, they had organized this all at the *Bezirk* level.<sup>358</sup>

As had been the case in previous initiatives, the responsibility for carrying out "Du, unsere Republik," lay with the *Kreis* secretariats of the National Front and their associated Departments of Culture. Pfister found the working relationships between *Kreis* secretariats and their Cultural Departments to be varied, but overall good. He commented that these organizations had had years of experience working together in the past: for example, they collaborated at a knowledge and skills exchange in 1975 and had also worked together on "Meinem besten Freund" in 1977.<sup>359</sup> Overall, Pfister was very impressed with the efforts made by all of the partners to reach out to artist collectives, individuals, professional artists, and architects,

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<sup>358</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Kurt Pfister, "Zwischenbericht über den Stand der Aktion 'Du, unsere Republik,'" September 1, 1978, p. 1.

<sup>359</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Kurt Pfister, "Zwischenbericht über den Stand der Aktion 'Du, unsere Republik,'" September 1, 1978, p. 2.

believing this would mark the beginning of new working relationships that could be used to improve cultural life in their socialist home.<sup>360</sup>

Pfister did observe some potential problems in the regions, however, such as in as the *Stadtbezirk* Berlin-Mitte and in the *Kreis* Magdeburg Süd/Ost, where the secretariats had attempted to shift all of their work onto the Departments of Culture (and were later ordered by their superiors in the National Front to end this).<sup>361</sup> Pfister also noted that some *Kreise* (like Zerbst and Magdeburg-North) were trying to take shortcuts by simply repeating “Meinem besten Freund,” while other *Kreise* misunderstood the initiative and only sought the input of professional artists and not any other professionals. However, he pointed out that most *Kreise* understood that from the Berlin National Front’s perspective, their main role, in addition to formulating themes and acting in a leadership role, was to recruit people to produce highly creative and excellent quality work. As underscored before, Pfister told the *Kreise* that for the National Front, achieving quality was far more important than quantity.<sup>362</sup>

While the types of projects that the National Front suggested varied, the themes on which many art installations were based were not. The themes were very patriotic, including titles such as “our socialist homeland,” the “anti-fascist resistance,” “German-Soviet Friendship,” “happiness and security of women and their families in socialism,” “youth and leisure,” “anti-imperialist solidarity,” and “space flights of the GDR and the Soviet Union.”<sup>363</sup> The National Front wrote that the final products were expected to prove “how our homeland is continually

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<sup>360</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Kurt Pfister, “Zwischenbericht über den Stand der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik,’” September 1, 1978, p. 2.

<sup>361</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Kurt Pfister, “Zwischenbericht über den Stand der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik,’” September 1, 1978, p. 1.

<sup>362</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Kurt Pfister, “Zwischenbericht über den Stand der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik,’” September 1, 1978, p. 3-4.

<sup>363</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Abteilung Kultur, “Abschlußeinschätzung der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik’ zur künstlerischen Gestaltung gesellschaftlicher Einrichtungen,” October 26, 1979, p. 6.

becoming more beautiful through our ‘mass cultural work.’”<sup>364</sup> Projects such as these, the National Front continued, demonstrated East Germans’ “optimistic outlook on life” and willingness to take part in social activities.

While most of the projects amounted to smaller decorating projects, the *Kreis* of Waren/Müritz in the *Bezirk* of Neubrandenburg undertook a large expansion of an animal park belonging to the Müritz-Museum, including reorganizing its layout and adding more native animals. Given that the museum was an important one in the area, acting as a major source of knowledge about nature conservation and numbering 100 000 visitors a year, the project was a massive undertaking that required collaboration with Rostock’s animal park. Since the finished park was to be a peaceful relaxation spot for the residents of the city, the organizers discussed all aspects of the expansion beforehand with the locals, including the proposed creation of an exhibition hall and an aquarium for native fish species.<sup>365</sup>

Smaller, more typical projects of “Du, unsere Republik” included the creation of a small gallery in Seelow (in *Bezirk* Frankfurt) with an accompanying exhibition that showcased the everyday life of the people in the *Kreis*. In the youth club house in Altenburg, club rooms, entrance ways, and halls were decorated with photos taken by the *Kulturbund*, as well as with ceramic works created for the occasion by a professional studio.<sup>366</sup> In Friedrichshain in Berlin, groups of schoolchildren led by professional artists made paintings on the themes of plants and animals for the hallways and stairways of two secondary schools, while also creating glass drawings to decorate the windows of another school. In Berlin-Treptow, workers from a

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<sup>364</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Abteilung Kultur, “Abschlußeinschätzung der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik’ zur künstlerischen Gestaltung gesellschaftlicher Einrichtungen,” October 26, 1979, p. 6.

<sup>365</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Inge Kießig, Abteilung Kultur, “Operativer Einsatz im Bezirk Neubrandenburg am 21.09.1978,” September 25, 1978, p. 1.

<sup>366</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Pressestelle beim Sekretariat des Nationalrates der National Front der DDR, “Presse information: Erfolgreicher Verlauf der Volkskunstinitiative IX. Parteitag ‘Du, unsere Republik,’” April, 1979, p. 2.

collective created metalworks with motifs from the life of communist hero Herta Geffke and presented it to a secondary school called “Herta Geffke” in Berlin-Treptow.<sup>367</sup> In Schwerin, workers’ collectives of ceramic, enamel and textile workers decorated a pub for locals.<sup>368</sup> At an Inn in Jessen in *Bezirk* Cottbus, a ceramics and engineering technical school, under the direction of a professional artist, decorated a wall space of 30m<sup>2</sup> with motifs from the surrounding countryside. This last project was one an entire community participated in, with almost everyone in the area also helping to decorate the hall.<sup>369</sup>

Although project lengths often varied, dependent upon the size of the undertaking and availability of materials and labour, a good example of an average timeline comes from *Kreis* Wolmirstedt in *Bezirk* Magdeburg. In this *Kreis*, two different projects involved creating a decorative wall installation for two different kindergarten and daycare centres, to be completed between the beginning of June and mid-September, with a budget of 3000 Marks for the first and 1500 Marks for the second. In another example, a youth club received a decorative wall installation at a cost of 1000 Marks, displayed from mid-August to the end of October 1979.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Pressestelle beim Sekretariat des Nationalrates der National Front der DDR, “Presse information: Erfolgreicher Verlauf der Volkskunstinitiative IX. Parteitag ‘Du, unsere Republik,’” April, 1979, p. 4.

<sup>368</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Abteilung Kultur, “Abschlußeinschätzung der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik’ zur künstlerischen Gestaltung gesellschaftlicher Einrichtungen,” October 26, 1979, p. 3.

<sup>369</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Abteilung Kultur, “Abschlußeinschätzung der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik’ zur künstlerischen Gestaltung gesellschaftlicher Einrichtungen,” October 26, 1979, p. 4.

<sup>370</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Rehbein, member of Rates für Kultur und Erholung and Liermann, member of Kreisausschuß der Nationalen Front Wolmirstedt. Report “Maßnahmeplan” October 30, 1979.



*Figure 34. Example from Neubrandenburg: showcasing a colourful street in Neubrandenburg that was now only for pedestrians. These houses from the 1950s were renovated, with the green space landscaped with flowers. (BArch DY 6/1039. Lothar Gerecke, "Volkskunst macht die Heimat schöner," Neues Deutschland (likely regional issue) October 4, 1979.)*

### **Regional Results**

The National Front reported "Du, unsere Republik" as having been a resounding success. They believed that not only had this initiative deepened political convictions, but also made great strides towards the "beautifying of their socialist Heimat," leaving people feeling more "at ease" in their residential areas.<sup>371</sup> "In all *Kreisen*," the National Front wrote in their final report,

we observed a tendency to create complex projects. A project was considered completed only once its surroundings became a picture of beauty, order and cleanliness. Many citizens have now become involved. The pride in what they have achieved has grown and resulted in a desire to actively continue such work in their residential areas.<sup>372</sup>

The National Front noted that 28 538 people took part in the initiative, of which 527 were professional artists, while 15 782 were amateurs. In total, people took part in 2245 projects at 493

<sup>371</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Abteilung Kultur, "Abschlußeinschätzung der Aktion 'Du, unsere Republik' zur künstlerischen Gestaltung gesellschaftlicher Einrichtungen," October 26, 1979, p. 2.

<sup>372</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Abteilung Kultur, "Abschlußeinschätzung der Aktion 'Du, unsere Republik' zur künstlerischen Gestaltung gesellschaftlicher Einrichtungen," October 26, 1979, p. 5.

cultural institutions, 168 youth clubs, 395 kindergartens, 339 health sector buildings, 232 educational buildings, 73 memorial sites, 128 leisure and sporting areas, 128 commercial enterprises such as 95 restaurants/pubs, and 261 places in the “Wohnumwelt” or home environment.<sup>373</sup> People who donated their time were of different ages and working backgrounds and the National Front believed one of the major outcomes of this initiative was ordinary people developing new friendships – including contacts with artists – which they hoped would further encourage cultural life in residential areas.<sup>374</sup>

Despite this overall success, experiences varied regionally. For example, Berlin received much assistance from collective clubhouses and culture houses, who, in many cases, were able to draw on their own organizations’ funds to help further the projects. They had even organized a knowledge/experience exchange between several groups in November 1978 so that they could trade skills and experiences to help better organize this particular initiative.<sup>375</sup> Berlin was also able to maintain effective contact with the press, with all of the Berlin daily newspapers dutifully reporting on the projects to their readership.<sup>376</sup> For its part, *Bezirk* Cottbus could also report good communication between the *Bezirk* and its *Kreis* secretariats at meetings, as well as good support from members of Cultural Departments of the *Bezirk*, the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF), the Democratic Women’s League (DFD), and the Association of Visual Artists (*Bildenden Künstler*) even though other partner National Front organizations in Cottbus showed

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<sup>373</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, report from Kurt Pfister of the Abteilung Kultur at the Nationalrat der Nationalen Front in Berlin to Eberhard Fuhrmann at the Ministerium für Kultur, October 4, 1979, p. 2-3.

<sup>374</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Abteilung Kultur, “Abschlußeinschätzung der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik’ zur künstlerischen Gestaltung gesellschaftlicher Einrichtungen,” October 26, 1979, p. 3.

<sup>375</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Sekretär Schumann of Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR Bezirksausschuß Berlin, report to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “Welche Ergebnisse wurden in der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik’ zur künstlerischen Gestaltung von gesellschaftlichen Einrichtungen erreicht?” September 18, 1979, p. 3.

<sup>376</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Sekretär Schumann of Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR Bezirksausschuß Berlin, report to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, “Welche Ergebnisse wurden in der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik’ zur künstlerischen Gestaltung von gesellschaftlichen Einrichtungen erreicht?” September 18, 1979, p. 3.



little to no interest at all.<sup>377</sup> Meanwhile, the *Bezirk* of Halle secretariat attributed the successes in their *Kreise* to the *Kreis* secretariat and Cultural Department's strict control over their projects, especially in communications between different organizations. Uniquely, Halle organized task forces at both the *Kreis* and *Bezirk* levels, which included members of most National Front mass organizations.<sup>378</sup>

In the case of *Bezirk* Neubrandenburg, the secretariat attributed their success to a large group of people having been focused on "achieving the political goals" of the initiative, given that many Neubrandenburg *Kreise* had arranged their projects as part of the larger "Mach mit!" ("Join In!") initiative.<sup>379</sup> In the entire *Bezirk*, 2015 people had worked on 208 projects, which was 140 projects more than they had originally planned. Neubrandenburg reported its best results had been achieved in *Kreise* where the secretariat understood the need to address their appeals to a wide section of population, in particular, targeting those who were part of cultural groups such as the Democratic Women's League (DFD) or educational groups. For example, the members of the Democratic Women's League (DFD) consistently supported the secretariat's activities and would often work on group projects in kindergartens.<sup>380</sup> In direct contrast to Cottbus's secretariat, which thought they would have been more successful if they had had more professional artist

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<sup>377</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Jacobi of the National Front Bezirksausschuß Cottbus, report on "Du unsere Republik" to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Sektor Information. September 17, 1979, p. 1-2.

<sup>378</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Bezirksausschuß Halle (Saale), "Information: Welche Ergebnisse wurden in der Aktion 'Du, unsere Republik' zur künstlerischen Gestaltung von gesellschaftlichen Einrichtungen erreicht," report to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Information. September 7, 1979, p. 3.

<sup>379</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Neubrandenburg National Front Bezirk Secretariat member Hoppenrath, report to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Kultur, "Information zur Aktion 'Du, unsere Republik,'" September 14, 1979, p. 1-2.

<sup>380</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Neubrandenburg National Front Bezirk Secretariat member Hoppenrath, report to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Kultur, "Information zur Aktion 'Du, unsere Republik,'" September 14, 1979, p. 3.

groups involved, Neubrandenburg's view was that they were ultimately more successful because they did not ask professional artists and groups to work on this initiative.<sup>381</sup>

While some of Neubrandenburg's *Kreise* like Neustrelitz and Strasburg had difficulties getting started on their projects, shifting the majority of their planning and organizational work into 1979, a more serious problem occurred when other *Kreise* completely misunderstood their mandate. Some learned nothing from 1977's initiative and decided the project was something in which only groups of very talented artists could participate. As a result, some areas did not even bother with the initiatives because they assumed that "we do not have those kinds of [artistic] people here."<sup>382</sup> These kinds of assumptions led to places like *Kreis* Ückermünde organizing only one project, or *Kreis* Templin organizing only three projects. The reason for such dismal results in these cases was because it was mostly the *Kreis* committees and their representatives who did the groundwork, so any misunderstanding at this crucial level would lead to complete failure, as local committees rarely took on these organizing responsibilities.<sup>383</sup>

The *Kreise* had a better chance of success if all the societal organizations were working together right from the beginning and took on their own responsibilities. Specifically, one area of Neubrandenburg that understood the importance of working together was *Kreis* Röbel, the smallest *Kreis* in the GDR. Not only did the Cultural Department of the *Kreis* and secretariat work well together, but they also created a task force that included the two professional artists of the *Kreis*, a painter named Schinko and a stonemason named Wagner. This small *Kreis* ended up

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<sup>381</sup> See BArch DY 6/1039, Jacobi of the National Front Bezirksausschuß Cottbus, report on "Du unsere Republik" to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Sektor Information, September 17, 1979, p. 1-2.

<sup>382</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Neubrandenburg National Front Bezirk Secretariat member Hoppenrath, report to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Kultur, "Information zur Aktion 'Du, unsere Republik,'" September 14, 1979, p. 1-2.

<sup>383</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Neubrandenburg National Front Bezirk Secretariat member Hoppenrath, report to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Kultur, "Information zur Aktion 'Du, unsere Republik,'" September 14, 1979, p. 1-2.

creating four projects that included arranging a memorial area for the “victims of fascism,” putting up displays in the youth clubs, and refitting a promenade.<sup>384</sup>

Meanwhile, the *Bezirk* of Karl-Marx-Stadt appeared to have absorbed many lessons from their experiences in “Meinem besten Freund,” including the importance of the *Bezirke* providing clear guidance to the *Kreise*. There was a difference in the quality of the work in the various *Kreise*, however, which was evident not only in the choice of projects and way they carried them out, but also in the variety of social forces that participated. Some were rather large projects: for example, in Tannenberg, (*Kreis* Annaberg) one project consisted of variety of groups helping to create free-standing plastic sculptures in a park.<sup>385</sup> Other *Kreise* struggled with getting their projects started: for example, while *Kreise* like Aue, Flöha and Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land had been able to quickly decide on their project plans, including which artist groups would help, others like Marienberg delayed choosing their projects, and some others, like Oelsnitz, were slow to connect with collectives and artists.<sup>386</sup> In other *Kreise* such as Werdau and Plauen, where the secretariats were very slow to make concrete partnerships and plans, Cultural Department member Inge Kießig, who was evaluating progress on the projects from Berlin, recommended that a representative be sent out from the Berlin National Front to personally visit the *Kreis* secretariats and help move plans forward.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Inge Kießig, Abteilung Kultur, “Operativer Einsatz im Bezirk Neubrandenburg am 21.09.1978” September 25, 1978, p. 3-4.

<sup>385</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt Bezirksekretär Georg Oehme, “Kurzinformation zur Entwicklung der ‘Volkskunstinitiative IX. Parteitag’ unter dem Motto ‘Du, unsere Republik’ zur künstlerischen Ausgestaltung von ‘Mach-mit!’ Objekten zu Ehren des 30. Jahrestages der Gründung unserer Republik,” November 20, 1978, p. 4.

<sup>386</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, National Front Karl-Marx-Stadt Bezirksekretär Georg Oehme, “Kurzinformation zur Entwicklung der ‘Volkskunstinitiative IX. Parteitag’ unter dem Motto ‘Du, unsere Republik’ zur künstlerischen Ausgestaltung von ‘Mach-mit!’ Objekten zu Ehren des 30. Jahrestages der Gründung unserer Republik,” November 20, 1978, p. 2-3.

<sup>387</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Inge Kießig, Abteilung Kultur, “Operativer Einsatz im Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt am 18./19.10.1978,” October 23, 1978, p. 8-9.

Kießig herself made visits to various *Kreise* in order to provide the National Front in Berlin with an insider's view as to the reasons for successes and failures in the different regions. On a visit to *Kreis* Flöha, which, in her opinion had shown great initiative with their organizing and communication abilities, *Kreis* committee member Jankowski told Kießig that not only had they organized task forces on the *Kreis* secretariat level, but they had also created additional smaller task forces representing the heads of art collectives and the mayors of the towns, who then chose and organized the projects. Representatives of organizations like the *Kreis* trade union (FDGB) and cultural department, as well as the area newspaper, the *Freie Presse*, were also invited to the most important meetings of the task forces.<sup>388</sup> In another *Kreis*, Marga Zais, *Kreis* secretary of Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land, reported that while her secretariat had created a task force to carry out the initiative and arranged many talks with artists and other organizational representatives to spread the word, this *Kreis* still faced many challenges. Firstly, she felt that the creative potential of the *Kreis* was largely located in the urban areas, and secondly, she found it difficult to find any money to fund these projects. In the end, Karl-Marx-Stadt/Land's task forces did finally settle on a variety of projects, including designing a fountain and wall decorations for a retirement home, designing a mosaic for an entrance to a school extension, creating another sculptured fountain, setting up a memorial, designing scarves for a youth festival, commissioning paintings of veterans for a clubhouse, and commissioning a playwright to write a play about the social initiatives undertaken in their *Kreis* over the past 30 years.<sup>389</sup>

Out of all the *Bezirke* in the GDR, Gera appears to have struggled the most with “Du, unsere Republik,” likely because it failed to comprehend what Berlin's goals for this initiative

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<sup>388</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Inge Kießig, Abteilung Kultur, “Operativer Einsatz im Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt am 18./19.10.1978,” October 23, 1978, p. 2-3.

<sup>389</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Inge Kießig, Abteilung Kultur, “Operativer Einsatz im Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt am 18./19.10.1978,” October 23, 1978, p. 7-8.

were. Gera's secretariat criticized Berlin for expecting the *Bezirke* to organize such a large initiative (especially in an 'election year'), which simply overwhelmed the secretariat. While the Gera *Bezirk* secretariat had informed all of the social organizations' representatives about the initiative, it does not appear to have resonated very well. Sharing responsibilities for organizing some of the projects just led to uneven results, especially in comparison to the way in which "Meinem besten Freund" had been organized previously.<sup>390</sup> Several organizations in some of Gera's *Kreise* did not carry out their responsibilities at all, while in other *Kreise* it was the Association of Gardeners, Settlers, and Animal Breeders (VKSK) and the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF) that did much of the organizing, while in still other *Kreise*, the work was carried by the Free German Youth (FDJ) or the FDGB (trade union).<sup>391</sup> Success was largely dependent on how many professional and amateur artists were available in a *Kreis*, but many *Kreise* suffered from a lack of materials, such as, for example, coloured glass. Gera's secretariat thought their best performing *Kreis* was Jena-Stadt, which completed a mere 14 projects.<sup>392</sup> Although *Bezirk* Gera had registered 154 projects, many were not finished in time for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in October 1979.<sup>393</sup> For its part, the Berlin secretariat attributed the lacklustre results to Gera "misunderstanding" the layout of the initiative and having unrealistic expectations of the projects (a fact which had caused other *Kreise* to fail in 1977 but which they had learned from by 1979).<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Gera Bezirkssekretär Anhalt, "Information: Du, unsere Republik" to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, undated, p. 6.

<sup>391</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Gera Bezirkssekretär Anhalt, "Information: Du, unsere Republik" to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, undated, p. 6.

<sup>392</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Gera Bezirkssekretär Anhalt, "Information: Du, unsere Republik" to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, undated, p. 6.

<sup>393</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Gera Bezirkssekretär Anhalt, "Information: Du, unsere Republik" to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, undated, p. 7.

<sup>394</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Gera Bezirkssekretär Anhalt, "Information: Du, unsere Republik" to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, undated, p. 6-7.

## ***Conclusion***

The National Front concluded from the results of “Du, unsere Republik,” that East Germans desired more competitions to do with art and culture. That the originally planned 1400 projects were exceeded by 800 to achieve a total of 2200 projects demonstrated for the National Front that not only was there was a need and desire for art and cultural projects, but that the regional National Front committees had succeeded in their political goal of keeping up interest in the projects over the course of the year. This also proved, the Berlin National Front was convinced, that its change in strategy from 1977, where they failed to provide adequate preparation time, had had real results. Despite this overall success, however, there were still differences in the quality, scope, and participation in the projects across the country. In some *Kreise* and *Bezirke*, the individuals and collectives working on the projects received very little help (and in some cases, none at all) from their sister regional National Front social organizations (like the DSF). In other *Kreise*, collaboration between the *Kreis* secretariats and the *Kreis* Cultural Departments could be strained at times. In many of these cases, Berlin had to get involved to mediate between the organizations.<sup>395</sup> At the same time, the national press in Berlin did not always have the best communication strategy with the *Kreise*, for secretariats often did not provide Berlin with sufficient information to publish stories in the national papers. The result was that Berlin often had to write back many times asking for more details.<sup>396</sup>

Other struggles facing the majority of *Kreis* secretariats included shortages in building and decorating materials like brushes, textiles, or colours which could result in delays to the

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<sup>395</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Abteilung Kultur, “Abschlußeinschätzung der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik’ zur künstlerischen Gestaltung gesellschaftlicher Einrichtungen,” October 26, 1979, p. 7-8.

<sup>396</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Abteilung Kultur, “Abschlußeinschätzung der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik’ zur künstlerischen Gestaltung gesellschaftlicher Einrichtungen,” October 26, 1979, p. 9.

projects. As in other initiatives, another major challenge for organizers was encouraging public participation. The *Bezirk* secretariat of Neubrandenburg cynically suspected, for example, that in the case of various park projects run by the VKSK, people were less motivated by the political meaning underpinning the projects (as the National Front hoped) than they were by the possibility of their park being awarded the title “state recognized leisure area.”<sup>397</sup> This self-interest was also evident in *Bezirk* Leipzig, which reported that the residents of the *Kreise* were most willing to participate in the competitions if the chosen projects led to better living and working conditions, especially the improvement and beautification of their immediate surroundings.<sup>398</sup>

Despite these challenges, however, the National Front remained convinced that collaborative work was an important factor in the overall success of the initiative. Going forward, the National Front hoped to continue with these kinds of beautification projects, especially for the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Liberation from Fascism in 1980. Indeed, Berlin wanted these and related projects such as “Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden -- mach mit!” to continue as ongoing activities. Berlin thought that, by doing this, the regional National Front committees could encourage even more people to participate, especially if they began regularly organizing skills and knowledge exchanges. In order to keep up interest in volunteering, Berlin concluded, all organizations would need to maintain their close contacts with each other, especially those associated with amateur and professional artists’ organizations.<sup>399</sup> Most important of all, however, the heavily-indebted state desperately needed these kind of initiatives to continue in

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<sup>397</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Neubrandenburg National Front Bezirk Secretariat member Hoppenrath, report to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abteilung Kultur, “Information zur Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik,’” September 14, 1979, p. 3.

<sup>398</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, National Front Bezirkssekretär Hoffmann of Leipzig to Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Abteilung Information, “Information zum Stand der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik,’” November 22, 1978, p. 5.

<sup>399</sup> BArch DY 6/1039, Abteilung Kultur “Abschlußeinschätzung der Aktion ‘Du, unsere Republik’ zur künstlerischen Gestaltung gesellschaftlicher Einrichtungen,” October 26, 1979, p. 9-11.

order to keep up appearances domestically and internationally, for the state simply could not afford to do so without all of the East Germans' "volunteer" work.



## Celebrating Socialism, 1979-1989: The final decade



Figure 35. Caption: “Our cleared-up garden: previously this was just a backyard, but now it is a nice shadowy place to sit under the trees” ( “Das Haus in dem wir wohnen” *Berliner Zeitung*, August 1, 1979 p. 8)

In 1979, in the aftermath of the successful 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the GDR initiative “Du, unsere Republik,” the National Front decided that the “Join in!” (“Mach mit!”) initiatives, first begun in 1969, would continue indefinitely. The reason for this was due to a housing shortage that had become “a most pressing social problem.”<sup>400</sup> Given the increasingly bad economic situation, it was helpful to the state both economically and pedagogically if East Germans donated their own time to fixing up their residential areas. It was economically beneficial because the state would not have to raise funds it did not have for these improvement projects. It was also pedagogically relevant, the state believed, for people to donate time to a project from which they, their families, and neighbours could benefit, and in which they could feel pride and ownership. The popularity of local activities over more high-culture ones (dedicated to showing the Soviet-

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<sup>400</sup> Sigtraut Finzelberg, “Ein Wohnungsbauprogramm von historischer Dimension wird in der DDR erfüllt,” *Berliner Zeitung*, September 9, 1989, p. 11.

East German bond, for example) was something which the National Front had come to expect. In addition, local activities had particular advantages over larger ones, for as Eli Rubin points out, *Hausgemeinschaft*-level activities, especially the “Mach mit!” competitions, helped “create a very real sense of community and *esprit d’corps* in most of the [apartment] buildings.”<sup>401</sup> In his study of one housing development on the outskirts of Berlin, Rubin found that many residents of the *Hausgemeinschaft* had been very interested in their building’s communal activities, though a greater number of people were interested in helping prepare for celebrations than were in helping with activities that involved manual labour.<sup>402</sup> Rubin notes that while one reason for this interest was fear of the Stasi, which was well-connected to many local National Front organizations, another major reason residents participated was due to “a certain amount of social pressure” from their neighbours.<sup>403</sup>

This social pressure amongst neighbours could also be found in larger residential districts. During one beautification campaign in Magdeburg in 1964, a group of residents from *Wohnbezirk* 138 angrily complained to their local National Front representative that while “almost every day, particularly on Saturday evenings and Sundays, one can observe hardworking people trying to realize these beautification projects,” their group did not see many leading local functionaries doing their part in the projects. This group of locals protested that even though the officials often possessed the nicest homes, they often left their yards in a complete state of disrepair, which in turn affected the aesthetic appeal of the whole neighbourhood:

If you look at the surroundings of these houses, you might get the impression that these people have been struck with blindness. They see – or they do not want to see – how hard

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<sup>401</sup> Rubin, *Amnesiopolis*, 111-12. Rubin goes so far as to describe the buildings as representing “a kind of Foucauldian microphysics of power or ‘governmentality,’ in which the National Front (or SED or Stasi, for that matter) needed not be visible or even consciously respected—the whole machinery of the buildings and the social structures bound up with them set in motion a group dynamic that naturally replicated the collectivist enforcement of the communist regime.”

<sup>402</sup> Rubin, *Amnesiopolis*, 111-12.

<sup>403</sup> Rubin, *Amnesiopolis*, 111-12.

people are working in our residential district. [Their] front gardens look like a nature reserve and the clothes line bars are nearly falling over because they can no longer carry the weight of the rust. [...] There are still comrades who refuse to help all because they are “overloaded with work.” [...] [So] they leave the dirty work to everyone else.<sup>404</sup>

Meanwhile, people such as retirees as well as skilled tradespeople who were carrying out the majority of the work, the group pointed out, were struggling to complete their beautification work as they often lacked the materials necessary to complete the job. Although clearly unhappy with the level of involvement by the local functionaries, residents still felt it was necessary to band together and carry out the work regardless. While this group from *Wohnbezirk* 138 did vent its frustrations to the National Front directly, it is unclear what, if any, satisfactory result was reached.

Nevertheless, even though at times leading to discord among neighbours, these beautification projects still had many positive benefits. Jan Palmowski argues that from the state’s perspective, these projects functioned as a form of identity creation, effectively showing that East Germans were “socialist citizens [who] were clean, orderly, respectful of property and mindful of each other’s safety.”<sup>405</sup> Thus, repeated active commitment to these public activities – like those of *Wohnbezirk* 138 – Palmowski maintains effectively “reinforced their ‘state consciousness (*Staatsbewußtsein*) and distinguished GDR citizens from West Germans.”<sup>406</sup>

In February 1980, National Front President Erich Correns and Vice-President Walter Kirchhoff framed the goal of residents using their own time to repair housing and local infrastructure as maintaining the momentum of the restoration and beautification initiatives that had been going on (in this form) for about a decade. While state-led building initiatives had existed from the founding of the country, the large community-led beautification projects had

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<sup>404</sup> BArch DY 6/2397, unsigned letter, “Es ist etwas los in Wohnbezirk 138!” Magdeburg, September 11, 1964.

<sup>405</sup> Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, 152.

<sup>406</sup> Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, 151.

begun in earnest in 1968 under the slogan of “Join in! Make our Cities and Communities more Beautiful!” “Schöner unsere Gemeinde und Städte – mach mit!” At that time, the National Front had wanted to remind the populace of what their communities had achieved 20 years after the war, but had also wanted to ensure continuous maintenance to smaller community-based buildings and residential projects, as well. Over a decade later, with the state deeply in debt, the National Front attempted to keep up these kinds of very necessary volunteer-driven projects. Thus, Correns pointed how beneficial it would be if everyone just kept working in the spirit of these past successful anniversary competitions:

We, too, as fellow campaigners of our great socialist people’s movement, see our future task as making a greater contribution to the realization of the conclusions of the Ninth Party Congress of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany through participating in the context of our now traditional competition “Join in! Make our Cities and Communities more Beautiful!” (“Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!”). That is why it is right and necessary for *Hausgemeinschaften* and families to hold personal conversations about continuing the great initiative and activities that the National Front’s committees and the many members have developed over the past year about taking part in the new tasks at a higher level.<sup>407</sup>

As in the past, the National Front proposed participating in these initiatives as a way of strengthening the republic, which in turn, was a central aspect of securing peace in the world. “Therefore,” Correns went on, “the National Front must act more strongly than before through their persuasive efforts (*Überzeugungsarbeit*), to ensure that all social organizations feel responsible for the realization of the economic plan.”<sup>408</sup> Of course, given the other dubious ways in which the state was desperately trying to find funds to service its debt, convincing communities to donate their time to helping each other and their community at large, was not

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<sup>407</sup> “Erfahrungen der Ausschüsse der Nationalen Front und worauf es jetzt ankommt,” *Neues Deutschland*, February 8, 1980, p. 3.

<sup>408</sup> “Erfahrungen der Ausschüsse der Nationalen Front und worauf es jetzt ankommt,” *Neues Deutschland*, February 8, 1980, p. 3.

necessarily a terrible idea in principle.<sup>409</sup> The problem was that the longer these initiatives went on, the less they seemed like one-off anniversary celebrations, and more like state-mandated volunteer work. Although socialist competitions had always been economically-based in reality, as time went on, these cultural competitions became more clearly about serving their economic purpose.

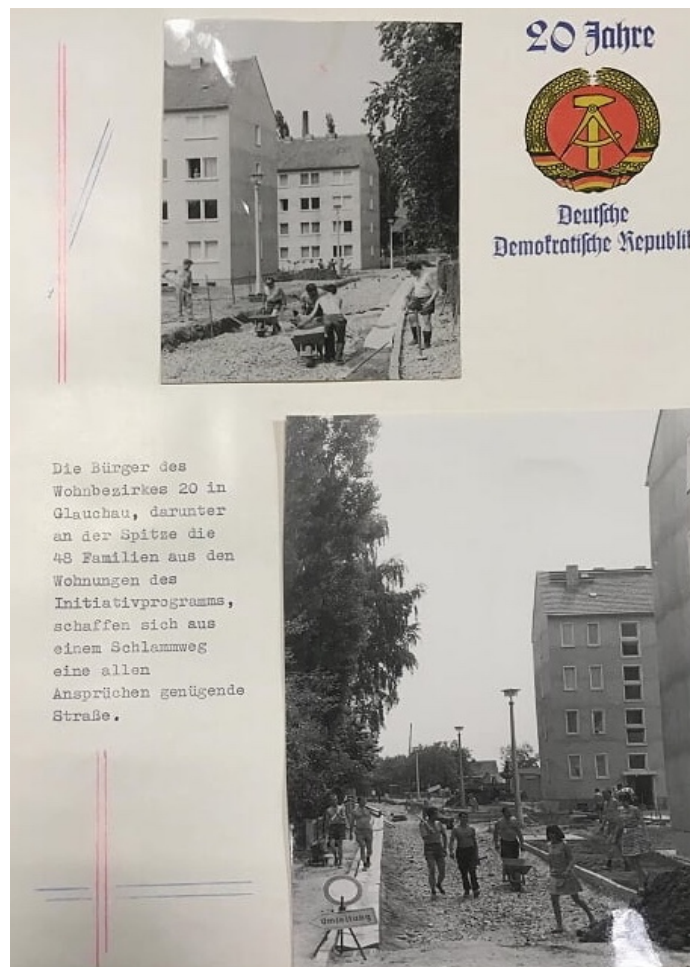


Figure 36. People participating in “Schöner unsere Gemeinde und Städte – mach mit!” in 1969. Caption reads “the people from the 48 families of Wohnbezirk 20 in Glauchau, creating a nice street that meets all requirements from a dirt road” (BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6974, Scrapbook “Wettbewerbsergebnisse der Gemeinde Blumenholz” [Kreis Neustrelitz])

<sup>409</sup> For more information on the activities of the Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski and the Kommerzielle Koordinierung (KoKo), see for example, “Der macht keinen Fehler,” *Der Spiegel*, May 6, 1991, p. 36-56.



Figure 37. This photo of a Hausgemeinschaft in Karl-Marx Stadt working on beautifying the grounds of their building captures the importance of landscaping to GDR officials during the final decade of the GDR. In this advertisement for “Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden - Mach mit!” in 1980, the caption states that in Karl-Marx- Stadt alone, 191 hectares of hedges and flower boxes have been taken care of in residential areas and parks. However, the people were reminded that there were over 100 000 hectares of “green spaces” in the GDR, with a tenth of those existing within residential areas in their courtyards and backyards. Thus, people across the country were reminded that they should, in tandem with collectives like FDJ groups and others, should ensure their “green spaces” were taken care of (*Neues Deutschland*, “Blumenrabatten vor der Haustür: ‘Mach mit!’ - Initiative zur Gestaltung von Grünflächen,” 7. August 1980, p. 2).

### **“Schöner unsere Gemeinde und Städte – mach mit!” View from a Hausgemeinschaft in 1979**

The inside view from the *Hausgemeinschaft* of Halbarstädter Straße 2 in the city of Halle tells us a great deal about what the socialist competitions looked like at the lowest level of organizing during the final decade of the GDR. Firstly, the clear divisions between the *Aktion* as they appeared from above did not exist on the bottom level: communities took on many different national, regional, and local socialist competitions during their whole year of carrying out “good deeds” in honour of their socialist state. As a result, the work of the people at the *Hausgemeinschaft* level was very practical. Based on an overall goal set by their local National

Front *Kreis* committee, individual families would carry out tasks such as making small repairs in order to preserve the value of their buildings, to add “comfort” to their living spaces; and to ensure that their living spaces maintained a high level of order, cleanliness and security, all so that their living spaces contributed to the maintenance of their “socialist environment.”<sup>410</sup>

During 1979, in honour of “Schöner unsere Gemeinde und Städte – mach mit!” the members of the *Hausgemeinschaft* on Halbarstädter Straße refurbished 10 living rooms, painted and varnished several dozen window frames and doors, fixed 35 locks and lights, completely renovated the building garage, and fixed their clothes lines with help from their neighbours in another building. The residents also put much time and effort into fixing up their large building courtyard: they painted benches, tables, play structures, fences and put new sand in the sandbox for the children.<sup>411</sup>

These small specific tasks were carried out by families as part of their contribution to making their socialist home a better place. A broad range of activities were considered part of the initiative: for example, the Eckert family donated 400 ml of blood, volunteered for the local elections, purchased four posters for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GDR, spent 10 hours renovating their living room and two hours painting their bathroom and basement windows, donated three hours of time to a community initiative in Leninpark and participated in a further eight hours of scrap collection for their residential district. For their fellow residents, the Eckert family changed light switches in the corridors and cleaned the courtyard.<sup>412</sup> Other work volunteered by other families included the Wald family donating 10 Marks to the people of Vietnam, designing flower

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<sup>410</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6975, Unknown author, “Rechenschaftsbericht: Der HGL aus Anlaß der festlichen Hausversammlung zu Ehren des 30. Jahrestages der DDR.” Approx. end of September, 1979, p. 4.

<sup>411</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6975, Unknown author, “Rechenschaftsbericht: Der HGL aus Anlaß der festlichen Hausversammlung zu Ehren des 30. Jahrestages der DDR.” Approx. end of September, 1979, p. 5-6.

<sup>412</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6975, Unknown author, “Rechenschaftsbericht: Der HGL aus Anlaß der festlichen Hausversammlung zu Ehren des 30. Jahrestages der DDR.” Approx. end of September, 1979, appendix 2.

boxes for the building courtyard, and refurbishing a room for their 80-year-old parents.<sup>413</sup> The Knobloch family of the *Hausgemeinschaft* donated a lot of time to helping residents of neighbouring *Hausgemeinschaften* with odd jobs like painting, helping with moving and fixing locks. The Knobloch family also helped their neighbour Frau Kothe, carrying coal and wood upstairs for her in the winter, washing her curtains, fixing her stove, and helping her with small repairs such as for her radio.<sup>414</sup>

Beyond the work in their own and neighbouring buildings, the residents of Halbarstädter Straße 2 also contributed to work for their region, participating in their residential district (*Wohnbezirksausschuß*) meetings and taking part in friendly competitions within their district. For example, it was their *Hausgemeinschaft's* idea for families to make contracts with a VEB to ensure the upkeep of the 1300m<sup>2</sup> area of their neighbourhood park on Leninallee. They also donated time helping neighbouring *Hausgemeinschaften*, such as by assisting two families with moving and renovating two apartments.<sup>415</sup> By the end of 1979, the residents planned to create a lane for their garbage containers and a paved path in the courtyard, as well as to prepare to support the initiatives of the residential district in achieving its own economic initiatives for the following year.<sup>416</sup> Additional regional activities the group anticipated participating in included cultural events of the region, such as every event of the “Wir und unser Wohngebiet – wir bitten

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<sup>413</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6975, Unknown author, “Rechenschaftsbericht: Der HGL aus Anlaß der festlichen Hausversammlung zu Ehren des 30. Jahrestages der DDR.” Approx. end of September, 1979, appendix 3.

<sup>414</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6975, Unknown author, “Rechenschaftsbericht: Der HGL aus Anlaß der festlichen Hausversammlung zu Ehren des 30. Jahrestages der DDR.” Approx. end of September, 1979, appendix 5.

<sup>415</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6975, Unknown author, “Rechenschaftsbericht: Der HGL aus Anlaß der festlichen Hausversammlung zu Ehren des 30. Jahrestages der DDR.” Approx. end of September, 1979, p. 6.

<sup>416</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6975, Unknown author, “Rechenschaftsbericht: Der HGL aus Anlaß der festlichen Hausversammlung zu Ehren des 30. Jahrestages der DDR.” Approx. end of September, 1979, p. 6.



zum Tanz” local initiative including the next two dances in October and December 1979, as well as “solidarity concerts” to be held in the region in December, 1979.<sup>417</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

What began in the 1960s as simple beautification campaigns, during the 1970s and into the 1980s grew into ongoing large-scale “Mach mit!” initiatives. In contrast to some of the earlier cultural campaigns, these economic initiatives were entirely practical in nature: people would donate labour, skills, and time to upkeep their homes, apartments, residential areas, parks, streets, clubs, and local restaurants/inns/pubs – thus saving the already financially struggling state money while at the same time keeping up the appearance that the GDR actually had the money to spend on such projects.

By April 1989, the state claimed that this focus on housing had resulted in a total of more than 3.2 million homes being rebuilt or reconstructed, amounting to nearly 350,000 in Berlin alone.<sup>418</sup> The Central Committee of the SED was proud of this achievement, given that in October 1973, its stated goal had been to build or modernize a total of 2.8 to 3 million dwellings in the GDR between 1976 and 1990, something which the SED claimed had already been surpassed by 1989. Of course, the constant labour ordinary people donated to remodeling the houses certainly helped the state in achieving such results.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> BArch DY 6/ vorl. 6975, Unknown author, “Rechenschaftsbericht: Der HGL aus Anlaß der festlichen Hausversammlung zu Ehren des 30. Jahrestages der DDR.” Approx. end of September, 1979, p. 6.

<sup>418</sup> Sigtraut Finzelberg, “Ein Wohnungsbauprogramm von historischer Dimension wird in der DDR erfüllt,” *Berliner Zeitung*, 9. September 1989, p. 11.

<sup>419</sup> Sigtraut Finzelberg, “Ein Wohnungsbauprogramm von historischer Dimension wird in der DDR erfüllt,” *Berliner Zeitung*, 9. September 1989, p. 11.

## **Conclusion to Socialist Competitions**

In the GDR, socialist competitions were a part of daily life for everyone from factory workers to agricultural workers, from artists, to children. During major anniversary years, the National Front organized special competitions in the months leading up to the anniversary itself. These competitions consisted of economic competitions in which all industries participated in order to increase production and get ahead of their yearly economic plan, as well as cultural competitions, in which participation was more voluntary and usually required some creative desire and skill.

From the state's perspective, these campaigns were necessary and vital to not only its economic success, but to the state's success as a whole: for it was through the cultural campaigns that the state could drive home its ideological message: not only was the state seeking to convince people of the existence of a new East German identity, distinct from the capitalist West and opposed to the threat the "imperialists" posed for the safety of Europe and the world, it was also seeking to make the close connection between the GDR and Soviet people seem both natural and necessary. Then there was the economic aspect of the competitions, which not only sought to improve on the inherent disadvantages in the centrally planned economy, but also to reinforce the idea that East Germany could be every bit as successful as West Germany in providing its people with both consumer goods and a social safety net, thereby "catching up to and overtaking the West." Over time, however, the GDR did not only not overtake nor catch up to the West, but fell further and further behind, at which point the socialist competitions devolved into desperate face-saving measures, particularly in the case of the beautification projects: for with the people working to save the crumbling cities, the GDR's financial straits did not appear to be dire from either outside or within.

Although their purpose and design remained much the same over the years, by the late 1960s, a subtle shift in Berlin's perspective on its role in tightly controlling its ideological messaging had begun to emerge. In 1957, Berlin was particularly insistent on the uniformity of its national competitions and paid close attention to how the competitions were unfolding themselves in the regions. Indeed, Berlin representatives pored over regional newspaper advertisements in exhaustive detail in 1964 – reading every last word and sentence of 70 different daily newspapers for months – in order to assess the efforts these localities were making in engaging the population in their socialist competitions. In these years, if the Berlin National Front sensed a region was diverging from their instructions, it would intervene by directly contacting the wayward locality in order to guide it to a “successful outcome,” i.e. widespread popular participation in the initiatives. However, by 1969, a subtle tolerance began to emerge in Berlin's views of its own role and power. Not only did the centre feel confident enough in the periphery by 1969 to entrust it with an extremely complex competition that would require great organizational skill, it did not largely interfere with regional divergences from the central message when they emerged. This did not mean that Berlin held any less tightly to the reins of power, but rather, that Berlin had determined over time that a lighter touch would be more effective. As a result, direct interventions became less frequent than previously. However, the Berlin National Front nevertheless remained obsessed with knowing every last detail about the popular participation in all events, and so turned to sending out its own representatives to individual localities to get opinions of officials on the ground, as well as attend the grand openings of events such as exhibitions, for example, to assess the organization of the events for itself (thereby bypassing the filter of the local committees).

Although local groups did not have complete autonomy in their competitions since they had to report back to their superiors, the truth was that Berlin was remote enough that these

ground-level day-to-day actions were often designed and decided on by those at the lowest levels by the 1970s. As long as the local competitions contained some reference to the anniversary these themes (even if they only paid lip-service to it) and contained some major elements of Berlin's own suggestions, as long as these localities succeeded in getting widespread participation (or even better, excitement) from the public, Berlin in these later years was satisfied enough to declare these semi-autonomous socialist competitions a success.

## GDR Anniversary Commemorations: A Conclusion

Siegfried Wittenburg, reflecting on his factory brigade's involvement in anniversary events at the time of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GDR in 1974, recalled the changes that came with the state's introduction of competitions for the title of "Socialist Labour Collective." Although his brigade had previously held festivals in any form they wanted, their superiors informed them that they needed to earn this title so that their brigade could receive a medal and a bonus. All the workers needed to do, their boss told them, was create a "brigade journal" describing their celebrations and including photos, and then submit it to their enterprise's "Competition Commission." Importantly, however, the workers did not seem to have much of a choice as to whether they even *wanted* to participate. Upon informing them about this new competition, their boss asked whether anyone was opposed to it, to which, Siegfried commented, "No one dared to raise his hand." To the boss's question, "Who is in favor?" Siegfried explained, "All hands stretched more or less in the air." Their boss then replied, "Okay, so I will report to management that the proposal was unanimously approved." Siegfried described the rest of the process as an ever more tedious one:<sup>1</sup>

In the years that followed, it became [increasingly] difficult to describe these yearly collective pleasures... in the reports of the Brigade journal so that we could secure the next collective premium. The competition tightened. Colleagues developed poetic and drawing talents to visually overwhelm the Competition Commission. There was a sense that nobody read these repetitive reports anyway. For the basic principle nevertheless always remained: 'wine, woman and song' in socialism instead of 'sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll' in capitalism. Anyone who 'shook things up' abused the principles of Erich Honecker and ran the risk of being targeted as a critic of the regime by the grey men.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Siegfried Wittenburg, "DDR Wettbewerb: Erst das Kollektiv der sozialistischen Arbeit, dann da Vergnügen" Spiegel Online, October 12, 2015. <https://www.spiegel.de/einestages/ddr-auszeichnung-zum-kollektiv-der-sozialistischen-arbeit-a-1034415.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Wittenburg, "DDR Wettbewerb."

Despite this dull exercise, Siegfried pointed out that “the brigade festivals nevertheless remained unforgettable.”<sup>3</sup> Written 40 years after the fact, it is very likely that Siegfried’s recollection of events was negatively affected by events *after* the ones he describes, such as by the fact that by the 1980s, these competitions had become rote and repetitive, while at the same time the reach of the Stasi into peoples’ everyday lives had expanded markedly. What is nevertheless significant is the fact that Siegfried remembered the competitions as being complete drudgery, in comparison to the fun of the festivities – both of which were equally designed and formed by the state with the goal of educating the populace on their ideological anniversary theses. The fact that these brigade workers felt compelled to participate – even if they were not particularly enthusiastic about it – shows that the SED *did* succeed in in this respect: while the National Front may not necessarily have wholly convinced the populace of the narrative as told by their anniversary theses, by successfully encouraging people to work together to compete against other groups and win funds for their next “unforgettable” brigade party, they succeeded in getting the populace to collectively gather to celebrate the state and still form positive memories associated with the anniversaries. Of course, there is still the fact that they were following top-down orders by having “fun” on the state’s terms and in a way that contributed to the state’s pedagogical goals. In this respect, then, such an example serves to further underscore the dominant role the SED played in ordinary peoples’ lives and the overbearing way in which it sought to control even the most local of commemorations.

As this dissertation has sought to demonstrate, GDR anniversary commemorations were about much more than just anniversary festivals. For the SED and the National Front, the anniversaries were a chance to show the populace (and indeed the outside world as well) how

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<sup>3</sup> Wittenburg, “DDR Wettbewerb.”

successful the GDR was, and to reinforce its values. In doing so, the state sought to define “being East German” – that is, that they were a peaceful and anti-fascist society, distinct from the West German capitalists, friendly with the Soviets, but still possessing their own new “socialist identity.” The theses characterized this identity as one upholding gender and class equality, as well as a focus on youth, the arts and culture, and one that promoted education and scientific research. A further advantage, the theses argued, were the vast social benefits Honecker provided in the 1970s through his “unity of social and economic policy,” such as the five-day work week, subsidized consumer goods, childcare and transport, great pensions, and an ever-increasing minimum wage. Then, of course, there was the fact that they were the only Germany that was “ruled by the working class,” i.e. the SED. While we cannot say for certain what parts of this new identity (if any) were actually internalized by the populace, we can say that this is what the state desperately wanted the National Front to convey in the anniversary commemorations.

The National Front, in creating the types of competitions and festivities it did, attempted to communicate all of the SED’s lofty and albeit impossibly theoretical perspectives to the East German populace at large in order to create a new East German identity. Though it did not create the anniversary theses themselves, the national and regional National Front committees proved obedient intermediaries, always ready to find new ways to help East Germans absorb the SED’s ideological messages. In this respect, this study also sheds light on the inner workings of the National Front: an oft intangible and ill-understood web of state organizations. It was not just a body that only came into force for “elections;” rather, this study has demonstrated that it played a very real and very important part of the governing state apparatus. Indeed, the SED entrusted the National Front and its constituent committees with one of the state’s most important tasks: that of disseminating the Party’s ideology and rallying popular support for it. This is significant because there is no evidence that the Berlin National Front was operating under any oversight from the

SED's Central Committee. Instead, they received their directives directly from the propaganda wing of the SED Central Committee.

By looking at the way in which the Berlin National Front planned these festivities – which became ever less detailed as time went on, increasingly relying on the ingenuity of the regional National Front committees – we can get a fascinating insight into the way in which the centre viewed the periphery: mainly as ever-resourceful and ultimately, very capable of figuring out the practicalities of arranging very complex competitions, cultural events, and festivities. Despite the commemorations' overall “success,” there were often large differences in the quality, scope, and participation in the projects across the country. However, as this work shows, a major barrier to successfully carrying out a competition or festival was that the communication between different National Front organizations could often be poor or non-existent both laterally and vertically. While Berlin could certainly reprimand the lower levels for their inefficiencies, they could not actually control them. In fact, even when the Berlin committees provided clear and detailed instructions, the organizers on the ground often did not strictly adhere to them, and proceeded to carry out the initiatives in a way that they felt made sense to their local situation and audience. This appears to be the case because many organizers genuinely did want to celebrate the GDR and brighten up their communities and there is no evidence of subterfuge. These lower level (often volunteer) organizers were not necessarily the most committed ideologues, but rather, pragmatic ordinary people who simply did what they thought was necessary to organize events on the ground level as best they could, given the time and financial constraints they had to work with. There is certainly no evidence of committees suffering harsh consequences for not carrying out a competition very well. When Berlin disapproved of a local committee's anniversary preparations, they would either sternly explain to the local committee what they were doing wrong and unfavourably compare them to other regions that had done well, or as in the case of



the socialist competitions of 1977 and 1979, send out representatives to attempt to salvage the competition. Berlin seems to have taken the view that these instances were a chance for improvement and evidence of areas in which further “ideological work” (i.e. convincing the populace of the state’s narrative) needed to be carried out.

Also vital were the midlevel functionaries who enabled this communication between the top and bottom levels of the state apparatus. While the National Front itself existed amongst a web of organizational structures in the GDR, the National Front’s smooth functioning was also dependent on further webs of committees from the national level all the way to the *Hausgemeinschaft* level. In the case of anniversary commemorations, while Berlin translated the goals of the SED Central Committee from its theoretical levels into more manageable anniversary plans, Berlin itself neither implemented, nor directly oversaw the anniversary celebrations. Although there were Berlin National Front functionaries who would often keep an obsessively close eye on the proceedings in many of the regions, it was the responsibility of varying levels of mid-tier officials to translate these goals and indeed make sure that the lower levels were not only provided with anniversary plans, but that they also would make decisions to further intercede with the local organization if need be. Although Berlin could also become involved, it was not a norm, and indeed Berlin only seemed to do so as a last-ditch effort to salvage the commemoration in a particular region/locality.

Most of the time, those who interceded were mid-tier officials at the *Bezirk* or *Kreis* level, with varying degrees of responsibility. These people were the vital “cogs” in the SED machine, for it was they who kept it running. Neither the SED nor the National Front in Berlin designed the majority of commemorations in any detail and the anniversary celebrations and competitions were certainly not spontaneously designed from below. Indeed, in some ways, mid-tier officials possessed less power than those at the very top of the state apparatus who designed the

anniversary commemorations, as well as less than those at the bottom who actually implemented the anniversary plans. However, this middling-role also made these officials more powerful because while they could neither make decisions down to the last detail in preparing the festivities or competitions, nor dictate the content of these, their roles as intermediaries reinforced GDR power structures by keeping the state's propaganda flowing from the top, while at the same time ensuring the peoples' acquiescence to the regime kept up by reporting local successes back up the chain. In this sense then, the SED in Berlin was totally reliant on these officials, for its anniversary commemorations certainly could not have existed in same way without them. Without these intermediaries, the top level could not have maintained its very hands off approach, rather, a far closer involvement with the organizers at the lowest of levels would have been required, taking up much valuable time.

By looking at these lines of communication between the multi-layered committee structure, we can get a sense of how the careful design of the anniversary commemorations transformed along its journey from its beginnings as themes of the SED Central Committee, to its manifestation on the lowest of ground levels, down to the nature of the decorations at a local kindergarten, or of a *Hausgemeinschaft* volunteer replacing the lightbulbs in a stairwell. In exploring these banalities, we can come to appreciate how incredibly important the socialist competitions were to the state. Although people only remembered the parades, the extremely varied socialist competitions were one of the major ways in which the state sought to bring people onside their ideological messages, such as the necessity of close Soviet-GDR relations.

Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to underscore just how important the anniversary commemorations were for the GDR, for they were a key element of the SED's efforts to educate the population about their new socialist state. Like the new France after the Revolution and the Soviets after the Russian Revolution, the GDR needed to break with the horrors of recent German

history and distinguish itself from the new West German state. In the beginning, the SED's solution was to tie itself to the Soviet past instead (which had had to go through the same process itself in 1917, breaking with symbols of imperial Russia) and create a reason for its citizens to form bonds with Soviet ones. At the same time, the anniversary theses criticize the ways in which the new West German state did not constitute such a break with the Nazi past. By the 1960s, the anniversary theses reflected this pride in the GDR's accomplishments as an independence state and sought to convince the populace of their new-found success and growing sense of identity.

As was made clear in the theses, the GDR was striving to create both internal and external legitimacy. Particularly before the Wall was built, it was important for the SED to create internal legitimacy, so as to attempt to convince the people of the GDR to stay and thus stem the flow of people across the border into the West. However, since people stopped fleeing after the Wall was put up, the SED's creation of internal legitimacy became much more about convincing the people of the GDR that they were part of a greater ideal, in order to assuage their feelings of being trapped. For, in the early 1960s, far more important to the SED was attaining *external* legitimacy in the world at large. This was something that was in evidence at the 1964 celebrations in honour of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary, where one goal was attracting western visitors to come see what the GDR had achieved. Although this external legitimacy did not develop immediately, the opening up of relations between East and West through the signing of the Basic Treaty in 1972 and the GDR's joining of the UN in 1974 underscored that the international community was prepared to accept the state's permanency. Indeed, as time went on, although internally the GDR was struggling economically, this was never obvious to the outside world. Internally, in later years, the GDR anniversary theses even became even more confident and emphasized the clear superiority of socialism – proven by not only their economic successes, but also by the very generous social policies that benefitted the entire population during this time. Despite imminent economic

collapse by the 1980s, the SED began to diverge even more from reality and doubled down on their previous themes in their anniversary theses about their international acclaim and economic prowess, asserting the stability and prosperity of their state.

It is difficult to say whether these socialist competitions actually achieved their dual purposes of further convincing people of the state ideology as well as helping to get the economic plans further ahead. On the one hand, while people certainly did participate in these competitions, it is not clear whether they did so as a result of any real ideological convictions, out of a desire to help the community, whether the rote nature of the commemorations eventually set in, if there was a fear of reprisal from the Stasi, or whether their reasons changed depending on the initiative. Much of it could also have been a result of the social pressures to conform. For example, during the 1960s, the populace seemed very interested in the local beautification campaigns, if only to finally clean up the still existent rubble of the war – though, after 20 years of continuous campaigns, it is not difficult to imagine that enthusiasm could have worn thin. The fact that people participated nevertheless tells us that they accepted the way things were, even if they did not agree with them.

Given the high number of celebrations that took place, it is very likely that most East Germans participated in the commemorative anniversary events over time, even if it was merely in the form of attending a sporting event or helping to decorate a street. Although too many events existed for the state to possibly insist on East Germans attending every one, it ultimately does not matter, since the uniformity with which all events were designed meant that it is highly likely every individual East German was exposed to the state's ideological anniversary message at some point. While individuals attending one commemorative event over another meant that they might not have attended the ones mostly closely curated to their interests, choosing one event over another in no way meant being exposed to a diluted or different message and as such,

posed no threat to the state's stability. Thus, having "fun" at a GDR anniversary commemoration invariably meant engaging with the anniversary theses, whether they were overtly present or not.

An interesting case that demonstrates the effectiveness of a less overt theses presence in anniversary activities is that of the "Meinem besten Freund" *Aktion* held in honour of the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the October Revolution. Internal reports show 1.4 million people attending 62 859 exhibits, and a total of 23 138 people producing 266 695 objects<sup>4</sup> – a surge of popular interest that genuinely surprised organizers in the regions as well as in Berlin. No other national *Aktion* seemed to attract this kind of interest, likely because others were not as accessible as "Meinem Besten Freund." While ostensibly as ideologically pedagogical as the rest of the socialist competitions, "Meinem besten Freund" differed in that many regional organizers decided to also accept non-ideological, non-political submissions. That this decision resulted in higher participation numbers is clear: those regions which accepted any submissions at all – even poorly crafted ones – reported higher participation numbers and thus better "results" than the regions that refused to do the same.

When looking at anniversaries from the angle of the development of a collective identity (that of the "new East German"), the current study helps us understand the ways in which collective identities and "consciousnesses" are formed and how they can be used as an instrument of social control. Nowhere is this clearer than in the examples of festivities held in 1964 in Sonneberg and Langewiesen in *Bezirk* Suhl, which, while providing us with a glimpse into what these festivals looked like at the lowest levels, also shows us that intricately involved state ideology was central to even the most simple of community-inspired festivities. The fact is that the National Front attempted to carefully manipulate people into participating, not only through

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<sup>4</sup> BArch, DY 6/ 1031, "Information über die Kreisaustellungen 'Meinem besten Freund' anlässlich des 60. Jahrestages der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution," undated (likely Nov 1977), p. 2-4.

the ideological propaganda in the form of flyers, newspaper articles and discussions, but also in the way in which it conceived of and organized these festivities and competitions. Delegating the organizing to the local committees who would be sure to create events relevant to the community was certainly a calculating way of inserting a political meaning into everyday collective activities.

In addition, crafting many of the anniversary appeals to participate as not only of benefit to the state at large, but also as a way of donating time to improve one's community, was a very powerful motivator. For it is much easier to set aside any abstract opposition to the state leadership and volunteer to decorate and clean up one's neighbourhood, than to refuse on principle and possibly become a social pariah. For example, even though the 1975 radio show competition "Troika der Freundschaft," was ostensibly asking for individual submissions, by broadcasting them far and wide, the National Front made it a communal event with the goal of creating bonds by sharing personal experiences, even if they were at odds with the listeners' own experiences. The fact was that the state continuously sought to create community spirit by pushing many people to work across organizations and communities and forge bonds they might not otherwise have had the opportunity to form. In this way then, community competitions could be said to have acted as a kind of substitute for voting, as people could contribute in a very real way to the upkeep of their state, including by helping to achieve the economic plans.

On the other hand, however, there was a darker side to these commemorations that went beyond creating community spirit, and that was how far the state went to promote its vision of East Germany to the population. As demonstrated in the introductory chapter, advancing a particular agenda and seeking to create a distinct identity is something common to all states, which the country's leadership reinforces and communicates to their population in various ways. However, in the case of the GDR, the leadership clearly sought to strictly control its message

down to the individual East German. Although local National Front committees did have some power to determine how best to organize anniversary events at the ground level, they did not have the same power with respect to the theses themselves. The SED Politburo's propaganda wing created them and there was no room for an alternative narrative. For example, although many East Germans had negative views of the Soviets given all they endured while under Soviet occupation, there was no space in which this negative narrative could be expressed. Given that one of the main pillars of the state's legitimacy was its firm "friendship" with the Soviet Union, the state would not allow any kind of discourse to creep into the anniversary commemorations that depicted negative experiences of the Soviet Union, nor did it even try to provide a rationale for the brutality of the Soviet occupation – such as the even more brutal Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union – instead preferring to rewrite history and pretend it had not happened at all. Although less-than-positive opinions often came up in these discussion forums, rather than acknowledge or incorporate these opinions, it was the duty of the local National Front committees to counteract them in an effort to convince East Germans of the state's point of view. The same can be said for the increasingly difficult housing situation in the GDR: rather than acknowledge the problem and admit that the state's financial difficulties were resulting in a lack of good housing options, the state, through the anniversary competitions, sought to deny that the supposedly thriving GDR was struggling economically, and instead attempted to save face by convincing residents that it was their duty as East Germans to repair their own neighbourhoods. In effect, the state was in a decades-long battle of legitimizing itself by convincing people at home and abroad through their anniversaries commemorations that the GDR had much to offer its citizens in the past, present and future – certainly much more to offer than the alternative, the imperialist West Germany.

## Glossary

### Select mass organizations of the GDR:

*Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands (DFD)*: Democratic Women's League of Germany

*Deutscher Turn- und Sportbund der DDR (DTSB)*: German Gymnastics and Sports Federation

*Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ)*: Free German Youth

*Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (FDGB)*: Free German Trade Union Federation

*Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft (DSF)*: Society for German–Soviet  
Friendship

*Kulturbund (KB)*: Cultural Association of the DDR

*Pionierorganisation Ernst Thälmann*: Ernst Thälmann Pioneer Organization

*Verband der Kleingärtner, Siedler und Kleintierzüchter (VKSK)*: Association of Gardeners,  
Settlers, and Small Animal Breeders

*Vereinigung der gegenseitigen Bauernhilfe (VdgB)*: Farmers' Mutual Aid Association

*Volkssolidarität (VS)*: People's Solidarity

### Terms:

*Bezirk*: state/province

*Kreis*: county

*Gemeinde*: region (smaller than a county)

*Wohnbezirk*: residential area

*Hausgemeinschaft*: apartment complex association



# Map of GDR Administrative Divisions



Figure 38: Source: Deutschen Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Verbindung mit dem Staatsverlag der Deutschen Republik, eds., *Handbuch der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik*. Berlin: Staatsverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, c. 1964, p. 843.

## Appendix: Anniversary Theses

# THESEN

## zum 40. Jahrestag

### der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution

Herausgegeben von der Abteilung Agitation und Propaganda beim ZK der SED

Am 7. November 1957 feiern das Sowjetvolk, seine Kommunistische Partei und mit ihnen die Werktätigen aller Länder den 40. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution. Mit ihrem Sieg begann die Zeit des Sozialismus und Kommunismus, die eigentliche Geschichte der menschlichen Gesellschaft.

Diese Revolution unterscheidet sich grundlegend von allen vorangegangenen Revolutionen in der Geschichte der Menschheit. Während frühere Revolutionen nur eine Form der Ausbeuterherrschaft durch eine andere ersetzten, führte die Große Sozialistische Oktoberrevolution zur Vernichtung jeglicher Form der Ausbeuterherrschaft. Sie erhob die werktätigen Massen zu den wahren und bewußten Gestaltern ihres Lebens. Damit leitete der Oktober 1917 eine neue weltgeschichtliche Ära ein, in der es keine Ausbeutung des Menschen durch den Menschen und keine nationale Unterdrückung mehr geben wird.

Der erfolgreiche Kampf der Partei der Bolschewiki in der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution führte zur Errichtung der Diktatur des Proletariats. Damit wurde die entscheidende Voraussetzung für den Aufbau des Sozialismus in der Sowjetunion geschaffen. Zugleich war diese Revolution der Ausgangspunkt für die Entstehung des sozialistischen Weltsystems und für den erfolgreichen Kampf der unterdrückten Völker zur Beseitigung der Kolonialherrschaft. Es konnte sich ein solches internationales Kräfteverhältnis zwischen Kapitalismus und Sozialismus, zwischen den imperialistischen Aggressoren und den friedliebenden Kräften herausbilden, daß heute eine reale Möglichkeit besteht, den Frieden zu erhalten.

In den vergangenen 40 Jahren wurde durch die Praxis die Sieghaftigkeit und internationale Bedeutung der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution bewiesen. 40 Jahre Sowjetmacht erbrachten den Nachweis: Dem Sozialismus gehört die Zukunft.

## I. Die Vorbereitung der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution

1. Die objektiven Voraussetzungen für die Große Sozialistische Oktoberrevolution wurden durch die Entwicklung des Kapitalismus geschaffen. In konsequenter Weiterentwicklung der Lehren von Marx und Engels wies Lenin nach, daß sich mit dem Übergang vom Kapitalismus der freien Konkurrenz zum Imperialismus alle Widersprüche des Kapitalismus derart verschärfen, daß seine Beseitigung und die Errichtung des Sozialismus zur geschichtlichen Aufgabe wird.

Die Herrschaft der Monopole verschärft vor allem den Widerspruch zwischen einer Handvoll Finanzmagnaten und der gewaltigen Mehrheit der Bevölkerung. Das Bestreben der Monopole, ihre Herrschaft und ihren Profit zu sichern und zu vergrößern, erhöht notwendigerweise die Ungleichmäßigkeit der Entwicklung des Kapitalismus und führt somit zur ständigen Zuspitzung der Widersprüche zwischen den verschiedenen imperialistischen Mächtegruppen. Dieser steten Ände-

rung des Kräfteverhältnisses entsprechend wird die Neuaufteilung der Welt immer wieder auf die Tagesordnung gesetzt; der Imperialismus wird zu einer ständigen Quelle von Kriegen.

Mit der starken Zunahme der kolonialen sowie nationalen Unterdrückung und Ausplünderung steigert sich der Kampf zwischen den um ihre Freiheit ringenden Völkern der Kolonien und abhängigen Länder und den imperialistischen Mächten aufs äußerste.

Lenin führte den wissenschaftlichen Nachweis, daß der Imperialismus als höchstes und letztes Stadium des Kapitalismus der Vorabend der proletarischen Revolution ist.

2. Das unvergängliche Verdienst W. I. Lenins besteht darin, daß er, ausgehend von seiner Analyse des Imperialismus, die Theorie und Taktik der proletarischen Revolution begründete. Unter den Bedingungen des

Figure 39. Theses for the 40th Anniversary of the October Revolution in 1957 (Barch DY 6/5641)

2 . P a s s u n g

15 Jahre Deutsche Demokratische Republik

(Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik)

Unsere Republik feiert Geburtstag. Gemeinsam mit ihren Freunden in aller Welt begehen die Bürger der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik den 15. Jahrestag der Gründung des ersten deutschen Arbeiter-und-Bauern-Staates.

Etwas Neues, Großes hat im Leben unseres Volkes festen Fuß gefaßt. Das Zeitalter des Sozialismus hat auch in Deutschland begonnen.

Die Deutsche Demokratische Republik hat den Sozialismus in deutschen Boden gepflanzt und zur Blüte gebracht. Sie hat sich fest mit der freien und großen Familie der sozialistischen Staaten, vor allem mit der Sowjetunion, verbunden. Sie ist gleichberechtigtes Glied eines gesellschaftlichen Systems, dem die Zukunft auf unserem Planeten gehört!

In der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik ist das Vermächtnis der Völker, die in der Antihitlerkoalition gegen Faschismus und Krieg gekämpft haben und deren Wille im Potsdamer Abkommen seinen völkerrechtlichen Niederschlag gefunden hatte, erfüllt. Imperialismus, Militarismus und Kriegshetze sind mit der Wurzel beseitigt. Die sozialistische Deutsche Demokratische Republik schützt und bewahrt

Figure 40. Theses for the 15th Anniversary of the Founding of the GDR in 1964 (BArch DY 30/J IV 2/2/938)

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Politische Massenarbeit

Bedeutende Jubiläen und Gedenktage

**DY 30 *Zentralkomitee der SED***

Büro Egon Krenz

Büro Kurt Hager

Protokolle des Politbüros des Zentralkomitees der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei

Deutschlands

**DR 1 *Ministerium für Kultur***

Büros der Minister Abusch, Bentzien und Gysi

**DR 105 *Büro für nationale Jubiläen und kulturelle Gedenktage beim Ministerium für Kultur***

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