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BEFORE THE WALL: EAST GERMANS, COMMUNIST AUTHORITY, AND THE MASS EXODUS TO THE WEST*

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ABSTRACT. *Based on sources from the East German regime's internal archives, this article examines how the exodus of over 3 million people from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) before the construction of the Berlin Wall undermined the communist regime's ability to exert its authority over internal affairs. Instead of focusing on the relatively well-known economic and diplomatic costs of the mass exodus, it considers rather the grass-roots political ramifications of this unique phenomenon among the Soviet satellite states. The article focuses on three interrelated issues: first, the government's little-known efforts to curb and control emigration before the Wall; second, the myriad causes of the mass emigration and how these were perceived by the party/state apparatus; and third, the variety of strategies through which ordinary East Germans who stayed in the GDR attempted to use the possibility of flight to the West to enhance their bargaining position with state authorities. It argues that the refugees to the West were not the only East Germans to capitalize on the permeable border around West Berlin. The possibility of emigrating westwards also gave those who stayed a degree of power vis-à-vis the regime that they otherwise would not have had.*

Until the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961, an unceasing exodus of East Germans to the West served to characterize and caricature the problems of social and political transformation in East Germany, and by association in the whole of Eastern Europe under Soviet influence. Between 1945 and 1961, it is estimated that some 3.5 million people out of a population of roughly 18 million left the Soviet Occupation Zone/German Democratic Republic (GDR), which not only undermined the East German economy, but also obviously belied the ruling Socialist Unity Party's (SED) claims to popular approval. It is generally accepted that this mass exodus – at the time, most commonly referred to in the GDR as '*Republikflucht*' (or 'fleeing the republic') – was a crucial factor to the dynamics of political and economic (de)stabilization of the fledgling East German regime, which in some ways set it apart from the other European states

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under Soviet hegemony. The 'economically ruinous' population movement and the 'terrific consequences for the economy and society' threatened to 'bleed the GDR dry'.¹ Moreover, the open border and possibility of flight to the West placed certain constraints on the entire 'construction of socialism' in East Germany. As Martin McCauley summarized it: 'Unlike citizens in other socialist states, those in the GDR had a choice: remain or emigrate. This prevented the full rigour of Stalinism being applied.'² The sealing of the border in August 1961 is therefore almost unanimously viewed as a deep caesura in the history of the GDR, presenting 'new opportunities for the stabilization of the system of power' and for the 'neutralization and manipulation of the masses', in essence finally putting it on a similar footing to the other 'People's Democracies' of east-central Europe.³

Only since the opening of the East German archives in 1990 have historians been able to flesh out many of the details of this story. We now know far more about the economic and political costs of the mass exodus out of the GDR, which represented not only a loss of skills, productivity, and human capital, but also of political manoeuvrability for the East German communist leadership vis-a-vis the Soviets.⁴ We also know far more about the political interplay and series of decisions that culminated in the erection of the Berlin Wall on the night of 12–13 August 1961. Yet beneath the level of macro-economics and international diplomacy, *Republikflucht* was also a defining characteristic of everyday life in the early GDR, and moreover both exacerbated and typified many of the problems the SED leadership had in exerting its authority at the grass-roots level.

Based on the East German regime's internal sources, this article examines a little-known aspect of an otherwise very well-known and highly symbolic chapter of Cold War history. It considers the mass exodus *out of the GDR* (as distinct from the influx into the Federal Republic, which has already been the subject of considerable scholarly interest)⁵ in terms of its causes and

¹ Christoph Kleßmann, *Zwei Staaten, eine Nation: Deutsche Geschichte, 1955–1970* (Bonn, 1997), p. 321; Klaus Schroeder, *Der SED-Staat* (Munich, 1998), p. 162; Hermann Weber, *Geschichte der DDR* (Munich, 1986), p. 325; Lutz Niethammer, 'Erfahrungen und Strukturen: Prolegomena zu einer Geschichte der Gesellschaft der DDR', in H. Kaelble, J. Kocka, and H. Zwahr, eds., *Sozialgeschichte der DDR* (Stuttgart, 1994), pp. 95–118, here p. 99.

² Martin McCauley, *The German Democratic Republic since 1945* (Houndmills, 1983), p. 103.

³ Weber, *Geschichte der DDR*, p. 327; Kleßmann, *Zwei Staaten, eine Nation*, p. 330.

⁴ See esp. André Steiner, 'Politische Vorstellungen und ökonomische Probleme im Vorfeld der Errichtung der Berliner Mauer: Briefe Walter Ulbrichts an Nikita Chruschtschow', in Hartmut Mehringer, ed., *Von der SBZ zur DDR* (Munich, 1995), pp. 233–68; Michael Lemke, *Die Berlinkrise 1958 bis 1963: Interessen und Handlungsspielräume der SED im Ost-West Konflikt* (Berlin, 1995); Hope Harrison, 'Ulbricht and the concrete "rose": new archival evidence on the dynamics of Soviet–East German relations and the Berlin crisis, 1958–1961', *Cold War International History Project Working Paper*, no. 5 (May 1993).

⁵ Volker Ackermann, *Der 'echte' Flüchtling: Deutsche Vertriebene und Flüchtlinge aus der DDR, 1945–1961* (Osnabrück, 1995); Helge Heidemeyer, *Flucht und Zuwanderung aus der SBZ/DDR 1945/1949–1961: Die Flüchtlingspolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland bis zum Bau der Berliner Mauer* (Düsseldorf, 1994); Sylvia Schraut and Thomas Grosser, eds., *Die Flüchtlingsfrage in der deutschen*

consequences 'on the ground', both for the regime and for the East German populace at large.

I

It first seems necessary to signpost the main developments in the East German government's policy towards the problem of *Republikflucht* prior to 1961. Although the mass exodus was eventually to become a nightmarish obsession of the government, in the beginning it was actually considered a relief from the problems of unemployment and providing basic necessities.⁶ It was only in 1952, when the economy began to pick up, that decisive measures were taken to control the population flow. The closure of the inner-German border and the forcible relocation of 'unreliable elements' from the five kilometre strip of land east of the demarcation line in May 1952 marked a new stage, as did the concurrent closure of 200 of the 277 access routes to West Berlin.⁷ But the unique problem of the West Berlin loophole, protected as it was by agreements between the wartime Allies, meant that these measures alone could not solve the problem.

In September 1952, only several weeks after the fateful Second Party Conference announced the accelerated 'construction of socialism', a special commission was created to deal specifically with the issue of *Republikflucht*. The guidelines it drew up⁸ set the tone for the entire campaign against the mass exodus until the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. The basic thrust was threefold: propaganda geared towards dissuading people from leaving; promises of suitable employment and housing for anyone who returned or emigrated from the Federal Republic, especially members of the intelligentsia; and, most importantly, the establishment of a comprehensive system of information on the population movement (the motives for leaving, each refugee's background, criminal record, actions during the Nazi period and Soviet occupation). Such information would, it was hoped, aid in the accurate diagnosis of the reasons for *Republikflucht*, which would in turn allow for the formulation of appropriate policies to combat it.

There were several modifications to this basic approach until the sealing of

Nachkriegsgesellschaft (Mannheim, 1996); Rainer Schulze, Doris von der Brölie-Lewien, and Helga Grebing, eds., *Flüchtlinge und Vertriebene in der westdeutschen Nachkriegsgeschichte* (Hildesheim, 1987).

⁶ The major exceptions were the flight of crucial technical experts and the desertion of police officers. See Richard Bessel, 'Grenzen des Polizeistaates: Polizei und Gesellschaft in der SBZ und frühen DDR, 1945–1953', in R. Bessel and R. Jessen, eds., *Die Grenzen der Diktatur* (Göttingen, 1996), pp. 224–52, esp. pp. 231–4. See also John Connelly, 'Zur "Republikflucht" von DDR-Wissenschaftlern in den fünfziger Jahren, Dokumentation', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* (hereafter *ZfG*), 42 (1994), pp. 331–52.

⁷ Bundesministerium für innerdeutsche Beziehungen, *Die Sperrmaßnahmen der DDR vom Mai 1952* (Bonn, 1987), pp. 88–9.

⁸ In Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der ehemaligen DDR im Bundesarchiv (hereafter SAPMO-BA) DY30/IV2/13/393, Abt. Bevölkerungspolitik.

the border around West Berlin. A temporary liberalization in the issuing of visas to West Germany in 1956 was abruptly halted in 1957 after recognition that over half of all cases of illegal emigration resulted from people legally visiting West Germany and failing to return. A handful of other preventative and punitive measures were introduced towards the end of the 1950s: educational and career obstacles for family members of refugees, the increasing involvement of the *Stasi* in sniffing out potential emigrants, and the creation of special '*Republikflucht*-commissions' at local and regional levels. Most important was the *Paßgesetz* (Passport Law) of 11 December 1957, which increased the punishment for unauthorized border crossings, formally outlawed both the preparation and assistance of *Republikflucht*, and eased state confiscation of property belonging to illegal emigrants.⁹ Taken together, these changes in emigration law constituted a powerful deterrent against leaving the GDR illegally, and have often been overlooked as factors underlying the decreased rate of *Republikflucht* over the years 1958–9.¹⁰

There was, then, no shortage of ideas among the party leadership as to what the various state and party organs should do to combat *Republikflucht*. The crucial question, as always, was whether any of their ideas would have an effect, or indeed would be carried out at the grass roots in the first place. From the very beginning the signs were unpromising. As the number of refugees soared to record heights during the 'construction of socialism' campaign in spring 1953 (agricultural collectivization, military recruitment, various price and tax increases, and serious shortages of many consumer goods), little was done to curb the flow. In March 1953, hitherto the record month for emigration, the Central Committee harshly criticized the party apparatus and police for failing to give serious attention to the problem of *Republikflucht*: 'as of the beginning of March 1953, those comrades made responsible by the [Politbüro] resolution have hardly done a thing worth mentioning'.¹¹ Internal SED reports throughout spring 1953 paint an overall picture of inertia.¹²

By the summer of 1953, communist leaders in both Moscow and Berlin clearly perceived *Republikflucht* as a grave problem for the future of the East German state. Just as the disadvantages it presented in terms of a drain of manpower and skills were becoming increasingly apparent, one of the few perceived advantages of the exodus – namely, the notion that mass emigration

⁹ See the 20 Aug. 1958 order 'Über die Behandlung des Vermögens von Personen, die die DDR nach dem 19.6.53 verlassen', *Gesetzblatt der DDR*, 1958, p. 644.

¹⁰ The decreasing number of refugees in these years has often been interpreted instead as a reflection of political and social 'consolidation' in the GDR. See, for instance, H. Weber, *DDR, Grundriß der Geschichte, 1945–1990* (Hannover, 1991), p. 88; also D. Staritz, *Geschichte der DDR* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), pp. 170–1.

¹¹ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/394, 'Bericht über die Durchführung von Maßnahmen gegen die Republikflucht und zur Werbung von Fachkräften in Westdeutschland gemäß dem Beschluß des Politbüros vom 6.1.53', 29 Mar. 1953.

¹² See, for example, SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/394, 'Einschätzung über den Stand der Republikflucht', 22 Apr. 1953, fos. 156–7, 159.

of potential enemies aided political stabilization – was obviously belied by the popular uprising of 17 June. None the less, the party leadership's rather abrupt reappraisal of the threat posed by mass emigration was not mirrored by a rapid change in the attitudes and activities of lower-level functionaries, as subsequent scoldings by both East German and Soviet authorities attest.¹³ Thus the Central Committee's 1954 year-end report on illegal emigration describes the state apparatus as 'generally apathetic towards *Republikflucht*'. 'Many comrades' within the party, it complains, were still 'unclear about the effects of *Republikflucht*'.¹⁴ At the Graphic-Design Studios in Leipzig, there was even a send-off party for one worker in which the SED factory organization members themselves participated.

Of course, much of this inertia resulted from the simple overburdening of grass-roots officials who had other tasks to fulfil, and who understandably felt that little could be done in any event. But another major cause was the narrow and dogmatic 'official' understanding of the problem. As early as 1953,¹⁵ the causes of *Republikflucht* were largely externalized and explained away by a kind of conspiracy theory of organized *Abwerbung* (wooing-away) by capitalist businessmen or by the West German Ministry for All-German Affairs (*Bundesministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen*). As countless newspaper articles and internal reports alleged, such *Abwerbung* was often done via letters or illicit flyers, sometimes through discussions with western agents in the GDR or while the 'victim' was in the West, and on a broader basis via the West German media.¹⁶

To be fair, the notion of *Abwerbung* was not complete fantasy when taken to include such factors as the influence of West German relatives and the efforts of West German firms to attract people with certain skills.¹⁷ But the inflationary usage of such language and the ludicrous extent to which 'enemy *Abwerbung*' was used to explain the mass exodus served more to obscure the roots of the problem than to illuminate them. By the end of 1953 at the latest, such notions and vocabulary had become the ritual centrepiece of official discourse on

¹³ SAPMO-BA DY30/JIV2/202/68, Aktennotiz, 11 Dec. 1953; also SAPMO-BA DY30/JIV2/2/337.

¹⁴ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/396, 'Bericht über die illegalen Abwanderungen aus der DDR und den Kampf gegen die Republikflucht im Jahre 1954', p. 6.

¹⁵ Bundesarchiv Berlin (hereafter BAB) DO1/11/962, fo. 67; SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/566, 'Durchführung des Beschlusses des Politbüros über weitere Maßnahmen gegen die Republikflucht vom 15.12.53', 11 Feb. 1954.

¹⁶ For typical examples, see BAB DO1/11/963, fos. 70, 74; BAB DO1/11/965, fo. 70.

¹⁷ A bulletin of 26 Aug. 1960 circulated by the West German government announced 524,300 vacant jobs; on 11 Aug. *Der Telegraf* reported that the labour shortage was so severe that industrial firms were recruiting workers directly from the refugee camps with placards and glossy flyers; a radio broadcast of 21 July 1960 announced that 30,000 engineers were needed for the booming West German economy. As the West German government was well aware, such opportunities as conveyed by the West German media or relatives certainly constituted a powerful attraction to many East Germans, and the business community in West Germany quite naturally tried to take advantage of this as it could.

Republikflucht in the GDR, not only in official propaganda, where one might expect it, but also in internal classified correspondence.¹⁸ The narrow ideological parameters of interpreting *Republikflucht* greatly hindered the regime's ability to communicate about it internally, even at the highest levels.¹⁹ Although there were critical voices within the Central Committee that argued for a more impartial understanding of the reasons for the mass emigration – some even arguing against the very notion of 'flight' itself in favour of the less loaded term 'emigration'²⁰ – these remained exceptions which in any event disappear from the records after the party purges following the Hungarian uprising of autumn 1956. Even when the party/state apparatus acknowledged its own mistakes (most often 'heartless bureaucratic behaviour' of local officials towards the intelligentsia), such 'self-criticism' never extended beyond the specific methods of exerting power. This not only nourished the comforting illusion that the problem was solvable within the parameters of the GDR as it existed, it also meant that the perceived solution lay in extending the presence of the state in people's lives instead of reducing it. As Volker Ackermann has put it, the 'real causes' lay not in a surplus, but rather a deficit of the state.²¹ The SED's anti-*Republikflucht* policy therefore sought to correct this deficit through 'increased vigilance', heightened 'ideological struggle', and strengthening the 'educational and mass cultural work' within the populace.

Viewed from below, however, the problem looked very different. Local officials knew from daily experience that the very 'vigilance' and 'ideological struggle' that the leadership was calling for was a large part of the problem in the first place. These different perspectives between centre and periphery prompted frequent complaints about local functionaries merely 'going through the motions' and failing to see the ubiquitous class enemy. As one Central Committee report of 1954 put it:

there must be an end to the fairy tale of *Republikflucht* 'for family reasons'. In almost all cases the true reason is entirely different: incitement by RIAS [Radio in the American Sector], promises of western *Abwerber*, enemy rumours. A worker in the GDR who is ideologically steadfast (*gefestigt*) does not move to his aunt or mother-in-law in West

¹⁸ On the ritualization of language in the GDR generally, see Ralph Jessen, 'Diktatorische Herrschaft als kommunikative Praxis: Überlegungen zum Zusammenhang von "Bürokratie" und Sprachnormierung in der DDR-Geschichte', in A. Lüdtker and P. Becker, eds., *Akten, Eingaben, Schaufenster: Die DDR und ihre Texte* (Berlin, 1997), pp. 57–75.

¹⁹ Ulbricht himself upheld these taboos within his closest circle. In his opinion, 60 per cent of the cases of flight were due to 'shortcomings in our work'; the fact that 75 per cent of emigrants were under twenty-five years of age only showed that 'the schools are not sufficiently fulfilling their tasks'. See Lemke, *Die Berlinkrise*, p. 49.

²⁰ See esp. SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/397, 'Niederschrift über die Sitzung der Kommission zu den Fragen der Republikflucht am 23 Nov. 1956', 4 Dec. 1956, fos. 446–7. Although this special commission was established by the Politbüro only in spring 1956, and seemed to address the problem in a relatively objective fashion, its meeting of 23 Nov. 1956 appears to have been its last. Ibid., 'Bericht der Kommission zu Fragen der Republikflucht', 25 May 1956, fos. 204–13.

²¹ Ackermann, *Der 'echte' Flüchtling*, p. 146.

Germany for so-called 'family reasons', giving up his livelihood here and possibly even leaving the furniture standing. The functionary who believes in 'family reasons' is politically blind.²²

Such blinkered views not only obscured many of the causes of *Republikflucht*, but in many ways made the problem worse. A 1955 Central Committee investigation among university personnel can serve as an illustration. As was often the case, enemy *Abwerbung* as a primary cause was a foregone conclusion. It seemed quite clear from discussions with both party functionaries and staff that few genuinely believed that 'enemy activity' played a significant role in illegal emigration. But this did not tally with the official understanding. Rather typically, the investigators blamed the lack of clues on 'extremely insufficient political-ideological work' and insufficient research, which was 'not carried out in the awareness that the class enemy is behind it'. Also rather typically, the report concludes by recommending intensified 'political-ideological work' at the universities, which in all likelihood would prove counterproductive.²³ Thus began the vicious circle that repeated itself time and again in schools, factories, and scholarly institutes all across the GDR. Every case of flight of an important individual prompted an inquisitorial investigation and tightening of political control which was in many cases one of the main reasons for leaving the GDR in the first place.²⁴

Such recommendations were of little use to functionaries on the ground, and had little impact on their day-to-day activities. It is hardly surprising that Central Committee reports on the universities in 1959 still found precisely the same problems as in 1955: little effort was expended on what many saw as an unsolvable problem, cases of flight were still merely 'registered', often with hopelessly vacuous conclusions such as 'presumed cause: political misconceptions'.²⁵ They also made precisely the same recommendations: intensified 'political-ideological work'. The situation looked broadly similar in the factories. Fairly typical were the conclusions of a 1956 report from Berlin-Treptow: 'In all investigations carried out by the commission, it is clear that the factory party organizations do not concern themselves at all with the causes that led or still could lead to *Republikflucht*.'²⁶ Apart from the police, who were expressly responsible for investigating cases of illegal emigration, most local functionaries gave the issue little attention. Even the few individuals who took

²² SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/395, 'Material für die Besprechung mit den Abteilungsleitern der Bezirksleitungen', undated (c. May 1954), p. 3.

²³ SAPMO-BA DY30/904/669, 'Bericht an das Sekretariat des ZKs über die Republikflucht', 19 Aug. 1955.

²⁴ This was occasionally recognized by party instructors. For instance, the flight of one university librarian was intentionally *not* condemned in a resolution prepared by instructors because the letter she left for her colleagues listed these resolutions as one of her main reasons for leaving. SAPMO-BA DY30/904/669, 'Analyse der Republikflucht', 8 Aug. 1959, p. 3.

²⁵ SAPMO-BA DY30/904/669, 'Analyse der Republikflucht', 8 Aug. 1959.

²⁶ Landesarchiv Berlin (hereafter LAB) C Rep. 900, IV/4/07-196, undated report, c. June 1956.

an active interest recognized that there was little they could do. As the party chairman at one Leipzig factory explained to Central Committee investigators: 'We've carried out assemblies, held lectures against *Republikflucht*, even carried out differentiated discussions, but have not had any great success with it.'²⁷ In the second half of the 1950s so-called '*Republikflucht*-commissions' were established in the larger towns and factories to mobilize grass-roots functionaries to stem the tide to the West and persuade former refugees to return, but most met only sporadically, were poorly attended and – in the words of a rather typical report from Halle – existed 'primarily on paper'.²⁸

Although such inertia was still due in part to the sheer overburdening of local functionaries, there was also a certain reluctance towards 'winning back' returnees. In spite of the countless triumphal newspaper reports of first-time immigrants and returnees from the West, these people were generally regarded with suspicion.²⁹ In the factories, those who left the 'golden West' for the GDR were widely viewed as either work-shy or criminals escaping prosecution – in any event undesired in one's work brigade.³⁰ The People's Police also complained in 1958 that 'the comrades are ... often of the opinion that the only people who leave or return from West Germany to the GDR have something on their record and are of no valuable help for constructing socialism in the GDR'.³¹ Against this backdrop it is understandable why a high proportion of returnees and first-time immigrants immediately left for the West again after bad experiences with the police in the East German intake camps.

²⁷ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/397, 'Niederschrift über die Überprüfung der Probleme des Kampfes gegen die Republikflucht im Bezirke Leipzig vom 26.-27.1. und vom 8.-10.2.1956', undated, p. 3.

²⁸ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/398, 'Bericht der Brigade über die Ergebnisse des Einsatzes im Bezirk Halle', undated, c. 1957. Further examples can be found in: LAB C Rep. 411, Nr. 197, 'Bericht über den Brigadeinsatz im VEB TRO vom 19.1. - 31.1.1959'; Lab C Rep. 411, Nr. 197, 'Einschätzung der Arbeit der betrieblichen RF-Kommission und Analyse der Republikfluchten, Rückkehrer und Neuzuzüge', 13 May 1961; LAB C Rep. 900, IV/4/07-196, 'Protokoll über die Zusammenkunft der R-kommission in der Kreisleitung am 7.6.1956'; Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv (hereafter BLHA) Bez. Pdm. Rep. 531, KL Neuruppin, Nr. 103, 'Bürovorlage', 16 Mar. 1961; BLHA Bez. Pdm. Rep. 401, Nr. 6644, 'Bericht über die am 24. und 25.10.57 durchgeführte Überprüfung im Kreis Belzig bezügl. Republikfluchten und anderen Fragen des innerdeutschen Reiseverkehrs', 7 Nov. 1957.

²⁹ BAB DO1/8/291/2, 'Erläuterung und Ergänzung zur Übersicht über Rückkehrer und Zuziehende aus Westdeutschland und Westberlin', 31 May 1961; BLHA Bez. Pdm. Rep. 401, Nr. 7308, 7304, 6696, *passim*.

³⁰ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/396, 'Bericht über die illegalen Abwanderungen aus der DDR und den Kampf gegen die Republikflucht im Jahre 1954', p. 14.

³¹ BAB DO1/11/965, 'Informationen über die Entwicklung der Behandlung von Rückkehrern in den Aufnahmestellen und Volkspolizeikreisämtern', 24 Oct. 1958, bl. 91. The police in fact reported that 22.6 per cent of returnees and 25.5 per cent of first-time immigrants had criminal records. see BAB DO1/8/291/2, 'Erläuterung und Ergänzung zur Übersicht über Rückkehrer und Zuziehende aus Westdeutschland und Westberlin', 31 May 1961, p. 3.

II

There was, then, a variety of factors that lamed the East German regime's ability to respond effectively to the population drain: organizational shortcomings, the tabooization of its causes, apathetic and/or perplexed local functionaries, and poor treatment of returnees. But in essence these factors merely reflected a more general and seemingly unsolvable problem: namely, the reactions of the GDR populace to the permeable West Berlin borders separating a relatively poor and unattractive East German state and an increasingly wealthy and attractive West German one. Debates as to why so many East Germans left the GDR are as old as the problem itself. Were internal political pressures paramount? Was the magnetic pull of the West German 'economic miracle' predominant? Or are answers better sought in the situational factors of the people and groups involved? Most importantly, what do the reasons and causes of the mass exodus tell us about social and political developments in East Germany more generally?

As we have seen, the view put forward by the East German authorities for popular consumption was that illegal emigrants to the West had either been seduced by western agents or succumbed to empty promises of a better life. The mass exodus was thus explained primarily in political terms, on the one hand as a kind of conspiracy theory of western subversion, and on the other of the lack of 'ideological steadfastness' on the part of people who were 'betraying' or 'deserting' the socialist project (the term *Republikflucht* had certain connotations with *Fahnenflucht*, or military desertion). Apart from the callousness of some local officials, the many undeniable 'push' factors within the GDR, whether political or material, were largely ignored.

Yet despite the aforementioned taboos surrounding the discussion of the mass exodus, there were limits to these political explanations, and as the 1950s wore on internal analyses of the problem increasingly began to stress material motives for leaving. The West German boom of the latter 1950s was acknowledged as a powerful pull factor, especially for skilled workers, engineers, and technicians who were in great demand (though even this was usually referred to as 'passive *Abwerbung*', as distinct from 'active *Abwerbung*', the supposed efforts of western agents).³² Only few official reports acknowledged the GDR's own material 'push factors', such as poor factory organization and the effects this had on wages; the widely held opinion that the GDR's economic problems were 'insurmountable'; the dire housing shortage; the lack of consumer goods; as well as a range of 'bureaucratic and heartless measures, exaggerated regulations, etc., that anger people'.³³

By the end of the decade, personal and situational factors were also

³² Cf. BAB DO1/11/963, 'Bericht über die Republikfluchten aus der DDR für die Zeit vom 1.1.1954 bis 31.12.1955', undated, fos. 225-9.

³³ BAB DE1/11835, Duschek to Leuschner, 25 Sept. 1956, fos. 5-8.

increasingly stressed in reports from the local level. A list of motives reported for absconded employees from the VEB Transformatorenwerk in Köpenick in 1959 gives an idea of their scope: 'Trip to West Germany rejected, fiancée left Republic shortly beforehand'; 'Had pro-West attitude, which meant he could not be delegated to study. All relatives in West Berlin and West Germany'; 'She was in factory only six months, was work-shy and led very immoral life. She had many debts and wanted to escape them by fleeing the Republic'; 'Returned from West Germany in January 1959 ... Fled Republic again probably for family reasons, because he did not get along with his mother.'³⁴ Reports by the local Party Control Commissions investigating the flight of SED members similarly emphasized personal causes such as the influence of relatives, following an absconded partner, marital breakdown, western contacts or relatives in the West, 'moral improprieties', and of course career motives.³⁵

Despite the very different suppositions that lay behind them, West German interpretations of the mass exodus followed a similar pattern of development. Until the mid-1960s, the central question of why some East Germans left while others stayed was generally answered in terms of political motivations. Given the overall context of competing systems between East and West Germany, it is not surprising that official accounts in the West tended to place political repression in the foreground, despite the fact that only 20 per cent of the immigrants from the GDR were granted the identification-card 'C' for political refugees.³⁶ The same was true of portrayals by refugee organizations, which stressed political motives not least in order to elicit understanding and acceptance from their fellow citizens in the Federal Republic. Even the few scholarly studies of the 1950s and early 1960s tended to view the mass emigration as a 'quiet protest' against the 'handing over of Central Germany to the Soviets', a 'vote against bondage', and against the 'ubiquitous totalitarian currents' which, so the implication ran, drove the freedom-seekers to the West and cowed the more compliant into submission.³⁷

With the advent of East-West détente, these views began to soften. The results of surveys on East German refugees had already contributed to a far more differentiated picture in the late 1950s.³⁸ On the basis of such findings,

³⁴ LAB C Rep. 411, Nr. 197, 'Aufstellung von R-Fluchten ab 1.1.1959'.

³⁵ Henrik Eberle, 'Weder Gegenseitigkeit noch Abwerbung. Zu den Motiven republikflüchtiger SED-Mitglieder aus dem Bezirk Halle im Jahr 1961', in Heiner Timmermann, ed., *Diktaturen in Europa im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1996), pp. 454–5.

³⁶ See, for example, Bundesministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen, *Die Flucht aus der Sowjetzone und die Sperrmaßnahmen des kommunistischen Regimes vom 13. August 1961* (Bonn and Berlin, 1961); Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge und Kriegsgeschädigte, *Flucht aus der Sowjetzone* (Bonn and Berlin, 1964); Johannes Klein, 'Ursachen und Motiven der Abwanderung aus der Sowjetzone Deutschlands', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* (hereafter *APuZG*), B 24/55 (15 June 1955), pp. 361–83. Figure from Heidemeyer, *Flucht und Zuwanderung*, p. 54.

³⁷ Johannes Kurt Klein, 'Ursachen und Motiven der Abwanderung aus der Sowjetzone Deutschlands', in: *APuZG*, B 24/55 (15 June 1955), pp. 361–83, here pp. 361, 381; also Bundesministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen, *Die Flucht aus der Sowjetzone*.

³⁸ Infratest GmbH, *Jugendliche Flüchtlinge aus der SBZ* (Munich, 1957); *Angestellten in der Sowjetzone Deutschlands: Verhaltensweise und gesellschaftliche Einordnung der mitteldeutschen Angestellten*

scholarly studies began to emphasize the importance of economic factors. In 1966, five years after the border around West Berlin was sealed, Ernst Richert described the population movement before August 1961 as an 'internal migration to more favourable living conditions'.³⁹ By 1979 even the Federal Ministry for All-German Affairs concluded that relatively few people left because of 'acute political danger', but rather were attracted by the higher living standard.⁴⁰ And by the 1980s, the exodus from the GDR was viewed increasingly as part of the broader European migration pattern since the nineteenth century from an agrarian East to an industrializing West.⁴¹

Yet despite this change of emphasis from political to material factors, the implication that those with any enterprising or freedom-seeking spirit made their way westwards remained largely intact. Thus a popular image of a docile rump population in the East emerged in West Germany. According to the joke, 'DDR' stood not only for *Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, but also *der doofe Rest* (the dumb remainder), a view in some ways reflected in scholarly accounts. As Dietrich Storbeck put it in 1964: *Republikflucht* got rid of politically 'inactive' persons and 'burdens for society'.⁴² Ralf Dahrendorf's suggestion that the mass exodus contributed to a kind of 'latent stabilization' in the GDR ran in the same direction, as did Günter Gaus's memorable phrase that 'only the so-called little people stayed behind'.⁴³ As recently as 1991, Arnulf Baring reiterated this view with remarkable coarseness: 'Anyone who showed initiative or was energetic and determined, had either left in time or was thrown out later on.'⁴⁴

In many ways these views (apart from Baring's) are entirely correct. In sociological terms, it is clear that the skilled and educated were overrepresented in the emigrant stream, which further augmented the already significant trends of upward mobility in the GDR of the 1950s and early 1960s.⁴⁵ But the evaluation of the categories of who left and who stayed has often been too simple and mechanical – non-conformist, 'disloyal' and 'politically inactive' persons left; 'system-conformist', 'loyal', and presumably more 'politically active' persons stayed. Such a judgement tends to narrow the causes of the exodus into essentially political motivations, and cannot stand unqualified if one looks closely at the array of motives for leaving.

(Munich, 1958); *Die Intelligenzschicht in der Sowjetzone Deutschlands*, 3 vols. (Munich, 1960); also Viggo Graf Blücher, *Industriearbeiterschaft in der Sowjetzone* (Stuttgart, 1959).

³⁹ Ernst Richert, *Das zweite Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main, 1966), p. 82. See also Dietrich Storbeck, 'Flucht oder Wanderung?', *Soziale Welt*, 14 (1963), pp. 153–71.

⁴⁰ *DDR-Handbuch* (Cologne, 1979), p. 401.

⁴¹ Cf. Siegfried Bethlehem and Klaus Bade, *Vom Auswanderungsland zum Einwanderungsland* (Berlin, 1983); Peter Marschalck, *Bevölkerungsgeschichte Deutschlands im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main, 1984).

⁴² Storbeck, 'Flucht oder Wanderung', p. 165.
⁴³ Ralf Dahrendorf, *Gesellschaft und Freiheit* (Munich, 1965), p. 310; Günter Gaus, *Wo Deutschland liegt* (Munich, 1986), p. 35.

⁴⁴ A. Baring, *Deutschland, was nun?* (Berlin, 1991), p. 55.
⁴⁵ Heike Solga, *Auf dem Weg in eine klassenlose Gesellschaft? Klassenlagen und Mobilität zwischen Generationen in der DDR* (Berlin, 1995).

For reasons of space, this is not the place to embark on a comprehensive discussion of the variety of factors influencing the mass exodus out of the GDR. A few points must suffice. First of all, it is important to stress that the motives and causes underlying *Republikflucht* were extremely complex. They cannot neatly be separated into a political-versus-economic schema and involved far more than an act of free will based on one's political inclinations. For one thing, economic and political factors were often inseparable. Career prospects for individuals in the GDR were to a considerable degree tied to participation in the mass organizations or to one's social background, and many professionals left for the sake of their children's careers. Moreover, the GDR had a thoroughly politicized economy; many members of the intelligentsia fled out of fear of being held responsible for problems over which they had little control – 'sabotage' was defined very loosely.⁴⁶

Secondly, personal and situational factors undoubtedly played a crucial (and often underappreciated) role, varying significantly from group to group, even individual to individual. The reuniting of families, for instance, remained an important factor until at least the mid-1950s. Many of the 'resettlers' from the former eastern territories of the Reich did not put down strong roots in East Germany. Especially in the northern agricultural areas of the GDR where they tended to be concentrated, reports remarked that many were using the GDR as a 'springboard' for moving on to the West.⁴⁷ It is telling in this regard that farmers, many of whom possessed significant property and could not simply take their trade with them, were underrepresented in the exodus, at least apart from the periods of acute agricultural collectivization in spring 1953 and spring 1960.⁴⁸ By contrast, young people under the age of twenty-five were overrepresented, since most were not tied down by family and career. As we have just seen, a variety of other personal factors such as marital breakdown or debts also encouraged flight. Indeed, *Republikflucht* often set off a kind of chain reaction, since immediate family members of illegal emigrants were systematically discriminated against because of their close 'Western ties'.

Thirdly, different groups naturally responded to different pressures. The SED's various policy campaigns throughout the 1950s tended to 'target' specific segments of the populace. It was no coincidence, for example, that university teachers left in disproportionately high numbers during the 1958 'socialist remodelling' of higher education, or that the number of service-age young men rose steeply during the army recruitment campaigns of 1952 and

⁴⁶ SAPMO-BA DY30/13/397, 'Wie ist die gegenwärtige Lage in der Abwanderung nach Westdeutschland?', undated, c. Feb. 1956, p. 5. See generally, SAPMO-BA DY30/904/668–669; also DY30/904/62, 'Probleme, die in der Arbeit mit der wissenschaftlichen Intelligenz eine Rolle spielen', 2 Dec. 1960, pp. 1–2. As Infratest researchers discovered in the latter 1950s, such fears were especially prevalent among administrative cadres and technicians, affecting physicians and teachers somewhat less. Infratest GmbH, *Intelligenzschicht*, II, figure 5.

⁴⁷ BAB DO1/11/964, 'Republikfluchten: Auswertung des Berichtsmonats September', 2 Nov. 1957, fos. 193–201.

⁴⁸ Bundesministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen, *Die Flucht aus der Sowjetzone*, p. 17.

especially 1955. Even the immensely magnetic ‘pull factor’ of the Federal Republic had different effects on different groups. It was of course easier for skilled workers to take their trades with them than, say, farmers, whose prospects of acquiring work in the rapidly mechanizing agrarian sector in West Germany were relatively slim. Educated professionals, especially those in technical fields, were especially highly sought after and well remunerated in the West German ‘economic miracle’. Moreover, the strength of the ‘pull’ was magnified all the more if one had close acquaintances or relatives in the West to whom one could initially turn for help, accommodation, perhaps even a job, thus avoiding the refugee induction camps that SED propaganda continually portrayed in such desperate terms.

The point of this admittedly very brief sketch is that the mass emigration out of the GDR was based on a broad range of overlapping, cross-cutting factors whose complexity is not always adequately appreciated. Most cases of flight resulted from a complex mixture of causes and catalysts, which interacted with a variety of broader structural factors such as housing and employment prospects in the West. In so far as the effects can be deduced from the causes, this complexity suggests the need to qualify the idea that the mass emigration represented a siphoning-off of potential troublemakers, and by extension a form of ‘latent political stabilization’ (to use Ralf Dahrendorf’s term). While this notion undoubtedly makes sense with regard to the departure of certain elites from economic or cultural life who might have formed an independent power-base (which Dahrendorf himself was referring to with a comparative eye on other Soviet satellite states), it is misleading when applied to *Republikflucht* as a mass phenomenon. Undoubtedly the vast bulk of those who left the GDR were discontented with certain aspects of life there; but so, too, were most of those who stayed. As we will now see, the consequences of the permeable borders for the regime’s ability to exert its authority were not limited to the obvious problem of losing emigrants to the West. The open border also affected the political behaviour of those who stayed, many of whom used the possibility of *Republikflucht* to their own advantage in their dealings with local authorities.

III

Albert Hirschman’s famous ‘exit-voice’ model is useful for understanding how this worked. Since 1989 this model has been used by numerous scholars, including Hirschman himself, to explain the dynamics of emigration, political dissent and stability in the GDR.⁴⁹ Its basic idea is that ‘exit’ (or ‘opting out’ in whatever form) usually tends to undermine ‘voice’ (or ‘interest articulation’) as a response to any undesirable state of affairs. As Hirschman summarizes: ‘deterioration generates the pressure of discontent, which will be channelled into voice or exit; the more pressure escapes through exit, the less

⁴⁹ Albert Hirschman, ‘Exit, voice, and the fate of the German Democratic Republic: an essay in conceptual history’, *World Politics*, 45 (1993), pp. 173–202.

is available to foment voice'.⁵⁰ When applied to the history of the GDR, the basic argument is that the possibility of improving one's lot simply by leaving (with or without the permission of the East German authorities) undermined the development of the kinds of resistance and dissident movements that sprouted up elsewhere in eastern Europe. In other words, the relative ability to 'opt out' of the GDR, or at least the comforting thought that this was a possibility, meant that there was less pressure to 'speak up' within it. In Hirschman's own words: 'the presence, real or imagined, of the exit option did undermine the development of the art of voice' in the GDR.⁵¹ 'Exit' and 'voice' are thus seen as antagonists before 1989.

What happened in 1989 was, in this interpretation, an exact reversal of the previous relationship between 'exit' and 'voice', which no longer operated against each other in the classic 'see-saw' fashion, but instead worked in tandem to bring down the regime once it became apparent that it could no longer prevent the large-scale flight of its citizens. The inability to control 'exit' was then 'taken to imply a similar decline in the ability and readiness to repress voice ... Precisely because the East German regime had made the repression of exit into the touchstone of its authority, its sudden incapacity to enforce its writ in this area meant a huge loss of face that emboldened people to other kinds of transgression.'⁵²

Clearly, there is much to recommend this explanation of the dynamics of mass emigration and political developments in the GDR, both before and during the revolutionary events of 1989. Yet it fails to capture some important aspects of these dynamics, especially for the period before 1961, when exit and voice also worked in tandem – albeit far less dramatically than in 1989 – to undermine the SED's authority.

One problem is that the rather narrow definition of 'voice' as an 'active' form of interest articulation tends to overlook the more subtle and 'passive' forms of asserting one's interests or expressing grievances in the GDR that were, because of the repressive political atmosphere and the fear generated by the *Stasi*, far more common than open dissent. Among the most prominent forms of such behaviour were the perennial work slow-downs, calling in sick, refusals to carry out certain tasks, or to participate in regime-sponsored activities, etc. Of course this is Hirschman's point, that precisely this kind of open dissent by and large failed to materialize between 1953 and 1989. But even though such passive forms of interest articulation were far more common than forthright 'voice', internal reports leave little doubt that the open border (the possibility of 'exit') significantly enhanced their effectiveness. Recently collectivized

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 176.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 178. This argument is of course not new. As early as 1965, Ralf Dahrendorf suggested that the flight of certain groups might have a 'latent stabilizing effect' on the GDR: 'the rigid Stalinism in the Eastern Zone can be explained in part by the inability to find reasonably qualified people who might represent an alternative'. *Gesellschaft und Freiheit*, p. 310.

⁵² Hirschman, 'Exit, voice', p. 187.

farmers reluctant to change their work patterns, for example, sometimes made explicit reference to it in discussions with the collectivization brigades: 'Enough people have already cleared out [for the West], and there's still room for us.'⁵³ Some young men disinclined to 'volunteer' for army service even temporarily left for the West to disqualify themselves from military service when they returned.⁵⁴ Most importantly, the ever-present threat of 'exit' (sometimes just to another factory, sometimes to the West) by skilled workers under the conditions of a labour shortage from the mid-1950s onwards constantly figured into norm and wage calculations on the shopfloor, and gave industrial workers a degree of bargaining power they otherwise would not have had.⁵⁵

Certainly the East German authorities saw a clear connection between the open border and the effectiveness of such forms of passive 'voice'. As Ulbricht himself put it in a letter to Khrushchev shortly before the sealing of the border around West Berlin:

The entire situation, influenced by the open border, hindered us from implementing adequate measures to eliminate the disproportions in the wage structure and to create a proper relationship between wages and performance ... In all the other People's Democracies, in the context of their closed borders, such political-economic issues could be tackled differently than was possible under our political circumstances.⁵⁶

Indeed, it is telling that the East German leadership, ever haunted by the spectre of the 17 June 1953 uprising, only dared tackle the wage problem in the shadow of the Wall.⁵⁷ Equally telling was the fact that conscription was also introduced only several months afterwards. Clearly, the more subtle means by which ordinary East Germans tried to assert their interests were much broader than the category 'voice'. Yet they were still significantly influenced by the possibility of 'exit'. If one broadens the definition of 'voice' to encompass these far more common forms of interest articulation under dictatorial political conditions, then 'voice' can in fact be seen to operate to a large extent *alongside*, not *against*, 'exit' before the construction of the Wall.

In fact, one need not even broaden Hirschman's definition of 'voice' to paint a more complex picture than the classic 'see-saw' interpretation. Far from always operating as antagonists before 1989, 'exit' and more forthright forms of 'voice' often worked in tandem during the 1950s and early 1960s, sometimes

⁵³ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/672, 'Informationsbericht', 24 July 1961.

⁵⁴ BAB DO1/11/967, fo. 80.

⁵⁵ See generally, Peter Hübner, *Konsens, Konflikt, Kompromiß: Soziale Arbeiterinteressen und Sozialpolitik in der SBZ/DDR, 1945-1970* (Berlin, 1995); 'Balance des Ungleichgewichtes: Zum Verhältnis von Arbeiterinteressen und SED-Herrschaft', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (hereafter *GG*), 19 (1993), pp. 15-28; Jörg Roesler, 'Probleme des Brigadealltags: Arbeitsverhältnisse und Arbeitsklima in volkseigenen Betrieben', *APuZG*, 38/47 (1997), pp. 3-17; J. Kopstein, *The politics of economic decline* (Chapel Hill, 1997); Rüdiger Soldt, 'Zum Beispiel Schwarze Pumpe: Arbeiterbrigaden in der DDR', *GG*, 24 (1998), pp. 88-109.

⁵⁶ A. Steiner, 'Politische Vorstellungen', pp. 263-4.

⁵⁷ The so-called *Produktionsaufgebot*, which was introduced only weeks after the border closure, was 'to produce more in the same time for the same pay'.

to considerable effect. The internal reports of the SED and People's Police make it clear that a significant number of East Germans who stayed in the GDR not only continued to complain loudly about various state policies that infringed upon their lives. They also quite openly and skillfully used the open border to their own advantage.

There were any number of motivations for doing this. The housing shortage – *the* subject of everyday complaint in the early GDR – can serve as an illustration. It was extremely common for people requesting new accommodation to threaten to leave the GDR if the request remained unfulfilled. Such threats were usually conveyed via written petitions (*Eingaben*) – a classic form of ‘voice’, albeit on the whole an *individual* one very different from the collective ‘voice’ of autumn 1989 – to various levels of the state apparatus.⁵⁸ A fairly typical example was the letter sent to President Wilhelm Pieck's office by Willi W. of Neustrelitz, who suffixed his request for a new flat with the words: ‘If the allocation should prove impossible, I would like to request your assistance in the acquisition of an exit permit to West Germany, since my relatives there can offer us suitable accommodation at any time.’⁵⁹

Although it is impossible to say how many such petitions were successful, there is clear evidence that some attained their objective, for example in the case of family K. from Großindow who withdrew their petition for an emigration permit immediately after receiving a new flat. Internal analyses of the petitions sent to President Pieck's office suggest that most threats were bluffs, and local officials were accordingly advised not to take them at face value.⁶⁰ But, significantly, it was also recommended that threats by members of certain groups – the intelligentsia, skilled workers – be given ‘special attention’. As an example one report quoted a letter from engineer Günther G. of Leipzig, who, with typical resort to the SED's own rhetoric, wrote that recent West German attempts at *Abwerbung* were

no grounds for me to leave the German Democratic Republic, although it would be quite easy, since my wife comes from the Rhineland and my parents-in-law would be happy to take us in. Since I would like to continue to devote all my energies to the

⁵⁸ On *Eingaben* generally, see the somewhat problematic overview by Felix Mühlberg, ‘Konformismus oder Eigensinn? Eingaben als Quelle zur Erforschung der Alltagsgeschichte der DDR’, *Mitteilungen aus der kulturwissenschaftlichen Forschung*, 19 (1996), pp. 331–45. For a better analysis of petitioning, albeit focusing on the final years of the GDR, see Jonathan Zatlin, ‘Ausgaben und Eingaben: Das Petitionsrecht und der Untergang der DDR’, *ZfG*, 45 (1997), pp. 902–17. Housing problems were by far the single greatest source of complaint in these petitions, comprising 30–40 per cent of all those received by the state.

⁵⁹ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/252, ‘Bericht der Korrespondenzabteilung für das I. Quartal 1956’, 12 Apr. 1956, fo. 46.

⁶⁰ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/252, 17 Jan. 1957, fos. 165–6. As the Central Committee's Correspondence Department put it in 1956: ‘We recommend that the local authorities carry out a joint discussion with the complainants, ... whereby in most cases it turns out that the complainants had no earnest intention of leaving the German Democratic Republic’. See SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/252, ‘Bericht der Korrespondenzabteilung für das I. Quartal 1956’, 12 Apr. 1956, fo. 46.

People's Own economy, I ask you, honourable Mr President, to clear up the matter of my accommodation most swiftly, for I will otherwise have to make use of my in-laws' offer.⁶¹

The development of this particular form of 'voice' appears to have been less related to a decrease in the possibility of 'exit' than to a general decline in the regime's authority – in some ways like the situation in 1989. In particular it seemed associated with a decline in the regime's willingness to suppress criticism of social provision after the leadership's self-critical climbdown with the advent of the so-called 'New Course' in June 1953, which sought to pacify the populace through social reforms after the year of belt-tightening associated with the 'construction of socialism' campaign. As the Central Committee Correspondence Department put it in April 1954: 'Especially since the announcement of the New Course, there are people writing in who try to push through their housing wishes by "threatening" to go to West Germany if their requests are not fulfilled.'⁶² Incidentally, it is important to point out here that this admission of mistakes and bundle of social concessions abruptly curtailed the record flow of refugees leaving the GDR in spring 1953, bringing them back to a more or less 'normal' level of 17,260 in July after the high points of 58,605 in March and 40,381 in June. Thus the failed attempt at mass 'voice' in June 1953 did not, as Hirschman argues on the basis of annual emigration figures, lead to an exceptionally large exit,⁶³ but on the contrary followed one. Even during the fateful year 1953, the two alternatives can therefore be seen as operating more in tandem than against each other.

Returning to the issue of housing, the policy of offering prioritized accommodation to returnees from the West added another dimension to these threats. Despite the rather small numbers of people involved in the West–East counter-current,⁶⁴ this was, given the dire shortage, not only an extremely unpopular practice, but also one which gave complainants additional leverage. Petitioners often pointed out the farcical logic of allowing a supposed 'traitor' to jump the queue as a means of giving their own housing demands additional justification. For instance, in 1956 Gerda S. of Lautawerk suffixed her request for a new flat with the story of a certain family B. who had come from West Germany, got a new flat, a loan to furnish it, even retraining for Herr B. as manager of a state-run guesthouse, but none the less left the GDR a little over a year later: 'here large sums of money were paid out for nothing. We who have not left the GDR are being pushed up against the wall.'⁶⁵ Such indignation was

⁶¹ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/252, 'Bericht der Korrespondenzabteilung für das I. Quartal 1956, 12 Apr. 1956, fo. 46.

⁶² SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/251, 'Monatsbericht der Korrespondenzabteilung für den Monat April 1954', undated, fo. 472.

⁶³ Hirschman, 'Exit, voice', p. 180.

⁶⁴ According to official West German statistics, there was a counter-traffic of around 503,361 people from 1950 to 1964, many of whom returned to the West. See *DDR-Handbuch*, 1985, p. 1368. Although it is impossible to calculate precisely, it seems that the population movement from East to West outweighed movement in the other direction by around 12:1.

⁶⁵ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/252, fo. 210.

widespread enough to spawn numerous jokes, and even provided inspiration for a satirical play at the Erfurt Youth Theatre: 'If you're looking for a flat, I'll tell you what is best, you travel to the West. As a reward for coming back, you get yourself a flat.'⁶⁶ Yet while some individuals contented themselves with irony, others sought to capitalize on the policy more directly. At the Sachsenwerk Niedersiedlitz in Dresden, where 300 workers were in search of accommodation in 1954, such threats were reportedly common: 'First we will leave the GDR for the West and after we come back someone will have to give us a flat.'⁶⁷

Whether taken seriously or not, the realities of the housing shortage meant that most of the thousands of petitions and threats simply could not be fulfilled. In fact, the strategy of amplifying 'voice' through the threat of 'exit' could in some circumstances be counterproductive. The crucial characteristic of petitions as a manifestation of 'voice' was their individual nature. As such, they had a certain appeal to the East German authorities as a means of acquiring popular feedback and 'letting off steam' in a way that was not threatening to their organizational hegemony.⁶⁸ However, as soon as such petitions took on too broad a character, let alone *organized* character, they began to pose a problem, even if only by virtue of their sheer numbers. Fearing a kind of 'domino-effect', some local officials were determined not to give in to such blackmail. The chairman of district council VII in Karl-Marx-Stadt, which seemed particularly inundated with such threats, refused to budge on the issue: 'Unfortunately the situation is currently such that there is almost no objective argumentation at all anymore regarding housing matters. Those looking for flats operate against us almost without exception with the threat of *Republikflucht*. Moreover, if you allow such threats to work, you immediately get three or four parallel cases, because these things quickly get spoken around.'⁶⁹

Despite such steadfastness on the part of a few individual functionaries, the threats and pressure clearly influenced the activities of many local officials. In trying to deal with the continuing housing shortage and mounds of angry complaints that piled up on their desks, *Bürgermeister* and local council officials had little interest in either 'winning back' former refugees or, for that matter, in keeping people from leaving. For them, quite unlike factory managers suffering from a labour shortage, every case of flight to the West represented less a political embarrassment for the SED or a drain of skilled manpower than it did another available flat. Likewise, every returning refugee or immigrant from the West was viewed less as a vote of confidence in the GDR than as a 'burdensome applicant' for scarce housing, as a 1957 report from Halle

⁶⁶ The text rhymes in German: 'Wenn du mal eine Wohnung suchst, dann ist es wohl am besten, du reist mal nach dem Westen. Bei deiner Rückkehr als Belohnung, bekommst du eine Wohnung'. SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/252, 'III. Quartal 1956', 2 Oct. 1956, fo. 112.

⁶⁷ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/396, 'Bericht über die illegalen Abwanderungen aus der DDR und den Kampf gegen die Republikflucht im Jahre 1954', p. 13.

⁶⁸ On the stabilizing effects of petitioning in the GDR, see esp. Zatlin, 'Ausgaben und Eingaben'. ⁶⁹ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/252, 'Eingabenanalyse', 17 Jan. 1957, fo. 166.

complained.⁷⁰ Thus while the problems associated with getting grass-roots officials to help curb the exodus to the West was, as we have seen, by and large limited to mere inactivity or 'insufficient attention', a significant number of local officials were actually operating in direct contradiction to the complementary practice of attracting immigrants and returnees with promises of employment and accommodation. As the example of housing shows, 'voice', reinforced by 'exit', could prove remarkably effective, even to the point of decoupling the activities of the regime's periphery from central policy.

Improved housing was by no means the only motivation for threatening to leave the GDR. There were also threats in conjunction with requests for automobiles, more suitable employment, and tax exemptions, as well as more financial or social assistance, to list just a few. But, as has already been mentioned, the success or failure of using the open border to one's advantage depended very much on the person doing it. Emigration of members of the 'intelligentsia', especially those in scientific and technical fields, was considered no less than 'a great danger to society',⁷¹ and they, more than any other segment of the population, were well placed to exploit the situation. Although the outlawing of even planned *Republikflucht* under the 'Passport Law' of December 1957 put a swift end to open threats of leaving for the West, the possibility of leaving the GDR remained an implicit part of the equation.

The government was particularly keen to court physicians, who were in alarmingly short supply since the 1940s. The rapid increase in the flight of medical personnel to the West after the introduction of new political controls in the universities in 1958 prompted the Politbüro to steer a more liberal course towards physicians, who were given special privileges in September 1958 and again in December 1960, including higher pay, eased restrictions on travel and on doctors' children entering higher education, even the ability to bequeath medical practices to one's children.⁷² But these 'physician communiqués', as they were called, failed to make much of an impact since most doctors sceptically viewed them as mere stop-gap measures. As a report from the outpatients' clinic in Senftenberg put it: 'In the People's Democracies doctors earn no more than their drivers. It is generally assumed that as soon as the Berlin-Question is solved in the interests of the GDR the position of doctors will be revised and all the privileges cancelled.'⁷³ Doctors quite correctly saw 'exit' and 'voice' as operating in tandem here, with the consequence that the abrogation of the former would lead to, or effectively amount to, a suppression of the latter. Although fewer physicians left the GDR in 1959 than in 1958, this fear of a change in the status of the border, and thus in physicians' fortunes,

⁷⁰ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/398, 'Bericht der Brigade über die Ergebnisse des Einsatzes im Bezirk Halle', undated, c. 1957–8.

⁷¹ BAB DO1/11/728, 'Halbjahresbericht', 30 July 1958, p. 99. It is telling that the police made regular special reports on *Republikflucht* among the intelligentsia, which it did not do for any other social groups. See BAB DO1/11/962–968, *passim*.

⁷² Printed in *Neues Deutschland*, 18 Sept. 1958, p. 2; 20 Dec. 1960, p. 1.

⁷³ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/13/401, fo. 28.

prompted a further wave of departures in 1960 and especially 1961, as many were gripped by *Torschlußpanik* ('stampede-panic').

The Politbüro thus found itself at an impasse. Cracking down in the medical faculties in 1958 only increased the emigration of physicians, and subsequent liberalization and privileges had little appreciable effect. Moreover, the open admission that physicians were precious commodities only amplified their demands for better housing, automobiles, holiday accommodation, and the like.⁷⁴ One month after the first 'physician communiqué', Central Committee officials ominously noted that 'there has recently been an increase in the number of petitions from physicians demanding a change to their poor housing conditions with reference to the Politbüro communiqué'.⁷⁵ Worse still for the SED leadership, the communiqués also raised expectations among other groups of the intelligentsia who resented the special treatment for doctors. A report from Bautzen summed up the mood thus: 'You've made concessions to the doctors, now you'll have to make some to us.'⁷⁶ The number of demands for flats, automobiles, and other perks deposited in the archives suggest (although this is impossible to quantify) that such manifestations of 'voice' among the technical and scientific intelligentsia were increasing in the late 1950s.⁷⁷ As regarded the possibilities of the open border before August 1961, East Germans had a clear understanding of what Hirschman theorized a decade later: namely, that 'the chances for voice to function effectively ... are appreciably strengthened if voice is backed up by the *threat of exit*, whether it is made openly or whether the possibility of exit is merely well understood to be an element in the situation by all concerned'.⁷⁸

IV

It was not necessary, then, to play the 'trump card' of the open border – that is, leave for the West – in order to make use of it. And it was not only in 1989 that the alternatives of 'exit' and 'voice' could *combine* to weaken the East German regime's authority; this was also the case, albeit in different ways, prior to August 1961. Many East Germans who might never have considered emigrating could still find ways of profiting from the open border and the possibility of 'exit' – a better flat, better working conditions, the list goes on. Indeed, this did not necessarily require active 'voice'. Given both the precarious labour situation in the GDR and the willingness of many local officials to bend or even contradict official policies to suit conditions on the

⁷⁴ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/902/6, 'Zur Einschätzung der Arbeit mit der Intelligenz', 4 Apr. 1961, p. 1; SAPMO-BA DY34/22231, 'Anlage zur Information Nr. 3/61', Jan. 1961, pp. 1–2, 4.

⁷⁵ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/253, report on third quarter 1958, 29 Oct. 1958, fo. 48.

⁷⁶ SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/443, 'Information über die Weiterführung der Wahlarbeit', 28 Oct. 1958, p. 17.

⁷⁷ See generally the files SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/902/58; DY34/21500.

⁷⁸ A. Hirschman, *Exit, voice and loyalty: responses to decline in firms, organizations and states* (Cambridge, MA, 1970), p. 82. Italics in the original.

ground, more passive and subtle forms of dissent and complaint were often sufficient to get the message across. The mass of East Germans who stayed behind were therefore *not* merely passive spectators to the problem, a 'dumb remainder'. This old dualistic myth of the enterprising and freedom-seeking refugee and the hapless, indecisive East German who stayed has more to do with processes of West German self-legitimation than with any balanced judgement of the motives of flight and the socio-political landscape in the GDR.

Before concluding, a few brief remarks on the end of the mass exodus after the erection of the Berlin Wall seem appropriate. As regards the relationship between mass emigration and broader developments in East German political culture, it would seem from the material presented here that the oft-cited domestic quiet in the GDR during the 1960s and 1970s resulted more from the new pressures of conformity in the shadow of the Wall than from any previous loss of supposed non-conformists. Those who found themselves behind the barbed wire on 13 August 1961 had little choice but to make the best of the new situation. As Albert Hirschman has noted, the 'exit-voice' see-saw was conspicuously absent in 1961: 'the brutal repression of exit signaled by the erection of the Wall was also understood as a further repression of voice'.⁷⁹ This view is certainly confirmed in internal reports, which in the days immediately following the sealing of the border emphasized a 'certain coming to terms' or at the very least a 'tendency towards reticence and silence'.⁸⁰ According to a trade union report from 14 August, one day after the border closure: 'The politeness and the veiled nature of objections now raised by colleagues who used to speak out much more loudly against us is quite surprising.'⁸¹

Certainly some of these early reports were the result of wishful thinking on the part of officials. The erection of the Wall could not change everything overnight. The campaign to raise productivity in the state-owned enterprises remained by and large unsuccessful; many recalcitrant farmers recently forced into 'kolkhozes' continued to work their fields 'uncollectively'; still only few people were interested in 'social-political activities' or taking on functions.⁸² Yet there can be little doubt that the Wall fundamentally changed the social and political framework for ordinary East Germans, which inevitably affected their expectations and orientations. As western scholars have long remarked, the inescapability of the GDR seems to have encouraged the spread of a pragmatic readiness to conform that made life easier for both rulers and ruled under 'real existing socialism'. Internal reports show that East German

⁷⁹ Hirschman, 'Exit, voice', p. 186.

⁸⁰ SAPMO-BA DY34/22232, 'Information', 17 Aug. 1961; SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/5/433, 'Information über die Stimmung an unseren wissenschaftlichen Einrichtungen zu den Maßnahmen des 13. August 1961', undated.

⁸¹ SAPMO-BA DY34/22232, 'Information', 14 Aug. 1961.

⁸² See Corey Ross, *Constructing socialism at the grass-roots: the transformation of East Germany, 1945–1965* (Houndmills, 2000), ch. 12; also Patrick Major, 'Vor und nach dem 13. August 1961', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 39 (1999), pp. 371–400.

authorities quickly reached this judgement as well. For instance, only two years after the construction of the Wall, a party report from East Berlin concluded that 'the number of citizens of our ... republic still standing on the sidelines has decreased dramatically', albeit with various caveats about continuing 'misconceptions' and 'hostile arguments' about the nature of the border.⁸³

These caveats were crucial. For however optimistic and unrealistic the internal evaluations of popular opinion became over the following years, it was never possible to overlook the widespread 'misconceptions' and 'hostile attitudes' about the outer parameter of brute force that ultimately held the regime together. Although East Berlin party officials proudly reported in 1967 that the 'securing of the border ... is already acknowledged as necessary by a large proportion of working people and especially the working class', there followed none the less the same popular criticisms: the border measures were 'too harsh', 'inhumane', and above all directed against the East German populace (not against supposed western 'militarists and revanchists', as official propaganda asserted).⁸⁴ In spite of the easing of visits between the two German states in the early 1970s in the wake of Bonn's *Ostpolitik*, and in spite of the tangibly improving living standard in East Germany from the middle of the 1960s, the SED's 'border-regime' and the brutal suppression of travel were never accepted by the vast majority of the populace, including the younger generation who only knew of the open border and construction of the Wall from private accounts. As the huge wave of emigrants after the opening of the Hungarian border in summer 1989 and the mass demonstrations in autumn clearly showed, communist authority in the GDR still relied on its ability to control the movement of the East German populace. In the final analysis, the East German communist regime was a prisoner of its own Wall.

⁸³ LAB-BPA IVA4/03/088, 'Einschätzung der Bewußtseinsentwicklung in der Arbeiterklasse und bei den Bürgern der verschiedenen Schichten der Bevölkerung im Stadtbezirk Lichtenberg', 23 Sept. 1963, pp. 1–2.

⁸⁴ LAB-BPA IVA4/08/096, 'Einschätzung des Entwicklungsstandes des sozialistischen Bewußtseins im Stadtbezirk Weißensee', 10 Jan. 1967, pp. 16–17.