

ScholarWorks@GSU

"With Vietnam We Are Bound as Brothers": Theorizing Socialism, Internationalism, and the Politics of Public Agency Among Vietnamese Contract Workers in the German Democratic Republic

Authors	Schmitt, Jonathan M.
Citation	Schmitt, Jonathan M. "With Vietnam We Are Bound as Brothers": Theorizing Socialism, Internationalism, and the Politics of Public Agency Among Vietnamese Contract Workers in the German Democratic Republic." Thesis. Georgia State University, 2013. https://doi.org/10.57709/3237845
DOI	https://doi.org/10.57709/3237845
Download date	2026-03-06 21:56:01
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/8406

“WITH VIETNAM WE ARE BOUND AS BROTHERS”: THEORIZING SOCIALISM,
INTERNATIONALISM, AND THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC AGENCY AMONG
VIETNAMESE CONTRACT WORKERS IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

by

JONATHAN M. SCHMITT

Under the direction of Dr. Joe Perry

ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the social, economic and ideological climate in the German Democratic Republic in the last decade of its existence (the 1980s) when excessive labor demands lead the country to import tens of thousands of “contract workers” from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Focusing primarily on theoretical contradictions in GDR socialism, and their impact on the day to day lives Vietnamese workers, I will argue that ideologically freighted pronouncements of “socialist fraternity” with Vietnam functioned to obscure the true, economic reasons for labor importation.

INDEX WORDS: East Germany, GDR, Vietnam, Marxism, Socialism, Public sphere, Immigration, Planned economy, Eric Honecker

“WITH VIETNAM WE ARE BOUND AS BROTHERS”: THEORIZING SOCIALISM,
INTERNATIONALISM, AND THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC AGENCY AMONG
VIETNAMESE CONTRACT WORKERS IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

by

JONATHAN M. SCHMITT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

Copyright by
Jonathan M. Schmitt
2012

“WITH VIETNAM WE ARE BOUND AS BROTHERS”: THEORIZING SOCIALISM,
INTERNATIONALISM, AND THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC AGENCY AMONG
VIETNAMESE CONTRACT WORKERS IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

by

JONATHAN M. SCHMITT

Committee Chair: Dr. Joe Perry

Committee: Dr. Isa Blumi

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

December 2012

DEDICATION

For my lovely wife Judith, without whom this thesis would not be finished.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Joe Perry, Dr. Isa Blumi, and soon to be Dr. Casey Cater. Without the three of you, well, I would not be writing acknowledgements for a completed thesis. Gratitude abounds, gentleman. I would also like to offer special thanks to my dear friend—and patron—Jeff Poffenbarger: although you may never read this, I'm sure it will give you some satisfaction that it was written. Last but not least, Mom, Dad, Andrew and Jen, Eve and Sal—thank you for your love and support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
1 INTRODUCTION: EXPLOITATION OR SOCIALIST FRATERNITY?.....	1
1.1 Historiography of the GDR: Hewing the Middle Path.....	9
2 METHODOLOGY: SOCIALISM’S PARADOXICAL METAPHYSICS.....	18
3 <i>DIE PARTEI HAT IMMER RECHT</i> : RIGHTS AND DUTIES OF VIETNAMESE CONTRACT WORKERS.....	27
3.1 The Failure of the Central Planning.....	27
3.2 <i>Abkommen</i>	29
3.3 <i>Ordnungen/Anträge</i>	36
4 “I WILL NOT LEAVE BEFORE MY TIME”: VIETNAMESE ACCESS TO THE GDR PUBLIC SPHERE.....	45
4.1 The GDR Public: Every Man a King?	46
4.2 <i>Eingaben</i>	53
5 NOT SAYING WHAT CANNOT BE SAID: GDR SOCIALISM AS RITUAL PERFORMANCE.....	65
5.1 <i>Neues Deutschland</i> on Vietnam: Internationalism in Black and White.....	66
5.2 Whatever Is Said, Is So: The Socialist Liturgy.....	76
6 CONCLUSION.....	82
REFERENCES.....	89

1 INTRODUCTION: EXPOITATION OR SOCIALIST FRATERNITY?

On April 11, 1980, the German Democratic Republic signed a bi-lateral labor agreement with the lately minted Socialist Republic of Vietnam that would, by 1989, bring roughly 60,000 Vietnamese *Vetrasarbeiter* (contract workers) to live and work in the GDR.¹ While the image of Vietnamese men and women working side by side with native East Germans may seem at first anomalous, the fact is that from the early years of its history, the GDR had entered into what the its Politburo (The German Socialist Unity Party, or SED) professed to be “fraternal partnerships” with not only the Soviet satellite states of the Eastern Bloc, but with fledgling socialist nations emerging in the post 1945 wake of decolonization in Africa and Asia. Initially, this project of “partnership” could be taken more or less at face value: the GDR, styling itself as the model of a socialist state *accomplished*, extended material and martial aid to countries that still struggled to throw off the Western imperialist yoke. Along these lines, East Germany officially entered into diplomatic relations with the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam in 1949; and throughout the course of the Vietnam War, the GDR provided crucial economic and military aid to the North Vietnamese in the name of socialist unity and resistance to American imperial aggression.² In addition to directly supporting the war effort, the GDR also invited thousands of young Vietnamese men and women to receive education and training in East German universities and technical schools. Prior to 1980, the GDR’s relationship with Vietnam (and to varying degrees other state socialisms) was one that did in fact evince a more genuine—if paternalistic—altruism

¹ Although the exact numbers are uncertain—as SED, VEB and MfSS documents, while having preserved running regional totals of Vietnamese in the GDR, did not, with the Wall’s collapse, offer final tabulations—present literature estimates that between 1980 and 1989, over 70,000 Vietnamese men and women came to work in the GDR, with between 59,000 and 60,000 living in East Germany at the time of reunification. See Eva Kolinsky, “Former Contract Workers from Vietnam in Eastern Germany: Between State Socialism and Democracy 1989-1993,” *gfl-journal* 3 (2004): 84; and Mike Dennis “Working Under Hammer and Sickle: Vietnamese Workers in the German Democratic Republic, 1980-1989,” *German Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (September, 2007): 339-340.

² Dennis, “Working under Hammer and Sickle,” 341.

in furtherance of its ideological mission. The bi-lateral agreement signed with the SVR government in 1980, however, substantively changed the GDR's relationship with its "Vietnamese brothers."³

This thesis engages precisely the shift from the GDR's more ideologically consonant practice of aiding other socialist countries in need, to the more self-serving and economically exploitative relationship it embarked on with the SRV in the 1980s. This notion of "shift" is an important one to consider if scholarship is to engage the GDR in an even-handed and intellectually honest way. To purge historical inquiry of the lingering bias of the Cold War Western conception that all socialisms are inherently corrupt and inexorably doomed (minus, of course, the more or less successful social democracies in Scandinavia) it is necessary to first grant a state like the GDR potential for contingency, to allow that it changed over time and, in fact, had a *history*—and one that was not pre-ordained by the social-scientific models of either Marxism/Leninism or neoliberal capitalism. If the GDR pursued a program of internationalist economic cooperation, it did so at least to some degree directed by Lenin's ideologue that socialism itself must be understood within a context of ethno-national hierarchy. If socialism in its most accomplished state eschewed nationalist identity in favor of international proletarian unity, it followed by (vulgar) Marxism's developmental, quasi-constructivist historical logic that some societies on the teleological continuum would need to pass through stages of ethnic and nationalist self-identification before reaching the culminant state of socialism.⁴ As this socio-

³ The language employed by the SED (Socialist Unity Party) when addressing the Vietnamese state and its people without fail employed explicitly fraternal terms. The title of a 1978 article in the East German daily *Neues Deutschland*, "Mit der SRV brüderlich verbunden" (With Vietnam we are bound as brothers) typifies this rhetorical strategy.

⁴ On the question of nationalism's role in social democracy's developmental paradigm, Lenin wrote: "The categorical requirement of Marxist theory in investigating any social question is that it be examined within *definite* historical limits, and, if it refers to a particular country (e. g., the national programme [sic] for a given country), that account be taken of the specific features distinguishing that country from others in the same historical

historical model was taken as orthodox by the East German government, then it was the GDR's historical mission to aid the development and defense of other state socialisms around the world; and its relationship with Vietnam was always *conceptualized* within these ideological parameters.

Leaving aside for the moment the inherent paternalism of this thinking, what demands investigation is the transition from a more genuine program of socialist cooperation to the GDR's reliance on foreign labor explicitly to meet economic demands. And, of course, this transition does not represent an absolutely clean break. As Damien Mac Con Uldah has noted, the GDR's training and education initiatives for foreign students prior to 1980 were themselves driven by more than ideological consistency.⁵ Early in the GDR's history, the SED was desperate for some measure of international legitimacy. In the shadow of the Soviet Union, East Germany's status as an autarkic and distinct "German nation" was at once a real desideratum for party heads and a profound site of historical and political anxiety. The argument that the Soviet Zone of occupation in Eastern Germany—and the establishment of a communist state within historical German borders—was merely a reversal of traditional colonial trajectories beleaguered national self-conception in the GDR at least until the General Treaty with FRG in 1972.⁶ Strict consonance with socialist ideology was one strategy by which the SED could establish not only its own legitimacy, but the legitimacy of the state it ruled. The diplomatic ties that the GDR established with North Vietnam in 1949 were to some extent an effort to credential itself on the

epoch." See Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination," in *Lenin's Collected Works, Vol. 20*, translated by Bernard Isaacs and Joe Fineberg (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 400. Accessed February 20, 2021 at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/self-det/index.htm>.

⁵ See Damian Henry Ton Mac Con Uldah, "Guests of the Socialist Nation? Foreign Students and Workers in the GDR, 1949-1990 (Ph. D. diss., University College London, 2005), 42.

⁶ See Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990* (Essex: Pearson LTD., 2000), 3-23 and 51-78.

international stage. As Mike Dennis notes, in the early post war years both states were “diplomatic pariahs”— the GDR in large part due to the stance of the U.S. allied Federal Republic to its West—so a diplomatic linkage fostered by GDR support for Vietnam against American imperialism made political sense.⁷ However, beyond these larger geo-political and ideological justifications, the GDR also reaped economic benefit from its relationship with Vietnam prior to 1980.⁸

Beginning in the 1960s, students came from fledgling socialist states like Algeria, Korea and North Vietnam to study in the GDR largely to solidify newly forged diplomatic ties. As the GDR extended scholarships to all students visiting as part of the state’s training and education initiatives, such diplomacy became an increasing financial burden. In the early 1960s, it was estimated by the State Secretariat for Higher and Vocational Education that the cost per annum for hosting international students was over 22 million marks. The justification for this expenditure, though not one that would have been readily admitted to by the SED, was that training young men and women from other socialist states would ultimately translate into increased exports for the GDR, effectively creating “the German economy’s customers of tomorrow.”⁹ The creation of a “customer base” being the final goal of the training programs, the SED soon determined that training international students in technical institutions rather than universities would ultimately be of more use to the East German state (presumably because qualification in skilled trades would lead to bolstered industrial infrastructure in other socialist

⁷ Mike Dennis, “Working under Hammer and Sickle,” 341.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁹ Damian Henry Tone Mac Con Uladh, “Guests of the Socialist Nation,” 42-43.

economies, hence creating a greater demand for East German products and raw materials abroad).¹⁰

With the signing of the bi-lateral labor agreement with the SRV in 1980, however, the GDR entered into a relationship that although still couched in the high-born language of socialist fraternity, was almost entirely driven by economic necessity. By the early 1980s, economic output in the GDR was at withered variance with the booming consumer economy in the Federal Republic. The Honecker regime's policy of intensified rationalization—at the expense of economic flexibility and technological development—had left the GDR economically moribund: “the Soviet-style road to modernity was becoming littered with the wreckage of obsolescent machines in the GDR of the Honecker era, innovative ideas were stifled by the obligatory fulfillment of planning targets, in particular the quantity of production.”¹¹ Moreover, the problem of unrealistic production quotas was exacerbated by an increasingly overburdened and mismanaged East German work force.¹² Added to these problems were the lingering effects of the world energy crisis (which had driven up the price of oil and gas from the Soviet Union, the GDR's main supplier), and vast debt that East Germany had incurred to the FRG after the General Treaty of 1972 had freed up the possibility of obtaining credit in the West.¹³

There is a general consensus among GDR historians that the 1980 labor agreement with Vietnam was not entered into on the grounds of fostering “socialist brotherhood.”¹⁴ What has

¹⁰ For a general discussion of the strategy behind the GDR's international technical training initiatives, see Damian Henry Tone Mac Con Uladh, “Guests of the Socialist Nation,” 43-44.

¹¹ Mike Dennis, *Social and Economic Modernization in Eastern Germany from Honecker to Kohl* (London: Pinter Publishers Ltd., 1993), 4-5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹³ For a thorough and largely unbiased assessment of the GDR economy, see Thomas A. Baylis, “Explaining the GDR's Economic Strategy,” *International Organization*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Spring, 1986): 381-420.

¹⁴ That is to say, there is consensus among the historians that have considered the inter-governmental agreements. Although there are several German scholars who have engaged the topic of Vietnamese labor in the GDR, most have only considered the phenomenon in the post *Wende* context. For general discussions of the Vietnamese labor

not been investigated, however, is the extent to which the SED's refusal to publicly acknowledge economic circumstances that made the Vietnamese *Vertragsarbeiter* a necessity not only prohibited the integration of foreign workers into the East German population, but also served to undermine the government's legitimacy. Continuing to portray the GDR's relationship with Vietnam as a deepening of fraternal cooperation was nothing more than a political expedient by the early 1980s. Rather than make public the chronic labor shortages, supply problems, gaining debt, and general inefficiency of the command economy, the SED never officially communicated to the East Germans that Vietnamese men and women were in fact working in the GDR in an effort prevent the collapse of the state.¹⁵

This tactic of concealing the true objective of the labor agreement with Vietnam behind a veil of internationalist rhetoric was lent apparent credibility by the GRD's history of extending educational and technical training opportunities to foreign cohorts.¹⁶ As Dennis Kuck claimed in a 2001 article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, prior to the 1980, Vietnamese workers who came to the East Germany were represented by official propaganda as partners in “‘work force cooperation’ within the framework of ‘socialist economic integration’ ... [and] as long as the GDR was economically superior to other socialist states, workers could come from those states to ‘build socialism in their homeland.’”¹⁷ But, Kuck continues, with the 1980 agreement, “the GDR clearly stipulated that labor was of higher priority than professional training.”¹⁸ Kuck's statement is, however, misleading. While with the benefit of hindsight the 1980 labor contract

programs in English, see Mike Dennis, “Working Under Hammer and Sickle,” Eva Kolinsky, “Former Contract Workers from Vietnam in Eastern Germany,” and Damian Henry Tone Mac Con Uladh, “Guests of the Socialist Nation.”

¹⁵ Dennis, “Working under Hammer and Sickle,” 341-342.

¹⁶ Dennis, “Working under Hammer and Sickle,” 340.

¹⁷ Dennis Kuck, “Die fremden sozialistischen Brüder,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 October 2001, reprinted in Göktürk, Gramling and Kaes, eds., *Germany in Transit*, 98

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

could be viewed, in and of itself, as the SED's tacit acknowledgement of the GDR's economic decline, the fact remains that economic necessity was never presented to the East German public as an explanation for the post-1980 influx of Vietnamese workers. The rhetorical figure of socialist solidarity invariably served as the East German government's justification of immigrant populations—Vietnamese or otherwise—living within GDR borders. And this strategy of obfuscation, according to Damien Mac Con Uladh, can be traced back well before the 1980 labor agreement. It is his claim that the SED's representation of foreign labor programs as "training for socialist economic integrations" was a "semantic ploy to disguise the real economic nature of the agreements."¹⁹

What follows further investigates this semantic ploy. Uldah, Dennis and Kuck all agree that the SED's economic agenda contradicted its outward justification for international labor agreements; but what they do not fully engage are the social and ideological ramifications of this contradiction for Vietnamese workers and native East German's alike. To begin with, the distinction between the West German *Gastarbeiter* (guest worker) and the East German *Vertragsarbeiter* (contract worker) was ideologically critical for the SED. Beginning in earnest in the 1960s the Federal Republic began to draw its *Gastarbeiter* from Spain, Portugal, Greece, Yugoslavia and, most prominently, Turkey. As Rita Chin avers, this program was styled in the West German press as tremendously beneficial arrangement for both the FDR and its client nations, as "government leaders would maintain national prosperity, business leaders would obtain much-needed manpower, and guest workers would gain access to a higher standard of

¹⁹ Damian Henry Tone Mac Con Uladh, "Guests of the Socialist Nation," 66.

living.”²⁰ The SED’s platform on internationalist solidarity, however, demanded that the East’s “socialist friends” be distinguished from capitalist West Germany’s foreign laborers.

This distinction, however, only bore itself out on the level of ideology (especially as systemic economic failure became increasingly difficult to hide). The type of employment that the Vietnamese found themselves in upon reaching the GDR speaks to this assertion, as they were not “trained” in skilled manufacturing positions consonant with the utopian socialist ideal, but rather, in most cases, labored in undesirable, low-skilled positions, “i.e. the kind that Germans did not want to take on.”²¹ Beyond this, the sheer number of Vietnamese brought to work in East Germany over the course of the 1980s indicates a practical necessity that far exceeded the mission of solidarity: by 1987, the number of Vietnamese living and working in the GDR approached 30 thousand; by the time of the *Wende*, that number had more than doubled. The question that follows here is if the GDR’s economic need for foreign labor cohorts was so great, why did the SED find it necessary to represent its agreement with Vietnam only in terms of “internationalist cooperation”? Was it simply a matter of a repressive, totalitarian regime pursuing a policy of obfuscation and misinformation in order to keep its population under its thumb? Or was it a measure of dissociation, an intractable fissure between the facts of “real existing socialism” and the pervasive, propagandistic rhetoric of ideology, in some way fundamentally constitutive of the discourses of East German socialism itself? As the extant literature concerning the lives of Vietnamese workers in East Germany says little on this point, it is necessary to look to the broader historiography of the GDR to provide answers.

²⁰ Rita Chin, *The Guest Worker Question in Postwar Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.

²¹ Eva Kolinsky, “Between State Socialism and Democracy, 1989-1993: Former Contract Workers from Vietnam in Eastern Germany.” *gfl-Journal*, No. 3 (2004): 87.

1.1 Historiography of the GDR: Hewing the Middle Path

The German Democratic Republic has been, at least for most of the Western capitalist world, consigned to the dustbin of modern history. The irony that this very phrase was wielded (if not minted) by Trotsky as he baited his Menshevik foes at the Second Party Congress is, in point of fact, instrumental to the work at hand. The GDR itself was replete with irony: a “democratic republic” without enfranchisement; a socialist utopia where class was abolished, the proletariat lionized, and yet a network of secret police and denunciation of one’s neighbors were deemed necessary to perpetuate arcadia; a partition of the German nation built on self-proclaimed iron-clad anti-fascist credentials; men and women who were the putatively incontestable post 1945 legacy of upright German Communism, but were in fact often late converts from a now anathema National Socialist ideology²²—all this would seem to indicate that the GDR, its citizens, its regnant (though never by popular mandate) political body, the SED, its culture and politics writ large, comprised what amounts to nothing more than a history of blind and despotic sanctimony. At least this is how the history of the GDR has been primarily represented by scholarship in the liberal and neoliberal West.

It is of course no surprise that Western academia—not to mention Western journalism—had among its ranks its fair share of Cold Warriors prior to the *Wende*; and it is also does not shock that the discursive and ideologically delimited territory in which mainstream Western European and American scholars conceptualized the “Soviet menace” and its minion states would not permit the trespass of ideas that would valorize any aspect Communist life, political or otherwise. The general tenor of scholarship produced on the GDR prior to 1990 assumed as

²² For a discussion of the generation overlap between the cohort of Hitler Youth and the early SED functionaries, see Mary Fullbrook, “Changing States, Changing Selves: Generations in the Third Reich and the GDR,” in *Un-civilizing Processes? Excess and Transgression in German Society and Culture: Perspectives Debating with Norbert Elisas*, ed. Mary Fullbrook (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi B.V., 2007), 255-294.

virtual warrant the inefficiency and endemic social and political mismanagement of socialist states. For example, a typical assessment of the GDR in the late 1980s claimed a kind of willful irrationality—one holding much in common with German romanticism of the 18th and 19th centuries—that privileged the collective over the individual was an originary defect of Marxist/Leninist thought, and that such a rejection of the basic tenants of “human nature” (that is to say, the “truth” of self empowering free liberal markets) could not fail to produce perverse if not disastrous results.²³ Of course a second irony rears its head here: even if the GDR persisted in a glaring schism between its ideology and its practice, writing on GDR that criticizes the contradictions of, say, historical materialism is generally blinkered by an ideology equally strident—the “free” capitalist market as a singular and deductive good.

But, ideology aside, it is also necessary to understand that prior to the breach of the Berlin Wall in 1989, historiography of the GDR emanating from the West had very little to go on beyond cold war platitudes. In the last two decades, however, this situation has changed dramatically. From a research perspective, the gates to the relic kingdom have been thrown open; since the early 1990s with the new availability of East German State archives, scholarly articles and monographs concerning the culture, society, economy and finally *fate* of the GDR number in the hundreds and counting. Generally speaking, these works can be divided into two antipodal camps: the first continues to treat the GDR as decidedly totalitarian (an admittedly problematic classification)²⁴, oppressive in conception and execution, a quasi-colonized puppet of the Soviet Union with a government wholly illegitimate and illiberal, and a population either numbed into a welfare-state-induced torpor or inchoately and perpetually disaffected; the second approach takes

²³ See Vladimir Tismaneanu, *The Crisis of Marxist Ideology in Easter Europe: The Poverty of Utopia* (London/New York; Routledge, 1988), 3-5.

²⁴ For a discussion of the misapplication of “totalitarianism” to the GDR, see 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. Jaraush (New York: Berhahn Books, 1999), 17-26.

a more sympathetic view of the GDR, validating its history as a noble but tragically flawed experiment in social evolution.²⁵ The essential component of the later, more positive assessment of the GDR is what Konrad Jarausch characterizes as the “‘legend of the good beginning’, i.e. a somewhat nostalgic portrayal of the founding of the GDR as a radical humanist experiment to create a better Germany.”²⁶

In the last decade, however, a new historiography of the GDR has emerged that attempts to move scholarship on East Germany along a “middle path between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ interpretive frameworks in order to study the GDR from less polemical ideological standpoints.”²⁷ My reading of the present historiographic effort to avoid polemical arguments is that the GDR must be evaluated not against the *expectation* that an “undemocratic and illiberal” East Germany was destined to fail; but rather that the collapse of the GDR—whether ultimately a matter of gross governmental mismanagement, dictatorial pretense, economic naivety, etc.—was conditioned by historical contingency, and that no part of its history was preordained. That being said, the notion of “preordainment” itself presents us with another nagging irony in the GDR’s history: for if it is necessary to abandon the notion East German Socialism was historically guaranteed to fail, it is equally necessary to interrogate with rigorous skepticism the GDR’s self-conception as the inviolable “victor of history.”

As Julia Hell contends, the founding narrative of the GDR was one that could not assimilate the memory of National Socialism—that is to say it could not proceed with the new

²⁵ See Konrad H. Jarausch, “Beyond Uniformity: The Challenge of Historicizing the GDR,” in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (New York: Berhahn Books, 1999), 4-5; and Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, “Introduction,” in *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, eds. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 4-5.

²⁶ Konrad Jarausch, “Beyond Uniformity,” 4.

²⁷ Katherine Pierce and Paul Betts, eds., *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 5.

project of a Soviet abetted (or rather, enforced) socialist German state if any continuity with the Hitler's legacy was acknowledged. This founding strategy of historical revisionism amounted to a "legitimacy discourse of antifascism...the idea that the [SED], its state, and, later, its people were the 'victors' in the battle of history, that they were *the victors of history*."²⁸

The notion of "historical victory" is one subtextually present in all SED rhetoric; but its legitimacy rests on a curious teleological assumption, a kind of inversion of historical cause and effect: insofar as the (vulgar) Marxist conception of historical progress is taken as gospel, the emergence of a socialist East Germany in the rubble of the Nazi state (conceived here as the ghastly apex and subsequent implosion of capitalist modernity) was guaranteed, and, in ideologically speaking, *always already present* as ineluctable historical potential. This mode of thinking is more than simply basking in the theoretical ether. The SED's insistence that the GDR was an historical triumph determined rigid ideological parameters outside of which actual SED policy (typified in its inter-governmental labor agreement with Vietnam) could be neither conceived nor implemented.

Further evidence of the overriding influence the ideology of "historical victory" is presented by Konrad Jarausch in his assessment of East German historiography, in which historians could offer no analysis of the GDR that deviated from the ideological line of historical materialism. The achievement of the perfected socialist state—the ineluctable culmination of socio-historical progress that the GDR putatively embodied—was a matter of empirical certainty that could not be vitiated by any subjective relativism.²⁹ Jarausch goes on to claim that this refusal of any kind of "subjective relativism" in GDR historiography (that is to say, the effort to

²⁸ Julia Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History and the Literature of East Germany* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 30.

²⁹ Konrad H. Jarausch, "The Failure of East German Antifascism: Some Ironies of History as Politics," *German Studies Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Feb., 1991), 88.

maintain a measure of reflexive critical distance from the tendentious influence one's own historical context) ultimately "failed to extirpate the roots of fascistoid behavior in the authoritarian collaboration and racism of the majority of the [East German] population."³⁰ A striking corroboration of the complicity of East German historiography and politics is forwarded by Martin Sabrow, who claims that SED functionaries often griped at being "instrumentalized by scholarship", remarking that "they [politicians] were left with the responsibility of making historical decisions."³¹

"Historical decisions," in the GDR were, however, always at the behest of the socialist ideological mission; and, in the case of Vietnamese contract workers, the SED's decision was to remain silent—at least with respect to the dire economic circumstances that truly underwrote the importation of tens of thousands Vietnamese laborers over the course of the 1980s. This silence, this willful elision of economic reality in SED rhetoric created a situation in which "few GDR citizen's knew anything about the foreign workers."³² And, as Klaus Fritsche notes, this silence masked a reality utterly at odds with the rhetoric of "internationalist cooperation": "general living conditions were such that it was clear that Vietnamese were not collaborating with the GDR as 'people,' but rather serving it as machines."³³

Their status as nonentities, however was to change as the 80s drew to a close and the GDR staggered toward collapse. As consumer goods became more and more scarce, competition between native East German's and the Vietnamese contract workers became a

³⁰ Konrad H. Jarausch, "The Failure of East German Antifascism: Some Ironies of History as Politics," 96.

³¹ Martin Sabrow, "Dictatorship as Discourse: General Perspectives on SED Legitimacy," in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), p. 202.

³² Dennis Kuck, "Die fremden sozialistischen Brüder," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 October 2001, reprinted in Göktürk, Gramling and Kaes, eds., *Germany in Transit*, 100

³³ Klaus Fritsche, "Vietnamesische Gastarbeiter in den europäischen RGW-Ländern," 30.

flashpoint of xenophobic tension. In addition to purchases made for their daily needs, the Vietnamese, “according to the labor agreements, were allowed to send home goods worth 50 percent of their total net income generated during their time in the GDR...this fact brought them into conflict with the East German public, who blamed them for empty shop shelves.”³⁴ The East German population’s resentment of the Vietnamese contract workers was, at its base, a kind of “socio-economic chauvinism”; the blame for the increasing scarcity of consumer goods was displaced from the real culprit—structural failures in the GDR’s planned economy—onto the purchasing power of the Vietnamese.³⁵

The SED’s silence on this matter only served to exacerbate the East German animosity toward foreign laborers. In addition, government policy that intended to keep the Vietnamese population sequestered from the native German public—an “agenda of exclusion’ in which ethnic diversity had no established place,”³⁶—ultimately made amicable relations between East German’s and Vietnamese even less tenable. The SED’s ideological cant did little to prepare the GDR population for the reality of Vietnamese living among them, sharing valuable resources, and evincing cultural attributes that were at wide variance with the German norm. As Mike Dennis has speculated, had the SED been more open about the economic need met by Vietnamese labor in the GDR, it is possible that the resentment and animosity felt by East Germans could have been curbed. As it stood, however, the East German government chose to obfuscate, relying on a rhetorical strategy that endeavored to construct the GDR’s labor importation as a matter socialist fraternity with Vietnam. In what follows, I attempt to unpack

³⁴ Damian Henry Tone Mac Con Uladh, “Guests of the Socialist Nation,” 129

³⁵ Mike Dennis, “Working under Hammer and Sickle,” 330.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

this rhetorical strategy, paying special attention to how it elided structural aspects of the labor contract, and set the stage for systemic mistreatment of Vietnamese employees in the GDR.

Chapter one discusses the historical legitimacy of GDR socialism. My approach to this problem will consider SED ideology and rhetoric as constitutive of a brand of historical metaphysics. More than unreconstructed *historicism*, socialist ideology in the GDR placed the East German state at the apex of the socio-historical teleology *revealed*—with all the counter-intuitive trappings of atheistic preterism—in the dogma of Marxism/Leninism. Central to this discussion will be the work of Andreas Glaeser and Roy Rappaport. Glaeser’s discussion of the SED as *theodician* (as a political class that acknowledged the flaws in socialist practice, but was *never* to blame for those flaws) is central to the development of my ideas about socialist metaphysics. Rappaport’s writing on the performative and formal aspects of ritual is an indispensable tool for approaching Party rhetoric as fundamentally “constructive,” insofar as pronouncements of GDR socialism’s success created a rhetorical reality that was meant to subordinate the “real” reality of socialism in practice.

Chapter two will discuss at greater length the theoretical problems inherent in GDR socialism, providing empirical background, and the nuts and bolts of the contract with Vietnam. It will also consider incidents of Vietnamese insubordination and the treatment of those charged with infractions as conditioned by the SED ideological line. By the reading official regulations for contract labor established by the SED (*Ordnungen*) against a collection of deportation requests (*Antägen*) generated by East German companies seeking permission to terminate the contracts of Vietnamese employees judged for various reasons to be liabilities, I will show that official claims of brotherhood and socialist fraternity were often completely disregarded in practice.

Chapter three will discuss the issue of the East German “public sphere” as a conceptual ideal masquerading as an historical reality. Habermas’s *Structural Transformations* is of course a compulsory orientation for this discussion; my use of this work, however, will focus more on what Habermas elaborates as an early historical emanation of the “public”: the feudal lord’s proprietary access to public representation. It is my contention that the GDR’s version of the public sphere resembled more this model of publicness at least insofar as the private was cognate with the base and apolitical in East German socialism, hence a citizen’s real value—theoretically—accrued only to his or her “public” function. This idea of the realization of the socialist individual through and only through the public body (a paradox to be sure) becomes even more fractious when foreign nationals are concerned. Insofar as Vietnamese contract workers were fraternally bound to the East German citizenry through internationalism, should they not also have had the opportunity to realize their potential as individuals in the collective through participation in the public sphere? And if it was the case that the public sphere was little more than a coercive mirage for East Germans themselves, what did that mean for the Vietnamese. I will discuss this question using *Eingaben* (citizen’s petitions) culled from the Bundesarchiv, which detail Vietnamese acts of resistance and insubordination to their East German “mindes.”

The fourth and final chapter will discuss reportage of Vietnamese-GDR relations in the main SED organ, *Neues Deutschland*. I will argue in this chapter that the historical reality of Vietnamese in East Germany of was little importance to the SED insofar as its public image was concerned. Although the Vietnamese became more and more visible in the daily lives East Germans over the course of the 1980s, the SED never saw fit to explain to its citizens the true nature of the GDR contractual relationship with Vietnam. *Neues Deutschland* did, however,

contain items on Vietnam—and GDR-Vietnamese relations—on an almost daily basis in the early 1980s. It is my contention that the regularity with which *ND* reported on Vietnam was a strategy by which the SED attempted to mask the reality of the GDR's economic dependence on contract labor with almost ritualized pronouncements of socialist fraternity.

It is my hope that this thesis will not only shed light on a largely unknown facet of German history—Vietnamese men and women as essential ballast for the late GDR economy—but will make some small contribution to the contemporary effort to write historiography of the GDR that approaches the subject with the complexity and nuance it deserves. GDR socialism, I maintain throughout this thesis, was no more pre-ordained to collapse than it was to triumph. Where criticism is best aimed is precisely where GDR socialism willfully ceased to function as socialism *conditioned by* history, but instead as socialism that somehow was *justified by* history, socialism that believed it gave its approbation to history in turn. This kind of pompous sanctimony is not necessarily the patrimony of Marx—though he cannot be fully exculpated—nor is it ingrained in a particularly German stripe of socialism.

The failure of the SED and, by extension, the GDR can only be explained by rigorous contextualization. This contextualization must not ignore those “subaltern” populations like the Vietnamese who were absolutely integral to the functioning of the East German state. It must not be forgotten that these Vietnamese men and women exercised agency vis-à-vis that state, were in fact *constitutive of* the GDR; and although the conditions under which they worked were oppressive, and the pronouncements of fraternity by the East German government often hollow, they were able to carve out a relatively successful niche in East German society. More important still, the Vietnamese in the GDR were a vital part of the country's history.

2 METHODOLOGY: SOCIALISM'S PARDOXICAL METAPHYSICS

A more general discussion of SED ideology and rhetoric is necessary in order to further understand the stakes the East German government faced as it styled the presentation of its *Vertragsarbeiter* program to its citizens. Certain structural contradictions in East German ideology-cum-historical theory that beset and disrupted the actual practice of “real and existing socialism” will help shed light of the conditions under which the Vietnamese were brought to East Germany. Limning the divergence between the “official” attitude the SED held toward Vietnamese contract workers and the latter’s actual experience in the GDR, will help to sketch the limits and disjunctures inherent in the ideological rigidity that dictated both the SED’s communication with the East German public, and the very form and structure of the public itself.

The investigation at hand is comprised not only by the limits of the SED conception of its socialist mission—in contexts both international and domestic—but also, and even more importantly by the *performative* limits that the government’s self-conception enforced. I use the word “performative” in this context in an explicitly technical sense: that is to say, and at the hazard of redundancy, that rhetoric—and by a kind of backwards extension, ideology—is entirely a matter of *technique*, an historically conditioned yet willful and operative program by which the understanding of self and other is *manufactured*. Put differently, in the present context of the GDR, political understanding, knowledge and the practices that emanate thereof were coextensive phenomena, circumscribed by what Foucault has termed the “discursive object.”³⁷

³⁷ In Foucault’s usage, the discursive object is that conceptualized exteriority which is simultaneously the product and target of discourse, that which, in effect (and specifically conditioned by historical contingency), sets the conceptual limit of the “discussion” of a purportedly discrete phenomenon. “The relations are established between institutions, economic and social processes, behavioral patterns, systems of norms techniques, types of characterizations; and these relations are not present in the object...They do not define its internal constitution, *but what enables it to appear*...in short, to be placed in a field of exteriority.” Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 45 [emphasis mine].

And this discursive object in the GDR, this object of socialism—in the sense of both socialism as a “goal,” and as the *de jure*, already accomplished East German political system—was one that, on a theoretical level, irrationally functioned as its own simultaneous cause and effect.

Andreas Glaeser’s work on the Stasi speaks directly to this paradox: he presents the GDR’s sociopolitical self-understanding as an ideologically conditioned “self-fulfilling prophecy.” This self-containment of the political project of socialism—that which must be, ideologically speaking, *always already accomplished*—produced in the GDR a type of “meta-political” understanding of the function of the East German state. Glaeser uses the term meta-understanding in very much the same way Foucault mobilized his “discursive object”; his analytical category, however, is less totalizing than Foucault’s. The case of political meta-understanding in the GDR is conditioned by certain presumptions about the nature and elaboration of socialism. Glaeser maintains the GDR socialism presumed itself to occupy a state of incorruptible anteriority to the *actual practice* of the socialism. The fact remains, however, that quotidian interactions with the institutions of GDR socialism (whether they be the Party, the Stasi, or the more abstractly conceived “collective”) were at times at radical divergence with SED’s ideologically imperative self-understanding.³⁸

What Glaeser does not explicitly say, but what seems a reasonable conclusion to draw from his line of argument, is that, on the level of ideology in the GDR, socialism existed as a kind of inexorable, very much *ontologically* rooted sociopolitical formation. Socialism, in this conception, was not something to be made, but something that either *already was*, or, at a certain point in history, would inevitably *be*. Of course, on one level this is reducible to a mere function

³⁸See Andreas Glaeser, *Political Epistemics: The Secret Police, the Opposition, and the End of East German Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 26-28 and 65-87.

of ideo-rhetorical figures emanating from the state, utterances not guaranteed to be taken “seriously” by GDR citizens, and in and of themselves possessing no reactive valence vis-à-vis the real body politic (the constant iteration of phrases like “internationalist brotherhood” in the press and Party documents, for example, certainly did not assure that East Germans would accept Vietnamese contract workers with open arms).

However, considering that these rhetorical figures were the primary medium by which the GDR state addressed its citizens, reducing them to the level of mere abstract, unreconstructed *rhetoric* (used here in the pejorative sense, i.e., that which is ineffectual, solipsistic, socially disengaged, empty) would seem to miss the point. As Glaeser astutely avers, generalized, discursively constructed “understandings” in given societies—precisely the site, in my conception, at which ideology and rhetoric converge and become operative—do not function effectively if the reality of day to day life diverges too widely from what institutional knowledge had not only prescribed, but, more importantly, *predicted*: “Whether background understandings remain effective in practice...depends entirely on the degree to which the domains of activity validating these understandings are actually integrated with the domains of activity in which these understandings are employed.”³⁹

There is stark evidence of this disjuncture in the SED’s explanations and assumptions concerning the deployment of a Vietnamese workforce in the GDR. What was presented by the SED—and, it must be remembered, presentation in this context is recursive, as the actual facts of the 1981 agreement with Vietnam were never publicly disclosed—concerning the labor contracts with the SRV assumed that a climate of socialist fraternity was already fully developed in the GDR, and that no real “work” would be necessary to accomplish the productive co-existence of

³⁹ Glaeser, *Political Epistemics*, 43.

East German citizens and what would become a cohort of extra-national labor numbering in the tens of thousands. While it could certainly be argued that the Politburo could not have been so callow, so idealistic as to actually *believe* the inflexible ideological and rhetorical horizons demanded of official discourse, it is equally certain that at the level of this discourse, individual, subjective doubts were utterly beside the point. As anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport claims in his discussion of the formal structures of language in ritual, “acceptance” and “belief” are not mutually inclusive categories in ritual practice: “Acceptance is not a private state, but a public act.”⁴⁰ In effect, reality was as the Party claimed it to be, even if this understanding did not reflect the actual, brute facts of socialist practice among the diurnal body politic—even if it did not reflect that secret, personal convictions of members of the government who tirelessly pronounced it into being.

All this makes a certain amount of sense when considering how the SED sought to represent itself to the public in popular press organs like *Neues Deutschland*; propaganda, one would think, is universally regarded as spurious, even if those people whom it targets choose to accept it without protest. And at the risk of making hazardous generalizations, it is the case that all modern states—democratic republics included—often willfully misrepresent themselves to their citizens. In the case of the GDR, however, what is interesting about this state-driven obfuscation and misinformation is on the one hand its highly formalized (in fact *ritualized*) character, and on the other, its persistence even in the realm of Party discourse that was never intended for public consumption.

⁴⁰ Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 120-121.

It is essential to stress at this point that this argument is not meant to engage the GDR, its people, or even its political leadership on the level of indictment. A schism between theory and practice is certain to exist in all political systems, and certainly also existed in the in the FRG with respect to its Guest Worker program.⁴¹ What I wish to explicate within this analysis is the very peculiar slippage between SED ideological rhetoric and “real and existing socialism.” This slippage is, I believe, partly constitutive of the GDR regime’s failure, of the failure of the Soviet sponsored communism/socialism on the whole. Returning to the earlier discussion of GDR historians chastened by SED officials for leaving them to do the “historical work,” we see stark evidence of the largely insoluble paradox of East German socialist thought: the historian’s work, what was expected of him of her by the Politburo, was very much to provide empirical, social-scientific justification for SED policy. The problem with this, however, is immediately apparent: very much like criticisms leveled at functionalist anthropology,⁴² providing “explanations,” historical or otherwise, for cultural, social or political phenomena in the service of an ideological paradigm that already assumes the nature of these explanations amounts to nothing more than logical fallacy—a colossal instance of begging the question, in which the conclusions drawn are in effect predetermined by the ideological parameters within which the investigation proceeded.

History in the service of SED ideology was inseparable from that ideology; and it was expected to enforce assumptions about the genesis, development and present condition of historical socialism that were to be taken as virtually sacred warrants before any investigation into the nature of socialism as historical phenomenon began. As Glaeser argues, the SED’s conception of its historical mission amounted to a type of theodicy. Governed by the adherence

⁴¹ See Rita Chin, *The Guest Worker Question in Postwar Germany*, 30-35.

⁴² For a general discussion of the charge of logical inconsistencies in functionalist Anthropology, Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, 172-175.

to the “absolute truth of the *substance* of Marxism/Leninism as the only true social science corroborated by the movement of history,” any failure or destabilization of the socialist state, once it was achieved—and because the socialist state amounted to the very entelechy of history itself, it could not fail to be achieved—was the result of either enemy intrigue or on an individual or individuals within the state who had not, for all the Party’s diligence, arrived at the desired level of “historical consciousness.” As Glaser succinctly puts it, “given that this form of failure accounting [always caused by an agent external to the state] involves the defense of an absolute it is properly addressed as a form of *theodicy*.” And this theodician justification for the existence of socialism in the GDR effectively insulated the SED against criticism,⁴³ as the Party and history in this conception existed in a realm autonomous and *ideal*, and there was to be absolutely no separation between them.

Roy Rappaport’s analysis of the formal structures of ritual practice is illuminating with regard to the present discussion of SED ideology as “absolute.” While his anthropological intervention in human ritual is decidedly synchronic—that is to say, at least superficially, of uncertain use to *historical* inquiry—I believe that several of the structural elements he identifies as universally constitutive of ritual as *form* to be strikingly similar to SED rhetorical *practice* (rhetoric here conceived as ideology on an operative register). That being said, it is important to make clear that these “formal” components of ritual practice are, when immersed in unique historical contexts, always mobilized to achieve different political, social and economic ends. What is, however, justly attributed to ritual in *all* contexts—and what permits a level of synchronic generalization—is that wherever and whenever one locates ritual practice in a society (whether it functions as a medium of sanctification, or as the rhetorical condensation of

⁴³ Andreas Glaeser, *Political Epistemics*, 112.

“atheistic” ideology, as was the case with the SED), its primary utility is the promotion of *social cohesion*. The East German government’s professions of “fraternity” and “internationalist cooperation,” their ubiquitous and highly formalized iteration, occupied a destabilized rhetorical territory in which that which *had already been achieved* (the absolute, historically guaranteed conditions of state socialism) was in effect incessantly, and with profound anxiety, pronounced into being, *performed*.

Foundational to the ritual as formal practice is signification as *performative act*. While signification is a broad category, encompassing gesture, posture, and certainly a host of non-linguistic sensory cues ranging across fields visual, haptic, auditory and olfactory—in the case GDR rhetoric as ritual, my investigation will be limited to performative verbal articulations: acts of speech and inscription that intend to bring their very content into being. As Rappaport points out, ritualized speech acts—utterances that “achieve conventional effects”—function to produce a real transformation of states within social relations of a given society. In the case of ritualized naming of an object or a person (as is in evidence, for instance, with the SED declaring within the pages of *Neues Deutschland*: “with the Vietnamese we are bound as brothers”), the naming itself “not only constitutes an action but actually brings into being the state of affairs with which it is concerned [and hence] is *performative*.” This state of transformation holds true—within the liturgical context—whether or not all members of a given society decide to act in accordance with what the act of naming has brought into being. And this assertion of particular importance with regard to the rhetorical performance of the SED—as Rapport goes on to explain, “the force

of performatives does not depend in any simple way and direct way upon the effect of these acts and utterances upon the minds and hearts of those exposed to them.”⁴⁴

The notion of state of affairs successfully *effected* through a ritual act that is potentially, simultaneously *ineffective* vis-à-vis its observance in the lives of men and women outside the liturgical context may seem at first an intractable contradiction. But, as discussed earlier, belief and acceptance are not conterminous as far as individual participation in social institutions is concerned. For an East German citizen to have accepted the SED’s insistence on his fraternal bond with his Vietnamese partner in socialism did not require that he actually *believed* in that filial—or, for that matter, world-historical—affinity. And at the rhetorical level, those pronouncements which issued from the GDR state in a real but formally circumscribed way actually created the very conditions of socialist fraternity that were putatively *already* historically vouchsafed. As Glaeser discusses, the absolute nature of SED political ideology—its historically corroborated “theodicy”—made the conditions of the accomplished socialist state—and all the fraternal bonds with other “partners in socialism” that those conditions assured—historically inexorable. Any deviation from the socialist ideal was not—could not be—imputed to the failure of the party, which would have meant the failure of socialism itself; failure, rather, was always *suffered* by the state, the result of the external interference of agents who had not yet come around to its historical truth.

This theodician formulation of GDR socialism exhibits a very peculiar feature: it inverts the conventional correspondence of statements *about* the world and the world these statements are intended to describe. In the day-to-day world, a statement is considered true if it corresponds to observable reality; a statement is false if it inaccurately represents empirical conditions. While

⁴⁴ Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 114-115.

this may seem too basic to be worth mentioning, it becomes important when the SED is considered as absolute, as theodician. On the ideological level, it is of no consequence if that which the SED states about the world does not, in fact, reflect the actual conditions of the world. The divergence between what the East German government pronounces about the state of socialism and the latter's "real and existing" conditions amounts to what Rappaport would classify as a "Vedic lie." In the case of an individuals who transgress the conventional order that ritual practice has brought into being, what is effected are "states of affairs that...do not conform to prevailing liturgically established orders [and] are the inverse of 'vulgar lies,' statements that their transmitters believe misrepresent the state of affairs which they purport to report."⁴⁵ Iterations of the socialist state as *already accomplished* were, for the SED the main rhetorical strategy by which it, in effect, pursued its legitimacy as *that which had already been incontrovertibly established*. In the chapters that follow, I will discuss this ideological nostrum, *the always already accomplished* state of "historical" socialism, to which the SED appealed time and time again in order to shore up its legitimacy.

⁴⁵ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 133-134.

3 *DIE PARTEI HAT IMMER RECHT: THE RIGHTS AND DUTIES OF VIETNAMESE CONTRACT WORKERS*

The disconnection between a blinkered return to inflexible central planning, and the real fracture points in the command economy in effect created the circumstances under which Vietnamese laborers were sought after by GDR companies. Unfortunately for the Vietnamese, this same disconnection extended to the “official” version of their status as residents of the GDR, and their actual treatment at the hands of their East German employers. This chapter endeavors to understand the ideological impasse of GDR socialism as a kind of background before which the actual daily politics between Vietnamese workers and their East German bosses took place. Relying on communications between GDR companies and local government agencies, I will show how ideology consistently failed to contain the full range of the contract workers experience; and how contracts that structured Vietnamese labor in the GDR by their very paternalism discouraged equality and integration.

3.1 The Failure of Central Planning

The gulf between what the SED claimed East German socialism to have achieved (whether it be a classless state, the triumph over racism, imperialism, etc.) and the disparate facts “on the ground” created a destabilized nation that could simply not bear the shocks of the global economic and political events of 1970s and 1980s. Socialist orthodoxy in the GDR would not (and could not) countenance the failure of intensified economic rationalization in meeting the needs of the East German citizenry. Ideological bias notwithstanding, historians tend to agree that Honecker’s decision to systematically dismantle Ulbricht’s economic reform was a major contributor to the eventual collapse of the GDR. Ulbricht’s New Economic System of Planning and Management (NES) had been designed to achieve rapprochement between the SED and the East German populace—in the absence of the regime’s legitimacy, it was at the very least vital

that the population's basic material needs be consistently met. Ulbricht's plan to achieve this end was to spur technological innovation, and to inaugurate a hybridization of the command economy (which produced goods largely within a fixed pricing structure) and a more market driven, "profit based" economic model.⁴⁶

These reform measures, however, were rolled back under Honecker, and economic policy was gradually steered back to heavy reliance on central planning. Honecker believed that worker productivity—hence, the GDR's economic health—would be guaranteed if the basic material needs of every citizen were met by the state; along these lines, he nearly tripled state spending on social programs over the course of the 1980s.⁴⁷ It is worth noting the circular nature of this thinking: meeting the conditions of socialism would, in effect, produce the economic yield to ensure the attainment of functioning socialist state.⁴⁸ This approach was based on a refractory, ideologically calcified, *quasi-metaphysical* conception of not only the function of the SED, but

⁴⁶ The drive to reform the command economy largely resulted from popular discontent with the SED. After the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 stemmed flight to the West, in an effort to placate unhappy citizens, a general relaxation of regime controls took place. As Khrushchev "destalinized" the Soviet Union, Ulbricht seized the opportunity to present the image of more tolerant SED, a party that wished to rule in concert with its people, not lord over them. Part of this "new" Party policy was to assuage the East German population's dissatisfaction with the perennial shortage of quality consumer goods. To accomplish this, Ulbricht believed it was necessary to abandon—or, at least, become less dependent on—production quotas determined *a priori*, and inefficient price controls. The thinking was that by giving more autonomy to manufacturing enterprises vis-à-vis the establishment of their own long term production goals, technical innovation and increased efficiency would proceed apace. A necessary compliment to this autonomy was the loosening of centrally mandated price controls, which had functioned to gear production in general toward the manufacture of more expensive items, regardless of actual demand. All this is to say that the SED under Ulbricht in the 1960s made efforts to hedge the nagging concern about its legitimacy by enacting at least superficial changes to its mode of government—by representing itself as no longer governing *despite the people*, but now governing on their behalf. Curiously, however, this seeming "thaw" in SED-popular relations was accompanied by staggering growth in the Ministry of State Security (Stasi), the ranks of which—excluding unofficial collaborators—grew from just under 18,000 in 1957 to 52,700 in 1973. See Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990* (London: Longman, 2000), 99-109.

⁴⁷ "The bill for the most heavily subsidized items—basic foodstuffs, rents and public transportation—rose from 16.9 million Marks in 1980 to 49.8 million Marks in 1980." *Ibid.*, 147-148.

⁴⁸ As Mike Dennis explains, "The central features of the 'social contract' were enshrined in the 'Main Task' (*Hauptaufgabe*) announced by Honecker at the 1971 SED Party Congress. The SED committed itself to an improvement in the material and cultural standard of living of the people... Higher economic growth and greater efficiency were to secure the systematic improvement of working and living conditions. And then, as a part of a virtuous circle, better welfare provisions would help create the environment appropriate to the release of new driving forces for further economic development." See, *Ibid.*, 147.

the nature of socialism itself. In response the suggestion that the social spending demanded by the SED's 'Main Task' would only worsen the GDR's already considerable hard currency debt, Honecker claimed that such contentions were "tantamount to sabotaging the decisions of the Party Congress."⁴⁹ The SED insisted that the GDR's strategy of central economic planning was fundamentally sound; and, as Honecker made clear, any doubts about this thinking amounted to a cardinal breach of faith in the Party. The reality of the situation, however, was the level of social spending that the Honecker regime deemed necessary to keep East German socialism on the rails (again, a circular conception that assumed the conditions of socialism would *lead to* socialism) exacerbated and already unwieldy trade deficit—not only with other COMECON nations (the Soviet Union in particular) but, since the General Treaty with the FRG in 1972, with the capitalist West as well. The global oil crisis in 1979 brought this deficit to crisis level. As the GDR had traditionally relied on the import of cheap raw materials from the Soviet Union—petroleum foremost among these—the spike in energy prices hit East Germany particularly hard. In an effort to attack the trade imbalance by ramping up exports, the GDR established a compulsory third shift system in basic goods industries, and raised production quotas to the point that the pool of native East German workers was insufficient to meet the country's labor demands.

3.2 *Abkommen*

It was as economic conditions deteriorated that the 1980 labor contracts with Vietnam were enacted. Setting aside all the pious cant and self-congratulatory Party rhetoric that spun GDR–Vietnamese relations as matter of paternalist socialist outreach, in 1980, the SED, staring at the hard reality of a moribund economy, looked to Vietnam for labor, and for labor alone. But

⁴⁹ Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic*, 148.

resorting to large scale importation of foreign workers was an admission that the GDR could not respond to the world economic crisis in a manner consistent with the new party program set forth in 1976 “whereby in return for an acceptable standard of living the citizens would tacitly, if unenthusiastically, were supposed to accept the party’s claim to be the leading force in society.”⁵⁰ The Party simply could not make this fact public without vitiating the legitimacy of its rule.

As the pronouncements of the SED Party Congress were intended to have the force and authority of a Holy Writ, to present the relations with Vietnam for what they really were—a fairly desperate measure aimed at nothing less than saving GDR socialism from collapse—would have been not only tantamount to political suicide, but, on a fundamental level, a rhetorical impossibility. Put another way, the ideological-cum-theoretical horizon of the SED’s self-conception (that is to say, in Foucauldian terms, the discursive limits of *official* GDR socialism) simply would not permit the “facts” of the 1980 labor contract with Vietnam to be made public. As a government plagued by constant threat of the charge of illegitimacy, recourse to historical and theoretical justifications for its rule demanded that the SED vet the reality of its situation—the “facts” on the ground—as of secondary importance. The importation of tens of thousands of Vietnamese nationals into the East German work force could not be represented to the public as redress for the Party’s economic mismanagement. At most, the presence of these foreigner laborers in East German shops was evidence of dialectical materialism at work: the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, having lately overcome its imperialist oppressors, now required tutelage of a more advanced GDR socialism. If the SED represented the 1980 contract to the public in any

⁵⁰ Dennis, *Economic Modernization*, p. 15.

other way, it would have had to admit its failings—and that admission would fatally undermine its ability to rule.

Curiously, it was not just in its public announcements that the SED relied on the vague terminology of “internationalism” and “brotherhood” as a gloss and justification for its foreign labor programs. As Annegret Schüle notes, a February 1986 Resolution of the GDR Council of Ministers states that “the Socialist Republic of Vietnam’s offer to supply a total of 17, 570 Vietnamese for *productive education* in GDR will be used” to compensate for critical production short falls in children’s clothing and shoes.⁵¹ Schüle correctly maintains that the rhetorical figure of “productive education of Vietnamese worker” operated “euphemistically” to distract from—or at least attenuate—the fact that East Germany’s command economy was insufficient to meet the material needs of its population.⁵² What she does not address, however, is that this “euphemistic” language in fact marks a kind of discursive horizon for the GDR’s brand of socialism, one that utterly foreclosed the possibility any official admission of the state’s failings.

This assertion is further borne out by the schizoid parlance of the GDR Council of Ministers. The resolution in question plainly acknowledges grave labor shortages: “For the protection and achievement of part of the Four Year Plan the actual deficit in light industry labor (a shortage of 4,600 workers in 1986; and approximately 5,000 in 1987) must be compensated for.”⁵³ But, in the next sentence, the matter of fact assessment of the GDR’s labor dearth—one that absolutely demands the further importation of Vietnamese workers—is effectively displaced by a rhetorical mode of decidedly paternalistic “internationalist brotherhood.” The Vietnamese

⁵¹ *Müggenburg*, *Ausländische Vertragsarbeitnehmer*, S. 51-59. Quoted in Annegret Schüle, “Proletischer Internationalismus oder ökonomischer Vorteil für die DDR: Mosambikanische, angolansiche und vietnamesische Arbeitskräfte in VEB Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei (1980-1989),” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 42, 2002: 198-199.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 198.

⁵³ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 198.

government has “offered” close to 20,000 more of its citizens to the GDR so that they can benefit from “productive *education*” in East German industries. The GDR’s posture of largesse towards its ephemic “socialist friend” is implicit in this language: regardless of the real economic motives behind Vietnamese contract labor in the GDR, official discourse insists—is ideologically bound to insist—that the SED’s true mission is to foster the international proletariat.

What is most important in the present discussion, however, is the SED’s fundamental assumption—and, in terms of establishing its legitimacy, this assumption was indispensable—that whatever policy it enacted, whatever rhetorical posture it took, it was always *historically* justified. The SED demonstrated its belief in its infallibility again and again in the rhetorical figures it disseminated to the East German population. A startling crass and direct example of this rhetoric can be found in the official anthem of the SED *Die Partei hat immer recht* (the Party is always right):

The Party, the Party, the Party is always right,
And, comrades, it will stay that way.
For who fights for the what’s right is always right
Against lies and exploitation.⁵⁴

One could hardly offer more striking evidence of the chauvinistic force of Party orthodoxy. Pronouncements—functionally, utterances of *truth*—made by the SED within the given historical conditions of state socialism were to be accepted as if they were simultaneously

⁵⁴ Louis Fürnberg, “Die Partei hat immer recht,” in Michal Glaser, ed., *Auferstanden*, Deutsche Schallplatten GmbH, 0 03 040, 1990, quoted in Alan L. Nothgale, *Building the East German Myth*, 16. Nothgale goes on to unpack this fragment of patriotic verse: “To an outsider it appears astonishing that the SED could in all seriousness proclaim such a crude and self serving slogan...or that it could “prove” such assertions as the inevitability of the victory of socialism by using Ulbricht and Honecker speeches—or even back issues of *Neues Deutschland*—as ‘evidence.’ The mystery is explained by the principle of *Parteilichkeit*.”

of divine provenance *and* matters of an unerring, social-scientific deduction. Socialism as a brand of historical Platontism—the Party itself occupying the role of the “ideal”—not only made the SED right in its every iteration, but “since the ideals were always projected into an inescapable ‘happy future,’ obvious shortcomings and contradictions of the here and now were ultimately irrelevant. They were by-products of change, and thus—from a dialectical standpoint—evidence of progress.”⁵⁵

The official justification and implicit directive issuing from the SED to its citizens concerning the importation of Vietnamese labor occupied a territory that one not immersed in the contemporaneous social context would probably see as untenable: the men and women who traveled from Vietnam to close production gaps in the GDR were presented in the official press—not to mention in the text of the 1980 agreement itself—in emphatically filial terms, and yet, from its inception, policy that brought Vietnamese workers to the GDR in no way intended that they stand on equal footing, much less that they be assimilated, with the native East German public. What drove the labor contract with Vietnam at the rhetorical level was the putative will to promote cooperation, brotherhood, socialist fraternity and internationalist solidarity; and yet, a closer look at the text of the 1980 agreement belies these more noble claims. The introduction to the articles of the contract proceeds as follows:

Guided by the wish to deepen the brotherly cooperation between the two countries and [proceeding] on the basis of a mutual interest in the temporary employment and training of Vietnamese workers in the enterprises of the German Democratic Republic, the government of the German Democratic Republic and the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam have concluded this agreement.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Alan L. Nothnabe, *Building the East German Myth*, 18.

⁵⁶ Abkommen zwischen der Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und der Regierung der Sozialistischen Republik Vietnam über die zeitweilige Beschäftigung und Qualifizierung vietnamesischer Werkträger in Betrieben der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, reprinted in Andreas Schätzke, *Die ausländischen Vertragsarbeitnehmer in der ehemaligen DDR: Darstellung und Dokumentation* (Berlin: s.n., 1996), 83.

Leading with the formalized and undeviating invocation of “brotherly cooperation,” the contract continues in Article I to further clarify the practical and ideological parameters within which the agreement is to be enacted:

This employment is associated with the acquisition and extension of practical occupational experience in the processes of production, as well as with occupational training and continuing education within the framework of adult on-the-job training.⁵⁷

What is interesting about the verbiage of this particular article of the agreement is the recourse taken to “occupational training and continuing education” as an explanation for the labor program. The SED’s paternalist rhetoric of internationalist cooperation with Vietnam provided a kind of stock explanation for the increasing visibility of Vietnamese laborers in the GDR. It must be noted, however, that prior to 1980 foreign workers *were* in fact recruited for reasons more closely in line with SED’s pronouncements of fraternity and education. Vietnamese who came to the East Germany in the 1960s and 70s were represented by official propaganda as partners in “‘work force cooperation’ within the framework of ‘socialist economic integration’... as long as the GDR was economically superior to other socialist states, workers could come from those states to ‘build socialism in their homeland.’”⁵⁸

As it turned out, with 1980 agreement, the labor displaced any charitable programs geared toward the “professional training” of Vietnamese nationals in the GDR.⁵⁹ Curiously, the

⁵⁷ Abkommen zwischen der Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und der Regierung der Sozialistischen Republik Vietnam; reprinted in Andreas Schätzke, *Die ausländischen Vertragsarbeitnehmer in der ehemaligen DDR*, 83.

⁵⁸ Dennis Kuck, “Die fremden sozialistischen Brüder,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 October 2001, reprinted in Göktürk, Gramling and Kaes, eds., *Germany in Transit*, 98.

⁵⁹ Dennis Kuck, “Die fremden sozialistischen Brüder,” 99.

text of the contract itself fails to fully register this policy shift: the compulsion to conceal economic realities in the GDR with ideological panaceas prevails over the facts on the ground. It is also interesting to note that this stratagem is not without precedent—even during a period when the foreign labor importation in the GDR hewed more closely to the official explanation of vocational training and education of socialist brothers. A letter written in July 1973 by Horst Sinderman (GDR Chairman of the Council of Ministers) and sent to Erich Honecker reveals that the SED saw its foreign labor agreements as primarily economic in character well before it entered into its contract with the SRV. Sindermann warned Honecker that: “We must not appear as a ‘guest worker country’ ...Hence we can only conclude an agreement on the ‘training and qualification’ ...of workers.”⁶⁰

It is certainly justifiable to maintain that Sinderman’s anxiety about the perception of the GDR foreign labor policy stemmed from a concern that it should be compared to the *Gastarbeiter* programs in the FRG; but what underwrote that anxiety was the fact that analogous foreign labor arrangements in West Germany were in unabashedly presented as primarily economic in nature (albeit in a way that would supposedly be positive for both the FRG *and* for those that came from abroad in search of work).⁶¹ Sinderman makes clear that no matter what the real impetus for foreign labor in GDR, it must be presented as strictly adhering to ideological principles, and in no way betray any weakness in the East German economy.

While the language of the first article of the agreement conflicts with the empirical data available concerning the actual state of the GDR’s economy and the real agenda behind “socialist cooperation,” article II constructs an unintended rhetorical aporia, one that exposes a stubborn

⁶⁰ Quoted in Damian Henry Tone Mac Con Uladh, “Guests of the Socialist Nation,” 67.

⁶¹ See Rita Chin, *The Guest Worker Question in Postwar Germany*, 36-37.

hypocrisy in the SED's internationalist mission: "The Vietnamese workers shall live in the German Democratic Republic without family members. In exceptional cases it is possible for both husband and wife to be employed on the basis of the agreement."⁶² While on a practical level it would seem reasonable to discourage workers whose status was, by the terms of the contract, temporary from establishing a true "home" environment in the GDR, an explicit clause prohibiting Vietnamese families from traveling together to work in East Germany runs utterly contrary to the agreement's previously stated "wish to deepen the brotherly cooperation between the two countries." This clause, taken in concert with the fact that Vietnamese women who became pregnant during their stay in the GDR were either forced to have an abortion or summarily sent back to the SRV does much to undermine the East German government's posture of benevolent host to its Vietnamese comrades.⁶³

3.3 Ordnungen/Anträge

In a Regulation (*Ordnung*) issued by the State's Secretary of Labor and Compensation (*Arbeit und Löhne*) in March of 1987, the GDR adjusted somewhat its official policy toward pregnancy among Vietnamese women working in East Germany. While still officially proscribed, the SED acknowledged that in certain circumstances, pregnancies would not only have to be carried to term, but deliveries would also have to be permitted *in* the GDR. Of course, it was stressed in the Regulation that pregnant laborers were not what the East German government envisioned when it entered into the labor agreement with Vietnam; but the reality of the situation—men and women working together and living in the same barracks inevitably entering into intimate relationships—could not be ignored forever. Acknowledging this, the SED

⁶² Abkommen zwischen der Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und der Regierung der Sozialistischen Republik Vietnam. reprinted in Andreas Schätzke, *Die ausländischen Vertragsarbeitnehmer in der ehemaligen DDR*, 85.

⁶³ Eva Kolinsky, "Former Contract Workers From Vietnam in Eastern Germany," 87

soft-peddled its distaste for the more “human” behavior of its foreign labor cohorts, and gave pregnant Vietnamese women the opportunity to use their vacation time to return to the SRV when their babies were due. If a woman took advantage of this concession, her contract with her GDR employer would not be terminated. The GDR also acknowledged in the 1987 Regulation that there did exist circumstances in which a pregnant woman’s health would permit neither abortion nor a flight back to Vietnam; in such cases, it was stipulated that the company for which the pregnant woman worked, and the “local state agencies,” would provide for the needs of mother and child.

All this new flexibility notwithstanding, the SED strongly encouraged pregnant Vietnamese laborers should very seriously consider abortion or repatriation—and this encouragement was to be echoed by not only the individual’s barracks supervisor and company “group leader,” but by any concerned representatives of the Vietnamese diplomatic envoy in the GDR—before burdening the East German state with a foreigner infant ward. Articles 1 and 2 of the *Ordnung* spell out this preference:

The goal of the workforce cooperation is the simultaneous employment and qualification [i.e. training/education] of young foreign workers in the national industries of the GDR for a period of five years. It is appropriate to note that in order to ensure that female workers are able to meet the concurrent demands of work and technical qualification in GDR industry, pregnancy is discouraged. Pursuant to this, it is incumbent upon GDR businesses—in cooperation with state healthcare facilities and [Vietnamese] delegates in the GDR—to inform female workers of the availability of birth control and abortion.⁶⁴

The subtext of the above directive cannot be ignored: the SED simply did not want to have foreign nationals giving birth and—even more—potentially starting families in the GDR.

⁶⁴ SAPMO/BAB D434/23799, *Ordnung über Aufgaben der Betriebe und örtlichen Staatsorgane im Zusammenhang mit der Schwangerschaft vietnamesischer Frauen, die auf der Grundlage zweiseitiger Regierungsabkommen zeitweilig in Betrieben der DDR arbeiten.*

There are certainly practical reasons for this, especially considering the immense increase in social spending under Honecker: if the entire reason that the Vietnamese were being brought to East Germany was to combat economic crisis, then to add superfluous numbers to the social welfare rolls would be grossly counterproductive. And the case of Vietnamese women having children while working in the GDR would be doubly burdensome to the state, as not only would a cost be incurred for the healthcare of mother and child, but the productive capacity of a pregnant worker—not to mention a new mother—would be significantly diminished, if not entirely lost.

The spirit of the 1980 agreement—if not, precisely, the letter—did, however, indicate that the GDR was extending a kind of service to the SRV, an opportunity to educate its young men and women in the socialist tradition. No mention is made in the agreement of a dire labor shortage that threatened to destroy the East German nation. And no mention is made of contingent developments in the importation of a Vietnamese labor force—say, pregnancy or illness—that may have run contrary to its presence in the GDR in the first place. Built into the contract was a stipulated 5 year employment rotation. This duration was long enough to acquire the necessary level of education and skill at a given job and then to discharge that skill in an effort to help the GDR in meeting its onerous production quotas; but it was not enough time, so the SED intended, for Vietnamese men and women to establish actual “lives,” or start families in East Germany. And again, there were what could be considered “practical” reasons for barring the Vietnamese from real integration into East German society; but there is no way to square these practical considerations with the explicit claims of SED rhetoric concerning its mission vis-à-vis bringing Vietnamese to the GDR. Never did Party rhetoric deviate from the proclamation that the Vietnamese were guests of GDR socialism, that they were welcomed into the East

German state as “brothers and sisters” (albeit always cast in the role of younger and inexperienced sibling) in the international family of the ascendant working class. But how could this talk of socialism’s filial bonds be taken seriously when the SED sought—despite its rhetoric, and in the face of the letter of Party orthodoxy—to prevent Vietnamese workers from having their immediate families with (or, for that matter, *starting* families) while they pitched in for the socialist cause in the GDR?

The labor contract signed with Vietnam in 1980 explicitly stated that Vietnamese workers were to have the same rights as East Germans. Articles 4 and 5 of the 1980 labor agreement with the SRV provide that:

On the basis of this agreement Vietnamese workers employed in the German Democratic Republic have the same rights and duties as East German workers... The businesses of the German Democratic Republic will conclude the labor contracts with Vietnamese workers, which will stipulate the duration of employment, in both German and Vietnamese. The contracts will also stipulate the mutual rights and duties extended to the Vietnamese workers.⁶⁵

It is interesting to note, however, that the individual “rights” stipulated in the above clause were severely curtailed by their conceptual obverse: “duty” to socialism. Article 5 of the agreement, after having explicitly put Vietnamese workers on equal footing with their East German counterparts, briskly moves forward to enumerate the conditions under which any rights the Vietnamese had initially been granted could be summarily revoked. A Vietnamese worker’s contract could be dissolved, and his or her return to Vietnam compelled, by infringements of “duty” including but not limited to: “violation of GDR penal law or repeated commission of

⁶⁵ “Abkommen zwischen der Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und der Regierung der Sozialistischen Republik Vietnam; reprinted in Andreas Schätzke, *Die ausländischen Vertragsarbeitnehmer in der ehemaligen DDR*, 86-87.

other violations of rights and liberties (*Rechtsverletzungen*); and serious violations of socialist work discipline (*Arbeitsdisziplin*).⁶⁶

Company maintenance of socialist or workplace discipline—two categories that were almost mutually inclusive—was a tool that offered GDR employers a power over Vietnamese laborers that could not be brought to bear on native East Germans: the right to actually deport the offender. Although the contract with Vietnam did stipulate that *Vertragsarbeiter* would have the same “rights” as East German workers, it also, in the same clause, insisted that the Vietnamese shoulder the same “obligations” as GDR citizens. Of course, these “obligations” were never explicitly enumerated, even though each Vietnamese worker was expected to be fully aware of the responsibilities of an upright socialist citizen.

Unfortunately, for many Vietnamese working in the GDR, lack of awareness or incomplete understanding what constituted *Rechtsverletzungen* of worker discipline led to punishment as severe as early termination of employment contracts and deportation to Vietnam. As it was not uncommon for Vietnamese men and women to go into considerable debt in an effort to secure work in the GDR in the first place—placement in the GDR often required bribing Vietnamese officials, and the bribes could sometimes only be afforded through loans taken out from Chinese creditors who charged usurious interest—contract termination and forced repatriation could be disastrous.⁶⁷

If a Vietnamese worker was charged with a breach of conduct as stipulated in the inter-governmental agreement, a representative of the accusing business would proceed to send a

⁶⁶ Abkommen zwischen der Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und der Regierung der Sozialistischen Republik Vietnam; reprinted in Andreas Schätzke, *Die ausländischen Vertragsarbeitnehmer in der ehemaligen DDR*, 87.

⁶⁷ See Mike Dennis, “Working under Hammer and Sickle,” 341; and Klaus Fritsche, *Vietnamesische Gastarbeiter in den europäischen RGW-Ländern*, 22-24.

request for contract termination to the State's Secretary for Employment and Compensation, (SAL) the GDR body that oversaw the implementation contract labor. These requests (*Anträge*) were many cases remarkably vague concerning the exact nature of Vietnamese misconduct—a fact that gives pause considering the severity of the punishment often being sought. In a request sent for deportation from VEB Polygraph Druckmaschinewerke in Leipzig to the SAL in October of 1982, it is claimed that although Vietnamese worker Tran (last name deleted) had successfully completed his training in German language instruction and had been integrated into the print shop's daily production, he had subsequently demonstrated that:

He is not at all capable of operating machinery or successfully completing other job tasks. Through his irresponsible actions, he puts himself and others at risk. It is not in any way feasible that he be left unattended in the plant. After a detailed medical examination, it has been established that he is of no use to this enterprise. Therefore, we urgently request that this colleague be sent home.⁶⁸

As no copy of a response to this request is available, it cannot be known if the SAL granted VEB Polygraph its request to terminate Tran's contract. It can, however, be safely inferred that it was not terribly difficult to terminate and deport a Vietnamese worker, as there appears to have been no expectation that a company *prove* the misconduct deemed punishable. In the case of this *Antrag* it was sufficient for the company to simply claim that the worker had behaved in a way that proved him incapable of performing his job duties, and that he was irresponsible to the point of putting himself and other employees at risk. Curiously, the request for termination closes with mention of a medical examination (though no specific malady, physical or psychological, is cited), possibly in an effort to corroborate and give credibility to the company's accusations. Recourse to medical opinion was not, however, a necessary step for GDR companies seeking to terminate Vietnamese workers.

⁶⁸ BAB/Aktenband 1325, *Antrag auf vorzeitige Auflösung des Arbeitsvertrages und Rückführung eines vietnamesischen Werkätigen*; reproduced Oliver Raedchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR: Ein Rückblick* (Berlin: SEACOM, 2000), 67.

In another *Antrag* from VEB Polygraph Leipzig in 1982—his time sent to the Minister of Tool and Machine Processes in Berlin—“colleague” Dao (last name deleted) is accused of having had an ongoing and inappropriate relationship with a sixteen year old girl, which led to the girl becoming pregnant. The request goes on to state: “It was determined by the medical commission that the pregnancy had progressed too far for an abortion to be considered.”⁶⁹ Two important points can be taken from this mention of the pregnancy. First, the fact that the inadvisability of an abortion is discussed at all suggests that there may be a concern here more alarming to the state than the mere insubordination of a foreign worker. If the young girl Dao impregnated had also been Vietnamese, one wonders if any mention of her health (or the health of her child to be) would have been made. And as it would be contrary to the conditions set forth in the 1980 agreement for a 16 year old girl to come to the GDR from Vietnam, it seems very possible that the pregnant teenager referred to in this *Antrag* may have been German. Proceeding from this assumption, the question arises whether or not the girl would have been advised against terminating the pregnancy had she been Vietnamese.

This *Antrag* goes on to claim: “Despite intense discussion with the Vietnamese group leader, the existing relationship with the underage girl has not been terminated.” Next, with absolutely no effort to transition into what could easily be read as a pretext for Dao’s deportation—as if his relationship with the girl is somehow not cause enough—the complaint registers that:

Colleague Dao has experienced great difficulties completing his [work]. His average completion rate in 1981 was 85%. Overall, in the last 3 months, his work has been very erratic. In January of 1982 his completion rate was 63%. The quality of his work is also below average. Continuing instructions from his supervisors concerning his work were

⁶⁹ BAB/Aktenband 46371, *Antrag auf Rückführung eines vietnamesischen Bürgers*; reprinted in Oliver Raedchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 77.

not heeded. Further, Colleague Dao has had to be admonished about order and cleanliness in the shop, and about the upkeep of machinery.⁷⁰

No mention is made of what is to happen to the girl once Dao is sent back to Vietnam (and, again, no response from the government agency in receipt of this *Antrag* is available). If the girl in question was in fact German, her pregnancy with a Vietnamese man would have certainly been the stuff of scandal. As historian Eva Kolinsky discovered in her interviews with former Vietnamese contract workers and their East German supervisors, for all the SED's insistence that the Vietnamese were guests of the GDR to be treated as equals, as "brothers," the true—if implicit—directive from the state was that no form of Vietnamese integration into the East German population take place. Frau W., a former assistant to a regional Foreigners' Commission in East Germany makes this point home in no uncertain terms:

In GDR times, one did not have contacts with the Vietnamese. They lived secluded, completely separate. They had their own shifts in the factories, they spoke very little German. This is what it was like, and it was not wanted that East Germans should have contacts with them. It was directed from above. There were no events outside the hostels. Nobody questioned it. This is what it was like. There were always German minders, but ordinary contact did not exist between Germans and Vietnamese at the time.⁷¹

Regardless if the young girl discussed in the above *Antrag* was German or Vietnamese, it is clear that she and the Vietnamese worker with whom she had the relationship were able—at least for a time—to avoid the controls put in place by the East German state. Whether or not the girl had the child—or if Dao was able to remain in the GDR to raise it—are questions this research cannot answer. A process did, however, exist in the GDR by which East German

⁷⁰ BAB/Aktenband 46371, *Antrag auf Rückführung eines vietnamesischen Bürgers*; reprinted in Oliver Raedchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 77.

⁷¹ Interview with Frau W., Mitarbeiterin im Büro des Ausländerbeauftragten des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt, 29 October 2002, quoted in Eva Kolinsky, "Former Contract Workers from Vietnam in Eastern Germany," 86-87.

citizens and foreign workers alike were able to petition the SED to correct occasions of injustice and, in some cases, beg clemency for an unintended transgression. This process, the constitutionally guaranteed right of *Eingabe*, was what came closest in the GDR to public participation in government, to citizens taking an active role in civic life. In the next chapter, I will discuss a series of *Eingaben* written by a Vietnamese woman who worked in Leipzig, considering her petition to the East German state in the context of the possibilities and limitations of the GDR public sphere.

4 “I WILL NOT LEAVE BEFORE MY TIME”: VIETNAMESE ACCESS TO THE GDR PUBLIC SPHERE

There has been considerable debate among historians about the East German public sphere. It is an unavoidable question whether any derivation of Habermas’s classic model of a privately founded (and, for that matter, *funded*) public existed within a state that used “democracy” as a pretext to establish, without mandate, the fifty year entrenchment of a single political class. Put differently, what has lately been investigated by historians of the GDR is whether or not—and again, irony bears forth—a “public sphere” can in fact exist in a political system that at least superficially resembled a polity of dictatorial “publicness.” In the more simplistic and (ideologically biased) accounts of life in the GDR, the native East German public is represented as functioning entirely at the behest of the state: but for the grace of the SED goes East Germany. Other historians have explored phenomena like the process of individual petition, or *Eingabe*, that GDR citizens were guaranteed by the SED as potential evidence of a sanctioned territory for free expression, and even criticism of the state.⁷²

This chapter considers in part a series of *Engaben* written by a Vietnamese woman working in Leipzig in 1985. Her communication with the state exhibited a genuine attempt to exercise some control over her fate as she faced deportation for breaking a law she did not know existed. What is most extraordinary about her *Eingaben* is that, read alongside the local government’s assessment and mismanagement of her case, it becomes clear that this contract worker most certainly did not fit the stereotype of passive docility often ascribed the Vietnamese in the GDR. In fact, this particular worker exhibited no small amount of guile, and ultimately slipped away from authorities who intended to send her back to Vietnam. It is precisely this point, where a contract worker attempts to simultaneously cooperate with the state *and* negotiate

⁷² See, for example, Mary Fullbrook, *The People’s State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

with it on her own terms, that something like public participation occurred for Vietnamese in East Germany. I will take up the details of this particular contract worker's *Eingaben* later in the chapter; but first, it is necessary to outline a few of the peculiarities of the GDR public sphere.

2.1 The GDR Public: Every Man a King?

Whatever institutional structures constituted, or aped, a “public sphere” in the GDR—that is, the limitations and shortcomings of the later—they were at least partly responsible for the government's collapse in 1989. The GDR's failure to recognize the limitations of how it demanded its body politic be both ritualized and dramatized over East Germany's fifty year existence served to accentuate an indelible weakness in the state; and those practices and public demonstrations intended to legitimize and make “natural” the state apparatus actually functioned to undermine the SED's legitimacy, precisely because the public which the state purported to embody was one pre-fabricated and, in effect, unilaterally *levied* on the East German population. The foundational mythologies of the resilient, ineradicable German *antifas* as the progenitors of the East German state (conveniently eliding the Soviet role in that development), along with the social-scientific guarantee of socialism's “historical victory,” these twin buttresses of SED's right to govern as it saw fit, were really nothing more than specious, *a priori* justifications for a coercive—and some would still maintain dictatorial—government that ruled a public without that public's explicit consent.

On the theoretical level, the GDR's conception of itself as a thoroughly and indisputably “public” body prior to any “practice” of the state vis-à-vis its public—or of an autonomous public as an agent of consent or resistance to the East German state—created a model socialist society, a kind of Platonic socialism that, of course, never had a diurnal analog; but this mode

still functioned to delimit the ways in which the state would conceptualize, justify and communicate itself to its citizens. In some sense, it was taken as an article of faith by the SED that the public did not in fact exist without it. Harkening back to Glaeser's discussion of theodicy in the East German government, we can begin to understand the implications of a political party whose essential theoretical armature was built from a veritably *metaphysical* model. And, as Alan Nothgale has argued, what was at stake in the SED's every action and pronouncement was the very formation of the "Party" as not only the natural and incontestable representative of "the worker's state," but as a kind of apotheosis of that state, one that gave rise to and permitted the East German polity to function in the first place.

It was with a particular brand of ideological conditioning—in a sort of expedient reversal of historical cause and effect—that the SED aligned itself with its citizenry: the idea and practice of *Parteilichkeit*. *Parteilichkeit* (translated in the dual sense of partisanship and commitment) requires that all political, social, cultural and economic questions be analyzed from the lens of the inexorable—and in East Germany, *always already* accomplished—historical triumph of the working class.⁷³ This thinking meant that the SED was theoretically indivisible from the worker's state—but even more, the Party, irrationally, served as both *cause and effect* of state socialism. By the logic of the SED's professed *antifas* legacy, and the "historically grounded" version of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy that pre-ordained culminant state socialism in East Germany, the "Party" (the SED, the one and only) was in fact *anterior to* and *representative of* the working class itself.

⁷³ Alan L. Nothgale, *Building the East German Myth: Historical Mythology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 16-18.

As Glaeser notes, a curious inversion of the socialism “base-superstructure” model occurred in the GDR. Although Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy insisted that the attainment of the material conditions of socialism in East Germany would have ensured the ideological rectitude of its citizens, considerable and constant ideological “conditioning” was deemed necessary by the Party. This imperative was explicitly spelled out in a 1986 program of the SED:

Marxism-Leninism, in the unity of its parts, is the theoretical foundation for all actions of the party. Only on the basis of generally valid scientific theory and its further creative development, is it possible to fight the revolutionary battle for the interests of the working class. The Socialist Unity Party provides direction and aim for the conscious, planned activity of the working people; it consolidates and strengthens socialist class consciousness.⁷⁴

The SED clearly understood that irrespective of the manner in which it *represented* GDR socialism to the East German public—that is, as an established, objective fact—the actual practice and administration of the socialist state was another matter entirely. In fact, it was the responsibility of the SED to “provide direction and aim for the conscious, planned activity of working people.” The question arises, however, why any direction giving was necessary at all. Marxism-Leninism’s “generally valid scientific theory” functioned to its authors as a predictive model, as a theoretical complement to objectively, empirically observed historical processes that would invariably lead to working class emancipation and socialism. In light of these “facts” what need did the SED have for ideological conditioning? The answer cuts right to the heart of the defining paradox of GDR socialism itself: that which was determined to have been historically achieved—namely the socialist state—*before* its political, social, cultural or economic practice, would always need to be enforced and protected from the dialectical residue—that bourgeois

⁷⁴ Reprinted in Günter Benser and Gerhard Naumann, eds., *Dokumente zur Geschichte der SED III: 1971-1986* (Berlin: Dietz, 1986), 159-160, quoted in Glaeser, *Political Epistemics*, 66. For a more thorough discussion of the inversion of the base-superstructure paradigm in GDR socialism, see Glaeser, *Political Epistemics*, 65-75.

inertia—of the historical conditions that preceded it. This may seem too arcane, too academic a concern to have had any real impact on the administration of the East German state; but in the case of the GDR, the tension between theoretical and historical certainty, and the contingent and always potentially destabilized reality of socialism “on the ground” was one that, I would argue, functioned to constantly *delegitimize* the state, and ultimately led to its demise.

If the East German body politic constituted a public, if it had an aggregate identity that was able to demonstrate a coherent “voice,” Party orthodoxy would have dictated that voice only be legitimately exercised through a kind of ventriloquism. Any deviation from *Parteilichkeit*, expressions of the imperfections and frictions, resistance and dissent, that characterized “real, existing socialism” in the GDR amounted, in the Party’s conception, to grist for the mill of dialectical historical development; and any disruptions in the execution of Party planning were not the fault of the Party—as the Party simply operated at the behest of ineluctable historical will—but were the work of scheming interlopers from the capitalist West that sought to see history thwarted.⁷⁵ Within the realm of politics, social theory and even historiography in the GDR, intellectual work was always intended to give credence to what was putatively *always already* evident—the triumphant fact of the socialist state itself.

Much like the feudal understanding of the lord’s identity *res publica*—that is, only the nobility having access to a fully elaborated public body—the socialist “public” in the GDR was the only official and ideologically acceptable instantiation of the East German citizenry. The

⁷⁵ Discussing the SED’s conceptualization of elements “disruptive” to the progress of socialism in the GDR, Andreas Glaeser notes that “the human ontology of GDR socialism dealt in three fundamental categories of people, distributing them over a continuum of orientations toward the socialist project as manifested in adherence to the current party line: believers...people temporarily in limbo...and enemies.” This last category, however, that of “enemy,” was never to be embodied in such a way that the failure of GDR socialism was to blame for its creation. Enemies of the state were never generated by a legitimate resistance to SED policy, but were the result entirely of *personal failures of the individual* in the face of his or her socialist duties. See Andreas Glaeser, *Political Epistemics*, 112-119.

legal status applied to the nobility in Germanic feudal society, *res publica*, designated the lord and the lord alone with an identity that could be represented and reproduced in public.

Commoners and peasants—those subordinated to the head of the feudal estate—had no recourse to public identity, could not, in the modern sense of civic action, publically represent their interests.⁷⁶ In a move that—much as Marx did to Hegel—recapitulated and stood an inherited social order “on its head,” the GDR *gentrified* the working class. But this ennobling of the proletariat functioned solely on the theoretical level. The absolute elaboration of a “noble public” was the ideal of East German socialism, but it did not often find practical application. In concert with the Party’s adherence to the inviolable “truth” of Marxist doctrine, “publicness” as an objective condition embedded in the teleological process of socio-historical development took on the paradoxical quality of something *always present but temporarily concealed*.

Private life—though its demands were, under the pressure of “real and existing socialism,” conceded to more and more throughout the GDR’s history—was, on vulgar, doctrinal level an inimical sphere of social existence. The GDR public sphere was ideally—but also

⁷⁶ As Habermas explains, manorial (i.e. feudal) Germanic social composition made the distinction between the common/private and the public in conceptual, legal and practical terms that bore little relation to the contemporary lingua franca significance of the “private/public sphere.” In German feudalism, that which was held to be “communal”—e.g. the market square, the town fountain—was designated as “public” insofar as access to a given space or resource was available to all in common. This notion of “publicness,” however, did not constitute the peasant class as a public body in any political or representative sense; did not constitute a modern “public sphere.” Interestingly, the absence of a coherent public body comprised of “ordinary” individuals also implied at once a derogation of any conception of life in “private” and a collapse of the “common” realm of life into the realm of the private. That which was designated as common, as private, under Germanic feudalism was that which, in effect, did not possess the special privilege of “public” embodiment, hence was constructed as not worthy of public representability. The only member of a manorial estate who possessed the special attribute of “publicness” was the lord; and he demonstrated his total authority over the common man by *representing his power in public*. That which was relegated to the private in the feudal context—the reproduction of daily life—was considered beneath the dignity of public embodiment, and because of this was *unrepresentable*. Most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, a lord’s exclusive right to public representation (to a public body) ran utterly contrary to public representation in the modern political sense, as a feudal lord’s “publicity of representation was inseparable from his concrete existence, that, as an ‘aura,’ surrounded and endowed him authority...As long as the prince and the estates of his realm ‘were’ the country and not just its representative, they could represent it in a specific sense. They could represent it *not for but ‘before’ the people*. See Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 5-9.

practically, insofar as Party dogma permitted no space between theory and practice—to expand to a critical mass that was not only self-fulfilling (if history was inexorable, so was, ultimately, the will of the Party), but functioned to displace the private sphere in its entirety. It was through the public and the public alone that citizens of the GDR accrued their identity, their dignity, their legal standing—the notion of the private citizen was neither valorized nor vouchsafed in the GDR; only the individual who, by adhering strictly to Party orthodoxy, to *Parteilichkeit*, participated in the public ideal deserved the emoluments of East German citizenship.⁷⁷

The irony of the GDR as a state founded on the simultaneous theoretical foreclosure of the private and the maximal elaboration of an ideal public originated in the persistent incompatibility between socialist ideology and practice: namely that the socialist public in East Germany was conceived by the Party *a priori*, and was considered to proceed undeviatingly, and univocally, from the apparatus of the state that constructed itself as already having attained the socialist ideal by the very utterance of that attainment. How else explain the tactic of policy justification and the demonstration of the “proof” GDR socialism’s nobility and success by reference to newspaper propaganda and political speeches? How else explain the massive network of secret policing and compelled denunciation of the “private” lives of East German citizens who were, theoretically (that is to say, *officially*) to have achieved class consciousness and hence no longer be in need of indoctrination? How else explain the absolute and willful negligence the SED displayed in failing to disclose the 1980 labor agreement with Vietnam to East German citizens? Officially, as state socialism was a matter of incontestable historical

⁷⁷ Although it was certainly the mission of the East German state to infiltrate and control—that is to say, *render public*—the private lives of its citizens, the facts of “real and existing socialism” were very seldom in keeping with the dictates of Party orthodoxy. As Paul Betts writes on the purported subordination of the private to an “SED-dominated public sphere...one can easily counter that it was the public sphere—rather than the private sphere—that occupied a sham existence in the GDR...In fact, it was precisely the relative absence of any public sphere of open debate and genuine civil society that rendered the private sphere so important and politically potent.” See Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

entelechy (the *fact* of the GDR's existence being proof of socialism's historical victory), Vietnamese labor could exist in the GDR *only* as a matter of socialist fraternity. How else explain a constitutionally guaranteed process of public participation, *Eingabe*, that was not intended as vehicle for discussion emanating from—or on the subject *of*—any traditional liberal conception of a coherent GDR public sphere?

As Mary Fullbrook has noted, the structure of the *Eingabe* process was one that ensured maximal atomization (even *privatization*) of any potentially public expression of discontent. *Eingaben* functioned as “complaints that were constrained to address individual issues that could in principle be rectified without querying the deeper systemic roots.”⁷⁸ In theory, Vietnamese *Vertagsarbeiter* had access to this same channel of expression available to East German citizens. If a Vietnamese worker experienced some legal or bureaucratic trouble in the GDR, the *Eingaben* should have been a tool at his or her disposal. It was often difficult, however, for foreigners in the GDR to avail themselves of this petitionary right. *Eingaben* were constructed as an avenue for GDR citizens to lodge complaints against government policy on both the local and state level. Insofar as they were contractually guaranteed the same rights (and concomitant “obligations”) as native East Germans, Vietnamese contract workers also had the right to *Eingaben*. Although it is certainly the case that the Vietnamese availed themselves of their right to petition less than their East German counterparts, examples of Vietnamese expressing confusion and discontent concerning what they perceived to be unwarranted punishments for contractually proscribed actions—which, in some cases meant deportation—do exist.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ See Mary Fullbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 269-272.

⁷⁹ Although the labor contract simultaneously afforded the Vietnamese the right *and* obligated them to achieve a functional level of German language proficiency, it was often the case the the workers would learn only enough German to perform their particular jobs and navigate the small amount of daily interaction they had with East

2.2 *Eingaben*

In April of 1986, a female contract worker named Phan (last name redacted) employed at Leipzig-Polygraph sent an *Eingaben* to the office of Herr Eric Honecker. Phan had lately been accused of price speculation. Judging from her account of the prosecution, one assumes it was a summary verdict:

Sadly, I did not know the policy of the GDR. So I sold sometime in October of November of 1984 a musical instrument worth 2,000 Marks for 10,000 Marks. On 3/8/1985 I received a communication from the Leipzig customs administration. Before this communication arrived, I had learned I had broken a GDR regulation, I was sincerely willing to clear up the matter with the Customs Administration, but I had already sold the item. So on 4/23/1985 I paid the high penalty of 500 Marks. On 9/19/1985, I received a decision from our [SRV] Embassy: “Return to Vietnam for an infraction against a regulation of a friendly party.”⁸⁰

Unfortunately for Phan, this kind of investment return ran contrary to the GDR/SRV agreement's allowance for the purchase of consumer goods while under contract with East German companies. Vietnamese workers were permitted to send back to Vietnam commodities purchased in the GDR and that policy was stipulated at the behest of the Vietnamese government. While the SED and the Stasi expressed discontent at the Vietnamese treating their time in the GDR as “supply missions,” the SRV took advantage of its emigrants' acquisitiveness: ignoring SED protests, in 1988 the Vietnamese government dropped all import and custom levies on goods sent back to Vietnam, citing the remission as a “strategic aspect of foreign trade.”⁸¹

Stasi records indicate that, while not engaging in the more outwardly “anti-social”

Germans. This was due in part to lack of follow through on the part of GDR companies, as the demand for unskilled labor in the effort to meet high production quotas made the SED's ceaselessly professed goal of “training and education” impractical. The Vietnamese, however, organized relatively insular communities around their work and barracks lives, and because of this did not generally find the language barrier to be a disadvantage—unless, of course, they had inadvertently broken a regulation their lack of German prevented them from knowing existed. For a discussion of Vietnamese “ethnic networks and support structures” before and after the *Wende*, see Karin Weiss, “Strukturen der Selbsthilfe im ethnischen Netzwerk,” in *Erfolg in der Nische?: Die Vietnamesen in der DDR un in Ostdeutschland*, eds., Karin Weiss and Mike Dennis (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005), 140-144.

⁸⁰ BA Berlin Aktenband 54087/6809, *Eingabe*; reproduced in Oliver Raendchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 91.

⁸¹ See Damian Mac Con Uladh, “Guests of the Socialist Nation?,” 125.

behavior witnessed in, for example, Polish or Algerian contract workers—bar fights, dalliances with East German women, etc.—the Vietnamese were notoriously uninterested in ideological edification, and seemed to bring their considerable industry to bear mostly on the accumulation of money and goods. Their barracks doubled as warehouses for storage of merchandise to be either re-sold or sent home, and extracurricular enterprises like clothing production (of blue jeans especially) for sale to East Germans was quite common.⁸² These deviations from contractually prescribed behavior were tolerated up to a point; clothing in particular was in high demand by GDR citizens in the 1980s, as access to FRG and Western media in general became less regulated and images of capitalist couture beckoned. Considering that GDR industry was failing to meet its production quotas for basic (and to the younger generation of East Germans, mundane) clothing and goods, turning a blind eye to Vietnamese cottage industry was sound policy. Honecker's platform, his return to a proper command economy, was predicated on meeting East Germans' basic needs—and if the Vietnamese could contribute to that goal, all the better. Currency and commodity speculation were another matter, however.

It was not uncommon—and it became increasingly more common over the course of the 1980s as the Vietnamese developed a kind of para-economic niche in GDR consumer goods—for contract workers to purchase merchandise at state-run *Intershops* for resale later in second hand *An- und Verkauf I* (A&V) shops. In this way, ambitious Vietnamese could capitalize on the scarcity of certain products on the East German market. For example, in 1985, through an elaborate scheme employing borrowed currency and the photo identity cards of former co-workers who had returned to Vietnam (the Vietnamese were not above taking advantage of the fact that many East Germans believed “they all looked alike), a Vietnamese man working in Dresden purchased 37 record players in the *Intershops* for 439 DM a piece, then turned around

⁸²Dennis, “Working under Hammer and Sickle,” 354-347.

sold them at A&V shops for 2,788 DM each.⁸³

This type of blatant speculative profiteering not only contravened the express purpose of Vietnamese commodity accumulation while in East Germany; it also flouted the SED's ideological line. And the SED took these infractions seriously. In Phan's case, the punishment was ultimately deportation. It is interesting to note that this sentence was not delivered by an East German governing body, but by the Vietnamese embassy. The *Eingabe* itself, however, was sent to the very top of the SED; and Phan justified her appeal not only by her persistent good faith in the face of being punished for breaking a law she had not known existed, but also on the grounds that the SED had the capacity for both reason and clemency, and could potentially exercise those faculties to provide her some redress: “During the period while I awaited my return to Vietnam, I continued to work, and I worked hard⁸⁴

According to Phan's account in the *Eingabe*, while she continued to work, awaiting her deportation, she fell ill with an unspecified throat condition that required minor surgery. Initially, the operation was scheduled in January of 1986, but Phan was transferred to a different hospital, the Karl Marx University hospital in Leipzig, and the doctor there moved the date of her surgery to the 5th of March. Some time before the scheduled operation, she was visited in her barracks by “the comrade responsible for overseeing Vietnamese” at the company, Herr Joachim, and was told that she could not have the surgery of February 5th, as she was scheduled to return to Vietnam on the 17th of that month, and that an operation on the 5th would not allow her enough time to convalesce before the trip. “Utterly baffled” at this treatment, Phan was at a loss—it seemed that she would not be able to have her operation in the GDR, and she was dismayed at the prospect of having to undergo surgery back in Vietnam where “the conditions are not as good

⁸³ BA, DO 1/8.0/51097, BDVP Dresden, Sofortmeldung, 1/8/1986; cited in Mac Con Uldah, “Guests of the Socialist Nation.”

⁸⁴ BA Berlin Aktenband 54087/6809, *Eingabe*, reprinted in Oliver Raendchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 91.

as they are here [in the GDR].”⁸⁵

On the 7th of February, 2 days after her surgery was scheduled to have taken place, Phan was reexamined by the company physician, who asked her why she had not undergone the operation he had scheduled her for. She told him about the forced cancellation of the surgery, and her immanent deportation date. This particular physician, however, would not accept bureaucratic meddling with his practice. He contacted the company manager—and another “comrade” who monitored the Vietnamese at Leipzig-Polygraph, Frau Steinhagen—and compelled them to do what was necessary to make sure Phan got her operation before leaving the GDR. They obliged, and Phan was re-scheduled to have her surgery on April 28th, a little more than a week after her assigned deportation date. Relaying this information to Frau Steinhagen, Phan was told that she would not have to return to Vietnam before the doctor affirmed that she had fully recovered from her operation. Thinking the matter closed, Phan continued to work while she waited for her operation date and eventual repatriation to Vietnam.

Toward the end of February, however, Phan received a Protocol letter from the barracks director (Herr Hung), co-signed by the company manager, that insisted that the matter of her status at Leipzig-Polygraph must be concluded by March 7, and that as soon as her health would allow it, she must return to Vietnam. On the 12th of March, Phan attended a meeting with the company director, the barracks supervisor, a translator, and Frau Steinhagen. At the meeting, Frau Steinhagen told Phan that she would have to leave the GDR on the 17th of March, completely disregarding the fact that she had herself arranged for Phan to have her operation on the 28th of April. This reversal understandably left Phan confused and frustrated:

⁸⁵ BA Berlin Aktenband 54087/6809 BA Berlin Aktenband 54087/6809, *Eingabe*; reprinted in Oliver Raendchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 92.

I was very upset and I didn't understand why Frau Steinhagen changed her opinion from what she had told me at our earlier meeting. I made the following proposal and offered the suggestion that: "I admit that I have made a mistake. I see this and I promise that I will not repeat it. I am a foreigner, and had only studied the German Language for two months ... You certainly can understand that I did not know the regulation I violated. I declare on my honor that I did not deliberately break any rules."⁸⁶

Phan then continues her defense, now not recounting her appeal to Frau Steinhagen and the others, but directly addressing the office of Herr Honecker:

In the past 4 years I have worked in the GDR. With great dedication I have mastered my trade. I have learned many skills from my friends here in the GDR. I love and respect this country, and I will not forget it. At the time of my arrival, I was a healthy girl who had never been sick. I do not want to return home with an illness. After so many years, I am very worried about my mother. Our country is still poor. In the aftermath of the war, things are not as good as they are here. Therefore I ask that you review my situation and determine if I can be helped, if the operation can be performed here in the GDR. When my health is good, I will return to Vietnam.⁸⁷

The above excerpt closed one (possibly the first) in a series of *Eingaben* drafted by Phan, and dispatched, so the addressee on the petitions would have us believe, directly to Eric Honecker. However, surmounting Honecker's name on this first *Eingabe* is the motto of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Independence, Freedom, Happiness). Official policy for *Eingaben* addressed to Honecker (or, in his time, Ulbricht) was to have them immediately sent down to the most relevant local authority.⁸⁸ In the case of Phan's *Eingabe*, it is safe to assume that the letter went through channels in the Vietnamese Embassy before reaching either an intermediate destination (that is to say, Honecker's desk) or its final audience: the Precinct Council, Labor and Wage Department, Leipzig.

In a second *Eingabe*, Phan laments that she has not yet had her surgery, and that "starting on March 3, 1985, [she] will no longer be a member of the company family." Her situation was

⁸⁶ BA Berlin Aktenband 54087/6809, *Eingabe*; reprinted in Oliver Raendchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 93.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸⁸ Mary Fullbrook, *The People's State*, 271.

further complicated by the fact that she did not have enough money to pay for her flight back to Vietnam (evidence that she was attempting to comply with the order, even as she protested it).⁸⁹ Phan claims that she is still owed part of her salary for 1985, and that if it were paid to her, she would use it to pay for travel. This fact is also mentioned—that is to say, simply reported—in the Labor and Wage memo dated July of 1986; this memo also notes that Leipzig-Polygraph insists that they have compensated Phan in full. Labor and Wage memo makes no recommendation as to how to resolve this issue.⁹⁰

Some months later, in response to having received to satisfactory results from dealings with the Leipzig-Polygraph (and receiving neither aid nor advice from the local government), Phan drafted another *Eingabe*. What is most interesting about this petition is that Phan's tone changes from deferential penitence to one more self-possessed, insistent of her right to remain in the GDR until she is well enough to travel:

During the last meeting with [with the company manager, etc.], I made it clear that I was resolved not to return to Vietnam on the date they insisted I must, and that I would seek help from upper management [at Leipzig-Polygraph]. So I came to the conclusion, after a few days of contemplation, to write this letter to you, honorable Mr. President.⁹¹

It is unclear from this letter—their exist in the copy no specific addressee—whether or not “Mr. President” refers to Honecker or to a company manager on some level above those with whom she had been dealing. In either event, Phan makes very clear her intention to receive the treatment she believes to be just:

⁸⁹ Flights to and from the GDR at the beginning and the end of the contract term were paid for by the individual East German industries. Though I have found no evidence to confirm it, my assumption is that Phan's flight was not paid for by Leipzig-Polygraph because her infraction amounted to a breach of contract, hence the company did not bear the responsibility to cover her travel fare. For a general discussion of travel and other compensation guaranteed to contract workers, see Mike Dennis, “Working under Hammer and Sickle,” 343.

⁹⁰ BA Berlin Aktenband 54087/680, *Sachstandbericht zur Staatsratseingabe der vietnamesischen Werkätigen Phan* (redacted), reprinted in Oliver Raendchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 96; and BA Berlin Aktenband 54087/6809, *Eingabe*, reprinted in Oliver Raendchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 94.

⁹¹ BA Berlin Aktenband 54087/6809, *Eingabe*; reproduced in Oliver Raendchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 94.

I would like for you to remember, that my throat ailment is still a problem. I must again go to the hospital, because my doctor has stressed that I need to have an operation. The hospital has many patients, and it will be some time before I can be fit in. I live now as a criminal without work. An outcast from society. My appeals to this point have been rejected, and I have been told I do not need to have my operation [in the GDR].⁹²

In yet another moving petition, Phan throws herself on the mercy of the government:

“Under the circumstances, I appeal to your humanity, because I have been denied everything. I see myself as a criminal, as a person outside of the lawful life, outside society.”⁹³ She also mentions the precise articles in the GDR statutes that she was being charged in violation of, closing her letter with the statement: “I understand that it is necessary to respect these laws.”

Unfortunately, as the correspondence under consideration here is not always dated, it is impossible to know exactly how much time past between the letter in which Phan branded herself a “criminal” and threw herself on the mercy of the state, and the last letter we have record of Phan writing. In this final *Eingabe*, her distress is slightly mitigated by a small concession made by the company: she has been permitted to return to work. The letter is dated April 1, 1986; and the last official meeting concerning Phan's operation and deportation took place on the 12th of March. Suffice it to say, Phan must have been made to experience extreme emotional and psychological stress in the time between when she was informed that she would be deported on March 17, and the drafting the letter sent on April 1st. The question that cannot be answered here is whether or not Phan simply disregarded the order that she be on a plane back to Vietnam on the 17th of March, or if some deferment was granted that is not noted in the correspondence. In either case, Phan was still in the GDR, and still in need of an operation:

I will have a healthy and happy future. Again, I am a worker in the company organization. I beg you to help me get the operation for my throat. Also, I ask that you help me reclaim the property that was confiscated from me by the company on the March

⁹² BA Berlin Aktenband 54087/6809, *Eingabe*; reproduced in Oliver Raendchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 94.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 94.

17. I have spoken with them, and told them that when my health is returned, I will comply with their orders. I heartily thank you in advance for your help. I hope day and night for your humanitarian aid.⁹⁴

The only record of available correspondence from a government office in consideration of Phan's case is a status report (*Sachstandbericht*) from the Leipzig Department of Labor and Wage, dated July 7, 1986 (three months after Phan's last letter). The Labor and Wage Department was, to be sure, a far cry from the office the GDR president; and it is not outside the realm of possibility that Phan was unaware that she was making her appeals to this particular department. As the status report appears to have been generated for internal use, it cannot be said with any certainty that Phan received any communication in response to her *Eingaben*.

As far as Labor and Wages interest in the situation is concerned, their status report goes as far as to enumerate the complaints Phan made in her several *Eingaben*; but there is very little comment on the merit of her appeals. The report is of the opinion that she had missed three surgery appointments due to her own negligence; but the three surgery dates cited in the report do not correspond to those claimed by Phan in her *Eingaben*. Whether this is attributable to Labor and Wage having a source in addition to Phan's appeal (which they certainly must have), or negligence and inattention to detail on *their* part can only be left to conjecture. Either way, the official "opinion" of Phan's predicament appears to have been that whatever treatment she received from her employer (not to mention the Vietnamese embassy) was probably justified. It is interesting to note the Precinct's seeming refusal to make any substantive recommendations regarding how to address Phan's situation. No further investigation is suggested; and no advice or direction on how to proceed is offered. There are disclosed in the report, however, a few facts about Phan's case that her *Eingaben* did not reveal.

It appears that in the three months since she last wrote, Phan had gone on the lam. Not

⁹⁴ BA Berlin Aktenband 54087/6809, *Eingabe*; reprinted in Oliver Raendchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 95.

having been able to have her surgery, according to the status report, she left Leipzig in early March. This information does not correspond with her April 1st letter, which claims that she had begun working again for the company. Whatever the truth of the matter was, the Labor and Wage believed that Phan was back at Leipzig-Polygraph by May; and upon her return she sought yet another mediation with the company manager. As with every other attempt that Phan had made to resolve her situation by protocol, no ground was gained. Phan left Leipzig again in late May, and as writing of the status report (July of '86) she was still somewhere in the GDR, though living “without residency permit.”⁹⁵

As stated above, this “official” account of Phan’s transgressions and ultimate disappearance into from Leipzig is recorded in a dry, almost ambivalent tone. To read “against the grain” of the archival material would, in this instance, lead one to speculate that local officials (at least those in the employ of Labor and Wage) did not have the resources to effectively deal with contract worker insubordination. Taking a larger view, it seems likely that in 1986, the sheer number of Vietnamese in the GDR made the task of their administration and surveillance almost Sisyphean.⁹⁶ Even the Stasi, whose sole purpose was to monitor and intervene on ideologically disruptive behavior could not keep track—or at least could not effectively police—general Vietnamese insubordination, not to mention black market activity.

In a report generated in 1988 concerning “recommendations for the political and ideological security of the Vietnamese workforce in the GDR,” the Stasi does its best to piece together and then advise how to combat a black market operation that smuggled “computer and

⁹⁵ BA Berlin Aktenband 54087/680, *Sachstandbericht zur Staatsratseingabe der vietnamesischen Werktätigen Phan* (redacted), repinted in Oliver Raendchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 97.

⁹⁶ There were an estimated 12,000 Vietnamese men and women working in the GDR by the end of 1986. Curiously, 1986 saw the fewest number of contracts signed, with the total number of Vietnamese immigrating to East Germany tabulated at 186. This number would rise drastically in the following year, however, with almost 25,000 Vietnamese workers contracted. In 1988, the number would jump to over 35,000. See Mike Dennis, “Die vietnamesischen Vertragsarbeiter und Vertragsarbeitinnen in der DDR,” 16.

other technical goods” into the GDR. Apparently, several Vietnamese workers—with the aid of some “anti-social” elements among the GDR population, an accomplice from an “African state,” and, potentially, some help from within the Vietnamese embassy—were not only bringing these technologies in from West Berlin, but were also selling them out of their barracks at a tremendous mark up. Moreover, they were using false personal identification cards in their operation. Identity fraud, it seems, had become an increasing trend among Vietnamese workers: “Compared to 1986, investigative work done in concert with the Vietnamese embassy indicates that in 1987, there have been five times the number of cases of Vietnamese citizens abusing their identification documents.”⁹⁷ The Stasi attempted to keep track of this criminal activity, but as the Vietnamese seemed to have formed well organized and tightly knit networks for supply and sale of contraband, attempts to control the smuggling of goods and the trade in counterfeit ID cards were often unsuccessful. As the report in question states: “There appears to be a highly developed level of organization, strict labor division, and collaboration among the criminal groups. In addition, the individual members are well aware of the high profits that speculation on black market goods can yield.”⁹⁸

It must not be assumed, however, that either the above Stasi report or Labor and Wage’s assessment of Phan’s *Eingaben* accurately reflect, or are in anyway representative, of the majority of the Vietnamese living and working in the GDR. These documents are useful to this discussion insofar as they point to incidences of insubordination, appeal and protest from Vietnamese vis-à-vis the East German government (on the state and local levels) that can, in a society whose “public sphere” is tightly circumscribed, be construed as the exercise of agency; and can even be understood as in a way “participatory” in the East German state despite the

⁹⁷ BStU MfS Abt. X SA 339, Bl. 79, 81-84; reprinted in Michael Feige, *Vietnamesische Studenten und Arbeiter in der DDR und ihre Beobachtung durch das MfS* (Magdeburg: LStU Sachsen-Anhalt, 1999), 78-79.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79, 81.

restrictions imposed by the state itself. In Phan’s case, her insubordination—at least as it is determined to by Leipzig-Polygraph and the city Precinct—was in fact a fierce resolution to *remain* in the GDR regardless of what the GDR had to say about her legal status. Labor and Wage came to exactly that conclusion at the end of their report, summing up Phan’s situation by stating: “Colleague Phan’s behavior expresses that she does not intend to leave the GDR before the legally scheduled termination of her work contract.”⁹⁹

Regardless of her apologetic tone and acknowledgement of guilt (if only through ignorance), Phan implicitly draws out a more fundamental injustice perpetrated by the East German state. If she is to be punished by deportation, she will not allow that punishment to be executed until she is granted what she is contractually guaranteed: the opportunity to avail herself of the *right* to healthcare that she, as did every citizen of the GRD, had legally extended to her. It is interesting at this point to note that Phan must have had enough familiarity with the German language to have read and understood the article in the 1980 agreement that provided for this particular right; but, the veracity plea of ignorance notwithstanding, in asserting her claim to that right, and by pursuing the one official channel, that of *Eingaben*, by which the perceived alienation of that right could be appealed, Phan acceded to the East German public body, to the extent that such a entity functioned in the GDR.

Whether or not Phan’s “insubordination”—her refusal to leave the GDR before her time—can be read as, paradoxically, a further elaboration of public participation is not a question that can be treated sufficiently here. And while it is hazardous to draw general conclusions from specific cases, the very reserve with which Labor and Wage in Leipzig—and the Stasi, for that matter—seemed to engage cases like Phan’s indicates a resignation toward certain

⁹⁹ BA Berlin Aktenband 54087/680, *Sachstandbericht zur Staatsratseingabe der vietnamesischen Werkütigen Phan* (redacted), reprinted in Oliver Raendchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 97.

transgressions, possibly even bordering on tolerance. And it is not irresponsible conjecture that this “tolerance” was guided by these agencies recognizing that the Vietnamese labor force had become indispensable to the GDR economy.

Simply put, these state organizations charged with policing the Vietnamese could not have, on some level, effectively discharged their official duties, because the duties themselves ran contrary to the true objectives of the state. Maintenance of ideological propriety and the discouragement of black market trade were, in the long view, infinitesimal concerns next to the massive structural economic challenges the GDR faced in the 1980s. In late 1987, the SED Economic Planning Commission noted that, even taking into consideration the over 30,000 Vietnamese workers that had come under contract to the GDR since the beginning of the year, production of children’s shoes, jackets and pants was still short; and it was estimated that another 5,000 worker would be required to meet the quotas.¹⁰⁰ But this urgent need for labor, as has been claimed already in this thesis, could not be admitted to the GDR public for a basic reason: the SED was theoretically infallible (*Die Partei hat immer recht*); without that certainty, the state would cease to function. The fact that it could not be officially admitted, however, does not mean that reality of the situation did not influence the “practice” of socialism in the day to day. And as *Eingaben* like Phan’s seem to suggest, those Vietnamese integral to propping up the GDR in its last decade did not function entirely as “machines” without agency; nor did those agencies that administered the diurnal state expect them to.

¹⁰⁰ Oliver Raendchen, *Vietnamesen in der DDR*, 54.

5 NOT SAYING WHAT CANNOT BE SAID: SOCIALISM AS RITUAL PERFORMANCE

This chapter takes up the problem of willful elision in not only SED rhetoric proper, but in the GDR's popular press. I argue that the calculated absence of information regarding the economic factors that brought tens of thousands of Vietnamese to East Germany over the course of the 1980s was a rhetorical strategy the SED employed that functioned on two levels: first, and most obviously, to simply not mention economic trouble at the very least deferred the moment when it had to be publically faced; second, and more subtlety, the endless repetition of Party nostrums functioned to displace the actual "real and existing" GDR socialism with a kind of "rhetorical real." The SED granted this rhetorical reality primacy over the always imperfect diurnal socialism, and used it as a kind of buffer—underwritten, always, by the "objective" conditions of history that only socialism could apprehend—against any criticism of the state.

This strategy could not, of course, ultimately contain the realities of the either the East German economy or building social anomie—whether or not these phenomena are coextensive cannot be answered here—and as I will show in this last chapter, the incessant pronouncements of socialist fraternity in the pages of popular publications like *Neues Deutschland* speak to the careful reader of the unstable ground under the SED's rhetorical gambit. The few examples from *Neues Deutschland* that appear below not only give evidence to this assertion, but also disclose a peculiar formal, ritualized structure to SED's engagement with the East German populace. To decipher this structure, we will turn again to Roy Rappaport, and his discussion of the performative nature of liturgy.

5.1 *Neues Deutschland* on Vietnam: Internationalism in Black and White

On April 26, 1980, a headline in the East German newspaper *Neues Deutschland* announced: “GDR and Vietnam Work in Closer Cooperation.”¹⁰¹ In light of the inter-governmental labor agreement signed just two weeks earlier, this article in takes on a special significance. It does not address the scope of the agreement with Vietnam, that would, by 1989, bring over seventy-thousand Vietnamese workers to East Germany. In fact, the article makes no specific mention of the labor agreement at all. Instead, *Neues Deutschland* emphasizes the general spirit of “brotherly friendship and effective collaboration between the [GDR and Vietnam],” claiming that the two governments have in the recent past (no specific date is given) jointly signed a “protocol” issuing from a conference on economic cooperation.¹⁰² Only tangentially does the article note Vietnamese working *in* East Germany, and this in the context of an SRV politburo representative expressing thanks for “training of Vietnamese citizens as skilled laborers in the GDR.”¹⁰³

A survey of *Neues Deutschland*'s reportage on GDR relations with Vietnam during April of 1980—the month that East Germany signed a labor contract of vast political and economic significance with the Southeast Asian state—demonstrates to what extent the SED's public rhetoric subordinated the basic facts of its foreign policy to its ideological mission. In addition to the article discussed above several articles over the course of the month of April discuss in very general terms the climate of “friendship and cooperation” being fostered by GDR delegates in Vietnam; but this author could not find a single item addressing the signing of an official

¹⁰¹ “DDR und Vietnam wirken in enger Kooperation,” *Neues Deutschland*, 26/27 April 1980, 6.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 6.

treaty which guaranteed a drastic increase of Vietnamese employment within the borders of the GDR.

An item concerning GDR relations with Vietnam in the April 12/13 edition of *Neues Deutschland* further serves to illustrate the SED's ideological agenda, while mentioning nothing about the labor agreement. Reporting on an FDJ (Free German Youth Movement) delegation visiting the Vietnamese city of Vihn, the article discusses how the delegates were welcomed to the city, the birthplace of the Vietnamese worker's movement that is now, with the help of the GDR "reemerging...after being utterly destroyed by the US airforce during the war of American aggression."¹⁰⁴ The highpoint of the delegation's visit was a "meeting convened by the FDJ to form friendship 500 members of the Communist Youth League of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh." It is also reported that the secretary of the Communist Youth League "thanked the FDJ for its support and solidarity."¹⁰⁵

Here we see two strategies that typify the internationalist rhetoric of the SED. First, the GDR delegates are represented as aligning themselves with the Vietnamese struggle against capitalist imperialism (celebrating the "reemergence of a city destroyed by American aggression"), cementing their commitment to the socialist mission; and second, the paper's depiction of the FDJ representatives addressing the Ho Chi Minh organization in a "meeting to build friendship," inscribes the East Germans as paternalistic educators (*bilden*, the verb employed in the article, means to "build" and to "educate"). To further sculpt the GDR representatives as model vessels of anti-imperialist socialism, *Neues Deutschland* notes that the secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Youth League "thanked the FDJ for its support and

¹⁰⁴ "Delgation der FDJ besuchte das wiederentstehende Vihn," *Neues Deutschland*, 12/13 April 1980, 1.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

solidarity.” The power dynamic in this discourse is implicit; and the image of GDR functionaries approaching their fledgling Vietnamese “bothers in socialism” with pedantic magnanimity and internationalist compassion occurs again and again in the pages of *Neues Deutschland*.

What is most important in this connection, however, is that this image of benevolent internationalism plied by the SED in *Neues Deutschland* was primarily meant for the consumption of the East German public. It was to the citizens of East Germany that the GDR government meant to represent itself in a glowing paternalistic light. And this effort of ideologically funded self-aggrandizement served a purpose beyond mere vanity. For example, on April 23, *Neues Deutschland* reports that

A conference for the committees for economic and scientific cooperation between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the GDR has commenced in Hanoi... The meeting began with the leaders of both delegations stating that the SED Central Committee’s General Secretary and the President of the GDR, Erich Honecker, met with the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1975 and 1977 concerning agreements about economic cooperation and the successful realization of GDR solidarity and support for Vietnam.¹⁰⁶

Here we have what amounts to the minutes of a high level cabinet meeting, a kind of mirage of transparency by which the SED allows the East German citizen to think that he or she has access to the machinery of the state. And again, the GDR’s continued support for and solidarity with Vietnam in the struggle for political and economic improvement is on display. But what is most interesting is that this dry reportage, which acknowledges some measure of cooperation between the GDR and Vietnam, completely fails to mention that a very specific and extensive labor was signed less than two weeks prior to the appearance of this article. This being

¹⁰⁶ “Beratung von Wirtschaftsausschüssen,” *Neues Deutschland*, 23 April, 1980, 2.

so, one is compelled to wonder why agreements (vaguely described as “economic and scientific cooperation”) that were made in the 1975 and 1977 respectively are the only ones *Neues Deutschland* mentions. Insofar as *Neues Deutschland* was the primary news organ of the SED, one cannot help but infer that the vague, ideologically freighted rhetoric that the paper employed was typical of the GDR government’s communication with its citizens; but what is being obscured, what is elided by the absence of information on the April 11 contract with Vietnam in the official press, was that, by 1980, foreign labor had become utterly essential to the survival of the East German economy.

The formulaic, almost ritualized, and most certainly repressive nature of *Neues Deutschland* reportage was brought into starker relief by the fact that GDR economic and trade relationships with countries other than Vietnam were written about in almost identical terms—sometimes within the same article. In the piece discussed above, “workforce cooperation” with Hungary is discussed alongside (in fact, prior to) the report on GDR-Vietnamese relations. And the template for reporting on these “cooperative economic arrangements” proves the same, regardless of which country is being addressed:

The president of the Peoples Republic of Hungary, György Lázár, received on Tuesday the Deputy of the Council of Ministers of the GDR, Wolfgang Rauchfuß. Rauchfuß visited Hungary as a representative of GDR delegation for the GDR/Hungary commission on technical and economic cooperation.¹⁰⁷

After having dispensed with the obligatory litany of party officials and their honorifics—not to mention the invariant and incantatory mention of vague “commissions” in furtherance of economic cooperation—the item gets down to the business of “details” :

¹⁰⁷ “Beratung von Wirtschaftsausschüssen,” *Neues Deutschland*, 23 April, 1980, 2.

Joined by representative of the Chief Minister, Jozsef Marjai, the council discussed the status of the realization of the March 1977 meeting concerning the party and government delegations of both countries and their assessment of the methods for the effective implementation for further cooperation. During the council meeting, questions were posed concerning economic and technological cooperation during the period of 1985-1989 and the continuing realization of supply deliveries in accordance with the 1980 protocol.¹⁰⁸

The apparent goal of complete obfuscation vis-à-vis any substantive reporting on the “objective” of these international meetings and agreements (not to mention evasion of any discussion of the success or failure of the later) is in fact a bone fide rhetorical strategy for SED’s daily news organ. And there is no variation of this strategy relative to the particular “international cooperative agreement” under consideration. One could simply replace the names of Hungarian council members with those of their Vietnamese counterparts, move the location from Budapest to Hanoi (as is actually done in this article) and message would be exactly the same: The GDR engages in diplomatic relationships with lesser socialist nations out of its benign sense of duty and avuncular charity. Both sections of the article make conspicuous mention of the GDR’s economic support for its socialist brothers. As far as Hungary is concerned, it is made clear in the one specific detail of the council meeting mentioned in the article that the question of “supplies” delivered by the GDR to Hungary was raised, and that the GDR planned to continue its altruism along those lines; with the Vietnamese, charitable donations amounted—in addition to economic cooperation—to gestures of solidarity and ideological support. That said, if the identical structure of these “news items” is worth noting in its own right, it is even more remarkable taking into consideration how disingenuous claims to “ideological and economic support” for Vietnam read now, in retrospective light of the 1980 labor agreements.

¹⁰⁸ “Beratung von Wirtschaftsausschüssen,” *Neues Deutschland*, 23 April, 1980, 2.

As *ND* articles discussed above seem to indicate, the SED's paternalist rhetoric of internationalist cooperation with Vietnam may have provided a kind of stock explanation for the increasing visibility of Vietnamese laborers in the GDR. Prior to the 1980s, Vietnamese workers who came to the East Germany were represented by official propaganda as partners in labor cooperation; and before the labor agreements, this depiction had some legitimacy.¹⁰⁹ As an article from September of 1978 announces, "With Vietnam We Are Bound as Brothers":

Right now the Socialist Republic of Vietnam needs the help of and support and solidarity of its brother countries, of the socialist collective around the world. The GDR has a long tradition of supporting its Vietnamese brothers. In the years of criminal U.S. aggression, and since the beginnings of socialism in Vietnam the citizens of our socialist fatherland have fulfilled their duties toward their Vietnamese brothers.¹¹⁰

This claim of East German dedication to the North Vietnamese cause during its conflict with the United States is not a hollow one. In fact, the GDR contributed much more than "ideological" support to the North Vietnamese during the war, sending shipments of arms and other material aid packages to Vietnam in the name of anti-imperialist fraternity.¹¹¹ As Horst Sinderman, chair of the GDR People's Chamber avowed to Vietnamese delegates in 1973: "You have inflicted a defeat on USA imperialism, the same USA imperialism which is just a few kilometers from us."¹¹² With the 1980 agreement, however, the GDR's relationship with its Vietnamese brothers

¹⁰⁹ Dennis Kuck, "Die fremden sozialistischen Brüder," 98.

¹¹⁰ "Mit der SRV brüderlich verbunden," *Neues Deutschland*, 1 September 1978, 2.

¹¹¹ See Mike Dennis, "Working Under Hammer and Sickle," 341.

¹¹² Quoted in *Ibid.*, 341; quoted in Ngyun Van Huong, 'Die Politik der DDR gegenüber Vietnam und den Vertragsarbeitern aus Vietnam sowie die Situation der Vietnamesen in Deutschland heute', in *Deutscher Bundestag* (ed.), *Materialien der Enquete-Kommission, Überwindung der Folgen der SED-Diktatur im Prozess der deutschen Einheit*, Vol. VII/2 (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, and Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1999), 1314.

took on much more exploitative dimensions; and the terms of that agreement made it clear that labor was of higher priority than solidarity.¹¹³

Regardless of the economic realities in the GDR in 1980s, the general drift of SED rhetoric geared toward the East German public (as in evidence by the articles considered earlier) continued to represent GDR agreements and economic arrangements with other socialist states as measures of socialist cooperation. In truth, dire economic circumstances are a much more plausible explanation for the GDR's accelerated importation of labor after 1980.¹¹⁴ And part of what drove the downturn in the East German economy (after larger indicators like having deeply leveraged itself to the FRG after 1972, and price spikes in Soviet raw material in the 70s and 80s)¹¹⁵ was an increasingly mismanaged and torpid native East German labor force. Under the Honecker regime, renewed emphasis on direct economic steering encouraged businesses to enhance manpower instead of investing in labor-saving technology; and the Eight Congress's principle task (*Hauptaufgabe*) to ramp up production at the expense of long term capital investment, left employers in need of an expanded labor force, the likes of which the East German population could not provide on its own.¹¹⁶ In comparative terms, prior to the programmatic importation of Vietnamese labor beginning in the 80s, overall production in the GDR was ran at roughly half the output of the FRG.¹¹⁷

This grim economic facts being so, what *Neues Deutschland* saw fit to print about GDR relations with Vietnam notwithstanding, by the 1980s, Vietnamese contract labor programs were

¹¹³ Dennis Kuck, "Die fremden sozialistischen Brüder," 99.

¹¹⁴ Mike Dennis, *Social and Economic Modernization in Eastern Germany*, 26.

¹¹⁵ See Thomas A. Bayliss, "Explaining the GDR's Economic Strategy," 392-400.

¹¹⁶ See Ibid., 388; and Jonathan R. Zatlin, "Scarcity and Resentment: Economic Sources of Xenophobia in the GDR, 1971-1989," *Central European History*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Dec., 2007): 702.

¹¹⁷ See Raymond Bently, *Research and Technology in the Former German Democratic Republic* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), p. 42; quoted in Dennis, *Social and Economic Modernization*, 32.

entirely geared toward filling production gaps in the East Germany's planned economy. The training and education initiatives of the '60s and '70s were supplanted by the demand for raw labor. This is borne out by the type of employment that the Vietnamese found themselves in upon reaching the GDR; their work was often in undesirable, low-skilled positions, "i.e. the kind that Germans did not want to take on."¹¹⁸ Moreover, in addition to being placed in the most "dirty and dangerous work," in GDR factories, not even the pretence of integration into the East German populations was made by the SED. In addition to GDR company's recourse to summary dismissal of Vietnamese employees in the event of broadly defined "insubordination," and prohibitions on marriage and pregnancy (as discussed in Chapter Three), the very fact that labor contracts were to last no longer than five years indicated that the GDR has no interest in the Vietnamese becoming full members of East German society.¹¹⁹

The glaring schism between the SED's rhetoric of "internationalist solidarity" and the actual drive toward and implementation of labor contracts with Vietnam did not fail to produce negative consequences in the daily lives of the Vietnamese and native East Germans. The fact that the East German public seems to have been calculatedly uninformed about the rising importation of labor in the 1980s speaks directly to the embattled state of SED ideology and practice. Moreover, the intended panacea of SED rhetoric not only failed to mitigate, but actually exacerbated the tension between the Vietnamese workers and the native East German population. In the absence of any complete explanation of Vietnamese working and living among them, and with economic conditions steadily worsening as the 1980s drew to a close, East Germans began to perceive contract workers from Vietnam as not only a cultural but a material

¹¹⁸ Eva Kolinsky, "Between State Socialism and Democracy," p. 87.

¹¹⁹ Klaus Fritsche, "Vietnamesische Gastarbeiter in den europäischen RGW-Ländern," 30.

threat. The pompous and hollow proclamations that the SED made about its mission of socialist fraternity did nothing to mitigate this growing tension.¹²⁰

While invocations of internationalism were stock in trade for SED “public relations,” the true objective of the labor contract with Vietnam was implicit even in preliminary negotiations with Vietnam concerning the articles of the 1980 contract. In response to a March 1980 Vietnamese proposal that new workers immigrating under the aegis of the new agreement be placed in companies in which Vietnamese skilled laborers already worked (possibly to ameliorate the cultural shock of the latest cohort), the SED flatly demurs. The justification for this refusal is a vague reference to the “structure of the GDR workforce” being incompatible with such a request; but the subtext in the negotiation is clear: Vietnamese workers are no longer considered the “beneficiaries” of GDR socialism’s goodwill, they are being recruited to work, and to work alone.¹²¹

Compare this more realistic assessment of the labor contract goals to an article printed in *Neues Deutschland* in November of 1980 entitled: “The GDR and Vietnam Conclude a Long-Term Agreement.” In light of what we now know about the 1980 agreement with Vietnam, the title of this article would lead one to assume that what would be covered therein would be the details of an expansive and unprecedented labor contract. But one would be wrong in that assumption. As I have said many times over the course of this thesis, not only did the SED refuse to explain the scope and impetus of the agreement with Vietnam, it failed to talk specifically about the agreement at all. What the article does say is that GDR and Vietnam Foreign Trade Ministers signed an agreement in Hanoi that would “further economic cooperation between 1981

¹²⁰ See Meredith W. Watts, “Political Xenophobia in the Transition from Socialism: Threat, Racism and Ideology Among East German Youth, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1996: 101-102.

¹²¹ BAB/SAPMO DQ3/863, *Verhandlungskonzeption zu den offenen Fragen in der Durchführungsvereinbarung*, 3.

and 1986.” This agreement, however, only considers trade between the two countries (couched in the seemingly pure altruism of the GDR): “The GDR will in the coming year supply technical equipment for the production of export goods in the SRV. It will also supply materials for the production of automobiles, pesticides and equipment for mining operations and medical practice.” The SRV, on the other hand, will continue to supply in trade the “traditional commodities” (that is to say: “primitive”) that they have offered in the past: coffee, tea, spices and fruit. There is the expectation of the further development of textile manufacture in Vietnam’s future; but that development is, of course, riding on the assistance of the GDR.¹²²

The general and reductive reportage in SED party organs like *Neues Deutschland* created a climate where GDR citizens knew almost nothing about the real reason Vietnamese men and women were working among them.¹²³ It must be noted, however, that while the SED’s apparent refusal to address the economic necessity of foreign labor in the state press (compounded by the fact that the labor agreement itself indirectly stipulated that integrations was not intended), the Vietnamese themselves also contributed to their relative invisibility in the GDR; their social lives were most often centered on their own expatriate communities, which formed cohesive and largely self-sufficient hostel based support networks.¹²⁴ In the end, it was the SED’s treatment of Vietnamese laborers—utterly at odds with its official rhetoric—that was most to blame for their anonymity. The question that remains is to what extent this relative anonymity functioned to either inhibit or abet the agency of Vietnamese workers under contract in GDR. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, occasions of insubordination and attempts to legally exercise personal rights were not unheard of for Vietnamese in the GDR. The disparity between socialist

¹²² “DDR un Vietnam schlossen langfristige Abkommen ab,” *Neues Deutschland*, 5 November, 1980, 2.

¹²³ Dennis Kuck, “Die fremden sozialistischen Brüder,” 100

¹²⁴ Mike Dennis, “Working under Hammer and Sickle,” 348.

theory and practice in the GDR sometimes meant that their existed space for individuals (East Germans and foreign laborers alike) negotiate the prescriptions of the state on their own terms. In fact, as I will investigate in the next section of this chapter, the paradoxical edifice of state socialism, verging in its theoretical aspect on a kind of irrational temporal disruption as justification for its governing legitimacy (the conditions of historical socialism as *always already present*), inadvertently created the conditions for its own subversion. And what is most important about this argument it is exactly the extent to which the GDR was not—in conception and execution—a totalitarian state that manufactured, a Foucault would have it, “the dense transfers of power” that characterized daily life in socialist East Germany.¹²⁵

5.2 Whatever Is Said, Is So: The Socialist Liturgy

To close this chapter, and to return to the theoretical argument broached in Chapter Two, I would like to turn again to anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport’s discussion of language and ritual. After the examples of repetitive, almost incantatory iterations of heavily ideologically freighted phrases (“brotherhood,” “fraternity,” and, as we will see in a moment, “history”) that have been offered above in the brief survey of *Neues Deutschland* reportage, Rappaport’s notion of the performative function of liturgy will serve as a useful tool with which to examine the curious rhetorical logic of the SED.

¹²⁵ Foucault’s assessment of these “dense power transfers” hinges on a kind of delocalization of the articulations and modes of power as a discursive phenomenon. In the GDR, for example, it is important to understand that citizens did in fact negotiate and resist the state on individual terms. Whether or not *Eingaben* were an effective means to address complaints, that such an avenue not only existed for the public, but was encouraged by the state indicates that the SED required a measure of discontent—that is to say, contest to its authority—to manufacture occasions to reassert its rule. Insubordination and outright dissent function in a very similar way vis-à-vis SED legitimacy: i.e. there must exist evidence of dialectical materialism as process; and if there were no counter-force to the coalescence of historical socialism, than there could be no sublation of the negative term, hence no progress. For a discussion of the discontinuous formations of discursive power, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 100-102.

Rappaport's argument that ritual is both *performative* and *ahistorical*, is especially germane to a discussion of the goal of SED rhetoric. I maintain that SED functioned within the parameters of an ideal-theoretical self-conception that worked very much like the formal liturgical structures of ritual. Liturgy (and, for the moment, as we are only speaking of formal characteristic, the term is used in a universal sense) is a phenomenon that in both theory and practice inhabits the realm of the *extramundane*. It limns a world—a metaphysical territory—that is not subject to the ambiguity or potential for deceit of everyday reality. Ritual practice, and the space it occupies, creates, sustains and validates a public body, its network of lateral dependency and reciprocation, as well as—and maybe most importantly—the legitimacy and stability of its leadership. As Rappaport maintains:

Liturgical acts repeatedly recover the eternal which, being nothing if not immutable, is intrinsically true, and thus moral and even proper. The enactments of time out of time may account for or explain the origins and states of historical events and processes, and thus provide grounds for understandings of them, but they are not themselves history. Indeed, they stand against history and may even propose standards in whose terms the events of history are to be judged.¹²⁶

In fact, liturgy is not only ahistorical, but, relative to history's irascible volatility and contingency, it is *anti*-historical. As such, diurnal reality in relation to the liturgical realm is always subordinate phenomenon. Actually, taking to its logical extreme within the context of liturgy, material reality is merely a phenomenon-*cum*-phenomenon—a kind of surface without substance. Only that which is antithetical to the contingent everyday world, and hence, antithetical to history, can lay claim to an ontological dimension. And only liturgy escapes history.

¹²⁶ Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, p. 234.

As we've seen over the course of this paper, the SED laid claim to what it conceived as an historically vouchsafed and inexorable socialist German state. GDR historians would look at any event in the German past and read that event of proof in the form of pre-ordainment of the triumph of German socialism. But what lingered beneath these pronouncements and verifications, these self-fulfilling prophecies putatively grounded in the scientifically derivable currents of historical progress, was an inveterately ahistorical— if not *anti*-historical— theoretical method. Take, for example, an article that appeared in *Neues Deutschland* in May of 1989 entitled, *The History of the Communist International*:

... as Lenin avowed: [the Soviet revolution] stands on the shoulders of the [Paris] Commune, so exactly should we treat the history of our Party, the KDP. Hence comrade Eric Honecker rightly claimed that we have no difficulty with our history, and we avow our past. Participation in this sentiment must be viewed through the eyes and experience of the present day. That is entirely natural and correct. Today we are experienced and wise in the class struggle. But don't we need to see in this the totality founded by the history of Materialism, Historicism and the present historical situation? Have we developed the history of the class struggle strictly through right (or wrong) decisions or formulas? ¹²⁷

The answers to these rhetorical questions are respectively—and definitively—“yes” and “no.” East Germans most certainly must see the totality of Materialism and Historicism—the seismic but *unerring* friction of history—in the present conditions of GDR socialism; just as much as they must *not* explain the existence of the present socialist state as the product of potentially misguided human agency. History's only function in the GDR—certainly one manifestly political— was to insist a perpetual *presentism* in the German past. Historical Germany (from Luther through Bismark and Hitler, and, finally to Ulbricht and Honecker)

¹²⁷ Prof. Hanna Wolf und Prof Wolfgang Schneider, “Zur Geschichte der Komintern,” *Neues Deutschland*, 6/7 May, 1989, 9.

always proceeded in the direction of state socialism; and any event in the long and bloody corridor that led to GDR was proof of the inevitability of that state before the fact.

This kind of thinking, which branded itself as historical, was in fact of the very same stripe of *extramundane* as the timeless and immutable formal structures of ritual. Historical materialism in the GDR justified all present events by recourse to an “indisputable” legacy of stalwart German communism that was itself only justified by the present state of East German socialism. Where this thinking broke down—or pointing to structural faults deeper than its surface cracks of circularity—was that it had to appeal to a transcendental model, to an ideal, to support and legitimate itself. But how does one accomplish this historio-theoretical task in a system that of necessity repudiates the metaphysical? Just the East German public body was supposed to irrationally proceed from an already constituted “publicness” represented by the SED, the *immanent* conditions of “historical” socialism in the GDR were, in effect, reputed to be the result of the material incarnation of eternal, ahistorical and *transcendent* world historical processes.¹²⁸ For all that Marx purported to stand Hegel on his head, *Marxism* circled back and made of history itself an external principal, a metaphysical prime mover. And, interestingly, this prime mover, this historical process that transcended history, had a name: ideology.

This notion of ideology as the “externalization” totalization of immanent phenomenon is taken up by Slavoj Žižek in his discussion of Marx and Hegel. It is his assertion Marx put forward the notion of historical processes (and hence, the process of historical accounting) as:

¹²⁸ And here is where we see the best example of Habermas’s dual method of immanence and transcendence in his analysis of the public sphere: the vital antecedent to bourgeoisie publicness was a fully elaborated *private* realm without which the public could have no meaning, insofar as no social phenomenon is autogenerative. What is more interesting about Habermas’s classical liberal public is that its private matrix was germinated in the face of yet another hyper-valORIZED instantiation of publicness: the body of the king. For a discussion of Habermas’s dual method, see *Anthony La Vopa*, “Conceiving a public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe,” *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 64, No. 1 (March, 1992), 101.

the radically external historical presuppositions of synchronous historical totality, its contingent starting point that eludes dialectical grasp, its “missing link” whose exclusion the dialectical totality endeavors to fill out by means of a fantasy-scene.”¹²⁹ This fantasy scene, for GDR historians and SED officials, was very much ideological certainty of socialism historical triumph. For SED ideology to proceed as a legitimating force in the Party’s claim to authority of East German society, the historical “missing link” was discovered in socialism itself—socialism that existed before, during and after its embodiment in the GDR; socialism as an eternal principle that gave the lie to history conceived as accidental.

This same approach is evident in the SED purely ideologically driven public representation of relationship with Vietnam. Never in the pages of *Neues Deutschland* was there printed a story that discussed contract labor as product of economic need. The Vietnamese were certainly present in the SED’s public rhetoric—in the early 1980s at least, mention of GDR-Vietnamese “relations” was an almost daily item in the pages of *ND*)—but they were present as a kind of idealized socialist “primitive”; by their very state of infrastructural and ideological “underdevelopment” the Vietnamese presented to the GDR proof of its superiority, and the superiority of socialism. Because without socialism, and without the GDR as its exemplar, a “nation” like Vietnam would languish in ignorance and brutality. Incessant pronouncements like “with Vietnam we are bound as brothers” (and even simple statements to the public like “We have entered into cooperation with the SRV) were more than just descriptions of external states; they were performative utterances intended to bring those states into being, if only on the ideological register.

¹²⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), 212.

Unfortunately for the Vietnamese who lived and worked in East Germany, these pronouncements did not influence the way East Germans treated them, did not make their lives any easier as they attempted to negotiate “real and existing” GDR socialism. And as the days of the GDR drew to a close, the manner in which the SED chose to rhetorically structure its real relations with real Vietnamese men and women in East Germany would prove to have profound and sometimes devastating consequences.

CONCLUSION

To close the investigation of GDR socialism taken up in this thesis, I would like to turn again to Roy Rappaport. His work on ritual and religion offers yet another analogy between SED ideology and liturgical practice—in particular, the way in which liturgy constructs and functionally inverts the correspondence between beliefs and statements about reality, and authentic state of that reality.

Rappaport discusses a particular extra-liturgical phenomenon in Zoroastrian Persia classified as a Vedic (or Zoroastrian lie). In simple terms, a Vedic lie is an occasion of everyday reality not corresponding to the prescriptions of the liturgical order: i.e. if something occurs in society that the liturgy does not endorse, or if a state of affairs seems to run counter to what the liturgy claims, it is the material, everyday reality that is “wrong” or misrepresentative, not the content of the liturgy.¹³⁰ It appears fairly clear that a system which confers absolute authority on the liturgical reality is virtually coextensive with a political system that insists the absolute rectitude of its regnant Party (*die Partei hat immer recht*), namely, the SED.

Rappaport goes on to explain how this incontrovertible liturgical authority actually purports to create the “true” reality of the social world. Insofar as ritual practice is “performative” (that is to say, it purports to bring into being the states of affairs it pronounces), it functions on two levels: on the one hand, a ritual practice that pronounces a state of affairs succeeds in creating that state solely by the successful completion of a prescribed liturgical utterance; on the other, that state of affairs must be reproduced in actual everyday society by a given individuals fidelity to the pronouncement of the liturgy. From the standpoint of the liturgy, however, the effect of a given performative act/utterance in the “real world” is a redundant

¹³⁰ Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, 133.

concern. The “real world” is not the world with which the liturgy measures its success or failure—liturgical achievements correspond to the metric of ritual prescription alone.¹³¹

The history of SED and the world that it constructed for the consumption of the East German population amounted, on some level, to an extended—and not always unsuccessful—Vedic lie. The image that was fashioned to explain Vietnamese nationals living and working in the GDR—fraternity, internationalist largess, etc.— was very much a reality fabricated and ceaselessly *pronounced* as if its utterance alone would not only disguise the reality it addressed, but, in effect, *bring a different reality into being*. In some true sense, GDR socialism as a rhetorical phenomenon appealed to its putative external historical certainty as kind of metaphysical collateral for its political, economic and social success; but this appeal demanded that the SED subordinate that reality—the struggles and failures—of the diurnal state to the rhetorical image it insisted was the reality of that state. The failings of day to day state were the lies; socialism was the one and only truth. The Vietnamese, however, suffered for the SED’s irrational inversions of cause and effect, of truth and lies. As the state did not communicate to its population the structural factors that demanded the presence of foreign labor, East Germans began to see the Vietnamese (and other contract labor contingents) as not only competition for scarce goods, but as directly responsible for their scarcity. This misperception led to pent up animosity against the Vietnamese, and that animosity found violent outlet with the collapse of the state that had served to keep it in check.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Vietnamese contract workers in the former German Democratic Republic found themselves in a precarious position. The dissolution of the GDR forced many East German companies to drastically scale back production (if not close

¹³¹ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 133.

down entirely), and massive lay-offs followed apace. And if GDR rhetoric of socialist fraternity and equal treatment of workers regardless of national origin proved hollow through the 80s, it seemed to have no place at all in country's final days. In May of 1990, East Germany and Vietnam amended the terms of the labor agreement to permit the early termination of work contracts at the behest of either the employer or the employee. If early termination was sought by either party, the Vietnamese worker was to receive from the company a bonus 3,000 DM, severance pay at 70% of their salary, and the cost of a return flight to Vietnam. These entitlements were not always met, however, as GDR and former GDR business did everything in their power to pay the Vietnamese as little termination compensation as possible (from stalling bonus payments so that workers would repatriate before receiving them, to terminating contracts earlier than stipulated, and even illegally raising dormitory rents to offset severance pay). Moreover, Vietnamese laborers were laid off in much greater numbers than were German workers; and in some cases Germans resorted to outright sabotage of their Vietnamese coworkers in order to protect their own jobs. In one instance, German workers even threatened to strike unless their "foreign" coworkers were fired.¹³²

For those Vietnamese workers who were able to keep their jobs—or for those who left their employers, but chose to remain in the transitional German state under FRG asylum laws—a host of new challenges reared. The confusing and occasionally mercenary treatment Vietnamese workers were subjected to in the last days of the GDR were not alleviated after unification. Vietnamese who had been laid off or quit jobs in the former East Germany were encouraged to return to Vietnam; but as has been mentioned, the money for flights home was rarely forthcoming, and in many cases, former contract workers found themselves stranded with no

¹³² Pipo Bui, *Envisioning Vietnamese Migrants in Germany: Ethnic Stigma, Immigrant Origin Narrative and Partial Masking* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2003), 122-132.

work, and cruelly limited prospects.

After unification, the FRG's expansive asylum law extended to the former East; and its protection offered—*prima facie*—some legal standing for disenfranchised contract workers to remain in Germany. Earning enough money to live in unified Germany—legally or otherwise—was another matter all together. Vietnamese who had worked for GDR companies were granted visas by the German government, but these visas expressly prohibited them working in the former FRG.¹³³ Barred from seeking employment in economically prosperous west, Vietnamese were forced to look for work in the aftermath of the East German state, and when this search inevitably proved unsatisfactory, they were forced to participate in the black market fringe economy that lingered on in the former GDR. This participation in the “fringe economy” ultimately translated into the stigma that the Vietnamese were parasites on the German welfare system, if not a mortal threat to ethnic Germans by dint of their participation in the illegal cigarette trade, and putative organization into “mafia” like cadres.¹³⁴

This structurally determined anomie, however, paled in comparison to the abominable treatment some former contract workers received at the hands of disenfranchised former East Germans. Right wing extremist groups—running the spectrum from unreconstructed “Germany for Germans” nationalism to blatant neo-Nazism—discharged their vitriol on Vietnamese and other immigrant populations in the early years of the new republic. Themselves unable to come to terms with the dislocation and social ostracism that attended their status as colonized pawns of the Soviet behemoth, former East Germans were subject to a crisis of identity not entirely unlike that which was suffered by the Vietnamese. Sadly, the Vietnamese became the scapegoats for this crisis, and for the depressed economic and social conditions in former East Germany. Foreigners

¹³³ Pipo Bui, *Envisioning Vietnamese Migrants in Germany*, 131.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 138-144.

were seen competition for resources and jobs; and in the absence of any concrete object of rage and discontent—one cannot lash out at a state that has dissolved, especially a state that had insisted that its citizens could feel no discontent—they often became victims of verbal and physical attacks.¹³⁵

The SED's responsibility for outbreaks of racist violence in the new Germany cannot be ignored. In fact, during the last years of the GDR, a groundswell of xenophobia, if not outright racism, began to breach the surface of a society where racial animosity officially did not exist. Scarcity of goods in the final days of the GDR was often blamed on the purchasing power of the Vietnamese; and the SED did nothing to dispel this thinking. The calculated evasion of the true nature of the Vietnamese presence in GDR left native East Germans unaware of the positive role that migrant labor played in the economy. But because admitting to the need for Vietnamese labor would have been tantamount to the SED putting its own legitimacy in jeopardy, invocation of brotherhood and internationalist fraternity stood in for the facts of "real and existing socialism." While the GDR existed, violent reactions to migrant laborers were held in check; but when the wall came down, whatever hate had built toward the Vietnamese and other migrant populations was unleashed. Misplaced outrage reached its ghastly apex when a neo-Nazi group fire-bombed a Vietnamese barracks in Rostock in August of 1992. This attack was the culmination of a right-wing extremist riot that raged for almost a week in the economically moribund Baltic coastal town. Almost more reprehensible than the attack on the Vietnamese itself, was the fact that neither the local police nor the fire brigade responded to the conflagration at the hostel; and the Vietnamese were left to their own devices, forced to escape over burning

¹³⁵ See Jonathan R. Zatlin, "Scarcity and Resentment," 708-711.

rooftops as a hate-drunk crowd screamed: “Germany for Germans.”¹³⁶

This violence was in large part a direct result of policy decisions of not only the GDR, but also the newly unified German state. Both governments failed to address the rising xenophobia in Eastern Germany, before and after the caesura of 1990. And although the alienation felt by Eastern Germans after they were effectively absorbed by their Western counterparts—compounded by high unemployment and the continued dearth of material goods—was certainly a contributing factor to racist treatment of immigrants, it was the post-*Wende* German government’s curiously “hands-off” attitude with regard xenophobia that was instrumental in the what became the politicization of anti-foreigner sentiment. The deliberately circumspect and paternalistic attitude of the SED in dealing with the importation of Vietnamese labor also contributed to racist violence in Eastern Germany post-1990. And the rhetorical strategy employed by the SED as it “explained” its foreign policy to its citizens left former East Germans without tools to negotiate the new Germany.¹³⁷

In closing, I must insist that the criticisms contained in this thesis are intended neither as an indictment of socialism-*qua*-socialism, or as sweeping dismissal of the history of the GDR as a putatively socialist state. The paradox of socialist theory in the GDR rested on a particular claim to history already having come to pass; and that history was inextricable from the history of a Germany that had very lately experienced the paroxysm of not only the unspeakable crimes of the Third Reich, but the early post-war abuses of Soviet occupation. With these traumas marking the genesis of the GDR, a measure of historical amnesia can be understood, if not ultimately excused. A fiction vital to the GDR was its long, unbroken claim to a legacy of

¹³⁶ See Panikos Panayi, “Racial Violence in the New Germany 1990-93,” *Contemporary European History*, 3,3 (1994): 270-271.

¹³⁷ See Patrick R. Ireland, “Socialism, Unification Policy and the Rise of Racism in Eastern Germany,” *International Migration Review*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997), 343-346.

German communism; and not merely a claim to communism, but one pristine in the face of Nazi atrocities. As it turned out, it was former East Germans, the proud heirs of the *antifas*, who were responsible some of the ugliest fascistoid behavior of the early reunification period. This irony will stand as one of the last among many in the history of the German Democratic Republic.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

Bundesarchiv, Berlin/ Die Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (BAB/SAPMO)

Neues Deutschland (ND)

Printed Materials

Baylis, Thomas A. "Explaining the GDR's Economic Strategy." *International Organization*. Vol. 40, No. 2 (Spring, 1986): 381-420.

Bently, Raymond. *Research and Technology in the Former German Democratic Republic*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992.

Betts, Paul. *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Bui, Pipo. *Envisioning Vietnamese Migrants in Germany: Ethnic Stigma, Immigrant Origin Narrative and Partial Masking*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2003.

Chin, Rita, et. al. *After the Nazi Racial State: Difference and Democracy in Germany and Europe*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009.

_____. *The Guest Worker Question in Postwar Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Dennis, Mike. *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990*. Essex: Pearson LTD., 2000.

_____. *Social and Economic Modernization in Eastern Germany from Honecker to Kohl* (London: Pinter Publishers Ltd., 1993)

_____. "Working Under Hammer and Sickle: Vietnamese Workers in the German Democratic Republic, 1980-1989." *German Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (September, 2007): 339-357

Feige, Michael. *Vietnamesische Studenten und Arbeiter in der DDR und ihre Beobachtung durch das MfS*. Magdeburg: LStU Sachsen-Anhalt, 1999.

Fritsche, Klaus. "Vietnamesische Gastarbeiter in den europäischen RGW-Ländern." Köln: Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, 1991.

Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.

_____. *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

Fullbrook, Mary. "Changing States, Changing Selves: Generations in the Third Reich and the GDR." In *Un-civilizing Processes? Excess and Transgression in German Society and Culture: Perspectives Debating with Norbert Elias*, edited by Mary Fullbrook, 255-294. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi B.V., 2007.

_____. *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

Glaeser, Andreas. *Political Epistemics: The Secret Police, the Opposition, and the End of East German Socialism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Habermas, Jürgen. *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.

Hell, Julia. *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History and the Literature of East Germany*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

Ireland, Patrick R. "Socialism, Unification Policy and the Rise of Racism in Eastern Germany." *International Migration Review*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 541-568.

Jarausch, Konrad H. "Beyond Uniformity: The Challenge of Historicizing the GDR." In *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, edited by Konrad H. Jarausch, 3-16. New York: Berhahn Books, 1999.

_____. "The Failure of East German Antifascism: Some Ironies of History as Politics." *German Studies Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Feb., 1991): 85-102.

Kocka, Jürgen. "The GDR: A Special Kind of Modern Dictatorship." In *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, edited by Konrad H. Jarausch, 17-26. New York: Berhahn Books, 1999.

Kolinsky, Eva. "Former Contract Workers from Vietnam in Eastern Germany: Between State Socialism and Democracy 1989-1993." *gfl-journal* 3 (2004): 83-101

Kuck, Dennis. "Die fremden sozialistischen Brüder," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 October 2001. In *Germany in Transit: Nation and Migration, 1955-2005*, edited by Göktürk, Gramling and Kaes, 67. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

La Vopa, Anthony. "Conceiving a public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe." *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 64, No. 1 (March, 1992): 79-116.

Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination." In *Lenin's Collected Works, Vol. 20*, translated by Bernard Isaacs and Joe Fineberg, 400. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972. Accessed February 20, 2021 at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/self-det/index.htm>

Nothngale, Alan L. *Building the East German Myth: Historical Mythology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Pence, Katherine and Betts, Paul. "Introduction." In *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, edited by Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, 1-20. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.

Raendchen, Oliver. *Vietnamesen in der DDR: Ein Rückblick*. SEACOM Edition, 2000.

Rappaport, Roy A. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Sabrow, Martin. "Dictatorship as Discourse: General Perspectives on SED Legitimacy." In *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Soico-Cultural History of the GDR*, edited by Konrad H. Jarausch, 195-212. New York: Berghahn Books, 1999.

Schätzke, Andreas. *Die ausländischen Vertragsarbeitnehmer in der ehemaligen DDR: Darstellung und Dokumentation*. Berlin: s.n., 1996).

Schüle, Annegret. "Proletischer Internationalismus oder ökonomischer Vorteil für die DDR: Mosambikanische, angolansiche und vietnamesische Arbeitskräfte in VEB Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei (1980-1989)" *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 42, (2002): 191-209.

Tismaneanu, Vladamir. *The Crisis of Marxist Ideology in Easter Europe: The Poverty of Utopia*. London/New York; Routledge, 1988.

Watts, Meredith W. "Political Xenophobia in the Transition from Socialism: Threat, Racism and Ideology Among East German Youth." *Political Psychology*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (1996): 101-102.

Weiss, Karin. "Strukturen der Selbsthilfe im ethnischen Netzwerk." In *Erfolg in der Nische?: Die Vietnamesen in der DDR un in Ostdeutschland*, edited by Karin Weiss and Mike Dennis, 139-150. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005.

Mac Con Uladh, Damian Henry Ton. "Guests of the Socialist Nation? Foreign Students and Workers in the GDR, 1949-1990. Ph. D. diss. University College London, 2005.

Zatlin, Jonathan R. "Scarcity and Resentment: Economic Sources of Xenophobia in the GDR, 1971-1989." *Central European History*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Dec., 2007): 683-720.

Žižek, Slavoj. *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. London: Verso, 1991.