

# Transmitting Revolution: Radio, Rumor, and the 1953 East German Uprising

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TRANSMITTING REVOLUTION: RADIO, RUMOR, AND THE 1953 EAST  
GERMAN UPRISING

By

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ABSTRACT  
TRANSMITTING REVOLUTION: RADIO, RUMOR,  
AND THE 1953 EAST GERMAN UPRISING

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Marquette University, 2017

This project examines public opinion in the Dresden Region of the German Democratic Republic from the end of World War II through the summer of 1953. I argue that the Socialist Unity Party (SED) projected its legitimacy through an official public sphere by representing publicness to its citizenry. Through banners, the press, and choreographed public demonstrations, it aimed to create the appearance of popular support. Even more significantly, the SED used radio to ground its legitimacy in a burgeoning post-war internationalism that bound residents of the GDR in an imagined community of socialist nations under Stalin's leadership.

At the same time, the regime's opponents challenged its legitimacy and credibility through a rival public sphere. In this space, foreign broadcasters, especially Radio in the American Sector (RIAS), chipped away at the regime's credibility and prestige while improvised news and rumor undermined the Party's state building efforts.

Tensions boiled over in the summer of 1953 when RIAS and rumor helped make revolution thinkable. On the seventeenth of June, East Germans took to the streets in hundreds of cities and protested the government. RIAS endowed the occasion with national imaginings before and after East German police and Soviet forces ended the protestors' hopes for change.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	i
TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS .....	iii
MAPS.....	vi
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER	
I. REPRESENTATIONAL CULTURE IN THE DRESDEN REGION, 1945 – 1953.....	58
II. THE RIVAL PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE DRESDEN REGION, 1945 – 1953.....	98
III. LEGITIMATION CRISIS, JUNE 11 – JUNE 16, 1953 .....	140
IV. THE WILDFIRE: TRANSMITTING POLITICAL POWER ON JUNE 17, 1953 .....	186
V. THE EMBERS OF UNREST .....	234
CONCLUSION.....	285
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	304

## TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ADN</b>	Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst or General East German News Service
<b>Aufklärungslokal</b>	Enlightenment venue / socialist education space
<b>Betriebsfunk</b>	Factory Radio Systems
<b>Bezirk Dresden</b>	Dresden Administrative Region (from July 1952 until October 1990)
<b>Bezirksleitung</b>	Regional Directorate
<b>BPKK</b>	Bezirksparteikontrollkommission or Regional Party Control Commission
<b>BPO</b>	Betriebsparteiorganisation or SED party representation in the workplace
<b>BRD</b>	Bundesrepublik Deutschland or Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany)
<b>CDU (&amp; CDU-Ost)</b>	Christlich-Demokratische Union Deutschlands and CDU-East (the GDR Blockparty)
<b>CPSU</b>	Communist party of the Soviet Union
<b>CSR</b>	Czechoslovak Socialist Republic
<b>DDR</b>	Deutsche Demokratische Republik or German Democratic republic (East Germany)
<b>DFD</b>	Dienst für Deutschland or barracked workers service
<b>DGB</b>	Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund or Confederation of German Trade Unions (FRG)
<b>FDGB</b>	Freie Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund or Free German Trade Union Federation (GDR)
<b>FDJ</b>	Freie Deutsche Jugend or Free German Youth
<b>Grossender</b>	Powerful national/international Radio Station

<b>H.O.</b>	Handelsorganisation or state owned retail outlet
<b>Hetz(en)</b>	popular term used by the SED to denote rabble rousing
<b>KPD</b>	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands or the Communist Party of Germany
<b>Kreisleitung</b>	County Directorate (under regional administration)
<b>Landessender</b>	Less powerful regional radio station
<b>LOWA</b>	Lokomotiv- und Waggonbaus or locomotive and car factory
<b>LPG</b>	Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft or communal farm
<b>NDPD</b>	National-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands or National-Democratic Party of [East] Germany (Blockparty)
<b>NSDAP</b>	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei or National Socialist German Workers' Party (the Nazi party)
<b>NWDR</b>	Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk or Northwest German Radio
<b>RFE</b>	Radio Free Europe
<b>RIAS</b>	Rundfunk im Amerikanischen Sektor or Radio in the American Sector
<b>SED</b>	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands or Socialist Unity Party of Germany
<b>SMAD</b>	Sowjetische Militäradministration in Deutschland or Soviet Military Administration in Germany
<b>SPD</b>	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands or Social Democratic Party of Germany
<b>Stadtfunk</b>	City radio systems that functioned similarly to a PA system
<b>Stasi / MfS</b>	Common names for the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit or Ministry for State Security
<b>VEB</b>	Volkseigener Betrieb or State-Owned Enterprise
<b>VOA</b>	Voice of America

**Citations:**

Archival abbreviations in footnotes are as follows:

<b>BStU MfS:</b>	Ministry for State Security (Stasi)
<b>DRA:</b>	German Radio Archives, Potsdam
<b>SächsHStA:</b>	Saxon State Archives, Dresden
<b>SAPMO-BArch:</b>	German Federal Archives, Lichterfelde (Berlin)
<b>NARA:</b>	National Archives and Records Administration (II), College Park, Maryland

**Regarding Archival Materials:**

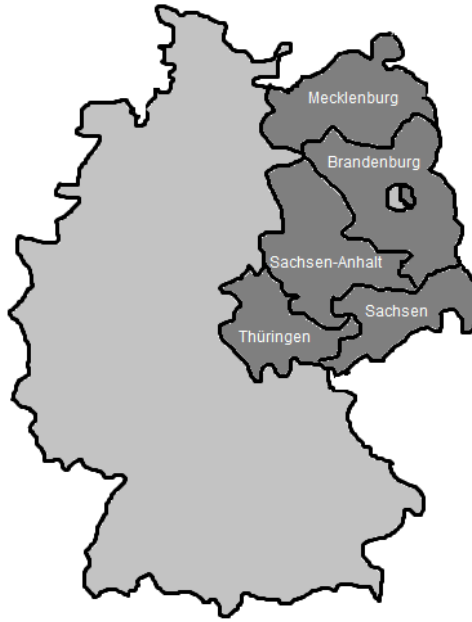
Those names protected under German law (*Schutzfrist*) have been changed to an initial.

**German Translations:**

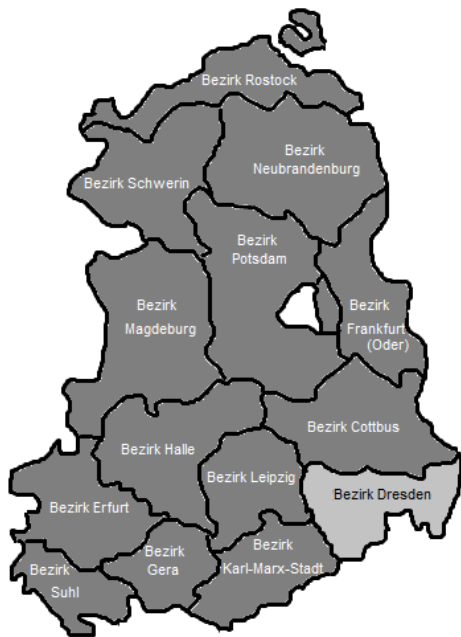
I have included the original German in all instances where it is available. However, there are some cases where documents from American depositories lack the original German.



# MAPS



West and East Germany, 1949



The GDR from mid-1952 until 1990



Dresden Region (Bezirk Dresden)

## Introduction

What follows is an inquiry into public opinion and the origins of a nationwide demonstration. I focus on the Dresden Region (Bezirk Dresden) which existed as an administrative unit from 1952 until 1990. I therefore project this region retroactively when necessary and focus on the capital city of Dresden and the small towns in its directorial orbit: Görlitz (the second-largest city); Bautzen; Bischofswerda; Dippoldiswalde; Freital; Großenhain; Kamenz; Löbau; Meißen; Niesky; Pirna; Riesa; Sebnitz; and Zittau. The events that unfolded here in the summer of 1953 represented an historically significant occasion, noteworthy for both its familiarity and its novelty.

### Early Dresden and Saxony

Dresden derives its name from the Slavic “Dreždžány,” or “swamp forest,” which referred to a medieval village near an Elbe River crossing. The Elbe runs through a section of central Europe that features a rolling green countryside, mild winters, and comfortable summers. Dreždžány sat on the Elbe’s north bank and a Germanic settlement developed on the south bank before a stone bridge connected the two in 1220. The Germanic counts of Meißen (from the Slavic “Misni”) eventually subdued their Slavic neighbors in the name of Christianity and established themselves as the area’s dominant force. The towns offered a typical central European medieval existence for their residents and the fertile terrain would prove especially productive in the development of mining techniques.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Retallack, ed. *Saxony in German History: Culture, Society, and Politics, 1830-1933* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), xiv; Anthony Clayton and Alan Russell, eds, *Dresden: A City Reborn* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 2-11; Frederick Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945* (London:

From the tenth century until 1815, Dresden, as the capital of Saxony, existed as part of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. The confederation of over 800 principalities, imperial cities, and other administrative units ranged wildly in size and strength. From the late 1500s, Saxony wielded considerable political power as an electorate hosting a prince in Dresden that sat on a committee that selected the Holy Roman Emperor. Indeed, this state of affairs formed the basis for Dresden's very existence and it was one of these Electors, Moritz, who helped shape Dresden into a notable Renaissance city. One example of his reign includes the city's first orchestra, the Staatskapelle in 1548, which found inspiration in the area's Protestant church music scene. In matters of religion, the region's inhabitants had cultivated a predominantly Lutheran heritage (Electors were Lutheran apart from Augustus the Strong) in the years after Martin Luther took refuge at Wartburg Castle in nearby Thuringia. Catholic and Protestant tensions boiled over between 1618 and 1648 and the Thirty Years War begot disaster that brought an end to most of the city's cultural developments in this period. Saxony, located amid the central European battlefield, experienced pillaging, disease, and misery.<sup>2</sup>

### **Prosperity and Power**

Not for the last time did a period of prosperity follow one of desolation. Dresden's rulers had built up the city's physical defenses during the war, attracting those peoples from the countryside looking to evade marauding armies. Thus, in contrast to many

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Bloomsbury, 2005), 14-20; Drezga means "Sumpfwald" (swamp forest) and Dresdzane means "Waldbewohner" and derives from the *Wendisch* or lower Sorbisch language. The name "Dresdene" first appeared in German in 1206. See "Allgemeine Geschichte Dresdens" (SAPMO-BArch DH 2 21413)  
<sup>2</sup> Retallack, *Saxony in German History*, xiv; Clayton and Russell, *A City Reborn*, 1-30; Frederick Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, 14-20; Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly, *Court Culture in Dresden: From Renaissance to Baroque* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 5.

European cities during this period, Dresden's population actually grew to just over 21,000 residents, making it a sizeable city for the period. Catholicism returned to the court in the early modern era and brought with it the baroque grandeur found in other German-speaking cities like Vienna and Munich. The force behind this bombastic build-up was the colossal personality of Elector Friedrich August II, or Augustus the Strong, who famously earned his epithet bending horseshoes to demonstrate his physical strength.<sup>3</sup> A cruel man who enjoyed the company of mistresses, Augustus' grand tour had taken him to the great Catholic courts of seventeenth-century Italy, Vienna, Spain, and France where the grandeur of Louis XIV's Palace at Versailles had left on him an especially lasting impression.<sup>4</sup>

Augustus took the throne in 1694 and became an elector following the death of his older brother. He also became King of Poland when that nation's nobility, fearful of an absolute monarchy, chose Augustus (an outsider, instead of a compatriot) for the Polish throne. Political snarls held things up before Augustus could claim his position, but his conversion to Catholicism helped seal the deal. As a European monarch, Augustus now needed to project his legitimacy and Dresden's mineral wealth and the healthy population of Saxony and Poland provided the resources to do so. Thus, in the early eighteenth century, Dresden, and especially the Old City, which sits on the southern side of the Elbe, saw its iconic cityscape take shape with a notable French influence. Augustus constructed public gardens that surrounded a palace built in the Baroque style, and like Versailles, their tidiness and geometric precision evoked control and domination. The Zwinger, perhaps the second-most famous point of reference in Dresden, represented another

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. He held several official titles: Elector of Saxony, King of Poland, and Grand Duke of Lithuania.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, 16-17; Clayton and Russell, *A City Reborn*, 2-20.

defining feature of the city-scape. In German, the name means “outer ward” and, in this case, it refers to an outdoor courtyard enclosed by a palatial construction that functioned as a staging grounds for competition as well as royal display and pageantry. Along with the Semper Opera House (destroyed and rebuilt in 1869), other landmarks built under Augustus’ watch include the Academy of the Arts, and the landmark Church of our Lady (die Frauenkirche). Typically, when Saxony’s Lutheran electors died, their bodies were taken in a ritual procession from Dresden to their final resting place in St. Mary’s Cathedral in Freiberg. In a departure from tradition, when Augustus died in 1733, the state placed his body in Wawel Cathedral in Kraków and his heart was placed in the newly-completed crypt of the Dresden Cathedral.<sup>5</sup>

As before, war and destruction followed a period of cultural expression and Dresden’s central location again led to its entanglement in the European conflicts of the mid-1700s. Frederick the Great’s designs on Silesia and his greater struggle with Austria forced Augustus III to choose an alliance, and he chose poorly. He switched sides and watched his Austrian allies loot Dresden and retreat before Prussian conquerors took the leftovers. The Seven Years War meant that Saxony’s army belonged to Frederick the Great and the artists and craftsmen who arrived in Dresden during its cultural flowering vanished following the city’s military occupation. The Prussians laid siege to, and bombarded, the city in 1760, destroying about half of it.<sup>6</sup> This, of course, would not be the city’s last experience with demolition. Forty-six years later, Napoleon’s dissolution of

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<sup>5</sup> Katja Doubek, *August der Starke* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2007), 139. Jan Hübler, *Dresden: Wo Reiter golden und Wunder blau sind* (Meßkirch: Gmeiner Verlag, 2012), 6; Watanabe-O’Kelly, *Court Culture in Dresden*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday February 13, 1945*, 26-30; Eric Dorn Brose, *Modern German History: From the Holy Roman Empire to the Bismarckian Reich* (New York: Berghahn, 1997), 45-59; Clayton and Russell, *Dresden: A City Reborn*, 19-21.

the Holy Roman Empire left Dresden under French occupation and politically affiliated within the Confederation of the Rhine until 1813. Saxony experienced less political disruption than the southwestern German territories closer to France, although Napoleon's ill-fated Russian campaign and the Elector of Saxony's decision to side with the Emperor nearly destined the state to Prussian rule at the Congress of Vienna. To Saxons' relief, Talleyrand and Castlereagh stepped in and prevented the state's dissolution, although it lost about half its territory.<sup>7</sup>

In the course of the nineteenth century, Dresden's built environment earned the city recognition throughout Europe and the sobriquet "Florence of the Elbe," coined by theologian and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.<sup>8</sup> A number of renowned thinkers called Dresden home, including Richard Wagner, Caspar David Friedrich, Theodor Körner, Robert Schumann, and Carl Maria von Weber.<sup>9</sup> But, once again, revolution swept across the continent in 1848, sparking an uprising in the Kingdom of Saxony. The following year, a coalition of students, workers, and political activists—democrats and liberals—marched through the streets singing the *Marseillaise*. They decreed a liberal government before troops squashed the uprising and political divisions doomed reform efforts.<sup>10</sup> In 1866, Saxony again found itself on the losing side of history after siding with Austria. Sharing the latter's defeat at Königgrätz, the state emerged a further-diminished European power. Thus, with its political influence swept away first with the Old Regime and later by the wars of German unification, Saxon cultural and economic endeavors

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday February 13, 1945*, 26-30; James Retallack, ed. *Saxony in German History*, xiv,

<sup>8</sup> Olaf B. Rader, *Kleine Geschichte Dresdens* (München: C.H. Beck, 2005), 43.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday February 13, 1945*, 30-33.

<sup>10</sup> Clayton and Russel, *A City Reborn*, 21-22. Andrea Neemann, "Models of Political Participation in the Beust Era: The State, the Saxon Landtag, and the Public Sphere, 1849-1864" and "Saxon Forty-eighters in the Postrevolutionary Epoch, 1849-1867" in James Retallack, ed. *Saxony in German History*, 9, 122-126.

increasingly defined the region. The final war of unification, between Prussia (and allied German states) and France ended in German victory and unity under Prussian leadership in 1871.<sup>11</sup>

### **Industry and the Working Class Movements**

Considerable economic, demographic, and social changes attended the political developments of the nineteenth century. Economically, the Zollverein had laid an economic foundation for German unification and Saxony had already established itself as one of Germany's most industrialized regions in the 1830s. In the second half of the century, railroads further enhanced Dresden's position at the heart of Europe both culturally and economically. The cityscape in Dresden continued to change, too. As the populations of the working classes and bourgeoisie grew, the area witnessed the construction of workers' tenements and tramways that moved residents into, around, and out of the city. Workers in the second half of the nineteenth century worked long nine-to-eleven-hour days in the factories. Otto von Bismarck's social security system warded off any genuine socialist threats and the state tamped down on those that made too much political noise. Still, notable socialist leaders appeared in or made Dresden their home: August Bebel delivered a speech that cautioned against Prussian hegemony and later ascended to parliament through Dresden and Rosa Luxembourg edited the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung*.<sup>12</sup>

By the time Saxony became part of the German Reich in 1871 it had reached the highest levels of industrialization. The textile industries dominated the industrial landscape well into the twentieth century, especially in the western part of the state. In

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday February 13, 1945*, 31-2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

the eastern part of the state, the industrial area of Dresden, Pirna, and Meißen boasted machine building, tobacco processing, metalworking, and textile production. Dresden also had a vibrant consumer goods industry, and could claim that the modern brassiere, cigarettes, squeezable toothpaste, and the latex condom had local origins. The region also developed a robust precision optics industry where skilled workers ground lenses for Carl Zeiss and other manufacturers. Finally, the railways had brought tourists in increasing numbers to the city stimulating the construction of hotels and restaurants. By 1900, the population had reached 4.8 million; home to an eighth of the German population living on just three percent of the nation's land area. But despite its continuously expanding industrial workforce, Saxony experienced little immigration compared to an area like the Ruhr Valley and as a result, this population remained overwhelmingly German and Protestant.<sup>13</sup>

Saxony had long been an epicenter of workers' movements, and Dresden had a history of labor strife, with lockouts and disputes driven by the city's 60,000 trade union members. The skilled and politically conscious workforce had joined the ranks of the SPD, founded in 1875, faster than the national average. Still, despite Bismarck's death and the elimination of anti-socialist legislation, the ruling class generally kept the party's political ambitions at bay. However, the exclusionary tactics practiced by the Conservative-Liberal coalition also helped deliver the middle classes into the SPD. One should note here that Leipzig and Dresden produced different types of SPD membership, with the socialists in the former further to the left on the spectrum while the socialists in

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<sup>13</sup> Toni Pierenkemper and Richard Tilly, *The German Economy During the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Berghahn, 2004); xv, 31; Brose, *Modern German History*, 168-9; Clayton and Russel, *A City Reborn*, 24; Rosemary H. T. O'Kane, *Rosa Luxemburg in Action: For Revolution and Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 27; Nathan LaPorte, *The German Communist Party in Saxony, 1924-1933* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 41-4; Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday February 13, 1945*, 30-40.



the latter looked to build a larger coalition and avoid class antagonisms. But although Saxony's ethnic homogeneity meant that working class movements lacked the usual fault lines formed by ethnic and confessional rifts elsewhere in the Reich, a distinct Saxon political discord did ultimately develop between the SPD and its sometime ally the KPD (Communist Party of Germany or Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, founded in 1918).<sup>14</sup>

### **The Great War and its Aftermath**

The First World War left Dresden physically untouched but politically unstable as the imperial government collapsed and food shortages followed. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had reverberated in Germany, although the vast majority of workers favored its anti-war posture and disavowed its violent means. On November 9, 1918, mass demonstrations broke out in Dresden (and elsewhere in Germany), when Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated and Prince Max resigned as Chancellor.<sup>15</sup> The region's industrial background and politically active working class meant that the revolutionary fervor that erupted elsewhere in Germany in November found fertile ground in Saxony. Demonstrators in Dresden established contact with revolutionaries elsewhere in Germany by radio—a novel development in revolutionary tactics at the time—and quickly declared that Friedrich August II of Saxony's reign had come to an end on the thirteenth of November, deposing a culture of power that had endured for three centuries.<sup>16</sup> In its

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Lapp, *Politics, Class, and the Rise of Nazism in Saxony, 1919-1933* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International – Studies in Central European History, 1997), 1-53.

<sup>15</sup> Sam M. Mustafa, *Germany in the Modern World: A New History* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 142-4.

<sup>16</sup> F.L. Carsten, *Revolution in Central Europe, 1918-1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 43-45; Martin Kitchen, *A History of Modern Germany: 1800 to the Present* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 192-6; Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday February 13, 1945*, 36; LaPorte, *The German Communist Party in Saxony*, 48-9.

place, the leaders of the demonstrations, in conjunction with the Social Democrats (and the Independents that joined), declared a Socialist Republic, ending the decades-long political domination of the Conservative-National Liberal coalition. The new union, along with workers' councils operating in Leipzig and Chemnitz, announced a revolutionary program of production, expropriation, and the dismissal of government official along class lines. The Spartacist Rebellion failed in January, 1919 as did the Kapp Putsch of March 13, 1920, after which the national government attempted to retreat to Dresden. The military commander there denied this move and in May, following a veterans' demonstration and the assassination of the minister of war, the military took control of the situation and declared martial law. Leaders dissolved the revolutionary workers' councils and the political class tried to prod Saxony along a more temperate path of parliamentary democracy. Alas, they would not succeed.<sup>17</sup>

The politicians that developed the framework for a republic in Weimar felt that Germany's legitimacy now derived from its conception as a state of culture and welfare.<sup>18</sup> This vision failed to come to fruition either nationally or in Saxony. During the 1920s, interwar European and global economic trends and emerging industrial regions in China and Latin America led to restrictive tariffs on imports, affecting industrialized nations and Saxony in particular. Saxony's higher wages hurt the competitiveness of its industrial firms and a regional credit shortage in the mid-1920s (after the stabilization of the Mark) helped bring about a recession and structural unemployment that persisted through the Great Depression. The economic downturn hit the state especially hard and it suffered the

<sup>17</sup> Carsten, *Revolution in Central Europe*, 43-45; Kitchen, *A History of Modern Germany*, 192-6; Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday February 13, 1945*, 36-40; LaPorte, *The German Communist Party in Saxony*, 48-55.

<sup>18</sup> Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 141.

highest unemployment rate in Germany. Some hopeful signs emerged, especially in Dresden where those specialized and advanced industries that produced modern equipment—radio, sewing machines, optics— prospered, but in the western half of Saxony textile manufacturers found themselves vulnerable to competition from producers in emerging economies. Furthermore, during this period even Dresden never truly regained its footing as either a premier tourist destination or capital of contemporary modern art and culture. Instead, economic conditions deteriorated and the Great Depression of the early 1930s exacerbated political divisions in Dresden, with the KPD and the National Socialists representing a repudiation of Weimar moderation. Indeed, the Weimar government failed to truly legitimize its authority. First, as Detlev Peukert points out, the regime had established itself as anti-monarchical, dismissing traditional sources (monarchy and church) of authority for Germans, while creating a hospitable political space for reactionary actors. The regime also struggled to sell the public on a state committed to a generous nationalism (as opposed to the chauvinistic and xenophobic nationalism that developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century and middle of the twentieth). Constitutional democracy failed to engender national pride, with few feeling any genuine dedication to the republic and even the workmanlike civil servants felt more committed to the state than the republic. Finally, a charismatic foundation of legitimacy for the Republic never had much of a chance, as those who held the highest offices generally lacked magnetism. Combined with two economic catastrophes and the loss of prestige from the *Diktat* of Versailles that much of the middle class conflated with the new order, the Weimar Republic had poor odds for survival.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Clayton and Russel, *A City Reborn*, 26-27; LaPorte, *The German Communist Party in Saxony*, 45-7; Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday February 13, 1945*, 39-43; Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 217-8.

## National Socialism and another World War

Turbulent times pushed voters to opposite ends of the political spectrum and into the KPD and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei or NSDAP). With the left fragmented by the KPD's refusal to unite with the SPD (whom they considered fascists in disguise), the Nazis, initially viewed by the KPD as the petty bourgeois entering its death throes, now had an easier path to power.<sup>20</sup> Nazi violence, political despair, and an increasingly extremist middle class also helped lay a foundation for the NSDAP's success in Saxony. Violence in particular, or even the threat of it, had become normalized in this politically volatile milieu, and the communists did not hesitate to engage their far-right opponents. The Nazis also presented themselves as the party that would destroy the Weimar structure and made appeals to Protestants in Saxony by highlighting socialist godlessness.<sup>21</sup> There is also evidence to suggest that bourgeois newspapers helped legitimize the NSDAP and heighten its "respectability" with flattering coverage.<sup>22</sup> The Nazis' newspaper in Dresden, *Der Freiheitskampf* (*The Struggle for Freedom*) boasted the largest circulation among all daily newspapers in the city.<sup>23</sup> The above tactics and the promise of economic salvation and national renewal turned Dresden into a Nazi stronghold. The 1932 city council elections in Dresden witnessed the KPD win thirteen seats and the SPD and the NSDAP 22 apiece. While Hitler's party had lost seats in national elections, his ascension to the

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday February 13, 1945*, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Lapp, *Politics, Class, and the Rise of Nazism in Saxony*, 176, 190-1, 206-7,

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 207-8.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday February 13, 1945*, 43.

chancellorship in 1933 nullified any short-term trends at the polls and the Enabling Law and the Reichstag Fire Decree legalized his dictatorship in 1933.<sup>24</sup>

The Nazi seizure of power ushered in an era of carefully choreographed rallies and propaganda that aesthetically confirmed a restored German vigor. The Nazi regime aligned the education system with its historical understanding of, and vision for, the future, and the quickly assumed control of all public media outlets, suppressed opposing views, and banned political parties, which disappeared or went underground. Churches came under close observation and the party's persecution of the Jews changed from economic discrimination and expropriation to expulsion, enslavement, and murder. The state's needs existed above all else in the National Socialist system. In Dresden this meant that the government utilized the city's Hygiene Museum for its politically driven racial studies and renamed some notable locales in Dresden, such as Theaterplatz, which became Adolf Hitler Platz. And it all happened with a shocking quickness. As the prominent Jewish professor Victor Klemperer noted, "It's astounding how easily everything collapses...complete revolution and party dictatorship. And all the opposing forces as if disappeared from the face of the earth..."<sup>25</sup>

### **Operation Thunderclap and the Dresden Firestorm**

During World War II, Dresden was of little military importance after briefly functioning as a hub during the invasion of Poland. As the tide turned against Germany at the end of the war, more pressing needs elsewhere prompted the transfer of Dresden's anti-aircraft guns. This left the city relatively defenseless—something that most believed (on both sides) would not pose a problem for a city that the Allies were not likely to

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Clayton and Russel, *A City Reborn*, 28-34; quoted in Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday February 13, 1945*, 46-8.

target. Indeed, many residents felt Dresden would never suffer the fate delivered by strategic bombing experienced in other German cities. This rationale had some basis in rumor, which held that Churchill had a beloved aunt living in Dresden or that the English remained so enamored with Dresden's cultural charm that they simply could not bring themselves to destroy it. While Dresden had been largely spared the experience of war, its citizens would face a devastating change in fortune as Operation Thunderclap and its bombing operations commenced. Some scholars speculate that strategists at Yalta drew up the plans for Dresden's destruction, though the reasons behind the decision and whether they derived from a military request to destroy transportation and communication installations or a desire to terrorize civilians remains a point of contention. A more sinister theory posits that the architects of destruction envisioned the ensuing inferno as an allegory for the annihilation of Nazism.<sup>26</sup>

While inclement weather had prevented this mission for weeks, a spring-like sunny day on February 13, 1945 meant that Dresdeners' string of luck had run out, though they had no idea at the time. Shortly after sundown that day, 244 British bombers departed England with the instructions to bomb Dresden, whose population of 630,000 occupied the largest city left in Germany that the Allies had left (mostly) untouched. When the air raid sirens sounded at 9:51 p.m. and bombers neared the city, most residents ignored what they mistook as another false alarm. The lead planes dropped marker flares to identify targets near Dresden's Old City and the incendiary bombs followed closely behind. The bombers spaced the raids to allow a false sense of security to develop among

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<sup>26</sup> Clayton and Russel, *A City Reborn*, 30-5; Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday, 13 February 1945*: 13-15; Tony Joel, *The Dresden Firebombing: Memory and the Politics of Commemorating Destruction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 59-67; Anne Fuchs, *After the Dresden Bombing: Pathways of Memory, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2-6.

survivors and emergency crews who emerged from the inadequate shelters. American bombers completed the Old City's destruction on the morning of February 14—Ash Wednesday. Kurt Vonnegut recalled waking up to a cityscape that now bore semblance to the surface of the moon.<sup>27</sup> Shocked survivors found that much of Dresden had been reduced to rubble—though incredibly, the famous Church of our Lady still stood. And then it collapsed the following day. More devastating than the destruction of the built environment were the deaths of 25,000 Dresdeners who perished in the attacks. Less than three months later, the war ended.<sup>28</sup>

### **Sovietization**

Historians have long focused on the origins of Nazism and just how, exactly, a sophisticated and cultured people could so quickly discard democratic principles for the brutality of National Socialism. More recently, however, historians have increasingly concerned themselves with the Germans' break with Nazism and their successful (and astonishingly quick) re-civilization. Richard Bessel and others have suggested that during the final months of the Second World War, Germans experienced the brutality of the conflict, especially in the eastern territories, to such a degree that the events came to define their wartime experience. The sense of victimhood that resulted from traumatizing

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.; Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1969).

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday, 13 February 1945: 2-8*; Joel, *The Dresden Firebombing*, 59-67; Fuchs, *After the Dresden Bombing*, 6. For a thoughtful and concise take on the moral dilemmas involved in wartime bombing, see Detlef Siebert, *British Bombing Strategy in World War Two*, February 17, 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/area\\_bombing\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/area_bombing_01.shtml); Scholars and non-scholars have long disputed the number dead, but a generally-agreed-upon figure is at most 25,000, argues Hans Michael Kloth, "Bombenangriffe auf Dresden 1945: Das Ende der Legenden," *Der Spiegel*, March 3, 2008.

events like the expulsions in the east, the battle for Berlin, mass rape, and in the case of Dresden, fire bombings, developed along with other new attitudes.<sup>29</sup>

Dresden's experience, in particular, did much to cultivate this victim mentality for Germans even though other cities that experienced terror bombing such as Hamburg could claim to have suffered equally. Dresden's attack came late, but Würzburg and Potsdam, along with a number of other German cities, felt the wrath of Allied bombers in the final month of the war, too. Still, Dresden emerged as the quintessential *Opferstadt* or "victim city," according to historian Tony Joel. He suggests that a number of factors can help account for this phenomena, including Dresden's widely acclaimed beauty; the enigmatic rationale behind the Allies' decision to target the city after having largely ignored it for years; the destruction of non-military buildings (in the Old City especially), and the devastating efficacy with which the incendiary bombs induced terror and killed people. Joel also reminds us that the word *Opfer* means both "victim" and "sacrifice," and either translation is suitable. This was true especially in the minds of the socialists who cast Dresden as both a victim of Western aggression and a sacrifice for the recklessness and arrogance of the Nazi period.<sup>30</sup>

Such destruction, combined with socialists' position that recent history had proved them right—while discrediting capitalism and the right—inspired a nearly unlimited righteousness among East Germany's future leaders. Capitalist rivalry and its fascist offshoots, after all, had spawned multiple depressions and two world wars—how much more proof did anyone need that the arrangement was a political dead end? Thus it should not have shocked anyone that the socialists advocated for and represented a

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.; Richard Bessel, *Germany, 1945: From War to Peace* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Joel, *The Dresden Firebombing*, 1-10; 58-60.



pacifist internationalism further encouraged by the psychological and physical destruction of Dresden. Equally importantly, German politicians who came to rule East Germany in the early postwar period readily capitalized on their anti-fascist biographies. Indeed, the emotional and political rubble of postwar Germany offered a gloomy but fortuitous site into which Old Communists could stake their rightful claim to German history.<sup>31</sup>

At the Yalta Conference in early February of 1945, the Allies failed to lay out a precise vision for Germany's future other than its division into four zones of occupation and the imposition of reparation payments. But at Potsdam in July of 1945, leaders made a number of border adjustments, including giving those lands east of the Oder and Neisse rivers to Poland—an issue that would fester leading up to the 1953 events in Saxon border towns near Dresden. The Soviets, under Marshal Georgi K. Zhukov, planned to annihilate the capitalistic institutions that had fostered fascism in its zone under SMAD (Sowjetische Militäradministration in Deutschland, or Soviet Military Administration in Germany).<sup>32</sup>

A number of historians have labeled this multi-year revolution from above in Eastern Europe as “Sovietization.” This term is useful in describing the process by which the German communists, with Soviet support, transformed the Soviet Zone of Occupation (and other future Eastern Bloc states) into a soviet-style satellite state. Sovietization was a

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<sup>31</sup> Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries: German Communists and Their Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard, 2003). A pattern developed in Saxony (and elsewhere in German history) which saw the leaders of successive regimes aiming to capitalize on their biographies of opposition to the previous political arrangement: anti-monarchial, anti-democratic/socialist, and following Sovietization, anti-fascist. One could also point out that the CDU has dominated the Landtag (Parliament) in Saxony since reunification. On this last point, see “Vorangegangene Wahlen” (Statistik) at [https://www.statistik.sachsen.de/wahlen/allg/Seite\\_2.htm](https://www.statistik.sachsen.de/wahlen/allg/Seite_2.htm) for post 1990 election results.

<sup>32</sup> Holger H. Herwig, *Hammer or Anvil?: Modern Germany, 1648-Present* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Company, 1994), 356-9.

two-part project that entailed imperial domination and the imposition of a Soviet-style modernity. Indeed, the project was ambitious in its scope: the initiation of “democratic centralism,” which was essentially a synonym for Stalinist Bolshevism; seizure and control of the public sphere with concomitant disciplining measures; transformation of the countryside alongside; industrial development; and the politicization of daily life.<sup>33</sup>

Germany experienced Sovietization along a timeline similar to other Eastern European states. This includes the arrival of the Walter Ulbricht and his group of exiled members of the native communist party in 1945, the electoral disappointments of 1946 (that proved a turning point as it dashed communist hopes for legitimate political hegemony), appeals to patriotism, and the development of “block politics” in an effort to attract moderate and right-leaning parties.<sup>34</sup> This last development included the creation of the Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or SED) out of a forced merger of the SPD and the KPD in 1946. The Ulbricht Group’s faith in their mission found its clearest expression with the “magnet theory” (*Magnetwirkung*), whereby East German economic successes (which did indeed exist with regard to food in the immediate postwar years) would draw broad support. These attempts came up short, and as the SED recognized its failure to gain political power at the polls, leadership shifted its attention to seizing control of the Soviet zone. This process took place in stages, the first of which witnessed Communist Party rule through leftist coalitions and

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<sup>33</sup> Konrad Jarausch and Hannes Siegrist, eds, *Amerikanisierung und Sowjetisierung in Deutschland 1945 – 1970* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1997), 15-38. The terms *Sowjetisierung*, *Bolschewisierung*, and *Stalinisierung* came into common usage in the 1950s in Germany; E. A. Rees, “The Sovietization of Eastern Europe,” in *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe: Perspectives on the Postwar Period*, Ed. Balazs Apor, Peter Apor, and E. A. Rees (Washington D.C.: New Academia, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Dirk Spilker, *The East German Leadership and the Division of Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). The Ulbricht group included Walter Ulbricht, Otto Fischer, Fritz Erpenbeck, Gustav Gundelach, Karl Maron, Richard Gyptner, Walter Köppe, Wolfgang Leonhard, Hans Mahle, and Otto Winzer.

the redistribution of land and the nationalization of industry from 1945 until 1947/8. These operations established two core socialist institutions: the communal farms (Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaften or LPGs) and the state-owned enterprise (Volkseigener Betrieb, or VEB). On October 7, 1949, the GDR formally came into existence as a nation state and an escalation of the above policies along with establishment of armed forces, collectivization drives, and an emphasis on the development of heavy industry characterized Sovietization from 1948 until the summer of 1953. Finally, the process by which the SED consolidated single party rule defined the second stage politically, which lasted until Stalin's death in March of 1953.<sup>35</sup>

Some historians have called this phase "Stalinist," but this term's application in the GDR as well as Stalin's role in the division of Germany is more complicated than many in the West might have liked to believe. First, as Corey Ross points out, Stalinism, and its politically institutionalized attributes—terror, arbitrariness, and a cult of personality—relied on Stalin's presence and leadership.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the term Stalinism implies a degree of fear, violence, and repression, such as that during the Great Terror in the Soviet Union, which simply did not exist in the postwar satellite states.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, historian Wilfried Loth argues that Stalin never even *wanted* East Germany as a satellite state and that its creation was solely the work of Walter Ulbricht and his group. However, Dirk Spilker offers a convincing rebuttal to this claim, noting that it only appeared this way, before the Soviets and their East German puppets gave up on winning at the ballot box and moved to take direct control of the political situation in

<sup>35</sup> Jaraus and Hannes, *Amerikanisierung und Sowjetisierung in Deutschland*, 15-38; E. A. Rees, "The Sovietization of Eastern Europe," in *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe*.

<sup>36</sup> Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (New York: Oxford, 2002), 19-43.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* See also Apor, *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe*.

their zone.<sup>38</sup> But as Carolyn Eisenberg reminds us, partition became reality in the second half of the 1940s as American and British leaders constructed a politically and economically integrated zone, doing their part to strengthen the division of Germany.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, she sees this division as primarily an American design. However, that too is still much too simple. As Edith Sheffer points out, the partition of Germany took place in stages after 1945 and in many ways represented the handiwork of not just political leaders, but the residents, especially those sharing borders, who did their part to make the division an everyday reality by reinforcing the it socially and economically.<sup>40</sup> Of course, these same GDR residents were probably tempted to give Stalin most of the credit after seeing his portraits plastered all over their towns.<sup>41</sup>

So while historiographical contention regarding Stalinism and Germany's division lingers, clearly the East German leadership looked to Stalin's Soviet Union for inspiration. To be sure, the GDR's politicians represented his image and power in the early years of the GDR and the Soviet leader cast a long shadow over the East German state.

### **The Politicization of Dresden's Aesthetics**

Sovietization also extended to the built—and destroyed—environment. In her essay “Public Space and Societal Utopia: State planning, Communication, and Presentation of Power in the Soviet Union using the Example of Moscow between 1917 and 1964,” Monica Rütters reminds us that the environments created by city planners for

<sup>38</sup> Wilfried Loth, *Stalin's ungeliebtes Kind: Warum Stalin die DDR nicht wollte* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1994), Spilker, *The East German Leadership and the Division of Germany*, 4-6.

<sup>39</sup> Carolyn Woods Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line: The American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 485-487.

<sup>40</sup> Edith Sheffer, *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3-13.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

the Communist Party of the Soviet Union intended to form a new type of habitat for a “new type of human.”<sup>42</sup> And, not surprisingly, so it was with East German communists and Dresden, which, as an *Opferstadt* and an urban tabula rasa, often starred in the promotion of the socialist program. Consequently, the city, as it fit into the greater socialist schema, offers us insights into the SED’s vision for the future.

Although one journalist lamented the conversion of the famous sanatorium in Weißer Hirsch into a hospital, the city’s Soviet sympathizers—who controlled the press—projected its future as a bright one as early as 1946. Strategic bombing had toppled a good deal of Dresden’s celebrated Old City silhouette, but much of the city appeared in good repair just a few kilometers away. As early as 1946, many of the suburbs that had escaped the devastation that befell the Old City witnessed a resumption of normal life. Eighty percent of the streetcars reportedly ran and businesses had reopened. And even in the Old City, where bombs had left little intact, a sympathetic observer put a positive spin on the situation, noting that a wholesale rebuild here would be easier than removing and rebuilding toppled structures amidst those in good repair. Cars reportedly zoomed through the streets beside the rubble at the busy interchange of Postplatz and across the river at Albertplatz. As for entertainment, the city that still guarded its reputation as a cultural center already put on shows and hosted premiers.<sup>43</sup> Such rosy perceptions constituted a key part of the vision adopted by the eternally

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<sup>42</sup> Monica Rüthers, “Öffentlicher Raum und Gesellschaftliche Utopie: Stadtplanung, Kommunikation und Inszenierung von Macht in der Sowjetunion am Beispiel Moskaus zwischen 1917 und 1964,” in Gabor T. Rittersporn, et al, eds. *Sphären von Öffentlichkeit in Gesellschaften sowjetischen Typs: zwischen partei-staatlicher Selbstinszenierung und kirchlichen Gegenwelten / Public Spheres in Soviet-Type Societies: Between the Great Show of the Party-State and Religious Counter-Cultures* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003), 65-67: “Neuen Menschen” While Rüthers analyzes the Soviet Union, the general principles and societal arrangements discussed here apply directly to the GDR and other soviet-type societies.

<sup>43</sup> R. Le., “Dresden, Heute und Morgen – Lebendiger Aufbauwille schafft eine neue Stadt,” *Neue Zeit*, Sonntag, 31. März, 1946.

optimistic and forever forward-looking one-party government that ruled over Dresden and the surrounding area. The SED detected immense political value in the area's destruction, too: rubble could always be tied to the West, whether, fascists, Americans or West Germans.

In this way, Dresden's destruction and the remaining rubble allowed the SED to represent the malevolence of the West through its press in commemorations and harangues when the party highlighted the city and mourned its victims on February 13 and 14. At the same time, the destruction gave the city a low baseline from which to rebuild. Local headlines in the SED's papers from the early 1950s suggested Dresden serve as a reminder for all Germans that the "senseless destructive frenzy" of the Anglo-American terror bombers had destroyed a portion of "the city of art" and created a twelve-square-kilometer pile of ash and rubble within the Old City.<sup>44</sup> The deaths caused by Allied bombing naturally represented Anglo-American inhumanity. *Neues Deutschland* pointed to thirty-two thousand charred and asphyxiated people—and the true number of deaths, which had yet to be ascertained, looked to the party like it would reach more than 100,000 (the true number is believed to be around 25,000, as mentioned earlier). The 90,000 demolished residences and the other 80,000 that bombing had damaged represented the "ruthless balance of a day of imperialist murder rage."<sup>45</sup> One former Dresdener who had left his native city in 1939 and returned after the war, experienced shock at the extent of the destruction. Walking through the rubble fields of his hometown, he came to understand why the GDR used the city's destruction as a pretext to campaign against the English, the Americans, and especially Konrad

<sup>44</sup> H. Sta., "Das Schicksal Dresdens geht auch dich an!" *Neues Deutschland* 13 Februar, 1951.: "Sinnloser Zerstörungswut"; "Kunststadt Dresden"

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.: "grausame Bilanz eines Tages imperialistischer Mordwut"

Adenauer's remilitarization efforts; his former home served as a morality tale spun from a recurring theme that linked the West to capitalism, fascism, and destruction. More specifically here, the published letter—genuine or not—reinforced the SED's position: “Dresden [was] the manifest unmasking of Anglo-American war criminals.”<sup>46</sup> As another former Dresdener put it in a letter published in the *Sächsische Zeitung*: “From Dresden outward—from its delightful and unwavering fostering of the arts, streamed wonderful currents through the world and to England and America, who've been most receptive. Have they forgotten that?”<sup>47</sup>

### **Soviet Virtues in the Built Environment**

Dresden's destruction also functioned as something of an allegory for the political vision of the state as it rebuilt with a scheme that would produce—if it had not *already* started producing—socio-economic prosperity for its residents. So while imperialist murderers had tried to destroy Dresden and all its treasures while furthering their “policies of destruction in Korea...and West Germany,” Dresden had, with Soviet backing, begun to rise from the ruins and move in a new and better direction.<sup>48</sup> By 1951, the SED had its fingers all over the city's blueprints. Were one to pick up a copy of the *Sächsische Zeitung* or *Neues Deutschland* prior to a trip to Dresden in the early 1950s, one might have arrived in the city with a number of expectations, not the least of which would include the opportunity to take in a new and improved urban environment. This meant the city and its annual celebrations served to represent the greatness and *potential*

<sup>46</sup> Rudolf Jahn, “Jeder Deutsche müsste Dresden Sehen...:Ein Brief aus Aachen,” *Neues Deutschland* 13 Februar, 1951.: “Dresden ist die sinnfälligste Entlarvung der Anglo-Amerikanischen Kriegsverbrecher”

<sup>47</sup> “Dresden lebt” *Berliner Zeitung*, 13 Februar, 1952: “von Dresden aus, von seiner köstlich gleichmäßigen Kunstpflege in Musik und Wort, sind herrliche Ströme durch die Welt geflossen und auch England und Amerika haben durstig davon getrunken. Haben sie das vergessen?”

<sup>48</sup> “Aus den Trümmern auferstanden!” *Sächsische Zeitung*, 14 Februar, 1951.

greatness of Soviet-style planning. Prior to July 1952, this new Dresden, according to technical and political leadership, derived its character from so-called democratic and antifascist-democratic principles. The SED referenced the preamble to the September 1950 law related to the construction of cities in the newly formed German Democratic Republic, noting that it would follow the five-year plan, raise living standards, and create a habitat to serve as a “visible manifestation for the economic and cultural advancement in the German Democratic Republic.”<sup>49</sup> Leadership pointed out the Baroque Old City—the Dresden, really—had been “built” by the princes, meaning “the people” financed and built the city, but the princes’ desires shaped it. Now, the people had at last become the employers, financiers, contractors, and executives.<sup>50</sup> Not surprisingly, the Soviet system served as a model for this new type of representative habitat.<sup>51</sup>

Authorities from Dresden toured Soviet cities including Moscow, Leningrad, Stalingrad, and Kiev, and gleaned knowledge regarding building techniques best suited for the working class.<sup>52</sup> The party boasted that residents again enjoyed theater and that the heavily damaged Zwinger Palace had already been partially rebuilt by February of 1951, as had the Hygiene Museum and the Academy of Fine Arts.<sup>53</sup> Grunaer Street evidenced the new type of Dresden emerging, serving as the city’s model street. It featured mixed housing that brought together workers and intelligentsia now that the quaint notion of a specific workers’ quarter had been relegated to history. In August of 1952, the SED listed the street among a number of exemplary projects in the GDR, a list

<sup>49</sup> “Das neue Dresden entsteht,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, 12 Mai, 1951.: “Sichtbarer Ausdruck für den wirtschaftlichen und kulturellen Aufstieg in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik.”

<sup>50</sup> “Die Bedürfnisse der Neuen Bauherren,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, 12 Mai, 1951.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> “Dresden baut auf,” *Neues Deutschland* 13. Februar, 1951.



spearheaded by the monumental Stalin Avenue in Berlin that represented the new democratic principles.<sup>54</sup>

In July of 1952 at the Second Party Conference, the SED announced the accelerated construction of socialism. As far as any real changes for the future of Dresden's physical layout and appearance, the repercussions here were largely limited to the public use of the term "socialism" in lieu of "democratic," "peaceful," and other softer adjectives. Officially, the SED confirmed that the plan for the future of the built environment in Dresden and elsewhere would find guidance in the Soviet experience. This plan, now "borne from the knowledge that every citizen in our Republic is ready to work and fight for the construction of our home, for the unity of our Fatherland, and for world peace" also served to represent a newfound unity, purpose, and prosperity in the city and region.<sup>55</sup> Political rhetoric intensified in this period, and the *Sächsische Zeitung* noted that as part of the larger effort to rebuild the GDR, the working class, bound together with farmers and progressive intelligentsia, now found itself resolved to lead a "ruthless campaign against all enemies of the peaceful, socialist rebuilding of Dresden."<sup>56</sup> According to the chief city architect, the "will of the people" now determined Dresden's appearance.<sup>57</sup>

By early 1953, the party claimed that a new Dresden radiated outward from the market square where the old "oppressor of the people" had once banned

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<sup>54</sup> "Das Neue Dresden Entsteht;" "Dresdens erste sozialistische Straße."

<sup>55</sup> "Beschluss über die Städtebauliche Planung der Stadt Dresden" 28. August 1952 (SAPMO-BArch DH 2 21413): Getragen von der Bewusstseinsstein, dass jeder Bürger unserer Republik bereit ist, für den Ausbau unserer Heimat, für die Einheit unseres Vaterlandes und für den Frieden in der Welt zu Arbeiten und zu kämpfen"

<sup>56</sup> "Baut das Sozialistische Dresden" *Sächsische Zeitung*, 13 Februar, 1953: "...ist entschlossen gegen alle Feinde des friedlichen, sozialistischen Aufbaus unserer Stadt einen rücksichtslosen Kampf zu führen."

<sup>57</sup> "Unsere Träume gehen in Erfüllung," *Sächsische Zeitung*, 13 Februar, 1953: "Wille der Bevölkerung; Unterdrücker des Volkes"

demonstrations.<sup>58</sup> Here at the market square, the regime had initiated the construction of “representative residential buildings” as part of a larger socialist buildup that would tie Dresden’s tradition of prosperity together with contemporary working class optimism.<sup>59</sup> The shops that had ringed the old town were to be replaced with those run by the socialist trade organization. These were to be bright and large enough to satisfy an advanced consumer culture, which, in the early 1950s, even the most ardent optimists must have recognized as wishful thinking.<sup>60</sup> Dresden, then, now functioned as a representation of SED power—its planning, the prosperity it promised, and the solidarity it would inspire. But, as we will see, the built environment was only one sphere where the regime projected its power.

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The thesis of this study, the key points of which will be elucidated below, is as follows: In the East German dictatorship, the SED represented publicness to its people while private citizens and their foreign accomplices challenged the regime through a rival public sphere, where in the summer of 1953, revolution became thinkable.

### **The Public Sphere in the GDR**

Any discussion of the public sphere begins with Jürgen Habermas’ classic thesis.<sup>61</sup> At first glance, the distance between East Germany in the 1950s and the early modern setting for Habermas’ research might appear an historical chasm in terms of

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<sup>58</sup> “Unsere Träume gehen in Erfüllung.”

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.: “Repräsentive Wohnbauten”

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

political structures and social and economic relationships, but there are some fundamental similarities. Early modern regimes and the SED (along with other dictatorial and authoritarian governments) similarly represented their legitimacy and power through an official public sphere, or representative publicness. As Habermas and others have shown, alongside this representative culture a new type of publicness emerged in the late eighteenth century in which participants deliberated the pressing issues of the period on equal terms and produced what we would recognize as public opinion.<sup>62</sup> More importantly, the new public sphere became a politically potent counterweight to state power and, in the French case, gave shape to a space where revolution became thinkable.<sup>63</sup> Still, the instances are quite different and applying this historical concept to the GDR requires explanation and alterations.

The original conception and translation of “public sphere” merits some discussion. Various scholars have challenged Habermas for romanticizing the democratic openness of these exchanges while critics also routinely note the clunky translation of *Öffentlichkeit* to “public sphere,” charging that this may have unfairly distorted his intended or original meaning. As Hartmut Kaeble points out, Habermas really meant for the term *Öffentlichkeit* (more precisely, *publicness*) to imply a development less particular, encompassing not only assembly and public meetings, but what Kaeble refers to as an “imagined translocal public sphere.”<sup>64</sup> This is a good starting point to apply

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<sup>62</sup> T.C.W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe 1660-1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Hartmut Kaeble, “The European Public Sphere” in *Building a European Public Sphere from the 1950s to the Present*, ed. Robert Frank et al. (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2010). Some historians including Joan Landes and Geoff Eley, among others, have suggested Habermas romanticizes the openness of the structure he refers to as the classical public sphere, and that a number of restrictions limited access to free and open debate of public concerns. See Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A contribution to the Critique

Habermas's historical conception to a modern industrialized society. Similar in function and effect, we will see that these spaces for the production and exchange of critical ideas existed not in salons or designated areas in the GDR but in the communities bound through the ether by radio in the form of radio waves and in ephemeral public and private exchanges. But moving from the eighteenth century to the twentieth with these ideas requires a number of other clarifications.

One way to consider the historical relationship between the concept of the bourgeois public sphere and its greater socio-political arrangement and that of the GDR is to identify a several key political analogies between late-eighteenth century absolutism and twentieth century dictatorship. Habermas argues that after the ideal-type public sphere disintegrated in the late nineteenth century, the process of what he called the "refeudalization of society" took place. This meant that the demarcation between public and private blurred as private interests took on political tasks and the state shouldered an increasing number of societal functions. Political participation waned, the vigor of the public sphere diminished, and the ills of mass society proliferated.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the Bolshevik Revolution completed the course of refeudalization, with some irony of course, by detangling the partially degraded public sphere from politics and once again plainly partitioning state and society.<sup>66</sup> Self-governing in name only, the one-party rule that emerged under the guise of democratic centralism and the promise of a peaceful and prosperous future had no space in its design for a truly adversarial public as it *already*

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of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Ed. Craig Calhoun, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 113-119.

<sup>65</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 231-2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 5.

represented the public.<sup>67</sup> Thus, as in the late Middle Ages, only one public figure existed, at least officially: the regime.<sup>68</sup> Of course, one only needs to consider the chants of “We are the People” in 1989 that brought the SED’s fundamental failures in this regard into sharp relief. To be fair, this was not the intention of socialist leaders who were at least professedly humanistic and of course did not see the arrangement in a negative light. Instead, socialist leadership viewed its official public sphere as a moderated forum (or, in more critical terms, a “simulated public sphere”) that could compromise, but only in limited ways as the party always scripted its public political debates.<sup>69</sup> The result though, especially in the GDR, if one “squints,” is an arrangement that resembles that of the early modern world in some respects, with a regime that represented publicness to its subjects, and private citizens who aired grievances publicly through (oftentimes) illicit channels. In other words, following re-feudalization, things came full circle with a regime that claimed and dominated publicness and a competing public opinion that functioned as a buffer to the government.

### **Representational Culture, the Official Public Sphere, and Legitimacy**

I borrow heavily, then, from Jürgen Habermas and those who have followed his line of thinking in conceiving of what I refer to as the official public sphere, based on the idea of “representative publicness.”<sup>70</sup> Tim Blanning’s expansion of this concept, which he similarly refers to as “representational culture” or, more clearly expressed as “re-presenting power *before* the people,” is likewise instructive and is the meaning I use

<sup>67</sup> Ray Rühle, *Entstehung von politischer Öffentlichkeit in der DDR in den 1980er Jahren am Beispiel von Leipzig* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2003), 35.

<sup>68</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Rühle, *Entstehung von politischer Öffentlichkeit*, 44-5.

<sup>70</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 7-11.

throughout this study.<sup>71</sup> Like Habermas, Blanning points to the court and reign of Louis XIV as the pinnacle of representational culture. This differed from the Middle Ages when representational culture existed in public places—streets and parks—before it shifted to the palace in the early modern period.<sup>72</sup> In the eighteenth century, Louis’ Versailles and European imitations such as, of course, Augustus’ Zwinger in Dresden came to embody this new representational culture that projected the confidence, vigor, stability, and legitimacy of the state. The court and its prince *were* the state, or as Bossuet put it, “the whole state is in the person of the prince. In him is found the will of the whole people.”<sup>73</sup>

A key to this early modern representational culture was *distance*: the figurative and literal space between royal authority and those who passively observed it. This is one area where early modern examples of representational culture and the representational culture of the SED diverge: as a socialist party, the SED presented itself as *close* to the people—*of the people*, and continuously strived to create *Verbindung* (a connection) with the masses through its propaganda. Unfortunately for the party, its claims of legitimacy rested on the appearance of democratic representation and popular support that never truly existed, although that did not stop the SED from creating an official public sphere or what several scholars have labeled a *Scheinöffentlichkeit*: a “phony public sphere” or world of appearances that falsely represented its claims to popular legitimacy and

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<sup>71</sup> Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture*, 6-7; 29-77.

<sup>72</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* 9-10; Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture*, 7.

<sup>73</sup> Jacques-Benigne Bossuet, *Politics Drawn from Holy Scripture* (edited by Patrick Riley) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 167. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture*, 32; 60-77.

functioned as representational culture, reupholstered and outfitted with electronic communication apparatuses for the modern era.<sup>74</sup>

The representational culture maintained by the SED existed not in the form of elaborate court ritual, but in city planning and the built environment (as we have seen), distinct forms of visual propaganda (*Sichtwerbungen*), choreographed demonstrations and, most notably, radio broadcasts designed to represent state power and popular support for the socialist program under Soviet guidance. As James Sheehan points out, over time, the princely court had lost its facility to represent the state in a corporeal and localized manner, and in the modern world, political communities came to exist as imagined communities. In other words, they stretched beyond visible representations, or, as Sheehan smartly puts it, “the state... must be imagined; that is to say, it becomes a projection of what we know on to what we don’t, what we can see on to what we can’t.”<sup>75</sup>

This study will show that within the official public sphere, the SED looked to establish an imagined community of socialist nations designed to bolster its claims to legitimacy. Revisiting Peukert’s three categories of analysis finds that the socialist regimes of Eastern Europe could not solely rely on tradition, a rational/legal foundation, or charisma for their legitimacy. Historians argue that the USSR and Eastern Bloc regimes instead based their legitimacy on historical and inevitable achievements along

<sup>74</sup> Rühle, *Entstehung von politischer Öffentlichkeit*; Walter Süß, “Revolution und Öffentlichkeit in der DDR,” *Deutschland Archiv* 23 (1990): 907-921; Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in central-eastern Europe* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1985).

<sup>75</sup> James J. Sheehan, “Introduction: Culture and Power during the Long Eighteenth Century” in *Cultures of Power in Europe during the Long Eighteenth Century*, Hamish Scott and Brendan Simms, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5-6.

with the symbolism of the “trappings of communist power,” the eternal promise of a better tomorrow, and, of course, the unspoken threat of Soviet intervention.<sup>76</sup>

One way in which the SED hoped to accomplish such a feat was through radio broadcasts, and more specifically, programming that incorporated the citizenry of the GDR into an international socialist community under Stalin’s leadership. In this way, the imagined community elucidated by Benedict Anderson—and the basis for this argument—must be modified. Anderson’s thesis holds that citizens imagine their nations as a “deep, horizontal comradeship” existing within boundaries that separate one’s national community from others.<sup>77</sup> When restricted to the boundaries of the nation state, such nationalist imaginings would certainly run counter to the internationalist tenets of Marxist ideology, but Anderson’s idea sheds light on the SED’s attempts to represent its legitimacy through radio and print. In doing so, the SED represented (though often grossly exaggerated) popular support from below for its policies. The citizens of the Eastern Bloc states, bound formally by a professed commitment to a socialist future and a steadfast solidarity in defense of it, became the greater imagined community to which East Germany now belonged. This new internationalism fit well with core socialist political impulses in that it cut across national boundaries, and it served East German leaders’ goals particularly well as it helped Germans move away from the brands of nationalism cultivated by the German Right since the late nineteenth century. Put differently, through radio and print, the SED projected the appearance of popular support

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<sup>76</sup> E. A. Rees, “The Sovietization of Eastern Europe,” in Apor, *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe*, 16-19; J. Pakulskii, “Legitimacy and Mass Compliance: Reflections on Max Weber and Soviet-Type Societies,” *British Journal of Political Science*, 16 (1986): 46; A. Jasinska-Kania, “Rationalization and Legitimation Crisis: The Relevance of Marxian and Weberian Works for an Explanation of the Political Order’s Legitimacy Crisis in Poland,” *Sociology*, 17 (1983): 161; Manfred G. Schmidt, *Sozialpolitik der DDR* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004), 26-7.

<sup>77</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 5-7.



through an internationalist approach that meshed with the anti-fascist profile of the Party.

Historians can also point to another historical parallel; the attempts of early modern states and the GDR to project power and legitimacy also derived from the regimes' need to conceal underlying uncertainties—or as Blanning points out, “the greater the doubts, the greater the need for display.”<sup>78</sup> And in the GDR there existed good reason for doubt—despite the unwavering confidence that characterized the SED's representations. As Mary Fulbrook notes, the words “not yet” (*noch nicht*) pepper the SED's internal record, evidence of the party's belief in a persistent and pervasive false consciousness infecting the masses that prevented the realization of its socialist vision.<sup>79</sup> And so it was with many of the SED's claims regarding the physical reconstruction of Dresden, the distribution of consumer goods, economic planning, and societal unity. The party's optimistic media productions meant for public consumption could conceal these sometimes obvious deficiencies, but the doubts surface with regularity throughout the regime's internal record. Thus, despite some appearances of a cohesive society and a popular government, cracks in this façade occasionally emerged in public spaces if one looked hard enough.

For instance, were a visitor to have walked down Grunaer Street—trumpeted as Dresden's first socialist street—in the spring of 1952, they would have seen anti-RIAS (Radio in The American Sector) signs hanging from the new housing blocks that inadvertently belied any claims to a media monopoly. “Trust your own strength – not the war monger – don't listen to RIAS!” read one of the signs while another urged residents

<sup>78</sup> Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture*, 32.

<sup>79</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 32.

to “Shut the door to RIAS lies.”<sup>80</sup> When considered along the lines of the old historical axiom that the enforcement of a law often verifies the existence of the outlawed activity, one could correctly conclude that RIAS enjoyed some measure of popularity in the GDR. As this study will show, such an assumption would have been a safe one. The notorious western station, a thorn in the GDR’s side until 1989, represented a powerful and relentlessly disruptive force that protested the existence of GDR and advocated for German unity.

### **Protest and Resistance in the GDR**

Germans protested Sovietization and all subsequent governments, institutions, and apparatuses to varying degrees from the earliest period of the Soviet occupation until 1989.<sup>81</sup> The nature and success of resistance remains a point of contention among historians, as does what we might even consider a “true” act of resistance. In the post-*Wende* period, during which the release of documents that have verified various types of discontent, questions of what constituted opposition and dissent have stirred academic debate. Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk has proposed a categorization of oppositional behavior that divides resistance (he uses the terms opposition and resistance interchangeably) into subcategories: passive refusal, social protest (partial strikes—which were always political, petitions), political dissent, and ultimately, mass protest which, of course, defined the summer of 1953 and fall of 1989.<sup>82</sup> Corey Ross has endorsed historian Hubertus Knabe’s similar, but more comprehensively weighted, ten-point system that

<sup>80</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, April 1952: “Vertraut eurer eigenen Kraft – nicht der der Kriegshetzer – hört keinen RIAS!”; “Riaslügen”

<sup>81</sup> The same could be said of any state, to different degrees.

<sup>82</sup> Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, “Von der Freiheit. Ich zu sagen. Widerständiges Verhalten in der DDR,” in *Zwischen Selbstbehauptung und Anpassung: Formen des Widerstands und der Opposition in der DDR*, Ulrike Poppe, Rainer Eckert, and Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, ed. (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1995), 91-115.

also concludes with open revolt.<sup>83</sup> Knabe's scale recognizes risk level for the participant, degree of criticism, and public versus private action.<sup>84</sup> Ross points out that such a system acknowledges the variability of protest and the way in which actions could escalate, proving that resistance was often a process, rather than an event. Gareth Dale distinguishes between resistance, which he sees as endemic in the GDR and often successful, and opposition, which sought political change—actions we really might only apply to several cases, notably 1953 and the 1980s. Thus, Dale found himself in disagreement with Ross, who argued that even in the final decade of the GDR's existence, activists really only opposed the regime, rather than communism itself, thus leading him to label this opposition as "limited."<sup>85</sup> In *Revolutions and Resistance in Eastern Europe* historians Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe acknowledge the competing definitions in the wide-ranging literature on the subject and choose to adhere to historian Lynne Viola's definition of resistance, which states that, "At its core, resistance involves opposition" and is wide ranging in its execution. Thus, issues of terminology remain unsettled in the literature. Still, the regime experienced two episodes of resistance that posed existential threats, in the summer of 1953 and the fall of 1989. The origins and character of the first incident concern much of this study.<sup>86</sup>

### **June 17 and Terminology**

An encyclopedia-like synopsis of the June 17 demonstrations might read as follows: In the summer of 1952, the SED initiated an accelerated buildup of socialism

<sup>83</sup> Ross, *The East German Dictatorship*.

<sup>84</sup> Hubertus Knabe, "Was war die "DDR-Opposition"? Zur Typologie des politischen Widerspruchs in Ostdeutschland," *Deutschland Archiv* 29 (1996): 184–198

<sup>85</sup> Gareth Dale, *Popular Protest in East Germany: Judgments on the Streets, 1945-1989* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>86</sup> Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe, eds., *Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe: Challenges to Communist Rule* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006).

along Stalinist lines. Economic planning emphasized heavy industry at the expense of consumer goods. “Bourgeois” institutions and those organizations deemed to be enemies of socialism by the Party (such as the Church) came under increased pressure to better align themselves with the regime’s atheistic model. The regime raised workers’ quotas to increase production in the factories and living standards and attitudes deteriorated; the regime had gone too far, too fast. Stalin passed in 1953 and his successors, recognizing the dire situation in the GDR, called on East German leadership to temper their efforts. On June 11, the SED announced the New Course, a planning package that scaled back much of the accelerated drive. Curiously, the heightened quotas for workers remained in place, rousing resentment among certain sectors of the workforce. In Berlin, construction workers began to organize strikes related to the norms in the capital and took to the streets on June 16. RIAS broadcasted the news that evening and the following morning, demonstrators took to the streets in over five hundred cities throughout the GDR, airing demands that had moved on from calls for reform to calls for revolution and reunification. That evening, the GDR’s police forces suppressed the demonstrations with help from the Soviets. While scholars generally agree with this much, points of contention remain, starting with just what we should *call* this event.

To be sure, a significant issue regarding the characterization of June 17 is the search for a term (or words) that most accurately convey the events that transpired. A number of terms have proved divisive or problematic. The SED typically used the terms like “anxiety,” “unrest,” “riots,” “enemy action,” “demonstrations,” and “(fascist) provocation” as shorthand for the collective actions of those who protested before settling

on the ominous-sounding “X Day”<sup>87</sup> The regime also used the word “unrest” to describe a range of behavior, from discussions hostile toward the state, to moderate confrontations with authorities in public spaces, while terming more boisterous public disturbances “riots.” Interestingly, terms “revolution” and “uprising,” appear more often when the regime is quoting demonstrators or opposing interpretations. The term “counterrevolution” appears in the SED’s analysis while some western observers and scholars adopted the term “failed revolution.” But the idea of “revolution” proves problematic using certain criteria. Historians’ hesitation to use the word probably begins with what Charles Maier noted as historians’ general conception of the events as “ephemeral and local.”<sup>88</sup> Such thinking likely encouraged scholars to shy away from a word that suggests a more substantial event. The term “revolution” raises other questions. For example, Theda Skocpol and Meyer Kestnbaum argue that the term, since its modern designation that developed out of the French Revolution (which has remained static since), requires, “sudden, fundamental, and *innovative* departure in a nation’s social and political life.”<sup>89</sup> Based on demonstrators’ calls for the removal of the SED and reunification, June 17 certainly presented the struggle for major political change, though perhaps that the event occurred so soon after Sovietization reminded observers that the existing system was not as entrenched as the Old Regime or the SED of 1989. Still, the temptation to use the term “failed revolution” might also derive from a pervasive (at least among most non-Party members) notion that revolution would have been *good*: the

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<sup>87</sup> “Mißstimmung,” “Unruhe,” “Ausschreitung,” “feindliche Aktion,” Demonstrationen,” “Provokation” “Der Tag X”

<sup>88</sup> Christian Ostermann, ed., *Uprising in East Germany 1953: The Cold War, the German Question, and the First Major Upheaval behind the Iron Curtain* (Budapest: Central European University Press 2000), xv.

<sup>89</sup> Theda Skocpol and Meyer Kestnbaum, “One Mars Unshackled: The French Revolution in World Historical Perspective,” in Ferenc Feher, ed., *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990), 13, italics in original.

euphoria of 1989 might have come thirty-six years earlier. As Jack Goldstone notes, the theory of revolutions has traditionally characterized them as vehicles for progress where, for example, revolutionaries have cast themselves (or been cast) as the proponents of a new and better order. The counterrevolutionaries, on the other hand, have been tagged as guardians of an undesirable and obsolete arrangement.<sup>90</sup> Or, as Eugene Weber quipped in a 1974 article, “one never hears of a counterrevolution in automobile design.”<sup>91</sup>

Other terms have become more established in the literature. Among the demonstrations’ sympathetic observers and public figures, the most common term used is “uprising” (*Aufstand*), though some historians prefer mass/popular uprising (*Volkserhebung*). The initially popular “workers’ uprising” fell out of favor as research uncovered the demonstrations’ broader participation. At least one historian has adopted “Uprising with revolutionary traits,” which, while an unwieldy phrase, is accurate in some ways.<sup>92</sup> Guido Knopp argues June 17 constituted an uprising, a peoples’ uprising, and a failed revolution that began as a workers’ revolt.<sup>93</sup> At this juncture, I propose that “mass demonstrations” fits best as a general phrase to describe what happened in the GDR on June 17, as those who took to the streets demonstrated a newfound political power.

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<sup>90</sup> Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991), xxiv.

<sup>91</sup> Eugene Weber, “Revolution? Counterrevolution? What Revolution?” *Journal of Contemporary History* 2 (1974): 3-47.

<sup>92</sup> Roger Engelmann and Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat: Eine Bestandsaufnahme zum 17. Juni 1953 – Analysen und Dokumente* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 11-12: “Volksaufstand mit revolutionären Zügen.”

<sup>93</sup> Guido Knopp, *Der Aufstand: 17. Juni 1953* (Hamburg: Edel Elements, 2013), 1-5.

### Interpretations of June 17, 1953

The SED leadership wasted no time in publically blaming the “putsch attempt” on reactionary agents, Western actors, saboteurs, and most of all, fascists. The events—strikes, protest marches, and a slew of demands that called for fundamental change in the GDR—were, in the official SED historiography, machinations, and fascist provocations that radiated from West Berlin. The SED argued that “Western agents” and fascists orchestrated the entire uprising and that it had been planned for some time (just how long is never stated). The official story that emerged in the days following the events within the SED held West Berlin “string pullers” (*die Drahtzieher*) responsible for the planning and initiating the unrest.<sup>94</sup> As Englemann and Kowalczyk point out, the possibility that a spontaneous escalation and politicization could grow out of a workers’ protest concerned with the issue of the heightened norms simply had no place in the imaginations of the regime’s leading functionaries.<sup>95</sup> The working, the regime argued, could not protest against a government of the working class and the day would be officially commemorated in the GDR as “X-Day.”<sup>96</sup>

Historians agree that the June 17 events constituted a significant moment of conflict in the brief history of the GDR. The literature surrounding the event has followed two significant trends. The first involved overturning the SED version’s of the event. Pre-*Wende* studies produced in the West such as Arnulf Baring’s *Uprising in East Germany*

<sup>94</sup> Englemann and Kowalczyk, “Einführende Bemerkungen” in *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat*, 8

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>96</sup> “Der Tag X”

from 1957 established an outline of the event, but did not have access to materials that could confirm the number of participants.<sup>97</sup>

After reunification, historians gained access to previously unavailable archival materials and began reconstructing just what *happened* in June of 1953 in the GDR. A wave of publications in the 1990s was followed by a flurry of literature for both popular and scholarly consumption for the fiftieth anniversary in 2003. The result of all this work is a basic consensus of what led to the uprising, how it transpired, how the authorities extinguished the revolt, and its political, economic, and social consequences. Naturally, disagreements and areas where further work is needed remain.

Historians have generally been in agreement concerning the long-term causes of the uprising. Heidi Roth and Karl Fricke have convincingly demonstrated in a superbly-documented case study of Saxony that the development of the East German state, which began with the postwar Sovietization process, contained in it the seeds of the June unrest. These included the Stalinization of the economy and a shift towards heavy industrialization, expropriation of private industries, and a lack of political legitimacy.<sup>98</sup> In his case study of Saalfeld, Andrew Port argues that the postwar housing situation, intensified by the presence of SAG (*Sowietische Aktiengesellschaft*) Wismut, refugees, and the evictions and requisitions prompted by the needs of the Maxhütte mill workers, led to endemic shortages and anger stemming from perceived (and real) privilege.<sup>99</sup> Ilko Sascha Kowalczuk suggests, along with Heidi Roth, that the difficult housing situation in Görlitz contributed to the long term frustrations, and also higher concentrations of people

<sup>97</sup> Arnulf Baring, *Uprising in East Germany: June 17, 1953* (Cornell University Press, 1972). The German language edition was published in 1957.

<sup>98</sup> Heidi Roth, *Der 17 Juni 1953 in Sachsen* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag - Schriften des Hannah-Arendt-Instituts für Totalitarismusforschung, 1999).

<sup>99</sup> Andrew Port, *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic* (New York: Cambridge, 2007).



that contributed to heightened levels of anger in that city.<sup>100</sup> In *Waffen gegen das Volk: Der 17. Juni 1953 in der DDR*, Torsten Deitrich utilizes police records to demonstrate that the military build-up (*Aufrüstung*), including the barracked police units (*Die Kasernierte Volkspolizei*) grew out of the SED's anti-fascist mentality and deep-rooted fear of Western imperialist ambitions that stemmed from Moscow. Diedrich also notes that the establishment of the European Defense Community in 1952 hastened the buildup, all of which funneled money away from civilian needs, lowering living standards for the population which he identifies as central to the events of June 17.<sup>101</sup>

Historians have unanimously identified the SED's decision at the Second Party Conference (July 1952) to lurch forward with the "planned construction of socialism" as a critical event leading to the uprising. The above-noted military buildup constituted what Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk deemed the highest phase of Stalinism in the GDR, accompanied by the construction of social building blocks along the lines of the *Führerprinzip*. The establishment of these building blocks, argues Kowalczyk, led to attacks on the Church, increased persecution and arrests of "subversive elements," and tightened border security, which instilled fear among intellectual classes of isolation from international peer groups.<sup>102</sup>

Historians are in general agreement that the immediate political causes of the uprising can be traced to three related events: the SED's decision to raise production norms in early 1953, the implementation of the New Course, which relaxed or canceled much of the rushed socialist build-up from the summer of 1952 following orders from

<sup>100</sup> Ilko Kowalczyk, *17. Juni 1953 - Volksaufstand in der DDR. Ursachen - Abläufe - Folgen* (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2003); Heidi Roth, *Der 17. Juni 1953 in Görlitz* (Bautzen: Lusatia Verlag, 2003).

<sup>101</sup> Torsten Diedrich, *Waffen gegen das Volk: Der 17. Juni 1953 in der DDR* (München: Oldenbourg, 2003).

<sup>102</sup> Engelmann and Kowalczyk, *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat*.

Stalin's concerned successors in Moscow, and the admission of error(s) by the SED coupled with the decision to *retain* the heightened workers norms. Kowalczuk points out that this acknowledgement of error had profound and unintended consequences that affected SED leadership in a variety of ways. He argues that functionaries who had been responsible for carrying out the SED's orders lost their credibility with the population and found themselves in a state of uncertainty. Some, he points out, continued on as mindless followers of the SED while others expressed hope for the reestablishment of the SPD. Roth and Kowalczuk note the role of rumors (particularly those that alleged Ulbricht's flight and the withdrawal of Soviet troops) in fostering excitement and hope among residents and energizing workers. This development, according to Kowalczuk, coincided with the permanent angst among the general population, creating a dangerous situation for a regime revealing weakness. This study will expand on this subject.

Historians have rightly observed Berlin as the epicenter of the revolt, while later publications, including several comprehensive regional studies have demonstrated that unrest had a far greater reach.<sup>103</sup> To be sure, all studies point to the construction workers' barracks in the Stalinallee where personnel planned the demonstrations that set off the uprising, which then swelled as the demonstrators marched through the city. Dietrich, Roth, and Kowalczuk take note of the role of communications—a defense of the decision to retain the norms in *die Tribune*, and the spread of the strikers' activities on RIAS—in fostering the spread of discontent, although the extent of the role played by the latter

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<sup>103</sup> There are numerous regional studies available, see for example, Andrea Herz, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte Thüringens: Der 17. Juni 1953 in Thüringen* (Thüringen: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2003); Heike Schmidt, *Der 17. Juni 1953 in Rostock* (Berlin: Wiss. Verl. Berlin, 2003); Lutz Müller, *Fünfeinhalb Tapfere und eine Stadt in Aufruhr. Dresden und der 17. Juni 1953* (Leipzig: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2003).

remains a point of contention. Dietrich also has shown that what began as peaceful protests often turned violent when demonstrators became aggressive, although he notes that violence was initially directed mainly towards symbolic government buildings and prisons that housed political “criminals.” Likewise, Roth has articulated the notion that events generally began in a peaceful manner throughout Germany on the morning of the seventeenth, as striking workers, who were often led by experienced strike leaders, organized marches. However, events often became unpredictable when protestors took to the streets and riled-up students and young people joined them. Dietrich argues the outbreak of violence can in many cases be traced to the manner in which police and military forces were deployed, either in insufficient numbers or by late arrival at sites of disorder due to underdeveloped communications apparatuses and protocols. The result was that forces agitated the crowds, yet were unable to suppress the agitation. This would seem to support Kowalczyk and Roth’s assertion that the regime’s ability to deploy and station sufficient numbers troops to Dresden *beforehand* helped prevent the level of violence seen in some other locales.<sup>104</sup>

Torsten Dietrich has characterized the uprising as primarily a workers’ revolt, yet he concedes that it eventually inspired large cross sections of the population to take action. This follows a larger trend wherein historians have expanded the dimensions of the uprising to illustrate a spirit that extended beyond the factory floor and reflected deeper social and political frustrations. Notably, Gary Bruce has attempted to shift emphasis away from the workers and economic concerns and instead suggests that the primarily *political* motives of official dissenters—the Blockparties—and non-communists inspired the events of 17. June. By examining party archives of the SED,

<sup>104</sup> Roth, *Der 17. Juni. 1953 in Sachsen*; Engelmann and Kowalczyk, *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat*.

LDPD, and eastern CDU, he demonstrates that the SED's destruction of any true opposition parties and an independent judiciary fostered political antagonism across large sections of the citizenry. Thus, Bruce is able to show that the numerous political demands made throughout the GDR that called for removal of the SED regime in the latter half of June stemmed primarily from political discontent, rather than economic aggravation. In the end, he sees the revolt as an anti-communist movement—an assertion to which most scholars would not be hostile.

Roth's detailed study of the June events in Saxony has emphasized several important aspects of the uprising. A central contention advanced (successfully) by Roth is that the uprising could take on quite different characters based on local conditions, contingencies, and personalities. For example in Leipzig, the police's decision to raid the Free German Youth's headquarters energized its occupants and sent youths into the streets, radicalizing the events in that city. She has also argued that local leadership in some places, such as Karl Marx-Stadt, responded to the morning's strike activity more delicately than the leadership of other cities, thus effectively tamping down worker discontent and rebellious energies. While Roth's meticulous reconstruction of the events in Dresden is an admirable and useful one, she leaves considerable room for further discussion regarding the role of rumor, radio, and the contentious issue of nationalism on June 17.<sup>105</sup> This study, which approaches the June 17 events with a theoretical framework in place and focuses on the local preconditions (Roth begins her survey on June 17), thus seeks to build on Roth and others' empirical research.

This study will argue that the 1953 demonstrations represented the first modern, electronically transmitted mass demonstration, a critical historical development that

<sup>105</sup> Roth, *Der 17. Juni 1953 in Sachsen*, 587-624.

allowed events to move at an unprecedented pace. For instance, while historians nearly universally reference the way in which the 1848-49 revolutions “spread like wildfire,” the events still unfolded rather slowly by twenty-first century standards.<sup>106</sup> The banquets that led to street demonstrations in Paris on February 22 spread eastward, triggering demonstrations in Munich on March 4.<sup>107</sup> The news, which took days to travel between cities, meant that “wildfire” did not appear in Vienna until March 13, nearby Budapest two days later, Venice two days after that, and Milan and Berlin still one day later.<sup>108</sup> The diffusion of revolt in 1918 in Germany took similar amounts of time to travel between cities. Strike waves began that summer in the north leading to the sailors’ revolt in Kiel on November 2 and unrest in the form of mass demonstrations spread to other major German cities on November 7.<sup>109</sup>

The widespread adoption of personal radios prior to the June 17 demonstrations showcased how this time lag no longer existed in industrialized areas. While large-scale demonstrations in Berlin took place prior to the nation-wide uprising, the June 17 demonstrations unfolded simultaneously throughout the nation. Participant and activist (in Berlin) Rainer Hildebrandt rightfully noted in a 1954 article that until this point, experts insisted that an uprising in an entrenched, totalitarian system had hitherto proved impossible. That all seemed to change, he argued, suggesting that we had entered a new

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<sup>106</sup> Jonathon Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848-1851* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 144, 114-15; Kurt Weyland, “The Diffusion of Revolution: ‘1848’ in Europe and Latin America,” *International Organization Foundation* 3 (2009): 411-13. A simple internet query or google book search confirms this assertion for the English and German language literature.

<sup>107</sup> Sperber, *The European Revolutions*, 114.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.; Weyland, “The Diffusion of Revolution,” 412.

<sup>109</sup> Gabriel Kuhn, Ed., *All Power to the Councils: A Documentary History of the German Revolution of 1918-1919* (Wales: Merlin Press, 2012), xxv, 27.

era—one in which a “leaderless” uprising had become possible.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, he suggested that, in this new era, when forty demonstrators took the streets, mere hours later, ten thousand would be present. Now, if everyone demonstrated simultaneously, he contended, power in numbers would lead to [political] power.<sup>111</sup> Hildebrandt’s last two points receive further consideration in the present study. On one hand, the June 17 demonstrations proved a nation-wide demonstration could unfold with unprecedented rapidity—a phenomenon that has, in recent years, reached new levels with “flash mobs” and “critical mass” events, whereby groups of people coordinate a sudden, unexpected, and dominating occupation (typically) of a public space. His second point, that simultaneity and the power in numbers bred confidence and power can also be expanded to include the role of radio.

### **The Question of Spontaneity**

The supposed spontaneity of the demonstrations that broke out on June 17 has been categorized as spontaneous throughout much, if not nearly all the current historiography and this characterization deserves more attention. But, this is also a point where modern historiographical consensus and the former official East German interpretation diverge. Since 1953, observers and historians have noted the inherent spontaneity of the demonstrations. Dealing with this word can be a bit tricky, as one is required to deduce one meaning of the word out of several based on the context in which it originally appears. For instance, when describing an uprising or demonstration as spontaneous, the term generally means “unplanned” or “without preparations.”

<sup>110</sup> Rainer Hildebrandt, “17 Juni: Großer Tatsachenbericht,” *IBZ*, no. 25 (June, 1954). Hildebrandt also founded the Kampfgruppe gegen Unmenschlichkeit and the Checkpoint Charlie Museum.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

Considering that the word translates directly between English and German, we might also add “unprompted,” or “without premeditation or outside impetus.” As early as June 17, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency along with the State Department reportedly accepted information that the riots in East Berlin represented “the spontaneous result of a planned demonstration” the previous day.<sup>112</sup> Contemporary interpretations have continued to note the spontaneity of the demonstrations. Gerhard Ritter points out that the “organization of the spontaneous Revolt” began in the factories with elected strike committees.<sup>113</sup> Engelmann and Kowalczyk argue that despite RIAS’s contributions to the uprising, political demands “developed in many places spontaneously.”<sup>114</sup> Along these lines, Fricke contends that “the strikes, demonstrations, and unrest on June 17 broke out spontaneously,” but for all their spontaneity and regional differences, a general pattern emerges in which workers’ demands regarding the norms turned into political demands.<sup>115</sup> The “spontaneity” of the demonstrations, according to Fricke, also meant that organized preparations and central leadership failed to materialize.<sup>116</sup> Roth notes the “spontaneous” origins of the work stoppages and demonstrations in Saxony, although she also points out that workers had become aware of the events in Berlin on the way to work—a key issue.<sup>117</sup> Despite this, she offers RIAS a smaller role than some interpretations. Participants and witnesses, too, occasionally characterize the events as spontaneous, though occasionally disagreement appears, for example, one student who later recalled of the demonstration in Dresden: “Whether it was an organized

<sup>112</sup> Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, 210.

<sup>113</sup> Gerhard Ritter, “Eine historische Ortsbestimmung” in Roger Engelmann and Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat: Eine Bestandsaufnahme zum 17. Juni 1953*, 29.

<sup>114</sup> Engelmann Kowalczyk, “Einführende Bemerkungen” in *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat*, 13: “Politische Forderungen entwickelten sich vielerorts spontan.”

<sup>115</sup> Karl Wilhelm Frick in Roth, *Der 17 Juni in Sachsen*, 45, 48-50.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

<sup>117</sup> Roth, *Der 17 Juni 1953 in Sachsen*, 587.

demonstration, I can no longer say. But I think so.”<sup>118</sup> Of course, others disagree and one always finds it challenging to refute what a participant remembers happening—especially when it supports, in some ways, the SED interpretation and it serves as a helpful reminder that participants’ experiences, of course, varied. Still, an investigation of the demonstrations’ “spontaneity” proves revealing and one could argue that historians have been overzealous in dismissing the SED’s major interpretations as fabrications.

Another related task upon which historians have yet to reach agreement concerns the June 17 events’ historical categorization. Jonathan Sperber has rightfully noted that the events of June 1953 remain difficult for historians to categorize and contextualize, partially because of the events’ diminished standing in popular memory.<sup>119</sup> One might also note that the problems faced by citizens in the Dresden region and elsewhere in the GDR were not unique or memorable ones: low wages, a government that, according to its critics, bungled and misdirected state resources, and the existence of oppressive state apparatuses. Citizens saw a regime that kowtowed to a foreign power that undermined (what they perceived as) a more authentic nationalism and had made the worst of what still seemed to be a temporary arrangement.<sup>120</sup> But the methods with which they communicated their frustrations in many ways reveal just as much about the period and place as the actual demands.

The SED’s contention that the demonstrations had been planned far in advance is not far-fetched when considered more closely and from a different perspective. In a

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<sup>118</sup> Peter Lange and Sabine Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen berichten: Protokoll eines Aufstands* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), 159: “Ob es so etwas wie eine organisierte Kundgebung, kann ich nicht mehr sicher sagen. Ich glaube aber schon”

<sup>119</sup> See Jonathan Sperber, “17 June 1953: Revisiting a Revolution,” *German History* no.4 (Summer 2004): 619–643.

<sup>120</sup> The SED still openly and regularly advocated reunification. The “New Course” and the popular belief that things would soon change helped reinforced this belief.



recent edited volume, Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein have spearheaded an investigation into the notion of what they have termed the “revolutionary script.” They argue that self-conscious revolutionary actors work from an historically informed revolutionary script that serves as a model for action. The actors might deviate here and there and improvisation is frequent, but the script provides an outline and a general narrative. The authors locate the invention of the first modern revolutionary script in France between 1789 and the Congress of Vienna. Following this period of upheaval, to proclaim a situation revolutionary or oneself a revolutionary meant carrying out a performance that followed the established script. The authors further note that after a crisis, whether financial, political, or military, a “critical mass of actors opts for a revolutionary diagnosis” and the actions that follow tend to follow a similar pattern.<sup>121</sup> Silvana Toska points out that the periods prior to revolution often witness the formation of a “revolutionary culture” whereby certain groups try to exploit unhappiness and establish a revolutionary consciousness. The first act in the script calls for reform before actors move to calls for revolution. The present study will examine the spaces where the revolutionary mentalities and scripts of the June 17 demonstrations originated.<sup>122</sup>

### **The Rival Public Sphere**

In Dresden, revolutionary mentalities developed in what I call the rival public sphere. The rival public sphere, consisting of unsanctioned communications including foreign broadcasting, rumors, and pamphleteering, and other uncontrollable strata, served

<sup>121</sup> Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein, eds, *Scripting Revolution*, 1-9.

<sup>122</sup> Silvana Toska, “The Multiple Scripts of the Arab Revolutions,” in Baker and Edelstein, *Scripting Revolution*, 327-331; Keith Michael Baker, “Enlightenment and Revolution in France: Old Problems, Renewed Approaches,” *Journal of Modern History* 53 (1981): 281.

as a counterweight to SED hegemony and emitted authentic public opinion that challenged the credibility of the government.

Scholars have put forth several arguments regarding the existence of a public sphere or spheres in the GDR and in its fellow Soviet satellite states. Some also argue that no genuine public sphere existed or could have existed in a closed system, but that citizens could retreat in private “niches,” though this concept is probably more applicable to later the decades in the GDR.<sup>123</sup> Some scholars have pointed out that the public sphere had the potential to challenge the regime in the latter half of the GDR’s existence. For instance, Peter Hohendahl has argued that a public sphere did indeed exist in what was a closed society, and that a “revolutionary public sphere” developed in the turbulent period leading up to the peaceful revolutions of 1989.<sup>124</sup> Rühle comes to a similar conclusion with his study, wherein he attempts to answer the question of how a political publicness developed alongside the official or simulated public sphere. His research leads him to conclude that no bourgeois public sphere existed in the GDR because the pre-conditions—a private economy and the search for money and power—did not exist in the GDR (though this does require one to disregard black or shadow markets).<sup>125</sup> Instead, Rühle suggests the existence of a “second public sphere,” independent from the state in the 1980s alongside the official one.<sup>126</sup> Originating in the Protestant Church before

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<sup>123</sup> The notion of a “niche society” comes from Günter Gaus, who argued in *Wo Deutschland liegt: Eine Ortsbestimmung* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1987) that citizens in the GDR retreated into private niches beyond the reach of the state where they could express authentic opinion – similar to the notion of *kleine Öffentlichkeiten*.

<sup>124</sup> Walter Süß, “Revolution und Öffentlichkeit in der DDR, 911; Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Recasting the Public Sphere,” *October* 73 (1995): 27-54.

<sup>125</sup> Rühle, *Entstehung von politischer Öffentlichkeit*, 59. See also Jürgen Habermas, “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere,” in Craig Calhoun, Ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 430. Here, Habermas reminds us that “the structural transformation of the public sphere is embedded in the transformation of state and economy.”

<sup>126</sup> Rühle, *Entstehung von politischer Öffentlichkeit*, 14: “zweite Öffentlichkeit”

establishing networks and becoming a national network, this space found impetus in changing societal values (*Wertewandel*) and a generational break that led to heightened conflict in the 1980s.<sup>127</sup> The search for venues outside the home, then, wherein authentic and anonymous debate could take place led to the formation of “communicative societies” in the Church. Rühle contends that these private exchanges in what he labels the “church public sphere” also functioned as identity-forming exercises and fashioned a connection between this public (second) public sphere and the lived-in-world and a buffer between the second public sphere and the official or simulated public sphere.<sup>128</sup> The second public sphere transformed into a counter public sphere and became intra-regional through calls for solidarity, signed lists, and declarations of protest.<sup>129</sup> Despite the prominent role of the church and the peripheral role assigned to Western media (more on this shortly), Rühle’s model serves as a starting point for a framework of the public sphere in the early 1950s.

Similar to the notion of broader, translocal public spheres proposed by Hartmut Kaeble, Gabor T. Rittersporn, Jan Behrends, and Malte Rolf suggest that in order to locate a public sphere in Soviet-type societies we must first dispense with government-generated categories of analysis (such as “peasant” or “intellectual”) and broaden our search for spaces where social relations formed. In other words, “secret spaces” where individuals could meet privately yielded insufficient results to offer a useful space of inquiry and they called on historians to consider *any* framework provided by the state. That is to say, any place where the state allowed people to come together such as city

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 53-4. This dovetails with Catherine Epstein’s suggestion that the SED had become a fossilized party clinging to outmoded ideals.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 56. “Kommunikationsgesellschaften”; “Kirchen Öffentlichkeit”

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 68-9; 115-16.

squares or shops functioned as a public sphere.<sup>130</sup> In other words, we can simply locate a public sphere in the same places where the party expected to educate its citizens. This stems partially from necessity, as the pervasiveness of the party meant that arenas free from state intervention were exceedingly rare while social standings and political leanings prevented the exchanges that distinguish a free society.<sup>131</sup>

Monica R uthers suggests a useful model based on a general dichotomy of communications, with legal or “formal communications model” on one hand (or a representative type) and the “informal communications model” on the other.<sup>132</sup> This informal sector then supplemented the formal sector in a fashion similar to the way a shadow economy augmented the planned economy. R uthers points out that informal networks formed and people spread information by word of mouth among friends, in the workplace and at school—places that became sources of information and as R uthers puts it, came to resemble the bourgeois salons, coffeehouses, and reading societies of the nineteenth century.<sup>133</sup> Other forms of informal communications included vandalism, violence, refusal of participation, laziness, sabotage, graffiti, song, and jokes, samizdat, and the consumption of foreign literature. Also pertinent to this study, R uthers notes that the Stalinist regime withheld or falsified information as a method of control during the

<sup>130</sup> Gabor T. Rittersporn et al., “Exploring Public Spheres in Regimes of the Soviet Type – A possible Approach (Introduction)” in Gabor T. Rittersporn, et al, Eds. *Sph ren von  ffentlichkeit in Gesellschaften sowjetischen Typs: zwischen partei-staatlicher Selbstinszenierung und kirchlichen Gegenwelten / Public Spheres in Soviet-Type Societies: Between the Great Show of the Party-State and Religious Counter-Cultures* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003), 23-5.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-7.

<sup>132</sup> Monica R uthers, “ ffentlicher Raum und gesellschaftliche Utopie: Stadtplanung, Kommunikation und Inszenierung von Macht in der Sowjetunion am Beispiel Moskaus zwischen 1917 und 1964,” in *Sph ren von  ffentlichkeit in Gesellschaften sowjetischen Typs*, 72-76. *Das formelle Kommunikationsmodell; Das informelle Kommunikationsmodell.* While the above categorizations are based on Soviet life in Moscow, the general arrangement can be imposed quite easily on other soviet-type societies, including, of course, the early GDR. R uthers also points out that the regime could also use informal types of communication to demonstrate its power such as intimidation and extralegal violence.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

revolution from above. Secrecy, too, then, though practiced covertly so as not to betray the party's stance as the embodiment of the people (a contrast with absolutist regimes that also employed this technique), was part of the regime's communications repertoire.<sup>134</sup> Such paradoxes were, according to Rütters, characteristic of the "neo-feudal Stalinist system of rule."<sup>135</sup> Secrecy did lead, however, to rumors and to an "unrefined" public sphere and public opinion—a development that will get empirical treatment in this study.<sup>136</sup> While Rütters imposes these categories of analysis on Soviet Moscow, the general arrangement can be profitably applied to the GDR, especially in the case of rumors, which formed one component of the rival public sphere.<sup>137</sup>

## Rumors

"Rumors are to everyday life in the GDR as bread is to the consumption of food," wrote regime opponent and historian Bernd Eisenfeld.<sup>138</sup> Though there is little consensus regarding how we might define, categorize, and analyze rumors, scholars have certainly recognized that they are a troublesome and powerful phenomena. Jean-Noël Kapferer reasons that rumors represent the first type of mass media and despite sharing space with print, radio, and electronic media, have lost none of their influence. While agreeing with other scholars who regard rumors as bits of information or news relating to contemporary affairs, he also notes that rumors exist to convince, rather than stir contemplation or

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<sup>134</sup> Nor did secrecy jibe with the materialist world outlook as it harkened back to the notion of a cryptic Christian God.

<sup>135</sup> Rütters, "Öffentlicher Raum und gesellschaftliche Utopie," 77: "neo-feudale Stalinistische Herrschaftssystem"

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.: "Unqualifizierten"

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. Note that this puts the "informal communications model" somewhat at odds with Rühle's arrangement as he sees foreign broadcasting as having little to do with the "second public sphere."

<sup>138</sup> Bernd Eisenfeld, "Gerucheküche der DDR – Die Disinformationspolitik des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit," *WerkstaatGeschichte* 15 (1996) 41: "Gerüchte gehörten in der DDR zum Alltag wie das Brot zum Essen."

deliberation. And Kapferer also notes that for too long, researchers have emphasized false rumors, pointing to numerous cases of *true* rumors such as the health issues of Reagan, Brezhnev, Andropov, and Pompidou. Furthermore, he notes that rumors demand categorization that separates them from the authentic diffusion of news.<sup>139</sup> Sociologist Tamotsu Shibutani categorizes rumors as “improvised” news borne from collective conversation. He and others have pointed out that earlier thinkers painted rumors as the pathological manifestations of “rumor mongers” rather than something endemic to all societies—especially in times of unrest or social strain.<sup>140</sup> Along these lines, Timothy Tackett views rumors as “statements communicated in times of uncertainty, ambiguity, and perceived dangers that help people explain the situation they are confronting and develop responses.”<sup>141</sup>

Cass Sunstein argues that people accept false rumors as true based on our hopes and fears—emotions that certainly run high in times of great uncertainty. He sees rumors spreading in the form of a “cascade,” as we tend to rely on others for information and quite often these are individuals who think like we do. The most significant impediment to such occurrences is the availability of impartial information, which was not easy to access in Stalinist states.<sup>142</sup> Such a conception of rumors offers us insight into the volatile situation in Dresden in the days before the June 17 Uprising. As this study will show, this last theory of the rumor is certainly reminiscent of one put forth by the SED in its

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<sup>139</sup> Jean-Noël Kapferer, *Rumors: Uses, Interpretations, and Images* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 1-10.

<sup>140</sup> Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (Indianapolis/New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), 8; Terry Ann Knopf, *Rumors, Race and Riots* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006).

<sup>141</sup> Timothy Tackett, “Rumors and Revolution: The Case of the September Massacres” *French History and Civilization* 4 (2011): 56.

<sup>142</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, What Can Be Done* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 2009), 1-11.

analyses of improvised news. Above all, such improvised news helps explain or make sense of a situation based on the available information. Tabitha Leigh Ewing has argued for the historicity of rumors and their presence in the historical record. While refuting the conception of rumors as pathological, she adopts Clifford Geertz's contention that rumors, with all their inventiveness should be construed as "imaginative works built out of social materials" and sees them and their production and transmission as a form of political participation.<sup>143</sup> Drawing from these studies, this study will show that rumors, as part of the rival public sphere, constituted improvised news with varying degrees of veracity and allowed for a distinct form of political participation in a dictatorship.

While rumors have received only passing attention from scholars of East German protest, other more visible acts and institutions have found ample space in the literature.<sup>144</sup> GDR-specific forms of protest to add to Ruther's categories above included leaving and visiting the West, though whether this constituted an act of protest has stirred some historiographical contention. We can also add notable outside groups that actively countered the SED (at least in the early 1950s) such as the Investigative Committee of Liberal Jurists (Untersuchungsausschuss freiheitlicher Juristen), the Taskforce against Inhumanity (Kampfgruppe gegen Unmenschlichkeit), the SPD-Eastern Office (SPD-OSTBURO), and finally, the notorious RIAS.<sup>145</sup>

<sup>143</sup> Ewing, *Rumor, Diplomacy, and War in Enlightenment Paris*, 1-17; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 449. In the passage cited by Ewing, Geertz is referencing cultural forms, which he argues should be treated as "texts, or imaginative works."

<sup>144</sup> For a good example of rumors in the early GDR, see Lars-Broder Keil and Sven Felix Kellerhof, *Gerichte machen Geschichte: Folgenreiche Falschmeldungen im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2013), especially chapter five for the role of rumor in the *Amikäfer* controversy.

<sup>145</sup> Ulrike Poppe et al, "Opposition, Widerstand und Widerständiges Verhalten in der DDR. Forschungsstand – Grundlinien – Probleme," in Ulrike Poppe et al, *Zwischen Selbstbehauptung und Anpassung: Formen des Widerstandes und der Opposition in der DDR* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1995), 16-19.

Franziska Kuschel's recent study is a superb examination of RIAS and other western outlets as key players in the GDR's media landscape.<sup>146</sup> Like Rühle, she notes that Habermas's bourgeois public sphere and the open, rational, and critical debate it engendered is not applicable to the GDR with its governmental restrictions. Instead, she introduces the framework of a "rival public sphere." Building on the work of sociologists Jürgen Gerhards and Friedhelm Neidhardt and communications scholar Michael Meyen, she further breaks down the categories of publicness as follows: 1) arenas of mass media, 2) organized groups, 3) smaller, unorganized encounters, and 4.) internal—for instance letters and petitions composed by an individual. RIAS, she argues, which constituted one of the two major mass mediums in the GDR, influenced the exchanges that took place within the other three categories. For example, through communal listening (and later, watching), friends, colleagues, and students discussed, during chance encounters, the information they heard listening to RIAS.<sup>147</sup>

The present study builds on these ideas with an empirical assessment of their manifestations in the Dresden region. The rival sphere here constituted local and national arenas for the exchange of information outside of the official public sphere and allowed for the production of what we can recognize as authentic public opinion. Composed of the exchange of illicit ideas and critiques that took the form of rumors, illegal leaflets, and other types of informal communications. The records evaluated here bring to light the SED's very real fear that residents undermined the regime when authorities were not

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<sup>146</sup> Franziska Kuschel, *Schwarz Hörer, Schwarzseher und Heimliche Leser: Die DDR und die Westmedien* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016), 10: "Konkurrierende Öffentlichkeit"; David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 34-5, 45-50. Bathrick identifies three spheres of publicness: one official, one "counter," and another formulated by the media based in West Germany.

<sup>147</sup> Kuschel, *Schwarz Hörer, Schwarzseher und Heimliche Leser*, 10-14.



present (and sometimes when they were). Ultimately, the criticism, exchanges, and, ideas that circulated within these uncontrollable strata allowed the regime to become challengeable in the summer of 1953. Thus, we will see that in June of 1953, the rival public sphere provided the space where revolution became thinkable and cultivated the script for its enactment.

The study is divided into five chapters. Chapter one examines the official public sphere and the methods used by the SED to represent publicness and power in the Dresden Region. Drawing on the concepts of representational power hitherto outlined, I insist that the SED's goals bore semblance to those used by early modern rulers, and that the ensuing representative publicness should be also understood as a modern and distinctly Cold War solution to the age-old challenge of establishing and maintaining legitimacy. The chapter will examine the re-founding of domestic radio stations in Dresden, the popularity they enjoyed in the region, and the programming they aired. Analysis of this programming will show that the SED aimed to construct an imagined community of listeners and supporters in national and international realms, thus bolstering their claims of popular approval. This chapter also offers an analysis of the visual methods used by the SED to project power into public space and concludes with an exploration of Stalin's death and the opportunities it presented the regime to represent its authority through choreographed display, ritual, and the publicization of such activities.

Chapter two examines the rival public sphere in the Dresden region. As a source of authentic public opinion, the rival public sphere challenged the vision and planning of the SED and thus its authority and legitimacy. Rumors, and to a lesser extent, leaflets, also served to undermine the government and adopted an increasingly rebellious tone

following Stalin's death. The chapter will also examine RIAS's programming, which delivered news that a large portion of the population in the GDR deemed to be more credible than that delivered by the GDR and stimulated conversations and action that undermined its government. Furthermore, it will show that through this programming, RIAS built an imagined community of all Germans that was integrated into the West. The survey concludes with an analysis of how RIAS and rumor conceived of Stalin's death and the GDR's future in March, 1953.

Chapter three surveys the volatile period between the announcements of the New Course and the eve of the June 17 demonstrations. Research here shows that RIAS and especially rumors challenged the regime's ability to maintain an appearance of authority and misinformation—often construed as disinformation by the SED—whittled away at the prestige of the GDR's leaders and brought about a crisis of legitimacy for the government. Furthermore, analysis will show that the narratives of real events took on new life in the imaginations of residents and the chapter will demonstrate that this allowed revolution to become thinkable: the rival public sphere became a revolutionary public sphere.

Chapter four examines how East Germans communicated knowledge of events on June 16 and 17. Research here investigates the function of rumors and radio in shaping collective action as well as RIAS's role in endowing the demonstrations with all-German imaginings, which contributes to the debate surrounding the role of nationalism. Chapter five surveys the aftermath of the demonstrations and considers how the regime projected authority in the official public sphere and its opposition challenged such efforts in the rival public sphere.

## Chapter One

### Representational Culture in the Dresden Region, 1945-1953

*“Dresden and Leipzig radio stations appeared as the primary representatives of Middle-Germany Radio, and therefore, representatives of Saxony’s political, intellectual, and cultural life, once again, through a tribune of the airwaves.”*

-Senior Councilor, Department of Popular Education – Radio, GDR<sup>1</sup>

*“Who represents Dresden in the airwaves, who carries the name of our city throughout the entire world? It’s our regional station, Radio Dresden!”*

- Sächsische Zeitung<sup>2</sup>

*“It must appear democratic, but everything must be in our hands.”*

-Walter Ulbricht<sup>3</sup>

*“Radio—a decisive organ of state power.”*

- Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands<sup>4</sup>

“A bleak stone desert.”<sup>5</sup> So Dresden appeared to one West German journalist in 1951 who regretted that a city noted for its beauty and cultural history had suffered such

<sup>1</sup> Oberregierungsrat (Doberenz), Abt. Allg.Volkserziehung – Rundfunk – an den Betriebsratsvorsitzenden beim Landessender Dresden, 7 Dezember, 1947 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4521, 0117): “Die Sender Dresden und Leipzig traten als erste Repräsentanten des Mitteldeutschen Rundfunks und somit als Repräsentanten des politischen,- des geistigen und des kulturellen Lebens Sachsens wieder auf die Tribüne des Funks im Äther.”

<sup>2</sup> “Unser Landessender – eine Visitenkarte Dresdens” *Sächsische Zeitung* March 22, 1957 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4512/0024): “Wer vertritt Dresden im Äther, wer trägt den Namen unserer Stadt in aller Welt Hinaus? Es ist unser Landessender Dresden!”

<sup>3</sup> Karl-Wilhelm Fricke, *Der Wahrheit verpflichtet: Texte aus fünf Jahrzehnten zur Geschichte der DDR* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2000), 366: “Es muß demokratisch aussehen, aber wir müssen alles in der Hand haben.”

<sup>4</sup> “Vorlage Betr.: Verbesserung der Rundfunkarbeit - Beschlussvorschlag,” Sekretariat des ZK Agitation, Der/Wi, 23.11.51 (SAPMO-BArch DR 6 Nr. 314): “Der Rundfunk ein entscheidenes Organ der Staatsmacht”

destruction in wartime bombing. Making their way through the city, the author's group stumbled across a number of depressing sights. The sanatorium at Weißer Hirsch, which had attracted guests from around the world, now seemed as if it belonged to a different era entirely, as did the city's status as a cultural center where visitors had lined up to see Rafael's *Madonna* at the Gemäldegalerie. Dresden, a place Richard Wagner once called home and the site of the premiere of Richard Strauss's *Die schweigsame Frau*, seemed to have been literally and figuratively swept away by war. *Trümmerfrauen*, along with tired and joyless workers charged with rebuilding the city for their "Red Masters" now inhabited the city.<sup>6</sup> Esteemed cultural institutions appeared neglected in lieu of public establishments that provided essential services focused on rudimentary needs or the politics of occupation, like the *Handelsorganisation*, or H.O.s—state-run stores—the city council, and barracks for Soviet soldiers. Images with the nation's new leaders, Otto Grotewohl, Wilhelm Pieck, and the leader of the future, Joseph Stalin, now hung in public spaces.<sup>7</sup> In short, Dresden, in the eyes of critics, embodied something along the lines of a "tragic city"—a place losing its tradition behind banners and posters that (falsely) promised residents a better future under leadership in close association with the victorious Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup>

A short trip on the streetcar to the Weißer Hirsch neighborhood, perched in the hills above the Elbe, revealed to the author's group that the Albrechtsberg Palace had been transformed into a "Pioneer Palace" on the Soviet model and named for Walter

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<sup>5</sup> K., H., "Dresden verlor sein Gesicht," *Berliner Anzeiger*, 25 November 1951 (DRA Potsdam: RIAS Ostarchiv Dresden, 3, Standort: 363/7/1): "Eine Trostlose Steinwüste"

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. *Trümmerfrauen*, or "rubble women" was the name given to women seen moving the rubble produced by the war's destruction—a term used throughout the German speaking cities of Europe: "rotten Herren"

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.: "Tragödie einer Stadt"

Ulbricht, the “best friend of the youth.”<sup>9</sup> At nearby Auf dem Meisenberg, one would find comfortable villas that housed the Party big-wigs— the so-called *Bonzen*—and other beneficiaries of the adopted Soviet system. Nothing remained of the neighborhood’s traditional elegance as Red Army Officers strolled in front of the Spa. Luisenhof, once a popular restaurant, still overlooked the Elbe and offered a view of the cityscape, but now operated as a state-run eatery. From this point, visitors could see Dresden’s silhouette missing some its most recognizable landmarks, most notably the dome of the Frauenkirche. The famous church would remain a pile of rubble for the duration of the GDR’s existence, an inverse monument to fascism and its destructive powers.<sup>10</sup>

Across the Elbe River in the picturesque Old City, the Western visitors noted other changes to Dresden’s built environment, such as the disappearance of the King Albert monument, recently melted down for scrap metal to help fuel the government’s Five-Year Plan. Socialist objectives had compelled authorities to strip the interior of the Zwinger palace during the larger rebuilding effort and, according to the visitors, a good number of paintings had traveled eastward. Several blocks away visitors would find the Postplatz, a traffic exchange and one of the busiest public spaces in the city. Residents waiting there for the streetcar experienced Dresden’s new postwar soundscape, broadcasted from a loudspeaker hanging above their heads that transmitted slogans from the National Front, a forced alliance of the mass organizations and block parties.<sup>11</sup> What exactly came out of that loudspeaker on that particular day in November of 1951 is

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.: “beste Freund der Jugend.”

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Gruening, “Transition, Memory and Narrations in the Urban Space: The Case of East German Cities,” in *Urban Plots and Organizing Cities*, ed. Giovanna Sonda et al. (Surrey: MPG Books, 2010); Elizabeth Ten Dyke, *Dresden : Paradoxes of Memory in History* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> K., H., “Dresden verlor sein Gesicht.”

difficult to say, though one can surmise that it probably related to the audible representation of the SED's socialist vision.

This chapter analyzes how the SED represented its authority and legitimacy in the Dresden region from 1945 until 1953. It will examine the regime's construction of an official public sphere or, more cynically, "phony public sphere," through radio and visual display. Analysis pertains to the regional authorities' re-establishment of local radio and (to a lesser extent) print media for the representation of an imagined, transnational public sphere designed to impart the legitimacy of the new regime and to orient residents eastward by incorporating them into the Eastern Bloc under Soviet leadership. This international imagined community, bound by members' commitment to a socialist world order served, to underscore the righteousness of the SED's vision and its widespread acceptance.

The chapter will conclude that the SED's efforts to establish its broadcasting apparatuses as powerful instruments to disseminate news while representing public opinion struggled not only to *reach* listeners, but also to win their confidence. One traces some of the problems attending this process to early technical difficulties stemming from wartime destruction and others derived from the SED's lack of a popular mandate. The chapter will then survey other methods by which the SED represented its legitimacy and power, such as through banners, images of leaders, "Friendship corners," and "enlightenment centers." Finally, the SED employed orchestrated and publicized demonstrations to project visually an image of mass support in the form of massive crowds.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I borrow this phrase, though not its application, from Kaeble, "The European Public Sphere" in *Building a European Public Sphere*, 22. I also borrow from Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 4-9.

A central component of the new East German nationalism included a focus on the formation of an anti-fascist and internationalist citizenry. The state administration in Saxony argued that the deeds of fascism had discredited propaganda in the minds of Germans, which during the Nazi period amounted to the malicious dissemination of lies and slander. Still, the SED recognized the essential role of propaganda, pointing to the importance of its propaganda department to the larger nation-building mission while trying to distance itself from the negative history of the National Socialists.

Unsurprisingly, the propaganda of the GDR was to be the “exact opposite” of its predecessor and spread “the truth,” even if such truths were difficult ones.<sup>13</sup> The GDR’s propaganda would also serve as an instrument that would cut through or across any social castes and privileged groups to enlighten and educate all Germans. The “spiritual rubble of the past” was to be liquidated, and a new people created.<sup>14</sup> The socialists would need to rely heavily on radio to transmit this new internationalist nationalism—a task made all the more difficult by the postwar condition of the region’s broadcasting systems.

### **Re-founding Local and Regional Radio**

In the months following the war’s end, regional authorities rebuilt and re-established radio in Dresden as a means by which they could broadcast a political vision for the future and build one of the cornerstones of the official public sphere. It took only

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<sup>13</sup> “Abteilung Propaganda,” Rechenschaftsbericht – Volksbildung, Landesverwaltung Sachsen, Herausgegeben vom Landesnachrichtenamt des Bundeslandes Sachsen Vertrieb: Dresden: Landesdruckerei Sachsen GmbH [undated document, but before 1952] (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4504/0074): “genaue Gegenteil“

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.: “die geistigen Trümmer aus der Vergangenheit”

five days for Radio Berlin to resume broadcasting amid the rubble, but things took a little longer in the Dresden region.<sup>15</sup>

Prior to 1945, there existed three regional stations: Görlitz, Dresden, and Leipzig, each technically maintained by the postal administration. On May 8, 1945, Dresden's transmitting equipment had been destroyed, although the machinery in nearby Leipzig remained operational, or at least in much better shape, and was fully functional by the fall of 1945. Led by confirmed anti-fascist Rudolph Pfützner, who oversaw a staff of around sixty, the station had begun transmitting programming produced in Berlin on September 1, 1945.<sup>16</sup> At this point, Berlin still received content by courier and SMAD required original programming to be routed through censors, which resulted in news that was no longer so current. Meanwhile, the non-functioning station in Dresden, which had a rating of only 1.5kW, had been temporarily placed in an inn and staff awaited orders and approval to begin transmitting Leipzig programming. Those with basic reception capabilities within fifty-one kilometers would be able to receive such programming. More distant reception was impossible because the radio tower for the station in Görlitz, the second largest city in the region, originally constructed of wood, had been damaged during fighting on May 8.<sup>17</sup> On November 20, 1945, Mitteldeutsche Rundfunk-

Gesellschaft celebrated its founding and on December 7, 1945, and transmitted its first

<sup>15</sup> *Deutschland Sender* was in operation again by fall 1945. For more on radio and nationalism, see Carolyn Birdsall, *Nazi Soundscapes*, especially pages 109-119; Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). For radio in the GDR see Reiner Stein, *Vom Fernsehen und Radio der DDR zur ARD: die Entwicklung und Neuordnung des Rundfunkwesens in den Neuen Bundesländern* (Marburg, Tectum Verlag, 2000), 32-48; Klaus Arnold and Christoph Classen, eds. *Zwischen Pop und Propaganda: Radio in der DDR* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2004); for media as a weapon of dictatorship, see Gunter Holzweißig, *Die schärfste Waffe der Partei. Eine Mediengeschichte der DDR* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag 2002).

<sup>16</sup> "Abteilung Propaganda," Rechenschaftsbericht – Volksbildung. Bl.76; "Rundfunk in der Ostzone," *Neues Deutschland* Nr. 265 vom 12.11.1948 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4512/0068).

<sup>17</sup> Landesnachrichtenamt Abteilung Rundfunk/Landesverwaltung Sachsen Inneres und Volksbildung, Kühn, Vizepräsident und die Sowjetisch-Militärische-Administration, z.Hd. des Herrn Obltn. Kudrin, Dresden N6, Bautzner Str. 130. 28.11.1945.



broadcast to the public out of Leipzig at noon with the words: “This is Middle–Germany Radio including Stations in Dresden and Leipzig.”<sup>18</sup>

The Landessender Dresden served as the city’s radio station until the GDR’s broadcasting systems underwent a massive re-organization in 1952 (more on this later). Although designated a *Landessender*, the station remained underpowered at 1.5kW for quite some time and despite plans to boost its transmission capabilities, the station’s broadcasts did not reach those beyond the city limits. SMAD ordered that the five *Landessender* (Schwerin, Potsdam, Weimar, Halle, and Dresden) increase their power to 20kW but this had not happened by the end of 1946 in Dresden, prompting the radio department to write the newly formed SED and express their concerns regarding the station’s anemic output. Uncertainties with regard to the greater political arrangements of postwar Europe also led to concerns within the party and among leaders who felt that a functioning radio system would provide influence and protections against reactionary elements. The intendant of the station envisioned its role as an institution in the socialists’ propagandizing arsenal, and thus more transmitting power could only help, though approval had to come from the state executive committee of Saxony.<sup>19</sup>

With a basic radio delivery system in place by 1946, the radio department noted that efforts to broadcast propaganda had intensified and it appeared some early self-congratulations were in order, with officials boasting that all strata of society—workers, farmers, artists, women, and youths—now received broadcasts. “That which had only

<sup>18</sup> “Mitteldeutsche Rundfunk Gesellschaft in Dresden,” *Volksstimme* vom 24.11.45 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4521, 0022); “Erste Sendung der Mitteldeutschen Rundfunkgesellschaft,” *Volksstimme Dresden*, Nr. 72 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4521/0021); Werner Doberenz, “Zwei Jahre Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4512/0019).

<sup>19</sup> “An die Sowjetische Militärverwaltung Im Bundeslande Sachsen Herrn General Dubrowsky, Dresden 21 Oktober 1946 (SächsHStA 11856 IV/A Nr. 264, B1.1); “Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk – Sender Dresden an den Landvorstand Sachsen der SED, Dresden,” 5.11.1946 Abt. Intendanz. Betr.: Verstärkung der Sendestation des Landessenders Dresden (SächsHStA 11856 IV/A Nr. 264, B1.2).

been conceivable in Saxony's public life [had been] put to use as radio propaganda," noted one report.<sup>20</sup> Though the SED did not yet control the region, behind these efforts stood the anti-fascist parties and the labor unions with Soviet backing. But first, authorities had to overcome several technical matters and although its propaganda department claimed that listeners—and voters—had been won over, such a celebration proved premature.

By June of 1947, SMAD controlled two *Großsender* in the Soviet Zone, Berlin and Leipzig, each utilizing 120kW transmitters, while only two of the *Landessender* (Schwerin and Halle) had been upgraded to 20kW.<sup>21</sup> At the head of the Dresden station sat Dr. Mauthner along with artistic director Richard Walter Hahnwald and conductor Hans-Hendrik Wehding.<sup>22</sup> Mauthner petitioned the State Executive Committee - Saxony (Landesvorstand Sachsen der SED) to upgrade his station from late 1946, and the postal administration (Oberpostdirektion) in Dresden had poured the necessary concrete in preparation for the upgrade, but the plan to upgrade Dresden to 20kW in the second half of 1947 remained unfulfilled.<sup>23</sup> Headway towards upgrading Radio Dresden into a true *Landessender* (also designated as an affiliated station to MDR, meaning it would also transmit the larger station's programming) lagged behind peer stations. The listening zone for Dresden remained restricted from the SW-NE axis to a 15-20 km listening

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<sup>20</sup> "Bericht des Rundfunks über den Volksentscheid," Kühn, Abteilung Rundfunk an das Sekretariat der Abt. Volksbildung, 1.7.1946 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4508/0097): "und was sonst im öffentlichen Leben Sachsens nur Denkbar ist, wurde für die Propaganda im Sender in Anspruch genommen."

<sup>21</sup> See "Zwei Jahre Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk: "Berliner Rundfunk und seiner sender gruppe der Mitteldeutsche Rundfunk mit seinen Landessendern Dresden, Weimar und Halle."

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.: "Verstärkung der Sendestation des Landessenders Dresden" (SächsHStA 11856 IV/A Nr. 264, Bl.2).

area.<sup>24</sup> A review of the station in December, 1948 by the *Sächsische Zeitung* noted that the station still operated at 1.5kW and that the power upgrade had failed to materialize due to the Berlin Airlift.<sup>25</sup> Not until 1950 did Radio Dresden finally received its power upgrade.<sup>26</sup>

### Radio's Potential Sphere of Influence

In late November of 1945, estimates put the number of residents in the federal state of Saxony at approximately five-to-six million residents, of whom there were an estimated 750,000 radio listeners or at least potential radio listeners.<sup>27</sup> This estimate is based on the 375,000 radio owners registered at the post office and authorities concluded that the number of radio listeners could potentially double this figure.<sup>28</sup> Another estimate by the Saxon government placed the actual number of residents in the region influenced by the large stations in Dresden and Leipzig at around two million. The task then, for the SED, was an obvious one: to better connect the regime to the people. By the end of 1947, more self-congratulations were in order. Authorities boasted that radio, an instrument misused by the Nazi regime, had successfully reemerged, with increased listenership, under their watch as a tool with which to educate Germans in a democratic fashion.

Statistics published by the *Sächsische Zeitung* placed listenership in Saxony at 500,000 in

<sup>24</sup> "Betr.: Strahlungsanlage des Landessender Dresden," Technische Betriebsleitung, Dresden den 5. Juni 1947 (SächsHStA 11856 IV/A Nr. 264, B1.5).

<sup>25</sup> Werner Doberenz, "Drei Jahre Landessender Dresden: Im Dienst unserer demokratischen Entwicklung," *Sächsische Zeitung* Nr. 285 vom 8.12.1948 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4512/0069).

<sup>26</sup> "Bericht über Hörerumfrage des Landessenders Dresden," Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk Landessender Dresden, Dresden, 20.1.-4.2. und 5.-17.2.51. (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4522/0046-47). It is not entirely clear from this document if the increased transmitting capacity was the 20kW increase ordered in 1946, but the report notes that sending capacity was substantially increased at this time.

<sup>27</sup> "Landesnachrichtenamt Abteilung Rundfunk/Landesverwaltung Sachsen Inneres und Volksbildung, Kühn," Vizepräsident und die Sowjetisch-Militärische-Administration, z.Hd. des Herrn Obltn. Kudrin, Dresden N6, Bautzner Str. 130. 28.11.1945.

<sup>28</sup> "Bericht des Rundfunks über den Volksentscheid," Kühn, Abteilung Rundfunk an das Sekretariat der Abt. Volksbildung, 1.7.1946 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4508/0097); "Landesnachrichtenamt Abteilung Rundfunk/Landesverwaltung Sachsen Inneres und Volksbildung, Kühn."

January of 1946 and almost one million by October 1947.<sup>29</sup> Estimates of listenership in Saxony could derive from two types of estimates, one based on registered receivers and the other based on the volume of listener mail. The latter drew on experience that suggested between sixty and ninety listeners existed per listener letter received.<sup>30</sup> Of course such estimates cannot reliably assess (nor do they attempt to appraise) how many listeners might gather around one radio or interpersonally transmit radio broadcasts which would extend radio's reach (more on this in chapter two). Unrepresented in these statistics was the number of Saxons who turned in foreign broadcasting from the West, which amounted to a direct challenge to the SED's rule. In other words, these types of surveys did not account for what stations listeners preferred.

The existing qualitative evidence regarding listenership suggests that technical issues negatively affected audience size or at least irritated listeners through at least 1951. A listenership survey in the eastern section of Saxony based on 432,000 questionnaires distributed to the population in the region that yielded 9,002 responses noted the lack of a connection between Dresden radio and its listeners, while the paltry number of letters received per month (60) suggested tepid listener interest.<sup>31</sup> Note here that this survey refers only to Radio Dresden, which often carried programming produced by the larger station in Leipzig, though listeners often failed to differentiate between the two. Regardless of the broadcast's perceived origin, 41% of 4007 respondents in Dresden complained of interference (a whistling sound) and the number increased to 56% at night. Reception difficulties only increased as one moved westward towards Görlitz where

<sup>29</sup> "Zwei Jahre Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk."

<sup>30</sup> "Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk an den Landesvorstand Sachsen SED," z.H. des. Genossen Hans Schrecker 24. März 1949 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 264 Bl.42).

<sup>31</sup> "Bericht über Hörerumfrage des Landessenders Dresden," Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk Landessender Dresden, 1951, 0047-48.

residents needed wired radio or a high-quality receiver.<sup>32</sup> In fact, Radio Prague could be heard more clearly in this area.<sup>33</sup> These concerns may not have directly prompted the erection of a wired public announcement system, but the construction of one could boost listenership as the audience would be essentially captive. Residents could control radio when inside their homes or private spaces but authorities (first SMAD, then the SED) in Dresden and elsewhere in the GDR could create an official soundscape by broadcasting directly into public space with strategically placed loudspeaker systems

### **“*Stadtfunk*”: City Radio and the Construction of a Socialist Soundscape**

The *Stadtfunk* (localized public announcement systems) and its speaker system served as one of the SED’s audible representations of legitimacy in the public sphere and a messenger of a new internationalist orientation.<sup>34</sup> Political instructions arrived on September 9, 1945 in the form of order Nr. 78 from SMAD, which permitted the construction of public loudspeaker systems that were capable of transmitting at low and high frequencies via wire. SMAD charged the postal service with the system’s technical fabrication while the communication department within the Landesverwaltung Sachsen managed the studios and developed programming. Such arrangements were to be constructed in all the locales of Saxony deemed necessary by administrative survey.<sup>35</sup> In the Dresden Region, this included communities within Bautzen, Dippoldiswalde, Dresden, Kamenz, Löbau, Meißen, Pirna, as well as several in Niesky and Zittau where existing

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 0049.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> I will use the German *Stadtfunk* throughout rather than the English “public announcement system.”

<sup>35</sup> Landesverwaltung Sachsen Inneres und Volksbildung, (gez. Althaus), Abteilung Nachrichtenwesen Rundfunk, I/3C, Dresden- A50, den 30..12.45, Fernspr. 52031 (65) an alle Oberbürgermeister und Landräte. (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4513/0264).

systems had been damaged.<sup>36</sup> The “free cities” of Radebeul and Freital had no equipment of their own.<sup>37</sup>

In February of 1946, Dresden had seven loudspeakers while Görlitz had five, Meißen ten, Pirna three, Riesa fourteen, and Zittau seven.<sup>38</sup> By the end of the month, officials claimed in the local newspaper that an additional seventy speakers had been ordered for Dresden and awaited installation in the city’s busiest traffic points as well as in peripheral zones. In Dresden, a studio at Stadthaus Karl-Marx-Platz had been prepared and would soon be in operation. Programming was to serve the public by not only broadcasting official proclamations, but also news relating to traffic conditions and other things of “general interest,” along with of course, political reports, signifying that party leaders viewed the *Stadtfunk* system as an instrument of didactic capabilities.<sup>39</sup>

By 1949, the *Stadtfunk* system in Dresden had started to take shape, though the earlier public estimates of its expansion cited above proved a bit overzealous. Through the first of January that year, six new substations for the *Stadtfunk* were created around the city, including units at Neustädter Markt and Grunaer Straße—points of heavy public traffic. Each substation consisted of a twenty-watt amplifier, a loudspeaker (either directed or omni-directional) and for 1949, two omni-directional speakers per every fifteen watts. In Görlitz, too, efforts to improve the *Stadtfunk* meant a technical modernization of the broadcasting capabilities, with new facilities and microphones. Just as importantly, engineers worked at that time to connect the *Stadtfunk* system to the

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<sup>36</sup> Gez. A. Althaus, Landesverwaltung Sachsen, Nachrichtenwesen, A/? I/3 C, Dresden, den 8.2.1946 an die Oberpostdirektion Dresden, Abteilung 2B (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4513/0240). Excluding those with fewer than 5,000 residents.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. “Kreisfreie,” or without a county. This arrangement ended after the Second Party Conference in 1952 and the cities fell under Dresden’s regional administration.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., Bl.0248.

<sup>39</sup> “Aufbau den Dresdener Stadtfunks,” Auszug aus *Sächsische Volkszeitung*” Nr. 45 vom 23.2.46 Dresdener Ausgabe, Seite 6. (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4513/0270).

*Betriebsfunk* (more on this shortly) at VEB LOWA (Vereinigung Volkseigener Betriebe Lokomotiv- und Waggonbau—state-owned factory that produced train locomotives and cars), the largest workplace in the city and later the focal point the June 17 demonstrations in Görlitz.<sup>40</sup>

By the beginning of 1952, the SED had installed twenty-two loudspeaker units in Dresden with plans for twenty-two more for the year, though it remains difficult to know the final number as broadcasting responsibilities shifted quite a bit after the Second Party Congress of 1952 and the reorganization and centralization of the GDR's radio activities.<sup>41</sup> Important public spaces in the city, including the Postplatz mentioned earlier, and Platz der Einheit (today, Albertplatz), now broadcasted national and local programming through twenty-five watt loudspeakers directly at passersby and crowds waiting for streetcars.<sup>42</sup> By the spring of 1952 Görlitz had 18 functioning public loudspeakers.<sup>43</sup> Among smaller locales, Bautzen had 26, Löbau 12.<sup>44</sup> The SED continued to amplify its transmitting power in Dresden and smaller towns in its region thus establishing an essential component of the official public sphere.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Landesregierung Sachsen Minst. f. Volksbildung, H.A. Allgem. Volkserzieh., Presse-Rundfunk-Aufklärung, VII3 B-D, Dresden, A50, den 16.1.1950, August-Bebel-Str.19 Hausapp. 283/568 Li/Kl, S4 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4548/0021).

<sup>41</sup> "Volkswirtschaftsplan 1952 (Entwicklungsplan)," Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik – Staatliche Plankommission – Dresden – Stadtfunk (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 2323/0004).

<sup>42</sup> "Analyse zum Volkswirtschaftsplan 1952 – Entwicklungsplan der Volkseigenen örtlichen Wirtschaft – Stadtfunk Dresden," 12.3.52. (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 2323/0005).

<sup>43</sup> "Volkswirtschaftsplan 1952 (Entwicklungsplan)," Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik – Staatliche Plankommission – Görlitz – Stadtfunk (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 2323/0008).

<sup>44</sup> "Volkswirtschaftsplan 1952 (Entwicklungsplan)," Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik – Staatliche Plankommission – Kreis Bautzen – Stadtfunk 5.23.52 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 2323/0010); "Volkswirtschaftsplan 1952 (Entwicklungsplan)," Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik – Staatliche Plankommission – Löbau – Stadtfunk 10.5.52 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 2323/0026).

<sup>45</sup> This did not hold for all cities in the GDR: neighbor-city Leipzig still lacked a working *Stadtfunk* system in early 1950.

### ***Betriebsfunk*: Representing in the Workplace**

Another method by which the state audibly represented its authority in public space included the *Betriebsfunk* system, or workplace radio systems that broadcasted directly to workers within the confines of the workplace. As with the traditional systems developed in the GDR, intentions here were also largely political: to influence the labor force and the conversations held in the workplace. The erection of the *Betriebsfunk* system under SED guidance dates to 1948, though a detailed overview is largely absent from the record as the origins of this endeavor were rather sporadic and the formation of the system lacked centralized direction. The impetus behind the scheme likely stemmed from the earlier use of factory loudspeaker systems and their employment in certain situations to provide what SED termed “supplemental agitation in certain political situations” or the transmission of “educational lectures” to prod recalcitrant party members. This task at first fell largely to the SED’s *Betriebsgruppen* and the growth of the system could be traced to the labors of the same authorities behind the regional broadcasting institutions. The radio authorities thus became the first to impose organization along political lines with regard to the *Betriebsfunk*.<sup>46</sup>

The SED received reports out of the most important workplaces in the Zone that the programs aired sparked lively conversation among workforces and by the fall of 1948, the General Directorship for Radio Stations in the Soviet Occupied Zone (General Intendanz der Rundfunksender der sowjetisch-besetzten Zone), perhaps sensing the power of this tool, ordered the strengthening of *Betriebsfunk* systems’ technical and political capabilities. The Riesa Steelworks in the Dresden Region [the future Dresden

<sup>46</sup> “Betr.: Die Entwicklung des Betriebsfunks” (SAPMO-BArch DY 34 Nr. 1688): “zusätzlichen Agitation in bestimmtem politischen Fragen zu benutzen; Schulungsvorträge.”



Region, that is] served as the pilot plant, working with Landessender Dresden, the region's main station. At the urging of the directorship, the RFT (Rundfunk und Fernmeldetechnik – Radio and Telecommunications) standardized the equipment. Regional radio stations took charge of programming and trained broadcasters.<sup>47</sup>

By April, 1950, a number of important work places in and around Dresden, including Stahl und Walzwerk Riesa, Einsen und Stahlwerk Gröditz, TU Hochschule Dresden, LOWA Waggonbau Görlitz, and the massive Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz had functioning *Betriebsfunk* systems that continued to expand. These in particular could transmit broadcasts from Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk through a studio receiver (usually by radio, rather than wire, with the exception of Riesa Gröditz).<sup>48</sup> By 1951, a number of workplaces also had the ability to record the conversations that took place, a tool that the party recognized as one that could offer insights into workers' daily lives.<sup>49</sup> But the *Betriebsfunk* worked best as a propagandizing method with which to establish Soviet strength, for example with the themes such as “Soviet Work Methods” that told the story of three Stakhanovites.<sup>50</sup> *Betriebsfunk* also functioned as a means to shoot down rumors or what the party perceived as misinformation. One example from 1951 dealt with the alleged rumor spread by “enemies of humanity... against progressive humanity” that youth from the GDR in Berlin for the [international socialist directed] World Festival of Youth had not eaten for three days.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> “Betr.: Betriebsfunk An den Landesvorstand der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands,” Abt. Massenagitation Dresden, den 26 April 1950 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 37 Bl.97).

<sup>49</sup> ZK der SED Abteilung Agitation an die Landesleitung der SED Abteilung Agitation, SED ZK Berlin Abteilung: Agitation, 5 September 1951 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 37 Bl.150).

<sup>50</sup> “Sendung: Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft,” Betriebsfunk Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz, Datum: 17.8.1951 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 244 Bl.149): “Sowjetische Arbeitsmethoden.”

<sup>51</sup> “Sendung - Musik 1. Das ganze Deutschland, Betriebsfunk Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz,” Zeit: 12.05/12.40/18.05, Uhr. Datum: 10.8.1951 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 244 Bl.100): “Die Feinde der

## Programming

Programming constituted one method by which the party represented its popular legitimacy and transmitted a specifically East German internationalism based on integration into the Eastern Bloc. With such broadcasting, those who drafted the programming beamed messages into public space and aimed to accomplish several things. First, programming featured an internationalist component that could help re-orient East Germans eastward through the construction of an imagined community based on international socialist solidarity with Stalin standing in as the new savior of the German people. Second, programming placed German unification along socialist lines—even prior to the establishment of two Germanys—as a priority. Above all, through broadcasting, the SED aimed to create imagined communities—imagined solidarities or a represented *Verbundenheit*—between two primary groups: East Germans and those living in other socialist states and eventually between West Germans and East Germans.<sup>52</sup>

Following the Second Party Congress of September, 1947, prior to the founding of the GDR in October of 1949, the SED used broadcasting to publicize its efforts as the lead organizational force behind the fulfillment of the Two-Year-Plan.<sup>53</sup> The general programming plan developed by the Radio Department set in motion an eastward orientation philosophically based on peace. At the head of the new order stood the Soviet Union above all other progressive (socialist) states in the world. Radio's task then was to

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Menschheit...die fortschrittliche Menschheit." The *Weltfestspiel* was a major international gathering of youth from socialist nations. Organizers held the event in East Berlin in 1951.

<sup>52</sup> West German politicians and RIAS commentators also recast German nationalism within an internationalist framework—more on this in chapters four and five.

<sup>53</sup> "Themenplan Referat Funk zum Halbjahresplan 1948 als Vorbereitung des Zweijahresplanes 1949/50," SED Landesvorstand Sachsen Referat Funk Dresden, den 3.8.48 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 267, Bl.8).

popularize and support this arrangement.<sup>54</sup> For domestic politics, the SED officially stated that radio programming would work to support the democratization of government and economy, while improving industrial production and living standards. The word “socialist” appeared relatively infrequently before the Second Party Conference in 1952, though the regime’s political vision and was hardly a secret. To wit, programming included a campaign celebrating thirty years of the Soviet Union and impressions of its economy, agriculture, transportations systems, along with first-hand reports.<sup>55</sup> By the last quarter of 1948, GDR radio programming for the Landessender Dresden fell under the general theme “Implementation of the Economic plans.”<sup>56</sup> This generally included anti-Western programming that attacked the Marshall Plan while promoting the “magnet theory” which held that Soviet Zone economic successes would attract those from the Western Zones and lead to German unification with a socialist mandate. Other programming efforts included reports of women’s delegations and their missions to the Soviet Union and Hungary while negative political attacks highlighted striking workers in the West.<sup>57</sup>

Following the establishment of the GDR on October 7, 1949, programming in Dresden continued this celebration and representation of Soviet strength, achievements and German-Soviet bonds with, for example, the literary musical production “Day of the Red Army,” which examined the history of, and paid tribute to, Soviet Military success. The program “Aktuelle Worte” (“Current Word”) focused on the Soviet Union and its

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<sup>54</sup> “Arbeitsbericht des Rundfunksachgebietes nach dem 2 Parteitag,” Abt FUNK, Gez. Schirmer (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 267 Bl.18).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> “Bericht über die Tätigkeit des Landessenders Dresden in der Zeit vom Oktober – Dezember 48,” Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk an die SED Landesvorstand Sachsen Abt. Werbung, Presse, Rundfunk, 28. Dezember 1948 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 264 Bl.24): “Durchführung der Wirtschaftspläne”

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Bl.25-6: “Magnetwirkung”

role as a friend of Germany and the strongest factor in the establishment of peace. Broadcasts aimed at youths explained what they could learn from the Young Pioneers in the Soviet Union.<sup>58</sup> A good portion of radio programming produced for the show aimed to reinforce the concept of a peace front spearheaded by the Soviet Union. The radio station argued internally that East Germans shared this position based on the growth of the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft) from October 1949 through the spring of 1950 in Saxony. Commentary worked to “deepen the friendship of the Soviet Union” and its satellites by promoting and publicizing the two states’ newfound relations, evidenced by initiatives such as letter writing exchanges between Soviet and East German (Saxon) youths, invitations to Soviet workers from local industry, discussions of Soviet film, and various commentaries that glorified life and work in the Soviet Union.<sup>59</sup>

By April, 1950, almost all such programming related to the growth of the Society for German-Soviet Friendship, which publically claimed 75,000 members by the end of April 1950. Listeners learned how revolutionary theory could be successfully put into practice using examples from Russia and how the moral righteousness of Soviet foreign policy would lead to success in Germany in line with the “wishes of the German people.”<sup>60</sup> In October of 1950 GDR radio celebrated almost daily the thirty-third

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<sup>58</sup> “Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk Landessender Dresden, Perspektivplan - August –September 1951” (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 265 Bl.117).

<sup>59</sup> “Monatsbericht des Landessenders Dresden für den Monat Februar 1950 Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk,” Landessender Dresden an die Generalintendanz der Rundfunksender, i.d. Deutschen Demokratischen Republik z.H.d.Herrn Generalintendanten Mahle, Berlin W 1 Thälmannplatz 8/9, 20. März 1950 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 264 Bl.164): “Vertiefung der Freundschaft zur Sowjetunion”

<sup>60</sup> “Monatsbericht des Landessenders Dresden für den Monat April 1950” an die Generalintendanz d. Rundfunksender i.d.Deutschen Demokratischen Republik z.H.d.Herrn Generalintendanten Mahle, 12 Juni 1950 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 264 Bl.185); Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk, Leipzig, Perspektivplan vom 1 Mai bis 31 Juli 1951 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 269 Bl.17): “Außenpolitik der SU entspricht Wünschen des deutschen Volkes”

anniversary of the October Revolution, with “Youth Radio” (“Jugendfunk”) producing on-air conversations with young German workers to celebrate the thirty-two years since the founding of the *Komsomol*, the Soviet inspiration for East German youth organizations. This newly fabricated bond between Soviet and German citizens played out in the program “Our Plan for a Better Life” with continued coverage of the state-sponsored letter exchange campaign.<sup>61</sup>

One theme for 1951 centered on the GDR’s official “Radio Day,” which celebrated the bond between MDR (this includes Dresden Radio) and its listeners and the station’s continued efforts to promote peace based on socialist principles. Broadcasts focused on a “representation of the tremendous economic and cultural development of the Soviet people on the way to communism” with the intention of transmitting the solutions to national issues to all strata of the East German population.<sup>62</sup> Part of this meant, naturally, representing the increasingly closer relations between Germans and the Soviet Union. Programming cast the Soviet Union as the voice of all people, and the greatest ally of Germans, and as the GDR’s strongest trade partner.<sup>63</sup> By the second half of 1951, programming dedicated to the Soviet Union amounted to about 5.6% of all spoken (non-musical or *Wortsendungen*) programming.<sup>64</sup> The SED also used radio programming as a representational institution to publicize the state’s (and thus its citizens’) blossoming relations with its Eastern Bloc allies as well as its own institutions. Radio detailed the

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<sup>61</sup> “Monatsbericht des Landessenders Dresden für den Monat Oktober 1950,” Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk Landessender Dresden an die Generalintendantz der Rundfunksender in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik 8. November 1950 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 264 Bl.234).

<sup>62</sup> Leipzig, den 23 April 1951 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 269 Bl.1;12): “der Darstellung der gewaltigen wirtschaftlichen und kulturellen Entwicklung der Sowjetvölker auf dem Wege zum Kommunismus”

<sup>63</sup> “Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk Leipzig Perspektivplan vom 1 Mai bis 31 Juli 1951” (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 269 Bl.14).

<sup>64</sup> “Analyse über die Arbeit des Landessenders Dresden,” Dresden den 30. Oktober, 1951 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4535 0117).

socialist development of these states, comparing for example the simultaneous revival of Poland and the GDR while establishing the friendship between the nations.<sup>65</sup>

In November of 1951 the propaganda department in Berlin called on radio stations to improve their work through a number of measures with the intention of further popularizing the Soviet Union, its development, and the lives of its citizens. Material from the Soviet press would be distributed to the GDR's radio stations and the foreign policy discussion from Radio Moscow would air on Sunday evening. Pertinent to this chapter's discussion of an official public sphere constructed to appear democratic and inclusive is the radio series of "Public Forum" ("Öffentliches Forum"). In this series, working class, members of the intelligentsia, and radio personalities would hold round table discussions and discuss the Five-Year-Plan, with planners noting that "progressive bourgeois people" should be included.<sup>66</sup> Of course at the same time, radio programming that promoted the Soviet Union as the "voice of all peoples" suggests open debate was a merely a mirage, and all decisions rested, as Ulbricht famously noted, in the hands of the SED's central leadership.<sup>67</sup>

After the Second Party Conference in the summer of 1952, the SED reorganized the GDR's administrative bureaucracy to accelerate the construction of socialism. The Council of Ministers (Ministerrat) announced the creation of the Staatliches Komitee für Rundfunk (State Radio Committee) and centralization of the GDR's radio

<sup>65</sup> Leipzig, den 23 April 1951 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 269 Bl.1;12)

<sup>66</sup> "Vorlage Betr.: Verbesserung der Rundfunkarbeit," Beschlussvorschlag Sekretariat des ZK, Agitation, Der/Wi.

23.11.51 (SAPMO-BArch DR 6, Nr. 314): "fortschrittlicher bürgerlicher Leute"

<sup>67</sup> "Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk, Leipzig, Perspektivplan vom 1 Mai bis 31 Juli 1951": "Sprecher für alle Völker"

programming in Berlin as Berlin I, II, and III.<sup>68</sup> The SED looked to strengthen the power of radio to contribute to the larger nation-building effort at hand. This meant that programming aimed at all Germans, but especially those in the West, moved away from the internationalism so popular in the GDR's other broadcasts. Indeed, the SED charged the State Radio Committee with “awakening love of country” and strengthening “national consciousness.”<sup>69</sup> Programming followed the development of national projects (“We’re Building Germany’s Capital” and “We’re Building the Five-Year-Plan”) and analysis of American policy and news (“The Truth about America” and “Mass strikes in the USA”).<sup>70</sup>

### **Representing Popular Support in West Germany**

One of the self-professed roles of the State Radio Committee as an “organ of state power” and “collective propagandist, agitator, and organizer” was to help realize “the bond between the working class and [socialist] farmers...and the union of all German patriots.”<sup>71</sup> It is also important to remember that in the early 1950s Germany’s partition still felt to most Germans like a temporary arrangement and the SED openly and regularly discussed reunification hopes and scenarios. With this in mind, it comes as little surprise that the party used radio to portray protest that occurred in West Germany as

<sup>68</sup> “Zusammenarbeit mit dem Staatlichen Rundfunkkomitees—Studio Dresden und Studio Görlitz,” Abteilung Propaganda-Agitation, Dresden, den 6.2.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV 2.9.01 Nr. 134. Bl.47).

<sup>69</sup> “Entschliessung der SED-Betriebsparteiorganisation des Staatliches Rundfunkkomitees,” Berlin, den 25 Januar 1953 (SAPMO-BArch DR 6 Nr. 201, Bl.2 S.3): “Liebe zur Heimat geweckt; das Nationalbewusstsein gestärkt”

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.: “Wir Bauen Deutschlands Hauptstadt; Wir Schaffen am Fünfjahrplan; die Wahrheit über Amerika; Massenstreiks in den USA.” For more on the Second Party Conference and the acceleration of socialist construction that the SED initiated in the summer of 1952, see: Gary Bruce, *Resistance with the People*, chapter 5.

<sup>71</sup> “Entschließung der SED-Betriebsparteiorganisation des Staatliches Rundfunkkomitees”: “In Westdeutschland die Aktionseinheit der Kommunistischen, Sozialdemokratischen, christlichen und parteilosen Arbeiter, das Bündnis zwischen der Arbeiterklasse und den werktätigen Bauern und der Zusammenschluss aller patriotischen Deutschen in der Friedensbewegung und der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland zustande kommt.”

evidence of anti-FRG sentiment. To accomplish this, the State Radio Committee expanded its reporting from West Germany to project its bi-German support. Such reporting fell under the broad umbrella term “*West-Arbeit*” which, in the case at hand, entailed placing agents armed with tape recorders at the scene of workers’ protests in West German cities. The Committee oversaw these operations after the institution’s formation in September in 1952, though the program encountered technical difficulties at the outset in the second half of 1952, generously referred to by the commission as a learning time for operatives. By October, the nine correspondents had become more proficient with their recording equipment and had begun documenting West German strikes and demonstrations. The reports focused on social, economic and national issues, and, of course, questions regarding national disunity. These recordings (*Westbänder*) then made their way into various GDR programs such as “We Speak for West Germany,” “Forum for German Patriots,” and “Behind the Façade,” that the SED broadcasted at home and in the Federal Republic.<sup>72</sup>

By the first quarter of 1953, this portion of the GDR’s *West-Arbeit* had become a reasonably well functioning operation, and technical problems subsided. Correspondents had been posted in those areas deemed important by the State Radio Committee—North Rhine - Westphalia, Hamburg, Bavaria, Baden - Württemberg, Hessen, and Rhineland-Pfalz—from where they sent the collected materials to a central correspondent. These reporters conducted and recorded interviews with striking textile workers in cities such as Mannheim, Hamburg, and Düsseldorf. On February 12, 1953 the State Radio Committee

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<sup>72</sup> “Bericht: Über eingegangene Westbänder und deren Auswertung durch die Redaktionen für die Zeit von Juli bis Dezember 1952 Regierung der DDR,” Staatliches Rundfunkkomitee, Leitung, Gesamtdeutsche Fragen, Den 16.1.1953 (SAPMO-BArch DR 6 Nr. 199): “Wir sprechen für Westdeutschland”; Forum Deutscher Patrioten; Hinter der Fassade”; Vorschläge zum Aufbau eines neuen Korrespondenten-Netzes, 6 Dezember 1952 (SAPMO-BArch DR 6 Nr. 199).



claimed that the effect of their work on the West German population had become palpable, notably through the claimed procurement of new West German listeners. The agency focused on the southwestern region of West Germany, with correspondents covering strikes and demonstrations in Stuttgart and Lörrach. The State Radio Committee quoted *Volksstimme* (*The Voice of The People*), which wrote on Friday, February 6, 1953, “It gets around by word of mouth: ‘listen to GDR radio, listen to GDR radio stations, Berlin, Leipzig, which cover our strike daily.’”<sup>73</sup> The paper argued more and more West Germans tuned into the East German radio and listened with bewilderment as to “how quickly this radio station react[ed] [to events] and the precision with which it reported news of the strikes...they are pleased with the calls to solidarity.”<sup>74</sup> The efforts here to foster rebellion and construct a community of dissent and solidarity through the airwaves and across the East-West border unknowingly foreshadowed the modern transmission of protest. This was a defining characteristic of the June 17 Demonstrations, with, of course, the roles reversed here.

## Reception

Evidence suggests that the SED was largely unsuccessful in its mission to win over the population through broadcasting. Beginning with the SED’s goal of creating a connection between radio and citizen, it is highly likely that survey respondents’ preference of musical programming and general distaste for serious political programming pleased party bosses. In fact, most of those 9,200 respondents in a 1951

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<sup>73</sup> “Die Wirkung der Sendungen des Staatlichen Rundfunkkomitees nach Westdeutschland,” Abschrift/Soe., 12 Februar 1953, Pe/Pu. (SAPMO-BArch DR 6 Nr. 199): “Es geht von Mund zu Mund: Hört den Rundfunk der DDR, hört den Deutschlandsender, Berlin, Leipzig, die sich täglich mit unserem Streik beschäftigen.”

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.: “wie schnell dieser Rundfunk reagiert und wie schnell und präzise er die Streikberichte aus dem Bezirk bringt. Man nimmt die Aufrufe zur Solidarität mit Genugtuung auf.”

survey had no opinion on how programming could be improved—which could be construed as satisfaction but more likely reflected pervasive disinterest. A proportionally large number of anonymous respondents stated the party broadcasted too much political programming and they wanted more music while many workers specifically requested light (conversational) programming in the evening supports the latter conclusion.<sup>75</sup> One VEB Meyer-Optik worker opined that interference from RIAS (and Radio Moscow) was only part of the problem: he could hardly get through a half-hour music program (he wanted evening-long shows) when a sudden (and unwanted) political feature interrupted his program.<sup>76</sup> Another respondent to a November 1951 survey, Herr Berdau, underscored the technical challenges facing GDR radio. Berdau, the Schulleiter der Betriebsberufsschule des VEB Meyer-Optik in Görlitz (and a member of the SED) noted that he could only receive MDR radio because he had a wired set. Unwired sets had difficulties picking up the East German stations as RIAS and NWDR operated on the same wavelengths—a symbolic challenge if there ever was one.

Finally (and this will receive more attention in chapter two), East German radio's chief rivals, and especially RIAS, enjoyed a larger and more enthusiastic audience. As one respondent from Oelsnitz [not in the Dresden Region, but in Saxony and I can confidently say that his opinion matches conditions in the Dresden Region] noted, about 60% of the population in his region preferred RIAS.<sup>77</sup> Statistical evidence from

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<sup>75</sup> “Bericht über Hörerumfrage des Landessenders Dresden,” Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk Landessender Dresden, 1951, 0047-48.

<sup>76</sup> “Betr.: Meinung der Bevölkerung über das Abendprogramm des Sender Leipzig – Bericht über die Empfangsmöglichkeiten des Landessenders sowie der Großsender,” Beauftragter des Amtes für Information Stadt Görlitz an den Ministerpräsidenten des Landes Sachsen, Amt für Information, Abt. Press und Funk, Görlitz, 23.11.1951 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4535/0024).

<sup>77</sup> “Entwurf: Auswertung der Berichte unser Kreisvertreter über die Meinung der Bevölkerung zum Programm des Mitteldeutschen Rundfunkes und des Landessender Dresden,” sowie die

HICOG/DIVO<sup>78</sup> reveals numbers that suggest East German stations lagged behind their Western competition in listener interest though Leipzig (MDR) was slightly more popular than other East German stations in one 1952 survey.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, as the next chapter will demonstrate, the regional authorities in Dresden found themselves forced to wage an energetic anti-RIAS campaign. In conclusion, the connection between state and citizen desired by the SED never materialized, at least to the extent the party might have wanted and this situation would reach a nadir in June and July of 1953. The party did, however, have other means with which it would represent its legitimacy and the virtue of its socialist vision for Germans.

### ***Sichtwerbung: Visual Representations of Power***

Walter Ulbricht's infamous directive, "It must appear democratic, but we must control everything," extended to the SED's representation of power in public space in several ways.<sup>80</sup> As the SED represented power, community, and legitimacy through radio broadcasts, Ray Rühle argues along with Vaclav Havel that in socialist dictatorships such as the GDR, no true public sphere existed and ideology formed the basis for maintenance of political power (leadership). He points to Havel's contention that this existed as the "bridge between (the) power and the people" and offers the following example: "the vegetable merchant places a banner in his shop window between the onions and the

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Empfangsmöglichkeiten des demokratischen Rundfunkes, Dresden, den 21.1.52 (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4535/0007).

<sup>78</sup> A joint U.S. occupation/German research effort: High Commission for Occupied Germany; Deutsches Institut für Volks- umfragen (German Institute for Public Surveys).

<sup>79</sup> Some General Patterns of Listening to RIAS, RIAS Coverage and Programming as evaluated by East Zone Listeners, Office of the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany Office of Public Affairs Reactions Analysis Staff, Report 170, Series 2, February 10, 1953 (NARA RG 306, A1 1005, Box 5).

<sup>80</sup> Karl-Wilhelm Fricke, *Der Wahrheit verpflichtet*, 366.

carrots that reads, ‘*Workers of all nations unite!*’<sup>81</sup> The key here is not the vegetable trader’s belief in the socialist system, but the ritual itself: the sign remains hanging only to ward off bothersome authorities. Taken further, Rühle argues that “The political leader can also, through the attempt to construct an all-encompassing ‘decoration’ of publicness which is constructed so that the ‘world of appearances’ is no longer perceived as a sham, but rather becomes interpreted as a part of reality.”<sup>82</sup> Such a system stabilizes as participants like the shop owner become willing accomplices in the arrangement. In his analysis of official public spheres in state-socialist societies, Walter Süß argues that a condition of “societal schizophrenia” develops where the phony public sphere helps create an amoral and schizophrenic universe wherein participants knowingly lie to each other in one space and tell the truth in another.”<sup>83</sup> Of course, one needs to guard against presenting the population as a monolithic body that always opposed the SED’s every move, but RIAS’s popularity, the genuine election returns during early postwar period, and the June 17 demonstrations provide the empirical data necessary to suggest that the party did not enjoy popular support and this probably helped prompt the construction of an official public sphere.

The following section considers how the official public sphere of the early GDR used visual representation in the public sphere to promote power, legitimacy, German unity and a new eastward-looking internationalism.<sup>84</sup> Visual enlightenment, according to the party, could not be separated from other forms of party communication, an arena in

<sup>81</sup> Rühle, *Entstehung von politischer Öffentlichkeit*, 10: “Proletarier aller Länder vereinigt euch!”

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.: “Die politische Herrschaft kann also durch den Versuch, eine allumfassende ‘Dekoration’ der Öffentlichkeit herzustellen bzw. herstellen zu lassen, erreichen dass die so aufgebaute ‘Welt des Scheins’ nicht mehr als Schein wahrgenommen wird, sondern als Teil einer Wirklichkeit interpretiert werden kann.”

<sup>83</sup> Süß, “Revolution und Öffentlichkeit in der DDR,” 911.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

which the National Front and its *Aufklärungsgruppen* (enlightenment/clarification task forces) worked to create the illusion of a public sphere (*Scheinöffentlichkeit*) that supported and legitimized the socialist regime by attempting to win over the population. Ultimately, such efforts functioned as propaganda that represented the authority of the regime and its popular support—whether real or not.

The SED intended to leave no public space without its presence. In addition to outdoor locations, the party naturally observed that thousands of residents regularly visited movie theaters, hospitals, stores, restaurants, train stations, post offices and doctors' offices, and the party viewed these as opportunities to make the public aware of its efforts to create a unified Germany and a peaceful political situation.<sup>85</sup> One way the party did this was through what it termed “individual visual propaganda” (*individuelle Sichtwerbung*). The intention here was to demonstrate the extent to which the population recognized the seriousness of the political situation (war brought on by the West) while confirming the establishment of a “democratic national consciousness.”<sup>86</sup> More specifically, *Aufklärungsgruppen* attempted to convince Dresdeners to demonstrate their opinions and commitments in a public manner. Sometimes this just meant homemade placards with one's political orientation (obviously favoring the SED) scribbled out, for example, “no blood for capitalism” or “I fight for peace.”<sup>87</sup> Other times, a simple, handwritten poster pleased the party, for instance, that of the mother who proclaimed her desire to use her entire strength toward the establishment of peace.<sup>88</sup> The party also asked

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<sup>85</sup> “Anleitung für die Verbesserung der Sichtwerbung in Stadt und Land,” Nationale Front des Demokratischen Deutschland; Landesausschuß Sachsen, o.D. (SächsHStA 11376 Nr. 4502/0015;0024). An ideal type arrangement for Dresden. See appendix, figure three for an example of a proposed arrangement.

<sup>86</sup> “Anleitung für die Verbesserung der Sichtwerbung in Stadt und Land,” 0022.: “Demokratische Staatsbewusstsein”

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 0022.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 0034.

individuals to express themselves in concrete ways rather than with abstract or general beliefs, for example, with written calls for inter-German negotiations (*Deutsche an einen Tisch!*) or promises to remember February 13, 1945 (the night of the bombing) and campaign against the development of atomic weaponry.<sup>89</sup> Other posters expressed commitments to community service as a result of that \ night, for example one housing community that promised to clear the local playground of rubble.<sup>90</sup>

Among public authorities and institutions, those working to establish the visual cues of the official public sphere worked closely with transportation authorities at the Deutsche Reichsbahn,<sup>91</sup> Straßenbahn, and VVB Kraftverkehr and the majority of these erected forms of *Sichtwerbung*. Inside public spaces such as train stations, the SED publicized the party's slogans with banners that tied Germans to the Soviet Union or nationalistic slogans calling on "patriots" to defend the peace. In the National Front's *Aufklärungslokalen*, or "enlightenment centers," visitors could read slogans from the party's literature, commitments from staff members, and view portraits of local and national leaders. In these spaces visitors also found "friendship corners" (*Freundschaftsecken*) designed to create the impression that the Soviet Union was the GDR's best friend and that Stalin represented the greatest leader of socialist states."<sup>92</sup>

The SED employed communal housing units as a cheap and easy way to create the large, easy-to-read banners announced the collective opinions of the building, for instance: "Don't forget February 13, 1945—fight for peace"; "Our Commitment: every

<sup>89</sup> February 13, 1945—the night the Allies destroyed Dresden, though bombing raids continued on 14 and 15 February.

<sup>90</sup> "Anleitung für die Verbesserung der Sichtwerbung in Stadt und Land," 0027.

<sup>91</sup> Curiously, the East German train system retained this name.

<sup>92</sup> "Anleitung für die Verbesserung der Sichtwerbung in Stadt und Land," 0032.

three percent of our gross earnings go to the peaceful rebuilding of Berlin.”<sup>93</sup> Bulletin boards and display cases functioned as so-called “enlightenment” vessels that considered the important political questions of the day, and, not surprisingly, held their answers. Some posters, for example, made the choice a seemingly obvious one, such as between imperialist (Western) destruction and peaceful socialist re-construction.<sup>94</sup> Finally, returning to the example given at the beginning of the section, the SED and its education task forces expected storeowners to use their storefronts as spaces for the visible representation of workers’ accomplishments and improving living standards. Authorities would persuade shopkeepers that such window decorations, whether handwritten opinions, or portraits of socialist statesmen—always arranged with care and with relevant text—represented their readiness to take an active role in the SED’s goals.<sup>95</sup> The sum of these words, displays, portraits, and personal declarations showcased one facet of the SED’s official public sphere—a world of appearances.

### **Theatrical Representations of Party Support**

“Solidarity knows no borders” claimed one headline in the *Sächsische Zeitung* that promoted East German workers’ declarations of support for West German workers’ strike movements.<sup>96</sup> Such occurrences became increasingly regular in the GDR’s early period as the SED aimed to confirm imagined communities, bound in solidarity and public protest that would help legitimize its rule and undermine the leadership of the Federal Republic and its supporters.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 0037.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 0039-0040.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 0050.

<sup>96</sup> “Solidarität kennt keine Grenzen,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, 25 Januar, 1951.

The party's representation appeared in the form of choreographed public demonstrations of support for the party—events that participants in, and historians of, the June 17 uprising might use as a point of contrast when discussing the authenticity of that demonstration. For instance, to celebrate the SED's fifth year in existence and protest the remilitarization of the FRG, the party published detailed plans in the newspaper for the day's event that included the streets along which workers from each city district would march before reaching Pirnaischer Platz, a significant public square in Dresden.<sup>97</sup> Five days later, headlines claimed that more than 200,000 workers demonstrated, representing, according to the *Sächsische Zeitung*, a manifestation of their "faith in their party, the party of the working class."<sup>98</sup> The workers approached the square carrying images of party leaders and banners with slogans that "made it clear that the will of the people fought for peace at the Soviet Union's side."<sup>99</sup> Such official public demonstrations functioned as a political ritual that represented national and international solidarity and political strength between not only the citizenry and its regime, but between the GDR and other socialist nations. Stalin's death on March 5, 1953 provided an opportunity to practice the theatrics of this type of representation on an especially grand scale.

As Stalin's health failed in the spring of 1953, questions surrounding his inevitable demise shifted to the forefront of political debate but remained behind closed doors.<sup>100</sup> Of course, policy shifts as they related to the GDR would not be made available

<sup>97</sup> "Am kommenden Sonntag heraus zur Großkundgebung!" *Sächsische Zeitung*, April 18, 1951.

<sup>98</sup> "Über 200000 auf der Kundgebung in Dresden," *Sächsische Zeitung*, April 23, 1951": "Vertrauens der Werktätigen zu ihrer Partei, zur Partei der Arbeiterklasse"

<sup>99</sup> "Über 200000 auf der Kundgebung in Dresden:" "Zeigten klar den Willen unsres Volkes...an der Seite der Sowjetunion für Frieden kämpft"

<sup>100</sup> For more on Stalin's death, see: Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000); Serhy Yekelchuk, *Stalin's Citizens: Everyday Politics in the Wake of Total War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Georges Bortoli, *The Death of Stalin* (New York: Praeger, 1975).



for public consumption for some time, and for several days, Stalin's status as savior and leader of the German people took center stage in the official public sphere. His death afforded the SED and its regional leadership in Dresden an occasion to represent its political mission in the ritual and pageantry that accompanied the leader's burial in Moscow. Press and radio transmissions provided the means by which to involve the regime's citizens and publicize popular emotion. Of course at the same, Stalin's death offered RIAS and other critics an opportunity to produce and transmit critical programming into the GDR that undermined the SED's attempts to project political power and international solidarity (more on this in chapter two).

Official news of Stalin's deteriorating condition appeared in regional media via ADN Moscow (Allgemeine Deutscher Nachrichtendienst- General East German News Service) on March 5 and East German readers would have learned precise details of his circulatory problems and blood pressure and thirty-six breaths per minute and 38.2 (grad) temperature.<sup>101</sup> On March 6, the 16:00 hours update informed East Germans that his situation had become even more serious. While the news seemed grave, the SED used the opportunity to remind East Germans that they were part of a larger, international, socialist community. *Neues Deutschland* informed readers that *Pravda*, the official organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), reminded *its* readers that the power of the party rested on the communion between party and masses: "The great strength of the party of Lenin and Stalin lies in its close bond between the millions of workers; in its

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<sup>101</sup> "Bulletin über den Gesundheitszustand J.W. Stalins vom 5. März 1953, 2.00 Uhr," *Neues Deutschland*, 6 März, 1953.

unbreakable unity with the people.”<sup>102</sup> This publicized closeness and community would become a recurring theme throughout the mourning period.

*ADN* distributed to the newspapers the telegrams of the Central Committee of the SED sent to the Soviet Central Committee regarding Stalin’s health. Such telegrams functioned as a reminder that East Germans’ imagined community of “peace-loving humanity” had also received and been moved by the news. “The Soviet people,” according to the version published in the *Sächsische Zeitung*, “and the working people of the entire world have been affected by the news of Stalin’s condition....These telegrams from the communist and workers’ parties speak to the resolve...to come together in these difficult times.”<sup>103</sup> The message from the SED to the CPSU noted that the Soviet leader had delivered the German nation from fascist enslavement and its citizenry now “felt bound” with the Central Committee of the Soviet Union and with the “great Soviet people” with whom Germans would continue to strengthen their bond.<sup>104</sup> In a similar telegram, the council of ministers communicated with the Soviet government to communicate that the entire East German people would fight to strengthen the friendship between the Soviet and German peoples and continue the struggle to generate a socialist society.<sup>105</sup>

The East German media began transmitting expressions of solidarity through a transnational public sphere, extending to the other Soviet Socialist Republics and western

<sup>102</sup> “Die grosse Einheit von Partei und Volk,” *Neues Deutschland*, 6 March, 1953: “Die große Stärke der Partei Lenins und Stalins liegt in ihrer engen Verbundenheit mit den Millionen Massen der Werktätigen; in ihrer unlöslichen Einheit mit dem Volke.”

<sup>103</sup> “Eng Verbunden mit dem Sowjetvolk,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, Freitag, 6 März, 1953: “das sowjetische Volk und die Werktätigen der ganzen Welt mit der Erkrankung J.W. Stalins betroffen hat. ....Aus den Telegrammen der Kommunistischen und Arbeiterparteien spricht die Entschlossenheit, sich in diesem schweren Tagen noch fester...zu scharen.”

<sup>104</sup> Ibid: “Fühlen wir uns verbunden”

<sup>105</sup> “Ministerrat der DDR an die Regierung der UdSSR,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, 6 March 1953.

states. *ADN* published the telegrams of the Polish Unified Workers' Party which spoke in the name of the Polish nation and its expressed empathy regarding the news of Stalin's condition.<sup>106</sup> The official telegram from the Czech government communicated that its people would, in these difficult times, "work to build socialism alongside the Soviet people in still greater unity and brotherly love."<sup>107</sup> The SED also publicized Western telegrams of support from France, which claimed that the entire nation had been "grievously affected" and affirmed the brotherly bond of the French Communist Party and the Soviet people.<sup>108</sup> The SED also published similar telegrams from the communist parties in Great Britain, Belgium, and Italy, all of which represented the extensive imagined community grieving together.

On March 6, GDR radio broadcasted: "The heart of a comrade and general carrier of Lenin's idea, the wise leader and teacher of the Communist Party of the Soviet People, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, has ceased to beat."<sup>109</sup> Word of Stalin's passing also reached Germans in the Dresden region via 6,000 special editions of the *Sächsische Zeitung* that arrived via courier at one o'clock in the afternoon on March 6.<sup>110</sup> Local authorities in Dresden received orders to distribute some to political operatives (agitators and *Aufklärer*) and others publically. Dresdeners reportedly ripped newspapers from the hands of distributors at the Postplatz.<sup>111</sup> Flags outside of workplaces and factories now

<sup>106</sup> "Telegramm der Polnischen Vereinigten Arbeiterpartei und der Polnischen Regierung," *Neues Deutschland*, 6 März, 1953.

<sup>107</sup> "Erklärung des ZK der KPC und der Tschechoslowakischen Regierung," *Neues Deutschland*, 6 März, 1953.

<sup>108</sup> "Telegramm des ZK der KP Frankreichs," *Neues Deutschland*, 6 März, 1953: "schmerzlich getroffen"

<sup>109</sup> Available at [http://www.17juni53.de/audio/5303\\_1.mp3](http://www.17juni53.de/audio/5303_1.mp3) "Das Herz des Mitkämpfers und Generalen Fortsetzer der Sache Lenins. Den weisen Führers und Lehrers der Kommunistischen Partei und des Sowjet Volkes Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, hat aufgehört zu schlagen."

<sup>110</sup> Telefonische Durchsage am 6.3.53, 14,40 Uhr, Sekretariat der Bezirksleitung – aufgenommen: Walter (SächsHStA 11859 Nr. IV 4.04 Nr.73).

<sup>111</sup> "Es wird vollendet, was Stalin begann," *Sächsische Zeitung*, 10 März, 1953.

flew at half-mast and comrades had begun preparations for public displays of grief. Makeshift *Trauerkundgebungen*, had already begun before lunch on March 6 after the special edition of the newspaper publicized Stalin's passing. His life works were honored and some even featured music.<sup>112</sup>

ADN represented the communal grieving spreading over the Eastern Bloc: "All of Poland...is in deep mourning," wrote ADN.<sup>113</sup> The message of the official telegram from the Polish government, reprinted in the local paper, noted the Poles' call for unity with the Soviet people.<sup>114</sup> In Romania, the news reports, apparently, or at least according to the ADN report in *Neues Deutschland*, prompted workforces in the factories, in the city and in the countryside, to gather and give thanks to Stalin while pledging their close solidarity with the Soviet Union.<sup>115</sup> The Romanian newspapers, adorned with a black border to signify the nation's mourning, allegedly, according to the SED, spoke for the entire Romanian people whose sorrow at this time cut around across societal lines.<sup>116</sup> The SED published similar reports from other Eastern Bloc nations. Such communications form instructive examples of socialist governments' representations of a unified and supportive imagined community that constituted the most important basis for their claims to legitimacy. Stalin's funeral would offer optimal conditions to create and publicize scenes full of imaginings that represented the authority of communist regimes.

The planning for the scenes that would unfold in Dresden the following Tuesday, March 10, began on March 6. Leadership in Dresden held a quick meeting with all the

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<sup>112</sup> FDGB Bezirks-org. Komitee Dresden, Dresden, den 6.3.1953 (SAPMO-BArch DY 34/25107).

<sup>113</sup> "Die Völker Trauern um Stalin," *Neues Deutschland*, 7 März, 1953: "Ganz Polen steht in Zeichen tiefer Trauer den Tod"

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

mass organizations in the region immediately after getting official news of Stalin's death from Moscow.<sup>117</sup> The Central Committee sent out the guidelines for the demonstration in Berlin and operational instructions for regional party leaders laid out their immediate tasks. Agitators found themselves charged with stirring up materials that could provide representational material for the GDR's media outlets: mobilizing workforces and procuring "commitments" concerning production targets, heightened awareness of provocateurs and saboteurs, and aid for security apparatuses and the police, along with declarations from the politically unaffiliated who planned to join the party.<sup>118</sup>

The Monday (March 9) edition of the *Sächsische Zeitung* revealed the schedule for the *Trauerkundgebung* in Dresden and spoke for the "entire working class of the Dresden region" which expressed their sympathies and veneration to Stalin."<sup>119</sup> Stalin's entombment was scheduled for noon that day (Moscow time) and the SED would stage parallel ceremonies throughout the GDR (two hours earlier).<sup>120</sup> At 9:00 A.M. in Dresden, the state was to broadcast grieving music over the airwaves for one hour and everyone was to be in place at 9:55 A.M.<sup>121</sup> At precisely 10:00 A.M. the GDR's airwaves were to go silent for five minutes. Sirens in the factories in Dresden (district) were scheduled to sound at 10:00 A.M. and five minutes after to signal to the workers the beginning and conclusion of five minutes of silence. Traffic through the city was to come to a standstill. Throughout the region's places of administration, schools, and other institutions concurrent events were to take place. The leader in each space was to deliver a message

<sup>117</sup> FDGB Bezirks-org. Komitee Dresden, Dresden, den 6.3.1953 (SAPMO-BArch DY 34/25107).

<sup>118</sup> Telefonische Durchsage am 6.3.53, 14,40 Uhr, Sekretariat der Bezirksleitung – aufgenommen: Walter (SächsHStA 11859 Nr. IV 4.04 Nr. 73).

<sup>119</sup> *Sächsische Zeitung*, 9 März, 1953.

<sup>120</sup> "Beisetzung J.W. Stalins im Lenin-Mausoleum," *Neues Deutschland*, Sonntag, 8 März, 1953.

<sup>121</sup> "Telefonische vom BL 7.3., 16,35, Betr.: Montag." (SächsHStA11859 Nr. IV 4.04 Nr. 73).

sent by the Soviet regime. The secretary of the Party Organization of the SED was to read a telegram from the Central Committee of the SED. Shortly after ten, GDR radio would broadcast the funeral procession (*Trauermarsch*) live from Moscow.<sup>122</sup> At noon in Berlin, residents would take part in a mourning march to Stalin Avenue, the monumental street in Berlin under construction as a tribute to the late soviet leader.<sup>123</sup> Throughout the day, the smaller towns and cities through the GDR were to stage simultaneous demonstrations to honor Stalin. Those who marched would present the flags of the GDR along with images of Stalin along with Marx and Engels. Such events were to be “scrupulously organized.”<sup>124</sup>

At 12:00 P.M., GDR radio transmitted the funeral procession live from Moscow: “The thoughts of millions convene here at Red Square, at the Kremlin Wall in front of Lenin’s mausoleum that will also serve as Stalin’s last resting site.”<sup>125</sup> The broadcast detailed the funeral procession and the placement of Stalin’s remains as Chopin’s famous “Funeral March” (Piano Sonata No. 2) played. In the early afternoon of that cold and windy Monday, the residents who had formed *Kranzdelegationen* (wreath carrying/laying delegations) throughout Dresden streamed out of factories and places of work, the administrative, and organizational houses toward the Unity Square. The wind billowed the banners which had written in gold, black and red the “eternal gratefulness” of the

<sup>122</sup> “Sendung des Staatlichen Rundfunkkomitees am 9 März 1953,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, 9 März, 1953.

<sup>123</sup> The East German government renamed the street “Karl-Marx-Allee” in 1961. “Aufruf der Bezirksleitung der SED und des Magistrats von Groß-Berlin zum Trauermarsch anlässlich der Beisetzung J.W. Stalins,” *Neues Deutschland*, 8 März, 1953.

<sup>124</sup> “Die Bevölkerung des Bezirkes Dresden ehrt Stalin,” *Sächsische Zeitung* 9 März, 1953. See for instance the schedule for Radebeul Programm und Organisation der Trauerfeier am Tage der Beisetzung des Sarges des Genossen Stalin in Moskau, Sekretariat, Dresden, am 7.3.1953 (SächsHStA 11859 Nr. IV 4.04 Nr. 73): “gewissenhaft organisiert”

<sup>125</sup> Available online at <http://www.mdr.de/tv/programm/sendung501990.html>: “Treffen sich die Gendanken von Millionen, hier auf dem roten Platz, hier an der Kreml Mauer, vor dem Lenin Mausoleum, das auch die letzte Ruhestätte Stalins sein wird.”

German people to “their greatest friend, their savior from the yoke of fascism and teacher who would give them a happy future.”<sup>126</sup>

At three o'clock that afternoon Dresdeners packed the square to offer Stalin his last honors. The image of Stalin loomed over Dresdeners and the red, black and gold banners bowed before his likeness. The eyes of all those in attendance reportedly were drawn to the towering image of the “*Führer*...who was a father to us.”<sup>127</sup> The regional SED leadership filed through and met with the friends of the Soviet Control Commission. All lingered at the Soviet Cenotaph before leaving a wreath at the image of the Soviet soldiers. Alongside Stalin's image, guards, including a Soviet soldier, an officer from the East German barracked police force and a comrade from the Society for Sport and Technik, stood like statues. Together they formed an “uplifting symbol of the determination to defend peace, if necessary with arms, in memory of the great one who has passed.”<sup>128</sup> The *Sächsische Zeitung* reported: Greek Pioneers, boys and girls, “who had seen the face of battle...move past the blazing flames of the offering cups. Awestruck, they lay their flowers down and raised their hands in a pioneer style greeting...”<sup>129</sup> The streamers attached to the wreaths offered Dresden's tributes to Stalin: “To the leader of the free people of the world,” and “To the best friend of the German people.”<sup>130</sup> The various mass organizations constructed by the SED streamed by the memorial and an elderly woman slowly laid a bouquet of lilacs and paused for a moment of silence. As the wreaths piled up in the area of the monument, the workers began to

<sup>126</sup> “Unsterblich schlägt sein Herz in unserem Herzen weiter,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, 9 März, 1953.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.: “Ja, der uns Vater war”

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.: “Ein erhebendes Symbol der Entschlossenheit, im Sinne des großen Toten gemeinsam, wenn es sein muss, mit der Waffe in der Hand, den Frieden zu verteidigen.”

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.: “Griechische Pioniere Jungen und Mädels, die den Krieg...gesehen haben...ziehen sie vorbei den Flammen der Opferschalen. Ehrfurchtsvoll legen sie ihren Blumen nieder, erheben zum Pioniergruss die Hand”

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.: “Dem Führer des Weltfriedenslagers, Dem besten Freund des Deutschen Volkes”

stream into the area, carrying images of Stalin. As the sun set, the demonstrators, reportedly numbering around one hundred thousand, headed home.<sup>131</sup>

That evening, GDR radio reported the mourning demonstrations from around the world.<sup>132</sup> Telegrams from Dresden's workplaces to the central authority in Berlin expressed the gratitude of various workforces for Stalin's leading role in the German nation's liberation from fascism. Reports from the *Bezirksleitung* in Dresden to Berlin indicated that local authorities were pleased with the outcome of the events. The FDGB claimed that the publicization (*Popularisierung*) of the services of "progressive peoples" throughout the world and the sympathy telegrams of the different parties and organizations had increased awareness among the workforces of these were published in the local press.<sup>133</sup> The workers at the Rheostat Factory, according to the *Sächsische Zeitung*, for example, held a demonstration and sent their condolences via telegram to the CPSU and the *Komsomol*.<sup>134</sup>

In the wake of Stalin's death, Georgi Malenkov would appear to take the reins of a new collective leadership called the CPSU Presidium that included, among others, Vyacheslav Molotov, Nikita Khrushchev, Nikolai Bulganin, Kliment Voroshilov, Lazar Kaganovich, Anastas Mikoyan, Maksim Saburov, and Mikhail Pervukhin.<sup>135</sup> Kaganovich, Bulganin, Beria, and Molotov became deputy chairmen. The move away from Stalinist policies—accelerated build-ups and an aggressive and paranoid world outlook—came less than one week after Stalin's body had been laid to rest, with Malenkov, speaking to the Supreme Soviet, proclaiming that no situation was beyond peaceful resolution.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> "Sendung des Staatlichen Rundfunkkomitees am 9. März 1953," *Sächsische Zeitung*, 9 März, 1953.

<sup>133</sup> Berichterstattung/Statistik, FDGB-Bezirks-Org. Komitee Dresden, Dresden, den 12.3.1953.

<sup>134</sup> "Des Grossen Erbes würdig erweisen," *Sächsische Zeitung*, 10 März, 1953.

<sup>135</sup> Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, 3.



Détente seemed to sprout almost overnight, reflected for instance in the Soviets' decision to temper its media campaign against all things American.<sup>136</sup> The Stalinist approach to socialist construction, mirrored in the accelerated program adopted by the GDR in 1952, ended in early June 1953, though not as quickly as Soviet leadership would have liked. Ulbricht and the SED leadership appeared either unaware of this seismic shift or willingly ignored it so as to continue along the Stalinist course until they found themselves summoned to Moscow in the summer of 1953 and ordered to abandon their program. By this point, conditions and attitudes had begun to deteriorate in the GDR and the rival public sphere, most notably foreign broadcasting and rumors, increasingly chipped away at the SED's prestige and its claims to legitimacy. The next chapter will survey these forces.

## Conclusions

The representational culture developed and practiced by the SED in these postwar years constituted a multi-pronged propaganda campaign. Radio broadcasts represented the vigor and virtue of the Soviet system under Stalin and the international community, including the GDR, which stood to profit from it. Radio also represented imagined communities of support in local, national, and transnational spheres, especially through the publicization of organized protests. As radio listenership remained unreliable due to technical issues and a programming schedule that failed to resonate with listeners, the party relied on the construction of public loudspeaker systems and factory radio systems to transmit their messages to a more-or-less captive audience. Visually, the party represented its legitimacy in the official public sphere with banners, images, and

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<sup>136</sup> The "Hate America Campaign"

orchestrated expression of public opinion. Carefully choreographed demonstrations functioned as political ritual and evidence of popular support. The aggregate of these activities amounted to a representational culture furnished with modern tools and designed to project the confidence and virtue of the SED while simultaneously disguising its doubts and lack of genuine support.

## Chapter Two

### The Rival Public Sphere in the Dresden Region, 1945-1953

*“RIAS will fight for the principles until twenty million Germans in East Germany again have the opportunity to unite in a political and economic relationship with West Germany.”*

- from W. H. – RIAS Direktor  
to A.S., a critic of the station in Dresden, 1949<sup>1</sup>

*“On the territory of West Berlin the American station RIAS constitutes a great espionage and subversive organization. RIAS carried special instruction broadcasts for its agents on the execution of acts of diversion and sabotage and destructive activities”*

- General W.I. Tschuikov  
Chairman, Soviet Control Commission for Germany  
In a letter to High Commissioner Walter J. Donnelly  
October 1, 1952<sup>2</sup>

*“There are no refugees fleeing the GDR, land of milk and honey; these rumors, lies out of the whole cloth, are invented by RIAS, the Northwest German Radio, the Western press and other capitalist crooks in order to create a psychological atmosphere for war against [the GDR] and the [Soviet Union].”*

-Radio Berlin I, II, III, March 4, 1953<sup>3</sup>

*“I can say without intending to flatter you that the entire East Zone population listens to RIAS.”*

-Frau A.A., Eberswalde<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Abschrift - Berlin, am 6 Juli 1949, von W. H. – RIAS Direktor an A.S. (SächsHStA 11856 IV/A Nr. 2008, Bl.99): “RIAS wird für die Prinzipien kämpfen, bis die 20 Millionen Deutschen von Ostdeutschland wieder in der Lage sein werden, sich in politischer und wirtschaftlicher Beziehung mit Westdeutschland zu vereinigen.”

<sup>2</sup> Untitled document. RIAS News Clippings, Radio Scripts, Magazine Articles, 1953 (G. A. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI 1/6).

<sup>3</sup> “March 4, 1953: Radios Berlin I, II, III,” RIAS News Clippings, Radio Scripts, Magazine Articles, 1953 (G. A. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation 1/6).

<sup>4</sup> “Background of RIAS” – RIAS listener mail, RIAS Programming & Organization Information (G. A. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI 1/4, #132).

This chapter will advance several arguments, chief among them is that a rival public sphere developed alongside the official public sphere discussed in the previous chapter. This was the arena where ideas that challenged the SED's hegemony originated, circulated and began to adopt a more revolutionary tone after Stalin's death in March of 1953. The rival public sphere existed in the form of foreign radio broadcasts, rumors, and, to a lesser degree, leaflets. The ever-popular programming produced by RIAS represented an especially powerful element in the rival public sphere. Indeed, the station's popularity and its relentless criticism of the GDR chipped away at the legitimacy of the state's government and eventually helped make revolution thinkable in the summer of 1953.

### **RIAS: Radio in the American Sector**

One example of such criticism turned up in the mail at the Görlitz SED office on December 2, 1953:

*Dear God, make me deaf,  
so I never believe RIAS.*

*Dear God, make me dumb,  
so I never end up in prison.*

*Dear God make me blind,  
so that I accept everything as true.*

*And since I am deaf, dumb, and blind,  
Yep, then I must be Stalin's favorite child.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Informationsmeldung Nr. 7/53. Dresden, den 20.2.1953 an die ZK für Staatliche Kontrolle Berlin, Zentrale Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle, Bezirksinspektion Dresden (SAPMO-BArch DC 1 6212):

Lieber Gott mach mich taub  
Dass ich nie dem RIAS glaub.

Lieber Gott mach mich stumm  
Dass ich nie ins Zuchthaus komm.

Lieber Gott mach mich blind

Indeed GDR Radio labeled RIAS the “Pied Pipers of U.S. occupation” in March of 1953 in reference to RIAS, displaying one side of the Cold War confrontation.<sup>6</sup> The station’s architects and fans would have suggested that RIAS offered an objective source of information for East Germans and an alternative to the overtly politicized, state-censored information from domestic outlets. To a large degree, that was accurate.<sup>7</sup> This chapter conceptualizes RIAS as a powerful institution in the larger rival public sphere that operated as a quasi-forum for the productions of candid critiques and the anonymous airing of grievances while providing the framework for an imagined community of listeners. On this second point, one notes that the similarity between radio broadcasting (or radio listening) and print media did not escape Benedict Anderson in 1983 when he wrote that “Radio made it possible to bypass print and summon into being an aural

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Dass ich alles für richtig befind.  
Denn bin ich erst taub, stumm u. blind  
Ja dann bin ich Josef Stalins Lieblingskind

<sup>6</sup> RIAS News Clippings, Radio Scripts, Magazine Articles 1953, 1/6 (G. A. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI); There is a considerable body of literature examining the Cold war confrontation in the air airwaves, though Radio Free Europe gets probably the bulk of the attention on the American side. For a recent and excellent history of RIAS and its role in the Cold War radio contest in Berlin, see Nicholas Schlosser, *Cold War on the Airwaves: The Radio Propaganda War Against East Germany* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015). Other useful general studies include: Herbert Kundler, *RIAS Berlin: Eine Radiostation in einer geteilten Stadt* (Berlin: Reimer, 1994); Donald R. Browne, *International Radio Broadcasting: The Limits of the Limitless Medium* (New York: Praeger, 1982) who suggests (correctly) that RIAS served as a prototype for RFE and Radio Liberty; James Wood, *History of International Broadcasting*, Volume 2 (Bath, England: Bookcraft, 2000); Richard H. Cummings *Cold War Radio: The Dangerous History of American Broadcasting in Europe, 1950-1989* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009); Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000); A Ross Johnson, *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty: The CIA Years and Beyond* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010); Bernd Stöver, *Der Kalte Krieg: 1947 – 1991: Geschichte eines radikalen Zeitalters 1947-1991* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2007); A Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta, eds., *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, A Collection of Studies and Documents* (Budapest and New York: CEU Press, 2010); Michael Nelson, *War of the Black Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Michael Kuhlmann, *Kalter Krieg im Äther - Der Ost-West-Konflikt in politischen Radioinformationsmeldungen der beiden deutschen Staaten 1945-1970* (Norderstedt: Grin Verlag, 1988); Thomas Lindenberger, ed., *Massenmedien im Kalten Krieg: Akteure, Bilder, Resonanzen* (Köln: Böhlau, 2006) See Lindenberger’s introduction here for an overview of the function of mass media in the Cold War.

<sup>7</sup> See Schlosser, *Cold War on the Airwaves*.

representation of the imagined community where the printed page scarcely penetrated.”<sup>8</sup> Others have drawn parallels between the mass simultaneity of newspaper reading and radio listening, whereby millions of Germans performed this daily ceremony that formed the basis of Anderson’s model. The division of Germany, which felt so provisional to so many in the early years of the GDR, meant that the political boundaries of the two states could easily be penetrated and challenged, if not dismissed, by a station like RIAS.<sup>9</sup> This chapter will show that the imagined community created by RIAS was a protestor nation that actively campaigned for a unified Germany. The following sections will present this conceptualization of RIAS with a short history of the station’s origins, followed by a quantitative and qualitative review of the station’s listenership and its programming, reception, and effects on the Dresden region.

### **Founding RIAS**

RIAS evolved out of the U.S. Army’s “DIAS,” or “Wired Radio in the American Sector” and quickly became the dominant force in the rival public sphere.<sup>10</sup> Created on November 21, 1945 at the order of the U.S. Office of Military Government – Berlin Sector, Communications Branch, the station grew out of the Soviet refusal to place the

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 56, note 28.

<sup>9</sup> See Michael Lemke’s study, in which he discusses the openness and lingering unity of Berlin before the Wall—despite the sides’ politically bellicose governments. Michael Lemke, *Vor der Mauer: Berlin in der Ost-West-Konkurrenz 1948 bis 1961*, (Böhlau: Cologne, 2011). While Dresden, of course existed with a very different geopolitical arrangement, residents here regularly traveled to Berlin. For other recent work that considers radio’s facility to construct or maintain imagined communities, see Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 11-12; Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos ‘n’ Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Random House, 1999), 23-4; Carolyn Birdsall, *Nazi Soundscapes: Sound, Technology and Urban Space in Germany, 1933-1945* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 118.

<sup>10</sup> DIAS or *Drahtfunk im Amerikanischen Sektor*.

Reichsender Berlin under allied control.<sup>11</sup> DIAS, under American control, began broadcasting on February 7, 1945, to provide a “mass medium of expression for the democratic West in Berlin and the Soviet Zone.”<sup>12</sup> Early schedules offered seven hours of programming and the station changed its name to RIAS (Radio in the American Sector) following the switch to over-the-air transmission in September of 1946. Compared with the Soviets’ Berlin transmitter that operated at 10,000 watts, RIAS only utilized a 1000-watt transmitter for a short time before its lack of power quickly prompted the installation of more powerful units. Staff size grew and the need for a larger facility landed the operation at its headquarters on Kufsteiner Straße in Schoenberg, Berlin, on July 6 1948. To offset problems related to a loss of nighttime signal while increasing broadcasting power to Thuringia and Saxony, authorities installed a second transmitter (medium wave) in Hof, Bavaria. In 1950, the station procured clearer frequencies for the two transmitters and thus strengthened its range to include portions of West Germany and other areas of Central Europe. Another, smaller power upgrade of twenty watts helped mitigate problems related to daytime short-wave transmission in August of 1951 and the power was again supplemented with a 300-watt transmitter in January of 1953 to counteract Soviet jamming.<sup>13</sup> The early development of RIAS, then, looked quite similar to the GDR stations as both sought to increase transmitting power as part of an effort to fashion the

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<sup>11</sup> RIAS was also the official station of the Office of the United States High Commissioner for Germany (HICOG).

<sup>12</sup> “RIAS, Berlin,” United States. Office of the US High Commissioner for Germany, Information Services Division. Available at <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/History/History-idx?id=History.RIAS>. Background on RIAS, RIAS Organization and Programming Information 1/4, (G. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI #132, 1/8).

<sup>13</sup> Rüter –Ansprache bei der Einweihung des 300 Rias-Kilowatt-Senders, 15.1.53 Br., RIAS, RIAS, Documenta, Sondersendungen, 15.1.53 – 30.11.54 (DRA Potsdam, B304-01-00-0012).

largest listening community possible.<sup>14</sup> Of course, the messages produced by RIAS diametrically opposed those produced by its domestic competition.

### **RIAS Programming**

Like the GDR's domestic radio stations, RIAS attempted to pull listeners into aural communion with the fellow listeners and the West by creating instances where the audience concurrently consumed political, cultural, and intellectual information. RIAS existed primarily as a political instrument and institution and its programming reflected this reality. By 1951, the station was on the air around the clock and news and politics accounted for 29% of its programming.<sup>15</sup> The most popular programs among RIAS's offerings included news (42%) and musical programs (22%), which demonstrates an inverse result when compared with listener preferences for the GDR's programming.<sup>16</sup> The station broadcasted fifteen newscasts daily during the week and one fewer on Sunday, all of which ranged from three to fifteen minutes. A 1952 study by DIVO revealed that news and political commentaries constituted the most popular types of programming.<sup>17</sup> By 1953, weekly output of program hours included 3.5 hours designed for the GDR, 3.5 hours for all Germans, and 1.5 hours aimed at West Germans, though the station noted that there was a fair amount of cross-listening.<sup>18</sup> When asked what shows they listened to specifically, "Berlin Speaks to the Zone," topped the list with 45% of adults (and 34% of youth) tuning in five-to-six times per week. This particular show had originally formed

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<sup>14</sup> RIAS, Berlin 13-4; See also: Petra Galle and Axel Schuster, *Archiv- und Sammlungsgut des RIAS Berlin: Ein Findbuch zum Bestand im Deutschen Archiv* (Potsdam: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 2000); Schlosser, *Cold War on the Airwaves*; Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 13-4.

<sup>15</sup> "RIAS, Berlin"

<sup>16</sup> Country Report on Radio – East Germany. Records of the U.S. Information Agency, Office of Research, Reports and Related Studies, 1948-1953 (NARA RG 306 Box 29 A1 Entry 1007A).

<sup>17</sup> "Some General Patterns of Listening to RIAS," RIAS Coverage and Programming as Evaluated by East Zone Listeners, Report 170, Series 2, February 10, 1953. HICOG 170 (NARA RG 306 A1 1005 box 5).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 8.; "Country Report on Radio" (NARA RG 306 Box 29 A1 Entry 1007A).



the basis of RIAS programming, beginning in the spring of 1949 as the fifteen-minute program “Broadcast for Central Germany” that aired twice per week.<sup>19</sup> “Current News Show” was the next most popular at 15% for each group followed by “Everyday life in the Zone.”<sup>20</sup> Other popular shows included “It Happened in Berlin,” “About all-German Problems,” “Hit Parade” and “Coffee Circle.”<sup>21</sup> These programs all paid close attention to the GDR and provided residents with information that was not available from domestic sources that drove the station’s popularity, with commentators taking care to avoid legitimizing the state by simply referring to it as “the Zone” or “The East Zone.”

Other efforts to undermine the SED’s endeavors were more overt. “Berlin Speaks to the Zone,” produced specifically for the GDR and aired daily in ten and fifteen minute segments, aimed to help those living under the SED and to create and maintain feelings of hope for “liberation from communist rule.”<sup>22</sup> The show had earned its reputation and listeners by offering information on how to deal with despotic laws while undermining the SED and warning East Germans of “soviet agents.”<sup>23</sup> In the “unmasking segment,” announcers delivered the information as though “pronouncing a death sentence” for the exposed agents.<sup>24</sup> For example, drawing on information from the East Bureau of the SPD, RIAS warned residents in the town of Niesky (Dresden Region) that local man Johannes Brückner, who resided at Zisendorferplatz, worked to set up a State Security Service Office at the county Economic Enterprise on Königshainer Straße.<sup>25</sup> Other programs such

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<sup>19</sup> “RIAS, Berlin”

<sup>20</sup> “Some General Patterns of Listening to RIAS.” (NARA RG 306 A1 1005 box 5).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “Background on RIAS,” RIAS Organization & Programming Information, 1/4 (G. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI #132, 1/8).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

as “Mirror of the East” surveyed news in the satellite states and the USSR and operated as part of the “truth campaign.”<sup>26</sup>

With its programming, RIAS aimed to maintain an intellectual connection between East Germans and western institutions. To reach all strata of East Germans, producers crafted shows aimed at white and blue collar workers (early in the morning), farmers, housewives, and a review of the “free” West German and foreign presses. Similarly, other programming incorporated listeners into West German conversations and functioned as a public through the airwaves. “Berlin Press Review” offered a comparison of the presses from East and West Berlin. Literary programs received less airtime than programs that used fictional characters to create the image of “man in the Western World and the questionability of everything human under totalitarian regimes.”<sup>27</sup> Youth programs (“Jugendfunk”) similarly contrasted the lives of West German youths with those in the East and strived to create for the latter, a “sense of community with the West.”<sup>28</sup> The program “European Hour,” which aired on Sundays, was also designed to create a sense of community for GDR residents, according to the station, by beaming news and music from London, Paris, Vienna, Zürich, Stockholm, the Benelux countries, Madrid, and Rome. The station also kept East Germans apprised of political affairs in the FRG with “Week in Bonn,” which provided a survey of political developments. “Report from the Berlin House of Representatives” transmitted recorded bits from the Berlin legislature every couple of weeks. Other programs aimed to combat Soviet indoctrination of children using fairy tales and stories that encouraged “humanity and tolerance.” Youth

<sup>26</sup> “Background on RIAS,” RIAS Organization & Programming Information, 1/4 (G. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI #132, 1/8).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. “Cultural Programs of Special Interest to Soviet Zone Listeners.”

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

and young people listened to RIAS productions that criticized the Free German Youth and recounted youth activities in the West. “Youth in our Times” offered radio plays and discussions concerning the “human and political problems” that youth faced in the GDR. Finally, “University of the Air” presented lecture series by Western scientists, scholars, and other experts in their fields as a response to the “intellectual emergency situation” in the GDR.<sup>29</sup>

RIAS combined politics and entertainment to satirize the GDR’s politicians and political actions. The most frequently listened to of such shows among adults, the comedy duo of Pinsel & Schnorchel, voiced by Erich Kestin and Friedrich Steig, ridiculed the SED’s various missteps and the Soviet agenda writ large. The show began in 1951 and aired on Saturday evenings.<sup>30</sup> The eponymous hosts portrayed the roles of two communist functionaries, one dedicated and the other comically overzealous. They met at a fictitious tavern called “The Old Red Mill” where they figured out how to avoid political deviations while reviewing the complexities of the Soviet system.<sup>31</sup> The show also mocked the GDR’s imagined (in both senses of the word here) bonds with the Soviet Union and China forged by its media apparatuses (see chapter one). The station sometimes did this with jokes, for example:

An airplane with a policeman, a Czech, a Pole, and a Russian transferring troops from one military exercise location to another suddenly has engine troubles. The pilot informs the passengers that three of the four soldiers have to jump from the plane. None of the four has a parachute. With a salute to President Bierut, the Pole jumps out first. The Czech shouts

<sup>29</sup> “Background on RIAS,” RIAS Organization & Programming Information (G. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI 1/4)

<sup>30</sup> “RIAS Coverage and Programming as Evaluated by East Zone Listeners.” Surveys suggested that 66% of adults listened to this show once per week.

<sup>31</sup> RIAS Pamphlet, 31; Margarete Wohlan, “Pinsel und Schnorchel” - Kabarettistische Reihe mit Erich Kestin und Friedrich Steig, RIAS 1951-1959 Aus den Archiv, Beitrag vom 28.05.2012. Deutschlandradio Kultur. [http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/pinsel-und-schnorchel.1261.de.html?dram:article\\_id=190778](http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/pinsel-und-schnorchel.1261.de.html?dram:article_id=190778): “Zur Roten Mühle”

“Long live Gottwald” and takes the plunge. The Russian grabs the German and tosses him out of the plane, calling out after him, “Long live German-Soviet Friendship!”<sup>32</sup>

### **Programming and Action**

RIAS took aim at what it perceived as anti-worker maneuvers in the GDR’s factories, which in 1951 appeared in the form of labor contracts designed to boost productivity.<sup>33</sup> The station pointed out that workers in the GDR had no organs of their own as the SED had complete control of the nation’s media outlets. The regime had also co-opted the associations and clubs that traditionally formed the social basis for workers’ organization. Thus, RIAS would “arm” the workers and assume the role of advisor, “gathering and disseminating as much news as possible...to break down the isolation of the many worker groups” while hopefully “supplanting the lack of a free press.”<sup>34</sup> The station aimed to operate as an organizational force for the opposition and provide a means to “combine the powers of hundreds and thousands of men and women.”<sup>35</sup> Finally, the station functioned as a forum, boasting that it would “work out a single, strong line of

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<sup>32</sup> For the audio of this transcription (and other examples), see "Pinsel & Schnorchel" - Spitze Töne - Politische Satire des RIAS, available at [http://rias1.de/sound4/rias\\_/pinsel/pinsel\\_und\\_schnorchel.html](http://rias1.de/sound4/rias_/pinsel/pinsel_und_schnorchel.html): Ein Flugzeug mit einem Volkspolizisten, einem Tschechen, einem Polen, und einem Russen, hat bei der Verlegung von einem Truppenübungsplatz zum andern plötzlich Motorschaden. Der Flugzeugführer gibt Anweisung: Drei von den vier Friedenskämpfern müssen die Maschine verlassen. Nur eine könnte notfalls drin bleiben. Alle vier haben keine Fallschirme. Mit einem Hoch auf Präsident Bierut, springt der Pole erst aus. Der Tscheche schreit “es lebe Gottwald!” und stürzt sich in die Tiefe. Da packt der Russe den Deutschen, wirft ihn schnell aus der Maschine, und ruft ihm nach: “Es lebe die Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft!”

<sup>33</sup> A demand that stemmed from the Five-Year-Plan.

<sup>34</sup> “Special Report No. 1 – 1953 – An Analysis of the RIAS Campaign Against the Soviet Zone Collective Contracts for the Director of RIAS,” RIAS, Radio Branch, Information Division, Office of Public Affairs, Berlin Germany, February 18, 1953 (G. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI RIAS Official Reports #132 1/5). RIAS reported that the contracts called for a 60% increase in productivity while wages were to rise only 20%, so pay would remain the same but workers would have higher quotas.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

argument from [workers' and listeners'] individual arguments" in order to present a unified front to the regime.<sup>36</sup>

While the station had knowledge of the contract issue going back to early 1951, the campaign began, in a way, with a single worker about fifty kilometers outside of Dresden in mid-March, of that year.<sup>37</sup> A man employed at the rolling mills in Riesa, which served as the pilot plant for the rollout of the new contracts, had received the collective contract for his plant, taken it home with him, and critiqued its content in the margins. He then mailed it to "Free Berlin" and it ended up in the hands of RIAS employees where it became the basis for a broadcast campaign against the contracts.<sup>38</sup> While station bosses had conceded that the contracts would eventually be forced into law everywhere, it aimed, through programming, to, at the very least, create a more genuine dialog regarding the contracts through careful evaluation while offering advice to GDR workers.

RIAS went about this in several ways. Above all, hosts presented analyses of the factory contracts and pointed out the disadvantages they held for workers while arguing that the Soviet Union stood as the principal beneficiary. The station also suggested workers avoid negotiating when fewer than 100 persons were present in order to bargain from a position enhanced through "safety in numbers."<sup>39</sup> Early morning programs gave workers "practical, detailed advice on ways to combat the contracts without serious danger" and then capitalized on instances of resistance by publicizing the occurrences,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Riesa was in the administrative region of Dresden between 1952 and 1990.

<sup>38</sup> "Special Report No. 1 – 1953 – An Analysis of the RIAS Campaign Against the Soviet Zone Collective Contracts for the Director of RIAS" (G. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI RIAS Official Reports #132 1/5).

<sup>39</sup> "Zur Information der Korrespondenten," Berlin 24. April 1952, Release # 1630, Office of the United States High Commissioner for Germany Berlin Element, Information Branch (DRA Potsdam F304-01-04/0004).

creating an imagined community of protestors.<sup>40</sup> RIAS reports equipped workers with arguments received from colleagues around the GDR and encouraged those listening to confront party functionaries, forcing the FDGB into drawn out discussions and debates.<sup>41</sup> Evidence of RIAS's influence also appeared in SED organs as authors bemoaned workers' use of "RIAS arguments," which perhaps inadvertently confirmed listenership.<sup>42</sup> This put the regime on the defensive, forcing it to directly deploy propagandists ("an army of instructors") in workplaces. Interestingly, RIAS encouraged workers to avoid these more skilled debaters and instead offer a cold shoulder and silence.<sup>43</sup> The station received reports from workers that such tactics had shown the efficacy (and this was also confirmed in GDR press reports) of such methods, though at least one individual conceded that this approach might merely have been the most obvious one and not truly the brainchild of RIAS. Still, radio functioned as a surrogate for traditional workers' publications and organization and made the tactics available to workers throughout the GDR. By making such information available to an entire nation, workers came to a "unified course," they mitigated risk through collective action, and "the workers' attitudes" according to RIAS's own assessment, "became a mass-phenomenon against which the system was temporarily powerless."<sup>44</sup> This represented a powerful and distinctly modern development.

RIAS appeared quite proud of its work here, further noting that "a major portion of the population of the Soviet Zone was brought together in opposition to the communist

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> "Special Report No. 1 – 1953 – An Analysis of the RIAS Campaign Against the Soviet Zone Collective Contracts for the Director of RIAS" (G. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI RIAS Official Reports #132 1/5).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 28. This is RIAS's own assessment that is in line with my reasoning.

regime and was thereby incalculably strengthened in its adherence to the West.”<sup>45</sup>

Though the SED eventually forced through the contracts some six months later in the winter of 1951, Gerhard Haas, who led the anti-communist German Trade Union Federation advisory office in Berlin for Soviet Zone workers, later boasted: “Last year RIAS almost singlehandedly solidified anti-communist resistance in the Soviet Zone and turned individual resistance into mass resistance. I think we all ought to recognize this fact and implore RIAS to maintain this policy.”<sup>46</sup> Such an outcome was indeed closely aligned with the station’s stated goal of creating “a new sense of solidarity against the rule of the Socialist Unity Party.”<sup>47</sup> Later, this statement might seem to corroborate the SED’s claims that RIAS orchestrated the June 17 mass demonstrations. But perhaps the most striking achievement here was less obvious: by fostering resistance, RIAS controlled the optics of the situation and forced the SED to publicly impose the contracts against the will of the workers. The regime could have simply written the contracts into law overnight and perhaps generated less resistance, but by engaging in a prolonged, public—and highly publicized—debate, no matter how scripted the outcome, it came out a political loser. Such episodes used up the regime’s political capital—and real capital—and whittled away its claims of popular support.<sup>48</sup>

Only occasionally did RIAS find itself forced into a defensive stance. As discussed in chapter one, the “West-Tactics”<sup>49</sup> employed by the East German State Radio

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<sup>45</sup> “Zur Information der Korrespondenten,” Berlin 24. April 1952, Release # 1630, Office of the United States High Commissioner for Germany Berlin Element, Information Branch (DRA Potsdam F304-01-04/0004).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “Special Report No. 1 – 1953 – An Analysis of the RIAS Campaign Against the Soviet Zone Collective Contracts for the Director of RIAS” (G. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI RIAS Official Reports #132 1/5).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> “West-Arbeit”

Committee, which broadcasted worker unrest and strikes in the FRG attempted to achieve similar results: create an imagined community of dissidents that could challenge the Adenauer government and the status quo of division.<sup>50</sup> In the spring of 1953, RIAS responded to the reports and headlines that appeared in the SED-controlled press that claimed every such strike indicated—in the words of RIAS—“another step towards the collapse of the capitalist system.”<sup>51</sup> Station editors took care to note that not only did these strikes in the FRG aim not to topple the government and that they also demonstrated what the SED simply refused to admit: that workers in the West were organized.<sup>52</sup>

In sum, RIAS programming created an aural and imagined community that consisted of GDR listeners and representatives in the FRG while at the same time pulling East German listeners westward. The station achieved this by providing an ersatz forum for East (and West) Germans and placing East Germans in an everyday aural communion with West Germans. And like their communist counterparts, RIAS officials felt they were educating or enlightening an audience, although opponents of the SED would point out that residents of the GDR did not have access to reliable or non-partisan news. In this way, to claim that RIAS merely represented another simulated public sphere has some merit. Certainly, the station’s existence began and ended with an unwavering political position, but programming claimed it strived for objectivity in its reporting and more

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<sup>50</sup> “State Radio Committee” (GDR)

<sup>51</sup> “Werktag der Zone” Nr. 577, Freitag, den 6. März 1953, Hauptabteilung Politik, 5.35-5.40 (DRA Potsdam, 03 Werktag d. Zone - F003, B 304-01-08 / 0001): “ein Schritt weiter auf dem Wege zum Zusammenbruch des Kapitalistischen Systems.”

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



importantly, its audience agreed.<sup>53</sup> In that way, these efforts reflected the powerful and authentic impulse of a majority of East and West Germans to re-connect with one another and the SED appeared to stand in the way of this objective. It thus found itself the target of an unrelenting criticism that whittled away at its prestige and legitimacy.<sup>54</sup> While the partition may not have existed because of the SED, according to at least one historian, the Americans and British were successful in establishing this narrative.<sup>55</sup> And unfortunately for the SED, the Americans' radio station in the GDR enjoyed a wide-ranging and dedicated listenership that appreciated its programs and made it only more difficult for the regime to communicate its positions and vision to the masses.

### **Listenership in Dresden**

*Middle-Germany Radio, a load of shit! RIAS... good!*

-written on a bathroom door in Bischofswerda, Dresden Region, 1952<sup>56</sup>

Compared to GDR broadcasting, RIAS programming found a larger and more enthusiastic audience. This meant that it more completely and effectively realized its mission in establishing an imagined community of listeners bound together in opposition to its Cold War adversaries. There are two main ways researchers can quantify and

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<sup>53</sup> See Nicholas Schlosser, "Creating an 'Atmosphere of Objectivity': Radio in the American Sector, Objectivity and the United States' Propaganda Campaign against the German Democratic Republic, 1945–1961," *German History* 4 (2011): 610-627.

<sup>54</sup> One must keep in mind that the SED openly and regularly campaigned for re-unification at this time, but on generally unrealistic political terms.

<sup>55</sup> Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line*, 485-6.

<sup>56</sup> Gen Knorr - Betr.: Auszug aus dem Informationsbericht der Bezirksinspektion der ZKK Dresden vom 25.9.1952, ZKK - Arbeitsgruppe Eberling, Berlin, den 3.10.1952 (SAPMO-BArch DC1 6212). This quote was written in a bathroom in Bischofswerda (Dresden Region): "Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk, große Scheiße! RIAS [und RIAS Österreich], gut!" [by "RIAS-Austria" the scribbler probably meant Rot-Weiß-Rot, an American-run station in postwar Austria]

qualify RIAS listenership in Dresden and the rest of the GDR: through Western surveys and functionaries' observations from the SED record.

In the early 1950s, RIAS was probably the most popular station in the Dresden region and the rest of the GDR. The surveys on the Western side, conducted by DIVO-Gesellschaft für Markt- und Meinungsforschung m.b.H., Frankfurt am Main, which had a contract with the Evaluation Staff at the Office of the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany (HICOG) reveal listener preferences for Saxony in the early 1950s. In June of 1951, in a survey of refugees Berlin found that among radio listeners, 78% of GDR residents listened mainly to RIAS while only 6% claimed not to listen at all. In the localized survey conducted by officials in Saxony, Radio Leipzig was the most popular domestic station among all GDR residents and refugees sampled in the West, attracting 62% (13% frequent listeners and 49% occasional) of a refugee sample.<sup>57</sup> These numbers, as pointed out in chapter one, possibly reflect the listening habits of approximately seventeen million East Germans with radio ownership in the early 1950s at about one set per five residents. In general, radio listening in the GDR was quite popular, with radio serving as the primary means by which East Germans received “reliable information” and maintained contact with the outside world.<sup>58</sup> Among those questioned who came from Saxony (105 cases), 79% stated that they listened mainly to RIAS, while a mere 17% listened mainly to GDR stations. Listeners revealed that the most popular times to tune in were typically after lunch and in the evening hours between 6:00p.m. and 9:00p.m. Perhaps most tellingly, when asked if RIAS offered too many or too few political

<sup>57</sup> “Country Report on Radio,” 5 (NARA RG 306 Box 29 A1 Entry 1007A).

<sup>58</sup> “East Zone Radio Listening – Trend and Current Evaluation of RIAS,” Report No. 189, Series 2, October 30, 1953. Evaluation Staff – Office of Public Affairs Office of the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany, HICOG 189 (NARA RG 306 A1 1005 Box 5); “Country Report on Radio” (NARA RG 306 Box 29 A1 Entry 1007A).

broadcasts, only 7% of respondents felt the number should be lower. While the people surveyed here are not representative, the results do not contradict other evidence of the station's popularity. For example, these numbers are essentially the opposite of the same findings of the Dresden-based survey in chapter one regarding the local station in Dresden.<sup>59</sup>

Between 1951 and September 1953, RIAS listenership plateaued and eventually waned perhaps 20% or so due to Soviet jamming operations (it also did not help that most of the radio sets in the GDR were at least ten years old) and the threat of reprisal.<sup>60</sup> It is difficult to track the decline with much precision though, as authorities in the GDR along with the Soviets began jamming on January 21, 1953, and then re-upped their jamming efforts following the June 17 Uprising in 1953 (see chapter five).<sup>61</sup> There seem to have been other issues with reception by the fall of 1951, with 37% noting they often experienced interference, 33% sometimes interference, and 41% recalling [refugees] that they had clear reception.<sup>62</sup> More problems arose in the fall of 1952 when GDR stations began broadcasting on the same frequencies as RIAS (and the Armed Force Networks) disturbing the signal.<sup>63</sup> But interviews revealed that the majority of listeners experienced difficulties tuning in and almost all former residents stated that they depended on house electricity to power their radios. Only 4% could use batteries to power their sets in the event of power outages which remained a part of daily life in the GDR in the early 1950s.<sup>64</sup> The outages remained unpredictable, with 45% noting that they could not

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> "Country Report on Radio" (NARA RG 306 Box 29 A1 Entry 1007A).

<sup>62</sup> "East Zone Radio Listening" (NARA RG 306 A1 1005 Box 5)

<sup>63</sup> "Country Report on Radio" (NARA RG 306 Box 29 A1 Entry 1007A).

<sup>64</sup> "RIAS Coverage and Programming as Evaluated by East Zone Listeners," Report #170, Series 2, February 10, 1953 (NARA RG 306 AL 1005 box 5).

forecast outages and thus these occurrences sometimes kept potential listeners from tuning in.<sup>65</sup> Finally, the threat of government reprisal loomed, though the situation here remained somewhat fluid, since, as we will see, the SED chose not to outlaw the station.

Despite such deterrents, RIAS broadcasts constituted a critical component in the rival public sphere. It offered Dresdeners what they deemed to be reliable news, palatable opinion, and popular entertainment. By doing so, RIAS became a significant force in public and private life in Dresden and the rest of the GDR. Group listening to RIAS appears to have been common, for example, at one banker's home where up to fifteen people listened to RIAS and other western stations and a hospital where patients listened to the Voice of America programs RIAS transmitted.<sup>66</sup> Or take the example of Comrade Otto T., a farmer in the Volksgut Kunnerwitz, who stayed at a spa where he reported hearing nothing but RIAS and other western news sources played over the speaker system during his five month stay.<sup>67</sup> When asked why they listened to RIAS, interviewees most often mentioned that they sought alternative news sources that could provide "factual" news about political changes in the East and West and secondly, to "maintain contact with the free world and to obtain psychological reinforcement of their anti-communist attitude and opinions."<sup>68</sup> Interviews with East German refugees in May-June 1951 showed that 55% of those questioned about word-of-mouth transmission of RIAS information stated this happened "very often" with another 25% stating "often." The poll was detailed enough to also show that this communication process happened most often at the "opinion-leading level," meaning "better-educated, professionals, and

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> "Country Report on Radio" (NARA RG 306 Box 29 A1 Entry 1007A).

<sup>67</sup> "Betr.: Kreiskurheim Teicha," Kreis Niesky an die Kreisleitung der SED Abt Agitation in Niesky. 3.12.51 (SächsHStA 11856 Landesleitung Sachsen Nr. 271 Bl.12).

<sup>68</sup> "Country Report on Radio" (NARA RG 306 Box 29 A1 Entry 1007A).

higher income groups.”<sup>69</sup> In some cases, leadership within the mass organizations complained that RIAS held an influence over entire units, for example within the Democratic Sport Movement in Dresden which prompted leadership to call for members to publically declare their intention to refrain from tuning in to RIAS.<sup>70</sup>

One can also confirm RIAS listenership at the local level through regional SED reports, which reveal officials’ frustration and listeners’ enthusiasm and thus seem to corroborate the popularity suggested by the formal surveys. Since the late 1940s, local authorities frequently noted the presence of RIAS listening and what they perceived as RIAS-stimulated discussions.<sup>71</sup> Authorities in Oelsnitz (later absorbed into the Karl Marx-Stadt Region that neighbored the Dresden Region), which lay in between the RIAS transmitter in Hof and Saxony, reported to leadership in Dresden that the stronger signal meant more RIAS “rabble rousing” in the region.<sup>72</sup> Other reports from locales in the southern portion of what was still Saxony complained that a cross up on the wavelengths meant that RIAS had become so powerful that a large portion of the workers were *forced* to listen to the station.<sup>73</sup> One comrade tuned into what *had* been Radio Leipzig and heard “Berlin speaks to the Zone” from RIAS—and that was not the only problem. He was shocked to learn that the broadcast reflected “exact knowledge of what a Comrade Glasser had said in a district committee meeting the previous day.”<sup>74</sup> The comrade

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> “Bericht.” Landessportausschuss Sachsen, Sektor Information, Dresden, den 3. April 1952 (SächsHStA 11856 Landesleitung Sachsen IV/A Nr. 385 Bl.30).

<sup>71</sup> Abschrift - SED - Arbeitsgebiet Langebrück, 30. Juni 1949 an SED Kreisvorstand Dresden – PPA (SächsHStA 11856 Landesleitung Sachsen Nr. IV 2008, Bl.109).

<sup>72</sup> SED Kreisvorstand Oelsnitz an den Landesvorstand der SED Sachsen, Sekretariat, 15.3.50 (SächsHStA 11856 Landesleitung Sachsen Nr. 271, Bl.1).

<sup>73</sup> SED Kreisvorstand Auerbach (Vogtl.) an den Landesvorstand der SED, PKM, 22.3.1950 (SächsHStA 11856 Landesleitung Sachsen Nr. 271, Bl.3).

<sup>74</sup> “Abschrift - Vertraulich!” - Gez. Sigrid Krause Im Amt für Information Dresden A. L., Winer Str. 44 Dresden, den 9.11.1950 An die SED Betriebsgruppe, z.HD.des. Gen. Heidler, Dresden A., 50 August-

broached the possibility of sabotage and called for colleagues to explore how RIAS could have known about a meeting that had taken place the same day.<sup>75</sup>

RIAS's popularity manifested its reach in less obvious ways, too. Functionaries tuning into the station also presented a problem within the party and substantiated the station's popularity and ability to find secondary transmission. Consider the following case that illustrates the source of information and opinion production RIAS had become in the small town of Zittau: Comrade L. walks into the room of Comrade M. and hears RIAS broadcasts playing in the open. Comrade L. looks into the situation and finds out that the Party reportedly instructed Comrade M. to regularly listen to RIAS broadcasts so as to better familiarize himself with the arguments of the regime's opponents and more ably defend the SED's positions.<sup>76</sup>

It is difficult to say if the numbers of reports stating that RIAS broadcasts stirred up trouble through communities in the Dresden region increased following the accelerated construction of socialism in 1952, but such an assertion would hardly be a bold one—and this despite the station's slightly lowered listenership due to political threats and jamming. The party quite often viewed rabble-rousing and resistance as the obvious byproduct of its accelerated planning packages and by December of 1952, individual reports from the counties in the Dresden region confirmed an “intensified class struggle.”<sup>77</sup> For instance, officials noted that RIAS-rabble rousing had become noticeable

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Bebel-Str. 19 (SächsHStA 11856 Landesleitung Sachsen Nr. 271, Bl.11): “Der Sender RIAS war genau unterrichtet von dem, was der Genosse Glasser in der gestrigen, also am 8.11.1950, stattgefundenen Kreisleitungssitzung gesagt hat.”

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> “Betr.: Abhören des RIAS-senders in Kreissekretariat Zittau” Kue./Ab. Abt. Agitation Dresden, am 26.7.50 an Gen Lohagen u. Gen Schön gegeben (SächsHStA 11856 Landesleitung Sachsen Nr. 271 Bl.9).

<sup>77</sup> Zusammenfassung der eingegangenen Berichte über Feindtätigkeit aus den Kreisen auf Grund einer Anforderung des Sekretariats, SED-Bezirksleitung, Dresden, Leitende Organe der Partei und

to the point that some large-scale farmers now shirked their communal obligations in the belief that “the Amis were coming anyways and they would get their estates back again.”<sup>78</sup>

The extensive influence of RIAS in the GDR suggested by surveys of listeners and the SED grumbling about the station’s pervasiveness in the east is further substantiated by the sheer volume of letters the station received. From 1948 through May of 1953, RIAS received 794,550 mail receipts and monthly listener mail averaged almost 2,000 pieces from the GDR and West Berlin—which represented a mere 10-15% of the total volume received. Prior to March of 1952, one-third of the mail received came from the GDR before increased border controls stemmed the flow of letters. The Dresden region represented about 10% of the GDR’s population which, based on the average listenership levels in the area, suggests that residents there probably composed and mailed approximately 200 letters per month.<sup>79</sup> RIAS found in these letters considerable reinforcement that its programming resonated with listeners in the GDR. “Your station is the only thing that gives us hope and confidence – hope that one day things will be different for us,” wrote one anonymous resident from Saxony.<sup>80</sup> A housewife in Görlitz wrote to the station noting that “For a long time it’s been on my mind to thank you for the courage and inspiration you give us with your broadcasts....keep on as you are so that we

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Massenorganisationen – Sektor Parteiinformation. 1.12.52 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.5 Nr. 107, Bl.26-32): “Verstärkenden Klassenkampfes”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, Bl. 29: “Die Amis kämen ja sowieso, da bekämen sie ihre Betriebe wieder.”

<sup>79</sup> “Background on RIAS” (G. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI #132, 1/8). RIAS also received mail from around the world, including places as far away as Venezuela, South Africa, and New Zealand. I base these slightly hazy calculations on the numbers originally reported in Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, *40 Jahre DDR: Zahlen und Fakten wurden zusammengestellt von Abteilungen des Zentralkomitees der SED und der Staatlichen Zentralverwaltung für Statistik* (Berlin – Ost: Verl. für Agitations- und Anschauungsmittel, 1989).

<sup>80</sup> “Background on RIAS” (G. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI #132, 1/8).

here may someday experience liberation.”<sup>81</sup> RIAS’s role as a buffer to the SED was apparent to a seventy-year-old woman (name and origin unknown) who thanked the station for its service combating its enemies on the air and asked that the station continue its work to “keep contact with us as the ‘big friend,’ I mean the real one (not that of ‘Eastern’ origin), for those of us barred from the West. You are the only one informing us of the truth and the world’s events!”<sup>82</sup> As administrators hand-picked these quotations from the thousands of letters—which does not mean they are not representative of audience opinion—they also reinforce our understanding of RIAS’s intention to represent a unified German nation.

*Dear RIAS,*

Such letters signified points of contact between East Germans and RIAS and thus an association in the rival public sphere that the SED worked to sever. Although the station received thousands of letters from East Germany every month, some letters never made it to West Berlin. In the case of an interception, the sender could expect a visit from the police or state security. Such offenses represented a violation of Article Six of the GDR’s constitution, which included the penal concept of boycott-instigation (*Boykotthetze*)—utilized by authorities to prosecute those who engaged in discriminatory acts, the boycott of democratic institutions and organizations, and war-mongering. Together, these categories of offense gave officials significant latitude in their accusations.<sup>83</sup> The content of intercepted letters leaves little wonder why officials looked

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Article 6 – Constitution of the German Democratic Republic:

“All citizens have equal rights before the law. Incitement to boycott of democratic institutions or organizations, incitement to attempts on the life of democratic politicians, the manifestation of religious



to break the connection between Dresdeners and RIAS. Wrote one Dresdener “Today the so-called East Regime does not enjoy the trust of the population; it has no right to speak in the name of the eastern population,” whose letter ended up in the hands of the Stasi in 1950.<sup>84</sup> Such a proclamation, conceived and drafted in private would seem to confirm to party officials that residents maintained a cloistered dialogue with RIAS that could (and would, eventually) allow the SED to become challengeable. Instances of authorities intercepting letters intended for RIAS reveal that the party took such correspondence quite seriously. A single letter addressed to RIAS could land one in serious trouble with the authorities and the interception of such letters and the subsequent statements given by the suspects also offer insights into the connections between the station and its listeners—and how those forced to account for their letters might defend themselves.

In 1950, a police operation in a small town (thirty kilometers from Dresden) turned up a letter addressed to RIAS, setting off an investigation as the communication constituted a crime under Article Six.<sup>85</sup> Authorities at a checkpoint discovered the letter in the pocketbook of a man, N., from Dresden, riding his bicycle home. He (N.) admitted that the letter belonged to him and that he had dictated it to a friend (whom he declined to name at the time) who composed it on a typewriter. He protested that he had not sent the letter to RIAS because the station had morphed into an outlet no different from the Nazi-era newspaper, *Der Stürmer*, and that he merely wanted to express his mindset. He stated

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and racial hatred and of hatred against other peoples, militaristic propaganda and warmongering as well as any other discriminatory acts are felonious crimes within the meaning of the Penal Code. The exercise of democratic rights within the meaning of the Constitution is not an incitement to boycott. Those persons convicted of such a crime are disqualified from holding public office or a leading position in economic or cultural life. They also lose the right to vote and to stand for election.”

<sup>84</sup> “Abschrift – an Rias Berlin.” Neustadt/Sa.den,25.10.50 (BStU Archiv der Außenstelle Dresden MfS BV Dresden, KD Sebnitz 3922): “Die heutige sogenannte Ostregierung besitzt nicht das Vertrauen des Volkes, sie hat kein Recht in der Namen der Ostbevölkerung zu sprechen”

<sup>85</sup> “Aktentnotiz,” Harnisch. Untersuchungsorgan Pirna. Pirna, 15.11.50. Tgb.Nr. E/1608/50 (BStU Archiv der Außenstelle Dresden MfS BV Dresden, KD Sebnitz 3922).

that he had neither given the letter to anyone nor spoken about it to anyone. He further pleaded that he often composed articles concerning how democracy and socialism ought to be, but never shared them. In fact, he pointed out that his wife often complained that such writings would be his downfall and that she had already thrown a number of these letters into the oven. “When I wrote such things, I wanted to vent to my feelings because one cannot speak [openly] of such acts,” he concluded.<sup>86</sup>

Z., who also ended up in custody, admitted that N., who was the party chairman of the local NDPD where they both worked, often dictated letters to him at the office.<sup>87</sup> Typically, he would type materials related to party business, but over time, personal letters had become part of a side deal involving small payments and on several recent occasions N. had dictated several letters to RIAS. Z. claimed to have warned him that to send such a letter meant he was breaking the law and that he knew RIAS as a rabble-rousing station. Still, he typed the letter anyways as N. paid him ten DM to do so. He concluded his statement by admitting guilt as far as typing the letter and not reporting the contents, and claimed he feared doing so would bring reprisal for his small-scale profiteering.<sup>88</sup>

Three days later, on November 23, 1950, N. amended his previous statement, adding that he *had* sent a letter to his sister in Berlin. In the letter, he discussed family affairs but also asked his sister if she had forwarded a previous letter to RIAS.

Furthermore, he admitted that through his sister he had a connection contact with RIAS,

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<sup>86</sup> “Vernehmung.” Pirna, den 15.11.1950 (BStU Archiv der Außenstelle Dresden MfS BV Dresden, KD Sebnitz 3922): “Wenn ich so etwas geschrieben habe, wollte ich meinen Herzen Luft machen, weil man über derartige Handlungen nicht sprechen kann.”

<sup>87</sup> The NDPD was an East German Block Party designed for former Nazis party members, though in reality it offered its members no real political power.

<sup>88</sup> “Vernehmung. Untersuchungsorgan Pirna” Pirna, am 20.11.1950 (BStU Archiv der Außenstelle Dresden MfS BV Dresden, KD Sebnitz 3922).

but stressed that it only concerned a “contest” that he knew about because he habitually listened to the station.<sup>89</sup> He had titled the letter, “The Question of Germany’s Reunification.”<sup>90</sup> N. then (again) professed his disdain for RIAS, claiming that he was of the opinion that those who supported RIAS’s partisan rumors and rabble-rousing news should be designated as warmongers.<sup>91</sup> The investigation moved on, and by late December, N. revealed the July RIAS contest had been called “The Next Step toward German Unity” and he had put his entry in an envelope addressed to RIAS inside another envelope addressed to his sister to avoid the censors. When asked if he knew anyone else in contact with RIAS, he claimed he did not.<sup>92</sup>

### **The Struggle against RIAS in Dresden**

While action taken in association with RIAS could result in legal consequences, dealing with those who simply listened to RIAS prompted a different approach by the SED. After all, the Party’s anti-fascist biography meant that to criminalize the availability of foreign broadcasts would constitute a massive act of hypocrisy since such a law would have been a bit too reminiscent of National Socialist legislation. Consider for instance the exchange between colleagues discussing RIAS: the first asked why the party simply does not *prohibit* listening to RIAS. The second colleague clarified: “That is a fascist method; our method is to convince.”<sup>93</sup> The approach generated by this mentality—which

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<sup>89</sup> “Vernehmung. Untersuchungsorgan Pirna” Pirna, den 23.11.1950 (BStU Archiv der Außenstelle Dresden MfS BV Dresden, KD Sebnitz 3922).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.: “die Frage der Wiedervereinigung Deutschlands”

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> “Betr.: Bericht über die Durchführung der Lektion, die Note der Sowjetregierung und das Seminar über Abhören feindlicher Sender.” FDGB Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, Landesvorstand Sachsen, Zentralschule Ruf Luppä 36 an die Landesleitung der SED, Dresden, 5.4.52 (SächsHStA 11856 Landesleitung Sachsen Nr. 385, Bl.68): “Ein anderer Kollege stellte die Frage warum man nicht einfach

publically seemed to make little reference to the legal measures laid out in article six—constituted an organized campaign of persuasion to deter those who tuned in to RIAS.

The SED hatched a major crusade against RIAS early 1952 that presaged the party's plan to accelerate the construction of socialism later that summer. In February of 1952, the Agitation Department resolved to unleash an offensive against enemy propaganda and, above all, RIAS. Walter Ulbricht recommended that the mass organizations and organs take leadership of the campaign. Under their direction, pilot brigades that would serve as exemplary units with efforts focused especially in Görlitz where “enemy propaganda continuously influenced a portion of the population with criminal slandering of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Army, and supposed rabble rousing concerning the Oder-Neisse border as the settled boundary.”<sup>94</sup> It is highly unlikely that RIAS called the border into question, but the regime often tied all types of potentially devious talk to the work of outside agitators, especially RIAS. In cases where especially dangerous lies, rumors, and defamations spread, the offensive would be more intense. Functionaries working on the campaign also vowed to operate in public places such as restaurants and workspaces where Dresdeners openly listened to enemy stations. Tactics included confronting listeners on the spot and publicly shaming others through a coordinated leaflet campaign, by word of mouth, and designating such people as

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das Abhören des RIAS verbietet? Die Kollegen Schuler machten ihm klar, dass dies eine faschistische Methode sei, unsere Methode aber die der Überzeugung ist.”

<sup>94</sup> Sekretarisvorlage, SED Landesleitung Sachsen, Abt. Agitation, Dresden, den 1.2.1952 (SächsHStA 11856 Landesleitung Sachsen Nr. 271, Bl.13): “gelingt es der Feindpropaganda immer noch einen Teil der Massen zu beeinflussen mit der verbrecherischen Hetze gegen die Sowjetunion und die Sowjetarmee, mit der Hetze gegen die Oder-Neiße-Grenze als Friedensgrenze”

warmongers in the local press.<sup>95</sup> The second part of the campaign consisted of publicizing the anti-RIAS efforts of the citizenry through the SED's media channels.<sup>96</sup>

These efforts, initiated by seminars and publications, began in the spring of 1952. The SED identified Görlitz, where “allegedly they only listen to RIAS... and RIAS arguments circulated powerfully through the population” as one focal point for the campaign.<sup>97</sup> Propagandists led so-called seminars in various public spaces such as stores, bars, and businesses, with one titled, for example “Who listens to RIAS lends an ear to the mortal enemies of humanity.”<sup>98</sup> In Dresden, propagandists swooped down on Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz—a focal point of the unrest on June 17, 1953. During the seventy-minute seminar workers seemed to either have played dumb with officials or perhaps they truly had little knowledge of the party's positions regarding RIAS. Employees stated that only “class conscious” workers could safely listen to RIAS; that listening was only a problem when one spread the information, and that one must listen to better recognize one's enemy.<sup>99</sup> Did the seminar convince workers of RIAS's political noxiousness? Probably not, though the instructor reported that perhaps it helped and that in subsequent “lessons,” he took every opportunity to point out the danger involved with listening to RIAS. As a result, colleagues now discussed the anti-RIAS article hanging on the factory wall during their breaks.<sup>100</sup> This probably referred to an article entitled “Those

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.: “die die Kriegshetze unterstützen”

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> “Plan für den Einsatz der Instrukteurbrigade der Landesleitung” (SächsHStA 11856 Landesleitung Sachsen Nr. 316, Bl.107): “Im Kreis Görlitz ist angeblich nur der RIAS zu hören; Die RIAS Argumente kursieren dadurch stark in der Bevölkerung”

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.: “wer RIAS hört, leiht den Todfeinden der Menschheit sein Ohr”

<sup>99</sup> Bericht über das Seminar: über das Abhören feindlicher Sender. Betriebsschule “Paul Gruner” Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz, Niedersedlitz, am 22.4.52 (SächsHStA 11856 Landesleitung Sachsen Nr. 271, Bl.27): “klassenbewusste”

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.: “Paul Gruner”

who listen to RIAS help the war mongers!” published by the factory press.<sup>101</sup> “Those who listen to RIAS (and NWDR) and spread these lies help deliver the war mongers’ corrosive poison to our people” claimed the piece.<sup>102</sup> This was, essentially—disregarding the colorful wording and propagandistic adjectives—RIAS’s entire mission. When one considers the resources used by the SED to counter that effort, one can deduce that the station experienced considerable success in this regard.

The second part of the anti-RIAS campaign, touched on at the beginning of this chapter and conceptualized in the previous chapter, involved the SED publicizing the actions of those groups who volunteered to campaign against the station and other Western outlets. In Dresden, the SED charged the Agitation Department with developing two examples to publicize, one of which was the previously mentioned Grunaer Straße housing community and the other was, not surprisingly in Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz. The department secured pledges from workers—though not without facing questions and considerable resistance from various brigades—and popularized the slogan “Don’t Listen to RIAS - - All Strengths for Peace.”<sup>103</sup> The story ended up in *Neues Deutschland* under the headline “Mass mobilization smothers the poison of the station of lies.”<sup>104</sup> It featured the Hempel Brigade, which pledged to heighten their productivity—the infamous norms that would become an issue in early June of 1953. But the article left out the numerous problems that manifested themselves simply by attempting to convert RIAS listeners,

<sup>101</sup> “Wer den ‘RIAS’ hört, hilft den Kriegshetzern!” Sachsenwerk – Spiegel, Betriebszeitung der Belegschaft des Sachsenwerkes Niedersedlitz – herausgeben von der SED-Betriebsparteiorganisation, 4 April 1952 – Jahrgang 3 – Nr. 13 5 pf. (DRA Potsdam, Ostarchiv, F304-01-04/0004).

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.: “Wer den RIAS und den NWDR hört und diese Lügen verbreitet, trägt dazu bei, das zersetzende Gift der Kriegshetzer in unser Volk zu tragen.”

<sup>103</sup> “Bericht über die Entfaltung des Kampfes gegen Riashetze,” SED Landesleitung Sachsen - Abteilung Agitation, Abt. Agitation, Dresden, den 13.5.1952 (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 271, Bl.35): “Kein Ohr dem Rias - - alle Kraft dem Frieden”

<sup>104</sup> “Massenmobilisierung erstickt das Gift der Lügensender,” *Neues Deutschland*, 28 Mai 1952.

notably the “organized enemy activity” in the sprawling factory discovered by the propagandists and the threatening letters received by comrades.<sup>105</sup>

In the hotspot of Görlitz, a housing community sent a pledge (after government prodding) to Radio Leipzig in which the residents of one building promised to refrain from listening to RIAS and adorn the façade of their building with a banner to promote the cause. In this case, the announcement came with a request for Radio Leipzig to develop better programming for the working class and do something about the annoying interference listeners experienced.<sup>106</sup> Factory workers from LOWA Waggonbau Görlitz—another prime source of unrest the following summer—sent their promise to cease receiving RIAS broadcasts to *Neues Deutschland* and GDR radio and called on all “peace-loving people to follow their example.”<sup>107</sup>

### **Other Elements of the Rival Public Sphere**

The production and exchange of rumors and anti-party literature further evidences the existence of a rival public sphere that functioned as a counterweight to state power. It is noteworthy that in the SED’s record, party officials categorized such activity under the rubric “enemy activity” which included “open sabotage.”<sup>108</sup> Pamphlets and leaflets reveal that groups and outside influences succeeded to various degrees in reaching Dresdeners with anti-SED literature, though the penetration could not match that of radio. Rumors

<sup>105</sup> “Bericht über die Entfaltung des Kampfes gegen Riashetze” (SächsHStA 11856 Nr. 271, Bl.35).

<sup>106</sup> Hausgemeinschaft Neissetrasse, Görlitz, am 27. März 1952 an den Intendanten des Mitteldeutschen Rundfunks Herrn Adolphs Leipzig – N22, Springerstrasse (SächsHStA 11856 Landesleitung Sachsen Nr. 271, Bl.29).

<sup>107</sup> SED Betriebsparteiorganisation Lowa Waggonbau Görlitz an die Landesleitung der SED Dresden, z.Hnd.d.Gen.Vogel (SächsHStA 11856 Landesleitung Sachsen Nr. 271, Bl.18): “friedliebenden Menschen auf ihrem Beispiel zu folgen”

<sup>108</sup> “Aufstellung von uns zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit in der Zeit vom 1.7.-19.8.52.,” Organisationskomitee der SED, Bezirk Dresden, Leitende Organe der Partei u. M., Sektor Parteinformation (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.5. Nr. 107, Bl.1): “Feindtätigkeit”; “Offene Sabotage”

also represented an alternative form of political participation and an outlet for the expression of hopes, fears, and desires. In this way, they offer us insights into the political goals and doubts of East Germans as well as the reservations and critical positions citizens often adopted concerning the ruling regime. The manner in which the SED recorded these exchanges, overheard by functionaries or police, also reveals the ways in which residents unofficially participated in government despite lacking structured, democratic outlets.

The record detailing rumors and written dissent also presents a problem because it is weighted toward the period following the Second Party Conference of July 1952. This could mean that rumors and other dissident activity posed a greater threat to the regime in this period, and this is quite plausible considering the economic suffering and political pressure exerted by the SED, or it could simply mean that the party began taking rumors and political attacks more seriously at this point. Possibly, too, it could mean that the SED decided to begin collecting such data whereas before it dismissed it. Plausible as well is the anticipation of an increase of activity in the rival public sphere. In other words, one should consider the record here with some reservations in mind.

Following the Second Party Conference in July of 1952, the SED ordered State Control to begin reporting immediately rumors, rabble rousing, and provocations. Functionaries were asked to keep track of rumors, especially as they led to panic purchasing and the withdrawal of savings.<sup>109</sup> In December, some five months following the initiation of Stalinist planning, the party recognized that dissident activity (the class struggle, in its terms) had continued to increase), though one might note that leadership in

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<sup>109</sup> See the untitled document beginning “Ab sofort ist folgendes zu veranlassen,” [likely July 1952] (SAPMO-BArch DC 1 6244).



Dresden demonstrated an awareness of known unknowns regarding enemy activity, suggesting that the existing evidence is perhaps only the tip of the iceberg. By December, 1952, regional reports suggest that illegal pamphleteering had steadily increased in Dresden as had illegal emigration. Conditions continued to deteriorate in the countryside where farmers—especially large scale farmers—discriminated against the collective farms. Rumormongers attempted to incite unrest among the population and class enemies tried to exploit weaknesses.<sup>110</sup>

### Leaflets

As it did with RIAS, the SED waged an ongoing battle against the distribution of illegal pamphlets, leaflets, and literature that appeared in the region. Unfortunately, as it did with rumors, the regime made no effort to systemically catalog these items, so it is difficult to chart their availability or production, which, given their illicit nature, is not surprising. Some of this literature arrived in Dresden via balloons, so the wind partially dictated its destination. The number of balloons discovered by the authorities ranged from single balloons to as many as 150.<sup>111</sup> Occasionally party functionaries just noted an empty balloon, while other times the leaflet from the balloon ended up in the hands of the authorities.<sup>112</sup> Some of these leaflets came from the Social Democratic Party in West Germany. For example, a blue balloon that turned up in Kamenz with the address “Freedom – SPD” accompanied by leaflets in the area that read “Administrative reform?

<sup>110</sup> “Zusammenfassung der eingegangenen Berichte über Feindtätigkeit aus den Kreisen auf Grund einer Anforderung des Sekretariats,” SED-Bezirksleitung, Dresden, Leitende Organe der Partei und Massenorganisationen – Sektor Parteiinformation. 1.12.52 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.5 Nr. 107, Bl.26-32).

<sup>111</sup> “Aufstellung von uns zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit in der Zeit vom 1.7.-19.8.52,” Bl.4.

<sup>112</sup> “Aufstellung von uns zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit in der Zeit vom 20.8.-30.8.52,” Organisationskomitee der SED, Bezirk Dresden, Leitende Organe der Partei u. M., Sektor Parteiinformation (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.5. Nr. 107, Bl.10).

No, Sovietization is the goal. The German people greet Dr. Kurt Schumacher; The SPD fights for German unity.”<sup>113</sup> Another SPD balloon with “Unity and Freedom” written on it appeared in Freital, with leaflets marking the contents’ origin with the SPD East-office in West Berlin.<sup>114</sup> The only other western group to sign its name to materials it distributed in East Germany was the Fighting Group against Inhumanity and the Investigative Committee of Free Jurists.<sup>115</sup> In one case, functionaries were able to collect the leaflets of a fallen balloon before they spread through the population.<sup>116</sup>

Quite often though, the source of leaflets remained unclear. The authors of these leaflets attacked the GDR and its program in a number of ways while at the same time serving as another connection between East and West. Some merely called for a “free Europe” while others were more specific, for instance, attacking the GDR’s decision to build up its armed forces: “Today it’s pellet guns, tomorrow real guns, the day after that, mass graves – not with us.”<sup>117</sup> In Zittau at the clothing factory, leaflets appeared asking colleagues to refuse their work because the factory produced parachutes while another set of leaflets pleaded with residents to avoid reporting to Service for Germany and the

<sup>113</sup> “Aufstellung der uns in Monat Januar zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit,” SED Bezirksleitung Dresden, Leitende Organe der Partei und Massenorganisationen, Sektor Parteiinformation. 6.2.53. (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.5. Nr. 107, Bl.84): “Verwaltungsreform? Nein. Sowjetisierung ist das Ziel. Das deutsche Volk grüßt Dr. Kurt Schumacher; Kampf der SPD um die Einheit Deutschlands.”

<sup>114</sup> “Aufstellung der in den Monaten Februar und März eingegangenen Informationen über Feindtätigkeit,” SED-Bezirksleitung Dresden, Leitende Organe der Partei und Massenorganisationen, Sektor Parteiinformation, 9.4.53. (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.5. Nr. 107, Bl.113).

<sup>115</sup> “Aufstellung von uns zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit in der Zeit vom 20.8.-30.8.52.” Note that they are listed here as *Kampfbund freiheitlicher Juristen*.

<sup>116</sup> “Monatsbericht für Januar 1953,” Bezirksparteikontrollkommission Dresden, Dresden, den 9.2.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 IV 2.4. Nr. 025, Bl.80).

<sup>117</sup> “Aufstellung uns zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit in der Zeit von 1. bis 29.9.52,” SED-Org.-Komitee Bezirk Dresden, Leitende Organe der Partei u.M., Sektor Parteiinformation 29.9.52 (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.5. Nr. 107, Bl.13), *Freie Europa*; “Aufstellung von uns zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit in der Zeit vom 1.7.-19.8.52,” Bl.4; “Aufstellung uns zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit im Monat Oktober, SED-Bezirksleitung Dresden, Leitende Organe der Partei und Massenorganisationen, Sektor Parteiinformation, Dresden 5.11.52 (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.5. Nr. 107, Bl.19): “Heute Luftgewehre, morgen Kanonen, übermorgen Massengrab – ohne uns”

People's Police.<sup>118</sup> Other leaflets served as warnings, for instance, by suggesting that authorities were listening in on conversations—"watch your conversations, the NKVD is listening in."<sup>119</sup> Some leaflets targeted specific groups. For example, The European Alliance of Youth (*Bund Europäischer Jugend*) claimed in their leaflets that Western institutions like the European Community for Coal and Steel had now brought Europe one step closer to integration as a "United States of Europe."<sup>120</sup> Another stated: "We acknowledge all of Europe's youth in a heartfelt bond – every postcard [leaflet] returned is evidence of this solidarity."<sup>121</sup> As with RIAS, the goal always remained the same: to maintain a connection between east and west while undermining the GDR's legitimacy.

### **Rumors in the Rival Public Sphere**

Rumors constituted a powerful component in the rival public sphere that revealed authentic public opinion and functioned as an informal type of political participation. Between the summer of 1952 and Stalin's death, rumors dogged party officials and undermined their attempts to build their new society. As was the case with leaflets, the rumor record requires careful analysis. Whether rumors began as a backlash against the accelerated buildup of socialism or had always circulated in a similar manner is difficult to determine, because the record begins taking regular stock of their occurrence in the summer of 1952. It is probably safe to argue, though, that rumor spreading intensified

<sup>118</sup> "Aufstellung uns zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit im Monat Oktober," Bl.19. <https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/item/AWBNKAMU7A5UHUMZTHFYTOZXMT4OWGB> Dienst für Deutschland was an organization led by the People's Police that came out of the Second party Conference which called on youth to help construct military facilities.

<sup>119</sup> "Aufstellung von uns zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit in der Zeit vom 1.7.-19.8.52," Bl.4: "Achtung bei Gesprächen, NKVD hört mit"

<sup>120</sup> "Aufstellung uns zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit in der Zeit von 1. bis 29.9.52," Bl.13: "Bund Europäischer Jugend"; "Vereinigten Staaten von Europa"

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.: "Wir grüßen die Jugend in ganz Europa in herzlicher Verbundenheit. Jede zurückgesandte Karte ist uns ein Beweis unserer Zusammengehörigkeit"

during this period and certainly rose following Stalin's death, which, as this chapter will show, engendered political uncertainty.

Rumors pertaining to food and goods were the most common prior to Stalin's death and reveal how Dresdeners explained and reacted to shortages and the economic shortcomings of the newly introduced economic plan. Around Christmas in Meißen, for instance, rumors circulated that white candles were no longer going to be produced and that residents should stock up at the same time belief spread around Dresden that bakers would not offer fruitcakes as that was now the domain of the state-run collective stores.<sup>122</sup> Rumor also explained that the shortage of canned fish could be traced to an East German trawler that had been impounded by the Swedes.<sup>123</sup> In a Görlitz factory, workers spread the rumor—supposedly based on a RIAS report—that bread cards were to be re-introduced and that Leipzig had run out of eggs.<sup>124</sup> These rumors seem innocuous, but in a nation of true shortages, they could lead to runs on goods. For example, rumors that butter would not be distributed in Großenhain in December resulted in a number of women buying an entire month's supply all at once.<sup>125</sup> Similarly, a rumor that the price of schnapps was to rise led to locals reportedly purchasing the drink by the backpack full.<sup>126</sup> Sometimes consumers explained higher prices as a result of greater economic planning hatched by the SED. In one area, residents attributed high coffee prices to the deficits now run by the state—a reference to the national economic problems that led to

<sup>122</sup> Dresden, 25.11.1952, Zentrale Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle, Bezirksinspektion Dresden Nr. 54 (SAPMO-BArch DC 1 6212).

<sup>123</sup> "Aufstellung der uns im Monat November zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit," SED-Bezirksleitung Dresden, Leitende Organe der Partei und Massenorganisationen, Sektor Parteiinformation, 1.12.52 (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.5. Nr. 107, B1.47).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> "Aufstellung der uns im Monat Dezember zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit," Leitende Organe der Partei und Massenorganisationen, Sektor Parteiinformation, 2.1.53 (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.5. Nr. 107, B1.74).

<sup>126</sup> "Aufstellung der uns im Monat Dezember zugegangenen Information über Feindtätigkeit," B1.82.

significant consumer dissatisfaction.<sup>127</sup> The real and perceived fragility of the GDR's economy would grow into a topic that would invigorate the rumor mill in the period leading up to June 17. The party took these rumors seriously as the economic plan was so closely tied to the political plan, and Joseph Stalin's death in March of 1953 stimulated the production of improvised news as national and international politics assumed an increasingly greater role in the rival public sphere.

### Stalin's Death

*“RIAS hören – Stalin tot – jetzt mehr Brot”*

- scribbled on a theater wall in Königsbrück, Dresden Region<sup>128</sup>

“The dog can go ahead and croak” quipped a young man and “active RIAS listener.”<sup>129</sup> Known by authorities to spread ideas gleaned from western radio stations in his youth group, his subsequent arrest and the investigation into his comments serves as a reminder of just how seriously the SED took RIAS's potential to indirectly undermine its leadership.<sup>130</sup> Now, Stalin's death on March 5 offered considerable political opportunity for the station. The previous chapter showed that Stalin's passing presented the SED with an opportunity to demonstrate its legitimacy through a distinctly Cold War form of representative or theatrical publicness. Choreographed demonstrations staffed by functionaries and coerced workers and publicized messages of solidarity designed to

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> “Aufstellung der in den Monaten Februar und März eingegangenen Informationen über Feindtätigkeit.” SED-Bezirksleitung Dresden, Leitende Organe der Partei und Massenorganisationen Sektor Parteiinformation. 9.4.53. (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.5 Nr. 107 Bl.115): “Listen to RIAS – Stalin is dead – more bread now”

<sup>129</sup> “Informationsmeldung Nr. 12/53,” Zentrale Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle Bezirksinspektion Dresden An die Zentrale Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle, Berlin. Dresden, den 12.3.53 (SAPMO-BArch DC 1 6212): “Der Hund kann ruhig verrecken; aktiver Hörer des Rias”

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

create the impression of a community bound in solidarity through Stalin's leadership while grieving his death all represented the SED's attempt to represent the unity of the greater Soviet Bloc. Against this official public sphere, RIAS broadcasted a disparate assessment of Stalin's legacy and raised the possibility of real political change while authorities fretted over rumors and jokes and unofficial celebrations that mocked the former Soviet leader's legacy, damaging the SED's prestige and authority.

While the SED and other pro-Soviet outlets boasted that Stalin had bequeathed a blueprint to the socialist lands that could leave them little doubt that prosperity lay in the near future, RIAS asked more pointed questions and chipped away at the CPSU's claim to rule and, by extension, the SED's claim to the future. What was to come after Stalin's passing? The station offered no clear answer, but the commentators largely framed the situation as one in which a major geo-political shift now appeared possible. Above all, the power vacuum meant that Soviet authority had waned, with RIAS commentators arguing that Malenkov or Molotov, either of whom might have the last word, could never project the authority of their predecessor whose clout simply could not be inherited. Certainly, Stalin's legend would inform their decisions, but they would also come to their own decisions and they would do so without a good number of Stalin's tactical benefits. Among these was a widespread forced adoration and the confidence that had permitted the Soviets to present any arbitrary decision as an unassailable interpretation based on Lenin's teachings. The superhuman splendor and image surrounding Stalin, an artificial creation, and Stalin's mystique that had formed the basis of a ritualized oath (*Eidesformel*) for the Soviet people and the slavish (*blindgehende*) functionaries on the

Volga and the Elbe also constituted part of the dictator's strength.<sup>131</sup> Even though all of this had passed with Stalin, RIAS noted that the party bureaucracy would carry on and the factories would continue to produce.<sup>132</sup>

In contrast to the SED's commemorations and adoring speeches, RIAS offered a review of the late leader's crimes against humanity, likening him in one case to Robespierre and the worst excesses of the French Revolution. The station claimed, for example, that while Karl Marx had once quipped that violence had become the midwife of a new society, Stalin "had made violence the mother of his dictatorship."<sup>133</sup> Commentators painted Stalin as a man without feelings or sentimentality, who had secretly ordered the murder of Leon Trotsky in Mexico and Sergey Kirov in Leningrad, before "quicken[ing] the guillotine's pace" in 1936.<sup>134</sup> The program concluded with eleven million dead from starvation and political purges before commentators turned to Pravda's headlines, mocking the outlet's claims of a "great unity between party and people."<sup>135</sup> And when the East Berlin press called Stalin "the greatest son in the history of mankind," the station reminded listeners just how powerful such adoration and "ritualistic superlatives" had been.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>131</sup> "Sendung am Tode Stalins," Hauptabteilung Politik, Werktag der Zone, Freitag, den 6. März 1953, 19.40 – 20.00 Uhr (DRA Potsdam Filus 03 Werktag d. Zone - F003, B 304-01-08 / 0001): "für kleinen Stalintreuen, blindgehende Funktionäre an der Wolga und an der Elbe, war dieser Nymbus wie eine zwingende Eidesformel"

<sup>132</sup> "Sendung zum Tode Stalins" – Kommentar / Heinz Frentzel - Freitag, den 6. März 1953 19.40 – 19.45. Hauptabteilung Politik (DRA Potsdam, B304-01-00-0012).

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.: "Stalin machte die Gewalt zur Mutter seiner Diktatur"

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.: "Die Guillotine wird schneller"

<sup>135</sup> "Sendung am Tode Stalins," Hauptabteilung Politik, Werktag der Zone: "Die große Einheit von Partei und Volk"

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.: "Das zeigt, wie fest eingefressen diese Ritualen Superlativen sind und er ist gleichzeitig so etwas wie eine der ersten Abweichungen von der neuen Linie, die das vergrößernde Fernglas abzusetzen befiehlt, um es in seiner umgedreht verkleinernden Wirkung zu verwenden."

## Rabble Rousing and Celebrating

Consider for an instant the phrasing from an April 1953 report produced by Dresden's Regional Party Control Commission: "in the past month it was attempted through rabble-rousing letters and rumors to influence the population."<sup>137</sup> The lack of an easily identified actor or source here (which, of course, I have collectively categorized as the rival public sphere) meant that the multitude of outlets from which the population gathered knowledge presented a serious and somewhat abstract threat to the SED and its control of information in an unstable political situation. So as RIAS speculated that a geopolitical change might now be possible and whittled away at the prestige of Stalin and by extension those who upheld his system in East Germany, the SED had to cope with a rumor mill and anti-SED propaganda that undercut the Party's official representations of national unity following Stalin's death. Some of this vitriol probably found inspiration in foreign broadcasts and certainly the SED felt that they did based on numerous incidents in the record. For example, on March 8, per a functionary based in Görlitz, a bakery owner and three others gathered at a tavern in the town of Gersdorf. The barkeeper led the group to a separate room where guests were listening to western radio broadcasts and one of the listeners proclaimed "[the time has arrived] to string up the entire SED."<sup>138</sup> Authorities in Görlitz encountered more troubling developments when listening in on conversations in the area. Workers at the Locomotive and Wagon Factory declined to comment on political developments when prompted by functionaries as someone's

<sup>137</sup> "Monatsbericht für März 1953," Bezirksparteikontrollkommission – Dresden – Dresden, den 13.4.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.4 025, Bl.107-8): "[Auch] im vergangenen Monat wurde versucht, durch Hetzettel und Gerüchte die Bevölkerung zu beeinflussen"

<sup>138</sup> "Informationsmeldung Nr. 14/53," Zentrale Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle, Bezirksinspektion Dresden, Dresden, den 18.3.53, An die Zentrale Kommission für staatliche Kontrolle, Berlin (SAPMO-BArch DC 1 6212): "Jetzt ist die Zeit gekommen, die ganze SED aufzuhängen"



brother had reportedly been arrested after thanking God for Stalin's death.<sup>139</sup> An older Christian told his colleagues that while Stalin had not been judged on earth, he would be in heaven.<sup>140</sup> And the churches became a potential thorn in the regime's side as pastors deviated from the SED's script. For instance, the pastor in Kamenz who (reportedly) read from his pastoral letter that "A great socialist leader has returned to Christendom. This leader has also written a book in which he instructs all socialists to do the same."<sup>141</sup> Residents ripped Stalin's pictures from the wall in Kamenz and other towns.<sup>142</sup> Or consider the anonymous letter received by the local SED office, wherein the author reported that the residents of Seifenhennersdorf celebrated Stalin's death as he had driven them from their native Reichenau, forcing them to give up their houses and farms. "We wish him good luck on his journey," the letter stated, "now he can no longer plunder east Germany."<sup>143</sup>

### **A Wind of Change?**

These conversations reveal that the uncertainty articulated by RIAS now circulated through the population. On Sunday morning in Sebnitz a priest stated to his congregation that God had willed Stalin's death and Germany now found itself in a "profound abyss and deep crisis."<sup>144</sup> This crisis, of course, stemmed from the very real

<sup>139</sup> "Aufstellung der in den Monaten Februar und März eingegangenen Informationen über Feindtätigkeit." Bl.115.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> "Informationsmeldung Nr. 13/53," Zentrale Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle, Bezirksinspektion Dresden, Dresden, den 14.3.53, An die Zentrale Kommission für staatliche Kontrolle, Berlin (SAPMO-BArch DC 1 6212): "Ein großer sozialistischer Führer ist zum Christentum zurückgekehrt. Derselbe hat ein Buch geschrieben, worin er alle Sozialisten auffordert, das gleiche zu tun." The report notes that it is unclear exactly to whom the letter refers. The case was passed on to the local Stasi office.

<sup>142</sup> "Aufstellung der in den Monaten Februar und März eingegangenen Informationen über Feindtätigkeit."

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., Bl.128: "Wir wünschen ihm viel Glück auf seiner Reise...nun kann er nicht mehr plündern."

<sup>144</sup> "Aufstellung der in den Monaten Februar und März eingegangenen Informationen über Feindtätigkeit." SED-Bezirksleitung Dresden, Leitende Organe der Partei und Massenorganisationen Sektor Parteinformation. 9.4.53. (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.5 Nr. 107 Bl.132).

question of political leadership in the Soviet Union and Germany, but the answers and predictions harbored by the population in the Dresden region reveal that popular opinion was quite often a concoction of reality and wishful (or fearful) thinking. Workers in the LOWA factory in Görlitz discussed rumors of Malenkov's resignation (not true yet since this conversation occurred sometime before 3.22.53) while a worker at the traffic enterprise joked to a colleague that he could now apply for Stalin's job. Thus, rumors of Malenkov's abdication seems to have gained legs for several weeks in the region. Other rumors circulated that claimed Malenkov would now do something about releasing prisoners of war.<sup>145</sup> Another theory in Riesa held that Malenkov succeeded Stalin because he was his son-in-law and a Jew—neither of which was true.<sup>146</sup> Workers in Pirna argued that Stalin's death and Malenkov's succession would bring about more aggressive policies.<sup>147</sup> All counties in the region reported that the number of illicit pamphlets in circulation increased in May.<sup>148</sup> Some leaflets of indeterminate origin circulated in one town (in Russian) that Russian soldiers were now demanding their freedom since Stalin was dead.<sup>149</sup> In the countryside around Dresden, leaflets in Russian were distributed by a self-proclaimed "Revolutionary Staff" while in Obercunnersdorf, leaflets proclaimed that "the emancipation from the Bolshevik yoke was getting close."<sup>150</sup>

It appears that during the months following Stalin's death, the rumor mill became more serious and increasingly took aim at the SED's very existence as a state's governing

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., Bl.115-16.

<sup>146</sup> "Gegnerische Tätigkeit: Zentrale Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle, Bezirksinspektion Dresden," Dresden, den 18.3.53.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> "Monatsbericht Mai 1953," Bezirksparteikontrollkommission, Dresden. Dresden, den 9.6.1953 1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.4 025, Bl.149).

<sup>149</sup> "Aufstellung der in den Monaten Februar und März eingegangenen Informationen über Feindtätigkeit," Bl.118; Bl.120, picture ripped off wall here too.

<sup>150</sup> "Monatsbericht für März, 1953," Bezirksparteikontrollkommission, Dresden. Dresden, den 13.4..1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.4 025, Bl.122).

party. The subject matter turned from the price of goods to the value of money, and for instance, in Pirna and Heidenau the rumor now spread that money not in a bank would soon become worthless.<sup>151</sup> And more troubling for the SED, political leaders now found themselves the subject of damaging rumors. The whereabouts, statuses, and health of East Germany's leading politicians increasingly drove public conversations in the period prior to the uprising. For instance, in three counties already in the week after Stalin's death, the rumor and unofficial news, respectively, circulated that President Pieck had moved to the West or had become quite ill.<sup>152</sup> When Stalin's heirs called on East German leadership to retreat from the accelerated buildup of socialism in early June, RIAS and the rumor mill would adopt an even more rebellious tone.

## Conclusions

RIAS existed at the heart of the rival public sphere in Dresden and relentlessly challenged the legitimacy, planning, and vision of the Socialist Unity Party. Through targeted campaigns, the station influenced and mobilized workers in opposition to SED policies and spread news that undermined the SED's efforts. Indeed, RIAS openly sought the dissolution of "the Zone," and in the meantime established a nation of Germans bound together by letters and popular programming. The SED's determination to diminish RIAS's influence underscored the station's effectiveness and the weakness of the GDR's media outlets and the state itself. This fragileness became increasingly evident following the Second Party Conference and Stalin's death, when the rumor mill, another critical component in the rival public sphere, became ever more hostile toward the party

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> "Informationsmeldung Nr. 14/53," Zentrale Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle, Bezirksinspektion Dresden, Dresden, den 18.3.53, an die Zentrale Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle, Berlin (SAPMO-BArch DC 1 6212).

as the political situation destabilized. A number of political missteps in the summer of 1953 would help turn the rival public sphere into a revolutionary public sphere—the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter Three

### Legitimation Crisis, June 11-16, 1953

*“It’s getting to be time that the red fat cats in the district also get liquidated.”*

-Overheard in Sebnitz a few day before June 17<sup>1</sup>

*“Don’t you know that an uprising has already broken out in Czechoslovakia and it’s going to kick off here soon, because the workers are only waiting until the revolution comes.”*

-A worker in Dresden, a day or two before June 17<sup>2</sup>

On June 11, everything appeared to change. The SED published and aired a Communiqué that announced the Party had made “errors” in the past, forcing the Politburo to make sweeping recommendations to address social, economic, and political problems. The explosive news was a key act in the events of June, 1953.

This chapter reasons that the SED’s decision (made for them in Moscow) to abandon the hard-line socialist buildup and its weak public relations campaign to *explain* the maneuver allowed rumors—improvised news—to shape public opinion. These rumors, sometimes true, sometimes partially true, and sometimes false, which emerged from collective conversations reveal a confused and disoriented public. As a result, rumors swirled through rival public sphere explaining the present and presenting hope for the future. Oftentimes these rumors were rooted in factual news but had taken on a life of

<sup>1</sup> Sebnitz - 11,10 Uhr [likely June 14, 1953]: “In Unternehmerkreisen, besonders bei kap. Blumengrosshändler wird diskutiert, endlich beginnt der Zuchthausstaat zusammenzubrechen. Es wird Zeti, das die roten Bonzen im Kreis auch liquidiert werden.”

<sup>2</sup> “Betr.: Wochen-Analyse zum Kommuniqué des Politbüros,” Dresden, 16.6.53, Abteilung: Sekretariat (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): “unsinnigsten”; “Weißt du nicht, dass in der CSR bereits ein Aufstand ausgebrochen ist, auch bei uns wird es bald losgehen und die Arbeiter warten nur darauf, bis die Revolution kommt.”

their own, reflecting official news sources' lack of credibility among the reading and listening public. The improvisational nature of the information also revealed the ideological media polarization in the GDR during the Cold War. As Cass Sunstein notes, rumors are often more prevalent in times of uncertainty. This certainly seems to have been the case here during the week before the demonstrations, as functionaries often noted the sheer volume and tenacity of the rumors in circulation. In other words, these rumors "cascaded," to borrow again from Sunstein. Furthermore, many of these rumors contributed to a situation where an already-weakened regime became increasingly challengeable and the existing political arrangement appeared evermore untenable.<sup>3</sup>

The period between the regime's proclamation of the New Course and the events of June 17 represented a crisis of legitimacy for the SED. The GDR's legitimacy, which opponents could never officially call into question, rested on the appearance of communal, national, and international solidarity as well as the widespread belief in the SED's vision for the future. Thus, the regime was essentially self-legitimizing; it alone needed to recognize itself as it did not acknowledge domestic political challenges. Once again, dependence on the Weberian construction of a constitutional-rational state renders the idea of a legitimization crisis unsuited for application to the former Eastern Bloc nations and calls for modifications to the notion of legitimacy. Instead, we might recognize "weak forms" of legitimacy behind the Iron Curtain: people did not like what was happening, but they could not imagine things being different and therefore they accepted their fate. Thus, such states only rarely suffered legitimacy crises except during occasional public outbursts as it was during these moments when citizens *did* imagine

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<sup>3</sup> Sunstein, *On Rumors*, 1-15; Timothy Tackett, "Rumors and Revolution;" Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News*: 8.

their situation changing. Thus, this chapter will show that the rival public sphere, increasingly energized by the announcement of the New Course on June 11, 1953, helped make revolution thinkable and in some cases, appear imminent or even as having already begun.<sup>4</sup>

Research based on the public “mood reports” (*Stimmungsberichte*) in Dresden after the announcement reveals a regime that had lost its ability to effectively communicate with the masses and found itself in a precarious political position.<sup>5</sup> This chapter will examine how this happened.

### **Background to the Resolution**

The political background of the SED’s course change, formulated in the Soviet Union by Stalin’s succession team of Beria, Malenkov, Molotov, and Bulganin, called for a retreat from their predecessor’s hardline tactics. In early June 1953, they summoned the East German leadership trifecta—Walter Ulbricht, Otto Grotewohl, and Wilhelm Pieck—to Moscow where they received instructions for a new planning package that would replace the accelerated buildup in the GDR that had focused on heavy industry.<sup>6</sup>

The East German government now found itself in the awkward position of retracting its uncompromising mission statement and pronouncing a softer platform as the way forward. The publicization of this political retreat proved perilous for the SED and it

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<sup>4</sup> There are problems with applying Habermas’ conception of a legitimation crisis to a Soviet type society, as traditional concepts of legitimacy cannot be readily applied here. See Atilla Ágh, “The Failure of the Socialist Project in East-Central Europe: The Legitimation Crisis of ‘Real Socialism,’” *Aula* 12 (1990): 7-16; Ferenc Feher, Agnes Heller, and Gyorgy Markus, *Dictatorship over Needs* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), 137-8.

<sup>5</sup> For a similar review of the mood reports generated following the announcement of the New Course, see Udo Wengst, “Der Aufstand am 17. Juni 1953 in der DDR. Aus den Stimmungsberichten der Kreis- und Bezirksverbände der Ost-CDU im Juni und Juli 1953,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 41 (1993): 277-321, 280. Wengst finds a similar mixture of confusion and rejoicing detailed in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Christian Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, 18-19.

found itself needing to maintain legitimacy while simultaneously admitting that its previous goals and tactics had been the wrong ones. The party thus put its communications apparatus to work along with political agitators to promote the new line. Nevertheless, this account was not the only information source available to East Germans. RIAS and other foreign broadcasters supplemented the official news and much of the population received a distorted edition of the SED's official message. This was especially true in the Dresden region, where the regime found it nearly impossible to convince audiences of what it considered factual news. Instead, in mid-June, sudden political change combined with rumors, misinformation, and genuine news of events, to create widespread doubt of the regime's viability.

At a glance, one might find it strange that unrest broke out in East Germany when it did. After all, the policies that had produced the rather devastating effects on the social and economic well-being of the country had been *abandoned*, and the regime fully expected that its call to implement many of the policies that East Germans desired would stave off attempts at revolution from below. But this was, of course, not the case.

### **The News**

Despite announcing news of its own making, the SED probably found itself in many instances "scooped" by the more popular RIAS. Early on June 11 the station broadcasted the most important points of the reforms including the relaxed rules regarding travel restrictions for both East and West Germans while noting the unusualness of this new policy, pointing out that this would allow families to reunite. RIAS also noted the new ability for those in the West to get a first-hand look at life in East and vice versa—timed perfectly for the traditional holiday season that had just



begun.<sup>7</sup> “So what can the population do now?” queried the announcer. His answer was: “in any case, more than before.”<sup>8</sup> The station presented the New Course as a moment when the SED lost political capital. Those who had been under the pressure of the SED—the middle-sized farmers, private businesses, and Christian youth groups could now, in the words of the station, again become active, and “insist the communists meet them face to face/take a stand.”<sup>9</sup> This initial assessment of the issuance concluded that it represented a blow to the SED and offered East Germans an uncommon chance—one that should not remain unused.<sup>10</sup> The broadcast concluded with some advice for the station’s listeners, urging them to get a hold of a copy of *Neues Deutschland* and read it closely.<sup>11</sup>

The Party revealed the resolution to its citizenry on the morning of June 11 on the front page of *Neues Deutschland* and through the airwaves, the factory radio systems in those workplaces that had them in place, and through the *Stadtfunk*. Those who purchased or got hold of a copy of the *Sächsische Zeitung* or *Neues Deutschland* on June 11 learned of the regime’s change of course, which was the official version of what they might have heard on RIAS. The announcement proclaimed the different efforts on the part of the SED to improve the living standards of GDR citizens, while admitting that errors had been made in the past with respect to taxes (too high), food rationing cards (not enough), and the repression of targeted portions of society, including the intelligentsia, individual farmers, and private merchants. Following this admission, the Politburo reiterated its goal to unite Germany, which, it claimed, would require a

<sup>7</sup> “Berlin Spricht zur Zone” 11. Juni 1953 (DRA Mikrofilm F0055 Hauptabteilung Politik Nr. 1014, 63.2).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.: “Sprecher: was kann die Bevölkerung tun? Auf alle Fälle mehr als bisher”

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 6: “ja sie müssen wieder aktiv und fordern den Kommunisten gegenüberzutreten.”

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 6: “Kommuniqué des Politbüros des Zentralkomitees der SED vom 9. Juni 1953,” *Neues Deutschland*, June 11, 1953.

rapprochement of both its halves. In connection with this statement, the resolution pointed to a new, more relaxed approach to the policing of traffic between the two states and offered those who had fled the GDR a chance to return to their homes and reclaim their property or receive compensation for their losses. Other sweeteners included lowered prices for marmalade, honey, sweets, and baked goods. Curiously, the hated workers' norms remained in place. Still, the resolution pointed to a radical shift in the Party's position. As the population came to recognize the gravity of what the regime had proposed, everything appeared to change in the popular imagination.<sup>12</sup> This is a significant point because the New Course raised hopes for fundamental change, not unlike the calling of the Estates General, which as George Lefebvre pointed out, heightened expectations for positive changes among common people.<sup>13</sup> Such a development would seem to set the stage for the enactment of a revolutionary script.

### **The Receptions of the News, Nationally**

Workplaces around the GDR buzzed with the news and what it all meant, with workers even speculating whether the heightened norms would be revised. Some workers now claimed that the Politburo had finally listened to its critics and accepted their objections. Factory workers discussed the resolution's importance in unifying Germany and easing the restrictions on travel, which would now allow East Germans to personally get in touch with their relatives in the West. Also, internal reports seemed to reveal that colleagues regarded the Communiqué as a sign of the SED's strength; the Party publically admitted past mistakes raising hopes that the Party would build a stronger

<sup>12</sup> "Kommuniqué des Politbüros des Zentralkomitees der SED vom 9. Juni 1953," *Neues Deutschland* Juni 11, 1953.

<sup>13</sup> Peter McPhee, ed., *A Companion to the French Revolution* (Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2013), 233.

relationship with the masses.<sup>14</sup> These mistakes, some argued, could have been avoided had the Leninist theory of “an ear to the masses” been upheld.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, rumors began to swirl around the GDR: Pieck had fled the country; Ulbricht and other ministers had been arrested; Pieck had died; and a range of other false reports that seemed to undermine or counter what the SED was saying.<sup>16</sup> Similar rumors would appear in the communities in and around Dresden in the week leading up to the uprising.

### **Communicating the Resolution in the Dresden Region**

A sense of elation and newfound hope appeared to grip the nation. The local government in Dresden almost immediately began to receive reports indicating the population took a keen interest in the news of June 11. People lined up at the newspaper stand to purchase *Die Union*, *Neues Deutschland*, and other publications that published the Communiqué.<sup>17</sup> In the course of a few minutes, the post office recorded fifty-four telephone calls with requests for the special edition of the *Sächsische Zeitung* presenting the Communiqué.<sup>18</sup> A newspaper saleswoman, whose stand was located at the waterworks in Dresden-Tolkewitz heard the resolution on the radio and immediately jotted down the news in shorthand so she would be able to read it to her early morning

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<sup>14</sup> “Thema: Kommuniqué des Politbüros des Zentralkomitees der SED vom 9. Juni 1953,” FDGB-Bundesvorstand Org.-Instr.-Abteilung, Sektor Information, den 12. Juni, 1953, Information Nr. 21 (SAPMO-BArch DY 30/IV/2/5 543).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> “Thema: Kommuniqué des Politbüros des Zentralkomitees der SED vom 9. Juni 1953,” FDGB-Bundesvorstand, Org.-Instr.-Abteilung, Sektor Information, Den 13. Juni, 1953 Information Nr. 22 (SAPMO-BArch DY 30/IV/2/5 543).

<sup>17</sup> See the untitled document beginning “Der Anteil der Bevölkerung verstärkt sich laufend” Nationale Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Bezirksausschuss Dresden, Sekretariat. 12.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>18</sup> See the untitled document beginning “Die Bevölkerung nimmt regen Anteil und zeigt großes Interesse für den Beschluss des Politbüros.” Nationale Front des Demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuss Dresden, i.A. Hempel, Sekretariat 11.6.1953 Wa/Bö (SAPMO-BArch DY 6 5005).

customers.<sup>19</sup> The enormity of the news was likewise not lost on at least one worker in a VEB, where someone recorded the wording of the Communiqué (as it aired over the radio) and shared the news with the entire staff during the morning break.<sup>20</sup> In nearby Riesa, as in other locations, the factory broadcast system announced the Communiqué to the majority of the factories while the same information went out over the SED's radio waves.<sup>21</sup> This happened, for example, at VEM Transformatoren-und Roentgenwerk and Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz early in the morning of June 12.<sup>22</sup> As the news blasted over the *Stadtfunk* system residents in Dresden and Bautzen gathered around the loudspeakers and chatted about the details of the news—perhaps planning a visit to West Germany.<sup>23</sup>

### **Preparation and clarification efforts**

After the Communiqué officially aired over the radio systems and through the local party publications, the SED rushed to explain its political maneuvers to confused party functionaries, deploying campaigners to explain positions to workforces and other communities.

In a number of enterprises, the BPO (*Betriebsparteiorganisation* or SED party representation in the workplace) gathered campaigners, instructors, organizers, and others between the early hours of the morning and the afternoon on Wednesday to relay directly

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Betr.: Situationsbericht – Kommuniqué vom 9.6. / 1.Bericht SED-Stadtbezirk III," Dresden-A17. Den 11.6.53 Parteiinformation, Schulstr. 11 an die Kreisleitung der SED, Parteiinformation (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>21</sup> See the untitled and undated document beginning "Sofort nach Bekanntwerden des Kommuniqué durch den demokratischen Rundfunk," Riesa, Genosse Möbius (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>22</sup> "Betr. Stimmungsbericht über die empfehlung des Polit.-Buros and die Regierung vom 9.6.1953," VEM Transformatoren-und Roentgenwerk Dresden, SED Betriebsparteiorganisation an die Bezirksleitung der SED Abt. Information (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>23</sup> "Stellungnahmen zum Kommuniqué des Politbüros des ZK der SED vom 9.6.1953," "Nationale Front des Demokratischen Deutschland Bezirksausschuss Dresden, Sekretariat. den 13.6.1953 Wa. (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011); "Betr. Stimmungsbericht über das Kommuniqué dzk der SED" v. 9.6.1953, Bezirksvorstand Dresden, Kreisvorstand Pirna. DPD 12.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

to them the Communiqué after it aired over GDR radio. In such meetings, the BPO sought to convince those present of the measures' necessity—particularly more abstract concepts such as the renewed struggle toward a unified Germany and the establishment of peace. Following such consultations, comrades in attendance received orders to visit workplaces and generate reports that gauged opinion in the workforces.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the consultations were to equip them with the arguments and knowledge necessary to clarify any misunderstandings that arose.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, functionaries throughout the Dresden region received the party line on June 11 from county committees and instructions to popularize it in key areas.<sup>26</sup> As the various departments around the region began attempting to defend and promote the regime's new position and gather information, the complexity of their task became apparent.

### **Approval and Relief**

On one hand, the proposed measures spelled out in the Communiqué met general approval, as after all, they seemed to rectify the most common complaints about the SED's governance of the GDR. Reports in Dresden declared that the majority of the working class, members of the intelligentsia, artisans, and businessmen greeted the New Course and the "self-criticism" of the Politburo as evidence that the government was

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<sup>24</sup> "Betr. Stimmungsbericht über die Empfehlung des Polit.-Buros und die Regierung vom 9.6.1953; Stimmungsbericht zum Beschluss des Politbüros vom 9.6.1953, SED – Betriebsparteiorganisation, Rat des Bezirkes Dresden, Dresden, den 12.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011); "Betr.: Diskussionen über das Kommuniqué des Politbüros," An die Abt. Leitende Organe - Sektor Parteiinformation - im Hause (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011); "Betr.: Situationsbericht – Kommuniqué vom 9.6. / 1.Bericht," SED-Stadtbezirk III Parteiinformation an die Kreisleitung der SED, Parteiinformation - Dresden-A17 den 11.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> "Operativ Information: Über das Kommuniqué des Politbüros vom 9.6.53, Bericht I," SED Kreisleitung Dresden Stadt, Abt. P.u.M., Parteiinformation, Dresden, den 12.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011); see the document beginning "Vom Kreissekretariat ist eine Besprechung mit den Genossen Abteilungsleiter," Freital - - Gen. Schossig – Kommuniqué Likely 12.6 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

honest with the working people.<sup>27</sup> In Riesa, the Communiqué had at first the effect of a “cold shower” although comrades as well as the general population generally greeted the Politburo’s resolution.<sup>28</sup> In Kamenz, on June 12, many reacted positively to the news, with the mayor noting that “now the masses could exhale.”<sup>29</sup> In Zeisholz, party officials found that residents had argued “it was high time that one took into account the mood of the masses.”<sup>30</sup> District Committees reported similar news in Görlitz where workers greeted the resolution’s call to end political persecutions.<sup>31</sup> Still another comrade stated on June 12 that she had heard the notification the previous day and was shocked, thinking that the news suggested a political *Wendung*—a notion that would prove a double-edged sword and recurring theme over the next week.<sup>32</sup> After the resolution went out over the radio, the *Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR* (National Council of the National Front of the GDR) noted that joy and approval dominated.<sup>33</sup> Examples include one politically unaffiliated worker at the chemical pulp factory in Pirna who reportedly wept with joy, not only because sweets and marmalade would now be cheaper, but because the resolution had been concocted in the interests of the working class and provided evidence the SED would do everything possible to reunify Germany—a popular topic of discussion in those days.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>27</sup> “Operativ Information: Über das Kommuniqué des Politbüros vom 9.6.53,” Bericht I.

<sup>28</sup> See the document beginning “Kommuniqué anfangs wie kalte Dusche gewirkt” Kreisleitung Riesa (Genosse Möbius, Information) 14.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>29</sup> See the document beginning “Das Kommuniqué des Politbüros vom ZK hat in der gesamten Bevölkerung” Kreisleitung Kamenz - Gen. Zschornack (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): “Es ist Zeit, das Volk atmet auf.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.: “es ist höchste Zeit, dass man der Stimmung in der Bevölkerung Rechnung trägt.”

<sup>31</sup> See the document beginning “Im Großen und Ganzen kann gesagt werden” Görlitz Stadt (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>32</sup> “Das Kommuniqué des Politbüros vom ZK hat in der gesamten Bevölkerung.”

<sup>33</sup> “Die Bevölkerung nimmt regen Anteil und zeigt großes Interesse für den Beschluss des Politbüros.”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Economic concessions in the announced New Course meant that people now expected more in the way of consumer goods and lowered prices. A number of Germans greeted the lower prices the regime now planned for goods, as did participants in a pensioners' house meeting in Dippoldiswalde who anticipated cheaper marmalade, sugar, and other privileges.<sup>35</sup> The German Democratic Association of Women reported that women dramatically rejoiced, stating that they had felt cut off from the regime due to issues surrounding the ration cards. "We had lost faith in the regime" stated one interviewee, "We wept at the radio as the new information aired."<sup>36</sup> Many were grateful for the lower priced tickets for public transportation, while others did note that residents expressed less interest in the cheaper sweets and more concern regarding the causes and greater ramifications of the proposed political turn.<sup>37</sup> Still, according to a math professor at the Technical College in Dresden, he had, through conversations with the population, come to believe that people reacted positively to the measures concerning price reductions and the reintroduction of ration cards.<sup>38</sup> Other reports out of Dresden note that workers similarly took keen interest in the recommendations of the Politburo, and despite a significant negativity toward the regime in these places, workers welcomed price reductions for sweets.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See the document beginning "Vor allem herrscht in den Betrieben noch ein Durcheinander" Kreis Dippoldiswalde, Gen. Nitzsche, 12.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>36</sup> "Betr.: Stimmungsbericht über das Kommuniqué des Politbüros der SED vom 9.6.1953," Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands Bezirkvorstand Dresden, 1. Bezirkssekretärin an die Bezirksleitungen SED, Sekretariat, Dresden A1 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): "Wir hatten das Vertrauen zur Regierung verloren, wir glaubten wir sind ausgeschaltet. Wir haben am Radio geweint als die neuen Mitteilungen herauskamen"

<sup>37</sup> "Betr.: Situationsbericht über das Kommuniqué, 3." "Bericht, SED-Stadtbezirk III, Dresden – A.17, Abt. P.u.m. – Parteiinformation an die Kreisleitung der SED Parteiinformation," Dresden, den 13.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>38</sup> Stellungnahme des Herrn Prof. Dr. phil. Dräger (SAPMO-Barch DY 27 1588, Bl.10).

<sup>39</sup> "Betr.: Situationsbericht über das Kommuniqué, 3. Bericht."

## Reaction in the Workplace

As in most places throughout the GDR, the news, above all, created an atmosphere of hope and confusion and encouraged conversations predicated on the assumption that fundamental change now seemed possible. However, dissent also began to percolate. At Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz, a number of politically unaffiliated workers concluded that they no longer had confidence in the regime's ability to run the state after learning of the proposed measure. The infamous workers' norms, a volatile point of contention between labor and government remained unchanged from their existing levels. As with most of the recommendations proposed by the Politburo, the issue took on a life of its own. And at Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz, workers had become convinced as soon as the Communiqué aired that the heightened norms would soon be revised in their favor.<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere, workers took matters into their own hands, such as in Elektrowärme Sörnewitz, where comrades from a range of departments drafted protest letters against the heightened norms and took part in a sit down strike on Saturday.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes, the conversations that broke out in the wake of the news demonstrated the workers had become more vocal, for instance, when a boisterous group declared that they had been working on a "dictatorial basis, rather than a persuasion basis," before leadership intervened and brought order to the meeting.<sup>42</sup>

Already on Thursday, June 12, evidence of "serious" confusion existed in the Meißen area factories, where reports indicated that many of the workers had no real knowledge of the Communiqué's content and knew "only the snippets of information"

<sup>40</sup> FDGB Dresden, 12.6.53, 17.xx 18.40 uhr kr, Sekretariat (SAPMO-Barch DY 34 2509).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> "Informationsbericht am 13.6.- 12 uhr," SED- Betriebsparteiorganisation des Sachsenwerkes Niedersedlitz Dresden, den 13.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): "nicht auf Überzeugungsbasis, sondern diktatorisch arbeiteten."



they get from colleagues. For instance, some argued that the Party had done a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn or “the working class had handed over the reins of power.”<sup>43</sup> Such reactions reflected the regime’s inability to adequately control the message and therefore the situation—a serious problem that allowed the news to take on lives of its own.

### **Communicating Power**

Meanwhile, the SED attempted to present their political retreat as one that demonstrated the Party’s strength. One tactic included admitting guilt as far as “errors” related to the accelerated socialist buildup, while publicizing the regime’s forthrightness in owning up to the mistakes of the past, and often claiming such a feat had no historical precedent. A second tactic included drawing parallels to the Soviet Union’s triumphs, which like the previous two claims, would hopefully shore up the SED’s waning legitimacy and credibility.

The BPO council in Dresden, which oversaw SED political activity in state-owned enterprises, had a special meeting on June 12 with all party secretaries, campaigners, and comrades after the Communiqué officially went out over the radio. A number of functionaries looked to draw comparisons between the present situation in the GDR and those in the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. One contemplated whether the New Course might be likened to the Soviets’ New Economic Policy or if one could speak, like Lenin, of a type of “Two steps forward and one step

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<sup>43</sup> “Betr.: Bericht über das Kommuniqué des Politbüros vom 9.6.53,” SED Kreisleitung Meißen an die SED Bezirksleitung – Sekretariat – Dresden. Meißen, den 16.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): “sie nur Auszuege von Kollegen erfahren; “die Arbeiterklasse hat das Heft aus der Hand gegeben.”

back” sort of progress.<sup>44</sup> Another party member agreed, suggesting that in the creation of a dictatorship of the proletariat they had taken two steps forward and had now taken a step back, but also that, in a “struggle for peace” they had fallen a step back, but also moved ten steps forward.<sup>45</sup> The meeting’s report concluded that the majority of the colleagues and comrades in attendance here quickly recognized the righteousness of the Party’s line in connection with the international situation and its inherent political strength.<sup>46</sup>

In reality, party departments and staff often told those gathering opinions what they wanted to hear, likely contributing to a sense of false confidence within the Party. The Organisation Instrukteur Abteilung, which since 1949 had been charged with continuously controlling the implementation of resolutions while instructing lower organizations and basic units, for example, expressed the view that the Communiqué proved the strength of the regime and the SED; such an admission, the department’s head manager averred, would never have been possible in a capitalist land.<sup>47</sup> Elsewhere, the chairman of IG Textil-Bekleidung-Leder agreed that the measures taken would “strengthen the power of the Party” and the confidence (*Vertrauen*) of not only party members, but the entire population.<sup>48</sup> One comrade in Freital greeted the “open and honest” position of the Politburo and the central committee while a leader from a

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<sup>44</sup> “Stimmungsbericht zum Beschluss des Politbüros vom 9.6.1953,” SED Betriebsparteiorganisation Rat des Bezirkes Dresden, Dresden, den 12.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 IV 2.13 Nr 6).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.: “Friedenskampf”

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Friedericke Sattler, *Wirtschaftsordnung im Übergang: Politik, Organisation und Funktion der KPD/SED im Land Brandenburg bei der Etablierung der zentralen Planwirtschaft in der SBZ/GDR 1945-52* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2002): 782; “Stimmungsbericht zum Beschluss des Politbüros vom 9.6.1953,” SED Betriebsparteiorganisation Rat des Bezirkes Dresden, Dresden, den 12.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 IV 2.13 Nr 6).

<sup>48</sup> See the document beginning with “Vom Kreissekretariat ist eine Besprechung” Freital - - Gen. Schossig - - Kommuniqué (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

communally-owned factory stated that the party demonstrated “great strength and power” through its openness and honesty, adding that, “Such a self-critical position had never before been demonstrated and in doing so, a decisive step in the struggle for peace and German unity had been taken.”<sup>49</sup> The SED also promoted this position over the airwaves as evidenced on June 11 at 7:15 A.M., when functionaries at Sachsenwerk Radeberg gathered in the factory dining area where the functionary had stenographically recorded the slogan as it aired over GDR Radio: only a regime of the working class could take the position of openness with regards to its errors, something that hitherto had never happened in Germany’s history—powerful claims indeed.<sup>50</sup>

In the days that followed, reports concluded that party functionaries could see the strength of the regime and the party in such self-criticisms, the traditional communist penance.<sup>51</sup> In Dresden, the District Committee compiled evidence that the Communiqué was generally greeted by party members, with one claiming, typically, that the Party’s decision to ruthlessly post its errors showed the “strength and simultaneous growth” of the Party, which could be tied to the experiences of the Soviet Union. “After all,” commented one party member, “not for nothing had they coined the phrase ‘to learn from the Soviet Union means to learn victory.’”<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Kreisleitung Freital (Gen Schossig) Aufgenommen: Elsner, 13.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011). “solche selbstkritische Stellungnahme von keinem System bisher aufgezeigt wurde und dass dadurch ein entscheidender Schritt im Kampf um Frieden und Einheit Deutschlands getan wurde.”

<sup>50</sup> “Bericht über den Vorschlag des Politbüros an die Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,” VEB an die SED - Kreisleitung – Land – Partei – Information - Dresden N6, 11.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>51</sup> “Betr.: Stimmungsbericht über das Kommuniqué des Politbüros,” SED-Stadtbezirksleitung 6, Abt. P.u.M. Parteiinformation Dresden den 12.6.53 an die SED-Kreisleitung Dresden Stadt Abt. P.u.M. Parteiinformation (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.: “die Stärke und gleichzeitig das Wachstum”; “Nicht umsonst haben wir die Losung geprägt: von der SU lernen – heißt siegen lernen”

Things appeared to be going according to plan with the public, too. In Pirna, residents were reported to have commented that they respected the regime's admission of guilt when it came to mistakes that had been made, but also that things were looking up as the regime, after all, "had an ear to the masses."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, in the streetcars in Freital, passengers discussed the correctness of the measures and that the population was impressed that the errors had been dealt with in an open and clear way.<sup>54</sup>

Representing the intelligentsia's opinion in these matters, Professor Dräger at the Technical College in Dresden noted in his discussion with a party functionary that the positives outweighed the negatives and that East Germans should have "complete trust in a regime that has the courage to openly admit its mistakes."<sup>55</sup> Engineers at Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz discussed the political posture of the regime in conversations with functionaries and agreed that a capitalist regime would either be forced to step down in such a situation—or cover things up. The SED on the other hand, they continued, openly admitted its mistakes and the people's confidence continued to grow through such actions—evidence of the regime's power.<sup>56</sup> The issue of the regime's honesty became a key issue for campaigners and Party members. For example, in Pirna, comrades reported that while their clarification efforts had become easier since workers had been promised a better living standard, it had also become apparent that many comrades remained convinced that the Communiqué suggested the regime's weakness. How, then, to set such false views straight? The party members who led the consultations noted to non-believers

<sup>53</sup> "Betr. Stimmungsbericht über das Kommuniqué dzk der SED v. 9.6.1953, Bezirksvorstand Dresden 12.6.1953, Kreisvorstand Pirna. DPD (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>54</sup> "Vom Kreissekretariat ist eine Besprechung mit den Genossen Abteilungsleiter," [Likely 12.6].

<sup>55</sup> "Stellungnahme des Herrn Prof. Dr. phil. Dräger" (DY 27 1558, B110): "Er selbst ist der Meinung, dass das Positive vorherrscht und wir zu einer solchen Regierung, die den Mut hat, ihre Fehler offen einzugestehen, restloses Vertrauen haben können."

<sup>56</sup> "Unterredung mit den Herren Ingenieuren Franke und Singer vom Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz durch unseren Kollegen Diessner am 13.6.1953," Dresden, am 13.6.53 (SAPMO-BArch DY 27 1558).

that the confession of errors “could only be strength for the Regime and the Party” as it demonstrated honesty.<sup>57</sup>

But to turn the SED’s track record, which, in reality, exhibited little success, into a source of political strength was easier said than done. Indeed, in some ways, the New Course seemed to stimulate the wrath of the public. Some residents pointed out that if they exercised criticism by earlier pointing to these mistakes, the Party designated them as opportunists and conciliators and their criticisms were not recognized.<sup>58</sup> In Dresden, the public conversations reportedly revealed mixed opinions, where in the streetcars and among those waiting in lines for goods, some now spoke openly of the “great weaknesses.”<sup>59</sup> Others, like the residents of Pirna, wanted to know why change took so long. The region’s factory workers continued to question the Party’s tardiness in admitting its mistakes and expressed confusion regarding the situation.<sup>60</sup> In Freital, unaffiliated teachers viewed the measures taken by the Party as a sign of weakness, with one LDP member stating that while he greeted that Communiqué, he felt the errors had been, sadly, recognized a bit late and that “open self-criticism” testified to the strength of the working class rather than the regime.<sup>61</sup> Still, some struggled to understand why the party had not heeded the clues it got from the people earlier, further noting that had the

<sup>57</sup> “Betr.: Bericht über das Kommuniqué des Politbüros vom 9.6.53,” SED – Kreisleitung Meißen an die SED Bezirksleitung - Sekretariat – Dresden, Meißen, den 16.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011); 4. Zwischenbericht über die Stimmung zum Kommuniqué des ZK vom 9.6.53, Kreisleitung Pirna (Gen. Ender) 15.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): “dass Fehler eingestehen für unsere Partei und Regierung nur eine Stärke sein kann, dass sie damit ihre Ehrlichkeit beweist”

<sup>58</sup> “Betr.: Kommuniqué ZK vom 9.6 1953,” SED Kreisleitung Dresden Land an die SED Bezirksleitung, 16.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).: “Oppurtunisten und Versöhnler”

<sup>59</sup> “Betr.: Kommuniqué des Polit-Büros des ZK der SED vom 9.6.1953” Betriebsparteileitung der SED – Betriebsgruppen Stadtverwaltung Dresden, Neues Rathaus, Abschrift/Hä, Dresden, den 12.6.1953 an die SED Betriebsparteileitung, Gen. Manfred Bürger (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV 2.13 Nr. 6): “Große Schwächen”

<sup>60</sup> “6. Lagebericht über den Beschluss des Politbüros vom 9.6.53.,” SED Bezirksleitung Dresden Leitende Organe der Partei und Massenorganisationen Sektor Parteiinformation, Dresden, den 16.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>61</sup> Kreisleitung Freital (Schossig), 14.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

measures not been implemented an uprising would have broken out and those responsible would have to be brought to justice.<sup>62</sup>

The SED also endured criticism from its supporters because of its admission of errors. While a good number of comrades had fallen in line with the regime's political strategy, many remained skeptical of the situation and felt that the Party's admission of errors and its self-critical position revealed weakness and amounted to an admission of political bankruptcy. Party members in the court in Dresden reportedly expected a Slansky Trial, suggesting that those who deviated would be ousted from the Party, similar to what had happened in the Czechs' show trial.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, in the Dresdner animal feed plant, workers on Monday argued that those who make mistakes should find themselves behind bars and wondered why those in the regime, having admitted mistakes, faced no consequences.<sup>64</sup> One worker at Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz, an alleged left-radical, displayed disappointment from that side of the political spectrum and argued that the resolution was RIAS rabble-rousing, since the SED would never allow such a thing.<sup>65</sup>

### **Explanations behind the New Course**

The impetus behind the regime's about-face remained something of a mystery to a vast majority of the population. The radical change of course provoked a range of

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<sup>62</sup> "Betr.: Kommuniké ZK vom 9.6 1953," SED Kreisleitung Dresden Land an die SED Bezirksleitung, 16.6.1953.

<sup>63</sup> "Bericht von der Bezirksleitung Dresden über Kommuniké des Politburos vom 15.6.53," Angesagt von: Genn Schöder, Unterschrieben von Brosselt, Geschrieben von Erika Stübner (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/528).

<sup>64</sup> "Unterschreiben vom 2. Sekr. Gen. Rebsch, Kreisleitung Zittau," Gen. Jähne, Uhr 1045 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>65</sup> "Kurzinformation über die Stimmung zum Kommuniké des Polit.-Büros im Bezirksverband Dresden," Freie Deutsche Jugend, Bezirksleitung Dresden, Sekretariat, Dresden, den 15.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

theories hashed out collectedly regarding just who or what might have been behind the SED's moderated position.

In Dresden, functionaries noted negative discussions in the city's streetcars on June 11, which, according to the responsible agent, were purportedly concentrated among passengers who hailed from those strata of the population that were indifferent to political developments.<sup>66</sup> One politically unaffiliated shepherdess declared to the strangers around her that now she could speak out and declared that the SED wanted "*Spitzbart*" ("pointy beard," meaning Walter Ulbricht) out because he had been too eager to follow Russian orders and that Malenkov was now calling for an entirely different direction than the previous Stalinist line.<sup>67</sup> It appears sometimes residents correctly recognized that the SED had simply done what Soviet leadership demanded, but then often put their own spin on the story.<sup>68</sup> For instance, at a spinning and weaving mill in Ebersbach, fifty kilometers from Dresden, workers discussed whether the Soviet Union owed the U.S money and had taken out a new line of credit. This might have resulted, they argued, in the High Commissar in the USSR ordering a change in its policy toward Germany.<sup>69</sup>

Some believed the SED's political retreat stemmed from foreign powers, but the explanations voiced by ordinary people varied. On occasion citizens tied the change to the Americans, as in Meißen, where functionaries reported a rumor circulating over the weekend that the Politburo's proposals only occurred because of pressure from the

<sup>66</sup> See the document beginning "Der Anteil der Bevölkerung verstärkt sich laufend" des Demokratischen Deutschland, Bezirksausschuss Dresden, Sekretariat. 12.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011)

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. "Die (gemeint ist die SED) den Spitzbart weghaben wollen (gemeint ist Walter Ulbricht), weil der zu viel den Russen nach Pfeife getanzt hätte"

<sup>68</sup> "Betr.: Kommuniké des ZK vom 9.6.1953," SED – Kreisleitung Dresden Land an die SED bezirksleitung Sekretariat, Dresden A1. 14.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>69</sup> Kreisleitung Löbau (Genn. Hennig), Aufgenommen: Elsner 13.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

United States. This pressure, so the rumor went, included the American threat of military intervention in the GDR should the regime fail to implement the proposals in the Communiqué in short order.<sup>70</sup> In Riesa similar rumors circulated, but here, some believed that the Americans would arrive by the middle of the week.<sup>71</sup> Along these lines, a brigadier in Bautzen claimed to have seen an unmarked sedan on June 12 with American flags on the fenders cruising through town, and he even produced for local officials a sketch of the occupants, whom he claimed to have been dressed in both civil and army uniforms. A later report revealed the car to have been from an Eastern Bloc state.<sup>72</sup> Similar arguments also appeared in Dresden, where one worker argued the New Course was the result of American pressure while other colleagues contradicted him, pointing to the Russian “Peace Offensive” (*Friedensoffensive*) and argued that the Russians were craftier than they (East Germans) were.<sup>73</sup> In Görlitz, a housewife echoed these sentiments, declaring that the New Course stemmed above all from Western lobbying.<sup>74</sup> In addition, as always, radio tied into perceptions, with some in Dresden arguing that since RIAS aired the news of the Communiqué before the local stations West Germany must have been behind everything.<sup>75</sup>

It should be noted that the party elected not to articulate or publicize the true reasons behind the New Course, which was the poverty and unrest brought about by the

<sup>70</sup> See the document beginning “Einige Handwerker stehen der Erklärung” 12,30 Uhr Unterschr.: Gen. Nitzsche (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>71</sup> “Sofort nach Bekanntwerden des Kommuniqué durch den demokratischen Rundfunk,” Riesa, Genosse Möbius.

<sup>72</sup> Bautzen, Gen. Letters. (see “7. Typische Erscheinungen”) (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>73</sup> “Information über die Stimmung in den Betrieben zu dem Kommuniqué über die Sitzung des Politburos der SED am 9.6.53 sowie Sitzung des Ministerrats am 11.6.53,” FDGB-Bezirksvorstand Dresden, Statistik/Berichterstattung, Dresden, den 13.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>74</sup> Görlitz Land, Lykowski (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>75</sup> “Kurzinformation über die Stimmung zum Kommuniqué des Politburos im Bezirksverband Dresden,” Freie Deutsche Jugend, Bezirksleitung Dresden, Sekretariat, Dresden, den 16.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).



accelerated drive to socialism. Furthermore, one could conclude that the party leaders seemed to be interested in hearing what they wanted to hear—that they (and only a party like their own) made the right decision to correct their “errors,” a catch-all phrase that avoided any genuine political admission of guilt while opening the regime to criticism and partially-informed speculation.

### **Heightened Expectations**

It now seemed that everything was changing, and the future, which had seemed so certain several days earlier, was once again an unknown. Although the announcement had been rather explicit in certain areas, it left enough details to the imagination as that the masses readily filled in the blanks. In place of concrete information, people began to speculate as to what was happening or what the future held. Annelies Zickermann, an employee at the Görlitz polyclinic, declared that the year (1953) would mainly see turns for the better, since, one hundred days after Stalin’s death, something good had happened (the Communiqué), and she prophesied that on August 8 Germany would be reunified. Of course, she had apparently heard this from a fortuneteller, but, as we will see, rumor that yet another major change would come in August circulated in other places.<sup>76</sup> Others predicted the end would come perhaps a bit sooner, such as the farmer in Kamenz who stated in a public gathering that the SED was now hanging by a thread and it would not be long until the time came when comrades had their party insignias ripped from their lapels—which, according to him, had already begun in Dresden.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Görlitz Stadt, S.2 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): “In der Poliklinik diskutierte die Angestellte Annelies Zickermann: Dieses Jahr wird überhaupt eine gute Wende, dass hat man schon [illeg.] das Hundert Tage nach Stalins Tod eine Wende kommt, die für uns zum Guten ist, am 8.8. werden wir die Einheit Deutschlands haben. (Angeblich Wahrsager erzählt).”

<sup>77</sup> Kreisleitung Kamenz, Gen. Zschornack 10:30 Uhr (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

## **Economy and Currency**

The announcement of the New Course raised expectations and sometimes rumors carried specific suggestions about the nation's future. As far as the GDR's economic future, residents imagined various scenarios. For instance in Großenhain a rumor circulated on Saturday that currency needed to be spent quickly as it would soon disappear. Later that evening, the local bank recorded only one deposit with every other customer making withdrawals, demonstrating the potential of rumors to spread quickly.<sup>78</sup> In Riesa, rumors circulated that the political situation had swept away the regime and that the Americans were scheduled to arrive at the beginning of the week, all of which would lead to currency reform after the borders fell.<sup>79</sup> Rumor in Freital held that it was the currency reform that would provide the necessary funds for the New Course.<sup>80</sup> The New Economic Policy of 1920s Soviet Russia helped convince a farmer in Löbau that, as in that country's past, the relaxation of economic controls would remain in place for only a bit before the regime reinstated socialism.<sup>81</sup>

## **The Reunification Question: a Source of Power and a Source of Weakness**

The Communiqué's rhetoric regarding reunification raised hopes and inspired visions of national unity. As Karl Fricke reminds us, Germans did not fully accept the nation's partition in 1953 and reunification remained a central part of the SED's political

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<sup>78</sup> "5. Lagebericht über den Beschluss des Politbüros vom 9.6.1953," SED-Bezirksleitung Dresden, Leitende Organe der Partei und Massenorganisationen, Sektor Parteinformation, Dresden, den 15.6.1953, Schr.-Schu. (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>79</sup> Kreisleitung Riesa (Genosse Möbius, Information) 14.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): "Kommuniqué anfangs wie kalte Dusche gewirkt"

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> "Betr.: Kommuniqué des Politbüros vom 9.6.53" - Durch genossen der Abt. Staatl. Organe wurde gestern in 3 Kreisen folgendes festgestellt: "- Abt. Staatliche Organe – Dresden, am 16.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

discourse.<sup>82</sup> The Communiqué reaffirmed this position and declared reunification fundamental to the Politburo's goals. Of course, little had been accomplished in previous years aside from political posturing, so when the party announced the New Course, to many it seemed that the moment for change had finally arrived. Some GDR citizens welcomed looser border controls while others anticipated a unified Germany within days. Perhaps fittingly, on the night of the Communiqué's announcement, a Dresden resident who lived across the street from a residence in which a radio was blasting the German national anthem concluded it was "Probably RIAS."<sup>83</sup>

The New Course stimulated national, all-German imaginings as residents looked forward to relaxed border controls that would immediately soften Germany's partition. Reports indicate that these new rules became one of the week's most discussed topics. The morning of the announcement, an older woman expressed delight that she would soon be able to visit her son in West Germany.<sup>84</sup> Other East Germans similarly anticipated the issuance of residence permits for stays in the GDR by West Germans and the disbursement of inter-zone passes.<sup>85</sup> The elderly discussed the opportunities they would now have to get together with their children and relatives.<sup>86</sup> A pensioner welcomed the measures of the Politburo, proclaiming, "We've now been given a further possibility

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<sup>82</sup> See Friecke in Roth, *Der 17 Juni in Sachsen*, introduction.

<sup>83</sup> See the document beginning "Werte Genossen! Soeben erreichte uns folgende Nachricht: "SED-Stadtbezirksleitung 6 Abt P.u.M. Information an die SED-Kreisleitung Dresden Stadt, Abt. P.u.M. Information Dresden 12.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): "Wahrscheinlich Rias"

<sup>84</sup> "Betr.: Informationsbericht über die Stimmung unter der Bevölkerung und der Kollegen unserem Betrieb," 11.6.1953.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Kreisleitung Dippoldiswalde, Gen. Nitzsche Kenntniz v.d. Bericht 1. u. 2. Sekretär (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

to take a concrete stance on the question of German unity.”<sup>87</sup> Indeed, reports from the countryside around Dresden alleged that residents were especially pleased with the relaxed travel restrictions and they were ready to begin making plans of whom they would visit first.<sup>88</sup> In Bischofswerda, a master watchmaker felt that the resolution represented a “new direction” in German national politics and that now, “nothing stood in the way of reunification.”<sup>89</sup> At least one comrade at LOWA Niesky “did not care as to what, how, or why” the Communiqué emerged from the Politburo; he just knew that the New Course was a necessary step toward the unity of Germany that had to be implemented soon.<sup>90</sup> The admission of errors seems to have led some to believe that the GDR amounted to a failed, short-lived project, which disavowed by its architects, brought German unification that much closer.

### Eastern Issues

On towns near the Oder-Neisse line, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the Communiqué raised expectations among residents of these areas in more immediate and tangible ways. On a train between Ebersbach and Löbau passengers averred that it was now “certain that they would get Silesia back.”<sup>91</sup> Others believed they would now return

<sup>87</sup> “4. Die negative Stimmung im Stadtkreis Görlitz ist in der Hauptsache durch Riashetzte entstanden,” Görlitz -Stadt, Gen. Lange, 15.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): “Nun wird uns eine weitere Möglichkeit gegeben, zur Frage der Einheit Deutschlands konkret Stellung zu nehmen.”

<sup>88</sup> “Betr.: Kommuniqué des ZK vom 9.6.1953,” SED – Kreisleitung Dresden Land an die SED Bezirksleitung Sekretariat Dresden A1, 14.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011); Betr.: Kommuniqué des ZK vom 9.6.1953, SED Kreisleitung Dresden Land an die SED Bezirksleitung Sekretariat, 13.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>89</sup> Bischofswerda, S2, [likely 12.6.53] (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): “neue Wendung”; “steht nicht mehr im Wege”

<sup>90</sup> Kreisleitung Niesky, Gen. Hartmann 10.40 Uhr (likely 14.6) (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): “Was, wie und warum interessiert mich jetzt nicht, ich weiß dieser Schritt ist zur Einheit Deutschlands notwendig und die muss jetzt bald hergestellt werden.”

<sup>91</sup> “Stellungnahmen zu den Maßnahmen der SED und der Regierung der DDR: Vom Kreisausschuss Dresden Stadt gehen uns folgende Diskussionen zu:” Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland

to their old homes.<sup>92</sup> Reports out of Zittau, Löbau, and Niesky also noted that residents had now begun discussing what they saw as the very real possibility that the Oder-Neisse border might be revised, which in many of these cases, meant potentially returning to their homes that now sat in Poland. These conversations, which took place in inns and other locales reportedly died down when party functionaries entered such establishments, suggesting such ideas remained reactionary and dangerous ones in the eyes of the SED—and that these conversations may have been more widespread than reported here.<sup>93</sup>

Conversations in the east of course further fed rumors of reunification. These ideas circulated in the Dresden Theater and from the director of the Dresden Zoo, who argued that the coming relaxation in foreign policy would facilitate negotiations in connection with German reunification.<sup>94</sup> The director also noted that members of the intelligentsia, who had earlier expressed their desire to attend more conferences in West Germany now believed the regime had responded to their wishes. In their opinion, German-language scholarship would receive a boost from the proposed measures.<sup>95</sup> Similarly, engineers from Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz imagined themselves reuniting with West German scholars as well as the international scholarly community.<sup>96</sup>

By raising the issue of reunification, however hollow or symbolic it may have been and presenting it in conjunction with a major political overhaul, the regime

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Bezirksausschuss Dresden, Sekretariat, 15.6.53 an die Bezirksleitung Dresden (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., “Jetzt bekommen wir bestimmt Schlesien wieder“

<sup>93</sup> “Lagebericht von 15.6.53” (SAPMO-BArch IV/2/5/528); See the document beginning “In Dresden und Bischofswerda war zu verzeichnen” Gewerkschaftshandel, Bezirkskirksvorstand Dresden, Dresden A 1, Ebertplatz 14.

<sup>94</sup> “Betr.: Situationsbericht über das Kommuniqué, 3. Bericht,” SED-Stadtbezirk III, Dresden – A.17, Abt. P.u.m. – Parteiinformation an die Kreisleitung der SED Parteiinformation, Dresden, den 13.6.53; Stellungnahme des Herrn Prof. Dr. phil. Dräger.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> “Unterredung mit den Herren Ingenieuren Franke und Singer vom Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz durch unseren Kollegen Diessner am 13.6.1953,” Dresden, am 13.6.53 (SAPMO-BArch DY 27 1558).

encouraged the population to imagine a unified Germany. Such imaginings threatened the state's legitimacy for, were Germany to reunify, the GDR would obviously cease to exist.

### A Contentious Citizenry

While the party noted the happiness engendered by the announcement, “negative” discussions also followed the publication of the Communiqué, and the rival public sphere, driven by an increasingly confident and angry citizenry, became a clearinghouse for criticisms of the government. Thus, in addition to expressions of hope and satisfaction many now felt more comfortable airing their grievances—and demonstrating a newfound political power.

On the day the announcement went out, streetcar passenger remarked that “had the masses not complained, nothing would have changed.”<sup>97</sup> Such complaints were commonplace. Within days of the announcement, one employee in Sebnitz declared “Now our time is here again,” while others discussed the “beginning of the collapse of the prison-state.”<sup>98</sup> Similarly, in the days before the uprising in Niesky, mood reports indicated that while outspoken criticisms of the regime were little-known, some argued that the regime “had waved the white flag and those in other nations are mentioning that the regime has stepped down.”<sup>99</sup> In Großenhain, an innkeeper rejoiced that she was no longer a member of the “BDM,” or, the “*Bund der Markelosen*” (association of the penniless)—probably a riff on the matching acronym from the Nazi period that stood for

<sup>97</sup> “Betr.: Kommunique des Politburos vom 10. Juni 1953,” Abt Staatliche Organe, Dresden, am 11. Juni 1953 an die Parteiinformation, im Hause (SächsHStA 11857 IV 2.13 Nr. 6): “Wenn von den Volksmassen nicht gemurrt worden wäre, hätte nichts geändert.”

<sup>98</sup> Sebnitz - 11,10 Uhr [likely June 14, 1953] (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): “Ein Angestellter, dessen Name uns noch bekanntgegeben wird, aus dem Umspannwerk Langburkerdorf, erklärte dem Sekretär der OPO: “jetzt kommt die Zeit für uns wieder;” “In Unternehmerkreisen, besonders bei kap. Blumengroßhändler wird diskutiert, endlich beginnt der Zuchthausstaat zusammenzubrechen.”

<sup>99</sup> Kreisleitung Niesky, Gen. Hartmann, [likely June 16, 1953]; “Jetzt habt Ihr die weiße Fahne herausgesetzt, in anderen Ländern nennt man das, die Regierung ist zurückgetreten.”

*Bund deutscher Mädel*.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, she reportedly uttered in a threatening voice, “until now you all [the regime] have eaten the butter. Now it’s all gone; now we’re eating it all.”<sup>101</sup> The mayor of Rauschwitz in the same county fled to West Berlin early in the morning with his family, likely after receiving a threatening letter.<sup>102</sup> Some threats were more cryptic, such as an incident in which a horse’s head was hung up in a concrete factory by workers.<sup>103</sup>

High school students in Meißen became unruly and openly declared that they would never engage socially. During lessons, a student, when asked to form a sentence, stated, “I would like to know, which way the wind blows,” whereupon the other students interjected, “from the West.”<sup>104</sup> At this same high school, one teacher had apparently claimed that all works from Stalin and Lenin were to be destroyed. Artisans in Meißen also demonstrated stubbornness, arguing with party representatives that the German question would need to be dealt with through a four power conference and that they were waiting on free elections, which would decide just who would be in control.<sup>105</sup> One particular painter felt he could not forgive the regime for its transgressions, arguing that it had ruined the lives of those who “tilled the soil through the generations and left their

<sup>100</sup> Großenhain, Unterschrieben: Gen. Siegert, 2. Kreissekretär, 10,10 Uhr [likely June 16, 1953] (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., “In der Gemeinde Lockwitz äusserte die Gastwirtin Eissler: “Wir sind nicht mehr im BDM (Bund der Markelosen) und sagt in drehender Art; “bis jetzt habt Ihr die Butter gefressen. Jetzt ist es aber aus, jetzt fressen wir sie selber.”

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> “Betr.: Kommuniké ZK 9.6.1953,” SED Bezirksleitung, Sekretariat, Dresden – A1, Devientstr.4, 17.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011 S5): “Im Betonwerk Cossebaude haben die Arbeiter einer Produktionsabteilung einen Pferdekopf aufgefangen. Auf die Frage des Parteisekretärs, was das zu bedeuten habe, wurde ihm gesagt, “nun, der wird bald überall rausgehungen, denn bei uns hängt doch draußen!”

<sup>104</sup> “Betr.: Bericht über das Kommuniké des Politbüros vom 9.6.53,” SED – Kreisleitung Meißen an die SED Bezirksleitung - Sekretariat – Dresden, Meißen, den 16.6.53: “ich möchte wissen, woher der Wind weht; Aus dem Westen”

<sup>105</sup> See the document beginning “Wie uns der Instrukteur dur dass Arbeitsbereich Langebrück” SED Kreisleitung Dresden Land, Abt. Partei-u. Massenorganisationen, Mitteilung für die Parteiinformation, Am 11.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

land because of fear and threats,” while pointing to “those who had been imprisoned for up to three years because of economic misdoings.”<sup>106</sup> He also brought up a former professor, who, like many, had been silenced because of reactionary positions. And then there were his neighbors, who had their market garden taken away, merely for failing to meet quotas and purchasing from those who had overfilled theirs. “I am of the opinion,” he concluded, “that it should not have been allowed to come to this!”<sup>107</sup>

In Dresden’s streetcars, passengers openly discussed who was responsible for the regime’s errors—with many pointing their finger at Walter Ulbricht, “who is hated by the entire German people because he is a radicalist.”<sup>108</sup> Propertied citizens, when asked their opinions, similarly argued that they could only have confidence in the regime’s measures if Ulbricht was relieved of his duties, prompting the reporting functionary to note that, in his estimation, Grotewohl and Pieck did not draw the same ire, perhaps because people viewed the latter two as merely Ulbricht’s subordinates.<sup>109</sup>

### **Trouble in the Countryside**

Following the announcement of the Communiqué on June 11, local government leaders held meetings to gauge the mood of farmers in an attempt to clarify the government’s current and future policies. In these meetings, the SED’s inability to effectively communicate its position became a recurring issue as tempers flared and the

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<sup>106</sup> In einem Gespräch mit Kunstmaler Kröner aus Radebeul, brachte der Gennante folgende Gedanken zum Ausdruck, 13. Juni 1953 (SAPMO-BArch DY 27 1558): “Wenn Menschen, die oftmals Generationen hindurch auf ihre Scholle sassen, ihren Boden aus Furcht und Bedrohung verlassen mussten? Oder wenn man jetzt die Menschen frei lässt, die bis zu 3 Jahren Gefängnis wegen Wirtschaftsvergehen verurteilt wurden?”

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.: “Ich bin der Meinung, dass es erst soweit gar nicht kommen durfte!”

<sup>108</sup> “Betr.: Kommuniqué des Politbüros vom 9.6.53 - Durch genossen der Abt. Staatl. Organe wurde gestern in 3 Kreisen folgendes festgestellt”: “als Radikalist vom ganzen deutschen Volk gehasst werde”

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.



collective imagination generated rumors that threatened the existence of the socialist farming arrangement.

The Communiqué and all its promises posed serious problems in the district's LPGs as rumor often distorted genuine news. For example, the New Course proposed to return the homesteads to those farmers who fled the GDR while those who could not make it back due to exceptional circumstances would receive compensation.<sup>110</sup> But this spawned the rumor circulated by some farmers that they would soon have to give up their farmsteads to the former great landowners (*Grossbauern*) who would be returning.<sup>111</sup> This was the case in Bischofswerda, for example, where new farmers believed that they would soon have to give up their farmsteads to these *Grossbauern*, whom they expected to return in short order.<sup>112</sup> And in Meißen, the announcement of the Communiqué triggered considerable panic within the LPG as members now thought all *Grossbauern* were returning and thus there was no possible way that things could continue as they were.<sup>113</sup> In the area around Dresden, one comrade was of the opinion that when it came to the possible return of the *Grossbauern*, the Party would have to consider whether they had left in order to sabotage the GDR's food supplies or because of RIAS propaganda.<sup>114</sup> And members of a motor and tractor station outside of Dresden were understanding of the majority of the Party's decisions, but questions regarding the *Grossbauern* remained as did the issue of whether the LPGs would be diminished or totally dissolved,

<sup>110</sup> "Kommuniqué des Politbüros des Zentralkomitees der SED vom 9. Juni 1953," *Neues Deutschland*, June 11, 1953.

<sup>111</sup> Bischofswerda, S2, [likely before June 18] (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>112</sup> "Zu 1: Bekanntgabe des K. Durch Betriebsfunk in den Schwerpunktbetrieben des Kreises und Agitatoreinsätze," Bischofswerda, durchgeg.: Gen. Phillip, untersch.: Gen Möscher, 8,000 Uhr [likely before June 18] (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>113</sup> "Betr.: Bericht über das Kommuniqué des Politbüros vom 9.6.53," SED Kreisleitung Meißen an die SED Bezirksleitung – Sekretariat – Dresden. Meißen, den 16.6.53.

<sup>114</sup> "Stimmungsbericht zum Beschluss des Politbüros vom 9.6.1953," SED Betriebsparteiorganisation, Rat des Bezirkes Dresden, Dresden, den 12.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 IV 2.13 Nr. 6).

demonstrating how a single pledge led farmers to believe that the system might collapse.<sup>115</sup>

Other forms of improvised news emerged in these farmers' meetings, which the SED labeled as "negative forces." For example, some attendees claimed that the planned economy had been a failure and soon the free-market economy would be re-introduced.<sup>116</sup> In Freital rumor had it that the management of the LPG had recently fled to the West.<sup>117</sup> Such confusion may have stemmed from foreign broadcasts, as members of an LPG in Sebnitz admitted misunderstandings regarding the regime's measures and claimed to have heard on the radio that the LPGs had been dissolved. Whatever the cause of the misunderstandings, desires and fears sometimes mixed together with authentic news.<sup>118</sup> Within days, other regions reported similar situations in farmers' meetings. After the Communiqué went out, a rumor began spreading, which allegedly had its origins in the Putzkau LPG with one Frau Eckert, that all the LPGs would be dissolved.<sup>119</sup> In three separate LPGs, members reportedly called for work stoppages as their efforts no longer had any purpose. A fourth LPG declared that if any "Kulaks" returned they would kill them.<sup>120</sup>

On Monday, June 15, reports out of Meißen noted that efforts to clarify the Communiqué and the Regime had proved inadequate and this had led to panic in the

<sup>115</sup> "6. Lagebericht über den Beschluss des Politburos vom 9.6.53, 16.6.1953" (SAPMO-BArch IV/2/5/528)

<sup>116</sup> "Betr. Stimmungsbericht über die Empfehlung des Polit.-Büros und die Regierung vom 9.6.1953," VEM Transformatoren-und Röntgenwerk Dresden, SED Betriebsparteiorganisation an die Bezirksleitung der SED, Abt. Information (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): "negative Kräfte"

<sup>117</sup> "Kreisleitung Freital (Gen Schossig) Aufgenommen: Elsner," 13.6.53: "Alle Erfolge in der LPG werden systematisch abgeleugnet"; "in vier Stunden runter von seinem Gut und jetzt kämen in 4 Stunden die anderen wieder drauf."

<sup>118</sup> "Bericht von der Bezirksleitung Dresden über Kommunique des Politburos vom 15.6.53."

<sup>119</sup> Zu 1: Bekanntgabe des K. Durch Betriebsfunk in den Schwerpunktbetrieben des Kreises und Agitatoreinsätze, Bischofswerda, durchgeg.: Gen. Phillip, untersch.: Gen Möscher, 8,000 Uhr [likely before June 18] (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.: "wir lassen keinen Kulaken mehr auf den Hof, wenn einer zurückkommt, den schlagen wir tot."

population.<sup>121</sup> In more than one LPG, re-settlers from the lost eastern territories drunkenly celebrated what they believed to be the imminent return to their homeland.<sup>122</sup> In Großenhain, serious alarm had also broken out after the Communiqué aired due to the misapprehension that the *Grossbauern* had been notifying the LPGs of their coming liquidation.<sup>123</sup> The Party reacted to the situation here by initiating more group meetings with the instructors in an attempt to clarify the situation.<sup>124</sup>

On June 16, the Regional Committee in Dresden reported to Berlin that problems remained in the LPGs, where in addition to a lack of leadership, the population remained anxious, especially the communal farmers. Members of various LPGs also expressed interest in bringing hay to their own farmsteads and still others discussed packing up their things, unsettling their neighbors. Still others drank in celebration of their “victory.”<sup>125</sup> Functionaries continued to receive insults while one report noted that “in some cases it is uttered, that such a breakdown of the government has never before happened.”<sup>126</sup> In Löbau discussions had taken on an aggressive character, especially within LPG meetings; the farmers now exhibited provocative behavior as they believed the New Course signaled the regime’s end. Farmers proclaimed that functionaries represented a party at the end of its rope while one farmer taunted officials as “Lumpen, dogs, criminals, and crooks.” And a barkeeper in Kleinmeritz told functionaries that any words from the SED meant nothing since, as he told the regime representatives, “You are all are finished.”<sup>127</sup>

<sup>121</sup> “Betr.: Kommuniqué des Politbüros vom 9.6.53 - Durch genossen der Abt. Staatl. Organe wurde gestern in 3 Kreisen folgendes festgestellt,” 16.6.53.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Bezirksleitung Dresden, 16.6, 16.30 Uhr (SAPMO-BArch IV/2/5/528).

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.: “teilweise wird geaussert, solchen Zusammenbruch an der Regierung habe es noch nie gegeben.”

<sup>127</sup> Löbau, Genossin Hennig, 16.6.53 (SächsHStA Dresden 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): “Lumpen, Hunde, Verbrecher und Gauner;“ “Was ihr da redet, hat ja sowieso keinen Zweck, Ihr habt ja sowieso ausgespielt.”

### **Improvised News: Revolution Next-Door**

By the time Soviet leadership moved to assuage the increasingly troubled situation in East Germany in the spring of 1953, Stalinist policies had created problematic situations throughout the Eastern Bloc. The proximity of the Dresden Region to Czechoslovakia meant that when unrest developed in Pilsen in late May-early-June, East Germans who listened to foreign radio broadcasts heard about it.<sup>128</sup> Radio Free Europe reported on the Czech events as did RIAS, with the latter noting that the East German police had been called in to help quell the disturbances, in which the city fell to demonstrators for two days before the government regained its footing. Forty protestors died and the regime arrested hundreds in the days after.<sup>129</sup> The reception (or ignorance) of this story in Dresden illustrates how individuals could construe an event as genuine news, improvised news, or (false) rumor, depending on their political orientation.

While police forces suppressed these riots by June 3, news of their occurrence—always designated as rumor by reporting functionaries, regardless of the information's validity—continuously spread like wildfire in the area. These stories do not appear as often in the reports from other regions sent to Berlin, which suggests that such information circulated more frequently in the southeastern region of the GDR.<sup>130</sup> It also contributed to an atmosphere of political unrest in the Dresden region, helped generate political instability, and revealed the hopes and fears of East Germans in the days before the mass demonstrations.

<sup>128</sup> Ivan Pfaff, "Weg mit der Partei!" *Die Zeit* 22. Mai 2003; Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany*, 15-17.

<sup>129</sup> Michael Nelson, *War of the Black Heaven: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 67-8. Ivan Pfaff, "Weg mit der Partei!"

<sup>130</sup> This is based on a partial sampling I conducted in Lichterfelde.

As mood reports piled up on the SED's desks, the nature and scope of the "rumors" regarding foreign upheaval became plainly evident to the regional directorate in Dresden. These rumors appear to have been rather widespread in the region and not confined to locations near the Czech border. In Dippoldiswalde, for instance, a functionary reported that a comrade at the glassworks informed *him* that a "state of siege" existed in Czechoslovakia, that chaos now reigned as the government there no longer existed, and that the Americans had been called in to help. This comrade, when asked how he knew this, cited the (Swiss) Beromünster radio station.<sup>131</sup> In Heidenau, 13 kilometers south of Dresden, the FDGB reported hearing more specific accounts of events in Czechoslovakia. In the paper factory there, a rumor alleged that riots were soon to break out because of the currency reform and the abolition of ration cards (true news, but it had already happened).<sup>132</sup> The FDGB functionary who recorded this rumor investigated the veracity of the news by getting in touch with the factory manager, who happened to be in Czechoslovakia at the time. This manager, according to the report, claimed to have dispelled the "rumor" by recounting the "joyful approval of the Czechoslovakian people" he personally met.<sup>133</sup>

But his story sounded little like the news that circulated in the rival public sphere. In Riesa, rumors circulated that a state of revolution existed in Czechoslovakia as well as in Poland—a rumor that also appeared in Dresden and held that street battles had broken out there and that the Soviet Union and the SED had only issued the Communiqué to

<sup>131</sup> Kreis Dippoldiswalde, Gen. Nitzsche, am 12.6.

<sup>132</sup> "2. Information über die Stimmung in den Betrieben zu dem Kommuniqué über die Sitzung des Politbüros der SED am 9.6.53 sowie Sitzung des Ministerrats am 11.6.53." There had indeed been a currency reform in the CSR and this news made it to the back pages of *Neues Deutschland*.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.: "Der Werksleiter, der zur Zeit in der CSR war, konnte diese Gerüchte sofort zerschlagen, indem er über die freudige Zustimmung des tschechoslowakischen Volkes seines eigenen Erlebnisse schilderte."

prevent such a situation from arising in the GDR.<sup>134</sup> So-called class enemies in Sebnitz inquired about the coup that had taken place in Czechoslovakia, and the Saxon troops who helped contain the revolution—news they believed since they heard it on the radio (the station is not noted). Again, this part is not too far off—though the rebellion had ended almost two weeks prior. However, unverified rumors here also purported that corpses had already begun floating down the Elbe.<sup>135</sup> These alarming stories also appeared in Dresden where residents argued that the situation was so bad in Czechoslovakia that “corpses were now swimming along the river!”<sup>136</sup> These rumors were probably exaggerations and possibly fabrications.

In the countryside around Dresden, improvised news of large uprisings in Czechoslovakia had persisted through the weekend and into the beginning of the week, with people now (correctly) claiming that the East German police force had been enlisted to help restore order.<sup>137</sup> Improvised news continued to swirl elsewhere on Monday. A woman in Dresden reported that Radio Prague had reported on the previous Friday that authorities had cleared the streets in the capital at 9:00 p.m., leading Dresdeners to conclude that there was indeed an uprising in progress (it had already ended, of course).<sup>138</sup> Another report from the countryside around Dresden stated that the news of indeterminate Czech origin held that revolution had broken out and the police and military had taken opposing sides.<sup>139</sup> Other versions of this story circulated in Dresden

<sup>135</sup> Sebnitz, Unterschrieben: Genosse Wabst, 12,30 Uhr [likely June 14]

<sup>136</sup> “Betr.: Kommuniqué ZK 9.6.1953, SED Bezirksleitung,” Sekretariat, Dresden – A1, Devientstr.4, 17.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>137</sup> “Betr.: Kommuniqué ZK vom 9.6.1953,” SED Kreisleitung Dresden Land an die SED Bezirksleitung, 16.6.1953.

<sup>138</sup> “Kurzinformation über die Stimmung zum Kommuniqué des Polit.-Büros im Bezirksverband Dresden,” 15.6.1953.

<sup>139</sup> “Betr.: Kommuniqué des ZK vom 9.6.1953,” SED Kreisleitung Dresden-Land an die SED Bezirksleitung, Dresden, 15.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

alleging that the Czech uprising had led to states of siege in Pilsen and Prague and thousands of party functionaries had been arrested (partially true).<sup>140</sup> These rumors surfaced at Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz where one worker reported hearing that there had been multiple deaths at the Skoda factory, in this case a true rumor.<sup>141</sup>

By the beginning of the week, stories of sizeable uprisings in Czechoslovakia—where the Volkspolizei now worked to restore order—continued to circulate in the countryside around Dresden.<sup>142</sup> It is possible that such information stemmed from earlier Czech sources, which Dresdeners identified as the source of the news on June 15.<sup>143</sup> The same day, one disbelieving comrade in Riesa (45 Km northwest of Dresden) noted that the “craziest” rumors in connection with the Communiqué circulated through the population, above all, in places and factories where they listened to RIAS and other foreign stations. These listeners, he added, were asking party members provocative questions, as for example, in Lichtensee where a farmer stated to a functionary, “Don’t you know that an uprising has already broken out in Czechoslovakia and it’s going to kick off here soon, because the workers are only waiting until the revolution comes.”<sup>144</sup> Similar news was also tied to RIAS by a comrade when a farmer from Kipsdorf (Dippoldiswalde area) recounted to the secretary of the BPO that a broadcast had stated

<sup>140</sup> “6. Lagebericht über den Beschluss des Politbüros vom 9.6.53.,” 16.6.1953.

<sup>141</sup> “Informationsbericht am 16.6.1953,” SED-Betriebsparteiorganisation des Sachsenwerkes Niedersedlitz, Dresden, den 15.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>142</sup> “Betr.: Kommuniqué ZK vom 9.6.1953,” SED Kreisleitung Dresden Land an die SED Bezirksleitung, 16.6.1953.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> “Betr.: Wochen-Analyse zum Kommuniqué des Politbüros,” Dresden, 16.6.53, Abteilung: Sekretariat (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): “unsinnigsten”; “Weißt du nicht, dass in der CSR bereits ein Aufstand ausgebrochen ist, auch bei uns wird es bald losgehen und die Arbeiter warten nur darauf, bis die Revolution kommt.”

that workers in the CSR had not received pay for four weeks and that four-hundred (an exaggeration) were already dead.<sup>145</sup>

That this improvised news of violent upheaval continued to circulate even after the events of June 17 in Dresden, and that the regime was apparently helpless to combat such stories demonstrates just how powerless the government was in refuting information circulated in the rival public sphere. Finally, such improvised news also suggests that the idea of a revolution was not, in the minds of many, far-fetched, thus perhaps revealing the collective hope and imagination in the days leading up to the June 17 events.

### **Chipping Away at the Leadership's Prestige**

Following the announcement of the New Course, rumors circulated that stripped away the authority and prestige of the regime. State agencies such as the FDGB noted that throughout the GDR, SED's figureheads and architects of the state, Otto Grotewohl, Walter Ulbricht, and Wilhelm Pieck, increasingly came under attack in the rival public sphere. The rumors—once again, often in the form of improvised news—undermined the SED's credibility and bolstered the popular notion among the masses that everything had begun to fall apart.

But when reports trickled back to Berlin that East Germans believed that President Pieck had fled with his daughter to Switzerland and that Otto Grotewohl and other ministers had been arrested, the SED appears to have accepted these rumors as mere inconveniences or fallout from their about-face.<sup>146</sup> Indeed, it was not until after the events

<sup>145</sup> Kreisleitung Dippoldiswalde, Gen. Nitzsche, Kenntniz v.d. Bericht 1. u. 2. Sekretär.

<sup>146</sup> "Thema: Kommunique des Politburos des Zentralkomitees der SED vom 9. Juni 1953," FDGB-Bundesvorstand, Org.-Instr.-Abteilung, Sektor Information, den 12. Juni, 1953, Information Nr. 21 (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 4/2/5/543); "Thema: Kommunique des Politburos des Zentralkomitees der SED



of the following week that the Party's inability to communicate its message clearly, and thus project its power, became apparent. Only then did officials realize that these rumors held the potential to incite unrest on a mass scale.

In the Dresden Region, rumors that damaged the prestige and "presence" of the leadership began to swirl shortly after the announcement of the New Course had been made. Surely these existed before June 11, but the surprise expressed by the authors who generated mood reports and the evidence that these stories continuously grew and spread through the population strongly suggests that the intensity of rumors surged in the days before the demonstrations. In Kamenz, for instance, district leadership reported to Dresden that a basic estimate regarding the mood of the population could not yet be established on June 11, but that a "powerful movement" now affected the population and the "wildest rumors circulated."<sup>147</sup>

While the origin of these rumors is difficult to discern, the situation showcases the inability of the government to shape the popular narrative through the official public sphere. The authorities were unable to insert their version of the story into the public discourse, thus the rumors persisted. These rumors, which were "quite hostile," purported that although the masses now seemed directionless, the opposition seemed to be acquiring at least local "leaders" while the SED's true leadership in many cases "disappeared" in the collective imagination of the rival public sphere. Indeed, in Wismut a comrade declared that all pictures of Walter Ulbricht and Wilheml Pieck were to be

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vom 9. Juni 1953," FDGB-Bundesvorstand, Org.-Instr.-Abteilung, Sektor Information, den 13. Juni, 1953, Information Nr. 22 (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 4/2/5/543).

<sup>147</sup> "Informationsbericht Durchsage gemäß den Anweisungen der Bezirksleitung": "Aus Informationen aus den verschiedenen Orten kann nur gesagt werden, dass eine mächtige Bewegung durch die gesamte Bevölkerung geht und dass die wildesten Gerüchte im Umlauf sind."

“removed and burned in front of the soviets”—excepting images of Stalin.<sup>148</sup> Here, Stalin’s picture remained in place, but all the symbols and slogans were reportedly taken away, including the Soviet star.<sup>149</sup> Reports from the factories in Wismut on June 12 noted that chaos still reigned here and that the Communiqué had generated in the general population a sense of victory. Furthermore, the people here—“Sitting on the high horse”—were of the opinion that the GDR was soon going to collapse.<sup>150</sup> In countryside around Görlitz, “hidden” rumors appeared that attempted to stop elections for house and farm communities and when functionaries chatted with school children, they revealed that their teacher had told them images of Wilhelm Pieck should be taken down, while in the LOWA factory rumors circulated that Pieck’s “books and booklets should be burned.”<sup>151</sup> The alleged order to remove the leadership’s images also appeared in schools in Bautzen, where stories circulated that all pictures of Pieck had to be removed from the schools.<sup>152</sup> Similar rumors circulated in Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz at the beginning of the workweek, where Pieck’s images had been disappearing. One comrade heard from his mother, who had heard at the store that the Soviets had picked up Pieck and taken him back to Moscow and that his image had been removed from the banks.<sup>153</sup> Again, a kernel of truth existed here: Pieck was in Moscow, but for physical rehabilitation. Whether anyone had removed images at the bank is unknown and probably unknowable.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.: “vor dem sowj. Freunden verbrannt“

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Kreis Dippoldiswalde, Gen. Nitzsche, 12.6.53.

<sup>151</sup> Görlitz-Land, Gen. Rokos (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011): “Alle Bücher und Broschüren von Walter Ulbricht sollten verbrannt werden.” “Walter Ulbricht würde zu Verantwortung gezogen und Wilhelm Pieck wäre in Verbannung”: “versteckt”

<sup>152</sup> Bautzen, Gen. Letters. (see “7. Typische Erscheinungen”) [likely 12.6.53]

<sup>153</sup> “Informationsbericht am 16.6.1953,” SED-Betriebsparteiorganisation des Sachsenwerkes Niedersedlitz, Dresden, den 15.6.53.

In Sebnitz, functionaries heard the rumor calling for the removal of Pieck's image on the bus en route from Pirna, where workers reportedly awaited American intervention and claimed to have heard orders to remove Pieck's pictures from the *Stadtfunk* and through party orders.<sup>154</sup> This, of course, was highly unlikely. Three members of the forest service who had been in Bautzen, where they had picked up rumors, now spread the "lie" that all pictures of Pieck had been collected, signifying his removal from office.<sup>155</sup> In Görlitz, the order reportedly came from Wismut, while Pieck's actual whereabouts and status continued to confound the regime's local functionaries.

Other rumors circulated that alleged leading comrades' writings were to be (the passive construction is necessary and intentional here and elsewhere when discussing such rumors) removed from libraries and bookstores or destroyed. Thus, for example, at the LOWA factory rumors had it that Ulbricht's booklets and books were to be burned.<sup>156</sup> The source of the news here might be traced back to radio; on June 12, a machinist at the textile and rubber factory Neugersdorf declared that at 7:30 in the morning of the previous day—the same time the Communiqué had gone out over the airwaves—he had heard a "special announcement over the radio."<sup>157</sup> He did not identify a station, but reported hearing that all of Walter Ulbricht's writings were to be removed and that the personal driver of President Pieck had gone to West Germany.<sup>158</sup>

The swift deterioration of public confidence in the regime became ever more evident as a profusion of rumors about the exodus or death of its leadership spread. On June 12, in Dresden, a party member heard from a coworker that Otto Grotewohl now

<sup>154</sup> Sebnitz - 11,10 Uhr [likely June 14, 1953].

<sup>155</sup> Bautzen, Gen. Letters. (see "7. Typische Erscheinungen:") [likely 6.12.53].

<sup>156</sup> Görlitz-Land, Gen. Rokos. [likely before 6.18.53].

<sup>157</sup> Bautzen, S5: "Sondersendung über den Rundfunk"

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

found himself in protective custody (not true) and that Walter Ulbricht had retired from his position (not true).<sup>159</sup> Another party member added that he had also heard this, but that he could not discuss it in public since the story could be true.<sup>160</sup> In the countryside around the city of Dresden the most prevalent report related the death or abdication of Wilhelm Pieck, with variations that replaced him with Grotewohl or Ulbricht.<sup>161</sup> In the IFA Radeberg, for instance, Pieck had been shot during his escape, but the most popular rumor alleged he had made it to Switzerland while his children were in Sweden.<sup>162</sup> Sometimes the rumors held that the children had been apprehended before making it to Sweden and had been found to be in possession of nine million Deutsche Marks.<sup>163</sup> Other rumors here alleged he had “had a leg amputated” while Grotewohl, at least according to rumor in Pirna, had shot himself dead on June 10.<sup>164</sup>

Some of these rumors may have originated with foreign radio broadcasts. An FDGB report from June 16 noted that in multiple factories discussions of Pieck’s death were alleged to have stemmed from Swiss Radio (*Sender Schweiz*), while in some cases, specific people were noted to have spread the rumor by word of mouth.<sup>165</sup> A report from the countryside notes that discussions inspired by an unnamed German station continued to swirl around Pieck’s whereabouts, with one rumor alleging that Ulbricht had been

<sup>159</sup> See the document beginning “Werte Genossen! Soeben erreichte uns folgende Nachricht:“ 12.6.53.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> “Betr.: Kommuniké des ZK vom 9.6.1953,” SED – Kreisleitung Dresden Land an die SED Bezirksleitung Sekretariat, Dresden A1. 14..6.1953: “Diese Spannung soll bereits seit dem vergangenen Jahr bestehen.”

<sup>162</sup> “Betr.: Kommuniké des ZK vom 9.6.1953,” SED Kreisleitung Dresden Land an die SED Bezirksleitung Sekretariat, 13.6.1953.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.: “Otto Grotewohl habe sich vorgestern erschossen”

<sup>165</sup> Kurzinformation über die Stimmung zum Kommuniké des Politburos im Bezirksverband Dresden, 16.6.53.

placed on leave and that the regime was resigning.<sup>166</sup> Meanwhile, a different rumor surfaced in a tavern in Ottendorf-Okrilla, where “Londoner Rundfunk” was said to have brought the news of a GDR bigwig’s death—by which at least the functionary deduced this referred to President Pieck.<sup>167</sup> Others in the bar claimed that Pieck had already been dead for fourteen days, either shot during his escape or because he wanted to admit the GDR’s bankruptcy. And there were reports that he was now in Mecklenburg “on ice”<sup>168</sup> By the end of the weekend, reports out of Meißen indicated that rumormongers continued to voice their “slogans” in discussions. And here, popular accounts alleged that Pieck had been killed in the Soviet Union.<sup>169</sup>

### **Political Deaths and the Flight of the Comrade**

Once again, some popular information was improvised news and Pieck’s health made him a popular topic for improvisation in the rival public sphere. For instance, the real news was that Wilhelm Pieck had fallen ill and missed Stalin’s funeral in March, but had become the basis for rumor as East Germans attempted to make sense of their political world based on hearsay, secrecy, and probably foreign broadcasting. Thus, it is hardly surprising that some East Germans repeatedly asked what was going on with the President and wanted to know why they rarely heard from him anymore.<sup>170</sup> In Görlitz, residents continued to ask about Pieck’s whereabouts and why no one had heard anything from him while housewives out shopping wanted to know just who the “criminals” were that had created the mess in the first place. They also argued that Pieck’s fate was

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<sup>166</sup> “Betr.: Kommuniké des ZK vom 9.6.1953,” SED Kreisleitung Dresden-Land an die SED Bezirksleitung, Dresden, 15.6.1953.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Meißen, 12,30 Uhr, Unterschr.: Gen. Nitzsche (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>170</sup> Kreisleitung Freital (Schossig), 14.6.53.

banishment to the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, in Pirna, various accounts alleged Pieck was now in custody after apprehension at the Swiss border while others believed he wanted to flee to Switzerland with his daughter and large sums of money.<sup>171</sup>

Authorities and sources blamed some rumors on radio broadcasts. A version of the Pieck rumor, overheard in a bar in Zschachwitz held that Pieck was in Switzerland with three million marks and West German radio was threatening to tell the whole story if East German radio failed to do so by Tuesday.<sup>172</sup> One rumor had it that a British radio station had given the GDR an ultimatum which allowed the SED until Sunday evening to disclose the situations regarding Pieck and Ulbricht. If the SED chose not to, foreign states would inform the population of the GDR of the situation on Monday.<sup>173</sup> Another case of foreign radio influencing the conversation occurred in Kamenz.<sup>174</sup> W. Schwede from Panschwitz stated that his boss had heard from London Sender that “Wilhelm Pieck wanted to flee to Switzerland, but was apprehended by Soviet occupation forces.”<sup>175</sup> “That he has been on vacation since the end of April is only a cover-up,” stated the worker, who had also heard from his boss that Pieck’s daughter had spoken on the radio in Switzerland.<sup>176</sup>

A report from Tuesday, June 16, out of Riesa noted that in this area, rumors continued to spread: Pieck was “on ice” in Moscow; Pieck had been arrested and put on trial; Pieck had been shot near the Crimean Peninsula; Grotewohl had been arrested;

<sup>171</sup> “Die negative Stimmung im Stadtkreis Görlitz ist in der Hauptsache durch Riashetzte Entstanden,” Görlitz -Stadt, Gen. Lange, 15.6.53; Situationsbericht vom 12.6.53, 14 Uhr., Kreisleitung Pirna (Genosse Ender).

<sup>172</sup> “Informationsbericht am 16.6.1953,” SED-Betriebsparteiorganisation des Sachsenwerkes Niedersedlitz, Dresden, den 15.6.53.

<sup>173</sup> “Kurzinformation über die Stimmung zum Kommuniqué des Politburos im Bezirksverband Dresden,” Freie Deutsche Jugend, Bezirksleitung Dresden, Sekretariat, Dresden, den 16.6.1953.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.: “Dass er sich seit Ende April in Urlaub befindet, ist nur eine Vertuschung der Angelegenheit.”

Ulbricht was no longer in power and his writings had been removed from libraries.<sup>177</sup> By June 16 in the countryside around Dresden, the rumors continued, as always, with Pieck's death reported in various ways—sometimes via his daughter in Switzerland, sometimes aired by Londoner Rundfunk, while sometimes he had been caught crossing the border and arrested carrying large sums of money. Sometimes Ulbricht replaced Pieck in these stories. Meanwhile, the functionaries tried in vain, without, it seems, the help of mass media, to convince residents that such news represented hoaxes concocted by RIAS.<sup>178</sup>

Rumors connected to Walter Ulbricht and Otto Grotewohl also circulated, reflecting residents' hopes for change. Some were simple, such as in Bertheldorf, where an older woman claimed that she had heard on the radio the night before (probably the night of June 13), on a station that she did not recall, what she herself wanted to hear: that Ulbricht had stepped down (not true).<sup>179</sup> More specific rumors appeared on the streetcars in Dresden where passengers suggested that Grotewohl had figuratively “put a gun to Ulbricht's head” and taken over the political decision making (certainly not true).<sup>180</sup> Other passengers affirmed that the Communiqué signified the end of the regime's policies (partially true) and thus President Pieck would never again return (not true), while Grotewohl was “up to his neck in water” (not true).<sup>181</sup> Locals in Görlitz supposed that Walter Ulbricht would be “brought to justice” and “Pieck had been banished” (not true, see above).<sup>182</sup>

<sup>177</sup> Kreisleitung Riesa (Gen. Möbius) 16.6.53/Oeh. (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>178</sup> “Betr.: Communiqué ZK vom 9.6 1953,” SED Kreisleitung Dresden Land an die SED Bezirksleitung, 16.6.1953.

<sup>179</sup> Sebnitz - 11,10 Uhr [likely June 14, 1953].

<sup>180</sup> Görlitz Stadt, S2: “die Pistole auf die Brust”

<sup>181</sup> See the untitled document beginning “Der Anteil der Bevölkerung verstärkt sich laufend.” 12: “Wasser auch schon bis zum Hals.”

<sup>182</sup> Görlitz-Land, Gen. Rokos. [likely before 6.18.53]: “berichtet einem Bericht”

It is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of local authorities' efforts to counter rumors and alternative news, but it is likely they had little effect, considering that reports from June 16 mention that the same rumors persisted and as we will see, some still circulated in the weeks after the June 17 events. In nearby Löbau, for example, where the Party made efforts to explain the "triviality" (*Haltlosigkeit*) of the rumors spread by class enemies regarding the alleged arrests of Pieck and Ulbricht, they still noted on Sunday that such information was current throughout the entire district.<sup>183</sup>

Groups continued to discuss the apparent dissolution of various parts of the state and of the GDR itself in the days before the demonstrations.<sup>184</sup> News of the dissolution of the KVP (barracked police) continued to spread through at least Freital and Dresden.<sup>185</sup> This may have originated with RIAS, which had guessed that the SED would perhaps dissolve the People's Police when reporting on the Communiqué.<sup>186</sup> Indeed, RIAS continued to influence locals' perception of events. Passengers on a train traveling through the Görlitz countryside claimed that "[the SED] still had to go back [politically], and go back even further."<sup>187</sup> These passengers also felt that the West German course was indeed the correct one while other travelers discussed how they "now had to listen to RIAS to know what exactly was going on."<sup>188</sup> One report concluded that it would be the task of the local press to stomp out these types of rumors as quickly as possible, so that

<sup>183</sup> Kreisleitung Löbau (Gen. Schubert, Inform.) 14.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>184</sup> "Betr.: Kommuniqué des ZK vom 9.6.1953," SED – Kreisleitung Dresden Land an die SED Bezirksleitung Sekretariat Dresden A1, 14.6.1953.

<sup>185</sup> "Lagebericht über den Beschluss des Politbüros vom 9.6.1953," SED-Bezirksleitung Dresden, Leitende Organe der Partei und Massenorganisationen, Sektor Parteiinformation, Dresden, den 15.6.1953.

<sup>186</sup> RIAS Berlin, Material: Berlin Spricht zur Zone, Ordner vom Sender Britz., Ab 2.5.1953 (DRA 05 Filmanfang, F 0055, B 304-01-00/0009).

<sup>187</sup> Görlitz-Land, Gen. Rokos.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.: "Im Zugverkehr wird viel diskutiert, dass sie jetzt den Rias hören müssen, um genau zu wissen, was los ist."



“class enemies and RIAS-listeners along with their hostile arguments are annihilated.”<sup>189</sup>

Indeed, during these times, outside news continued to be a problem, with this report noting that, “The population, during the current situation, is especially receptive to the lies of RIAS and the rest of the Western stations, and those that do listen largely spread the lies further.”<sup>190</sup>

## Conclusions

In the absence of accurate political polling, the mood reports do much to reveal a regime that had lost its connection to the masses and to a certain extent, its own functionalities. RIAS’s announcement presaged East Germans’ reception and acceptance of the Communiqué. The station’s prescient remark that East Germans could now confront functionaries face-to-face came to pass as emboldened residents openly challenged SED functionaries, who now confronted the masses from a point of weakness. An ascendant public, to be sure. Meanwhile, the SED failed in its quest to present its political retreat as a maneuver that reflected its sincerity and courage. The weakness of the regime that its critics sensed in the withdrawal from accelerated socialism was similarly regarded as a failure by those functionaries who might be labeled true believers.

The question of German unity, central to the Politburo’s Communiqué, became a predominant theme in not only conversations that praised the regime, but in those that called for, or planned for, the SED’s demise. The Communiqué’s vague references to reunification and the practical considerations concerning inter-zone traffic inspired

<sup>189</sup> “Betr.: Informationbericht des 2. Kreissekretärs über die Lage im Kreis - Bezug: Beschluss des Sekretariats vom 11.6.1953,” SED- Kreisleitung Freital an die SED Bezirksleitung Dresden Sekretariat, 15.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2/12/011).

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.: “Die Bevölkerung ist in der jetzigen Situation für die Lügenmeldungen des Rias und der übrigen westlichen Lügensender besonders empfänglich und verbreitet diese zu einem großen Teil weiter.”

grandeur hopes and ideas. Real news and rumors that reflected the hopes of East Germans energized the rival public sphere and raised expectations. What once seemed highly unlikely now seemed probable and even imminent, representing a legitimation crisis for the government.

Rumors and improvised news severely undermined the government's prestige and authority. To suggest Pieck, Ulbricht, and Grotewohl garnered approval ratings before June 11 that could have supported the popularity they claimed to enjoy would be false, but the mood reports, if considered as a barometer of public popularity for the East German leadership, reflected an almost impossibly low approval rating. Rumors eviscerated the leadership's socialist biographies that the party crafted (not that they were fiction, of course) as the basis for the power they represented, and the three became corpses, prisoners, or crooks on the run in the popular imagination. The rumored call for the removal of the leaderships' images from public spaces—an ersatz statue toppling—signaled the masses' sense that the regime was on its last legs. That the regime and those who heard and repeated these rumors often tied them to radio broadcasts suggests that the line between credible news and incredible news often blurred. Perhaps this should not surprise, as the bifurcated media spheres served in many ways to reinforce political preconceptions.

Above all, the regime had become challengeable and the exchanges within the rival public sphere made revolution thinkable. That the population often relied on RIAS for what they believed to be real news also meant that a localized rebellion the regime might otherwise keep secret, could, in the rival public sphere, find a global audience. This is the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter Four

### The Wildfire: Transmitting Political Power on June 17, 1953

*“Today is the first time in a long time we can again freely and openly express our opinion.”*

-Wilhelm Grothaus, in a speech to workers in Dresden on June 17 as quoted by a Stasi agent<sup>1</sup>

Workers’ strikes occurred in the GDR sporadically in the weeks before and after the June 17 demonstrations, but the occasion’s name has always been tied to a single day. On that Wednesday in 1953, nationwide public demonstrations unfolded in the GDR and briefly appeared to threaten the nation’s existence.

What follows is less an investigation into what *happened* on June 16 and 17 than it is an inquiry into how East Germans and RIAS experienced and communicated the days’ events. In other words, it is an exploration into how participants and observers heard about what was going on. Historians have largely pieced together the narrative, but analysis of certain aspects of the June 17 events remain inadequately studied or disputed, particularly the roles of nationalism and radio in shaping the occasion.

This chapter advances several arguments. First, contrary to what many have argued, the events of June 17 were not entirely spontaneous. The localized demonstrations that unfolded in Berlin on June 16 could probably be categorized as such, but that evening, RIAS spread the news of their occurrence. Of course, since the

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<sup>1</sup> “Sinngemässe Wiedergabe der Hetzrede des Grothaus, beschäftigt in VEB “Abus” Dresden-Niedersedlitz am 17.6.53 zwischen 15,00 und 16,00 Uhr auf dem Werkhof im N.S. Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz, Dresden, den 19.6.53, Pg. 18 (BStU MfS, BV Dresden, AU 239/53). “Heute ist seit langer Zeit zum ersten Mal wieder Gelegenheit seine Meinung frei und offen zum Ausdruck zu bringen.”

announcement of the New Course, RIAS programming and improvised news had diminished the prestige, legitimacy, and credibility of the government and rendered it challengeable. So that Tuesday night when RIAS broadcasts discussed the Pilsen rebellion and the mass demonstrations unfolding in Berlin they helped make revolution thinkable throughout the GDR. Indeed, the station reported declarations of solidarity from East and West Germany that endowed the occasion with national imaginings and stirred hopes for reunification. In short, RIAS helped transform protest related to workers' norms into questions that revolved around East Germany's future. These broadcasts stimulated conversations in the rival public sphere and came close to openly encouraging protest. When employees arrived at work the next morning, they arrived armed with a script for action and things unfolded nationally at a never-before-seen pace—radio had changed everything. Throughout that morning, workers and residents gathered in public and private spaces, aired grievances, and debated the nation's economic and political course. That afternoon, mass demonstrations marked the occasion when large sections of the East German citizenry exercised “open, critical reasoning as an instrument of public self-assertion.”<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will argue that the events on June 17 represented a distinctly *modern* occasion as mass demonstrations endowed and guided by national imaginings. The modern public demonstration, defined here as the occupation of public (or private) space by a group of people that express political opinions—had its origin in the nineteenth

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Nathans, “‘Public Sphere’ in the era of the French Revolution” *French Historical Studies* 16 (1990): 625; 620-644; Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Interestingly, the Marxist argument against Habermas's “critically reasoning public” suggests that this is a social construction that represents nothing more than bourgeois desires masquerading as something else. This is similar, of course, to the SED's claim that critics of its regime usually had fascist backgrounds or mentalities.

century.<sup>3</sup> Contrast this with the early modern riot where the collective action often took place at the site of the perceived offense. In these cases, observers would likely identify a direct link between cause and objective and the actors typically operated at the scene of the offense. Modern demonstrations, on the other hand, feature collective action that affirms a group's identity and demonstrates strength while communicating political demands. Another development to consider, according to Fillieule and Tartakoswky, is that the demonstration "implies the existence of organizations that have, if not a strategy, at least some capacity to control what is no longer a mob, and authorities prepared to acknowledge its specific nature, or at least the existence of a public sphere."<sup>4</sup>

Modern communications thus helped rally popular discontent so quickly as to create the illusion that a nation erupted in a unified and "spontaneous" fashion. RIAS allowed listeners to anticipate and envision collective action when it publicized and helped nationalize the demonstrations in the days and hours leading up the seventeenth. Radio broadcasts, rumors, telephone calls, and "whisper campaigns" characterized the rival public sphere during the events in Dresden. These whisper campaigns, or improvised news often unfamiliar to functionaries, circulated in the rival public sphere as Dresdeners discussed the news out of Berlin and deliberated action.<sup>5</sup>

Internally, evaluations by the regional SED leadership in Dresden of the situation argued that the West had planned the provocation well in advance.<sup>6</sup> Enemies, they argued, had skillfully exploited the crisis of confidence that existed between the workers and the

<sup>3</sup> Olivier Fillieule & Danielle Tartakowsky, *Demonstrations* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2013), 11-12; Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> "Flüsterpropaganda"

<sup>6</sup> "Einschätzungen und Berichte über den 17. Juni 1953 aus allen Kreisen und Abteilungen der Bezirksleitung" Juni-Aug 1953, SED Kreisleitung Dresden Stadt, Dresden, am 2.8.1953, Situationsbericht, 14.00 Uhr (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.12 Nr. 9).

party in order to call for strikes and demonstrations.<sup>7</sup> The SED insisted that the rapid spread of the unrest, especially in Dresden and Görlitz, could be attributed to the long-term discontent among the workers, the weak ideological influence the Party had on these workers, the Party organs' lack of a foundation of trust with the masses, and functionaries' inability to stem the tide of events during morning meetings.<sup>8</sup> Among other methods, according to the party, demonstrators used the telephone system, delegations, and strike committees to attempt a fascist putsch.<sup>9</sup> State security analysis noted that the tactics and methods of the demonstrators [enemies] followed a consistent pattern. Ringleaders and their helpers organized meetings whereby they spread the news that strikes had broken out throughout the GDR. Then, workers' rabble-rousing speeches called for abdication of the regime and free elections and other similar demands. Organizers and speakers then led marches to a particular location in the city where they incited the crowds with more speeches and banners. Demonstrators called neighboring workforces to join by demanding solidarity with striking workers and those who had been wounded in Berlin. Youth reportedly went from workplace to workplace organizing the general strike. Inter-workplace telephone calls and the notion of solidarity helped bring more demonstrators into the fold and misleading rumors regarding the GDR's leadership continued to spread.<sup>10</sup> The regime's characterization of the demonstrations as the long-term work of fascists remained the party's official line until the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Considering these supposed

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> "Gesamtbericht: Über die Vorgänge vom 17- 19.6.53. im Bezirk Dresden" Dresden den 1. Juli 1953, S.21-22 (BStU Archiv der Aussenstelle Dresden MfS BV Dresden 1. Stellvertreter d. Leiter Nr. 4, Teil 1 von 2).

<sup>11</sup> For a rather notorious example, see Hans Bentzien, *Was geschah am 17. Juni?* (Berlin: Edition Ost, 2003).

preparations and tactics, it is little surprise that the notion of a “spontaneous uprising” did not correspond with the SED’s interpretation.

### **News from Berlin**

The June 17 demonstrations in Dresden had their immediate roots and inspiration in the workers’ protests that began in Berlin several days earlier. The workers here, like elsewhere in the GDR, took considerable issue with their norms, which remained heightened (essentially the communist version of a pay cut) despite the New Course’s generally lauded concessions. Demonstrations, some of which brought around 5,000 workers in Berlin into the streets, began in earnest as a response to the norms. During a weekend retreat, a number of workers planned further demonstrations for the coming week. When the SED held party meetings at several work sites on Monday, June 15, to adopt “resolutions of gratitude” for raising the norms, protests broke out. By Tuesday, June 16, an article in *Die Tribüne*, the state-controlled union paper of East Germany, doubled down on the heightened norms and restated their importance to the East German economy, sending workers streaming toward the center of Berlin. Carrying banners and employing the use of several trucks with loudspeakers, the workers called for a general strike and planned a demonstration for June 17, the next day.<sup>12</sup> That evening, the SED revoked the heightened norms. RIAS had carried the news of the June 15 and June 16 demonstrations and the protest resolutions that workers in Berlin had drafted and forwarded to the East German government.<sup>13</sup> A commentary by Eberhard Schütz pointed

<sup>12</sup> Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, 163-164.

<sup>13</sup> See “Die Sendungen des RIAS am Dienstag, 16. Juni 1953,” in “Der Aufstand der Arbeiterschaft im Ostsektor von Berlin und in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone Deutschlands.” (DRA Potsdam, Schriftgut, Ostarchiv 038/12/6/5/3, Standort 363/33/8/4/1/).

to the recent anti-government demonstrations in Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, which, he noted, many at the station had been reluctant to discuss because of the events' seeming impossibility. But now, it seemed possible, according to those at the station, for fundamental change to take place behind the Iron Curtain. Without explicitly calling for a general strike, the station, as Christian Ostermann notes, "came close to open encouragement" of protests.<sup>14</sup> In an interview thirty years later, Schütz (correctly) noted that the station never uttered this word[s] "General strike."<sup>15</sup> In fact, according to Schütz, the station carefully guarded against fabricated slogans and reports. No one who visited the station from East Berlin asked the staff to call for a general strike, and Schütz stressed that broadcasters avoided word. Rather, RIAS reported only news of protest strikes and work stoppages. Still, despite the word *Generalstreik's* absence from RIAS broadcasts, the idea that such an event had been planned or was imminent began to make its rounds on June 17.<sup>16</sup> For instance, the SED's statement that the demonstrators in Dresden that "marched in unison under the slogan: 'General strike,'" suggests that such participants had certainly adopted the idea.<sup>17</sup>

That evening, RIAS began to see in the demonstration's potential for change in Germany and broadcast declarations of solidarity. Schütz noted the recent victory regarding the norms was one that the East Berlin workers shared with the entire East

<sup>14</sup> Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, 173.

<sup>15</sup> "17. Juni – Aufstand in Deutschland," Interview: Peter Schultze / Eberhard Schütz [Program director], 10.3.83, (DRA Potsdam, B503 01 00 0007, RIAS Documenta, Sondersendungen 4.2.71-10.3.83)

<sup>16</sup> "17. Juni – Aufstand in Deutschland," Bl.112; The well-known quote from the moment concerning the use of the term "general strike" can be found in Manfred Regin, "Zur Rolle Westdeutschlands und West-Berlin" in Engelmann and Kowalczyk, *Volkserhebung gegen den SED Staat*, 88-89. As Charles Hulick, a confidant of station boss G. Ewing noted, "My God, Gordon, be careful, you can start a war with this station." ("Mein Gott, Gordon, sei vorsichtig, du kannst einen Krieg mit dieser Station auslösen.")

<sup>17</sup> "Analyse der Ereignisse im Bezirk Dresden vom 17.6 bis 19.6. 1953," Dresden, den 19.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.12 Nr. 9 Bl.3).



German population.<sup>18</sup> “We feel bound with our listeners in East Berlin and throughout East Germany in the effort to accomplish the most possible; to exploit the insecurities of the [SED] functionaries.”<sup>19</sup> Following Schütz’s commentary on the night of June 16, Jakob Kaiser, Minister for All-German Issues (*Minister für gesamtdeutsche Fragen*) reminded listeners in East Germany that “everyone in West Germany, just as in the entire free world, is bound in solidarity with you.”<sup>20</sup> “We appreciate the meaning and the courage of your demonstrations,” he continued, “and we appreciate your demonstrations, but please, trust in our solidarity and remain prudent.”<sup>21</sup>

At ten o’clock that evening, RIAS offered short reports on the various demonstrations that had occurred throughout East Germany that day.<sup>22</sup> From eleven P.M. through six-thirty A.M., the station repeated the East Berlin workers’ (from all branches of industry) call for a demonstration on Wednesday, June 17 at seven A.M. at Strausberger Platz.<sup>23</sup> These broadcasts repeated the above message while adding numerous declarations of solidarity from West Germany, West Berlin, and West Berlin workplaces.<sup>24</sup>

“Workday in the Zone” aired between five and six A.M. on June 17 and reported on the struggles of the East German workers: “In the previous weeks we’ve reported to you, dear listener, about the work stoppages in all districts of East Germany...because of

<sup>18</sup> Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, 173.

<sup>19</sup> Die Sendungen des RIAS am Dienstag, 16. Juni 1953 in “Der Aufstand der Arbeiterschaft”: “Wir fühlen uns mit unseren Hörern in Ostberlin und der Sowjetzone verbunden in dem Bestreben, das möglichste zu erreichen, die Unsicherheit der Funktionäre auszunutzen”

<sup>20</sup> “Die Sendungen des RIAS am Dienstag, 16. Juni 1953”: “Dabei brauche ich nicht zu betonen, dass sich jedermann in der Bundesrepublik wie in der ganzen freien Welt mit Euch in Solidarität verbunden weiss.”

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.: “Wir wissen den Sinn und wir wissen den Mut Eurer Demonstrationen zu würdigen, bitten Euch aber, im Vertrauen auf unsere Solidarität Besonnenheit zu wahren.”

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

these protests the regime [that is, the SED] has been driven back, step by step.”<sup>25</sup> The station also declared that on June 16, the protests, having gotten the norms lowered, had now turned political and workers had begun demanding free elections and the resignation of the regime. According to RIAS, the day’s “spontaneous” protests had produced a slogan: “Tomorrow it continues.”<sup>26</sup> From 5:36 until 5:42 A.M., Ernst Scharnowski, chairman of the Berliner DGB (the West Berlin Workers’ Union), characterized the East German workers’ democratic actions to improve their lot as “A natural right belonging to all oppressed people.”<sup>27</sup> Scharnowski concluded by stating the FGB’s solidarity [WC] with the East German workers’ struggle to secure basic rights.<sup>28</sup> This broadcast aired again from 6:40 to 6:45 while the station also began reporting Wednesday’s planned demonstration that began, on time, at 7:00 A.M., at Strausberger Platz.<sup>29</sup>

At 7:20 on Wednesday, June 17, “Berlin Speaks to the Zone” aired on RIAS and recounted once again the protesters’ actions in Berlin from the previous day, which, intentionally or not, served as a script in other areas of the GDR. Listeners throughout the GDR learned from the station that “[workers] formed discussion groups and communist functionaries were shouted down.”<sup>30</sup> The reporter noted the demonstration columns formed by the workers that subsequently moved through the city while protestors ripped down communist slogans and carried their own banners. As the demonstrators moved

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.: “Protest gegen das gesamte Regime” 7. In den letzten Wochen konnten wir Ihnen, liebe Hörer, über Arbeitsniederlegungen in allen Bezirken der Sowjetzone berichten; “Vor diesen Protesten ist das Regime zurückgewichen Schritt um Schritt.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 8: “Morgen geht es weiter”

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., “Der DGB steht zu euch,” 8: “Eure demokratischen Selbsthilfemassnahmen, geboren aus dem Naturrecht jedes bedrückten Menschen”

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> “Berlin Spricht Zur Zone” (11) Nr 296, Mittwoch, den 17 Juni 1953 7:20-7:30 Uhr (DRA Potsdam: F0112 Film 1, Sendunterlagen von besonderen Ereignissen, A104-00-05/0002): “Es bildeten Diskussionsgruppen, und kommunistische Agitatoren wurden niedergeschrien”

through the city, Berliners jammed the streets and expressed their solidarity with the workers with shouts of encouragement. Listeners heard of the demonstrators' demands—lowered norms, cheaper goods, resignation of the regime, and free elections. Finally, the demonstrators commandeered two sound trucks that demanded the protestors disperse and used them to broadcast their demands: “If you are a son of the nation [*Volkes*], join us!”<sup>31</sup>

While the demonstrations prior to June 17 in Berlin might be considered spontaneous, June 17 was different; specific criticisms, general themes, a place, and a time had been set the evening before. The demonstrations that unfolded in Dresden, while not planned in the same way as those in Berlin, should be understood as deliberate events, prompted and inspired by the demonstrations in the capital. The rival public sphere produced critical debates, whisper campaigns, speeches, written demands, or shouts in unison, showcase the character of the demonstrations. In addition to undermining the regime, unsanctioned communications confirmed communities—workers; East Germans; Germans—that desired the same political changes, namely revolutionary change in the governance of the GDR. These imagined communities, often expressed explicitly (and ironically) with the term *solidarity*, formed the building blocks of a modern, nation-wide demonstration.

### **In the Dresden Region**

While authorities in Dresden regularly commented that functionaries and officials were caught off guard by the sudden collective action they faced on Wednesday, this

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<sup>31</sup> “Die Sendungen des RIAS am Dienstag, 16. Juni 1953”: “Wenn Ihr Söhne des Volkes seid, schließt Euch an!”

would seem to speak largely to the weak inter-governmental communications. Telephone calls from the Central Committee in Berlin in the early morning hours warned the police in the region that there were forces out of Berlin—probably referring to the Western half—that planned to provoke unrest with the norms.<sup>32</sup> The chief of police in Dresden also received a call at four o'clock in the morning that ordered a state of preparedness among all comrades in Dresden due to unrest in Berlin and various other regions.<sup>33</sup> This suggests that while the party's intelligence had been outdone by the rival public sphere—namely RIAS—the likelihood of something resembling a massive, nation-wide uprising was not totally out of the question.

In retrospective testimonies, some conceived of the June 17 events in terms that suggest things had been planned or expected. Of course, memories are imperfect sometimes apply a teleological reasoning to historical experience so in one way such claims must read with caution. Thus, we should maintain a skeptical stance when witnesses claimed to have heard rumblings that something was going to happen. For example, the party member who later stated that when his wife was on the streetcar the previous Saturday, a passenger said to his daughter, “Well, little one, on June 17 this train will head for a better future.”<sup>34</sup> Or the functionary who confessed that he had heard from another colleague at the hospital in Görlitz that “Something big was going to happen” on

<sup>32</sup> “Telefonische Durchsage vom ZK am 16.6.53 23.20 Uhr: Mitteilung des Sekretariats des ZK an alle 1. Sekretäre der BL (Durchsage von Gen Rüter im Auftrage von Gen. Schirdewan” (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.12 Nr. 8).

<sup>33</sup> “Dresden – Einsatzleitung,” BDVP, Dresden, am 20 Juni, 1953 (SächsHStA 23/18 Bl.74).

<sup>34</sup> “Die Kreissekretäre berichteten anlässlich einer Besprechung im Bezirksverband Dresden folgende Situation:” Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands, Bezirksverband Dresden, Dresden, am 18.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.12 Nr. 8): “Na, Kleine, um 17.06 Uhr fährt der Zug in eine bessere Zukunft.”

June 16, but he could not say exactly what.<sup>35</sup> And in Meißen, the review noted that workers had held an “illegal meeting” and that a worker claimed that he heard from the Secretary of State that the time had come for everything to change.<sup>36</sup> Such memories are probably examples of retrospective determinism but they helped convince the SED that the demonstrations had been secretly in the works for quite some time.

An analysis by the Department of Propaganda and Agitation in Dresden noted that those who took to the streets and protested employed, as a rule, RIAS slogans, which appealed to the workers. As for the period before demonstrations broke out, the review noted that the provocateurs themselves remained out of view, where they operated a whisper campaign.<sup>37</sup> These records fail to mention the specific content of the so-called whisper campaigns, perhaps because the officials were not privy to such insider information. Either way, workers met in private spaces where they discussed national policy and courses of action and in these spaces, revolution became thinkable.

### **Focal Points**

Historians recognize large enterprises like Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz and the LOWA works in Görlitz as origin points for the demonstrations in the region. Heidi Roth has argued that the reason workers in these large-scale enterprises—who enjoyed economic privilege when compared to those workers in other sectors of the economy—rose up first was that they were employed in the largest enterprises in Dresden and had strength in numbers. Furthermore, she suggests that these workers had experienced

<sup>35</sup> “Situationsbericht aus dem Bezirk Dresden der Gewerkschaft Gesundheitsw.” Gewerkschaft Gesundheitswesen, Bezirksvorstand Dresden, Dresden, den 27.6, 1953 (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.12 Nr. 10). “Morgen soll was grosses passieren.”

<sup>36</sup> “Bericht über die durchgeführte Kontrollfahrt in den Stadtbezirken Coswig and Weinböhl.” KDKK-Meißen an das Sekretariat im Haus, den 18.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.4 Nr. 061).

<sup>37</sup> Abt. Propaganda – Agitation an das Sekretariat, Zur Taktik und Methode des Gegners, Dresden, den 20.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.12 Nr. 9 Bl.12).

organized labor as an instrument of action and protest over the last thirty years.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, Andrew Port has found these explanations problematic. He contends that they do not explain why in many other cases these same workers opted *not* to take part in the collective action, concluding that historians should guard against making generalizations about what happened on June 17.<sup>39</sup> One could add to Roth's interpretation that workers knew they had support not only within their own workplaces, but in Berlin as well, and therefore it was extremely likely that a good number of workers recognized that a mass movement was developing. One should also point to what are, perhaps, obvious circumstances that proved conducive to collective action: these workers represented a massive, routinized, and intimate labor force where rumor and secretive news traveled faster than authorities could act.<sup>40</sup> As noted earlier, RIAS's role in the events remains contentious among historians and witnesses who still debate the extent of the station's role on June 17. Roth has downplayed the role of foreign broadcasting, pointing out that demonstrations also occurred in places where the station's signal was quite weak. While she notes that workers in these places listened to RIAS, it remains peripheral to her interpretation. Another way to understand what happened in Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz and other work places in the region is to consider that the RIAS broadcasts accomplished several things.

First, RIAS had already endowed the demonstrations with national imaginings.

While the norms still figured into workers' demands, RIAS had, since its broadcasts of

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<sup>38</sup> Roth, *Der 17. Juni 1953 in Sachsen*, 48-50.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew I. Port, "East German Workers and the 'Dark Side' of *Eigensinn*: Divisive Shop-Floor Practices and the failed Revolution of June 17, 1953," in *East German Economy, 1945-2010: Falling Behind or Catching Up?* Ed. Harmut Berghoff (Washington, D.C.: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 120-1.

<sup>40</sup> Consider also, that while a routinized and disciplined labor force represented an arrangement that allowed for surveillance and control on one hand (state power), it provided workers with a (potentially) powerful position.

the Berlin demonstrations, helped change the conversation from one centered on localized economic concerns to one with national and international implications. These broadcasts in turn stimulated workers' conversation and helped generate conversations and criticism of the government. Thus, smaller workers' meetings helped individuals become aware of a larger dissident community that could take action. So while RIAS commentators never actually called for a general strike, they played a central role in nationalizing the movement and must bear considerable responsibility for what happened on June 17.

Hans Hundhausen, a worker at Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz, recalled that during the previous week, workers discussed the existing problems in the GDR and railed against those in power, but that in workers' meetings (here meaning unofficial meetings) strike threats had been unknown as of the morning of June 17. Reports suggest that a "state of angst" existed in the workplace and that "RIAS slogans" had become widespread.<sup>41</sup> Hundhausen also recalls in his memoir that Berlin had only given the "signal" [to strike] and that since the same conditions existed throughout the GDR, the work stoppages developed "spontaneously."<sup>42</sup> More revealingly, Hundhausen notes that during the morning hours at Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz, a "whisper campaign" notified workers that they should meet at 9 A.M. at the coalbunker.<sup>43</sup> This story is corroborated in the SED's record, which suggests that plans for the meeting had been hatched by the workers' beforehand and without official knowledge. One party member [Klengel]

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<sup>41</sup> Bericht über den Brigadeinsatz der BPKK in Verbindung der Genossen vom ZK." [no date] (SächsHStA 11857, IV2.4. Nr. 072 B1.3).

<sup>42</sup> Hans Hundhausen, *Der 17. Juni in Sachsenwerk Dresden und der ABUS* (Manuscript) (Dresden, Eigenverlag, 1994, 14. While many participants suggest the collective actions were spontaneous in nature, others disagree.

<sup>43</sup> Hundhausen, *Der 17. Juni in Sachsenwerk Dresden und der ABUS*, 15.

recalled that during the breakfast break, a colleague [Kühn] suddenly declared, “Now we are going to a meeting,” authorities later confirmed that the workers had earlier been working on a subversive plan of sorts.<sup>44</sup> Five days later, the police would report that in Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz, an address had gone out over the factory radio system that morning slightly before workers met in the court of the factory.<sup>45</sup> The first secretary of the BPO had addressed the workers’ complaints regarding the heightened norms via *Betriebsfunk* and, according to the police report, workers subsequently assembled in the courtyard to protest. The regime announced that quotas had been made voluntary, which like in Berlin, proved too late.<sup>46</sup> It is unclear here whether the whisper campaign or the radio address compelled the workers to gather and one must also consider that officials might not have been aware of rumors or perhaps that the timing could simply be a coincidence. Either way, hundreds (or perhaps even 1000, the exact numbers range, depending on which source one wants to believe) of workers now stood in the courtyard of Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz at approximately 9:30 in the morning.<sup>47</sup> A makeshift banner appeared in the assembled crowd, emblazoned with the word “*Generalstreik*.”<sup>48</sup> Workers demanded discussions with officials, again noting that the regime had made

<sup>44</sup> “Leitungssitzung der Grundorganisation Mfc /I - Am 22.6.1953, 14.00 Uhr Neue Küche, SED-Betriebsparteileitung Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz, Dresden den 27.6.53 (SächsHStA 12391, SED Grundorganisation VEB Elektromaschinenbau, Sachsenwerk Dresden Nr. IV/7/463.32)

<sup>45</sup> “Betr.: Bericht über die Bezirk Dresden stattgefundenen Provokationen und Demonstrationen,” BDVP Dresden Operativstab, Genossen Garatschenko, Bezug: Telef. Anforderung vom 22.6.1953, Dresden, den 22.6.1953 (Bezirksbehörde Polizei 23/18 Bl.49).

<sup>46</sup> “Bericht über die im Bezirk Dresden stattgefundenen Provokationen und Demonstrationen,” Genosse Oberstleutnant Garatschenko, Dresden, den 22.6.53 (SächsHStA 23/18 Bl.49).

<sup>47</sup> Hundhausen, *Der 17. Juni in Sachsenwerk Dresden und der ABUS*, 15-16.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.



mistakes and nothing had been done.<sup>49</sup> A number of workers also struck out toward Heidenau and the nearby ABUS factory.<sup>50</sup>

On the evening of June 16, Wilhelm Grothaus, who would act as a strike leader at the ABUS Niedersedlitz (approximately 1.5km from Sachsenwerk), heard what he remembered as a call for a general strike by the Berlin construction workers via RIAS broadcasts. Again, we should remember that RIAS did *not* explicitly call for a general strike, so he could either have misremembered this point or RIAS's language could have been close enough to such an appeal that the recollection serves to implicate RIAS in spreading the demonstrations. Regardless, Grothaus recalled deciding that night that he, along with his friends, would call for Dresdeners to strike in solidarity with those in Berlin to fight against the "the system."<sup>51</sup> On the morning of the seventeenth, they formed a strike committee and convened 1600 workers in the assembly hall where they deliberated for (according to official reports) one and a half hours. They emerged from this meeting and demanded access to the radio system, which they were unable to use.<sup>52</sup> News did spread, however, with the help of the factory radio system that Otto Buchwitz, a member of the Central Committee, and a respected figure with ties to the region, would soon speak to workers at the courtyard of the nearby Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz.<sup>53</sup> This news then drew workers from ABUS to the courtyard.

<sup>49</sup> "Situationsbericht über die faschistische Provokation von 17.6.1953," FDGB-Bezirkvorstand Dresden, Statistik/Berichterstattung, Dresden, den 20.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857, IV2.12 Nr. 10).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. This criticism had been widespread since the regime announced its new course, demonstrating an historical rule of thumb: a reforming regime is a weak regime.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.: "Das System"

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. The record is not clear why the workers failed to get access to the *Betriebsfunk*, but one surmises that the regime succeeded in containing the conversation.

<sup>53</sup> "Augenzeugenberichte von streikenden Arbeitern: Wilhelm Grothaus, antifaschistischer Widerstandskämpfer, Streikführer in Dresden," in Karl Wilhelm Fricke, ed. *17 Juni 1953: Arbeiteraufstand in der DDR*, (Köln: Deutschland Archiv, 1982), 114. Fricke points out that Grothaus's memory is likely faulty here since RIAS never officially called for a general strike, but again, one can easily argue the

Several thousand had assembled in the courtyard sometime in the early afternoon at Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz when Grothaus and the workers from ABUS arrived.<sup>54</sup> By now, the factory leadership at Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz had received a phone call from the leadership at ABUS and knew of the approaching demonstration column—the colleague who answered the phone reportedly saw between five and six hundred workers approaching before he even hung up the phone.<sup>55</sup> Upon his arrival at 13:30, Otto Buchwitz noticed in several places placards calling for a general strike.<sup>56</sup> Buchwitz spoke to the assembled crowd of the problems surrounding German unity, but was unable to garner sympathy from the workers for the regime’s position. He instead found himself forced to debate the vastly more popular Grothaus. Grothaus stepped up and articulated the demands of the “political struggle:” removal of the regime, elimination of communism, release of all political prisoners, free and secret elections, and the reunification of Germany. Most importantly, Grothaus’ words, roughly transcribed here by a Stasi functionary, reinforced the ascendancy of the rival public sphere on the morning of June 17:

Today is the first time in a long time we can again freely and openly express our opinion. True, we have a constitution that affords us certain rights to speech and freedom of conscience—but that’s only on paper. When have we ever been able to actually do so? We had no opportunity to do this. The upper-level functionaries are supposed to indeed have their ears to the masses, but if they had done that, they would have learned the true opinion of the masses. I would like to know, just where they had their ears until now. Well, they have been hovering in higher regions [not been

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station’s words had such an effect that they might as well have. The ABUS plant is today *Sächsischen Brücken- und Stahlhochbau*.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>55</sup> “Parteiaktivtagung der Bezirksleitung der SED Dresden am 21.6.1953” (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.2 Nr. 001).

<sup>56</sup> “Bericht über die Versammlung der streikenden Arbeiter im Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz am 17.6.1953” Dresden, den 20 Juni, 1953 (BStU MfS, BV Dresden, AU 239/53 Bl.182-7) available at <http://www.bstu.bund.de/DE/Wissen/DDRGeschichte/17-juni-1953/Aufstand-in-den-Bezirken/Dresden/Dokumente/05-bericht.html>.

listening to the masses], and for that reason, they couldn't know. I believe that there is no one among us who doesn't want the unity of our fatherland and peace, but we reject a unity and regime with moral constraint.<sup>57</sup>

The assembled workers greeted the list with applause.<sup>58</sup> Grothaus repeated the demands, and after Buchwitz claimed that Grothaus had betrayed the working class, Grothaus responded that the only way he could betray the working class, would be to “abandon the workers who were now protesting in all cities.”<sup>59</sup> Buchwitz urged the crowd to return to work, but those gathered announced their plan to march to downtown Dresden; they had already received reports—though it is not clear how—that demonstrations had begun in the inner city.<sup>60</sup>

Similar scenes unfolded in workplaces around the Dresden region. Factory courtyards became spaces of civic debate after rumors and reports regarding the “strike movement” in Berlin spread among the workforce.<sup>61</sup> In places where unrest developed, the party continuously noted that various discussions led to work stoppages and, according to the Regional Party Control Commission, the “organized work of the

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<sup>57</sup> “Sinngemässe Wiedergabe der Hetzrede des Grothaus, beschäftigt in VEB “Abus” Dresden-Niedersedlitz am 17.6.53 zwischen 15,00 und 16,00 Uhr auf dem Werkhof im N.S.” Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz, Dresden, den 19.6.53. Pg. 18 (BStU MfS, BV Dresden, AU 239/53): “Heute ist seit langer Zeit zum ersten Mal wieder Gelegenheit seine Meinung frei und offen zum Ausdruck zu bringen. Wir haben zwar eine Verfassung die uns Rede-und Gewissensfreiheit zuerkennt, aber das steht nur auf dem Papier. Wo konnten wir bisher davon Gebrauch machen. Wir hatten ja bisher keine Gelegenheit dazu. Die hohen Funktionäre sollen zwar das Ohr an der Masse haben, aber wenn sie das gehabt hätten, dann wüssten sie die wirkliche Meinung des Volkes. Ich möchte wissen, wo sie bisher ihre Ohren gehabt haben. Aber sie schwebten ja in höheren Regionen und darum konnten sie es auch nicht wissen. Ich glaube, es gibt keinen unter uns, der nicht die Einheit unseres Vaterlandes und den Frieden will, wir lehnen aber eine Einheit und Regierung mit Gewissenszwang ab.”

<sup>58</sup> Karl Wilhelm Fricke, *17 Juni 1953*, 115; “Situationsbericht über die faschistische Provokation von 17.6.1953”

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 115, “Wenn ich jetzt die Arbeiter, die in allen Städten aufgestanden sind, im Stich lassen würde.”

<sup>60</sup> “Situationsbericht über die faschistische Provokation von 17.6.1953.”

<sup>61</sup> Bezirksbehörde der Deutschen Volkspolizei (SächsHStA 23/18 Bl.49; Bl.8).

enemies” was palpable even where they were not successful in initiating provocation.<sup>62</sup> In Görlitz, official analysis pointed to the rumors that had been circulating there in the days prior that called for the removal of President Pieck’s images.<sup>63</sup> These types of discussions, generated by the Resolution of June 11 again, at least according to one report, became the topic of debate on the morning on June 17 when groups of colleagues gathered. Before the demonstrations began, there were conversations pertaining to the working conditions, which had not improved since the announcement of the New Course, but rather, had deteriorated.<sup>64</sup> In the LOWA factory in Görlitz, 600 employees stopped working at 9:45 and marched to other factories where workers joined their demonstration. The workers by that time, according to police reports, had planned a demonstration to take place at Leninplatz, under the slogan, “We declare solidarity with the Workers in Berlin.”<sup>65</sup> In the nearby VEB Feinmechanik und Optik, the issue of the norms had become a subject of serious debate and as such, inspired the workers join in the LOWA workers’ protest march.<sup>66</sup>

Not all workers chose to take to the streets. In a number of enterprises, workers debated the effectiveness of the events in Berlin and Dresden, sometimes electing *not* to strike. The news of unrest at Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz reached the gas works in Löbau around noon—basically as events unfolded. Those at this factory learned that the workers at Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz had resolved to strike and had begun marching toward the

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<sup>62</sup> “Bericht über Verhalten von Partei und Leitungsmitgliedern während der faschistischen Provokation und über typische Einzelfälle” BPKK Dresden, Dresden den 28.6.1953 Ull/b. (SächsHStA 11857, IV2.4 Nr. 60 Bl.6).

<sup>63</sup> “Bericht an die Bezirksleitung über Analyse der Entstehung, der Ausbruch und Entwicklung des faschistischen Abenteurs in Stadt Görlitz.” (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.12 Nr. 9).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Bezirksbehörde der Deutschen Volkspolizei (SächsHStA 23/18, Bl.8).

<sup>66</sup> “Bericht: Die Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik an das Sekretariat über die Ursachen der entstandenen Situation.” Abt. Wirtschaftspolitik, Dresden, den 20.6.53. (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.12 Nr. 9).

city center. The news reportedly triggered considerable debate among the workers at the gas works whether such measures were necessary. In the end, the workers reached a nearly unanimous decision to refrain from demonstrating based on the regime's recognition of its past mistakes.<sup>67</sup>

In the VEB Phänomen-Werk 1 in Zittau, a truck factory, 2,000 workers put down their tools and demanded that factory leadership immediately organize a meeting in the courtyard of the factory. Management here granted permission and promptly fielded questions from the assembled workers concerning what was transpiring in Berlin. The answers provided, whatever they might have been, failed to pacify the workers. Several workers stepped to the microphone where they stirred up the crowd and called for a demonstration. Workers also approved a resolution, which, according to party functionaries, had been prepared beforehand. The resolution called for the overthrow of the regime, increased wages, lowered HO prices, and the release of all political prisoners.<sup>68</sup> The demonstration never took place, as news of the state of emergency made it to the factory.<sup>69</sup>

Some workers learned of others' demonstrations before arriving to work in the early afternoon. In the Oberlausitzer Textilveredlungswerk the early shift went as expected. Those who arrived to work the second shift at 2:00 P.M. already knew of the events in Berlin and now, Görlitz.<sup>70</sup> Before beginning their shift, workers congregated in the courtyard in the factory to discuss the news. Functionaries' attempts to confront the

<sup>67</sup> "Betriebsfriedenrat Gaswerk Joliot-Curie Dresden," 19 Juni (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.12 Nr. 8).

<sup>68</sup> Volkspolizei-Kreisamt Zittau an die Bezirksbehörde der Deutschen Volkspolizei Operativ-stab, Dresden, N 15, 27. Juni 1953 (SächsHStA 23/18 Bl.227).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Industriegewerkschaft – Textil-Bekleidung-Leder, Bezirksvorstand Dresden, Bericht, Dresden, den 29, Juni 1953. Görlitz is approximately fifteen miles west of Löbau; Dresden is located 56 miles to the west of Löbau (SächsHStA IV2.12 Nr. 10).

workers in the courtyard failed as they discussed their solidarity with Berlin and Görlitz , and the five-point program for which they now (allegedly, according to the SED) fought.<sup>71</sup>

In Meißen, discussions in the morning hours at the *Kabelwerk* factory revolved around the heightened norms, which had since been reduced to the previous (accepted) levels. Sometime after lunch, a workers' meeting revealed that workers no longer concerned themselves with the norms, but rather, bigger issues, or as one worker put it: "Germany."<sup>72</sup> This worker called for a "sympathy strike" for their "brothers in Berlin," which met applause from his fellow workers.<sup>73</sup> Still surprisingly, at least to the functionaries present, the workers went back to work after this episode.<sup>74</sup>

At one school in Görlitz, a students' meeting unfolded and a drafted resolution that called for East Germans to live in peace with Czechs and Poles, who, like themselves, lived under Soviet repression. This, they argued, bound them together more closely than the nearby border [the Oder-Neisse] separated the two groups.<sup>75</sup>

The organized and deliberate meetings held by workers the morning of June 17 suggests that the demonstrations had an (at least partially) a deliberate and scripted impetus, rather than a spontaneous generation. Critical resolutions and declarations of solidarity undermined the SED by not only attacking its program, but by recognizing the presence and activity of other dissident movements. Within these discussions, workers became involved in critical debates with a national scope. The discussions and private

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> SED Kreisleitung Meißen an die Bezirksleitung der SED – Information. Meißen , den 20.6.1953. (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.12 Nr. 9).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.: "Sympathiestreik;" "Berliner Brüder"

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Rainer Hildebrandt, "Was Lehrte der 17. Juni?: Eine Denkschrift (1954) (DRA Potsdam, Schriftgut, OST Archiv – 038 12 6 5 3, standort 363/33/8/4/1/).

meetings also underscore the deliberations that took place before a consensus was reached as far as how those present would act.

### **Radio's Reach**

One of the more difficult questions to answer pertains to RIAS and other Western stations' reach on the morning of June 17. In a number of cases, the party later identified those who had taken part in the demonstrations as enthusiastic RIAS listeners, such as one dockworker (employed in a factory besieged that morning by RIAS rumors/news) who demanded the Soviets' removal from Germany.<sup>76</sup> Or consider those workers who left a courtyard after a meeting instigated by known RIAS listeners.<sup>77</sup> Another noted RIAS-listener in Dresden had established himself as a rumor mongerer by informing his co-workers of Pieck's "timeout" and, according to officials there, "probably" spread the rumor that there would be a new regime in August. He had heard this from another colleague who had, according to reports, either regularly listened to RIAS or knew of an "underground movement."<sup>78</sup> While there is little doubt that RIAS could claim a wide and enthusiastic listenership in Dresden, such incidents might also be shaded by the SED's insistence that the West used foreign broadcasting to help carry out an orchestrated rebellion in the GDR.

When referencing RIAS or others in regard to the events of June 17, functionaries often claimed ignorance of the station's broadcasts, but also recognized the influence and tactical advantage they provided critics and dissidents. As one SED official put it:

<sup>76</sup> "Bericht über Verhalten von Partei und Leitungsmitgliedern während der faschistischen Provokation und über typische Einzelfälle." BPKK Dresden, den 28.6.1953, Ull/b. (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.4 Nr. 60 Bl.7).

<sup>77</sup> "Bericht." Industriegewerkschaft Textil-bekleidung-Leder, Bezirksvorstand Dresden, Dresden, den 29. Juni 1953, Ha/Ro. (SächsHStA 11857, IV2.12 Nr. 10).

<sup>78</sup> "Über eine außerordentliche Leitungssitzung der BPO Werkstatt Tra. Am 20.11.1953 6,30 Uhr im Zimmer des Parteisekretärs" Niederschrift. (SächsHStA 11857, IV2.3 Nr. 207): "Untergrundbewegung"

...I must be totally clear and plainly stress that, yes, there were errors, that certainly we must discuss, and there were inadequacies in our own factories and in the city that were irresponsible. [But] I would like to remind everyone that, regarding the conditions on 17 June in Berlin, only those who listened to RIAS, NWDR or other western stations were in the know.

I myself have a radio, but I can't hear because of [SED-induced] interference. But, when I arrive at work and no one [appears to] know anything, and then suddenly everyone is in the streets and martial law has already been declared, that's a problem and the functionaries and the factory leaders have already failed. Those who are not informed of the truth about events and only find out days later what's really going on, are angry when they don't learn the true facts from those who are responsible.<sup>79</sup>

In some cases, those who later claimed not to have taken part in the strikes or demonstrations merely asserted that the discussions stemmed from the reports that came "from outside."<sup>80</sup> For example, at the power plant in Dresden, one functionary claimed to recall that in the early morning hours, he overheard a teenager in the coat closet openly declare, "Today it's to be decided whether the East German construction workers will strike."<sup>81</sup> In the RFT Funkwerk (a radio and communications firm) in Dresden, functionaries noted that "continuous listening in to Western radio stations" along with telephone calls and messengers "continuously kept negative forces informed of the events

<sup>79</sup> "Betr.: Protokoll der Diskussion anlässlich der am 22.7.1953 stattgefundenen Belegschaftsversammlung unseres Werkes," SED Betriebsparteiorganisation VEB Trafo und Röntgenwerk Dresden, Dresden den 23.7.1953, S.16 (SAPMO-BArch DC 1/1829): "Aber ich muß hier ganz klar und deutlich betonen, dass es Fehler gab, über die wir ganz besonders sprechen müssen und das es auch bei uns im Betrieb und in der Stadt Unzulänglichkeiten gab, die unverantwortlich sind. Ich möchte daran erinnern, dass über die Zustände am 17. Juni in Berlin nur diejenigen Bescheid wussten, die RIAS, NWDR oder einen anderen Westdeutscher Sender hörten. Ich selbst habe ein Radio, mit dem ich vor Störungen nicht hören kann. Aber wenn ich auf Arbeit komme und man weiss von nichts und dann geht man auf die Strasse und der Ausnahmezustand ist schon verhängt, so ist das schlecht und die Funktionäre und die Betriebsleitung haben versagt. Ein Mensch, der über die wahren Dinge nicht unterrichtet ist und erst nach Tagen erfährt, was los ist, ist ungehalten, wenn er nicht den wahren Sachverhalt von den verantwortlichen Menschen erfährt." The interference (*Störung*) referred to here made the station more difficult to tune, but still accessible to anyone with a bit of patience. In the wake of the demonstrations, the SED would increase the level of interference.

<sup>80</sup> "Berichte und Informationen der Bezirks- und Kreisleitungen zu besonderen Vorkommnissen u.a. am 17.6.1953" (SächsHStA Dresden, 11857 IV/2.3 Nr. 207, Bl.122).

<sup>81</sup> "Parteiaktivtagung- der Bezirksleitung der SED Dresden," Am 21.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.2 Nr. 001 Bl.55): "Heute entscheidet es sich, ob die deutschen Bauarbeiter in den Streik treten."



in Dresden and Berlin.”<sup>82</sup> Here, these dissident workers who had been listening to Western stations (unnamed, but probably RIAS or maybe NWDR) took control of the house radio system and tried to seize control of the situation by urging part of the workforce to take to the streets. Such efforts reportedly failed after functionaries stepped in.<sup>83</sup> According to the official report, the Western stations demanded that the workforce strike and demonstrate, a request followed by a number of workers and comrades. Other groups stayed behind in the factory and in a workers’ meeting, elected a commission charged with formulating the demands of the workforce. This led to political demands that called for the regime to be overthrown.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, in a shop, two men called for a staff meeting, apparently with little regard for keeping their intentions secret. Officials noted that they shared information gathered from RIAS, including a five-point-program that served as a basis for the discussions. The two men reportedly argued that for eight years they had been cheated and that it (likely meaning the SED’s brand of socialism) was all a scam.<sup>85</sup>

The workers’ meetings in the morning and early afternoon of 17 June represented the inability of the SED to restrain an emboldened rival public sphere at this point. In these spaces, often courtyards, workers did not spontaneously initiate strikes (as opposed to the work stoppages necessary to hold such meetings), but rather deliberated and debated not only the perceived injustices facing workers, but also the discussions pertaining to national issues that the rival public sphere had inspired. By drafting

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<sup>82</sup> “Bericht” SED Kreisleitung IX Dresden KPKK, Vertrauliche Verschlussache Tgb 602/nr. 259/53, Dresden den 22.12.53. (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.4 Nr. 061 Bl.42): “Durch ständiges Abhören von Westsendern, durch Anrufe von Außen und durch angesandte Kuriere hatten sich negative Kräfte im Funkwerk weitgehend über die Vorgänge in Berlin und Dresden informiert.”

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. Bl.41.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> “Vorkommisse in der Zeit vom 17. -20.6.1953Bl.76, Kreisleitung Löbau an die Bezirksparteikontrollkommission Dresden” (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.4 Nr. 061).

resolutions and proclaiming solidarity with other protest-minded workers, they imagined communities of dissidents throughout the Dresden region and the GDR. The methods of communication also changed. The whisper campaigns of the early morning hours became louder as the number of workers aware of what was unfolding in Berlin, the region, and perhaps other locales, grew.

### **The SED's Radio Address**

Sometimes rumors and misinformation stemming from the GDR outlets influenced participants' vision of what was unfolding in Dresden. Lothar Besser, a student at a vocational school recalled a run-in with two Soviet soldiers, one of whom knocked a fellow student from his bicycle with the butt of his rifle. The soldiers apparently believed that the demonstrators were American saboteurs, a story spread by GDR radio at the time.<sup>86</sup>

As the SED's power and credibility ultimately rested in the appearance that a unified community of East Germans supported its existence, GDR presented the uprising as the work of outsiders, namely foreign agents and fascists. These forces, according to the SED's official line, now reacted to the SED's efforts (meaning the New Course) to improve living standards.<sup>87</sup> Others who might have been skeptical of the news—often perceived as rumor—might have been swayed by the GDR's radio address, which admitted that unrest had become widespread. In an unsent letter he composed to a friend in Munich, Gottfried Schmidt arrived early to his office and heard discussions surrounding the reports from Berlin. This seemed unlikely to him at the time, but when GDR radio reported the unrest, he knew something was happening. By early afternoon,

<sup>86</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 162.

<sup>87</sup> <http://www.17juni53.de/audio/track9.mp3>

reports had trickled in that similar unrest had spread to other cities and telephone calls confirmed the rumors.<sup>88</sup>

### **The Soundscape of Protest and the Reach of RIAS**

Radio, rumors, whisper campaigns, chants, and a distinct buzz rounded out the soundscape of revolt through the morning hours of June 17. The pattern unfolded throughout the region and the GDR; radio waves carried the message into private homes and establishments and workers and residents spread the news at work in private meetings. In these audible spaces, dissidents challenged the regime's authority and claim to the future. Around noon, marching workers had begun to stream into the city center of Dresden and the small towns in its orbit. Meanwhile, those outside the factories learned of the events that had been unfolding locally and throughout the GDR in a number of ways. A number of witnesses note that Wednesday, 17 June 1953 was a beautiful, hot day in East Germany and some claim that "something eerie" could be sensed in the air that day.<sup>89</sup> Others, like housewife Hannelore Kuhn, already knew about the strikes developing in Berlin by listening to RIAS, but recalled thinking that Berlin was quite far away and Dresden seemed peaceful. Still, everything seemed *so* quiet that afternoon that she had become uneasy. She remembered that the normal cacophony created by the workers—hammering, knocking, a cement mixer, men on scaffolding—was missing and the scaffolds were empty. She then heard a Soviet tank rumble into the intersection, which pleased her little boy. Still, Hannelore found the tank a bit unsettling so she walked to the park with her son where other mothers watched their children.<sup>90</sup> She soon learned that

<sup>88</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 163-4

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 152. "etwas unheimliches in der Luft."

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

strikes and demonstrations had broken out “everywhere” and the prisons had been stormed. Those who were closer to the city center began hearing the chants of protest after lunch or an “exceptional din” emanating from the streets.<sup>91</sup>

News reports and the news of news reports—sometimes RIAS, sometimes others—helped bring groups and individuals to places of protest. Such information, although its origin is unclear, brought Klaus Lindner, for example, to his job at Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz early (around noon) on June 17. Upon his arrival he found the crowd assembled in the factory yard.<sup>92</sup> Elsewhere in Dresden, Siegfried Bannack, a metal worker in Dresden recalled the strange feeling in the air as he walked through Platz der Einheit (today, Albertplatz) and Nord Platz (Olbrichtplatz today) after work. The usual passersby now stood in small groups and spoke insistently to one another. Bannack suggests that by this point—probably early afternoon—even those without access to Western radio stations knew something unusual was happening as tanks rumbled through parts of town. He set off toward home and passed groups of residents in the city cloistered together, discussing the news. He ran into a neighbor who explained to him that Berliners were striking. Bannack quickly tuned into RIAS, where a reporter in Berlin excitedly stated that gunfire had forced him to take cover behind a tipped over construction trailer. He immediately called his brother and father from a payphone and told them the news before meeting up with a friend.<sup>93</sup>

Information spread quickly that morning, often reaching students in the classroom in the early morning hours and demonstrating just how quickly the news spread from RIAS to public places. In Dresden, for instance, a student stormed into his classroom and

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 178: “außergewöhnlichen Lärm”

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 152.

informed his classmates that the workforce of a local factory had gone into the streets to demonstrate—and that it had something to do with the events transpiring in Berlin.

“Imagine,” said the student who brought the news, “if our regime has to resign, perhaps we are a bit closer to German reunification.”<sup>94</sup> The teacher appeared and told the students to immediately take the street car home (which probably no longer operated), and to stay away from the Postplatz.<sup>95</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the students headed directly to the Postplatz.<sup>96</sup>

Radio also informed residents in the Dresden region’s smaller towns of the demonstrations and potential for national change. Exactly how many people listened to these reports is probably impossible to ascertain, but as in other locales, residents often assembled in the streets and began to strengthen their numbers as they marched to the town squares.<sup>97</sup> Ingrid Anders in Hoyerswerda recalled that everyone in her office had grown restless wondering what was going to happen, as they had learned from the radio that something was going on in Berlin.<sup>98</sup> In Zittau, Gottfried Schinke, a metalworker remembered that there was a certain tension in the air. He noted that the adults/senior colleagues (he was an apprentice) had apparently heard a lot to talk about that morning as they stood around in groups talking amongst themselves. A student in Niesky recalled that some reports regarding the actions in Berlin made their way to the town in the morning and “awakened hope for a change.”<sup>99</sup> In Radebeul, Barbara Mohr, an assistant surgeon at the hospital noticed that in the morning hours, as the staff began its

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 154-55: “Stellt euch mal vor, wenn unsere Regierung zurücktreten müsste, vielleicht wären wir da der Einheit Deutschlands ein Stück näher usw.”

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 321.:

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 327.: “weckte Hoffnungen auf einen Wandel.”

consultation hour (*Sprechstunde*) the waiting room was empty. She went outside the hospital with several co-workers and took in the morning sun, but slowly become more unnerved as the usual patient load failed to materialize. Finally, someone informed them to tune into the radio which was reporting the strikes in Berlin in the *Stalinallee* along with the news that the Russians were soon going to impose a curfew. A nurse who lived close by procured a radio and with some difficulty, tuned into a Western station. They listened to the movement in Berlin and recalled hearing that the Russians looked to move in with tanks.<sup>100</sup>

Günter Jarzombek in Löbau had received a call from his colleague in Görlitz in the evening on June 16. He had told him that demonstrations had begun in the streets and in the Neumarkt. The next morning, Jarzombek called his colleges in Görlitz and asked what was going on. His colleagues there told him that Stalin busts and pictures of Ulbricht and other leaders were being tossed into the streets.<sup>101</sup> Elsewhere in Löbau, a curious man first heard it from the local butcher who informed him that something was going on in Berlin and that announcements centered around HO prices while reports (of an unknown origin) discussed free elections and political prisoners that had been released in the GDR. The woman next to him suggested such news could be RIAS-hoaxes. Shortly after he came across a meeting in which workers demanded to know what was happening—especially in Görlitz where they heard shots had been fired and workers were dead.<sup>102</sup> By noon in Görlitz, demonstrators had begun to appear at Leninplatz. Hartmut Jatzko, then fourteen years old, had been at school reciting the lessons of the great October Revolution when the school suddenly sent the students home around noon.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 332-333.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 324-5.

His brother rode by on his bike and shouted that they were “cleaning out the Party Palace.”<sup>103</sup> Things seemed to be happening quickly, and it took several minutes for the young man to understand that a demonstration was unfolding. He tuned into RIAS and raised the volume. The station had by now reported that an uprising existed in Berlin and other cities. After hearing the news, he immediately headed to the city center.<sup>104</sup> Bärbel Timm, another student in Görlitz arrived at school to find her classroom empty. She returned home early and her father, who lay sick in bed excitedly called Bärbel into the room. “Listen to this!” said her father as his radio aired the RIAS broadcasts, “there’s an uprising in Berlin!”<sup>105</sup> Then her grandmother, who lived in the back of the house called him: “Listen—what is that—the clamor outside?”<sup>106</sup> Cases also existed in which family members living in other cities relayed RIAS news by telephone. Functionaries observed, for example, a worker in a textile factory receiving calls from his father, who listened to RIAS. He then passed on the information, shouting that, “Yeah, if they want to go ahead and allow free elections, then they’ll really get a sense of how things are.”<sup>107</sup>

Werner Herbig described a nascent unrest among the population in Görlitz as a nascent one, wherein residents had begun to tell each other that things simply had to change.<sup>108</sup> The workers had grown restless in the area and now an “Uprising was clearly in the air.”<sup>109</sup> Herbig recalled that RIAS had been hesitant the day before (June 16]) when

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<sup>103</sup> Project 17. Juni 1953, *Zeitzeugen*: Dr. Med. Hartmut Jatzko, “Es War am 17. Juni 1953 in Görlitz.”

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 171. “Hör doch! In Berlin ist ein Aufstand!”

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> “Vorkommnisse in der Zeit vom 17.-20.6.1953” SED Kreisleitung Löbau an die Bezirksparteikontrollkommission Dresden, Löbau, Den 21 Dezember 1953 (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.4 Nr. 061 Bl.80): “jawohl, sie mögen nur freie Wahlen zulassen, dann werden sie schon merken, wie es aussieht.”

<sup>108</sup> Regine Möbius, *Panzer gegen die Freiheit: Zeitzeugen des 17 Juni 1953 Berichten* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2003), 84.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

reporting on the strikes in Berlin, because, according to him, the Americans did not know how the Berlin strikes would develop. He tuned in early on the morning of June 17 before heading to the police station to pick up his disability pass (he had been shot through the shoulder in the war) when the police suddenly distributed steel helmets and sent officers into the city.<sup>110</sup>

In a 1983 interview, program director Schütz recalled that throughout that Wednesday, RIAS received a continuously growing number of reports that underlined the extent of the protests. These reports came from cities and towns, large and small throughout the GDR. Schütz noted that the activities in the provinces seemed to reflect, in certain ways, what had happened in Berlin. For example, he remembered that when demonstrators stormed a prison in one city and freed the prisoners word got back to the station where the event was reported. Shortly thereafter, in another town a prison would be stormed, suggesting to those at the station that they were indeed responsible for inflaming the demonstrations. Unfortunately, no record exists of the information that made its way from the regions to RIAS headquarters. Those participants and observers who did share information with the station probably did so by telephone.<sup>111</sup>

### **Efforts to get Control**

Hannah Arendt has referred to public places where collective action takes develops as “spaces of appearance,” which represent areas of political freedom where individuals come together and act in concert. The space of appearance is where participants can, through their collective and public visibility, reactivate their citizenship,

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Interview: Peter Schultze/ Eberhard Schütz [Programm direktor] HA – Politik /FS, RIAS Documenta, Sondersendungen, 4.2.71 – 10.3.83 “17. Juni – Aufstand in Deutschland,” 10.3.83 (DRA Potsdam B503-00-0007).



neutralize inequalities and, at least temporarily, generate political power—a useful description for the demonstrations on June 17 in Dresden and elsewhere in the GDR. One can recognize that urban marches and the occupation of public space represent key scenes in the modern revolutionary script, whether the march to Versailles in October, 1789, or through the streets of Dresden in 1848.<sup>112</sup>

Such spaces also became official spaces of surveillance, wherein the state attempted to disband the groups of demonstrators that had congregated in public spaces by forbidding foot and automobile traffic.<sup>113</sup> Such a state of emergency had existed in Berlin since 1:00 P.M.<sup>114</sup> RIAS interrupted their reporting at 1:44 P.M. to announce the Soviet Military Commandant's declaration of a state of emergency in Berlin. In Dresden, from 2:00 P.M. on, authorities enforced a similar state of emergency and requested that citizens behave peacefully and quietly return to work.<sup>115</sup> This categorically forbade demonstrations, meetings, congregations, and imposed a curfew on locales such as theaters, bars, and museums, that would begin at 9:00 P.M.<sup>116</sup> The order, which forbade groups of more than three from gathering in streets and spaces and public buildings, sought to dissolve the so-called discussion groups that had formed in the streets.<sup>117</sup> Functionaries with megaphones continuously ordered the demonstrators to scatter.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958), 199-220; Xavier Marquez, "Spaces of Appearance and Spaces of Surveillance" Victoria University of Wellington, 2011, work in progress.

<sup>113</sup> "Punkt 1) Ab 13.00 Uhr des 17 Juni 1953 wird im sowjetischen Sektor von Grossberlin der Ausnahmezustand verhängt" (SächsHStA 23/18 BDVP). Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199-220; Xavier Marquez, "Spaces of Appearance and Spaces of Surveillance."

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., "Punkt 3."

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Chef der Garnison Dresden, Nr. 1 / Stadt Dresden, 17. Juni 1953 (SächsHStA 23/18, BDVP Bl.6).

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Hundhausen, *Der 17. Juni in Sachsenwerk Dresden und der ABUS*, 38.

Soviet forces deployed loudspeaker cars to repeatedly broadcast the orders.<sup>119</sup> The news did little to dissuade demonstrators and potential demonstrators, while functionaries often received the information over the radio and had little idea how to act.<sup>120</sup> As demonstrators continued to stream into city centers in the early afternoon hours, the measures appeared futile for the time being.

### **Spaces of Appearance: Postplatz and Theaterplatz in Dresden**

As workers and residents occupied public spaces, they realized the potential for collective action. Significant places where protestors gathered included market squares in the city of Dresden and popular urban crossroads and traffic interchanges, most notably Postplatz. At the state theater in the heart of Dresden, so-called reactionary elements had already begun to challenge the regime and exacerbate a negative mood by spreading so-called RIAS-slogans among the workforce, according to the regime. During a meeting, workers here received word that a large portion of the workforce of Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz and other factories were moving toward the middle of the city. Those present drafted a resolution and elected to strike. Workers at the neighboring Zwinger Palace had also called a solidarity strike.<sup>121</sup> The information received proved correct, and workers and residents from the region began converging on the city center, chiefly in the Postplatz and Theaterplatz.

In Dresden, public transportation had stopped running sometime earlier in the morning. Streetcars rested in a long line that extended from the Postplatz over the river to

<sup>119</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 163.

<sup>120</sup> "Lagebericht vom 24.6.53-10,30 Uhr – Gen. Wolf, WPO 21" SED Kreisleitung Dresden Stadt, Abt. P.u.M. Parteinformation, Dresden, den 24.6.53. (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553 B1.54).

<sup>121</sup> "Situationsbericht," Zentralvorstand Gewerkschaft Kunst z. HD. Des Kollegen [name withheld] Berlin – W8 Unter den Linden 15, 20 Juni 1953 (SächsHStA 11857, IV2.12 Nr.10).

Neustädter Markt.<sup>122</sup> Now, public address vehicles allegedly communicated an order that groups of more than three persons disband or be shot.<sup>123</sup> Trucks, motorcycles, and armed soldiers weaved through the crowd in attempts to prevent demonstrators from coagulating into a core of greater density and number.<sup>124</sup>

The rumors from the week before, which claimed that the pictures and works of socialism's leading men—Pieck, Grotewohl, Stalin, and Ulbricht were to be removed (and often were)—led to the same thing happening in the Postplatz. Next to the Zwinger Palace, a large steel frame supported an oversized effigy of Stalin. Demonstrators climbed the structure and yelled down to those below: “Should it come down?”<sup>125</sup> According to one witness, this was the moment when things turned rowdy as the crowd tore down the image.<sup>126</sup>

A motif of the June 17 demonstrations included the protestors' desire to connect to other dissidents, whether in the same factory, in the same city, or nationally, and continue to organize and inspire collective action. With several thousand demonstrators occupying the heart of Dresden, a group seized control of the city's *Stadtfunk* sometime in mid-to-late afternoon (around 4:00 P.M. according to comprehensive FDGB report. Stasi reports suggest this happened earlier and Roth makes no mention of the incident). According to another witness, this radio system was actually used by the Verkehrsbetriebe in a pavilion at the Postplatz.<sup>127</sup> An unidentified individual gave the announcement that a state of emergency had been declared, but no demonstrators should

<sup>122</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 156.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

go home, along with “fascist slogans” and announcements critical of the regime.<sup>128</sup> Instead, the radio announcement invited protestors to a demonstration at Grunaer Street (Dresden’s first socialist street!) along with instructions to assemble “not in small groups, but in lines.”<sup>129</sup> Anti-regime proponents gathered in small groups at the Postplatz and continued planning. In one group of youths, word circulated that the demonstration would continue on June 18 and that the Fernmeldamt (telegraph building) would be stormed then, too.<sup>130</sup> Located next to rubble heaps that supplied demonstrators with rocks to bombard police forces, the Fernmeldamt (also referred to as Telegraphenam by *Volkspolizei*) came under attack of the demonstrators. They ripped down the political slogans and wrangled with the police.<sup>131</sup> Ultimately, the barracked police were able to secure the building by firing warning shots as a demonstrator in the crowd with a megaphone shouted at the police not to shoot.<sup>132</sup> The deployment of the police and Soviet forces prevented planned demonstration from fully materializing.<sup>133</sup> At this point another memorable tone entered the soundscape of the demonstration, as the rumbling of tank treads could be heard in the distance.

### Radio in Görlitz

In Görlitz, the soundscape of revolution evolved from whisper campaigns and private meetings in the morning to discussion groups in public spaces while assembled

<sup>128</sup> “Gesamtbericht: Über die Vorgänge vom 17- 19.6.53. im Bezirk Dresden” Dresden den 1. Juli 1953, (BStU Archiv der Außenstelle Dresden MfS BV Dresden 1. Stellvertreter d. Leiter Nr. 4, Teil 1 von 2 S.7); *Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 153.

<sup>129</sup> “Informationen,” FDGB-Bezirkvorstand Dresden, Statistik / Berichterstattung, Dresden den 18.6.1953, Pe.Ge (SächsHStA 11857, IV2.12 Nr.10).

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 153, 160.

<sup>132</sup> “Verlauf im Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz” (SächsHStA 23/18 Bl.178); Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 162.

<sup>133</sup> “Situationsbericht über die faschistische Provokation von 17.6.1953” FDGB-Bezirkvorstand Dresden, Statistik/Berichterstattung, Dresden, den 20.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857, IV2.12 Nr. 10 Bl.13).

crowds sang songs and chanted slogans. As in Dresden, residents, often informed by RIAS broadcasts, occupied public squares and the demonstrators' voices occupied audible space, forcing the regime to deploy loudspeaker trucks and disperse the discussion groups. Roth notes demonstrators in Görlitz achieved a higher level of rebellion, which she attributes to a number of factors, most notable, the city's location next to the Polish border (residents could actually see their old houses across the Oder-Neisse border!), which had incensed residents for years, housing shortages, and higher-than-average unemployment.<sup>134</sup> While these factors surely contributed to the level of unrest in Görlitz, radio transmissions contributed to the popular belief that events in Görlitz were part of a national demonstration.

As students headed home from school in the early afternoon, the chants and calls from the city center could be heard in the distance.<sup>135</sup> This helped draw thousands to the market square where witnesses recalled that they had never seen so many gathered in this space.<sup>136</sup> An electrician, likely in league with the demonstrators, had connected a microphone to the city public address system.<sup>137</sup> The system's speakers hung throughout the inner city and early in the afternoon broadcasted the demonstration taking place in front of the town hall. Those present discussed how quickly a new and legitimate regime could be erected and the possibility of German reunification.<sup>138</sup> Demonstrators grabbed a table from an *Aufklärungslokal*, which they then used as a speaking platform for what had evolved into a sort of provisional government.<sup>139</sup> Of course by now, the reports

<sup>134</sup> See Roth, *Der 17 Juni in Sachsen*, 245-250.

<sup>135</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 178.

<sup>136</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 168

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-9, 170.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* See Roth, *Der 17 Juni in Sachsen*, 258-266.

from Berlin had been circulating and the crowd would not settle for small-time demands: instead, it seemed to those present that the time had come to remove the ruling regime and dissolve its apparatuses.<sup>140</sup> A young student elsewhere in the city recalled suddenly hearing the “Deutschlandlied” blasting from the speakers: “That truly gave us the feeling that things had reached a turning point.”<sup>141</sup> Others echoed this sentiment, with one participant later claiming that “The highpoint was probably when demonstrators sang the great chorus of the true German national anthem.”<sup>142</sup> A good number present found themselves moved to tears, while for some younger residents, singing the national anthem in such a context provided a new type of experience. “It was the high point for me when everyone sang the national anthem... I knew such a song existed and was familiar with the text and melody because of my mother, but now I truly heard it, meaningful and fervent.”<sup>143</sup> Benedict Anderson suggests that national anthems, when sung, allow for a singular occurrence of community and simultaneity; an impression of unisonance, full of national imaginings.<sup>144</sup>

## Rumors

It remains difficult to determine what, exactly, individuals knew of events outside their locales as events unfolded throughout the GDR. As before, rumor often contained a certain amount of truth. For example, analysis of June 17 produced by the local SED noted that rumors regarding the abdication of the regime and the police (who, it was

<sup>140</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 170.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.: “Das für uns wirklich das Gefühl einer Zeitenwende!”

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 170. “Der Höhepunkt mag wohl gewesen sein, als der riesige Chor die richtige deutsche Nationalhymne sang.”

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.: “Für mich war der Höhepunkt, dass gemeinsam das Deutschland-Lied gesungen wurde. Bis dahin wusste ich zwar, dass es dieses Lied gab, von der Mutter hatte ich sicher schon eine Andeutung der Melodie und des Textes gehört, hier aber hörte ich es wirklich, inbrünstig und bedeutungsvoll.”

<sup>144</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 149.

claimed, stood with demonstrators) helped provocateurs gather support for their cause.<sup>145</sup> In other cases, local news deviated wildly from what historians know to have transpired. As one intern in Dresden later put it, “A lot of rumors circulated, but no one truly knew what was going on.”<sup>146</sup> Of course, the young man does not speak for everyone and many likely unknowingly mistook false rumors as true news.

The SED classified such communications as disinformation. Records and witness recollections indicate that a number of residents felt the GDR was in the midst of a political turn on June 17. In other words, to a number of onlookers and participants, the moment for change had arrived. Werner Stoll, a student at the time, remembers that rumors whirred through the decks of the steamboat he traveled on between Riesa and Dresden, but always in low voices in order to keep things secret.<sup>147</sup> The source of the rumors came into focus when the steamboat docked and it became apparent that the streetcars and busses no longer ran. Other rumors, which might seem ridiculous or innocuous still reveal the confusion and anger present on June 17. Rosemarie Ulbricht, a young girl in Görlitz at the time, remembered hearing that a revolution had taken place or the currency had been demonetized, prompting her to close her bank account and buy a watch before she even saw a protest march.<sup>148</sup> An example of a more foreboding rumor arose in Görlitz, where Georg Walter arrived early to work and heard right away that a dead dog hung in the Obermarkt and underneath someone had written, “That was the first

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<sup>145</sup> SED Bezirksleitung Dresden, gen. Wolf, “Analyse über die Entstehung, den Ausbruch, die Entwicklung des fasch. Abenteurers und seine Liquidierung,” Dresden, den 8.7.1953 (SächsHStA Dresden 11857, IV/2.12 Nr. 8).

<sup>146</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 166.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

dog that died a terrible death!”<sup>149</sup> He claims he was never able to confirm the validity of this rumor.

The whereabouts and status of the SED leadership remained a hot topic on June 17. RIAS addressed this topic sometime in the mid-morning during an interview with Otto Nuschke, representative of the Council of Ministers of the GDR and leader of the CDU (GDR). When asked where the three leaders were now, Otto Nuschke claimed truthfully that Pieck was recovering in the Soviet Union and the other two remained in Berlin.<sup>150</sup> One might also note that such a question posed by RIAS, in an underhanded way, suggested that the SED’s leadership situation remained hazy and seemed to give at least some credence to the improvised news that circulated widely enough to prompt the question. Indeed, the destruction of the party’s leadership through rumor mongering seems to have continued unabated. At the Trust Company in Dresden, the managing director was seen removing Pieck’s image from the wall and remarking, “He is dead anyways!”<sup>151</sup> And in nearby Löbau, reports indicated that images of Pieck, Stalin, and Grotewohl were removed at the town pool.<sup>152</sup> Elsewhere in Dresden, a functionary at the public prosecutors’ office stated that GDR radio carried the news that Pieck was dead, Ulbricht had been arrested and that 20,000 workers were now striking.<sup>153</sup> Only the last bit of information here was true. Of course, this news probably stemmed from RIAS and earlier improvised news as the domestic GDR stations mostly played music that day, so it

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 174.: “Das war der erste Hund, der verreckte!”

<sup>150</sup> See: <http://www.17juni53.de/audio/track18.mp3> for a recording of this broadcast.

<sup>151</sup> Information, FDGB-Bezirkvorstand Dresden, Statistik-Berichterstattung. Dresden, den 26.6.53, 11 Uhr (SächsHStA 11857 IV2.12).

<sup>152</sup> SED Kreisleitung Löbau, an die Bezirksparteikontrollkommission Dresden, Löbau, 21 Dezember, 1953 (SächsHStA IV/2.4 Nr. 061, Bl.80).

<sup>153</sup> B P O der Bezirksstaatsanwaltschaft, Partei Information, an die SED – Bezirksleitung, Staatl. Organe – zu Hd.d.Genin Heinrich, Dresden, Dresden, am 17 Juni 1953 (SächsHStA 11857, IV2.13 Nr. 6). They actually referenced *Mitteleuropa-Rundfunk*, which had been absorbed by Berlin radio.



is likely this information stemmed from a rumor.<sup>154</sup> In Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz workers had continued to discuss the alleged the various fates (death, arrest, abdication) of party leadership to the extent that the Party Secretary of the BPO countered these “baseless” rumors over the factory radio system, suggesting that functionaries here recognized the pervasiveness of improvised news.<sup>155</sup>

It seems that no locale was immune to rumor. Rumors also swirled in Oberschule West in Dresden. Here, students claimed that the regime had fled, the Russians had attacked the Germans, striking was now permitted and democratic rights had been introduced, that the Russians had used bloodhounds, and that Otto Nuschke had left.<sup>156</sup> Only the last bit of information had some truth to it: Nuschke had indeed been apprehended at the West German border in Berlin—as reported by RIAS at 3:00 P.M.<sup>157</sup> At the trade school in Dresden a rumor circulated that Otto Nuschke had fled to the West and Walter Ulbricht had been shot.<sup>158</sup> The latter was a persistent (false) rumor appeared elsewhere in the June 17 reports. Similar rumors circulated at the schools in Görlitz. Erika Morgenstern, a schoolgirl in Görlitz remembered the superintendent storming into her classroom and telling students to collect the portraits that hung on the walls. “Should these images be thrown away?” she wondered, “but these were the holiness of the GDR?”<sup>159</sup> In Meißen, party officials found themselves dealing with “enemy activity” that spread a number of rumors: war was just around the corner (a potentially true rumor); the

<sup>154</sup> See Schlosser, *Cold war on the Airwaves*, Chapter 5.

<sup>155</sup> “Betr.: Protestversammlung der Werktätigen im Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz anlässlich der Normenerhöhung,” Vp.- Amt B an den Chef der BDVP Dresden, VP – Inspekteur Huhn, ND (SächsHStA 23/18 Bl.233).

<sup>156</sup> “Informationsbericht: Hoch, Fach- und Oberschulen,” Freie Deutsche Jugend, Bezirksleitung Dresden, Sekretariat, Dresden, den 17.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.12 Nr. 10). Nuschke was indeed forced into West Berlin by the demonstrators against his will.

<sup>157</sup> See [http://www.17juni53.de/karte/berlin\\_2.html](http://www.17juni53.de/karte/berlin_2.html).

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 176.

regime had fled or been neutralized in some fashion or another (this could be construed as correct, at that moment), and that the Americans had already mobilized, presumably in preparation for a GDR invasion (false). The later rumor (or hope)—that help from the Americans was imminent—also appeared in Görlitz, when a crowd assembled in front of the town hall, one of the chants called for the regime to open the western border because the Americans were “with them.”<sup>160</sup>

Local and national information, appearing as rumors to some, and good news to others, even penetrated the walls of the prison in Bautzen. Two prisoners remembered sympathetic guards keeping the prisoners abreast of the strikes in the capital as the construction workers in Berlin protested the norms: “I could hardly believe it...something was up, here we go!” he recalled thinking.<sup>161</sup> But it was not clear exactly what, aside from a chance for a revolution and it seemed likely that in such a case, the Americans would have to intervene. Beck recalled that messages reached the inside of the prison on June 17 and informed inmates that the “uprising had spread throughout the larger cities in the GDR and even, to some degree, the provinces.”<sup>162</sup> News that probably stemmed from RIAS broadcasts continued to make its way to the prisoners. By now, the guards allegedly stood “on the side” of the prisoners and news continued to detail what had become a national uprising, with prisons stormed in Cottbus and protestors fired upon in Berlin. Beck recalls wondering how the Allies would react: were they willing to risk starting a war? Another prisoner remembered little in the way of sounds from the

<sup>160</sup> “Informationsmeldung- Bezirkinspektion Dresden, den 17.6.1953,” Zentral Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.12 Nr. 8).

<sup>161</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 289: “Kaum zu glauben! Endlich-jetzt passiert was, nun geht’s los!!” This statement may refer to June 16.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 290: “Die Amerikaner, die müssten doch eingreifen!; Am nächsten Tag sorgten neue Meldungen für Aufregung. Der Aufstand in der Republik dehnte sich aus auf andere Grosstädte, teilweise bis in die Provinz.”

uprising from outside the prison walls, but rumors circulated throughout the prison. For others, the sound of tank treads signaled something was up.<sup>163</sup> That evening, inmate Hans-Georg Güntzel claimed to recall that prisoners could hear the chants of demonstrators calling for freedom. The next morning, prisoners noted that rumors continued to swirl through the prison.<sup>164</sup> Such rumors—partly true, partly false—would continue to beleaguer the SED throughout the following weeks and draw more attention from party officials.

### **Re-writing Revolution: Banners and Placards**

Despite the quasi-makeshift nature of the June 17 events, the methods by which demonstrators communicated revolution and power reveal that some protestors probably anticipated a public demonstration. This happened in several different ways. The first resolutions and lists of demands found inspiration, if not their content, in the demands aired in Berlin. Banners and leaflets appeared from the early morning hours, through the events of June 17, and into the following week (which will be discussed in chapter five). Finally, the destruction of SED slogans, banners, and insignias represented another way in which protestors demonstrated power.

The lists of demands, which had their origin in Berlin, emerged in a number of the workplaces in the Dresden region. Subversive, anti-SED ideas that originated as rumors and whispers made their way into written form as workers became aware that a local and national movement had begun to unfold. As dissidents hoisted or distributed their messages, they also continued, as noted in several cases already, to tear down the signs (and images) of the SED. These actions, of course, did not go unnoticed by the regime.

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 289.

Written or printed materials appeared early Wednesday morning in a number of places, suggesting that at least some East Germans arrived at work with a revolutionary mindset and the intent to follow the script from Berlin and protest the regime. Often these materials reflected the slogans aired in Berlin over RIAS and expressed by residents in the days after the communiqué aired. As early as six in the morning on Wednesday the police in Görlitz had come across residents with placards printed using India ink. The posters called for a reduction of the workers' norms, free elections and the removal of Grotewohl's "criminal regime."<sup>165</sup> By seven o'clock, a fifty-centimeter poster hung in that town's post office urging the "People to fight for truly free elections" and the removal of the Ulbricht clique.<sup>166</sup>

Banners represented another method by which demonstrators publically communicated demands for change and connect with, and motivate, other demonstrators and potential protestors. Little evidence exists as far as when demonstrators created the banners. In their review of the situation that unfolded in Bautzen at Ifa-Phänomen Zittau, district leadership tried to pin anti-regime banners that appeared on June 17 on a young man known for his anti-Soviet attitude.<sup>167</sup> The demands became the slogans of the event and participants claimed to easily recall those decades later. "I can still remember the banners," noted one resident in Dresden [Frank R. M.], "We Sachsenwerkers [the Sachsenwerk workforce] demand a retraction of the heightened norms" and "down with the Ulbricht regime."<sup>168</sup> Workers at the Sachsenwerk and Abus grounds had drawn up

<sup>165</sup> [illeg.] Polizei Kreisamt Görlitz, Amtsleiter, Görlitz den 27.6.53 an die Bezirksbehörde der Deutschen Volkspolizei Einsatzleitung (SächsHStA 23/18 Bl.183): "Verbrecherregierung"

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> "Betr. "Ifa-phänomen Zittau – Feststellung über einzelne Provokateure im Betriebe" SED Kreisleitung Bautzen an die Bezirksparteikontrollkommission z.Hd.d. Becker, Dresden. [un-dated] (SächsHStA 11857, IV2.4 Nr. 072 Bl.35).

<sup>168</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 153.

other banners that morning calling for German Unity, freedom, “Ulbricht to the gallows,” and “down with Grotewohl.”<sup>169</sup> A number of protestors at the Postplatz carried placards that called for new elections and those that held such signs, according to one witness, also called for representatives to appear in public and answer questions.<sup>170</sup> The construction factory on Grunaer Street joined the protests and its workers carried banners that called for a general strike.<sup>171</sup> The scenes were similar elsewhere. In Görlitz the workers carried banners thinking the workers of Berlin. They demanded that the HO prices be lowered 40%, that immediately all-German elections take place, that the Oder-Neisse border be abolished, and that the KVP and the regime be abolished.<sup>172</sup>

While one analysis by the regional leadership office in Dresden noted that surprisingly few leaflets appeared, quite a few letters threatening functionaries had been sent, especially in Görlitz.<sup>173</sup> Other reports suggest that handwritten leaflets had been found containing death threats to local functionaries. Leaflets at MTS Taubenheim reportedly called for a “return to fascism” (though this could have been a call for a range of more innocuous things) and removal of the hated state-run Konsum stores.<sup>174</sup> Meißen appears to have been an exception to the rule regarding leaflets. Police records note that the “enemy” attempted to incite the population through the spread of inflammatory

<sup>169</sup> Hundhausen, *Der 17. Juni in Sachsenwerk Dresden und der ABUS*, 32.

<sup>170</sup> *Lange and Roß, 17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 157.

<sup>171</sup> “Information am 17.6.1953,” FDGB-Bezirkvorstand Dresden Statistik / Berichterstattung, Dresden, den 17.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.12 Nr. 10).

<sup>172</sup> “Die Kreissekretäre berichten anlässlich einer Besprechung im Bezirksverband Dresden folgende Situation: KV : Kollege Louda:” Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands, Bezirksverband Dresden, Dresden am 18.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.12 Nr. 8).

<sup>173</sup> “Analyse über die Entstehung, den Ausbruch, die Entwicklung des fasch. Abenteurers und seine Liquidierung,” SED Bezirksleitung Dresden, gen. Wolf, Dresden, den 8.7.1953 (SächsHStA Dresden, 11857, IV/2.12 Nr. 8 Bl.14).

<sup>174</sup> “Bericht an das Sekretariat über die Geschlossenheit, Aktivität, und Kampfkraft die die Partei Entwickelte, zur Zerschlagung der feindlichen Aktion,” Abt. Leitende Organe, Dresden, den 20.6.53. (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.12 Nr. 9).

pamphlets that had been typed up and posted on advertising columns in the city spreading rumors concerning leadership and the collapse of the GDR.<sup>175</sup>

### Party Badges

Dresdeners' removal of their party badges represented the emblematic destruction, or even a reversal, of the SED's essential political community. Removing one's badge appears to have been a popular form of protest on June 17 and records and eyewitness reports suggest that the number of East Germans who removed their regalia was significant. On her way to the park, Hannelore had picked up a red SED badge, known colloquially as an "existence badge."<sup>176</sup> Later she showed the badge to another woman in the park, who pointed out that she had found three such badges already: "They are throwing away their existence." Hannelore remembered thinking that perhaps the GDR was at its end, and everything was changing.<sup>177</sup> One comrade in the city of Dresden noticed that workers who had gone to work as comrades, were suddenly no longer comrades and a large portion of the workers had removed their party insignias.<sup>178</sup> Eyewitness Hans Hundhausen recalled that as the streetcars came to a halt, demonstrators called on passengers to join the protest and several comrades ripped off their party badges.<sup>179</sup> This is partially confirmed by an SED situation report that the next day,

<sup>175</sup> "Betr.: Auswertung der reignisse vom 17.65.53," Volkspolizeifreisamt Meissen Politabteilung Meissen, d 3.7.53 (SächsHStA 23/18 Bl.207).

<sup>176</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 165.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.: "Sie werfen ihre Existenz weg."

<sup>178</sup> SED Kreisleitung Dresden Stadt, Abt. P.u.M, Parteiinformation, Dresden, den 24.6.53, Lagebericht von 24.6.53, - 10:30 Uhr. (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV 2 5 553).

<sup>179</sup> Hundhausen, *Der 17. Juni 1953 in Sachsenwerk Dresden und der ABUS*, 35

Dresdeners were overheard discussing the “hundreds of Party badges that remained [on the ground] at the Postplatz.”<sup>180</sup>

### **Solidarity in the Airwaves**

In the evening, as the demonstrations waned, Western observers and transmitters continued to endow the June 17 demonstrations with national imaginings. The FRG for instance, called for, “all of us [to] stick together, without differences of political opinion, until we reach the great and common goal.”<sup>181</sup> While some commentators, either mistakenly or as a sort of shorthand, continued to refer to the day’s events as predominately a Berlin event, the messengers intended to reaffirm an imagined community of all Germans. Furthermore, while listenership is impossible to determine with any precision, RIAS’ longstanding popularity and the tumultuousness of the day meant that in all likelihood, a good number of Dresdeners tuned in that night.<sup>182</sup>

Shortly thereafter, at 20:19 and 20:57, RIAS broadcasted to East Germans the speech of Ernst Reuter (mayor of Berlin), speaking at a solidarity demonstration in Vienna. Listeners heard Reuter note that, “no power on earth can hold the German people permanently in bondage...we are determined to reach our goal...of national unity.”<sup>183</sup> In the next hour RIAS broadcasted solidarity demonstrations held by the DGB and the SPD in West Berlin. The station stressed, too, that the demonstrations had unleashed strong feelings of sympathy for the GDR demonstrations along with a keen interest to learn of

<sup>180</sup> “Situationsbericht des Genossen Kempt,” SED 8. Stadtbezirk, Dresden, Den 18.6.53, K/Sch (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.4. Nr. 60, Bl.93).

<sup>181</sup> FRG Ministry for All-German Questions, *It Happened in June 1953: Facts and Dates* (Bonn: Weyler-Druck, 1966), 52.

<sup>182</sup> RIAS also notes that they received thousands of extra letters from throughout the GDR following the demonstrations, which suggests heightened listenership.

<sup>183</sup> FRG Ministry for All-German Questions, *It Happened in June 1953*, 52; “Der Aufstand der Arbeiterschaft,” 10. The speech is re-produced in former and merely noted as “broadcasted” in the latter.

what happened in the “free world.”<sup>184</sup> RIAS also used the opportunity to position June 17 as a significant international event in the Cold War, noting that President Eisenhower argued the day represented an “extremely momentous event” and a “demonstration of communist lies.”<sup>185</sup> The station passed on to East Germans that night that an American Senator (Alexander Wiley) considered the demonstrations a “symptom of general unrest in the communist sphere of control.”<sup>186</sup>

RIAS also repeated some of the broadcasts from earlier in the day. One comrade in Löbau, the factory foreman, noted to party officials that he did not usually listen to RIAS, but that on the evening of the seventeenth he tuned into hear the reports of the red flag being torn from the Brandenburg Gate. “I also heard that some police have come over to the side of the demonstrators because they were fed up with it all,” he declared, “It was really a factual report because you could hear the ruckus on the street, cars honking and so forth.”<sup>187</sup> The preference for RIAS broadcasts as sources of (trusted information) and the lack of faith in GDR news sources, along with rumors and misinformation, would continue to beleaguer the SED in the coming weeks. This is the subject of the next chapter.

<sup>184</sup> “17.6. rk Abgeordnetenhaus – Demonstrationen” Approx. screen 330 (DRA Potsdam, B203-00-02/0001).

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.: “äusserst bedeutsames Ereignis,” “Beweis für die Lügen der Kommunisten.”

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.: “ein Symptom der allgemeinen Unruhe im kommunistischen Machtbereich.”

<sup>187</sup> “Vorkommnisse in der Zeit vom 17. -20.6 1953,” SED Kreisleitung Löbau an die Bezirkspartei-Kontrollkommission Dresden, Löbau, 21 Dezember 1953 (SächsHStA 11857, IV/2.4 Nr 061 Bl.179): Der genosse Becher, Betriebsleiter der Büromöbelfabrik Nuegersdorf, erklärte folgendes: “ich höre sonst keinen Rias, aber am Mittwoch habe ich abends auch einmal den Rias eingeschaltet und habe mir den Tatsachenbericht angehört über die Herunterholung der Roten Fahne auf dem Brandenburger Tor. Dabei hörte ich, dass auch Volkspolizisten übergelaufen sind, denn diese haben im Rundfunk erklärt, dass sie die Sache satt hätten. Es war wirklich ein Tatsachenbericht, denn man hörte den Krawall auf der Straße, Auto hupen und dergleichen.”



## Conclusions

While historians are fond of mentioning the ways in which revolution sweeps across space like “wildfire,” an examination into the June 17 demonstrations reveals that the diffusion of revolutionary ideas unfolded more quickly than anyone could have anticipated. In this way, the June 17 events represented a new type of demonstration, wherein mass media broadcasted the story in real time and mass demonstrations could unfold simultaneously, but not necessarily “spontaneously,” throughout a nation state. While historians like to point to the “signal effect” of RIAS, the station also mobilized the GDR’s citizenry, stimulated protest-minded conversations in the rival public sphere, and provided the revolutionary script. RIAS programming also endowed the demonstrations with national imaginings by broadcasting declarations of solidarity. Workers and residents listened to radio broadcasts the evening of the sixteenth or tuned in Wednesday morning. So-called whisper campaigns, private workers’ meetings, and discussion groups that formed in the streets served as places individuals to share knowledge or debate politics. In these spaces, individuals shared knowledge of the situations and deliberated courses of action. Public spaces became spaces of appearance, where individuals, through collective action, openly criticized the regime. Demonstrators attempted to connect with other demonstrators through radio—successfully in Görlitz. In Dresden, efforts to commandeer the telegraph building failed, though the *Stadtfunk* briefly fell into the hands of protestors. While some historians have argued that RIAS created and controlled the narrative of the demonstrations, the prevalence of rumors and misinformation indicate that this was certainly not always the case, at least as events unfolded. One *can* be certain, however, that RIAS essentially turned what might have

been a localized event in Berlin into a nationwide demonstration, full of national imaginings.

## Chapter Five

### The Embers of Unrest

*“Our press represents an instrument of power, but we must correctly exploit this instrument of power.”*

-The Socialist Unity Party in Dresden, a week after the demonstrations<sup>1</sup>

Though public spaces had been largely cleared of demonstrators by 18 June, the situation remained tense in Dresden. Tanks rumbled through the city and parked in strategic places, often outside factories where workers occasionally went on strike.<sup>2</sup> Soviet troops occupied and regulated other strategic points of transmission, exchange, and assembly such as bridges, the telegraph bureau, and the Postplatz.<sup>3</sup> Soviet motorcycles lined the perimeter of the Zwinger, another area that demonstrators had occupied the day before.<sup>4</sup> But witnesses remember that a relative calm quickly fell over the region and as party symbols resurfaced—for example, a bust of Stalin in a classroom—the SED appeared to regain its footing. Students recalled that classes resumed after a couple days, although instructors avoided discussing recent events. One witness described the scene on the streets and in the city squares as normal, aside from the occupation.<sup>5</sup> Still, in the days and weeks following the demonstrations, protest continued, if not in the streets, then through the airwaves and by hearsay and ephemeral public exchanges in spaces difficult for the state to regulate. Thus the rival public sphere

<sup>1</sup> “Lagebericht vom 24.6.53 – 10,30 Uhr,” SED Kreisleitung Dresden Stadt, Abt. P.u.M, Parteiinformation Dresden, den 24.6.53 (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.54): “Unsere Presse stellt ein Machtmittel dar, aber wir müssen dieses Machtmittel richtig auswerten.”

<sup>2</sup> Lange and Roß, *17. Juni 1953, Zeitzeugen Berichten*, 372-4, 376.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 373-4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

and the popular opinion it generated continued to undermine and challenge the regime in a variety of ways.

This chapter re-examines the rival and official public spheres and assess their roles in the aftermath of the demonstrations. In the weeks following the June 17 demonstrations, the status and future of the GDR and even the entire Soviet satellite system appeared to many to hang in the balance. In this way, the aftermath of June 17 mostly supports the historical axioms that wars, revolutions, and mass upheavals rarely have tidy endings. While governments, media, and military authorities on both sides of the Iron Curtain announced or recognized that the nation-wide public demonstration had been extinguished nearly as quickly as it had detonated, the situation, as *popularly* conceptualized, often appeared in flux and it seemed that for the time being, the SED had been outflanked—with the aid of foreign broadcasting—by an ascendant public. Thus the first part of this chapter examines how, through the rival public sphere, participants, witnesses, and commentators publicly communicated protest and imagined communities of support after the June 17 demonstrations. These communities of support had an international dimension, bringing to light the polarized political situation, centered, not for the last time, in East Germany. The second half of the chapter will show that the SED pushed back by communicating stability and representing through the official public sphere its own imagined communities of support, domestic and international, to enhance its legitimacy. Taken together, the evidence presented here amounts to a case study of the intersection of distinct Cold War nationalism and internationalism, modern mass politicking, and the power of public opinion in divided Europe.

## Part One

### The Rival Public Sphere

#### The Popularity of News Sources

In the weeks after June 17, reports from the regional governments to Berlin noted that RIAS's audience throughout the GDR continued to expand, with some listeners now even letting the broadcasts blare out of their windows. For example, in the town of Werdau (not in the Dresden Region), officials noted that whereas RIAS had previously been listened to privately, it could now be heard in public.<sup>6</sup> June 17 also emboldened East Germans to publicly criticize the regime: consider for example the factory leader who on June 18, tuned into RIAS, cranked the volume up for all his co-workers, and announced, "Listen to this, the party bigwigs are driving cars while we push bicycles."<sup>7</sup>

One reason for RIAS's sustained popularity rested with the weakness of the official public sphere, which, in the eyes of many, failed to reflect popular opinion and did not deliver credible news. Furthermore, the SED came to the realization that it did not have its finger on the nation's pulse in the wake of the June 17 events.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Berlin received reports from every regional office that the population became increasingly more likely to dismiss the reporting from domestic radio and press as phony news in the weeks

<sup>6</sup> "Betrifft: Situationsbericht aus den Konsumgenossenschaften der DDR zu dem Kommuniqué des Politbüros und den Beschlüssen der Regierung vom 17. bis einschließlich 20.6.1953," Kurt Preikschat, Berlin, 22.6.1953 im Verband Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften e.G.m.b.H. an das ZK der SED, Abteilung Information (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/544 Bl.127).

<sup>7</sup> "Neue feindliche Aktionen und Gerüchte," Nr.8 Berlin, den 24.6.1953, Rauchbach (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5 547 Bl.125): "Guck mal, die Bonzen fahren mit dem Auto und wir müssen die Fahrräder schieben."

<sup>8</sup> See for example, "Bericht an das Sekretariat über die Geschlossenheit, Aktivität und Kampfkraft die die Partei entwickelte, zur Zerschlagung der feindlichen Aktion." Abt. Leitende Organe Dresden, den 20.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2/12/009).

after June 17.<sup>9</sup> In Dresden, in one instance, the party found itself forced to send a delegation from a factory to Berlin for clarification on the political situation as they refused to believe the official GDR broadcasts.<sup>10</sup> Other East Germans blamed East German programmers' decision to play serious music when they simply wanted something lighter—which forced them to tune in to RIAS.<sup>11</sup> Some listeners complained that the foreign broadcasters delivered news quickly while the GDR's stations lagged behind.<sup>12</sup> These negative assessments of GDR programming persisted through at least mid-July (and probably thereafter), prompting one functionary from Görlitz to write, “They [the residents] still say the programming [of GDR radio] has not really changed, and it is no wonder that people listen to RIAS.”<sup>13</sup>

The SED's press fared little better in the aftermath of June 17 and incurred similar criticism that found its way back to the regime. On June 19, residents bought up all the copies of newspapers, reportedly ripping them from the hands of the sales people to the extent that the district asked for extra copies of *Neues Deutschland*.<sup>14</sup> As the regime chose not to address the demonstrations on June 18, this likely presented locals the first opportunity to see what their government had to say about recent events. Dresdeners

<sup>9</sup> “Zusammenfassung der wichtigsten Fragen aus den Berichten der Bezirke vom 25.6.1953,” Abteilung Leitende Organe der Partei und Massenorganisationen, Berlin, den 25.6.1953 (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/547).

<sup>10</sup> Staatliche Organe, Dresden, am 18.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 IV 2.13 Nr. 6). The factory was IFA-Werk II in Seifhennersdorf.

<sup>11</sup> “Zusammenfassung der wichtigsten Erscheinungen aus den Berichten der Bezirksleitung vom 28.6.1953,” Abteilung Leitende Organe der Partei und der Massenorganisationen, Berlin, den 29.6.1953 - (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/547 Bl.183); Bezirksleitung Dresden, Gen. Kröger, 2.7.53, 11:50 Uhr, (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.99).

<sup>12</sup> “Informationsbericht,” Nationale Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Bezirksausschuss Dresden, 14.7.53 (SAPMO-BArch DY6 5006).

<sup>13</sup> “Agitationsbericht für die Zeit vom 10.7. bis 16.7.1953. SED Betriebsparteiorganisation – EKM Görlitzer Maschinenbau VEB,” Görlitz, dem 16.July, 1953 (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.9.01 Nr. 40 Bl.55): “Zum Funk wird noch gesagt, dass er sein Programm noch nicht wesentlich geändert hat und sich keiner wundern soll, wenn einer RIAS hört.”

<sup>14</sup> Bezirksleitung Dresden, Genn, Elli Schmidt, 19.6 (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/535 Bl.57).

criticized the narratives postulated by their local press, which tended to localize and diminish the event. Some complained, for example, that the local press reduced the geographic scope of unrest to Dresden and Görlitz while ignoring demonstrations that had unfolded in the counties.<sup>15</sup> Other condemnations centered on the press's misrepresentation of the current state of affairs and government's lack of a "connection" with workers and rural populations alike. Workers in Transformatorenwerk complained about *Neues Deutschland's* assertion that "All [East Germans] stood united behind the regime;" a dubious claim that proved the regime continued to "whitewash" the situation through the official public sphere.<sup>16</sup>

The weaknesses in the domestic press meant that Dresdeners, like those in other regions, tended to rely on the rival public sphere instead, which of course included news from RIAS. Reports from regional authorities to leadership in Berlin noted that in every county in the Dresden region RIAS continued to gain listeners.<sup>17</sup> Officials in Dippoldiswalde confirmed that residents often listened to RIAS and *believed* the reports—a potentially serious problem in their minds. After all, the SED had concluded, and not entirely incorrectly, that RIAS had given the signal for the demonstrations to begin, and the peace that settled over Dresden could again be shattered should RIAS set things off once again. "It is indeed 'peaceful,' but one gets the feeling that some are merely waiting for a signal to start rioting," noted one official.<sup>18</sup> The belief that the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "Lage im Bezirk Dresden," Telefonische Durchsage BL Dresden (Gen. Wurzbacher), 25.6.1953/17.20 Uhr/Aufgenommen: genn. Arnold (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.75): "Das ganze Volk steht geschlossen hinter der Regierung"; "Schönfärben" – a term that occurs frequently in this context.

<sup>17</sup> "Bericht über den Instrukteur Einsatz im Bezirk Dresden von 7-11 Juli," Instrukteure Gründen und Köhler, Berlin, den 14.7.1953 (SAPMO-BArch Nationalrat der Nationalen Front der DDR, DY 6/5006).

<sup>18</sup> "Sondereinsatz für ZK-Berichterstattung," Kreis Dippoldiswalde, 10-16 Uhr- Gen.Peter, 22.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.0.01 Nr. 38 Bl.61): "Es ist zwar alles 'ruhig,' man hat aber den Eindruck, dass einige nur auf ein Zeichen warten, auch mit Unruhen zu beginnen."

demonstrations could and should and might continue, although they had their origins in rumor rather than RIAS despite what SED functionaries believed, proved problematic for party leaders. In sum, the weakness of the domestic media organs and the strength of RIAS together represented a serious threat to the regime's tenuous hold on public tranquility and its ability to regain its political footing.

### **RIAS's Interpretation**

RIAS established the popular version of events. The station characterized the demonstrations as spontaneous, which became a keyword to designate the event as one that represented genuine or authentic protest, rather than the orchestrated demonstrations staged by a government.<sup>19</sup> On the evening of June 17 and during the days after, RIAS continued to frame the demonstrations as popular uprisings motivated by nationalism (based especially on the desire for reunification) and a spirit of revolution that reached across the GDR and cut across class lines. As the demonstrations had waned in the evening of June 17, RIAS had reiterated that, contrary to what SED officials might try to promote, reports had streamed in from cities throughout the GDR where citizens had demonstrated.<sup>20</sup> Interviews with West German political leaders punctuated conversations that noted, "the last two days of demonstrations are a grave reminder to the entire world that the German Question demands an answer sooner rather than later."<sup>21</sup> On June 18, RIAS had broadcasted a commentary by Egon Bahr that continued to reinforce the national imaginings that the station had conferred on the June 17 demonstrations. Taking

<sup>19</sup> "Der Aufstand der Arbeiterschaft." See especially pg. 16, "Kommentar," Egon Bahr. See also the evaluation from Matthias Walden (pg. 17-18) which attacks the SED's claims.

<sup>20</sup> Nachrichten. alt. mat. 18.6/ko. (DRA Potsdam B203-00-02/0001 S.26). Precise time not noted.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., "Die Demonstrationen der letzten zwei Tage seien zugleich eine ernste Mahnung an die gesamte Welt, die Deutschland -Frage einer beschleunigten Lösung zuzuführen"



stock of what had transpired the previous day, he stated: “What people in the West had probably considered impossible: the working class and people from all strata of society demonstrated on their own will. They demonstrated not only against the norms and high cost of living [in the GDR], but for something else, too—for their reunification with the rest of Germany, for freedom.”<sup>22</sup> RIAS also portrayed the demonstrations as a moment when residents of the GDR became aware of their ability to effectively test state power: “The people have measured their strength against the regime,” claimed the station, “the workforce and the masses are aware of their power. They’ve handed the SED the biggest defeat of its existence.”<sup>23</sup> In the coming weeks, SED functionaries would find themselves contending with an active and hostile public sphere despite their efforts to prevent dissident exchanges, notably by jamming RIAS and prohibiting public assembly.

Dresdeners, and other East and West Germans who tuned in to RIAS between 7:20 and 7:30 AM on June 18 heard the program “Berlin Speaks to the Zone” transmit the sentiment of citizens and governments in the Federal Republic and Western Europe where special editions of newspapers reportedly flew off the presses to tell the story of June 17. Likewise, they heard that declarations of solidarity for the demonstrators came out of the various West German workplaces in telegraph and telephone exchanges. One notable trait of broadcasts is the tendency of the commentators to concentrate on the Berlin demonstrations, though this seemed to have little to no effect on listeners’ opinion

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<sup>22</sup> “Der Aufstand der Arbeiterschaft,” 15: “Was wohl kaum jemand im Westen für möglich gehalten hat: die Arbeiterschaft und sich anschließende Menschen aus allen Bevölkerungsschichten haben aus eigenem Willen demonstriert. Demonstriert nicht nur gegen die Normen und die hohen Lebenshaltungskosten, sondern für etwas, für ihre Vereinigung mit dem übrigen Deutschland, für die Freiheit.”

<sup>23</sup> “Der Aufstand der Arbeiterschaft,” 16: “Die Bevölkerung hat ihre Kräfte mit dem Regime gemessen. Die Arbeiterschaft und die Bevölkerung sind sich ihrer Kraft bewusst geworden. Sie haben die SED die größte Niederlage seit ihrem Bestehen zugefügt.”

that June 17 represented a national event.<sup>24</sup> And at the same time, RIAS just as often noted that the demonstrations took place throughout the “Soviet Zone of Occupation” so listeners probably merely considered Berlin the epicenter of events.<sup>25</sup> Regardless, RIAS transmitted a Cold War nationalism based on empathy and reunification that dominated the airwaves before, during, and after June 17. RIAS noted “the sympathy expressed by those in the Federal Government, and the parliament of the German Trade Unions Federation for the [East Germans’] struggle for freedom.”<sup>26</sup> The station broadcasted that leaders in Stuttgart passed a resolution that looked to foster human rights in the GDR: “The Parliament from Baden-Wuerttemberg salutes in this hour of hardship, those who fought for freedom as citizens...in East Berlin and the entire eastern Zone.”<sup>27</sup>

On the morning of June 18, RIAS reported to listeners throughout East Germany that an “exceptionally strong echo” reverberated throughout through the world’s media and that the GDR dominated the headlines of the world’s press as it had done during the blockade.<sup>28</sup> The June 17 demonstrations constituted an international media event and a sympathetic community of support transmitted public opinion from European and other western nations. RIAS broadcasted western communications, sympathies, and reactions to the June 17 demonstrations, which represented a distinctly modern and international public sphere that challenged the SED’s version of events and the SED’s claims of popular support. RIAS described similar scenes throughout Europe where citizens

<sup>24</sup> In an interview years later, station director Gordon Ewing noted how much this upset him.

<sup>25</sup> “Sowjetische Besatzungszone” Recall that one tactic employed by RIAS to undermine and challenge the legitimacy of the SED included referring to the GDR as “die Zone” or the “Pankower System,” among other monikers.

<sup>26</sup> “Der Aufstand der Arbeiterschaft,” 12: “Die von Bundesregierung und Bundestag und vom Deutschen Gewerkschaftsbund bezeugte Sympathie für den Freiheitskampf der Ostberliner und der Sowjetzonenbevölkerung wurde im Laufe des gestrigen Tages”

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 12: “Die Volksvertretung von Baden-Württemberg begrüßt in dieser schweren Stunde die um ihre Freiheit als Staatsbürger und schaffende kämpfende Bevölkerung in Ostberlin und der Gesamten Ostzone.”

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 12: “Außerordentlich starkes Echo”

consumed news that told the story of East Germans' courage. For example, the station reported to listeners that in Holland, the nation's largest daily newspaper, the socialist *Het Vrije Volk (A Free People)* reported as early as Wednesday afternoon what had unfolded in Berlin. Copies of the paper reportedly "sold out in a heartbeat."<sup>29</sup> RIAS reported to listeners in the GDR that radio stations dedicated the largest part of its nightly news broadcast to the demands for freedom heard in Berlin and East Germany.<sup>30</sup> News transmitted by outlets in the United States also found its way into Dresdeners' homes via RIAS. "As in Europe the public is focused on the events in East Berlin," the station went on to report that "Radio and TV stations reported intermittingly in several minutes on the newest developments in the Soviet Zone."<sup>31</sup> At noon, RIAS reviewed the opinions published in the foreign press.<sup>32</sup> "Western Europe and the entire world will never be the same," proclaimed the *New York Herald Tribune*, while RIAS broadcasted the *New York Time's* commentary which suggested that "the German people will not tolerate oppression forever."<sup>33</sup>

### **Making Connections to Women in the GDR**

RIAS also aimed to create an imagined bond between West and East German women in particular by airing the program "Women's Voices" ("Stimme der Frau"). "In these hours we women of West Berlin and the entire free world feel bound especially closely with you," noted the commentator who also stated that "Your husbands and sons,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.: "im Nu vergriffen."

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 13: "Wie in Europa konzentrierte sich auch in den Vereinigten Staaten das Interesse der Öffentlichkeit auf die Ereignisse in Ostberlin. Rundfunk und Fernsehsender berichteten in Abständen von wenigen Minuten über die neueste Entwicklung im Sowjetsektor."

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 14: "Westeuropa und die ganze Welt werden niemals wieder so sein wie vorher; Das deutsche Volk wird Unterdrückung nicht ewig dulden."

and not least, yourselves, have demonstrated against the power that has repressed you for years.”<sup>34</sup> The station also framed the prior day’s event as a decisive moment when women publically announced “where they really stood.”<sup>35</sup> West German public opinion found transmission inside further commentary by the (female) secretary of the (West) German Salaried Workers Union (Deutsche Angestellten-Gewerkschaft), who told East German women that the organization called on them to “have faith!”<sup>36</sup> The program noted that they had received word via telegraph that afternoon that the women of West Germany were aware of the difficulties and oppression faced by women in the Soviet Zone and that they stood ready to take all necessary steps to assist and help those in the GDR.<sup>37</sup> Another female commentator from the FRG told listeners that the demonstrations’ power became evident to her as she read the stories in newspapers. Referring to the public actions that unfolded in cities she concluded: “here’s to our courage for solidarity.”<sup>38</sup>

### **News in Neighboring States**

In some ways the demonstrations foreshadowed the political events leading up to the fall of the Wall in 1989, as the idea of change swirled through the satellite states behind the Iron Curtain. Officials in these nations had to deal with this problematic information that trickled in through unofficial conduits with care. News of the East German demonstrations represented an existential threat to communist party leaders behind the Iron Curtain where according to commentators, this news, a concoction of

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 13: “In diesen Stunden fühlen wir Frauen Westberlins und der ganzen Welt und besonders eng mit Ihnen verbunden. Ihre Männer und Söhne und nicht zuletzt Sie selbst demonstrieren gegen eine Macht, die seit Jahren unterdrückte.”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 13: “wirklich stehen”

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 13,

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 14: “Auf unseren Mut zur Solidarität!”

rumor and foreign broadcasting, typically “spread like wildfire.”<sup>39</sup> On June 18, Czech police, for instance, had begun to take precautions against the “provocations” in the neighboring GDR.<sup>40</sup> The Czech government noted that news had quickly spread into the country and some “reactionary elements” and “entrepreneurs” had quickly become convinced that the time had arrived for privatization.<sup>41</sup> Officials identified the source of this news as “Voice of Free Europe” (so probably either Voice of America or Radio Free Europe), which had been broadcasting the “most senseless speeches.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the news of unrest in the GDR spawned a number of rumors in Czechoslovakia, one of which held that revolution had seized Germany.<sup>43</sup> In Poland, state security aimed to prevent unrest in the GDR from spilling into their state. At least one report (on June 19) suggested a storyline similar to the one constructed by SED authorities: that imperialist agents and spy circles from the U.S. and West Germany would attempt to foment unrest, particularly in former German territories and Upper Silesia.<sup>44</sup>

### **Rumor in Dresden**

Evidence of the widespread circulation of rumors helps explain Heidi Roth’s contention that the Dresden region achieved a higher level of rebellion than elsewhere in the GDR, as her study does not analyze public opinion as I do here. As rumors and improvised news regarding June 17 swirled through the Eastern Bloc in the weeks and months after the demonstrations, so did speculation about events in these neighboring

<sup>39</sup> FRG Ministry for All-German Questions, *It Happened in June 1953*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> See June 30, 1953, Current Intelligence Bulletin by the CIA’s office of Current Intelligence (SC No. 07069, Copy No. 84), as reproduced in Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, 237, note 136.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 238-40.

<sup>44</sup> Order from Polish Minister of State Security of regional Branches Outlining Steps to be taken to Limit Spillover of Events in East Germany, 19 June 1953, Warsaw, 19 June 1953 Ministry of State Security No. AC-R-1022/53, translated in Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, 241.

states circulated in public conversations in Dresden, prolonging revolutionary fervor. Once again, we can explain these phenomenon as “imaginative works built out of social materials,” that help us understand how residents in the GDR, at least in the Dresden region, conceptualized the world around them in a turbulent and confused situation.<sup>45</sup> As noted in previous chapters, rumors regarding unrest, rebellion, and revolution in these areas helped create a more volatile situation in Dresden before the uprising and probably after, too.

Indeed, improvised news that circulated in the rival public sphere exaggerated the state of unrest in Dresden, the GDR and the East Bloc states. Locally, the Young Pioneers spread the news that the Americans would soon arrive in downtown Dresden and that the Red Army had supposedly been driven from the northern part of the GDR (not true).<sup>46</sup> In some towns in the Dresden region, residents discussed revolts that had begun in Hungary (not true), as refugees from that state who now supposedly began arriving in the GDR (not until 1956).<sup>47</sup> At least in the Dresden region (and once again, this is probably due to geographic proximity), functionaries overheard residents throughout the region discussing what they believed to be a revolutionary situation in Czechoslovakia: there were reports of numerous dead in different cities, including Prague, which was said to be in flames and rumors that along with the Skoda Automotive works, an automobile factory that burned as unrest continued to spread.<sup>48</sup> The unrest here had ended weeks prior. In

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<sup>45</sup> Ewing, *Rumor, Diplomacy and War in Enlightenment Paris*, 11. 2014.

<sup>46</sup> “Mitteilung von Bautzen, gute Arbeitsmoral,” Staatliche Organe, Dresden am 18.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.13 Nr. 6).

<sup>47</sup> “Lagebericht der Bezirksleitung Dresden vom 22.6.1953 2.35 Uhr.”

<sup>48</sup> “Betrifft: Situationsbericht aus den Konsumgenossenschaften der DDR zu dem Kommuniqué des Politbüros und den Beschlüssen der Regierung vom 17. bis einschließlich 20.6.1953,” Kurt Preikschat im Verband Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften e.G.m.b.H. An Das ZK der SED Abteilung Information, Berlin, den 22.6.1953 (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/544 Bl.127).

Pirna residents demanded that the press and radio of the GDR address this development.<sup>49</sup> Here, residents discussed the causalities there and asked for the newspapers to publish information about this.<sup>50</sup> Residents in Freital believed an event similar to that of June 17 had transpired in the CSR and that 800 had died (an exaggeration, but not entirely untrue).<sup>51</sup> In Löbau, residents claimed according to a “completely reliable source” that airplanes were transporting the wounded from Prague and Warsaw to Dresden (unconfirmed).<sup>52</sup> In towns along the Elbe River, residents wondered about the veracity of the information circulating about Czechoslovakia as they had heard bathing in the river was forbidden, because after all, rumor had it that corpses had been floating downstream from Prague (highly unlikely).<sup>53</sup> In other towns, functionaries noted that residents believed Warsaw was now engulfed in flames.<sup>54</sup> That the functionaries labeled such claims as rumor also speaks to the polarization of news, and thus reality, at the time.

These rumors, along with RIAS news stories, prompted listeners to imagine themselves as part of an international rebellion whose adherents both commiserated in their oppression (those in the West who kept them in their thoughts) and joined them in the struggle (the eastern bloc residents rumored to be in revolt) for liberation. This created a dangerous situation for the SED and thus the week of June 17 became an

<sup>49</sup> “Betrifft: Situationsbericht aus den Konsumgenossenschaften der DDR zu dem Kommuniqué des Politbüros und den Beschlüssen der Regierung vom 17. bis einschließlich 18.6.1953,” Berlin, den 20.6.1953, Kurt Preikschat im Verband Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften e.G.m.b.H. Berlin w.8., Stresemanns. 128 an das ZK der SED Abteilung Information (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/544 Bl.121).

<sup>50</sup> “Betrifft: Situationsbericht aus den Konsumgenossenschaften der DDR zu dem Kommuniqué des Politbüros und den Beschlüssen der Regierung vom 17. bis einschließlich 20.6.1953.”

<sup>51</sup> Information vom Rat des Bezirkes, 1.40 Uhr, Staatliche Organe, Dresden am 19.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.13 Nr. 06).

<sup>52</sup> “Aus dem Bericht der Bezirksleitung Dresden u.a. wie hervor,” Simon: 22.6.1953, 15.45 (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553): “ganz sicherer Quelle”

<sup>53</sup> “Bericht über die Lage am 4.7.53,” BL – Dresden – Genn.Schulz, 17.00 Uhr (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.120).

<sup>54</sup> “Aus dem Bericht der Bezirksleitung Dresden u.a. wie hervor,” Durchgegeben: Gen. Hoffmann, Aufgenommen: Genn. Olia 22.6.1953, 15.45 – Simon (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553).

important moment in GDR history as the SED realized just how weak its efforts to communicate with the masses had been.

### **The Continuation of Dissent**

While mass political action in the streets dissipated after June 17, protest activity continued throughout the GDR in the form of workers' (anti-communist) resolutions, leaflets, rumors, various forms of rabble-rousing (*Hetze*), letters that threatened officials, and, of course, more rumors. While leaflets and other forms of written protest had been rare on June 17, they increased in the weeks afterwards and challenged the regime's legitimacy and authority. One should also note that this time lag probably reflects the very modernity of the event, as radio broadcasts that shaped the demonstrations largely outpaced the ability of demonstrators to produce written communications, though they certainly appeared on June 17.

Resolutions from workers' meetings continued to serve as a form of expression in the rival public sphere. On June 18 and 19, workers in the region continued to hold private meetings where they drafted, read, and dispatched letters demanding various actions by the regime. For example, in Radebeul, workers called on the SED to lift the state of emergency, arrange for all-Germany elections, and release the prisoners taken on June 17.<sup>55</sup> Nearby workforces gathered and drafted similar lists of demands that they then forwarded to the regime. In the countryside on June 19, officials discovered leaflets that read: "Our general strike must continue until the political prisoners are free; until the regime is removed from power, free elections are introduced. If we don't succeed the

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<sup>55</sup> "Resolution," Das Gewerkschaftskollektiv Rapido Radebeul an die Regierung der DDR Berlin. 18.6.53 (SächsHStA 11859 Nr. 140).



party big wigs win and our sacrifice will have been in vain.”<sup>56</sup> Polish authorities shared information with their East German counterparts regarding leaflets that appeared near the border suggesting that the GDR was the intended target for the balloons that carried them. One such leaflet supposedly read: “Through this leaflet we pronounce our slogans, we are known throughout the entire world, in Germany, in Russia, etc. Down with communism, fight the Party and socialism. Pass this on and take action. More leaflets to follow.”<sup>57</sup>

In Dresden and other cities including Berlin, Magdeburg, and Potsdam, residents argued that the strikes were not over yet and a general strike was still to come. In Dresden, some contended that the regime had only changed course to calm down the population and that the money to keep up such programs simply did not exist.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, one of these seemed to be a popular belief that the seventeenth had merely been the opening salvo in what was to be the eventual destruction of the regime.<sup>59</sup> Although Heidi Roth and others note that work stoppages continued sporadically for some time throughout the GDR, the Dresden region had, more or less, gone back to work in the week following the demonstrations. But workers still continued to publically criticize the regime by forming discussion groups and composing resolutions that they then forwarded to local or national authorities.

<sup>56</sup> “Tel. Durchsage von der Bl. Dresden am 19.6.53 um 19 Uhr, Aschwemmer/Wagner (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/535 Bl.56.): “Unser Generalstreik muss weitergeführt werden, bis die pol. Gefangenen frei sind; bis die Regierung abgesetzt ist, freie Wahlen durchgeführt sind, Wenn wir nicht durchhalten, siegen die SED Bonzen und unsere Opfer sind umsonst.”

<sup>57</sup> “Mitteilung der Bezirksleitung Dresden vom 22.6.53 030 Uhr” (erhalten vom Operativsstab Zittau) Genn. Büsner Reitz (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV 2/5/553 Bl.1): “Durch dieses Abzeichen geben wir unsere Parole, wir sind in der ganzen Welt bekannt, in Deutschland, Russland usw. Nieder mit dem Kommunismus, Kampf gegen die Partei und Sozialismus. Gebt dieses Flugblatt von Hand zu Hand weiter und handelt danach. Weitere Flugblätter folgen.”

<sup>58</sup> “Neue feindliche Aktionen und Gerüchte,” Berlin, den 24.6.1953, Rachbach. (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/547 Bl.25).

<sup>59</sup> Dresden, 22.6.53, 6:40 Uhr, Franzski/Wagner (SAPMO-BArch DY30/IV/2/5/553 Bl.17).

Authorities charged with surveying the public mood took stock of the general attitude and conversations held by residents. Confusion still reigned in places, they found, and at least one worker claimed to have heard radio reports of the regime's demise, declaring in response "It's high time the regime is gone."<sup>60</sup> More typically, general reports noted that many expected the New Course to be put in place quickly and in an "un-bureaucratic manner," so that faith in the regime could be restored.<sup>61</sup> In some places, such as in the countryside around Dresden and in Freital, officials noted that many workers refrained from discussing politics, which the report suggested likely stemmed from fear of arrest.<sup>62</sup> In general, the population appeared to profess little faith in the regime and officials noted that it seemed like supposed party members had been working more for the enemy than the regime might have previously thought.<sup>63</sup> Central to the argument here, a report from June 24 that noted that the local population was less concerned with the recent decrees of the Central Committee and the most recent resolutions of the regime, and more concerned with the events of recent days and the "rumors spread by enemies."<sup>64</sup> Even almost two weeks later, officials commented that the population remained critical of the regime and especially the sentiment that the regime had no real connection to its citizenry as lowly party members got lost in the

<sup>60</sup> "Betr.: Bericht über die durchgeführte Kontrollfahrt in den Stadtbezirken Coswig und Weinböhla." KPKK Meißen an das Sekretariat, im Haus, 18.6.53. (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.4 Nr. 06 Bl.81): "Es würde die höchste Zeit, dass die Regierung weg ist."

<sup>61</sup> Dresden, 22.6.53. 6.40 Uhr Freitag, Franzski/Wagner (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV 2/5/553 Bl.17).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> "Lagebericht vom 24.6.53-10.30 Uhr," SED Kreisleitung Dresden Stadt Abt. P.u.M, Parteiinformation, Dresden, den 24.6.53. (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV 2/5/553).

<sup>64</sup> "Bericht über die Stimmung der Bevölkerung zum Beschluss der 14 Plenums des ZK sowie den Beschlüssen der Regierung - Dresden, Bericht über die Lage im Bezirk," Dresden, 24.6.53 – 17:30 Uhr (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.63).

paperwork.<sup>65</sup> In other words the regime lacked a true democratic connection, a feeling shared by one worker in Gröditz who argued that “we have a dictatorship from above, not a dictatorship of the proletariat.”<sup>66</sup> This repeated the criticism of the SED explored in the run-up to June 17, that the party had become distant, not to mention corrupt and bankrupt.

If our digital-age contemporaries refer to a story (or any such item transmitted electronically) that spreads rapidly and widely as something that “goes viral,” then the stories, true or not, surrounding the event of the June 17 proved hardy and potentially dangerous contagions that further threatened an already weakened regime. Indeed, improvised news, whether totally fabricated or mostly accurate, found a place in official SED records in Berlin. Thus, the participants in the rival public sphere gained a unique form of indirect political participation.

### **Desire to re-create the Space of Appearance**

One particularly resilient, and for the SED distressing, rumor in the days and weeks after the uprising was popular view that another massive demonstration lurked just around the corner.<sup>67</sup> This represents a larger theme running through this study that East Germans desired to reestablish contact with what they imagined—especially now owing to June 17—as a vast community of dissidents.

Already during the afternoon and evening hours of June 17, protestors in the city of Dresden had openly called for the demonstrations to continue the next day, as did workers in Kamez, who had planned intra-factory demonstrations for 10:00 A.M. on June

<sup>65</sup> “Betr.: Bericht über die durchgeführten Mitgliederversammlungen, Belegschaftsversammlungen usw.” Durchsage der Bezirksleitung Dresden, 30.6.53, 11,45 Uhr Genn. Hoffman/Klauder (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.89).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.: “Wir hatten keine Diktatur des Proletariats, sondern Diktatur von oben.”

<sup>67</sup> This is an idea that the public abandoned, but the SED did not.

18.<sup>68</sup> Sometimes workers spoke only of further demonstrations to support the workers in Berlin, while a number of rumors proclaimed that a sort of Sorelian general strike would commence the following day. In the town of Kamenz, for instance, word had already arrived at the central leadership in Dresden on June 17 that another demonstration for June 18 had been planned under the slogans “free elections” and “lowered prices.”<sup>69</sup> In the village of Großenhain, rumor spread in one factory that workers in Wismut had formed a marching column and headed toward Dresden, where they would topple the local party regime.<sup>70</sup> Reports appeared Sunday, June 22, that on the following day workers in a number of larger factories in the region (Elbtalwerks, Pirna Sachsenwerk NS und Kunstseidenwerk Siegfried Rädels, Kreis Zittau at the Phänomen Werk) would resume strikes if political prisoners were not released.<sup>71</sup> Such rumors also appeared in Dresden and Sebnitz (Sachsenwerk Radeberg).<sup>72</sup> It seems that some residents were willing to at least attempt to take matters into their own hands; on June 23, for example, “unknown elements” called the Fernmeldeamt and informed them that the strike in Dresden was to begin at 2:30.<sup>73</sup>

Reports from regional governments throughout the GD around June 25 noted rumors of a renewed general strike expressed the sentiment that the revolution had not yet

<sup>68</sup> Bezirksleitung Dresden 22.15 17.6.1953 Rachbach (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/535); Bezirksleitung Dresden, 18.6.53 3.40 Uhr (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/535).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Bezirk Dresden, Genossin Schwemmer; Angenommen: Genn. Barth. 20.6.1953, Müller, 1.05 Uhr (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/535).

<sup>71</sup> “Lagebericht der Bezirksleitung Dresden vom 22.6.1953 2.35 Uhr Durchgegeben,” Genn. Büsner - aufgenommen: Genn. Reitz, Lage um 22.Uhr. Bl.2 (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/553).

<sup>72</sup> “Bericht über die Lage im Bezirk Dresden am 22.6.53,” SED Bezirksleitung Dresden, 23.6.53 – Reimann, Um 6.45 Uhr (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.32).

<sup>73</sup> “Neue feindliche Aktionen und Gerüchte,” 6.23.1953 – 10,55 Uhr (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/547 Bl.101). This may have resulted from confusion regarding the *Trauerkundgebung* RIAS broadcasted that afternoon—more on this below.

ended.<sup>74</sup> Dresden was no different. The supposed dates for the new strikes varied by region. In one county, a rumor circulated that the general strike would break out on June 25 and the regime would fall.<sup>75</sup> It remains difficult to discern where these rumors started, though a report produced by the department of press and radio regarding enemy radio activity on June 27 suggests that NWDR may have been responsible. The report claimed that the station broadcasted throughout the GDR that on June 25 in Dresden (along with several other cities), new demonstrations were to have taken place. But was the station simply passing on a rumor that developed within the GDR and communicated by a source? This is more likely.<sup>76</sup>

### **Atrocities and National Imaginings**

In the weeks following June 17, improvised news circulated in the GDR of atrocities not only in the GDR, but throughout the Eastern Bloc. It remains unknown exactly how many died in the events, but the number is at least 55.<sup>77</sup> The situation was even more unclear in Dresden in the weeks after June 17, though the public knew that there had been death and violence. Officials, for instance, noted one slogan in Para (Riesa County): “We won’t forget the blood of workers that flowed on June 17; we’ve long since given up on the government.”<sup>78</sup> Leadership in Berlin received reports that in some counties, RIAS had allegedly spread the “rumor” that Soviet tanks had repressed East

<sup>74</sup> “Neue feindliche Aktionen und Gerüchte,” Berlin, den 25.6.1953 (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/547).

<sup>75</sup> “Die Ausdehnung dieser feindlichen Aktionen auf das Gebiet der Republik,” Abt. Leitende Organe der Partei und der Massenorganisationen, Berlin, den 24.6.53, (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/547 Bl.138).

<sup>76</sup> “Neue feindliche Aktionen und Gerüchte,” Berlin, den 25.6.1953 (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/547).

<sup>77</sup> “Tote des 17. Juni 1953” at <http://www.17juni53.de/tote/recherche.html>.

<sup>78</sup> “Bericht über den Instrukteureinsatz im Bezirk Dresden vom 7.-11. Juli,” Instrukteure Gründen und Köhler Berlin, den 14.7.1953 (SAPMO-BArch DY 6 5006): “Das Arbeiterblut das am 17. Juni geflossen ist, werden wir nicht vergessen, die Regierung haben wir jedoch schon lange vergessen.”

German workers (this was true, of course).<sup>79</sup> Workers in Dippoldiswalde heard that twelve of their colleagues at Wismut had been shot.<sup>80</sup> Functionaries in Dresden who had been stationed aboard ships traveling the Elbe River overheard discussions of those that had been killed in Dresden (there are two known deaths) and other cities, while in the countryside around Görlitz residents discussed the alleged massacre of political prisoners in a Gestapo-like fashion in Dresden and other cities (this probably did not happen though there were, of course, hundreds of arrests).<sup>81</sup> Sometimes acts of later protest pointed to atrocities. In the week after the demonstrations, young people in Görlitz wore white armbands in public, although officials in the area argued these had nothing to do with the wounded (their reasoning here is unknown).<sup>82</sup> This is part of a general belief in Dresden and perhaps elsewhere in late June that rebels had been shot. Understandably, East Germans demanded answers. District reports from Dresden to Berlin note, for example, that a number of residents from Löbau requested information regarding what had happened in Görlitz and other cities. Residents of Bischofswerda, for instance, had heard that fifty people had been shot in Dresden (an exaggeration) and sought to learn more about events in the regional capital.<sup>83</sup> In all, these tales paint a picture of a confused scene in which popular sentiment found expression in violent and turbulent tales. At the same time the situation reminds us that neither the official public sphere nor the rival

<sup>79</sup> "Neue feindliche Aktionen und Gerüchte," Berlin, den 25.6.1953 (SAPMP-BArch DY 30/IV/2/5/547).

<sup>80</sup> "Neue feindliche Aktionen und Gerüchte," Rauchbach, Berlin, den 24.6.1953 (SAPMP-BArch DY 30/IV/2/5/547). For the most up-to-date list of those who died on June 17, see <http://www.17juni53.de/tote/index.html> which offers a biography of each known casualty.

<sup>81</sup> "Lagebericht der Bezirksleitung Dresden vom 22.6.1953 2.35 Uhr," Durchgegeben: Genn. Büsner – aufgenommen: Genn. Reitz., Lage um 22. Uhr," Bl.12.; <http://www.17juni53.de/tote/index.html>

<sup>82</sup> "Lagebericht des Bezirkes Dresden – 18.00 Uhr," Bezirksleitung SED Dresden, 22.6.1953 – Simon. (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553).

<sup>83</sup> "Bericht über die Stimmung der Bevölkerung zum Beschluss des 14 Plenums des ZK sowie den Beschlüssen der Regierung." Dresden, Bericht über die Lage im Bezirk, 24.5.53 – 17:30 Uhr. (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.61).

public sphere had a monopoly on truth or totally controlled the story of the June events. Alternative news concerning atrocities, factual or not, only added to the SED's growing list of items that would require political attention.

As perhaps the most famous non-official in the June 17 story, West Berlin resident Willi Götting achieved notoriety among communist officials and provoked sympathy among West and East Germans alike. Götting demonstrated with East Berliners on June 17 before East German police arrested him in the early afternoon.<sup>84</sup> Sentenced to death by the Soviet Military Commander of East Berlin, General Dibrowa, for organizing the provocation that had taken place, radio reported that his execution took place on June 18.<sup>85</sup> GDR officials also transmitted news of the sentence by leaflet in Dresden, though with presumably different intentions and the expectation of different reactions.<sup>86</sup>

RIAS used Götting's execution to emphasize, in its words, the all-German "solidarity" evident in the demonstrations, noting that this word probably seemed "suspect" to listeners in the Zone: "How often has the East German regime spoken of solidarity [in the past]," stated an evening report, "how often has this word sounded absurd.... Solidarity cannot be commanded," the station continued, "genuine solidarity manifests itself in a spiritual bond...and it's been a pleasure to report to you [East Germans], such demonstrations of solidarity that were not organized by any government."<sup>87</sup> The SED, according to RIAS, had been calculating the construction of

<sup>84</sup> "Willi Götting, 14.4.1918 - 18.6.1953, hingerichtet am Nachmittag in Ost-Berlin an unbekanntem Ort," <http://www.17juni53.de/tote/goettling.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> "Bericht über die Lage im Bezirk Dresden am 22.6.53," SED Bezirksleitung Dresden, Reimann, 23.6.53, Um 6.45 Uhr (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.32).

<sup>87</sup> "Berlin spricht zur Zone," Hauptabteilung Politik, Nr. 1022, Sonnabend, den 20 Juni, 1953, 19.40-20.00 Uhr (DRA Potsdam Mikrofilm F0055): "Und nun ein Wort zu den Solidaritätsaktionen....Wie oft hat das

solidarity based on “mere words,” rather than active aid, and proclaiming solidarity based on artificial compassion, rather than authentic connections.<sup>88</sup> The family of Willi Götting, since his recent execution, had become a beneficiary of such genuine solidarity, receiving aid, according to RIAS broadcasts, from supporters within hours of his execution.<sup>89</sup> While it remains a bit unclear why the SED helped publicize Götting’s execution, the SED-issued leaflets circulating in Dresden proclaiming that all workers found the death sentence justified suggest that the SED aimed to drum up and publicize support for his death sentence.<sup>90</sup> At least some residents in the Dresden region disagreed after coming across the leaflet, claiming to authorities that it would have made more sense had General Dibrowa been shot.<sup>91</sup>

In addition to the continuous reports of West German solidarity demonstrations broadcast from RIAS, the station helped East Germans collectively and subversively mourn the victims of June 17 as part of an imagined community with the West. The obsequies and moments of silence (*Trauerfeiern* and *Gedenkpausen*) that paid respect to the victims of June 17 created moments of national and international imaginings, transmitted to all Germans. On Tuesday, June 23, between 3:00 and 3:46 P.M., RIAS broadcasted the demonstration of sorrow from Rudolph-Wilde-Platz in Berlin-Schönberg to memorialize the victims of the June 16 and 17 demonstrations.<sup>92</sup> A contribution from

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Regime von Solidarität gesprochen, wie oft hat es dieses Wort ad absurdum geführt...Solidarität aber kann nicht befohlen, kann nicht erzwungen werden. Wirkliche Solidarität...sich nicht in sentimentalem Mitgefühl oder Mitleid, sondern in einer geistigen Verbundenheit...Es ist eine angenehme Pflicht, von Solidarität-Kundgebungen zu berichten, die keine Behörde, keine Organisation zu veranlassen brauchte”

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.: “bloßen Worten”

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> “Bericht über die Lage im Bezirk Dresden am 22.6.53 – Feindargumente und Feindtätigkeit,” SED Bezirksleitung Dresden, 23.6.53, um 6.45 Uhr (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.32).

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> “Der Aufstand der Arbeiterschaft.” Rudolph-Wilde-Platz was re-named Joseph-F.-Kennedy-Platz in 1963. The U.S. president gave his “ich bin ein Berliner” speech here.



the program *Zeit im Funk* described the previous week's uprising in heroic, national terms, noting that the "uprising of the entire German population [of the GDR] had claimed victims."<sup>93</sup> The number of demonstrators murdered by the *Volkspolizei* or the Soviet *Standgerichte* remained, according to the commentator, unknown at that point, but the moment had arrived for Germans to pay their last respects.<sup>94</sup> Tens of thousands West Berliners converged on Rudolph-Wilde-Platz, forming a "sea of people."<sup>95</sup> Konrad Adenauer spoke and paid tribute to the unknown demonstrators:

Our hearts are full of sorrow as we think of our dead, those deceased, who gave their blood for freedom—whose blood was spilled by a brutal and cruel ruling regime, in order to preserve their reign of tyranny. Millions of Germans mourn with us and so do those [people] in other lands, who despise slavery and love freedom.... From a wave of unrest at the construction site at Frankfurter Allee came a tremendous wave of anger, the desperateness, that spread over the entire region, over East-Berlin, over Magdeburg, Brandenburg, Leipzig, Chemnitz, Dessau, and Gera, over the area of the uranium mining sites, through the population of the countryside in Saxony and Mecklenburg—it moved through the entire Soviet Zone.... The entire German people behind the Iron Curtain have called on us not to forget, and we swear to them in this solemn hour: we will not forget. We will not rest—I pledge this for the entire German people—until they again have freedom, until all of Germany is again united in peace and freedom.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. pg. 35.: Dieser Aufstand des ganzen deutschen Volkes im Sowjetsektor und der Zone hat Opfer gefordert.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.: "Meer von Menschen"

<sup>96</sup> "23. Juni 1953: Ansprache bei der Trauerfeier für die Opfer des Aufstandes vom 17. Juni vor dem Schöneberger Rathaus in Berlin," available online, <http://www.konrad-adenauer.de/dokumente/reden/ansprache-berlin>. "Unsere Herzen sind von Trauer erfüllt, da wir unserer Toten gedenken, der Toten, die ihr Blut dahingaben für die Freiheit, deren Blut von brutalen und grausamen Machthabern vergossen wurde, um ihre tyrannische Herrschaft aufrecht zu erhalten, Mit uns trauern Millionen Deutscher, mit uns trauern alle in anderen Ländern, die die Sklaverei hassen und die Freiheit lieben.... Aus einer Welle der Unzufriedenheit an der Baustelle in der Frankfurter Allee wurde eine ungeheure Woge der Erbitterung, der Verzweiflung, die über das ganze große Gebiet, über Ost-Berlin, über Magdeburg, Brandenburg, Leipzig, Chemnitz, Dessau und Gera, über das Gebiet des Uranbergbaus, über die Landbevölkerung in Sachsen und Mecklenburg, wie überhaupt über die gesamte Sowjetzone hinwegging. ... Das ganze deutsche Volk hinter dem Eisernen Vorhang ruft uns zu, seiner nicht zu vergessen, und wir schwören ihm in dieser feierlichen Stunde: Wir werden seiner nicht vergessen. Wir werden nicht ruhen und wir werden nicht rasten - diesen Schwur lege ich ab für das gesamte deutsche Volk -, bis auch sie wieder Freiheit haben, bis ganz Deutschland wieder vereint ist in Frieden und Freiheit."

Jakob Kaiser, Minister for All-German Questions, and West Berlin mayor Ernst Reuter spoke thereafter. The crowd sang *Guten Kameraden*, which rang from the square, and thanks to RIAS, “out into the world.”<sup>97</sup> The moment, noted RIAS, “was recorded and carried on, to Magdeburg and Chemnitz, to Schwerin and Görlitz, to Frankfurt and Dresden.”<sup>98</sup> At the border between the two Germanys, the song would be intercepted at the “hermetically sealed” border, thanks to the “merciless” martial law put in place by the Soviet military commanders.<sup>99</sup> Still, the station stated that, “here too, the song would be heard—the song that accompanied the victims of June 17 on their final journey.”<sup>100</sup> At that moment, Germans in the east and west simultaneously listened on the radio to those in attendance share moments of silence and song. Certainly, it would be difficult to envisage a scene more beset with national imaginings.<sup>101</sup>

In the Dresden Region, it is challenging to estimate just how many workers or individuals remotely took part in the RIAS-led national mourning demonstration as most listeners probably did this in private. Thus, evidence is scant, though general listenership levels would suggest that a significant number of Dresdeners had their radios tuned in for the broadcast. Also, SED officials did occasionally note when workforces listened to RIAS for these moments of silence. In Niesky, for example, we know workers simultaneously took part in a sympathy demonstration for the victims of June 17 on June

<sup>97</sup> “Der Aufstand der Arbeiterschaft”: “hinaus in die Welt.” The song is also known as “Ich hatt’ einen Kameraden.”

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.: “wurde aufgenommen und weitergetragen, nach Magdeburg und Chemnitz, nach Schwerin und Görlitz, nach Frankfurt und Dresden.”

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.: “hermetisch abgeriegelt”; “erbarmungslos”

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.: “Aber es wurde auch hier gehört – das Lied, das die Opfer des 17. Juni auf ihrem letzten Weg begeistete [sic].”

<sup>101</sup> See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7-10.

23 at 3:00.<sup>102</sup> And at the leatherworks in Zittau, the RIAS *Trauerkundgebungen* blared from the communal radio, despite the presence of the factory workforce leadership.<sup>103</sup> A similar situation occurred at VEB Fortschritt, where authorities noted that a moment of silence was held for the “so-called victims” (in SED parlance) of June 16 and 17.<sup>104</sup> At the Feinmaschinenbau in Dresden, officials recorded a moment of silence for the victims of June 17.<sup>105</sup> And on June 22 in Riesa, workers had discussed a sympathy strike based on the “commemoration hubbub,” which authorities noted, they prevented from occurring.<sup>106</sup> For those who did listen, the broadcasted mourning demonstration transmitted a moment of national and international imaginings that contributes to our understanding of the role of nationalism and June 17, 1953.

Ten days later on July 3, RIAS broadcasted that the Bundestag was to meet and consider a proposal that would officially proclaim June 17 as the “Day of National Unity.”<sup>107</sup> On August 7, the Bundestag made the resolution law, and June 17 became the official “Day of German Unity” until 1990.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>102</sup> “Neue feindliche Aktionen und Gerüchte,” Berlin, den 24.6.1953, Rachbach. (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/547 Bl.25).

<sup>103</sup> “Bericht über die Kreisparteiaktivitätung in Zittau am 24.6.1953,” Referent im Auftrage der SED Bezirksleitung Dresden: Genosse Walter Vogt, FDGB Bundesvorstand, Sektorenleiter kulturelle Massenarbeit. (SächsHStA 12465 Nr. 463 S.2).

<sup>104</sup> “Weitere feindliche Aktionen und Gerüchte” (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/547 Bl.165): “die sogenn. Opfer”

<sup>105</sup> Abschulßanalyse über die Ereignisse des 16., 17., 18.6.1953 in Dresden (SächsHStA 12465 Nr. 454).

<sup>106</sup> “Tagesbericht der Bezirksleitung Dresden,” BL Dresden, Durchgegeben von Genossin Hoffman; Aufgenommen vom genossen Franzki, BL Dresden (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.23): “Gedenkrummels Westberlins”

<sup>107</sup> “RIAS Nachrichten, 7.3.1953 8.30 h,” Staatl. Rundfunk-Komitee Abt. Information (SAPMO-BArch DY 34 Nr. 19006 Bl.452): “Tag der deutschen Einheit”

<sup>108</sup> “Law on the Day of German Unity” from the ‘Federal Law Gazette’ Part I, No. 45 of August 7, page 778,” FRG Ministry for All-German Questions, *It Happened in June 1953*, 55.

## Public Opinion in July and August

Public polling conducted by DIVO- Gesellschaft für Markt- und Meinungsforschung m.b.H., Frankfurt am Main, the German survey organization under contract with the Reactions Analysis Staff of the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany-Office of Public Affairs sheds some light on the thoughts of East Germans following the June 17 events.<sup>109</sup> These results should be read with caution because they reflect the views of interviewees who had fled to the Federal Republic from the GDR and such individuals may have been more likely than the average East German citizen to hold a negative view of the GDR and a positive view of the West. The institute conducted these interviews between August 6 and August 15 at three food distribution points in West Berlin and interviewees represented all regions of the GDR.<sup>110</sup> Most East Germans showed up at these food distribution points after learning of the program through RIAS announcements and 75% of those surveyed knew that the food came from the United States. The majority of these participants felt that the food represented humanitarian concerns rather than political gamesmanship.<sup>111</sup> So while problematic (though what survey is not?), these statistics offer some insights into the general, national public opinion that can be weighed against rumor and the “official” public opinion in the GDR and the Dresden Region.

East Germans including those from Saxony and the Dresden region, were, by and large, pleased with the way the West acted with regard to the June 17 demonstrations.

Only 23% of East Germans polled felt that the West had acted incorrectly. Residents of

<sup>109</sup> “East Zone Views on the June Riots, Food Aid, and Current Political Issues,” Report No. 185, Series No. 2, August 27, 1953, HICOG 185, U.S. Information Agency, Office of Research and Analysis: Research Reports on German Public Opinion, 1949-1962 (NARA RG 306, A1 1005, Box 5).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. The West provided food aid for East Germans after the demonstrations—mostly in Berlin.

<sup>111</sup> “East Zone Views on the June Riots, Food Aid, and Current Political Issues.”

the Saxon region (from a sample of 67 cases/interviews) largely (76%) felt that the West had done nothing wrong. This probably meant that the United States they had not acted incorrectly, raising hopes or choosing not to intervene before or during the Uprising. This is likely related to the popular opinion found in the surveys that two-thirds of East Germans interviewed felt that the demonstrations (referred to as riots in the study on this occasion) had achieved positive results. Again, a sample from the Saxon region (140 cases) found that 75% of the interviewees—this is 5-10% above average when compared with the other four areas in the GDR—felt June 17 had achieved some positive outcomes. While reference to what these positive results constituted is not broken down by region in the survey, interviewees argued that the demonstrations provided a referendum on the SED that allowed or encouraged the population to become more outspoken (35%). People also became more hopeful (16%) that the government would have to be more willing to accommodate demands in the future, that consumer goods would receive more attention, and that the world now understood what East Germans thought (5% of 876 cases divided almost evenly between males and females).<sup>112</sup> A majority (63%) of the interviewees felt that nothing had gotten worse since June 17, which perhaps suggests that a good number of East Germans believed the political landscape remained far from settled.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 4.

## Part Two

### Representing Publicness

In the wake of the June 17 events, the SED looked to reestablish its authority while coming to terms with the failures and shortcomings of its media outlets. First, the media in the GDR broadcasted, at least in the days immediately following the demonstrations, a message of peace and order. Additionally, the SED hastily put together a public relations campaign whereby the imagined GDR community, represented by the SED—and at the time quite obviously in tatters—would be reconstructed in several ways. These included: 1) constructing an official storyline for what had occurred on June 17 that painted the demonstrations as the work of outsiders; 2) publicizing domestic and international communities of support; and 3) attempting to re-establish, through mass media, a connection with the citizenry of the GDR.<sup>113</sup> As one party secretary noted in the aftermath of June 17, “Our press represents an instrument of power, but we must correctly exploit this instrument of power.”<sup>114</sup> Indeed, the realization that the party had indeed failed to use the press to its fullest extent became a focal point for the regime in the months after June 17.

#### **The SED’s Interpretation (X-Day)**

While RIAS and other western commentators branded June 17 as a country-wide demonstration with popular support that stemmed from national imaginings and disdain

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<sup>113</sup> Heidi Roth’s survey of the official demonstrations that followed June 17 examine events in Leipzig, which unfolded similarly to those in Dresden (see Roth, *17 Juni 1953 in Sachsen*, 410-413). For her survey of the mass-political work see pgs 414-30, wherein she again primarily focuses on Leipzig with little discussion of mass media and the international and national dimensions of the situation.

<sup>114</sup> “Lagebericht vom 24.6.53 – 10,30 Uhr,” SED Kreisleitung Dresden Stadt, Abt. P.u.M, Parteiinformation Dresden, den 24.6.53 (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.54): “Unsere Presse stellt ein Machtmittel dar, aber wir müssen dieses Machtmittel richtig auswerten.”

for the socialist system, the SED countered by publicizing popular opinion that helped re-legitimize its rule. One method employed by the SED included crafting a version of events that cast demonstrators as outsiders.

After June 17, GDR radio worked to re-establish the country's national community by presenting demonstrators as foreign agents, sometimes in imaginative ways. Thus, at 9:55 in the evening of June 19, Radio Berlin interviewed a woman from a publishing house in the city who recounted the events for listeners. She recalled how "construction workers" (quotes in original used for inference) rushed to disperse before the approaching tanks and one of these "construction workers" lost his construction pants because they were too big. As soon as this happened, his "western style" pants under his worker garb became visible. This could be explained according to the broadcast, by the fact that the American clothing distributor in Berlin had supplied the western agent with the wrong size pants. Thus the true identity of June protestors became clear for the witness at this moment.<sup>115</sup>

Another explanation offered by the SED over the airwaves for the mass demonstrations insinuated that confusion probably led to the sheer number of individuals in public spaces. For example, GDR radio interviewed one worker from Hennigsdorf who, when asked whether he had taken part in the demonstrations, stated that he was discussing events with his colleagues, when someone, from somewhere, called over and claimed everyone was taking to the streets to protest for "peace and the like."<sup>116</sup> Thus the interviewee and his cohort joined the protestors without actually knowing what the

<sup>115</sup> "Zu den Ereignissen vom 16. und 17. Juni 1953 und den dazu erfolgenden Stellungnahmen und Maßnahmen," 7.1.1953 (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 4/2/5/542 Bl.170).

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.: "für Frieden u.ä."

demonstrations were all about!<sup>117</sup> While the veracity of the specific story is questionable (some individuals probably *did* get caught up in the confusion of June 17), it shows the need of the SED to publicize and represent the existence of its popular support by placing the responsibility for the demonstrations on a few bad apples and western agents.

In the days and weeks after June 17, GDR radio also attacked RIAS for its involvement and distortion of events. On June 21, Radio Berlin broadcasted:

“X-Day....Western intriguers, under U.S. leadership, had thought the moment favorable and had struck at the GDR, since they could no longer tolerate its shining example of prosperity, progress and humaneness. The spearhead of the fascist adventure, meant to be another Sarajevo, which, it was hoped, would touch off a mass attack not only on the GDR, but on the Popular Democracies in general, was of course, RIAS, which, throughout the demonstrations, steadily issued directives to its agents at work in the East Sector, which were composed of Jakob Kaiser and Ernst Reuter terror bands trained in the postwar years with the aid of American subvention...<sup>118</sup>

The SED and leadership in Moscow broadcasted a version of events that also attacked the Western—above all U.S. and West German—presses at the same time. On June 23, Radio Berlin publicized the story that appeared in Pravda describing the West’s “propaganda campaign” to obscure and cover up, for the public, what had really transpired in Berlin while at the same time the article ignored the national dimension of the demonstrations. The Pravda article also noted that the alleged Western plot stemmed from the provocateurs’ fear of a peaceful solution to the German question and their desire to worsen relations between East and West Germans. This was all quite typical of the general approach behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> RIAS News Clippings, Radio Scripts, Magazine Articles 1953, 1/6 (G. A. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI).

<sup>119</sup> Verlesung des Leitartikels aus der Prawda, DDR-Rundfunk. Available at [http://www.17juni53.de/material/otoene\\_4.html](http://www.17juni53.de/material/otoene_4.html)



GDR radio also claimed on June 24 that demonstrators had, as early as June 13, collaborated to outline a plan of attack, though such a meeting does not appear in any historical record discovered thus far.<sup>120</sup> Still, as discussed in the previous chapter, though RIAS did not explicitly call for a mass-demonstration or uprising, this is essentially what happened. Also notable here is the SED's claim that the goal was to destabilize the region, which, as we have seen, in popular opinion seems to have actually been the case. The station argued that "throughout the night from June 16 to 17, RIAS broadcasted directives on positions and meeting places for agents who were sent to the democratic sector."<sup>121</sup> Such accusations by the SED are invariably dismissed by historians, but deserve a second look. As noted in the previous chapter, June 17 represented a new type of mass demonstration, supported by radio which, by transmitting a dissident voice into volatile spaces *did* function as an agent of unrest. The SED's inaccurate claim that there existed a vast conspirator network of agents deployed to undermine the GDR reflected the inability of the SED (and most nearly everyone else, to be fair) to understand a fundamental shift in how a modern protest, aided by modern communications networks, might unfold.<sup>122</sup>

### **Crumbling Communities**

In Dresden following the events of June 17, the SED found itself forced to deal with an alarming number of individuals leaving the party and party-sponsored organizations that formed the building blocks of the socialist state. By June 24 it had become apparent to party leadership that comrades had begun to distance themselves

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> "Betrifft: Störungen unserer Frequenzen." Techn. Direktion, Aktenvermerk, Verteiler: Mr. Taylor, Mr. Ewing, Herr Schütz, 22 Juni, 1953 1/8 RIAS Special Reports (G. A. Ewing Collection, G. C. Marshall Foundation, VMI).

from the party, often choosing not to wear their party insignias.<sup>123</sup> Leadership in Sebnitz, for instance, noted that a number of party members always claimed that they had lost their party emblems or forgotten them at home.<sup>124</sup> Functionaries also noted that in several counties, including the city of Dresden and Riesa, the Society for German-Soviet Friendship was losing members.<sup>125</sup> The statistics that came in from the counties began to back up these observations. The number of persons officially tallied as leaving the party around June 24 included:

Dresden – City 46  
 Zittau 35  
 Dresden Countryside 9  
 Riesa 12  
 Niesky 1  
 Görlitz Land 6  
 Görlitz Stadt 5  
 Sebnitz 14  
 Löbau 1  
 Bischofswerda 3  
 Dippoldiswalde 7  
 Kamenz 1<sup>126</sup>

Using a small SED sampling from Riesa County we find examples of reasons members gave for leaving the party included excuses ranging from health considerations to miscommunication and confusion regarding the party's future plans.<sup>127</sup> Following June 17, communal farmers in the countryside began to leave the LPGs, or at the very least, publically declared their intention to leave. For example in LPG Kreckwitz in Bautzen sixteen of forty-eight farmers announced their withdrawal from the unit, leading officials

<sup>123</sup> "Bericht über die Stimmung der Bevölkerung zum Beschluss des 14 Plenums des ZK sowie den Beschlüssen der Regierung," Dresden, 24.5.53 – 17:30 Uhr (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.61)

<sup>124</sup> KL. Sebnitz, Gen. Kunert, 18.25 Uhr, 22.6.53 Ka/Di (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.9.01 Nr. 38 Bl.59).

<sup>125</sup> "Bericht über die Stimmung der Bevölkerung zum Beschluss des 14 Plenums des ZK sowie den Beschlüssen der Regierung," Dresden, 24.5.53 – 17:30 Uhr.

<sup>126</sup> "Lage im Bezirk Dresden," Telefonische Durchsage BL Dresden (Gnn. Wurzbacher), 25.6.1953/17.20 Uhr/Aufgenommen: genn. Arnold (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.75).

<sup>127</sup> Much of this could be tied to the New Course.

there to believe that class enemies had been at work, indeed leadership was shocked because in the past this LPG had been well supported and already had a radio system in place broadcasting the party's messages.<sup>128</sup> That party leaders found their organizations losing members and sought at least one quick fix in published propaganda. Consider, for instance, the newspaper headline that boasted, "Party-less colleagues strengthen[ed] the SED with their entrance into the party of the working class."<sup>129</sup> This type of news became part of a larger effort to represent a community of support through the official public sphere that demonstrated the regime's popular support and legitimacy.

### **Transmitting Stability**

Whereas RIAS, dissidents, and demonstrators had transmitted the idea of revolution and popular protest, the SED's effort to communicate a state of calm became one of the GDR media's essential tasks in the days following June 17. Internally, the regional leadership in Dresden received news from Berlin that the workforces in all public institutions and workplaces had returned to their respective jobs and that the fascist provocation had been terminated. Regional leadership then transmitted the news via telephone to local party secretaries.<sup>130</sup> Not until Friday, June 19, however, did the local and national media apparatuses begin to cover the demonstrations in any depth.

Nationally, on June 19, *Neues Deutschland* proclaimed that workplaces in Berlin had resumed normal operations and it was becoming apparent that even those workers

<sup>128</sup> "Bericht Monat Juni 1953," Bezirksparteikontrollkommission Dresden, Dresden, den 13.7.1953 Be/Ko. (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.4.025 Bl.155).

<sup>129</sup> "Aufruf der größten Granitwerke der DDR," *Sächsische Zeitung*, 20 Juni, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek): "Parteilose Kollegen stärken die SED mit ihrem Eintritt in die Partei der Arbeiterklasse."

<sup>130</sup> Bezirksleitung Dresden der SED (gez. Brosselt) Sekretariat, Mitteilung an alle Genossen 1. Kreissekretäre, Dresden am 18.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.9.01.40 Bl.7).

who had participated in the demonstrations now felt shameful of their actions.<sup>131</sup> Even those workers at the *Stalinallee* in Berlin, the origin of the demonstrations, had, after lengthy discussions, reportedly opted to begin working again. The local press in Dresden echoed the stories of *Neues Deutschland*, informing local residents that the fascist agents had been defeated and that in Berlin, life had “again taken on its normal course.”<sup>132</sup> The article called on residents to help get the situation back to a normal state of affairs by countering those who attempted to incite unrest and supporting the efforts of the apparatuses of state power in re-establishing peace. Only in this way could East and West Germany be re-united.<sup>133</sup> The local news reported that an overwhelming number of workers had heard the regime’s appeals, and that even those who had taken to the streets on June 17 had done so in a misdirected quest to express their requests to the regime.<sup>134</sup> Out of Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz, an epicenter of unrest in Dresden two days prior, appeared reports in the *Sächsische Zeitung* that the “first requests of all honest mates is to again carry on working in an orderly manner.”<sup>135</sup> The effort to transmit peace continued into the next week, with stories of workers distancing themselves from the provocateurs and unmasking or arresting foreign agents sent to disturb the peace.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>131</sup> “Berlin geht wieder in die Arbeit- Die Werktätigen verurteilen die faschistischen Provokationen,” *Neues Deutschland*, June 16, 1953.

<sup>132</sup> “Werktätiges des Bezirkes Dresden!” *Sächsische Zeitung*, June 19, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek): “das Leben hat wieder seinen normalen Gang genommen.”

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> “Den Provokateuren die gebührende Antwort erteilen – Werktätige unseres Bezirkes sagen Ihre Meinung – Berechtigte Wünsche so schnell wie möglich erfüllen,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, June 19, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek).

<sup>135</sup> “Einige Lehren an den Vorgängen im Sachsenwerk Niedersedlitz,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, June 19, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek): “Die erste Forderung aller ehrlichen Kumpel ist die Arbeit geordnet weiterführen”

<sup>136</sup> “Werktätigen bekunden ihr Vertrauen zur Regierung – Sie distanzieren sich von der Faschistischen Provokation – der friedliche Aufbau wird fortgesetzt;“ *Sächsische Zeitung*, June 22, 1953; “Interessen der Werktätigen im Mittelpunkt – Mit Provokateuren und Unruhestiftern wollen wir nichts zu tun haben;“ *Sächsische Zeitung*, June 24, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek).

## The Propaganda Plan

On June 21 and 22, in the Dresden Region, officials from the counties along with representatives from major workplaces that had experienced unrest met to discuss what had transpired. Through such meetings and the reports they produced as well as the general self-reflection the SED found itself forced to undergo, party leaders came to understand that prior to June 17, the press had no real connection with the workers and had been, along with radio, largely ineffective in shaping general support for the regime. This predicament was, of course, compounded by RIAS's continued popularity. The party leaders would also come to the realization that they had failed to understand what workers *actually* discussed and what motivated them.<sup>137</sup> As the reports from the Regional Party Control Commission (BPKK) noted almost one month later, functionaries simply did not know the true mood of the population.<sup>138</sup> Fixing the problem would require "comprehensive and optimistic" campaigning which began in the days after the public demonstrated their distaste for the SED's brand of socialism.<sup>139</sup>

In the month or so after June 17, mass political work became a top priority. Previously, such work had been the charge of the *Instrukteuren*, but now all available personnel in each county had been deployed to carry out this extensive task. The primary goals included explaining the New Course while publicizing the official version of June

<sup>137</sup> "Mitteilungen der 1. Sekretäre der Bezirke über die Lage in der Partei und über besondere Vorkommnisse," 22.6.1953, 18.00 Uhr, Aufgenommen Gen. Kühne – Lenz-Reek Dresden durchgegeben Gen. Brotz (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/547); "Teilbericht über Instrukteureinsatz des Sekretariats der Brigade Bauer vom 22.-27.6.53 in Görlitz," Org.-Instrukteur-Abt., Robert Bauer, Berlin, den 29. Juni 1953 (SAPMO-BArch DY 34 25111); "Lage im Bezirk Dresden Telefonische Durchsage" BL Dresden (Gnn. Wurzbacher) 25.6.1953/17.20 Uhr/Aufgenommen: genn. Arnold (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.75); "Tel. Durchsage von der Bl. Dresden am 19.6.53 um 19.00 Uhr," Schwemmer/Wagner (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV/2/5/535).

<sup>138</sup> "Bericht Juni 1953," Bezirksparteikontrollkommission Dresden, Dresden, den 13.7. 1953, Be/Ko., (SächsHStA1857 IV/2.4. Nr. 025 Bl.164). Bezirksparteikontrollkommission (BPKK). The BPKK replaced the Parteikontrollkommission in 1952 and reviewed the behavior of party members and candidates.

<sup>139</sup> Mitteilungen der 1. Sekretäre der Bezirke über die Lage in der Partei und über besondere Vorkommnisse": "umfassenden und optimistischen Agitation"

17. All such units received instructions for this mass political work along with weekly information from regional party leadership in Dresden concerning the argumentation of this program along with the special articles in the press and radio reports. The SED held running agitation seminars in which they distributed such information to hundreds of propagandists in each location.<sup>140</sup> By mid-July, thousands of propagandists would be working daily throughout the Dresden Region.<sup>141</sup>

To communicate its intentions, and specifically its meeting on June 21 (14. Tagung des Zentralkomitees der SED) and the resolutions pronounced therein, the Central Committee of the SED employed various methods designed to re-establish and represent in the official public sphere its communities of support in national and international realms.<sup>142</sup> In the week following the demonstrations, the Central Committee conveyed these propagandizing tactics to regional leadership for the immediate future, calling on all forces to implement the New Course. This tactic, according to Party leadership, represented the regime's most powerful weapon to prevent future provocations on German soil. These instructions called for expressions of gratitude for the Soviet forces' intervention, vigilance to identify those who might look to initiate unrest; the uncovering of enemies who sought to turn Germany into a "Korea," and open communications between the Party and the workforce. The last program would, for example, be realized in a simulated public sphere through GDR radio with the program,

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<sup>140</sup> "betrifft: Bericht über die Agitationsarbeit seit dem 17.6.1953," SED Bezirksleitung Dresden Abt. Propaganda u. Agitation an Bezirksleitung Dresden, Genossen Subkow, Dresden, 13.7.53. (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.9.01.40 Bl.52).

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. The number was probably well over 10,000. Over 7,000 such persons existed in the counties that reported numbers—a group that excluded the city of Dresden, the Görlitz countryside, Meißen, Sebnitz, Großenhain, and Zittau.

<sup>142</sup> "Erklärung des Zentralkomitees der SED: Über die Lage und die unmittelbaren Aufgaben der Partei," *Neues Deutschland*, 23 Juni, 1953. In this meeting the party laid out the official story behind the uprising and confirmed the implementation of the New Course that they had announced on June 11.

“Workers ask – Propagandists Answer,” that aired in the morning and evening hours. The Party also requested that local governments expand existing visual propaganda in the cities, villages, and factories.<sup>143</sup> In Dresden, the SED printed the resolutions of the 14. Tagung, which essentially confirmed the implementation of the New Course and condemned the demonstrations in leaflets that the Party then distributed to the counties, factories, housing communities, and villages. Posters accompanied the leaflets and those factories that published their own newspapers printed extra copies that they circulated among workers. Audibly, the loudspeaker systems in factories and towns received and broadcasted the declarations of the Central Committee at regular intervals.<sup>144</sup>

On June 18, the Central Committee had sent out a request to all counties asking that the regional governments send to Berlin examples of positive declarations and resolutions they had received from workforces and residents. The committee further requested that all written enemy transmission be sent to Party Information.<sup>145</sup> Press and radio would publicize these positive declarations from the workforce and elsewhere in Dresden with the intention of reaffirming the SED’s imagined communities of support.<sup>146</sup>

The official line included news that, as early as June 17, at least one factory loudspeaker system had broadcasted on the hour the resolutions drafted by workers who protested against the day’s demonstrations and those who had participated in them. This announcement described the demonstrations as “riots” and demonstrators as the

<sup>143</sup> Sekretariat - ZK - FS 252 v. 25.6.53 21.00 Uhr (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.9.01.40 Bl.23).

<sup>144</sup> Sekretariat an alle Kreissekretariate Betr.: Auswertung der 14. Tagung des ZK, Dresden, am 22.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.9.01.40 Bl.21).

<sup>145</sup> “Mitteilung des Zentralkomitees: Durchsage an alle Kreise” 18.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.9.01.40 Bl.11).

<sup>146</sup> Sekretariat an alle Kreissekretariate Betr.: Auswertung der 14. Tagung des ZK, Dresden, am 22.6. 1953 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.9.01.40 Bl.21).

“mob.”<sup>147</sup> Sometimes, workers just wanted their colleagues to start working again. In Freital at the Edelstahlwerk, some of the one-thousand-man workforce composed a resolution which they requested be played on the loudspeaker, that those who continued to strike, even on June 18, resume working.<sup>148</sup> Other written resolutions, such as one drafted at Stadt-und Kreissparkasse Dresden, placed the authors in the socialist camp in the larger Cold War and expressed their anger against the “machinations of the West German provocateurs” and their faith in the SED and its ability to prevent war.<sup>149</sup> After the June 17 unrest, government agencies such as the city council in Dresden drafted resolutions reaffirming the faith employees had in the regime’s ability to recognize its mistakes while condemning the demonstrators as enemies of the state.<sup>150</sup> So, too, did the workforces of the Dresden libraries, which in its resolution—a product, so they claimed, of “free and open debate”—thanked the majority of the population, the police, and the Soviet Occupation Forces that prevented the fascists from starting a third world war.<sup>151</sup> Some workforces transmitted declarations of solidarity or confidence in the regime directly to the Central Committee in Berlin via telex, such as the stoneworkers at the granite works in Demitz-Thumitz (55 kilometers from Dresden), who proclaimed their solidarity and faith with the SED on June 19.<sup>152</sup> The party received a number of such

<sup>147</sup> Bezirksleitung Dresden, Rauchbach, 17.6.1953, 22.15 (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/535).

<sup>148</sup> Telef. Durchsage der BL Dresden – Durchgeg.: Krautmann, Lipfert/Strehle, 18.6.1953, 18.30 Uhr/19.55 Uhr (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/535).

<sup>149</sup> “Entschließung,” Stadt- und Kreissparkasse Dresden, Dresden, am 18.Juni,1953, gez.: Grebedüinkel; SED-Betriebsgr. Piefke; Betriebsleit. Hausmann (SächsHStA 12461 Nr. 461).

<sup>150</sup> “Resolution,” Der Rat der Stadt Dresden, Dresden, 20.6.1953, Betriebsgewerkschaftsleitung (SächsHStA 12461 Nr. 461).

<sup>151</sup> “Entschließung” (SächsHStA 12461 Nr. 461): “in freier und offener Stellung genommen.”

<sup>152</sup> Belegschaft 670 Entschließung der Größtengranitwerke der DDR in demitz-puhmitz kreis Bischofswerda, Sachsen. Fernschreiber Zentralkomitee der SED Eingangs-FS.v. 19.6.53, 3.30 Uhr, Aufgen.: [illeg.] (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/545 Bl.89).



declarations, with the press department in Berlin processing examples from around the GDR.

In the weeks following the uprising, the SED transmitted these types of solidarity declarations through the press to re-establish its legitimacy by publicizing an imagined community of support. Press stories of the peace that settled over the GDR accompanied these declarations of faith in the regime as the SED countered the imagined community of dissent so successfully established by RIAS.

The regime's efforts to publicize transmissions of support began within days of the June 17 unrest, with the announcement on the front page of *Neues Deutschland* that "A wave of declarations of faith," or *Vertrauenskundgebungen*, had reached the regime.<sup>153</sup> In the large workspaces in the Dresden Region, factory radio systems broadcasted workers professing their faith in the regime.<sup>154</sup> Declarations of solidarity with the regime went out over the domestic airwaves in the late evening on June 19.<sup>155</sup> The party used similar tactics in the local papers to create the impression that popular opinion remained on its side. Nationally, *Neues Deutschland* published stories in which workers from around the nation expressed their political support, such as in a cable factory in Oberspree. Here, "97-percent of employees worked," while one of these workers declared, "I stand behind the resolutions of our Regime—[the] provocations were anti-worker."<sup>156</sup> Other workers opined that the SED had earned the trust of the

<sup>153</sup> "Eine Welle von Vertrauenskundgebungen zu unsere Regierung" *Neues Deutschland* June 20, 1953.

<sup>154</sup> Lagebericht vom 24.6.53 – 10,30 Uhr, SED Kreisleitung Dresden Stadt, Abt. P.u.M., Parteinformation, Dresden, den 24.6.53 (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.54).

<sup>155</sup> "Zu den Ereignissen vom 16. Und 17. Juni 1953 und den dazu erfolgenden Stellungnahmen und Maßnahmen." 7.1.1953 (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/542 Bl.170).

<sup>156</sup> "Wir stehen hinter den Beschlüssen unserer Regierung," *Neues Deutschland*, June 20, 1953: "arbeiten heute 97 Prozent aller Belegschaftsangehörigen; Ich stehe hinter den Beschlüssen unserer Regierung, diese Provokationen waren Arbeiterfeindlich."

workers through its actions while some expressed their approval of the regime's decision to call on the Soviet forces.<sup>157</sup>

The press in Dresden followed this example and ostensibly surveyed the local workforces for opinions they could publicize to create the illusion of a community of popular support. For example, a lead article in *Sächsische Zeitung* of June 24 noted that “In numerous personal opinions the workers in our region offer the impression that because the party openly admitted its mistakes, faith of the population in the regime...continues to grow.”<sup>158</sup> The reporters here, who had the chance to chat with some of the workers at the Transformatoren und Roentgen Werkes Dresden, explained that such opinions, that they characterized as “the honest opinion of the majority of our workers,” conveyed the messages that workers wanted nothing to do with the demonstrators of June 17. But the article also conveyed the observation that workers did want the party to concern itself more fully with their needs. Indeed, the Party addressed this desire in the second set of resolutions taken up in the fourteenth meeting of the SED.<sup>159</sup>

### **International Community and Support**

As RIAS broadcasted declarations of solidarity from throughout the western Cold War community, the SED followed suit, with the regime's media instruments representing an international community of supporters in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc through the official public sphere. The propaganda instructions for the week

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> “Interessen der Werktätigen im Mittelpunkt,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, 24 Juni, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek): “In zahlreichen persönlichen Stellungnahmen bringen immer mehr Werktätige unseres Bezirkes zum Ausdruck, dass durch das offene Bekennen der begangenen Fehler das Vertrauen unserer Bevölkerung zur Partei der Arbeiterklasse und zur Regierung ständig wächst.”

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.: “Interessen der Werktätigen im Mittelpunkt – Mit Provokateuren und Unruhestiftern wollen wir nichts zu tun haben”; “ehrliche Meinung des größten Teiles unserer Arbeiter”

of June 29 asked for the local (county) SED leaders in Dresden to consider the “continuous revelations” concerning the background of June 17 (more on this shortly) and the “effects on the global public.”<sup>160</sup> These instructions noted that the destruction of the fascist provocation represented a victory for socialist nations and the establishment of peace. The regime publicized that the “countless solidarity demonstrations throughout the world, and above all those of the Soviet workers, show that the German people are not fighting for peace and unification alone.”<sup>161</sup> This all formed a crucial part of the propaganda campaign in the summer of 1953 and served to counter the power of the rival public sphere.

This part of the SED’s public relations campaign focusing on a strengthened international community played out in the national and local presses. *Neues Deutschland* claimed that despite fascist mercenaries in the GDR, things fell through for the western provocateurs because of the Soviet army and the “democratic strength” of the East German people. As a result, the German-Soviet relationship had been strengthened.<sup>162</sup> Editors translated *Pravda* articles that spoke to the “voice of millions of Soviets,” who revealed in their speeches and discussions the “powerful growth of the world-wide peace movement.”<sup>163</sup>

In Dresden, the editors at the *Sächsische Zeitung* published a range of articles that reinforced Cold War German nationalism and the connections that theoretically bound an

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<sup>160</sup> “Hinweise für die Kreisleitung zur Ausarbeitung ihrer Argumentation,” 29.6.53 (SächsHStA 11857 Nr. IV/2.9.01.40 Bl.29): “LaufeNeues Deutschland e Entlarvung;” “Wirkung auf die Weltöffentlichkeit”

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.: “Unzählige SolidaritätskuNeues Deutschland gebungen in der Welt, vor allem die der sowj. Werktätigen, lassen erkennen, das deutsche Volk im Kampf um Frieden und die nationale Wiedervereinigung nicht allein steht”

<sup>162</sup> “Die deutsch-sowjetische Freundschaft wächst und erstarkt,” *Neues Deutschland*, 30 Juni, 1953: “demokratischen Kräften”

<sup>163</sup> “Die Stimme der Millionen Sowjetmenschen (Leitartikel der ‘Prawda’ vom 27. Juni),” *Neues Deutschland*, June 28, 1953: “mächtige Anwachsen der Friedensbewegung in der ganzen Welt”

imagined community of citizens on the socialist side of the Iron Curtain. Readers learned that, “the entire Eastern Bloc press conveys the firm solidarity of the working classes in those nations, which have been conveyed through their letters.”<sup>164</sup> Bulgarians learned that those forces that worked to shatter the peace grew in proportion to the strength of the socialists, while Hungarians learned through *Szabad Nep* (“A Free People”—the official organ of the Hungarian Working People’s Party) that the connection that bonded the masses, the state, the party, and the workers demanded constant attention.<sup>165</sup> In Budapest at the Waggonfabrik – Wilhelm Pieck, the workers drafted a letter in which they vowed that the “fascist attack” had affected not only the German people, but all peace-loving people.<sup>166</sup> The declarations of solidarity went the other way, too. For instance, the SED publicized through ADN (and the *Sächsische Zeitung*) a letter composed by the workers in Freital thanking the Soviet workforce for their “brotherly bond” in the struggle against fascism. They directed the letter to the workers at the Stalin Automobile Works in Moscow: “The solidarity demonstrations of the entire Soviet people give us new power and strength in our the national struggle for the establishment of a unified Germany...in total confidence of the SED and to the regime the defeated enemies of our democratic order will be granted no respite .”<sup>167</sup>

<sup>164</sup> “Der 17. Juni – Eine Warnung für alle – Die Ereignisse des ‘Tages X’ im Spiegel der ausländischen Presse,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, 1 Juli, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek): “Die gesamte volksdemokratische Presse vermittelt den Werktätigen ihrer Länder, die in Briefen ihre feste Solidarität mit den Arbeitern der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zum Ausdruck bringen.”

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> “Budapester Waggonfabrik, Wilhelm Pieck solidarisch mit deutschen Werktätigen,” *Sächsische Zeitung* 7 Juli, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek).

<sup>167</sup> “Wismutkumpel danken Sowjetischen Werktätigen,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, 10 Juli, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek): “Brüderliche Verbundenheit...Die Solidaritätskundgebungen des ganzen Sowjetvolkes geben uns neue Kraft und Stärke in unserem nationalen Kampf für die Herstellung der Einheit Deutschlands...Im vollen Vertrauen zur Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands und zu unserer Regierung werden wir den geschlagenen Feinden unserer demokratischen Ordnung keine Ruhepause gönnen”

## Protests and their Transmissions

Using a trick out of RIAS's playbook, the SED publicized public protest in domestic locales, too.<sup>168</sup> The arrangements for such events began during the week after June 17 and, it appears without irony, that the SED in Berlin carefully planned out a demonstration for Friday June 26. *Neues Deutschland*, along with GDR radio, announced, for example, that a demonstration in Berlin had been scheduled for the afternoon and would support the regime's reform package and its efforts to raise living standards while providing evidence of workers' faith in the regime.<sup>169</sup> The official coverage of the protests noted that demonstrators filled the streets, chanting "Long live Wilhelm Pieck and the GDR" and listened to Otto Grotewohl's version of X-Day, which recounted Western provocateurs in "cowboy pants and Texas-style shirts" who wanted to disrupt international developments pertaining to Germany.<sup>170</sup> Pieck himself showed up, too, along with Wilhelm Zaisser. The article that appeared in Dresden in the *Sächsische Zeitung* noted that despite the pouring rain, 70,000 Berliners took to the streets to show support.<sup>171</sup>

Beneath that headline appeared a call for a large-scale youth demonstration on July 1 at Karl-Marx-Platz in Dresden. According to the local media in Dresden, five-thousand youths, including many from the Free German Youth, appeared in the streets on Wednesday, July 1 to "express their solidarity with the Party of the working class and

<sup>168</sup> For similar examples of such events in Leipzig and Karl Marx Stadt, see Roth, 410-413.

<sup>169</sup> "Am Freitag Demonstration der Werktätigen!" *Neues Deutschland* June 25, 1953; "Zu den Ereignissen vom 16. und 17. Juni 1953 und den dazu erfolgenden Stellungnahmen und Maßnahmen," 7.1.1953 (SAPMO-BArch FDGB DY30 4/2/5/542 Bl.170).

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.: "Cowboyhosen uNeues Deutschland Texashemden"

<sup>171</sup> "Trotz strömendem Regen kamen 70,000 Berliner zur Kundgebung," *Sächsische Zeitung*, 30 Juni, 1953, (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek).

[the] regime.”<sup>172</sup> Of course, one wonders about the true mood of those who demonstrated in support of the regime, as the demonstrations, were of course, planned by the party and local workplaces. Through “investigative” or internal conversations with the SED’s youth leadership from the day of the demonstrations, it became apparent that apathy pervaded the organization while conversations with the youth who attended revealed that they did not really have any faith in the regime, either. Still, a good number did show up at the rally and most seemed to actually listen to the speeches, but a good portion of the youth merely chatted with one another, paying little attention to the regime’s theatrics.<sup>173</sup>

The *Sächsische Zeitung* also described the demonstration and loyalty rally (a two part affair in the minds of the SED) that moved through Görlitz on Friday, July 4, as a “powerful” event that drew not only thousands of comrades to Leninplatz, but “many party-less workers, too.”<sup>174</sup> Party leaders rehashed the official story, wherein American imperialists and their German lackeys hatched X-Day. Hidden behind the theatrics masquerading as a public outpouring of support, participants aired grievances and functionaries bemoaned low turnout. Workers at Görlitz Maschinenbau, for example argued that it was much too soon for such an event and that the regime would have to prove through action, rather than rhetoric, that it could earn the workers’ trust. Others contended that they had just demonstrated *against* the regime and refused to demonstrate in support of the regime less than two weeks later. It must have seemed ridiculous, after all. Perhaps even more alarming than these workers’ lukewarm enthusiasm for the

<sup>172</sup> “Wir helfen den neuen Kurs verwirklichen!” *Sächsische Zeitung*, 3 Juli, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek): “um ihre Verbundenheit mit der Partei der Arbeiterklasse und unserer Regierung zu bekunden.”

<sup>173</sup> “Betr. Sondereinsatz zur Jugendkundgebung am 1.7.53.” Eva Kölbl, Prop/Agit. an die Abt. Leitende Organe, 2.7.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 2.0.01 Nr. 40 Bl.44).

<sup>174</sup> “Die Ärmel hoch und ran an die Arbeit,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, 6 Juli, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek).

government's efforts was the pervasive belief among these workers that revolution and unrest had engulfed the neighboring Eastern Bloc nations.<sup>175</sup>

### **Recognizing the Power of Rumor**

As noted in section one, while rumors functioned as an alternative form of political participation for those who spread them, they represented deliberate “enemy activity” to the SED. An analysis published by the NDPD entitled “The Provocation of June 17 and its Background – ‘Messenger of the Enemy,’” noted the power of rumor during the unrest and reflected a larger body of concerns coursing through the party. The essay referenced nineteenth century French painter Honore Daumier’s *Crispin and Scapin*, which, in the writer’s mind perfectly characterized the hideous nature of rumors that served the politics of dissention and war mongering: the rumor existed in the arsenals of those who sought to ruin society. The article suggested that one could identify the victims of rumors in and around June 17, for example, the single woman who purchased seventy-two loaves of bread with her meager savings (for fear of revolution, shortage, or currency reform? The article is not clear here). Furthermore, this was not the first time rumor had incited financial panic although in the minds of SED functionaries, this could have turned into a larger run on the banks. In Dresden, and probably elsewhere, rumor of currency reform following the announcement of the New Course had prompted speculation and irregular purchases.<sup>176</sup> According to this piece, the rumor had presented

<sup>175</sup> “Agitationsbericht für die Zeit vom 3.Juli bis 9. Juli 1953,” SED Betriebsparteiorganisation, EKM Görlitzer Maschinenbau VEB, Görlitz, den 9. Juni, 1953 (SächsHStA 11857 2.0.01 Nr. 40 Bl.48-49).

<sup>176</sup> See chapter three.

another set of challenges and helped spread “X-Day.”<sup>177</sup> The arguments presented by the NDPD also reinforce interpretations of the rapid pace at which the June events developed (and ended) that proved essential to the very modernity of the June 17 demonstrations: “Just as the *Schwindelkurslüge* [of 1951—the so-called “currency reform lie”—a rumor which supposedly began in the West] unraveled literally overnight, so too failed in just a few hours the lies and rumors that had psychologically prepared X-Day.”<sup>178</sup> Or, to return to one of the central arguments presented in chapter three, public discussion, prompted and aided by illicit foreign broadcasting had created a space where revolution became thinkable in a hitherto impossibly short period of time. The analysis presented by the NDPD continues along familiar, though certainly not identical lines, to what has been presented here, framing RIAS as a conversation starter: “only because they believe the rumors from RIAS and the Western muckraking press and fomenting rumors,” were the provocateurs successful in attempting to begin a third world war.<sup>179</sup>

In Dresden, the rumor issue appeared as a lesson for readers in the *Sächsische Zeitung* under the heading “How Rumors Develop.”<sup>180</sup> In the story, the reporter visits the office responsible for distributing passes for international travel. A young woman exits the building and is quite upset, complaining that things should have improved by now. It turns out that she had applied three months ago for her pass, and the application still needed to be checked. But, she had heard from the radio (it is unclear which station,

<sup>177</sup> Mit Nationalem Kurs National-Demokratische Hefte, Heft 38, *Die Provokation des 17 Juni und Ihre Hintergründe*, NDPD, Herausgegeben von der National-Demokratischen Partei Deutschlands. Originally published in “National-Zeitung” June 25, 1953 (DRA Potsdam).

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.: “Wie so buchstäblich über Nacht die Schwindelkurs Lüge zusammenbrach, so fielen auch die Lügen und Gerüchte, die den “Tag X“ psychologisch vorzubereiten hatten, wie das ganze Unternehmen der Feinde des Friedens am 17. Juni in wenigen Stunden sich zusammen.”

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> “Ein Besuch bei der Interzonenpaßstelle in Dresden,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, June 26, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek): “Wie Gerüchte entstehen”



though RIAS's coverage of this issue—see chapter three—makes it the prime suspect) that it only took two days—which was not officially true. The moral of the story: radio could mislead the GDR's citizenry through disinformation and create confusion.<sup>181</sup> In others words, the SED recognized that rumors mattered.

### **Atrocities**

While RIAS and other western outlets and politicians used the execution of Willi Götting as an atrocity that spoke to the inhumanity of the GDR's brand of socialism, the SED used the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as an occasion to publicize the brutality of the West. Tried as spies who conspired to sell secrets to the Soviet Union, a jury found the couple guilty of espionage and executed them at Sing Sing correctional facility in New York on June 19, 1953.<sup>182</sup> The SED, which had been using the case as anti-U.S. propaganda for months, organized local memorials on June 20, with workers in a number of factories in Dresden drafting protest resolutions that linked the execution with the recent “failed fascist putsch attempt.”<sup>183</sup> *Neues Deutschland* reported on Sunday, June 21 that, “screams of fiery outrage,” could be heard through the entire world as protests broke out in front of the White House. In a protest telegram to President Eisenhower, the World Federation of Trade Unions spoke for workers around the globe, expressing their outrage at the execution.<sup>184</sup> ADN carried articles from Pravda that argued that “the blood of the Rosenbergs” bound all of human kind while the news triggered

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Sam Roberts, “The Rosenbergs Revisited,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2010.

<sup>183</sup> Bezirksleitung Dresden, Genn. Trautmann, 20.6.53, 24.20 Uhr (SAPMO-BArch DY30/4/2/5/535): “missglückten faschistischen Putschversuch”

<sup>184</sup> “Der Zorn der Völker wendet sich gegen die Mörder von Ethel und Julius Rosenberg,” *Neues Deutschland*, 21 Juni, 1953.

protests that shook New York, London, Rome, and Paris.<sup>185</sup> Other news reports showed the same purpose: coverage of protests in Sidney in front of the U.S. embassy against America's alleged slide into dictatorship appeared on June 24 in *Neues Deutschland* and reported that the "Finnish public protested in numerous telegrams and letters to the U.S. embassy," strove to create the impression of an international community of protestors bound in solidarity against a mutual, inhumane enemy.<sup>186</sup>

### *Sie sind Helden*

While rumors and dissident public opinion held that the SED leadership trio, Ulbricht, Grotewohl, and Pieck, were either dead, arrested, or on the run, the party looked to rehabilitate the images of these three in the weeks after June 17. During this period, the party commenced this effort by simply putting their portraits back onto the walls where rumor had led to their removal.<sup>187</sup> The media organs then aimed to represent through the official public sphere the broad support these three men still enjoyed—or at least the *image* of popular support. *Neues Deutschland* publicized (via ADN) laudatory letters—socialist fan mail, really—received by Otto Grotewohl from around the GDR in the wake of June 17, which served as "Mark[s] of confidence from all strata of society."<sup>188</sup> Pieck addressed Dresdeners on the front page of the *Sächsische Zeitung* on June 29 via telegram, in an article that noted that he was still recovering in the Soviet Union, reinforcing the SED's narrative of events and calling for national unity.<sup>189</sup> One day later, on his sixtieth birthday, a representative filling in for the absent Pieck, bestowed the

<sup>185</sup> "Das Blut der Rosenbergs verbindet die ganze Menschheit," *Neues Deutschland*, 23 Juni, 1953.

<sup>186</sup> "Weltprotest gegen Mord an den Rosenbergs," *Neues Deutschland*, 24 Juni, 1953.

<sup>187</sup> KL-Dresden – Land, Gen. Bolt Uhr 16.45, 18.6.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 IV/2.9.01.38 Bl.19).

<sup>188</sup> "Vertrauensbeweis aus allen Bevölkerungsschichten," *Neues Deutschland*, 25 Juni, 1953.

<sup>189</sup> "Präsident Pieck an die Bevölkerung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik," *Sächsische Zeitung*, 29 Juni, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek).

prestigious title “Hero of Labor” (*Held der Arbeit*) upon Walter Ulbricht in recognition of his service to the construction of an “economy of peace” and a “unified, democratic Germany.”<sup>190</sup> Pieck himself recorded a speech in the Soviet Union that GDR radio broadcasted. Like Grotewohl, he mentioned the numerous faith declarations and “marks of confidence” that he had received and that since June 17, he had felt an especially close bond with citizens of the GDR.<sup>191</sup>

On Friday, July 3, a memo detailing propaganda tactics called for county leadership to broadly popularize Ulbricht’s speeches. Propagandists received instructions to discuss Pieck’s speech with factory workers and organize letter writing campaigns. In an effort to create the impression—true or not—of positive popular opinion, agitators received orders to collect commentary from workers of all levels and publicize such opinions on factory bulletins and over the factory radio systems. Excerpts from the speech were to accompany Pieck’s images as part of the larger visual propaganda effort, while radio systems were to broadcast the speech into communal listening spaces during work breaks. Outside of the factories, functionaries found themselves charged with carrying out the above duties in enlightenment offices and in communal living spaces where letter writing campaigns were to be held.<sup>192</sup> These communications functioned as a machine for manufacturing public opinion for the official public sphere that established legitimacy in the form of the support of GDR leadership of an imagined national community.

<sup>190</sup> “Walter Ulbricht als Held der Arbeit ausgezeichnet,” *Sächsische Zeitung*, 1 Juli, 1953 (SAPMO-BArch, Bibliothek): “Friedenswirtschaft... und um das einheitliches, demokratisches Deutschland.”

<sup>191</sup> “Rundfunkansprache des Präsident Wilhelm Pieck an die Bevölkerung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,” *Neues Deutschland*, 3. Juli 1953: “Vertrauensbeweise”

<sup>192</sup> “Hinweise für Argumentation,” Wolf, 4.7.1953 (SächsHStA 11857 IV 2.9.01 B1.47).

Early results of this public relations campaign proved disappointing for the regime. In almost every area of the Dresden Region residents maligned Ulbricht's newfound status as labor hero.<sup>193</sup> In various locales, the "mood of the people was against Ulbricht" and discussions amongst workers revealed curiosity regarding the timing of his designation as Hero of Labor.<sup>194</sup> Workers at Spinnerei und Weberei in Ebersbach wanted to know why Ulbricht had not only been honored as a Hero of Labor, but why he had been paid DM 10,000 for all the errors that the party made on his watch. And these workers demanded Ulbricht appear in Dresden so they could "give him a piece of their mind."<sup>195</sup> In a printing house in Görlitz, workers wondered why the party chose not to make Pieck's whereabouts public knowledge for so long, as it only encouraged the rumors. Rumor—probably false—circulated in Sebnitz that Pieck had not actually spoken on the radio and someone had impersonated him.<sup>196</sup> One can probably construe this as a representative example of public opinion as the workers here (2,500) came from twenty-five localities.

## Conclusions

On June 17 the SED had found itself outflanked by the rival public sphere and it continued to struggle mightily in the aftermath of this challenge. In some ways, June 17, as a modern mass demonstration, did have a tidy ending: the SED, with Soviet help, effectively and quickly cleared the streets of public protestors on the afternoon and evening of June 17, removing a national conversation from public space and neutralizing

<sup>193</sup> Bezirk Dresden, genn, Schulz, 6. VII-53 (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.128).

<sup>194</sup> "Diskussionen in Abtlg. Umbruch und Korrektoren im Werk II," Betriebsparteiorganisation – Ostsachsendruck, Görlitz-Biesnitz an die SED Kreisleitung Görlitz –Stadt, Abt. Information, Görlitz, Görlitz, den 10. Juli 1953 (SächsHStA 11861 Nr. IV/4.06.260, Teil 2 von 3).

<sup>195</sup> "Bericht über den Instrukteureinsatz im Bezirk Dresden vom 7.-11. Juli," Instrukteure Gründen und Köhler, Berlin, den 14.7.1953 (SAPMO-BArch DY6 5006): "Dem wollen wir unsere Meinung sagen.

<sup>196</sup> Bezirk Dresden, genn, Schulz, 6. VII-53 (SAPMO-BArch DY30 IV/2/5/553 Bl.128).

what had become, in Arendtian parlance, spaces of appearance. Despite some demonstrators lingering in the streets that night and sporadic strikes and work stoppages in the weeks that followed, the SED effectively confined mass protest to a single day. On the other hand, the spirit of June 17 carried on into the next weeks in the rival public sphere and many felt that revolution continued and the future of the GDR remained in doubt. RIAS, like rumor, made some sense of a confused situation, undermining the SED and endowing June 17 with national and international imaginings. Those who gave their lives on June 17 offered the most hallowed method by which to do so and the mourning ceremony in West Berlin epitomized the power of radio in a national moment of silence. RIAS also underscored the notion of solidarity as a key component of June 17, and more importantly, bluntly noted the difference, in its opinion, between fabricated (through the official public sphere) and authentic (in the rival public sphere) bonds of solidarity. The station's broadcasts also demonstrated the international dimension of post-war German nationalism, whereby western nations commiserated with (East) German suffering. The SED offered an alternative explanation for June 17 that became part of a larger public relations effort to re-establish the appearance of national and international communities of support desperately needed to legitimize its rule. The party employed its media apparatuses to publicize staged solidarity rallies and what sometimes amounted to Potemkin protests. Efforts to rehabilitate the SED's leading men also proved quite difficult, with Dresdeners unwilling to accept Walter Ulbricht as a Labor Hero, considering his accomplishments and failures—real or rumored.

## Conclusion

The June 17 events of 1953 followed the modern revolutionary script but introduced a new wrinkle: the electronic transmission of protest that rapidly mobilized the masses and fueled a nationwide demonstration. This study has suggested that June 1953 thus constituted the first *modern*, radio-driven demonstration, whereby protest on a nationwide scale unfolded nearly instantly. We have also seen that the occasion had roots not only in the GDR's short-term economic decisions and political maneuvering, but in a rival public sphere that had allowed private citizens to become collectively ascendant and challenge the legitimacy of a regime that struggled to project its authority.

Indeed, the Soviet intervention revealed the real basis of the SED's power, and the optics of the event were quite horrible. But the (open) threat of force could never be suitable for a regime that based its legitimacy on humane philosophical underpinnings. We also should remember here that the Stasi prior to the June events had not yet become the omnipresent force of the later decades and the first bricks of the Wall were still eight years away.<sup>1</sup> And we should also consider that East German communists' alliance with Stalin took place under circumstances in which his armies had done the heavy lifting to stop Hitler and the Soviet leader had only months prior been an ally of the SED's American antagonists. So on one hand, the SED truly did have the people's best interests in mind and believed that their time had arrived. This mindset must have certainly been especially strong in Dresden, at least in the early days, when the desolate Old City and toppled Church of our Lady served as daily representations of its two greatest enemies.

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<sup>1</sup> See Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, Armin Mitter, and Stefan Wolle, eds., *Der Tag X - 17. Juni 1953 Die »Innere Staatsgründung« der DDR als Ergebnis der Krise 1952/54* (Berlin: C.H. Links Verlag, 1996).

Finally, Walter Ulbricht, Otto Grotewohl, and Wilhelm Pieck were Old Communists. They, and others like them, had dedicated their lives to a cause and had a myopic vision for its course in their later years (more on this later). Thus the SED's confidence in the virtue of its positions and unwavering faith in its policies should not surprise us.

This righteousness manifested itself in the official public sphere, a projection of the party's collective opinion. And since the SED philosophically conceived of itself as the embodiment of working class interests, its positions *were* that of the public, or at least the largest and most important part of it. That some of the GDR's citizens still had not gotten with the program simply represented false consciousness or lack of enlightenment—issues that could and would be overcome. Indeed, the new Dresden could now exist not only as a representation of western (meaning fascist and capitalist) crimes, but as a didactic tool to get such a process underway, too. Consider for example the Church of our Lady, which remained a symbolic memorial to war until reunification, or stories and pictures of Stalin Avenue, the avenue that embodied monumental planning built along socialist principles. Such projects and the greater East German habitat therefore functioned as a visible element of the official public sphere and the party's confidence in its objectives. The official public sphere also found expression with *Sichtwerbungen*, such as banners, “friendship corners,” and “public” declarations. The inference here by placing quotation marks around the word public is intentional: the party looked to establish the appearance of public support by encouraging the displays of support for its programs and faith in the socialist purpose. As some have pointed out, this amounted to a world of appearances that belied the true political feelings of the population. Undoubtedly, some of those volunteers that hung a banner of support from

their window decrying RIAS or western warmongers *did* in fact harbor feelings that aligned with those of the regime. But since displays of opposition obviously did not exist in the official public sphere, it is of course impossible to determine the authenticity of the displays, which, of course, leads to monikers like “phony public sphere.”

Because there existed only one public entity—the authoritarian regime—this study has suggested that the arrangement in the GDR and other Soviet-type states was reminiscent of the absolutist early modern European state. As with Louis’ Versailles and Augustus’ Zwinger (note the word here has a root in *zwingen*, to force or compel), the SED looked to re-present power before the people. The politics of display noted above stood in here quite nicely, and one could argue that the Stalin Allee was similar to the early modern palace in that it was a sort of “people’s palace.” Or perhaps consider *the* Palace of the Republic, the seat of the East German congress that was open to the public for entertainment from the late-1970s. Furthermore, as in the early modern system, the hidden uncertainties of the regime led to greater displays of power. Of course there were, as noted, several important differences. The early modern regime looked to impress distance upon its subjects while the SED, as a socialist regime, looked to create the feeling of closeness. But, as we have seen, such efforts found little success in the early 1950s. To this point, consider that following the Hungarian Uprising of 1956—more on this shortly—the leaders of the SED, in a panic, packed up and moved to the outskirts of Berlin to distance themselves from any possible unrest. The compound, known as die *Waldsiedlung* (forest settlement) built near Wandlitz to house the leading statesmen certainly revealed the party’s doubts—and fears.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Andreas Malycha, *Die SED in der Ära Honecker. Machtstrukturen, Entscheidungsmechanismen und Konfliktfelder in der Staatspartei 1971 bis 1989* (Berlin: de Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2014), 20-3.



A significant difference between the representative culture of the early modern period and that which existed in the GDR relates again to distance. As pointed out earlier, the modern state extended beyond the scope of physical representations and political communities emerged as imagined communities: states now projected through media apparatuses what we could not experience or see in person. In the GDR, the SED used radio as part of the official public sphere to extend its representation, and thus its authority and legitimacy, to the entire nation. Radio had played an important role in the Nazi seizure and maintenance of power and this did not go unnoticed by the socialists. The Party carried out what they considered a propaganda makeover that would broadcast the exact opposite of what the National Socialists' efforts delivered: the truth. Thus they wasted little time getting their message onto the airwaves.

A central argument in this study has revolved around the idea of an imagined community. To this end I have modified Benedict Anderson's original thesis (though I am certainly not the first to do so) to suggest that radio played a similar role to print capitalism in socially constructing a particular type of GDR nationalism. This nationalism that existed on the radio (and in print) found inspiration and direction in the internationalism of the post-war period. Therefore, Benedict Anderson's idea of a fixed national boundary gets pushed to the wayside here and we might better understand the imagined community broadcasted as one that integrated East Germans in to the Eastern Bloc politically and culturally. The SED broadcasted this internationalism as a solidarity or *Verbundenheit* between East Germans and Soviet and Eastern Bloc peoples, and celebrated the successes of the Red Army and instructed the GDR in Soviet cultural happenings. East German nationalism on the radio also projected an all-German

community based on working class solidarity. Broadcasters recorded workers' demonstrations in the Federal Republic and transmitted such protests to the GDR and listeners in the West in an attempt to undermine the government there and foreshadowing the vastly more effective transmission of protest in June of 1953. The delivery system for such programming in the GDR was extensive and pervasive. The *Betriebsfunk* system meant that the Party essentially had a captive audience and the *Stadtfunk* system allowed it to audibly project its authority into those spaces where people naturally congregated, like the Postplatz.

The SED also employed organized and choreographed demonstrations as a way to represent publicness to its citizenry. The party regularly announced and held rallies that it then later publicized to represent its popular support. Stalin's death afforded a notable and unique opportunity to do so. Using the occasion to stage synchronized rallies wherein attendants and those listening on the radio could imagine themselves as part of a larger community of mourners produced an occasion full of international imaginings.

This study has also suggested that a rival public sphere developed alongside the representative culture embodied in the official public sphere. This political publicness existed in the form of improvised news and foreign radio broadcasting. We have also seen that while modern dictatorial regimes such as the SED attempted to fashion totalitarian states, radio broadcasting and the widespread ownership of receivers created a breach in their communications fortress. This was not unlike the pamphlets from the Netherlands that made it into France or the alternative media (backdoor news) in China that undermined/undermines the regimes those respective states. Nor was it unlike the radio programming during World War II that aimed at destabilizing home fronts.

However, RIAS was also quite different from anything that had come before by virtue of its location in the “other half” of a divided Germany. The station existed as a pillar of the rival public sphere and continuously, and quite often, successfully, called into question the SED’s agenda.

RIAS programming, like that of its rivals in the GDR, pulled listeners in the two Germanys into aural communion to form an imagined community of all Germans. Political shows kept East Germans abreast of governmental developments in the FRG and these extended to all segments of society. Such programming offered East Germans alternative news to that which was available in the official public sphere while at the same time challenging the political positions of the SED at every step. These broadcasts also chipped away at the SED’s prestige and thus its legitimacy. On this point, it is important to note that RIAS openly campaigned (like the GDR) for a reunified Germany and envisioned reunification proceeding under West German control (as it did in 1989). Thus, RIAS’s decision to refer to the GDR as “the Zone” in lieu of its official name probably reinforced the belief in this period that the division was only temporary. Talk, though, is only important if someone is listening, and in the case of RIAS, it certainly enjoyed greater listenership in the period leading up to the June 1953 events than did the GDR’s stations.

Perhaps the most important development—and an overlooked one—was RIAS’s ability to inspire action. After the SED dismantled or co-opted workers’ traditional associations of collective deliberation and political action, RIAS filled in as a virtual forum and helped workers organize in opposition to the regime. The campaign surveyed in chapter two showed that communication went both ways, which RIAS receiving

information from the workers in the GDR and then broadcasting ideas about how workers might resist the regime. The activities here speak volumes about the station's motivations and power behind the Iron Curtain, as workers' actions revealed widespread listenership and the ability of the station to shape action on the ground. First, RIAS allowed informed workers to present a unified front in different locales—foreshadowing its role on June 17. Indeed, the station internally boasted of its newfound faculty to turn individual resistance into mass resistance that could develop so quickly as to paralyze briefly the state; one that they continuously derided as illegitimate.

This study has suggested that rumors constituted the second-most important element in the rival public sphere. Naturally, foreign radio broadcasting, which delivered news unavailable in the official public sphere and was thus probably unknown to the functionaries tasked with recording public opinion, tied into the formation of “rumors.” Therefore, in some cases, these rumors were true or at least partially true, despite the regime's record often categorizing them as false or dis-information. A notable example of this included the pervasive stream of improvised news related to the strikes in Pilsen in the period before June 17. The SED obviously had little interest in making such unrest the talk of the town, thus, outside sources—probably RIAS—delivered the news in and around Dresden. Improvised news of the uprising, which actually *was* a violent event, kept the event in the news cycle of the rival public sphere and helped de-stabilize the situation even further in the weeks prior to the June events. While reports regarding the Pilsen uprising circulated in the region in the form of (often accurate) improvised news, many stories strayed from the truth. The rumors that the regime had stepped down or fled—and often in some dishonorable way—show that bits of true news became the

social materials out of which residents constructed sometimes-alternative or hope-filled realities. This is significant, and offers a key insight into the event: what participants knew or thought to be happening is often quite different from what historians know or think they know to have happened. The polarized news outlets almost certainly contributed to the proliferation of improvised news and one has to wonder if the medium contributed here, too. After all, it took some effort to tune into foreign radio stations due to jamming and the need—sometimes, though not always—to do so secretly meant that residents might have been more likely to have heard bits and pieces of stories through static or low volume. These may have been moments of improvisation.

After the announcement of the New Course, the rival public sphere, to paraphrase Tim Blanning, had developed its own power and it was in these spaces that revolution became thinkable. The story by now seems vaguely familiar: financial crisis had weakened the regime's position and its public calls for reform had heightened expectations. Rumor had damaged the leadership's prestige and improvised news suggested that the authorities had moved violently to put down revolutionary fervor nearby.<sup>3</sup> While the events of June 17 were not, of course, inevitable, the stage had certainly been set.

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<sup>3</sup> I allude to France in 1789, where upheaval destroyed traditional information barriers like the Church, and as a result, rumors circulated unchecked in the early years of the Revolution. In his classic work, *The Great Fear: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* (1932), Georges Lefebvre traced the spread of rumor, panic, and unrest that traveled along rural and military roads, beginning on July 20 and continuing through August 3. Lefebvre followed the spread of the rumors and unrest in concentric circles, where the peasants reacted violently as “news” regarding brigands reached the local town or village. Supposedly, the nobility had instructed these brigands to destroy crops and put down revolutionary fervor. Of course, we now know there were no brigands, but the peasants rebelled anyway with the rumors taking on a life of their own. As another historian put it, “the reign of rumor had begun.” (see Jordan, David P., “Rumor, Fear, and Paranoia in the French Revolution,” *Oxford Scholarship Online*. May 2010). What turned out to be misinformation helped give birth to the Terror, as well, after rumor of a military coup and food riots, supposedly redirected by aristocrats, made their rounds. Even the *end* of the Terror had some basis in rumor: gossip purported that Robespierre was planning to marry Louis' daughter and proclaim himself king.

The analysis of the June 17 events presented here proposed that the occasion was not a truly spontaneous one, which in a way puts it at odds with the entire historiography minus the public interpretation of the SED. While that overtly political interpretation falsely accused “western agents” of hiding in the GDR and springing to action on the morning of the seventeenth, one must admit that the reasoning behind such a story is not unreasonable when one considers two factors. In the long term, RIAS had pushed for mass mobilization against the regime and its programming—consider again the campaign against the collective contracts, which aimed to arm workers with a unified argument against the regime. And recall RIAS’s own assessment from that event in 1952: “Last year RIAS almost singlehandedly solidified anti-communist resistance in the Soviet Zone and turned individual resistance into mass resistance. I think we all ought to recognize this fact and implore RIAS to maintain this policy.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, the SED was not privy to this internal report and this is not to say that RIAS planned the June 17 demonstrations, but the station was certainly aware that it had the power to dramatically shape the situation. Thus, when the spontaneous (and even these had been discussed among the construction workers over the weekend) demonstrations of June 16 broke out in Berlin, simply by covering them the station gave the entire population a “unified argument” and a script to follow the next day.

That the commentators did not call for a general strike—a point they made in interviews after the fact—does not seem to have mattered much. They came close enough and listeners heard what they wanted to hear. As we have seen, some recalled hearing the station call for a general strike, though their memories prove faulty in this case. One

<sup>4</sup> “Zur Information der Korrespondenten,” Berlin 24. April 1952, Release # 1630, Office of the United States High Commissioner for Germany Berlin Element, Information Branch (DRA Potsdam F304-01-04/0004).

might note, though, that RIAS remarked that one of the protest's slogans had been "Tomorrow it continues." This study has suggested that by merely reporting the day's events, the RIAS broadcasted a script for the next day and it is little surprise that things played out the way they did on June 17. Indeed, the protestors marched through the streets and declared their solidarity with the Berlin marchers, chanted similar slogans, and made analogous demands, essentially enacting the script they had been given. Yet radio had ushered in a new era of public protest that day. Participant Rainer Hildebrandt's observation that a "leaderless" uprising had now become possible and that we had entered a new era where ten thousand protestors could be in the streets within hours was an astute one indeed.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, this study has attempted to contribute to our understanding of nationalism's role in the June 17 demonstrations and has suggested that radio's centrality in the event sheds light on this debate. Certainly, RIAS endowed the demonstrations with national imaginings on the night of June 16 and helped turn the workers' protests into a movement that spoke to national questions and alluded to national unity. For example, by reporting that with a sound truck demonstrators had declared, "If you are a son of the nation [Volkes], join us!"<sup>6</sup> Such slogans, heard by workers around the GDR that evening, help explain why things moved beyond economic issues so quickly. This inquiry into the question of nationalism has also shown that in the aftermath of the June 17 demonstrations, RIAS allowed for moments of national imaginings. Most notable among these was the demonstration of sorrow held in Berlin to pay tribute to those (unknown) victims of June 17. RIAS's transmission of the occasion, with the crowd and listeners

<sup>5</sup> Hildebrandt, "17 Juni: Großer Tatsachenbericht."

<sup>6</sup> "Die Sendungen des RIAS am Dienstag, 16. Juni 1953": "Wenn Ihr Söhne des Volkes seid, schließt Euch an!"

sharing moments of song and of silence, represented an instance full of national imaginings.

### **Take Two: Hungary, 1956**

The new stage of the revolutionary script—coordination in strata of communication outside of government control such as electronic mass media—has played out in the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Just over three years after East Germans took to the streets to protest the Soviet-style regime, Hungarians did the same. Events here followed a strikingly similar script: an ascendant public, encouraged by foreign broadcasting and improvised—and mostly accurate—news of unrest in a neighboring state, took to the streets and challenged the existing order.<sup>7</sup>

As in the GDR, Western foreign broadcasting penetrated the Hungarian Communist Workers' Party (HCWP) of Hungary's broadcasting landscape. The United States, with RFE and VOA, beamed messages of hope to Hungarians who tuned in with specially modified radios. Indeed, in the 1950s, the United States' very public liberation

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<sup>7</sup> For English-language surveys of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, see: Charles Gati, *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Terry Cox, ed., *Hungary 1956- Forty Years On* (Portland, Ore.: Frank Cass, 1997); Johanna Granville, *The First Domino: International Decision Making during the Hungarian Crisis of 1956* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004); Sandor Kopacsi, *In the Name of the Working Class: The Inside Story of the Hungarian Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1987); Tamas Meszerics, "Independence Before all Else: Hungarian anti-communist resistance in the East European context, 1945-1956," *East European Quarterly* 41 (2007): 39-59; Victor Sebestyen: *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution* (Random House, 2006); Malcolm Byrne et al, eds., *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2002); Paul Kecskemeti, *The Unexpected Revolution: Social Forces in the Hungarian Uprising* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1961); Much of the following section is taken from my own research on the events in Hungary and based on the 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews from the Columbia History Research Project Hungary and U.S. State Department documents. See Michael Pulido, "Transmitting a Revolution: Mass Communications and the 1956 Hungarian Uprising" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina, Wilmington, 2007).



rhetoric had *implied* assistance, and Hungarians took this idea to heart.<sup>8</sup> Of course, the U.S. had stayed on the sidelines in 1953, and privately President Dwight Eisenhower (along with those who crafted foreign policy) had accepted that John Foster Dulles' "rollback" and the "liberation of captive peoples" was simply unrealistic.<sup>9</sup> Still, Hungarians listened to RFE and VOA broadcasts that encouraged hopes of liberation, and years of broadcasting had heightened expectations among the population, whether these ideas were realistic or not. Indeed, from these stations' broadcasts, listeners gathered that they had a powerful ally on their side that was willing to come to their aid should they actively resist Soviet domination. Furthermore, for five years, these transmissions had stimulated conversations among listeners in a rival public sphere that often led to discussions regarding the *possibility* of an armed uprising, with help from the West. In short, RFE and VOA helped make revolution thinkable.<sup>10</sup>

American efforts to challenge the communist regime in Hungary developed beyond radio, too. For example, from late 1954 until the middle of 1955, Operation Focus, an extension of RFE, dropped millions of leaflets over Hungary. The government intended for these leaflets, an extension of American foreign policy, to stir resistance activity and ultimately help Hungarians force concessions from the government. There is evidence that these leaflets held significance for Hungarians who deduced from their appearance that they had a powerful ally on their side. These leaflets then circulated among the population prompting conversations in the rival public sphere pertaining to the

<sup>8</sup> Gati, *Failed Illusions*, 69-74.

<sup>9</sup> Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne and Janos M. Rainer, eds., *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2002), 2-3

<sup>10</sup> Michael Pulido, "Transmitting a Revolution: Mass Communications and the 1956 Hungarian Uprising."

possibility of action; some Hungarians even spoke of reviving the revolutionary script of 1848-9.<sup>11</sup>

As in the GDR, American broadcasting had stimulated the growth of a rival public sphere in Hungary. When RFE aired Khrushchev's secret speech in 1955 and Matyas Rakosi found himself forced to resign, the government appeared to falter and the rival public sphere became ascendant. Hungarian students became aware of unrest in Poland between October 19 and 22 via RFE broadcasts—a situation not unlike that which unfolded in the GDR in regard to the Pilsen rebellion. In an effort to show solidarity with the Poles, students in Szeged began demonstrating, which in turn inspired similar demonstrations in Budapest. In the capital on the evening of 22 October, students drafted a list of demands, just as dissidents had done in 1848 (and in numerous other instances, including June 1953). Radio broadcasts on 23 October shaped the collective action of the opposition and directed mass gatherings that formed the basis for a popular uprising in Budapest. When students attempted to broadcast their demands over the airwaves the night of 23 October, a contest as to who controlled Hungarian media ignited the demonstration. News of the outbreak of violence spread throughout Budapest, and what began as a skirmish became a city-wide uprising. Through radio transmissions, leaflets, and posters, the revolution coagulated in the capital. Fighting factions communicated via shortwave broadcasts, many of which were relayed by RFE from one group of Freedom Fighters to another. Copycat lists of demands circulated among the population while posters and the written word verified the veracity of claims made by radio.<sup>12</sup> News of the demonstration went out over the radio on October 23 and participation exploded. As in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

the GDR, radio fostered collective activity and calls for solidarity drove the movement. For instance, coalminers, who had gone on strike immediately after hearing of the events in Budapest, refused to resume work “as long as Russian soldiers were murdering their brothers in Budapest.”<sup>13</sup>

By the morning of October 24, news of revolution had already spread outside of Budapest and inspired Hungarians throughout the nation to follow the lead of the capital. On 24 October, workers and students hundreds of kilometers from the hostilities in the capital city were brought into the fold via radio transmission. When those outside of Budapest heard the news of the violence, they immediately felt the pull of national imaginings and communities throughout Hungary rose up against their foreign occupiers. The Sixteen Points inspired similar lists of demands and unified the aims of the movement. The popularity of Western broadcasting stations contributed to Hungarians’ recognition of shortwave radio as an effective means of broadcasting and the regime’s opponents had become adept at utilizing the potential of this type of radio. This meant that Revolutionary radio operators transmitted local news and leveraged the leadership of the Revolution. The desire to listen to Western broadcasting meant that the majority of Hungarian households had procured (or had altered) a set to receive shortwave broadcasts—those transmitting the revolution had a large audience.<sup>14</sup>

This rapid swelling of the uprising has become one of its defining characteristics. Authorities on the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, such as Charles Gati, maintain that the revolution was spontaneous. Paul Kecskemeti agreed, appropriately titling his book *The Unexpected Revolution*. Indeed, events took western governments by surprise. But as

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

with 1953, spontaneity was only one part of the revolutionary equation: the rapid explosion primarily stemmed from the communications infrastructure in place and an energized rival public sphere. The swift unification of the uprising can also be explained by the communities formed through Western broadcasting between 1951 and 1956, primarily RFE and VOA. These broadcasts had fostered the establishment of independence-minded communities, bound by the belief in Western assistance. When news of the first shots aired, Hungarians felt that those in their communities harbored the same thoughts of liberation and shared similar faith in their imagined Western allies. Through their calls for help, Hungarian freedom fighters who manned shortwave radio stations affirmed this pre-existing faith in the West.<sup>15</sup>

After Soviet forces crushed the revolution on November 4, 1956, the popular belief held by Hungarians that the West would come to their aid proved to be deceptive—a recurring theme for Eastern Bloc residents. In Hungary the revolutionary script seemed familiar here, too: as in 1848, Western Europe had professed the desire for Hungarian self-determination, yet in reality, held little interest in intervening in a meaningful way. Soviet troops capitalized, ending another battle between the two sides for independence. This was also the second time the Soviets used force to quell unrest in one of their satellite states—but this time they hesitated.<sup>16</sup>

### **Take Three: East Germany, 1989**

The Soviets' suppression of the East German demonstrations and the Hungarian Uprising confirmed Soviet rule of Eastern Europe and proved that the West, and especially the United States, with its posturing and rollback rhetoric had no intention of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

intervening behind the Iron Curtain. But, each time the Soviets deployed tanks it created a public relations debacle that damaged their diminishing prestige. The Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 to restore hard-line rule after eight months of reforms under Alexander Dubcek aimed to soften the nature of Czech socialism meant that stability and legitimacy existed only in appearance in the Eastern Bloc states. And this was true of all the satellite states: by 1968, the native governments lacked the genuine legitimacy that would have been necessary for their political survival without Soviet backing.<sup>17</sup>

Mary Fulbrook challenges the notion that Soviet-style totalitarian regimes stood directly opposed to “the people.” In her effort to capture the normality of everyday GDR life, she has more recently proposed the elegant term “participatory dictatorship.” Essentially, she argues that while only a few had true power, almost everyone, in some way or another, participated, whether through direct involvement or through various forms of protest. Fulbrook thus rejects the totalitarian model that this study has presented, though that may be largely due to the periods under study. Certainly, this analysis covers a period wherein East Germans experienced the aftermath of war and Stalinism, rather than the consumerist socialism and stability of the later decades. And of course, 1953 had something to do with that, as the regime opted for a program of repression and expansion (a strengthened secret police and greater party discipline) *and* retreat (they never again ignored consumer demands as they had between the summer of 1952 and the June events).

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<sup>17</sup> Günter Bischof, Stefan Karner, and Peter Ruggenthaler, *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2010), 35-6.

In short, life probably became much more normal for most East Germans after 1953 and before 1989.<sup>18</sup>

The very unexpectedness of the 1989 revolutions seemed to endorse the stability of the state, though some have argued that revolt was never far from the surface. There is certainly ample evidence to back up either argument, but observers in the 1980s could see that the regime had in many ways become ossified. Indeed, Erich Honecker and others remained mentally grounded in the pre-war period, promoting cheap streetcar tickets while consumers wanted blue jeans. Honecker's decision to embrace East-West détente only exacerbated his difficulties. His need to differentiate the GDR from the FRG in a favorable light proved an unfeasible goal. In the later period then, party, and thus the state, had become thoroughly outmoded. And even if mass revolt was not lurking right below the surface, the public certainly had its power. Sure, there the GDR produced some homegrown favorites (die Puhdys; *Unser Sandmännchen*), but on balance the little republic could not compete with Western music and fashion and this put the party at odds with the rival public sphere, which by the 1980s had become the supreme arbiter in matters of good taste (to paraphrase Tim Blanning, yet again).<sup>19</sup> In 1989, the rival public sphere became the ultimate arbiter in matters of politics, too.

Rolf Steninger argues that 1989 represented the completion of 1953, which, in his mind, constituted an unfinished revolution. He points to the nearly identical slogans expressed in Leipzig 36 years later—*Wir sind ein Volk; Free and Secret Elections; Freedom of the Press*—and contends that the only significant difference between the two events was the Soviets' decision to stay out. Of course, international developments set the

<sup>18</sup> Fulbrook, *The People's State*; Kowalczyk, *17. Juni 1953 - Volksaufstand in der DDR*, Kowalczyk, Mitter and Wolle, eds. *Der Tag X - 17. Juni 1953*.

<sup>19</sup> See Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries* and Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture*.

stage here, too, as political transformations in the Soviet Union represented decisive factors leading to the peaceful revolutions in Germany. Hungary and Poland, too, with their successful efforts to liberalize their governments, demonstrated that the Soviet Union would tolerate liberation in the Eastern Bloc. Perhaps most importantly, Gorbachev's policies of Glasnost and Perestroika horrified SED leadership and when the Soviet leader decided to allow revolution to take place elsewhere in the Bloc, it became thinkable in the GDR.

Historians like Ray Rühle and Peter Hohendahl have argued that revolution became thinkable in emergent public spheres—the former points to a church-based publicness and the latter posits that the actors in a “revolutionary public sphere” overthrew the “state public sphere.”<sup>20</sup> As this study has built upon their ideas, the model these authors present does not look radically different than what I suggest happened in 1953. But did the actors of 1989 follow the same script as those in 1953? For one thing, the actors were different. New modes of political and social protest, especially in the 1980s, replaced the East German social democratic tradition of the 1950s and 60s. Avant-garde artists, bohemians, environmentalists, along with other purveyors of counter-culture matured into a sort of intellectual proletariat. These dissidents found space in the Protestant Church, and armed with samizdat leaflets, became emboldened and moved outside of their initially limited spheres of protest. Largely responding to historian Linda Fuller's assertion that 1989 was the work of intellectuals, Gareth Dale argues that this “intellectual proletariat” *along* with traditional workers, laid the foundation for mass protest in 1989. In this way, he sees 1989 as a continuation of the 1953 revolts, as both

<sup>20</sup> Ray Rühle, *Entstehung von politischer Öffentlichkeit in der DDR in den 1980er Jahren am Beispiel von Leipzig*. Peter Hohendahl, “Recasting the Public Sphere.”

were products of the working class, though the latter protests lacked the strikes that activated the former.<sup>21</sup>

So while protestors were less likely to have been dressed in the blue work suits of the 1953 event and the issues were broader, we still find an ascendant public, a weakened and reforming regime in the Soviet Union that directly affected the policies of its satellite states, unrest in a neighboring state, and a media that had been covering events for months. Indeed, television broadcasted images of refugees streaming out of the GDR (by way of Hungary) or crowds gathered in Leipzig, Berlin, and Dresden for the organized Monday demonstrations. In this way the media, especially that in the West, shaped and propelled the events.<sup>22</sup> When a group of journalists asked SED official Günter Schabowski about the rumored removal of travel restrictions, he mistakenly informed the press that the borders had been opened. While the wall probably would have come down eventually, this bit of misinformation, amplified by TV and radio outlets, almost certainly hastened the course of events.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Gareth Dale, *Popular Protest in East Germany*; Ray Rühle, *Entstehung von politischer Öffentlichkeit*.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Großmann, *Fernsehen, Revolution und das Ende der DDR* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Antonia Kleikamp, "Der Mann, der die Mauer öffnete" *Welt*, January 2, 2014.



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