

The Shield and Sword of Consumption: The Police-Society Relationship in the Former East Germany

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Abstract

The East German secret police or Ministry for State Security (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, commonly known as the Stasi) upheld its motto of *shield and sword* by permeating all aspects of the East German economy and the country's consumer culture. Because consumerism intersected with culture, economics, and socio-political factors, consumption became a crucial link between the Stasi and society. Moreover, consumption was always a complex negotiation between the party leadership, various governmental and economic apparatuses, and the population. Every aspect of consumption in East Germany (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, DDR) was inherently political, right down to the basic provision of (or failure to provide) meat, toys, and toilet paper. In the DDR, consumption became a politicized test of the regime's claim to be a successful socialist state. For this reason, the Stasi not only monitored, but also defended the interests of the consumers subscribing to the socialist consumer aesthetic. This paper argues that the Stasi was intervening in economic affairs and conflating consumer satisfaction with national security. This thesis is substantiated with references to numerous archival sources and interviews with East Germans associated with the Stasi and the *Konsum*.

The East German secret police or Ministry for State Security (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, MfS, commonly known as the **Stasi**) upheld its motto of *shield and sword* by permeating all aspects of the East German economy and the country's consumer culture. Because consumerism intersected with culture, economics, and socio-political factors, consumption became a crucial link between the Stasi and society. Moreover, consumption was always a complex negotiation between the party leadership, various governmental and economic apparatuses, and the

population.¹ However, according to historians Burghard Ciesla and Patrice G. Poutrus, consumption needs were always secondary and only received attention when it became necessary to deal with supply shortages, or in crisis situations that were no longer “manageable.”² When such a crisis situation occurred, the Stasi would have to intervene and put out the flames. To illustrate this point, I primarily examine the relationship between the Stasi and the Union of Consumer Co-operatives of East Germany (*Konsum*).³ Every aspect of consumption in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany or the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, **DDR**) was inherently political, right down to the provision of (or failure to provide) meat, toys, and toilet paper. In the DDR, consumption tended to become politicized as a test of the regime's claim to be a successful socialist state. For this reason, the Stasi not only monitored, but also defended the interests of the consumers subscribing to the socialist consumer aesthetic. This paper argues that the Stasi was intervening in economic affairs and gauging consumer satisfaction as a matter of national security. This thesis alludes to an important question: could it be said that the Stasi was “running” the East German economy?⁴

The Stasi Observation of the *Konsum*

Consumption shortages undermined support for the East German state. *Konsum* propagandists said, “Shortages can be criticized and they had to be overcome as quickly as possible. What we promised had to be real and fulfilled.”⁵ It

¹ Philipp Heldmann, *Herrschaft, Wirtschaft, Anoraks: Konsumpolitik in der DDR der Sechzigerjahre* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 9-10.

² Burghard Ciesla and Patrice G. Poutrus, “Food Supply in a Planned Economy: SED Nutrition Policy between Crisis Response and Popular Needs,” in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Hugo Jarausch (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 145.

³ The evidence for this paper is drawn from the Stasi archive and the files of the Union of the Consumer Co-operatives of the DDR (*Konsum*). Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes (**BStU**) or Stasi archive contains files regarding the infiltration of the Stasi into the *Konsum* workforce and Stasi observations of consumption.

⁴ The *Konsum* was a massive organization, which served multiple societal and ideological functions in the Soviet Occupation Zone from 1945 to 1949 (*Sowjetische Besatzungszone*, – 1945 to 1949) and the German Democratic Republic (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, DDR – 1949 to 1990). Its omnipresence consisted of an outlet in nearly every town and village totalling 21,000 retail outlets, 544 department stores, 399 stores that sold agricultural goods, as well as production factories and restaurants. By 1988, these *Konsum* locations served a membership of around 4.6 million and employed a combined 287,000 workers. Andreas Herbst, Winfried Ranke, and Jürgen Winkler, “Verband Der Konsumgenossenschaften der DDR (VDK),” in *So funktionierte die DDR, Bd. 2: Lexikon der Organisationen und Institutionen* (Hamburg: Reinbek, 1994), 1113.

⁵ *Sächsisches Wirtschaftsarchiv (SWA)* is a regional archive in Leipzig which houses the files of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig* from 1884 to 1990 and the files of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Zwickau* from 1873 to 1990. “SWA: U2/I/58, Richtlinien für die Agitationsarbeit in den

was through the provision of commodities that the ruling party of East Germany (Socialist Unity Party of Germany, *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, **SED**) tried to convince East Germans that their state was worth having and keeping.⁶ Because the Stasi linked consumption with national security, it was compelled to intervene whenever the population grew too dismayed over shortages because it understood (correctly) that its power to shape compliance rested just as much on the small things of everyday consumption in the *Konsum* retail outlets as on the major political initiatives. This section examines the correlation between consumerism and national security. On a micro-level, it also shows that the Stasi had considerable influence on the *Konsum* and almost unfettered access to spy on its employees and members.

The Stasi operated a division for the “protection of the economy” known as Department XVIII.⁷ The Stasi’s Department XVIII was perhaps the singular body that was most able to intervene in the East German economy. It provided the muscle to ensure that the party’s economic decrees were enforced. During the initial years of the fledgling East German state, this included the removal of small private businesses, forcing the farmers onto collective farms, and staging show trials in rural villages.⁸ According to historian John C. Schmeidel, economic industries “viewed the Stasi as the godfather, the well connected fixer that could overcome by its clout the shortages, the ‘plan mentality’ that punished good results by imposing higher norms after a good year, the favouritism, and the misallocation of resources that have distinguished command economies since the Russian Revolution.”⁹ The *Konsum*, therefore, may have welcomed the infiltration of Department XVIII due to its ability to provide leverage over competing industries and allocate resources in the shortage economy of the DDR.

It was common for Department XVIII to imbed informants (*Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter*, **IMs**) into sensitive industrial and economic areas. While Stasi officers were usually open about their profession and status, IMs worked secretly within the *Konsum* and only the Stasi recruiters knew their identities. The informants often held a few primary roles in the *Konsum*: spying on colleagues and reporting on the morale of the workforce. From the information gathered by these informants, the Stasi made weekly reports written from their vantage points within *Konsum* stores. Whether the Stasi was perceived as a nuisance or something worse, Stasi informants certainly made deep inroads into the *Konsum* and monitored its employees and customers for

Konsumgenossenschaften im Bereich der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik," Author not given, document produced by the *Konsum*'s Advertising and Agitation Department, 1952; p. 4.

⁶ Annette Kaminsky, "Einkaufsbeutel und Bückware," in *Erinnerungsorte der DDR*, ed. Martin Sabrow (Munich C.H. Beck, 2009), 248.

⁷ Kristie Macrakis, *Seduced by Secrets: Inside the Stasi's Spy-Tech World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008), 16.

⁸ John C. Schmeidel, *Stasi: Shield and Sword of the Party* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 18-19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

any signs of potential resistance and to gauge the mood of the population in relation to consumption. The *Konsum* was not a sensitive military site. Therefore, the cases explored in this paper demonstrate the considerable efforts the IMs undertook to gather information about the everyday consuming practices of East German citizens.¹⁰

The Stasi and its IMs monitored and measured the ideological influence of *Konsum* workers on consumers. In 1960, the Stasi asserted that propaganda and ideology was weakly developed and inadequate at the consumer co-operative in Berlin-Mitte (the central district of Berlin). The Stasi was alarmed that this ideological work was considered less important than the concerns of daily work within this co-operative. More worrisome from the Stasi perspective, as the report also indicated, a politically weak female Comrade (*Genossin*) was elected who was incapable of disseminating the ideology of the party. As a result, the Stasi believed this retail outlet was failing to influence its workers and customers ideologically, and so the Stasi recommend increased ideological training for the *Konsum* workforce.¹¹ For instance, in order to have a current view on contemporary political events, sales personnel had to arrive at work fifteen minutes early to discuss newspaper articles and questions about life in the socialist collective. The primary reason for these meetings was to enable the sales-personnel to act as a junction between the party and the consumers.¹²

Even well-trained sales personnel, however, could not overcome the negative impact of shortages on the stability of the regime, especially in the countryside throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In the rural areas of the DDR, shopping was often an unpleasant, unrewarding, and disillusioning experience. (At least in the cities, especially Berlin, consumers had other retail options and access to better supplied stores.) The *Konsum* outlet in Saalfeld was a case in point. Because it could not satisfy demand, many consumers turned to private merchants to meet their daily needs. As party personnel at the *Konsum* admitted, private dealers sold a greater variety of higher-quality goods at lower prices, while they, in contrast, had very little to offer local residents. Many Saalfelders complained about people with personal connections to *Konsum* saleswomen, since some gained unfair access to goods at the expense of others.¹³ This was sarcastically referred to as Vitamin B, for the German word *Beziehungen* (personal connections). Informal networks or Vitamin B were a

¹⁰ Gary Bruce, *The Firm: The Inside Story of the Stasi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.

¹¹ BStU - MfS Zentralarchiv 2493/67, Analyse Konsumgenossenschaft - Mitte, Berlin den 8.11.1960, 34.

¹² SWA: U2/SWA 1594, Verkaufsstelle der ausgezeichneten Verkaufskultur (Date not given - probably the 1950s or early 1960s), 9.

¹³ Andrew I. Port, *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 249-52.

common technique in acquiring desired goods, which resulted in frustration and resentment for those who lacked such connections or *Beziehungen*. The following humorous poem is one such example:

In the <i>Konsum</i> store no aunt	<i>Beim Konsum keine Tante</i>
In the H.O. store no relatives	<i>Beim H.O. keine Verwandte</i>
From the West no package	<i>Aus dem Westen kein Paket</i>
And you still ask me how	<i>Und da fragen Sie mir noch</i>
I'm doing.	<i>wie es mir geht.</i> ¹⁴

Customers were repeatedly frustrated by supply shortages and uneven distribution practices in Saalfeld, while the authorities and workers who managed the *Konsum* and other state-run stores also grew annoyed. For example, the SED District Secretariat in Saalfeld berated the *Konsum* for neglecting the rural areas, where it was the main supplier. Historian Andrew Port writes "this was especially disconcerting at a time when many farmers were complaining about the failure of the *Konsum* to offer its customers more indispensable items like blankets."¹⁵

Like in Saalfeld, customers grew very angry in 1970 in Zittau (a small community near the German-Czechoslovak border) because of the deteriorating supply situation due to the closure of *Konsum* retail outlets 1120 and 1122. According to a Stasi report, customers were so dismayed with these closures and, more broadly, socialist consumer culture that they expressed their anger by protesting in the forms of meetings with the National Front.¹⁶ In spite of their protests, these two *Konsum* shops remained closed. In response, the *Konsum* received anonymous calls threatening to sabotage the store if it were not reopened the following Monday. In one call, the culprit stated, "I warn you that something is going to happen."¹⁷ Indeed, something did happen. At the *Konsum* retail outlets 1120 and 1122, the shop windows became targets of anger and were destroyed. The culprits then entered the shops through the broken windows and started fires. The report concludes with the notation that the Stasi had not yet caught the criminals.¹⁸

¹⁴ Judd Stitzel, "Shopping, Sewing, Networking, Complaining: Consumer Culture and the Relationship between State and Society in the GDR," in *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, ed. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 263.

¹⁵ Port, *Conflict and Stability*, 247.

¹⁶ The East German Parliament (*Volkskammer* or People's Chamber) was the single legislative chamber of the DDR. Its members (from its founding in 1949 until the first free elections on 18 March 1990) were elected on a slate called the National Front.

¹⁷ BStU - MfS BV Dresden Abt. XVIII 13035, Bezirksverwaltung für Staatssicherheit Dresden Kreisdienststelle Zittau, Vorsätzliche Brandstiftung und Vorsätzliche Beschädigung sozialistischen Eigentums in der Konsum-Verkaufsstelle 1122 und 1120 Pethau, Hauptstraße 27 Zittau, äußere Weberstraße, Zittau, den 27.9.70, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-4.

In the Saalfeld and Zittau cases, the Stasi understood the correlation between the consumer goods shortages and diminishing support for the state. *Konsum* propaganda compounded the problem of shortages by drawing attention to the contrasts between the actual shopping experience in these stores and propagandized images of plenty. While ideological conversations with customers and members took place within retail outlets, attempts to engage in these conversations were not warmly received by customers at the consumer co-operative at Berlin-Köpenick (a wealthy district in the outskirts of Berlin). Instead, customers complained about the shortages of milk, butter, and vegetables. Customers often replied to sales staff's attempts at ideological conversation with the following answer: "first and foremost worry about providing us with a better selection of goods. Only then will you be able to engage us in political and ideological conversations."¹⁹ In a 2011 interview, Herr Ulrich Fitzkow, a former civil engineer in the DDR, described the *Konsum's* propaganda as ineffective and his general interaction with this organization as negative. For him, the primary message the *Konsum* portrayed to customers was actually counterproductive because, as he stated, "The experience of shopping in the *Konsum* could best be described as shortages or continual bottlenecks in the delivery of goods (*Mängel oder standigen Engpässe bei den Waren*). From the beginning to the end, the distribution in these stores was full of gaps (*lückenhaft*), which only became worse in the 1980s."²⁰ Combined, these examples illustrate that frustrations with the regime often stemmed out of material shortages and the SED's inadequate material culture.

By the late 1980s, consumption and the supply situation were rapidly deteriorating in the countryside as the DDR's command economy began to flounder to the point that the Stasi was becoming alarmed by what it perceived as growing resentment and instability. For instance, consumers in Ebersbach (a town of around 8,000 inhabitants near the German-Czech border) had to deal with severe discrepancies in the availability of goods. Similarly, in district Löbau, there was a limited availability of fruits and vegetables. As a result, the Stasi came to the conclusion that it had to collect more information about how the population was reacting to the supply problems. This being so, the Stasi, a highly effective and repressive secret police agency and intelligence service, subsequently intensified its surveillance in the sleepy town of Ebersbach and district Löbau.²¹

The forms of complaint illustrated in this section demonstrate the population's

¹⁹ Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB)—Berlin State Archives "LAB: C Rep. 904-035 Nr. 4, Stand der Wahlvorbereitung und Situationsbericht, Konsumgenossenschaft Berlin Köpenick, 20.6.57.

²⁰ Author's interview with Ullrich Fitzkow, Brunkau, Germany, 18 April 2011.

²¹ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS-ZAIG 20544, Bezirksverwaltung für Staatssicherheit Bereich Auswertung 1, Politisch-operative Einschätzung zu den in der Stadt Ebersbach, Kreis Löbau, aufgetretenen Reaktionen der Bevölkerung zur Versorgung, Dresden, 4. Juli 1988, 66.

growing dissatisfaction with the East German socialist consumer culture. Seeing the growing unrest amongst the population, the Stasi intervened in the *Konsum*, conflating consumer culture with national security. In so doing, the Stasi used the *Konsum* as a means to monitor the population. In fact, the *Konsum* stores, as historian Katherine Pence argues, brought its customers into a readily observable space in which they could be controlled and surveyed.²² While labelling the *Konsum* as a disciplinary institution may be an overstatement, it was, nevertheless, a site in which there was a continual presence of surveillance. Stasi files support this contention and indicate that there was a great deal of observation taking place in these stores in order to monitor deviance or dissatisfaction amongst the population. In this way, the *Konsum* brought the consuming population into the view of the state, especially in the form of citizen petitions or *Eingaben*.

The Stasi Monitors Protest Letters and the Correct Forms of Consumption

In February 1953, the regime enacted laws that governed how the various state authorities would respond to the treatment of both oral and written petitions.²³ Customers, consumers, and workers had the opportunity to direct petitions to the various administrative levels of the *Konsum*. For instance, the executive of the Consumer Co-operative Leipzig ensured that every member could send petitions to its various administrative levels, including individual members of the executive. In fact, the *Konsum* executive guaranteed that letter-writers would receive a written response from them within ten days, and they guaranteed a two-day response for letters written to the lower branches of this organization.²⁴ Historian Judd Stitzel describes protest letters:

Often with much humour, sarcasm, and wit, consumers used petitions as a vent for anger and frustration, and more importantly as yet another technique of obtaining needed goods. As sources that offer insights into both consumers' quotidian practices of consumption and discourses about the respective responsibilities and rights of consumers and the regime, petitions reveal much about the relations between state and society in the DDR.²⁵

²² Katherine Pence, "From Rations to Fashions: The Gendered Politics of East and West German Consumption, 1945-1961 - Volume I" (University of Michigan 1999), 613-14.

²³ Judd Stitzel, *Fashioning Socialism: Clothing, Politics, and Consumer Culture in East Germany* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 153.

²⁴ SWA: U2/(SWA 623) 870, Richtlinie über die Ordnung für die Arbeit mit den Eingaben der Bürger in der Verwaltung des KGV Stadt Leipzig, Konsum-Genossenschaftsverband Stadt Leipzig, den 23.6.62, 1-2.

²⁵ Stitzel, *Fashioning Socialism*, 153.

The Stasi checked petitions for what it perceived as “enemy activity” (*Feindarbeit*). If there was clear collective protest against the regime, then the local state organs were notified.²⁶ When East Germans attempted to communicate with the party and state there were, as historian Jan Palmowski suggests, “rules of engagement.” The first rule was to confront the state and the party on the basis of its own rules and arguments; the political language of the SED had to be appropriated and turned against the local authorities (never the party itself).²⁷ For those who were subordinated, it was in their interest to grumble to a superior, for any move beyond grumbling ran the risk of open retaliation by the Stasi. Because party officials were fully aware of their advantageous position in such a situation, they would encourage the grumbler to openly state his or her complaint. In the words of anthropologist James C. Scott, “Over time a pattern of muttering may develop that has much of the communicative force of a quite refined language as the timing, tune, and nuances of the complaints become quite definitely understood. This language exists alongside the language of deference without necessarily violating its prescriptions.”²⁸

Though not speaking directly about East Germany, the methods of complaint Scott describes certainly seemed to exist in the DDR. And more specifically, by adopting the regime’s language in order to ask the state to fulfill official promises and to respect worker-consumers’ “rights,” East Germans reproduced official discourses while practicing a form of self-regulation.²⁹ This conclusion is evidenced in the following letter. A frustrated *Konsum* customer knowingly used language that would get a reaction from state authorities by comparing socialist retail with capitalism. The letter-writer stated:

I bought a TV for 2170 East German marks at the *Konsum* retail outlet 430 on 13 December 1962. However, my personal satisfaction did not last long. A few days later, the original picture tube became defective. This was then replaced on 18 January 1963. In August of this year, this component again needed to be replaced.... This type of service has nothing to do with socialism and socialist retail trade. On the contrary, such fraudulent methods remind me of capitalism.³⁰

²⁶ Manfred Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!: Konsumgeschichten* (Berlin: Eulenspiegel Verlag 2004), 68.

²⁷ Jan Palmowski, “Learning the Rules: Local Activists and the Heimat,” in *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The “Normalisation of Rule”?*, ed. Mary Fulbrook (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 167.

²⁸ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 156.

²⁹ Stitzel, *Fashioning Socialism*: 160.

³⁰ SWA: U2/SWA 1402, An den Vorstand der Konsum Gen. Leipzig, Betr.: Fernsehgerät Staßfurt 53, Leipzig. D.5.10.63.

Of course, a TV was not an everyday item in the DDR in 1963. Nevertheless, this *Eingabe* demonstrates the ways in which East Germans expressed their individual desires for commodities through the language of SED socialism.

Nevertheless, there are examples in which these demands and complaints exceeded the accepted limits—that is, when they became coordinated and group-orientated the state perceived them as a challenge to its authority and subsequently intervened. On 17 June 1988, for instance, the administration of *Konsum* retail outlet 306 Ebersbach (a small city in Saxony just north of the Czechoslovak border) submitted a complaint letter titled “Petition to the council of the district of Löbau and the department of Trade and Provision.” This protest letter drew the direct attention of the Stasi functionaries in Dresden. Given the urgency of the supply situation, Hans Modrow, the high-ranking First Secretary of the SED of the regional administration in Dresden, was also notified. The letter stated, “For months the supply of fruit and vegetables in the co-operative retail outlet in Ebersbach was miserable. There is never any cauliflower, tomatoes, and cucumbers for sale, and the selection of fruit is also meagre. Since this co-operative retail outlet is the only available option for shopping in the area, we request a quick change to these conditions.”³¹ Since forty-eight citizens signed this petition, the Stasi was alarmed, resulting in the identification of the signatures and the examination of the facts and circumstances surrounding the writing of this letter. In the end, the examination did not produce what the Stasi might have perceived as evidence of “enemy activity,” but the secret police force was distressed by the general and growing frustration with the supply problems in Ebersbach.³² Historian Paul Betts suggests that by the early 1980s collectively written petitions, such as the preceding example, reflected an emerging public sphere and the growing confidence of the citizenry to demand justice. To use his words, “A revealing marker of change was that signatories were less apprehensive about preserving their anonymity in more politically oriented, collectively written *Eingaben*.”³³

In a further example, Frau H. described her negative experience at the *Konsum* butchery in Zwickau on 23 February 1989. She complained that only one saleswoman serviced this outlet even though the store was often full of customers. She said, “I fear that this kind of service was not an isolated case. It really should be considered if

³¹ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS-ZAIG 20544, Bezirksverwaltung für Staatssicherheit Bereich Auswertung 1, Politisch-operative Einschätzung zu den in der Stadt Ebersbach, Kreis Löbau, aufgetretenen Reaktionen der Bevölkerung zur Versorgung, Dresden, 4. Juli 1988, 64.

³² *Ibid.*, 65.

³³ Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 189-90.

it is wise to anger the population right before the election."³⁴ The directness of the language in petitions signalled that the letter writer recognized that East Germany's final days were numbered. With some certainty, it can be concluded that she had been harbouring this negative sentiment towards the *Konsum* and its employees for a long time and only felt confident to openly express her dismay by 1989.

Historian Eli Rubin notes that the Stasi was alarmed by the growing confidence of consumers and identified those who were not shopping in mainstream shops (i.e., *Konsum* type stores). The Stasi considered these people to be "outsiders" and thus worth putting under surveillance. To make this argument, Rubin uses the case of Angela, who, after 1989, discovered that the Stasi kept a file on her. The informer (one of her neighbours) noted her selection of wood and antique furniture instead of the ubiquitous East German plastics. For the Stasi, this was unequivocal evidence that Angela was not the "average" consumer; therefore, she was described as "different, suspicious, and worth watching carefully."³⁵ The example Rubin presents can be more broadly contextualized within the framework of this paper. For instance, the Stasi defended the consumers that used products that were in accordance with the socialist aesthetic, but was suspicious of those who did not conform.³⁶

To make a few conclusions from this section, it seems as though the letter writer of the Ebersbach petition and those who signed it overstepped the limits of acceptable protest by coordinating a group protest letter. This suggests that atomized complaint was allowed, but coordinated group protests were not tolerated. To make a further point, the Stasi, and by extension the state, took the provision of the population very seriously and grew alarmed whenever significant supply problems arose. For this reason, the Stasi acted on behalf of consumers in an attempt to quell potential opposition to the state. Then again, inefficiencies of the planned economy could not ultimately meet the increasing demands of East Germans.³⁷ Nevertheless, the state did try.

³⁴ SWA: U64/242, Eingabe, *Betreff*: Verkaufsstelle Vettermannstraße VKE-Nr. 0715, 31. Jan 1989.

³⁵ Eli Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics & Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 281.

³⁶ East German authorities were also suspicious of youth in jeans. While youth saw jeans as a symbol of rebellion and freedom, the Stasi perceived this consumer product as derisory Western influence. According to Rebecca Menzel, "jeans in the DDR were not just pants—they were an attitude!" Rebecca Menzel, *Jeans in der DDR: vom tieferen Sinn einer Freizeithose*, 1. Aufl. ed. (Berlin: Links, 2004), 8.

³⁷ Juliane Schütterle, *Klassenkampf im Kaufhaus: Versorgung und Sonderversorgung in der DDR 1971-1989* (Erfurt: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Thüringen, 2009), 48.

The Stasi and *Konsum* Monitor and Try to Improve Consumption

The Stasi recognized the frustration of consumers and undertook measures to improve consumption. To do so, it maintained and received files and weekly reports from the *Konsum* dealing with its provision of the population. For example, the supply report from Potsdam's *Konsum* outlet for the week of 7 March to 13 March 1986 indicated that the quality of goods failed to satisfy consumers. In turn, the *Konsum*'s management reported that they were only able to make a limited amount of meat and poultry products available to consumers.³⁸ Once again, officials were alarmed by the provisional report from the week of 6 June 1986 to 12 June 1986. It indicated that there were considerable quality control problems. More troublingly, the delivery of bread to the *Konsum* retail outlets 309, 315, and 316 did not take place on schedule. Consequently, the customers were burdened with having to make two or three trips to their respective retail outlet in order to pick up the most basic of foodstuffs; not surprisingly, they blamed the sales staff for the unavailable products which led to unpleasant exchanges and arguments.³⁹

The Stasi was able to wield a big stick to make an organization as large as the *Konsum* work better for consumers: it took the president of the *Konsum* to task over the provision problems. The Stasi was monitoring citizens' frustrations with and criticisms of the range of goods in *Konsum* stores and became acutely aware of the inadequate quality of meat and sausages. Customers particularly complained about the high salt content, freshness, the insufficient shelf-life, and the rapid discoloration of these meat products.⁴⁰ As a result, the president of the *Konsum* had to inform the Council of Ministers of the DDR about the shortages, as well as the plans and designs for the modernisation and reconstruction of the consumer co-operative meat processing industries to quell consumer demand and frustration.⁴¹

Above all, what the Stasi wanted from the *Konsum* was a "yardstick" by which to measure how the supply situation was impacting the mood of the population and the stability of the East German state.⁴² In this context, the Stasi—the world-renowned infamous secret police and intelligence service—became something of a consumer advocate and played the role of liaison between consumers and the *Konsum*.

³⁸ BStU - Archiv der Außenstelle Potsdam: BVfS Potsdam, KD OR 766 Bd.4, Versorgungsbericht für die Woche vom 7.3. - 13.3.1986, 66-67.

³⁹ BStU - Archiv der Außenstelle Potsdam: BVfS Potsdam, KD OR 766 Bd.4, Versorgungsbericht für die Woche vom 6.6 - 12.6.1986, 104-05.

⁴⁰ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS-ZAIG 21122, Bericht über Kontrollergebnisse zur Sicherung der Qualität Struktur von Fleisch- und Wurstwaren im Grundsortiment (date not given - probably late 1980s), 138.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴² Ulrich Kurzer, "Konsumgenossenschaften in der Sowjetischen Zone und in der DDR: Hypothesen zu einem bisher wenig beachteten Forschungsfeld," *Deutschland Archiv* 32, no. 5 (1999), 815.

Defending Consumers: The Stasi Observation of the *Konsum* Workforce

Since *Konsum* employees controlled access to goods, this placed them in a relatively privileged position in a shortage-economy, a position that they often used as compensation for being underpaid and for enduring difficult working conditions. And because commodities were often bought, sold, and traded on the level of mutual favours, those without anything to barter experienced hardships within the DDR's favour-economy. Not surprisingly, during an interview a former *Konsum* saleswoman defended the customer service in the *Konsum*, but admitted that there were, of course, unfriendly saleswomen. She also noted, "Relations with *Konsum* staff were extremely important in order to get in-demand articles."⁴³ Yet, civil engineer Fitzkow also described his relations with *Konsum* staff as positive: "The sales-women made great efforts to serve their customers, even though the goods were simply often not there to deliver. Yet, with such shortages, there was corruption."⁴⁴

Stasi forces, for their roles, were used to defend the rights of consumers by combating corruption in the *Konsum*. To ensure the service of the *Konsum* clientele, the Stasi infiltrated the *Konsum* and kept records on the mundane activities of its employees. In 1954 in Wittenberg, an employee at the local *Konsum* store in the electronics department was evaluated as a positive promoter of socialist consumer culture amongst his co-workers and customers and was described as quiet, polite, and courteous. Through his work in promoting *Konsum* fashion shows, he had "demonstrated a positive interest in his consumer co-operative." His file contains biographical information such as his being a member of the Nazi Party from 1938 to 1945 and being in an English POW camp from May to August 1945. Since his behaviour was apparently calm and disciplined, his biographical background did not, as the document states, "pose any disadvantage for him."⁴⁵ In another report from the Wittenberg co-operative in 1954, an employee was given a positive evaluation for leading a musical group. This man apparently had "an open character and good relations with customers, and it was unknown if he had connections to the West and West Berlin."⁴⁶ It was this subtle avenue of coercion, or to use Stephen Kotkin's turn of phrase, "the ability to define who people were," which made the Stasi a truly totalitarian and coercive instrument of state control.⁴⁷

⁴³ Author's interview with former *Konsum* Saleswoman who requested anonymity, Essingen Germany, 2011.

⁴⁴ Author's interview with Ullrich Fitzkow.

⁴⁵ BStU - BV Schwerin, AIM 817/55 P, Beurteilung, Wittenberge Datum: 13.10.54.

⁴⁶ BStU - BV Schwerin, AIM 817/55 P, Beurteilung, Wittenberge, den 9.11.1954, 19.

⁴⁷ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 224.

Notably, these reports and biographies were often tainted with personal views and preferences, which led to a highly subjective dissemination of information about the workforce, the state of consumption, and the general mood of the population. For instance, a Stasi-informant code-named "Barbara," who was born in 1944 in Bad Elster, became an apprentice at the Consumer Co-operative Adorf from 1960 to 1963. She trained to be an economist at the *Konsum* College for Domestic Trade from 1964 to 1967. Then Barbara was recruited to spy for the Stasi on 6 January 1977.⁴⁸ In 1982, Barbara was imbedded in the *Konsum* to report on the mood, loyalty, and opinions voiced by the administration and her co-workers. She concluded that the current conflict in Lebanon was having a negative impact on the mood of the *Konsum* workforce, since her co-workers believed it could lead to a wider confrontation between the super powers and a worsening of the entire global situation during the early 1980s.⁴⁹ The legitimacy of Barbara's report is difficult to decipher. To speculate, perhaps Barbara's colleagues were genuinely concerned about the crisis in Lebanon; however, she may have simply been feeding her superiors what they wanted to hear. Whatever the case, biases expressed within the reports of Stasi informants had the potential to endanger workers and colleagues, and render the Stasi a less effective communications instrument between populace and state, since it flooded the secret police service with endless amounts of useless information. For a further example, a Stasi informant code-named Stähr reported to a Major Mühlberg about an employee at the *Konsum* restaurant in Oranienburg. On 20 August 1979, Stähr reported to Mühlberg that he was successful in infiltrating this organization and establishing contact with an employee over the course of several visits to the restaurant. Stähr's report concluded, "This employee served various customers from the surrounding areas such as farmers, tradesmen, and youth, although without close relations with them. The employee was a passionate windsurfer and did not receive further holidays for the month of August. He or she was very angry about this!"⁵⁰ The story of the windsurfing *Konsum* employee illustrates the wastefulness, ineffectiveness, and general uselessness of the vast majority of such reports to improve consumption.

In spite of the arbitrary reporting of some of these IMs, the Stasi's Department XVIII had a direct understanding of the economic problems that plagued the East German economy. For instance, already by 1980, the Stasi accurately concluded that East Germany's dependence on West German loans and by extension its hard currency deficits were spiralling out of control and would lead to economic collapse.

⁴⁸ BStU - BV-Karl-Marx-Stadt Oelsnitz XIV 1416/76 I/I, Auskunftsbericht Datum: 20.4.1978, 84-85.

⁴⁹ BStU - BV-Karl-Marx-Stadt Oelsnitz XIV 1416/76 I/II, Stimmungen und Meinungen, 28.7.82, 433.

⁵⁰ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS - HA II Nr. 32768, Information zu (Name wurde verdunkelt) der Konsumgaststätte Zehlendorf Kr. Oranienburg, Berlin, 19.09.1979, 120.

However, the Stasi Chief Erich Mielke fatefully dismissed the warning and reprimanded Department XVIII.⁵¹

In 1982, the Stasi determined that it was necessary to recruit more IMs to further infiltrate the *Konsum*.⁵² That year, the Stasi recruited a man codenamed “Theo Bergner,” who reported on his colleagues at the consumer co-operative outlet in Stahnsdorf (a small community just east of Potsdam). His report dealt with a woman who was born in Stahnsdorf in 1943 and conducted technical work at the Consumer Co-operative Stahnsdorf. Bergner characterised her as modest, honest, and politically loyal; however, she had strong religious beliefs. During a visit to her house, Bergner reported that she was in possession of religious relics. She also had possible western contacts, but this was not certain. She was in a long-term relationship with a man who Bergner described as a member of the working-class (*Arbeitertyp*). Her daughter and her three “illegitimate” children also lived with them.⁵³ The fact that this report highlights that the daughter had “illegitimate” children signifies the arbitrary and intrusive nature of such surveillance, the lack of a private sphere, and the totalitarian nature of the regime. Moreover, the drafting of such calculated reports would have almost certainly left its mark on the daily lives of colleagues, neighbours, and classmates.⁵⁴

Bergner then reported on a second saleswoman, a twenty-year-old living in Potsdam. She was trained and studied at the State Co-operative in Potsdam (*Genossenschaft KG Potsdam-Land*). According to Bergner’s assessment, she was a so-called “late developer”, (*Spätentwickler*), and he characterised her as friendly and honest. The assessment states:

There were clear inconsistencies not to be overlooked because she did not inform on a former colleague’s alcohol problems. In September 1982, she will receive her qualification certificate to begin work as an administrator of a co-operative retail outlet. She is married and her husband is considered to be a member of the working-class, who has made a positive impression at a party gathering. For her services, she had been honoured with a trip abroad. She is not affiliated with any party and it is believed that she had not conducted any negative political discussions.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Mike Dennis and Peter Brown, *The Stasi: Myth and Reality* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2003), 126.

⁵² BStU - Archiv der Außenstelle Potsdam: BVfS Potsdam Abt. XVIII 189, Vorschlag zur Werbung der IMK/KW „Konsum“, Reg. -Nr.: IV/1173/83, Potsdam, 20.12.1982, 447.

⁵³ BStU - Archiv der Außenstelle Potsdam: BVfS Potsdam Abt. XVIII 189, Mündlicher Bericht des IMK/KW „Theo Bergner“ vom 14.07.1982 zum Personal der Konsumverkaufsstelle in Stahnsdorf, 146.

⁵⁴ Stefan Wolle, *Die heile Welt der Diktatur: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1971-1989*, 1. Aufl. ed. (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1998), 153.

⁵⁵ BStU - Archiv der Außenstelle Potsdam: BVfS Potsdam Abt. XVIII 189, Mündlicher Bericht des IMK/KW „Theo Bergner“ vom 14.07.1982 zum Personal der Konsumverkaufsstelle in Stahnsdorf, 146-47.

Bergner determined that there was a positive partnership between the two saleswomen. He concluded his report by noting that the women were neither garrulous nor did they engage in interests directly related to their workplace. The saleswomen, for their part, may have suspected Bergner of having Stasi affiliations and purposefully remained silent in his company.

In the late 1980s, the Stasi was monitoring relations between *Konsum* employees and customers at a *Konsum* outlet in Karl-Marx-Stadt (present-day Chemnitz). This retail outlet was located on Sonnenstraße and was apparently as well stocked as other retail outlets, yet there were constant customer complaints about access to goods and customer treatment at the hands of the sales staff. The Stasi reported that sales personnel were not working in accordance with socialist principles; rather they were apparently involved in secretive, “underhanded” dealings with customers. Consequently, the goods available to customers without contacts or close relations with sales personnel were severely limited, and they were forced to spend a lot of time in search of desired goods in other stores. The Stasi was notified and the leading employees of this retail outlet were brought under further investigation.⁵⁶ In 1981, the Stasi further reported thefts being committed by a group of employees at the *Konsum* bakery in Grimmen. Apparently, these workers were stealing various products amounting to 10,000 East German marks per month. The Stasi determined that part of the cause of this thievery and corruption was the high level of alcohol consumed during working hours. It also profiled some of the workers at the Grimmen *Konsum* bakery. Worker A was a member of the Democratic Peasants Party of Germany (*Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands, DBD*) and apparently overburdened. Worker B had no party affiliation, but was deemed as loyal. The administrator, a member of the SED, failed to carry out his or her duties and was unable to comprehend the severity of the problems in this bakery.⁵⁷

The aforementioned cases explored demonstrate the lengths that the Stasi undertook in order to “protect the economy,” including the gathering of information about mundane aspects in the lives of East German citizens. As this section has shown, historian Gary Bruce is correct when he suggests, “What is remarkable about the Stasi is its penetration of the most ordinary, ostensibly nonthreatening, areas of East Germany.... It is difficult to imagine that a dictatorship with the range of instruments that the DDR had could not colour, in very real terms, the ordinary lives

⁵⁶ BStU - Karl-Marx-Stadt AKG Nr. 9341, Information über Hinweise aus der Bevölkerung zu Mängeln in der Arbeit der Konsum-Möbelverkaufsstelle Karl-Marx-Stadt, Sonnenstraße (Date not given—likely the late 1980s), 405-06.

⁵⁷ BStU - MfS BV Rostock AKG Nr. 558, Kreisdienststelle den Konsumbackwarenbetrieb Grimmen, 3.4.1981, 14-17.

of East Germans."⁵⁸ Ultimately, it is difficult to determine if the IMs and Stasi intervention as a whole produced any positive outcomes for consumers. However, it can be concluded with certainty that the Stasi fused consumerism with national security and understood (correctly) consumption's relationship with state legitimacy.

Conclusions

To return to the questions raised in the introduction: could it be said that the Stasi was "running" the economy by a certain point? It is exceedingly difficult to answer these questions given that the history of the DDR was not static and had geographical variations. The Stasi, founded in February 1950, was initially used to guard industrial areas. This basic role as the protector of the economy remained intact until 1989.⁵⁹ Yet, Bruce notes that the central focus of Stasi operations varied from district to district (*kreisspezifisch*). Specifically, he gives the example of district Gransee where protection of military installations was the primary concern for the Stasi. On the other hand, in district Perleberg the Stasi's central focus was the protection of the economy.⁶⁰ And so, to give a relatively slippery answer, at certain periods and in certain locations the Stasi held a dominant position in the economy.

There are a number of further conclusions that need to be illustrated. First of all, the Stasi was willing to spend time and resources to micromanage the economy. As indicated throughout this paper, the Stasi reports allude to the state's attempts to infiltrate into the most humdrum and anodyne aspects of the economy in an attempt to have it work better for its citizens. This direct intervention into the workers' lives of a supposedly apolitical and economic organization such as the *Konsum* supports my general perception of the DDR as a totalitarian state. In this sense, totalitarian does not mean the complete control of the state over the private lives of individuals; rather, just the state's complete claim on the private lives of individuals. Yet, Stasi documentation clearly demonstrates that the party was reporting on and reacting to individual demands for improved consumption. In this sense, the Stasi was acting as a liaison between state and consumers. In other words, the SED wanted the *Konsum* to foster an enjoyable consumer culture to promote and legitimize its rule, whereas the Stasi wanted to use the *Konsum* as a means to monitor the mood of the population

⁵⁸ Bruce, *The Firm*, 11-12.

⁵⁹ Georg Wagner-Kyora, "Spione der Arbeit—Zur Methodik der Alltagsgeschichte mit IM-Berichten aus Industriebetrieben," in *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft: Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR*, ed. Jens Gieseke (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 217.

⁶⁰ Gary Bruce, "Wir haben den Kontakt zu den Massen nie verloren: Das Verhältnis zwischen Stasi und Gesellschaft am Beispiel der Kreise Perleberg und Gransee," in *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft: Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR*, ed. Jens Gieseke (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 378.

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while simultaneously creating an enjoyable consumer culture to quell and remove any possible motivation for dissension. In order to increase the population's commitment to the East German state, the Stasi, acting on behalf of consumers, ordered the *Konsum* to produce goods that would please its customers.⁶¹ However, as the *shield and sword* of the entire East German economy, the Stasi was overburdened with safeguarding literally all facets of political and economical life. The Stasi and its Department XVIII was never able to adequately make East Germany's command economy run smoothly for consumers and was only able to intervene and put out the fire when a given situation became particularly dire.

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⁶¹ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS SED-KL 551, Direktive über die Vorbereitung und Durchführung der Wahlen leitenden Organe der Konsumgenossenschaften, 3-5.