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It Tastes Like the East...: The Problem of Taste in the GDR

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IT TASTES LIKE THE EAST…

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Cover Image (Figure 1): Gaby from the Eastern Zone (17) in Paradise (the FRG): My First Banana. From: Titanic 11 (November 1989). Image courtesy of Titanic Redaktion, Frankfurt, Germany.

Abstract | This essay uses the topic of taste, specifically taste for food, as a way of unpacking the history of the GDR and East-West relations during the late Cold War. It explores the question of East German tastes from two angles: West German fantasies about the inadequacies of the GDR's food system, and East German nutritionists' unsuccessful struggles to regulate popular tastes. In particular, it focuses on the moment when popular taste was seen as a serious problem by the GDR state—during the rise of the obesity epidemic in the 1970s and 1980s.

Résumé | Cet essai utilise le thème du goût, spécifiquement le goût pour la nourriture, comme un moyen de dévoiler l'histoire de la RDA et les relations Est-Ouest pendant la fin de la guerre froide. Il examine la question des goûts de l'Allemagne de l'Est sous deux angles: Les fantaisies des ouest-allemands sur les insuffisances du système alimentaire de la RDA, et les luttes infructueuses des spécialistes de la nutrition est-allemands pour réglementer les goûts populaires. L'essai se concentre en particulière sur le moment où le goût populaire a été considéré comme un problème grave par l'état de la RDA—pendant l'augmentation de l'épidémie d'obésité dans les années 1970 et 1980.

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It Tastes like the East…: The Problem of Taste in the GDR

In the autumn of 1999, just a few months after I had moved to Berlin for a post-college fellowship, I attended a party hosted by a good friend. Like most of my friends at that time, she was East German, a fact of which I was barely aware. This particular party proved unexpectedly memorable, however, as it was the stage for my first experience of the infamous *Mauer im*

Kopf, the “Wall in the head” that was still a subject of much debate a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The hostess had provided abundant snacks for our enjoyment, including, to my delight, one of my favorite sweets: *Knusperflocken*, small candies made of crunchy grains and milk chocolate. I was enthusiastically reaching for a handful when a guest warned me away: “I can’t believe it—don’t eat those,” he said. “Those are so *Ossi* [East German].” “What do you mean,” I asked innocently, “I think they’re delicious.” “No, they are not,” he insisted, “they only have two ingredients!” This both simple and nonsensical answer revealed that this *Wessi* defined East German food by what he perceived as inadequacy and lack—not poor flavor per se, but the abstract problem of having “only” two ingredients (chocolate and grain). His explanation bemused me; it only made sense when I began to understand it as part of a larger discourse that existed within recently reunified Germany. It also was my first exposure to the pervasiveness of food-based fantasies on the part of both East and West Germans with regard to one another in the wake of reunification.

Perhaps the most famous example of this sort of West German fantasy of East German “bad taste” is the infamous satirical magazine *Titanic*’s cover image from November 1989: the smiling “Zonen-Gabi,” or “Gabi from the [Eastern] zone,” holds an enormous peeled cucumber under the headline, “My first banana” (See Cover Image/ Fig. 1). The *Titanic* picture was only the most famous in a veritable flood of cartoons and images memorializing the fall of the Wall—an overwhelming number of which focused on bananas (Seeßlen). These jokes almost always described a profound East German desire for bananas, one that was so strong it bordered on the pathological. For example, East Germans were depicted as monkeys or as ravenous hordes consuming overnight the entire supply of bananas in the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany or West Germany). These jokes often revolved around the idea that East Germans’ tastes were so underdeveloped that they could not actually identify a banana when

they ate it—or did not eat it, as the case may be. Most frequent was the premise of the *Titanic* image: an East German ate a pickle, cucumber, sausage, or other deeply familiar food, but in their ignorance they "tasted" a banana. In other words, post-reunification discourse on the GDR normalized assumptions not only about how much East Germans ate (a lot) and what they ate (drab, non-delicious foods), but also about their inability to identify specific flavors. Most of these jokes could be summed up with the premise that the GDR was a land inhabited by people who were universally afflicted with "bad taste."

Theories of taste have been a crucial part of discussions of class, difference, and identity at least since Pierre Bourdieu's influential work *Distinction*, in which the sociologist noted that "tastes in food also depend on the idea each class has of the body and of the effects of food on the body, that is, on its strength, health and beauty" (190). However, taste is not simply a component of the expression of individual and collective identity. People's tastes in food have long been a central concern of modern states. Economists and nutritionists have struggled to determine, explain, and modify individual tastes in food since the emergence of the industrial economy; the rise of industrialization meant that economic health depended upon eating habits. Labour productivity was seen as directly related to popular diets, and food production and consumption became increasingly important components of the national economy. This recognition of the economic and social significance of individual dietary preferences has inspired countless projects to improve how and what populations eat. However, nutritionists' consistent failures to modify what they consider unhealthy popular eating habits has only confirmed anthropologist Jack Goody's observation that foodways often seem to be "the most conservative aspects of culture" (150). Indeed, since the emergence of the modern nutritional sciences, nutritionists have consistently complained about the near-impossibility of changing popular tastes ("Psychologische Grundlagen des Ernährungsverhaltens"). As a West German nutritionist explained grimly in 1967, "it is the task of nutritionists to work against false dietary habits, and this obligation

makes nutritionists unpopular. Nowhere is the human spirit less reasonable and more stubborn than when it is defending traditional and false eating habits" (Holtmeier 312). Thus taste remains individual and almost impossible for external forces to regulate at the same time that peoples' tastes in food matter profoundly to modern states because they determine what and how much individuals eat.

Scholarship on the GDR has only recently begun to address issues of food production and consumption as key components of everyday life (Ciesla and Poutrus). This literature has carefully documented East Germans' struggles to purchase foodstuffs given the vagaries of a socialist economy. Poor quality products, irregular and inadequate supplies, and inequitable and unpredictable distribution shaped consumer culture generally, but also of course determined how and what people ate. Historians have been less aware, however, of the ways in which the GDR's distinctive food culture incorporated citizens', especially East German women's, struggles to purchase foodstuffs. Moreover, they have ignored the existence of an elaborate network of collective-eating establishments in workplace canteens and school cafeterias, as well as a variety of individual strategies for food acquisition, including a reliance on private gardens and barter and trade as methods of compensating for inadequate state-provided supplies. More generally, the expanding literature on consumption practices in the GDR has rarely explored the issue of taste. While scholars such as Paul Betts, Judd Stitziel, and Eli Rubin have addressed the relationship between taste and East German identity vis-à-vis, respectively, furniture, fashion, and plastics, food has been marginal to these discussions. Nonetheless expressions of taste as a strategy of social ordering and hierarchy are inseparable from food itself. While we usually assume that good taste (or flavor) determines the foods that we eat, we simultaneously believe that other people's "wrong" food choices are made because of their underdeveloped or inadequate tastes. In short, the relationship between the actual flavor of specific foods and their symbolic association with "good taste" or "bad taste" is fluid, often contradictory, and heavily influenced by larger external political

and social categories.

This essay thinks about the category of taste as a way of exploring both the history and the legacy of the GDR by focusing upon two distinct discourses that constructed East German popular food tastes as flawed or bad. During the 1970s, the East German medical establishment came to the consensus that its population was too fat because of its inappropriate appetites for both too much food and the wrong sort of food. Actually the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the emergence of a so-called obesity epidemic in both East and West Germany, as well as across much of the industrialized world. Obesity posed a particular problem to the socialist state because its very existence suggested that popular taste was flawed, and that the sorts of "ordinary" foodways generally conceptualized as central to the state's identity caused serious health problems. This disturbing idea that East German citizens did not, in fact, like the "correct" foods suggested that some core values of socialism needed to be redefined. The obesity epidemic thus became a source of tension between nutritionists, who believed that excessive levels of fatness revealed poor eating habits, and a larger political, economic, and cultural discourse that associated socialism with cheap, abundant, and tasty foods. This essay compares this tension surrounding East German obesity with West German descriptions of East Germans as both impoverished and overweight, a population imagined as relying upon poor-tasting and undesirable foodstuffs. Here, East Germans' poor taste was imagined as being the direct and inevitable result of the economic system; West Germans imagined the East German population as icons of "bad taste" because they were forced to live within the inadequate consumer landscape of state socialism. Although these discourses served different purposes and emerged out of different contexts, they shared a common perception of the flawed nature of East German bodies and appetites.

WESTERN FANTASIES OF EASTERN FOOD

The conceptualization of East Germans as possessing singularly unsophisticated palates and an inferior gustatory culture had a long

tradition in the FRG. During the decades of Cold War division, mainstream West German discourse invoked two distinct and seemingly opposed images of the East German body: the starving victim of communism and the overweight and unsophisticated socialist citizen. Neither of these clichés was specific to the FRG. At least since the Russian Revolution, Western anti-communists associated communism with food shortages and even famine (Veit). During the Cold War, the emergence of private consumption as a primary sphere of global competition generally associated the Eastern Bloc with an underdeveloped, inadequate, and unattractive consumer market. In the case of divided Germany, however, these general patterns proved ubiquitous and long-lasting. Here popular discourse invoked these pathologized bodies to represent a distorted consumer culture and the profound inadequacies of the GDR's political and economic system more generally.[1] In addition, these stereotypes of East German bodies assumed that what and how East Germans ate was uniquely central to their overall lived experiences.

In the newly developing rhetoric of the Cold War, the sameness and anti-individualism that was thought to be a hallmark of communism became associated with poor quality and inadequate supply. Convinced, in the words of the postwar West German agricultural expert Frieda Wunderlich, that the goal of the Soviets had always been "above all the ruin of East German agriculture," anti-communists believed that a socialist government inevitably resulted in malnourishment and hunger (50). The weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* regularly reported throughout the 1950s and 1960s that "hunger, the vulture that circles over the socialist reconstruction, is hovering over the German Soviet Zone" ("Schweinemord"), as the German Democratic Republic was often termed in Western media. Until the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the *Grüne Woche* (Green Week), the major West German agricultural convention held annually in West Berlin, offered free food samples to East German visitors who were assumed to suffer from severe hunger. Indeed, beginning in the late 1950s, the West Berlin government began

stockpiling vast amounts of groceries in city storehouses, as advisors predicted a food crisis as a result of an anticipated unification. Decades before Gabi was depicted devouring her "banana," West German economists imagined hordes of half-starved East Germans gobbling up their supplies of sugar, butter, and meat (Betr: Arbeitsgruppe "Lebensmittelindustrie"). Throughout the years of division and regardless of the actual nutritional status of the population, West German depictions of life in the GDR relied upon tropes of hunger and deprivation that had been established during earlier wartime and immediate postwar experiences of poverty and shortages: poorly stocked stores and empty shelves, meager obligatory canteen meals, and never-satisfied cravings. For the FRG, the GDR became a key symbol of and shorthand for German hunger.

This vision of the GDR as a place of hunger and underdevelopment was encouraged by the steady shipments of West Packages (*Westpakete*) sent eastward across the border. They contained everything from bonbons to soaps, exotic fruits to stockings, noodles to imported chocolates. As a 1954 ad in the popular West German magazine *Prima* explained to its readers:

> *[F]ood packages seem to be a permanent aspect of our age. Before the currency reform, many lives depended on them. That's how it was with us. Then came the great [currency] reform, and suddenly we were no longer dependent on the food packages.* ***We*** *were not. But on the other side of the oft-cited curtain not much has changed, and so we now send packages across it. What you and I fill the packages and gift baskets with is not insignificant. It must be luxurious food products, butter and cheese, fish conserves, a sausage, fruit juices, a bottle of wine, valuable things for which our brothers and sisters will thank us. ("Prima Abschrift")*

These packages of chocolates, coffee, and cigarettes continued to be sent long after the GDR had transformed itself into a prosperous, industrialized, and—from a purely caloric perspective—quite well-fed

socialist country.[2] By relegating the GDR to a state of permanent want, these shipments compounded the internalized model of inequality that was central to West German identity. Even at the peak of the GDR's obesity epidemic in the 1970s and 1980s, these packages continued to be shipped across the border, feeding East German fantasies of Western abundance rather than intending to address real food shortages. Tellingly, throughout division and on into reunification, West Germans tended to depict East Germans as both chubby and badly dressed, exploiting a heavily class-based iconography that linked socialist bodies with the uneducated and unsophisticated proletariat.[3] These poor-yet-overfed bodies represented a particular kind of "Cold War hunger" which allowed East Germans to be constructed as simultaneously hungry (needing food aid) and fat (lacking sophistication and knowledge about how to eat well).

The real food situation in the GDR was certainly different from that of the FRG, although as much in terms of the ways in which people acquired their food as the actual foods consumed. Rather than relying on well-stocked and reliable supermarkets, a hallmark of the West German economy, East Germans acquired their foods through a wide array of means. In addition to standard grocery shopping, food was acquired through an informal economy that included systems of barter and trade, the black market, favours, bribery, or personal connections—so-called "Vitamin B," with B standing for *Beziehungen* or "relationships" (Schneider 250). Though the most severe supply problems had been resolved by the early 1960s, inadequate and monotonous food supplies continued to be a major political problem throughout the duration of the GDR. A 1968 report from the Leipzig Institute for Market Research found that "the lack of continuity in product supply is most noticeable in the structural differences between supply and demand," noting that sheer quantity of goods was adequate for the population as a whole but distributed sporadically "in terms of time and territory" (Institut für Markforschung). A shop's selection of goods was generally determined by geographic location; large cities, tourist destinations, or industrial regions were better supplied than

smaller towns or areas with low population density. Nutritionists complained that inequitable and unreliable distribution policies not only insured constant dissatisfaction but did not serve the interests of public health (Vorschlag Nr 5). Unpredictability and recurrent shortages produced scarcity and consumer unhappiness that coexisted with low basic food prices, high caloric intake, and well-developed collective feeding programs for working adults and school children.

The extended life of rationing in the GDR meant that private food consumption did not increase as dramatically or as early as it did in the West. However, despite frequent shortages of individual foods, and countering West German assumptions of starvation and food deprivation, caloric intake remained quite high.[4] Without a doubt shortages in staple products—especially butter and meat—often signaled excessive consumption rather than inadequate supply. As the populace had rising incomes and inadequate consumer goods to purchase, they frequently turned to foodstuffs, which were available abundantly if not always in the best quality or greatest variety. As a result, food quickly became one of the population's most important outlets for spending (Steiner 186). In a development celebrated by East German politicians, if not the country's nutritionists, the GDR's per capita butter consumption had already outpaced that of the FRG by 1960 (Steiner 109).

In 1965, *Der Spiegel* bitingly noted that "the GDR—as always ten years behind progress—has finally reached the stage of the eating wave. Walter Ulbricht's cherished dream of reaching global superiority has finally been realized—at least on the scale" ("Süß und fett"). Indeed, the FRG had already begun reporting dangerous levels of obesity amongst segments of its population within two years of the country's 1949 founding (Bansi). A decade after the *Spiegel* article, in 1976, at the same time that the West German medical establishment was confirming obesity as the country's most pressing medical threat, *Die Zeit* reported in open disgust that "obesity has gradually acquired an epidemic character" in the GDR, as "84,000 tons of excess fat are wobbling around" ("Gegen die Fettsucht"). The article, typical

of West German discourse on East German obesity, diagnosed this excessive weight as being existentially different from the West's own struggles with overweight citizens. West Germans were generally assumed to be too fat because of their booming economy's excessive consumer choice. West German citizens, especially women, were thought to lack the willpower to resist the seductive call of abundant high-quality delicacies (Neuloh and Teuteberg). In dramatic contrast, socialist obesity was interpreted as a cipher of unfulfilled and displaced desires. In the East, food "makes up for difficulties, stresses, and disappointments. It is often a substitute for pleasures that one can no longer enjoy ("Gegen die Fettsucht"). This pathologized fatness—representing poverty and unhappiness rather than prosperity and pleasure—was a physical expression of the country's flawed economy.

The association of the GDR with a distinctive sort of overweight was both true and untrue. While East German bodyweight steadily climbed over the postwar decades, and nutritionists agreed that the population's diet was far too fatty and sweet, including too much meat and too little produce, this was not an East German but rather a German-German trend. Comparisons of the two countries' diets were far more striking for their similarities than for their differences. East Germans ate more butter, flour, and potatoes than West Germans, roughly the same amount of sugar, meat, and milk, and, surprisingly, more vegetables—though primarily preserved and pickled—and much less tropical and citrus fruit. In short, since the early 1960s, the two German states had consistently reported analogous levels of overweight. While both states began reporting rising levels of overweight by the mid-to-late 1950s, it was the 1970s that ushered in talk of an epidemic. At this point, both FRG and GDR studies consistently found that about one in three German adults was overweight ("Übergewicht als Risikofaktor;" Müller).

THE DILEMMA OF DIETING IN SOCIALISM

Figure 2: “Prosperity for All: Ludwig Erhard, CDU.” Electoral poster from 1957. Image courtesy of the Lebendiges Museum Online. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung; KAS/ACDP 10-001:650 CC-BY-SA 3.0 DE.

While basic dietary intake as well as general rates of obesity resembled those of the FRG, the GDR’s struggle with overweight was really quite different from that of West Germany, discursively as well as in terms of policy. What were the specific contours of the East German struggle to control and reduce the country’s relatively high levels of overweight citizens? In the FRG, overweight went from being celebrated as an icon of economic success (see Economic Minister Ludwig Erhard, whose own bulk represented the abundance that marked the end of austerity and poverty) to being demonized as a working-class problem caused by a combination of laziness and ignorance. In the GDR, by contrast, a specific level of plumpness represented a proletarian sort of prosperity and social equality, while hunger signaled moral and economic failure. Much as they might have bemoaned excessive caloric consumption, socialist commentators never forgot, as chef Kurt Drummer pointed out in a bestselling cookbook promoting healthy, lower-fat recipes, that “after all we have not been living in this excess for so long. Less than two centuries ago cakes and tarts were still a luxury of which the poorer segments of the population generally could only dream” (Drummer and Muskewitz 172). East German “real-existing socialism”

consistently rejected the West's purportedly "self-absorbed" obsession with slimness, condemning the health harms of weight-loss pills and quack diets as well as the rise of eating disorders among western youth as indicative of capitalism's moral and societal flaws. By contrast, East Germany promoted an idealized worker's body that was supposed to be attainable to all, neither thin nor fat, consuming neither too much nor too little, and focused on productivity rather than external appearance.

One of the earliest national studies of the spread of obesity in the East, published in 1970, estimated that one-third of the adult population was seriously overweight, while assuring its readers that it was "the high standard of living in the GDR" that was responsible for the "incredible spread of obesity" (Müller 1008). The study claimed that East Germans were overweight because "food is available everywhere—when among friends, it is practically forced upon you," rather than, as in the West, being consumed inappropriately due to loneliness, familial degeneration, or isolation (Krebs 481). The head of the GDR Institute for Health Education explained that "our current health problems are the problems of a rich society, from the first we should see this, and for all complaints about the widespread overweight and the growing abuse of natural stimulants, we should not forget that, after all, we wanted this high quality of life and fought hard for it" (Voß 64). The fact that the GDR had the highest per capita rate of butter consumption in the world was a source of pride for government officials, although anathema to nutritionists. This contradiction resulted in awkward constructions, as in the pamphlet "Your Diet, Your Health," which claimed that "we are proud that in our state workers eat butter. But one must say to them that the exclusive consumption of butter can lead to health problems" ("Deine Ernährung, deine Gesundheit"). As a result, the GDR was much less consistent than the FRG in its official rejection of fatness, which remained medically pathologized at the same time that it was considered aesthetically acceptable, a sign of prosperity and pleasure. While women's magazines in the West were dominated by countless pages of dieting advice, East German women's magazines made a point of encouraging readers to reject both fatness and thinness,

instead modeling a moderate range of body shapes that included the acceptable category of *vollschlank* (usually translated as “stout,” the word literally means “full-slim” or “big-slim.”) Public figures referenced abundant appetites and celebrated their paunches in a way unimaginable in the West. Even in the midst of the country’s obesity epidemic, conventional dieting continued to have negative associations, while abundant and carefree eating remained both norm and ideal.[5] Although health professionals agreed that growing rates of overweight were a serious problem and health risk for the population, East German politicians and many ordinary citizens continued to see excess body weight as a cipher for abundant and tasty food, and thus proof of the country’s economic and social success.

In the GDR, a modern food economy was conceptualized as one of abundance, egalitarianism, collective wellbeing, and pleasure. East German health and nutrition experts repeatedly emphasized the close relationship between food and pleasure—something that is especially striking given the relative absence of this theme in equivalent West German sources. The German Hygiene Museum in Dresden, reflecting on how to get its citizens to eat both less and differently, reminded educators that “eating is a pleasurable experience, it belongs to the important pleasures of human life. One cannot underestimate the value of this pleasure. Speaking prohibitions with a raised finger prevents the necessary open-mindedness and willingness to change one’s own eating habits” (Brinkmann 65). Experts asserted that healthful eating and moderate dietary restraint did not mean “a society of thin ascetics with burning gazes who want everyone to live from a diet of black bread, yogurt, and radishes” (Haenel, “Fettsucht muss nicht sein”), and nutritionists were constantly reminding chefs and cookbook authors not to sacrifice flavor for health, something they believed was a sure recipe for failure. Indeed, this celebration of the pleasure of eating, and especially the joys of “good taste,” reflected a political ideology that officially venerated the “ordinary” citizen and “normal” tastes. Thus, Honecker himself described his dietary lifestyle as a sort of model for socialist eating, combining an ascetic denial of exotic foodstuffs with

an enthusiastic consumption of the simple yet distinctly unhealthy foods (meat, fat, starches), which nutritionists blamed for the country's weight problems:

> *[E]very morning I ate one or two rolls with only butter and honey; for lunchtime I was in the Central Committee [canteen]; there I had either sausage with mashed potatoes, macaroni with bacon or goulash, and in the evenings I ate a little something at home, watched some TV, and went to sleep […]. Thus I never lost my connection to the Volk. (qtd. in Merkel, Wunderwirtschaft 314)*

Such a celebration of domestic, low-cost, and high-calorie canteen meals was entirely absent from West Germany's far more stringent language of crisis and self-control.

For nutritionists, this discourse posed a serious problem as they struggled to reconcile the country's economic and social realities with their own recommendations for weight-loss. They complained that waging a serious fight against obesity would require a reversal of the country's basic economic priorities, which generally equated high levels of popular consumption with economic as well as political success. While in the West diet products and reduced-calorie foodstuffs represented the potential for massive profit, in the GDR this was not the case. Diet foods, which generally required higher levels of industrial processing as well as the addition of artificial sweeteners and other relatively expensive and often imported chemicals, were a hard sell to socialist economists. In the early 1970s, when a Dresden cake factory developed a reduced-fat cream torte with 6,000 calories (reduced from the 9,000 in the original recipe), the additional labour costs were so substantial that the company's production numbers dropped dramatically (Bericht über den Stand der Qualität). The company requested a reduction in their assigned quota because their yearly productivity ratings were suffering; the threat of reduced profits won them permission to reduce their production of the dietetic desserts and to return to the full-fat version.

By the 1970s, rising rates of obesity had inspired medical experts to exert unprecedented pressure on the food industry to expand its dietetic offerings. At this point, East German factories were producing only 74 diabetic and “special diet” foods, 23 reduced-calorie items, and 35 healthy children’s food products (Ibid.). Ten years later, the number of such products had nearly doubled (Entwicklungskonzeptionen). In order to regulate this expanding market, the Trademark Association for Dietetic Products received increased funding for its ON stamp (*optimierte Nahrung* or “optimized food”), which was awarded to products that met a high standard of quality and healthfulness: it could signal reduced calorie, high fiber, low fat, reduced sugar, or diabetic-safe. A guide to dietetic food products shows the variants of ON labels being produced in the late 1970s. By the mid-1980s, 140 products were receiving the stamp, and this number continued to grow until 1990 (Ibid.). However, impressive as these official numbers were, the products actually available varied in quality and were always in inadequate quantities to meet popular demand.

Figure 3: “Food Products for Healthy Nutrition.” A guide to new East German products that support healthy diets, particularly focusing on low-calorie and low-cholesterol foodstuffs. Lebensmittel für die gesunde Ernährung (Fachbuchverlag, 1978). Author’s private collection.

East Germany’s difficulty with marketing weight-loss was both conceptual and economic. Especially problematic was the basic premise of encouraging people to simply eat less food. After all, the GDR’s much-vaunted subsidized food prices were explicitly designed to encourage high levels of (specific kinds of) food consumption, a goal inspired by the poverty and hunger of the interwar and postwar years. The rise in obesity, however, added fuel to older economic criticisms of the counterproductive consequences of artificially low

food prices. Frozen prices on core goods led to subsidized commodities being seen as cheap rather than valuable and, as a result, they were consumed in excess and wasted profligately.[6] Nonetheless, economists worried that any decline in food spending would leave citizens with no outlet for their excess cash. In the West, decreased food spending could be countered with increased spending on auxiliary dieting products, ranging from gym memberships to weight-loss pills to diet sodas. Such products were nearly nonexistent in the GDR. In short, food seemed to be the only thing that one could always buy, to the frustration of many East German dieters. In 1975, professional chef Claus Kulka wrote a letter blaming the country's supply issues for his unsuccessful struggle to lose weight. After seeing a short TV clip composed by the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden on "healthy nutrition," he had been inspired to change his eating habits. The program had recommended a calorie chart to regulate individual diet more precisely. However, such a chart proved impossible to find at a store or through mail-order, causing Kulka to ask angrily: "what use is it to us when healthy lifestyles are advocated by our media, but the simple and even cheap-to-produce products that are required cannot be found anywhere (Letter)?"

Nutritional chemists proudly claimed that "we are already capable of simulating meat so effectively that it cannot be distinguished from the natural product" (Haenel, An Frau Ilse Schäfer), asserting that such "simulated foods" would become especially popular among the overweight population by providing "much needed low-calorie alternatives" (Haenel, "Entwicklungen"). In reality, even simple reduced-fat sausages—which had been produced before the Second World War—were often difficult to come by. Despite official production quotas for over two dozen varieties of health-conscious sausages, a diabetic man complained in 1975 that it was:

> *incomprehensible why fine baked goods are made so excessively rich with sugar and fat, [and] the same is true for sausage. In general there is only one single variety of low-fat sausage [in stock]. Who can eat this year after*

> *year? In special shops one can generally receive two to three sorts in exchange for standing in line for twenty minutes. All of them however are distinguished by a particular flavorlessness because they are all diet-sausage.(Betr: Diabetiker)*

Even when the food industry did manage to develop and produce foodstuffs with reduced levels of fat and sugar, this meant, counterproductively, that the East German market was flooded with these "unhealthy" waste products. A new variety of reduced-fat condensed milk with only four-percent fat promised, ironically, to also result in the production of "forty-seven tons of butter with seventy-four percent fat for [every] one thousand tons of condensed milk" —an equation of questionable health benefit (Beschluss); standard East German butter at the time had a fat-level of 70 percent. As much as nutritionists tried to guide and regulate food consumption, economic goals rather than nutritional ideals determined the foodstuffs that were produced.

Particularly galling was the fact that the East German media consistently affirmed the widespread belief that prosperity was "connected to a high consumption of meat, butter, sweets made from refined flour, etc." (Ein heisses Eisen). Magazines, newspapers, and other popular media explicitly rejected official nutritional recommendations to eat both less and differently, making it difficult to market alternative or healthier foods as "good." As nutritionists complained:

> *[O]ccasionally we find support in the press, but often things there are made especially difficult for us. There were great difficulties with getting an article about whole grain noodles published in the newspaper. It was said, "with whole grain noodles we are taking a step backwards," or "this means that lean years are coming our way." At this point a colleague spontaneously took a pot of whole grain noodles to the press and thus convinced the editorial board.(Gemeinschaftsküche 29)*

In 1976, the popular magazine *Guter Rat* (*Good Advice*) casually defended its frequent inclusion of high-calorie recipes despite the growing levels of obesity by asserting that “for years our readers have enjoyed the little special occasion at which they occasionally present their guests with something special on the table. From this perspective we see absolutely no contradiction in the fact that we here exceed the caloric limits, and on the other hand speak of a healthy diet” (Editorial). Such popular venues defended high-calorie and purportedly unhealthy food choices as both normal and appropriate, suggesting that official nutritional recommendations were inadequate, unappealing, or just plain wrong.

A 1987 report on the psychology of dietary behavior blamed the food industry for the country’s negligible declines in obesity rates. The problem, the report found, was in the poor flavors of the country’s dietetic foodstuffs. By trying to market these products to overweight citizens, the industry was ignoring the primal fact that “in dietary behavior the taste of foods and dishes and the affiliated satisfaction of the pleasure drive plays an essential role. This fact should be the basis for all decisions of those responsible for the food industry and food preparation to prepare tasty foods in the interest of a healthy diet” (“Psychologische Grundlagen”). On the other hand, nutritionists acknowledged that the better food tasted, the more people ate, working against weigh loss goals. Even as they labored to improve the quality and taste of the country’s food supply, nutritionists worried about numerous studies of consumer behavior that had found that improving grocery selection “stimulates private food production” and discouraged the use of canteens, which in turn meant that carefully calibrated reduced-calorie canteen meals would have far less impact than anticipated (Entwicklung des Bedarfs).

Figure 4: “Overweight. Excessive Eating leads to Overweight.” Image courtesy of Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, Dresden, Germany.

The country’s high levels of fatness and obesity-related illnesses suggested that the widespread availability of cheap and popular high-fat and high-sugar products was counterproductive. Anti-obesity campaigners attempted to sever the association of socialism with a “comfortable,” even potentially attractive, sort of fatness. The East German Central Institute for Nutrition (Zentralinstitut für Ernährung) initiated a public debate asking “whether obesity is a private issue.” The answer was a resounding no, since “the consequences of obesity are so serious and impactful that one is dealing with a social, health, humanitarian, and economic problem of the first degree […] and beyond that the fat person certainly does not match our beauty ideal and seems unaesthetic, which one—including the fat person him or herself—is regrettably well aware of” (“Ist Fettleibigkeit Privatsache”). Dr. Helmut Haenel, the leading public figure in the country’s anti-obesity campaign, openly expressed his desire to make slim bodies the societal norm of the GDR. An egalitarian socialist society, according to Haenel, “cannot afford to maintain up to a third of its citizens, even up to a half, with heavy bodies, gasping for breath and unwilling to be active, susceptible to disease, less resistant to disease, early invalids,

and dying early. A model society must also have the model of a healthy productive individual, that is, of a slim person" (Haenel, "Fettsucht muss nicht sein"). Such messages, however, did not have the desired impact. Although by the 1980s, surveys revealed that for the first time a majority of the population was trying to lose weight, these high rates of dieting correlated with higher rather than lower levels of obesity. By the time the Berlin Wall fell, the East German medical establishment, much like its capitalist counterpart, had come to see the population's recalcitrant tastes as its biggest obstacle to popular health.

CONCLUSION

By the 1970s East and West German nutritionists agreed that obesity was their respective nation's most pressing health threat. As a result, both socialist and capitalist experts believed that the goal of modern nutritional education was to tackle diet-related health problems through retraining popular tastes. Through a combination of propagandistic scare tactics and increased interventions in childhood and workplace diets, both states struggled throughout the 1970s and 1980s to change German tastes, and both admitted a discouraging lack of success (Weinreb, *Modern Hungers*). Thus, despite Western assertions of profound differences in tastes on either side of the Iron Curtain, East and West German food habits were more similar than different, both in terms of their resistance to change and their specific desires. The fall of the Wall changed the contours of these German-German struggles to regulate bodies and control popular taste. The disappearance of the GDR meant for West Germans the disappearance of an "other" Germany that embodied the "wrong" sort of food consumption and production. Yet food has remained a pivotal symbol. The importance of food in the complex memory work that has surrounded German reunification since 1990 reflects the ways in which both East and West Germans have been struggling to come to terms with their divided past and shared present (Gries).

The importance of food for remembering the past and imagining the future at least partially explains why it is that foods and drinks are

some of the only East German products still being produced in reunified Germany (Sutton); most other consumer products are no longer available (Merkel, “From Stigma to Cult” 264). This continued interest in East German foods appears to many Westerners counterintuitive, if not absurd. For many West Germans, the GDR’s food culture seemed to be the aspect of everyday life that most graphically represented the horrors and failures of the former nation. Instead, the East German food landscape has become the focal point of distinctly positive memories and acts of recreation; it is a crucial, though underexplored, component of the phenomenon of the rise in nostalgia for the GDR—a sort of magical memory of the past that has even grown to include West Germans who in turn fetishize products of the imagined former East (Jarausch 336). Indeed, the continued prominence of foodstuffs in post-reunification constructions of the GDR—ranging from the Spreewald pickles of the blockbuster film *Good Bye Lenin!* to the revival of newly exotic “cult” classics such as the East German *Rotkäppchen* brand of sparkling wine or even the aforementioned *Knusperflocken*—remind us that food-based fantasies of the self and the other have proved longer lasting than the political divisions of the Cold War itself. More generally, this brief discussion of both internal and external debates over popular tastes in the socialist GDR suggests the importance of taste for the working of state power. Modern states, regardless of their economic system, strive to optimize their populations’ diets, and nutritionists and economists fail to reconcile the frustrating reality of individual tastes with such larger biopolitical projects.

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IMAGE NOTES

Cover Image (Figure 1): Gaby from the Eastern Zone (17) in Paradise (the FRG): My First Banana. From: *Titanic* 11 (November 1989). Image courtesy of Titanic Redaktion, Frankfurt, Germany.

Figure 2: "Prosperity for All: Ludwig Erhard, CDU." Electoral poster from 1957. Image courtesy of the Lebendiges Museum Online. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung; KAS/ACDP 10-001:650 CC-BY-SA 3.0

DE.

Figure 3: “Food Products for Healthy Nutrition.” A guide to new East German products that support healthy diets, particularly focusing on low-calorie and low-cholesterol foodstuffs. *Lebensmittel für die gesunde Ernährung* (Fachbuchverlag, 1978). Author’s private collection.

Figure 4: “Overweight. Excessive Eating leads to Overweight.” Image courtesy of Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, Dresden, Germany.

NOTES

[1] I have previously argued that the West German interest in the material reality of East German bodies was a direct legacy of Germans’ personal and collective experiences during the Third Reich and the postwar Occupation (see Weinreb, “Embodying German Suffering”).

[2] By the late 1950s, per-head caloric intake in the GDR had reached prewar levels and rose steadily over the subsequent decades. By the 1960s, the country had largely overcome its severe housing shortage and was boasting impressive rates of economic growth. By the early 1970s, the GDR had established itself as the “shop window” of the Eastern Bloc and was generally considered the most prosperous communist country (Steiner 84). Of course, these developments paled in comparison to the Federal Republic, whose postwar Economic Miracle made the country the world’s fastest growing economy within just a few years of its defeat and collapse in 1945.

[3] East German anthropologist Katrin Rohnstock notes the ubiquity of beer bellies in descriptions of East German men, arguing that the swollen stomach is a sort of “socialist phenotype” in both German states (Rohnstock, “Der Bierbauch.”)

[4] While the GDR did not cancel its rationing program until 1958, by this point caloric intake had already exceeded medical recommendations. Indeed, this extended rationing is linked more to excessive food consumption than to significant shortages (Steiner 109).

[5] This is not to say that individual East Germans, and especially women and girls, did not feel pressure to lose weight or suffer from eating disorders, only that mainstream discourse did not openly encourage extreme thinness (see Kerr-Boyle).

[6] The official end of rationing in 1958 accompanied the establishment of prices for core commodities that remained constant for the duration of the state's existence (e.g., bread rolls were 5 pfennig, half a pound of butter was 2.50 marks, a sausage was 80 pfennig) (see Kaminsky 49).