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*Oberlin College*

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# **Socialist Realignment: Correctional Education in East Germany's Youth Workhouses, 1949-1969**



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-48115-0001 / Fotograf(in): Wittig  
Main Entrance of the Youth Workhouse in Friedrichswerth, 1957.

Milena Rae Kagel

Candidate for Senior Honors in History

Thesis Advisors—Leonard Smith and Annemarie Sammartino

Submitted Spring 2020

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This project would not have been possible without the support of the History and Sociology departments. Receiving the Artz Grant and Jerome Davis Award allowed me to travel to Berlin over Winter Term, where I conducted the majority of my primary source research.

I would also like to express appreciation for the programs and organizations that have allowed me to study in Germany in high school and college, the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange and the Federation of German-American Clubs. These experiences sparked my interest in German history and have dramatically advanced my German-language skills, preparing me to conduct the bulk of my research in German and rely on my own translations for this project.

Finally, I am grateful to my parents, who have provided me with encouragement and guidance throughout this project. They have frequently supported me in prioritizing my thesis, never questioning the inherent value of an academic pursuit.

## Glossary of Foreign Terms

### Bildung

Education or schooling.

### Eckensteher

Adolescent layabout or loiterer.

### Entbürgerlichung

The undoing of bourgeois structures in society.

### Erziehung

Education or upbringing.

### Familienerziehung

Education or upbringing in the family.

### Jugendhilfe

The title of an East German journal on youth issues.

### Milieuschaden

Damages resulting from someone's social environment.

### Republikflucht

Refers to the phenomenon of emigration to West Germany from the GDR.

### Rowdytum

A form of youth criminality associated with public disruptions, displaying an affinity for the West and generally anti-state attitudes.

### Überzeugung

Conviction or belief in something.

### Vergangenheitsbewältigung

Refers to a process of historical reckoning, usually in connection with Nazism.

## **Introduction**

In 1949, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was founded in the eastern Soviet occupation zone. Although the GDR was constitutionally a parliamentary democracy, the Socialist Unity Party (SED) soon established itself as the ruling party. In the early years of the GDR, the party, which was committed to Marxism-Leninism and class struggle, pursued a vision of a utopian socialist society. In the wake of Nazism and the Second World War, SED officials pushed for the establishment of a new political, social and economic order in East Germany and referred to this as the “construction” of socialism. This was inspired both by an impulse to distance East Germany from its recent history of Nazism and a desire to replicate the Soviet Union’s political and economic model in the GDR.

Achieving this would require the dedication of the entire East German population, which had only recently repudiated fascism. In the 1950s, the party’s idealistic vision of transforming East Germany into a socialist state became connected to ideas about social engineering. Party officials discussed the model of the “socialist personality,” a combination of traits and behaviors that characterized the ideal socialist citizen. The socialist personality seemed to represent both the person necessary to facilitate the construction of socialism in the GDR and the kind of exemplary person who would naturally emerge under socialism.

The SED particularly placed hopes for social transformation in the youth. Young people represented a new generation that could be shaped by Marxist-Leninist ideals and a collectivist economic structure. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, youth policies gained increasing importance in the eyes of the SED. This is in part reflected in dramatic reforms made to the East German education and youth welfare systems, which I will discuss in my first chapter. During this period,

SED officials also worked to combat youth criminality, which contradicted their vision for the country's youth. In the 1950s, the practice of "socialist reeducation" in youth workhouses—the focus of my thesis—emerged as part of a youth welfare system that was trying to come to terms with a population of young people who rejected socialist ideals.

The practice of socialist reeducation, which was inspired by Marxist-Leninist ideology and Soviet pedagogy, was based upon party officials' firm belief in the corrigibility of young delinquents. East German politicians and pedagogues described a program of ideological instruction and productive labor that would reform young offenders and prepare them to be reintegrated into society. This reeducation took place in the GDR's many youth workhouses, residential facilities with dormitory-style housing where young delinquents remained in protective custody for a period of up to nine months. These facilities functioned as laboratories for reform, testing the party's ability to control younger citizens' behavior and development.

In this thesis, I will argue that the Socialist Unity Party's approach to youth criminality was fundamentally motivated by a pragmatic need to establish social and economic stability in a recently founded socialist state. The party viewed criminality broadly as a social and ideological, rather than moral or psychological, problem. Its coexisting desire to eliminate youth criminality and raise a generation of "socialist personalities" inspired the practice of socialist reeducation in youth workhouses. Educational and reformatory practices in these facilities further demonstrate the party's goal of realigning wayward young offenders with particular social, familial and economic roles.

This thesis begins with a description of how the practice of socialist reeducation originated in the GDR. In this first chapter, I discuss the emergence of the socialist personality as a guiding ideology for youth policy. The second chapter focuses on the issue of youth criminality

itself. In it, I demonstrate how East German politicians and experts viewed youth criminality through a social, ideological and economic lens. Finally, my third chapter discusses the practice of socialist reeducation in youth workhouses. I will show how socialist reeducation sought to realign young delinquents with the state's economic and social imperatives.

My thesis draws on historical scholarship on a range of subjects, such as youth criminality, education, criminal justice and youth welfare in the GDR. The work of Emmanuel Droit, a French historian who has written extensively about socialist education in the GDR, has helped me to contextualize the pedagogy of correctional education in youth workhouses.<sup>1</sup> Greg Eghigian's book *The Corrigible and the Incurable: Science, Medicine and the Convict in Twentieth-Century Germany* describes the evolution of criminal justice in German history and has similarly allowed me to better understand the East German approach to correctional education.<sup>2</sup> Wiebke Janssen's *Halbstarke in der DDR* (Adolescents in the GDR) has proved to be my most valuable resource for understanding the history of youth criminality in the GDR.<sup>3</sup>

*Den neuen Menschen schaffen* (Creating the New Person) by German historian Verena Zimmermann has provided me with an essential comprehensive overview of the history of correctional education in the GDR.<sup>4</sup> This book imparted important knowledge to me on the

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Droit, *Vorwärts zum neuen Menschen?: Die sozialistische Erziehung in der DDR (1949-1989)*, (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Greg Eghigian, *The Corrigible and the Incurable: Science, Medicine, and the Convict in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Wiebke Janssen, *Halbstarke in der DDR: Verfolgung und Kriminalisierung einer Jugendkultur*, (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Verena Zimmermann, "Den neuen Menschen schaffen." *Die Umerziehung von schwererziehbaren und straffälligen Jugendlichen in der DDR (1945-1990)*, (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2004).



political origins, pedagogical philosophy and real-life practice of corrective education in East Germany, which helped me to interpret my archival sources.

My analysis has also been heavily informed by the work of Thomas Lindenberger on asociality in the GDR. In his article “*Asoziale Lebensweise*” (Asocial Living), Lindenberger describes how those who failed to adhere to socialist principles in the GDR were ostracized, stigmatized and effectively excluded from society.<sup>5</sup> These insights apply to the practice of socialist reeducation as well, which isolated young delinquents who outwardly displayed nonconformity. That being said, my research on the subject has shown me that socialist reeducation represented an attempt to coax or force young people into socialist society, rather than condemn them to exclusion.

The current historical scholarship on the GDR’s youth workhouses includes the work of several different historians but is still somewhat limited in scope. Most of the literature on this subject focuses on a particular facility—the youth workhouse in Torgau, infamous for the high level of abuse that occurred there. In books such as *Jugendwerkhöfe in DDR: Der geschlossene Jugendwerkhof Torgau* (Youth Workhouses in the GDR: The Closed Youth Workhouse in Torgau) by Daniel Krausz, the author describes the oppressiveness of daily life in the Torgau facility.<sup>6</sup> Krausz and other historians, such as Claudia Beyer and Andreas Gatzemann have generally viewed socialist reeducation as a product of a repressive educational system in the GDR. By extension, these historians seek to make an argument about whether or not the GDR was a truly totalitarian state.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Lindenberger, “Asoziale Lebensweise.” Herrschaftslegitimation, Sozialdisziplinierung und die Konstruktion eines ‘negativen Milieus’ in der SED-Diktatur, in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 32 (2005), 227–254.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Krausz. *Jugendwerkhöfe in der DDR. Der Geschlossene Jugendwerkhof Torgau*. (Hamburg: Diplomica Verlag, 2010).

For this project, I have elected to venture beyond an inquiry focused on determining whether or not the GDR was a totalitarian state. Instead, I will seek to answer different questions—How did the SED’s approach to youth criminality in the 1950s and 60s relate to its overall vision for social transformation? Which priorities was the party juggling in dealing with this issue? Finally, how did the party’s social and economic imperatives influence the practice of socialist reeducation in youth workhouses?

Until now, historical literature on East Germany’s youth workhouses has been almost exclusively written in German. I have encountered only one exception to this in my research, Jennifer Evans’ article “Repressive Rehabilitation: Crime, Morality, and Delinquency in Berlin-Brandenburg, 1945–1958,” published in *Crime and Criminal Justice in Modern Germany* in 2014.<sup>7</sup> In this article, Evans discusses socialist reeducation in youth workhouses surrounding East Berlin, particularly focusing on how corrective education signified a response to sexual deviancy among adolescents. “Repressive Rehabilitation” was my point of entry to this subject—In my thesis, I have sought to build upon Evans’ work by offering my contribution to English-language scholarship on the GDR’s youth workhouses. Moreover, the scope of my thesis extends to the 1960s and is not limited to youth workhouses in the area surrounding East Berlin.

My thesis is largely based on primary sources I uncovered while conducting independent research at the German Federal Archive (*Bundesarchiv*) in Berlin-Lichterfelde, which houses an extensive collection of documents from the German Democratic Republic. For my research, I mostly looked at documents from the SED’s Bureau of Youth Issues, which was responsible for taking on the challenge of youth criminality, and the Ministry of People’s Education, which

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<sup>7</sup> Jennifer V. Evans, "Repressive Rehabilitation: Crime, Morality, and Delinquency in Berlin-Brandenburg, 1945–1958," in *Crime and Criminal Justice in Modern Germany*, edited by Wetzell Richard F., (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014), 302-26.

oversaw education, youth welfare and the administration of the youth workhouses. These documents included reports on the SED's approach to youth criminality, observational accounts from youth workhouses and official interparty correspondences.

Additionally, my research is based on a collection of articles from an East German journal about youth issues, called *Jugendhilfe* (Youth Welfare). *Jugendhilfe* was first published in 1963 by *Volk und Wissen* (People and Knowledge), a publishing agency overseen by the SED's Ministry of People's Education. Although the authors who contributed to *Jugendhilfe* were not necessarily party officials, the journal was certainly a state-approved publication and certain party leaders, such as Eberhard Mannschatz, who oversaw the youth welfare department of the Ministry of People's Education, frequently contributed. For the purposes of my research, I primarily made use of articles on youth criminality, socialist education and the specific pedagogy of corrective education in youth workhouses.

## **Chapter One—Raising the Architects of Socialism**

In 1958, the SED's Bureau of Youth Issues published a report on the "Struggle Against Youth Criminality and Youth Endangerment" in the GDR.<sup>8</sup> The report, which outlines the party's multipronged approach to overcoming youth criminality, ends with the impactful motto, "the youth for socialism, socialism for the youth."<sup>9</sup> This slogan captures perfectly the party's aim with regard to youth policy—Party leaders wanted to create a symbiotic relationship between young people and their government. To this end, they worked to bring young people into the "construction" of socialism, while also creating a welfare state that would support young people's education and development.

In this chapter, I will delve into how the SED, East Germany's communist party, pursued this goal by promulgating the model of the "socialist personality," enacting educational reforms and expanding the youth welfare system. In examining these historical developments, I will focus on the party's idealistic vision for young people and how this vision affected youth policies in the 1950s and 60s. Furthermore, I will discuss the influence of Marxist-Leninist ideology on East German pedagogy. I will argue that these historical developments led to the emergence of socialist reeducation in a network of youth workhouses across East Germany.

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<sup>8</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Kampf gegen Jugendgefährdung und Jugendkriminalität, Undated.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Section One—The Socialist Personality

In the early years after the founding of the GDR in 1949, the Socialist Unity Party (SED) worked to distance East Germany from its recent history of National Socialism. A utopian socialist future became a guiding vision for the SED and the motivation for establishing social, political and economic reforms. Party leaders worked to carry out *Entbürgerlichung*, or the undoing of traditional bourgeois structures, in East German society. By instead centering society around the proletariat, and subordinating the individual to collective aspirations, the party aimed to secure a “future of peace, prosperity and happiness” for all East Germans.<sup>10</sup> In the 1950s, this aspirational goal became closely linked to the concept of the “socialist personality,” an idealistic model of socialist citizenship that symbolized the type of “new person” who would populate the GDR in the future.

The notion of the “socialist personality” drew heavily from Marxist-Leninist ideology, which emphasized the importance of “well-rounded” (meaning social, ideological, moral and physical) development.<sup>11</sup> The profile of the socialist personality encompassed a range of different characteristics, such as being educated, industrious, morally upright, physically fit, committed to socialist progress and generally happy. According to the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism, a society organized around collectivism, rather than the “exploitation of man and the division of society into antagonistic classes” (as in the capitalist West), would produce the ideal circumstances for human development.<sup>12</sup> In East Germany, SED leadership imagined a “bold,

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<sup>10</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Untitled, Undated.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>12</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 829, Studien zur Bewegung der Jugendkriminalität in Deutschland und ihren Ursachen, August 1964.

collectivist, egalitarian and politically energized consciousness” emerging in conjunction with advanced socialism.<sup>13</sup> In the early years of the GDR, the party’s belief in the socially transformative power of socialism was virtually unlimited. This belief would later be challenged, however, by the continued existence of social problems such as youth criminality.

By the late 1950s, the concept of the socialist personality was frequently referenced by leading members of the SED, who in plain terms directed citizens to conform to this model of citizenship. In 1958, First Party Secretary Walter Ulbricht, who was widely recognized for his rigid leadership and uncompromising attitude, published the “Ten Commandments for the New Socialist Person,” which dictated ten essential facets of socialist citizenship.<sup>14</sup> Ulbricht’s Commandments clearly reflect his desire to see the East German citizenry transformed into a population of socialist personalities, whose lives would be determined by their commitment to class struggle and socialist progress. He emphasizes various economic, social and ideological aspects of socialist citizenship, declaring maxims such as, “You shall love your fatherland and always be prepared to use all of your strength and ability to protect the power of workers and peasants” and “You shall always strive to improve your performance, be frugal and maintain a socialist work ethic.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Greg Eghigian, *The Corrigible and the Incurable: Science, Medicine, and the Convict in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 73.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Ulbricht, “Ten Commandments for the New Socialist Person” at the SED’s Fifth Party Congress, 1958.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

# 10 GEBOTE

## für den neuen sozialistischen Menschen

# GEBOTE

- ① DU SOLLST Dich stets für die internationale Solidarität der Arbeiterklasse und aller Werktätigen sowie für die unverbrüchliche Verbundenheit aller sozialistischen Länder einsetzen.
- ② DU SOLLST Dein Vaterland lieben und stets bereit sein, Deine ganze Kraft und Fähigkeit für die Verteidigung der Arbeiter- und Bauern-Macht einzusetzen.
- ③ DU SOLLST helfen, die Ausbeutung des Menschen durch den Menschen zu beseitigen.
- ④ DU SOLLST gute Taten für den Sozialismus vollbringen, denn der Sozialismus führt zu einem besseren Leben für alle Werktätigen.
- ⑤ DU SOLLST beim Aufbau des Sozialismus im Geiste der gegenseitigen Hilfe und der kameradschaftlichen Zusammenarbeit handeln, das Kollektiv achten und seine Kritik beherzigen.
- ⑥ DU SOLLST das Volkseigentum schützen und mehren.
- ⑦ DU SOLLST stets nach Verbesserung Deiner Leistungen streben, sparsam sein und die sozialistische Arbeitsdisziplin festigen.
- ⑧ DU SOLLST Deine Kinder im Geiste des Friedens und des Sozialismus zu allseitig gebildeten, charakterfesten und körperlich gestählten Menschen erziehen.
- ⑨ DU SOLLST sauber und anständig leben und Deine Familie achten.
- ⑩ DU SOLLST Solidarität mit den um ihre nationale Befreiung kämpfenden und den ihre nationale Unabhängigkeit verteidigenden Völkern üben.

WALTER ULBRICHT AUF DEM V. PARTEITAG DER SED  
AM 10. JULI 1958 IN BERLIN

Walter Ulbricht's Ten Commandments for the New Socialist Person, 1958.

Deutsches Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-57163-0001 / CC-BY-SA 3.0

The aforementioned citations refer to the second and seventh commandments.

While all citizens were expected to adhere to these principles, the SED especially wanted young people to adopt the qualities of the socialist personality. This is reflected in Ulbricht's Ten Commandments; his ninth commandment instructs East German parents to raise their children "in the spirit of peace and socialism, to be well-educated, morally upright and physically strong."<sup>16</sup> The widespread adoption of these traits among the youth was clearly meant to help the party achieve its own objectives—namely, establishing social stability, securing an ideological stronghold and increasing economic production in the GDR. In the eyes of the party, young people held a critical position as the future "architects of socialism" in East Germany.<sup>17</sup>

The population of the GDR in the 1950s was generally young due to the post-war baby boom in Europe, and the future success and longevity of socialism would depend upon this younger generation's commitment to socialist ideology and principles. In a report on the "Party Leadership Regarding the Socialist Education of the Youth," an unnamed official correctly noted that "working consistently and persistently with the youth is matter of life and death for the party."<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, the SED sought to connect young people to the so-called "construction" of socialism in East Germany. This implied adopting socialist ideology, fulfilling societal obligations and developing a "socialist consciousness."<sup>19</sup> The founding of the Free

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Kampf gegen Jugendgefährdung und Jugendkriminalität, Undated.

<sup>18</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Die Führung der Partei bei der sozialistischen Erziehung der Jugend, Undated.

<sup>19</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Die Führung der Partei bei der sozialistischen Erziehung der Jugend, Undated.



German Youth, an organization created to promote Marxist-Leninist ideology among young people, symbolized the party's desire to influence different aspects of their daily lives. When in the 1960s East Germans began to express some disenchantment with socialism, the party became extremely preoccupied with young people's overall *Überzeugung* (the degree to which they were convinced of the merits of socialism). Despite the fact that younger citizens often lacked *Überzeugung*, the party often praised its own successes, claiming that young people had come to understand that "the party will show them the way to a brighter future."<sup>20</sup>

The SED also encouraged young people to contribute to the East German economy and sought to increase their responsibility for economic success. Especially in the early years of the GDR, the SED responded to the need to grow the country's workforce by trying to integrate different groups into planned economic production. After the SED's first Five-Year Plan was announced in 1951, the Bureau of Youth Issues outlined how young people would play a role in the country's expanding economy. Party officials spoke positively about this, stating that "participating in economic life" would allow young people to "develop their skills and create a happy life in accordance with their diverse interests."<sup>21</sup> In the eyes of the SED, the separate aims of integrating the youth into the economy and growing their socialist consciousness were inextricably linked. One official from the Bureau of Youth Issues remarked, "the greatest economic successes are achieved where socialist ideology is purposefully communicated on a daily basis."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Durchführung des Gesetzes über die Teilnahme der Jugend am Aufbau der DDR und die Förderung der Jugend in Schule und Beruf, bei Sport und Erholung, 1954.

<sup>22</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Untitled, Undated.

Raising a generation of socialist personalities would require the collaborative efforts of state organs, social institutions, businesses, schools and parents.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the 1950s, the SED made a concerted effort to align these different groups in order to support the full development of the youth. In the words of Verena Zimmermann, a German historian who has written about socialist reeducation in the GDR, “all efforts were directed towards monopolizing, co-opting and ideologizing the youth.”<sup>24</sup> This manifested itself in a series of social and educational reforms that promised to develop young people’s full potential as well-rounded socialist citizens. The model of the socialist personality also inspired a new approach to correctional education in youth workhouses, centered around realigning wayward youth with the requirements for socialist citizenship.

## **Section Two—Socialist Education**

Influenced by Soviet pedagogy and the doctrines of Marxism-Leninism, East German politicians and experts came to view the school as one of the main sites of young people’s ideological, social and economic development. Beginning in the late 1940s, the SED’s Ministry of People’s Education began to enact sweeping educational reforms, fundamentally reshaping schooling in East Germany. These reforms, which emphasized anti-fascism, polytechnical education and fostering the qualities of the socialist personality, reflect the party’s desire to marry young people’s development to the needs of socialist society. Although the Ministry for

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<sup>23</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Schlussfolgerung für den Politbürobericht Jugenderziehung, Undated.

<sup>24</sup> Verena Zimmermann, “*Den neuen Menschen schaffen.*” *Die Umerziehung von schwererziehbaren und straffälligen Jugendlichen in der DDR (1945–1990)*, (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2004), 16.

National Education mainly aimed to reform East German schools, the educational philosophies that inspired these reforms had far-reaching effects; the reforms ultimately influenced correctional educational as well.

In August 1949, the SED published new “School Policy Guides for the German Democratic School,” which outlined the party’s preliminary goals for educational reform in the GDR.<sup>25</sup> This document discusses the party’s two primary aims in plain terms—inculcating young people with socialist ideology and advancing their integration into the East German economy. Both were to be achieved by expanding political and polytechnical instruction. Ideological education in school emphasized a rejection of western capitalism, patriotism, anti-fascism, solidarity with other socialist countries and information about important political actors, such as Vladimir Lenin. Compulsory polytechnical education in math, science and related subjects was intended to help the GDR gain a position as a leading global economic power. While the party’s educational reforms were clearly designed to support the GDR, the SED’s Pedagogical Congress also emphasized that these reforms would benefit young people. One official noted that socialist education would “offer every child the opportunity for well-rounded and continuous education and participation in social advancement according to its abilities.”<sup>26</sup>

In the book *Vorwärts zum neuen Menschen?* (Onward to the New Person?), Emanuel Droit, a French historian specializing in German history, explains that the SED reimagined the East German education system to serve a dual purpose.<sup>27</sup> Party leaders wanted to do more than educate students in a traditional sense; they also sought to mold young people’s developing

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<sup>25</sup> Pädagogische Kongress der DDR, Beschluß: “Schulpolitische Richtlinien für die deutsche demokratische Schule,” August 24, 1949.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Emmanuel Droit, *Vorwärts zum neuen Menschen?: Die sozialistische Erziehung in der DDR (1949-1989)*, (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2014).

personalities. This is reflected in party leaders' goal of achieving two types of education—*Bildung* and *Erziehung*—in schools. According to Droit, *Bildung* refers to traditional institutional education, while *Erziehung* “is connected above all to the idea of being drawn out of a natural state.”<sup>28</sup> Importantly, the term *Erziehung* is also used to describe the way that children are brought up by their parents. By taking on both aspects of individual education and development, the SED was asserting its primary role in determining what kind of people younger citizens would grow up to be.

Overall, the party's educational philosophies were premised on Marxist-Leninist ideas about the malleability and receptiveness of young people. Party leaders and educators alike displayed an optimistic view of human nature and confidence in their ability to mold young people through pedagogy. In an article for *Jugendhilfe*, an East German journal on youth issues, Hans Treichel discusses the development of the socialist personality in young people. Treichel is a clear proponent of Marxist-Leninist ideology and highlights the fact that “a man does not create himself, but rather, he is educated.”<sup>29</sup> He describes socialist education as having the power to foster certain “characteristics, abilities, behavior and ways of thinking” in young people.<sup>30</sup> Over the next several decades, however, GDR party members, pedagogues and educational professionals would discover the strengths and limitations of their attempts to influence young people through education.

The SED's educational reforms were heavily influenced by the pedagogical philosophy of the influential Soviet pedagogue, Anton Makarenko, one of the founders of socialist pedagogy

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Hans Treichel, “Karl Marx und die Entwicklung der sozialistischen Persönlichkeit.” *Jugendhilfe* (1967).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

in post-revolutionary Russia. Makarenko himself was heavily influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideas about individual improvement and well-rounded development, which aligned with the model of the socialist personality. As an educator, Makarenko emphasized developing a sense of morality, productive labor and collectivism. He believed that the collective acted as a powerful and positive educational force, as the place where a student would acquire important personal qualities, such as “discipline, will power, perseverance, sense of collectivism and responsibility, ability to guide and obey, and a respectful regard for manual labor.”<sup>31</sup> Because Makarenko oversaw a work colony for juvenile delinquents in Russia, his ideas heavily influenced correctional education in the GDR. With regard to correctional education, Makarenko stated that “it is not enough for us to simply improve a person, we must re-educate him, that is, educate him so that he becomes more than a harmless and innocuous member of society, but a capable person who actively participates in the construction of this new era.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Section Three—Youth Welfare**

The SED’s desire to influence young people’s education, behavior and overall development extended far beyond educational reforms. In the 1950s, the party also concentrated its efforts on expanding the East German youth welfare system with the aim of generally supporting the youth. Rising rates of youth criminality produced growing anxiety about the moral condition of the country’s youth, which prompted state-led efforts to exert a positive

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<sup>31</sup> Victor Zilberman, "Anton Makarenko: Contribution to Soviet Educational Theory." *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET)/Revue De La Pensée Éducative* 22, no. 1 (1988), 38.

<sup>32</sup> Anton Makarenko, *Pädagogische Texte (Auswahl)*, Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1976., *Pädagogische Texte (Auswahl)*, Paderborn 1976.

influence. To this end, the SED sought to mobilize East Germany's collective society and substantial bureaucracy.

Political leaders in the GDR worried not just about how they would exert influence over the youth, but also about different factors that could impede that effort. Party publications from the Bureau of Youth Issues in the 1950s and 60s reflect that the predominant view of young people as vulnerable, easily corrupted and often misguided. East German politicians generally regarded youth criminality as the product of a negative environment and corrupting influences, as opposed to personality defects or individual psychology. SED officials were particularly concerned about the allegedly dangerous influence of the West. Western media and culture had a significant appeal to many young people, who despite communist party efforts to bring them into the fold, donned jeans and eagerly read American comics. In addition to this, party leaders felt that they were contending with various internal enemies as well. They often attributed youth criminality to dysfunctional family relationships and so-called *Milieuschaden* (damages resulting from someone's social environment). In order to combat these different negative sources, the party significantly expanded youth welfare services in the GDR.

Throughout the 1950s, the SED created more youth welfare offices, built youth clubhouses for approved social gatherings and expanded legal services related to youth criminality. Additionally, the party introduced "socialist reeducation" as a quintessential facet of its approach to combatting youth criminality. According to the Bureau of Youth Issues, wayward young delinquents required a "consistent educational influence" in order to ensure their "positive development."<sup>33</sup> This would be accomplished through socialist reeducation, a combination of

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<sup>33</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Kampf gegen Jugendgefährdung und Jugendkriminalität, Undated.

ideological education and productive labor in residential educational facilities for troubled youth, ranging from group foster homes to reformatories. Historian Verena Zimmermann has described the mission of these facilities as “contributing to a fundamental change in [delinquents’] attitudes and motivations and creating the conditions for them to develop in line with the demands of society in the future.”<sup>34</sup> Particular recalcitrant adolescents were placed in youth workhouses, where they might stay for a period of up to nine months. In my third chapter, I will demonstrate how the aforementioned educational philosophies influenced the practice of socialist reeducation in youth workhouses.

The East German approach to youth welfare had its origins in both the Weimar Republic and Third Reich. Recognizing a need to align young people’s development with the needs of society, politicians in Weimar established a youth welfare system to offer social services to “deviant” youths.<sup>35</sup> In the Third Reich, the youth welfare system was restructured to reflect the Nazis’ racialized worldview. Through both rehabilitation and punishment, state officials sought to correct “delinquent genotypes,” which they regarded as evidence of racial unfitness in German society.<sup>36</sup>

While GDR politicians did not maintain this focus on racial hygiene, and in fact sought to entirely disconnect themselves from the Nazi past, the East German approach to youth welfare displayed shocking parallels to that of their Nazi forebears at times. In his article *Asoziale Lebensweise* (Asocial Living), historian Thomas Lindenberger has highlighted how the word “asocial” was used “unthinkingly” to describe individuals who failed to embody socialist

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<sup>34</sup> Verena Zimmermann, “*Den neuen Menschen schaffen*,” 210.

<sup>35</sup> Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 90.

<sup>36</sup> Greg Eghigian, *The Corrigible and the Incurable*, 52.

principles (i.e. hard work, patriotism, collectivism, heterosexual marriage and a rejection of western capitalism), despite the fact that the Nazis had categorized people in the same way only decades earlier.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the adjective “asocial” has shown surprising durability and malleability over the course of German history—Today, the abbreviation “*Asi*” is commonly used pejoratively to describe someone as lower-class, uneducated and generally crude.

Interestingly, the SED’s approach to the issue of youth criminality signified both a continuation and departure from the Nazi period. A decade before the East German government would erect its own youth workhouses for the purpose of “socialist reeducation,” the Nazis had constructed detention camps for wayward young people.<sup>38</sup> During the Nazi era, these detention camps existed to punitively isolate young delinquents who had been deemed asocial (and were therefore not useful to society) for an unlimited period. The GDR’s youth workhouses, while also repressive in nature, ultimately served a different function: Instead of permanently excluding young delinquents from society, the SED sought to forcibly reintegrate them into East Germany society through socialist reeducation.

## Conclusion

The early years of the German Democratic Republic were marked by feelings of aspirational optimism, as well as a firm belief in the socially transformative power of socialism. Party leaders posited that socialism would create the ideal conditions for personal development

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Lindenberger, “Asoziale Lebensweise.” Herrschaftslegitimation, Sozialdisziplinierung und die Konstruktion eines ‘negativen Milieus’ in der SED-Diktatur, in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 32 (2005), 232.

<sup>38</sup> Greg Eghigian, *The Corrigible and the Incurable*, 52.



and a new type of person, the socialist personality, would emerge as a result. At the same time, however, the SED worked to foster the development of the socialist personality among young people by enacting social reforms. Reforming education and the youth welfare system served to shape the practice of correctional education in the GDR by establishing the party's goals of securing young people's economic integration and ideological devotion.

## **Chapter Two—Youth Criminality in the GDR**

In an undated report from the Bureau of Youth Issues, an unknown author remarked on the phenomenon of youth criminality in the German Democratic Republic:

Until now, it has generally been thought that in a socialist state, the phenomena of youth endangerment and youth criminality will disappear of their own accord, with increased material provisions and the implementation of youth welfare policies.<sup>39</sup>

This statement represents a critical moment in the history of youth politics in the GDR. For roughly a decade, East German academics, pedagogues and party leaders operated on the assumption that the phenomenon of youth criminality was directly connected to the conditions of capitalism. Youth delinquency was seen as a natural result of the disruptive transition from capitalism to socialism that would disappear over time. In their view, capitalist exploitation and “class antagonism” were the primary causes of criminality in any society.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, they were inclined to believe that criminality would disappear under socialism. In a socialist society, they reasoned, citizens’ material needs would be met and their involvement in a collective would discourage them from breaking the law.

After roughly a decade of seemingly unlimited optimism about the country’s social trajectory, however, continually rising rates of youth criminality suggested that the SED had overestimated the transformative power of socialism. The realization that eliminating youth criminality would prove to be extremely difficult was problematic for the SED. Comparing rates

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<sup>39</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Kampf gegen Jugendgefährdung und Jugendkriminalität, Undated.

<sup>40</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 829, Studien zur Bewegung der Jugendkriminalität in Deutschland und ihren Ursachen, August 1964.

of juvenile delinquency was one aspect of the GDR's unofficial competition with West Germany, and unfavorable statistics would suggest the existence of unsolved social problems.

Nonetheless, leading members of the party maintained their belief that East German youth could be molded into proper socialist citizens. They argued that high rates of youth criminality had little to do with the character of a socialist state, but rather could be attributed to a combination of insidious factors, such as western influence, dysfunctional families and insufficient education. In the 1960s, the SED revamped its efforts to tackle youth criminality through a program of socialist reeducation in youth workhouses. In the following chapter, I will investigate the ways in which the SED understood youth criminality as a social, political and economic issue in order to contextualize the measures the state took against it.

### **Section One—What is Youth Criminality?**

Totally eliminating (or even successfully containing) youth criminality in East Germany proved to be an immense challenge. Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, national rates of youth criminality steadily climbed, rather than dropping off. Youth criminality was viewed and approached as a distinct phenomenon, characterized by particular behaviors. Typical juvenile offenses included stealing, skipping work and a range of non-severe sexual offenses. In the GDR, criminality was broadly defined and could encompass property crimes, being “socially conspicuous” (i.e. outwardly displaying an anti-state attitude) or homosexuality (decriminalized for adults in 1968 but still illegal for minors). In dealing with young delinquents, youth services usually opted for some sort of intervention rather than immediate punishment, citing the importance of corrective education and arguing that “without rigorous educational influence,

children will not develop positively.”<sup>41</sup> If offenders were not receptive to these measures, however, they could be temporarily committed to a youth workhouse.

Beginning in the late 1950s, the SED was also being faced with the rise of *Rowdytum*, a form of group criminality associated with public disruptions, displaying an affinity for the West and generally anti-state attitudes. In a report on state policies against youth criminality, an official from the SED’s Bureau of Youth Issues describes the *Rowdys*:

In public, there is an increase in this so-called *Rowdytum*: young people gathering in the evening, undisciplined behavior (sometimes involving the consumption of alcohol), harassment of adults and young girls, minor or major mischief, public disturbances at night (on the street, at movie theaters, at events, etc.).<sup>42</sup>

*Rowdytum* was regarded as a particularly dangerous form of youth criminality, because of its perceived potential to disrupt East German society through resistance to conformity and opposition to the party. In addition to being a great source of anxiety for the SED, *Rowdytum* became an object of interest in the academic sphere. In 1959, Horst Luther published a dissertation on the phenomenon of *Rowdytum* in the GDR. Luther described young delinquents as “threatening public order” by “intentionally disregarding for the norms of social coexistence.”<sup>43</sup> While *Rowdytum* peaked in 1960, this form of youth criminality still continued to “cause quite a stir among the population and state authorities” in East Germany for the remainder of the decade.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Kampf gegen Jugendgefährdung und Jugendkriminalität, Undated.

<sup>42</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Kampf gegen Jugendgefährdung und Jugendkriminalität, Undated.

<sup>43</sup> Horst Luther, *Das Rowdytum in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und seine Bekämpfung*, Diss. Berlin (Ost), 1959.

<sup>44</sup> Daniel Krausz, *Die Umerziehung schwererziehbarer und krimineller Jugendlicher in den Jugendwerkhöfen der DDR*. Hamburg: Diplomica Verlag, 2009, 11.

The illustration below was featured in an article *Jugendhilfe* in 1965, titled “Prevent Youth Criminality!” This image depicts a group of archetypal young delinquents—They are dressed in western-style clothing, probably listening to American jazz or rock-n-roll on a small radio.<sup>45</sup> These adolescents look remarkably unbothered; it is almost as if they are daring someone to report them to youth services. The group is comprised of both young men and women, hinting at some undertone of sexual promiscuity. The feminine posture and styled hair of the young man on the far right suggest that he is the nefarious homosexual of the group.

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<sup>45</sup> Gerhard Stiller, “Der Jugendkriminalität vorbeugen!” *Jugendhilfe* (1965).



Woodblock print of young troublemakers by Jürgen Wittdorf, featured in *Jugendhilfe*, 1965.

Each of the various forms of youth criminality had a specific significance within the context of a socialist state effectively controlled by a single party, the SED. Theft and other property-related offenses undermined the GDR's socialist economic system, under which capital should be distributed equally. Similarly, young delinquents' disinterest in working contradicted the party's aim of economic mobilization. Because of its association with anti-state sentiments, the phenomenon of *Rowdytum* was understood as an alarming result of a compromised relationship between young people and their government.<sup>46</sup> Overall, the existence of youth criminality showed that some young people were not aligned with the state's vision for its younger citizens.

## **Section Two—Obstacles to Social Transformation**

From the perspective of the SED, high rates of youth criminality were an alarming indicator of unresolved social problems in the GDR. Party leaders from the Bureau of Youth Issues expressed concern that young people's "socialist consciousness" was underdeveloped, leaving them vulnerable to the "hostile influence" of the West.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, party officials interpreted delinquent behavior as a sign that young people were not being exposed to the correct influences at home. They feared that dysfunctional families had disrupted adolescents' social development and left them ill-equipped to navigate a society firmly rooted in the collective. Finally, high rates of youth criminality reflected poorly on the GDR and threatened the country's

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<sup>46</sup> SAPMO, DY 30/IV 2/16/90 – Bericht der deutschen Volkspolizei über die Jugendkriminalität und das Rowdytum (1960).

<sup>47</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Kampf gegen Jugendgefährdung und Jugendkriminalität, Undated.

ability to compete both socially and economically with West Germany. Due to all of these factors, youth criminality represented an obstacle to the SED's aim of establishing a new social order.

When discussing youth policies, party officials from the Bureau of Youth Issues voiced concern about a segment of the population that lagged behind socialist progress and had not yet overcome the "bourgeois way of thinking."<sup>48</sup> In an article in *Jugendhilfe*, Dr. Gerhard Stiller expresses a sentiment echoed by leading members of the SED: "While the vast majority of our youth are demonstrating outstanding productive and social achievements ... and actively and responsibly participating in the construction of socialism," he writes, "a portion of young people are still lagging behind this overall development."<sup>49</sup> This was an impediment to the party's goal of *Entbürgerlichung* and suggested that some young people's ideological commitment to socialism was still lacking.

Indeed, the SED found it difficult to connect young people to socialist ideology. Much to the chagrin of party leadership, many young people were captivated by western media, music and products coming from West Germany or the United States. This was clearly evidenced by the popularity of the *Rowdy* lifestyle in the 1960s, which continued to grow even after the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961.<sup>50</sup> Reluctant to portray the *Rowdys'* interest in the West as legitimate or genuine, state authorities blamed this form of youth criminality on the antagonizing force of West Germany. The corrupting influence of western media, ranging from radio programs to comic books, was deemed to be "one of the principle causes of criminal

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Gerhard Stiller, "Der Jugendkriminalität vorbeugen!" *Jugendhilfe* (1965).

<sup>50</sup> Daniel Krausz, *Die Umerziehung schwererziehbarer und krimineller Jugendlicher in den Jugendwerkhöfen der DDR*, 10.



offenses,” party officials reported to the Ministry of People’s Education.<sup>51</sup> In a 1960 report, an East German policeman described how the “class enemy” of the West was “making great efforts to influence the youth of the GDR ideologically.”<sup>52</sup>

Whether or not West Germans were attempting to win over young GDR citizens, the fact that western media, products and culture appealed to many young people was undeniable. This phenomenon, combined with the SED’s inability to create real enthusiasm for socialism among the youth, had dramatic consequences for the GDR. From 1949 to 1961, the year the Berlin Wall was constructed, tens of thousands of young people chose to leave the GDR for West Germany. In fact, around fifty percent of the people who fled East Germany during this period were under the age of twenty-five.<sup>53</sup> This phenomenon, known as *Republikflucht* (flight from the Republic) undermined the legitimacy of the state and gave party leaders cause for concern—Why were young people who had spent most of their lives being educated about the merits of socialism still choosing to leave?

High rates of youth criminality were also tied to undesirable developments in many East German families. Beginning in the 1950s, both East German politicians and experts were emphasizing the family’s role in the emotional, social and ideological development of young people. The combination of these influences became known as *Familienerziehung* (family-education; upbringing). In an article for *Jugendhilfe*, Rolf Borrmann explained in an uncomplicated manner that “in a favorable family climate,” young people would learn to

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<sup>51</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Brief an das Ministerium für Volksbildung, von der SED-Betriebsparteiorganisation, Freiberg Justizbehörden, January 1961.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> „Republikflucht“, hrsg. v. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung und Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft e.V., letzte Änderung Dezember 2019,.

“comply with the responsibilities and expectations of society.”<sup>54</sup> A family environment characterized by dysfunction or conflict, however, would produce misbehavior, moral turpitude and delinquency.

According to the Bureau of Youth Issues, “dysfunctional family relationships [were] a frequent cause of the [moral] derailment of children and young people.”<sup>55</sup> To make matters worse, some parents were not raising their children in accordance with socialist principles at all. On the contrary, the Bureau of Youth Issues reported that some parents were “deliberately raising their children to become enemies of our worker and peasants’ state.”<sup>56</sup> Clearly, these parents could not be trusted to raise their children. In the 1950s and 60s, the SED employed these ideas to justify extending its reach into the private sphere. Paradoxically, at the same time as the SED emphasized the importance of the family to a child’s development, the party asserted its ability to replace *Familienerziehung* with socialist reeducation in youth workhouses.

Although juvenile sexual offenses were not viewed as the result of a specific underlying social issue, to the SED, sexual deviance among young people allegedly posed a threat to the future social stability of the GDR. Party officials adopted Anton Makarenko’s thesis that the nuclear family—rooted in heterosexual marriage—represented the most basic cell of society. According to their view, sexual deviancy among young people, which was often characterized by homosexuality and promiscuity, could potentially disrupt family life in East Germany.

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<sup>54</sup> Rolf Borrmann, “Sexuelle Erziehung in der Familie,” *Jugendhilfe* (1965).

<sup>55</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Entwurf des Berichtes für den Genossen Walter Ulbricht über Ursachen und Stand der Jugendkriminalität, und Vorschläge für Maßnahmen zur Senkung der Jugendkriminalität, July 26, 1955.

<sup>56</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Kampf gegen Jugendgefährdung und Jugendkriminalität, Undated.

Additionally, party officials worried about the dangerous interplay between “abnormal” sexual desire and gender identity.<sup>57</sup> The SED’s regarding the social transformation of the GDR certainly had gendered aspects. Historian Jennifer Evans has argued that the SED sought to construct a “new socialist manhood” in the GDR, under which East German men would occupy three central positions—that of the “worker hero, soldier and father.”<sup>58</sup> East German women, who were theoretically emancipated under an egalitarian socialist system, occupied two essential roles in the GDR as workers and mothers. The party encouraged women to put their productive, as well as their reproductive, capacities toward helping the socialist cause.

Overall, high rates of criminality in the GDR in the 1950s and 60s alerted the SED to the existence of unresolved social problems and provoked anxieties about future social instability. Although party leaders were forced to realize that youth criminality would not naturally disappear under socialism, they tightly held onto their belief in social engineering. Already in the 1950s, the SED began revamping its efforts to tackle youth criminality through a program of socialist reeducation in youth workhouses. In my third chapter, I will explore how socialist reeducation practices combatted youth criminality by addressing the effects of social issues (e.g. dysfunctional families, sexual deviancy and western influence).

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<sup>57</sup> Jennifer V. Evans, "Decriminalization, Seduction, and 'Unnatural Desire' in East Germany," in *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 3 (2010), 559.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 555-58.

### Section Three—Layabouts and Loiterers

The SED envisioned that young people would take on an important role in the GDR's economic transition to socialism. Economic prosperity was a quintessential element of the party's aspirational vision for the country's future, and one that could not be realized without a generation of young workers fulfilling economic imperatives presented to them by their government. When young people increasingly began to shirk their work duties and spend more time loitering, this was recognized as a serious obstacle to the party's aim of establishing a new economic order in the GDR based on a planned economy. Moreover, party officials feared that this phenomenon would "facilitate the penetration of capitalist influences" coming from the West, further weakening young people's relationship to their government.<sup>59</sup>

Beginning in the late-1950s, and in addition to *Rowdytum*, state authorities worked to combat another form of youth criminality. Police reported the presence of *Eckensteher* (literally, corner-standers) who spent their free time hanging around public places. The figure of the *Eckensteher*, an adolescent entirely ambivalent to his societal obligations, provoked the anxieties of party members—Loitering was perceived as the opposite of productive labor. As a result of this, the SED's Bureau for Youth Issues increasingly paid attention to how young people were spending their free time. In the eyes of the party, there was an important distinction to be made between "meaningful" and "meaningless" leisure activities.<sup>60</sup> In the view of the party, the youth

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<sup>59</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Kampf gegen Jugendgefährdung und Jugendkriminalität, Undated.

<sup>60</sup> Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Rep. 404/151-3444, Bezirksbehörde der deutschen Volkspolizei, Einschätzung der Jugendkriminalität und des Rowdytums sowie der vorbeugenden Tätigkeit im Bezirk Potsdam, August 1961.

needed to be taught “proper leisure pursuits.”<sup>61</sup> This usually meant partaking in state-approved activities such as youth organizations, sports, or work. Marxism-Leninism defined free time as “a part of not working,” during which people could pursue “education, recreation, socio-political activities, social life, the enjoyment of art, entertainment, physical activities and sports.”<sup>62</sup> Improper and criminalized activities included “loitering ... alcohol abuse, rowdy behavior and committing criminal offenses.”<sup>63</sup> Wiebke Janssen observes that “a meaningful use of leisure time became an essential prerequisite for increasing labor productivity and thus for the development of socialism” as a whole, hence the party’s incentive for involving itself in young people’s free time.<sup>64</sup>

The party’s proposed solution for disciplining the *Eckensteher*, who would rather loiter than find meaningful employment, was essentially to force them into the latter through a program of productive labor. Working was a crucial facet of socialist education in youth workhouses; it was seen as a powerful educative and reformatory tool that could teach young delinquents to spend their free time meaningfully and enjoy working. In my next chapter, I will go into more detail about the nature of productive labor in youth workhouses.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Wörterbuch der marxistisch-leninistischen Soziologie, hg. Von Wolfgang Eichhorn u.a., Berlin (Ost) 1969, 132.

<sup>63</sup> Stiller, Gerhard. “Der Jugendkriminalität vorbeugen!” *Jugendhilfe* (1965).

<sup>64</sup> Wiebke Janssen, *Halbstarke in der DDR: Verfolgung und Kriminalisierung einer Jugendkultur*, (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2009), 70.

## **Chapter Three—Socialist Reeducation in Youth Workhouses**

Despite the mounting challenge of youth criminality in the early decades of the German Democratic Republic, communist party officials maintained their faith in the welfare state to resolve this issue. On some level, socialist reeducation in youth workhouses represented a punitive measure against youth criminality; young delinquents were temporarily isolated from society and required to do mandatory activities. From the perspective of the party, however, socialist reeducation functioned as a way to reform young offenders and—almost forcibly—reintegrate them back into East German society. This would be achieved by removing ill-behaved young people from their families and subjecting them to a combined program of productive labor and ideological education. By immersing these young delinquents into a collective and emulating family relationships, the SED sought to take control of their development and develop the qualities of the socialist personality in its citizenry.

### **Section One—Productive Labor in Youth Workhouses**

Although SED officials argued that youth workhouses' primary function was educational and rehabilitative, these facilities provided no psychological treatment or behavioral therapy. Instead, educators primarily sought to reform young delinquents through productive labor. A report on the conditions in youth workhouses remarked that “the main means of education [there] is work.”<sup>65</sup> A typical day in a youth workhouse was a full eight-hour workday, beginning early in

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<sup>65</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, No. 1657 Die Arbeit zwischen Jugendklubhäuser und Heimen und soziale Betreuung Jugendlicher 1952-56, Bericht über die Lage in den Jugendwerkhöfen und die Perspektive im 2. Fünfjahrplan, Undated.

the morning and following a strict schedule throughout the day. Young offenders were typically kept on a strict schedule to avoid idling. Work was interrupted periodically by meals, organized sport activities, and political-educational activities, such as watching the news.<sup>66</sup> The cheap labor that youth workhouses provided was sometimes commissioned by a local industry. For example, in the small city of Güstrow, a textile manufacturer promised to pass on material to make pants.<sup>67</sup> If they were not occupied with factory-style work, young delinquents were often tasked with local projects, such as building a playground, repairing streets, etc.<sup>68</sup>

The pedagogy of reforming young delinquents primarily through work was largely inspired by the Soviet pedagogue Anton Makarenko, educative value of productive labor in molding young people's character. In a lecture addressed to the Soviet People's Commissariat of Education in 1938, Makarenko declared, "I believe in a steady labor enthusiasm ... a calm, steady enthusiasm for the collective's far perspectives which will spur the pupils on to the performance of enormous tasks ... I consider an enthusiasm such as this of the greatest educational value."<sup>69</sup>

While productive labor in youth workhouses supposedly only served an educational and rehabilitative purpose, it clearly had economic value as well. The German historian Anke Dreier-Hornig, who has written about the role of work in socialist reeducation in the GDR, argues that youth workhouses represented the state's blatant attempt to "systematically capture the

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<sup>66</sup> Anke Dreier-Hornig, *Zwangsarbeit—Über die Rolle der Arbeit in der DDR-Heimerziehung*, (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2018), 108.

<sup>67</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DR 2 Ministerium für Volksbildung, No. 5335 Brief von dem Kleiderwerke Güstrow an den Jugendwerkhof Blücherhof, 15. August 1955.

<sup>68</sup> Anke Dreier-Hornig, *Zwangsarbeit—Über die Rolle der Arbeit in der DDR-Heimerziehung*, 49.

<sup>69</sup> Anton Makarenko, *Problems of Soviet School Education*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965, 118.

productive capacities of young people.”<sup>70</sup> Throughout the 1950s, youth workhouses were set up in regions with significant labor shortages with the hope they would boost overall productivity.<sup>71</sup> Each facility was outfitted with multiple workshops for production, which effectively functioned as small-scale factories supporting East German industry. By 1955, there were already 38 youth workhouses in the GDR, included in them a total of 120 workshops for production.<sup>72</sup> Residents of the youth workhouses were compensated for their labor, albeit not very generously. Socialist reeducation served as a way to prepare young offenders to rejoin the East German economy, while also helping to fulfill the state’s immediate need for an expanded workforce.

Young delinquents’ experience working in one of these facilities was intended to act as a form of vocational training that would prepare them for future employment. This practice dovetailed with a national push to increase vocational education for young people, led by the SED’s Ministry of National Education. In 1952, the First Ordinance on Vocational Education established the importance of preparing young people for future occupations. Both state officials and educators supported the idea that by giving young delinquents the appropriate education and work experience, they could be reformed into productive members of society. Moreover, gaining basic skills would facilitate these adolescents’ reintegration into the workforce after being discharged from the youth workhouse.

On a basic level, traditional gender roles were frequently reinforced through work assignments in youth workhouses. Although many facilities were coeducational, some were divided along gendered lines. In facilities that housed only young men, residents were mostly

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 59

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.



occupied with industrial labor.<sup>73</sup> Facilities for young women, on the other hand, were more likely to have opportunities for tasks such as sewing and gardening.<sup>74</sup> The images below show young women learning these skills at the youth workhouse at Dämeritz Lake in Berlin-Wilhelmshagen in 1953. This type of work was intended to contribute to young women's overall behavioral reform and impart them with marketable skills for their future employment.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Jennifer V. Evans, "Repressive Rehabilitation: Crime, Morality, and Delinquency in Berlin-Brandenburg, 1945–1958," in *Crime and Criminal Justice in Modern Germany*, edited by Wetzell Richard F., (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014), 311.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



Young women learn to sew at the youth workhouse at the Dämeritz Lake in Berlin-Wilhelmshagen, 1953.

BPK-Bildagentur No. 30020036, photograph by Hildegard Dreyer.



Young women gardening at the youth workhouse at the Dämeritz Lake in Berlin-Wilhelmshagen, 1953.

BPK-Bildagentur No. 30020038, photograph by Hildegard Dreyer.

Turning young delinquents into industrious citizens required a transformation of their character. In order to increase these young offenders' sense of responsibility to the collective, educators aimed to fundamentally change their relationship to working. Young delinquents would not only be required to work daily; they would also be expected to grow to love it. This was widely supported by the party, which deliberately tried to generate enthusiasm for socialist production among young people and mobilize them as a productive labor force. A party publication titled "Call the Youth to Action!" published in 1955 asserted that young people should be eager to take on the "proud task ... of fulfilling the obligations of industry in a worker and peasants' state."<sup>76</sup> Educators sought to foster a "socialist attitude toward working" in their pupils, characterized by a strong work ethic, a desire to contribute meaningfully to society and a profound "love for physical and mental work."<sup>77</sup> Moreover, young people were taught to "harmoniously join their own interests with the interests of the general public" by subordinating their individual desires to the economic imperatives of the state.<sup>78</sup>

Socialist reeducation also married socialist production with the GDR's ongoing class struggle against global capitalism. Contributing to the East German economy was viewed as a societal obligation shared by all; socialist reeducation served as a method for getting young delinquents, who might have ignored their responsibilities in the past, to accept this duty. In this way, party officials believed that "the education of the youth is class struggle. It takes place

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<sup>76</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, 1. Zentrale Jugendkonferenz des staatlichen und gesellschaftlichen Handels, *Ruf an die Jugend im Handel!*, 1955.

<sup>77</sup> Andreas Gatzemann. *Die Erziehung zum „neuen“ Menschen im Jugendwerkhof Torgau: ein Beitrag zum kulturellen Gedächtnis*, (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008), 50.

<sup>78</sup> Verena Zimmermann, "Den neuen Menschen schaffen," 62.

wherever young people live and work, learn and spend their free time.”<sup>79</sup>

The importance of work in socialist reeducation practices reflect state authorities’ desire to reform irresponsible young people into hard workers, who were able to meaningfully contribute to the socialist economy. Employing young delinquents in youth workhouses served as a way to utilize their productive capacities immediately, while also training them for future employment. For the educators responsible for reforming young delinquents, ideology played an important role in changing their pupils’ relationship to work. By connecting economic production to ideas about social responsibility and class struggle, educators hoped to teach young adults the greater value of work. Although daily life in a youth workhouse was centered around productive labor, the pedagogy of socialist reeducation included social aspects as well. In the following section, I will discuss how socialist reeducation represented state authorities’ attempt to enforce social norms among young people.

## **Section Two—Correcting Social Deviance**

In addition to fulfilling the aforementioned economic purposes, SED officials imagined youth workhouses as serving a broader social function by responding to criminalized forms of social deviance, such as non-normative sexuality and expressing a lack of allegiance to the state. An emphasis was placed on rehabilitative and reformatory education over punishment: by removing wayward youth from the negative environment that presumably produced their delinquent behavior (often the family), party officials hoped to bring about a transformation of

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<sup>79</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, Nr. 1401, Kampf gegen Jugendgefährdung und Jugendkriminalität, Undated.

their character. New surroundings and influences, coupled with intensive ideological instruction, would allow young delinquents to develop the qualities of the socialist personality. Among other things, young people would learn to strive for “active participation in the Free German Youth, a positive attitude to work and promoting a sense of responsibility toward our worker and peasants’ state.”<sup>80</sup> Overall, correctional education in the youth workhouses would ostensibly ensure that upon leaving, reformed young delinquents would be prepared and motivated to fulfill their societal obligations as socialist citizens.

The expansion of socialist reeducation in youth workhouses also signified a response to issues the SED perceived to be at the root of youth criminality. State officials worked to combat the apparent lack of socialist consciousness among young delinquents by subjecting them to a program of ideological education that emphasized patriotism, anti-fascism and the tenets of Marxism-Leninism. On the premise of correcting the corrupting influence of negative home environments, the party asserted its ability to replace *Familienerziehung* (family-based upbringing) with socialist reeducation in youth workhouses. This would allow the SED to take control over a young person’s development moving forward and by extension exert some influence over the parents as well. In 1968, Eberhard Mannschatz, who oversaw socialist reeducation in youth workhouses from 1951 to 1971, remarked that “reeducating parents begins with the child.”<sup>81</sup>

Collectivism was also fundamental to the project of socialist reeducation. Broadly speaking, educators believed that being immersed in a collective living and working environment

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<sup>80</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin, DC 4 Amt für Jugendfragen, No. 1657 Die Arbeit zwischen Jugendklubhäuser und Heimen und soziale Betreuung Jugendlicher 1952-56, Bericht über die Lage in den Jugendwerkhöfen und die Perspektive im 2. Fünfjahrplan, Undated.

<sup>81</sup> Eberhard Mannschatz, “Die sozialpädagogische Aufgabe und die Heimerziehung,” *Jugendhilfe* (1968).

would increase young delinquents' sense of social responsibility. The Soviet pedagogue Anton Makarenko posited that reeducating young delinquents in a collective could correct their dysfunctional relationship to society. In an article for *Jugendhilfe*, Bernhard Krebs echoed this sentiment and stated that “collective education is the best method for creating socialist personalities.”<sup>82</sup> He continues:

A well-organized and led collective can be an excellent means to shape the social bonds of its members. Above all, the disturbed social relationships of the minors are corrected in form and content by the experience of and participation in authentic social relationships. The social norms that are valid within the collective are usually also adopted by the individual as valid norms.<sup>83</sup>

Youth workhouses were designed to “replace the family for a child, temporarily or until he has reached adulthood.”<sup>84</sup> More accurately stated, a program of socialist reeducation in a youth workhouse would replace the ideological influences young people would ordinarily receive at home. Socialization through familial relationships would be replaced by a collective of peers in the youth workhouse. The family served as an ideal model for social relationships—In the words of Eberhard Mannschatz, the family was “generally the first collective children became a part of.”<sup>85</sup> Mannschatz also indicated that it was the specific nature of familial relationships that made them worth replicating, because they were characterized by “endurance,

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<sup>82</sup> Bernhard Krebs, “Aufgaben und Gestaltung des Heimaufenthaltes im Prozeß der Umerziehung,” *Jugendhilfe* (1965).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Eberhard Mannschatz, “Die sozialpädagogische Aufgabe und die Heimerziehung,” *Jugendhilfe* (1968).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

stability and significance.”<sup>86</sup> The family was still viewed as the ideal environment for producing socialist personalities, but party leaders asserted that it was possible when necessary to effectively substitute *Familienerziehung* with socialist reeducation in a youth workhouse.

In East Germany, teaching young people to practice a socially responsible form of heterosexuality was viewed as an integral part of socialist education. In an article on sexual education in *Jugendhilfe*, Rolf Borrmann emphasizes that young people must learn to form a relationship to the opposite sex “in such a way that it is aligned with the demands and expectations of society.”<sup>87</sup> Friendships between young men and women were acceptable, but they should learn “to deny their desires, refrain from something” until they were able to recognize the boundaries surrounding sexual desire.<sup>88</sup> In the GDR, the family ideal was characterized by a loving heterosexual marriage and the existence of a “favorable family atmosphere.”<sup>89</sup>

These ideas were incorporated into socialist reeducation in youth workhouses, where educators worked to correct what they perceived to be sexual deviancy, that is to say sexuality distinct from the state’s goal of reproducing a healthy workforce. While socialist reeducation did not perfectly replicate the sexual education adolescents would ideally receive at home under normal circumstances, youth workhouses punished sexual misbehavior. In order to reform these young delinquents, educators tried to control their socialization and teach them to form appropriate relationships. By keeping young men and women separated and tightly controlling what little free time they had, educators cracked down on promiscuity.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Rolf Borrmann, “Sexuelle Erziehung in der Familie,” *Jugendhilfe* (1965).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

Although the construction of youth workhouses was premised on revolutionary ideas of social transformation, the practice of socialist reeducation mostly served the pragmatic function of realigning young delinquents with the state's economic and social priorities and involved compulsion and the suppression of individual thoughts and desires. By tasking young delinquents with productive labor, state authorities instantly expanded the workforce. Moreover, they sought to prepare young people to rejoin the GDR economy by training them in productive skills and fostering a positive relationship to work. The youth workhouses' social function included increasing young delinquents' sense of social responsibility and ideological commitment, while also teaching them to form social and sexual relationships in a way that would support social stability in the GDR. Overall, socialist reeducation practices were designed to correct delinquent or non-conformist behavior and foster the qualities of the socialist personality, hopefully turning young delinquents into future socialist leaders.

Was socialist reeducation in youth workhouses an effective way to reform young delinquents? Ultimately, socialist reeducation was often an arduous process that could not really offer any guarantee of success. Reintegrating ostensibly reformed young delinquents into East German society proved to be difficult and state authorities struggled to combat recidivism. Although a stay in a youth workhouse was never supposed to exceed nine months, many young offenders found themselves returned to a youth workhouse a few months after their release, suggesting that SED officials' belief in their ability to socially engineer the population of the GDR was ultimately shortsighted.



## **Conclusion**

The emergence of a program of socialist reeducation for juvenile delinquents in East Germany in the 1950s was the product of a particular historical moment, during which optimism about the socially transformative power of socialism was nearly unlimited. SED leadership worked to remake East German society in the wake of World War II, by erasing the legacy of Nazism and providing an alternative to capitalism, which they viewed as inherently exploitative. The party's mission extended beyond transforming social, economic and political systems in East Germany—First Party Secretary Walter Ulbricht boldly spoke of the type of new person who would exist under socialism. Ulbricht envisioned a future in which the individual would be subordinated to collective aspirations, creating a population of well-rounded and ideologically committed citizens. This vision was especially projected onto young people, who represented the future of the GDR.

Young East Germans represented harbingers of an idealized future under socialism, while also creating obstacles to the party's aim of establishing a new social and economic order. Many young people's affinity for the West, unwillingness to fit into prescribed social or sexual roles and apathy toward work responsibilities were serious problems in the eyes of the SED. Members of the Bureau of Youth Issues assessed how *Rowdytum* and other forms of youth criminality conflicted with the party's vision for young people. This led party officials to categorize a broad range of behaviors as criminal, including political disaffectedness, shirking work duties and deviant sexuality. Party officials attributed rising rates of youth criminality to underlying issues

in East German society, such as dysfunctional families and a broad failure to convince young people of the true merits of socialism.

When faced with the problem of youth criminality, the SED was forced to juggle multiple priorities—eliminating criminality, securing an ideological stronghold, addressing the social issues they saw as the root of lawbreaking and reforming young delinquents so that they could rejoin a rigidly organized society. Socialist reeducation in youth workhouses represented a catch-all solution to these problems. Through a program of political-ideological education and productive labor, state-employed educators sought to remind young people of their societal obligations, prepare them to contribute to the East German economy and commit to the socialist project. Educators and state officials possessed a deep belief in the educative power of living and working in a collective to teach young people to embrace shared responsibilities and create positive social relationships. Moreover, socialist reeducation represented an attempt to correct so-called dysfunctional family relationships. Educators modeled socialist reeducation practices on the family unit, enforcing state authorities' claim that they possessed the ability to replace family education. By reforming young offenders, SED officials also hoped to be able to exert influence over parents who displayed anti-state sentiments, a desire to relocate to West Germany or an unwillingness to raise their children in accordance with socialist principles.

Overall, the SED's approach to youth criminality was fundamentally motivated by a pragmatic need to establish social and economic stability in a new socialist state. The party's coexisting desire to eliminate youth criminality and raise a generation of "socialist personalities" inspired the practice of socialist reeducation in youth work camps. Educational and reformative

practices in these facilities further demonstrate the party's goal of realigning "derailed" young offenders with particular social, familial and economic roles.

In recent historical scholarship, East Germany's youth workhouses have primarily been examined as appendages of a repressive and dysfunctional criminal justice system. By highlighting the rampant abuse that occurred at a specific youth workhouse in Torgau, historians such as Daniel Krausz and Andreas Gatzemann have highlighted a particular contradiction that existed in the East German welfare state—Young delinquents placed in the care of the state in these facilities were not protected or nurtured, but rather subjected to abuse. Although the focus of my thesis is not the abusive practices in youth workhouses, I certainly do not deny that they occurred. However, I believe that the history of these facilities offers much more to consider than the potentially totalitarian nature of the German Democratic Republic. The project of socialist reeducation demonstrates how the SED's aim of establishing a new social, political and economic order was closely tied to a desire to socially engineer East German citizens themselves.

In researching this subject, I was frequently struck by the unique position held by young people in East German society in the 1950s and 60s. In such a relatively young country, politicians' approach to youth policies reflected their desired trajectory for the GDR as a whole. By working to educate, raise and influence young people, these politicians were responding to the question: What sort of people were East Germans to become under socialism? My focus upon the issue of youth criminality also gave me insight into politicians' views on what sort of people East Germans should not become—capitalist, immoral and socially irresponsible people had no place in the GDR. By looking at how these characteristics were criminalized, I came to

understand what purpose normative behaviors served in the GDR, namely securing social and economic stability.

The centrality of socialist reeducation in the East German youth welfare system shows an interesting departure from the Nazi era. During both periods, youth criminality was associated with poor education, an undesirable class background and general asocial behavior. However, the SED's emphasis on the need to support and reform young offenders demonstrates a significant break with the Nazi era, when asociality implied being unworthy of having a place in society. In contrast, the SED sought to tackle asociality head-on by expanding the youth welfare system and introducing the program of socialist reeducation in the 1950s. Ensuring that young delinquents found their way to a productive and functional role in society was a primary aim of socialist reeducation in youth workhouses.

Although it would seem that the approach to youth criminality taken by the GDR was more tolerant than that of Nazi Germany, I do not wish to gratuitously favor the East German approach. If the youth workhouses gave young delinquents an opportunity to be accepted back into society by their government, they did so only on very constricted terms. Ultimately, the youth workhouses functioned as a means to encourage (and sometimes force) conformity to a narrow set of economic and social roles.

By comparing the GDR to its capitalist neighbor in the West, the Federal Republic of Germany, historians can make arguments about the ability of state socialism address social problems such as youth criminality. Furthermore, interesting connections can be drawn between the GDR and the modern, reunified Germany of today. How Germans should remember the GDR is still a highly contentious issue in unified Germany, among both historians and ordinary

citizens who lived through this period of history. I have seen how Germans have applied their well-known practice of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or “grappling with the past,” which is usually associated with engaging with the history of Nazi era, to the complicated history of East Germany. In writing this thesis, I am offering my contribution to historians’ collective work of understanding and unpacking the history of the GDR.

My thesis’ connection to the present day is relatively straightforward—The SED was not able to achieve its goal of eliminating youth criminality, and various forms of juvenile delinquency still exist in Germany today. The terms used to describe those young people who resist the constraints of legal restrictions, social norms and personal responsibilities are often the same as in East Germany—asocial and *schwererziehbar* (difficult to raise or educate). These young offenders continue to pose a serious challenge to German educators and caseworkers, parents and the youth welfare system as a whole.

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