

AFTER SOCIALISM: THE TRANSFORMATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN  
EISENHÜTTENSTADT, 1975-2015

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## **ABSTRACT**

Larissa R. Stiglich: *After Socialism: The Transformation of Everyday Life in Eisenhüttenstadt, 1975-2015* (Under the direction of Konrad H. Jarausch)

This dissertation offers a systematic exploration of Eisenhüttenstadt's transformation from a thriving socialist model city and heart of the German Democratic Republic's steel industry, to a declining eastern German town on the Polish border on the periphery of a united Germany. Rather than focus exclusively on the processes of economic and political integration of the two Germanys, this dissertation centers on ordinary citizens' experiences of these changes in their everyday lives. In particular, it asks how local politicians and administrators, city and economic planners, and ordinary residents alike navigated the triple transition from a divided to a united Germany, from communism to liberal democracy, and from a command economy to competitive global capitalism. Using oral history interviews to complement archival research, this project examines how unification with West Germany as well as entry into a competitive market economy pulled the economic rug out from under residents' feet, casting uncertainty onto formerly secure employment in the local steel mill and eroding state-subsidized social services and cultural amenities upon which residents relied. Unemployment and a wave of outmigration created new problems in the 1990s and 2000s, the solutions to which heightened the tension between the renovation and demolition of socialist spaces. Despite these seemingly fundamental transformations, this dissertation argues that the legacies of state socialism continue to affect the everyday lives of ordinary citizens even three decades after the collapse of East Germany.

This dissertation contends that German unification had long-term, ambivalent effects on the everyday lives of former East Germans. Its findings challenge triumphalist narratives of the victory of Western capitalism and democracy over communism. At the same time, it rejects the characterization of German unification as a story of overwhelming loss, an interpretation common among those with selective memories of state socialism or “nostalgia for the east” (*Ostalgie*). Instead, using the history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) showcases how the tensions between the benefits of liberal democracy and a free market on the one hand, and the dislocations of transitioning to a capitalist society on the other hand, played themselves out in residents’ daily lives. Experiences of unemployment and feelings of uncertainty were juxtaposed with expansive new democratic rights, like the freedom to travel or buy long-coveted consumer goods. By bringing East Germans’ everyday experiences to the center of the analysis, this dissertation presents a nuanced account of the simultaneously disorienting and euphoric transformations of German unification, integration into an expanding Europe, and entry into a global economy.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AG	Joint-stock company ( <i>Aktiengesellschaft</i> )
APO	Company-division Party organization ( <i>Abteilungsparteiorganization</i> )
BFD	Association of Free Democrats ( <i>Bund Freier Demokraten</i> )
BSG	Company sports club ( <i>Betriebssportgemeinschaft</i> )
CDU	Christian Democratic Union ( <i>Christlich-Demokratische Union Deutschlands</i> )
COMECON	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
DBD	Democratic Farmers' Party ( <i>Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands</i> )
DFD	Democratic Women's League of Germany ( <i>Demokratische Frauensbund Deutschlands</i> )
DM	German mark ( <i>Deutsche Mark</i> , or <i>D-Mark</i> )
DSU	German Social Union ( <i>Deutsche Soziale Union</i> )
EC	European Community
EFC	Eisenhüttenstadt Soccer Club ( <i>Eisenhüttenstädter Fußball Club</i> )
EKO	Steelworks Combine East ( <i>Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost</i> )
EU	European Union
EUROFER	European Confederation of Iron and Steel Industries ( <i>Wirtschaftsvereinigung Eisen- und Stahl</i> )
FDGB	Free German Trade Union Federation ( <i>Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund</i> )
FDJ	Free German Youth ( <i>Freie Deutsche Jugend</i> )
FDP	Free Democratic Party ( <i>Freie Demokratische Partei</i> )
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany ( <i>Bundesrepublik Deutschland</i> )



GDR	German Democratic Republic ( <i>Deutsche Demokratische Republik</i> )
GmbH	Company with limited liability ( <i>Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung</i> )
LDPD	Liberal Democratic Party ( <i>Liberal-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> )
NDPD	National Democratic Party ( <i>National-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> )
PDS	Party of Democratic Socialism ( <i>Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus</i> )
RS	Municipal Council ( <i>Rat der Stadt</i> )
SBZ	Soviet Occupation Zone ( <i>Sowjetische Besatzungszone</i> )
SED	Socialist Unity Party ( <i>Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands</i> )
SVV	City Council ( <i>Stadtverordnetenversammlung</i> )
THA	Trusteeship Agency ( <i>Treuhandanstalt</i> )
VEB	People's-owned company ( <i>Volkseigener Betrieb</i> )
WK	Housing Complex ( <i>Wohnkomplex</i> )

## INTRODUCTION

During the anniversary celebrations of the German Democratic Republic's "first socialist city" on June 27, 1980, the General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), Erich Honecker, remarked on the astounding transformation of Eisenhüttenstadt over the past thirty years since its founding. "Your city is a persuasive example of this great change that has taken place over the past three decades under the socialist conditions in our country and for the welfare of the people."<sup>1</sup> According to Honecker, the citizens and workers of Eisenhüttenstadt had played an important role in ensuring that citizens all throughout the GDR felt "a feeling of security and certainty in the future." This compliment was not merely empty political rhetoric. Before 1950 the region east of Berlin along the Oder River was among the least economically developed in all of Germany, and also suffered from corresponding social and cultural underdevelopment. Besides the small towns of Fürstenberg and Schönfließ, a sprawling green meadow (*grüne Wiese*) had dominated the landscape upon which *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* (Steelworks Combine East, abbreviated EKO) and its accompanying settlement would come to be built.

The East German regime's initial decision to build the new iron and steel combine on the Oder River was born out of economic and political necessity. In the material devastation following World War II, the Soviet occupation zone (*Sowjetische Besatzungszone*, abbreviated SBZ) inherited a relative abundance of machine, munitions, and vehicle manufacturing factories,

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<sup>1</sup> SAPMO-BAarch, DA 5-10502, speech by Erich Honecker, read by Klaus Sorgenicht on June 27, 1980. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's own.

but lacked the raw material processing capabilities to be able to use them.<sup>2</sup> In other words, even though the SBZ had the ability process steel into various finished products, they were unable to manufacture steel from its raw materials. Given that steel is a central necessity of heavy industrialization—and that political circumstances constrained their willingness and ability to continue to depend upon Western steel imports—the SBZ and subsequent East German leadership made steel production a priority in its plans for economic reconstruction.<sup>3</sup> Following the Stalinist example, at the Third Party Congress in July 1950, the SED decided to focus their efforts and resources on building up an independent, nationally owned, heavy industry.<sup>4</sup> The resulting Five-Year Plan provided for the construction of an integrated steel mill with a 500,000-ton capacity, which would make it the largest in the GDR.<sup>5</sup> Party leaders eventually decided on the undeveloped area in between Fürstenberg and Schönfließ for the location of the new iron and steel combine because it lay on the Oder River, which facilitated the transportation of coal and ore from Poland and the Soviet Union, respectively.<sup>6</sup>

As the first of several “new socialist towns” in the GDR, Eisenhüttenstadt was an attractive destination for a range of Germans and for a variety of reasons.<sup>7</sup> In the aftermath of

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<sup>2</sup> While many factories had been relocated from western Germany in order to escape Allied bombing raids, the SBZ did not have the raw material processing capabilities of the Ruhr, the Saar, or Silesia, for example.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt: Wandel einer industriellen Gründungsstadt in fünfzig Jahren* (Potsdam: Brandenburgische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2000), 22-23. The challenge of economic rebuilding was exacerbated by the Soviet occupation of eastern Germany and the reparations that the Soviets took, first in the form of entire factories, which were dismantled and moved east, and later in the form of reparations in kind. See Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. Subsequent additions and expansions, including that of a cold rolling mill in June 1968, made the EKO the largest metallurgic combine in the GDR, with the capacity to employ up to 16,000 workers. See “Firmengeschichte,” ArcelorMittal website, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://www.arcelormittal-ehst.com/unternehmen/geschichte?pgr=6&lang=de>.

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt*, 29.

<sup>7</sup> There is a substantial body of scholarship concerning socialist towns and cities throughout other countries and regions in the Soviet bloc. See, for example, Sándor Horváth, *Stalinism Reloaded: Everyday Life in Stalin-City*,

World War II, refugees from the lost eastern territories, orphans, single mothers, and young men alike were drawn by the stability represented by the city and the opportunities it offered. The possibilities of secure employment in the steelworks, the promise of a newly constructed flat, and improved access to food provisions were among some of the reasons that attracted people to Eisenhüttenstadt in the 1950s. In addition to material security, the model-city “was to be a livable community, not merely barracks for workers,” with plenty of “light, sunshine and air,” and with “cultural and social amenities close to hand.”<sup>8</sup> Although this vision would take time to complete, many residents were also attracted to the opportunity to be part of a collective enterprise and to work toward building up socialism. The city’s appeal was reflected in its population, which grew rapidly from 13,000 in 1952 to almost 43,000 in 1968, and then more slowly in the 1970s and 1980s, reaching its peak of over 53,000 residents in 1988.<sup>9</sup>

In the three decades after Honecker praised the city for its accomplishments in 1980, however, Eisenhüttenstadt would undergo yet another transformation, this time from a privileged, socialist model-city and the industrial heart of the GDR, to a declining, eastern German town on the Polish border at the periphery of a united Germany. The intervening

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*Hungary*, Thomas Cooper, trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Katherine Lebow, *Unfinished Utopia: Nowa Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society, 1949-1956* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Kinga Pozniak, *Nowa Huta: Generations of Change in a Model Socialist Town* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2014). For comparative works see Dagmara Jajeśniak-Quast, “Ein lokaler ‘Rat für gegenseitige Wirtschaftshilfe’: Eisenhüttenstadt, Krakó, Nowa Huta, und Ostrava Kunčice, in *Sozialistische Städte zwischen Herrschaft und Selbstbehauptung: Kommunalpolitik, Stadtplanung und Alltag in der DDR*, Christoph Bernhardt and Heinz Reif, eds. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2009), 95-114; Mark Laszlo-Herbert, “The Construction and Transformation of Socialist Space in the Planned Cities of Stalinstadt and Sztálinváros” (PhD. diss.), University of Toronto, 2016. For a more theoretical consideration of socialist cities in shifting historical circumstances see Kimberly Elman Zarecor, “What Was So Socialist about the Socialist City? Second World Urbanity in Europe,” *Journal of Urban History* 44, no. 1 (2018): 95-117.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 58-59.

<sup>9</sup> “Jenny Richter, Heike Förster, and Ulrich Lakemann, *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt. Von der Utopie zur Gegenwart. Wandel industrieller, regionaler und sozialer Strukturen in Eisenhüttenstadt* (Marburg: Schürin, 1997), 28.

decades had witnessed the irrevocable stagnation of the East German economy, shifting international circumstances within the Soviet bloc as a result of the reform policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, a growing dissidence movement protesting flagrant human rights abuses, travel restrictions, and demanding democratic renewal—all of which culminated dramatically with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. The disintegration of state socialism in the GDR, and the subsequent integration of the country into the Federal Republic in October 1990, heralded a long process of unification that had enormous consequences for East Germans everywhere. How these processes played out in Eisenhüttenstadt, specifically, is a particularly pressing and interesting issue, as it raises the question “what happens to a model-city when the model goes bust?”<sup>10</sup>

In the herculean endeavor to privatize the formerly state-owned iron and steel combine, EKO went from employing over 12,000 residents in 1989, to fewer than 3,000 full-time employees by 1993.<sup>11</sup> With most of the employment opportunities in the city tied directly or indirectly to steel production, workers experienced joblessness for the first time. The unemployment rate grew throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, remaining at or above 20 percent through the middle of the decade.<sup>12</sup> This economic uncertainty led many residents to leave the city, reducing the population of Eisenhüttenstadt from its peak of over 53,000 residents in 1988 to fewer than an estimated 25,000 today.<sup>13</sup> The increasing prevalence of empty

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<sup>10</sup> Melissa Eddy, “East German Model City Rusts, Quarter-Century After Berlin Wall’s Fall,” *The New York Times* (3 November 2013): A6.

<sup>11</sup> Lutz Schmidt, et al. *Einblicke. 50 Jahre EKO Stahl* (Eisenhüttenstadt: EKO Stahl GmbH, 2000), 269.

<sup>12</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 19.09.2001, “17.3.4 Ausgewählte Arbeitsmarktdaten ab 1997,” 190.

<sup>13</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 25.11.1998, Statistikstelle Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt, “Beiträge zur Statistik: Information über die Bevölkerung der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt nach der ‘Kommunalen Gebietsgliederung,’” 4/98 (November 1998): 5/19. Landesamt für Bauen und Verkehr, *Berichte der Raumbewachung. Entwicklung der Wohnbevölkerung 2001 bis 2013. Hauptstadtregion Berlin-Brandenburg* (Hoppegarten: Landesamt für Bauen und Verkehr, 2014): 61. According to the official statistics of the Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, a population survey at the end of 2018 revealed that Eisenhüttenstadt has 24,633 residents, which is less than half of its

apartments left city administrators and urban planners with a challenging problem, as many of the buildings in the city center of Eisenhüttenstadt had been granted historic preservation status. Instead, many empty buildings and apartment complexes on the outskirts of the city were slated for demolition, irrevocably altering the physical and social fabric of the city. These challenges, however, were of course accompanied by the expansive new rights of liberal democracy and benefits of market capitalism. Since the 1990s many Eisenhüttenstadt residents have enjoyed substantial improvements to their quality of life, as well as the opportunity to travel broadly throughout western Europe and the world. Taken together, these developments attest to some of the ambivalent results of German unification on ordinary residents' everyday lives.

This dissertation undertakes a systematic exploration of Eisenhüttenstadt's transformation after the fall of the Berlin wall, the disintegration of state socialism, and the unification of the two Germanys. In placing the Eisenhüttenstadt into the broader narrative of German unification and postsocialist transition, this project goes beyond recounting the complicated process of economic and political integration of the two Germanys. Instead, I argue that our understanding of these political and economic transformations remains incomplete without attending to the experiences of ordinary East Germans and their efforts to navigate the new system. This approach highlights how these changes were both disorienting and euphoric, and could trigger feelings of both loss and hope, often within the same life trajectory. By centering the perspectives and agency of Eisenhüttenstadt residents, my dissertation offers a nuanced, "bottom up" understanding of the complex processes of government change, economic privatization and

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population at the end of 1989. Stefan Lötsch, "Eisenhüttenstadt hat weniger als 25,000 Einwohner," *Märkische Oderzeitung* (8 December 2019), <https://www.moz.de/landkreise/oder-spreewald/eisenhuettenstadt/artikel0/dg/0/1/1746045/>.

deindustrialization, and integration not only into a united Germany, but also into an expanding Europe Union and an increasingly globalized world.

## **Historiography**

This project lies at the intersection of several well-established bodies of historical literature concerning the GDR, as well as emerging interdisciplinary scholarship that assesses consequences of German reunification. First, although I am primarily concerned with the period after the Peaceful Revolution of 1989-1990, an understanding of East German state and society *before* reunification is nonetheless essential to an investigation of the multiple transitions East Germans experienced in their everyday lives. As such, I offer a consideration of the historical debates surrounding the nature of the GDR as a dictatorship, as well as an evaluation of the literature assessing the relationship between state and society in the GDR. Second, I provide a brief overview of scholarship that catalogues and evaluates the events of the Peaceful Revolution itself. Third, I address the three decades of research that has sought to evaluate the consequences of German unification, revealing the relative dearth of historical accounts among an abundance of social scientific literature. And, finally, I survey the respectable body of German-language scholarship on Eisenhüttenstadt specifically, representing a range of historical and social scientific approaches to understanding the socialist model-city. Taken together, these historiographical overviews attest to the necessity of a more systematic historical investigation of former East Germans' everyday experiences of transition to a unified Germany.

### *The Nature of East German Dictatorship*

Since the collapse of the GDR, historical research has experienced many conceptual shifts, among the most notable being the renaissance of totalitarian theories to explain the nature

of the regime.<sup>14</sup> Some scholars attempted to resuscitate these totalitarian interpretations in an effort to understand both the Nazi and SED dictatorships, as well as to explain the failure of communism and the triumph of democratic liberalism.<sup>15</sup> This critical approach was met by the voices of other scholars—often former East Germans themselves—who attempted to redeem the memory of the GDR, excusing it as a “failed experiment” rather than a “state *not* under the rule of law” (*Unrechtsstaat*).<sup>16</sup> Other scholars, however, taking a more balanced approach, criticized totalitarian theories because they leave “unexamined the standards of Western democracies it applies to totalitarian regimes.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the totalitarianism approach tends to focus exclusively on regime-produced materials, creating misleading impressions of a static society which are unable to adequately explain the end of the GDR. Overall, while the interpretive lens of totalitarian theories can be useful in revealing the extent of political repression, its applicability is limited by its inability to capture the lived experience of dictatorship beyond the confines of a state- and party-power analysis. My study, by privileging citizens’ everyday

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<sup>14</sup> Originally conceptualized and popularized in the 1940s and 1950s with the classic works by Hannah Arendt, and Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, these works sought to understand National Socialism as a totalitarian state on par with contemporary communist regimes in the context of the early Cold War. Hannah Arendt focused on the revolutionary, radicalizing aspects of totalitarian movements that were motivated by an “interior drive” and adhering to a single ideology, whereas Friedrich and Brzezinski emphasized the attempts to control all areas of life according to said single ideology and through implementation of modern weapons and communications, including the secret police, and control of the media and the economy. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1994), 389. See also Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 22. These theories experienced a renaissance after 1989 as scholars searched for tools to understand the nature of the East German dictatorship compared to its National Socialist precursor.

<sup>15</sup> For two examples of this approach see: Klaus Schroeder, “Einleitung: Die DDR als politische Gesellschaft,” in *Geschichte und Transformation des SED Staates: Beiträge und Analysen*, Klaus Schroeder, ed. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994), 11-26; Eckhard Jesse, “Die Totalitarismusforschung im Streit der Meinungen,” in *Totalitarismus im 20. Jahrhundert: Eine Bilanz der internationalen Forschung*, ed. Eckhard Jesse (Baden-Baden: NOMOS Verlagsgesellschaft, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> See for example Rolf Reißig and Gert-Joachim Glaeßner, eds., *Das Ende eines Experiments* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1991). *Unrechtsstaat* plays on the concept of a *Rechtsstaat*, which is a state under the rule of law.

<sup>17</sup> Konrad H. Jarausch, “Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship,” in *Dictatorship as Experience: Toward a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, Konrad H. Jarausch, ed. (Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 52-53.



experiences of work and life in the GDR, reveals both the most acute sites of contact between the regime and its citizens, as well as the areas in which citizens did not feel the intrusive presence of the state.

Scholars of East Germany have also intensely debated the relationship between state and society in the GDR. Although East Germany inarguably experienced far-reaching social changes throughout the course of four decades, the extent of this control was not as absolute as the SED claimed. This more recent debate was incited by sociologist Sigrid Meuschel's study of "legitimation and party rule." Building in part on earlier totalitarian theories, she suggested that society, as opposed to the state, "withered away" under communism.<sup>18</sup> Meuschel's argument elicited a spectrum of responses. On the one hand, Ralph Jessen called to reject the notion of a "one-sided relationship of dependence between state and society," and argued instead for "the relative autonomy of the social dimension."<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Jürgen Kocka echoed Meuschel's argument with his notion of a *durchherrschte Gesellschaft*, "a society ruled through and through," and emphasized the political foundations of these social processes and the SED's ability to mold "society all the way into its finest branches."<sup>20</sup> Both of these approaches, however, privilege a particular understanding of the relationship between state and society, potentially overlooking or discarding evidence that does not fit.

Instead, the approaches that occupy a middle ground in this debate can provide a more balanced portrayal of the relationship between state and society in the GDR. Thomas Lindenberger implemented a "bottom-up" perspective of state-society relations, arguing that East

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<sup>18</sup> Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft: zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR, 1945-1989* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 32.

<sup>19</sup> Ross, 48. The term *durchherrschte Gesellschaft* was borrowed from Alf Lütke.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

German society did exist to an extent on the local level, where it could show considerable self-will beyond the party.<sup>21</sup> Konrad Jarausch coined the term “welfare dictatorship” (*Fürsorgediktatur*) in order to capture the inherent contradiction “between socialism’s emancipatory rhetoric and the corrupt practice of Stalinism within a single analytical category.”<sup>22</sup> Mary Fulbrook, in turn, characterized the GDR as a “participatory dictatorship,” in that large numbers of East Germans actually did participate in the “democratic centralism” of the GDR, and not necessarily either out of genuine ideological commitment or simple coercion.<sup>23</sup>

These latter two approaches are particularly useful for Eisenhüttenstadt because, on the one hand, the construction and maintenance of a model-city was made possible by the rapid industrialization plans and subsequent central control of the East German dictatorship. On the other hand, the utopian vision and fulfillment of certain promises for its residents—including jobs, housing, childcare, and other social and cultural amenities—reveals the more emancipatory impulses that existed simultaneously alongside the more repressive practices of the regime. Likewise, seeing how Eisenhüttenstadt functioned as part of a “participatory dictatorship” can suggest how people were simultaneously affected and even constrained by the state, while also often actively and voluntarily contributing to its maintenance.

Another subset of this state-society literature central to my project is that of workers’ experiences and culture during the GDR. Modeling itself as a “workers’ state,” the SED regime’s legitimacy was inextricably bound up with its promise to provide the best alternative to the inequality, injustice, and suppression of the capitalist system. The most authoritative account of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 51. See Thomas Lindenberger, ed., *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur: Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Jarausch, “Care and Coercion,” 60.

<sup>23</sup> See Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, 12.

the regime's efforts to deliver on these promises, and the workers' (at times ambivalent) loyalty to the system, is Christoph Kleßmann's *Arbeiter im 'Arbeiterstaat' DDR*.<sup>24</sup> Here Kleßmann focuses at length on the asymmetrical, but still intertwined, relationship between the SED regime and its workers, while also accounting for the influences of both the Soviet model and the competing West German model. Kleßmann's tome devotes an impressive amount of attention and detail to the everyday experiences of East German workers. In addition, there is a small but essential selection of studies of Eisenhüttenstadt specifically that provide local texture to workers' experiences, including Andreas Ludwig's publications and the edited volume *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt*.<sup>25</sup> My work builds off of this scholarship by offering further specific insights into workers' experiences in Eisenhüttenstadt's both materially and symbolically important metallurgic factory.

#### *Collapse of the GDR and Transformation Literature*

My project also contributes to a body of scholarship that seeks to explain the end of the GDR and document the multiple processes of unification. There are three main historiographical interpretations that attempt to explicate the downfall of the GDR as either a “revolution from below,” as an “implosion from above,” or as “a collapse from outside.”<sup>26</sup> The best among these are those that understand that the failure of the GDR cannot be explained monocausally, and instead propose a combination of these factors.<sup>27</sup> While mounting internal pressure from East

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<sup>24</sup> Christoph Kleßmann, *Arbeiter im 'Arbeiterstaat' DDR. Deutsche Traditionen, sowjetisches Modell, westdeutsches Magnetfeld (1945-1971)* (Bonn: Verlag J.H.W. Dietz, 2007). The English translation of this title would read *Worker in the "Worker's State" GDR. German Traditions, Soviet Model, West German Magnet Field*.

<sup>25</sup> See Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt*, and Andreas Ludwig, “Eisenhüttenstadt,” in *Erinnerungsorte der DDR*, ed. Martin Sabrow (München: Beck, 2009); and Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt*.

<sup>26</sup> Ross, 127.

<sup>27</sup> See Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Rush to Germany Unity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Charles Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Mary Elise Sarotte, *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall* (Basic Books: New York, 2014).

German dissidents was certainly a strong impetus for change within the politically and economically decaying regime, it is also necessary to understand the international context, in particular M.S. Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* and the renunciation of the Brezhnev doctrine.<sup>28</sup> Keeping these interrelated factors in mind, my dissertation contributes to this rich body of literature by shifting focus away from the centers of dissidence and the international context in order to explore events on the local level in Eisenhüttenstadt. Unlike Leipzig, Dresden, and Schwerin, which were centers of discontent in the autumn of 1989, some residents of Eisenhüttenstadt interviewed in 2004 recounted the ways in which they almost “slept through” the revolutionary excitement.<sup>29</sup> This story of is not represented in the popular narratives of the Peaceful Revolution, and my research goes a long way in answering Mary Fulbrook's call for a more careful investigation of “the differential regional distribution of ‘social peace’ and discontent” in the revolutionary autumn.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the historiographical debates surrounding the nature of the dictatorship and the causes of the collapse, my project builds on the interdisciplinary body of literature examining German unification and the transition from communism to capitalism and democracy. The first of these fields comprises primarily political scientists who sought to understand the processes of economic change as it was still happening. Political scientists such as Claus Offe and Wolfgang Merkel quickly recognized the “dilemma of simultaneity” that faced Eastern European countries coping with multiple transition processes at once, for democratization and the processes of

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 62. These insights were based on some oral interviews that Mary Fulbrook conducted with citizens of Eisenhüttenstadt in 2004.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

economic, social, cultural, and spatial change were occurring simultaneously and rapidly.<sup>31</sup> This included, for example, the privatization and dissolution of East Germany's combine based economy, which was supplemented by West German investments and efforts toward corporate integration.<sup>32</sup> This well-researched body of scholarship provides a foundation for understanding of processes of economic integration.

More interesting for the purposes of my study are the contributions of anthropologists who have documented the difficult processes of cultural adjustment.<sup>33</sup> Their ethnographic work on the everyday lives of these newly minted democratic subjects has done much of the heavy lifting in identifying the main themes of so-called "transition" literature. In her 1996 book *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*, anthropologist Katherine Verdery identified these themes as privatization, the emergence of a market economy, nationalism, civil society, and later, democratization.<sup>34</sup> In addition, other anthropologists, such as the late Daphne Berdahl, point to the importance of categories that fall outside but intersect with these main themes in ways that have implications for the everyday lives of citizens. These include notably gender, memory, consumption, and ethnic and national identity.<sup>35</sup> Together these main themes of anthropological scholarship can provide important factual and analytical insights for historians beginning to

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<sup>31</sup> See Claus Offe, "Das Dilemma der Gleichzeitigkeit. Demokratisierung und Marktwirtschaft in Osteuropa," *Merkur* 45:4 (1991), 279-292; Wolfgang Merkel, "Die Konsolidierung postautoritärer und posttotalitärer Demokratien: ein Beitrag zur theorieorientierten Transformationsforschung," in *Transformationsprozess in den Staaten Ostmitteleuropas*, ed. Hans Süssmut (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1998), 39-61.

<sup>32</sup> See for example, Gernot Grabher, "Adaption at the Cost of Adaptability? Restructuring the East German Regional Economy," in *Restructuring Networks in Post-Socialism: legacies, Linkages, and Localities*, Gernot Grabher and David Stark, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 107-135.

<sup>33</sup> For the main themes of transition literature see Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). For an example of ethnographic work that documents the economic transition process in the everyday lives of factory workers see, Elizabeth C. Dunn, *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*, 11-12.

<sup>35</sup> Daphne Berdahl, *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 11.

delve into different dimensions of daily life in the transition from communism to capitalism and democracy.

### *Historical Scholarship on Unified Germany*

Historians, by and large, have only relatively recently turned their attention to accounting for and interpreting the multifaceted processes of postsocialist transition. As the editor of the relatively recent volume *United Germany: Debating Processes and Prospects* noted, “due to the temporal proximity of the events and the lack of access to official documentation, few historians have so far dared to address the issue of unification.”<sup>36</sup> Of those who have, political processes and economic problems of unification represent the most fully researched fields in transition literature. Of those historians who occupy themselves with the question of “inner unity” (*innere Einheit*) most have still sought to explain the continued presence of the “wall in the head” in political and economic terms.<sup>37</sup> One promising new interdisciplinary volume edited by Andrew Stuart Bergerson and Leonard Schmieding does an excellent job centering ordinary Germans’ everyday experiences of the *Wende* and German unification.<sup>38</sup> Its intentionally fragmented narrative structure, however, means that these experiences often appear divorced from more well-known narratives of German history, rather than more seamlessly integrating the two.<sup>39</sup> With this year marking the thirtieth of German unification, my dissertation contributes to an

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<sup>36</sup> Konrad H. Jarausch, “Growing Together? Processes and Problems of German Unification,” in *United Germany: Debating Processes and Prospects* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Klaus Schroeder, *Die veränderte Republik. Deutschland nach der Wiedervereinigung* (Munich: Verlag Ernst Vögel, Stamsried, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> The *Wende*, which is a term I use frequently throughout this dissertation, is a German word literally meaning “turn” or “reversal.” It is used broadly by ordinary Germans and scholars alike to refer to the processes leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Stuart Bergerson and Leonard Schmieding, eds., *Ruptures in the Everyday: Views of Modern Germany from the Ground* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017). Konrad H. Jarausch’s most recent book, *Broken Lives: How Ordinary Germans Experienced the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), provides an excellent model for how ordinary people’s everyday experience of multifaceted rupture can remain central to the historical narrative, while simultaneously seamlessly integrated into broader narratives of German history.

emerging body of historical scholarship that seeks to provide a more comprehensive account of the social and cultural effects of economic and political transformation on the lives of former East Germans.

### *Local Eisenhüttenstadt*

This dissertation has benefited tremendously from a small but respectable body of German-language scholarship on Eisenhüttenstadt specifically. Historian of everyday life Andreas Ludwig's slim volume offers good background on the regional history of Fürstenberg and Schönfließ prior to existence of Eisenhüttenstadt, as well as an accessible narrative of the early years of living and working in the steel town, the period of late-stage socialism, and a brief overview of German unification.<sup>40</sup> Ruth May's book *Planstadt Stalinstadt* is the definitive architectural history of the founding and planning of the socialist model-city.<sup>41</sup> Several sociological studies have offered essential overviews of various social and demographic developments in the model city.<sup>42</sup> Finally, several current and former employees of EKO have been involved in projects to produce a factory history of the steel mill from its inception to its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the year 2000.<sup>43</sup> These accounts focus the bulk of their analysis on the years preceding German unification, largely because most were published in the 1990s and early 2000s. This means that their interpretation of the consequences of German unification on the city

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<sup>40</sup> Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt: Wandel einer industriellen Gründungsstadt in fünfzig Jahren*.

<sup>41</sup> Ruth May, *Planstadt Stalinstadt. Ein Grundriß in der frühen DDR – aufgesucht in Eisenhüttenstadt*. Dortmunder Beiträge zur Raumplanung, no. 92 (Dortmund: Institut für Raumplanung Universität Dortmund Fakultät Raumplanung, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> Jenny Richter, Heike Förster, and Ulrich Lakemann, *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt. Von der Utopie zur Gegenwart. Wandel industrieller, regionaler und sozialer Strukturen in Eisenhüttenstadt* (Marburg: Schürin, 1997); Elisabeth Knauer-Romani, *Eisenhüttenstadt und die Idealstadt des 20. Jahrhundert* (Weimar: VDG, 2000).

<sup>43</sup> Schmidt, et al. *Einblicke*. Former General Director of EKO, Karl Döring, also published a memoir in 2015 that helps to provide personal insights and texture to the complex decision-making process surrounding the steel firm during the 1980s and 1990s. See Karl Döring, *EKO. Stahl für die DDR – Stahl für die Welt. Kombinatdirektor und Stahlmanager* (Berlin: edition berlona, 2015).

and its residents is necessarily somewhat short-sighted. That said, these accounts offer an essential baseline from which my dissertation can push the temporal boundaries of historical interpretation.

## **Methodology**

To grasp such a complex project, I implement a variety of methodological approaches that facilitate both bottom-up and top-down understandings of Eisenhüttenstadt's development and its residents' experiences. The overarching methodological approach to my study is that of *Alltagsgeschichte*, or the history of everyday life. This approach helps to center the actions and experiences of "everyday, ordinary people" (*kleine Leute*).<sup>44</sup> But rather than offer a depoliticized definition of "the everyday," I understand patterns of daily life to be inextricably connected to politics and the state—especially in socialist countries and during times of regime transition.<sup>45</sup> This is not to say that there were no components of daily life that existed independently from the state. Rather, it is simply to recognize the linkages between state and society, and, like historian Katherine Lebow does in her study of Nowa Huta, to pay special attention "to connections between the industrial workplace and the home, work and leisure, and public and private."<sup>46</sup> This sensitivity to state-society power relations is also essential in understanding the transition from communism to capitalism and from a divided to a united Germany. In particular, I focus on the

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<sup>44</sup> Alf Lüdtke, "Introduction: What is the History of Everyday Life and Who Are its Practitioners?" in *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, Alf Lüdtke, ed., William Templer, trans., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3. See also Geoff Eley, "Labor History, Social History, 'Alltagsgeschichte': Experience, Culture, and the Politics of the Everyday—A New Direction for German Social History?" in *The Journal of Modern History* 61:2 (June 1989): 297-343.

<sup>45</sup> For a classic example of this approach see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Given the near omni-presence of the state in urban Russia during the 1930s, Fitzpatrick focuses explicitly on everyday actions that in some way involved the state.

<sup>46</sup> Katherine Lebow, *Unfinished Utopia: Nowa Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society, 1949-56* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 6. For the definitive work on private life in the GDR see Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).



four dimensions of daily life in which citizens most acutely experienced the effects of political and economic reunification. Reflecting the themes introduced in my central questions, I investigate changes to the patterns of everyday life in the areas of employment, urban living, leisure and free time, consumption, individual social relations, and civil society. The following additional methodological approaches will help guide my conceptualization of the intertwining factors and processes driving these transformations.

First, an appreciation of the changes to working life in Eisenhüttenstadt that accompanied the long privatization process requires an understanding of what working in the EKO was like before unification. Here I draw on some of the previous research on Eisenhüttenstadt, paying particular attention to workplace dynamics and interactions in the decades preceding 1989.<sup>47</sup> In this instance Alf Lüdtke's notion of *Eigensinn* can shed light on the extent to which workers' "combination of self-reliance, self-will, and self-respect" aided them in "reappropriating alienated social relations" not only in the workplace, but also at school or on the street or in any other context externally determined by the regime.<sup>48</sup> While Lüdtke uses this concept to demonstrate how workers' actions in their everyday lives created a "culture of resistance," the concept can likewise be useful in examining how workers created relationships and spaces of meaning within existing regime structures.

Second, in Eisenhüttenstadt the process of privatization coincided with exposure to the global market economy for the first time, compounding the deindustrializing effects upon EKO.<sup>49</sup> During the twentieth century, the citizens of Eisenhüttenstadt were certainly not alone in

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<sup>47</sup> See in particular the edited volume by Richter, Förster, and Lakemann, *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt*.

<sup>48</sup> Eley, "Labor History, Social History, 'Alltagsgeschichte,'" 323.

<sup>49</sup> For a detailed account of the privatization process see Wolfgang Seibel, *Verwaltete Illusionen: Die Privatisierung der DDR-Wirtschaft durch die Treuhandanstalt und ihre Nachfolger 1990-2000* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2005).

experiencing the acute effects of deindustrialization in their daily lives. The special challenge of studying Eisenhüttenstadt is to determine to what extent the changes that took place in residents' everyday lives happened as a result of the transition to democracy, or primarily as a result of partial deindustrialization, or a combination of the two. Comparative studies of deindustrialization processes in the West suggest the ways in which Eisenhüttenstadt resembled other deindustrializing regions, and the ways in which it departed.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, comparative studies of deindustrialization help to “rethink the chronology, memory, spatial relations, culture, and politics” of the deindustrialization process in general, and in Eisenhüttenstadt specifically.<sup>51</sup> The editors of *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* understand deindustrialization as “a temporary, historically bound set of conditions that are experienced in terms of permanence by ordinary people in daily life.”<sup>52</sup> I follow the editors' cue by moving away from a strictly quantitative “body count” of manufacturing jobs lost in order to understand deindustrialization as “a historical transformation that marks not just a quantitative and qualitative change in employment, but a fundamental change in the social fabric on par with industrialization itself.”<sup>53</sup> The broader field of vision accommodated by this approach allows me to appreciate the overlapping processes of deindustrialization and democratization, and to begin to distinguish between them.

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<sup>50</sup> There is a rich literature documenting the processes of both industrialization and deindustrialization in Europe and North America. For a recent comparative work that focuses on Niagra Falls, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and Ivanovo, see Alice Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012). For one account that addresses the process of deindustrialization in the Aubin Coal Basin of France see Donald Reid, *The Miners of Decazeville: A Genealogy of Deindustrialization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985). For a work that addresses the deindustrialization process in West German see Christoph Nonn, *Die Ruhrbergbaukrise: Entindustrialisierung und Politik 1958-1969* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001).

<sup>51</sup> See Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, eds., *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Third, urban studies—including spatial analysis and urban history—offer further methodological insights for my study of Eisenhüttenstadt.<sup>54</sup> David Crowley and Susan E. Reid’s edited volume *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* suggests that “monumental” spaces of socialist regimes were not the only ones imbued with politics. Rather, “the spaces of everyday life—places of leisure, learning, consumption and domesticity—were no less important as sites for ideological intervention than the more obviously ‘socialist spaces.’”<sup>55</sup> This argument has interesting implications for Eisenhüttenstadt as a planned city. For example, the *Wohnkomplexe* (Housing Complexes) were intentionally designed to foster the development of good socialist citizens. After 1989, many of these explicitly socialist spaces were preserved under historic protected monuments, even as the political context, social circumstances, and ideological orientations of society shifted around them. In this way, urban history offers further insights into the changing meaning of these former “socialist spaces,” not only as the regime changed, but also as the spaces themselves—including apartment blocks, streets, train stations, and parks—deteriorated, were renovated, or were demolished completely.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>For a broad range of interdisciplinary approaches and topics see the *City Reader* series, especially Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, eds., *The City Reader (5<sup>th</sup> Edition)* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>55</sup> See David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 5.

<sup>56</sup> For a more sociological approach to understanding changing urban patterns and the implications for everyday spaces see Chris Pickvance, “State Socialism, Post-socialism, and their Urban Patterns: Theorizing the Central and Eastern European Experience,” in *Understanding the City: Contemporary and Future Perspectives*, John Eade and Christopher Mele, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 183-203. Here my project also benefits from the work of many historians who, working in various geographical and temporal contexts, likewise investigate the effects of transformative political, social, cultural ruptures (among others) on their urban environments. They also often show how the urban setting can inform these processes of transformative change, in turn. See, for example, Chad Bryant’s study of nation-making under and after Nazi occupation in Prague, *Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). See also Susan D. Pennybacker’s work on the interplay between the urban context of prewar metropolitan London and the political culture that shaped the visions and efforts of the London County Council, *A Vision for London 1889-1914: Labour, Everyday Life, and the LLC Experiment* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). See also Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Donald J. Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War: Politics, Society, and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1917-1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Edith Sheffer, *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Gregor Thum, *Uprooted: How Breslau Became Wrocław during the Century of Expulsions* (Princeton:

Fourth, my dissertation relies on approximately twenty oral history interviews I conducted with current and former Eisenhüttenstadt residents in order to record and better understand their experiences of everyday life in the GDR and postsocialist transition from their own perspective. I benefit from ethnographic insights and methodologies from anthropologists such as John Borneman and Daphne Berdahl, who have conducted extensive ethnographic research in Berlin and Kella (a small former East German border town), respectively.<sup>57</sup> While their questions center more around the construction and articulation of identities, their methods of systematically observing and inquiring after dimensions informed my own methodological approach to conducting oral interviews.<sup>58</sup> Together these oral interviews serve to supplement more extensive archival evidence. Like Donald J. Raleigh's work, I have worked toward constructing a "composite narrative" out of "individual stories that no one person could tell," then situating it within a larger historical narrative.<sup>59</sup> Put short, oral history is valuable not only as a collection of individual stories, but also in its ability to shed light on broader patterns in East Germans' experiences of postsocialist transformation.

Fifth, in order to help understand and evaluate the range of individuals' experiences of deindustrialization and democratization based on their gender or age, for example, my research draws on further theoretical contributions of scholars of postsocialist East Central Europe. Most

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Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>57</sup> John Borneman, *After the Wall: East Meets West in the New Berlin* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Daphne Berdahl, *Where the World Ended*.

<sup>58</sup> Some oral interviews have been conducted with residents of Eisenhüttenstadt. See Dagmar Semmelmann, "Neue Heimat Stalinstadt: Eine Collage aus Interviews," in *Befremdlich anders: Leben in der DDR*, ed. Evemarie Badstübner (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2000), 117-141. While this represents an important effort to document residents' memories of early life in Eisenhüttenstadt, the questions and the timeframe within which the interviews were conducted speak to residents' experiences under socialism as opposed to after it.

<sup>59</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12. See also a classic oral history of East Germans, Dorothee Wierling, *Geboren im Jahr Eins: Der Jahrgang 1949 in der DDR—Versuch einer kollektivbiographie* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2002).

important among these are scholars attentive to the ways in which men and women have experienced the postsocialist transformations differently. In Susan Gal and Gail Kligman's edited volume *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism*, the authors define gender as "the socially and culturally produced ideas about male-female difference, power, and inequality that structure the reproduction of these differences in the institutionalized practices of society."<sup>60</sup> This definition in and of itself demonstrates a sensitivity to the continuities of cultural ideas and representations about gender, how those representations have ramifications in the organization of institutions and politics, and how these in turn affect the lived experiences of individual women and men. This flexible definition allows for attention to a broad array of topics of contemporary and local relevance for individual residents in Eisenhüttenstadt, including employment status, availability of childcare, and issues of reproductive rights.

Finally, theories of civil society provide a framework for understanding the constraints upon residents' independent organizational activities during the GDR, as well as their efforts to construct civil society after 1989. I proceed from Jürgen Kocka's two-part working definition of civil society as both a specific "type of social action" as well as "a sphere of self-organization" separate from the state and independent from the private sphere.<sup>61</sup> By his own admission, however, "civil society understood this way is an ideal type," and for my purposes required modification in order to accommodate the threat of state repression individuals could experience in a dictatorship.<sup>62</sup> For my work, these theories of civil society proved the most helpful in

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<sup>60</sup> Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, eds., *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>61</sup> Jürgen Kocka, *Civil Society and Dictatorship in Modern Germany* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2010), 19.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* Throughout the course of the GDR, citizens' efforts to self-organize could vary in terms of the type of social action they undertook, as well as the degree of independence from the state. On one level, adolescents gathering to

understanding how and why Eisenhüttenstadt departed from now-popular narratives of widespread dissidence in East Germany during the revolutionary autumn. That Eisenhüttenstadt residents were not on the frontlines of political revolt in 1989 suggests perhaps that the absence of preexisting bourgeois institutions and cultures resulted in a corresponding lack of residual civil society during dictatorship. Attention to different levels of “self-organization” and “social action” are useful in determining the extent—if any—of civil society in Eisenhüttenstadt during the GDR, and they likewise provide a useful measure of the development of civil society after 1989.

## Sources

In order to complete this dissertation project, I used sets of sources located in several archives throughout Germany. First, I examined sources relating to the operation of *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* during the GDR, and the processes of its privatization and partial deindustrialization. This included internal documentation from the *Betriebsarchiv ArcelorMittal* in Eisenhüttenstadt. These company archives offered some interesting material regarding social and communal life within the steel mill during the GDR, including brigade diaries and postcards from factory-owned vacation homes. In the city archive in Eisenhüttenstadt (*Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt*), I examined three iterations of the factory newspaper, reflecting its transition from a state-owned enterprise, to a partially privatized asset of the *Treuhandanstalt*, to a fully privatized company owned by a series of European and global steel conglomerates. In order to understand the top-down perspective of the regime and their evolving plans for EKO and the city

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consume West German clothes or music could constitute an example of rudimentary self-organization. On an intermediate level, citizens might have used the institutional frameworks of the state, including meetings of their workers' brigade or other mandatory associational meetings, for purposes other than those directly intended by the state. Finally, many citizens succeeded in organizing themselves completely independently from the state, the most obvious instances being the various movements and dissident activities associated with the Protestant churches.

as a whole, I also interrogated official SED records from before and city government records from after unification, located in the SAPMO collections in the federal archives (*Bundesarchiv*) in Berlin and in the *Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt*.<sup>63</sup> Together these sources shed light on the structural changes in the economy that affected workers' lives in the transition from communism to capitalism.

Second, I investigated sources that help explain the physical transformation of Eisenhüttenstadt. Regional and local records from the *Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv* in Potsdam and the *Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt* contain city and housing planning initiatives, regional demographic records, and city council meeting records. In addition to contributing important local texture to my research, these reports reveal the decision-making processes around renovation and demolition plans in Eisenhüttenstadt after unification when outmigration had left many apartments vacant. These reports also addressed the importation of West German businesses and new commercial building projects in the city. These official records were complemented by local newspaper and magazine articles highlighting developments in the city throughout the scope of the study. In particular, the regional newspaper *Neuer Tag*, which changed its name to *Märkische Oderzeitung* in 1990, as well as the monthly city magazine, *Kulurspiegel*, which likewise changed its name to *Stadtspiegel*, provided letters to the editor, interviews with city officials, and feature articles. This group of sources illuminated the physical transformations of urban space, which ultimately had profound effects upon citizens' experiences of life in the city.

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<sup>63</sup> SAPMO stands for *Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR*, which holds materials from the political parties and mass organizations of the GDR.

Third, I conducted a total of twenty formal and informal open-ended interviews with residents who lived in Eisenhüttenstadt before, during, and after the events of 1989-90, as well as a couple who left during the 1990s. I attempted to select my interviewees based on their particular experiences relating to my central questions. For example, I interviewed individuals who were employed in EKO before 1989, those who lost their jobs in the process of privatization, and some who remained employed there. I also found individuals who were involved in city planning initiatives of the 1990s and 2000s. I also targeted some individuals who had roles in the emerging civil society networks since unification. Ultimately, using an informal so-called “snowball” method of making new contacts, I was able to interview residents of a range of genders, generations, classes, and political persuasions. While this technique did not give me a representative sample of residents in Eisenhüttenstadt, as a study of everyday life, these oral interviews are nonetheless an essential component of my dissertation project, proving essential personal experiences that I am able to integrate with archival sources in order to do justice to the manifold effects of reunification on citizens’ daily lives.

Finally, I consulted national, regional, and local archives to document the emergence of civil society and the transformations of civic and political organizations in Eisenhüttenstadt during and after unification. Records from emerging voluntary associations served to illuminate residents’ incipient efforts at constructing civil society. As much of this activity has moved onto the Internet, it offered the unique opportunity to use some online social media sources to complement archival sources. The city council meeting minutes from the *Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt* helped to situate these activities in the context of growing budget restraints. Furthermore, detailed transcriptions of certain city council meetings were invaluable in



understanding the transformation of the bloc parties in the early 1990s and the rapid processes of democratization on the local level.

### **Central Questions**

In order to understand Eisenhüttenstadt residents' experiences of the triple transition from a divided to a united Germany, from communism to liberal democracy, and from a command economy to competitive global capitalism, several main sets of questions have to be answered. These questions proceed chronologically from the founding of the steelworks and its settlement in 1950, attending thematically to the areas of everyday life in which Eisenhüttenstadt residents ultimately experienced the most acute effects of these transitions in their daily lives. Put differently, the answers to these questions necessarily entail considering ordinary Eisenhüttenstädter's experiences in the context of broader "top-down" political, economic, and social transformations. As such, these questions simultaneously lay the foundation for the progression of my analysis throughout the following chapters of the dissertation.

First, how is it that an integrated steel mill originally came to be built on the banks of the Oder River? What circumstances created the necessity for heavy industrialization in the region, and which other impulses contributed to East German leaders' decision-making process about the location of the steelworks and its accompanying settlement? It is also important to consider the process of constructing and operating *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* from the perspective of the construction workers and early steelworkers. What were early working and living conditions like at the factory? What might have drawn people to move to this previously rural region of eastern Brandenburg? And, finally, how and why did these daily rhythms of working and living in the settlement that became Stalinstadt, and later Eisenhüttenstadt, change over the course of the first couple decades of its existence?

Second, I seek to establish the contours of everyday life in Eisenhüttenstadt during the final two decades of state-socialism. What did an average day look like for a steelworker in the steel-city? How were other social services, cultural amenities, and leisure activities tied to the expansive infrastructure of the iron and steel combine? This period of “late-stage socialism” was characterized by General Secretary Honecker’s so-called “unity of economic and social policy,” which promised to deliver “real existing socialism” to citizens of the GDR. To what extent did the regime succeed in improving residents’ quality of life and achieve “real existing socialism” on the local level? These efforts affected residents’ experiences of urban living, consumption, and structured their free time, as well, and are thus an important baseline for establishing the scope of changes that would be heralded by the collapse of state socialism in the decade to come.

Third, how did the *Wende* unfold in Eisenhüttenstadt, specifically? How did Eisenhüttenstadt politicians, steelworkers, and ordinary residents respond to the growing political and social unrest of the summer and early autumn of 1989? Did they take to the streets in weekly Monday evening demonstrations to voice their growing frustrations like their fellow citizens in Leipzig, Berlin, or Dresden? If not, why was this the case, and how did they respond instead? This includes considerations of how they interacted with the increasingly opening press, as well as their participation in the GDR’s first free parliamentary elections. Although German unification was not a foregone conclusion, some economic and political leaders in Eisenhüttenstadt were beginning to make preparations for several possible futures, illustrating the contingency of the process on the local level.

Fourth, once the *Wende* had decisively and irrevocably reached Eisenhüttenstadt, how did factory managers and steelworkers, politicians and city administrators, and ordinary citizens respond? The first year of unification provides a helpful measure of assessing how now former

East Germans dealt with the most immediate implications of German unification. For example, what did the early stages of partial privatization of EKO look like for both the management and rank and file steelworkers? Moreover, what were the most pressing concerns for citizens and their elected representatives in the first true democratically constituted city council meetings in the first year of German unification?

Fifth, as the first decade of German unification wore on, and the scope of transformations became increasingly clear, which changes to the patterns of daily life did Eisenhüttenstadt residents experience the most acutely? Of course, the political and economic realities of being a part of the Federal Republic and the European Union created new uncertainties. For example, how did economic adjustment strategies in the newly privatized EKO Stahl AG affect ordinary steelworkers? How did the city administration attempt to address new challenges created by global market capitalism, such as unemployment or the erosion of state subsidized social services? But these transformations also allowed for positive changes in residents daily lives. To what extent did Eisenhüttenstadt residents take advantage of the ability to travel, pursue broader educational and profession opportunities, or act as consumers?

And, finally, what were the long-term legacies of state-socialism on the city? After the first decade of life in a united Germany drew to a close, which new challenges came to replace some of the earlier problems? How have city administrators and ordinary residents responded to these new sets of problems facing their city? What does it mean today for Eisenhüttenstädters to live and work in a socialist city in a decidedly postsocialist world? These questions in particular serve to push the temporal boundaries of historical analysis to consider some local implications of German unification that may not yet have been clear by the end of the 1990s. Their answers

have broader implications for understanding the transformation of industrial cities in other postcommunist states, as well as for other contexts of deindustrialization throughout the world.

## **Conclusion**

A local history of Eisenhüttenstadt residents' everyday experiences of life under dictatorship, during the *Wende*, and throughout the layered transformation processes of the postsocialist period reveals that German unification had long-term, ambivalent effects on the everyday lives of former East Germans. Attention to ordinary Eisenhüttenstädters' experiences of the crushing uncertainty of potentially becoming unemployed, the frustrations of a competitive job market, or the humiliation of long-term unemployment offer compelling evidence that the transition from communism to capitalism was not a unilateral success. Living in a market economy in a state that no longer subsidized rent, groceries, and social services, meant that some Eisenhüttenstadt residents found it impossible to bear the rising private costs of everyday necessities. These conditions further challenge triumphalist narratives of the victory of Western capitalism and democracy over communism. However, attention to other areas of everyday life tells quite a different story. Beginning in 1990, Eisenhüttenstadt residents were eager to purchase West German goods, buy new cars, build their own homes, and travel by train, plane, or automobile to destinations they never could have dreamed of during the GDR. This evidence counters the characterization of Germany unification as a story of overwhelming loss, an interpretation common among those with selective memories of state socialism or "nostalgia for the East" (*Ostalgie*).

During the GDR, Eisenhüttenstadt was an ideologically important, bustling industrial center that offered wide ranging cultural and social amenities and comfortable modern living to its residents. Today the city would more likely be characterized as a partially deindustrialized,

economically struggling, and demographically shrinking city. The reality is that the transition between these two versions of Eisenhüttenstadt was—and is—not by any means linear. Ultimately, it is only a local study privileging the perspectives of ordinary East Germans that can showcase how the tensions between the benefits of liberal democracy and a free market, on the one hand, and the dislocations of transitioning to a capitalist society, on the other hand, played themselves out in residents' daily lives. By bringing East Germans' everyday experiences to the center of my analysis, this dissertation offers a systematic account of the simultaneously disorienting and euphoric transformations of German unification, integration into an expanding Europe, and entry into a global economy.

## CHAPTER 1: “FIRST THERE WAS STEEL, THEN CAME THE CITY”: BUILDING THE FIRST SOCIALIST MODEL CITY OF THE GDR, 1950-1970

### Introduction

In the formerly socialist model city Eisenhüttenstadt, it remains a common refrain among residents to this day that “without steel, there never would have been a city.” Indeed, the haphazard collection of workers’ barracks that initially served as living quarters for the East Germans working to construct *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* (Steelworks Combine East, or EKO) would never had existed were it not for SED leaders’ determination to develop independent heavy industry in the fledgling German Democratic Republic. These early living and working conditions, however, bore little resemblance to the impressive city that began to emerge from the late-1950s onward.<sup>1</sup> Helga Otto, who moved to Stalinstadt in the 1950s, later recalled that “here there were apartments and everything was new. It was built so expansively and there was so much green. It really catered to everything.”<sup>2</sup> How, then, did the EKO residential town (*Wohnstadt*) go from this impermanent, ad hoc collection of workers’ barracks to the first socialist model city of the GDR, boasting not only the most advanced industries, but also the

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<sup>1</sup> A note on names: the housing settlement constructed alongside *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* initially did not have a name besides *die Wohnstadt*, or the residential town. In a quirk of history Stalin died about a week before the *Wohnstadt* was set to receive its name. As such, the city was named Stalinstadt, or Stalin’s City, until its name was changed to Eisenhüttenstadt in a second wave of destalinization in 1961. For the period between 1953 and 1961, I will refer to the city as Stalinstadt. In the period before 1953, I will refer to the city either as the *Wohnstadt* or settlement. And from 1961 on I will refer to the city as Eisenhüttenstadt. Mark Laszlo-Herbert’s 2016 dissertation attests to the broader phenomenon of naming cities, streets, squares, factories, neighborhoods, administrative units, and even mountain peaks after the Soviet leader both before and after his death. Some of these monikers retained their names until well into the 1980s. See Mark Laszlo-Herbert, “The Construction and Transformation of Socialist Space in the Planned Cities of Stalinstadt and Sztálinváros” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2016), 1-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Der Osten – Entdecke wo du lebst*, episode 189, “Eisenhüttenstadt – Stahl, Brot und Frieden,” directed by Michael Erler, aired 15 December 2015, on Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk.

most attractive living quarters in all of East Germany?

Drawing on a well-established body of primarily German-language scholarship, this chapter chronicles this transformation of *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* from its humble origins as an empty field (*grüne Wiese*) to an attractive new town and the first socialist model city of the GDR. The chapter highlights several different stages of the factory's and city's development, laying the groundwork for understanding how the steelworks came to be designated as the site of the regime's first socialist model city. The first section of the chapter briefly situates the founding and development of Eisenhüttenstadt within a broader twentieth-century impulse to construct planned cities. This impulse was evident not only in the Soviet Union, with the impressive and imposing Magnitogorsk built up throughout the 1930s, but in western European contexts as well.<sup>3</sup> This section also asks how the city that would come to be Eisenhüttenstadt resembled its "contemporaries"—socialist model cities in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, respectively—and the extent to which it departed from this postwar pattern.

Second, the chapter asks what decision-making factors were involved in selecting the "site of steel production" (*Stahlstandort*) for the revitalization of East German heavy industry. It was not, however, a forgone conclusion to construct a new steel manufacturing center from scratch. Why did the East German regime decide against simply expanding one of the preexisting steel mills to serve its economic needs in steel manufacturing? Moreover, how did the East German economic planners settle on this precise location for construction of the new iron and steel combine? Constrained by a convergence of economic and political circumstances, the choice to build EKO on the eastern-most edge of East German territory offered several practical,

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<sup>3</sup> See Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

ideological, and social advantages. It is important to understand this decision-making rationale on the part of GDR political and economic leaders, as Eisenhüttenstadt's location on the edge of a united Germany has had far-reaching consequences for the continued development of urban living in the formerly socialist model city.

Finally, the third section of this asks what were the working and living conditions for ordinary East Germans residing in the new steel town beginning in 1950, and how did these change over the course of the 1950s and 1960s? This section chronicles the fits and starts of the early years of EKO and its accompanying settlement, attesting to the deeper tensions in East German history between large economic imperatives, like the development of heavy industry, and the necessity of providing satisfactory living and working conditions for the citizens of the workers' and farmers' state (*Arbeiter-und-Bauern-Staat*). Given their hope that the steel industry in the GDR would become completely self-sufficient, this section also asks what steps SED leaders took to achieve these long-term goals and what circumstances constrained their abilities to achieve them, and most importantly, what effect this had on the everyday lives of Eisenhüttenstädters living and working in the settlement? Finally, what improvements in working conditions and living standards, as well as developments in social services and cultural amenities, were necessary in order for the settlement to be properly deserving of its status as an explicitly socialist model city?

Taken as a whole, beyond the narrative necessity of starting a story at the beginning, the questions answered in this chapter lay the groundwork for understanding, on the one hand, the unique features of Eisenhüttenstadt as a new town and symbolically important model city. On the other hand, they also establish a pattern that persists throughout the rest of the dissertation. Namely, that Eisenhüttenstadt and its residents were likewise very much connected to and



affected by broader economic and political trends, both domestically within the GDR and broader Soviet bloc, but also more broadly on an international, supranational, and ultimately global scale.

### **Constructing New Towns in Europe, 1900-1949**

The founding and development of the GDR's "first socialist city" fits into a broader history of industrialization and urban development throughout Europe and beyond. Since the Industrial Revolution, new towns had been constructed to accommodate workers and miners responsible for extracting the natural resources that fueled even further industrial development. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, these new towns were built on even larger scales to serve the growing urban populations, or "to meet new demands for leisure and health, from spa towns to seaside resorts."<sup>4</sup> From the late nineteenth century European urban planners began to conceptualize and experiment with intentional, contained living communities.<sup>5</sup> By the interwar period, new towns were growing increasingly prevalent all throughout Europe, and in other parts of the world as well. This included, to name just a few, garden city communities in the United Kingdom, Dutch planned industrial and agricultural towns, new settlements that would achieve new town status by the late 1950s in Finland, newly independent Czechoslovak and Polish new towns, new towns in the Zionist settlements in Palestine, as well as a series of Soviet new towns.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Helen Meller and Heleni Porfyriou, eds., *Planting New Towns in Europe in the Interwar Years: Experiments and Dreams for Future Societies* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), xi.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the garden city movement initiated in 1898 in the United Kingdom envisioned contained communities with a precise balance of residential living, agriculture, and industry, all surrounded by so-called "greenbelts" that connected the communities to others of their kind. See Stanley Buder, *Visionaries and Planners: The Garden City Movement and the Modern Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Standish Meacham, *Regaining Paradise: Englishness and the Early Garden City Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). For a broader intellectual history of the resurgence of the new town movement in the twentieth century, see Rosemary Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia: An Intellectual History of the New Town Movement* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> See the individual chapters in Meller and Porfyriou's edited volume *Planting New Towns in Europe in the Interwar Years*.

After World War II this movement to construct new towns expanded even further. In the words of historian Rosemary Wakeman, “throughout Europe and the United States and beyond, in the Middle East, Australia, and Asia, New Towns were a campaign to construct—literally—a completely new world.”<sup>7</sup> In this postwar landscape, city and urban planners in Europe had a new constellation of challenges with which to reckon. First, there was the issue of rebuilding in the wake of occupation and material devastation, depending on the extent of physical destruction of residential, industrial, and agricultural areas in each national context. Second, the formal zones of occupation or increasingly clearly delineated “spheres of influence” into which European countries fell likewise provided some new guidelines or constraints as to the shape that urban planning efforts took. For the Soviet Union, or for the countries within the Soviet sphere of influence, their postwar planning and rebuilding efforts were influenced by principles of socialist architecture and design that had been developing since the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> As the ideological divisions of the Cold War deepened and state socialist republics were established throughout the late-1940s, these new regimes dedicated themselves to rebuilding their economies and societies in an explicitly socialist manner and a corresponding wave of socialist new towns were born.

One common feature among the wave of socialist new towns constructed after the Second World War was their role in supporting and promoting heavy industrialization in their respective republics. As such, politicians and urban planners carefully considered the most strategic locations to build these new steel factories and cities. They accounted for proximity to raw materials, such as ore and coke (in the case of steel production), as well as how easily the

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<sup>7</sup> Rosemary Wakeman, “Was There an Ideal Socialist City? Socialist New Towns as Modern Dreamscapes,” in *Transnationalism and the German City*, ed. Jeffrey M. Diefendorf and Janet Ward (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 105.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Ferry Vermeer, “Chapter Three: Hannes Meyer’s New Towns in the USSR,” in *Planting New Towns in Europe in the Interwar Years: Experiments and Dreams for Future Societies*, ed. Helen Meller and Heleni Porfyriou (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 53-88.

materials and finished products could be transported.<sup>9</sup> In some cases, planners were able to modify existing prewar plans, while in other cases they started from scratch. But within five years of the end of the war, construction on this wave of socialist towns that promised a fresh start for the fledgling state socialist republics was already well underway. In 1949 Nowa Huta was founded outside of Krakow in close proximity to new steel plants.<sup>10</sup> Construction on the largest Hungarian new town, Sztálinváros (later Dunaújváros), began in 1946 adjacent to new steel plants.<sup>11</sup> In Czechoslovakia the prewar plans for the Kunčice steel plant were never completed. Instead they were incorporated into the Vítkovice ironworks and nationalized in 1946.<sup>12</sup> In the beginning of the 1950s, the center of heavy industry in Brasov, Romania, was also expanded and underwent socialist rebranding, receiving the name Orasul Stalin.<sup>13</sup> Stalinstadt, too, was of course planned in conjunction with the new iron and steel combines of EKO. In all these cases there was a close interdependency of the steel mills and their respective cities—as the factories developed and expanded, the cities grew alongside them.

As intentionally socialist cities, the steel mills and planned cities of East Germany, Poland,

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<sup>9</sup> In one of her essays, Dagmara Jajeśniak-Quast notes the broader pattern of socialist cities developing in close conjunction with projects of heavy industrialization. Eisenhüttenstadt, Kraków Nowa Huta, and Ostrava Kunčice, in particular, were “closely dependent on their respective large firm industries” and “each of them was originally developed as the living settlement for the workers who built up and were employed in these large firms.” Of course, the location of raw material deposits was likewise taken into consideration. Dagmara Jajeśniak-Quast, “Ein lokaler ‘Rat für gegenseitige Wirtschaftshilfe’: Eisenhüttenstadt, Kraków Nowa Huta, and Ostrava Kunčice,” in *Sozialistische Städte zwischen Herrschaft und Selbstbehauptung: Kommunalpolitik, Stadtplanung und Alltag in der DDR*, ed. Chrisoph Bernhardt and Heinz Reif (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2009), 95-114.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Katherine Lebow, *Unfinished Utopia: Nowa Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society, 1949-56* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Kinga Poznaniak, *Nowa Huta: Generations of Change in a Model Socialist Town* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Pascaline Gaborit, *European New Towns: Images, Identities, Future Perspectives* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2010), 33. See also Sándor Horváth, *Stalinism Reloaded: Everyday Life in Stalin-City Hungary*, trans. Thomas Cooper (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Dagmara Jajeśniak-Quast, “In the Shadow of the Factory: Steel Towns in Postwar Eastern Europe,” in *Urban Machinery: Inside Modern European Cities*, ed. Mikael Hård and Thomas J. Misa (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 193-194.

<sup>13</sup> Lazlo-Herbert, “The Construction and Transformation of Socialist Space,” 16-17.

Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, the Soviet Union, and beyond, were meant to demonstrate the ideological and practical superiority of socialism as means of organizing the economy and society compared to the Western capitalist alternative.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, largescale state-directed investments like EKO were explicitly labeled “new steel mills” in order to designate them as an antithesis to the “old” capitalist factories, like the Maxhütte in Thuringia.<sup>15</sup> Despite this rhetorical distancing, architects and urban planners in the GDR, along with their counterparts in other state socialist republics, drew upon urban planning and design traditions that long predated the existence of their respective countries.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, they often grounded their planning in classicist urban design, which was a design vocabulary that resonated in eastern and western Europe alike.<sup>17</sup> Put short, while Stalinstadt and other new towns behind the Iron Curtain explicitly tried to distance themselves from their capitalist precursors, their development must nevertheless be understood in a broader geographic and temporal context.

In the case of Stalinstadt, one additional factor was important in deciding the location of the new iron and steel combine. In keeping with the Sixteen Principles of Urban Development

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<sup>14</sup> It should be mentioned that there were, of course, socialist-style planning efforts in western Europe as well, predating the post-1945 expansion of these planned cities in the eastern and central European context. Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Étienne Cabet were among those western European thinkers of the mid-nineteenth century who envisioned that urban planning should be informed by intentional, socialist (or utopian) design. As Matěj Spurný and others have clarified, in the postwar period central and eastern European planners benefited from the availability of resources, and sufficient and appropriate land in order to realize their socialist planning designs. See *Making the Most of Tomorrow: A Laboratory of Socialist Modernity in Czechoslovakia*, trans. Derek and Marzia Paton (Charles University in Prague: Karolinum Press, 2019). See also Kimberly Elman Zarecor, “What Was So Socialist about the Socialist City? Second World Urbanity in Europe,” *Journal of Urban History* 44, no. 1 (2018): 95-117.

<sup>15</sup> Jajeśniak-Quast, “In the Shadow of the Factory,” 190.

<sup>16</sup> Several scholars have successfully demonstrated the similarities between new towns in both eastern and western Europe. Rosemary Wakeman, for example, traces the careers of the urban planners and architects responsible for designing East Germany’s four socialist model cities in order to show that they drew upon both socialist and “capitalist” impulses. See Rosemary Wakeman, “Was There an Ideal Socialist City? Socialist New Towns as Modern Dreamscapes,” in *Transnationalism and the German City*, ed. Jeffrey M. Diefendorf and Janet Ward (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 105-124; see also Dagmara Jajeśniak-Quast, “In the Shadow of the Factory,” 187-210.

<sup>17</sup> Rosemary Wakeman, “Was There an Ideal Socialist City?” 109.

(*die sechzehn Grundsätze des Städtebaus*), which guided urban planning initiatives in the GDR from 1950 to 1955, the steel mill and *Wohnstadt* were intentionally built in a more rural region of the new regime.<sup>18</sup> This was intended to ameliorate some of the differences and inequalities of the countryside compared to more urban areas, a discrepancy that was a hallmark of capitalism. Brandenburg, in particular, was much less economically developed than other regions of the fledgling GDR. As will be discussed at more length in the next section, this represented another mark in favor of the Oder-Spree region in the minds of East German leaders, who saw many concrete advantages to developing in an underdeveloped region.<sup>19</sup>

While some comparative scholarship on the origins of these respective socialist new towns notes this peculiarity of Stalinstadt, scholars have yet to systematically consider the long-term implications of this decision for Eisenhüttenstadt and its residents, especially after Germany unification. Unlike Nowa Huta, Kunčice, and Orasul Stalin, which were built or expanded upon in close proximity to much larger neighboring cities, Stalinstadt and its Hungarian counterpart, Sztálinváros, were constructed in more rural, underdeveloped regions. In the process of postsocialist and postcommunist transition throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the lack of proximity to a larger metropolitan area would be one factor in the population shrinkage experienced by these cities in comparison to their Czech and Polish counterparts. While the existing comparative approaches give us an excellent idea for how the planning and construction of these socialist model cities compare to each other, their inattention to the period after 1989-90

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<sup>18</sup> For a full reproduction of the Sixteen Principles of Urban Development, see Ruth May, *Planstadt Stalinstadt. Ein Grundriß in der frühen DDR – aufgesucht in Eisenhüttenstadt*. Dortmund: Beiträge zur Raumplanung, no. 92 (Dortmund: Institut für Raumplanung Universität Dortmund Fakultät Raumplanung, 1999), 98-99.

<sup>19</sup> Andreas Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt: Wandel einer industriellen Gründungsstadt in fünfzig Jahren* (Potsdam: Brandenburgische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2000), 48.

represents one avenue for further comparative research.<sup>20</sup>

### **Selecting the *Stahlstandort*:<sup>21</sup> Investment Politics of the Early GDR, 1945-1950**

The GDR faced some specific challenges that greatly impacted its recovery in the aftermath of the material and economic devastation of the Second World War. The division of the country, first into various occupations zones, and by 1949 into the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and GDR respectively, disrupted the transregional collaboration upon which German industry had been built. The early development of the German industrial economy had necessitated cooperation between the western and central parts of Germany, making use of the various regional strengths of the country. Since the 1880s the German economy had developed rapidly, carried in large part by the coal and steel industry. By the eve of the First World War, Germany's steel production was some 17.6 million tons per year—greater than the output of Great Britain, France, and Russia combined.<sup>22</sup> By the beginning of the Second World War, the economic and industrial production capabilities of the German Reich had developed a distinct regional specialization. The western region of the Reich, including the convergence of the lower Rhine and Ruhr rivers, boasted rich coal deposits around which iron and steel production facilities had been built. The central German region did not have such immediately accessible raw material deposits, limiting their independent iron and steel production capabilities. But a well-developed network of streets, canals, and railroads had facilitated the exchange of goods between these regions throughout the course of both wars and up until the division of Germany

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<sup>20</sup> Both Dagmar Jajeśniak-Quast and Mark Laszlo-Herbert undertake excellent comparative studies of several socialist model cities in the early years of their construction and operation. Their analyses, however, do not move much past the 1950s, and therefore cannot answer the central question of how postsocialist and postcommunist transition affected these cities and communities.

<sup>21</sup> The English version of this alliterative subtitle reads “Selecting the Site of Steel Production.”

<sup>22</sup> Schmidt and Nicolaus, *Einblicke*, 14.

into occupation zones.<sup>23</sup>

An understanding of the complicated considerations facing the Soviet Occupation Zone (*Sowjetische Besatzungszone*, or SBZ) and later GDR in their postwar plans for industrial development requires first a brief diversion into the process of manufacturing steel. On a basic level, the raw materials to make steel are crude iron ore and coal. That said, both must be transformed into processed materials for use in steel production. Iron ore is extracted from taconite and other sedimentary rocks through mining, separated through use of powerful magnets, and then melted into small pellets to subsequently be turned into iron. Coal, in turn must be crushed, sealed, and processed into solid carbon fuel, or coke, in order to power the blast furnaces. Heating the iron ore pellets to extreme levels of heat—up to 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit—in a blast furnace ultimately turns them into molten iron, which is poured into containers and transported to another part of the factory where it is turned into steel. This process begins by dumping steel scraps into the basic oxygen furnace and then adding the molten iron. Hot, purified oxygen is then blown into the furnace at supersonic speeds, removing impurities (including the by-product steel slag) and turning the molten iron into molten steel. This molten steel is then typically poured into caster molds in order to shape the steel into slabs as it cools. These slabs can then be transported by rail elsewhere, either within in the factory complex or to another processing facility. For example, a hot rolling mill reheats the steel to 2,400 degrees Fahrenheit and runs it through roughing stands in order to flatten and lengthen the slabs, ultimately making them thin enough to roll into coils once they are cooled. A cold-rolling mill would be able to make these steel coils even thinner. Steel processed in these ways can then be

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<sup>23</sup> Karl Eckart. *Die Eisen- und Stahlindustrie in den Beiden Deutschen Staaten* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH, 1988), 16.

either further processed—through coating, tinning, annealing, or tempering—or could be used already to support various industrial manufacturing projects needed, for instance, to rebuild after the material devastation of the Second World War.<sup>24</sup>

With the division of Germany in the postwar settlement, the West retained the lower Rhine and Ruhr areas and the heart of Germany's heavy industry, including access to the raw materials deposits and most of the formerly united country's iron and coal production capabilities. While the East inherited a relative abundance of machine, munitions, and vehicle manufacturing factories, like the automobile construction centers in Saxony, the vast majority of iron and coal production facilities fell in the British and American occupation zones.<sup>25</sup> Alternatively, the Soviet Occupation Zone (SBZ) controlled a mere 3.0 percent of German stone coal, 0.9 percent of coke, 1.6 percent of raw iron, and 7.6 percent of raw steel production capacity. Of 124 blast furnaces located in all of Germany, only four were located in the SBZ.<sup>26</sup> In other words, without the technological capacity to process iron ore and coke into molten iron—a crucial step in the steel production process—the SBZ's ability to process steel or produce manufactured goods did them little good. Put short, the economy of SBZ was trapped in a vicious cycle. In order to develop their own metallurgic capacities, their existing heavy machinery capabilities could not help, and they were forced to rely on inner-German trade for raw materials such as coal, iron, and steel.<sup>27</sup>

The implications of the uneven development and specialization of the German steel

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<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed and comprehensive overview of the steel production process see Clifford S. Russell and William J. Vaughan, "An Overview of Steel Technology," in *Steel Production: Processes, Products, and Residuals* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 21-33.

<sup>25</sup> See Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Schmidt and Nicolaus, *Einblicke.*, 42.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.



industry for the economic reconstruction of the SBZ were compounded by the Soviet Union's policy of demanding harsh reparations and compensation for the destruction they endured during the Second World War. These came in the form of entire factories, which the Soviets dismantled and transported east, and later in the form of reparations in kind.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to the Western Allies, whose policies in the West encouraged the reconstruction and further development of industrial centers in the Lower Rhine and Ruhr, the Soviet Union's policy had harsh consequences for the economic recovery of the SBZ and later GDR. Their policy further crippled the industrial capacity of East Germany, reducing their metallurgic production capacity alone by 85 percent of prewar levels.<sup>29</sup>

Escalating political tensions between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union also exacerbated the challenge of economic reconstruction. After the currency reform of the western occupation zones in June 1948, to which the Soviet Zone had not agreed, inter-German trade was a decreasingly viable option for propping up East German manufacturing capabilities.<sup>30</sup> As such, the fledgling regime of the GDR turned its attention and energies toward building up a Soviet-style production model that would emphasize and prioritize the development of an independent steel industry.<sup>31</sup> The construction of a completely new iron and steel production facility was a determination of the Third Party Congress of the SED in 1950 and would come to be the most important project of the first Five Year Plan (1951-1955). But where they would construct this

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<sup>28</sup> Andreas Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt: Wandel einer industriellen Gründungsstadt in fünfzig Jahren* (Potsdam: Brandenburgische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2000), 22-23. For the challenges facing the Soviets in exacting reparations from their occupation zone—a government that they intended to further support—see also Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 178-189.

<sup>29</sup> Schmidt and Nicolaus, *Einblicke*, 42.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 44. This currency reform served in part as the catalyst for the famed Berlin Blockade, which lasted from June 1948 to May 1949.

<sup>31</sup> Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt*, 18. An independent steel industry was particularly important, because not all socialist republics could rely on the USSR for their steel needs; Richter, et al., 19.

new metallurgic center was not a foregone conclusion.

The earliest iteration of the plan to build a completely new iron and steel combine dates back to 1948 when future Industry Minister, Fritz Selbmann, served as Head Office of the German Economic Commission. Initially, the regime considered adding onto a rolling mill already in operation, in other words, building the facilities that could make raw steel in close proximity to the existing steel mills that could process the raw steel into steel plates. The rolling mills in Brandenburg-an-der-Havel and Hennigsdorf could both manufacture heavy, medium, and fine steel plates.<sup>32</sup> However, in addition to having sustained extensive damage during the course of the Second World War, neither of these locations had enough steel scrap reserves to serve as the foundation of the East German steel industry. One alternative, which was to use the open-hearth furnaces at the Maxhütte in Unterwellenborn, also did not come to fruition because of the reduced capacity of the blast furnaces there and the lack of sufficient raw materials. These constraints made it clear to planners at the time that the existing iron ore and coal resources in the SBZ were insufficient to support an entirely independent steel industry.<sup>33</sup>

With this in mind, in the summer of 1949, Selbmann and other planners secured funds to build a new blast furnace in Calbe in order to increase production of raw iron that could then be used at the rolling mills that were still in operation throughout the SBZ. The occupying powers had taken over a research project on raw iron production at the Maxhütte in Unterwellenborn, which should have helped the regime achieve its goal of self-sufficiency by using primarily brown coal in order to make the coke needed to power the blast furnaces. While the new low

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<sup>32</sup> The rolling mill in Brandenburg could make heavy and medium plates (*Grobbleche* and *Mittelbleche*), and the rolling mill in Hennigsdorf could make fine plates in addition to heavy and medium ones (*Feinbleche*). Eckart, *Die Eisen- und Stahlindustrie in den Beiden Deutschen Staaten*, 29.

<sup>33</sup> Axel Gayko, *Investitions- und Standortpolitik der DDR an der Oder-Neiße-Grenze, 1950-1970* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), 60.

shaft furnace (*Niederschachtofen*) that would open in Calbe in 1950 had sufficient fuel to heat their blast furnaces, they could not produce sufficient raw iron due to a lack of iron ore. As such, at their meeting on August 12, 1949, with other options seemingly exhausted, SBZ industrial planners first mentioned the need for an additional steel works to produce raw steel, using West German or Czech coal and Swedish iron ore.<sup>34</sup>

By the Third Party Congress in July 1950, the regime confirmed the need for a new steel works, but had yet to decide where precisely this new industrial center would be built. About three months after the first discussions about the location, on November 14, 1950, the SED made its final decision on where to build the new iron and steel combine.<sup>35</sup> Based on several structural, economic, and political factors, they ultimately chose the large, undeveloped area along the Oder river, between the small villages of Fürstenberg and Schönfließ in the eastern portion of Brandenburg. The small village of Fürstenberg was known as the “little town of skippers, basket makers and glass blowers,” and Schönfließ’s economy was dominated by agricultural production, and later lignite mining.<sup>36</sup> Prior to the construction of *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost*, the industry in the region was limited, dominated by small shipyards and the glass factory (*Glasshütte*) in Fürstenberg, which operated up until the Second World War. These small enterprises with lagging technology could not keep up with advancements in other regions, making this one of the most economically underdeveloped regions in all of Germany.

Structurally, the location of Fürstenberg and Schönfließ on the periphery of East Germany was an advantage, for it made possible the transportation of raw materials, such as ore and coke, from Poland and the Soviet Union along the preexisting system of canals connecting the Oder

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>35</sup> See timeline in Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

and Spree rivers. Although there were no deposits of iron ore or coal in close proximity to Fürstenberg and Schönfließ, the iron ore and coke needed for various stages of the steel production cycle could be relatively easily procured by the canal system.<sup>37</sup> The area also boasted an already established network of railroad tracks, which would facilitate transport of chalk, limestone, and other raw materials from central Germany.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, improving the economically background region through economic development was an added benefit in keeping with the aforementioned Sixteen Principles of Urban Development. Although by 1950 the precise plans for further development of the steel mill were still unclear, the location along the Oder River would provide plenty of opportunity for expansion.

Politically, the choice of this location was also inflected by burgeoning Cold War politics. In July 1950 the GDR officially recognized the Oder-Neiße “border of peace” (*Oder-Neiße-Friedensgrenze*) as the border between the GDR and what would become the Republic of Poland.<sup>39</sup> This move was intended as a symbolic gesture of friendship and trust between the socialist “brother countries” (*Brüderländer*). Moreover, the placement of the factory in the eastern-most parts of the GDR’s territory indicated a shift away from ties to the old German industrial center in the Ruhr and Lower Rhine. Instead, the new steel combine was oriented toward the Soviet Union, from whom the East German regime would receive material and technical support, including the most advanced technologies and experienced advisors.<sup>40</sup>

Building in an undeveloped area, as opposed to expanding one of the existing villages of

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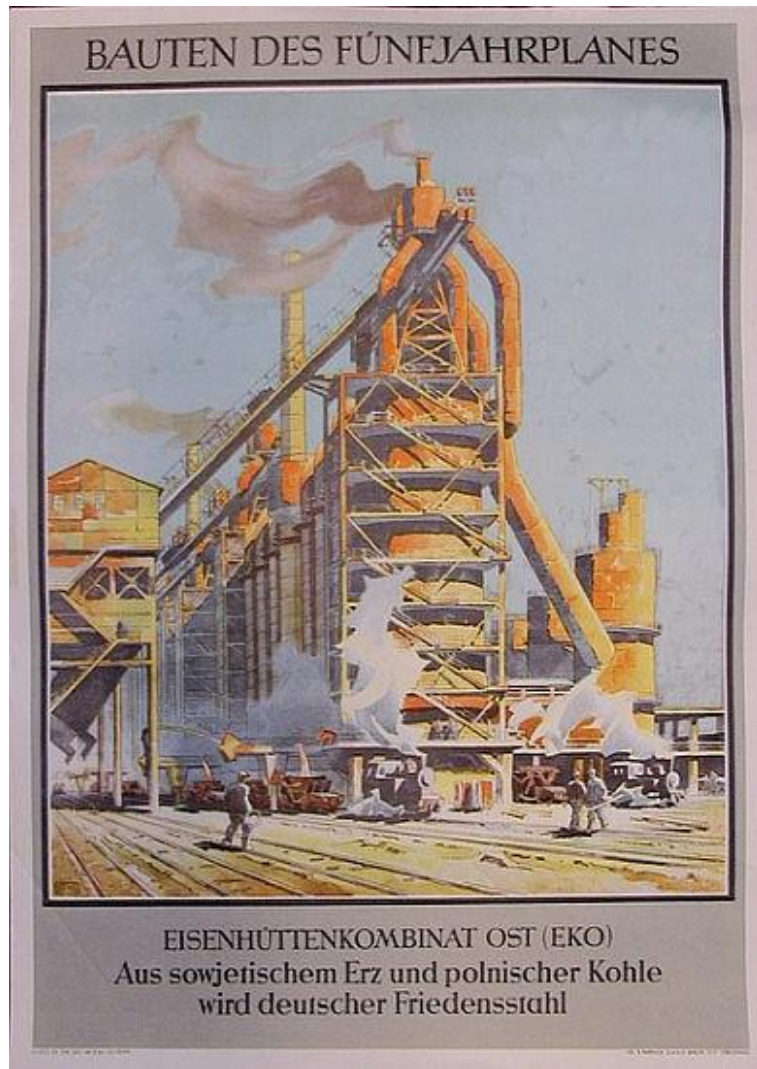
<sup>37</sup> Schmidt and Nicolaus, *Einblicke*, 46.

<sup>38</sup> Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt*, 20.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. It was not until the Constitution of 1952 that the name became the Polish People’s Republic. See also May, *Planstadt Stalinstadt*, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt*, 21.

Fürstenberg or Schönfließ, was likewise a calculated political decision. Constructing a completely new settlement was intended to sever any ties to a preexisting bourgeois milieu that might have otherwise conflicted with the political and ideological aims of the new regime. The empty, green meadow (*grüne Wiese*) that dominated the landscape between the two villages provided an ideologically blank slate, so to speak, for creating new citizens according to a socialist *Menschenbild* (idea of man).<sup>41</sup>



**Figure 1.1** Poster depicting the central construction project of the GDR's first Five Year Plan. The caption under *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* reads "From Soviet ore and Polish coal German 'peace steel' will be made." (Image credit: Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Axel Thünker / Patrick Marc Schwarz)

This choice, however, to build in a relatively underdeveloped and unpeopled region of the new GDR did exacerbate a different problem for the important industrial undertaking. In the short term, the regime was faced with the challenge of attracting sufficient workers to support the rapid construction of a functioning steel mill. The unexpected answer to this problem would come as a result of the shifting map of European borders. Since 1944 many Germans living in

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

West and East Prussia or Silesia had been forced to leave their homes and flee west.<sup>42</sup> The first wave of refugees arrived in Fürstenberg in the beginning of February 1945, fleeing the advance of the Red Army, and another wave came in May of 1945 after the capitulation of the Wehrmacht.<sup>43</sup> Despite the victorious Allies' decision to recognize the Oder-Neiße line as the western border of Poland, which simultaneously legalized the flight and expulsion of the millions of Germans from east central Europe, many of these refugees elected to remain along the Polish border where they could still "see" their homes and in the hopes that they would someday be able to return.<sup>44</sup> The employment opportunities offered by the construction of *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* along the Oder River would ultimately serve as a means to integrate and unite the many evacuees and settlers from the former eastern territories.<sup>45</sup>

All told, the choice to build the steelworks and settlement that would eventually become Eisenhüttenstadt in the underdeveloped Oder-Spree region in the eastern part of Brandenburg emerged out of the specific set of postwar circumstances that the Soviet Occupation Zone and later GDR confronted. Understanding the decision to build in a seemingly peripheral and out of the way location on the border with Poland actually served the regime's short- and long-term economic and geopolitical goals. That said, as the next section demonstrates, the process by which the new steelworks came to be the center of the GDR's steel industry was not always straight-forward, and despite the accompanying settlement's eventual status a planned socialist city, its development likewise did not always go according to plan.

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<sup>42</sup> For an overview of refugees in the SBZ and later GDR see Alexander von Plato and Wolfgang Meinicke, *Alte Heimat—neue Zeit: Flüchtlinge, Umgesiedelte, Vertriebene in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone und in der DDR* (Berlin: Verlags-Anstalt Union, 1991).

<sup>43</sup> Schmidt and Nicolaus, *Einblicke*, 32.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt*, 20.

## **Building the Socialist Model City: Working and Living Conditions in Eisenhüttenstadt, 1950-1970**

August 18, 1950, marked the official beginning of construction on *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost*. These first years of building and operation were characterized by an overarching uncertainty in the development plans, as well as a corresponding spontaneity in the measures used to achieve initial construction goals. Even a year after ground was broken, and only a month before the first blast furnace was set to begin operations in the summer of 1951, there was still a lack of clarity about the long-term vision for EKO, compounded by short-term challenges. These included, to name a few, severe difficulties in the transportation of raw materials, a shortage of qualified workers, and by uncertainty regarding urban development plans in the accompanying settlement.<sup>46</sup> It took until the fall of 1951 for SED and economic officials to officially decide on the long-term goal of expanding EKO to close the metallurgic production cycle.<sup>47</sup> In other words, East German economic and political leaders envisioned that EKO would ultimately have the ability to complete all steps in the production of steel, from creating raw steel (which the blast furnaces assured it could already do), to achieving the various levels of rolling and processing necessary for more sophisticated manufacturing needs.

These uncertainties and the contingent nature of planning stemmed from the regime-wide pressure to build up heavy industry as quickly as possible. During this time, large-scale investments (*Großinvestitionen*) like EKO played an economically and ideologically important role. EKO was one of 54 firms in the raw materials and heavy machinery industry that the SED designated as a priority firm (*Schwerpunktbetrieb*).<sup>48</sup> But even among priority firms, EKO was

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 22.

particularly privileged, meaning that “the investment sums for construction as well as the health, social, and cultural offerings were double or triple that of other priority firms.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, from very shortly after their initial founding EKO and its accompanying settlement became privileged sites to work and live. That said, working conditions in the construction site of EKO or in the early blast furnaces, not to mention living conditions in the initial settlement, were not without their challenges.

Among the most pressing challenges of regulating early working conditions at EKO had to do with both controlling workers’ behavior and ensuring their safety. The majority of workers on the initial construction site of EKO were unskilled workers, above all young people, including men and women who could not find any work in their own careers. There were also farmers and laborers, and many refugees.<sup>50</sup> Shift leaders and foremen were left to craft disciplined, industrial workers from this diversity of backgrounds and skillsets. Management often had to deal with the mysterious disappearance of tools and building materials from construction sites, or worry about damage to construction materials.<sup>51</sup> One public safety supervisory committee informed the SED’s Central Committee in August 1952 about its frustrating correspondence with the local construction union at EKO. “Despite several notices, we have determined once again that the handling of wood and other construction materials remains haphazard. It must somehow be possible to properly convey to the brigadiers, foremen, and shift leaders that there is a more delicate way of handling these very valuable raw materials.”<sup>52</sup>

Beyond damaging materials, at other times workers’ behavior could even create unsafe

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> May, *Planstadt Stalinstadt*, 56 and 62.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>52</sup> SAPMO-BAarch, DC 1/1770, “Volkskontrollausschuss Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost,” 21 August 1952, 1.



working conditions. For example, the SED-led brigades often ran campaigns against consuming alcohol on shift, attempting to prevent the sale of wine and schnapps on construction site premises in the hopes that this would reduce rowdy and dangerous behavior.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, dangerous working conditions often prevailed despite efforts to manage behavior of workers. In May 1951, a subcommittee on workers' safety had been tasked with investigating working conditions in EKO. In the report delivered to the Central Committee in March of the following year, the subcommittee summarized that during the visit they "determined the uncleanliness of the construction site and track system as well as the insufficient safety measures and controls for the technical systems at the construction site."<sup>54</sup> The rest of the report detailed the months-long back and forth between the Central Committee and various local construction enterprises, including their efforts to improve lighting in the construction site, as well as to make sure that a new occupational safety engineer was on staff to begin making improvements.<sup>55</sup> In short, conditions on the ground at the EKO construction site could be alternatively dangerous for workers, and frustrating for the management.

This rapid pace of development in heavy industry also came at the expense of advancements in other areas of everyday life. In the case of EKO and its accompanying settlement, this meant that expanding social and cultural offerings was by and large overlooked despite the fact that the population of workers that was growing just as rapidly. While there had been only 200 workers for the symbolic beginning of construction in August 1950, by June 1951 there were 8,200 workers employed in EKO. By 1952 EKO there was a combined total of 13,000

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<sup>53</sup> May, *Planstadt Stalinstadt*, 65-66.

<sup>54</sup> SAPMO-BAarch, DC 1/1770, "Die wichtigsten Feststellungen auf dem Gebiet des Arbeitsschutzes im Hüttenkombinat Ost, Fürstenberg/O," 13 March 1952, 1.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

people working EKO or living in the *Wohnstadt*.<sup>56</sup> Given this rapid increase in population, the regime aimed to outfit these workers and their families with adequate housing as fast as possible. Despite completion of the first apartment complexes in September 1951, which could house 1,900 residents, a simple “roof over one’s head” (*Dach über den Kopf*) was the reality that prevailed for the majority of *Wohnstadt* residents.<sup>57</sup> Most workers still lived in the ad hoc shanty town of temporary housing (*Barackenstadt*), at least until further apartment complexes were completed as the 1950s wore on.<sup>58</sup>

The regime ostensibly did make some early efforts to address these oversights. In October 1951 a government resolution (*Regierungsbeschluss*) indicated that the most important cultural, social, and public health infrastructural concerns should be prioritized, including nurseries and daycares, youth centers, apartments for trainees and single workers, clinics, and movie theaters and cultural centers. However, what this actually looked like in EKO was a preference for social facilities like showers and locker rooms, cafeterias and kitchens, while any cultural offerings could be satisfied only through workers’ independent initiatives.<sup>59</sup> This, coupled with continued difficulties in securing adequate housing and provisions for workers, created poor living conditions that actively undermined the project truly “building socialism” in the new town.<sup>60</sup>

This contradiction between inadequate material circumstances and the ideological rhetoric of the SED became even more acute after the second Party Conference of the SED held in July 1952, at which General Secretary Walter Ulbricht famously articulated the plan to “build

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<sup>56</sup> Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt*, 27.

<sup>57</sup> Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt*, 47.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, 37.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39.

socialism” in the GDR.<sup>61</sup> Party officials also declared the *Wohnstadt* at EKO a model project (*Musterprojekt*) of “building socialism” in the GDR.<sup>62</sup> Even among the workers laboring to build up socialism in the regime’s first model city, material circumstances often fell short of expectations. Historian Jochen Czerny has argued that these discrepancies stem from the fact that the initial goal in the construction of EKO and its settlement did not have anything to do with building socialism. Rather, the steel mill was intended to solve the regime’s steel problem.<sup>63</sup> In other words, expectations about working and living conditions in a socialist model city (*Musterstadt*) were initially subordinate to the goal of producing steel as quickly as possible. It was only beginning in the latter half of 1953 that Ulbricht and other SED functionaries become increasingly concerned that conditions in EKO and its settlement did not accurately represent their visions for what a model socialist city should look like.<sup>64</sup> That said, in the beginning of 1953 the regime remained committed to prioritizing the economic goals of “building socialism” by massively increasing construction quotas in order to keep up with production goals for the first Five-Year-Plan.<sup>65</sup> While the acquisition of the name *Stalinstadt* on May 7, 1953—just four days after Stalin’s death—brought some additional privileges to the already privileged city, poor

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<sup>61</sup> See Klaus Schroeder, “Der Aufbau des Sozialismus,” in *Der SED-Staat: Geschichte und Strukturen der DDR, 1949-1990* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2013), 110-136.

<sup>62</sup> Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt*, 48-49.

<sup>63</sup> May, *Planstadt Stalinstadt*, 68. See also Jochen Czerny, “Stalinstadt – Erste sozialistische Stadt Deutschlands,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung: BzG* 1/38 (1996): 31-43.

<sup>64</sup> A commission including SED General Secretary Walter Ulbricht visited EKO and its settlement on January 18, 1952. While they were primarily interested in challenges in the factory, where 90 percent of the workers laboring were as of yet not Party members (*parteilos*), they also had social political (*sozialpolitisch*) concerns. On his visit to the settlement, Ulbricht was concerned with raising the height of the ceilings of the various floors in the apartments, and he criticized the façades of the apartment complexes. In his mind, the façades should set a high example for the luxury of living in a socialist city by having balconies, loggia, bay windows, and attractive entablature. For details on this visit and subsequent changes made to building style see May, *Planstadt Stalinstadt* 176-183.

<sup>65</sup> Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt*, 57.

living conditions and harsh working conditions persisted.<sup>66</sup>

These unsatisfactory living and working conditions affected workers more broadly throughout the fledgling state, and helped to provide catalysts for the events of the June 17, 1953, uprisings that swept the entire GDR.<sup>67</sup> In Stalinstadt, witnesses recall how “construction workers laid down their work” and “marched in the afternoon to City Hall in Fürstenberg/Oder.”<sup>68</sup> The primary instigators of the uprisings in Stalinstadt were those assembly workers (*Montagearbeiter*) who moved around from construction site to construction site, living in various temporary housing situations and unable to benefit from the expansion of apartment complexes in the city itself. According to other EKO workers at the time, these construction workers were paid much worse than their counterparts working in the steel mill proper, another factor contributing to their relative dissatisfaction.<sup>69</sup> These workers led the way as a large group stormed City Hall in Fürstenberg, breaking windows panes and throwing documents out the window. One woman who was just a child at the time recalled how “it got really bad. The police came, I believe. And squads of soldiers and such. And tanks. Tanks drove right up into the square. Yes, that was the Russians.”<sup>70</sup> That this incident imprinted so strongly upon the memory of a young girl attests also to the SED state’s methods of suppressing the protests. Ultimately, it was Soviet military support that provided the force to quell the SED-labeled “fascist

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<sup>66</sup> In early 1953, SED leaders and planners discussed several different names that the *Wohnstadt* might receive, including Thälmannstadt. They had already decided, however, to name the city Karl-Marx-Stadt in remembrance of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Marx’s death on March 14, 1953, when Stalin died on March 5<sup>th</sup>. As a result of his death, on May 7, 1953, SED leaders gave the EKO *Wohnstadt* the great honor of receiving the name Stalinstadt. Karl-Marx-Stadt went to Chemnitz instead. See Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt*, 51.

<sup>67</sup> See Schroeder, “Zeit der Krisen: Der 17. Juni 1953,” in *Der SED-Staat*, 137-151.

<sup>68</sup> Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt*, 49.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with EKO worker, published in Richter, et al, *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt*, 50-51.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

provocations.”<sup>71</sup> When all was said and done, in Stalinstadt there were 95 arrests, with some of the participants sentenced to long imprisonment terms. There were also 55 official party reprimands, and countless complaints and replacements.<sup>72</sup> What the June 17 uprisings ultimately made clear to SED leaders was that the forced goal of constructing a socialist city—and a socialist state more broadly—was not possible if it entailed neglect of the everyday needs of the population.

After 1953, the politics of the “new course” (*Neuer Kurs*) ostensibly put more explicit emphasis on the provision of consumer goods and the improvement of living standards throughout the GDR.<sup>73</sup> At a meeting of the city council (*Stadtverordnetenversammlung*) on July 7, 1953, the mayor made a succinct assessment of the current status of living standards and cultural amenities in the city. For a population of nearly 20,000 residents in the city and temporary workers’ housing, there was only one public house (*Gaststätte*), and no cultural or recreation areas. The First Secretary of the SED District leadership remarked, “Stalinstadt is still nothing more than a collection of buildings, its missing everything that really belongs to a city. . . . Waiting in a long line for shopping has become the norm for residents. For those of us in the city there’s nothing more than one street with shops; that’s where all of life takes place. This shopping street has no more than five stores, all with a giant mass of people lining up before the doors.”<sup>74</sup> The everyday inconveniences were multiplied by many complaints about

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<sup>71</sup> An issue of the EKO newspaper, *Unser Friedenswerk*, published on June 24, 1953, featured an image of the agreement between construction workers, steel workers, and leadership that ultimately ended the so-called “fascist provocation in District Eisenhüttenstadt.” Headline from *Unser Friedenswerk* 3/36 (24 June 1953): 1. Cited in Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt*, 50. This framing of the uprising as a fascist provocation was in keeping with the SED’s characterization of the conflicts more broadly.

<sup>72</sup> Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt*, 65.

<sup>73</sup> See Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt - Eisenhüttenstadt*, 58-66.

<sup>74</sup> Cited in Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt*, 66.

inadequate provisions. Several people pointed out that mothers could only procure sour milk for their children. These circumstances, which officials worried would lead to further unrest, clearly had to change.

And by the time Stalinstadt residents celebrated the tenth anniversary of the steelworks with a big “Smeltery Festival” (*Hüttenfest*) in August 1960, the steelworks and its city had undergone substantial transformations on its way to doing the status of “first socialist city” justice. EKO itself had undertaken great efforts to expand the services it offered to its workers and their families, cementing its role in the city as a type of social agency (*soziale Agentur*) in and of itself. The steelworks now boasted:

Ten retail outlets; a polyclinic with new specialist departments; a large steelworks training school, a technical training school, and a training school for the trade union and SED members; the trade union house (*Haus der Gewerkschaft*) with its large auditorium, meeting rooms, and public house, and a further 29 meeting rooms for clubs throughout different parts of the steelworks; a large trade union library and technical library; sport fields and gymnastics and training halls.<sup>75</sup>

There were also vacation camps for children and the steelworks acquired the holiday retreat *Haus Goor* in for workers and their families to use at steeply subsidized prices.

By 1960, the characterizations of the city as “nothing more than a collection of buildings” no longer remotely applied. Both *Wohnkomplex I* and *II* (Housing Complex, abbreviated *WK*) had been completed by 1955, providing housing for 5,600 and 7,800 residents respectively. The city was already in the process of constructing three more *Wohnkomplexe*, all of which would be completed by the mid-1960s. *WK III* would house 3,800 residents, *WK IV* had room for 5,700 people, and *WK V* would come to house and additional 6,500. Moreover, the thoughtful design of the *Wohnkomplex* paid careful attention to solving the former problems of provisioning residents

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<sup>75</sup> May, *Planstadt Stalinstadt*, 77.

with the daily necessities. The completed *Wohnkomplex I* and *II* each boasted several kindergartens, at least one school, and shopping opportunities. This included supermarkets, bakeries, fresh fruit and vegetable stands, dairy products, and a fish store. There were also spaces for other services, like several hairdressers, a liquor and tobacco store, a stationary store, pharmacies, laundromats, a housewares store, and the hospital that was completed in 1959. Moreover, there were new gastronomical experiences, like the public house *Aktivist* (“Activist”), that provided a place to enjoy a meal with the entire family, or a beer (or three) with friends.<sup>76</sup> In short, by 1960 the city had come to resemble what both urban planners and ordinary residents believed to truly deserve the title socialist model city.

Despite these advancements in residents’ everyday lives, over the subsequent decades the regime on both the local and national level still struggled to achieve its ambitious expansionist goals for the East German steel industry. Following the Fourth Party Congress in 1954, the regime once again placed stronger emphasis on the growth of heavy industry, which revived the discussion about the further development of EKO. A significant part of this second Five-Year-Plan (1956-1960) included the full expansion of EKO, with the goal of constructing both a cold-rolling mill (*Kaltwalzwerk*) and hot-rolling mill (*Warmwalzwerk*) to accompany the already existing crude iron plant by 1960. This would complete the metallurgic production cycle, making the GDR’s fledgling steel industry completely self-sufficient. But in 1958 this second Five-Year-Plan, too, was cut short and replaced by a Seven-Year-Plan (1959-1965) that instead aimed to finish construction of EKO by 1965.<sup>77</sup>

The early 1960s, however, were characterized by further extreme difficulties in trying to

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<sup>76</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, “Dokumentation Entwicklung der Wohnkomplex I bis VII.”

<sup>77</sup> Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt*, 65.

meet the goals of the new Seven-Year-Plan, ultimately pushing back construction goals in EKO yet again.<sup>78</sup> The Sixth Party Congress in 1963 recommitted to an expansion of EKO, this time planning to complete the cold-rolling mill by 1967 and a more-efficient converter steel mill (*Konverterstahlwerk*) and hot-rolling mill by 1970.<sup>79</sup> By 1966 it was clear that these construction goals would also be unsuccessful. At this point, the regime considered two options to further develop the GDR's steel industry more realistically. They could continue with the construction of the hot-rolling mill in order to complete the metallurgic production cycle as originally planned in 1963, or they could finish the cold-rolling mill and then meet the increased demand for iron ore through imports. The regime decided on the latter, and in 1967 they stopped construction of the converter steel mill and the hot-rolling mill.<sup>80</sup> By 1968 the cold-rolling mill was fully operational, and in 1984 they would add a modern converter steel mill, as well.<sup>81</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Although the early years of EKO's construction were characterized by extreme uncertainty and contingency, by 1961 when the city's name was changed from Stalinstadt to Eisenhüttenstadt, the city and its steelworks offered convincing evidence of the regime's successful attempts to "build socialism." Residents were now firmly established in Eisenhüttenstadt, building their careers in the steelworks or in one of EKO's supporting industries, while simultaneously building their lives and families in the comfortable environment of one of the city's several *Wohnkomplexen*. Having weathered the early storm of the post-

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>79</sup> A converter steel mill refers to part of the steel production process in which super-heated oxygen is introduced to the molten iron and steel scraps in order to remove impurities and make molten steel. This is a more efficient means of producing steel than an open-hearth furnace process, though it still would have been technically possible to complete the metallurgic production cycle without the existence of a converter steel mill.

<sup>80</sup> Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt*, 69.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 72.



Stalinist moment of 1953, work in the steel mill had become routinized and everyday life in the town had likewise taken on a predictable pattern. By this point, the city's privileged status as a socialist model city was firmly established, as was its symbolic significance to the regime. Moreover, by this point, the fate of factory and city were irrevocably intertwined. The name "Eisenhüttenstadt" literally means "Steelworks City," an ever-present reminder that the city would not exist were it not for the steelworks. As the steelworks continued to expand, albeit slower than originally planned, the population of the city expanded as well, from 13,000 or so in 1953 when the settlement received the name Stalinstadt, to 33,000 in 1961 by the time its name was changed to Eisenhüttenstadt, to 42,500 by the time the cold-rolling mill went into operation in 1968.<sup>82</sup> The far-reaching social and cultural amenities that EKO provided for its employees, beyond simply their wages, deepened the importance of the steelworks to the everyday lives of ordinary Eisenhüttenstädters, as the next chapter will attest.

The abundance of secondary scholarship on the construction phases and early years of living and working in Stalinstadt, as well as other socialist model cities throughout the Soviet bloc, attests to the importance of these prestige projects to their respective states. Additionally, it attests to their historiographical importance as sites to study, in the words of Sándor Horváth, "the ways in which the social discourses, values, everyday practices, family structures, uses of urban and social spaces, and leisure activities were shaped by the socialist regime," on the one hand, but also the ways in which "these people exercised agency and exerted significant influences on the state that ruled them," on the other.<sup>83</sup> If studies of socialist model cities can help historians learn about the process of "building socialism" or crafting a new Soviet man, then

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<sup>82</sup> Table in Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt – Eisenhüttenstadt*, 28.

<sup>83</sup> Horváth, *Stalinism Reloaded*, 3.

what can they tell us about the processes and experiences of dismantling socialism? The remainder of this dissertation seeks to answer this question by shifting the periodization of these studies of socialist cities and their inhabitants beyond the first decades of their existence.

## CHAPTER 2: REAL EXISTING SOCIALISM IN EISENHÜTTENSATDT, 1971-1987

### Introduction

In June 1983, one anonymous Eisenhüttenstadt resident postmarked a letter to the Department of Trade and Supply (*Abteilung Handel und Versorgung*) of the local city council. He opened his letter by throwing the Party's own promises back in their face. "Everyone delivers quality to everyone," he wrote, tapping into a popular slogan of the time. "So one reads nearly every day in the paper, and so it should be in every area of the economy. But it doesn't always look that way in practice."<sup>1</sup> The petitioner went on to explain a problem that had been persistent for some time. Namely, that early on Saturday mornings in the sales hall on Diehloer Street there were no fresh bread rolls. A conversation with the attendant informed him that the production and delivery schedule of the industrial bakery (*Backwarenkombinat*) required that the rolls be baked on Wednesdays, delivered to the individual bakeries in Eisenhüttenstadt on Friday evenings, and then finally sold on Saturday mornings, resulting in stale and unappetizing rolls for residents' weekend breakfasts. Despite policy changes throughout the 1970s and 1980s that would witness great improvements in GDR citizens' everyday lives, this resident's complaint is testament to a growing dissatisfaction with the goods and services provided by the regime

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous Eisenhüttenstadt resident, "Betr.: Brötchenversorgung," an der Rat der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt, Abteilung Handel und Versorgung, 18 July 1986, in *Ham wa nich! Bewchwerden Eisenhüttenstädter und Gubener Bürger aus der DDR-Endzeit* (Bürgervereinigung "Fürstenberg (Oder)" e.V., 2008), 3. In German, the slogan reads "Jeder liefert jedem Qualität."

throughout the 1980s. Indeed, it reveals that local Eisenhüttenstadt residents' encounters with unsatisfactory products and services were so routine that it literally affected their daily bread.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the economic development of the GDR had been characterized by a series of growth crises, in which the regime had tried to find a balance between sufficient economic growth and production and consumption.<sup>2</sup> The crisis that immediately preceded a shift in leadership from Walter Ulbricht to the much younger Erich Honecker followed the regime's typical pattern of privileging industrial growth at the expense of consumption and the overall standard of living. Walter Ulbricht's economic reform efforts of the mid to late 1960s, which included a strong emphasis on growth and technology intended to "overtake [the West] without catching up," ultimately resulted in a supply crisis for the population. Lacking sufficient investment and materials and simultaneously plagued by power cuts, individual enterprises fell further behind their planned production quotas, resulting in deficits in retail trade, and ultimately shortages for GDR consumers. These shortages were exacerbated by the fact that industrial employees' wages had risen rapidly in 1970s on account of the extra shifts and overtime they had been forced to work in order to try and catch up with the plan arrears, meaning that workers had an increase in disposable income but there was not a corresponding expansion of selection in consumer goods for which they could spend their wages.<sup>3</sup>

By 1971, when Erich Honecker took Walter Ulbricht's place as leader of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), other Eastern Bloc countries that had attempted reforms throughout the 1960s had also been plagued by similar economic difficulties. In neighboring Poland, workers

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent and accessible overview of the economic history of the GDR, see André Steiner, *The Plans that Failed: An Economic History of the GDR*, translated by Ewald Osers (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

had reacted to attempted austerity measures in December 1970 with protests and strikes, which the regime brutally suppressed. This led other Eastern Bloc countries, including East Germany, to adopt a drastic reversal of economic policy, one intended to appease workers and citizens. At the Eighth Party Congress of the SED in June 1971, Honecker articulated the shared goals of the Party and “every citizen of our state.” He claimed that, “we know only one goal, which permeates all the policies of our party: to do everything possible for the good of the citizens, for the happiness of the people, for the interests of the working class and of all workers.”<sup>4</sup> This political caesura of 1971 signaled a drastic shift in economic policy for the entirety of the GDR. The new Five-Year Plan of 1971 continued the regime’s efforts to foster technological innovation and industrial output, but it also placed new emphasis on the production of consumer goods.

The “main task” of the new economic policy was to “rais[e] the people’s material and cultural standard of living on the basis of a fast developmental pace of socialist production, of higher efficiency, of scientific-technological progress and the growth of productivity of labor.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, economic development would now align with sociopolitical concerns, as well. This “unity of economic and social policy” (*Einheit von Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik*), as it came to be called, promised far-reaching improvements in the everyday lives of ordinary East German citizens and workers. By 1973, at the Ninth Conference of the SED, Erich Honecker used the term *real existierender Sozialismus* (“real existing socialism”) to describe the regime’s

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<sup>4</sup> “Report of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) at the Eight Party Congress of the SED,” trans. Allison Brown, Erich Honecker on the ‘Unity of Economic and Social Policy’ (June 15-19, 1971), German History in Documents and Images, [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=1706](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=1706).

<sup>5</sup> *Protokoll der Verhandlung des VIII. Parteitages der SED*, 15. Bis 19. Juni 1971, Vol. 2 (Berlin (East): 1971), 296. Cited in Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 143.

policy of increased attention to consumer goods and expanded social welfare policies.<sup>6</sup> Put differently, whereas previously the GDR had demanded its citizens actively work toward “building up socialism,” by 1971 and on, in the words of historian Eli Rubin, “the state was going to give workers a taste of utopia in the here in [*sic*] now, in the hopes that they would stay loyal to the vision of an ultimate socialist utopia.”<sup>7</sup>

This chapter assesses the extent to which the SED regime did—or did not—succeed in achieving “real existing socialism” on the local level in Eisenhüttenstadt and explores the mechanisms and institutions through which the state attempted to do so. How did the state harness its workers and citizens, both inside and outside of the factory, in order to achieve its goals? Were residents satisfied with their everyday lives as working conditions and daily rhythms in the socialist model city settled into predictably and a sense of normalcy?<sup>8</sup> Or did new challenges and problems come to take the place of old ones as the decades wore on? This chapter is divided into four sections that explore the areas of everyday life most affected by the regime’s drive to increase its citizens’ standard of living. First, I show the continued importance of steel in the industrial goals of the GDR, and how the management of EKO worked to achieve higher

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<sup>6</sup> This term is alternatively translated as “really existing socialism.”

<sup>7</sup> Eli Rubin, *Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space, and Memory in East Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 28.

<sup>8</sup> In *The People’s State*, Mary Fulbrook explains that “the extraordinarily slippery concept of ‘normalization,’ with its linguistic variations of ‘norm’ and ‘normal,’ can refer to the internalization of culturally and historically specific norms; it may refer also to the ways in which people are able to predict the parameters of their situation and be prepared to behave ‘as if’ they accepted the dominant norms in order to achieve certain goals, and to the routinization of structures and institutions—to the stability and predictability of the social world.” Throughout the book, Fulbrook attempts to reconcile how it is that the majority of “ordinary” East German citizens came to feel that they had lived “perfectly ordinary lives” within the confines of a state-socialist dictatorship. “Normalization” is one of the concepts she uses to describe these phenomena. See Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). Other works that wrestle with society and everyday life under state socialism in the GDR include Konrad H. Jarausch, ed., *Dictatorship as Experience: Toward a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999); Mary Fullbrook, ed., *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The ‘Normalization of Rule’?* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009); Jan Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

industrial production, both through its motivational campaigns and the social and cultural activities that it sponsored as incentives to increase workers' productivity. The second section explores the results of the regime-wide housing construction program on the local level, paying particular attention to residents' satisfaction (or lack thereof) with the quality of housing in Eisenhüttenstadt. Third, I examine the expansion of welfare and leisure activities available to residents of Eisenhüttenstadt throughout the 1970s and 1980s. And finally, the last section turns its attention to consumption and other everyday concerns, drawing on citizens' petitions and complaints to the municipal council (*Rat der Stadt*) of Eisenhüttenstadt about shortages and long-waiting times, among other issues, that reflected the local government's failure to continue to improve its citizens living standards.

### **Heart of Steel: Everyday Rhythms of Working Life in the “Steelworks City”**

In June 1980, in order to commemorate the thirtieth year since the founding of the model-city, General Secretary Erich Honecker lauded the citizens of Eisenhüttenstadt for their essential role in transforming the German Democratic Republic (GDR) into a country “in which a feeling of security and certainty in the future shape people's attitudes toward life.” In his remarks, Honecker also reinforced the interpretation that these material advancements and the improvements in quality of life proceeded from economic accomplishments. Recalling the SED's decision at the Third Party Congress to construct *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost*, Honecker marveled at how, “in a historically short period of time . . . the workers constructed the high-capacity metallurgic foundation of our GDR, which is a testament to the productive capacity of the liberated working class. With this steelwork combine was your modern socialist city built.”<sup>9</sup> Honecker's speech reinforced EKO's importance not only to the city itself, but also to the

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<sup>9</sup> SAPMO-BArch, DA 5-10502, speech by Erich Honecker, read by Klaus Sorgenicht on June 27, 1980.

economic and industrial success of the regime as a whole. Put differently, despite the marked shift in socioeconomic policy toward a renewed focus on the production of consumer goods and provision of welfare policies throughout the 1970s and 1980s, industrial production and technical advancement remained the means by which these goals would be accomplished.

Despite these accolades, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, however, the management of EKO faced many of the same economic challenges as the GDR as a whole. Indeed, many of the difficulties that EKO encountered, including raising the social labor capacity (*gesellschaftliche Arbeitsvermögen*), were challenges symptomatic to the regime's planned economy as a whole. Despite this dilemma, Honecker insisted that the aim of improving the standard of living for East German citizens must "absolutely be kept" and that "higher productivity...should be attained through the development of consciousness."<sup>10</sup> While the growing availability and broader selection of consumer goods and the social welfare policies introduced in the 1970s were intended to both pacify and incentivize workers, productivity rates throughout the final two decades of the GDR would ultimately remain insufficient to sustain the social program without escalating debts to both the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).

This section shows how the incentives administered by *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* was one of the mechanisms through which the regime tried to boost industrial productivity in order to compensate for the portion of the national budget that was devoted to raising the standard of living. This push to raise productivity is reflected in the commitment to technological advancements meant to increase efficiency in steel production, such as the development of the converter steel mill (*Konverterstahlwerk*) that began trial operations in 1984, and in part by their

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<sup>10</sup> SAPMO-BArch DE 1/56131, SPK, "Staatssekretär: Persönliche Niederschrift über die Beratung der Grundlinie...im Politbüro am 24.3.1971," in Steiner, *The Plans That Failed*, 145.



extensive efforts to inculcate an appropriate consciousness among their workers.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, this section shows how EKO itself also served as a means to improve the quality of life of workers and residents through its extensive program of social support, combined with leisure activities (which is discussed more at length in the fourth section). Although workers on the shop floor had very little sense—if any at all—that their efforts to raise productivity and keep the East German economy afloat would ultimately be in vain, this period of late-stage socialism was another important chapter in cementing the symbiotic relationship between factory and town (*Werk und Stadt*)—a relationship that persists to this day.

By the time the Honecker replaced Ulbricht as head of the SED, *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* was the undisputed heart of the steel industry throughout the entire GDR. This had been confirmed in April 1968 when the SED Politbüro decided to reorganize seventeen previously independent factories in the mining, metallurgy, and potash industries into three overarching steel combines. On January 1, 1969, the Steel Strip Combine Eisenhüttenstadt (*Bandstahlkombinat Eisenhüttenstadt*, or BKE) was created out of seven individual factories.<sup>12</sup> As the head-factory (*Stammbetrieb*), EKO had the highest production capacity and technological capabilities of all the factories; in 1969 they produced over 70 percent of the production volume of the entire combine.<sup>13</sup> By 1980 the BKE produced 99 percent of the cold-rolled strip steel, as well as 100 percent of all light weight and hot strip steel, and performed many essential steps in processing steel, such as 100 percent and 97 percent, respectively, of all batch annealing and

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<sup>11</sup> Lutz Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke – 50 Jahre EKO Stahl* (Eisenhüttenstadt: EKO Stahl GmbH, 2000), 160. Christoph Kleßmann, *Arbeiter im 'Arbeiterstaat' DDR. Deutsche Traditionen, sowjetisches Modell, westdeutsches Magnetfeld (1945-1971)* (Bonn: Verlag J.H.W. Dietz, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> In addition to EKO, the factories subordinated under the newly formed *Bahndstahlkombinat Eisenhüttenstadt* included VEB Walzwerk Finow, VEB Kaltwalzwerk Oranienburg, VEB Blechwalzwerk Olbernahu, VEB Walzwerk 'Hermann Matern' Burg, and VEB Magnesitwerk Aken. See Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 162-3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

surface refining on steel strips and sheets.<sup>14</sup> The BKE would continue to dominate the GDR steel industry for the rest of the country's existence.

Given the importance of the BKE combine throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the regime, the management, and the workers themselves understood EKO's central role as head-factory in working toward the achievement of a "unity of economic and social policy." First, steel remained an essential material in construction projects even beyond the initial period of postwar reconstruction. In part, this was due to the regime-wide housing program instituted in 1973, which witnessed the construction of some two million new apartments by 1990, most of which were part of mass-produced apartment blocks.<sup>15</sup> Second, the steel industry—along with the chemical industry and the microelectronics industry spearheaded in 1977—was able to produce goods that were attractive for export. In particular, EKO was instrumental in producing and refining the finely processed, rolled steel that could be exported as is, or used to manufacture consumer appliances for export. As such, unlike in Western countries that were beginning to feel the effects of a globalizing steel industry, the SED leadership still viewed steel production as a central means of generating the investments needed to accomplish the Party's expanded social and welfare program.<sup>16</sup>

At the Ninth Party Congress in 1976, the SED charged the metallurgy industry with "securing the demand-oriented supply of the national economy (*Volkswirtschaft*) and preparing the further expansion of EKO." The combine leaders were meant to accomplish this "through the

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<sup>14</sup> See table in Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 160.

<sup>15</sup> Rubin, *Amnesiopolis*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> As Steiner explains, because of its growing indebtedness to the West and reliance on raw materials from the Soviet Union, the GDR was required to orient itself more and more toward the demands of the Soviet Union and what they wanted to import from the GDR. As such, in a backwards sort of way, steel production still remained vital even if the industry was less competitive than its Western counterparts (as the rest of this section shows). See Steiner, *The Plans That Failed*, 162.

fast-paced development of in-house production and on the basis of a close collaboration with the USSR and the other socialist countries.”<sup>17</sup> This was no small task, however, as a 1978 analysis undertaken by the Ministry for Ore Mining, Metallurgy, and Potash (*Ministerium für Erzbergbau, Metallurgie und Kali*) revealed “the deficits of the GDR metallurgy industry” when compared with “the ‘well-advanced’ international standard.”<sup>18</sup> On account of small, old blast furnaces that had been in operation since the early 1950s, the production of raw iron (or pig iron) in the GDR lay at about 40 to 50 percent below the international standard, while their energy consumption was approximately 20 to 30 percent higher. But the most indicative factor in the GDR steel industry’s comparative underperformance vis-à-vis its Western counterparts according to the analysis were the inefficiencies in the production of raw steel and semifinished product on account of outdated technology. While the GDR was still using open-hearth *Siemens-Martin* furnaces to burn the impurities out of raw iron and make steel, by this point, the global standard for steel production was achieved in a converter steel mill with continuous oxygen blast capabilities.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the analysis found that while the East German Steel industry’s production of cold-rolled steel sheets and bands suggested a competitive technological level, they also had deficiencies when it came to manufacturing of rolled hot band and heavy plate, as well as sectional steel.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 191.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Siemens-Martin open-hearth furnace is named after the German engineer who first invented it and then the French engineer who picked up the patent and made further technological innovations. A more extended discussion of the steel production process can be found in Chapter 1. A helpful overview of the process can be found in Clifford S. Russell and William J. Vaughan, *Steel Production: Processes, Products, and Residuals* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976).

<sup>20</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 191.

Ultimately, the 1978 report concluded that it had been impossible to raise the production of high-quality steel products in the GDR throughout the 1970s because they had failed to accomplish the necessary material and technical prerequisites.<sup>21</sup> As such, the most important developments of the 1970s and 1980s that contributed to an increase in the overall efficiency of the East German steel industry were the strides toward technological advancement of steel production equipment. According to a resolution of the SED Politbüro from June 26, 1979, the expansion of EKO was to be the “centerpiece for the general productivity, effectivity, and quality turnaround in the iron and steel industry of the GDR.”<sup>22</sup>

How specifically this would be accomplished was constrained in large part by the international political climate of the early 1980s. While the early 1970s had witnessed a relaxation of Cold War tensions between the Soviet and Western blocs, and between East and West Germany in particular, by the late 1970s and early 1980s this easing of tensions appeared to have run its course.<sup>23</sup> While this political context seemingly would have precluded any collaboration between EKO leadership and nonsocialist countries, the concurrent political crisis in Poland—in which industrial workers in northern Poland protested the stark increase in the price of foodstuffs—meant that consistent deliveries of coke could not be relied upon as a basis for the expansion of EKO. This, combined with the reduction of the typical delivery of rolled steel (*Walzstahl*) from COMECON, led the SED regime to develop a plan for improving the iron and steel industry of the GDR that relied upon cooperation with a non-socialist country. In particular, the regime decided to commission the construction of a converter steel mill

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>23</sup> For a good overview of German foreign policy that situates East and West German diplomacy in the context of the broader Cold War, see Helga Haffendorn, *Coming of Age: German Foreign Policy Since 1945* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

(*Konverterstahlwerk*) from the Austrian steel firm VOEST-Alpine AG.<sup>24</sup> Construction of the converter steel mill began in 1980 and the first trial operations proceeded just a few months after planned in March 1984.<sup>25</sup> This piece of technology was crucial in bringing EKO closer to closing the metallurgic production cycle, because it would allow them to make raw steel more efficiently, therefore improving the volume of steel bands and sheets, and reducing imports of various partially-processed steel products from COMECON or non-socialist countries.

Aside from technological advancements in the steel manufacturing process, the other main prong of the regime's efforts to meet production quotas was the expansion of social welfare services intended to incentivize workers. By the time Honecker assumed power, the East German economy was driven primarily by fulfilling the demands of the annual plans, as opposed to the longer-term Five and Seven-Year Plans that had been typical throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. Among the primary task of individual enterprises like EKO was to fulfill their production goals for the year, while not exceeding their rigid allotment of materials and funds. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the regime and local enterprises developed different strategies in order to motivate workers and increase production.

One strategy involved attempting to foment friendly competition in place of the competitive market forces of capitalism. At the beginning of each year, the local union representatives (*Vertrauensleute*) laid out the competition program (*Wettbewerbsprogramm*) for the year, which was intended to inspire the workers in friendly "socialist competition" with members from other factories and enterprises. Members of the Factory Party Organization (*Betriebsparteiorganisation*, or BPO) like Comrade Günter Kriegel, who was interviewed in the

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<sup>24</sup> Schmidt, et al. *Einblicke*, 193.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

factory newspaper at the beginning of 1980, explained that “one of the goals of all collectives [was] to spare materials in keeping with the initiative ‘Reduce what’s needed for production, don’t give away any income!’” Comrade Kriegel was sure to emphasize not only that each individual worker could make a difference, but also how the task of decreasing the amount of materials necessary for production was something that every collective should work toward.<sup>26</sup>

Workers also received constant reminders about their essential role in increasing productivity and the efficiency of the labor capacity from the combine’s weekly newspaper, *Unser Friedenswerk* (“Our Factory of Peace”). Published weekly and distributed at the subsidized rate of 10 Pfennig, the newspaper informed workers of the goings-on at various levels of the factory, from the official state visit of Erich Honecker to interviews with outstanding workers, and from sporting events to a crossword puzzle. Throughout the newspaper there were articles and slogans on nearly every page reinforcing workers’ individual and collective responsibility to do their part to boost productivity. “From each Mark, each hour of work, each gram of material, greater efficiency!” read one banner across the top of the centerfold.<sup>27</sup> The newspapers were peppered with stories of individual workers and brigades taking initiative to “*Produktionsverbrauch senken, kein Nationaleinkommen verschenken,*” no doubt a part of the Party’s dual effort to spare materials and develop consciousness among its workers.<sup>28</sup> In this way, workers could not escape awareness of their important task in service of their brigade, their combine, and the regime as a whole.

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<sup>26</sup> “Unser aktuelles Interview heute mit...Genossen Günter Kriegel, Mitglied der Leitung der BPO, Vorsitzender der Betriebsgewerkschaftsleitung,” *Unser Friedenswerk*, 3/80, 3. In German this slogan is much snappier and rhymes to boot: *Produktionsverbrauch senken, kein Nationaleinkommen verschenken.*

<sup>27</sup> *Unser Friedenswerk* 2/80 (February 1980): 4-5.

<sup>28</sup> “Mit ‘Ideen, Lösungen, Patente’ helfen Forscher Produktionsverbrauch senken,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 2:80 (February 1980): 4.

The directive to spare materials permeated the language of the local Party administration meetings as well. Both city and municipal council meetings throughout the 1980s reflected the regime-wide efforts to decrease the use of materials while still reaching production quotas. For example, in a March 1983 meeting of the city council (*Stadtverordnetenversammlung*), Mayor Werner Viertel reported on the strides toward completion of the plan for the first two months of 1983. So far, it had been possible for the various factories in Eisenhüttenstadt to fulfill their transportation related activities even though they only had around 85.7 percent of diesel fuel and 92 percent of gasoline available compared to 1982 levels. Mayor Viertel went on to explain that although this was promising, they still had not saved enough resources. “If we compare the funds available for diesel and gasoline fuel for 1983 to that of 1981, then the task is to fulfill our supply and disposal responsibilities with around 31 percent less diesel and 43 percent less gasoline in 1983.”<sup>29</sup> For the first two months of 1983, the various factories in Eisenhüttenstadt were still falling short of these goals by 8 percent of diesel and 7 percent of gasoline, respectively, illustrating how necessary it was for the administration to “closely advise” the factory branches and institutions. While this progress report was carefully framed to emphasize the accomplishments of the *Bandstahlkombinat Eisenhüttenstadt* (BKE), it nonetheless reveals the various constituent efforts needed in order to succeed in fulfilling the overall steel production quota.

On the surface, these top-down efforts seemed to inspire the desired effect, resulting in many worker-led initiatives to decrease production costs and increase production. One popular effort began in the neighboring Brandenburg city, Schwedt, which was a prominent site of crude

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<sup>29</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 02.03.1983, Oberbürgermeister Werner Viertel, Referat to the Stadtverordnetenversammlung, 6-7.

oil processing in the GDR, as well as the location of the famed “Friendship oil pipeline that delivered oil to the GDR from the Soviet Union. This so-called “Schwedter Initiative,” which the City Council of Eisenhüttenstadt approved for implementation on the local level in August 1981, operated with the slogan *Weniger produzieren mehr*, or “fewer produce more.” According to a report from a federal Committee for Work and Social Policy (*Ausschuß für Arbeit und Sozialpolitik*), the Schwedter Initiative had proven to be a “modern and reliable method for the resolution of the manpower problem.”<sup>30</sup> Even within the first couple years of implementation in EKO, the rationalization measures were already showing modest results. For example, in 1982, the management of EKO had managed to free up 345 workers for different positions compared, to 285 positions in the previous year, theoretically increasing overall efficiency by more effectively using the productive capacity that was available.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to participating in regional initiatives like the one out of Schwedt, the factory newspaper in Eisenhüttenstadt reported on many brigades taking their own individual initiatives to increase productivity and reach the goals of the planning year (*Planjahr*). In one short article, *Unser Friedenswerk* recounted how the Collective B-Shift went out of their way to increase the efficiency of the batch annealing process. The article reported how their workflow was often interrupted by standstills on account of insufficient crane operators. As a result, a few individual members of the B-Shift decided to get their qualifications as crane operators in order to minimize the stoppages. While the newspaper article likely intended other collectives to be inspired by this creative initiative, it simultaneously revealed that EKO was not immune to the economic challenges of the 1980s.

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<sup>30</sup> SAPMO-BArch, DA 1/15314, “Bericht über einen Arbeitsgruppeneinsatz im VEB Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost, Stammbetrieb des Bandstahkombinates Eisenhüttenstadt, vom 10. bis 12. Mai 1983,” 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.



Workers were peppered with reminders of the small steps they could take in their daily work routine in order to reduce production costs. “Did you know that we spend many thousands of marks on work clothes each year?” one short article inquired, going on to list the cost of work safety suits, gloves, and felt coats, among others. The author hoped that these facts would serve as a reminder that the reduction of production costs was not simply about the “big chunks,” but that “the careful handling of protective work clothes was also a part of it.”<sup>32</sup> Individual brigades also worked to increase their efficiency by participating in certification courses (*Qualifizierungslehrgang*) and experience exchanges (*Erfahrungsaustausch*). The brigade logbook from the Collective “Dr. Richard Sorge” recounted how members participated in a four-day seminar in Möhra with other leaders of the security organs at the BKE. Their report concluded that “experience exchanges are the cheapest investments!” reflecting that the top-down messages about increasing productivity while reducing investments had successfully permeated down to the brigade level in EKO.

In keeping with the regime wide efforts to increase the living standards, EKO likewise developed programming and expanded its offerings of social support for its workers, which had begun already in the latter 1950s and 1960s. This included measures to improve the day-to-day lives of employees, as well as offering them a broader selection of activities to pursue in their free time. Rudi Schmidt, who moved to Eisenhüttenstadt along with a wave of other experts and laborers in the early to mid-1960s, could attest first-hand to the factory’s efforts to improve the daily lives of its workers. He contextualized his arrival in the steel-city as coinciding with the regime’s second attempt to make steel production in the GDR a self-sufficient industry.<sup>33</sup> When

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<sup>32</sup> “Ist euch bekannt...,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 6/80 (June 1980): 4.

<sup>33</sup> The fits and starts of the attempts to close the metallurgic production cycle in EKO are explained in more depth in the previous chapter.

he first arrived, he lived temporarily in the workers' hostel (*Arbeiterwohnhotel*) "because whenever they were adding onto EKO, they had to add onto the city as well," he explained.<sup>34</sup> When he, along with his wife and son, moved into their own apartment in March 1966, he emphasized that it was EKO that paid for the move. For Schmidt and many others, EKO was more than simply an employer—it provided essential and social and cultural services for their employees and for the city as a whole.

EKO's attempts to further improve the daily lives of its workers began immediately with their commute into work. "In all different corners of the city there were busses that brought people to EKO. The bus cost 10 cents, because EKO subsidized it."<sup>35</sup> One could judge the time of day and the changing of the shift based on the pattern of busses taking employees to and from EKO. For EKO employees the work schedule was predictable. As one former worker explained,

If you were on early shift, the workday began on Monday at 6:00 AM and ended at 2:00 PM. Tuesday of that week would also be early shift; you would come home on Tuesday at 2:30 PM, but you didn't have to be at work again until 2:00 PM on Wednesday for late shift, which ended at 10:00 PM. The same was true for Thursday. On Friday, Saturday, Sunday followed the night shift, which began at 10:00 PM and lasted until 6:00 AM the next morning. Then Monday and Tuesday were free, '*Großfrei*' (completely free), it was called in the parlance. Wednesday and Thursday it picked up with the early shift again, Friday, and Saturday, and Sunday were late shift, then Monday and Tuesday were night shift. Now '*Großfrei*' fell on Wednesday and Thursday, until Friday when it started all over with the early shift. Such a shift cycle ran over 28 days, until it started over again from the top.<sup>36</sup>

The entire rhythm of daily life in the city was structured around the schedule of the factory; even the timetable of after-school activities was timed to correspond with when the normal shift ended at 2:00 PM or 2:30 PM.

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Rudi Schmidt, interview by the author, audio recording, Eisenhüttenstadt, March 31, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Wolfgang Anton, "Schichtarbeit. Arbeit und Familienleben," in *Eisenhüttenstadt. Erste Sozialistische Stadt Deutschlands*, 162. Cited in Schmidt, et al, *Einblicke*, 181.

EKO also tried to ease the burdens of daily life for its workers during the workday itself. “We had seven industrial kitchens, a polyclinic, six or seven dentists, so people could go get their teeth cleaned while they were at work,” Schmidt boasted. Probably the most important of these services were the factory kitchens, which provided meals to all employees of EKO around the clock at a steeply subsidized price. Given the staggered nature of shiftwork throughout the factories of EKO, keeping food adequately warm throughout the day was a common problem. Moreover, “the shift workers often complained that there weren’t better factory meals during the late and night shifts (*Spät- und Nachtschicht*).”<sup>37</sup> As such, during the 1970s and into the 1980s, EKO endeavored to improve the quality and quantity of workplace amenities that they offered. From April to December 1977 the factory kitchens in EKO entered into a benchmark test with 17 other industrial kitchens throughout the region. “The goal of the comparison was to improve the quality of the main meals, offer a varied range of options during breaks, and broaden the selection of bland and diet foods.”<sup>38</sup> In the same year they also began distributing complimentary “industrial safety drinks” (*Arbeitsschutzgetränke*) during overtime or extreme outside temperatures. This could take the form of coffee or black tea, lemonade, seltzer, or alcohol-free beer.<sup>39</sup> By 1981, 78 percent of all EKO employees took their main midday meal in EKO.<sup>40</sup> As such, these marked advancements and small touches in the provision of meals throughout EKO came to directly benefit the majority of employees.

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<sup>37</sup> “Sozialmaßnahmen, Geistig-kulturelles Leben, Sportliche Betaetigung der Werktaetigen,” *BKV EKO*, Unternehmensarchiv ArcelorMittal Eisenhüttenstadt, 25.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* Additionally, all workers who were scheduled to work the late- or night-shift on Christmas Eve or New Years Eve got a stolen, a chocolate bar, and a jar of hot dogs.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* For nightshift workers, the percent that took their main meals in the EKO kitchens stood at 65 percent.

Another essential expansion in social welfare programming came with the improvement of the childcare services offered by EKO. Throughout the first two decades of the city's existence, there had been far more applications for nursery school and kindergarten than there were available spots. Indeed, in the late 1960s there were 102 applications for every one spot in a day care, and 58 applications for each kindergarten spot.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the 1970s, EKO took an active role in alleviating this imbalance by both financially contributing to the construction of more daycares and kindergartens in other housing complexes, and also by opening their own factory daycare center. In 1971 the existing factory kindergarten was refashioned into a factory daycare center that could accommodate up to 148 children up to three years of age. By 1988, the factory childcare centers looked after 718 employees' children ages three and under, and 716 who were of kindergarten age.<sup>42</sup>

In keeping with the regime's goals of improving social welfare programs for its citizens, throughout the 1970s and 1980s the management of EKO dramatically expanded the variety and volume of factory-sponsored vacation opportunities for its workers. Whereas in 1969 EKO distributed a total of 1,261 vacation spots sponsored by the Free German Trade Union Confederation (*Freie Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund*, or FDGB), during 1970s the quantity and variety of these opportunities broadened considerably.<sup>43</sup> By 1988, EKO workers and their families had 8,754 domestic and international vacation spots to choose from.<sup>44</sup> First, there were a number of regional places to get away that were easily accessible from Eisenhüttenstadt. In particular, the local factory vacation home "Müllrose" (*Betriebsferienheim*), which was nestled

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 49.

in the middle of a nature reserve area on the Müllroser Lake, was a popular destination for EKO workers and their families. Its location also made it ideal for *Brigadewochenende* (brigade weekends) and other factory sponsored recreational activities.<sup>45</sup> Second, for the vacationer who preferred a more urban experience, there were also vacation spots available at a series of luxury hotels throughout the GDR known as *Interhotels*. Workers could spend their vacation at Interhotel “Neptun” in Warnemünde, “Panorama” in Oberhof, or “Bastei” in Dresden at a rate subsidized by EKO.<sup>46</sup>

Third, if workers and their families wanted to travel a bit further afield but still remain in the border of the GDR, a popular destination was to travel to the island Rügen in the Baltic Sea and stay at the factory-owned holiday home “Haus Goor.” Beginning in 1959, workers and their families had travelled to the vacation home in Lauterbach to partake in rest and relaxation. As the brochure boasted, “since the Eighth Party Congress, the vacation and holiday offerings had become an essential part of the politics of the GDR,” and were a productive way “to further increase the working and living condition of the workers.”<sup>47</sup> Hiking, swimming, and camping were among the most popular pursuits for active visitors, but vacationers could also enjoy a full program of cultural pursuits at the theater and the various historical monuments around the island, or simply a relaxing afternoon at a café followed by dinner in the restaurant. Vacations such as the ones at Haus Goor were intended as “a relaxation for the labors of the past years, but should also provide the strength to master newer and bigger challenges.”<sup>48</sup> By the late 1970s, trips to Haus Goor had become so popular, that they had to be offered all year round.

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<sup>45</sup> *Betriebsferienheim Müllrose*, Unternehmensarchiv ArcelorMittal Eisenhüttenstadt, 3-5.

<sup>46</sup> “Sozialmaßnahmen, Geistig-kulturelles Leben, Sportliche Betaetigung der Werktaetigen,” *BKV EKO*, Unternehmensarchiv ArcelorMittal Eisenhüttenstadt, 48.

<sup>47</sup> *Betriebsferienheim Haus Goor*, Unternehmensarchiv ArcelorMittal Eisenhüttenstadt, 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

Finally, in addition to technological or personnel collaboration between the socialist “brother nations” (*Brüderländer*), state-owned enterprises in the GDR would often coordinate with their counterparts in Poland and Czechoslovakia when it came to vacation. Whether as a means of refreshing oneself for the challenges ahead, or an escape from the daily grind of working life, Eisenhüttenstadt residents took advantage of their opportunities to take a vacation and to travel. Because of East Germany’s access to the Baltic Sea, it was a popular vacation destination for workers from Hungary and Czechoslovakia in particular. As a result, many EKO employees had the opportunity to go on vacation to Poland and Czechoslovakia, in turn. EKO workers could take full advantage of Czech recreational areas, including in Košice, Krutzberg, Celadna, Cossicka Bela, Tatranske Madliary, Jassow, and in the High Tatra mountain range. They could also swap vacation spots with their neighbors in Poland, opening up new locations, including in Zakopane, on Lake Lagow (*Lagower See*), or on the Polish coast of the Baltic Sea (*Ostsee*).<sup>49</sup> While it was often difficult to get a spot during the school vacation—as this was when families wanted to go with their children—in the off-season Eisenhüttenstädters with grown children could go on vacation whenever they wanted. As it was subsidized by EKO, the cost was very affordable. One resident recalled that a 13-day trip to Czechoslovakia with all amenities included cost a mere 53 Marks per person, making it very accessible for ordinary workers and their families.<sup>50</sup>

Given that over 75 percent of Eisenhüttenstadt residents employed in industrial jobs worked in EKO, almost every family in the city was connected to the factory in some way, and was therefore a beneficiary of EKO’s expanded social welfare programs.<sup>51</sup> Given the factory’s

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Rudi Schmidt, interview by the author, March 31, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 181.

leading role in the steel industry of the entire GDR, the motivation and happiness of EKO workers was a priority, not just for the local management, but for the regime as a whole. The broadened array of social welfare activities came to be part and parcel of the workday for over 12,000 EKO employees and their families. Furthermore, combined with the leisure and free-time activities discussed in the third section, these social support functions came to be enjoyed in some way, shape, or form by the vast majority of Eisenhüttenstadt residents. In other words, the relationship between the factory and the city became even more fundamentally intertwined during the 1970s and 1980s, which would have far-reaching implications for the processes heralded by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.<sup>52</sup>

### **“Everything was on hand”? Life inside the *Wohnkomplexen***

As explored more fully in the first chapter, the regime’s decision to devote financial and material resources to developing a self-sufficient steel industry in the GDR was testament to the fledgling regime’s broader prioritization of heavy industrialization over other pressing developmental concerns. This agenda exacerbated an already existing housing crisis that had its origins in the rapid industrialization of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which had grown more acute after the extensive destruction during the Second World War.<sup>53</sup> The subordination of the housing question compared to heavy industry was reflected in its budgetary marginalization. In 1950 only one third of one percent of the GDR’s budget was allotted to housing, and by 1955 this had dropped to one tenth of one percent.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, initial efforts to address the housing shortage

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<sup>52</sup> The immediate consequences of political and economic unification on the factory and employees of EKO is one of the subjects of my third chapter.

<sup>53</sup> See Eli Rubin’s recent overview of the development of mass housing in Berlin and the failed attempts of the Imperial German government, the Weimar Republic, and the Third Reich to mitigate the housing crisis, Rubin, *Amnesiopolis*, 13-20.

<sup>54</sup> Christine Hannemann, *Die Platte: Industrialiserte Wohnungsbau in der DDR* (Berlin: Schiler, 2005), 65.

eschewed mass-produced housing in favor of traditional methods and materials, and this ultimately became financially unsustainable. The regime concentrated on several early prestige projects, including Stalinstadt itself, as well as Stalinallee (“Stalin Alley”) in Berlin. In Eisenhüttenstadt the apartment blocks built in the 1950s and 1960s were part of this early prestige project, and were of such good quality that they were colloquially referred to as “workers’ palaces” (*Arbeiterpalast*). But even so, such efforts were a far cry from satisfying the number of new dwellings needed to house all of the GDR’s citizens.<sup>55</sup> Neither the First nor the Second Five-Year Plans reached their housing quotas, falling short by approximately thirteen and thirty-three percent, respectively.<sup>56</sup> By 1959 even the General Secretary Walter Ulbricht, openly acknowledged that the GDR was experiencing a housing shortage of over half million apartments.<sup>57</sup>

With Honecker’s ascension to power in 1971 came the Party leadership’s renewed devotion to raising the living standard for its citizens. One of the central components of this aforementioned “unity of economic and social policy” was the country-wide Housing Construction Plan (*Wohnungsbauprogramm*) that sought to address the housing shortage that had plagued the GDR from its founding. A resolution of the SED Politbüro in October 1973 inaugurated the Housing Program, which Party members described as the centerpiece (*Kernstück*) of the regime’s new policy of “real existing socialism.”<sup>58</sup> The overall aim of the housing program was to provide each citizen a modern, comfortable apartment by 1990, and thus

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<sup>55</sup> Rubin, *Amnesiopolis*, 20.

<sup>56</sup> For a detailed discussion of the housing quotas and results in the early five-year plans see Hannsjörg F. Buck, *Mit hohem Anspruch gescheitert: die Wohnungspolitik der DDR* (Münster Lit, 2004), 172-177.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 179. Walter Ulbricht acknowledged this at the third Baukonferenz, on May 6-7, 1959.

<sup>58</sup> Steiner, *The Plans That Failed*, 144.



solve “once and for all the housing problem as a social problem.”<sup>59</sup> However, that this Housing Plan remained the centerpiece of the SED’s economic and social policy at the Ninth, Tenth, and Eleventh Party Congresses in 1976, 1981, and 1986, respectively, is testament to the regime’s continued inability to decisively solve its housing problem.<sup>60</sup> This section shows that while the regime may have succeeded in markedly improving the quality of availability housing on the local level in Eisenhüttenstadt compared to the previous two decades, residents’ expectations for their new accommodations increased in kind. This, in turn, contributed to the perception of the regime's failure to deliver on the promises of “real existing socialism.”

Reflecting the nationwide dedication to solving the housing problem, the local government in Eisenhüttenstadt likewise labored to provide their residents with sufficient and quality housing. In keeping with imperatives of the 9<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and in anticipation of the Tenth Party Congress the following year, in 1980 the Department of Housing Policy and Industry (*Abteilung Wohnungspolitik und Wohnungswirtschaft*) laid out the components and priorities of Eisenhüttenstadt’s own housing plan for the years 1981-1985. This plan would be realized through a combination of endeavors, including the construction of new apartments, the modernization and renovation of existing apartments, timely maintenance and upkeep of the apartments so that they would retain their value, and the rational distribution of apartments.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Christa Hübner, Herbert Nicolaus, and Manfred Teresiak, *20 Jahre Marzahn: Chronik eines Berliner Bezirkes* (Heimatsmuseum Marzahn: Marzahn, 1998), 10. This language of “solving the housing problem as a social problem by 1990” was repeated consistently in the language of Party resolution and determinations from the 1970s to the 1980s.

<sup>60</sup> The consistency of housing policy as a central social issue for the GDR is also reflected on the local level in Eisenhüttenstadt in the city council records in Eisenhüttenstadt. See the city council meeting records in preparation of the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress meeting, Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 19.11.1980, “Rechenschaftsbericht der ständigen Kommission Wohnungspolitik und Wohnungswirtschaft.” See also the city council records from after the Eleventh Party Congress, Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 09.07.1986.

<sup>61</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, RS 07.05.1980, Abteilung Wohnungspolitik und Wohnungswirtschaft, “Grundrichtung der Wohnungspolitik und Wohnungswirtschaft im Stadtkreis Eisenhüttenstadt 1981-1985,” 1.

Working class families (especially shift workers), young married couples, families with many children, and elderly citizens received priority in being awarded new apartments, or being upgraded to larger living accommodations.<sup>62</sup>

On the surface, the local administration in Eisenhüttenstadt appeared to make strides toward the regime-wide goal of providing every citizen a modern, comfortable apartment by 1990. In addition to the completion of Housing Complex 6 (hereafter, *Wohnkomplex* or *WK*) in 1977, which could house up to 16,000 residents, the city also made plans to construct a seventh housing complex on the eastern edge of the city.<sup>63</sup> The design and realization of *Wohnkomplex VII* was based on a collaboration between Eisenhüttenstadt urban planners and architects, as well as two Frankfurt (Oder) educated artists. In particular, with its location on the edge of the city proper, *WK VII* accomplished the structural and functional task of binding the city center of Eisenhüttenstadt to the historic center of the town formerly known as Fürstenberg, and then simply known as District East (*Stadtteil Ost*).<sup>64</sup> Upon its completion in 1987, this expansion of the housing market would ultimately make an additional 3,200 apartments available. As over three-quarters of these new apartments were of the 2 or 3-bedroom variety, the *Wohnkomplex* could provide accommodation for up to 7,750 Eisenhüttenstadt residents.<sup>65</sup>

As with the other housing complexes in Eisenhüttenstadt, *WK VII* was planned with the ease of everyday life in mind. The apartment complexes were typically built in rectangular clusters, with large, open courtyards in the center. They were connected by a network of

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>63</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, "Wohnkomplex VI," in *Dokumentation. Entwicklung der Wohnkomplexe I bis VII*, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Wolfgang Haubold, *Kulturspiegel Eisenhüttenstadt*, Nr. 1 (January 1985): 17.

<sup>65</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, "Wohnkomplex VII," in *Dokumentation. Entwicklung der Wohnkomplexe I bis VII*, 3.

pathways easily navigable by pedestrians, bicycles, and the rare passenger car. The ground floor of the buildings on the perimeter of the housing complexes typically contained retail and service space. This meant that shopping, dining, educational institutions, and free-time activities were centrally located for residents of all ages. Indeed, as *WK VII* was being constructed beginning in 1983, so too were the new facilities and amenities to serve its residents. In addition to the large supermarket (*Kaufhalle*) located in the northern section of the housing complex, residents could stop by the flower shop right around the corner, or do some shopping in the women's and children clothing store just down the street.<sup>66</sup> Residents did not have to travel far to get their hair cut or do their laundry, as these services were also located on the same street as the supermarket. A branch of the local savings bank (*Sparkasse*), a post office, and a pharmacy were likewise conveniently located. There were also gastronomic amenities on site, where residents could grab a quick bite at the snack bar (*Imbißstube*), get some ice cream or a coffee at the milk bar (*Milchbar*), or enjoy a more relaxed meal or a beer with friends at the local restaurant and pub.<sup>67</sup>

As with the *Wohnkomplexen* designed and constructed from the 1950s to the 1970s, an essential feature of *WK VII* was its family friendliness. One Eisenhüttenstadt resident, Wolfgang Perske, who lived with his family in *WK VI* for many years, recalled how one could simply look out one's apartment window to watch the children walk to school in the morning.<sup>68</sup> *WK VII* also had its own educational institutions, including two kindergartens, as well as an elementary school (*Grundschule*) and a high school (*Gymnasium*).<sup>69</sup> The built environment of the *Wohnkomplexen* offered children of various ages a range of activities for their free time. There

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Wolfgang Perske, interview by the author, audio recording, March 22, 2016, Eisenhüttenstadt.

<sup>69</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, "Wohnkomplex VII," in *Dokumentation. Entwicklung der Wohnkomplexe I bis VII*, 5-6.

were numerous sandboxes and play grounds for the younger children, complete with slides, ropes, swings, and play houses. For the slightly older children there were ping pong tables, climbing structures, and designated soccer fields.

In addition to the proximity of essential amenities, the urban planners and architects of *Wohnkomplex VII* put careful thought into making the apartment complex qualitatively pleasant. In particular, they strove to make the open areas into spaces that could be enjoyed by all residents. The central courtyard of *WK VII*, called the “Chestnut Courtyard” (*Kastanienhof*), was designed to be a special place, with a network of paths, lovely raised beds for flowers and vegetation, a sitting area with plenty of benches to have a seat while out for an afternoon stroll, and a central fountain.<sup>70</sup> The *Kastanienhof* even had its own special play areas specially commissioned by the designer Ute Fritzch for Frankfurt (Oder), and further subtle touches worked into the built environment, such as large paintings of snails, ducks, and other wildlife, to guide schoolchildren's way to school every morning.<sup>71</sup> Taken all together, the proximity of everyday amenities and the shiny, new lived environment of *WK VII* might have seemed like conclusive evidence that Eisenhüttenstadt was succeeding in fulfilling its housing program.

However, despite the successful construction of *Wohnkomplexen VI and VII*, like the country as a whole, Eisenhüttenstadt was also struggling to meet the requirements of its own housing program throughout the 1970s and 1980s. That citizens were not yet satisfied with the regime's efforts since the implementation of “real existing socialism” in 1971 is abundantly clear from the yearly analyses of citizens' petitions compiled by the municipal council. In their meeting in November 1980, the Deputy Mayor of Eisenhüttenstadt presented an overview of the

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<sup>70</sup> Wolfgang Haubold, *Kulturspiegel* 1 (January 1985): 17.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

suggestions, notes, concerns, and complaints collected from citizens in the preceding year. In it he reported that although the number of citizens who complained to the government in the last year had decreased overall, the percentage of these complaints directed at state organs—in particular the state-run building management firm (*VEB Gebäudewirtschaft*)—had more than doubled, from 7.2 percent to 15.2 percent of all petitions received.<sup>72</sup> The Deputy Mayor highlighted some points of emphasis among these petitions, including general housing related complaints, especially the difficulty in switching apartments, as well as frustrations with wait time for important maintenance issues, such as roof repairs and roof draining.<sup>73</sup>

The bureaucratic, rhetorically formulaic language of reports such as this one by the Deputy Mayor fail to tangibly capture the substandard conditions and long waiting times that residents often had to endure, not to mention their mounting frustrations. One resident of Eisenhüttenstadt who worked in the Transportation Department for EKO first completed an application for a larger apartment in 1977, shortly after the birth of his first child. He received no answer for eleven years, when he finally petitioned the mayor directly to explain his circumstances. Not only was this resident an upstanding citizen of the GDR—he served as a leader for the Party organization in the Transportation Department and pursued further ideological education at the company school (*Betriebsschule*)—but he was also living with two (nearly) teenagers under his roof. Because he and his family still resided in the same the two-and-a-half room apartment they had since his children were born, his thirteen-year-old son and twelve-year-old daughter had to share a room. “Because they are nearly the same age and have

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<sup>72</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, RS 04.11.1980, W. Nogatz, 1. Stellvertreter des Oberbürgermeisters, “Analyse über die Arbeit mit den Vorschlägen, Hinweise, Anliegen und Beschwerden der Bürger für den Zeitraum 1.11.1979-31.10.1980,” 3-4.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

extremely divergent interests” it had become untenable for them to continue this living arrangement.<sup>74</sup> Despite these circumstances and personal appeals to his company union leader (*Betriebsgewerkschaftsleitung*), his requests had gone unanswered up until the time he authored this petition in June of 1988.

Despite their progress and “firm commitment” to solving the “housing problem,” the municipal council’s Department of Housing Policy and Industry received significantly more requests for new accommodation or apartment upgrades than they could fulfill. In 1982 they collected over 3,000 applications both from new transplants to Eisenhüttenstadt who did not yet have their own residence, as well as about 1,600 requests from current residents to upgrade to a larger apartment.<sup>75</sup> These requests came from elderly people seeking age appropriate housing, young couples wanting their own apartments, growing families who needed an additional room, and single workers requiring accommodation closer to their workplace. These proposals were typically categorized based on their exigency, and only those with an urgency rating (*Dringlichkeitsstufe*) of three or higher were even considered. Of those considered, only a portion were successfully fulfilled. For example, in 1985 the Department of Housing Policy and Industry received nearly 2,000 applications for apartments from individuals without their own living quarters. Of these, only 300 were considered urgent, revealing that the city administration routinely left approximately three quarters of its requests unfulfilled.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Anonymous Eisenhüttenstädt resident, “Eingabe: Antrag auf eine 4-Raum-Fernheizungswohnung,” an der Rat der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt, Oberbürgermeister, 30 August 1988, in *Ham wa leider nich! Bewchwerden Eisenhüttenstädter und Gubener Bürger aus der DDR-Endzeit, Teil 2* (Bürgervereinigung “Fürstenberg (Oder)” e.V., 2008), 278.

<sup>75</sup> Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Rep 601 RdB FfO 24585, 05.01.1983, Herr Brückner, to Rat des Bezirkes Frankfurt (Oder), Abteilung Wohnungspolitik, Mitglied des Rates und Leiter der Abteilung, Kollegen Schröder, “Abrechnung der sozialpolitischen Maßnahmen auf dem Gebiet der Wohnungspolitik 1982.”

<sup>76</sup> See the series of reports on the housing industry sent to the regional *Rat des Bezirkes* in Frankfurt (Oder). In particular see Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Rep 601 RdB FfO 24585, 05.01.1983, Herr Gasche, Stadtrat für Wohnungspolitik und Wohnungswirtschaft to Rat des Bezirkes Frankfurt (Oder), Abteilung Wohnungspolitik,

Housing policy remained the centerpiece of the regime's "unity of economic and policy" throughout the 1980s. At both the federal and local level, regime officials faced the task of constantly rearticulating their commitment to the "housing problem" each time their planning goals went unfulfilled. In the wake of the Eleventh Party Congress in 1986, a meeting of the city council in Eisenhüttenstadt echoed the language and content of previous iterations of the housing program in describing the city's housing plan for 1990.<sup>77</sup> Their goals until the next Party Congress included: providing every family with appropriately sized living arrangements; quickly outfitting young families with their own apartment; ensuring that their citizens live "safe – dry – warm"; and raising the living standard throughout the city by addressing the problem of long-term conservation of value for existing and planned apartment complexes.<sup>78</sup> The successful completion of *Wohnkomplex VII* between 1983 and 1987, and the plans for an eighth block of apartments, would seem to indicate tangible steps toward solving the city's housing question once and for all.<sup>79</sup> But despite the more than 3,000 new apartments made available by the completion *WK VII*, the Department of Housing Policy and Industry still continued to receive thousands of applications for new and upgraded accommodations each year.<sup>80</sup>

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Mitglied des Rates für Wohnungspolitik, Kollegen Schröder, "Abrechnung der sozialpolitischen Maßnahmen auf dem Gebiet der Wohnungspolitik 1982." See also Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Rep 601 RdB FfO 24587, 03.01.1986, Rat der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt, Bezirk Frankfurt (Oder), Abt. Wohnungspolitik und Wohnungswirtschaft, "Abrechnung der sozialpolitischen Maßnahmen auf dem Gebiet der Wohnungspolitik 1985."

<sup>77</sup>Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 09.11.1986, Dr. Sader, Oberbürgermeister and Herr Menzer, Stadtrat für Wohnungspolitik und Wohnungswirtschaft, "Grundrichtung der sozialistischen Wohnungspolitik und der Verwaltung und Erhaltung des Wohnungsfonds im Zeitraum 1986-1990 zur Lösung der Wohnungsfrage als soziales Problem im Territorium Eisenhüttenstadt."

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> See above for details on the construction plans for Wohnkomplex VII. See also the report compiled by an ABM-Gruppe for the city archive, Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, *Dokumentation. Entwicklung der Wohnkomplexe I bis VII*.

<sup>80</sup> Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Rep. 601 RdB FfO 24587, 03.01.1986, "Abrechnung der sozialpolitischen Maßnahmen auf dem Gebiet der Wohnungspolitik 1985."

Beyond petitions about unfulfilled applications and long waiting periods, the city council and Housing Office also received numerous complaints regarding the unsatisfactory quality of apartment units. In April 1986, one family received notice that a five-room-apartment was available. But upon examination of the apartment they found that it was such in “catastrophic condition” that the under-floor had to be completely redone in two of the rooms. The petitioner undertook some of the renovations himself, including painting the entire apartment, but at the time he wrote the letter to the mayor of Eisenhüttenstadt in June, he and his family had been waiting over four weeks for the flooring to be replaced and a new gas oven to be installed. In the meantime, he and his wife and their five children continued to occupy their old four-room-apartment, which was an increasingly untenable situation, as their seventeen-year-old son woke every morning at 4:00am in order to go to work, inevitably waking up his seven-year-old brother with whom he shared a room.<sup>81</sup> Even multi-child families such as this one, whose welfare was a stated priority of the regime, were often frustrated with their living situations and the difficulty in improving them. Moreover, this family’s experience is also evidence of deteriorating conditions of housing in Eisenhüttenstadt more broadly. By the 1980s, many of the apartments that had been constructed in the 1950s and 1960s had been inhabited for two to three decades without significant renovation and were starting to show the wear and tear. This provided an additional layer of challenges for the Housing Department in their quest to provide satisfactory housing to all residents of Eisenhüttenstadt.

Testimony from my interview subjects largely confirms the difficulties and frustrations that residents of Eisenhüttenstadt faced in securing appropriate housing. Frau P., for example,

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<sup>81</sup> Anonymous Eisenhüttenstädt resident, “Eingabe: Instandsetzung der Wohnung,” an der Rat der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt, Oberbürgermeister, 11 June 1986, in *Ham wa leider nich! Bewchwerden Eisenhüttenstädter und Gubener Bürger aus der DDR-Endzeit, Teil 2* (Bürgervereinigung “Fürstenberg (Oder)” e.V., 2008), 83-84.



who worked in Eisenhüttenstadt's Housing Office (*Wohnungsamt*) throughout the 1980s, recalls the unpleasant experience of sitting in the daily consultation hours (*Sprechstunden*) with a line full of disgruntled residents stretching out the door.<sup>82</sup> One of Wolfgang Perske's children lived at home after his apprenticeship (*Ausbildung*) because he could not get his own apartment as a young, unmarried man.<sup>83</sup> Another interview subject, Hartmut Preuß, who moved to Eisenhüttenstadt with his wife in 1985, did not have trouble getting an apartment. But he speculated that this was because of their profession as teachers, and also because they accepted a less desirable apartment with stove heating (*Ofenheizung*), as opposed to one with modern, district heating (*Fernheizung*), which were in higher demand.<sup>84</sup> This meant that in the winters they had to lug buckets of coal up from the ground floor to burn in the stove in order to heat their apartment—a common practice for those dwelling in prewar architecture, but one that was becoming decreasingly desirable in the newer apartment blocks in the GDR.

Hartmut Preuß's experience living in an apartment with stove heating also speaks to another component of Eisenhüttenstadt's housing problem, namely, the wide-ranging conditions of the apartment complexes depending on their age and quality. *Wohnkomplex VII*, built between 1983 and 1987, was the last apartment complex constructed in Eisenhüttenstadt before unification.<sup>85</sup> Although they were typical prefabricated apartment blocks, residents found them very desirable, for they all had district heating, small balconies, and were brand new, and had an

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<sup>82</sup> Frau P. lived in Eisenhüttenstadt for several decades and worked in the city administration. Interview with Frau P., interview by author, audio recording, Eisenhüttenstadt, June 2, 2016. This was apparently a somewhat common phenomenon, and is referenced in several of the reports to the *Rat des Bezirkes* throughout the early 1980s.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Wolfgang Perske, interview by the author, March 22, 2016.

<sup>84</sup> Hartmut Preuß recently retired as the Director of the Städtisches Museums in Fürstenberg. Interview with Hartmut Preuß, interview by author, audio recording, March 9, 2016, Eisenhüttenstadt.

<sup>85</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, "Wohnkomplex VII," in *Dokumentation. Entwicklung der Wohnkomplexe I bis VII*, 2.

impressive range of social amenities and shopping options nearby. This stood in sharp contrast to some of the other apartment blocks constructed in the earlier decades of the GDR. As of June 1983, 73.2 percent of Eisenhüttenstadt's individual apartments were outfitted with modern heating (meaning district, gas, or central heating), whereas the remaining 26.8 percent still had stove heating.<sup>86</sup> Only 82.3 percent of apartments had warm water, whereas 5.4 percent did not have their own shower or bath. Even 2.1 percent still did not have a toilet in the apartment.<sup>87</sup> For those apartment complexes constructed in the early years of Eisenhüttenstadt's existence, such as *Wohnkomplexen I* through *IV*, many modern amenities were not yet broadly available.<sup>88</sup> This, combined with two to three decades of inhabitation without significant renovation, meant that by the end of the 1980s many apartments in Eisenhüttenstadt were showing their age.

In a process mirroring what happened with the expansion of social welfare, leisure activities, and consumption, using the quality of housing as a benchmark for measuring the improvement citizens' standard of living proved to be a moving target for the regime. While Eisenhüttenstadt's reputation as a socialist model city—combined with the fact that it was not even founded until 1950—meant that it was better outfitted than many other similarly-sized industrial cities in East Germany, these facts simultaneously created new problems for the local administration trying to reach their housing construction and renovation goals. Because residents had higher expectations for the quality of apartments they would receive in Eisenhüttenstadt, this meant that demand for newer apartment units like those of *Wohnkomplexen VI* and *VII* outpaced

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<sup>86</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 02.11.1983, Abteilung Wohnungspolitik und Wohnungswirtschaft, "Informationsmaterial für die Stadtverordnetenversammlung am 2. Nov. 1983. Ergebnisse bei der Realisierung des Wohnungsbauprogramms und der Erfüllung wohnungspolitischer Aufgaben," 2.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, "Wohnkomplex VI," and "Wohnkomplex II" in *Dokumentation. Entwicklung der Wohnkomplexe I bis VII*.

the rate at which the city could construct new or renovate old apartments. In this way, the strides that the regime did make toward the implementation of “real existing socialism” on the local level in Eisenhüttenstadt paradoxically served to raise residents’ expectations, and predispose them toward disappointment and frustration with their housing circumstances.

### **Privileged Model City? Leisure Activities in the 1970s and 1980s**

Flipping through the pages of the city’s colorful magazine of cultural events, the *Kulturspiegel*, Eisenhüttenstadt residents would find no shortage of events and activities to fill their free time. In fact, they very well may have had the opposite problem! By the 1970s and 1980s, the pages of the *Kulturspiegel* were bursting with information about the cultural programming on offer from the city’s various clubs, culture houses (*Kulturhäuser*), performance halls, dining and drinking opportunities, and so on. This is because one of the main components of the regime’s task of increasing its citizens’ quality of life was expanding the variety and volume of leisure activities they could undertake in their free time. With the official implementation and legalization of the five-day work week in 1965 and 1967, accompanied by an increase in workers’ wages throughout the course of the late 1960s and early 1970s,<sup>89</sup> GDR citizens had more discretionary time and income and therefore required a corresponding expansion of both activities and products with which to occupy themselves. This section explores a sampling of the variety of social and cultural activities that became commonplace throughout the 1970s and 1980s in Eisenhüttenstadt. Some of these activities were state-sponsored, and others were provided to employees by EKO. But in both cases, the variety and volume of leisure activities came to be an accepted part of the social and cultural fabric of Eisenhüttenstadt.

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<sup>89</sup> Steiner, *The Plans That Failed*, 131-132.

One means by which the local SED leadership enriched the cultural opportunities in Eisenhüttenstadt throughout the 1970s and 1980s was to expand the cultural programming of the existing institutions in the city. The Friedrich-Wolf-Theater, which opened in March 1955, was one of the central cultural institutions in Eisenhüttenstadt, and remains so to this day. In a 1980 interview in the city magazine *Kulturspiegel*, the chairman of a working group in local history reflected on some of his most recent favorite highlights in the programming for the Friedrich-Wolf-Theater. In particular, he recalled East German actress and singer Gisela May's visit to Eisenhüttenstadt, as well as a memorable performance of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony, and Czechoslovak puppet duo Hurvinek and Spejbl's show.<sup>90</sup> This variety and notoriety of programming in the Friedrich-Wolf-Theater was typical for the 1970s and onward. Eisenhüttenstadt residents of all ages could find something to entertain, whether it was a screening of a new children's film or an exhibit on the city's history in honor of the thirtieth anniversary celebrations. Throughout the years, the Friedrich-Wolf-Theater had helped to commemorate some of the high points in the life of the city and of the entire republic.

Outside of the Friedrich-Wolf-Theater, there were a series of other state-funded clubs and cultural centers that offered diverse programming. Residents would have already been familiar with the Friedrich-Engels-Klub, which—like the theater—had been founded in 1955 by a small group dedicated to cultural pursuits in the young city.<sup>91</sup> Throughout the years, the club had become a consistent feature in the cultural life of the city. “Surely, dear reader, you know the Friedrich-Engels-Klub—surely you have also visited the “Heights of Culture”—our home on the

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<sup>90</sup> Werner Mrosan, “25 Jahre Friedrich-Wolf-Theater,” *Kulturspiegel* 3 (March 1980): 7.

<sup>91</sup> Hermann Schilling, “Unser Friedrich-Engels-Klub in seiner Zeit,” *Kulturspiegel* 12 (December 1980): 3.

fourth floor of the department store (*Kaufhaus*).<sup>92</sup> The article in the *Kulturspiegel* went on to remind readers of the selection of events with which they should already be familiar, such as the “Topical Monthly Talk” (*Aktuelles Monatsgespräch*) or the regular dance evenings.

Additionally, the article went on to alert residents about some new programming about which they might not know. For example, in their author invitational series, the club invited all members and residents interested in literature to come “exchange ideas about modern or classical literature with authors, publishers, and other creators of literature.”<sup>93</sup> Although the subject matter sounded heavy, the article promised lively discussion and more light-hearted activities as well, such as a trivia game and a book sale. For 1980 they had varied program planned, including visits from the authors Dieter Noll, Helmut Sakowski, Franz Fühmann, and a series of talks on classical literature as well.

In addition to literature, the Friedrich-Engels-Klub also offered activities and events for those interested in music or art. Not only could one join a singing circle that practiced regularly and held small concerts in the ballroom of City Hall (*Rathaus*), but the club also invited well-known singers for more intimate performances and discussions accompanying their larger performances.<sup>94</sup> In these endeavors, the Friedrich-Engels-Klub hoped to continue their collaboration with the *Haus der Gewerkschaft*, which was the cultural center for the local branch of the trade union in Eisenhüttenstadt. For those interested in discussing art, the club sponsored a small, monthly discussion circle in the club room of the medical school.<sup>95</sup> They also led periodic

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<sup>92</sup> Anneliese Minkner, “Besuchen Sie uns doch einmal – Anregungen zur interessanten Gestaltung Ihrer Freizeit,” *Kulturspiegel* 1 (January 1980): 7.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

field trips to Frankfurt (Oder) or Weimar to take advantage of the broader array of artistic and cultural offerings in those somewhat larger cities.<sup>96</sup>

The Friedrich-Engels-Klub and other clubs throughout Eisenhüttenstadt endeavored to create new programming for younger citizens of Eisenhüttenstadt, particularly those who were too old for the youth clubs (*Jugendclubs*), but were perhaps too young to be interested in some of the more sophisticated cultural programming offered by various clubs and culture houses. In January 1980, the Friedrich-Engels-Klub added a monthly meet-up for young, married couples to their agenda. Here, couples between the ages of 18 and 26 could gather, enjoy a glass of wine, and meet other young couples with similar interests as themselves.<sup>97</sup> The April 1980 issue of the *Kulturspiegel* interviewed Anneliese Minkner, club secretary of the Friedrich-Engels-Klub, about a new series of events that proved to be a big hit among the younger generation of Eisenhüttenstadt residents. The series, called “Live-Club” was inspired by the EKO-*Jugendclub* and then taken up by Friedrich-Engels-Klub, and invited “all young people interested in good and discerning music” to come on Saturday evenings starting at 7:00 PM and enjoy live performances from well-known regional musicians and singer-songwriters. The audience was reportedly delighted; one attendee said that it was an “awesome thing that it’s now specifically 18 and older,” while another added that having it on “Saturday was great because then you can out more afterwards.” Another attendee was pleasantly surprised, commenting that they “had no idea that it was so lit in the Engels-Klub.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>98</sup> *Kulturspiegel* staff, interview with Comrade Anneliese Minkner, “‘Live-Club’ im Friedrich-Engels-Klub,” *Kulturspiegel* 4 (April 1980): 11. The original German comment reads “wusste gar nicht, dass es im Engels-Klub so dufte ist.” In the parlance of the time, “dufte” is probably closer to the English “smashing,” but I modified it to fit more contemporary slang terminology.

In addition to programming for teenagers and young adults, Eisenhüttenstadt also had an extensive network of programming for school-age children run by the various *Jugendklubs* throughout the city. As an October 1980 article in the *Kulturspiegel* underlined, these *Jugendklubs* “were important centers of cultural-intellectual life.” The article reported that in 1979, the *Jugendklubs* in Eisenhüttenstadt held a total of 145 events, and that a total 16,095 young Eisenhüttenstädters had attended these programs.<sup>99</sup> Of these 145 individual events, there were 23 different types of events, meaning that there was a versatility able to satisfy all tastes. The events encompassed the full range of traditional cultural programming, like oldies movie nights, panel discussions, youth concerts, disco nights, talent shows, and sporting events, to name a few. Some clubs, like the *Jugendklub* “International 69” of the state-*Kulturhaus*, went above and beyond by preparing a program of activities that managed to combine convivial activities like dances with “the dissemination of knowledge, information, artistic experience, and relaxation.”<sup>100</sup> The numbers alone attest to the popularity of these events among the youth of Eisenhüttenstadt, and the amount of energy and resources that the local administration invested in the quality and quantity of these events likewise indicates their importance to the regime.

The array of leisure activities in Eisenhüttenstadt, however, was not all fun and games. In addition to ostensibly inspiring workers to be more productive (or so the regime hoped), leisure activities were also a prime opportunity for the state to inculcate a proper consciousness in its workers and citizens. Besides the official socialist youth movements sponsored by the SED, which included the Young Pioneers (*Junge Pioniere*) intended for school-aged children from age 6 to 14 and the Free German Youth (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*, or FDJ) there were many local

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<sup>99</sup> Ferdinand Wöllner, “Jugendklubs. Stätten des Gedankenaustausch,” *Kulturspiegel* 10 (October 1980): 22.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

endeavors to use social and cultural programming as a means to foster a working-class consciousness among residents.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, as evidenced by the previous example, the most successful cultural events for young residents were those that could strike the appropriate balance between “fun” and “educational.” Moreover, many of these opportunities for instilling a proper working-class mentality amongst workers conveniently also involved “volunteer” projects that benefitted the city in various ways.

On the national and local level, the SED developed wide-ranging programs to harness workers’ productivity in their free time, as well. One nation-wide volunteer campaign operated with success in Eisenhüttenstadt under the slogan “*Schöner unsere Stadt, die wir lieben, mach mit!*” (or, “beautify our city, that we love, take part!”). This campaign encouraged residents to demonstrate their city-pride by participating in local volunteer projects to beautify or improve the city. For example, in preparation for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in Eisenhüttenstadt, the local newspaper, *Neuer Tag* (“New Day”), ran a feature article about the older, female retirees who volunteered to plant all the flowers throughout the city in anticipation of the large festival that would take place in June 1980. Comrade Irma Altmann had worked for 25 years in the landscaping department of a civil engineering firm in Frankfurt (Oder). She reported that the fact “that she was still needed and could still be there for others,” even in retirement, “made her very happy.”<sup>102</sup> In this case, not only did Comrade Altmann and her group of retirees provide a service, but the opportunity to do something kind and beautiful for the city and its residents achieved self-fulfillment as well.

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<sup>101</sup> For a classic account of the history of the Free German Youth movement see Ulrich Mählert, *Blaue Hemden, Rote Fahnen: die Geschichte der Freien Deutschen Jugend* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1996). Or, for an account of FDJ movement that focuses on “crisis points” in GDR history up until 1968 see Alan McDougall, *Youth Politics in East Germany: The Free German Youth Movement, 1946-1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>102</sup> Ingrid Bossack, “Sie setzte unserer Stadt die ersten Blumen,” *Neuer Tag* 29:84 (April 9, 1980): 8.



The “*Mach Mit!*” (“Take Part!”) competition had the potential to generate significant free labor for the state, and was thus an important means of offsetting lagging productivity in other areas. Shortly on the heels of the city’s 30<sup>th</sup> year anniversary celebrations, a newspaper article in *Neuer Tag* reported on the success of the competition in the first half of 1980. As of May 31, Eisenhüttenstadt residents had painted 1,560 apartments and groomed 45,000 square meters of green areas throughout the city. In the first five months of the year, the citizens of Eisenhüttenstadt had already achieved 43.9 percent of their goal of saving 12 million Marks for the city. This result was so promising that the state set a new goal: to overshoot the old goal of 12 million by an additional million!<sup>103</sup> Voluntary campaigns such as the “*Mach Mit!*” competition revealed that the regime’s goals of improving the cultural and social lives of its citizens were inextricably intertwined with their parallel goals of increasing economic output across the board and crafting politically reliable workers and citizens who would go above and beyond for their city and state.

In addition to the social and cultural activities sponsored by the state, *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* also played an important role in expanding the volume and variety of leisure activities for workers and residents alike. The factory had its own workers’ clubs, *Jugendklubs*, and array of social and cultural programming to mirror what was offered by the state. They had their own Photo Club, reading circles, casual conversation groups, holiday programming, and more formal receptions, like for International Women’s Day.<sup>104</sup> Often EKO organizations would collaborate on or support events being organized by other local groups.

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<sup>103</sup> Christa Kraft, “Für unsere Stadt, die wir alle lieben. Neue Zielstellung im ‘Mach Mit’-Wettbewerb: in diesem Jahr werden 13 Millionen Mark Werte geschaffen,” *Neuer Tag* 29:138 (June 13, 1980): 6.

<sup>104</sup> See for example, *Kulturspiegel*, “Wir stellen vor Foto Club des EKO,” 10 (October 1981): 5-7; Unternehmensarchiv ArcelorMitall, Eisenhüttenstadt, “Jahreskulturangebot – Klubhaus der Gewerkschaft. VEB Bahndstahlkombinat ‘Hermann Matern’ EKO.”

Among the most popular activities organized by EKO were those sponsored by the Factory Sports Club “Steel” (*Betriebssportgemeinschaft Stahl*, or BSG Stahl) which had been founded in 1950 in order to encourage active participation in sports and athletic endeavors among the citizens Eisenhüttenstadt.<sup>105</sup> BSG Stahl was responsible for the organization of both professional sports leagues in the town, like the soccer team of the same name, *BSG Stahl Eisenhüttenstadt*, as well as the extensive network of amateur sports leagues.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, sports and athletic activities also benefited from the regime’s efforts to expand social and cultural amenities for its citizens. The regime’s success in fortifying physical culture (*Körperkultur*) on the local level in Eisenhüttenstadt is reflected by the growth in popularity of one of the most visible and popular sport events in the city. Once a year, the BSG-Stahl put on a factory-wide sports’ festival (*Betriebssportfest*) in which workers were encouraged to compete against each other in friendly athletic pursuits. The first official factory-wide *Betriebssportfest* took place in August 1970 and had 670 participants total. By the 10<sup>th</sup> annual *Betriebssportfest* held in 1979, more than 2,400 workers from almost every branch of EKO participated in a range of athletic pursuits, from track and field events to lawn bowling (*Kegelbahn*).<sup>106</sup>

EKO workers enjoyed access to all of the factory-sponsored sports and leisure facilities because the management of EKO, like the regime as a whole, was committed to the supporting the athletic pursuits of its citizens. As the chairman of the BSG, Comrade Dr. Horst Kittel, explained, “we are all interested in the further development of physical culture and sport and

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<sup>105</sup> Rena Malinowski, “Die Entwicklung der BSG Stahl Eisenhüttenstadt im Zeitraum von 1950-1995,” (Bachelorarbeit, Universität Potsdam, 2011), 23.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

proud about the good condition of our facilities.”<sup>107</sup> Indeed, BSG-Stahl boasted extensive facilities for both the competitive and casual athlete. By 1980 Eisenhüttenstadt residents had access to “four tennis courts, a modern track and field facility,” including a throwing ring for discus, shot put, and javelin, “six soccer fields, two small track and field facilities, five volleyball courts, lawn-bowling facilities, training and competition sites for weight lifting, Judo, wrestling, and cycling, as well as recreational and relaxation sports, a sauna, four small handball fields and numerous additional facilities.”<sup>108</sup>

And Eisenhüttenstadt residents had particular grounds to be proud about their sporting facilities, for they bore the brunt of the burden of maintaining them, which was no small task. “The sports complexes and facilities must be constantly cultivated and maintained so that they are ready at any time for competition.”<sup>109</sup> This job fell to a specially designated collective, whose main responsibility was upkeep of the sporting facilities. In addition to paid employees, in 1979 residents of Eisenhüttenstadt logged over 4,182 hours of volunteer work as a part of the “*Mach Mit!*” (“Take Part!”) competition. Workers from other brigades all throughout EKO—from the sinter plant to ore processing and the cold-rolling mill—helped in “socialist collaboration” to make the facilities available for everyone to use.

The extensive factory and state-sponsored leisure activities that were intended to incentivize workers are testament to the quintessential tension of the “welfare dictatorship.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Gustav Bräutigam, “Gute Möglichkeiten zum Sporttreiben,” *Unser Friedenswerk* Nr. 1/80 (January 1980), 6.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Historian Konrad H. Jarausch coined the term “welfare dictatorship” (*Fürsorgediktatur*) in order to capture the inherent contradiction “between socialism’s emancipatory rhetoric and the corrupt practice of Stalinism within a single analytical category.” See Konrad H. Jarausch, “Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship,” in *Dictatorship as Experience: Toward a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 52-53.

On the one hand, there was the top-down imperative to increase the vibrancy of “intellectual and cultural life” (*geistig-kulturelles Leben*) by expanding athletic offerings in Eisenhüttenstadt and throughout the entire GDR. Residents and factory workers were required to participate in “voluntary” campaigns in order to demonstrate their ideological credibility and commitment to the regime. On the other hand, these state-coordinated efforts often resulted in tangible improvements in residents’ everyday lives. Whether it was maintaining recreational sport facilities or renovating a building for use as a culture house, workers and their fellow citizens benefitted from the top-down imperatives of the “participatory dictatorship.”<sup>111</sup>

All told, the SED leadership on the national and local level did succeed in expanding leisure and free-time activities for residents throughout the 1970s and 1980s. However, even as the plethora of activities for residents of Eisenhüttenstadt came to be a central part of the social and cultural fabric of the model city, they paradoxically at times also left the local administration vulnerable to new criticism. The next section demonstrates, the more opportunities that the regime provided for its citizens, the more opportunities they created for disappointment, as well. In this case, by raising citizens’ standard of living by improving their access to leisure activities, the regime had also succeeded in raising citizens expectations of what precisely constituted “real existing socialism.”

### **Consumption and Everyday Life**

Guaranteeing a stable standard of living in the GDR had been a priority for the Party leadership since the founding of the regime, and especially since the unrest of June 17, 1953. As economic historian André Steiner explains, however, “the standard of living . . . was based on

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<sup>111</sup> Mary Fulbrook, in turn, has characterized the GDR as a “participatory dictatorship,” in that large numbers of East Germans actually did participate in the “democratic centralism” of the GDR, and not necessarily either out of genuine ideological commitment or simple coercion. See Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, 12.

the needs of a working-class family during the Weimar era,” which was “a living standard under which most of [the Party leadership] were themselves socialized.”<sup>112</sup> In keeping with the social problems that plagued the Weimar Republic, the emphasis in the early years of the republic was on solving the social problem of hunger, homelessness, and exorbitant rent prices—policies that resulted in low prices for basic foodstuffs and low rents. After the end of postwar rationing, when the economy of the GDR had begun to grow again, “a roll of bread in the GDR cost 5 Pfennig and a half a pound of butter cost 2.50 Marks—and this was how matters remained until 1989.”<sup>113</sup> This practice of maintaining low prices for basic foodstuffs ensured that no one in the GDR went hungry, but it did not mean a corresponding reduction in prices or expansion in selection for industrial goods, as evidenced by the mounting volume of petitions received by the SED regime throughout the final two decades of the GDR.

Petitions and written letters of complaint to the East German leadership in which citizens expressed their everyday concerns had occupied a significant part of the regime’s administrative attentions since with Wilhelm Pieck’s short presidency. The “petitions laws” (*Eingabengesetze*) had their origins in the masses of spontaneous letters that Wilhelm Pieck and his administration received in the first months of the regime. These correspondences were initially welcomed and used as an instrument to measure the administration’s effectiveness. After Pieck’s death, Walter Ulbricht institutionalized the petition system through the creation of the State Council (*Staatsrat*), which served as the official addressee for all citizens’ petitions and complaints. With Honecker’s ascension to power, however, the petition system became a farce. While Honecker’s administration interpreted a sinking quantity of petitions as proof of the legitimacy of the Party’s

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<sup>112</sup> Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 89.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

politics and leadership, the opposite was not understood as an indicator of the illegitimacy or inadequacy of the regime. Rather, the growing quantity of complaints throughout the 1980s was simply ignored, to the detriment of the Party's and regime's legitimacy, as well as to detriment of citizens' standard of living.<sup>114</sup>

At the same time, by the 1970s and 1980s, this culture of petitioning the government with suggestions, complaints, and apolitical criticism was firmly enshrined. Indeed, as the promises of improved living standards that were supposed to accompany “real existing socialism” proved slow to materialize in certain areas, ordinary East German citizens turned increasingly to their local, regional, and national governments to air their grievances. In fact, there was even a widespread rumor circulating that maintained that appealing directly to Erich Honecker himself could improve one's chances of having their request fulfilled.<sup>115</sup> The sheer quantity of complaints about the shortcomings of everyday life during the 1980s is not to be dismissed lightly. Whereas in 1983 around 52,000 letters were addressed to the Berlin *Staatsrat* (State Council), by 1989 this number had risen to 134,000—a figure that does not include other complaints sent to local administrative bodies.<sup>116</sup>

This section examines the influx of petitions received by the local government in Eisenhüttenstadt throughout the last decade of the GDR in order to show the ways in which residents of Eisenhüttenstadt understood the neglect of their everyday needs by the city government. For the local administration, and for the regime as a whole, the 1970s and 1980s created the perfect storm of economic and social conditions that made the heightened attention to

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<sup>114</sup> Felix Mühlberg, “Vorwort,” in *Ham wa nich! Bewchwerden Eisenhüttenstädter und Gubener Bürger aus der DDR-Endzeit* (Bürgerverinigung “Fürstenberg (Oder)” e.V., 2008), iii-iv.

<sup>115</sup> Informal interview with anonymous resident of Eisenhüttenstadt.

<sup>116</sup> Erich Opitz, front matter, in *Ham wa nich! Bewchwerden Eisenhüttenstädter und Gubener Bürger aus der DDR-Endzeit* (Bürgerverinigung “Fürstenberg (Oder)” e.V., 2008), i-ii.

consumption all the more acute. The convergence of low prices for basic goods, rising wages, promises of expanded consumer choices, growing comparisons with the quality of life in West (as propagated by near universal consumption of West German television), and shortages of more desirable basic goods help explain both why Eisenhüttenstadt residents' expectations had increased, as well as why the city was failing to deliver.

Shortages affected Eisenhüttenstadt residents in all areas of their everyday lives. Whether at home, at work, or somewhere in between—during each stage of their lives from childhood adolescence, throughout adulthood until death, East German citizens in the 1980s were faced with the frustrating reality of shortages. As Dr. Felix Mühlberg explains, “For some these petitions are a sign of the centrally-controlled dictatorship and oppression.” For others, however, “the petitions were an effective instrument to strike back against state services.”<sup>117</sup> In the extensive multivolume collection of petitions published by the civic association *Bürgervereinigung “Fürstenberg (Oder)” e.V.*, residents revealed a variety of motivations for airing their grievances with the local government and the regime on the whole. In some instances, residents seemed simply to want to express their frustration with the situation and establish an official record of their complaint. In other cases, residents clearly hoped that their petitions would result in a change in their particular outcome or an improvement of the overall situation for other citizens as well. Sometimes they even received a response from the local governmental organizations involved. Finally, the petitions from Eisenhüttenstädters are also rife with implicit and sometimes explicit criticisms of the regime's failure to meet the benchmarks of living standards that it had promised to its citizens.

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<sup>117</sup> Mühlberg, “Vorwort,” *Ham wa nich!*, iii.

Despite the Party leadership's commitment and apparent belief that they had solved the Weimar era problems of hunger and homelessness, GDR citizens were clearly not entirely satisfied with the provisions provided. For example, although the price of bread rolls never rose about 5 Pfennig in the GDR until after 1989, that did not mean that the quality or assortment was always satisfactory to customers, as evidenced by the vignette that opened this chapter. Residents were also plagued by unsatisfactory selection of other everyday goods, even going so far as to disrupt funeral preparations for a deceased loved-one. One resident wrote to convey her experience of trying to organize a burial for a family member. On Monday, February 23, 1987, she went to the flower shop at the cemetery to put in an order of flowers for the funeral that upcoming Friday. She was informed by the attendants that “[they] couldn't take any orders for Friday—[they] couldn't manage it, as [they] were only two workers.” The petitioner was forced to conclude that it was impossible to organize a funeral in Eisenhüttenstadt within a week, and wished that the flower shop employees could be more flexible, as “one can't really plan for a death.”<sup>118</sup>

Among the most important prongs of the East German leadership's efforts to raise their citizens' standard of living—as well as one of the most highly anticipated on the part of consumers—was through an expansion in the offering of consumer goods. In particular, Honecker and his administration hoped that production of industrial consumer goods such as refrigerators, televisions, cars and gasoline, and detergent and textiles, among others, combined with social welfare measures, would “appeal to the working class . . . yield[ing] such results in

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<sup>118</sup> Anonymous family member and Eisenhüttenstadt, resident “Eingabe,” to the Rat der Stadt, Abt. Örtl. Versorgungswirtschaft, in *Ham wa nich! Bewchwerden Eisenhüttenstädter und Gubener Bürger aus der DDR-Endzeit* (Bürgervereinigung “Fürstenberg (Oder)” e.V., 2008), 30.



production as [were] not yet contained in the calculations of the State Planning Commission.”<sup>119</sup>

However, unlike the price of basic foodstuffs like bread—its freshness aside—the cost of these industrial goods and appliances was not subsidized by the state. Rather, these goods were intentionally priced above their cost in order to finance subsidies in other areas.<sup>120</sup>

In addition to the often-prohibitive cost of industrial goods, GDR citizens who could afford to purchase more luxury consumer goods such as a refrigerator, automobile, or washing machine, were forced to wait a comically long period of time (by Western standards) in order to receive their order. One of my interview subjects, Eberhard Harz, was attending technical university in Dresden when his father suggested that he order a car, specifically a Soviet Lada.<sup>121</sup> Harz was hesitant, as he did not have the money, to which his father replied, “by the time you get the car, you’ll have the money.”<sup>122</sup> Indeed, Harz put the order for the Soviet car in 1969, and is still waiting for its delivery until this day! Other consumers interested in making big purchases were alternatively faced with empty shelves or lackluster excuses. A March 1985 correspondence between the Department of Trade and Supply and the city council revealed that sales personnel in Eisenhüttenstadt, as well as the neighboring cities Frankfurt (Oder) and Guben, were overwhelmed by requests for high quality consumer items like freezers or color televisions. The letter requested that the city council consider implementing a more sophisticated ordering system for these items, to which the city council member replied unhelpfully but truthfully (and over two months later) that “the implementation of an ordering system would not

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<sup>119</sup> Cited in Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 145.

<sup>120</sup> Steiner, *The Plans that Failed*, 90.

<sup>121</sup> The Lada was one of the most popular Soviet sedans, comparable to the GDR’s Trabant or Trabi.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with Eberhard Harz, interview by the author, audio recording, Eisenhüttenstadt, June 26, 2017.

change anything about the relationship between availability and demand [of these items], and therefore would do nothing to solve the problem.”<sup>123</sup>

Even ordinary GDR citizens who attempted to use existing ordering systems to pursue their own home-renovation projects often endured long waiting periods and frustrating results. In July 1986, one disgruntled Eisenhüttenstadt resident appealed directly to the city council to explain the problems encountered when trying to remodel his kitchen. The previous October he had placed an order for 500 wall tiles from the BHG Eisenhüttenstadt (*Bäuerliche Handelsgenossenschaft*) and was told they would be available to pick up on July 10, 1986. On the date in question, he and his wife arrived punctually at the BHG after his wife got off work at 2:00 PM, where they were greeted by a curt saleswoman who informed them that the tiles were already gone and that they should have lined up at 5:00 AM that morning had they wanted to get their hands on any. Indeed, the petitioner and his wife could see “that the wall tiles were picked through and sold out. The only two types leftover were plain, “which didn’t match what [they] imagined at all or speak to [their] tastes.” The saleswoman suggested they try again next year. The Eisenhüttenstadt resident asked in the conclusion of his letter, “is the ordering system incorrect, or poorly organized, or did my wife and I do something amiss? Do we really have to wait another entire year for the same joke to begin all over again?”<sup>124</sup> Although this resident’s reaction may seem bold bordering on excessively defiant, such a pointed criticism was acceptable as long as it remained directed at the regime’s failings to uphold its promises of

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<sup>123</sup> Anonymous employee in the Abteilung Handel und Versorgung and response from Comrade Wiese, “Eingabe zum Bestellsystem hochwertiger Konsumgüter,” March 4 and May 24, 1985, in in *Ham wa leider nich! Bewchwerden Eisenhüttenstädter und Gubener Bürger aus der DDR-Endzeit, Vol. II* (Bürgervereinigung “Fürstenberg (Oder)” e.V., 2008), 42-43.

<sup>124</sup> Anonymous Eisenhüttenstadt resident, “Eingabe: Bestellung und Abholung von Wandfliesen in der BHG Eisenhüttenstadt,” an der Rat der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt, Abteilung Handel und Versorgung, 18 July 1986, in *Ham wa nich! Bewchwerden Eisenhüttenstädter und Gubener Bürger aus der DDR-Endzeit* (Bürgervereinigung “Fürstenberg (Oder)” e.V., 2008), 16.

increasing citizens' standard of living, as opposed to fundamentally questioning the ideology of Marxism-Leninism.

The same appalling wait times and dissatisfactory service often also held true for repairs. In an economy in which one might routinely wait a decade to receive their automobile order, citizens were naturally inclined to take good care of their possession to make them last as long as possible. However, they also wanted them to actually work, which was not the case for one resident's color "Raduga" television. In his petition, he explained that he had dropped the television off for repairs on November 30, 1987, when he was told it would take approximately four to five weeks to complete the job. On February 16, 1988—now 10 weeks later—the resident followed up with a complaint to the City Council. As a retiree, he explained, "[his] TV gave [him] the chance to keep up with world events," but at the same time, "[he] unfortunately could not afford a second device." The resident eventually received his repaired television back the following week; the letter from the repair services firm explained that "as the only repair workshop in the area equipped to repair that model of television, they were often overwhelmed by the excessively high accrual of repair requests."<sup>125</sup>

Indeed, as evidenced by the response from the repair services department, shortages also made it difficult for ordinary East Germans to do their jobs. On August 8, 1986, the sales team leader at Sales Outlet 1115 for Game and Poultry appealed directly to the mayor of Eisenhüttenstadt regarding an ongoing problem at her store. "It's unusual to burden the mayor with things for which there are seemingly many other people to solve it," Frau Elsner began.

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<sup>125</sup> Anonymous Eisenhüttenstadt resident and response from Comrade Sekorsky, "Fernsehreparatur (Raduga) bei der PGH," February 16, 1988 and March 8, 1988, in in *Ham wa leider nich! Bewchwerden Eisenhüttenstädter und Gubener Bürger aus der DDR-Endzeit, Vol. II* (Bürgervereinigung "Fürstenberg (Oder)" e.V., 2008), 234-236.

“But since nothing has come of it, there aren’t any other options,” she continued, detailing how the main cooling unit in her sales outlet had been broken for months, meaning that it was only possible to store the game and poultry in a tiny freezer unit. “In addition to these aggravated working conditions, our saleswomen are constantly subjected to the justified critique on the part of the customers.” Although the Commission for Hygiene and Utility Services (*Kommission der Hygiene und Dienstleistungsbetriebe*) knew of the situation, they had not been able to offer anything other than verbal assurances. Frau Elsner concluded her letter expressing her hope “that there are a few men that understand something besides theory, and can do something in practice,” and making clear that she was “counting on a thorough repair or a new cooling unit.”<sup>126</sup>

Frau Elsner’s frustration about the lengthy wait time for regular repairs was quite palpable. But more than this, her letter reveals the continued failure of the GDR’s planned economy. Though she was sympathetic to citizens’ frustrations about the insufficient quantity and quality of poultry and game available at her sales outlet, she likewise resented the fact that she and her sales team were blamed for a problem that was out of their control. And though she scathingly critiqued the Commission for Hygiene and Utility Services for their inability to provide timely repairs, in reality, this situation was likely out of the commission’s control as well. Perhaps they had put in a request for the replacement part necessary from a regional distribution center, but if that distribution center had not been allocated sufficient parts at the beginning of the planning year, then there was no way for the Eisenhüttenstadt branch to get what they needed. In other words, the lack of flexibility in the planned economy proved a

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<sup>126</sup> Frau Elsner, “Eingabe: Kein Bier im Staatlichen Kulturhaus ‚Ernst Thälmann,‘” an der Rat der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt, Abteilung Handel und Versorgung, received 31 October 1986, in *Ham wa leider nich! Bewchwerden Eisenhüttenstädter und Gubener Bürger aus der DDR-Endzeit, Vol. II* (Bürgervereinigung “Fürstenberg (Oder)” e.V., 2008), 107-108.

stumbling block throughout most areas of development, from industrial development, as we witnessed above in the case of steel production, to the consumer goods industry.

As explored in the previous section, the 1970s and 1980s in Eisenhüttenstadt witnessed the local administration invest renewed time and resources in the many local state-owned culture houses (*Kulturhäuser*). Unfortunately, some of the regime's efforts throughout the 1970s to expand the volume and assortment of social and cultural programming for citizens ultimately opened new avenues for criticism by the 1980s. These culture houses and clubs offered diverse programming for a range of Eisenhüttenstädters, young and old alike. But if the service, accommodation, or programming failed to live up to what residents had become accustomed to, then they were not restrained in expressing their dissatisfaction to local administrative avenues.

In October 1986, the city council received a letter from a local resident who wrote in with a serious complaint about the Culture House "Ernst Thälmann," namely, that there was insufficient beer. More specifically, the petitioner observed that on the evenings that the Culture House held disco nights for the younger residents of Eisenhüttenstadt, the drink service was so illogically organized and of such low quality that it was likely a deterrent to visitors. The official opening of the disco nights on Thursday was 6:00 PM, which should have meant the official start of drink service as well, although this was not always the case, the petitioner made clear. By 7:00 PM the restaurant closed for an hour to give the employees a break (though the music and dancing continued). By 8:00 PM when the restaurant reopened one could only order non-alcoholic beverages. This meant that there was routinely less than a one-hour window in which adolescents could order a beer, which did not compare favorably to other culture houses in

Eisenhüttenstadt. Moreover, the petitioner believed “that the disco nights were no longer as well attended by adolescents as they used to be” because of the unsatisfactory drink service.<sup>127</sup>

Even the city’s most elite fine-dining institution was not immune from criticism. The famous Hotel “Lunik” occupied a prominent position on the main shopping street, *Leninallee*, on the opposite corner from City Hall. The Hotel “Lunik” was where visiting Party functionaries often stayed for their visits to the socialist model city. The hotel also boasted an Intershop on the first floor, where *Deutsche Mark* (DM, or currency from the BRD) or dollars could be exchanged for luxury items from the West, such as spirits or cigarettes.<sup>128</sup> The hotel had ample space for entertaining as well, and the banquet rooms were often used for official state functions or rented out to local residents for special occasions. Such was the case for one disgusted Eisenhüttenstädter who had used Hotel “Lunik” and the attached Restaurant “Aktivist” for a family celebration. The petitioner’s complaints were numerous. First, the kitchen had made unauthorized changes to the menu. Instead of the agreed upon appetizers, they served “caviar filled peach halves with—a culinary highlight to be sure—a cucumber garnish.” Second, the warm menu items arrived to the guests as decidedly cold courses. Third, “the color of the carrot soup was indefinable, ranging from a reddish brown to downright brown and black.” And finally, although the serving staff was “friendly and nice,” they were excessively slow, and the guests were only served two beers in the first two hours of service. The petitioner was seemingly justified in their conclusion that the 7.10 Mark paid per plate was grossly overpriced.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Anonymous Eisenhüttenstädt resident, “Eingabe: Instandsetzung der Wohnung,” an der Rat der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt, Oberbürgermeister, 11 June 1986, in *Ham wa leider nich! Bewchwerden Eisenhüttenstädter und Gubener Bürger aus der DDR-Endzeit, Teil 2* (Bürgervereinigung “Fürstenberg (Oder)” e.V., 2008), 83-84.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Eberhard Harz, interview by the author, June 26, 2017.

<sup>129</sup> Anonymous Eisenhüttenstädt resident, “Betrifft: Reklamation des Angebotes bei einer Familienfeier am 13.09.1987 im Hotel „Lunik”” an dem Hotel „Lunik“ Eisenhüttenstadt, 25 September 1987, in *Ham wa leider nich!*

As this small sampling of petitions makes abundantly clear, residents of Eisenhüttenstadt were not satisfied with the provision of everyday goods and services in the city. Most of their complaints, however, would have been astounding to residents of the socialist model city just three decades earlier. Compared to the provision of foodstuffs and repair services available in the city's first decade of existence, residents in Eisenhüttenstadt in the 1980s were living large. However, as demonstrated in the previous sections as well, the benchmark for what constituted a satisfactory quality of life in terms of the goods and services available was not a stable one. As such, as residents' standard of living improved, so too did their expectations. And, as evidenced by the volume and tone of these petitions, they were no longer going to suffer in silence brown carrot soup or an inadequate beer supply.

## **Conclusion**

In 1971, General Secretary of the SED Erich Honecker set forth an ambitious plan to realize a "unity of economic and social policy" in the GDR. As historian Stefan Wolle has concisely summarized:

The centerpiece of the sociopolitical program consisted of a systematic increase of real income and along with it the propensity to consume, an increase of the minimum wage and minimum pension, expanded production of consumer goods as well as expansions of the service industry, of educational opportunities and kindergartens, and of the healthcare sector and recreational facilities.<sup>130</sup>

Compared to the 1950s and 1960s especially, the regime's endeavor to expand the social and welfare services to the citizens of the GDR was a conclusive success. Unfortunately for the SED-

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*Bewchwerden Eisenhüttenstädter und Gubener Bürger aus der DDR-Endzeit, Teil 2* (Bürgervereinigung "Fürstenberg (Oder)" e.V., 2008), 196-197.

<sup>130</sup> Stefan Wolle, *Die Heile Welt der Diktatur: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR, 1971-1989* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1998), 195. The German reads "Das Kernstück des sozialpolitischen Programms bestand aus einer planmäßigen Steigerung der Realeinkommen und damit der Konsumquote, einer Anhebung der Mindestlöhne und Mindestrenten, einer Produktionssteigerung von Konsumgütern sowie einem Ausbau des Dienstleistungssystems, des Bildungswesens, der Kindergärten, des Gesundheitswesens und der Erholungseinrichtungen."

regime, the standard of living of the 1950s and 1960s was no longer the metric that the populace of the GDR used to measure success. Indeed, as this chapter has shown, “real existing socialism” did not prove to be a stable benchmark to indicate whether the state was achieving the promises to its citizens.

This chapter has argued that, in the case of Eisenhüttenstadt, the state and local administration succeeded in the short-term of improving residents’ living standards, and styling workers as being an important driving force of economic growth and increased productivity. The constant striving for higher productivity combined with expanded social support from the state came to be a normal part of everyday life in Eisenhüttenstadt. Throughout the 1970s, the working population came to take for granted the range of opportunities and services that had been sorely lacking in the early 1950s and which were slowly expanded in the 1960s. Workers and their families fell into a routine in which the rhythm of their everyday lives was by and large structured around the workday in *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* or one of its supporting industries. Citizens felt confident and secure in their employment, and more or less satisfied in their living circumstances. They had disposable income to purchase the selection of consumer goods available, and which to take vacations and travel. Younger people had calculable and achievable paths forward, like working in EKO, one of its supporting industries, or in the extensive city administration. In other words, as Mary Fulbrook has written, there was a sense of “normalization” in the lives of East Germans under state socialism. Put differently, to the residents of Eisenhüttenstadt, the patterns and parameters of everyday life—constrained though they were by the state apparatus—became predictable. They learned to navigate them, and in so doing, to achieve some semblance of a *ganz normales Leben*, or a perfectly ordinary life.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, 9.



The trouble emerged, however, when the new predictability of everyday life was interrupted. Whether it was a work stoppage due to a shortage of material, or long lines and inadequate consumer goods, the conditions of late-stage socialism began to intrude on the newly predictable patterns of life under “real existing socialism.”<sup>132</sup> And despite the city’s privileged status as a socialist planned city (*Planstadt*) and as the heart of the steel industry in the GDR, Eisenhüttenstadt residents were not immune to many of the challenges of late-stage socialism. This chapter has also argued that the SED’s implementation of “real existing socialism” was ultimately a backwards policy for achieving further economic and industrial growth. By frontloading the improvements in living standards and availability of consumer goods, citizens of the GDR had essentially already received their reward for their future efforts in increasing productivity. Moreover, the expansion of welfare provisions and consumer goods became the new benchmark for citizens’ expectations about their quality of life and the rate at which they could expect further improvements. In other words, by promising citizens continued improvement in their standard of living in return for an anticipated increase in production—but simultaneously being dependent upon rising productivity in order to achieve these material promises—the SED regime had created an unresolvable tension within its system. In this way, the “normalization” of “real existing socialism” contributed to the regime’s real and perceived failure to achieve its promises to its citizens, which exacerbated the litany of mounting complaints and dissatisfactions about life in East Germany throughout the course of the 1980s.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> See, for example, Part I of *The People’s State*, “Visions of the good society (and how they were not realised in practice),” *ibid.*, 1-177.

<sup>133</sup> The convergence of internal and external factors that accompanied growing dissidence movements throughout the late-1980s will be discussed more at length in the third chapter, which, among other things, situates Eisenhüttenstadt among popular narratives of discontent in the revolutionary autumn of 1989.

Meanwhile, as the regime scrambled to hit a moving target in its attempts to deliver on the promises of “real existing socialism,” the broader economic, geopolitical, and cultural context of the 1980s was likewise shifting beneath their feet. In the final years of the 1980s, the SED-regime would be faced with a combination short- and long-term, internal and external challenges that gradually loosened their hold on the populace and government of East Germany. Between reforms emanating from the Soviet Union, increasing internal dissidence, growing dissatisfaction with travel restrictions and deficiencies in consumption and living standards, and mounting economic challenges—among many others—the SED leadership on the national and local level had their work cut out for them. The next chapter will examine how Eisenhüttenstadt and its residents fit into the next chapter of German history—namely the Peaceful Revolution, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and German unification.

## CHAPTER 3: 'REALITY WAS ABOLISHED': THE PEACEFUL REVOLUTION IN EISENHÜTTENSTADT

### Introduction

On November 17, 1989, residents gathered at the public house 'Aktivist' for an emergency, open meeting of the Eisenhüttenstadt city council (*Stadtverordnetenversammlung*) in order to "assess the current deteriorating situation in all areas of the city and in order to understand what the first steps in [the] communal work plan should be."<sup>1</sup> Although the announcement for the meeting had been circulated as early as November 6, the intervening two weeks had witnessed profound and, to some degree, unexpected changes in the political context both locally and nationally. For, on the evening of November 9, 1989, just over a week previously, the East German leadership had announced that travel restrictions to western countries—including West Berlin—would be relaxed, "effective immediately."<sup>2</sup> The opening of the Berlin Wall, now arguably the most recognizable symbol of the end of the Cold War, clearly had far-reaching consequences throughout all of the German Democratic Republic. But the build-up and aftermath of this momentous event was not monolithic—it took different shapes, moved at different speeds, and had different outcomes depending on the local places and spaces in which events unfolded. In other words, what would come to pass in the city council and on the

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<sup>1</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.11.1989, Oberbürgermeister Ottokar Wundersee, "Referat zur Sitzung der Stadtverordnetenversammlung am 17.11.1989," 1.

<sup>2</sup> For some several accounts of the events leading up to the fall of the wall see Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Hans-Hermann Hertle, *Der Fall der Mauer: die unbeabsichtigte Selbstaflösung des SED-Staates* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996); Mary Elise Sarotte, *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

streets of Eisenhüttenstadt looked different than Leipzig, Dresden, Berlin, or any number of other cities and towns throughout the GDR.

In Eisenhüttenstadt, the November 17 meeting drew a large range of participants. The usual suspects were there, including the leadership of the Socialist Unity Party as well as other members from the bloc parties (*Blockparteien*) in the National Front.<sup>3</sup> But many ordinary Eisenhüttenstadt citizens were also invited in order to participate openly and honestly in a city council meeting for the first time. Among these attendees was Pastor Joachim Rinn who took the floor about halfway through the meeting. “What would you do if someone handed over power to you?” he asked the assembled crowd. Herr Rinn referenced Austrian writer Robert Musil, whose protagonist in *The Man without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*) had answered that question by saying that he would abolish reality. “Maybe we were able to laugh at the mischievousness of this answer,” Rinn continued, “but today we know it was our *Alltag* (everyday life). Reality was abolished. Real election results were transformed into desired election results. The real economic situation was converted into a desirable economic situation with the help of statistics.” Rinn paused, and added mournfully, “I ask myself whether one should laugh or cry.”<sup>4</sup>

This chapter asks how Eisenhüttenstadt residents navigated yet another abolishment of their reality. Not only had the SED “abolished reality” throughout the course of the GDR, Pastor

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<sup>3</sup> The National Front was an alliance of political parties and other mass organizations in the GDR. Though dominated by the SED, the existence of other political parties gave the impression of a pluralistic society. These so-called bloc parties included the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Liberal Democratic Party (LDPD), Democratic Farmers’ Party (DBD), and National Democratic Party (NDPD). For an overview of the bloc parties in the GDR see Christoph Wunnicke, *Die Blockparteien der DDR: Kontinuitäten und Transformation, 1945-1990* (Berlin: Der Berliner Landesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.11.1989, Statement from Pastor Joachim Rinn in “Maßnahmen zur Erhöhung der Wirksamkeit und der Autorität der SVV Eisenhüttenstadt zur Lösung aktueller kommunalpolitischer Aufgabe und Probleme,” 1.

Rinn argued, but now it appeared as if what residents had experienced as their reality over the course of the past four decades in the socialist model city would also be abolished in the course of the so-called Peaceful Revolution. By placing Eisenhüttenstadt into the broader narrative of the *Wende*, I want to demonstrate the contingency of these processes of transformation. Indeed, at this point, unification with West Germany was not a foregone conclusion, nor even all residents' most desired outcome. Moreover, close attention to the specifics in the socialist model city reveals how events and residents' experiences on the local level depart from popular and scholarly portrayals of the *Wende*.

First, I examine the months leading up to November 9 in Eisenhüttenstadt, showing how Eisenhüttenstadt diverges from now-dominant narratives of popular discontent in East Germany during the revolutionary autumn. Unlike other centers of dissent throughout the GDR, including Leipzig, Dresden, or Schwerin, in the socialist model city only a small minority of residents were on the front lines of political revolt. What is the significance of an absence of a strong political dissidence movement in Eisenhüttenstadt before November 9, 1989? Recalling the city's status as a new town in the postwar period, what structural factors help to explain the particular way in which revolution unfolded in Eisenhüttenstadt? The absence of a strong middle-class (*Bürgertum*), and their traditional accompanying institutions such as the Protestant church, perhaps affected the formation (or lack thereof) of a strong protest movement, which had significant implications for how discussion and dissent would ultimately evolve in Eisenhüttenstadt in the late fall and early winter 1989.

Second, this chapter reveals that even against the backdrop of mounting political tensions and the growing permissibility of open dissidence and criticism against the regime, residents in Eisenhüttenstadt continued to be more concerned about their economic and material well-being

than their civil rights. Even as direct and open criticism became increasingly accepted in the local press and open forum meetings, Eisenhüttenstadt residents were more likely to express their frustration with the regime at the local and national level in terms of their dissatisfaction with their material circumstances than in terms of their restricted democratic freedoms. Building on patterns and practices of dissent developed during late-stage socialism in Eisenhüttenstadt, I argue that this form of “economic revolt” is a by-product of a regime that rested much of its legitimacy on promises of tangible material advancement. On the one hand, this was a site at which residents were practiced at expressing their criticism, as it had been permissible throughout the 1980s, as evidenced by the masses of petitions received by the city council. And on the other hand, might also reflect the regime loyalty of Eisenhüttenstädters, many of whom were committed Communists and therefore disinclined to express political dissent.

Third, this chapter asks how residents of Eisenhüttenstadt and their political representatives alike took their first tentative steps toward democracy. As ordinary Eisenhüttenstadt residents slowly felt emboldened to share their critical opinions of the regime, divergent recommendations for the present and visions for the future began to emerge. An examination of these rapidly evolving discussions in Eisenhüttenstadt gives insight into the contingent process of political democratization on the local level, and is suggestive of broader trends on the national level, as well. In particular, I argue that the transformation of the bloc parties (*Blockparteien*) into true opposition parties played an important role in challenging the moderate reform efforts of the local SED—a role that is underappreciated in English-language scholarship on German unification.<sup>5</sup> After decades of being auxiliary but decidedly subordinate

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Richter’s exhaustive account of the Peaceful Revolution in Saxony pays excellent attention to the complementary role of protesters, the Protestant Church, and members of the local bloc parties. See Michael Richter, *Die Friedliche Revolution: Aufbruch zur Demokratie in Sachsen 1989/90, Band 1* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2009). For other accounts of the role of the bloc parties throughout the GDR and in its end stages see

to the ruling SED, members of the bloc parties on the local and national level were understandably frustrated, and seized the opportunity to have true input in the discussions of democratic reform. Their attempts to make existing institutions like the parliament (*Volksammer*) function democratically laid important groundwork for collaboration and integration with the West German branches of certain individual bloc parties, a decisive step toward German unification.

Finally, this chapter reveals how democratic discussions permeated the shop floor of *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost*, as well. Much like in other areas of the city, ordinary workers in EKO were initially slow to air their grievances against the regime. But in the rapidly changing political context throughout the autumn of 1989, workers were emboldened to share their criticisms of the management, their elected trade union officials, and the economic situation in the GDR, in general. And much like in the case of the bloc parties, workers took advantage of the infrastructures built into EKO—like worker’s councils, discussion roundtables, and the factory newspaper—forcing them to fulfill their democratic functions, and laying bare the myriad ways in which the regime had failed to uphold its promises to its citizens. Taken all together, an examination of these discussions on the local level in Eisenhüttenstadt, both in the city council and on the shop floor, shows that the impulse for democratic reform came not only from the vestiges of middle-class institutions as was arguably the case elsewhere in the GDR, but also from within socialist institutions themselves. Moreover, they played an important role in the broader dissident movement, contributing to the process of democratic renewal—and ultimately dissolution—of the German Democratic Republic.

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Christoph Wunnicke, *Die Blockparteien der DDR: Kontinuitäten und Transformation 1945-1990*. On the contrary, many of the English-language accounts of German unification give the bloc parties relatively short shrift, favoring the admittedly more exciting account of political dissidents and human rights activists.

## Self-Selection and Regime Loyalty: A Profile of Eisenhüttenstadt Residents

In the summer and early autumn of 1989, against a backdrop of growing domestic discontent and an acute crisis of outmigration throughout the GDR, residents of the socialist model city, Eisenhüttenstadt, went about their business more or less as usual. A perusal of the regional newspaper, *Neuer Tag*, contained no mention of the nearly 39,000 GDR citizens who had fled the country in the first half of 1989 alone, or of dissident movements that were steadily growing in popularity.<sup>6</sup> Instead, *Neuer Tag* continued its dutiful reporting of national and regional stories—carefully in keeping with what was politically permissible in the centralized press—and local events of interest, such as the construction of new apartment units, or the delayed opening of a fresh flower stand.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to Poland and Hungary, which by the summer of 1989 had both responded to reforms in Moscow by beginning their own individual democratization processes, the SED attempted to keep a firm grip on the both the press and the people of the GDR. Its efforts to control the movement of people, however, were foiled in the late summer of 1989 by Hungary's new lenient travel policies, which escalated into a mass flight (*Massenflucht*) of GDR citizens who attempted to enter Austria via the relaxed Hungarian borders. From the beginning of the year until the end of September over 101,000 people fled the GDR. More than 65,000 of them fled successfully through Hungary.<sup>8</sup> For those who did not manage to leave before the regime sealed the GDR entirely in early October, protest became a way of expressing their rage and

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Richter, *Die Friedliche Revolution: Aufbruch zur Demokratie in Sachsen 1989/90, Band 1* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2009), 80.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Klaus Käthner, "7000 neuen Wohnungen," *Neuer Tag* 38:117 (20 May 1989): 8; Klaus Käthner, "Schritt für Schritt auf neuen Wegen," *Neuer Tag* 38:191 (15 August 1989): 8; Christa Kraft, "NT im Leserauftrag," *Neuer Tag* 38:206 (1 September 1989): 6.

<sup>8</sup> Richter, *Die Friedliche Revolution*, 160.



frustration about their greatly curtailed travel freedoms.<sup>9</sup> Citizens of Eisenhüttenstadt, however, did not appear to reach this same level of frustration, or at least refrained from expressing it so publicly. Indeed, according to the opening speech of the city council meeting on September 20, 1989, only twenty-eight Eisenhüttenstadt residents had left the GDR illegally.<sup>10</sup>

By the beginning of October, however, the mounting popular protest movements, hundreds of thousands of applications to leave the country, and swell of East German refugees who had escaped to the West via Hungary could no longer be ignored, even in Eisenhüttenstadt.<sup>11</sup> Articles in the local newspaper made oblique reference to “the times of sharpening tensions in the GDR.”<sup>12</sup> Although the authors did not make explicit the specifics of events in Leipzig or Dresden—where rapidly growing protests were met with increasing police repression—Eisenhüttenstadt residents followed along closely by other means. They saw reports on West German television about the Nikolai Church (*Nikolaikirche*) in Leipzig where protesters had swelled from a few thousand in the beginning of September to over 100,000 by mid-October.<sup>13</sup> Eisenhüttenstadt residents were likewise familiar with these dissidents’ demands, having seen photographs captured by Western journalists of protest banners reading “We want to leave!” or demanding “an open country with free people.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Honecker made the decision to seal the GDR on October 3, 1989, requiring a passport and approval for each specific trip, even between Warsaw pact countries. See Sarotte, *The Collapse*, 29.

<sup>10</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 20.09.1989, “Referat zur 2. Stadtverordnetenversammlung am 20.9.1989, 3.

<sup>11</sup> For a good overview of the atmosphere during the summer and autumn 1989 see Chapters 1 and 2, “Running Away” and “Protesting Freedom” in Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 15-32, 33-52.

<sup>12</sup> Klaus Käthner, “Unser Heimatland, sozial und sicher,” *Neuer Tag* 38:222 (20 September 1989): 8.

<sup>13</sup> See table in Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 47.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

These images depicting masses of banner-wielding, peaceful protestors remain indelibly stamped on the popular and scholarly memories of the autumn of 1989, even nigh on thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. And for good reason: the historiography of the *Wende*—a term meaning “turn” or “reversal” used by scholars and ordinary Germans alike to describe the events of 1989 and 1990—confirms that this citizens’ movement (*Bürgerbewegung*) is essential to our understanding of the peaceful disintegration of the East German state.<sup>15</sup> But in Eisenhüttenstadt, this dissident movement from the bottom-up was largely absent. Indeed, some residents recall how they almost “slept through” the revolutionary excitement of autumn 1989.<sup>16</sup> In Eisenhüttenstadt there were no spontaneous silent marches through the city streets. Instead, the first local, open discussion about the political situation in the GDR did not take place until October 25, 1989—at which point protesters in Leipzig had swelled to 225,000 strong—and was organized not by disgruntled citizens, but rather by SED Party officials themselves. This section lays the groundwork for understanding how patterns of protest did develop in Eisenhüttenstadt in November of 1989. It speculates as to how a combination of structural factors tied to the city’s location, as well as policies implemented by the fledgling regime, resulted in a population that was relatively content with the political status quo or more interested in reforming socialism from within. Put differently, Eisenhüttenstadt’s early history as a socialist new town shaped the contours of how the Peaceful Revolution would ultimately unfold, both in terms of the individuals who made the city their home, and in terms of the spaces in which and means by which dissent could occur.

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<sup>15</sup> For some of the key historical literature on the *Wende* see Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity*; Charles Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 62. In 2004, Mary Fulbrook conducted some oral interviews with citizens of Eisenhüttenstadt who had also lived there during the fall of 1989.

Eisenhüttenstadt was constructed in one of the most economically underdeveloped regions of all of Germany. The small nearby village of Fürstenberg was known as the “little town of skippers, basket makers and glass blowers.” The other neighboring village, Schönfließ, boasted a small economy dominated by agricultural production and later lignite mining.<sup>17</sup> Prior to the construction of *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost*, industry in the region was limited to small shipyards and the glass factory (*Glasshütte*) in Fürstenberg, which had operated up until the Second World War. While the economic and industrial development of the region in the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries did witness a corresponding growth in the population, Fürstenberg’s peripheral location in comparison with the more developed industrial regions of Germany meant that it was never a populous area. Beginning with the period after the Napoleonic wars, the population of the town grew steadily from 1,454 in 1816, to 2,500 in 1864, and hit 5,700 by the turn of the century. In 1923 the town’s population had reached 7,000. This slow population growth meant that expansion of communal infrastructure was also slow to materialize. It was not until the late German Empire (*Kaiserreich*) that a second school house was built in 1898 and expanded in 1915. The gasworks for the town did not go into operation until 1903, and the main street was not paved until 1911.<sup>18</sup>

As the economic and demographic history of the region perhaps make clear, Fürstenberg was not a stronghold of traditional middle-class institutions. There was a church and the two school houses, but there were no institutions of higher learning, or a hospital, or other hallmarks of a more rotund educated middle-class (*Bildungsbürgertum*). This was in contrast to Frankfurt

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>18</sup> Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt*, 13-14.

(Oder), the closest northern neighboring city along the Oder River, which could boast the existence of a prestigious university since the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Fürstenberg's status as a small, peripheral town with a limited *Bildungsbürgertum* was an important factor not only in its selection as the new steel site (*Stahlstandort*) for the fledgling regime, but also in the longer term development of social movements and political unrest in the town that would grow into Eisenhüttenstadt. While the lack of this preexisting educated middle-class in the region posed some initial problems—such as difficulty in securing employees with the necessary technical expertise for the construction of the iron and steel factory—in the long run, this proved compatible with the regime's aims to develop Eisenhüttenstadt as an explicitly socialist model city. The absence of an established prewar bourgeois milieu meant less potential resistance against some of the regime's policies on the local level (especially after the June 17, 1953 workers' uprising). It also meant that throughout the subsequent decades the SED leadership was able to recruit politically and ideologically reliable technical expertise for the continued expansion of the steel mill.

Another way in which the Party leadership stymied the growth of later opposition movements—intentionally or not—was by preventing the construction of a community center for the Protestant church congregation within the Eisenhüttenstadt city limits. Although there had been demand for additional worship space since the early 1950s, Eisenhüttenstadt residents had to either attend services at the church in Fürstenberg or in various *ad hoc* spaces. Indeed, the first official introductory service in Stalinstadt in 1953 was held in a tent. This marginalization of the churchgoing community in Eisenhüttenstadt was in keeping with the local leadership's and city planner's goals of creating the ideal socialist city. "Stalinstadt was supposed to be a city without

God and was therefore (and would remain) a city without a church!”<sup>19</sup> But in 1954 the state relented on this position, indicating vaguely that “work on the construction of a church in Stalinstadt could be counted on in the relatively near future.”<sup>20</sup> Until that time, the Protestant churchgoers in Eisenhüttenstadt could attend services only in a set of newly constructed barracks just for their use. It is here that they would remain until May 1981, when the promised community center (*Gemeindezentrum*) was finally completed.<sup>21</sup>

Another important factor that might help to explain the lack of revolutionary fervor in 1989 is the ideological commitment—or lack thereof—of the citizens who dwelt there. As dwellers in the first of several “new socialist towns” in the GDR, Eisenhüttenstädters were primarily self-selecting. A brief glimpse into the biographies of several residents I interviewed highlights the range of motivations individuals had for moving to Eisenhüttenstadt. Rudi Schmidt moved to the city along with a wave of other experts and laborers in the early to mid-1960s. He contextualized his arrival as coinciding with the regime’s second attempt to close the metallurgic production cycle at EKO and make steel production in the GDR a self-sufficient industry. As a plant manager in EKO and later head of the city council (*Stadtverordnetenvorsteher*), Schmidt could be described as a “true believer” in the socialist system. Recruited to work in the steel factory because of his technical expertise, Schmidt gained prominence on the local political scene for being a committed communist and long-time Party member. Even his recollections of the *Wende* are colored by his bitterness about what transpired during German unification. By his estimation, EKO was a “smoothly operating and profitable

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<sup>19</sup> Christoph Lange, “Nomen est Omen: Die evangelische Friedenskirchengemeinde Eisenhüttenstadt,” *Stadtspiegel* (March 1991): 8.

<sup>20</sup> Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Lange, “Nomen est Omen,” *Stadtspiegel*, 9-10.

factory” up until the *Wende*. “If we hadn’t had any televisions and newspapers—any media, period—then we wouldn’t have noticed the *Wende* at all,” he claimed.<sup>22</sup> While the archival material contradicts Herr Schmidt’s belief that EKO was an economically profitable endeavor, his firm commitment to the GDR is testament to many former residents’ prevailing (and sometimes continued) belief in the superiority of socialism over capitalism, and therefore understandable reluctance to work against the stability of the system during the fall of 1989 and into early 1990.<sup>23</sup>

A second example illustrates how other residents were often motivated by much more pragmatic concerns. Eberhard Harz and his family moved to Eisenhüttenstadt in 1986. This was during another planned expansion of EKO, in this case for a hot-rolling mill. Ultimately the new mill would not be completed until the 1990s, but during the initial preparations for construction, the EKO management recruited heavily in the surrounding region for individuals with the necessary experience. Harz explained that he had already participated in one big construction endeavor near Dresden, so he and his wife “came here of our own volition because we knew that we could earn good money here.”<sup>24</sup> Although they were nominally members of the SED, Harz and his wife were more interested in their career prospects in the city administration and the relative ease of securing a modern apartment compared to other cities in the GDR. In short, the socialist model city’s material privilege compared to the “immensely unattractive” crumbling

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Rudi and Helga Schmidt, interview by the author, audio recording, Eisenhüttenstadt, March 31, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> The exquisitely researched anniversary volume to celebrate fifty years of EKO does an excellent job of situating the factory’s productivity into the larger context of steel producers in the rest of Europe and the world. Lutz Schmidt, et al. *Einblicke. 50 Jahre EKO Stahl* (Eisenhüttenstadt: EKO Stahl GmbH, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Eberhard Harz, interview by the author, audio recording, Fürstenberg, June 26, 2017. This perspective about the relative privilege of Eisenhüttenstadt residents was substantiated by some of my other interview subjects including Wolfgang Perske, interview by the author, audio recording, March 22, 2016, Eisenhüttenstadt.

facades of places like Leipzig or Dresden often drew people who were interested in securing and preserving an improvement in their quality of life.<sup>25</sup>

For the residents that had relocated to Eisenhüttenstadt since the 1950s onward—including Rudi Schmidt and Eberhard Harz—the growing city managed by and large to fulfill its reputation as a locale that offered secure housing and employment, extensive social and cultural programming, and sufficient food and consumer goods provisions. As the examples suggest, individuals who came to the socialist model city were primarily self-selecting, thus influencing the political and ideological demographics of the city. On the one hand, “true believers” like Rudi Schmidt were typically inclined to reform the system from within, and therefore perceived the burgeoning dissident movements as a threat to the stability of the socialist state. On the other hand, residents who came to Eisenhüttenstadt on account of individual, career, or material concerns like Eberhard Harz and his wife, were likewise not particularly motivated to take up the revolutionary mantle during the budding Peaceful Revolution.<sup>26</sup>

In short, unlike Leipzig, Dresden, and other centers of discontent throughout the German Democratic Republic, Eisenhüttenstadt was a young town, without the vestiges of traditional bourgeois institutions or professions. Eisenhüttenstadt residents had no long memories of early twentieth century democratic freedoms tied to the place and space in which they lived.

Moreover, that authorities had impeded the growth of the Protestant church in Eisenhüttenstadt

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<sup>25</sup> Richter, *Die Friedliche Revolution*, 97.

<sup>26</sup> The authors Jenny Richter, et al., of *Stalinstadt-Eisenhüttenstadt* agree that the quieter Wende in Eisenhüttenstadt in 1989 largely had to do with the fact “that the expectations of the population in this city had been met better than in many other comparable cities.” They likewise based these conclusions on interviews, where interviewees reported having a better living situation compared to other cities in the GDR, and in particular were more satisfied with their living situation and the social and cultural amenities at hand. Jenny Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt-Eisenhüttenstadt: von der utopie zur Gegenwart. Wandel industrieller, regionaler, und sozialer Strukturen in Eisenhüttenstadt* (Marburg: Schüren, 1997), 105.

meant the loss of an important physical and ideological space for dissenting voices.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Leipzig, Dresden, and Berlin—to name a few—any latent dissident movements in Eisenhüttenstadt faced the additional challenge of finding a secure space in which to gather. Taken together, these factors could help to explain why the socialist model city departed from patterns of popular protest in the fall of 1989.

### **Summer 1989 to November 9: The Peaceful Revolution in Eisenhüttenstadt**

On the evening of November 6, 1989, just three days before the fall of the Berlin Wall, “between 400 and 500 demonstrators moved peacefully through Eisenhüttenstadt calling for democratic renewal and free elections.” Many citizens carried burning candles as they moved through the streets of Eisenhüttenstadt, shouting out calls of “Join us!” The march moved down the main street, Leninallee, cutting a large square along Thälmann Street, Diehloer Street, Friedrich-Engels-Street and back to the shopping center where it dispersed. “It didn’t come to traffic interruptions,” the author noted.<sup>28</sup> Buried at the very bottom of the last page of the local newspaper, this serves both as symbolic representation of the limited prominence of overt political agitation in Eisenhüttenstadt during the early stages of democratic renewal in the GDR, as well as evidence of the local paper’s determination to ignore its existence.

This section places Eisenhüttenstadt in the context of growing protest movements that were unfolding throughout the entirety of the GDR during the summer and early autumn of 1989. In keeping with some of the structural limitations outlined in the previous section, public protest and agitation like those movements found in Leipzig or Dresden did not find broad appeal in

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<sup>27</sup> For more on the role of the Protestant church in sheltering dissenting voices during late-stage socialism see Julia E. Ault, “Defending God’s Creation? The Environment in State, Church and Society in the German Democratic Republic, 1975-1989,” *German History* 37, no. 2 (April 2019): 205-26.

<sup>28</sup> “Kurz notiert,” *Neuer Tag* 38: 263 (8 November 1989): 8.



Eisenhüttenstadt. Indeed, the series of open dialogues beginning in Eisenhüttenstadt on October 25, 1989, not only happened much later than elsewhere in the GDR, but were also implemented from the top-down, organized by the local Party leadership in an effort to control and mitigate the changes that were beginning to sweep the country. Although Eisenhüttenstadt residents' dissatisfaction rarely translated into political action in the streets, they were not silent. Rather, this section also shows how the local press mediated citizens' opinions as they wrote letters to the editor in unprecedented numbers. As protest movements and democratic discussion escalated throughout the country, Eisenhüttenstadt residents grew more vociferous in their verbal and written demands for change, hard work, and democratic transformation, laying important groundwork for more overt political agitation after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

By November 1989 a Monday Demonstration (*Montagsdemonstration*, or *Montagsdemo*) such as this one in Eisenhüttenstadt would have been a recognizable political and cultural phenomenon anywhere in East Germany. The form of protest had its origins in the Saxon city of Leipzig. Beginning as early as autumn 1988, small groups of church attendees had gathered every Monday at 6:00 PM after the evening service at St. Nicholas Church (*Nikolaikirche*) for a peace prayer (*Friedensgebet*).<sup>29</sup> On March 13, 1989, more than 100 participants marched through the streets of Leipzig after the conclusion of the prayer. This marked the first large demonstration in the GDR that was not organized by human rights groups and church activists, but rather by ordinary GDR citizens and departure applicants, protesting the travel restrictions and the limited availability of exit visas.<sup>30</sup> Tellingly, in the previous year over 29,000 GDR citizens had left the country legally, with another nearly 10,000 fleeing illegally, which

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<sup>29</sup> Richter, *Die Friedliche Revolution*, 98.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

represented an 87.6 percent increase of illegal border crossings compared to 1987.<sup>31</sup> But this was only one of many reasons for growing distaste with life in the GDR. Others included “dissatisfaction with the constantly increasing waiting time for a passenger car, as well as for the accompanying repair and service industry, the selection of fruits and vegetables, fashionable clothing and consumer items, restricted travel opportunities, declining trust in the prospects of socialism, rejection of current societal relations, dissatisfaction with the environmental protection efforts, and unresolved housing problems,” among others also explored in the previous chapter.<sup>32</sup>

As such, from March 1989 onward, silent marches after the conclusion of the peace prayer in the *Nikolaikirche* became tradition. And East Germans had no shortage of things to protest. Between January 1, 1989, and the day of the municipal election (*Kommunalwahlen*) on May 7, the Stasi registered 103 different campaigns in Leipzig voicing discontent with the democratic processes of the GDR, or lack thereof. This was twice as many were recorded prior to the previous municipal elections in 1984.<sup>33</sup> As the late summer and early fall wore on, the number of participants continued to grow. In August and September, citizens’ agitation for relaxed travel restrictions and an increase in the number of exit visas joined the ranks of those protesting against human rights violations. By the end of the September, several thousand people were routinely gathering on Monday evenings in Leipzig to show their growing dissatisfaction with the regime. By the first Monday of October, protestors numbered 20,000 in Leipzig, with several thousand more gathering in places like Berlin, Dresden, Karl-Max-Stadt, Schwedt, and Magdeburg.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>34</sup> For a table with the estimated size of protests in the GDR from the end of September to the beginning of November, see Jarausch, *A Rush to German Unity*, 47.

In Eisenhüttenstadt, local authorities did not have to confront masses of increasingly agitated citizens, but they were still concerned about the development of events throughout the rest of the country and how that might affect local conditions in their town. Indeed, the September 20 meeting of the city council (*Stadtverordnetenversammlung*) was devoted wholly to the subject of order and security. The first item on the agenda was a lengthy report about initial results and further tasks necessary in order to secure “socialist legality” in Eisenhüttenstadt. Unlike the local press, which at this point still referenced the growing dissident movements throughout the rest of the country only obliquely, the report during the city council meeting acknowledged these events as a real threat to the security of Eisenhüttenstadt, and the regime as a whole. “How necessary it is to secure the power and strength of our Workers’ and Farmers’ state is evident currently as the FRG continues to launch a tendentious campaign against the GDR—inciting people over radio and television and leading citizens into illegal behavior.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, any political unrest currently evident in the GDR was understood—or presented—by the local authorities as part of an external, propagandistic effort to undermine the socialist state.<sup>36</sup> At this point the city council continued to toe the Party line, assigning no fault or shortcomings to the regime itself. The solution, according to this report and apparently supported by citizens, was clear: “to fight with all one’s strength for a life in peace and socialist security, and to roundly reject the imperialist enemy with every behavior and action.”<sup>37</sup>

For the next several weeks the official Party strategy on the local level entailed doubling down on positive images of the GDR and providing tangible evidence of individuals’ investment

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<sup>35</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 20.9.1989, “Referat zur 2. Stadtverordnetenversammlung am 20.9.1989,” 2.

<sup>36</sup> The concept of subversion (beloved by the Stasi) meant outside agitation. See Jens Gieseke, *The History of the Stasi: East Germany’s Secret Police, 1945-1990* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 20.9.1989, “Referat zur 2. Stadtverordnetenversammlung am 20.9.1989,” 3.

in a life “in socialist peace and security.” A series of articles published in *Neuer Tag* on September 10, 1989, attested to the perspectives of Party elite and everyday workers alike. One of these articles summarized a speech delivered by Siegfried Uhlig, who was the 1<sup>st</sup> Secretary of the SED at the District Administration (*Kreisleitung*) level, during an official visit to the converter steel mill. Uhlig appealed to workers’ emotional attachment to their homeland (*Heimat*), “a homeland that offers social security, a homeland that everyone can take part in creating.” He encouraged everyone to stand by the republic despite the ongoing defamation and slander campaigns. Uhlig intoned that “the important task of each comrade is to strengthen the relationship of trust between the Party and the people and to work even more determinedly against bureaucracy and setbacks that crop up, and to work for changes.” Uhlig’s appeal tacitly acknowledged that there were some problems to be addressed. In particular, his oblique reference to “setbacks” might have referred to falling production quotas in many industries, including *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* (EKO).<sup>38</sup> Indeed, he made clear that “the Party demands continued follow-through (*Planstreue*) and stability from steelworkers in the converter steelworks and beyond.”<sup>39</sup> But, Uhlig assured the gathered workers, as long as the Party and the people continued their close collaboration, none of these problems would be insurmountable.

On September 22, Uhlig echoed these sentiments while meeting with a group of members from a youth-brigade in the converter steel mill. In this case, Uhlig appeared to speak a bit more openly and concretely about some of the problems that he had obliquely referenced in his earlier visit. The official company newspaper, *Unser Friedenswerk*, summarized Uhlig’s remarks, which included reference to the fact that some residents of Eisenhüttenstadt were making their

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<sup>38</sup> For a detailed discussion of the multifaced problems facing EKO production at the end of the 1980s, including the insufficiency of investments to secure continued production levels, see Schmidt, et al, *Einblicke*, 224-226.

<sup>39</sup> Klaus Käthner, “Unser Heimatland, sozial und sicher,” *Neuer Tag* 38:222 (20 September 1989): 8.

way via Hungary to the West. “It falls to us to make socialism more attractive,” the author maintained. While there were real problems of trade and provision, as well as other problems that were growing more prominent in discussions in the media, it was also clear to the author, a leader of the local chapter of the Free German Youth (FDJ) in the converter steel mill, “that we aren’t bound to answer all of the agitation and lies of the opposition.” While this article was modestly more concrete in acknowledging some of the problems facing the city and country, it ended on a similar activist note, claiming that “the youth and older colleagues know that we can only solve these problems when we all pull together to do everything that we can for our socialist economy.”<sup>40</sup>

*Neuer Tag* also did its part to affirm the importance of a collective socialist effort to overcome the current problems facing the GDR and its citizens. *Neuer Tag* contributor, Klaus Käthner, reported on the leading role that steelworkers had to play in staying the course. “In the time of growing agitation against the GDR, comrades in the converter steel mill” continued to support the “the good policies of the unity of economic and social politics in the fortieth year of the GDR and in preparation for the Twelfth Party Congress of the SED.”<sup>41</sup> While this testimony more clearly reflects the formulaic, laudatory language of the SED, this steelworker’s commitment was echoed by the personal anecdotes of other workers also interviewed by the local press. Wolf-Eberhard Honert, an electronic technician at EKO, passionately intoned: “I stand by my country. I grew up here, I have a job and security here, my four kids have certain prospects here that are long lasting.”<sup>42</sup> Jürgen Bielke, in turn, declared that the class enemy

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Grund, “Siegfried Uhlig bei Stahlwerken,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 39/89 (October 1989): 6.

<sup>41</sup> Klaus Käthner, “Unser Heimatland, sozial und sicher,” *Neuer Tag* 38:222 (20 September 1989): 8.

<sup>42</sup> Wolf-Eberhard Honert and Jürgen Bielke, “Stahlwerker mit Position und Tat für unsere Republik,” *Neuer Tag*, 38:222 (20 September 1989): 8.

“won’t make us stray from our path; he can’t break my pride over what we’ve accomplished. But this pride in our land is something that we have to encourage in our daily political conversations.”<sup>43</sup> The inclusion of these testimonies routinely throughout the course of September and early October makes clear the local press’s efforts to support the official strategy of the city council by establishing just how committed ordinary Eisenhüttenstadt residents were to their country.

On the evening of Monday, October 9, 1989, protesters gathered in Leipzig for what would later be interpreted as a turning point in the process of democratic renewal in the GDR. On this Monday, three more churches in addition to the *Nikolaikirche* had also agreed to hold Monday prayers at 5:00 PM, meaning that the number of protesters could be expected to swell dramatically, though it was unclear by how much. Expecting a larger turn-out, the regime had also prepared, making sure that a large, armed force of army, police, paramilitaries, and Stasi were standing by in Leipzig. Fear of bloodshed, or of a result like Tiananmen square in Beijing in April, permeated the city and some of the Party leaders alike. Ultimately, as the crowd of 70,000 moved to occupy the ring road (*Ringstraße*) surrounding the city center, it came down to a split-second decision on the part of Helmut Hackenberg, who was acting as first secretary in Leipzig at the time. Unable to get confirmation from Egon Krenz, head of security issues for the Party, as to whether he should let the demonstration pass or follow Honecker’s orders to “commence all measures” to keep the crowd from reaching the main train station, Hackenburg ordered the armed forces to stand down unless the crowd attacked. In other words, he allowed the demonstrators to pass peacefully, marking a turning point in the Party’s response to demonstrators. At a moment that could have very easily ended with violent repression as had

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

been the case throughout the Eastern bloc in 1953, 1956, and 1968, among others, the East German regime exhibited tolerance for the protestors, signaling a significant shift for the protests and negotiations that were yet to come.<sup>44</sup>

The events of October 9, 1989, did not represent a sea change in the political climate in Eisenhüttenstadt, for there was no dramatic standoff between massive crowds of demonstrators occupying the city's main streets and armed forces. The weeks following, however, did witness a gradual growth in commitment to open, democratic discussions on the part of the state institutions in the city and surrounding region. But unlike in other centers of discontent where these initiatives were spearheaded largely from below, in Eisenhüttenstadt it was the local SED leadership that took the first steps, with the local press taking their signal from the politicians.

The local Party leaders, in turn, no doubt took their cues from what was happening on the national level in the GDR. In a Politburo meeting on Tuesday, October 17, Erich Honecker was ousted from his role as General Secretary of the SED and replaced by none other than Egon Krenz. In order to truly convince East German citizens of the changes afoot in the regime, Krenz additionally adopted a conciliatory attitude, “wrapp[ing] himself in Gorbachev’s mantle.”<sup>45</sup> Although he rejected the possibility of unification with West Germany, he candidly acknowledged economic problems and laid out a set of priorities intended to prioritize economic recovery, improve “socialist human rights” and ease travel restrictions, calling for a “new

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<sup>44</sup> For an excellent, accessible account of the events of October 9, 1989, in Leipzig, from the perspective of both the state and the activists, see Mary Elise Sarotte, “Chapter 3: The Fight for the Ring,” in *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 49-82.

<sup>45</sup> Jarausch, *A Rush to German Unity*, 59. On the whole, these discussions bore striking resemblance to what followed Gorbachev’s policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union. See for example Stephen Kotkin, *Steeltown, USSR: Soviet Society in the Gorbachev Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Perestroika: The Soviet Labour Process and Gorbachev’s Reforms, 1985-1991* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

dialogue” intended to reinvigorate socialism. While these claims were somewhat undermined by the tight control maintained behind the scenes, and the reluctance to completely rule out the possibility of martial law, this reformist rhetoric nonetheless served as a cue for regional level SED strategies to deescalate the growing tensions in their respective districts.<sup>46</sup> As such, the first and most crucial moments of reform in Eisenhüttenstadt were not on the streets like in Leipzig, but in meeting halls and under guidance of Party officials.

For example, on October 25, 1989, the SED District Administration (*Kreisleitung*) in Eisenhüttenstadt’s neighboring city, Frankfurt (Oder), held an open forum entitled “Dialog-89” in order to address “the current questions of our society.”<sup>47</sup> Frankfurter Mayor Fritz Krause opened the meeting shortly before 7:00 PM in the large hall of the local *Kulturhaus*. The hall was packed to the bursting with additional citizens gathering on the front steps—no one was turned away. The editorial team of the regional paper, *Neuer Tag*, was there, eagerly participating in what they described as a “lively dispute, that was factual, active, punctuated by applause and whistling, but largely constructive.”<sup>48</sup> The evening consisted of multiple hours of open debate among Party members and citizens of various political persuasions alike, with many individuals leveling explicit criticism at the regime.

In his opening remarks Mayor Fritz Krause stressed that “it was the first event of its kind . . . in this city and on the Oder,” and that it would be a “learning process” for everyone involved, but he challenged the hundreds of citizens gathered “to learn from each other and to listen to each other.”<sup>49</sup> The first citizen to speak was Bernhard Kien, who shared that his own life was

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<sup>46</sup> Sarotte, *The Collapse*, 89-90.

<sup>47</sup> “Offener Disput zu aktuellen Fragen unserer Gesellschaft,” *Neuer Tag* 38:253 (27 October 1989): 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*



testament to the fact that GDR citizens were more often “coerced as opposed to persuaded, indoctrinated rather than involved in decisions” but that “the Dialog-89 was a good start.”<sup>50</sup> Perspectives included those of committed Communists as well, such as Hartmut Friedrich, who thought that all learned people from different political persuasions should take part in this discussion, but that it should rest “on the foundation of socialism and our constitution.”<sup>51</sup> Member of the National Democratic Party of Germany (NDPD), Uwe Laden, also piped up that “his party stands by the successes of socialism, just as much as they stand by what hasn’t been accomplished.” He acknowledged that it had not always worked out for things to be “open and transparent,” but that no one should be allowed “to twist this history how they wish it would have been.”<sup>52</sup>

While Frankfurt residents discussed the future of democratic renewal in the district capital, just 50 kilometers to the south Eisenhüttenstadt residents participated in their own open forum. On the evening of Wednesday, October 25, the SED invited Eisenhüttenstadt citizens to city hall to participate in an open dialogue on pressing societal questions. The large auditorium was packed to the seams, despite many additional chairs, leading Party and city officials to spontaneously hold another discussion on the front steps of the building in order to accommodate the more than 400 members of the city who had shown up to participate. “The participation of so many here today I interpret as an expression of the deep care that our citizens have about the recent developments,” said 1<sup>st</sup> Secretary Siegfried Uhlig in his opening remarks.<sup>53</sup> In the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> “Ein zweites Forum vor der Tür, um niemanden nach Hause zu schicken,” *Neuer Tag* 38:253 (27 October 1989): 3.

discussion that followed, residents were able to “make suggestions and identify challenges, without taboos, uninhibited and open, with often hot, pent-up anger.”<sup>54</sup>

Residents’ questions and criticisms varied in their degree of hostility toward the Party and the state. The first person to speak up asked whether the next elections would also be “sham elections.” Another young secretary from the company-division Party organization (*Abteilungsparteiorganization*, or APO) in the steel mill lamented the lack of accountability throughout the bureaucratic structure in addressing problems and questions in various departments of the steel mill. For over a year and a half he had been passing along concerned reports to his superiors without ever receiving an answer, and without any tangible change. “Now we’ve got to get out of this mess. The scam within socialist competition has to stop.”<sup>55</sup> Toward the end of the meeting a young woman took the floor: “I want to live here in this country, also in socialism. But changes must be visible, and fast. I want to be a part of them,” she demanded. “My trust in the party, however,” she continued, “is gone.”<sup>56</sup> In response to these criticisms that took the Party leadership to task about their political economic, and ideological failings, 1<sup>st</sup> Secretary Uhlig admitted, “*Jawohl*, we’ve made mistakes, including me. The criticism from below did not lead to changes.” But from this point forward he emphasized that “the dialogue must be conducted with all citizens, no one can be left out.”<sup>57</sup>

The local press in Eisenhüttenstadt seemed to take this perspective to heart. In their reporting in the coming weeks, they shared residents’ perspectives from across the political

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<sup>54</sup> Klaus Käthner, “Dialog im Saal und vor der Rathaustür,” *Neuer Tag* 38:253 (27 October 1989): 8.

<sup>55</sup> “Ein zweites Forum vor der Tür, um niemanden nach Hause zu schicken,” *Neuer Tag* 38:253 (27 October 1989): 3.

<sup>56</sup> Klaus Käthner, “Dialog im Saal und vor der Rathaustür,” *Neuer Tag* 38:253 (27 October 1989): 8.

<sup>57</sup> “Ein zweites Forum vor der Tür, um niemanden nach Hause zu schicken,” *Neuer Tag* 38:253 (27 October 1989): 3.

spectrum. Whether the editorial staff were hedging their bets in order to see how developments in the growing democratic protest movement would play out, or whether what they chose to publish represented an accurate sampling of citizens' opinions is hard to say. Either way, readers in support of and critical of the regime would find something to their liking in the pages of *Neuer Tag*. On the one hand, there were citizens like the Mödebecks, a couple who wrote in to express their pride in what had been accomplished in the GDR. They wrote, "we stand for peaceful dialogue, open conversation—but where those who have the answers are actually given the chance to give them," revealing perhaps a subtle criticism for those who called for a unilateral changing of the guard. They were also in support of fostering democratic renewal but were cautious about how a full-fledged transformation could play out, warning that it should not happen overnight. They closed their letter with a reminder that "only diligent and determined work is going to accomplish a better life for all. Only with that—not 100,00 citizens taking to the streets—can we raise the standard of living." Although they recognized that the causes of these protests were more complicated than the fact "there were only very rarely bananas" they stood firm in their belief that "with demonstrations we're not accomplishing anything."<sup>58</sup> The Mödebecks clearly held the opinion that mass protests movements like those that had become commonplace in Leipzig were counterproductive to the goal of democratic renewal in the GDR.

On the other hand, *Neuer Tag* also published the opinions of readers who were expressly critical of the GDR regime at the local or national level. This criticism could take the form of distrust in the Party leadership, as expressed by the young woman who stood to spoke at the end of the October 25 meeting at the Eisenhüttenstadt City Hall. One letter writer took the local Party leadership to task for underestimating citizens' interest in the new dialogues—that the October

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<sup>58</sup> "Zum Friedlichen Dialog," *Neuer Tag* 38:258 (2 November 1989): 8.

25 meeting had offered room for only 160 people was insulting!<sup>59</sup> Another common critique was frustration with the various bureaucratic apparatuses of the GDR, whether this be the “scam of socialist competition” in the economy, or rejection of the election tampering. Notably, however, of the 171 letters that *Neuer Tag* received between October 9 and November 8, the most common source of published criticism in the newspaper remained dissatisfaction with material conditions in the GDR.<sup>60</sup>

Residents’ continued concern with their material surroundings in the summer and fall of 1989 demonstrates continuity with the dissatisfaction that they expressed throughout the course of the 1980s. By the 1970s and 1980s, the East German state had succeeded in substantially raising the standard of living for its citizens—opportunities and services that had been sorely lacking in the first two decades of the regime came to be essential and routine parts of citizens’ everyday lives. In their ongoing promise to achieve “real existing socialism” for the people, however, the regime had in effect created a moving target for itself. For when it failed to meet or improve upon the now-normalized expansion in social support and increases in material well-being, it was perceived as a failure to deliver on the promise of “real existing socialism,” and added further fuel to the fire of residents’ mounting discontent. This was compounded by implicit comparisons to the West, images and conceptions of which had only become more pervasive over time as watching West German Television (*Westfernsehen*) became an increasingly ubiquitous leisure activity for ordinary East Germans.

In October and November of 1989, even against the backdrop of increasingly overt political agitation against the regime throughout the rest of the country, Eisenhüttenstadt

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<sup>59</sup> “Wortmeldungen. Leser zum Dialog 89—Meinungen—Fragen—Motive,” *Neuer Tag* 38:262 (7 November 1989).

<sup>60</sup> “Lesbarer und kritischer, doch immer noch zu zahm,” *Neuer Tag* 38:263 (8 November 1989): 8.

residents more openly expressed their agitation about the regime's continued failure to satisfy its promises of providing a high standard of living. In a letter to the editor published on October 28, 1989, a disgruntled mother took the regime to task for the abysmal assortment of material goods available in some of the smaller villages surrounding Eisenhüttenstadt. Her letter warrants reproduction in full:

Dear Editorial Staff,

It is a constant refrain: work, work, and once again, work. Naturally, I'm in support of the idea that everyone must give their best. But nothing comes of it! I work in the state-owned operation ZBE 'Fresh Eggs' in Wriggen. And every quarter we produce above our target.

But I would like to actually be able to buy something in the store for my hard-earned money. I have three children, and in my opinion, they have every right to get some vitamins once and a while. For us the only chance of that is with apples—bananas, oranges, etc.? None to speak of. If you head out to the villages or other small cities, there's hardly anything. Where is everything then, if everyone is working?

On page three of the *Neuer Tag* article from Saturday the 21<sup>st</sup> of October you responded to the question of a Mrs. Höfemeier saying that "in any case, it didn't get to the heart of the matter." Tell me whether this gets to the heart of the matter: I can drive to Berlin if I want. The chests and shelves are always filled with rich offerings, for example, juice for children. Here we can only get children's juice by allocation (if there's any at all to be had), and in Berlin there are crates of it. I could burst into tears at any moment. You try splitting two bottles of juice between three children. You must go into the villages and report truthfully on how things are here. Without advance notice.

In closing I would like to share with you that my husband and I have also considered whether or not we should apply for exit visas (*Ausreiseantrag*). But we're still hoping that something will finally change...or will it?

With pleasant greetings,

Martina Schwarz, Bliesdorf, 1311, Dorfstraße 69<sup>61</sup>

Frau Schwarz's letter bore striking resemblance to many of the complaints received by the City council throughout the course of the earlier 1980s. But where previous letters had to be more veiled in their criticism of the regime, framing their complaints carefully in terms of what was politically permissible, by late October 1989 Frau Schwarz could be perfectly frank. She established her own authority by identifying herself as a contributing member of the working

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<sup>61</sup> Martina Schwarz, "Post an uns: Hoffen auf Veränderung," *Neuer Tag* 38:254 (28 October 1989): 3.

class, then highlighted the discrepancies in standard of living and consumer goods availability between Berlin and more rural areas. She identified herself as a working, socialist mother, eliciting pity for her plight in not having enough to provide for her children. And finally, in a significant departure from what would have been imaginable just several years previously, she admitted that these conditions were enough to make her and her husband consider leaving the country, while simultaneously implying that the thousands of others who had done so were more than justified.

Other residents also took advantage of the expansion in opportunities for open criticism of the regime. On November 7, 1989, *Neuer Tag* published a letter to the editor from Norbert Orlik, who wrote in to share his own experiences with worsening material standards in Eisenhüttenstadt. He wrote that, although he agreed with the Mödebeck couple discussed above that “demonstrations alone cannot raise the living standard of our republic,” he also understood why some people were moved to express their resentment in this particular manner because the “conditions in stores and service shops lately have gotten worse—so bad that one must speak of scandalous conditions.”<sup>62</sup> His own recent experience at the state-owned vehicle maintenance shop in Eisenhüttenstadt (*VEB Kraftfahrzeuginstandhaltung Eisenhüttenstadt*) attested to this, as the earliest available appointment for routine maintenance of his Trabi had to be scheduled 14 months in advance. This was firm confirmation that the service industry, in addition to the consumer goods industry, was incapable of satisfying citizens’ needs.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> “Wartezeit—ein Jahr,” *Neuer Tag* 38:262 (7 November 1989): 8.

<sup>63</sup> These material shortages were a common feature in other state socialist contexts during this period, likewise contributing to dissatisfactions among citizens. See James Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989-1992* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Kevin McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945-1989: A Political and Social History* (New York: Palgrave, 2015).

On November 7, 1989, *Neuer Tag* published another letter from the editor from a resident of *Wohnkomplex VII*. For more than a year members of the housing community (*Hausgemeinschaft*) had been writing letters of complaint to the city council about the unbearable conditions in front of their housing block. It was so bad that “mothers had to push their strollers through the filth,” an image that strongly contradicted the picture of Eisenhüttenstadt as a “clean city,” not to mention the importance of children and motherhood in the ideology of the regime.<sup>64</sup> Until this point, their letters had been met only with unfulfilled promises. In particular, the author could not help but remember that completion and maintenance of these living areas had been an election promise. Indeed, *Neuer Tag* had even published pictures of the housing block calling *WK VII* a “successfully designed living area,” a subtle criticism of the complicity of the newspaper itself in upholding the mistruths of the local administration.<sup>65</sup> How could the city council simply ignore the ongoing complaints of its citizens for so long? The resident concluded that this was evidence of a larger problem of how many political promises had been broken.

In addition to letters to the editor, Eisenhüttenstadt residents also brought their concerns to the various open forum discussions held throughout the city in October and November of 1989. For example, on November 2, 1989, the Mayor of Eisenhüttenstadt, Ottokar Wundersee, conducted a small dialogue with residents, where residents were encouraged to offer their criticism and suggestions. “Over 30 residents took the opportunity to speak convincingly about a subject they were passionate about . . . namely, the renovations to the central square, the heart of

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<sup>64</sup> See Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>65</sup> “Bilder, die nicht helfen,” *Neuer Tag* 38:262 (7 November 1989): 8.

Eisenhüttenstadt.”<sup>66</sup> The discussion developed into a “lively experience exchange, a step on the way of our revolutionary transformation,” the author assessed. While renovating the city center might have seemed superfluous compared to the rapid development of opportunities for expressing even more critical opinions, this interest in maintaining the physical façades and infrastructure of the city demonstrates residents’ continued prioritization of material concerns over overt political issues. In other words, despite the increasingly unpredictable unfolding of events on the national level, Eisenhüttenstadt residents seemed to prioritize their overall standard of living over concerns about their civil rights.

Eisenhüttenstadt residents’ preoccupation with seemingly superfluous material issues may also have been due to a fear of the consequences were they to express more open political dissidence. One interview subject, who prefers to be identified simply as Frau P., recalled that “she was a bit scared at the time, when people were taking to the streets.” Both of her sons were in the army at the time. Her younger son was stationed in Frankfurt (Oder), where many GDR citizens returned after deciding against fleeing via the open border between Hungary and Austria in the summer of 1989. “He had permission to shoot!” she exclaimed, “but he said he would rather be shot than shoot anyone.” This knowledge made her astounded at the audacity of protesters throughout the GDR. “Leipzig had already exploded, and people in Frankfurt (Oder) were also going into the streets.” She reflected that “in other places they went out in the streets and weren’t scared at all.” She even had acquaintances in Frankfurt (Oder) who had done so, “but Eisenhüttenstadt had a real fence around it.”<sup>67</sup> Frau P. concluded that “many would have

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<sup>66</sup> Christa Kraft, “Ein Maßnahmekatalog zur Stadtverordnetenversammlung,” *Neuer Tag* 38:259 (3 November 1989): 6.

<sup>67</sup> Material from this paragraph taken from an interview with Frau. P in Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt. Interview with Frau. P, interview by the author, audio recording, June 2, 2016, Eisenhüttenstadt. “Aber Eisenhüttenstadt hat einen Zaun ringsum.”



taken to the streets but they were scared. They were afraid of their work collectives (*Arbeitskollektiv*) or of the comrades (SED Party members, or *Genossen*).” This testimony suggests, then, that the presence of more committed Communists in the city administration created an atmosphere in which open political protest was still viewed as dangerous, even though it was happening just up the road in Frankfurt (Oder).

The above examples seem to indicate that throughout the autumn of 1989 Eisenhüttenstadt residents were primarily concerned with the further deterioration of their material circumstances. The beautification of their city and the proper outfitting of supermarket shelves took up more space in their agitation efforts than advocating for expanded democratic freedoms or a reduction in travel restrictions. One interpretation of this pattern would be to dismiss Eisenhüttenstadt residents as politically apathetic, but this would be overly simplistic. Rather, citizens in Eisenhüttenstadt primarily exhibited a form of economic revolt—as opposed to political—which was a by-product of living in a regime that rested its legitimacy on material progress. This continuity in the issues that Eisenhüttenstadt residents were most frustrated about helps to explain why they seemed less interested in travel restrictions, state surveillance, or free elections.

### **After the Fall of the Wall: Reform Impulses Develop in Eisenhüttenstadt**

On the evening of November 9, 1989, Wolfgang Perske and his wife Christel were watching the evening West German television broadcast, as was their habit to do every evening. They saw footage of the press release where Günter Schabowski, the Party Secretary of Berlin, announced the relaxation of travel restrictions, “but we didn’t fully understand what we were hearing.”<sup>68</sup> They got ready for bed and went to sleep but were woken shortly thereafter by the

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with Wolfgang and Christel Perske, interview by the author, audio recording, Fürstenberg, March 22, 2016. “Wir haben es nicht kapiert” is the exact German sentence that Wolfgang used to explain that they didn’t

calls reverberating around the courtyard of their apartment complex. “The wall is open! There is only *one* Germany!” The next day at work many colleagues were notably absent. Several of the cranes at the construction firm where Wolfgang worked were out of commission for the day because the crane operators had gone off to Berlin. Wolfgang, Christel, and their two children were not far behind. That weekend they drove to Berlin themselves and broke off a piece of the fallen wall.

Hartmut Preuß had a different experience of discovering that the wall had opened. He and his wife were in Rostock to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of his father-in-law. They enjoyed a nice evening with family, naturally partaking of some “refreshing, bubbly beverages—and I don’t mean water,” he added amusedly. But they never even turned on the TV that evening. The next day when they drove back home to

Eisenhüttenstadt they wondered, “how come so many people are out and about?” He remembered that “there was a lot of traffic, but all the cars were turning off for Berlin.” He added with a bemused laugh, “I missed the fall of the Wall.”<sup>69</sup>



**Figure 3.1** Ostensible piece of the Berlin Wall that Wolfgang and Christel Perske gifted me when I interviewed them on March 22, 2016. Photo by the author.

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grasp the full implications of the East German press release relaxing travel restrictions.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Hartmut Preuß, interview by the author, audio recording, Fürstenberg, March 9, 2016.

Taken together, both Herr Preuß and the Perskes' recollections of November 9, 1989, give a taste of the range of experiences and memories former East Germans have of the opening of the Berlin Wall. These divergent experiences also set the tone for the range of reactions and proposals that would develop rapidly as democratic discussion bloomed in Eisenhüttenstadt for the first time. Some residents remained steadfast in their belief in the Party, calling for a renewed commitment to the state despite its mistakes. Others were not yet ready to give up their belief in the superiority of socialism, but recognized the necessity of a dramatic renewal of democracy in the GDR. And finally, there were a growing number of voices expressing their desire for doing away with the system entirely, implementing a market economy, and even seeking unification with the Federal Republic. An examination of these rapidly evolving discussions in Eisenhüttenstadt gives insight into the contingent process of political democratization on the local level, and is suggestive of broader trends on the national level, as well. In particular, I argue that the transformation of the bloc parties (*Blockpartien*) into true opposition parties played an important role in challenging the moderate reform efforts of the local SED—a role that is underappreciated in English-language scholarship on German unification. In short, this section shows how formerly politically powerless auxiliary bloc parties helped lay the groundwork for a process that would ultimately result in *one* Germany.

On November 17, 1989, the Eisenhüttenstadt city council held its first meeting since the momentous events of the evening of a week before, when the wall dividing East and West Berlin was peacefully and irrevocably breached after an official announcement that travel restrictions for GDR citizens would be lifted “effective immediately.” The fall of the Berlin Wall was a symbolic marker of the sea change in societal and political upheaval already underway in East Germany—physical evidence that the popular challenge to the one-party state was gaining

momentum and that permanent changes were inevitable. Although Eisenhüttenstadt residents were late to overtly express political dissidence, as the previous section demonstrated, by mid-November the calls for democratic renewal had reached the model city. As such, this city council meeting in Eisenhüttenstadt marked the first time that the local Party authorities truly had to accommodate ordinary citizens in political processes. Put differently, this meeting marked the beginning of participatory democracy in Eisenhüttenstadt, which was relatively late compared to other places.

While the Party leadership at the national level and throughout central institutions of the GDR experienced its own rapid upheavals, in Eisenhüttenstadt these changes would develop more slowly. Indeed, the November 17 meeting began like many city council meetings before it, with a brief opening and greeting and the selection of the council members that would lead the proceedings for the day (*Tagesleitung*). Early on in the meeting someone would also take attendance to see which council members were accounted for and which were absent, and then the assembled members would hold a confirmation vote for the agenda for the day. Once all of these business matters were attended to, the meeting typically proceeded to the presentation portion for the day. On November 17, the presenter was none other than the mayor of Eisenhüttenstadt himself, Ottokar Wundersee. The title of his presentation (*Referat*) alone, “Measures for the Elevation of the Effectiveness and Authority of the Eisenhüttenstadt SVV (city council) toward a Solution to Current Local Political Challenges and Problems,” is evidence of the political crisis that had decidedly reached Eisenhüttenstadt. “In our city we are experiencing the daily, far-reaching processes of the people-led transformation of our society on the path to renewal,” Herr Wundersee observed in his opening remarks. “Emotionally laden, controversial, accompanied by sharp criticism—these many-sided dialogues will help develop

the forces and build the momentum necessary for this process of renewal,” he continued.<sup>70</sup>

Despite the mayor’s acknowledgement of challenging conversations that were to come, he and other central members of the City council did not seem prepared for what a true process of democratic renewal entailed.

Following his opening remarks, Herr Wundersee presented the local SED leadership’s plan to address the city’s worsening economic situation. “On account of the extraordinarily difficult position that our economy (*Volkswirtschaft*) currently finds itself in . . . we have not come up with some new ‘miracle program’ (*Wunderprogramm*), but rather we’ve restricted ourselves to focusing on important new economic priority tasks based on the following positions.”<sup>71</sup> He then went on to outline the leadership’s plan, beginning with “the reliable security and provisioning of the citizens with foodstuffs and everyday consumer goods and the improvement of services.”<sup>72</sup> Second on the list was establishing a working group to reduce administrative expenses, whereas his third priority was the pursuit of further substitution and redistribution of manpower from the administrative apparatus of the municipal council (*Rat der Stadt*) to various areas of the economy that needed it on account of manpower shortages and stoppages. Fourth was a commitment to achieve the already outlined construction plan for 1989 so that there would be fewer difficulties in accomplishing the longer-term 1990 plan. Fifth and sixth emphasized oversight of commercial development and pedagogy, respectively. And finally, the seventh action item proposed the formation of a “working group to investigate corruption in the city administration, unjustified privileges, misuse of official funds, etc.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.11.1989, Oberbürgermeister Ottokar Wundersee, “Referat zur Sitzung der Stadtverordnetenversammlung am 17.11.1989,” 1.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

This action plan represented a rather moderate reform agenda, given that ordinary Eisenhüttenstädters had already made their concerns about the issues in question known. In particular, the city council's prioritization of improving the provision of sufficient consumer goods and services likely reflects the fact that quality of life concerns were areas in which Eisenhüttenstadt residents had been most vociferous in their criticism long before the *Wende*. As such, the local SED authorities recognized this as among the most important problems they needed to address in order to retain or reestablish political legitimacy. Other points of the city council's priority tasks also reflected criticisms emerging from the nascent democratic discussions throughout the city and the state. For example, intended efforts to reduce administrative expenses and redistribute labor within the bureaucratic apparatus of the Party certainly reflected the criticisms about the inefficacy and inefficiency of the SED leadership. So too did the formation of a working group investigating corruption attest to the outrage that many citizens felt upon learning about special privileges enjoyed by certain SED Party elites.

After Mayor Wundersee finished outlining the local SED's work plan, the meeting opened up for discussion, accepting contributions from members of the other political parties in Eisenhüttenstadt. Unlike previous meetings, however, when elected representatives from other parties "who had until now offered enthusiastic and long-lasting applause, chanting cheers for the Party and state leadership, their solidarity evident,"<sup>74</sup> the gloves were now off. The very first contribution to the discussion came from the secretariat of the county chapter of the NDPD (National Democratic Party of Germany), which had been a contributing bloc party since the regime's founding in 1949. The secretariat, a Herr Schröder, firmly stated that his party "was in

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<sup>74</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.11.1989, Statement from Pastor Joachim Rinn in "Maßnahmen zur Erhöhung der Wirksamkeit und der Autorität der SVV Eisenhüttenstadt zur Lösung aktueller kommunalpolitischer Aufgabe und Probleme," 1.

support of an equal party pluralism, in which all parties have equal terms.”<sup>75</sup> This statement represented a direct attack on the leading role of the Party, for traditionally the *Blockpartien* existed alongside of the SED to give the appearance of party pluralism without wielding any independent political power. Moreover, the NDPD “was in support of a clear separation of state and Party institutions,” which meant that “new voting laws must be developed as fast as possible. . . . a free, secret election between people and parties, that allows for exact monitoring of results is of upmost priority.”<sup>76</sup> In short, like ordinary Eisenhüttenstädters airing their grievances before them, members of the *Blockparteien* in Eisenhüttenstadt were beginning to take advantage of the political moment to air their own dissatisfactions with the SED Party leadership and articulate their visions for a different future.

The other local *Blockparteien* followed suit and throughout the rest of the November 17 meeting representatives took the opportunity to speak openly about the problems facing the Party and the nation. They shared deeply moving, often personal anecdotes to illustrate their bitter disappointment with the SED leadership. Frau Doris Kaden, for example, spoke up as a member of the Liberal Democratic Party of Germany (LDPD). She explained that “for two years I’ve been a member of the LDPD. I’m a child of the GDR and I was educated in this country and in its history. A truth that I therefore never questioned was the truth of the leading role of the SED. I was always close with Party members and would have liked to be one myself.”<sup>77</sup> However, since her entry into the LDPD her relationship with Party members was no longer so

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<sup>75</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.11.1989, Statement from Herr Schröder, Secretariat of the NDPD in “Maßnahmen zur Erhöhung der Wirksamkeit und der Autorität der SVV Eisenhüttenstadt zur Lösung aktueller kommunalpolitischer Aufgabe und Probleme,” 3.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>77</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.11.1989, Statement from Doris Kaden (LDPD) in “Maßnahmen zur Erhöhung der Wirksamkeit und der Autorität der SVV Eisenhüttenstadt zur Lösung aktueller kommunalpolitischer Aufgabe und Probleme,” 1.

harmonious. Before the May 8, 1989, elections she had told a group of voters that she wished to serve them openly and honestly as their elected representative. She “sensed the sympathetic smiles and their ironic reaction was, ‘yeah, and how far do you expect to get with your honesty?’”<sup>78</sup> The implication of Frau Kaden’s statement was clear. Under leadership of the SED, honesty was not only an empty promise, but also an impossibility. Now, however, this moment of democratic awakening provided a new opportunity for honesty among the political parties and their constituents. And, as evidenced by Frau Kaden’s vulnerable statement, the bloc parties were leading the way in this regard.

Even SED Party members took the opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with their party’s leadership and with the regime itself. City council member Lanfred Herkt shared that “as a member of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, I am also deeply and bitterly disappointed in my Party leadership, in the behavior and mannerism of our leading members.”<sup>79</sup> However, Herr Herkt went on to temper these criticisms, saying that despite the Party’s failings, it was necessary to put these concerns aside for the good of the people. “We have accomplished much, and it cannot be that it was all for nothing.”<sup>80</sup> He also underscored a previous point made by CDU representative Werner Schulz, concurring that “we, as elected representatives of the people, want to use all our civic power to do everything that we can for the political renewal of our country and for the well-being of our citizens and voters.”<sup>81</sup> On the one hand, that Herr Herkt was able to be so forthcoming in the criticism of his own Party attests to the openness of the political

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.11.1989, Statement from Lanfred Herkt (SED) in “Maßnahmen zur Erhöhung der Wirksamkeit und der Autorität der SVV Eisenhüttenstadt zur Lösung aktueller kommunalpolitischer Aufgabe und Probleme,” 1.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 2



moment, and perhaps is also in keeping with the SED's tradition of self-criticism. On the other hand, sensing the shifting tide of the political consensus, his criticism combined with his validation of the statements of other *Blockparteien* may have also been calculated to position the local SED to weather the anticipated political transitions.

The honesty evinced by the spokespersons for the various *Blockparteien*, and even SED members themselves, emboldened the ordinary Eisenhüttenstadt residents in attendance to speak up as well. For the remainder of the meeting, citizens grew increasingly vocal in airing their own grievances with the state and its local leadership. Following a by now familiar pattern, residents' concerns typically reflected their frustration that the local administration was not adequately attending to the maintenance and improvement of residents' quality of life. Amid larger discussions about the housing market or production stoppages at EKO, ordinary Eisenhüttenstadt residents took the floor to bring attention to other pressing issues that they felt had been overlooked or too often dismissed. Frau Baumgarten raised the issue of the promised fresh flower stand in *Wohnkomplex VI*. Construction was supposed to have begun in June, but still in November there was no tangible evidence of progress.<sup>82</sup> Frau Seefeld, complained about her treatment during her visit to the open office hours at city hall. "It cannot be so that citizens be treated like supplicants!" she exclaimed, going on to explain how citizens are ignored, and often left with no other choice but to take their own initiative in finding work-arounds to their problems.<sup>83</sup> Blanka Vogt painstakingly detailed the challenges faced in addressing her own housing issues. She began with the caveat, "I know it's a very personal problem, but I want to

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<sup>82</sup> Christa Kraft, "NT im Leserauftrag," *Neuer Tag* 38:206 (1 September 1989): 6; Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.11.1989, Statement from Frau Baumgarten, in "Maßnahmen zur Erhöhung der Wirksamkeit und der Autorität der SVV Eisenhüttenstadt zur Lösung aktueller kommunalpolitischer Aufgabe und Probleme," 3.

<sup>83</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.11.1989, Statement from Frau Seefeld, in "Maßnahmen zur Erhöhung der Wirksamkeit und der Autorität der SVV Eisenhüttenstadt zur Lösung aktueller kommunalpolitischer Aufgabe und Probleme," 3-4.

say it here openly all the same,” before going on to explain that she had been waiting for the *VEB Gebäudewirtschaft* to fix the cause of her soggy walls and floors since December 1985.<sup>84</sup>

While the assembled politicians remained very patient and professional at first, it is clear that the highly personal anecdotes and complaints of ordinary Eisenhüttenstadt residents began to try their patience. In response to Frau Seefeld’s complaint about her treatment at city hall, Mayor Wundersee interrupted her mid-sentence to defend himself and his office. “Frau Seefeld, allow me please to have a word on the subject. I can understand that you felt you experienced this, but I can’t reconcile it.” The city council is there for its citizens, he claimed, and they take their office hours very seriously, “yes, even the Mayor on Tuesday afternoons,” he added sardonically.<sup>85</sup> As the meeting went on, the members of the city council, most of whom were more seasoned politicians, grew continually more frustrated with the direct and time-consuming feedback from ordinary citizens. As Blanka Vogt detailed her housing woes, including some frustrating interactions with the Mayor’s office, the Mayor himself interrupted yet again, angrily denying that he had returned a set of incomplete documents to her. “Stick to the truth, yeah?” he ordered harshly.

The carefully transcribed meeting minutes from this first open city council meeting reveal that although the SED Party leadership and city council members were anxious to echo the calls of their colleagues from the *Blockparteien*, they had little idea of what democratic renewal would look like in practice. The growing impatience, particularly on the part of Mayor Ottokar Wundersee, speaks largely to the uncertainty of this novel political moment. Throughout the

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<sup>84</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.11.1989, Statement from Blanka Vogt, in “Maßnahmen zur Erhöhung der Wirksamkeit und der Autorität der SVV Eisenhüttenstadt zur Lösung aktueller kommunalpolitischer Aufgabe und Probleme,” 3.

<sup>85</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.11.1989, Reply from Mayor Ottokar Wundersee to Statement from Frau Seefeld, in “Maßnahmen zur Erhöhung der Wirksamkeit und der Autorität der SVV Eisenhüttenstadt zur Lösung aktueller kommunalpolitischer Aufgabe und Probleme,” 4.

course of the GDR, the legitimacy and dominance of the SED had rarely been significantly tested. Now, however, the future of the Party's control over the unfolding of events was by no means guaranteed. Certainly, there were many SED members for whom the desire for democratic renewal and reformation of the Party were authentic. But it is also possible that SED leaders such as Mayor Wundersee felt they had to entertain this outburst of civic involvement simply for the time being, not yet fully comprehending the scope of the challenges and changes to come.

In the months that followed, improvised democratic discussions of this sort continued, quickly becoming more regulated and institutionalized. One important democratic institution to emerge out of these discussions was the Round Table, or *Runder Tisch*. Originating from a November 10 proposal from members of the civic movement in Leipzig and subsequently approved by Protestant Church leaders and the SED itself, the Round Table was a meeting of civic activists, SED members, and members of other bloc parties intended "to set the course for democratization."<sup>86</sup> The first meeting was held in Leipzig on December 7, 1989, and while the group did not wield official executive or legislative power, it was committed to demanding "frank disclosure of the ecological, economic, and financial situation."<sup>87</sup> It was determined to continue their work until the conclusion of the country's first free elections, which they set for May 6, 1990, in order to allow time for campaigning.

With the promise of free elections, the seriousness of the political challenge to the SED's rule swiftly became clear on the local level in Eisenhüttenstadt as well. In the subsequent meeting of the city council on December 10, council members elected a voluntary executive

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<sup>86</sup> Jaraus, *The Rush to German Unity*, 75-77.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

committee to oversee proceedings for the duration of the voting period. These positions were explicitly voluntary—that they were unpaid was intended to avoid a conflict of interest with the campaign process and upcoming election results. While the executive committee was made up of some members of the SED and remained an SED affiliates majority, there was strong representation from members of the increasingly independent bloc parties, as well as a member from the Free German Trade Union Federation (*Freier Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund*) and the Free German Youth (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*, or FDJ). Naturally, no members of the executive committee were allowed to run for election themselves. The responsibility of the executive committee also included calling to order and facilitating subsequent meetings of the city council, coordinating collaboration with the municipal council and the various standing committees, as well as supporting council members in their campaigning in the various housing communities, industries, and voting districts.<sup>88</sup> The formation of this committee is evidence of the quick strides being made to increase accountability and transparency in local governments throughout the region.

As these democratic discussions evolved, the members of the bloc parties continued to play a leading role in opposing the SED. Indeed, in Eisenhüttenstadt and the surrounding region, a strong opposition movement was slow to develop compared to other regions of the GDR. For example, a regional local branch of New Forum (*Neues Forum*), which was the strongest new political party to emerge out of Berlin, would not be constituted until January 1990. At the first meeting of Eisenhüttenstadt’s local iteration of the *Runder Tisch*, it was the CDU, LDPD, NDPD, and the newly formed SPD in the GDR that gave the most robust opening statements as

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<sup>88</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 10.12.1989, “Standpunkt zur ‘Stellung und Arbeitsweise des Präsidiums der Stadtverordnetenversammlung Eisenhüttenstadt,’” 1-2.

voting members of the newly formed organization. The *Neues Forum*, though nominally present, clarified in a few short sentences that they were a new democratic organization—“a party of the middle”—and that local chapter for the district Frankfurt (Oder) would be formed later in January.<sup>89</sup> In other words, in Eisenhüttenstadt the bloc parties played a central role in challenging the SED on the local level. In exerting their right to participate as equal members of the ostensibly democratic government of the GDR, the bloc parties demonstrated an attempt to make the pre-existing parliamentary infrastructures—in particular the parliament, or *Volkskammer*—of the country truly work for the first time.

Over the course of the next months preceding the March 1990 elections, the independence exerted by the bloc parties throughout the GDR would lay the groundwork for collaboration and eventual integration with the West German branches of individual bloc parties, a decisive step toward German unification. Examining the early stages of this process on the micro level in Eisenhüttenstadt affirms the importance of considering the role of the bloc parties alongside the broader dissident movement in the process of democratic renewal—and ultimately dissolution—of the German Democratic Republic.

### **“The Political *Wende* Requires a Stable Material Basis:” The *Wende* Comes to EKO**

The conversations challenging the leading role of the SED in local and national politics were mirrored in other state-run institutions and organizations, including the various firms that constituted *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* (EKO). However, as was the case with dialogues and

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<sup>89</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, *Runder Tisch* 03.01.1990, “Protokoll Nr. 1 der Beratung ‘Runder Tisch’ Stadt- und Landkreis Eisenhüttenstadt am 3. Januar 1990,” 3-6. It was not clear to me in the local archival record as to why the *Neues Forum* did not have a stronger presence in Brandenburg and Eisenhüttenstadt, specifically. This could have perhaps had to do with a smaller student population, although Frankfurt (Oder) did have a university. See Gerhard Rein, ed., *Die Opposition in der DDR: Entwürfe für einen anderen Sozialismus: Texte Programme, Statuten von Neues Forum, Demokratischer Aufbruch, Demokratie Jetzt, SDP, Böhleener Plattform und Grüne Partie in der DDR* (Berlin: Wichern-Verlag, 1989).

discussions of democratic reform throughout the city, these conversations in EKO were slow to develop. As evidenced by Siegfried Uhlig's visit to the steelworks touched on in the previous section, early conversations about the problems plaguing the GDR during September 1989 were intended to stay the course, emphasizing the importance of socialist competition in order to increase production while remaining impervious to the "propaganda" efforts of Western media.

By late October, however, increasingly open dialogues and criticism of the regime had begun to percolate within the steelworks as a response to the changes afoot at the national level. In the wake of the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Central Committee of the SED—the same meeting in which long-time General Secretary, Erich Honecker, had been forced to step down in favor of the younger Egon Krenz—the official factory newspaper, *Unser Friedenswerk*, published an article that affirmed that "our workplace remains our battleground for socialism and peace."<sup>90</sup> If anything, "the factual, constructive, militant, and passionate discussions" growing throughout the GDR were evidence that the republic was "on the correct path to overcome boundaries and to increase the quality of socialism."<sup>91</sup> This "correct path" did involve recognizing some of the shortcomings plaguing various industries and the East German economy as a whole. Otto Zabel, who was Section Director of the Drawing and Surveying Department, was quoted in the article with an honest assessment that "whoever looks at the full shopping centers in the West and doesn't recognize that they're producing more in West Germany than we are here is lying to themselves." Although this might seem at first to be a condemnation of the socialist economy, on the contrary, Zabel concluded that "competition, striving for profit, and existential fear are necessary mechanisms to achieve a sufficient level of productivity."<sup>92</sup> If that was the case, then

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<sup>90</sup> "Arbeite mit—plane mit—regiere mit," *Unser Friedenswerk* 42/89 (October 1989): 3.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

the system of socialist competition in EKO was on the right track to reach the level of productivity in the West.

These sentiments were echoed at the factory leadership level, in particular by the General Director of EKO, Dr. Karl Döring, who assured everyone at a packed meeting in the trade union building (*Haus der Gewerkschaft*) that the steelworks were producing according to plan. After all, “the political *Wende* require[d] a stable material basis.”<sup>93</sup> Like the conversations happening elsewhere in late October, this high-profile meeting revealed a tendency to offer criticisms of the current situation in the GDR without condemning the entire socialist system. Case in point, Dr. Döring acknowledged that although EKO was meeting its production quotas, “bureaucracy in the factory and from outside is an element that often hinders us and prevents us from increasing efficiency, and maintaining discipline and responsibility on all levels and in all different collectives.”<sup>94</sup> This criticism was in keeping with some of the other more modest complaints that had been articulated throughout the GDR, and in Eisenhüttenstadt in particular, before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the November 17 meeting of the city council.

As the events of late October unfolded, criticisms on the shop floor of EKO grew increasingly direct. On October 31, 1989, the leader of the raw iron plan (*Roheisenwerk*), Joachim Buchwalder, invited members the A-shift to an open discussion group, where the shift workers were encouraged to share their worries and advice about how to make socialism stronger and more attractive. One worker, Ute Zander, spoke up about the challenge that plagued most of the different sectors in EKO, namely labor shortages. He explained that the furnace collective should have 18 men total, but on the days that only 16 showed up they were still expected to

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<sup>93</sup> Evelyn Reich, “Lösungen erstreiten und den Plan sichern,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 44/89 (November 1989), 1.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

meet their production quotas for the day. On those days, “we should get additional compensation to show for our increased inefficiency,” he suggested. This sentiment revealed a broader frustration with size of the management and the compensation they received versus the wages that ordinary workers earned. Additionally, this desire for increased compensation to reflect the additional effort of operating with a labor deficit belied a growing critique of the system of socialist competition as a whole, namely that it did not reward workers with wages commensurate to growing challenges facing their working conditions.

Other shift workers present in the discussion circle picked up the issue of labor shortages and work stoppages. In particular, Peter Strübling spoke to the problem of having workers outfitted with the correct equipment, because without the materials and other small pieces of machinery they need to help them, it would result in labor stoppages. The smelter, Hermann Mohnke, in turn, underscored underlying causes and problems associated with labor shortages. In the case of smelting, he argued that something must be done to make a career in smelting more attractive, so that they did not continue to lose colleagues who sought greater opportunities for career growth in other sectors. Mohnke worried that this “along with so many other annoyances, requires close contact with our elected trade union officials in order to achieve solutions.”<sup>95</sup> Mohnke’s frustration implied that such contact was lacking in the raw iron sector.

Indeed, Mohnke’s suggestion that their elected trade union officials (*gewählten Gewerkschaftsfunktionären*) should be doing more resonated strongly with other shift workers present in the discussion circle. Hartmut Fedler, from the induction furnace plant, said that “all of us are waiting for our elected trade union officials to take their work seriously.” This would go a

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<sup>95</sup> “Auf Kritik und Vorschläge der Kumpel hören und ihren Leistungswillen fördern,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 44/89 (November 1989): 4.



long way, he suggested, in earning (back) the necessary trust to make socialism more attractive.<sup>96</sup> Günter Fix reported that in his nine years of employment in the induction furnace plant, “no one from the upper levels of the trade union management had visited his workplace.”<sup>97</sup> Taken together, these complaints attest to the broader failings of the trade union management and the management in EKO, not simply during the series of crises in the autumn of 1989, but throughout the period of late stage socialism in general.

The October 31 discussion circle was one of several in a series that took place among the different sectors and branches of EKO intended to more directly involve shift workers in open dialogues about improving socialism within the firm and the GDR as a whole. On the following afternoon, the leader of the factory transportation department (*Werkverkehr*), Horst Breuer, opened their meeting by declaring it “a gathering for a general exchange of ideas,” rather than with the typical SED rhetoric. The presence of members of the company-division Party organization (*Abteilungsparteiorganisation*, or APO), however, “was an important aspect of creating an open and honest dispute,” according to Breuer.<sup>98</sup> Norbert Schulz, a transport mechanic who was first to speak, made it clear that the presence of Party officials would intimidate workers into delivering less than truthful criticisms. “Our workers and our comrades have many questions. We’ve informed ourselves. This discussion round can’t satisfy our expectations.”<sup>99</sup> Schulz went on to hit on several criticisms that would come to be echoed by his colleagues, including changes to election procedures—suggestions which had gone unanswered

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> “Vom offenen und kritischen Disput aus einer Versammlung im Werkverkehr,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 44/89 (November 1989): 5.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

by Party officials preceding the previous elections— concerns about the performance principle (*Leistungsprinzip*), and questions about the overlap between Party and state apparatus.

As a whole, workers' critiques at this meeting fell into two categories, punctuated by a general frustration that the Party and EKO leadership was not doing enough to respond to workers' criticisms or the economic and political challenges that had come to a head in autumn 1989. First, workers were understandably fixated on the issue of wages, namely that the management and Party officials in EKO received substantially higher wages than ordinary workers. In his comment, Schulz had called for "a real weighing of the responsibilities—why are there are differences in payment for the same work in different sectors?" Another transport mechanic, Günter Kober, also began his remarks with a general critique of the lack of adaptability exhibited by EKO in light of recent events, observing that "in most branches we aren't sufficiently dealing with the new developments. Why is our Party and trade union leadership allowing a lag in production speed?"<sup>100</sup> Given these failures, Kober underscored that at the top of workers' questions were wages and recognition.

Second, workers began to question fundamentally the leading role of the Party, not only in the directorship of EKO, but throughout the GDR more broadly. Helmut Knoblauch was the first participant to put it so plainly. He claimed that, despite the atmosphere of more open discussion, there were many questions that the media still refrained from answering openly. "Why is the leading role of the SED necessary? Did the Party make mistakes? Which and where? Why does the Party have to dominate in the factory? What is the status of freedom of the press and travel freedom? There must be answers and actions."<sup>101</sup> This questioning of the leading role

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

of the Party stemmed from workers' observations about the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of Party leaders throughout the ranks of the EKO management. The signalman, Detlef Witte, expressed the dubious sentiment that anything was really going to change:

I was present for many discussions. In every one there were reports. But I haven't seen any effects. Whoever hasn't fulfilled their responsibilities has to face the consequences. But if it's not visible to us, then I don't have any certainty that what we're talking about today will eventually become reality.<sup>102</sup>

This sentiment was closely echoed by another seasoned worker who had over 27 years of shiftwork in different departments under his belt. He explained that "my trust in the government has been bitterly disappointed. I don't believe that it will ever recover. For 10 years we've observed that we're going in a circle and not moving forward. We said this, but no one listened to us." In general, workers at the works' transport discussion circle were frustrated about the ongoing failings of the Party and steelworks management and pessimistic about the possibilities for real change. These feelings were closely mirrored by a steady stream of letters to the editorial board of *Unser Friedenswerk* and were oft repeated in other discussion circles that would continue to convene throughout the duration of that autumn and early winter.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> See also the letter of demands from the Elektrik Ervorbereitung department, "Post an uns: Die Wende für unser Kombinat," *Unser Friedenswerk* 45/89 (November 1989): 3. This letter supported demands for freedom of the press, new voting laws, and the immediate acknowledgement of New Forum, as well as demands that directly affected the combine, including a trade union organization independent of the SED, reorganization and reduction of the bureaucratic apparatus, and overall separation of the factory management from the SED. Similar sentiments about loss of trust in the Party were echoed by a letter in the subsequent issue of the newspaper, see "Post an uns," *Unser Friedenswerk* 46/89 (November 1989): 3. On the contrary, a November 11 meeting in the mess hall of the firm school drew over 400 Party members struck a different tone than that of the letter from the Elektrik Ervorbereitung department, instead affirming the role of the Party in the leadership of the factory. Even so, nearly every person who spoke up worried that "not enough was being done quickly enough in order to renew the Party and confirm the worth of socialism, including the role of EKO in securing the standard of living of its workers. This is significant in that even committed Party members felt emboldened and even beholden to express their criticism of how the Party had handled things up until this point. See Horst Zimmer, "Um die Erneuerung der Partei kämpfen," *Unser Friedenswerk* 46/89 (November 1989): 1. This lively discussion continued in the pages of *Unser Friedenswerk* throughout the duration of the year.

Taken together, these series of discussion circles show how ordinary workers' efforts to create accountability or change from below had long gone unanswered. By their accounts, throughout the period of late stage socialism, workers had been acutely aware of significant problems in their work collectives and departments. Indeed, many workers had gone so far as to try to draw attention to and address these problems themselves. They had reported these challenges to their elected trade union officials—on the occasion they actually received a visit from said officials to their collective or department—with little results. And now, in this moment of increased honesty and transparency, steelworkers took advantage of the democratic apparatuses built into the structure of EKO to air their grievances honestly for the first time. They wanted change, and they wanted it quickly. They made clear that their trust in the Party had been betrayed, for the leaders of the so-called “workers’ and farmers’ state” (*Arbeiter und Bauer Staat*) had failed to put the welfare of their workers and farmers first.

These demands continued throughout the final months of 1989. In each of the subsequent December issues of *Unser Friedenswerk*, the editors published opinion pieces and letters from various collectives that echoed the conversations they had been having at discussion circles in their departments. For example, in the third December issue, members of the pipe assembly department (*Rohrmontage*) wrote with a list of demands that would guarantee ordinary workers’ rights to have a say in company decisions (*Mitspracherecht*).<sup>104</sup> The editors also published a letter from Horst Maschik, the official Director for Rationalization and Maintenance. Maschik provided an overview of the many worker-led impulses for reform, while simultaneously providing his own suggestion for how to organize these disparate movements, keep up their

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<sup>104</sup> “Mehr Recht auf Mitsprache,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 49/89 (December 1989): 6; Horst Maschi, “Ohne Selbstlauf und Planlosigkeit,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 49/89 (December 1989): 6.

momentum, and translate them into economically productive results. While the cover story for the final edition of 1989 was a piece that affirmed Minister President Hans Modrow's expectations for the GDR as a whole, subsequent articles continued the critical refrain, with one union steward writing how disappointed she had been with the union representative meeting that had taken place on December 6, and another article calling for higher individual responsibility on all levels.<sup>105</sup>

As with the local city administration responding to a deluge of ordinary citizens' requests and opinions, the management of EKO had to play a bit of catch up with the enthusiastic and often critical calls for accountability and reform coming from the rank and file EKO workers. One way in which they did this was by following the cue that originated in Leipzig, which was by now standard practice for GDR institutions attempting to at least give the appearance of democratization. On December 19, 1989, EKO's first official *Runder Tisch* discussion took place. General Director of EKO, Dr. Karl Döring, had invited participants from various parties, organizations, and religious organizations from throughout the factory to participate in order to "build a consensus out of the discussion of diverse opinions and views as to how EKO's development should continue," bearing in mind its responsibility for the territory.<sup>106</sup> This commitment to accommodating a diversity of opinions was no coincidence. Given the timing of this first EKO Round Table, Dr. Döring's actions were closely circumscribed by the evolving democratic discussions in the Eisenhüttenstadt City council, and in particular, the local bloc parties' (*Blockparteien*) break with the consensus of the SED that had taken place in November.

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<sup>105</sup> See Evelyn Reich, "...daß wir die Zukunft bewältigen können," *Unser Friedenswerk* 50/89 (December 1989): 1; Renate Golde, "Vertrauensleutenvollversammlung hat mich maßlos enttäuscht," *Unser Friedenswerk* 50/89 (December 1989): 3; "Höhere Eigenverantwortung übernehmen und Wirtschaftswachstum gewährleisten," *Unser Friedenswerk* 50/89 (December 1989): 5

<sup>106</sup> Evelyn Reich, "Alles, was an Ideen einfließt, kann uns nur helfen," *Unser Friedenswerk* 1/90 (January 1990): 3.

In his opening remarks at the Round Table meeting, Dr. Döring acknowledged that “in the past, the SED was guilty of not listening to divergent opinions, and allowing little or no contradiction.” From here on out however, it would be different.<sup>107</sup> As such, the participants of the *Runder Tische* took quick advantage of the chance to express their opinions “openly and unadorned.” Questions and concerns poured in from the various representatives present, including demands for more flexible scheduling, worries about environmental degradation, and the uncertainties presented by evolving relationships with West German corporations. Participants also expressed concerns about recruiting and maintaining female employees, and problems regarding EKO trainees.

Despite this official gesture of accommodating a larger diversity of viewpoints and opinions, one position was not up for debate, namely, the leading role of socialism in EKO and by extension, the GDR economy as a whole. On the front page of the first 1990 issue of *Unser Friedenswerk*, readers were greeted with the headline “We are and remain a socialist factory.” In this open letter to all EKO employees, General Director Dr. Döring expressed his hearty thanks, underscoring EKO’s continued successes of meeting all of their material and financial production goals (with the exception of a 19,700-ton deficit in the production of raw iron). Workers would be rewarded with an additional 130 Mark bonus, on top of their year-end bonus. For the year 1990, Dr. Döring predicted that “it will be important for us as a conglomerate (*Kombinat*) to express our own opinion and realize our own suggestions regarding the question of economic reform.” While gesturing to challenges that no doubt lay ahead, the General Director also underscored all that the socialist economy of the GDR had already accomplished. “My basic position,” Dr. Döring wrote, “is that we want to use our own powers to make efforts

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

to secure the social security for our workers, in order to maintain and expand our workforce.”

The reason for the emphasis of the competency of an independent East Germany was intended to lay to rest speculation about how economic relations between the GDR and West Germany would develop. “Cooperation with FRG-firms will be pursued for individual projects,” Dr. Döring continued. “However: We are and will remain a people’s owned firm. Selling out is not intended.”<sup>108</sup>

### **January 1, 1990, to March 18, 1990: Political and Economic Crisis in Eisenhüttenstadt**

Despite this strong message of staying the socialist course, 1990 would bring unprecedented and fast-paced changes that neither the management of EKO nor the political leadership of Eisenhüttenstadt could have predicted. The challenges facing the local administration in EKO and the city council were part and parcel of larger economic and political problems that were coming to a head at the national level during the first month of 1990, problems that ordinary citizens in Eisenhüttenstadt and throughout the GDR continued to feel acutely in their everyday lives. As a result of this worsening economic situation, combined with the ever increasing number of East German citizens that were fleeing to the West, on January 28, 1990, the members of the East Berlin *Runder Tisch* and Minister President Hans Modrow decided to change the date of the upcoming *Volksammer* (parliament) elections from May 6 to March 18<sup>th</sup>.<sup>109</sup> Although the newly formed political parties and independent bloc parties complained that they would not have enough time to campaign, the recently renamed Party of Democratic Socialism (*Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus*, or PDS for short, previously the

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<sup>108</sup> Dr. Karl Döring, “Wir sind und bleiben ein sozialistischer Betrieb,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 1/90 (January 1990): 1.

<sup>109</sup> SAPMO BArch, DA 3/10, 10. For a more thorough discussion of the deteriorating economic situation and the political crisis that it exacerbated, see Jarausch, “Abandoning the Socialist Dream,” *The Rush to German Unity*, 95-114. In this chapter he deftly summarizes the long-term economic problems that crystalized in the final quarter of 1989, and shows how they corresponded to a mounting crisis of legitimacy in Modrow’s government.

SED) and the Social Democratic Party of the GDR (also abbreviated SPD, but independent of its western branch) insisted. They hoped that moving the free elections up by several months would help to stabilize the both the economic and demographic challenges that had escalated so dramatically since the previous autumn. And they no doubt also hoped that such a short campaign period would make their own election outcomes more favorable.

In Eisenhüttenstadt, however, it did not appear that the newly scheduled national parliamentary elections were tremendously effective in mitigating the challenges that the local administration was already facing. Indeed, the protocols from the frequent meetings of the City council and the local branch of the *Runder Tisch* illustrate how the national problems of a slowing economy and hemorrhaging population played themselves out on the local level. For example, the third session of the Round Table held on February 1, 1990, was devoted entirely to the subject of *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost*. General Director Dr. Karl Döring was there to give an overview of the state combine (*Kombinat*) results for 1989, to present current challenges, and to outline proposals for their solution. As in his January 1, 1990 letter to the readership of *Unser Friedenswerk*, Dr. Döring's initial confident proclamation that "the important thing is, that the 1989 Plan was fulfilled in its entirety," in fact elided much larger structural problems.<sup>110</sup> First, EKO did not, in fact, completely fulfill the 1989 plan, as they had a "failure to perform" (*Nichterfüllung*) in the area of raw iron production. Second, the goal for 1990, which was to increase the efficiency and profitability of EKO as a whole, revealed its own set of interrelated problems. Dr. Döring explained that in January alone more than 60 EKO employees had vacated their positions to leave for the West.<sup>111</sup> This meant a severe disruption in the coordination in

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<sup>110</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Protokoll Nr. 3 der Beratung "Runder Tisch," Stadt- und Landkreis Eisenhüttenstadt, 1.2.1990, 2.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.



production schedules between the different branches of EKO. Moreover, in order to truly accomplish the plan of increasing EKO's efficiency and profitability, Dr. Döring returned to an issue that had been on the table since the factory's construction in the 1950s, namely the necessity of closing the metallurgic production cycle. If this was to truly be accomplished, it would require repairs to the blast furnaces and investments in new technology, both of which would necessitate more loans and further cooperation with western firms who had the necessary technical expertise. In other words, there were no quick fixes for the problems facing EKO, and if anything, these problems seemed to be growing both more numerous and more acute.

The challenges of economic production and the interrelated effects on the fabric of local politics, society, and cultural life, unsurprisingly also continued to preoccupy the city council as a whole. At a February 8, 1990 meeting, the Standing Committee (*Ständige Kommission*) of the city council presented their draft of the Plan for 1990. Goals of the draft plan included “stopping or slowing a further sinking of the production level in the economy of the territory; creating new economic and social structures; maintaining the long-term social security and living standards of Eisenhüttenstädters; and securing and increasing the provision of the population of our city with consumer goods and services.”<sup>112</sup> While most of these challenges clearly predated the events of the previous autumn, their urgency was exacerbated by the new political climate in which citizens and local politicians from the bloc parties were emboldened to highlight the failures of the SED/PDS and demand more rapid, substantial changes.

After the Standing Committee had presented their plan, there followed substantial discussion from the assembled members of the city council, including both members from the SED and the bloc parties. In addition to the broad areas of improvement outlined in the plan,

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<sup>112</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 8.2.1990, “Begründung zum Planentwurf 1990 vor der SVV am 8.2.1990,” 2.

other members of the city council brought forth a range of further areas of concern including insufficient healthcare provision, particularly the dearth of doctors; stabilizing the regional food industry in order to meet demands for the provision of fresh foodstuffs; funds for environmental protection; more concrete figures for construction projections; addressing the emerging surplus of female employees; and maintaining cultural programming and preventing commercialization.<sup>113</sup> In particular, several members of the city council, including Mayor Ottokar Wundersee, drew attention to the issue of empty apartments (*leerstehende Wohnungen*). Mayor Wundersee chimed in that “citizens are very, *very* angry about the long periods that apartments stand empty” before they are renovated and another family can move in.<sup>114</sup> The slow process in turning over apartments meant that citizens were being actively denied the chance to move into a bigger, better apartment, likely one that was newer or had central heating. Given that the slow pace of renovating apartment units had been a central complaint of Eisenhüttenstadt residents throughout the 1980s, it is understandable that citizens would be especially frustrated that this issue continued to go unresolved, despite the continued assurances of the local administration and national Party leadership that it was a top priority.

Another urgent problem that began to grow in visibility throughout February and March was that of unemployment. Since its founding, one of the central claims of superiority of the East German state over its western counterpart was that it could boast full employment. East German citizens were not plagued by the hardships accompanied by uncertain or inconsistent employment opportunities. Indeed, the planned economy of the GDR actually necessitated the full labor force of its citizens in order to function. In Eisenhüttenstadt, the growing problem of

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<sup>113</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 8.2.1990, “Discussion,” 1-22.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

unemployment was at first obscured by a shortage of workers in certain areas of the local economy. An article published on February 10, 1990, revealed that to date there had been 626 available jobs registered at the local employment office (*Amt für Arbeit*, or *Arbeitsamt*). On the one hand, employers like EKO and the city construction firms and repair services reported a shortage of skilled workers qualified for the available positions, in large part due to jobs vacated by employees who had out-migrated. But on the other hand, there was a surplus of certain types of laborers, in particular female workers whose schedules were constrained by parental or familial responsibilities and could therefore only apply for jobs with “normal shift” (*Normalschicht*) hours, as opposed to having the flexibility to fill a position that necessitated more unusual hours. The solution to this shortage of appropriate workers, according to the article, was retraining programs (*Umschulungsprogramme*) in which workers could participate in order to learn the requisite skills for the open positions.<sup>115</sup> The scope of this problem, as the next chapters will show, would soon outpace any systematic efforts to retrain employees whose positions had been consolidated or become obsolete.

By March it had become clear that this problem was more than a mismatch of the labor available compared to the labor needed. The front page of the *Neuer Tag* newspaper on March 1, 1990, left little room for misinterpretation. On the previous Monday, 96 Frankfurt (Oder) residents had registered as unemployed, meaning that there were now more than 2,000 total unemployed in the district capital. Newspapers throughout the country conveyed similar messages, and headlines proclaiming that the number of unemployed in the GDR had reached

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<sup>115</sup> Käte Gehrke, “Umschulung angebracht,” *Neuer Tag* 35:39 (10 February, 1990): 8. For further discussion of the issue of women’s unemployment, see also Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Protokoll Nr. 8 der Beratung “Runder Tisch,” Stadt- und Landkreis Eisenhüttenstadt, 26.3.1990.

70,000 citizens nearly jumped off the page. So too did more sensational headlines such as this one: “What was never an issue for us earlier: Unemployment in “real existing [socialism].”<sup>116</sup>

The growing problem of unemployment hit close to home in Eisenhüttenstadt, as well. By March 2, 1990, *Neuer Tag* reported that in the previous weeks the first 53 unemployed residents had registered themselves as “unemployed” at the employment office.<sup>117</sup> And at the March 13, 1990, meeting of the Eisenhüttenstadt city council, council members listened attentively to the first ever report regarding “The Situation on the Job Market.” The report surveyed the status of unemployment in Eisenhüttenstadt proper, sharing some surprising figures. In February, 260 residents came to the employment office, and in the intervening two weeks that number had reached 450. Of those, 107 were registered officially as unemployed, whereas the rest came to get more information about available employment opportunities. While the report acknowledged the previously identified problem of the mismatch between available jobs and the skillset of the applicants, it also highlighted a new problem. Namely, that with 410 registered available jobs, they had now reached a point where there were more applicants in need of work than there were positions to be filled. The report concluded that given the expected further reduction of the administrative apparatus in the various firms, “it is expected that the number of applications will continue to steadily climb.”<sup>118</sup> Indeed, in the months and years to come, “The Situation on the Job Market” report would come to be a regular feature at every meeting of the city council.

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<sup>116</sup> “In Frankfurt seit Montag 96 Anträge,” *Neuer Tag* 51:39 (1 March 1990): 1.

<sup>117</sup> “Erste Arbeitslose sind registriert,” *Neuer Tag* 52:39 (2 March 1990): 6.

<sup>118</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 14.03.1990, “Situation auf dem Arbeitsmarkt,” 1-2.

## Conclusion

Although General Director Dr. Karl Döring's message on January 1, 1990, had seemed decisive in its promise that *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* "was and would remain a socialist firm," ultimately this status would be determined by a combination of internal and external factors—both external to the firm, and to the country itself. Internally, it was the local party leadership who often took the leading role in spearheading the democratic discussions that unfolded over November and December of 1989 and into early 1990. In part, local politicians were following the cue of other cities, where SED leadership was acquiescing rapidly to the demands of protesters, holding open meetings and creating new institutions such as the Round Table that attempted to mitigate the damage to the Party's authority and control. While the SED leadership in Eisenhüttenstadt may have initiated conversations about socialist renewal and democratic reform, Eisenhüttenstadt residents and steelworkers, emboldened by the news of successful protests throughout the rest of the country, ultimately did not miss the opportunity to engage in unfolding democratic processes. Unlike Leipzig or Dresden, where protesters could take physical and ideological refuge in the spaces of the Protestant church, in Eisenhüttenstadt, dissent and reform—when they came—took place within the institutions and spaces of the state socialist regime and its iconic factory.

In the background of the GDR's mounting internal economic and political problems, West German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, and other European politicians were hard at work to make international conditions favorable for unification. Closely monitoring the domestic political situation in East Germany, Kohl stalled on plans to develop the new treaty community between the FRG and the GDR, instead deciding to postpone negotiations until Modrow's weak government had been replaced by the formation of an actual democratic government. Kohl also

went to great length to assure Germany's western neighbors, namely French President Mitterrand, that they remained committed to European integration.<sup>119</sup> The Soviets, for their part, were also closely observing the developments in the western-most state socialist republic. Ultimately, Gorbachev recognized the futility of opposing a popular movement for German unity, and withdrew its veto of German unification.<sup>120</sup> This development from Moscow accelerated the preparations for unification, and in particular, discussions about a potential economic union in order to stop the decline of the East German currency and economy more broadly. Finally, the most decisive diplomatic step toward unification took place at the Open Skies conference in Ottawa, Canada, which was an international meeting intended to build confidence and security between the attending NATO and Warsaw Pact countries. Instead of discussing flight observation standards and schedules, the foreign ministers of the four former occupying powers of Germany, as well as East and West German foreign ministers, spoke "with stunning frankness" about finally ending the postwar order.<sup>121</sup> This discussion, which would come to be known as the two-plus-four agreement, was the last in the series of international developments that made the prospect of German unification seem closer than it had in over fifty years.

The March 18, 1990, free elections of the *Volkskammer* would give Eisenhüttenstadt residents the chance to speak with their votes. The discussion that had bloomed in the local press, in the series of open forum discussions, and in the public meetings of the city council, among other places, would ultimately be resolved at the ballot box. As soon as the Round Table and Minister President Hans Modrow announced their decision to move up the date of the elections,

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<sup>119</sup> Jarausch, *Rush to Germany Unity*, 107-108.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

the competing political parties jostled to make their platforms heard. Had GDR citizens' faith in socialism been pushed to the breaking point, or were they willing to continue to try to reform the party and political system into a working solution? The election would answer not only which party or parties were in power, but also would determine the nature of the political system by serving as a referendum on the question of German unification. How Eisenhüttenstädters and their compatriots cast their votes would prove a decisive answer to the questions that had been brewing since the escalating social and political unrest of the previous summer and autumn.

## CHAPTER 4: THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC *WENDE* IN EISENHÜTTENSTADT, 1990-1991

### Introduction

While the full implications of the March 18, 1990, parliamentary elections would take time to unfold, the results did give one immediate answer as to how the country would face the challenges that had crystalized in the preceding months. They would do so with a newly constituted, democratically elected government—the first ever in the country’s forty-year history. The Party of Democratic Socialism (abbreviated PDS, which was the successor party to the previous SED) would no longer serve as the ruling party of East Germany. On March 19, 1990, the front page of the *Märkische Oderzeitung* declared “The CDU made the race clear.”<sup>1</sup> With 40.8 percent of the vote, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) was the decisive leader. The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) had achieved a disappointing 21.9 percent and the PDS had received only 16.4 percent of all East Germans’ votes.<sup>2</sup> By casting their votes for the CDU, which had run on a platform pushing rapid incorporation of East Germany into West Germany, East German citizens had voted overwhelmingly in favor of German unification. Although many economic advisors and politicians—including the European Community (EC)

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<sup>1</sup> The *Märkische Oderzeitung* was the newly renamed regional newspaper for the Oder region, including Frankfurt (Oder) and Eisenhüttenstadt. Previously it was called *Neuer Tag* (“New Day”). The first issue reflecting this name change appeared on Saturday, March 17, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> On the national level, Eisenhüttenstadt residents cast their votes in the parliamentary elections similarly to how East Germans did nation-wide. The CDU was the strongest individual party among Eisenhüttenstadt voters with 30.5 percent of the vote. But the PDS was not far behind with and even 26.0 percent and the SPD came in with 23.6 percent, which is a slightly smaller margin of victory compared to the national level. “Ergebnisse der Wahl zur Zehnten Volkskammer der DDR am 18.3.1990 nach Kreisen der Bezirke und Stadtbezirken von Berlin-Ost, in Prozent,” *Deutschland seit 1945*, <http://www.wahlen-in-deutschland.de/bovkKreise.htm>.



itself—had expected a slower process of economic and political transition, the path toward German unification proceeded with unanticipated rapidity.<sup>3</sup>

For residents of Eisenhüttenstadt, the pace of these political and economic changes was particularly abrupt. As the last chapter has shown, in the summer and autumn of 1989, Eisenhüttenstadt residents were not among those taking to the streets throughout the country to protest the paucity of exit visas and lack of travel freedom, among other human rights violations. Rather, local politicians and economic leaders, alongside ordinary Eisenhüttenstadt residents, looked on as protests throughout the country grew in both magnitude and frequency. But after the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, even Eisenhüttenstädters felt emboldened to join in the growing democratic discussions. Initially their criticisms remained relatively modest, often contained to material concerns. This evinced a trend that had been established during the 1980s when subtle critiques that the state-socialist regime was failing to live up to the material promises of “real existing socialism” were among the only criticisms that had been openly permissible. As the first free elections of March 1990 approached, Eisenhüttenstadt residents from across the political spectrum grew more vociferous. This manifested itself in the formerly auxiliary bloc parties exerting their political independence, and among ordinary steelworkers criticizing the inaction of their union representatives and the management, to name just a few. By March 18, 1990, it was abundantly clear that many residents in Eisenhüttenstadt (though not all) wanted transformative political and economic changes in their city and their country, though there was no consensus as to what shape these changes should take.

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<sup>3</sup> The European Community’s anticipation that the process of German unification would take longer to complete is evident in the May 8, 1990, Trade and Cooperation Agreement they signed together with the East German government in Brussels. This agreement, which would be valid for a decade, reflected the joint assumption that the process of German unification would be much more drawn out than it was. Lutz Schmidt and Herbert Nicolaus, *Einblicke: 50 Jahre EKO Stahl* (Eisenhüttenstadt: EKO Stahl, 2000), 239.

In the historiography of the *Wende*, cities such as Leipzig, Dresden, and other centers of discontent often take center stage, as the previous chapter also demonstrated. As a result, in the explosion of scholarship that followed the opening of the East German archives, these cities became synecdoche for the broader narrative of national transformation in the GDR—as if how events unfolded in Berlin also indicated how they did in other more peripheral locations. Such a circumscribed geographic focus helps to explain why certain dates and events have been cemented in the historiography as turning points in the history of German unification. While no one would dismiss the importance of October 9 or November 9, 1989, respectively, the paucity of local narratives of the *Wende* and postsocialist transition means that other significant caesuras get less attention.<sup>4</sup>

As such, this chapter asks how German unification and the first year of postsocialist transition unfolded in the socialist model-city, Eisenhüttenstadt. First, I ask how the prospect and process of the monetary union (*Währungsunion*) between East and West Germany affected the outlook and operations of *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* and its subsidiaries. The state-owned monopoly was not only the lifeblood of the local and regional economy, providing employment and social services that benefitted the majority of Eisenhüttenstädters. But EKO was also the heart of the GDR steel industry as a whole, and its inefficiency and outdated technology compared to the FRG had broader implications for the prospect of a smooth economic integration and entry into a global, competitive market economy. Second, I investigate the evolution of democratic politics on the local level, beginning with the May 6, 1990 municipal

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<sup>4</sup> For one notable exception to this paucity of local scholarship on postsocialist transition, see the anthropological account of another socialist model city during the 1990s and 2000s, Felix Ringel, *Back to the Postindustrial Future: An Ethnography of Germany's Fastest-Shrinking City* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018). Ringel's monograph provides another important narrative of local change, however, he focuses more on Hoyerswerda residents' orientation toward the future, as opposed to accounting for the state socialist or postsocialist past.

elections. After four decades of state socialism, how did Eisenhüttenstadt residents, their elected representatives, and city administrators learn to make democracy work? The opening of the press and flowering of discussion since the autumn of 1989 had given some opportunity for Eisenhüttenstädters to practice democratic politics. But now, instead of focusing on tearing down a repressive political system, by October 1990 their efforts were necessarily aimed at building up and maintaining a new democratic system, while still allowing room for criticism and growth.

Taken together, these two sections show how ordinary Eisenhüttenstädters and their economic and political leaders played an active role in attempting to navigate the vagaries of German unification. Although changes to accommodate a capitalist market economy and liberal democratic politics were made out of necessity, citizens in Eisenhüttenstadt were not fully at the mercy of these West German impositions from above. Moreover, prioritizing residents' everyday experiences of economic and political transformation shows once again how Eisenhüttenstadt departs from mainstream national narratives of postsocialist transition. In Eisenhüttenstadt the real *Wende* did not occur in the streets on a chilly evening in the autumn of 1989. Rather, for residents of the steel town and socialist model-city, the true transformations happened in the implementation of economic and political unification throughout the summer and early autumn of 1990.

### **EKO and the Free Market: Early Efforts to Secure the *Stahlstandort*, 1990-1991**

On March 22, 1990, the chapter house of the trade union at EKO was packed with employees gathered for the central meeting of the foremen (*Zentraler Tag des Meisters*). Latecomers dragged chairs from the restaurant next door and then simply started standing along the walls and crowding around the entrance to the room. It is little wonder that there was not a chair to spare, for this was the first opportunity for the EKO leadership to address how the results

of the March 18 national parliamentary elections were likely to affect the factory's fate. While General Director Dr. Karl Döring had confidently declared at the beginning of 1990 that EKO "was and would remain a socialist operation," this meeting attested to the changes that were already in motion within the administrative levels of EKO. As leaders and employees met to discuss the "State of the Implementation of Economic Reform in Steel Strip Combine Eisenhüttenstadt with the Goal of Securing International Market Competitiveness," it became abundantly clear that the future of the firm was not, as it would turn out, that of a socialist operation. Rather, in order to ensure the future of the steel mill and the livelihood of its employees in a competitive market economy, EKO needed to pursue the path to privatization as quickly as possible.

General Director Döring opened the meeting with a concise assessment, "the 1990 GDR parliamentary elections are history." He described how "the people of this country decided upon a program of unrestricted market economy, the fastest possible currency and economic union, and rapid 'annexation' of the GDR into the FRG." While the economic leaders of both EKO and the nation were already at work to try to ease this transition for their industries and employees, there was still much about the impending transitions that could not be predicted or controlled "considering that in the past [we] had assumed that [our] factory would remain publicly owned." Döring was well aware of both the expectations of his employees, as well as the variables he could not control. "I understand our employees' expectations from the leadership—and from myself—that our combine will be guided safely into the market economy, and I also understand that employees expect that this will be accomplished with a high degree of social security," he continued. "The leadership and myself feel personally responsible to ensure this,"

he assured them, “but the extent to which we can achieve this goal cannot be promised, and can only be achieved as a result of our collective work.”<sup>5</sup>

In the rest of his opening remarks to the collected employees, Döring gave an honest assessment of the factory’s status compared to its West German counterparts, simultaneously laying out an action plan for the transitions to come. He began by outlining the four pillars that made up the firm’s strategy for entering the market economy. He underscored that “the first pillar has always been that it’s necessary for us to trust in our own strength,” expressing his confidence that EKO workers had a tremendous capacity to figure out ways to economize and be more efficient. Second was the necessity of undertaking “expeditious renovations in the cold rolling mill in order to ensure the serviceability and competitive standard of our final products.” The third pillar recognized the need to actively pursue “partnerships with one or two large steel firms in the FRG in order to have western capital, western administrative and leadership experience, and to increase the chances that our own factory remains viable and continues to improve.” And finally, the fourth pillar was the assertion that “the social situation of our employees (an above all the security of jobs) must be guaranteed to the highest degree.”<sup>6</sup>

With these pillars in mind, Döring also offered an assessment of how EKO compared to West German factories from a productivity and technological standpoint. In short, while EKO boasted the most advanced technology in terms of their converter steel mill (*Konverterstahlwerk*),<sup>7</sup> they suffered from an overall productivity deficit compared to the FRG resulting from their outdated technology in the cold rolling mill and raw iron works and from

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<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Reich, “Konzept des BKE hat realen Chance,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 12/90 (March 1990): 1.

<sup>6</sup> “Aus eigener Kraft effektiver wirtschaften,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 12/90 (March 1990): 3.

<sup>7</sup> This was unsurprising given that the converter steel work began operation in 1984 and had been constructed with the technological and financial support of the Austrian steel company VOEST Alpine. For more details on this process, see Chapter 2.

their overall inefficiency. At EKO they required more employees in order to produce one ton of final product than their West German counterparts. This assessment was in keeping with subsequent national evaluations from the Ministry for Economic Affairs (*Ministerium für Wirtschaft*) undertaken in May 1990. This report characterized EKO as “the central problem of the steel industry in the GDR” on account of the technological inadequacies of its manufacturing process. Not only did EKO lack a completed warm rolling mill, but their extremely modern converter steel mill was insufficient to be competitive on account of the outdated raw ironworks.<sup>8</sup> An attempt to address these problems, which would include reconstruction of the raw ironworks and the completion of the warm rolling mill, would cost upwards of 5 billion DM.<sup>9</sup> Despite these sobering challenges, General Director Döring ended his remarks on an optimistic note, stating that now that technological updates had been accepted as a central part of their new strategy, “with an aggressive program, it should be possible to reach the necessary production levels.”<sup>10</sup> Taken all together, this strategic concept was well received, and enjoyed the support of those employees present.

These plans, which EKO employees and the broader public heard for the first time at this March 22 meeting, had been in formulation since the beginning of the year. In other words, even though General Director Döring had been hopeful about the possibility of successful social and economic reforms to keep EKO a “socialist firm,” behind the scenes he and other leaders were already preparing for potential alternatives. During the first couple months of 1990, international

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<sup>8</sup>In other words, the blast furnaces and raw ironworks hamstrung the process of making the raw steel that the converter steel mill then processed into steel sheets and bands that could then be sold to manufacturing companies. For a more thorough discussion of the steel production process, see Chapter 1.

<sup>9</sup> SAPMO BArch DE 10/454, Ministerium für Wirtschaft, “Standpunkt zur Entwicklung und Perspektive einer Stahlindustrie in der DDR,” 4 May 1990, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

developments in the Eastern bloc rapidly changed the possibilities and strategies necessary for economic reform in the GDR, making the nonsocialist reform alternatives increasingly likely. At the 45<sup>th</sup> meeting of COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, or *Rat für gegenseitliche Wirtschaftshilfe*) in Sofia, Bulgaria, in early January 1990, the Soviet Union's surprising decision to allow Hungary and Poland to transition to world-market prices suggested that this was the type of transition model that the GDR could also expect.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, plans for EKO's adjustment strategies also had to be considered in the context of the state of the West German, western European, and international steel industry. Beginning after the 1973 oil crisis and during the 1973-1975 economic recession, a "steel crisis" developed. In short, the market was saturated with steel based on previous demand, informed by the period of economic expansion following the Second World War. This oversaturation ultimately led to the closure of many steel mills throughout the western world, particularly throughout the Rust belt in North America, the *Ruhrgebiet* in West Germany, and the English Midlands in the United Kingdom.<sup>12</sup> Deindustrialization proceeded rapidly and drastically. Whereas in 1950, "the United States produced almost half of the world's steel output; by 1984, its share was less than 12 percent of this output." The European Community, in turn, "tripled its steel production between 1950 and 1970," but its output, too, was reduced substantially in the decade between 1974 and 1984, going from 160,000 thousands of metric tons to 120,000. More telling, perhaps, is that in the same period the EC went from employing nearly 800,000 workers in their collective steel

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<sup>11</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 238. See also Tony Smith, "Communist Trading Bloc Comecon Agrees it Needs Overhauling with AM-Romania, Bjt," *AP News* (January 10, 1990), <https://www.apnews.com/905c063ac562b3d4642821424244a613>.

<sup>12</sup> See William Sheuerman, *The Steel Crisis: The Economics and Politics of a Declining Industry* (New York: Praeger, 1986).

industries, to employing approximately 445,000.<sup>13</sup> This crisis for western Europe and the United States was compounded by the growing strength and efficiency of the steel industry in several Southeast Asian countries. By 1976, for example, Japan could produce a metric ton of steel for 161.93 dollars, compared to the United States' 284.65 dollars per metric ton.<sup>14</sup> Countries affected by this steel crisis generally attempted to modernize, reduce production capacities, and downsize personnel. West German steel firms also formed regional cartels “that helped avoid ruinous price competition through market-sharing agreements and price coordination.”<sup>15</sup> By 1990, the continued health of the global steel industry was still in question.<sup>16</sup>

These were the short- and long-term constellation of challenges that East German steel leaders had to navigate as they considered growing likelihood of transitioning to a competitive market economy. Since the transitional government under Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Hans Modrow, had also given up on attempts to regulate the activities of firms receiving foreign capital participation, EKO leadership undertook these investigations itself. They began negotiations with West German and Austrian steel companies—including such household names as Thyssen, Krupp, and VOEST Alpine AG—about potential joint construction ventures in order to close EKO's technological gaps, or at the very least to secure foreign capital investments.

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<sup>13</sup> David G. Tarr, “The Steel Crisis in the United States and the European Community: Causes and Adjustments,” in *Issues in US-EC Trade Relations*, eds. Robert E. Baldwin, et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 173-198. The measurement of EC steel production was based off of the EC-9, which comprised Belgium, Denmark, France, West Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and the UK.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Edward Deeg, *Finance Capitalism Unveiled: Banks and the German Political Economy* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 131.

<sup>16</sup> For the decisive new social history of deindustrialization in the coal and steel industries in western Europe see Lutz Raphael, *Jenseits von Kohle und Stahl: Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte Westeuropas nach dem Boom* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2019). For a more specific overview of West German firms during the 1970s see Morten Reitmayer and Ruth Rosenberger, eds., *Unternehmen am Ende des “goldenen Zeitalters”: Die 1970er Jahre in unternehmens- und wirtschaftshistorischer Perspektive* (Essen: Klartext, 2008). See also Konrad H. Jarausch, ed., *Das Ende der Zuversicht? Die siebziger Jahre als Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).



These talks were met with some successes at the end of March, when EKO and West German firm Peine-Salzgitter AG founded the Society for Steelworks Cooperation (*Gesellschaft für Stahlwirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit GmbH*) in Frankfurt (Oder). By the end of May they had signed a shareholder agreement for the construction of a joint venture casting- and rolling-line plant in Eisenhüttenstadt.<sup>17</sup> The partners hoped that this would help to strengthen their competitiveness on the global steel market.

In addition to EKO's independent attempts to collaborate with Western steel companies, the transitional government also took steps to facilitate the transition of East Germany's state-owned enterprises to the private sector at the national level. In early March 1990, the GDR Ministry took up the suggestion that a trusteeship (*Treuhand*) should be formed in order to protect the publicly-owned industries in their transition. This institute for the fiduciary management of the public property was called the *Treuhandanstalt* (Trusteeship Agency, abbreviated THA). "It saw its task above all as the protection and administration of the public property through the transformation and unbundling of people's-owned monopolies and firms, in the protection of the state and public property against unlawful sales through a limited privatization, and in the mobilization of resources for the rehabilitation of the state budget."<sup>18</sup> The most pressing task on the agenda for the newly constituted *Treuhandanstalt* was the transformation of the GDR's publicly owned enterprises into administrating stock corporations.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> This continuous casting installation (*Dünnbrammengießwalzanlage*) would have provided a method for operating a thin-slab casting and rolling plant.

<sup>18</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 240.

<sup>19</sup> For an overview of the privatization process of GDR industries through the *Treuhandanstalt*, see Wolfgang Seibel, *Verwaltete Illusionen: die Privatisierung der DDR-Wirtschaft durch die Treuhandanstalt und ihre Nachfolger, 1990-2000* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2005).

Over the course of the next few weeks, the General Director Döring and other EKO leaders met several times to discuss paths to partial privatization. By the beginning of April, they had officially decided to take the course of transforming the entire state-run monopoly (*Kombinat*) into one or more joint-stock companies (*Aktiengesellschaft* or AG). Finally, on May 16, 1990, the steel strip combine (*Bandstahlkombinat*) “Hermann Matern” became a joint-stock company worth 776.3 million marks. General Director Karl Döring was now Chairman Döring. The name EKO Stahl AG remained familiar, but the abbreviation had a new meaning. Now, the letters EKO no longer signified *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* (Steelworks Combine East). Rather, the “E” stood for *Eisen und Stahl* (iron and steel), the “K” for *Kaltgewaltzte Qualitätsbleche* (cold-rolled quality sheets), and the “O” for *Oberflächenveredelte Blecher, Bänder und Profile* (surface finished, sheets, bands, and profiles).<sup>20</sup>

On May 18, 1990, East and West German finance ministers signed the State Treaty between the FRG and the GDR on the Creation of a Monetary, Economic and Social Union (*Staatsvertrag zwischen der BRD und der DDR über die Schaffung einer Währungs-, Wirtschafts- und Sozialunion*, hereafter simply the State Treaty).<sup>21</sup> Beyond the introduction of the *Deutschmark* (DM or D-Mark), “the treaty introduced labor law, welfare support, and private health care, as well as contributory retirement, health, accident, and unemployment insurance,

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<sup>20</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 241.

<sup>21</sup> The discussions between East and West German leaders negotiating the currency reform had been ongoing since the results of the *Volkskammerwahl* on March 18, 1990. Initially many financial experts favored a more gradual approach, but as Kohl was determined to pursue more fast action in order to help his reelection chances, the finance ministers moved forward with negotiations. Toward the end of April, Bonn proposed a differentiated rate of currency exchange that was ultimately accepted, and the currency treaty was signed on May 18. It would go into effect on July 1st. For an overview of the back and forth negotiations see Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity*, 137-147. Political scientists and policy makers take Kohl’s actions to push for major rather than incremental change in this moment as indication that he recognized a ‘window of opportunity.’ Instead of pursuing a policy coexistence with a reformed GDR, he pushed for German unification at a moment when Soviet dominance in the Eastern bloc seemed to be waning. See Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *German Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

with startup funding from Bonn.”<sup>22</sup> With the knowledge that this treaty would officially go into effect on July 1, 1990, Chairman Döring underscored that the transformation from a people’s-owned firm to a joint stock company was a necessary precursor for the transition to a market economy.<sup>23</sup> Although it was a necessary prerequisite, it was not a sufficient condition for success in the new economic reality that would take hold on July 1. According to Döring, who spoke at a stewards’ meeting in mid-May (*Vertrauensleuteaktivetagung*), there were three fundamental challenges facing every citizen and industry in the GDR. First, and certainly the most challenging, was that “people’s labor would become a commodity,” and they would have to sell their labor on a market that was unconcerned about the fundamental human right to work, as evidenced by the current unemployment rate of about 7.5 to 8 percent in the Federal Republic. Second, every East German industry would soon be thrown into severe competition, and “only those who could compete in terms of the quality of their products as well as the costs of production would have a durable economic chance.” And third, returning to a previous point, Döring underscored that this market economy had no place for a “people’s owned” company (*volkseigener Betrieb*), and that the changes afoot were necessary for survival.

The elephant in the room during this talk, and indeed, throughout the entire factory during this stressful period, was the real possibility that these preparative measures would be insufficient to ready the steel company for competition on the free market. When members of the audience raised concerns that some of the measures included the elimination of essential social services that the steel firm offered to its workers and to outside community members, Döring replied soberly. “This is the fundamental crux of every action, because the ‘social question’ will

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<sup>22</sup> Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity*, 147.

<sup>23</sup> Karl Döring, “EKO Stahl Aktiengesellschaft Eisenhüttenstadt,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 19/90 (May 1990): 1.

take on an uncontrollable dimension if we do not succeed in maintaining [Eisenhüttenstadt] as the site of steel production (*Stahlstandort*).”<sup>24</sup> In other words, if EKO was not able to make a successful transition to the global market economy, the social consequences of losing nearly 13,000 jobs would far outweigh that of cutting certain auxiliary social services.

This fundamental awareness permeated the entire city as residents and workers alike celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the factory in 1950. At the banquet held on June 15, Döring gave yet another speech, this time recalling the origins of the steel factory “on this barren strip of land in Brandenburg.” He remembered the hard work and dedication of all Eisenhüttenstädters who had erected the factory and then remained to man its furnaces, underscoring the symbiotic relationship between the steel mill and the city (*Werk und Stadt*) that had grown up around it. While the path had been difficult, Döring also reminded those gathered that the hard work was not yet over, and that the survival and success of the entire city rested on the fate of the factory. For “when things go well in the *Werk*, then things also go well in the *Stadt*.”<sup>25</sup>

Fortunately, as a new enterprise of the *Treuhandanstalt*, EKO Stahl AG had more independence and freedom to pursue strategies and collaborations with other steel firms—including with the West German Krupp Stahl AG Bochum—to hopefully see them successfully through this period of transition and to do their best to secure Eisenhüttenstadt’s continued status as the *Stahlstandort*. The two companies formalized their agreement on June 29, 1990, coinciding with a visit in EKO Stahl AG from GDR Minister President Lothar de Maizière

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<sup>24</sup> The German word *Stahlstandort* can be literally translated as “steel site.” In other words, during this time the emphasis became to ensure that Eisenhüttenstadt remain a site of steel production even after unification. “Stahlstandort Eisenhüttenstadt muß gesichert werden,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 19/90 (May 1990): 3.

<sup>25</sup> Evelyn Reich, “Weiter in enger Beziehung von Werk und Stadt,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 22/90 (June 1990): 1.

himself. De Maizière supported the leadership's market plans, which included the aforementioned renovations and technical advancements, and was committed to maintaining Eisenhüttenstadt as a location of steel production. The factory newspaper wrote that this promise to secure Eisenhüttenstadt as the continued site of steel production "awoke hope in thousands of Eisenhüttenstädters and had given them new courage," which underscored the tenuous status of this promise in the minds of steelworkers and their families.<sup>26</sup> In the following week, when GDR Economic Minister Gerhard Pohl traveled to Brussels to meet with members of the European Commission for Credit and Investments, they discussed the necessity for Eisenhüttenstadt economic and political leaders to move quickly with their restructuring plans. Pohl also received information about what financial support was available from EC for the renovation of EKO Stahl AG.<sup>27</sup> With this said, the first half of 1990 was a period of fast-paced negotiations and tentative optimism, in which the management of EKO likely felt as if they were racing against the clock as the currency union drew nearer.

Concerns about the economic and political uncertainties that unification would bring were not limited to the political or economic elite. Rather, ordinary steelworkers had a litany of worries about the upcoming currency union, as well. During his visit on June 29, a group of female crane operators from the cold-rolling mill approached Minister President de Maizière to express their trepidations about the West German law that banned industrial night shift work for women.<sup>28</sup> The women drew attention to the fact that there were over 3,800 female employees throughout all of EKO, which comprised about one-third of the workforce. The new laws

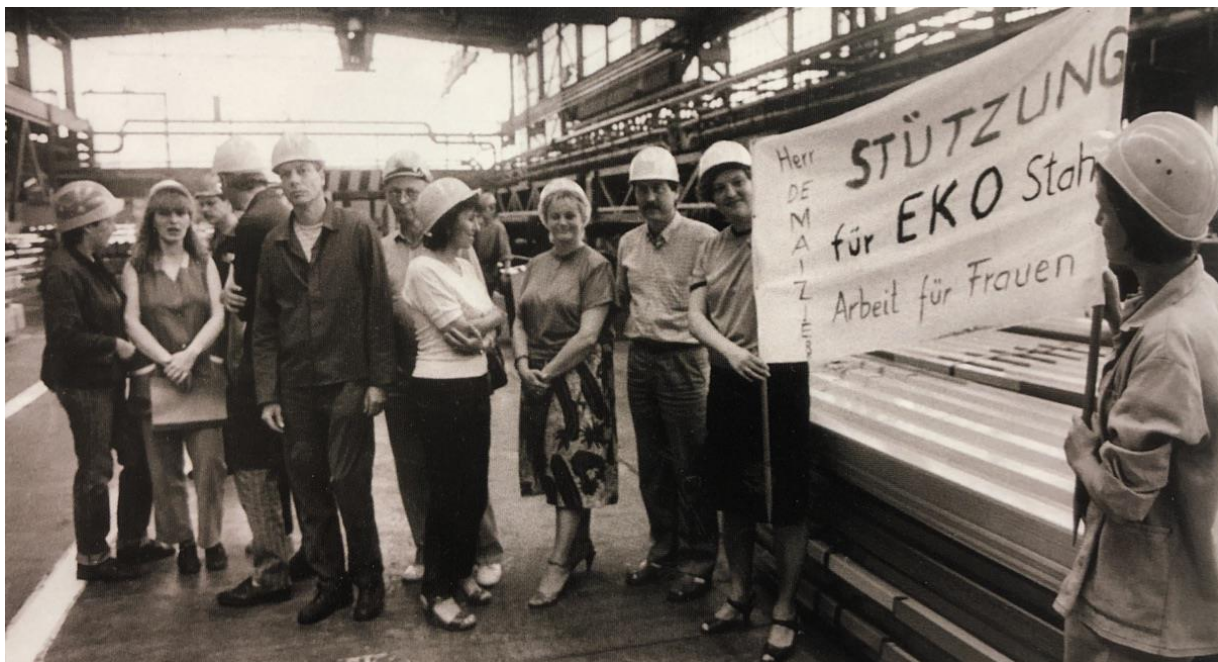
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<sup>26</sup> Evelyn Reich, "Stahlstandort Eisenhüttenstadt bleibt erhalten," *Unser Friedenswerk* 24/90 (July 1990): 1.

<sup>27</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 243.

<sup>28</sup> This law prohibiting industrial night-shift work for women had been in effect in Germany since 1891, and would remain in effect in the Federal Republic until 1992. See Wolfgang Ayaß, "'Der Übel größtes.' Das Verbot der Nachtarbeit von Arbeiterinnen in Deutschland, 1891-1992," *Zeitschrift für Sozialreform* 46 (2000): 189-200.

prohibiting female employees from working the night shift—which would also go into effect on July 1—would affect the employment status of over 1,000 women in EKO alone. Along with their conversation, the women delivered a letter with a list of demands for de Maizière and the regime. In this letter, the female crane operators demanded that the regime work to abolish this unnecessary law and provide sufficient retraining and work substitution opportunities to help the women who would be affected in the interim. Given that “the employment status of women is for many a means of securing the financial and social status of the entire family,” they also had further demands, which included continued subsidized care for children in daycares and kindergartens, as well as ongoing free-time activities for older children; keeping the monthly housework day (*Hausarbeitstag*); upholding women’s right to work until they were sixty-years-old; and maintaining a women’s “right to choose,” including the right to free abortions and subsidized medical care during and after pregnancy.<sup>29</sup>



**Figure 4.1** Female crane workers (and their male allies) demanding support for female employees in EKO during GDR Minister President, Lothar de Maizière’s visit on June 29, 1990. Source: Ch. Walter, *Unser Friedenswerk* 25/90 (July 1990): 4.

<sup>29</sup> Evelyn Reich, “Nachtschichtarbeit muß für uns bleiben,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 26/90 (July 1990): 3.

This incident reveals that employment was a site of understandable uncertainty for women (and all EKO employees, for that matter). But more broadly, in the face of this first phase of German unification, East German women workers were also unsettled about how the gendered laws and practices of West Germany would affect their daily lives, in the workforce and beyond. The law prohibiting female employees to work the night shift, in this case, became a signifier not only for legal inequalities as expressed in West German economic practices, but also for the many differences in social and cultural practices that existed between the two Germanys. Anxieties about the uncertainties inherent in German unification, in short, were manifold and multifaceted. But perhaps most importantly, this case demonstrates that in the face of these overwhelming uncertainties, East German workers took advantage of their democratic right to organize and protest. Delivering a list of demands directly to the Minister President of the GDR would have been unimaginable less than a year previously. Ultimately, these female crane operators who exercised democratic agency in the face of the impending currency union would prove to be the pathbreakers for further worker activism in the weeks, months, and years to come.

Although EKO ended the first half of 1990 with a profit of 389 million Marks (after subsidies still received from the GDR government), July 1, 1990, heralded a fundamental change in the economic conditions under which the factory had operated for the past four decades. On the eve of this transformation, Chairman Döring had cause to utter publicly a gloomier estimate of the company's prospects on the market economy. During Lothar de Maizière's visit to the steel firm on June 29, Döring clarified that despite the first half-year profit of 389 million marks, the forecast for the second half of the year was a loss of 286 million DM. "Although it may be hard to hear it, this is the first concrete outcome of our currency union for EKO Stahl AG." This

prognosis would be even worse, he predicted, without accompanying supporting economic measures from the state. Moreover, Döring worried that the cancellations of orders that they had received in the last few days meant that it would no longer be possible to avoid taking measures to reduce employees' hours (*Kurzarbeit*).<sup>30</sup>

When the Treaty for the Creation of an Economic, Monetary, and Social Union (*Vertrag zur Wirtschafts-, Währungs- und Sozialunion*) did go into effect on July 1, overnight EKO Stahl AG entered into free market competition with West German and western European steel companies. Because the prices on this competitive market were substantially lower than the prices for EKO products, and because the products on the global market were of significantly higher quality, GDR firms that had previously used EKO-produced steel instead turned to the free market. For example, *Blechformwerke Bernsbach*, which was a company that performed sheet metal shaping and stamping, reduced their purchases from EKO by 97.5 percent. Overall, production of cold rolled sheets and bands decreased in the second half of 1990 by 60 percent, from 105,000 tons to a mere 44,000 tons. This created an existential crisis for the fledgling joint-stock company that had far-reaching ripple effects throughout the Eisenhüttenstadt community. Moreover, this crisis was not unique to EKO, rather, it was also reflected or even eclipsed by the decline in production capacity and growth in unemployment in many of the combine's former subsidiary steel firms throughout the (former) GDR.<sup>31</sup> For example, by the end of 1990, two of

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<sup>30</sup> Personal archive of Karl Döring, in *EKO: Stahl für die DDR - Stahl für die Welt*, by Karl Döring (Berlin: Rohnstock Biografien, 2015), 202.

<sup>31</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 250. Like EKO, some other well-known GDR steel manufacturers pieced together a transition plan in the early 1990s. For example, the steel manufacturer in Brandenburg an der Havel had collaborated with the Italian steel company Riva to construct an electro-steel plant in the 1980s, much like EKO had collaborated with the Austrian firm VOEST-Alpine. As such, in 1992 they were able to use this connection to privatize into the B.E.S. Brandenburger Elektrostahlwerke GmbH under the Gruppo Riva. The electro-steelwork continues to operate to this day, employing approximately 730 workers. See "Brandenburg: Standorte," Riva Stahl website, [https://www.rivastahl.com/de/standorte/bes/unternehmensprofil\\_und\\_geschichte](https://www.rivastahl.com/de/standorte/bes/unternehmensprofil_und_geschichte).



the eight steel manufacturers that made up the steel strip collective combine (*Bandstahlkombinat*) “Hermann Matern” were permanently shut down. Taken all together, employment in the steel industry in the (former) GDR decreased by 25 percent from 1990 to 1991.<sup>32</sup>

With these sobering results and the specter of the impending currency union, the management of EKO could see the writing on the wall. Ultimately, there was no getting around the fact that the steel mill needed to downsize its personnel drastically in order to be competitive. One way of accomplishing this was to encourage a practice that had begun earlier in 1990 in anticipation of the structural changes that were to come. Early retirement (*Vorruhestand*) would come to be a particularly important rationalization measure, especially insofar that it recognized that the structural changes to the working environment would affect older employees disproportionately. As Marlies Arenbeck from human resources explained in an interview that ran in *Unser Friedenswerk* back in April, “for [older employees] it will always be more challenging to transition to a new professional occupation. And for us in the employment office (*Kaderbereich*) it will always be harder to find suitable new positions for these workers. In this respect I consider the introduction of early retirement as a good thing, especially as it is a way of regulating the job market.”<sup>33</sup> Frau Arenbeck then went on to outline the regulations regarding who specifically could seek early retirement. This included women fifty-five and older who have worked for a minimum of twenty years, including at least five years preceding early retirement. Men were eligible for early retirement once they reached sixty years, working for at least twenty-

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<sup>32</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 250. See the table documenting employment numbers in the VEB Bandstahlkombinat ‘Hermann Matern.’ Kaltwalzwerk Oranienburg and Blechwalzwerk Olbernhau were the two firms that were closed completely. EKO’s employees were reduced by approximately 15 percent, whereas (with the exception of the Metallurgieanlagen Wittstock) the remaining firms all lost between 20 percent and 55 percent of their employees.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Marlies Arenbeck, “Wer kann in den Vorruhestand gehen?” *Unser Friedenswerk* 14/90 (April 1990): 2.

five years total, with five of those years immediately preceding early retirement. Finally, there were two overarching conditions that all employees seeking early retirement had to recognize. First, that further employment in their current position would never again be possible, and two, that reasonable alternative employment at the same firm or within the territory also could not be offered.

By mid-July, just weeks after the currency union, early retirement was a topic inextricably bound up with the subject of workplace politics. On the surface, the management and firm newspaper continued to frame early retirement in a popular light. Chairman Döring sent a personal letter to long-term employees of EKO seeking early retirement, thanking them for their diligent work and for their understanding about the circumstances of their departure. The newspaper was peppered with retirement announcements, emotional accounts of retirement parties, and profiles of long-time EKO employees who were now departing. In a late July issue of *Unser Friedenswerk*, contributor Evelyn Reich recounted touchingly one of these retirement parties. Each employee received a rose and the promise that they would never be forgotten by their former bosses and colleagues. Indeed, one employee spoke up to express his gratitude, underscoring that “their willingness to enter into early retirement would mean, very concretely, that younger colleagues in EKO Stahl AG would be guaranteed a job.”<sup>34</sup> But under the surface, not all of these departures were entirely voluntary. According to the article, “Out of the 895 employees who have received an early retirement package, only 539 of them submitted a request for early retirement.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, the heartfelt words and ceremonial send-offs also belied

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<sup>34</sup> Evelyn Reich, “Wenn ein Auge lacht and das andere weint,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 26/90 (July 1990): 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

an understanding that for some of these older EKO employees their departure was more bitter than sweet.

Another strategy employed by the human resources and personnel department in order to cut down on costs was to encourage part-time work, particularly for working women and mothers. Earlier in May, *Unser Friedenswerk* ran a cover story on the success of the pilot program for part-time, female crane operators



**Figure 4.2** The participants in the pilot program for part-time, women crane operators gather around their forewoman to review their schedule for the upcoming weeks. Source: M. Suckert, “Teilzeitarbeit – eine Sache ohne Haken” *Unser Friedenswerk* 17/90 (May 1990): 1.

in the cold-rolling mill. According to the foreman, Birgit Droschinski, the trial run was going splendidly—indeed, “they couldn’t really have imagined it going so smoothly.”<sup>36</sup> This type of program had the advantage of not only cutting costs, but was also good optics. Brigitte Blahout, one of the two women interviewed for the profile, explained that she “had always wanted to work part-time in order to have more time for her kids.” Ute Metze, who had returned to part-time work after her year of maternity leave, was pleased with the arrangement because “she had more free time for her little Robert.”<sup>37</sup> Superficially, the existence and success of such a pilot program would seem to attest to positive gender politics in the workplace. Contrary to criticisms formerly leveled by the Federal Republic that women in the Democratic Republic were more or less forced to work full-time, this article demonstrated that women had the freedom to choose

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<sup>36</sup> Evelyn Reich, “Teilzeitarbeit – eine Sache ohne Haken,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 17/90 (May 1990): 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

whether they wanted to work full or part-time.<sup>38</sup> However, in light of women crane operators' subsequent activism at the end of June (discussed on pp. 12-13), it is more likely that this pilot program and its accompanying article were simply lip-service to the broader challenge of women's employment in EKO as opposed to any substantive, cost-saving alternative to women's full-time employment.

Despite these socially humane efforts to cut costs by encouraging early retirement, on August 1, 1990, only one month after the currency union had commenced, Döring's worst fears came to fruition. Seventy-five percent of EKO employees were placed on reduced hours (*Kurzarbeit*) because such substantially lower production quotas required far fewer employees. This meant that 8,200 of the approximately 11,100 employees in EKO alone were not working full hours, nor receiving full paychecks.<sup>39</sup> Initially, the management of EKO attempted to spin this development as positively as possible. *Unser Friedenswerk* reported on how Armin Kuster, vice chairman of the advisory board, communicated "with great openness about how staff downsizing would be accomplished socially, so that the employees would be financially cushioned," which sometimes took the form of early retirement packages. With such measures, Kuster expected that "in the future, it will be a functional rationalization method, and will allow us to move around extra labor to areas where it is needed."<sup>40</sup> Despite these attempts to elide the true magnitude of the problem, Döring recalled later in his memoir that "never before in the

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<sup>38</sup> For a sophisticated discussion of the GDR and FRG's competing cultural diplomacy efforts against each other in regard to the gendered politics of labor see Lorn Edward Hillaker, "Presenting a Better Germany: Competing Cultural Diplomacies of East and West Germany, 1949-1990" (PhD Diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 244. See also the interview with labor director, Dr. Bert Bartak, in which he explains that these were measures facing most of the industrial firms in the new Bundesländer, "Einführung der Kurzarbeit wird ab 1. August notwendig," *Unser Friedenswerk* 26/90 (July 1990): 5. For the announcement from the board that shortened hours would go into effect on August 1, 1990, see "Kurzarbeit in der EKO Stahl AG für 75 Prozent der Belegschaft," *Unser Friedenswerk* 28/90 (24 July 1990): 5.

<sup>40</sup> "Den Personalabbau sozial durchführen und finanziell abfedern," *Unser Friedenswerk* 25/90 (July 1990): 2.

forty-year history of the factory and its city had there been this type of uncertainty in the region.”<sup>41</sup>

In the face of this threat to their jobs, steelworkers in EKO Stahl AG did not stand idly by. On August 15, 1990, over 1,800 EKO employees answered the call of the West German metalworker’s union, IG Metall, to rally before a collective bargaining meeting between the union and the workers’ council leaders of EKO Stahl AG.<sup>42</sup> This rally was intended as a show of strength, demonstrating to both the leadership of EKO and to the leaders of the GDR that steelworkers were prepared to fight for their rights. Dr. Bernd Hartelt, a representative of IG Metall and member of the EKO workers’ council present for the tariff negotiation, clarified their stance. “The Minister President declared that no one should fare worse after July 2. But the reality for many GDR citizens already looks different, and with the start of the new year [the challenges] will only sharpen.” As such, IG Metall’s principle demands were retraining instead of termination, 24 months of protection against dismissal, and wage increases.<sup>43</sup> The sheer number of workers who attended, their enthusiastic cheering and applause, their spontaneous speeches and homemade signs, were all testament to what was at stake for steelworkers in Eisenhüttenstadt, as well as their willingness to fight for it.

In order to attempt to triage some of the financial losses of the first half of 1990, on September 1, 1990, the *Treuhandanstalt* oversaw the formation of a supervisory board (*Aufsichtsrat*) for EKO Stahl AG. The Hamburg-based economic auditor, Otto Gellert, was elected as chair of the supervisory committee. His deputy was another West German, Rainer

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<sup>41</sup> Döring, *EKO: Stahl für die DDR - Stahl für die Welt*, 203.

<sup>42</sup> IG Metall was the major metalworkers’ union in West German from its founding in 1949. See Bernhard Boll, *Organisation und Akzeptanz. Eine empirische Analyse der IG Metall im Transformationsprozeß Ostdeutschlands* (Hemsbach: Leske + Budrich, Opladen, 1997).

<sup>43</sup> Evelyn Reich, “Wir werden um unsere Rechten kämpfen,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 31/90 (August 1990): 1.



**Figure 4.3** Photo from the August 15, 1990, rally in which employees at EKO Stahl AG demonstrated their solidarity with IG Metall's collective bargaining demands in negotiations with the EKO leadership. Source: Evelyn Reich, "Wir werden um unsere Rechten Kämpfen," *Unser Friedenswerk* 31/90 (August 1990): 1.

Barcikowski, who was the leader of the Düsseldorf branch office of IG Metall. The rest of the board was comprised of other important leaders in West German steel production and banking.<sup>44</sup>

In their first meeting, the *Aufsichtsrat* wasted no time in confirming the internal board of EKO Stahl AG (*Betriebsrat*), including Dr. Karl Döring as chair. A week later, on September 7, the board held a consultation meeting with the members and leaders of the worker's council and with union representatives. This meeting was intended to address the 40 percent decrease in production capacity after only two months of operation in the market economy and the dangers of further losses in sales. Döring spoke about the necessity of "[jolting] awake our entire team and the leadership until we are out of the danger zone that we currently find ourselves in."<sup>45</sup>

After unification on October 3, 1990, EKO Stahl AG's status as an independent and profitable joint-stock company remained highly questionable. If anything, the GDR's absorption into the FRG, and by definition into the European Community (EC) as well, made the company's

<sup>44</sup> Döring, *EKO: Stahl für die DDR - Stahl für die Welt*, 205.

<sup>45</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 247.

future even more tenuous. Moreover, the fate of the steel firm continued to be rest on a combination of external political factors. Because the scope of the EC now stretched to encompass the five newest German states (*Bundesländer*), financial help for EC members was regulated by state aid law provisions (*Beihilferechts*) overseen by the EC. The agreement that the GDR had secured with the EC in early July was therefore defunct. And according to the European Coal and Steel Commission Treaty, which was interested in reducing surplus steel production capacities throughout its jurisdiction, state-sponsored firm and investment aid to the iron and steel industry in the new *Bundesländer* was now forbidden. Put short, in a united Germany, EKO Stahl AG would no longer be able to count on special treatment from the EC that the GDR regime had attempted to secure.<sup>46</sup> This fact would add additional urgency to their attempts find West German and international collaborators or investors for the company.

Unfortunately, in their efforts to begin implementing their restructuring plan (*Sanierungskonzept*) in as timely a manner of possible, the leadership of EKO Stahl AG once again ran up against external political obstacles outside of their control. On January 21, 1991, the board of EKO Stahl AG submitted their expanded restructuring plan to the head office of the *Treuhandanstalt* in Berlin. This plan included provisions for modernizing not only EKO in Eisenhüttenstadt, but also plans to bring up to date the remaining subsidiary companies. As it so happened, at this time the Berlin *Treuhand* was in the process of preparing to move their offices, which according to political scientist, Wolfgang Seibel, was “the epitome of organizational chaos.”<sup>47</sup> This physical disorganization was exacerbated by structural chaos as well, for on January 1, 1991, a new organizational structure for the office had also gone into effect. It was not

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>47</sup> Wolfgang Seibel and Stefan Kapferer, “Die organisatorische Entwicklung der Treuhandanstalt,” in *Treuhandanstalt: das Unmögliche wagen*, edited by Wolfram Fischer, (Berlin: Akademi-Verlag, 1993), 121.

until early March that the *Treuhand* even began to move their offices, and it took until the beginning of April for Hans Krämer to assume his post as the new leader of the Department of Iron and Steel Production/Non-Ferrous Metal Industry. These overlapping restructuring efforts meant that the supervisory board of EKO was left waiting for months before receiving any feedback about their restructuring plan.

These delays were frustrating not only to the top leadership of EKO Stahl AG, but the stagnancy and uncertainty about what lay ahead also affected ordinary workers in the steel mill. On March 21, 1991, approximately 4,800 employees throughout EKO put aside their work for an hour and gathered before the executive board building. This action against the board and management was designed to lend weight to their position in the current collective bargaining associations. Leaders of the strike made clear that this action was just a warning strike, but that they were also prepared to take stronger measures in order to accomplish their goals. According to one of the organizers, Bernd Pagel, their goals were above all to draw attention to what was at stake in the broader restructuring and privatization negotiations with the *Treuhandanstalt*, for not only ordinary EKO workers, but also for the entire city. “For us it isn’t about money, our vacations, or hardship allowances, rather for us it’s first and foremost about the preservation of our company, and with it our jobs and the security of our families.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, many protesters carried signs that underscored the relationship between the steel mill and the city itself. As one sign in the above photo simply read, “If EKO dies, the city dies.” The three other visible signs bore similar messages hammering home the city’s dependence on the continued existence of the steel industry. Though their protests were not explicitly directed at the *Treuhandanstalt*, it was

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<sup>48</sup> *EKO Stahl Report* 11/91 (April 1991): 1.





**Figure 4.4** Around 4,800 EKO employees gathered for a warning strike on March 21, 1991 in order to make clear to the board and management what was at stake for EKO workers and the city in the ongoing collective bargaining negotiation, as well as in the stalled restructuring plans with the *Treuhandanstalt*. Source: *EKO Stahl Report* 11/91 (April 1991): 1.

clear to all parties involved that the continued operation of the steel mill rested upon whether or not the trusteeship agreed that the restructuring plan for EKO Stahl AG was feasible or not.

Finally, on Monday, June 17, 1991, EKO employees heading to work in the converter steel mill were joined by some unanticipated visitors. Hans Krämer and his associates toured the factory in order to “inform themselves about the general situation of the firm, and the efficiency of the individual factories and branches.” After their tour, Krämer held a press conference for the assembled journalists and employees. His remarks made clear that he too understood the significance of the firm to the city. “In Eisenhüttenstadt there are around 50,000 residents, two-thirds of whom are dependent on EKO Stahl AG. As such, new possibilities for the firm that bring long-term competitiveness must be found.” Though Krämer assured everyone that this was a “completely normal work visit,” he also underscored that the visit was meant to be “a sign of the solidarity of the *Treuhand* with the company.” That being said, the visit was also a public acknowledgment “that it is with difficult challenges—like those we will no doubt have here in Eisenhüttenstadt—that we must move forward.”<sup>49</sup> Krämer hoped that the opening of eastern

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<sup>49</sup> Evelyn Reich, “Treuhand-Bsuch in der EKO Stahl AG,” in *EKO Stahl Report* 19/1991 (June 1991): 1.

markets would turn EKO's locational disadvantage into an advantage, but ultimately the firm's ability to make good on its restructuring plan—including the technological reorientation and quality improvements—must come from the firm itself.

After Hans Krämer's visit to the factory, the restructuring plan was presented once again to the Berlin office of the *Treuhand*. On August 7, 1991, members of the supervisory board of EKO met at the *Treuhand* office in Berlin for a comprehensive meeting led by Hans Krämer regarding EKO's proposal. In this meeting, the supervisory board was charged with making some last-minute further concessions to their plan that the *Treuhand* deemed necessary to ensure continued, successful steel production.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Hans Krämer announced that full privatization should be completed by the end of the calendar year. The board had until November to further sharpen their restructuring plan, which they now referred to by the more auspicious and business-savvy title, "corporate concept" (*Unternehmenskonzept*). The *Treuhand* accepted, with some initial doubt and reluctance, a future in which Eisenhüttenstadt remained the location of an integrated steel mill.<sup>51</sup> That being said, the implication was that their continued support depended on the ability of EKO Stahl AG to meet these last-minute demands and make good on the promises of their proposed corporate concept.

Following this meeting in Berlin, the local and regional governments of Eisenhüttenstadt and Brandenburg, respectively, sprang to action to demonstrate their support for the continued vitality of EKO Stahl AG. At a special meeting of the Eisenhüttenstadt city council called to order on August 28, 1991, members of all political parties came together in a moment of rare unity to issue a joint statement to the *Treuhand*. "The existence of an industrial center with an

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<sup>50</sup> Rosi Schimke, "Beratung zum Sanierungskonzept," in *EKO Stahl Report 23/1991* (August 1991): 1.

<sup>51</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 253.

emphasis on steel production in Eisenhüttenstadt is existentially important for the citizens and the entire city,” they wrote. They warned against any hasty decisions on the part of the *Treuhand*, reminding them once again of the livelihoods that were at stake. “The representatives of the city council of Eisenhüttenstadt demand that the *Treuhandanstalt* in Berlin take into consideration the interests of the citizens of Eisenhüttenstadt and that they help to secure the future steel jobs in EKO Stahl AG through their decision.”<sup>52</sup> This united front is testament perhaps to the resiliency of more cooperative mentalities between workers and management than those developed in capitalist work environments. Though the previous chapter witnessed some fragmentation between ordinary steelworkers and their trade-union representatives, in the face of an existential threat to their steelworks as a whole, workers and management took the steps where necessary to stand together.

Regional politicians, too, were vociferous in their support of securing Eisenhüttenstadt as a site of steel production. On the very same day, the state parliament (*Landtag*) in Potsdam held special session regarding the steel industry in Brandenburg. During the course of this session, Detleff Kirchhoff (CDU), who was a member of the state parliament from Eisenhüttenstadt originally, spoke up to demand that the state government of Brandenburg (*Landesregierung*) do everything in its power to retain this site of steel production in the new state.<sup>53</sup> This call was supported unanimously by members from all parties in the state parliament, as well as by the state government. Subsequently, on September 4, 1991, the party chairman of the CDU in the Brandenburg state parliament, Dr. Peter Michael Diestel, paid a visit to EKO Stahl AG. He came to inform himself about the situation in the factory, and in particular about the worries of its

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<sup>52</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 28.08.1991, “Gemeinsame Erklärung der Sondersitzung der Stadtverordnetenversammlung Eisenhüttenstadt,” 1.

<sup>53</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 253.

employees. After a tour of the converter steel mill, he expressed his commitment to continue to fight to retain this eastern site of steel production in Germany.

It would be more than absurd to reduce production in these modern steelworks to a minimum or to stop it altogether. The factory has a regionally-defining character for this area that must be retained—otherwise this could be a death toll for the region *arbeitspolitisch* [politically and economically speaking]. From my perspective, [EKO Stahl AG] demonstrates a good synthesis of market economy know-how and domestic specialists—a good mix of East and West. I hope that the unique opportunity that this location holds will be recognized...As a member of the state parliament, I will campaign so that this region doesn't remain a peripheral region in the state of Brandenburg, as some still see it.<sup>54</sup>

Chairman Diestel's comment demonstrates EKO Stahl AG's continued importance not only to the citizens of Eisenhüttenstadt, but also to the wider economy of the new state of Brandenburg. As previously discussed, at the conclusion of the Second World War, the province of Brandenburg (which became a state in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SBZ) and subsequent GDR) was one of the most economically and industrially underdeveloped regions of all of Germany. The East German regime's decision to construct the massive steelworks on a more or less empty site on its easternmost border was in explicitly intended as a means of economic development and modernization for the entire region. Throughout the course of the GDR, an extensive network of supportive industries had developed throughout the region, providing necessary services and manufacturing essential components to sustain steel production in Eisenhüttenstadt. In short, the threat of EKO Stahl AG's closure could have disastrous consequences for the lives and livelihoods of former East German citizens all throughout Brandenburg.

Despite the trusteeship's assurances that they were committed to securing full privatization of EKO Stahl AG by the end of the year, after the meeting at the beginning of

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<sup>54</sup> "Diese Region muß eine Zukunft haben," *EKO Stahl Report* 25/1991 (September 1991): 1.

August, there was no further word from the *Treuhand*.<sup>55</sup> In the face of this silence and uncertainty, the management and steelworkers of Eisenhüttenstadt once again took action. At a full plenary assembly on September 17, 1991, just shy of one year after German unification, the stewards, management, and rank and file steelworkers of EKO Stahl AG officially began the campaign “Eisenhüttenstadt must live – therefore steel” (*Eisenhüttenstadt muss leben – darum Stahl*).<sup>56</sup> The following week, employees from all of the different branches of the steelworks also met to demonstrate their support and solidarity with the campaign. At the workers’ council meeting the following week, chairman Günter Reski implored the collected workers to actively support the initiative. “In order to achieve successful realization of this campaign everyone must participate. No woman, no man, no child, even the youngest can be allowed to stand idly by. We must succeed in mobilizing the fighting strength (*Kampfkraft*) of everyone.”<sup>57</sup>

In the following weeks, this campaign grew in both numbers and visibility due in large part to the enthusiastic participation of ordinary steelworkers and the management alike. A spontaneous donation campaign collected funds to finance promotional materials like stickers, posters, and banners all bearing the campaign motto.<sup>58</sup> These were quickly distributed for use in organized demonstrations and even to adorn the entrance pillar to the EKO Stahl AG grounds. Campaigners’ first success came on October 2, 1991, when they accosted State Economic Minister, Walter Hirche, as he arrived in Eisenhüttenstadt for a long overdue visit to the steelworks. At the subsequent meeting Hirche spoke before thousands of assembled colleagues, declaring that “[he] came here in order to demonstrate the state parliament’s solidarity with the

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<sup>55</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 253.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>57</sup> “Eisenhüttenstadt muß leben – darum Stahl,” *EKO Stahl Report* 26/1991 (September 1991): 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 4.5** Image of the banner draped on the entrance pillar to the EKO Stahl AG grounds in Eisenhüttenstadt. Source: “Eisenhüttenstadt muß leben – darum Stahl,” EKO Stahl Report 26/1991 (September 1991): 1.

city and with the factory, and their support for Eisenhüttenstadt remaining the cite of steel production.”<sup>59</sup> Steelworkers were not the only ones participating actively in the campaign to save steel in Eisenhüttenstadt. On October 29, school children and apprentices also held a demonstration to show their support for the initiative. And EKO employees brought their activism to the neighboring town of Frankfurt (Oder) as well, increasing the visibility of the threat to the economic lifeblood of the entire region.

These efforts succeeded in bringing national attention to bear on the so-called “Steel Crisis” brewing in the Brandenburg region. On October 31, 1991, EKO Stahl AG received an important visitor: Jürgen Möllemann, Minister of Economic Affairs for the entire Federal Republic. Chairman Döring and thousands of employees gathered to welcome Möllemann as he took the podium to make some remarks to the assembled crowd. “With my visit to EKO Stahl AG, I want to communicate a central

<sup>59</sup> “Aktionskomitee erzielte erste Erfolge,” *EKO Stahl Report* 27/1991 (October 1991): 1; Speech from Brandenburg Economic Minister Walter Hirche, “Wirtschaftsminister Walter Hirche sprach zu Belegschaftsmitgliedern,” *EKO Stahl Report* 27/1991 (October 1991): 2.

message. We want to preserve Eisenhüttenstadt as a site of steel production. When I say we, that means the federal government.”<sup>60</sup> This announcement unsurprisingly received a thunderous applause. But as the cheers died down, a heckler interjected, “We don’t want any empty promises!” To this the Minister replied:

I don’t make empty promises. I’m well-known for this. I want for this site of steel production to have a fighting chance, because I’m of the opinion that the new German states won’t make it if they simply remain the sales counter of the old German states for an extended period of time. We need an industrial core in eastern Germany as well, because only here can small and mid-sized industries continue to develop. That means that an immediate decision must be brought about from the federal government, the state government, the *Treuhand*, and the investors, so that a future corporate concept can be realized.

These words from Minister Mölleman awoke hope once again in Eisenhüttenstädters that their jobs would be safe and their social security would be guaranteed. But despite these promises, there were no quick fix or immediate resolution for the future of EKO Stahl AG. The steel firm ended the first calendar year of German unification in a suspended state of uncertainty about whether steel would continue to be produced in Eisenhüttenstadt at all.

Ultimately, the combined efforts of East German, West German, and European economic advisors and politicians as well as the EKO management were insufficient to guarantee immediate, stable employment prospects for thousands of ordinary steelworkers and their families. This threat to the livelihood of Eisenhüttenstadt residents and to the regional economy as a whole, however, did provide a unifying rallying point. In the face of an existential threat to the entire steelworks, the fragmentations between management and workers that had become increasingly evident in the previous chapter were quickly cast aside. In the first year of the economic union between East and West Germany, ordinary citizens, local and regional political

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<sup>60</sup> Hans Frohnert, “Eine Zukunftschance für den Standort im Osten,” *EKO Stahl Report* 29/1991 (November 1991): 1.

leaders, and the supervisory board of EKO came together to fight for the continued existence of EKO. They did so all in their own way, organizing warning strikes, petitioning the *Treuhand* directly, or taking the floor of the state parliament (*Landtag*) to call other representatives to action. That this unifying activism came only after the road to German unification was well on its way—or had even already concluded—is further evidence that the true *Wende* in Eisenhüttenstadt not only came later, but was also substantively different than the revolutionary activism of the autumn of 1989. Instead of fighting for human rights in the context of a dictatorial regime, Eisenhüttenstädters used their new democratic rights to advocate for economic security in the face of a new, competitive, global, capitalist economy.

The first year of German unification set the tone for the challenges that EKO Stahl AG—and its subsequent iterations—would face for the coming decade. The contingency of these early strides toward partial privatization, a process which often felt like two steps forward followed by one step back, continued to characterize the privatization process as the European and global economy shifted to accommodate the opening of Eastern European markets. In these short months, the EKO leadership and ordinary workers alike had learned the meaning of true uncertainty, and they knew all too well what was at stake if the steel factory was ultimately not competitive on a global steel market, namely, their employment and livelihoods, and along with it some semblance of a sense of security and certainty about their futures.

### **Democracy by Necessity in the City Council and on the Streets, 1990-1991**

While the results of the March 18, 1990, national parliamentary elections had set the GDR on the fast track for unification with the FRG, additional changes to the local political landscape remained to be decided during the municipal elections on May 6, 1990. This important election would determine the political leaders who would be responsible for guiding the city and



its people through the upcoming processes of unification. Some of Eisenhüttenstadt residents' initial concerns about how these unification proceedings would unfold were met with an explosion of local campaigning activities on the part of those running for office. Their campaign agendas attempted to assuage the anxieties of the group of voters whose support they wanted to capture. All of the former bloc parties and newly formed political parties—such as the SPD, DBD, Neues Forum, Bündnis 90 - Green Party, and the FDP, to name a few—had thrown their hats into the ring to vie for dominance against the PDS. Other independent Eisenhüttenstadt residents also started their own new political parties and citizens' initiatives (*Bürgerinitiativen*) to make sure that their specific concerns were represented. For example, residents formed initiatives for the elderly, for home and property owners, and for the family. Campaigning politicians and parties proposed policies on a broad array of issues, from economic policies and unemployment, to administrative organization and environmental questions. The diversity of political candidates and platforms attests strongly to the fact that the underlying anxiety about the implications of German unification cut through all levels of society.

On May 6, Eisenhüttenstadt residents cast their votes yet again, but the results of the national parliamentary elections held two months earlier were not a perfect predictor of what happened on the local level. Unlike with the *Volkskammer* elections, where the CDU had been the strongest party at both the national and local level in Eisenhüttenstadt, at the municipal level the PDS emerged the victor, securing 17,597 votes, which constituted 25.5 percent of votes cast.<sup>61</sup> This was clearly not a decisive victory, however, as 17,179 residents (or 24.85 percent)

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<sup>61</sup> Among all GDR citizens, the CDU received 40.8 percent of the votes, the SPD received 21.9 percent, and the PDS 16.4 percent. These three constituted the three strongest parties. In Eisenhüttenstadt, the CDU was also the strongest individual party with 30.5 percent of the vote. But the PDS was not far behind with and even 26.0 percent and the SPD came in with 23.6 percent. See “Ergebnisse der Wahl zur Zehnten Volkskammer der DDR am 18.3.1990 nach Kreisen der Bezirke und Stadtbezirken von Berlin-Ost, in Prozent,” *Deutschland seit 1945*, <http://www.wahlen-in-deutschland.de/bovkKreise.htm>.

had cast their ballots for the CDU. This meant that both the PDS and CDU would have 13 seats on the new city council (*Stadtverordnetenversammlung*). The SPD came in only shortly behind that, with 23.1 percent of votes, which corresponded to 12 seats on the city council. After that, Bündnis 90 and the Association of Free Democrats (*Bund Freier Demokraten*, or BFD) both earned 3 seats, while the Free Democratic Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei*, or FDP) and the German Social Union (*Deutsche Soziale Union*, or DSU) earned 2 seats each. There was just one seat each for the Democratic Farmers' Party of Germany (*Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands*, or DBD), the Democratic Women's League of Germany (*Demokratische Frauensbund Deutschlands*, or DFD), and the *Volkssolidarität*.<sup>62</sup> The remaining political parties and organizations that ran did not receive enough votes to earn a representative on the city council.

These local election results meant that there would be no “red city hall” for the incumbent city administration. Rather, the PDS, which had won by only a small margin, would face the necessity of cooperating with members from other parties throughout this term. Part of this cooperation, according to former Round Table moderator and pastor, Joachim Rinn, whom we heard from in the previous chapter, would rest on politicians' ability to “learn democracy.” In a heartfelt statement at the Round Table's farewell banquet in mid-May, Pastor Rinn quoted East German author, Christa Wolf. He used her words from the forward she had written in Walter Janka's book—another East German author and publisher, who had faced trial and imprisonment for “counterrevolutionary” activities from 1956 to 1960 and was subsequently rehabilitated. His

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<sup>62</sup> For a summary of voting results see “PDS stärkste Partei, doch keine Mehrheit,” *Märkische Oderzeitung* 1:41 (8 May 1990): 1.

memoir, which recalled this period of imprisonment, was finally published in October 1989 and entitled *Difficulties with the Truth (Schwierigkeiten mit der Wahrheit)*:

We must examine our own ‘difficulties with the truth’ and we shall discover that we too have cause for regret and shame. We don’t want to continue to deceive ourselves: because until the renewal of our society has penetrated into the individual depths of self-questioning and self-criticism, it remains symptom based, misused and dangerous.<sup>63</sup>

Pastor Rinn’s conviction that each member of the city council needed to look within themselves, to acknowledge their own mistakes and shortcomings, was an important step along the path toward collaboration and democratization.

While Eisenhüttenstadt residents may have been slow to take to the streets during the Peaceful Revolution, now that German unification was more or less a forgone conclusion, they were emboldened to make their concerns known. Ordinary Eisenhüttenstadt residents also took full advantage of the opportunity to exercise their democratic freedoms, which were no longer purely theoretical. Indeed, the overwhelming uncertainty that residents now faced in almost every aspect of their daily lives was arguably a much more powerful motivator to civic action. In particular, with the two Germanys moving swiftly toward a currency union, which signaled the formerly planned economy’s full transition to a market economy, many Eisenhüttenstädters were understandably anxious about how their employment would be affected. They worried about how changes and reorganization would affect both the contours and security of their employment. Above all, they feared that the looming specter of unemployment—that had so long been an associated evil of the capitalist West—would come to plague them as well.

This section shows how this new process of practicing democracy was not restricted to within in the walls of the city council. Politicians, economic leaders, city administrators, and

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<sup>63</sup> “Es war für alle eine Schule der Demokratie,” *Märkische Oderzeitung* 1:49 (16 May 1990): 8.

ordinary Eisenhüttenstädters alike had the mantle of true democracy thrust upon their shoulders exceptionally quickly. The early stages of democratic discussions in the city council and local press, and the issues that dominated the agenda or animated letter writers, reveal some of the most pressing everyday concerns for Eisenhüttenstadt residents.

One of the most difficult early—and one of the inherent challenges of democratic governance—is that city council members had different interpretations of what the most pressing priorities were in the task of facilitating the process of German unification on the local level. At times these visions overlapped or were complementary, and at other times they conflicted. This dilemma of democracy constituted the new status quo for city council members in a united Germany. On October 10, 1990, the democratically elected city council members met in City Hall to convene their first meeting of the city council since German unification exactly one week prior on October 3. Understandably, the tenor of the meeting was dominated by the uncharted territory into which ordinary Eisenhüttenstädters and their elected representatives had entered. After attendance was taken, the meeting convened with thirty minutes allotted to a citizens' question and answer period (*Bürgerfragestunde*). While some of the petitioners came with routine items such as noise disruptions at 9 Gubener Street or an invitation to a discussion circle about the future of youth policy in the city, Herr Dr. Jestel's concern was colored by the unresolved uncertainties wrought by unification. As he began his remarks, Dr. Jestel inquired to the collected council whether “they were aware that, in the medical practice, among workers and particularly among the patients, that there is considerable unrest and justified worried about how things will proceed with healthcare coverages [in a united Germany]?”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 10.10.1990, Herr Dr. Jestel, “Bürgerfragestunde.”

As the meeting progressed, the motions from the elected representatives also evidenced this pattern, namely, an overarching concern about the uncertainty of navigating the new political landscape that they then expressed in terms of one specific, pressing problem. For example, faction Bündnis 90 - Green Party proposed a motion to address the growing volume of traffic in the city. They suggested a long-term effort to reduce the amount of traffic, as well as looking into possibilities for better traffic management. Implicit in this proposal was both an observation about the proliferation of motor vehicles since economic unification and the resulting safety and infrastructural challenges, as well as a proposed solution on how to address this problem.<sup>65</sup> The CDU's motion to take out federal loans in order to pursue pressing renovation projects also belied this tension. In this case, concern about the state of the city's finances was explicit in the CDU's observation that "there is already a deficit in the budget for the second half of 1990 and the first half of 1991, which can only be balanced after the creation of new laws."<sup>66</sup> That these funds were needed immediately, however, to update both the external facades and interiors of many of the buildings throughout the city, attested to the imbalance between the standard of living in the former East Germany compared to its western counterpart. In general, the flood of specific problems brought forth by ordinary citizens and political representatives alike is a testament to the overwhelming scope of the changes that German unification brought to the everyday lives of all East German citizens.

After the *Bürgerfragestunde* and the initial motions, the tone of the meeting shifted to reflection, in which the mayor and representatives of each of the assembled political parties

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<sup>65</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 10.10.1990, Bündnis 90/Grüne, "Antrag an die 4. SVV zur Bestätigung einer zeitweiligen Verkehrsberuhigung im Bereich Fritz-Heckert-Straße - Leninallee - 1. Wohnkomplex,"

<sup>66</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 10.10.1990, CDU-Fraktion, "Antrag der CDU-Fraktion an die SVV auf Inanspruchnahme von Krediten durch die Kommune der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt ab 1991," 1.

offered a substantial statement reflecting on the path leading up to German unification and as well as the way that still lay ahead. The mayor, Wolfgang Müller (CDU), offered the first comment, which was predictably a rather triumphalist account of the victory of freedom and human rights over that of dictatorship.<sup>67</sup> He recalled the June 17, 1953 workers' uprising that was brutally repressed, connecting it directly to the Peaceful Revolution of the previous autumn. "In my opinion, this day is a new beginning for all of us," Mayor Müller opined. But this new beginning was "bound up with the obligation to bring both Germanys . . . into a new peaceful European order." This task, as well as the integration of the people from the new and old Germanys, was understandably characterized by a fair degree of uncertainty. While "there is uncertainty here and there, we shouldn't let this uncertainty or these fears get out of hand. Everyone knows that these things must be met with courage, strength, the willingness to work hard to change things and to solve problems." Mayor Müller concluded that "we, as Germans, have the particular obligation to behave well, not only for us, but also for our role in Europe and in the world. I believe that only then can we realize the goals of 1989."<sup>68</sup> Understandably, as the newly elected mayor and as a member of one of the coalition parties of the newly constituted local government in Eisenhüttenstadt, Müller's speech underscored the achievements of the previous year in attempt to minimize the differences between the factions and ease their task of their cooperation in the coming months and years.

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<sup>67</sup> In order to fill the position of mayor (*Oberbürgermeister*), the elected members of the City council had voted to select a candidate from amongst their midst. Wolfgang Müller had won this distinction at the May 22 meeting of the City council with 31 votes. Ottokar Wundersee and Axel Dieter Rademacher had received only 14 and 3 votes, respectively. According to protocol, Müller, who was a member of the CDU, was replaced by the next representative from the first voting district from the CDU. Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 10.10.1990, Beschluß Nr. 06/01/1990, 2-3.

<sup>68</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 10.10.1990, "Erklärung des Oberbürgermeisters," 1-2.

Following Mayor Müller's call to collaborative action, the statement from the representative of the SPD did recognize the tremendous accomplishments and strides compared to one year previously, but they also drew more concrete attention to the difficulty of the work that lay ahead. Recalling the swift growth of the citizens' movement (*Bürgerbewegung*), the awakening of the bloc parties, and the purging of the SED from this very city council, the representative acknowledged that "we Social Democrats are not dissatisfied, though we are far from accomplishing the entirety of our goals." In particular, they underscored that there were "still many structures in the administration and production that need[ed] to be drastically modified in order to fit into the market economy." Moreover, "the interplay between the city council and the city administration, since its democratization in May, [was] not yet functioning without friction." In addition to this, the representative emphasized that "the most pressing problem at the moment appears to be the development of a far-reaching regional support and industrial center, the establishment of a job creation company, and with it a long-term, focused plan for promoting work training and retraining." These concerns had implications far beyond the confines of local city politics, demonstrating the Social Democrats' awareness of Eisenhüttenstadt's shifting role in the region, the country, and the world. "We don't want to be simply a region of consumption, but rather also a region of production," the representative underscored. "We in Eisenhüttenstadt aren't just a city in the new state of Brandenburg; we are also a region in Eastern Europe. As a city on the border with Poland, we have the task of demonstrating the integration ability of Germany and the European Community."<sup>69</sup> In short, the Social Democrats and their colleagues on the city council recognized both the pressing

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<sup>69</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 10.10.1990, "Erklärung der Fraktion der SPD," 1-2.

challenges and potential opportunities of this moment, thinking broadly about Eisenhüttenstadt's potentially leading geopolitical role in the region.

In contrast to the call to action offered by both the Mayor and the Social Democrats, the statement from the PDS was colored much more by fear about former East Germans' place in this emerging new order. In reflecting on the events that led up to the official dissolution of the GDR one week prior, the PDS representative did not accept that "an equitable growing together of the two German states had taken place." Rather, this process had made "more than a few Germans fear becoming second-class citizens, and I don't think any of us want for an internal wall to be erected in the stead of the external wall that has already fallen," the representative continued. To members of the PDS, the development of economic and social conditions in the coming weeks and months would be decisive in determining "the pace and quality of economic development, as well as the improvement of the standard of living of the population in the former GDR throughout the 1990s." But instead of recognizing Eisenhüttenstadt residents'—and GDR citizens' more broadly—potential agency in these upcoming processes, the PDS representative expressed fear and trepidation, not only that the "burdens of German unification [would not be] shared evenly," but also that former GDR citizens would not be given the possibility of participating equally in societal life. Despite Article 3 of the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*), and further legal assurances that no one can be discriminated against on account of their political persuasion, "already today citizens are afraid that their political associations will cause them to lose their jobs."<sup>70</sup> This statement, which continued in this vein for another several pages, evidenced the bitterness and frustration that most often characterized PDS members'

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<sup>70</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 10.10.1990, "Erklärung der Fraktion der PDS," 1-2.



attitude toward the loss of the status quo and the overwhelming uncertainties of German unification.

In keeping with the mayor's opening speech, the designated representative of the CDU also offered a sweeping retrospective of the history of the GDR from its origin after World War II, when "a new dictatorship took root in the eastern part of Germany." The representative recounted and lamented the CDU's formerly marginal role in the government, which was "thanks to the Bolshevik style and method of socialism," whose "forced merger between the KPD and SPD" meant that "bloc parties like the CDU, NDPD, LDPD, and the Bauernpartei" were only "a mantle of so-called democracy." This meandering account eventually reached the present, ultimately echoing some of the sentiments of the SPD by recognizing the symbolism of a reunited Germany. "With an eye to the future, we don't want the hard-won German identity to dissolve into national euphoria. We want to mitigate the understandable fears of our Polish neighbors. As local politicians, therefore, we carry a lot of responsibility for our coexistence with our neighbors to the East." Indeed, the CDU representative argued that the city's location should be seen as an opportunity. "The Oder as Germany's border should not take on the symbolism of a division, rather, many bridges need to be built over this river—bridges for Europe, and for all people." German unification gave all Germans both "the possibility and the responsibility of this highest goal: an equal, peaceful, togetherness or the peoples of Europe." The CDU, like the SPD, was able to look beyond the immediate uncertainties of unification and recognize the many symbolic and concrete opportunities that came with German reunification.<sup>71</sup>

Finally, the representative from the FDP was the last to offer a comment on the occasion of this first meeting of the city council in a united Germany. Somewhat sardonically, the

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<sup>71</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 10.10.1990, "Erklärung der Fraktion der CDU," 1-3.

representative opened his statement with the observation that “there have been many celebratory speeches in the last days. I don’t want to hold another here. I also don’t want to deliver a eulogy for the GDR. Socialism had its chance for over forty years in Germany, far too long, and the results are everywhere to see.” Rather than offer a “long retrospective,” members of the FDP recognized the “plethora of work laid out before us” and were therefore read ready to roll up their sleeves. “We must naturally even here in this city concern ourselves not only with economic and political things, but also, for example, foreign policy.” Echoing the sentiments of both the SPD and the CDU, the FDP representative recognized Eisenhüttenstadt’s geopolitical location in a changing Europe, underscoring their responsibility to attend to the friendship with Poland. Indeed, they observed that “we have much to thank the people of Eastern Europe for—remember Hungary and Poland?” Ultimately, one of the many tasks ahead was their duty “not to stand up nationalistically again and say ‘look how big Germany is again!’ Rather, we have now to prove that we as Germans can also be good Europeans.”<sup>72</sup>

Though these statements were quite rehearsed in nature, they nonetheless provide an interesting cross-section of the mixture of tentative optimism and bracing uncertainty that characterized the prevailing attitude toward unification among local politicians. With the exception of the PDS, most of the representatives from the various political parties recognized the significance of Eisenhüttenstadt’s geopolitical location on the eastern-most border of a unified Germany. They gestured to the historical legacies of a united Germany, and expressed a commitment to becoming better neighbors. Moreover, they were acutely aware that their location also placed them on the border of an expanding European Community, and were hopeful about the new opportunities that this might offer. As a whole, in keeping with the significance of the

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<sup>72</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 10.10.1990, “Erklärung der Fraktion der FDP,” 1-2

political moment, most of these statements projected optimism and determination about the future. The statement from the PDS was the one exception, and it proved to be surprisingly prescient about the nature and breadth of long-term challenges that would face Eisenhüttenstadt residents and their elected representatives in the years to come. Taken all together, these statements—colored by optimism and defensiveness, in turn—are testament to the deep uncertainty and insecurity felt by many members of the city council, combined with a keen awareness of the new political moment.

Throughout the 1990s, but beginning in earnest during the months preceding and following German unification, ordinary people also “learned democracy” by participating actively in public discussions on a range of subjects. One hot button issue that captivated the entire town during the first couple years of unification was that of renaming streets (*Straßenumbenennung*) throughout the city and within the neighboring towns of Fürstenberg and Schönfließ. City council members from the CDU had first broached this subject in a proposal during their June 20, 1990, meeting. After a “constructive discussion,” the city council then tasked the city administration (*Stadtverwaltung*) with appealing to the public to solicit their opinion, suggestions, and justifications for renaming certain streets, places, properties, and buildings throughout the city, which they did the following week in an issue of the local newspaper, the *Märkische Oderzeitung*.<sup>73</sup>

It was not until early 1991, however, that the subject returned to the public’s attention, and when it did so it was with fervor. On January 8, 1991, the newspaper published a series of letters to the editor showcasing residents’ range of opinions on the topic of renaming not only

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<sup>73</sup> Karl-Otto Neubert, “Die Bürger sind gefragt: Namen für Straßen und Plätze gesucht,” *Märkische Oderzeitung* 1:83 (27 June 1990): 8. See also Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 20.06.1990, Beschluß 19.2.1990, 1.

city streets, but potentially the city itself. Although there had been some limited reference to keeping the name “Eisenhüttenstadt” back in early July following GDR Minister President Lothar de Maizière’s visit to the steel mill, this had been in connection to the commitment to maintaining Eisenhüttenstadt as a site of steel production. If the city remained a place where steel was manufactured, then it was logical that it should retain the name “Ironworks City.” With the contingency of EKO Stahl AG’s privatization process to date, as well as the difficulties they faced in moving forward with their restructuring plan, it is perhaps little wonder that the subject of renaming the city and its streets once again gained traction among both ordinary citizens and their elected representatives alike.

Already in the first slate of letters to the editor, it was clear to see how emotionally charged the topic was for Eisenhüttenstadt residents. Günther Kremz, whose letter was published first, drew attention to the frequent discussions that permeated the city council and local newspaper regarding the financial challenges facing the new *Bundesländer*. This begged the question, according to Kremz, about the costs of such a renaming. He wrote that “Eisenhüttenstadt is a symbol, known far beyond the borders of Germany, which expresses that there is a giant factory here that we all want to keep.” He then asked, “is such a renaming really necessary, and moreover, is it a priority? Wouldn’t it be better to use the funds for something else, like to strengthen social amenities?” He proposed that the full costs of such an undertaking be made transparent before the citizens were again queried about their opinions. Gerd Förster, who also wrote a short note to the editors, agreed with Kremz that the administration should save the money that would be used to rename the city, but thought that it was high time some of the city streets get a new name. After all, “many street names had been overtaken by history.” In

particular, it was about time that they got a “Saarlouiser Street” in honor of their West German partner city, Saarlouis.

In a third short letter, Friedhelm Gamz disagreed with both of the previous authors, instead expressing his support of renaming the city “Fürstenberg an der Oder.” But he agreed that the citizens should be asked again in a survey before a decision was reached. Finally, Gerhard Kraft used his letter to express his frustration with the city council in general. “For over forty years we simply had to acquiesce to decisions from the SED and bloc parities. The people were never asked. And now we learn in the newspaper that our city is to be renamed? Did the new political parties decide that? It seems to me that our council members should have other worries besides renaming the city, or are they going to pay for the expenses out of their own parliamentary allowances?”<sup>74</sup> Taken together, these initial responses reveal that residents felt passionately one way or the other about the subject of renaming the city and its streets and were adamant that they should have a say in the process.

In part because of this resurgent interest, the city council formed a working group specifically devoted to the subject of renaming city streets that met for the first time on February 7, 1991. The working group’s task was to catalogue the street names throughout the city—both the streets that had existed before the city’s construction, as well as those that were new since its founding in 1950—and make a recommendation as to whether the name should be kept or changed. In the meeting minutes, members of the working group recorded the current name of the street, its precommunist name (if applicable), and a recommendation as to whether or not the name should be changed along with a justification for this decision. The committee members were exceptionally thorough, systematically examining the street names within each housing

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<sup>74</sup> “Aus der Leserpost,” *Märkische Oderzeitung* 2:6 (8 January 1991): 8.

complex, throughout the old towns of Fürstenberg and Schönfließ, and in the areas of newer construction, and even taking the time to do additional research about the individual after whom the street was named when necessary. Despite the changing political climate, not all streets named after influential socialists were automatically cast into the dustbin of history. For example, the committee recommended that streets named after Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx, and Clara Zetkin should remain. But they recommended that a street named after the Polish Stalinist “General Walter” be changed. Not all streets in the old town of Fürstenberg were automatically slated to revert to their old names either. For example, although Fellerstraße had previously been named Prinz-Carolath-Straße, the working group justified their recommendation that it retain its current name by noting that “Emma and Sigfried Feller fell victim to the Nazis; Sigfried Fellert was a Jew; Mrs. Emma Fellert was a worker who remained married to her husband until death—her corpse was buried somewhere.”<sup>75</sup> Put short, the working group took into account a number of different historical and political considerations and navigated the rapidly changing memory culture of the former GDR when making their recommendations.

Eisenhüttenstadt community members passionate about the subject of street names did not hesitate to barrage the new working group with their personal opinions regarding the best strategies for the process, as well as specific street name recommendations. Indeed, the committee began receiving letters even before they had convened for the first time. On February 6, 1991, they received a letter from local historian Günter Fromm, who had already written substantially on the subject in the city’s magazine, *Der Stadtspiegel*. According to Fromm, “the question of which names should replace those that are now intolerable or simply don’t fit in the democratic landscape is easily answered.” He proposed a straightforward solution, namely, “the

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<sup>75</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Protokoll der Arbeitsgruppe “Straßennamen,” 07.02.1991, 2.



**Figure 4.6** Photo of the intersection of Friedrich-Engels-Street and Karl-Marx-Street, obviously among those prominent communists whose names remained acceptable to Eisenhüttenstadt residents. Photo by the author, June 2014.

restoration of the original, or rather, the historic names.” Some Eisenhüttenstadt examples would be Phillipp-Müller-Straße back to Kastanienstraße (Chesnut Street), Roter Platz (Red Square) back to Roßplatz (Steed Square), or Marx-Engels-Platz back to Marktplatz (Market Square). But what about the street names that had no previously existing name? Fromm had suggestions for these as well. Some might be named after Eisenhüttenstadt’s partner cities (with the exception of Dimitroffgrad), whereas others might be named after small historic towns and villages in the surrounding area. For streets that bore the name of famous Stalinists, such as Klement-Gottwald-Straße, Fromm proposed that the names be changed to remember notable victims of Stalinism in the old town of Fürstenberg. For other streets named after historical individuals, Fromm underscored that “their biography as well as their view of democracy” must be thoroughly

corroborated.<sup>76</sup> At the bottom of the typed letter, Herr Fromm added a hand-written note in which he adamantly requested an invitation to the next meeting of the committee.<sup>77</sup>

Fromm was not alone in thinking he had worked out a solution to the city's street naming dilemma. Over the course of the next months, the working group continued to be deluged by letters from citizens who had been following along with the committee's activities in the local newspaper. On the one hand, some residents who wrote in simply wanted to have their concern about a specific street registered. For example, on March 12, 1991, the committee received a letter from Wolfgang Budnik in response to an article he had read in the newspaper in mid-February. Herr Budnik wrote that "[he] saw little sense in renaming the Square of German-Soviet Friendship (*Platz der Deutsch Sowjetischen Freundschaft*). Surely for some people friendship with the Soviet Union had always been a thorn in the side—they don't want to accept that those who are buried there also died for Germany."<sup>78</sup>

On the other hand, other residents who wrote to the working group also took issue with the practice of renaming streets altogether. For instance, Heike Pöhler wrote on April 19, 1990, that "undoubtedly there are some changes necessary in our city. . . .but at the present moment can no other problems be foreseen for which the costs of replacing the street names might be used instead?"<sup>79</sup> Similarly, on April 22 the Lonzek family wrote to register their unilateral rejection of renaming streets in the city "because this is not the right way to process the past (*die Vergangenheit zu verarbeiten*)."<sup>80</sup> Moreover, as residents of a street that was slated for a name

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<sup>76</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Letter from Günter Fromm to the Arbeitsgruppe "Straßennamen," 6 February 1991, 1.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>78</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Letter from Wolfgang Budnik to the Arbeitsgruppe "Straßennamen," 19 February 1991, 1.

<sup>79</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Letter from Heike Pöhler to the Arbeitsgruppe "Straßennamen," 19 April 1991, 1.



change, the Lonzek family protested energetically against all the costs and running around (*Ankosten und Lauferei*) that would be necessary to see this through. “What all would have to be changed? The identification cards, driver’s licenses, addresses for health insurance and pension insurance, and don’t forget address changes in the bank and savings accounts. And finally, every single acquaintance with whom one has exchanged letters must be informed of the new street name.”<sup>80</sup>

The Lonzek family and many others who worried about the costs of changing all of the proposed street names in Eisenhüttenstadt had reason to be concerned. Following the June 1991 meeting of the working group, the deputy director of the civil construction firm (*Tiefbauamt*), Herr J. Koch, sent a letter to Mayor Werner and to the head of the working group that detailed the costs of renaming the streets in the city. Koch gave the estimated costs of two different proposals he had received from the working group. Variant A proposed to change significantly more street names, whereas Variant B was more conservative in its recommendations, with the implicit suggestion that the city council should let some time elapse before they make decisions about certain street names. According to Koch, Variant A was projected to cost over 56,000 DM, and even the minimum changes of Variant B were estimated to cost the city and its residents over 30,000 DM.<sup>81</sup>

Despite these substantial costs, the city council chose to move ahead with the project of renaming street names in Eisenhüttenstadt. At the October 23, 1991, meeting of the city council, council members were faced with a choice: whether they should decide among themselves

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<sup>80</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Letter from the Lonzek Family to the Arbeitsgruppe “Straßennamen,” 22 April 1991, 1.

<sup>81</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Letter from Director of the *Tiefbauamt* to Mayor Werner and the AG “Straßennamen,” 6 June 1991, 1.

regarding the renaming of the streets during the day's meeting, or whether they should distribute another more systematic survey to the residents of the city to ask for more feedback on which streets should be renamed. The assembled city council members voted overwhelmingly in favor of deciding the matter among themselves, with 42 council members voting in favor, and 10 voting against.<sup>82</sup> As such, the rest of the meeting was devoted to systematically proceeding through the list of street names and voting to approve or dismiss the changes that the working group had proposed.

This process, however, did not go as smoothly as Mayor Werner and the Chairman of the city council, Herbert Böhme (SPD), had intended. After the initial vote to proceed without an additional citizen survey (*Bürgerbefragung*), Böhme attempted to segue right into voting about individual street names, beginning with four streets in the old town of Fürstenberg. As the scribe tallied the votes, however, it became clear that only 32 council members had even voted, and that the remaining 20 did not cast any vote. This was in part because the council members from the PDS decided to abstain, as their party chairman, Frau Flaig, clarified. Members from other political parties present also had questions and objections, with which they began bombarding Chairman Böhme. "If I could just ask one more question," Axel Rademacher (Bündnis 90/Grüne) broke in. "We already voted about it," Böhme spoke over him until he was interrupted again by Rademacher. Böhme persisted, "We have already voted and we can't go back. I don't think that discussing it would have brought a different result." At this point Klaus Miekley, chairman of the CDU, tried to get a word in as well, but Böhme cut him off abruptly. "Thank

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<sup>82</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 23.10.1991, Tonbandaufzeichnung: "TOP 4. Umbenennung von Straßen und Plätzen in Eisenhüttenstadt," 1.

you, we will continue. Next on our list is “Thälmann Street. Here I would offer the suggestion Eisenhüttenstädter Chaussee. Please! Let the voting continue.”<sup>83</sup>

Although Chairman Böhme tried willfully to plow through the interjections and questions from the other council members, he was ultimately forced to back up a step and clarify his rationale regarding the agenda for the day. Because the main committee (*Hauptausschuß*) and the finance committee (*Finanzausschuß*) were not able to agree on whether the city should proceed with renaming according to Variant A or B, it was now left to the city council to decide. And since Variant B was a smaller selection of streets, Böhme clarified that it was his wish that they go through and discuss and then vote on each individual street in Variant A, so they did not have to reconvene at a later date to address the streets that they had missed (if they were to do Variant B). In response to Böhme’s curt inquiry, “are you in agreement with these rules or not,” Rademacher piped up once again to ask about the petition that he had also submitted. The council secretary responded that Rademacher’s petition was next on the agenda (*Geschäftstordnung*). “That’s right, thank you very much. We want to adhere to the agenda,” Böhme responded snidely before continuing on with the next street up for discussion.<sup>84</sup>

The rest of the discussion of the street names in Variant A proceeded more or less according to plan. For each street city council members first had a chance to discuss, share their concerns, or ask clarifying questions before they voted. For example, regarding Thälmann Street, which was named after the Weimar era Communist leader Ernst Thälmann, council members encouraged each other “to take a minute to think about the person.” They also proposed their own alternative names. Some city council members still peppered the discussion with criticisms

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 4.

of the procedural side of things. For example, during his comment, Roland Jäger (Neues Forum) made sure to express not only his agreement with the SPD that perhaps Thälmann Street should not be renamed in the first place, but also snuck in a procedural suggestion that each Party agree on which name they want instead of all voting individually. Chairman Böhme, however, plowed on undeterred. When it came time to decide, the first round of voting was simply to determine whether a majority of council members were in favor of changing the name. 26 voted in favor of changing it, 4 voted against, and 2 withheld their votes. Then discussion opened once again to address alternatives for a new name, which seemed to come down to a choice between Eisenhüttenstädter Chaussee or Schönfließer Chaussee. One council member, who was himself a resident of the village Schönfließ, piped up to say that although “[he] could be a local patriot about it” he wanted to acknowledge that in this quarter of the city there already as a Schönfließer Street and a Schönfließer Square “so if [they] now added a Schönfließer Chaussee, then [they’d] never find their way around.”<sup>85</sup> After this feedback, Böhme put the vote to the council members and a majority of them voted to change the name from Thälmann Street to Eisenhüttenstädter Chaussee.

The city council meeting proceeded in this way until they had made their way through all of the street names on the Variant A list. As Böhme steered the meeting toward the next item on the agenda for the day (a discussion of tax rates), Jäger spoke up and requested to “once again have the right to speak on the manner in which all this has gone down with the street names.”<sup>86</sup> Böhme, his frustration palpable, tried to avoid the interruption on a procedural technicality. Since the meeting had a set agenda, he would have to put it to a vote among the council members

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>86</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Abschrift (Auszug) der Tonbandaufzeichnung von der SVV am 32.10.1991, 1.

whether Herr Jäger could have another word on the subject. A majority of council members agreed and Jäger took the floor. “First, I must say that what went down here is with certainty, I say this gently, an unsightly thing (*unschöne Sache*).”<sup>87</sup> Jäger went on to explain how both the working group and this council had made a mistake by not putting the different proposals (Variant A and B) to a discussion and truly weighing the pros and cons of each proposal (including cost, public opinion, etc.). “We could have done something—‘say, hold on a minute’—we will come to an agreement as a parliament and not simply go along with what it says here in this protocol. We could have done that. But no, here it has to go all *ruck zuck, fatzi, fatzi*. This is naturally not the only thing that I must criticize.”<sup>88</sup>

After this opening complaint, Jäger’s criticisms became decidedly less gentle. He chastised the city council for failing to invite Günther Fromm “who has more of a clue than most of the people in this room.”<sup>89</sup> He bemoaned the fact that people’s instinct was to erase any name that was slightly left-leaning. He called on all those council members who were not members of the major political parties to realize they were being steamrolled. Unsurprisingly, when he took the floor again, Chariman Böhme defended the city council’s procedures, emphasizing that all city council members had had a chance to vote ‘yes’ or ‘no’ on whether they should proceed with the street renames, as well as on the individual street names, and that a majority of city council members had done so. Other members of the city council clambered for a word, including Frau Manhardt, who jumped to Böhme’s defense by pointing out that she and Herr Jäger had collaborated as members of the working group, and that he therefore had nothing to

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 2. Günther Fromm is a local Eisenhüttenstädter of some notoriety. He is a self-declared local historian and was already active in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly writing articles for the city magazine.

complain about as the city council was strictly following the recommendations of the working group. When Jäger got the floor again, he grew even more irritated, using profanity and disparaging the intelligence of the other city council members. Böhme attempted to keep the proceedings civil, reprimanding him that he could not patronize the city council members that way and that there was no place for that kind of language in city hall, but Herr Jäger went on undeterred. Finally, in a last aspersion as Chairman Böhme withdrew his right to speak, Jäger cried, “what happened here is worse than in the old SED times!”<sup>90</sup> Though his frustration was understandable, most council members likely would not have gone so far as to equate the new democratically elected city council with the SED regime. That said, this incident does reveal a stumble of early democracy, evidence that the city council was still in the thick of learning and developing the local democratic processes in Eisenhüttenstadt.

The city council’s executive decision to go through with renaming the streets by no means put the subject to rest throughout the broader community. If anything, Eisenhüttenstadt residents were more vociferous than ever in airing their dissatisfaction about how their elected representatives had handled the issue of renaming. Merely days after the decisions reached during their October 23, 1991, the city council began to receive a fresh onslaught of letters and petitions from disgruntled citizens. On October 28, employees from the old-building renovation company (*Altbausanierung*) wrote to register their disagreement with the city council’s decision “that Mittelstraße will be renamed totally needlessly.” They explained “that with such a decision one would expect that the majority of the citizens of the street would be consulted in the decision.”<sup>91</sup> Also on October 28, the city council received a more formal letter of protest from a

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>91</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Letter to the Mayor from Hans-Jürgen Golm, 28 October 1991, 1.

small group of Eisenhüttenstädters against the “undemocratic procedures” of the previous meeting. They demanded, among other things, that streets named after anti-fascist resistance fighters like Ernst Thälmann and John Schehr retain their names because “to politically defame them [would be] a national disgrace,” as well as a public statement explaining the costs for the citizens who live on the streets that will be changed.<sup>92</sup> Additionally, Waltraud Bartoch, a resident of Helmut Just Street, conducted an independent survey of other residents of his street and found that of the 78 residents, three did not care what the street was named, one wanted its name to change to Dr. Semmelweis Street, and the remaining seventy-four wanted to continue to live on Helmut Just Street. These citizens requested that the city council once again review their decision to change the name to Dr. Semmelweis Street.<sup>93</sup>

Citizens’ frustrations with the street renaming debacle reached its apex the following month when an action group delivered a petition to the council members at their November 27 meeting that called for the implementation of an additional public survey of Eisenhüttenstadt residents. In their statement, the action group wrote:

Because we disagree with the manner by which the renaming of streets in our city was approached, and because we are convinced that the majority of Eisenhüttenstadt residents will not go along with a large portion of the renames that were carried out on October 23, 1991, we propose on this day, the 27<sup>th</sup> of November, 1991, that a public survey on the subject of “Street names” be carried out. In order to keep the costs of this survey as low as possible, we suggest that the survey be conducted in conjunction with the upcoming elections (*Europawahl*).<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, “Protest gegen die undemokratische Verfahrensweise der Stadtverordnetenversammlung am 23.10.1991 zur Umbenennung von Straßen in Eisenhüttenstadt,” 26 October 1991, 1.

<sup>93</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Letter to the City Council from Waltraud Bartoch, 1 November 1991, 1-3.

<sup>94</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Brief von dem Innenministerium des Landes Brandenburg re: Umbenennung von Straßen in Eisenhüttenstadt,” 1-2.

The statement delivered in November was signed by 1,823 Eisenhüttenstadt residents, and later in December the action group turned over lists of additional signatures, meaning that ultimately nearly 4,000 citizens supported the proposal of carrying out an additional public survey.

Following the outpouring of resentment and protests from citizens, the city council walked back some of its hasty decisions reached in the October 23 meeting. During the first city council meeting of the new year, Chairman Böhme acquiesced to the request to hold a consultation with the Citizens' Initiative "Street Names" before further action.<sup>95</sup> The city council likewise decided to reconvene the working group and tasked them with developing a recommendation as to how the city should proceed. In their April 27, 1992, meeting they proposed three new alternatives. First was to conduct a survey by mail to all of the households in Eisenhüttenstadt so that "every Eisenhüttenstadt citizen eligible to vote can express their decision on each individual street name."<sup>96</sup> The second suggestion proposed that the decisions reached by the city council during October should be implemented with the exception of Thälmann Street, Helmut Just Street, John Schehr Street, and Straße der Jugend, which should be voted upon again on account of the strong reaction they had elicited. And their third suggestion, in keeping with the FDP's specific proposal, was that the October 23 decisions should go into effect without any further changes. In their May 20 meeting, the city council decided upon the working group's second suggestion, and proceeded through the series of votes in an orderly fashion that little resembled the chaos and frustration of the previous October.

The subject of street names remained a hot topic in local party politics, in the press, and among citizens for the next several years, and had long term consequences for the culture of

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<sup>95</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 22.01.1991, "Beschlusprotokoll der 18. Sitzung der Stadtverordnetenversammlung am 22.01.1992," 4.

<sup>96</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Ergebnis der 2. Beratung der Arbeitsgruppe 'Straßennamen' vom 27.04.1992, 1.



democracy in Eisenhüttenstadt. This debate surrounding street names represents the convergence of politics from the bottom up and local politics from the top down. It shows how both ordinary citizens and their elected representatives alike were practicing democracy. City council members learned the hard way how to make decisions, and how to deal with the consequences of those decisions in the event that their constituents were dissatisfied, even if that meant walking back on those decisions. These early instances of practicing democracy were not only essential in coordinating the various facets of German unification, but was also inextricably bound up in early processes of coming to terms with the state socialist past. In the first year of unification, ordinary citizens and politicians alike used local political meetings as a space to vent their hurt and anger about the injustices of the previous regime, and to articulate their visions for what the future would hold. All told, the first year of political transformation in a united Germany was more than just the imposition of West German and European laws onto East Germany communities. Rather, Eisenhüttenstädters had agency in the way they developed their own practices of democracy and advocated for their democratic rights. In particular, community discussions about renaming streets, squares, and buildings became a site at which local politicians and ordinary Eisenhüttenstadt residents began to create a new culture of political and civic involvement and activism.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to capture the mood of devastating uncertainty that permeated the lives of Eisenhüttenstadt residents in the first year of German unification, for these systemic changes wrought unavoidable effects on the economic and political structures of the city. That being said, Eisenhüttenstadt residents were clearly not fully at the mercy of these transitions. During this first year, local economic and political leaders worked to the best of their abilities to

make the transition to a market economy and a democratic government as smooth as possible. The management of EKO negotiated with West German steel manufacturers during the privatization process, and steelworkers took to the streets in organized rallies and protests to demonstrate their willingness to fight for their jobs. The local city government navigated a new field of democratic politics, tackling pressing economic, social, and political issues in their city council meetings, while ordinary citizens contributed enthusiastically to the democratic process in active letter writing campaigns and citizen question and answer periods. Ultimately, I have argued that the political and economic uncertainty of the first year of German unification acted as a catalyst for Eisenhüttenstadt residents to take to the streets, figuratively and literally, exercising their individual agency and democratic rights in attempt to mitigate the potential negative effects of German unification.

But in addition to this often-debilitating anxiety about the future and frustration about the past, German unification also offered new possibilities for Eisenhüttenstadt residents on an individual and communal level. As such, this section has shown furthermore how the spaces of local politics could also serve as a venue to articulate new visions for the future. As the borders of the Federal Republic changed to absorb the former Democratic Republic, Eisenhüttenstadt residents imagined themselves at the center of an expanding (western) Europe. They were aware of the historical symbolism of a united Germany, and of their status as the furthest east member of the European Community (with the exception of Greece). Residents and local politicians also used the opportunity to participate in democratic politics as a space to verbalize their hopes for their new role in a shifting Europe. As a whole, the first year of German unification can be characterized by this tension between opportunity and uncertainty, showing the ways in which Eisenhüttenstadt residents effectively learned to practice democracy in their action to mitigate

uncertainty and cultivate new opportunities. The next chapter will explore the extent to which life in a united Germany—and a united Europe—matched their aspirations and expectations, and how they tackled those challenges in turn.

## CHAPTER 5: “A CERTAIN UNCERTAINTY”:<sup>1</sup> EVERYDAY IMPLICATIONS OF UNIFICATION, 1991-2001

### Introduction

As a fourteen-year-old boy in 1990, Gordon Perske remembers vividly some of the most exciting changes that accompanied German unification. “I have very specific memories of how the old East German grocery stores were emptied out overnight, and all the new West German goods poured in. I remember the first thing I bought was a Lion candy bar.” After this, however, he recalls more disorienting adjustments to everyday life. Like many young Eisenhüttenstädters, Perske had taken for granted that he would finish school, become a trainee at *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost*, and spend the rest of his career there. Perske had felt a sense of comfort knowing that his future in Eisenhüttenstadt was more or less laid out for him.

German unification, which entailed entry into the global market economy and activated the tenuous privatization process of the formerly state-owned steel combine, derailed this envisioned future for Perske. He continued his schooling in the newly reformed school system through the 13<sup>th</sup> grade, but had not figured out an alternate career trajectory. After a year in the army he was unemployed for a period before beginning vocational business school in the neighboring town of Frankfurt (Oder). He remembers this as a particularly difficult period. “In the GDR it was all predetermined,” he reflected. “You didn’t have to worry about it: where will my next job be? Where will I be able to find work? You always had work,” he continued. This

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “a certain uncertainty” (*eine gewisse Ungewissheit*) was used by one of my interview subjects, Hartmut Preuß, to describe the most dominant feeling that characterized the early 1990s, for himself personally, and for many other Eisenhüttenstädters

was completely uncharted territory, Perske intoned. “I was sad. . . . I was unemployed. My parents had never been unemployed their entire lives. Not one day.”<sup>2</sup> This feeling of all-encompassing uncertainty—the lack of a predetermined and obvious path forward—was something that all East Germans experienced to varying degrees in the first years of life in a unified Germany.

In the wake of German unification and the opening of the East German archives, an explosion of scholarship sought to understand how and why the East German state—which had existed for forty years longer than many critics would have expected—disintegrated when it did. In this transition literature (*Transformationsforschung*) published throughout the 1990s, it became clear to historians and social scientists that a monocausal explanation was insufficient to understand the failure of the GDR. They instead favored a combination of three main interpretations that posited that the regime ended as a result of “revolution from below,” “implosion from above,” and “collapse from outside.”<sup>3</sup> During these early years, political scientists were particularly interested in investigating the processes of economic and political transformation while they were still happening, quickly recognizing the “dilemma of simultaneity” that faced Eastern European countries coping with multiple transition processes at once. Democratization and the processes of economic, social, cultural, and spatial change—to name a few—were occurring simultaneously and rapidly.<sup>4</sup> In its effort to capture the monumental

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Gordon Perske, interview by the author, audio recording, Berlin, Germany, May 5, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Rush to Germany Unity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Charles Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Mary Elise Sarotte, *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall* (Basic Books: New York, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> See Claus Offe, “Das Dilemma der Gleichzeitigkeit. Demokratisierung und Marktwirtschaft in Osteuropa,” *Merkur* 45:4 (1991), 279-292; Wolfgang Merkel, “Die Konsolidierung postautoritärer und posttotalitärer Demokratien: ein Beitrag zur theorieorientierten Transformationsforschung,” in *Transformationsprozess in den Staaten Ostmitteleuropas*, ed. Hans Süßmut (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1998), 39-61. To be fair, anthropologists throughout the 1990s did a much better job of identifying the main themes of so-called “transition” literature. See in particular

scope of these transitions, however, much of this scholarship tends to overlook or gloss over the concurrent tremendous and immediate implications for the everyday lives of individual East Germans.

This chapter asks how residents of Eisenhüttenstadt experienced the longer-term effects of German unification in their everyday lives, as the sense of uncertainty about the concrete implications of unification for daily life in the former East Germany lingered long after the initial shock of the economic and political union. Most Eisenhüttenstadt residents had spent the majority—if not all—of their lives in the GDR. Their employment had been secure and predictable, and the state had subsidized the costs of housing, vacations, cultural and entertainment programming, and (the albeit at times limited selection of) consumer goods. On the one hand, unification brought with it threats to stable employment and perceived social security, as the existence of a steel industry in Eisenhüttenstadt continued to be called into question. On the other hand, unification also heralded an expansion of freedoms, including the ability to travel and purchase a wide variety of long-coveted consumer goods. How did Eisenhüttenstadt residents react to these transformative changes in their daily lives as the long-term effects of unification continued to develop. Who was able to take advantage of these expanded opportunities and who was left adrift in a new, foreign system?

The first section of this chapter picks up the story of EKO Stahl AG's continually uncertain fate. This section makes clear the human toll of economic adjustment strategies that had begun with the *Währungsunion*. In the context of new inter-German, European Community (EC), and international steel politics, EKO's survival strategy necessarily changed course. The

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Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). This literature, with a few exceptions, remains largely unintegrated from historical and political science scholarship.

uncoupling of the administrative apparatuses of EKO's central steel production branches from former auxiliary firms, a process known as *Ausgliederung*, included a corresponding uncoupling of pay-rolled employees, which therefore still had far-reaching effects for ordinary residents of Eisenhüttenstadt. Long-time EKO workers, though not terminated outright, often found themselves employed in new, small, private firms, many of which did not survive for more than a year. The end result was the same. For the first time, Eisenhüttenstadt residents not only had to worry about where their next paycheck would come from, but also about how their decreasingly secure employment opportunities would be able to meet the ever-increasing private costs of living in a free market, liberal democracy.

The second section of this chapter examines the effects of unemployment on the lives of Eisenhüttenstadt residents. Of all of the changes that accompanied the transition to the market economy, the absence of certain and stable employment prospects for former GDR citizens was arguably the most traumatic rupture. While this section makes clear that unemployment was an inescapable phenomenon, affecting residents of all genders at all stages of their careers, I also ask whether there were any groups of citizens who were more adversely affected by unemployment than others. The oral interviews, magazine and newspaper profiles, and local city council records reveal that female, young, and elderly Eisenhüttenstädters were more likely to lose their jobs than their middle-aged, male counterparts. That said, no resident who experienced unemployment was immune to the emotional, psychological, and of course, financial, burdens of not having a secure job.

The third section of this chapter examines another casualty of the transition to a competitive market economy, namely, the erosion of state-subsidized services and activities throughout the city. In the effort to trim budgets in EKO and throughout the city administration,

“nonessential” social services and subsidized leisure activities that had previously been steeply subsidized were among the first casualties. This section asks whether and how some of these services, clubs, and activities were able to survive in a market economy. What types of activities and services emerged to take their place, and who bore the costs of this new social and cultural infrastructure? Given the myriad changes in residents’ employment status and consumption habits, there were necessarily changes to the type of support and diversion that citizens needed.

The final section of this chapter turns to some of the more positive changes in Eisenhüttenstadt residents’ everyday lives that came with the transition to a market economy and liberal democracy. With German unification, Eisenhüttenstädters finally had access to long-coveted West German and international consumer goods. They had the freedom to travel beyond the Eastern bloc countries for the first time. What were Eisenhüttenstädters’ priorities as consumers and travelers? How did they spend their money and where did they choose to travel? This section also asks whether these opportunities were available to all Eisenhüttenstädters, or whether there emerged new patterns of exclusion and inequality that structured residents’ experiences as consumers and travelers in a rapidly globalizing world.

### **EKO Embroiled in German, European, and International Steel Politics**

The suspended uncertainty and fluctuations in employment that Eisenhüttenstadt residents experienced throughout the 1990s were compounded by the continued existential threat to the main employer in the city. Despite efforts on the part of the EKO management and the *Treuhand*, in cooperation with politicians at the local, regional, and national levels, the first year of German unification yielded no straightforward or conclusive answer to the steelworks’ fate. The comprehensive restructuring plan that the management had delivered to the *Treuhand* back in 1991—and revised and resubmitted in 1992—had still not been officially approved by the



beginning of 1993. Moreover, the renovation plans and path to full privatization were further complicated by broader developments in Western European and international steel markets.

By 1991 the contours of a new set of challenges for the West German steel industry were rapidly taking shape. As the West German steel firms were in the process of negotiating a 10.5 percent increase in wages for their employees, the mini-steel boom that had begun in 1988 ended abruptly, entailing a sharp drop in prices and leaving the participating steel firms on the verge of bankruptcy. This was the context into which EKO and steel firms from other former COMECON countries entered the international market, offering cheap (but often poorer quality) steel products and seeking avenues to privatization. In the face of this glut in steel, individual member countries of the European Community, such as France, Spain, and Italy, initiated subsidies for their national steel firms. As the producer of over half of the steel in the EC market, these subventions politics combined with rationalization tendencies sharpened the competition among West German steel firms making them particularly antagonistic to their underperforming, over-employed eastern counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

In the beginning of 1993, representatives from the various European steel branches met in Maastricht for an emergency meeting. In response to the glut of inexpensive steel on European and world markets, they decided to decrease the overall production of steel in EC member states by 26 and 18 million tons of raw steel and hot-pressed steel, respectively. In order to accomplish this, the steel branches projected cutting 45,000 steel jobs throughout all member countries. Given the dominance of the German steel industry among steel-producing members of the European Community, a representative proportion of job cuts would likewise have to come from

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<sup>5</sup> For a particularly thorough overview of the Western and international steel market at the time see Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt-Eisenhüttenstadt*, 107.

Germany. The question remained, however, which sites of steel production in Germany would survive the massive downsizing efforts.

Almost immediately, the discussion crystalized specifically around the question of whether or not Eisenhüttenstadt in particular would remain a site of steel production. Although EKO Stahl AG had a modern converter steel mill and a functional cold rolling mill, the absence of a hot strip mill (*Warmbreitbandstraße*) meant it was still unable to close the metallurgic production cycle. In other words, it was still less efficient and more expensive to produce steel in Eisenhüttenstadt compared to other German sites of steel manufacturing. While East German steel representatives had lobbied for federal and EC investments in order to construct a hot strip mill and to modernize the cold rolling mill, there were serious considerations as to the financial and political feasibility of this option. First and foremost, there was the question of funding. In order to bring EKO up to speed, some experts estimated that it would cost up to 1 billion DM. As one journalist put it, “given the massive excess capacities for steel production in Germany, this was a sum that would never pay off.”<sup>6</sup> Secondly, according to EC regulations, member states could only offer subsidies to individual steel firms if parallel locations within the member state were shut down. So not only would EKO require massive federal and EC support to accomplish its ambitious restructuring plan, but this aid would be contingent on the elimination of another site of steel production somewhere else in Germany.<sup>7</sup> In short, as one journalist at the time remarked, “EKO lies in the way of Brussels steel politics like a barnyard in the path of a planned interstate.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Erwin Single, “Wer soll das bezahlen?” *Die Tageszeitung* (13 February 1993): 7.

<sup>7</sup> Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt - Eisenhüttenstadt*, 107.

<sup>8</sup> K.W., “Pluspunkte für Bremer-Hütte,” *Die Tageszeitung* (10 January 1993): 22.

As such, the proposal to modernize EKO was wildly unpopular among representatives from the West German steel industry. The first Monday after the emergency steel meeting in Maastricht, the Minister President of Nordrhein Westfalen, Johannes Rau (SPD), made a visit to the national government to ask for financial support for the already crisis-ridden Ruhr, which stood to suffer most acutely from further downsizing in the steel sector. Ruprecht Vondran, the President of the European Confederation of Iron and Steel Industries (EUROFER, or *Wirtschaftsvereinigung Eisen- und Stahl*) also spoke out against the restructuring plan for EKO. He instead proposed closing the steel firm in Eisenhüttenstadt altogether. As a consolation, 1,260 different jobs would supposedly be created in other sectors, though the specifics were perhaps deliberately left vague. Because steel could be already produced more inexpensively in other German steel manufacturing locations, the financial investments and continued subventions necessary to make EKO Stahl AG competitive, according to Vondran, “would only increase the financial overcapacities and create the conditions for a state of ‘permanent subventions’ in Eisenhüttenstadt.”<sup>9</sup>

Unsurprisingly, this suggestion “from the Rhein” was not well received in Eisenhüttenstadt. Indeed, the following week, on February 12, 1993, approximately 6,000 steelworkers from across eastern Germany gathered at a rally in Eisenhüttenstadt to demonstrate their frustration with the behavior of the federal government. Manfred Stolpe (SPD), the Minister President of Brandenburg, spoke before the assembled crowd and demanded that “instead of the stalling tactics of the last two years, the *Treuhand* and the federal government need to make an immediate and clear decision about EKO Stahl AG.”<sup>10</sup> For over two years now, the livelihoods

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<sup>9</sup> “Welcher Stahlstandort darf überleben?” *Die Tageszeitung* (10 February 1993): 6.

<sup>10</sup> “6,000 EKO-Stahlwerker 18,000 Studienplätze für Erhalt des Standortes neu einzurichten,” *Neues Deutschland*, 13 February 1993, <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/403337.eko-stahlwefker-stuedienplaize-fuer-erhalt-des->

of Eisenhüttenstadt steelworkers and their families had hung in the balance of complicated negotiations at the local, regional, and national, and now supranational level. But the stakes for ordinary Eisenhüttenstädters remained the same. As one member of the local workers' council put it, "Eisenhüttenstadt without steel—that would mean the death of the city."<sup>11</sup>

Eisenhüttenstädters, however, were not the only ones who stood to suffer from the restructuring of the European and German steel industry. Throughout both halves of the formerly divided country, steelworkers took to the streets and assembled before regional and national government buildings in order to make their distress known. Steelworkers in eastern Germany gathered in Berlin and Potsdam at the offices of the *Treuhand* and regional government (*Landesregierung*), respectively. In western Germany, steelworkers set up permanent demonstrations and disrupted traffic for hours at a time by building freeway blockades. Despite these numerous and widespread demonstrations, the German steel industry leaders held firm to their plans. At a press conference on Thursday, February 18, 1993, Vondran confirmed the details of the German steel industry's plan to go through with the massive layoffs and decommissioning of select steel firms. In order to sufficiently reduce production capacities within a two-year period, Vondran further clarified that 25,000 to 30,000 West German and 10,000 East German steelworkers, respectively, could expect to lose their jobs.<sup>12</sup> At the press conference, the Federal Minister for Economic Affairs, Günther Rexrodt (FDP), gave further

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[standortes-neu-einzurichten.html](http://www.zeit.de/1993/09/das-bedeutet-den-tod-dieser-stadt).

<sup>11</sup> Klaus Scheffer, "Das bedeutet den Tod dieser Stadt," *Zeit Online*, 26 February 1993, <http://www.zeit.de/1993/09/das-bedeutet-den-tod-dieser-stadt>. As mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, several of EKO's daughter firms were closed by the end of 1991. By the end of 1993, Walzwerk Oranienburg, Blechwalzwerk Olbernhau BmbH, and Metallurgieanlagenbau Wittstock GmbH had been closed. The remaining four daughter firms in the combine were sold or individually privatized. Other well-known East German firms, like in Brandenburg an der Havel, managed to survive by being purchased by the Italian steel conglomerate Gruppo Riza, as explained in the previous chapter. See Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 243.

<sup>12</sup> "Nur die Entlassungen sind sicher," *Die Tageszeitung* (19 February 1993): 1.

information as to which steel sites were under threat from closure. In western Germany, steelworks in Dortmund and Rheinhausen would be affected, and the Krupp Stahl AG locations in Siegen and Hagen were also in danger. In eastern Germany, however, “Rexdrodt gave an all-clear: EKO was not in acute danger.”<sup>13</sup>

Emboldened by the news from the federal level, the supervisory board of EKO Stahl AG wasted no time in taking the next steps to secure Eisenhüttenstadt as a site of steel production. On Monday, March 1, 1993, the top management team passed a resolution supporting and making the funds available for the transformation of EKO Stahl into an integrated “mini, flat steelworks.”<sup>14</sup> At subsequent meetings throughout the rest of March, top officials of the *Treuhand*, along with the management and supervisory boards of EKO Stahl AG, were able to approve the plans and commit the funds for the modernization of the cold-rolling mill, as well as for the reconfiguration of EKO Stahl AG into said mini flat steelworks (*Mini-Flachstahlwerk*).<sup>15</sup> With this green light at the national level, the next hurdle on the path to securing the survival of Eisenhüttenstadt as a site of steel production lay with Brussels.

In preparation for the meeting in Brussels when EKO Stahl AG would present their corporate concept (*Unternehmenskonzept*) to high-ranking members of the EC Commission, the company began an aggressive marketing campaign in order to showcase how closely the fate of EKO Stahl AG and Europe as a whole were intertwined. The form and content of the company newspaper, *EKO-aktuell*, shifted quickly in order to demonstrate these linkages. A new logo, which appeared for the first time in a June 1993 special issue of the newspaper, featured the city crest of Eisenhüttenstadt with the European Community flag in the background. The logo was

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “EKO Stahl: Konzept beschlossen,” *Die Tageszeitung* (2 March 1993): 2.

<sup>15</sup> “Eisenhüttenstadt hat eine Zukunft,” *EKO-aktuelle* 1/93 (1993): 1.



**Figure 5.1** New logo appearing in the June 1993 special edition of *EKO-aktuell*. The logo features the Eisenhüttenstadt crest—with the steelworks spitting out steam in the shape of a dove—overlaid on the European Community flag. That Eisenhüttenstadt was a “Model for Europe” was underscored in three languages. Source: Extra Ausgabe, *EKO-aktuell* (June 1993): 1.

encircled by the words Eisenhüttenstadt, “Model for Europe,” in German, English, and French.<sup>16</sup> The editors did not miss the chance to print this logo as often as possible, as well as other marketing strategies to tie the steelworks and the European community together in the minds of its readers. The “E” in “Extra Issue” was overlaid on a mini blue circle with stars representing the EC member

states. Beyond the use of overt images from the EC, the entire color palette of the newspaper shifted. Whereas the previous iteration of the newspaper, *EKO-Stahl Report*, had been printed exclusively in black and white and greyscale, from its first issue in the late spring of 1993, *EKO-aktuell* was printed in black and various shades of blue.

The content of the newspapers also shifted, with most articles directly or indirectly engaging with the relationship between EKO Stahl AG and the European Community. The aforementioned special issue from June 1993 featured a series of articles, interviews, and profiles from a wide range of EKO employees, all attesting to the importance of the steelworks in

<sup>16</sup> Extra Ausgabe, *EKO-aktuell* (June 1993): 1. The new logo also appeared on the front page of the 2/93 issue of the newspaper, which was printed sometime after the June 18, 1993 meeting in Brussels.

Eisenhüttenstadt to the future of European steel, and styling themselves as a “Model for Europe.” In the cover story of the special issue, “A future in Europe?” Rainer Barcikowski, the vice chairman of the supervisory board of the steelworks, explained that there was historical precedent for the survival of a steelworks that went against the interests of the steel industry in the Rhein and Ruhr. In the postwar period, the former Hermann Göring Werke in Salzgitter had narrowly avoided being completely dismantled by Allied forces, tensions coming to a head in March 1950 when unarmed workers stood up to British soldiers and tanks to prevent the dismantling of a yet another coking plant.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, over the course of the subsequent decades, “the former ‘*Osthütte*’ of the old Federal Republic flourished as the pearl of the West German steel industry, earning its place among the ‘circle of giants.’”<sup>18</sup> According to Barcikowski, EKO Stahl had this same potential. Moreover, “in Brussels it’s about more than just the fate of EKO Stahl AG.” Because the corporate concept for EKO was more than a specific location concept—it was also a regional concept, that would have implications across national borders. The survival of steel production in Eisenhüttenstadt, and further industrial development along the Polish border in Brandenburg and Saxony, “is necessary to give the idea of a European Union potency.”<sup>19</sup>

The fate of EKO also had layered political and social ramifications closer to home. Walter Hirche (FDP), the Brandenburg Minister of Economic Affairs, wrote a short column outlining the implications of EKO Stahl AG’s status for German-German relations, as well. “Given the catastrophic job market situation in eastern Germany, it would be a mockery if a

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<sup>17</sup> Klaus Neumann, *Shifting Memories: The Nazi Past in the New Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Rainer Barcikowski, “Eine Zukunft in Europa,” *EKO-aktuell* (June 1993): 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

western German steel site was preserved instead of the modernization of EKO Stahl AG.”<sup>20</sup>

According to Hirche, the recovery of “the East” as a whole only stood a chance if what was left of the industrial core was renovated and preserved. Like Barcikowski, Hirche also did not miss the opportunity to underscore the region’s potential advantages. For one, the expansive property along the Oder offered the possibility of attracting new industrial firms to the area. Already the steelworks was in discussion to bring new companies to the EKO property, including a recycling center, a construction material firm, and a logistic transportation firm. Moreover, the proximity to Poland could actually bring certain advantages as well. In particular, Hirche envisioned a cooperation between manufacturing efforts on both side of the Oder, with more labor-intensive production phases completed on the eastern side of the Oder and the more capital-intensive, highly technical finishing stages completed on the German side. As a whole, Hirche’s short column made a case for the preservation of the Eisenhüttenstadt steel production site not only in terms of its potential productivity, but also in terms of its continued symbolic importance in a newly reunified Europe. In other words, EKO could serve as “a new bridge to Eastern Europe,” as one of the articles was entitled.

The special issue also made clear the human cost of a potential closure of EKO. Detlef Kirchhof, an Eisenhüttenstadt native and CDU member in the Brandenburg Parliament, warned of the threat of social chaos if EKO were to close. If the EC Commission decided against the integrated EKO concept “it would have catastrophic results for the entire region.” Indeed, “it would mean social chaos and the paralysis of economic development for a long time.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Walter Hirche, “EKO Sthal ist ein Sonderfall,” in *EKO-aktuelle* (June 1993): 2.

<sup>21</sup> Detlef Kirchhof, “Soziales Chaos befürchtet,” in *EKO-aktuell* (June 1993): 2.



More compelling perhaps, were the portraits and voices of ordinary Eisenhüttenstadt residents who had the most to lose if EKO Stahl AG were to shut down completely. The front cover featured the portrait and soundbite of a veteran EKO employee, Klaus Schnabel, who had begun his training EKO back in 1964, diligently studying and working his way up to the department head of the cold rolling mill. Although two years ago he was relatively optimistic about EKO's future prospects, "now the optimism is somewhat muffled." According to Schnabel, "it is necessary and just that we remain as an integrated site [of steel production]. Why shouldn't there also be something new in the East, which there hasn't been up until now?"<sup>22</sup> This question spoke to broader patterns of dissatisfaction that were growing increasingly entrenched in the former East Germany. Many former East Germans felt that their post-unification outcomes did not compare favorably to their lives in the GDR, and even articulated feeling like "second-class citizens" in their own country.<sup>23</sup>

Although it is unlikely that this marketing campaign alone successfully pulled on the heartstrings of high-ranking EC officials, in the long-term, the European Community did ultimately approve EKO Stahl AG's transformation into a mini-steelworks, which laid the groundwork for securing the steelworks' future. The biggest objection laying in the way of the European Commission's approval of EKO Stahl AG's restructuring plan had been the lack of a committed investor.<sup>24</sup> After plans for privatization with the Italian steel firm Riva fell through in

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<sup>22</sup> Klaus Schnabel, "Wir wollen eine Chance," in *EKO-aktuell* (June 1993): 1.

<sup>23</sup> There is a substantial body of scholarship on this phenomenon. For a small sampling see, for example, Daniela Dahn, *Westwärts und nicht vergessen: vom Unbehagen in der Einheit* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1996); Olaf Georg Klein, *Suddenly Everything Was Different: German Lives in Upheaval*, trans. Ann McGlashan (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007); Daniela Dahn, *Wehe dem Sieger! Ohne Osten kein Westen* (Reibek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2009); Ben Gook, *Divided Subjects, Invisible Borders: Re-Unified Germany after 1989* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> The European Commission is the executive branch of the European Union (until November 1993, European Community) responsible for approving or rejecting EKO's restructuring plan.

May 1994, negotiations seemed like they would return to the realm of uncertainty.<sup>25</sup> With the European Commission demanding a new plan about EKO Stahl AG's privatization within fifteen business days, EKO leaders scrambled to find a solution. Enter Jean Gandois, president of the Belgian steel firm Cockerill Sambre, who was looking for a way to break into the German steel industry and potentially for further investment opportunities in eastern Europe. By September Cockerill Sambre's plans for acquiring EKO Stahl AG were firm, and on December 23, 1994, the transfer became official. Cockerill Sambre planned to maintain nearly 2,800 workers in EKO throughout the following year, news that was greeted as a tremendous victory by the management and workers of EKO, alike.<sup>26</sup>

Privatization by Cockerill Sambre secured the continued symbiotic relationship between the factory and its city. Despite the reduction of employees over the course of the first years of the 1990s, privatization meant that Eisenhüttenstadt would remain a *Stahlstandort*. Under Cockerill Sambre, EKO Stahl was finally able to close the metallurgic production cycle in 1997 through modernization of their blast furnaces and cold rolling mill, as well as the construction of a modern hot rolling mill.<sup>27</sup> That said, the four years of acute uncertainty testified to the fact that Eisenhüttenstädters' lives and livelihoods were at the mercy of a tangle of domestic, European, and international politics related to the global steel industry. Though the latter 1990s witnessed their strides in transforming themselves into a modern, competitive steel firm, this was surely not

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<sup>25</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke* 296-301. Gruppo Riva is the firm that privatized the steel mill in Brandenburg an der Havel.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 306-311.

<sup>27</sup> "Der metallurgische Kreislauf schließt sich," ArcelorMittal Eisenhüttenstadt, <https://eisenhuettenstadt.arcelormittal.com/icc/arcelor-ehst-de/broker.jsp?uMen=d13152c2-2d9e-d51d-b2a9-147d7b2f25d3&uCon=ecc152c2-2d9e-d51d-b2a9-147d7b2f25d3&uTem=aaaaaaaa-aaaa-aaaa-000000000011>.

the last time that the continued existence of Eisenhüttenstadt as a site of steel production would be called into question.

**“Jeder muss sein eigenes Brot suchen”<sup>28</sup>: (Un)employment in a Market Economy**

By the beginning of 1991, Jakob Frenz\* had worked in EKO on and off for over fifteen years. After high school he worked there for a year, and upon the completion of his mandatory military service he returned, first as a trainee and full-time from 1981. By the time of the *Wende* he had worked his way up to being a manager of the personnel development department. By the early 1990s, however, in the context of growing rationalization measures intended to preserve the core functions of the steel mill, Frenz’s job was eliminated. As a man in his mid-thirties, he found himself jobless for the first time in his life. In a scramble to find different employment and means to financially support himself and his family, Frenz cast his net widely, attempting to take advantage of the variety of new businesses that had emerged in and around Eisenhüttenstadt during the early 1990s. Unfortunately, Frenz found himself in competition with thousands of other individuals also seeking work, some of whom had technical qualifications better suited to the jobs available. With mounting desperation, Frenz applied for and received a coveted spot in a retraining course in information systems, with the assurance that a career in computers was the way of the future. At the conclusion of the course he secured an internship at an engineering firm, recalling that it was particularly embarrassing and frustrating to go from a department manager at EKO to a forty-something intern with uncertain job prospects. And indeed, after nine months of employment at the engineering firm, he was once again let go.

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<sup>28</sup> This German phrase literally translates to “everyone must search for his or her own bread.” In this context, my interview subject was alluding to the fact that everyone had to fend for themselves in a capitalist job market after the *Wende*. \* This name has been changed to protect the anonymity of my interview subject.

Frenz's experience of unemployment, underemployment, and the suspended uncertainty of his employment status would have been incomprehensible in the GDR. But for a staggering number of East German citizens, this became part and parcel of everyday life in the aftermath of German unification. For Frenz and many others, the East German propaganda about the compassionless inhumanity of a competitive market economy and the capitalist system proved to hold a surprising degree of truth. This section explores the specter of unemployment that haunted Eisenhüttenstadt residents throughout the course of the 1990s, which came as a direct result of the reorganization of the economy and the rationalization measures outlined in the previous chapter. I ask how citizens navigated joblessness in their everyday lives, as well as how local politicians and city administrators attempted to mitigate the problem of unemployment in their own realms. Frenz's story, along with the experiences of many others', makes abundantly clear that behind the galling unemployment statistics—sobering enough in their own right—there were real lives and livelihoods at stake.

Since the first ever report delivered to the city council about the “Situation on the Job Market” back in March 1990, unemployment had grown to become an unpleasant but undeniable part of everyday life both in Eisenhüttenstadt and throughout all of eastern Germany. On the national level, in the first half of 1991 alone the GDP of the former East Germany had sunk to 55 percent of the previous year's level. The official unemployment rate rose to 11.7 percent, with other estimates that included people participating in retraining courses, work creation measures (*Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahmen*, or ABM), and early retirement ranging closer to 13 percent. The number of employees throughout all of the *Treuhand* enterprises sank from 4 to 2.1 million.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 267.

These developments also played themselves out on the local level in Eisenhüttenstadt. In February 1991 EKO was operating at only 60 percent production capacity, which meant a corresponding reduction in the required labor force. But the supervisory board of EKO was determined to find rationalization measures to reduce the number of employees without having to officially terminate any workers. On the surface, their measures were successful. As Rudi Schmidt, former director of employment and subsequent head of the city council, explained, “over 3,500 people came through our door, and none of them was fired.”<sup>30</sup> How then did the massive steelworks go from employing nearly 13,000 workers to having fewer than 3,000 employees by the end of 1993? The answer lies in part in some of the aforementioned rationalization measures. In February 1991, over 7,000 of EKO’s approximately 13,000 employees remained on reduced hours (*Kurzarbeit*), and the number continued to climb until the end of 1992. By the end of December 1992 there were more than 1,600 additional EKO employees with “inactive work contracts” (*ruhende Arbeitsverhältnisse*), meaning that they had been permanently reduced to part-time (*Dauerkurzarbeit*), were completing a retraining course, or were participating in the short-term ABM jobs.<sup>31</sup>

Above all, the *Treuhand* and the supervisory board’s strategy to reduce the number of employees was to eliminate entire branches and departments of EKO by encouraging their privatization. This process of *Ausgliederung*, or “de-merging,” meant simply the uncoupling of the administrative apparatuses of the many services that had previously been discrete branches or departments of EKO. Now, many of these branches were privatized into their own companies. They still offered the same services and by and large retained their premises on the EKO

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Rudi Schmidt, interview by the author, audio recording, Eisenhüttenstadt, March 31, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Schmidt, et al., *Einblicke*, 267.

property. For example, the building material sector “Bereich Baustoff” was privatized on March 21, 1991. Two hundred twenty-seven employees made the transition from the old department to the new “Eisenhüttenstädter Schlackeaufbereitung und Umwelttechnik GmbH.” Other sectors, such as railroad track construction or sign writing, to name just a couple, were bought by external companies, in this case as far afield as Braunschweig and Berlin, respectively. Through this method of privatization, the *Treuhand* and EKO leaders alike hoped to ensure that the former steelworks’ employees retained their positions, but that they were no longer being bankrolled by EKO itself. Of course, of the 51 departments and 2,167 employees privatized between unification and June 1996, only a portion were retained over the long term, as many of these fledgling businesses struggled for survival in a new market economy. Indeed, some of them did not even last out the year. As such, the number of Eisenhüttenstädters affected by unemployment continued to grow throughout the 1990s.

Given these circumstances, the topic of unemployment also took on increased importance on the agendas of local politicians on the city council. At the first city council meeting of 1991, Petra Farra, who was a job counselor and one of the deputy directors of the Eisenhüttenstadt Employment Office, gave a presentation to the assembled city council members summarizing the situation on the job market (*Arbeitsmarkt*) for the previous year. Farra painted a relatively optimistic picture, acknowledging that “the situation on the job market is once again strained,” while simultaneously emphasizing that “the effectiveness of the job market political instruments have once again increased.”<sup>32</sup> Farra began by giving an overview of the employment situation

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<sup>32</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 16.01.1991, “Bericht des Leiters der Dienststelle Eisenhüttenstadt des Arbeitsamtes Frankfurt/Oder zur aktuelle Lage auf dem Arbeitsmarkt in Eisenhüttenstadt,” 1. Beginning in 1990, the district administration had established a central unemployment office in Frankfurt (Oder), with local offices in Eisenhüttenstadt and other cities like Beeskow or Guben. This is how they measured employment statistics and dispensed advice and resources for individuals seeking work. These offices had not existed previously because it had been unnecessary to measure unemployment in the GDR.

throughout the entire district (*Bezirk*), which also included offices in Frankfurt (Oder), Beeskow, Fürstenwalde, Seelow, and Strausberg. From November to December of the previous year, the unemployment rate had increased from 7.3 to 8.1 percent, representing an additional 2,000 or so people who had visited an employment office in the month of December above the nearly 15,000 who had registered in November. Compared to the regional average, Farra made sure to underscore that the situation did not look quite so bleak in the Eisenhüttenstadt office specifically. In Eisenhüttenstadt during the month of December, over 3,000 citizens registered as “seeking work,” 1,853 of whom were currently unemployed. This meant that the unemployment rate had only grown from 4.4 to 4.5 percent from November to December 1990.<sup>33</sup>

Buried within these averages, however, were some sobering statistics about job creation measures that seemed to contradict Farra’s assertion that the “job market political instruments” were functioning well. Retraining courses, which politicians and administrators touted as one of the central strategies of solving issues of structural unemployment in the emerging competitive market economy, were not yet by any means equipped for the volume of job seekers. For example, beginning in 1991, the Qualification Center for the Economy of Eisenhüttenstadt GmbH offered several different retraining opportunities. They had room for 25 people to take a two-year retraining course to become an office clerk; 50 spots in a one-year continuing education course for current office clerks to receive a special industry and trade certification; 50 spots for a market economy orientation seminar; 21 spaces for students to study to pass their instructor’s license exam and an additional 12 spaces in a welding certification course; and finally there was room for 50 people to take a seven-month refresher course to be a commercial sales clerk.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

While the collected council members might have felt initially impressed by the laundry list of retraining opportunities available throughout Eisenhüttenstadt, if they had taken a moment to do some quick calculations they would have realized that this number was far insufficient to meet the needs of all of those residents seeking work. These 208 retraining spots available for the first part of 1991 would fall comically short of serving the needs of the thousands of jobseekers in Eisenhüttenstadt.

The shifting economic situation and newly emerging conditions on the job market affected Eisenhüttenstadt residents at all stages of their careers. Early retirement was a rationalization strategy utilized by EKO that disproportionately affected older citizens. But younger citizens poised to begin their careers were likewise not immune from contractions on the job market. In her presentation, Farra outlined the job prospects for those finishing their vocational training in 1991. Like Gordon Perske, whose ruminations opened this chapter, the 389 graduates of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade had no doubt counted on the certainty of a training spot in order to begin their careers. However, for the 389 students graduating—213 of whom were women—there were only 220 total training spots. According to Farra, “more detailed inquiries reveal that the male graduates can all be provided with a training spot, but for the 213 female graduates only 35 positions are available.”<sup>35</sup> Farra assured the assembled council members that special emphasis would be placed on creating training spots for the remaining female graduates in the coming months, with extensive cooperation between the large industrial firms, the Department of Education, and the career training offices. This vignette reveals a layer of employment politics that took on increasing importance as the decade wore on, namely that young people and women were disproportionately affected by the growing unemployment throughout the 1990s.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 4.



Less than one year later, at the final city council meeting of 1991, the situation on the job market had already worsened substantially in Eisenhüttenstadt. Although this overlapped with EKO Stahl AG's efforts at demerging, even before the bulk of this restructuring was completed there were still many Eisenhüttenstadt residents on reduced hours or with inactive work contracts to create a growing body of jobseekers in Eisenhüttenstadt. Compared to the numbers reported at the beginning of 1991, in November there had been 7,921 job seekers, nearly 3,000 of whom who were unemployed at the time of their search. Whereas in December 1989, women had made up approximately half of the job seekers at 53.4 percent, by November 1991 women made up 62.9 percent of those seeking work. Young people under 20 years old made up only 4.8 percent of those seeking work. All told, the overall unemployment rate had risen in Eisenhüttenstadt from 4.5 percent to 7.3 percent within the course of one year, a trend that would continue throughout the 1990s.<sup>36</sup> By the end of 1992 the unemployment rate reached 10.9 percent, with women still making up over 63 percent of those unemployed.<sup>37</sup> By the beginning of 1994 the overall rate had reached 16.4 percent and showed little signs of abating.<sup>38</sup>

Although job market experts, city council members, and ordinary Eisenhüttenstädters alike recognized that women and young people were disproportionately affected by unemployment, there was a more systematic effort to address the problem of joblessness among the youth of Eisenhüttenstadt than among women. In the December 1991 city council meeting, the Office for Youth and Social Welfare (*Amt für Jugend und Sozial*) delivered an extensive

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<sup>36</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 18.12.1991, "Arbeitsmarkt in Zahlen für Monat November 1991 - Stadt- und Landkreis Eisenhüttenstadt," 1.

<sup>37</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 16.01.1992, "Bericht zur aktuellen Lage auf der Arbeitsmarkt in Eisenhüttenstadt," 2.

<sup>38</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 27.04.1994, "Statistische Monatszahlen der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt," Nr. 02/94, 2. For the beginning of 1994, the percentage women comprising all of those unemployed also remained around 64 percent.

report detailing the scope of the challenges facing the youth of Eisenhüttenstadt today, as well as their past, current, and future efforts to address these problems. The report acknowledged that “the complete reorganization of society and the economy brings with it challenging social problems like unemployment, part-time employment, reduced training and educational opportunities, among many others.”<sup>39</sup> For the unskilled and uneducated workers it was especially challenging to find work, and this fact was not likely to change in the near future. Indeed, according to estimates by the German Parliament’s Eight Youth Welfare Report, “by the year 2000 around 2 to 3.5 million jobs will be eliminated, and 1 million young people without formal qualifications will flood the job market.”<sup>40</sup>

These estimates were particularly sobering given that the potential effects of extended periods of unemployment were far-reaching and multifaceted, going far beyond simple economic duress. The report outlined that unemployment “might result in a withdrawal from certain parts of social life, with consequences such as psychological and social strains, stigmatization, discredit, and exclusion.” Moreover, long-term unemployment was often a starting point for negative career and personal developments resulting in “unhappiness, boredom, lack of direction, neglect, among others.” The report warned that “these daily frustrations then need an outlet, which could result in vandalism, criminality, drug abuse, prostitution, gambling, and political extremism,” to name a few.<sup>41</sup> The report also cautioned that joblessness could have direct effects on children whose parents were unemployed “including psychological and developmental effects, such as stuttering, bed wetting, sleep and learning difficulties, aggressive behavior, and emotional instability.” Parental unemployment might also result in restricted opportunities for

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<sup>39</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 18.12.1991, Report from “Amt für Jugend und Soziales,” 1.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 2.

the children “including vacation activities, participation in classroom activities and trips, and other areas of cultural life.” Most alarming, perhaps, was the warning that the overwhelming pressure on parents could even lead to physically or emotionally abusive actions toward their children.<sup>42</sup>

These estimates made clear that young people threatened by or experiencing unemployment would need help and support from many different sides, and the solution would need to be as complex and many-sided as the problem. The report underscored that youth welfare support alone was not going to cut it. They called for a strong political lobby to advocate for measures to help mitigate the problems facing young people in Eisenhüttenstadt today, including preventative measures to head off some of the predicted unemployment and lack of training options. In particular, the existing leisure time opportunities available for children and youth throughout the city needed to be maintained.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the report suggested that supportive measures must be integrated into the school system, including career exploration and preparation as early as elementary school, and it underlined the necessity of additional amenities for physically or mentally disabled young people, as well as young single mothers and fathers.<sup>44</sup>

Notably absent from this extensive report, however, was any discussion of the social, psychological, emotional, or economic effects of unemployment for women, specifically. This is remarkable, given that Eisenhüttenstadt was no exception to a growing trend throughout other cities and regions of the “neue Bundesländer” of women making up a growing percentage of

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>44</sup> These new sets of challenges coincided with school reform efforts on a broader level throughout the GDR. For literature on school reform in the former East Germany see Rosalind M.O. Pritchard, *Reconstructing Education: East German Schools and Universities after Unification* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999); John Rodden, *Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse: A History of East German Education, 1945-1995* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

those unemployed. As we saw in the late 1991 job market report in Eisenhüttenstadt, they made up about 61 percent of job seekers. By the end of 1994 this had reached 68 percent, and by the end of 1995 women made up over 70 percent of all those unemployed.<sup>45</sup> While reports acknowledged the fact of growing unemployment among women, specifically, in the early 1990s there was insufficient programmatic effort to offer support or resources for women in particular.<sup>46</sup>

To be clear, the rapidly growing unemployment rate among women had little to do with the level of importance that women assigned to their careers in their everyday lives. In 1993, the Equality Commission (*Gleichstellungbeauftragung*) for the city of Eisenhüttenstadt circulated a survey to 900 female citizens. They received 386 responses, corresponding to a response rate of 43.8 percent. One of the first questions the survey asked participants was “How important is it, for you personally, to be employed (*berufstätig*)?” 72.8 percent of women answered that being employed was “very important,” and an additional 26.2 percent of women answered that it was “important.” Only 4 women of the 386 respondents answered that it was “not very important,” “not important,” or that they “did not know.”<sup>47</sup> A follow up question asked the women “Why is it important to you, personally, to be employed?” Here the women showcased a range of answers. 30 percent responded simply “because I need the money.” Another 29 percent answered “because I need the contact to other people.” A further 28 percent replied “because I enjoy

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<sup>45</sup> Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt-Eisenhüttenstadt*, 139.

<sup>46</sup> For an overview of some of the issues facing East German women after unification see Helen H. Frink, *Women after Communism: The East German Experience* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001); Eva Kolinsky and Hildegard Maria Nickel, eds., *Reinventing Gender: Women in Eastern Germany since Unification* (London: Cass, 2003). See also Ingrid Sandole-Staroste, *Women in Transition: Between Socialism and Capitalism* (Westport: Praeger, 2002); Eva Schäfer, et al., eds., *Irritation Ostdeutschland: Geschlechterverhältnisse in Deutschland seit der Wende* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt-Eisenhüttenstadt*, 139.

practicing my career.” And the remaining 14 percent responded “because I find personal fulfillment in my career.” When asked whether they would want to continue to work even if their partner’s income was sufficient to support them, 56.7 percent answered “yes, but I would work part-time.” 38.3 percent responded “yes, I would continue to work full-time.” Only 2.9 percent of women survey admitted that they wouldn’t want to work anymore, and 2.1 percent responded “I don’t know.”<sup>48</sup>

Given the central economic and personal importance of employment to women in the GDR, it is unsurprising that the attitudes regarding employment lingered so strongly into the 1990s. In the GDR in 1988, 91 percent of all working-age women were employed. As evidenced by their responses to the 1993 survey questions, both economic necessity and personal preference played central roles in women’s desire to be gainfully employed. Employment provided financial stability and independence in the context of an unknown economy and job market, and the disposable income to be able to enjoy some of the wide variety of consumer goods that were now available. Moreover, employment also offered social contact and friendship, a sense of purpose and community beyond the realm of private life. In other words, employment was a meaningful part of East Germans’ and Eisenhüttenstädters’ everyday lives—women and men alike—that was coming increasingly under threat.

Women in Eisenhüttenstadt in the 1990s recognized how many these values cultivated during decades of life in the GDR were coming into conflict more often with the new economic reality of a competitive market economy and job market. One anonymous worker in the Eisenhüttenstadt city administration observed:

“Because there are many women—who also worked in EKO, who have degrees—who don’t just want to stay home. . . . Most of them [would be] desperately unhappy

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 140.

(*todunglücklich*). I don't want to throw them all in the same pot—some say that even 4 to 6 hours of work would be enough for them, but most of them don't even have the option. They say that they will go crazy at home—that they would feel all cooped up (*denen fällt die Decke auf den Kopf*). And they're not finding [any work] that has to do with their technical careers. [In the GDR] over 90 percent of women worked. Of those—what do I know—say 80 percent of those had degrees. That has never been the case in, say, England or in the old West German states (*Bundesländer*). In those countries there was always a big proportion of women who were housewives, who didn't find anything wrong with that life trajectory. . . . they were maybe even completely happy to have a husband that could just provide for the whole family. And they might say that it would be a burden to have to go work. But to just be thrown out of a system where everyone was economically independent—where we all shed blood, sweat, and tears together—and to know that you did quality work and that you met these challenging demands of your career—who really wants to just sit at home then?"<sup>49</sup>

As the 1990s wore on, women and young people continued to be unevenly affected by rationalization measures and unemployment throughout Eisenhüttenstadt. Employment summaries regarding the status of EKO employees routinely observed that women and young workers under 25 years old made up a disproportionate majority of employees reduced to *Kurzarbeit* or permanent part-time status.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, despite the personal significance of employment to many women—not to mention the financial necessity—many of the retraining or short-term work options specifically targeted at women revealed perhaps a bias in the type of work that was supposed to appeal to women. Disregarding their technical qualifications, the company newspaper advertised retraining courses in restaurant management and hotel hospitality as “Alternatives for Women.”<sup>51</sup> Not only were these careers explicitly and implicitly gendered, but in overlooking the fact that many women employed in EKO had technical qualifications equaling or exceeding those of their male counterparts, the advertisements reveal a tendency on the part of the EKO management to value the continued employment of men in EKO above the

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<sup>49</sup> Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt-Eisenhüttenstadt*, 140.

<sup>50</sup> “GEM sicherte Beschäftigung für 1173 Dauerkurzarbeiter,” *EKO-aktuell* 1/93 (1993): 8.

<sup>51</sup> “Alternative für Frauen,” *EKO Stahl Report* 31 (December 1991): 2.

employment of women. In part this could perhaps be explained by the underdevelopment of the service economy in the former East, meaning that these were some of the types of jobs that were readily available at the time. That said, the newspaper did not advertise such service sectors as “Alternatives for Men.”

These statistics are of course made up from the stories of individual women and their families who lived through the psychological and emotional tolls of unemployment, sometimes for years at a time. The experiences of three anonymous women profiled in a 1992 issue of the city magazine, *Stadtspiegel*, highlighted some of the challenges for unemployed single-mothers in particular. Two of the women interviewed had engineering degrees, and had been among the first to lose their full-time positions in EKO the previous year. Through a program offered by the unemployment office, the women had the opportunity to take part in a months-long retraining course in order to become economists. But even with this new certification, their opportunities appeared just as hopeless as before. First, the certification would expire if they did not find employment as economists within a certain time frame. And despite countless applications submitted, the women still remained jobless. Second, their prolonged unemployment status had effects far beyond the damage of repeated rejections on their own feelings of self-worth. As single mothers, both women’s joblessness also had direct impact on their children. One of the women explained that her son “was being very considerate. He deferred many of his personal wishes” in order to reduce the financial burdens on her. Another woman worried that her lack of work would affect her son’s prospects for undertaking his *Abitur*.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> “Arbeitslosigkeit und Frauen,” *Stadtspiegel* 8/92 (August 1992): 22. An *Abitur* is a form of high school diploma in Germany that prepares one to attend university.

The challenges were even greater for the third woman profiled in this 1992 article. She worked for thirty-six years as a crane operator in EKO, but then she had to give up her job in order to care for grievously ill relatives. On top of that, at a certain point her marriage fell apart, meaning that earning her own income was now a necessity. Unfortunately, because of her age, overall health, and the rationalization measures at EKO, returning to her old career as a crane operator was not a possibility. Instead, she took a position as a porter. But this employer too was implementing rationalization measures, so her position was cut there, as well. Unqualified for early retirement, but undesirable as an employee based on her age, this third woman interviewed had to rely on financial support from the state. She “received social and unemployment benefits (*Sozial und Arbeitslosenhilfe*), which was a total of 450 DM a month. [She] would receive this support for a maximum of five years, and two years had already passed. How things would go after that, [she] didn’t know.”<sup>53</sup>

The federal government was not unaware of the challenges for former East German women and their families within a still unfamiliar market economy. As a part of the United Nations call for an “International Year of the Family,”<sup>54</sup> the German government planned an ambitious year-long program of events, conferences, and local functions, intended to “enshrine a family-friendly climate throughout society.”<sup>55</sup> As “the basic unit of society,” the family had several

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>54</sup> The United Nations General Assembly first proclaimed 1994 to be the so-called “International Year of the Family” in its December 1989 meeting. The theme for the year was “Family: resources and responsibilities in a changing world,” and the driving motto was “Building the Smallest Democracy at the Heart of Society.” The UN General Assembly envisioned that major events and activities organized around the theme of the year would be held at the local, regional, and national levels with support from the United Nations system where applicable. “International Year of the Family,” Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Social Inclusion, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/international-year-of-the-family.html> (Accessed August 20, 2019).

<sup>55</sup> Barbara Dribbusch, “Das Fundament ist reichlich kostspielig,” *Die Tageszeitung* (7 January 1994): 3. It should be noted that *Die Tageszeitung* is a German newspaper generally known for its clear Left-Green ideology that could tend to reject traditional family models altogether. In the case of this article, however, seems to be more critical of the paucity of support available for German families, especially in this time of transition.



fundamentally important roles to assume. “Hence, the widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to families so that they may fully assume their responsibilities within the community,” including support for “the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights, the Declaration on Social Progress and Development; and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.” This organizational principle was particularly timely for the formerly divided Federal Republic of Germany given that the average family size throughout the country continued to decrease. According to the most up to date statistics at the time, “more than half of all children in the Federal Republic grow up without siblings.”<sup>56</sup> For the former East Germany, the statistics regarding the family were perhaps more sobering. Since the *Wende*, the number of births and marriages had decreased by about 65 percent, no doubt influenced by the disappearance of state-run child care facilities. According to the author of one article in *Die Tageszeitung*, it mattered little that German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, routinely emphasized the family’s role as “‘the foundation of our society.’ Because the construction costs for ‘the foundation’ were continually climbing—and they had to be shouldered above all by the individual family.”<sup>57</sup>

As part of the effort to bring increased attention to the subject of the family in Eisenhüttenstadt, the Eisenhüttenstadt Equal Opportunities Advisory Council (*Gleichstellungsbeirat*) sponsored a series of articles in the *Stadtspiegel* featuring local families and how they faced the new challenges of life in unified Germany. In introducing the series, Equal Opportunities Officer, Juliane Fechner, explained that “how a family navigates problems, strokes of fate, and crises is determined by their ‘family culture.’” But how is this culture within

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

an individual and within the family affected “in a time when everything hinges on the mastery of existence, on having a job, and around money?”<sup>58</sup> In the series that would ultimately run for several years after the official “International Year of the Family,” Fechner and her interviewees intended to investigate how exactly the federal government planned to achieve the material promises accompanying its insistence on the centrality of the family to societal life. The series was aptly entitled “Hautnah,” or literally translated, “skin-tight,” gesturing to the deeply personal questions explored by the interview partners.

The first interview in the “Hautnah” series ran in August 1994 and featured Ines Höwing, a single-mother with two children. She had experienced several years of unemployment, but since July 1994 had finally received a permanent position working as a manager for GEM,<sup>59</sup> which was one of several work creation agencies active in the area since unification. Fechner began the interview by asking Höwing what effects, if any, did it have on her that 1994 was the “International Year of the Family.” Höwing responded, “Oh, it’s the year of the family? No effects.” If anything, she would have guessed it was the opposite, as this year she suffered from the shortened duration of her unemployment money and other state support. As a single mother of two, Höwing had received hardly any support from various local or government agencies, getting by only because of consistent help from her parents, brother, and circle of friends. Höwing responded affirmatively to Fechner’s question about feeling disadvantaged and discriminated against as a single mother of two. “I had the constant feeling that I was falling through a giant sieve. For 50 written applications, I only got one interview.” In her opinion, if the

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<sup>58</sup> Juliane Fechner, “Hautnah: Lebensbilder aus Eisenhüttenstadt zum ‘Jahr der Familie,’” *Stadtspiegel* 8/1994 (August 1994): 15.

<sup>59</sup> GEM stood for Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft für Qualifizierung und productive Berufs- und Arbeitsförderung der Region Eisenhüttenstadt nbH, which roughly translates to the Society for the Qualification and Promotion of Productive Careers and Work in the Region Eisenhüttenstadt.

federal government was serious about their commitment to the family, “public opportunities for families [would be] better supported, like when searching for an apartment. And that money subsidizing food considers the parents’ income and the number of children. And that social services like daycare remain open so that every child has a space.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, what federal measures that did exist to support families were insufficient to achieve a sense of security for single-mothers and their children.

More traditional families also felt frustrated by federal government policies regarding the family. In January 1995, Juliane Fechner and her colleague, Michael Stranz, interviewed the Mikloweit family, comprised of Hans-Peter and Martina, and their four children, ranging in age from seventeen to eleven. Throughout the interview, the family reflected on their lives, what was important to them, their careers and future careers, and their family dynamic. The interviewers reminded the family that the 1994 had been the “International Year of the Family” and asked whether or not “they felt supported by current family policies.” Martina responded with a decisive “No!” She continued, “We who live in the East always have the comparison to before. When I want suggest to an outing for the family on the weekend, I can’t. It would be much too expensive. Instead we do something on our own, like crafts or playing together. Going out to eat as a family is only something we can do on extraordinarily special occasions.” Hans-Peter echoed his wife, claiming that, generally, the Federal Republic had policies hostile to families (*familienfeindlich*). “Before there was more welfare for families with multiple children, for example shopping vouchers or a discount on a refrigerator or something. Even textbooks were free. But the current financial loads on big families are simply too high.” Although measures like the Brandenburg government’s decision to award a family 1,000 DM for each newborn were

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<sup>60</sup> Juliane Fechner, “Hautnah: 1. Interview,” *Stadtspiegel* 8/94 (August 1994): 16-17.

good, Martina reminded the interviewers that such support existed during the GDR as well.

“During GDR times 1,000 DM was A LOT of money. Today it is NOTHING,” she emphasized.<sup>61</sup>

It should be underscored that for some Eisenhüttenstädters, unification also brought an expansion of professional opportunities. One of my interview subjects, Birgit Pohle had been a sixteen-year-old trainee in *EKO* when the Berlin Wall fell. She realized quickly that her future working in the steelworks like her father before her (who was a teacher in the *Berufsschule*) was no longer a foregone conclusion. After finishing her *Abitur*, Pohle went to Dortmund to study spatial planning (*Raumplanung*), which is something she had been interested in during the GDR, but that she had been dissuaded from pursuing on account of all the burgeoning hype surrounding computers and informatics. While Pohle had the freedom to go to university in the West, her job opportunities upon completion of her studies in 1999 were more constrained. Positions in land use planning were hard to find by the late 1990s. She was unemployed for a time, sought work in Berlin, and had a job outside of her field in Frankfurt (Oder) for a year. Eventually she was able to secure her current job—at a firm in Eisenhüttenstadt that specializes in heating, plumbing, and air conditioning, which is also decidedly outside of her specialization, but which allows her to live in the same city as her husband and children.<sup>62</sup>

The women and families spotlighted in the “Hautnah” interviews are only a sampling of thousands of Eisenhüttenstadt individuals and families who were adversely affected by the rising unemployment and the concurrent dismantling of social services during the first decade of life in a united Germany. For Eisenhüttenstädters—women and men alike—work was tremendously

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<sup>61</sup> Juliane Fechner and Michael Stranz, “Hautnah: 6. Interview,” *Stadtspiegel* 1/95 (January 1995): 18-20.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Birgit Pohle, interview by the author, audio recording, Eisenhüttenstadt, March 22, 2016.

valuable, not only in terms of offering financial security, but also in terms of self-esteem and feelings of personal self-worth. Experiences like that of Birgit Pohle's and Gordon Perske's, whose complete story will be relayed in the final section of this chapter, attest to the tensions between diminished and expanded horizons even within individual life trajectories. Many Eisenhüttenstädters experienced the employment transformations of the first decade of German unification as utterly disorienting. At the same time, the "Hautnah" interviews offer only a narrowly framed snapshot of former East Germans' experiences—in most cases, we do not know definitively how the narrative of their life trajectories continued.

### **Reconfiguring the Social System: Erosion of Social and Cultural Amenities**

One of the many open questions about the logistics of transforming the GDR's state-run monopolies (*Kombinate*) into individual joint stock companies was what would happen to the subsidiary publicly-owned industries that were essential to the smooth functioning of broader operations, such as construction and transportation firms, childcare services, sports facilities, and the industrial kitchens, to name just a few. This facet of the transformation had been a consideration already from very early on in discussions about the privatization of EKO, though the full implications of the issue would take much longer to unfold. In a March 30, 1990, memo from the Ministry for Economic Affairs, this question appeared at the bottom of a lengthy list of other problems that still needed to be resolved. "It is as of yet unclear how new joint stock companies will be constructed from numerous subsidiary industries, and whether additional opening balance sheets and constituent documents need to be worked out for these associations."<sup>63</sup> While this question was just one of many open issues at the time, the fate of

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<sup>63</sup> BArch Lichterfelde SAPMO DE 10/454, Ministerium für Wirtschaft, "Probleme, die in Zusammenhang mit der umwandlung der VEB in Kapitalgesellschaften geklärt werden müssen," 30 March 1990, 1.

these many supporting firms would have significant and far-reaching consequences not only for the employees of said firms, but also for those who benefitted from their services.

Part and parcel of this burning question about the privatization process of EKO was what would happen to the many auxiliary firms that operated alongside the steelworks, providing important goods and services for steelworkers, their families, and Eisenhüttenstadt residents more broadly. One anonymous EKO worker outlined the scope of this problem succinctly: “So long as a firm is operating in the red and surviving on tax payer dollars, such social components can no longer be supported. These were the first things to go, whether it was the kindergarten or the daycare—the entirety of social affairs, the entirety of the housing system—they were dispensed with.”<sup>64</sup> This affected many branches throughout EKO including child care, vacation home management and maintenance, social and cultural programming, as well as myriad other services and activities. “These were the first people who were axed—anyone and anything that didn’t have to do with the core business of EKO was dispensed with because the opinion was that somebody else was responsible for them.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, in the transition to a market economy, EKO also had to start acting the part of a capitalist employer by prioritizing profit over social services.

The stark realities and social consequences of this new economic order began raising concerns among residents of Eisenhüttenstadt as early as March 1990, even as the privatization discussions and negotiations were in their early stages at the top management levels of EKO. Helga Otto, who was the leader of the factory-funded Kindergarten “Marchlewskiring,” had heard by chance earlier in March that her kindergarten would not receive financial support the

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<sup>64</sup> Anonymous EKO worker, quoted in Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt-Eisenhüttenstadt*, 121.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

following year. As one of the oldest kindergartens in the entire city, Kita “Marchlewskiring” had been founded in 1968 in order to see to the educational needs of the children of workers in the steel strip combine “Hermann Matern.”<sup>66</sup> She wrote immediately to the editors of the factory newspaper, *Unser Friedenswerk*, to make this injustice known. “Our kindergarten has been open for 22 years, and we’ve been responsible for many children throughout this time period. The oldest of these children are now 27 years old, many already parents themselves and some even employed at EKO.”<sup>67</sup>

The potential closure of the kindergarten would have effects far beyond Frau Otto and the other kindergarten teachers. A follow-up article in *Unser Friedenswerk* made the stakes clear. “In the last months, a thought has occurred in the minds of many mothers in our factory: Will my child continue to be able to attend a daycare or kindergarten? Will there even be an EKO kindergarten in the area at this point next year?”<sup>68</sup> This question would be resolved in a series of meetings, the first of which had already taken place on March 20, 1990, between Achim Richter, the Director for Work and Living Conditions (*Direktor für Arbeits- und Lebensbedingungen*), Christel Wirner, the city school inspector, and Helga Otto. This first meeting proved to be frustratingly inconclusive for Frau Otto and the residents whose children attended the kindergarten. One consideration was for the kindergarten—both the building and its personnel—to be transferred to the regional administration (*Bezirk*). This decision, however, had to be postponed at least until the second half of the year on account of the host of other challenges created by the impending introduction of a market economy.

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<sup>66</sup> “Gebaut für Stahlwerkbambinis,” *Märkische Oderzeitung* (15 November 2008): 1.

<sup>67</sup> Helga Otto, “Unser Standpunkt: Für die Erhaltung der Kindereinrichtung,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 12/90 (March 1990): 4.

<sup>68</sup> Ingrid Bossack, “Im Blickpunkt: Keine Schließung der Kindereinrichtung,” *Unser Friedenswerk* 12/90 (March 1990): 4.

Ultimately, Kindergarten “Marchlewskiring” survived this first trial of unification by becoming a possession of the municipality, relying on funding from the city government as opposed to EKO Stahl AG. But the kindergarten’s tenuous fate and the means by which it survived is emblematic of a much broader existential threat that faced other formerly firm- or state-sponsored services, institutions, and clubs throughout the city. The story of Kindergarten “Marchlewskiring” is evidence of EKO Stahl AG’s survival strategy that was alluded to in the previous chapter. Given the dire economic situation of the steel firm as it transformed into a joint-stock company and entered the competitive, global market economy, the management of EKO prioritized certain “essential functions” and made the difficult decision to cut funding for all “inessential services” that had previously been steeply (or completely) subsidized from the firm’s budget. As a result, the uncertainty experienced by Helga Otto and other kindergarten teachers, as well as EKO parents and their children, was replicated time and time again throughout the 1990s.

Another institution dear to Eisenhüttenstadt residents’ hearts that also came under threat during the early 1990s was the EKO-sponsored sports club, BSG Stahl. Citizens’ concern about what would happen to their local sports club was symptomatic of a broader anxiety about the fate of East German sports as a whole. In the face of German unification, professional and amateur sports represented an exception wherein East Germany could for once claim to be ahead of its western counterpart. The GDR had succeeded in winning the medal count against the FRG in each summer and winter Olympics since the 1968 Summer Games in Mexico City.<sup>69</sup> That said,

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<sup>69</sup> Jutta Braun, “Einleitung,” in *Sportstadt Berlin im Kalten Krieg. Prestigekämpfe und Systemwettbewerb*, Jutta Braun and Hans Joachim Teichler, eds. (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2006), 7-19. This is with the exception of the 1980 Moscow Games when the Western Bloc countries including the USA and West Germany boycotted, and the 1984 Los Angeles Games when many Eastern Bloc countries including the Soviet Union and East Germany boycotted.



in the constellation of urgent issues facing the GDR regime at the time, the fate of national, regional, and local sports programs did not often occupy a central position on the national stage.

On the local level, however, Eisenhüttenstädters certainly did have cause to worry about the fate of their beloved BSG Stahl after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Following a January 1990 meeting where half of BSG Stahl employees were missing on account of personal visits to West Berlin, Chairman Friedrich Schmidt sternly informed the workforce that “in the future this new reality would require frugality.”<sup>70</sup> Taking this statement as evidence of the threat to both their jobs and the continued existence of the club as a whole, sports enthusiasts in Eisenhüttenstadt, Frankfurt (Oder), and Schwedt organized parallel demonstrations. On January 25, 1990, over two-thousand people, including trainers, coaches, professional and amateur athletes, and children and their parents from BSG Stahl took to the streets of Eisenhüttenstadt to demand the salvation of sports in the city.<sup>71</sup> Using the slogan “Trotz der Wende—dem Sport kein Ende,” protestors pressed the local government to find new funds for the financing of BSG Stahl.<sup>72</sup> They also stipulated that there should be a more balanced relationship between recreational and competitive sports.<sup>73</sup> This demonstration made abundantly clear that sports were an essential physical and social activity for Eisenhüttenstadt residents of all ages, and despite their sometimes marginalized position at the national level, on the local level they would continue to play a prominent role in discussions about the evolution of social life throughout the city.

In the process of EKO Stahl AG’s transformation into a joint stock company, BSG Stahl underwent its own transformations, as well. On September 28, 1990, the club was officially

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<sup>70</sup> Rena Malinowski, “Die Entwicklung der BSG Stahl Eisenhüttenstadt im Zeitraum von 1950-1995” (Bachelor’s Thesis, Universität Potsdam, 2011), 67.

<sup>71</sup> “Sportler gehen auf die Straße,” *Neuer Tag* 20:39 (24 January, 1990): 5.

<sup>72</sup> The motto can be translated as “Despite the Wende—no end for sports!” In German the slogan rhymes.

<sup>73</sup> “Trotz der Wende—dem Sport kein Ende,” *Neuer Tag* 23:39 (27 January, 1990).

registered as BSG Stahl Eisenhüttenstadt e.V. This meant that the club was now legally independent and that the painful separation process from EKO Stahl AG had begun. The central challenge for BSG Stahl e.V., as for most newly independent clubs in the early 1990s, was financial. Compared to many other cultural amenities throughout the steel firm, many of which were cut entirely, the new iteration of BSG Stahl actually still received relatively substantial financial support. Nonetheless, this support was insufficient to maintain the same level of programming that existed before the *Wende*. And following the monetary union on July 1, 1990, there were even fewer funds available than anticipated on account of the ultimate decisions on conversion rate.<sup>74</sup> In other words, EKO Stahl AG was “de-merging” the administrative and financial apparatuses of the core steel production operations and the ancillary social services of the sports club. This aforementioned process, known as *Ausgliederung*, affected workers across all sectors of EKO, including the staff in the kitchens, vacation homes, dental services, and childcare services, to name just a few, that had previously simply been separate branches of EKO. In the interim, these workers faced the same challenges of reduced hours and stoppages that were everyday experiences amongst steelworkers.

BSG Stahl e.V.’S financial problems were exacerbated by the soccer team’s decision to leave the organizational and administrative apparatus of BSG Stahl completely. In the 1988/89 season the team had won first place in the DDR-Liga, securing a promotion up to the Oberliga for the first time in twenty years.<sup>75</sup> This success was met with the desire to further differentiate

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<sup>74</sup> In the negotiations leading up to the signing of the monetary union, East German lawmakers had been hoping to secure a 2:1 conversion rate for East German Marks into Deutschmarks. Instead, they reached an agreement for a differentiated rate based on citizens’ age and employment status. For more information on this process see the previous chapter.

<sup>75</sup> In the GDR, the DDR-Liga was the second most competitive level of soccer after the Oberliga. This is roughly equivalent to 2. Bundesliga. The 1989/90 season was the last season played under the old GDR system before transitioning into the West German Football League.

between professional soccer (*Lizenzfußball*) and recreational soccer, which would require a separate organizational structure and independent financing. As such, on May 29, 1990, the “Eisenhüttestädter Fußball Club Stahl” (EFC Stahl) became an official club, legally independent and separate from the BSG Stahl e.V.<sup>76</sup> Head coach of EFC Stahl until 2017, Harry Rath, recalls several reasons for this besides distinguishing between professional and amateur sports. “In the end, soccer was a crowd pleaser, and therefore we would be better off getting sponsors on our own [than if we stayed with BSG Stahl e.V.].” Moreover, Rath observed that this was part of a broader, GDR-wide trend where “almost all the soccer clubs dissolved out and founded their own clubs simply to have access to the sponsor money.”<sup>77</sup>

Without their main revenue-generating sport and without the possibility of securing their own big sponsors, BSG Stahl attempted a few strategies to reduce their expenses and increase their income. First, they marshalled volunteer labor to fill the gaps that would be created by the loss of nearly one-hundred full-time employees. Second, they encouraged all individual sports within the club to take part in developing new services to increase the cash flow for the whole club. For example, in May 1990 they opened a video store in the Haus des Sports. Different individual sports also began charging for beginner courses and lessons. So, in 1990 a six-week Judo course that previously been subsidized by EKO would now cost the participant (or their parents) 59 DM. Water sports like rowing and canoeing began to charge for equipment rental at their boat house, 4 DM for two hours. Finally, and most drastically, in 1991 BSG Stahl e.V. raised its monthly membership fees. For most sports it now cost between 6 and 8 DM a month, though there were some more expensive sports that had to raise fees to between 15 and 20 DM a

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Harry Rath, in Ibid.

month. During the GDR, the monthly fees had been 20 and 80 pennies for children and youth, respectively, and 1.30 marks for adults. This economic necessity resulted in a steep decline in membership. Whereas in 1989 the club boasted 4,229 members, by the end of 1991 there were only approximately 1,500 paying members remaining.<sup>78</sup>

Ultimately, sports in Eisenhüttenstadt did not end with the Wende, but the transformation and restructuring of BSG Stahl is another story of suspended uncertainty, showcasing how closely EKO and the social life of the city were intertwined. In this case, and in many other cases, the *Ausgliederung* of BSG Stahl from the infrastructural and financial support of EKO meant a sharp reduction in operations in both the short- and long-term. Within one year of unification, BSG Stahl e.V. was forced to increase their membership fees, in effect restricting access to a social amenity that was previously accessible to Eisenhüttenstadt residents with little to no financial overhead of their own. This is again evidence of a broader trend that would be repeated throughout the 1990s. The forced independence of various clubs and organizations throughout Eisenhüttenstadt that was often perceived as an irrevocable erosion of social life came as a direct result of the transformation to a market economy.

Given the expansion of travel freedoms and consumer choices—which will be explored more fully in the following section—it comes as little surprise that interest in some of Eisenhüttenstadt’s central cultural institutions during the GDR began to wane during a united Germany. One such institution was the model-city’s famed Friedrich-Wolf-Theater. During the GDR, the theater boasted an impressive line up of musicians, authors, directors, and other leading GDR intellectuals. In 1988, the theater had attracted nearly 20,000 yearly visitors. Between 1988 and 1989, the number of visitors declined already by nearly half, as did the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 68 & 73.

number of different events, which fell from 761 in 1988 to 431 in 1989. In 1990 the theater made a concerted effort to increase the number of events again, nearly reaching pre-Wende levels with 715 different programs on the calendar. But the number of visitors never recovered, declining more or less steadily into the mid-1990s. In 1995 the Friedrich-Wolf-Theater received just shy of 8,000 visitors for the whole year.<sup>79</sup>

The process of *Ausgliederung* of social services and cultural amenities continued throughout the course of the 1990s with a growing number of youth clubs, newly independent clubs and organizations, and other independent free-time activities losing their state and then municipal funding, and often being left with no choice but to close. That said, there were also some success stories, and the 1990s did witness the invention of some new cultural events that would become city tradition. For example, in 1995, InterKultur VielFarben e.V. was founded in order to initiate projects of cultural interest for children and grown-up residents of Eisenhüttenstadt and the broader county.<sup>80</sup> In 1997, the creative team at InterKultur VielFarben e.V. wrote and produced a family-friendly, winter musical known as the “Adventure of Snowy the Snowman.” This production has grown into a yearly institutional event—casting calls have already gone out for auditions in May for the winter 2020/2021 season.<sup>81</sup> These range of examples attest, as with the range of Eisenhüttenstädter’s individual experiences, that results of unification were ambivalent. To characterize the transition exclusively in terms of the loss of social services and state-sponsored cultural activities is to overlook the spaces that opened up for

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<sup>79</sup> Ingrid Bossack and Monika Fabich, “Dokumentarische Aufarbeitung der Entwicklung des kommunalen und betrieblichen Kulturbereichen in Eisenhüttenstadt im Zeitraum 1988 bis 1995,” Section 2.

<sup>80</sup> “Club ‘Hans Marchwitza’ – Sitz des InterKultur Vielfarben e.V.,” Kreatives Brandenburg, [https://www.kreatives-brandenburg.de/de/network/profiles/member/club\\_hans\\_marchwitza\\_sitz\\_des\\_interkultur\\_vielfarben\\_ev/](https://www.kreatives-brandenburg.de/de/network/profiles/member/club_hans_marchwitza_sitz_des_interkultur_vielfarben_ev/).

<sup>81</sup> “Das Weihnachtsmusical für die ganze Familie: Snowys Abendteuer,” Freidrich-Wolf-Teather website, <http://www.friwo.info/html/main/snowy.html>.

individual Eisenhüttenstädters to create new institutions and organizations, many of which continue to be successful until this day.

### **Eisenhüttenstädters as Consumers at Home and Abroad**

Many of the new freedoms and opportunities also heralded joy. Recall Gordon Perske's vivid recollection of his first West German candy bar purchase. Eisenhüttenstädters of all ages experienced parallel euphoria at the chance to travel beyond the Eastern Bloc for the first time, to get their hands on their first pair of acid-washed Levis, or to buy their first automobile. This section asks how the transition to a capitalist market economy affected Eisenhüttenstadt residents' patterns of daily consumption, as well as their relationship to what were previously considered unattainable luxury items. Moreover, I also ask how life in a liberal democracy allowed people to satisfy their curiosity about the wider world on travels throughout Germany, Western Europe, and to even more exotic locales. Finally, this section contemplates whether these opportunities were open to all former East Germans, and if not, asks what ramifications came as a result of these emerging inequalities.

When asked broadly about the changes to everyday life after the *Wende*, the Eisenhüttenstadt residents whom I interviewed answered almost universally that one of the most immediate and noticeable changes to the city after the *Währungsunion* was the explosion of West German shopping opportunities in the city.<sup>82</sup> At first, West German food and other products simply flooded into the existing East German supermarkets. This was only a temporary solution, however, intended to get West German goods to a new market of consumers as fast as possible, and one that left some Eisenhüttenstadt residents put out. On July 10, 1990—just ten days after the *Währungsunion*—two political-hopefuls wrote a letter to the editor of the *Märkische*

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<sup>82</sup> Interviews with Gordon Perske and Hartmut Preuß.

*Oderzeitung* provocatively entitled, “Why must we pay more than in the West?” They complained that “we pay between 20 and 100 percent more than our brothers and sisters in the FRG, who have at least double the wages and salaries that we do. And we don’t have the opportunity to go into a discount store like Aldi or Plus.”<sup>83</sup> While the two authors wrote this letter as a criticism of the uneven nature of the newly minted market economy, ultimately the market would prove incredibly fast in responding to their complaints. By the beginning of 1995, Eisenhüttenstadt residents would have not one but several discount stores to choose from, as well as several hypermarkets, and their very own shopping mall.

As it turns out, even before Germany’s official unification on October 3, 1990, experts had been hard at work behind the scenes to determine the best location to construct several new discount stores, including the coveted Aldi-Markt that was mentioned in the letter to the editor. At the October 10, 1990, meeting of the city council, the construction committee (*Bauausschuss*) delivered their opinion regarding the best locations for both the Aldi supermarket and a new Marktkauf, which was a popular West German “hypermarket” or superstore combining a supermarket and department store somewhat comparable to an American Walmart or French Carrefour. The opinion, dated September 28, represented months of previous discussion within the construction committee before they arrived at a unanimous decision.<sup>84</sup>

For Aldi, the *Bauausschuss* ultimately approved property on Karl Marx Street, one of the main thoroughfares on the eastern side of the city and a location that had been previously suggested by the city administration. For Marktkauf they recommended a site near Housing

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<sup>83</sup> Roland Jäger and Rudi Schimanski, “Warum müssen wir mehr bezahlen als im Westen?” *Märkische Oderzeitung* 1/94 (10 July 1990): 7.

<sup>84</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, “Protokoll der Beratung des Bauausschusses mit Vertretern der Wirtschaftsförderung und des Umweltschutzes,” 9 August 1990), 3.

Complex 5, also giving the go ahead for a land utilization and building plan that had been presented by company representatives. The close proximity to the highway that connected Eisenhüttenstadt and Frankfurt (Oder) was intended to attract additional customers.<sup>85</sup> By the end of January 1991, Aldi and the city had agreed upon the terms of a contract to sell the property as well as on a construction schedule. All told, the shopping hall and parking lot would take about 6 months to complete. In the interim, the Aldi representatives proposed that a temporary structure be built until construction on the shopping hall was complete, but the representatives from the construction committee declined the proposal because it would cost too much for its proposed length of use.<sup>86</sup> In short, within one calendar year of their letter to the editor, the two Eisenhüttenstädters no longer had cause to complain. The Aldi opened its doors in 1991, and the Marktkauf followed suit in 1992.

While the construction of Aldi and Marktkauf had proceeded with relative ease, other West German stores faced more turbulent circumstances in breaking into the Eisenhüttenstadt market. In particular, the story of Kaufland's arrival to Eisenhüttenstadt reveals some of the challenges that could emerge in such a rapidly expanding retail market. As early as mid-June 1990, the West German retail group Lidl & Schwarz had purchased a large building and piece of property in Eisenhüttenstadt with the intention of converting and expanding the structure into a Kaufland, which was another popular West German hypermarket.<sup>87</sup> The piece of property that Lidl & Schwarz had purchased was located along Fährstraße, which was not on the main drag

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<sup>85</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, "Errichtung eines Einkaufs- und Gewerbezentrum der Fa. Marktkauf

<sup>86</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 13.02.1990, "Akttenotiz: Beratung am 29.1.90 im Haus zum Aldi-Markt Karl-Marx-Straße/Trockendock," 1.

<sup>87</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Haupt- und Finanzausschuß - 6 May 1992, "Stellungnahme zum Bauvorhaben Kaufland, Eisenhüttenstadt, Fährstraße," 24 February 1992, 1. Today Schwarz-Gruppe, which owns all Lidl's and Kaufland's throughout the world, is the largest retail group in Europe.



between the train station and the city center, but was still a relatively large thoroughfare, with a bridge over the Oder-Spree canal connecting some residential areas to the city center. The property was bordered on two sides by apartment complexes and on the other two sides by industrial areas.

For a time, all went according to plan. In December 1991, the Kaufland opened its doors to eager Eisenhüttenstadt residents.<sup>88</sup> The massive retailer brought 130 new jobs to Eisenhüttenstadt, a welcome infusion of new positions at a time when unemployment rates were on the climb.<sup>89</sup> Just as things were settling into a rhythm, however, at the April 1992 city council meeting, a concerned citizen and resident of a neighboring apartment building presented a petition to the assembled city council members. In this petition, a Herr Bollfraß and some of his neighbors reminded the council members that the piece of property upon which Kaufland was currently operating had also been previously designated as a special buffer zone where manufacturing and industrial settlement was forbidden.<sup>90</sup>

Over the course of the following months and years, this revelation sparked a flurry of activity within the city administrative apparatus surrounding the legal status of Kaufland.<sup>91</sup> Despite its maximum allotted size of 5,000 square meters, Kaufland was technically still a retail store. In the hopes they could use this loophole to resolve the legal question, the Haupt- und

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<sup>88</sup> Stadtverwaltung Eisenhüttenstadt, “Begründung zum Vorhaben- und Erschließungsplan ‘Kaufland Lidl & Schwarz, Fährstraße,’” 11 October 1996, 2, [https://www.eisenhuettenstadt.de/media/custom/2852\\_811\\_1.PDF?1527593483](https://www.eisenhuettenstadt.de/media/custom/2852_811_1.PDF?1527593483).

<sup>89</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Haupt- und Finanzausschuß - 6 May 1992, “Stellungnahme zum Bauvorhaben Kaufland, Eisenhüttenstadt, Fährstraße,” 24 February 1992, 1.

<sup>90</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 22.04.1992, Einwohnerfragestunde: Herr Bollfraß, 1. The industrial park where Kaufland was already operating was also known as a “Sondergebiet zur Nichtansiedlung von Gewerbe und Industrie.”

<sup>91</sup> See Haupt- und Finanzausschuß meetings from April, May, and June 1992: Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Haupt- und Finanzausschuß, April 4, May 6 & 19, June, 3, 1992.

Finanzausschuss solicited opinions from all of the relevant commissions throughout the city administration. This included the civil engineering office, environmental office, city planning office, municipal economy office, business development office, housing office, health office, property office, and the registry office. Almost all of the offices were of the opinion that the location on Fährstraße could be preserved, and they offered concrete suggestion to reduce noise pollution and other disturbances for nearby residents. The city planning and development office, however, remained steadfast in their refusal to remove the special buffer zone designation on the property.<sup>92</sup>

Given this bump in the road, the main committee and the construction committee voted to postpone additional discussion of Kaufland construction until further progress had been made on the development of a trade network conception for the city as a whole. However, at the subsequent city council meeting on May 20, 1992, “Investment Project Kaufland” graced the city council daily agenda once again. For city council member Winfried Mante (SPD), this breach of protocol was evidence of larger ills within the city administration of Eisenhüttenstadt. In his objection to the violation of the rules of procedure, Mante asked, “how is it, Mr. Mayor, that the relevant expert committees for construction and the economy won’t have the opportunity to discuss the retail trade conception at length until June? This concept should form the foundation of orderly commercial activity in the course of healthy urban development.”<sup>93</sup> In Mante’s view, prioritizing Kaufland on the city council agenda was not only irresponsible and unethical, but also very possibly illegal. He suspected that the mayor and other council members were being

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<sup>92</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, Haupt- und Finanzausschuß, “Ergebnis des Amtsdurchlaufes zum Bauvorhaben Kaufland Eisenhüttenstadt, Fährstraße,” May 6, 1992, 1.

<sup>93</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 20.05.1992, “Antrag des Abgeordneten Herrn Mante zur Geschäftsordnung,” 13.

swayed by public opinion, as opposed to holding firm not only to procedure, but to their responsibilities to the city as a whole.

Some of Mante's criticisms were perhaps fair, for it would have been difficult for city council members to remain unaffected by their constituents' growing activism of on behalf of Kaufland. During the citizen's question and answer portion of the March 17, 1993, city council meeting, a Kaufland employee presented the assembled council members with an open letter and petition. Over the course of the previous months she had collected over 15,000 signatures from Kaufland customers in support of the store's continued operation and location along Fährstraße. In her remarks to the city council, she implored them to consider the needs and wishes of many thousands of Eisenhüttenstadt citizens, and she hoped that they would make a rational (*vernünftig*) decision. As she turned over the box containing all seven binders' worth of signatures, the employee stated firmly, "We—Kaufland—were and are a part of the city. That's the way it is, and that's the way it will remain."<sup>94</sup> Although the archival record did not reveal whether this petition movement was authentically grassroots, as opposed to more overtly orchestrated by Kaufland executives, it was still a significant testament to Eisenhüttenstadt residents' transformation into consumers.

Ultimately, the confident prediction of the Kaufland employee would prove to be true. Over the course of the next several years—and countless committee and council meetings—city administrators were able to resolve the legal status of the Kaufland's location. The store is still there today, which cannot be said for all of the discount retailers and hypermarkets that opened in the early 1990s. This extended example reveals several competing priorities that would

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<sup>94</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.03.1993, "Einwohnerfragestunde: Eine Arbeiterin aus dem 'Kaufland,'" 2-3.

continue to jostle for dominance over the course of the 1990s. First, some city administrators and residents had long-term concerns about city planning and development, perhaps with a prescient worry about an overabundance of retail stores. Second, Kaufland's presence—and its success—had implications for the success of other potential investors, which the city government would go to great lengths to attract. And third, on the surface, Kaufland's survival is also testament to the power of the consumer (or at least the power of West German business lobbyists). In a twist of history, Eisenhüttenstadt residents, who had been initially reluctant to call for freedoms during the *Wende*, were not shy about demanding cheap prices for groceries and wholesale goods. Competitive prices were a right for consumers in living a capitalist economy, and Eisenhüttenstadt residents were able to leverage their democratic freedoms to demand just that.

Of course, with a city full of new consumers, local businesses did not stand idly by. Advertisements and billboards and flyers were swiftly woven into the fabric of residents' daily lives. After unification in October 1990, advertisements snuck into Eisenhüttenstädters' newspapers and magazines almost overnight. In the October 1990 edition of the city magazine, *Kulturspiegel* (before the name changed to *Stadtspiegel* the following month), the editorial staff ran their own full-page advertisement on the back cover soliciting advertisements from local businesses. The advertisements would provide a welcome infusion of revenue for the magazine itself, and they established a trend that was mirrored in other publications throughout the city. In particular, the aforementioned discount retailers were keen to place ads in the city magazine, as was the case with Real-Markt that opened its doors to Eisenhüttenstadt shoppers on December 13, 1993 in the “North Passage” of the new City-Center shopping mall.

All told, the proliferation of new stores and shopping options—and their accompanying advertisements—became a normal part of everyday life for residents of Eisenhüttenstadt. The

**WERBUNG**

**Wirtschaft  
Handel  
Gastronomie**

**im Kulturspiegel möglich**

Ihre Anzeigen in verschiedenen Größen, von 5,6 cm x 4,0 cm bis 17,6 cm x 16,7 cm, können im Kulturspiegel veröffentlicht werden.

Ihre Anzeigen sind bei uns einen Monat lang aktuell.  
Sie inserieren bei uns zu günstigen Preisen.

Ihre Anzeigen werden auch in Berlin (West), Ahrensburg, Frankfurt am Main und Saarlouis gelesen, da wir auch dorthin den Kulturspiegel versenden.

**Informieren Sie sich bei uns!**

Stadtverwaltung · Amt für Schule und Kultur · Telefon: 5 63 23

**Figure 5.2** Advertisement soliciting external advertisements that ran in the October 1990 issue of the *Kulturspiegel*. The ad mentions that *Kulturspiegel* was also in circulation in West Berlin, Ahrensburg, Frankfurt am Main, and Saarlouis, which would likely have incentivized businesses by promising a reach beyond the local readership.

euphoria regarding the wide selection of consumer goods was rivaled only by the novelty of their immediate availability. Gordon Perske recalled this to be a particularly stark contrast compared to patterns of consumption in the GDR. First, he contradicted a common misconception about the availability of consumer goods under state socialism. One could actually buy things in the GDR, it was simply that “everyone could buy the *same* things. You had enough money, because we earned decent wages. My dad earned, I think, around 1,100 Marks [a month] and my mom 800 or so. Our apartment cost only 48 Marks.” While there was clearly substantial money left over

for other expenses and for discretionary income, the frustration had more to do with the selection of goods available. “Nowadays everyone can dress themselves individually. It wasn’t like that before. In school there would be 6 people with the same pants, and 8 with the same jacket. If you wanted to get something extra special, like for the *Jugendweihe*, you had to travel to Frankfurt or Dresden where they had more selection—just to be able to stand out a bit from the others.”<sup>95</sup>

Perske also recalled that his parents looked all over for a pair of acid washed jeans for him, to no avail, as that sort of popular 1980s fashion trend was not manufactured in the GDR. “Obviously it was a pain for them to be looking all over for pants,” he reflected, “but now they’re everywhere.”

Cars, too, were now everywhere. During the GDR, cars were famously expensive and difficult to acquire, cementing their status as a coveted quality of life goal. That someone might have to wait for over a decade to purchase the now-iconic Trabant, or Trabi, is now arguably common knowledge even among only casual observers of German history. Perske’s recollections confirm this impression. He remembered that even an abundance of discretionary income was not sufficient to acquire a car quickly. For one, “a Wartburg cost 40,000 Marks and you had to wait 15 years. A Trabi maybe 10.” Given the massive deficit of cars in the GDR, it is little wonder that “everybody was keen to have a new car.” The market responded accordingly. Even in Eisenhüttenstadt, “a car dealership popped up on every corner—used cars, too. We bought all the used cars from the FRG.” To this day, walking from the train station to the city center, there seems to be an oversaturation of used car dealerships for a town with a population of fewer than 30,000 people.

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<sup>95</sup> The *Jugendweihe* is a secular confirmation ceremony conducted in order to confer adult social status onto teenagers. During the GDR it was a de facto socialist confirmation ceremony in which almost all 14-year-olds participated.

It is perhaps no surprise, however, that cars proliferated so quickly throughout Eisenhüttenstädters' everyday lives insofar as they were a symbolic and literal means to achieve the long-denied freedom to travel. In many Eisenhüttenstadt residents' understanding of the *Wende*, one of the biggest contributing factors to East Germans' dissatisfaction with the state-socialist regime was the restricted travel freedoms. Before the *Wende*, very few East Germans ever had the opportunity to travel outside of the Eastern bloc.<sup>96</sup> This was true for Gordon Perske as well, who had visited Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary as a child. After the *Wende*, however, East Germans wasted no time in beginning to explore the wider (often, western) world that had so long been denied them. Sometimes it was as simple as packing up the car and driving to visit relatives in Bavaria or Baden-Württemberg. Other times, East Germans took the opportunity to explore further afoot. Perske recalls that his older sister, who is three years older than him, would often take the chance to fly to Mallorca or Spain for a weekend in the early 1990s. His parents have traveled to the United States on several different occasions to participate in cross-country motorcycle tours.

Despite his own period of unemployment and the uncertainty he experienced as a young adult, Perske ultimately had opportunities that his parents could have never imagined. After completing his *Ausbildung* and working for a couple years in EKO, he had a realization. "Man, to do this for another thirty-five years? I was 28-29 at the time, and to do it for another thirty-five years? I simply can't do it. The work was too dry for me—to many numbers, too many tables." So, he and his girlfriend at the time went to Australia for a year where they bought a camper van. They drove around the continent working at different farms during harvest season. He explained

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<sup>96</sup> Occasionally, ordinary East Germans would be allowed to travel to West Germany to attend an important event for a West German relative, but in the latter decades of the GDR this opportunity was increasingly revoked on account of fears that the East Germans would defect to the West.

that “Australia has a lot more laid back of a lifestyle. They’re a lot less worried about the future. Everyone is friendly. It’s a big contrast to Germany where people get grumpy if you have to talk to them.” This experience drastically altered Perske’s world view. When returned to Eisenhüttenstadt, he found that “it had come to feel village-like and small” to him. “Everybody knew everybody,” and though he would not say there was a total absence of cultural activities, there were a lot fewer.<sup>97</sup> He decided to leave Eisenhüttenstadt for Berlin, where he applied to become a police officer, and where he has been working, in a career that he finds interesting and fulfilling, ever since.

Though not substantially represented in the oral history interviews that I conducted, these stories of postunification consumption and international travel were not, of course, enjoyed universally by all Eisenhüttenstadt residents. Depending on their employment status, age and mobility, language skills, among many other factors, many Eisenhüttenstadt residents may have been denied the opportunity to travel widely or be as lavish consumers.<sup>98</sup> Once again, Eisenhüttenstadt residents exhibited a range of postunification experiences when it came to their consumption and travel patterns in the 1990s. Even the positive elements of the postsocialist narrative must be tempered with a reminder that a transition to a capitalist consumer society also created more substantial economic inequalities among former East Germans.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the 1990s, the tensions between the benefits of liberal democracy and a free market on the one hand, and the vagaries of transitioning to a capitalist society on the other hand, played themselves out in Eisenhüttenstadt residents’ everyday lives. Experiences of

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<sup>97</sup> Interview with Gordon Perske.

<sup>98</sup> See Milena Veenis, *Material Fantasies: Expectations of the Western Consumer World among East Germans* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).



unemployment and feelings of insecurity and uncertainty were juxtaposed with expansive new freedoms to travel and buy newly available consumer products. The rise of unemployment shortly after unification was the first in the series of massive structural changes that created a domino effect throughout the course of the 1990s and beyond. As the 1990s wore on, the effects of the transformation of the economy and existence of structural unemployment proliferated into other areas of everyday life. Above all, unemployment created the conditions for inequality at a scope unprecedented for residents of Eisenhüttenstadt. In a new competitive market economy, there was a surplus of workers compared to the deficit that had existed throughout the course of the GDR. People with secure income had the opportunity to take advantage of the proliferation of new businesses and consumer choices, whereas those suffering from uncertain or inconsistent unemployment were left with a far less robust social service net than they had experienced during the GDR. Even the new assortment of social services—like the unemployment office or job creation measures—were insufficient over the long-term to make up for the erosion of former state-run childcare services and subsidized leisure activities. All of these factors also affected the physical, social, and cultural fabric of the city. The following chapter will investigate how the domino effects of unification continued to play themselves out, even in a united Germany that had come to feel “normal.”

## CHAPTER 6: CONFRONTING THE NEW NORMAL: EVERYDAY LIFE IN A SHRINKING CITY, 2001-2008

### Introduction

Peering out the window of the cramped passenger seat of the new Mercedes sports car, I could see an empty field, somewhat at odds with the other apartment buildings and the discount supermarket *Netto* in the immediate vicinity. Gesturing out across the landscape, my interview subject said to me, “now if you can imagine, this is where *Wohnkomplex VII* (Housing Complex 7, abbreviated *WK*) stood. Completely torn down.” It was a rainy Tuesday in March, and after an oral interview over the requisite afternoon coffee and cake, Wolfgang Perske had taken me on a brief personalized tour of Eisenhüttenstadt. We drove by the old concrete plant where he used to work. He pointed out his former office windows in the gutted, dilapidated building. Although the cement plant continued operating for the first few years after the *Wende*, he explained “nobody needs concrete when you’re not building anymore.” We also drove by the locations of the apartment buildings where he used to live. The prefabricated apartment building (*Plattenbau*) in which he and his wife resided when they first moved to the city in 1971 had met the same fate as *Wohnkomplex VII*, while the other apartment complex he lived in with his family for nearly twenty years was renovated and is still occupied today. We pulled up in front of a long two-story building surrounded by renovated *Plattenbauten* on all sides. Perske turned to me and said sardonically, “if you want an example that characterizes the development of this city since the *Wende*, here you go. Before 1989 this was a daycare center. Now it’s a home for the elderly.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts in this paragraph taken from the informal portion of an interview conducted with Wolfgang Perske on

The repurposing of a former daycare into an assisted living facility attests not only to the physical transformations in Eisenhüttenstadt's built environment since the *Wende*, but also sheds light on new demographic challenges that began to emerge in the city by the end of the 1990s. Since the 1950s, young people of working age had come to the socialist model city seeking employment both in the initial construction of *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* and subsequently as steelworkers. As the steel mill expanded throughout the following decades, young workers and their families continued to move to Eisenhüttenstadt, providing a consistent supply of young people and children that kept the average age of the city artificially low. But the declining employment opportunities in EKO and its supporting industries during the 1990s exacerbated a process of outmigration that had begun in 1989, contributing to a simultaneously shrinking and aging population. In 1985, the average age of residents in Eisenhüttenstadt was 33 years and the population just exceeded 49,000.<sup>2</sup> By 2012, the average age of residents had increased to 48 years, and the 2011 census reported a population barely exceeding 28,000.<sup>3</sup> In short, by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Eisenhüttenstadt had decisively joined the ranks of other shrinking cities throughout the former East Germany, the former Soviet bloc, and the industrialized world.

The shrinkage of cities and regions was, of course, not a new or entirely unprecedented phenomenon. East Germans had only to look to their western neighbors to observe the economic structural changes that had afflicted the industrial regions since the 1970s and early 1980s.

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March 22, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> SAPMO-BArch, DA1/15286, "Aktivitäten der Volksammer Ausschuß. Ausschuß für Haushalt und Finanzen;" Historical population data for Eisenhüttenstadt can be found in the *Beitrag zur Statistik: Historisches Gemeindeverzeichnis des Landes Brandenburg, 1875 bis 2005* (Potsdam: Landesbetrieb für Datenverarbeitung und Statistik Land Brandenburg, 2006), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Homepage der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt, "SeniorenEinkaufsMobil startet ab 01. März 2012 in Eisenhüttenstadt," February 23, 2012, <http://www.eisenhuettenstadt.de/index.php?psnr=1520&pdlnk=1>; "Bevölkerung und Haushalte: Gemeinde Eisenhüttenstadt, Stadt," *Zensus 2011* (Potsdam: Amt für Statistik Berlin Brandenburg, 2014), 6.

Deindustrialization, unemployment, and outmigration were alarming symptoms for many cities that had previously been characterized exclusively by industrial growth. Now, throughout East Germany, the complete closure or acute downsizing of most industrial enterprises had created the perfect conditions for the shrinkage process (*Schrumpfungsprozess*). By the late 1990s and early 2000s, shrinkage had become a central part and primary preoccupation of many former east German's everyday lives.<sup>4</sup> As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that the first wave of comparative literature on shrinking cities came out of the former East Germany.<sup>5</sup> This chapter contributes to this body of literature by centering Eisenhüttenstädters everyday experiences of shrinkage.

The central task of this chapter is to understand how Eisenhüttenstadt residents and their elected representatives confronted this central new challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Population shrinkage was inextricably bound up with other long-term challenges associated with economic transformation and democratic renewal. While a new sense of normalcy did ultimately emerge over the course of the first decade of life in a united Germany, as citizens became accustomed to new daily rhythms it became clear that some of the problems that characterized the early to mid-1990s were not the temporary growing pains associated with rapid, simultaneous processes of

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<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon of shrinking cities in the former East Germany even in North American news outlets. See “Rob Schmitz, “In German Coal Country, This Former Socialist Model City Has Shrunk in Half,” *NPR*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/07/776703119/in-german-coal-country-this-former-socialist-model-city-has-shrunk-in-half>.

<sup>5</sup> For literature on the phenomenon of East German shrinking cities, see Christine Hannemann, “Schrumpfende Städte in Ostdeutschland – Ursachen und Folgen einer Stadtentwicklung ohne Wirtschaftswachstum,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* B28: 16-24; Heinz , et al., *ÜberLeben im Umbruch: Am Beispiel Wittenberge: Ansichten einer fragmentierten Gesellschaft* (Hamburg: HIS Verlag, 2011); Andreas Willisich, ed., *Wittenberge ist überall: Überleben in schrumpfenden Regionen* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2012); Gwyneth Cliver and Carrie Smith-Prei, eds., *Boom and Bust: Urban Landscapes in the East since German Unification* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014); Felix Ringel, *Back to the Postindustrial Future: An Ethnography of Germany's Fastest Shrinking City* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018). For broader comparative literature on shrinking cities as a global phenomenon, see Phillipp Oswald, ed., *Shrinking Cities. Vol. 1: International Research* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005) and Phillipp Oswald, ed., *Shrinking Cities. Vol. 2: Interventions* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2006); Phillipp Oswald and Tim Rieniets, eds., *Atlas of Shrinking Cities/Atlas der schrumpfende Städte* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2006).

postsocialist transition. Rather, some of the challenges were endemic to the “new normal” of life in a united, liberal democratic, capitalist Germany. Unemployment, demographic change, infrastructural deterioration, insufficient and eroding social and cultural services, and overarching regional economic uncertainty, to name just a few, were there to stay. As such, this chapter specifically asks how ordinary residents, city administrators, and elected officials attempted to ameliorate this constellation of challenges that mutually reinforced the overarching problem of shrinkage.

The first section of the chapter surveys the developments in local industries and commercial enterprises as economic developers and local business leaders continued to adjust to market capitalism. With the full privatization of EKO by Cockerill Sambre in 1994 and the subsequent closure of the metallurgic production cycle in 1997, local economic leaders were optimistic that job creation would begin to alleviate the elevated unemployment rate. This section asks what other actions and policies city administrators and economic leaders took in order to attempt to stabilize the economy. These techniques ran the gamut, including attempts to attract investors and create new jobs, as well as rebranding the city using the newly acquired vocabulary of market capitalism. To what extent were these efforts actually successful in ameliorating high joblessness rates for Eisenhüttenstadt residents?

The second section investigates the slow process by which ordinary Eisenhüttenstädters and city administrators alike came to accept that there was a population shrinkage problem. Though anecdotally residents may have known many families to move away from Eisenhüttenstadt throughout the 1990s, it took the city administration until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to officially recognize the declining population as an ongoing demographic trend. One of the areas of everyday life in which shrinkage first became apparent was in the rising

number of empty apartments (*leerstehende Wohnungen*) throughout the city. As such, this section explores in particular the growing discourse surrounding empty apartments and storefronts, and what it meant for the city and its residents to abruptly develop a surplus of living and commercial spaces compared to the shortage throughout the course of the GDR.

Finally, the third section of the chapter asks what concrete, long-term policy solutions the city developed in order to deal with the increasing volume of empty apartments and other retail buildings that came as a direct result of population shrinkage.<sup>6</sup> Having accepted that the city's population was unlikely to stabilize, let alone recover, demolition was one solution that the city leadership began to pursue beginning in 2002. This section outlines the development and implementation of the city's demolition concept in conjunction with the federal initiative *Stadtumbau Ost* (City Renovation East). More importantly, I ask how ordinary Eisenhüttenstadt residents responded to both the decision to pursue demolition, as well as to the changing face of the city once demolition was underway. After all, to the residents of the retirement community mentioned above, Eisenhüttenstadt's efforts to confront its shrinking population through demolition and renovation were especially poignant. "These people are members of the founding generation of Eisenhüttenstadt—they built the city and EKO with their own hands. And now they have to watch it be torn down around them," Perske intoned.<sup>7</sup> In other words, projects of demolition and renovation affected more than the physical face of the city. Residents also experienced the emotional and psychological effects of the destruction of some parts of their city

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout the (de)industrializing world there is an interdisciplinary group of scholars working on understanding how cities can "shrink smart." Architecture historian Kimberly Elman Zarecor is among a group of scholars in North America pursuing these aims. See "ISU Researchers awarded National Science Foundation grant to study 'shrink-smart' communities in Iowa," Iowa State University News Service, 17 October 2017, <https://www.news.iastate.edu/news/2017/10/17/zarecor-nsf>. See also Matt Krupnick, "How America's shrinking cities can 'rightsize,'" *The Guardian*, 13 February 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/feb/13/us-shrinking-cities-rightsize>.

<sup>7</sup> Informal portion of the interview with Wolfgang Perske, March 22, 2016.

combined with the preservation of others, a process made all the more disconcerting by the transformative changes that had already characterized the previous decade.

### **Navigating Market Capitalism in the 1990s and Early 2000s**

Throughout the 1990s, the unemployment rate in Eisenhüttenstadt had grown rapidly and consistently, rising from a mere 4.5 percent in 1990 to 10.9 percent only two years later.<sup>8</sup> By early 1994 it had risen further to 16.4 percent, and by January of 1997 the unemployment rate would exceed 20 percent for the first time.<sup>9</sup> During this time period, federal, regional, and local government leaders and employers took measures to attempt to mitigate job losses and long-term unemployment, such as the creation of the unemployment office, the implementation of retraining programs and short-term employment projects, and the institution of unemployment benefits for citizens seeking work.

Initially, many economic and political leaders in Eisenhüttenstadt had hoped that the full privatization of EKO by Cockerill Sambre in 1994, and the subsequent completion of the mini-steelworks in 1997, would help to stabilize the labor market in Eisenhüttenstadt. The mini-steelworks, which represented the solution to the steel factory's uncertain fate during the early 1990s, meant that the metallurgic production cycle in Eisenhüttenstadt was finally complete—a step that had been initially envisioned for as early as 1960. In other words, from 1997 on, Eisenhüttenstadt finally had the capacity to manufacture steel from its raw ingredients—coke and ore—all the way to the final product, namely, the coils of thinly rolled steel sheets that would ultimately be used in automotive or other secondary manufacturing processes.

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<sup>8</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 16.01.1991, “Bericht des Leiters der Dienststelle Eisenhüttenstadt des Arbeitsamtes Frankfurt/Oder zur aktuelle Lage auf dem Arbeitsmarkt in Eisenhüttenstadt,” 1; Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 16.01.1992, “Bericht zur aktuellen Lage auf dem Arbeitsmarkt in Eisenhüttenstadt,” 2.

<sup>9</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 27.04.1994, “Statistische Monatszahlen der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt,” Nr. 02/94, 2; Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 23.04.1997, “Berichterstattung auf der Stadtverordnetenversammlung am 23.04.97,” 1.

By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, unemployment showed no signs of disappearing as one of the main preoccupations for city officials and ordinary Eisenhüttenstädters alike. The unemployment rate had seemed to stabilize at a high rate, fluctuating between 15 percent and 20 percent throughout the late 1990s and very early 2000s. In the first city council meeting of 2001, the leader of the Eisenhüttenstadt employment office, Frau Griethe distributed precise employment statistics from December 2000, along with a comparison with 1999, to the assembled city council members. “When you consult the numbers, you can see that they portray predominantly positive developments.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the overall unemployment rate had decreased by 2.5 percent since the previous year. The number of unemployed women had decreased by 7.5 percent, and was down 15.2 percent for those older than 55 years old. In fact, all individual categories of people seeking work had declined, except for those who were long-term unemployed. For those who fell into that unfortunate category, the newest statistics indicated that they were increasingly likely to stay there, as evidenced by the fact their numbers had climbed by 14.1 percent over the course of the past year.<sup>11</sup>

However, as Griethe had conceded, the numbers were only “predominantly positive.” The encouraging trends in individual categories of employment over one year failed to capture broader structural developments in other areas of the economy. The overall unemployment rate in the year 2000 was still 15.7 percent.<sup>12</sup> According to Griethe, “the existing job market reacts cautiously, is subject to seasonal fluctuations, and shows a certain degree of saturation. New jobs are only created in individual cases.” In other words, “the region still needs new investors to

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<sup>10</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 24.01.2001, “Bericht über die Lage auf dem Arbeitsmarkt in Eisenhüttenstadt,” 1.

<sup>11</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 24.01.2001, “Wichtige Arbeitsmarktdaten der Geschäftsstelle Eisenhüttenstadt im Überblick,” 1

<sup>12</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 19.09.2001, “17.3.4 Ausgewählte Arbeitsmarktdaten ab 1997,” 190.



create additional jobs.”<sup>13</sup> Although at the moment there seemed to be some potential new employers on the horizon, they needed to do more in Eisenhüttenstadt to actualize these possibilities as soon as possible, not to mention to more fully integrate those new employers who had already arrived.

This assessment that the city of Eisenhüttenstadt needed to attract companies and investors very well could have been presented at any one of the city council meetings over the course of the last decade. And indeed, since the early 1990s, city officials throughout the Oder-Spree region already had been consistently trying to attract investors to create new jobs to balance out the job losses in industrial areas. In Eisenhüttenstadt during the early 1990s, in particular, the city attempted to orient its economic development as a bridge between eastern and western Europe, explicitly styling itself as the center of an expanding Europe.<sup>14</sup> They did so primarily with the help of several iterations of regional economic development groups, which enjoyed varying degrees of success throughout the course of the 1990s. One such early endeavor was the foundation of the Oder-Spree Society for Regional Development and Promotion of the Economy in Eisenhüttenstadt, abbreviated OSW.<sup>15</sup> Founded in 1992, the OSW helped to

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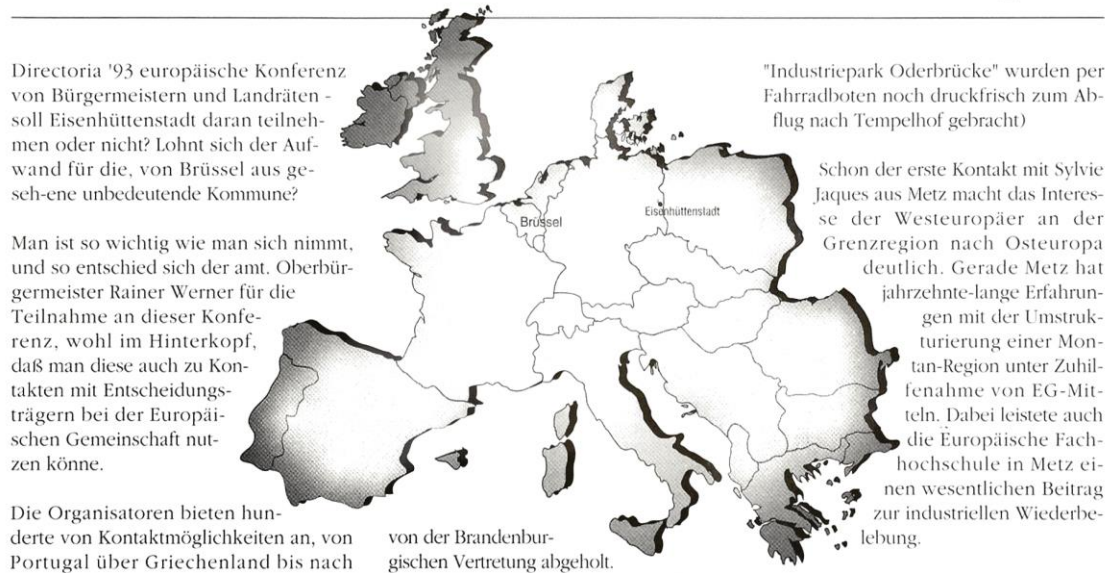
<sup>13</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 24.01.2001, “Bericht über die Lage auf dem Arbeitsmarkt in Eisenhüttenstadt,” 2.

<sup>14</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 23.06.1993, “TOP 4.1 Vorlage Nr. 151: Positionierung der Stadt zur Wirtschaftsentwicklung,” 3.

<sup>15</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 22.01.1992, “Beschluß-Nr. 165/18/92,” 5.

promote economic development in the city and region by attending international conferences, facilitating industrial development, and negotiating zoning plans, among other activities.

# EISENHÜTTENSTADT findet Anschluß an Europa



**Figure 6.1** Image from the *Stadtspiegel* article on the Directoria '93 conference depicting Eisenhüttenstadt and Brussels and the potential European connections. The title reads “Eisenhüttenstadt finds connections to Europe.”

One of the OSW’s first endeavors to support more robust industrial development in the region was to repurpose some of the grounds of EKO Stahl AG into an industrial and business park. The downsizing and initial partial privatization of EKO Stahl AG in the early 1990s had freed up approximately 6 million square meters that would no longer be in use by the steelworks. As such, OSW, working closely with the city council, proposed changes to the Eisenhüttenstadt zoning plans in order to prepare these surfaces for new businesses and industrial development.<sup>16</sup> For example, in June 1993 the city council unilaterally approved the construction of an

<sup>16</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 22.04.1992, “Antrag 10/92 Änderung des Flächennutzungsplanes,” 1.

Integrated Recycling Center serving the states of Brandenburg and Berlin.<sup>17</sup> This was the first new occupant to the industrial and business park. Local politicians and economic leaders hoped the recycling center would not only bring new jobs to the region, but also serve to cement Eisenhüttenstadt's regional industrial importance for Brandenburg and Berlin.

The OSW also facilitated Eisenhüttenstadt's participation in regional, national, and international business conferences in the hopes this would create more connections leading to further investors. In 1993, the OSW arranged for Eisenhüttenstadt mayor, Rainer Werner, to attend the inaugural Directoria '93 European Conference of Mayors and County Commissioners in Brussels. This three-day convention was intended to foment connections between local and regional administrators and European Union commissioners and officials, in order to set up cross-national partnerships and networks, prepare applications to funding programs, and participate in a series of workshops and presentations.<sup>18</sup> According to Dr. Siegfried Behrendt of the OSW, "the organizers [of Directoria '93] offer hundreds of possible connections, from Portugal to Greece and even Sweden."<sup>19</sup> In particular, the OSW was interested in pursuing connections with European communities whose experience could be useful to their status as a steel city, or to awake interest in potential western European investors.

Throughout the 1990s, Eisenhüttenstadt leaders continued with their attempts to market Eisenhüttenstadt more broadly both to foreign investors, but also to tourists and potential future residents, as well. In 1995, the city's Economic Development Office published a colorful English-language brochure proclaiming Eisenhüttenstadt a "City with a future!" The brochure

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<sup>17</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 16.06.1993, "Beschluß Nr. 532/35/93," 6.

<sup>18</sup> R.H. Williams, *European Union Spatial Policy and Planning* (London: Paul Chapman Publishing, 1996): 247-248.

<sup>19</sup> Siegfried Behrendt, "Eisenhüttenstadt findet Anschluß an Europa," *Stadtspiegel* 7/93 (July 1993): 3-4.

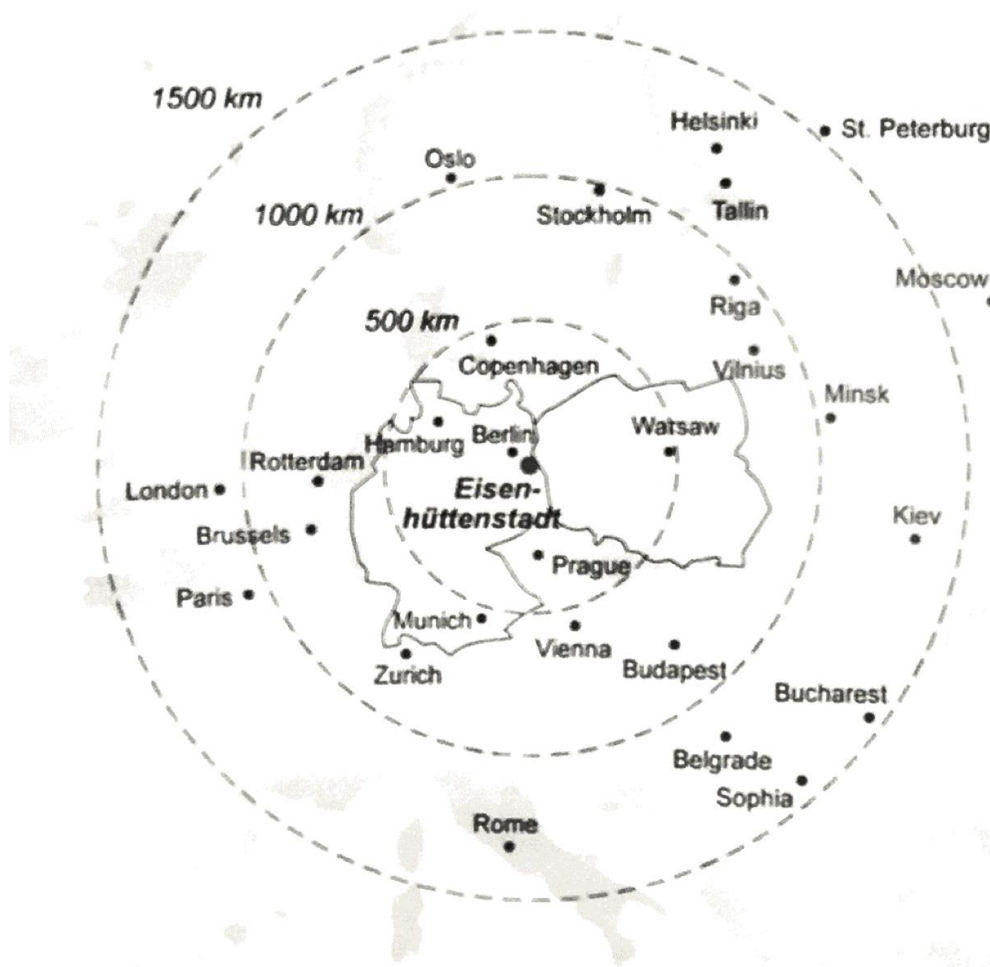
offered an accessible overview of the city's history, architecture and art, historical monuments, education and culture, sport and recreation infrastructure, economic development, housing, and tourist attractions. The brochure claimed that Eisenhüttenstadt is more accessible than ever thanks to the completion of the B 112 express highway extension, and that they were in the final stages of planning the reconstruction of a bridge over the Oder river to Poland. "Not only Germany and Poland, but also eastern and western European countries will then move that much closer. The river will not only be used as a transport route, but will also unite people and nations. The border which runs through it will be surmountable from shore to shore."<sup>20</sup> In emphasizing the connection and proximity to Poland, the Economic Development Office sought to present Eisenhüttenstadt as the location of a literal and figurative bridge to the markets of eastern Europe.

The city's explicitly economic promotional materials likewise sought to emphasize Eisenhüttenstadt's access to broader European markets. In August 1997, the Investor Center Ostbrandenburg (ICOB) published the English-language "Eisenhüttenstadt Foreign Investors Guide" on behalf of the Economic Development Office. This marketing material showcased competent command of the vocabulary of market capitalism. The short characteristics of Eisenhüttenstadt made sure to emphasize access to Germany's largest market in Berlin, as well as easy access to eastern European markets. They highlighted the on-site integrated steel production and "diversification potentials in metal processing, recycling, construction, logistics, and service sectors." Moreover, the area boasted a "large highly-qualified and highly-motivated workforce and a pro-business and pro-industrial climate, open for new technologies, reflected in

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<sup>20</sup> S. Schulz, ed., "City with a future!" (Eisenhüttenstadt: Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt Economic Development Office, 1995), 19.

economic and fiscal policy.”<sup>21</sup> Most striking, perhaps, were their efforts to convey that Eisenhüttenstadt was “situated in the centre of the new Europe,” as evidenced by the below map. Eisenhüttenstadt appears in the very center of the map, the large font displacing even Berlin as the imagined geographic center of a united Europe. The inclusion the relative locations of so many other European cities suggests a myriad of potential connections between Eisenhüttenstadt and the rest of both eastern and western Europe.



**Figure 6.2** The map portraying Eisenhüttenstadt as being “situated in the centre of the new Europe,” as depicted in the Eisenhüttenstadt Foreign Investors Guide, which was published in August 1997.

<sup>21</sup> “Eisenhüttenstadt Foreign Investors Guide,” (Frankfurt (Oder): Investment Center Ostbrandenburg, 1997), 3.

Despite what might appear to be a promising start in the city's endeavors to attract new investors to the region, concrete new business partnerships let alone even potential investment opportunities were slow to develop in Eisenhüttenstadt. In 1996 the city pushed back the anticipated completion date of the integrated recycling center (that they had initially approved back in 1993) to the year 2000.<sup>22</sup> Finally, by February 2001, there were approximately a dozen private companies operating out of the integrated recycling center, but all told they only employed 350 individuals.<sup>23</sup> These relatively paltry employment numbers call to mind Frau Griethe's early 2001 assessment regarding the local job market from the beginning of this section. Though at first glance there were some positive industrial developments in the first decade of a unified Germany, these had not yet resulted in substantive enough changes to dramatically improve employment statistics. Or as one resident of Eisenhüttenstadt put it, "who even knows anyone who works at the Integrated Recycling Center?"<sup>24</sup> Moreover, despite hopes about fostering transnational collaboration with their Polish neighbors, the western Polish region across the Oder remained economically underdeveloped, failing to generate new investment opportunities in Eisenhüttenstadt. In short, the marketing measures implemented by city officials and economists throughout the course of the 1990s in an attempt to attract promising new investors or employers had proven unable to sufficiently improve the overall unemployment rate in Eisenhüttenstadt.

As if these developments were not disconcerting enough for Eisenhüttenstadt residents in the early 2000s, it would get much worse before it got better. In 2001, Germany, along with most

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<sup>22</sup> "Bis zum Jahre 2000 entsteht ein Integriertes Recyclingzentrum," *Stadtspiegel* 9/96 (September 1996): 16-17.

<sup>23</sup> Sabine Oberlein, "Rückblick und Vorausschau aus den Dezernaten: Zehn Jahre Wirtschaftsentwicklung in Eisenhüttenstadt," *Stadtspiegel* 2/01 (February 2001): 7.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Birgit Pohle, interview by the author, audio recording, Eisenhüttenstadt, March 22, 2016.

of the rest of the world, experienced some negative effects as a result of an economic recession. The initial contraction of the global economy lasted from March to November 2001, and in Germany and several other countries developed into a minor recession.<sup>25</sup> International events, such as the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the increasingly likely scenario of a war with Iraq, meant that the German economy never truly recovered from this initial downturn, and fell officially into a deeper recession in August 2003.<sup>26</sup> As a result of this mounting recession, the overall federal unemployment rate began to climb again, from its lowest point of 9.4 percent since unification in 2001, to 10.5 percent in 2003, and reaching a peak of 11.7 percent in 2005.<sup>27</sup> The unemployment rate in Eisenhüttenstadt likewise rose, albeit more drastically. By the beginning of 2003, the unemployment rate in Eisenhüttenstadt had climbed again to 21.5 percent. That meant that over 7,200 individual Eisenhüttenstädters were registered as unemployed, almost all of whom received unemployment benefits from the state.<sup>28</sup> By mid-year, it had risen again to exceed 25 percent of the working population of the city.

In the face of these newest sobering developments, and with consideration of the decade-long elevated national unemployment rate threatening to overwhelm the social security system, the federal government took action. In 2002, the newly reelected Red-Green coalition government under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder decided on a path of radical labor market reforms. The series of four reforms became known as the Hartz Reforms, unofficially but

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<sup>25</sup> Marc Labonte, et al., “CRS Report for Congress: The 2001 Economic Recession: How Long, How Deep, and How Different from the Past,” *Congressional Research Service (Library of Congress)*, 25 August 2003, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL31237.html>.

<sup>26</sup> “Germany at ‘risk’ of recession,” *CNN.com/BUSINESS*, 18 February 2003, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/BUSINESS/02/19/german.economy/index.html>;

“Germany falls into recession,” *BBC News*, 14 August 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3149613.stm>.

<sup>27</sup> “Arbeitslose und Arbeitslosenquote,” *Bundesagentur für Arbeit*, February 2014, 1..

<sup>28</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 12.03.2003, “Bericht des Leiters der Geschäftsstelle Eisenhüttenstadt des Arbeitsamtes auf der SVV am 12.03.2003, Herr Mahlkow,” 1.

colloquially named after Volkswagen's HR Director, Peter Hartz, who led the independent expert commission's investigation of the federal employment office. Implemented between 2003 and 2005, the Hartz Reforms "eased regulation on temporary work agencies, relaxed firing restrictions, restructured the federal employment agency, and reshaped unemployment insurance to significantly reduce benefits for the long-term unemployed and tighten job search obligations."<sup>29</sup> In the long-term, the Hartz Reforms are largely credited with transforming the German economy from the "sick man of Europe," as it was often called throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, into the strongest economy in Europe and the country with the fourth-largest GDP in the entire world.<sup>30</sup>

In the short-term and on the individual level, however, the Hartz Reforms could have a tremendously negative effect on those individuals suffering from long-term unemployment. The first three stages of the reforms, which went into effect between January 2003 and January 2005, introduced market mechanisms into the realm of placement services, making it easier for employers to terminate short-term employment opportunities in favor of a different job seeker. The final set of reforms, known as Hartz IV, in turn, went into effect on January 1, 2005, and "entailed a major restructuring of the unemployment and social assistance system that considerably reduced the size and duration of unemployment benefits and made them conditional

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<sup>29</sup> Niklas Engborn, et al, "The German Labor Market Reforms and Post-Unemployment Earnings," *International Monetary Fund: Working Paper*, July 2015, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2015/wp15162.pdf>, 3.

<sup>30</sup> For an explanation of the role of the Hartz Reforms in Germany's economic recover see, Christian Dustmann, et al., "From Sick Man of Europe to Economic Superstar: Germany's Resurgent Economy," in *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 28:1 (Winter 2014): 167-188; Engborn, et al., "The German Labor Market Reforms and Post-Unemployment Earnings," July 2015; Lena Jacob and Jochen Kluve, "Before and After the Hartz Reforms: The Performance of the Active Labour Market Policy in Germany," in *Institute for the Study of Labor* no. 2100 (April 2006): 1-32. On contemporary references to Germany as the "sick man of Europe," see for example, "The sick man of the euro," in *The Economist* (3 June 1999), <https://www.economist.com/special/1999/06/03/the-sick-man-of-the-euro>.



on tighter rules for job search and acceptance.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, this meant a sharp reduction in the amount and duration of benefits one was able to collect throughout the period of their unemployment.

After the German Parliament (*Bundestag*) and Federal Council (*Bundesrat*) jointly approved the passage of Hartz IV on July 9, 2004, over 20,000 protesters throughout the entire Federal Republic took to the streets to protest the cuts in social services (*Sozialabbau*).<sup>32</sup> Of deepest concern to protesters were the provisions in the Hartz IV that combined two formerly separate sources of unemployment benefits. Previously, unemployed people could collect federal unemployment benefits from the state as well as social welfare support from the municipality. Beginning on January 1, 2005, however, these sources of unemployment benefits were combined into *Arbeitslosengeld II* (ALG II), or Basic Social Security. Beyond reducing time and duration of unemployment benefits, protesters had a litany of specific complaints about the reforms. Some argued that the basic income provided by ALG II was insufficient to secure a minimum standard of living for recipients. Moreover, some critics worried that the reforms might lead to false reporting of marital or partner status in order to receive more benefits, thus disadvantaging those who truthfully reported the existence of dependents or partners.<sup>33</sup> Others argued that the short-term and contingent nature of the new support increased existential angst for recipients, who were no longer truly supported by a social welfare net.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Engborn, et al., “The German Labor Market Reforms and Post-Unemployment Earnings,” July 2015, 8.

<sup>32</sup> See, “Montagsdemo gegen Hartz IV in Rostock (9. August 2004),” *German History in Documents and Images*, [http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=3132](http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=3132); “Mit PDS-Parolen gegen hartz IV in Jena (9. August 2004),” *German History in Documents and Images*, [http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=3133](http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=3133).

<sup>33</sup> Hans von der Hagen, “Die Tricksereien machen mich fassungslos,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (11 May 2010), <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/armutdiskussion-in-deutschland-die-tricksereien-machen-mich-fassungslos-1.193110>.

<sup>34</sup> “Angst vor der Armut,” *Der Spiegel* 34/2004 (16 August 2004).

Eisenhüttenstädters, too, stridently expressed their trepidations about the anticipated changes to the quantity, quality, and duration of support for the unemployed. They wrote to the local newspaper, visited city council meetings, and once again took to the streets in protest to make their plight known.<sup>35</sup> The first protest against the Hartz IV reforms in Eisenhüttenstadt took place on Monday, August 16, 2004, when over 1,200 people blocked the main street, Lindenallee. In Eisenhüttenstadt and throughout the country, these protestors reinvoked the so-called *Montagsdemos*, or Monday demonstrations, that began in Leipzig and spread throughout the GDR during the Peaceful Revolution of 1989. Instead of advocating for expanded democratic freedoms, however, these protestors condemned the leaders of their liberal democratic, welfare state for failing to sufficient look after the welfare of all of its citizens.

By 2006, the federal unemployment rate in Germany already showed signs of recovering. From its peak of nearly 12 percent in 2005, it declined to 10.8 percent, 9 percent, and 7.8 percent over the subsequent three years.<sup>36</sup> And in the aftermath of the Great Recession that would begin two years later, economists observed that the unemployment rate in Germany was only minimally affected, and recovered much quicker than the United States, for example.<sup>37</sup> Though many would credit the Hartz IV reforms with the German economy and job market's resiliency, this was cold comfort to the Eisenhüttenstädters, and other Germans, who still found themselves in need of support. Indeed, in Eisenhüttenstadt, the second generation of these *Montagdemos*,

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<sup>35</sup> At the November 11, 2004 meeting of the city council, members of the Monday demonstrators group hijacked the citizens question and answer period to ply the mayor and council members with questions, and to make their demands known. Their questions were so substantial, that the mayor passed them along in their entirety to the county commissioner (*Landrat*), Manfred Zalenga, in order to get satisfactory answers about some of the features of the upcoming Hartz IV reforms. See Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 03.11.2004, "Wortprotokoll der Einwohnerfragestunde der SVV am 03.11.2004."

<sup>36</sup> "Arbeitslose und Arbeitslosenquote," *Bundesagentur für Arbeit*, February 2014, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Floy Norris, "A Jobs Recovery Is Happening Faster for Some Countries than Others," *The New York Times* (13 May 2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/14/business/economy/14charts.html>.

borne out of the Hartz IV reforms in 2004, are still ongoing. Every Monday, a group of die-hard protestors continue to gather in front of the Friedrich-Wolf-Theater to register their rejection of continued cuts in social services. In the words of one protestor, “Hartz IV drove a wedge between us, between workers and the unemployed. That’s how they keep us small.”<sup>38</sup> And though the group of protestors may very well be small in numbers, their presence in the city center every Monday is a continued reminder that in a capitalist economy and competitive job market, some people will always slip through the cracks.

Despite consistent efforts on the part of local and regional politicians and business leaders, the 1990s and early 2000s witnessed no new influx of investors eager to take advantage of the city’s geography or industrial capabilities. Although the city administration and economic development office worked hard to acquire and implement the language of market capitalism, they were unsuccessful in the short- and long-term in attracting new employers to the city. Moreover, the boom in retail stores described in the previous chapter brought only a finite number of new jobs to the city, hardly enough to make up for job losses in industrial sectors. As we will see in the following section, the prolonged difficulties and suspended uncertainties of securing stable employment was understandably reason enough for a growing number of Eisenhüttenstädters to make the difficult choice to leave the city and pursue their livelihoods elsewhere.

### **Empty Apartments and a “Sickly” City Center: Early Signs of Shrinkage in the 1990s**

On February 17, 1993, a resident of an apartment building on Beeskower Street attended the citizens’ question and answer period of the monthly city council meeting. He wanted to draw

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<sup>38</sup> Ulrike Nimz, “Mit Hartz IV halten sie uns klein,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (28 April 2017), <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/gesellschaft-biegen-und-brechen-1.3483785>.

the council members' attention to a problem that had been developing in a neighboring apartment building on Karl Liebknecht Street. Namely, over the course of the past two years, approximately forty individual apartments had been vacated and remained empty.<sup>39</sup> Throughout the rest of the 1990s, the problem of empty apartments (*leerstehende Wohnungen*) would periodically grace the city council meeting agenda. In 1996, the city council's social committee (*Sozialausschuss*) recommended a new strategy for leasing empty apartments. Because there were more than three available apartments for every interested renter, the committee suggested simply offering the full list of empty apartments to each potential renter so they could have their choice.<sup>40</sup> The following June, the mayor informed the city council that in the first four months of that year over five-hundred Eisenhüttenstadt residents had left the city because they wanted to move into single-family homes in the surrounding area. As such, if the city wanted to retain as many citizens as possible, they would have to make it a possibility to construct single-family homes in the city center, since "the many empty apartments are not of interest."<sup>41</sup>

Just a decade previously, the existence of so many empty apartments and the fact they remained vacant for so long would have been the source of disbelief and extreme frustration on the part of local residents eager to acquire a larger or more modern apartment. Indeed, the petitions discussed in chapter 2 attest to residents' impatience at having to wait for vacated apartments to be made ready for new inhabitants. Throughout the 1990s, however, a new trend was becoming increasingly visible—even if it would ultimately take city administrators until the

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<sup>39</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.02.1993, "Beschlüßprotokol - Bürgerfragestunde," 3.

<sup>40</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.04.1996, "Behandlung der Vorlage 063/96 als 2. TOP. 'Sicherung von Belegungsrechten am Altbauwohnungsbestand der Stadt Ehist. auf der Grundlage eines Wohnungsversorgungsvertrages,'" 13.03.1996, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 17.06.1997, "Niederschrift der 51. öffentlichen Sitzung der Stadtverordnetenversammlung Eisenhüttenstadt am 17.06.1991," 4.

new millennium to officially acknowledge, let alone attempt to address, the new challenges created by outmigration and population shrinkage. This section chronicles the slow transformation of the so-called “housing problem” in Eisenhüttenstadt from a shortage of suitable apartments to a surplus. This section asks how the slow-moving demographic developments in the city affected the quality of residents’ lives and their experiences living in the socialist spaces of a former socialist model-city. Certainly, the urban and demographic challenges became more acute during the adjustment to capitalism and democracy over the course of the 1990s and as the city entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That said, this section also suggests that these ostensibly new problems must be grounded in an understanding of their origins in the late-stage GDR.

Throughout the four decades of its existence in the GDR, Eisenhüttenstadt had enjoyed a steady population growth. The city’s privilege as the primary site of the steel industry in the GDR, and the ongoing (if unrealized) plans to expand *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* to complete the metallurgic production cycle, meant that the city had expected to continue to grow as well. For each new planned expansion of EKO there was a parallel planned expansion of the Housing Program to accommodate the anticipated influx of experts and skilled workers needed to run the steel mill. For example, between 1964 and 1971, the population of the city grew from approximately 37,000 to nearly 46,000, mirroring the construction and operation of the cold-rolling mill (*Kaltwalzwerk*) and warm-rolling mill (*Warmwalzwerk*) in 1968 and 1971, respectively.<sup>42</sup> By 1985, one year after the completion of the converter steel mill

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<sup>42</sup> *Beitrag zur Statistik: Historisches Gemeindeverzeichnis des Landes Brandenburg, 1875 bis 2005* (Potsdam: Landesbetrieb für Datenverarbeitung und Statistik Land Brandenburg, 2006), 11; Jenny Richter, et al., *Stalinstadt - Eisenhüttenstadt: Von der Utopie zur Gegenwart. Wandel industrieller, regionaler und sozialer Strukturen in Eisenhüttenstadt* (Marburg: Schüren, 1997): 241.

(*Konverterstahlwerk*), the population had grown further, exceeding 49,000 residents for the first time.<sup>43</sup>

In the early 1990s, Eisenhüttenstadt's pattern of continued population growth showed no signs of abating. In the last city council meeting before unification in early October 1990, the Housing Office reported that the number of applications for apartments they received had not declined, despite the changing laws and structures of the housing market.<sup>44</sup> Just eighteen months later, however, some initial new difficulties in the housing market in Eisenhüttenstadt became apparent. In a proposed resolution delivered a meeting of the city council in April 1992, the Chief Officer of the Housing Office, Uwe Gerlach, observed that "in the last months Eisenhüttenstadt has shown a tendency that runs somewhat contrary to the experiences of other cities in the new federal states (*Bundesländer*)."<sup>45</sup> He explained that the two formerly state-run building management firms in Eisenhüttenstadt, "[were] having problems leasing their apartments."<sup>46</sup> Gerlach clarified that the difficulty leasing depended on the location and floor of the specific apartment in question. In particular, residents tended to reject apartments on the fourth and fifth floors of apartment complexes, likely influenced by the absence of elevators.

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<sup>43</sup> *Beitrag zur Statistik: Historisches Gemeindeverzeichnis des Landes Brandenburg, 1875 bis 2005* (Potsdam: Landesbetrieb für Datenverarbeitung und Statistik Land Brandenburg, 2006), 11.

<sup>44</sup> Amtsleiter des Wohnungsamtes, "Information zur bisherigen Tätigkeiten des Wohnungsamtes und zur Wohnungssituation in Eisenhüttenstadt," 1 October 1990, Rat der Stadt – Stadtverwaltung, SVV 1990, Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt. As of September 1, 1990, a new law regulating the leasing and allocation of apartments went into effect. This meant that most applications for housing no longer went through the Housing Office; instead, the Housing Office was responsible for dispensing a certificate indicating that the individual had a legitimate need for updated housing. Only then could these individuals turn to the former state-run housing cooperatives to apply for an apartment.

<sup>45</sup> Uwe Gerlach, Amtsleiter des Wohnungsamtes, "Vorlage zum Wohnungswesen in der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt," pp. 1, 22 April 1992, Stadtverordnetenversammlung, SVV 1992, Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* The two major formerly state-run housing cooperatives in Eisenhüttenstadt were the VEB Gebäudewirtschaft and the factory-sponsored AWG 'Friedenswerk'. Both of these organizations were privatized and renamed in 1990, though they continued to lease and manage their existing apartments and buildings to private residents and companies. See Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt 20.06.2990, Beschluß-Nr. 18/2/90.

This phenomenon persisted, “even though there were urgent housing requirements at hand,” and was early evidence of a shrinking process (*Schrumpfungsprozess*) that would become more pronounced as the decade progressed.<sup>47</sup>

As the decade wore on, the ongoing and persistent problem of empty apartments and empty storefronts or retail spaces was evident to residents and city council members alike. The city council employed a number of different strategies to try to rent out these empty apartments in a timelier manner. For example, at a city council meeting in June 1994, one of the newly privatized housing cooperatives, *Eisenhüttenstädter Gebäudewirtschaft GmbH*, or *GeWi* for short, presented their action plan for improving marketing strategies for empty apartments. This plan entailed, in part, a program for developing friendlier customer service, including distribution of promotional information about the amenities in the neighborhood, individual viewings of empty apartments with the interested renters, and targeted and ongoing advertisement efforts, particularly in the local press. Toward the end of their presentation, *GeWi* made a point to underscore one ongoing challenge of their efforts to up their marketing game. “The City Council must be made aware, however, that the successful rental of an empty apartment to current Eisenhüttenstadt residents in most cases results in a new empty apartment.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, in many instances, all the housing authorities could accomplish was to shuffle residents around, which did little to ameliorate the growing problem of a housing surplus.

Despite *GeWi*'s attempts to make their marketing efforts more robust, city council members remained concerned about the proliferation of empty buildings throughout

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 29.06.1994, “Berichterstattung der Eisenhüttenstädter Gebäudewirtschaft GmbH zum Antrag Nr. 012 der SPD-Fraktion - Protokoll der SVV vom 27.04.1994,” 2.



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**Figure 6.3** Advertisement taken out by *GeWi* in the July 1995 issue of the city magazine *Stadtspiegel*. The ad details the location of *GeWi*'s offices and their public office hours. The image depicts an apartment building in *Wohnkomplex II*, one of the more central and desirable locations in the city.

Eisenhüttenstadt, not only in apartment complexes. At the December city council meeting of the same year, the SPD submitted an official request to the mayor to task *GeWi* “to exhaust every possible option to rent out empty storefronts, especially in the city center.”<sup>49</sup> This trend was particularly worrying because the city had already gone to great lengths to revitalize shopping in the downtown area by constructing a new, modern shopping arcade, intended to attract new businesses into ostensibly desirable downtown locations. The existence of the SPD’s proposal, however, was testament to the fact that the now year-old shopping arcade was insufficient on its own to bring in new businesses. Indeed, an article from December 14 in the local page of *Märkische Oderzeitung* testified in more detail to this dilemma. According to the article, so much had been invested in improving and renovating the *Wohnkomplexe*, there was little left in the city budget to address revitalization projects along main street, Lindenallee. The problem was a

<sup>49</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SV 21.12.1994, “Niederschrift der 15. öffentlichen Sitzung der Stadtverordnetenversammlung am 21.12.1994,” 10.



circular one: business owners were reluctant to pay higher rents in downtown storefronts when there was not enough foot traffic, but potential customers were unlikely to be drawn to the area with so few businesses. As such, the problem persisted, and at the time of the SPD's proposal, only one half of all the storefronts on Lindenallee were occupied.<sup>50</sup>

The growing trend of emptying apartments was troubling not only to politicians and city administrators, but to ordinary residents as well. While Eisenhüttenstadt residents in the 1980s may have welcomed increasingly empty apartment blocks as an opportunity to have their pick of an expanded selection of nicer apartments, by the 1990s this development evoked much different reactions from residents. Growing up in *Wohnkomplex VI*, Gordon Perske remembers an “easy-going childhood” in the last decade of the GDR. He recalls having no shortage of friends to play with, because “you knew someone on each floor of the apartment building.”<sup>51</sup> The thoughtful design of the apartment complexes, with all the basic necessities of everyday life close at hand, served to foster a tight-knit community among residents. Families moving in would often take a basket filled with snacks and *Schnapps* around to introduce themselves and drink a toast with their new neighbors. If a couple wanted to attend a cultural event or go dancing for an evening, another family would be happy to watch the children for the night.<sup>52</sup> In a set of 1994 interviews with residents published in the city magazine, *Stadtspiegel*, a Herr H. speculated that this sense of community stemmed from the common background of many residents. “They all started new in the factory, they all moved here, they all took part in building up this new *Heimat* (home).”<sup>53</sup>

The housing community (*Hausgemeinschaft*) within each of the apartment complexes was

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<sup>50</sup> “Schaufenster,” *Märkische Oderzeitung* (14 December 1994): ?.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Gordon Perske, interview by the author, audio recording, May 4, 2016, Berlin.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Harmut Preuß, March 9, 2016, Eisenhüttenstadt.

<sup>53</sup> *Heimat* translation and historiography footnote?

therefore a microcosm of these broader commonalities; “it was fundamentally a growing together of families.”<sup>54</sup>

By the time Gordon Perske was a teenager in the 1990s, however, the feeling of a contained community of individual families coming together could be difficult to maintain. Moreover, the quality of one’s *Hausgemeinschaft* was necessarily impacted by related developments in other areas of everyday life. As detailed in the previous chapter, the many small improvements to consumption and the ease of daily life could add up to substantial changes over the longer-term. As described in the previous chapter, many residents were able to purchase a car for the first time, meaning that they could easily drive to the new West German stores and supermarkets that had moved in on the periphery of the city, replacing the formerly state-run supermarkets and other East German shops.<sup>55</sup> The feeling of community within the *Wohnkomplexe* also suffered in the face of emptying apartment blocks, as families moved away from Eisenhüttenstadt in search of work or to be closer to relatives, for example. Many residents also took advantage of the comparative ease of securing building materials to move out of the city center into their own single-family homes. This likewise affected friendships that had been years in the making. As one resident stated wistfully, “people wished that they could just pick up their whole wide world and transport it with them, but that’s a wish that can’t be realized.”<sup>56</sup> Certainly some residents’ memories are colored by a tinge of *Ostalgie*, or “nostalgia for the East,” depending on their own experience of transition in the 1990s and their current personal circumstances. Even so, throughout the 1990s and 2000s residents everyday experiences of

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<sup>54</sup> Frau Dr. Semmelman, “Auskünfte über die Arbeit der ‘Geschichtswerkstatt Eisenhüttenstadt,’” *Stadtspiegel* (Dezember 1994): 24.

<sup>55</sup> For a more expanded discussion of this process, see Chapter 5.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Gabriele Haubold, interview by the author, audio recording, July 19, 2016, Eisenhüttenstadt.

living in the former model city have them plenty of concrete resents to compare the present unfavorably with the past.

Residents' specific complaints ranged from a general deterioration of community feeling to extreme dissatisfaction with the upkeep of communal spaces. Frau B., whose interview was likewise published in the aforementioned 1994 *Stadtspiegel* article, said these negative developments were obvious. "Take a look at the stairways [of the individual apartment buildings] in *WK VI*—see how they look, after just two or three years. It was harrowing to behold how wild and neglected they were. One might have thought that they were in a completely different city; it was shocking."<sup>57</sup> Frau B. was not alone in her concern about the physical upkeep of the apartment buildings. Indeed, this complaint developed into a consistent problem. Over five years later, Frau Sylvia Strese brought similar concerns to the city council during an open question and answer period. She asked whether there was any way for trash and recycling in her *Wohnkomplex* to be picked up more promptly, as the designated areas often got so full that they were overflowing, which was a less than desirable visual and olfactory experience for residents.<sup>58</sup> According to Frau B., these troubling developments in the aesthetic upkeep of shared spaces was in part a result of changes to communal feeling in the *Wohnkomplexe*. Perhaps the older generation had neglected to instill these important values in their children, but more likely, she speculated, it had to do with the declining number of families residing in the *Wohnkomplexe*. Whether they left the city altogether or moved to a more spacious or modern apartment, the Eisenhüttenstadt residents who were left behind were undoubtedly

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 25.01.2000, "Einwohnerfragestunde."

beginning to feel some of the effects of a declining population, even before it was officially acknowledged as such.

These were not isolated dissatisfactions. Published interviews, letters to the editor, and city council citizens' question and answer hours (*Einwohnerfragestunde*) were riddled with complaints from residents about the deteriorating quality of life throughout the Housing Complexes. In the city magazine interview series "Hautnah," one woman complained that the number of free-time activities for children had declined dramatically, a challenge for working parents that was compounded by the deteriorating environment of *Wohnkomplex VII*:

"[With such] tiny bedrooms for children, who has space to have their kids underfoot up in the apartment all the time? That means the only option is to send them outside, where there's barely any room to play—instead there's only sand and cars, which race through the complex despite the 30 kilometer per hour speed limit, making even riding bikes dangerous [for the kids]. If you take a look at the inner courtyards, there is really nothing that kids can meaningfully occupy themselves with, and really no way for them to let their hair down without doing damage to others; no tree or bush to play hide and seek or invent an adventure.<sup>59</sup>

This problem was particularly pronounced for children and their families living in *Wohnkomplexe VI* and *VII*. Though initially more attractive because they were newly constructed in the late 1980s, the free-time infrastructure in these housing complexes was less developed because there had not been time or funds to fully realize all the planned amenities. Moreover, they had a much denser concentration of children, as evidenced by the below graph.<sup>60</sup> Not only could this state of affairs lead to boredom and potential behavioral problems for the children, but it also attests to how the declining selection of social and cultural amenities—like afterschool

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<sup>59</sup> Brita Schulz, "Hautnah: 12. Interview," *Stadtspiegel* 9/95 (September 1995): 22.

<sup>60</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 25.05.1994, "Kinder- und Jugendbericht der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt: Bericht über Bestrebungen und Leistungen der Kinder- und Jugendarbeit," 1.

and free-time activities for children—was an issue inextricably connected to growing challenges associated with the built environment of the city.

In their petitions and complaints about the deteriorating state of affairs in some of their housing complexes, Eisenhüttenstadt residents began to run up against some of the new bureaucratic and budgetary challenges that accompanied democratic politics and city finances in a capitalist economy. In one city council meeting in September 1995, Herr Schriefer brought his concerns regarding maintenance of the bike paths in *Wohnkomplexe VI* and *VII* to the attention of the council members. On the one hand, he expressed his delight that so many new bike paths were being constructed throughout the city. At the same time, he was indignant that neither *WK VI* or the new bridge over the Oder-Spree canal had been outfitted with new bike lanes. Moreover, many of the bike paths were in such poor condition that it was an unreasonable demand to ask anyone to bike on them. “There are country lanes (*Feldwege*) that serve as better bike paths!” he exclaimed. He then asked, “What good does it do when in one place they’re being built anew and in another, they’re rotting?” Wolfgang Perske, whose informal city tour opened this chapter, was director of the city building department (*Baudezernnat*) at this time. Unfortunately, he responded, “it is only a possibility at the moment for the city to make repairs on the existing bike paths.” It was not an option to construct entirely new paths “because they lacked the funding opportunities at the moment.” Herr Schliefer responded biting that this was a completely unsatisfactory answer, at which point the mayor, Reiner Werner, threw his hat into the ring. He explained that it would be possible using funds in the street maintenance category to survey and catalogue all the bike paths in *WK VI* and *VII*, but that because the city budget for the following year had already been decided, no full reconstruction could be undertaken until 1997.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SV 13.09.1995, “Niederschrift der 25. öffentlichen Sitzung der

Indeed, the city's resources were spread so thin, that many of their endeavors went unresolved for years at a time. For example, by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the downtown revitalization project of the mid-1990s had gone more or less nowhere. An excerpt from the city council's citizen question and answer period (*Bürgerfragestunde*) in April 2000 sheds light on what one resident identified as the city council's unsatisfactory follow-through. Herr Tuchen, who owned a business on Lindenallee, sarcastically asked the city council, "what seriously positive developments in the city center of Lindenallee and Königstraße could have caused the city administration and the majority of council members to abandon their former proposal to suspend the parking fees in the downtown area?" The proposal to which Tuchen referred had been intended to try to increase the volume of visitors to the shopping arcade area on Lindenallee. Of course, this presented a challenging dilemma, because by eliminating parking fees, the city would be relinquishing a much-needed influx of funds into its annual budget. To Tuchen, however, this was evidence of the city administration's lack of commitment to saving the downtown area. "You all know, that Lindenallee and Königstraße represent a sickly city center. How can you as city administrators and council members, with your responsibility for the citizens of this city and for the preservation of jobs, reconcile your choice to effectively condemn the city center" by not resolving the issue of parking fees?<sup>62</sup>

In short, as these examples have demonstrated, there were simply not enough funds available for the city administration to accomplish all of the improvement projects that residents brought to their attention. Both residents and council members were acutely aware of the tremendous financial implications of vacated apartments, in particular. During the

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Stadtverordnetenversammlung am 13.09.1995," 5-6.

<sup>62</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 05.04.2000, "Niederschrift der 16. öffentlichen Sitzung der Stadtverordnetenversammlung am 05.04.2000," 4-5.

*Einwohnerfragestunde* at a city council meeting in November 1994, a Herr Fritsche politely inquired as to how long the apartment buildings on Karl-Liebkecht-Street 27 to 31 were going to remain empty. So far “the loss of rent amounts to approximately 700,000 DM,” Fritsche observed. “How long will the [housing management firm] *Gebäudewirtschaft GmbH* continue to accept these losses?”<sup>63</sup>

Tuchen and Fritsche’s concerns and frustrations were symptoms of the central dilemma of the city administration, namely, balancing the city budget in a new market economy. In the aftermath of the *Wende*, the city of Eisenhüttenstadt had acquired a majority of the buildings in Eisenhüttenstadt. Some of these they were able to transfer quickly into the newly privatized housing cooperatives, *EWG* and *GeWi*. But the upkeep of a growing number of other buildings and properties fell to the city, not to mention the growing numbers of social services and cultural amenities. The city administration was active throughout the 1990s in selling off what property they could to interested investors and hopeful new business endeavors. But for the buildings that remained, over the long term, their upkeep proved to be too expensive for the fragile city budget to endure.<sup>64</sup>

Fortunately, during these early years after unification, the city was at times the lucky recipient of regional and federal funding designated to support the renovation of old prewar buildings (*Altbau*), other historic structures, and infrastructural projects, among other things. Renovation projects in Eisenhüttenstadt, however, were made more complicated by the fact that

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<sup>63</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 23.11.1995, “Niederschrift der 13. öffentlichen Sitzung der Stadtverordnetenversammlung am 23.11.1994,” 4.

<sup>64</sup> Throughout the course of the 1990s the city council routinely approved the transfer of buildings, training facilities, club houses, among others, into the trusteeship (*Trägerschaft*) of the city. See for example city council meetings on 30 November 1990, 10 April 1991, 22 January 1992, to name just a few. These city council meetings detail the transfer of a sports complex, two welfare centers, and the city’s public transportation department into municipal oversight.

many of the city's buildings had been declared historic monuments and were thus protected by a historic preservation order (*Denkmalschutz*). This process had begun as early as 1977, when individual objects in the city—like the central street “Leninallee”—were given historic preservation status by decree from the federal government and municipal council (*Rat der Stadt*).<sup>65</sup> The functional features of the street, like its apartments, cultural spaces, and storefronts, as well as its compositional development as a main thoroughfare to the industrial area of EKO, were protected under *Denkmalschutz*. In 1984, *Wohnkomplexe I, II, and III* were also placed under historic preservation status because they were exemplary of postwar socialist architectural style. *Wohnkomplex IV* was added subsequently, as well. After unification, on July 1, 1991, the higher memorial office (*Denkmalbehörde*) of Brandenburg agreed to uphold the GDR decision that originally placed these areas under historic preservation laws.<sup>66</sup>

In the first years after unification, it became quickly clear that renovation efforts throughout the city needed to be guided by careful consideration of the cultural and historical importance of various structures. Beginning in 1991, one of the aforementioned federal programs, *Gemeinschaftswerk Aufschwung-Ost*, injected a massive investment of funds in transportation infrastructure, environmental protection, and housing and urban development into the new *Bundesländer*. The German government spent 24 billion Marks over the course of 1991 and 1992 in order to jump start former East German infrastructure and urban renovation projects.<sup>67</sup> Eisenhüttenstadt, in particular, received 200 million Marks in both 1991 and 1992 in order to support the renovation of historic monuments, as well as general urban renewal

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<sup>65</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 19.02.1992, “Städtebaulicher Ideenwettbewerb Zentrum,” January 1992, 12.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Wolf-Sören Treusch, “Vor 25 Jahren: ‘Gemeinschaftswerk Aufschwung Ost’ wird beschlossen,” *Deutschlandfunk*, 08.03.2016, [https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/vor-25-jahren-gemeinschaftswerk-aufschwung-ost-wird.871.de.html?dram:article\\_id=347378](https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/vor-25-jahren-gemeinschaftswerk-aufschwung-ost-wird.871.de.html?dram:article_id=347378).



projects.<sup>68</sup> Initially, these funds were directed toward renewal projects in areas that predated the construction of Eisenhüttenstadt itself. Many buildings in the old towns of Fürstenberg and Schönfließ required urgent renovations, as they had gone more or less neglected throughout the course of the GDR.

As such, throughout the 1990s, the city government often devoted urban renewal funds to renovation projects for old buildings (*Altbau*) as opposed to investing funds into renovating older *Wohnkomplexe*. This rationale was also tinged by municipal politics. Throughout the course of the GDR, residents of Fürstenberg and Schönfließ, some of whom had lived in the region since before the existence of Eisenhüttenstadt, were often neglected compared to the residents of Eisenhüttenstadt proper. Instead of retaining their own municipal status, they had been incorporated into Eisenhüttenstadt as districts (*Stadtteile*) in 1961. After unification, they remained incorporated into the larger city of Eisenhüttenstadt. Moreover, in the postunification period, revitalization projects that targeted historic city centers were gaining popularity throughout other regions of the former GDR, making the choice to renew the *Altbau* in Fürstenberg and Schönfließ a particularly timely trend.<sup>69</sup> When renovation projects were undertaken on the *Wohnkomplexe I, II, III, and IV*, the building office had to carefully observe and preserve the original design of the buildings in order to honor their historical preservation status.<sup>70</sup> As a result, housing complexes in the more peripheral areas of the city remained an afterthought, and their continued neglect perpetuated the cycle of their undesirability.

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<sup>68</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 13.03.1991, “Gemeinschaftswer Aufschwung-Ost,” 9.

<sup>69</sup> See Jean-Claude Garcia-Zamor, *Strategies for Urban Development in Leipzig, Germany: Harmonizing Planning and Equity* (New York: Springer, 2014).

<sup>70</sup> See for example, Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 26.02.1997, “Textliche Erläuterung zum Vorläufigen Unternehmenskonzept der Eisenhüttenstädter Gebäudewirtschaft GmbH für die Jahre 1997 bis 2002,” 1-5.

Over the course of the 1990s, the overlapping transformation processes that affected residents' employment opportunities, and access to social services and leisure activities led many Eisenhüttenstädters to move away from the city. This growing pattern of outmigration introduced new challenges to Eisenhüttenstadt urban planners and city administrators. The increasing prevalence of empty storefronts and apartments was among the most pressing of these challenges, because it both reflected and perpetuated the city's overarching financial predicament. Residents who remained in the *Wohnkomplexe* or business owners holding out on Lindenallee persistently brought their concerns to their elected representatives in city hall. When these problems could not be immediately addressed or went ignored completely, however, it contributed to the further deterioration of these housing communities, making current residents increasingly unsatisfied with their quality of life, and rendering them even more unattractive to potential new residents. Unfortunately, over the course of the next decade, this contradiction would grow even more acute, and the solutions ultimately reached by city administrators and urban planners not only altered the physical space of the city forever, but also had significant effects on residents' everyday lives.

### **Solutions to Shrinkage: Demolition, Renovation, and a new *Stadtbild*<sup>71</sup>**

That the difficulty leasing apartments or storefronts on Lindenallee was testament to permanent demographic developments, however, was either not immediately apparent to residents and city administrators, or they were in understandable denial about the negative trend. For decades the population of Eisenhüttenstadt had grown along with the expansion of the steel mill. With the systematic modernization efforts and closure of the metallurgic production cycle in 1997, the local city administration in Eisenhüttenstadt had good reason to assume that

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<sup>71</sup> *Stadtbild* is the German word for cityscape, urban landscape, or city image.

Eisenhüttenstadt would continue to grow as it had throughout the duration of the GDR. Indeed, the city government and everyday Eisenhüttenstädters alike, long remained optimistic that early evidence of outmigration and economic stagnation could be overcome. A February 1997 article in the city magazine, *Stadtspiegel*, outlining the new land development plan (*Flächennutzungsplan*) acknowledged that the population of the city was predicted to decline from the current estimate of 47,000 residents to 45,000 by 2010.<sup>72</sup> But because of the full privatization of EKO, and other ostensible attractions of the commercial and industrial economy in Eisenhüttenstadt, the plan still anticipated that 3,600 new apartments would be needed. These estimates affirmed an optimistic belief that the population would eventually stabilize, and even that there would be growth again.<sup>73</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that these early prognoses of shrinkage significantly underestimated the ultimate scope of population decline in Eisenhüttenstadt.<sup>74</sup> It was not until the end of the year 2000 that the city administration openly acknowledged “the developmental stagnation and shrinkage of all areas of the economy and public life.”<sup>75</sup> This section asks what course of action urban planners and city administrators ultimately decided upon in their efforts to address the multifaceted problem of population shrinkage. More importantly, as this strategy gained coherence and federal funding in the early 2000s, this section asks how ordinary residents experienced the irrevocable changes to the physical spaces of their city. For Eisenhüttenstädters, the juxtaposition of deterioration and demolition of certain socialist

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<sup>72</sup> Jörg Ihlow, “Flächennutzungsplan Eisenhüttenstadt,” *Stadtspiegel*, February 1997, 4.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> According to the official statistics of the Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, a population survey at the end of 2018 revealed that Eisenhüttenstadt has 24,633 residents, which is less than half of its population at the end of 1989. Stefan Lötsch, “Eisenhüttenstadt hat weniger als 25,000 Einwohner,” *Märkische Oderzeitung* (8 December 2019), <https://www.moz.de/landkreise/oder-spreewald/eisenhuettenstadt/artikel0/dg/0/1/1746045/>

<sup>75</sup> Wolfgang Perske, “Stadtumbau in Eisenhüttenstadt,” *Stadtspiegel*, Oktober 2001, 3.

structures, on the one hand, with restoration and renewal of other socialist structures, on the other hand, could understandably invoke mixed feelings about both the socialist past and the capitalist present.

Given the symbolic, ideological, and industrial importance of the socialist model-city throughout the course of the GDR, it should come perhaps as little surprise that Eisenhüttenstädters of all stripes assumed that their city would remain a desirable place to live in a united Germany, as well. Gabriele Haubold, a city planner who has lived and worked in Eisenhüttenstadt on an off since the 1950s, suggested that this reluctance or inability to recognize the drastic migration away from the city can be in part be attributed to mentalities developed during Eisenhüttenstadt's years as privileged and independent city.<sup>76</sup> During the GDR, Eisenhüttenstadt was what was known as a *kreisfreie Stadt*, or a municipality independent from a surrounding county administration. After unification, many assumed that Eisenhüttenstadt would maintain its privileged status and become the district town (*Kreisstadt*) of the administrative district (*Landkreis*) Oder Spree. In 1993, however, they lost this status, and with it the abundance of administrative functions and jobs that accompanied, which was one of many developments that exacerbated the decline in population.

Despite this setback, in the latter part of the 1990s, the city administration actively pursued the development of social programs that they hoped would stabilize the population, especially in the more peripheral *Wohnkomplexe*. Beginning in July 1999, the city contracted with a development company with the less than pithy name *complan Gesellschaft für Kommunalberatung, Planung und Standortentwicklung mbh*, to help formulate a spatial development plan for the area around *Wohnkomplex VI*. *complan GmbH* was a communal

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<sup>76</sup> Interview with Gabriele Haubold, July 19, 2016, Eisenhüttenstadt.

consultation company based out of Langerwisch near Potsdam that specialized in collaborative and integrated urban planning and development. Their goal for *WK VI* was, “together with residents, and resident clubs, associations, and companies, to develop social services such as administrative and political concepts and concrete measures that contribute to improving the quality of life in the district.”<sup>77</sup> This region of the city was specifically selected by the Eisenhüttenstadt administration because it had been more starkly affected by population decline than the average rate of the city as a whole. At the time of the project’s inception, *WK VI* had approximately 9,800 residents, down from 12,000 ten years previously. This development necessarily affected the status of surrounding amenities, and several kindergartens were forced to close. The neighborhood was also in dire need of commercial attention because the closure of the larger firms in the mid-1990s, like the meat processing plant and the industrial bakery, meant the loss of substantial jobs in the immediate vicinity.

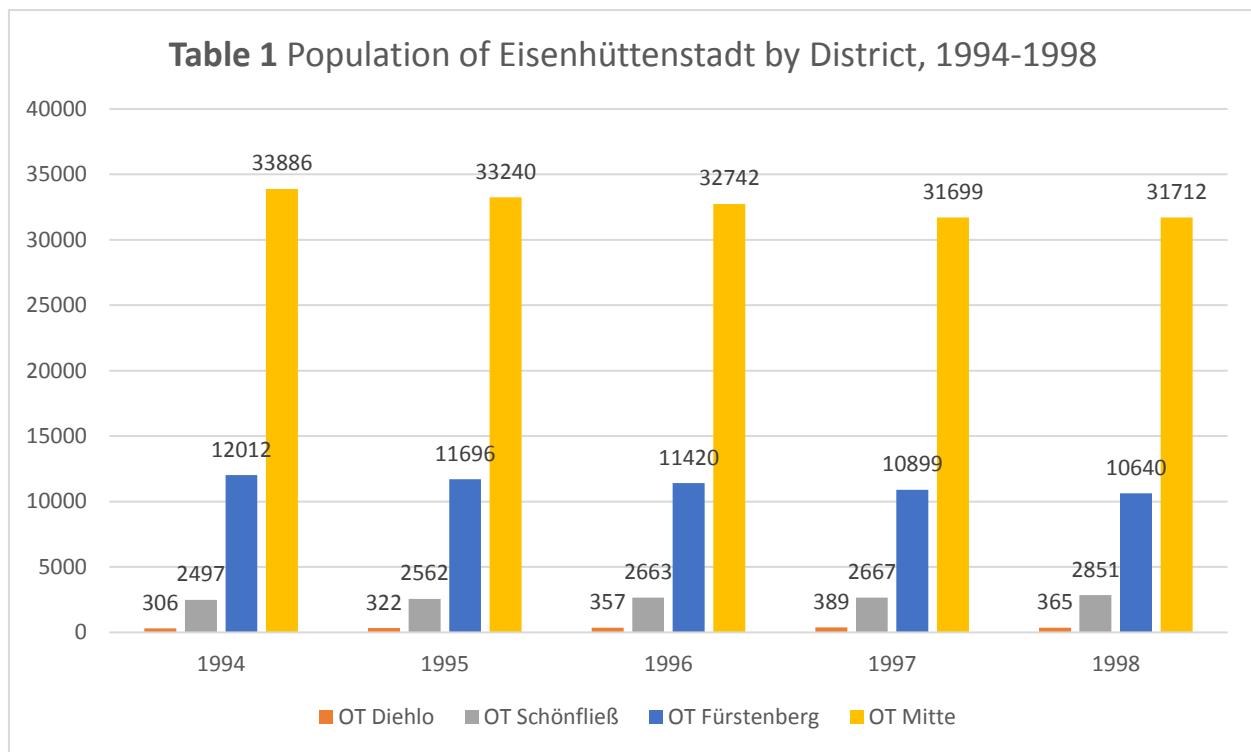
In order to begin to address these challenges, *complan GmbH* held an open house on September 6, 1999, so that they could collaboratively decide on their development goals with the residents, associations, and business owners of the *WK VI* neighborhood. After a series of short presentations from various local and regional representatives such as the mayor, the employment office, and the Brandenburg Ministry for City Development, Housing, and Transportation, *complan GmbH* opened the floor to hear the worries and problems from residents of *WK VI*. Among the issues nearest and dearest to residents’ heart was the revitalization of the Fröbelring Passage, to restore it to its former status as an “attractive meeting place, and destination for social services and shopping options.”<sup>78</sup> Other issues included making the apartments accessible

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<sup>77</sup> M. von Popowski and M. Veenhuis, “Eine Zukunft für den VI. Wohnkomplex,” *Stadtspiegel* 9/99 (September 1999): 4.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

to elderly residents, expanding the bus connections, among others. At the end of the meeting, in light of residents’ input, *complan GmbH* articulated some guidelines upon which they would base their subsequent efforts, most importantly “to attract the engagement of residents and residential institutions, so that future generations will also want to live and work in the neighborhood. Raising the standard of living in the area means, above all, the building up of new employment sectors, the improvement of the structural situation, the orientation of new infrastructural and service establishments, and the cultivation of a lively neighborhood feel.”<sup>79</sup>



Despite such highly publicized efforts, there was incontrovertible proof that the population was shrinking, and that certain regions of the city were suffering worse than others. In 1998, the city’s office of statistics had undertaken an expanded analysis of the yearly statistical data. In their annual “Beiträge zur Statistik” published in November 1998, they offered additional information regarding the communal distribution of Eisenhüttenstadt residents

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

throughout the city. Both the old town of Fürstenberg and the city center were losing residents, their overall populations declining by approximately 12 and 7 percent from 1994 to 1998. The small districts of Schönfließ and Diehlo, however, had increased by 14 and 19 percent, respectively.<sup>80</sup> Though they did not represent a substantial volume of the overall population, this trend was easily explained suburbanization impulses. In other words, residents moving away from the city center areas in order to purchase or construct their own single-family homes (*Eigenheime*).<sup>81</sup> All told, the entire population of the city had shrunk from 48,700 in 1994 to 45,500 by the beginning of 1998. This distribution of residents was based off of population data collected at the end of 1997. By the time said data was compiled for the 1998 report, however, it was already out of date. An additional population survey conducted on June 30, 1998 recorded 44,848 total residents of Eisenhüttenstadt, meaning that in the intervening six months over 700 additional residents had moved away from the city.<sup>82</sup>

In addition to the population statistics by overall district, the “Beiträge zur Statistik” offered detailed breakdowns of the distribution of residents throughout the various *Wohnkomplexe* in the city. As represented in the below graph and table, the number of residents in each housing complex declined steadily from 1994 to 1998. *WK I* and *VI* appeared to be the least affected by a sheer decline in residents. Over the course of the five years they lost

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<sup>80</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 25.11.1998, Statistikstelle Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt, “Beiträge zur Statistik: Information über die Bevölkerung der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt nach der ‘Kommunalen Gebietsgliederung,’” 4/98 (November 1998): 5-19.

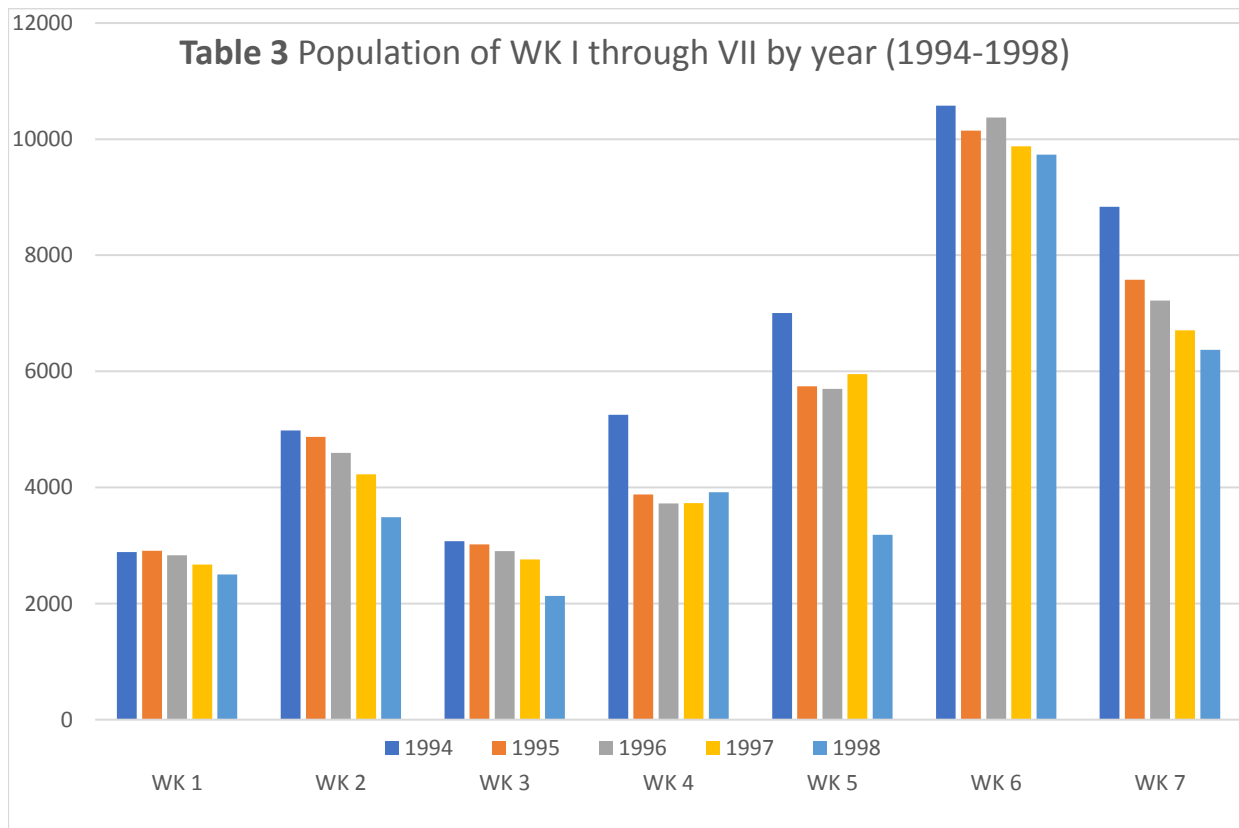
<sup>81</sup> To be clear, the desire to living in single family homes did not originate after 1989. In his interview, Hartmut Preuß explained how he and his family had been in the process of constructing their own home in the GDR for years upon years, but had been constrained because of insufficient materials. After unification, these supply issues were no longer an impediment, and so long as residents could afford it, many of them took advantage of the opportunity to move out of apartment complexes and build their own homes, either in the city center, but more likely outside of the city entirely.

<sup>82</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 25.11.1998, Statistikstelle Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt, “Beiträge zur Statistik: Information über die Bevölkerung der Stadt Eisenhüttenstadt nach der ‘Kommunalen Gebietsgliederung,’” 4/98 (November 1998): 4.

**Table 2** Table representing the number of residents of each *Wohnkomplex*, 1994-1998

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	Percentage Loss since 1994
WK 1	2,885	2,907	2,833	2,671	2,503	<b>13.24</b>
WK 2	4,984	2,870	4,595	4,224	3,488	<b>30.02</b>
WK 3	3,076	3,017	2,906	2,761	2,132	<b>30.69</b>
WK 4	5,251	3,878	3,723	3,729	3,919	<b>25.37</b>
WK 5	7,002	5,744	5,697	5,954	3,186	<b>54.50</b>
WK 6	10,578	10,146	10,371	9,878	9,734	<b>7.98</b>
WK 7	8,836	7,577	7,222	6,708	6,386	<b>27.93</b>

approximately 13 and 8 percent of their residents, respectively. *Wohnkomplexe II, III, IV, and VI* lost in the 25 to 30 percent range of their total residents between 1994 and 1998. Finally, *WK V* was clearly the most acutely affected, as they lost of 50 percent of their residents in the five-year period. This overarching trend could no longer be optimistically dismissed as a momentary contraction that would be offset by new employees in EKO or other employers. Instead, the city administration would need to take a different approach to managing the problem of shrinkage.





Perhaps fittingly, the first official acknowledgement of population shrinkage affecting the city of Eisenhüttenstadt came at the end of the first year of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In an article published in the last *Stadtspiegel* issue of the year 2000, the various subdepartments of the *Baudezernat* offered a retrospective look at trends in city development (*Stadtentwicklung*) over the past decade, as well as a forecast for the rest of the first decade of the new millennium. In this article, head of the building department, Wolfgang Perske, lamented that “not all of the developments in Eisenhüttenstadt were able to be influenced by the city administration.” Unresolved property issues, developments in the labor market, and “the drastic reduction in residents” in the last years have left behind traces. And unfortunately, the instruments and methods typically used by city developers had been intended for managing growth, but all of a sudden “both now and in the future, it is a matter of steering and managing shrinkage (*Schrumpfung*).”<sup>83</sup>

From this moment on, the issue of *Stadtumbau*, or urban redevelopment, was a catch phrase that permeated all levels of city administration and ordinary life. After a decade of skating around the issue, there seemed now to be a real urgency to acknowledging the acute problem of population shrinkage, and more importantly, to settle on an urban redevelopment plan to solve the many overlapping problems associated with this trend. City officials, including Eberhard Harz, who was the former director of *GeWi*, went to great lengths to underscore that “one mustn’t think of the term *Stadtumbau* and any associated dismantling (*Rückbau*) as an absolute negative, because urban redevelopment as part of a creative design process could help to realize

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<sup>83</sup> Wolfgang Perske, “Rückblick und Vorausschau aus den Dezernaten,” *Stadtspiegel* (December 2000/January 2001): 12.

positive changes” in the city, as well.<sup>84</sup> By October 2001, in another article published in *Stadtspiegel*, Wolfgang Perske wrote bluntly about the newest population prognoses for the city. More than 18 percent of Eisenhüttenstadt residents had left the borders of the city proper. Around 40 percent of those who left settled into single-family homes in the surrounding rural areas. The three biggest leasing companies in the city, which included the housing cooperatives *GeWi*, *EWG e.G.*, and the *Oder-Immobilien GmbH & Co.KG*, had a vacancy rate of 18.6 percent. These trends made the newest population prognosis, which predicted only 35,000 residents by 2015, perfectly believable, clearly necessitating a new set of solutions.<sup>85</sup>

In March 2002, Eisenhüttenstadt was selected as one of 21 cities to participate in conceptual contest (*Ideenwettbewerb*) sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Participation in this *Ideenwettbewerb* “Stadt 2030” gave the city planning department the opportunity to begin working on urban redevelopment conceptions.<sup>86</sup> This, combined with their ongoing work with the Brandenburg regional administration, provided some additional funds to hone their urban redevelopment concept (*Stadtumbaukonzept*). The building committee initially focused its attention on the *Wohnkomplexe* with the highest vacancy rate, in this case, the southern portion of *WK VII*. As such, the various branches of the city administration decided on a course of action that they believed would support long-term, sustainable city structures and a consolidation of the city’s housing market. Namely, they planned to tear down 3,500 apartments in Eisenhüttenstadt by 2015. This plan also provided for the modernization and updating of 6,600 apartments throughout *Wohnkomplexe I* through *VI*. Given the peripheral

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<sup>84</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 07.03.2001, Eberhard Harz, “Wörtliche Wiedergabe des Berichts des Geschäftsführers der Eisenhüttenstädter Gebäudewirtschaft GmbH auf der SVV am 07.03.2001,” 1-2.

<sup>85</sup> Wolfgang Perske, “Stadtumbau in Eisenhüttenstadt,” *Stadtspiegel* (October 2001): 3.

<sup>86</sup> Christiane Nowak, “Die Leiterin des Stadtplanungsamtes informiert über ausgewählte Arbeitsaufgaben des Stadtplanungsamtes im Jahr 2001,” *Stadtspiegel* (February 2002): 12-13.

location of *WK VII* in relation to the city center, demolition on the outskirts of the city would likewise help to support a more integrated and livelier city-center.<sup>87</sup> An initial survey of residents suggested that a majority approved these urban redevelopment plans. According to the residents surveyed, over 65 percent characterized the renovation of *Altbauten* as “positive” or “very positive.” Even 54 percent of residents supported the demolition of empty buildings. When asked how the space freed up by demolition should be used, 76 percent responded positively to the idea of more green space in the city, and 55 percent also approved of the creation of more parking spots.<sup>88</sup>

In 2002, the availability of further federal funding for urban redevelopment solidified the city’s plan to pursue a balance of demolition and renewal. The Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, and Nuclear Safety (*Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz, Bau und Reaktorsicherheit*) instituted an urban restructuring program called *Stadtumbau Ost*, or “Urban Redevelopment East.” Eisenhüttenstadt was one of more than 480 cities to receive funding to improve its city center, restore and preserve historic buildings, and tear down empty buildings and apartment complexes.<sup>89</sup> As such, in 2003, the planning process for urban redevelopment in Eisenhüttenstadt began in earnest.

At the end of March 2004, the city council approved the urban redevelopment concept that had been developed over the course of the past year. The overarching goal was “the creation

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<sup>87</sup> AG Stadtumbau, “Konzeption Eisenhüttenstadt 2015: Auswertung der Mieterbefragung läuft,” *Stadtspiegel* (April 2002): 4.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>89</sup> “Stadtumbau,” Bundesumweltministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, [http://www.staedtebaufoerderung.info/StBauF/DE/Programm/StadtumbauOst/stadtumbauOst\\_node.html](http://www.staedtebaufoerderung.info/StBauF/DE/Programm/StadtumbauOst/stadtumbauOst_node.html).

of a sustainable city structure.”<sup>90</sup> By this point, they had expanded their demolition plans to include 4,500 apartments by 2010 in the peripherally located apartment complexes, with the intention to use the newly freed up space for the construction of single-family homes and a renaturation of the surrounding residential environment. They still planned for the renovation and modernization of 3,500 to 4,000 apartments concentrated in and around the city center. The vacancy quota of the apartments under *Denkmalschutz* in *WK I* through *IV* was only between 26 and 32 percent.<sup>91</sup> *WK VII*, in contrast, had some of the highest vacancy rates in the entire city, with fewer than half of the total apartments occupied. As such, they had decided to accelerate the demolition rate decided upon in 2002. Instead, they planned for a full demolition of the southern



**Figure 6.4** Photograph of the demolition process in the southern portion of *WK VII*, ca. 2003-2004.  
Source: Peter Ullrich and Gabriele Haubold, “Stadtumbau aus Gesamtstädtischer Perspektive,”  
*Stadtspiegel* (June/July 2004).

<sup>90</sup> Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt, SVV 31.03.2004, “Fortschreibung Stadtumbaukonzept Eisenhüttenstadt,”  
Beschlussvorlage March 2004.

<sup>91</sup> Peter Ullrich and Gabriele Haubold, “Stadtumbau aus Gesamtstädtischer Perspektive,” *Stadtspiegel* (June/July  
2004): 19.

half of *WK VII* between what had already been completed in 2003 and 2006, as well as the demolition of approximately 1,650 of the remaining 2,000 apartments in the northern part of the *Wohnkomplex*.<sup>92</sup>

Over the course of the rest of the 2000s, the city continued to hone its vision for urban renewal in Eisenhüttenstadt. Despite residents' understandable reaction to the demolition of substantive parts of their city, in the beginning of 2005, Wolfgang Perske, now division manager for City Management, Culture, Leisure and Schools, supported an even faster tempo for demolition. After all, "empty apartment and apartment blocks are not only cost-ineffective for the respective housing associations, rather they negative effect the urban landscape (*Stadtbild*), encouraging no one to invest or want to live here."<sup>93</sup> By mid-2006, however, city administrators were in the practice of emphasizing that *Stadtumbau* was more than just demolition, no doubt in part to combat the overwhelming tone of negative feelings on the party of city residents.

For current and former residents of *WK VII*, or of any other apartment block that met a similar fate, its demolition understandably triggered feelings of loss, frustration, and even anger. In 2006, the civic association in Fürstenberg, the *Fürstenberger Bürgervereinigung*, designed, produced, and distributed a series of satirical postcards featuring images of Eisenhüttenstadt in various states of demolition. The photos of active construction sites and gutted *Plattenbauten* were accompanied by the standard cheery greeting one might find on any postcards. For example, the greeting in the first postcard reads "Heartfelt greetings from Eisenhüttenstadt," in the middle of four images depicting apartment complexes in various states of demolition. The second postcard below layers on the irony thick, its greeting reading "Blooming Landscapes,"

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>93</sup> Wolfgang Perske, "Das aktuelle Interview," *Stadtspiegel* (December 2004/January 2005): 7-9.



which was a reference to Chancellor Kohl's 1990 prediction about the economic outlook for the new German states, as well one of the CDU's slogans for the 1998 parliamentary elections. The top right image in the postcard shows an advertisement for Freiburger beer with the enticing slogan, "*Wirtschaftswunder*," yet another callback to West Germany's miraculous economic recovery in the postwar period. This bus-stop advertisement is, of course, ironically juxtaposed with images of a mountain of gravel, detritus from the demolish process, and an image of the gutted remains of *WK VII*.<sup>94</sup>



**Figure 6.5** One of several total postcards designed and distributed by the *Fürstenberger Bürgervereinigung*. The greeting in the middle reads "Heartfelt Greetings from Eisenhüttenstadt." Source: Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt.

<sup>94</sup> There were mixed reactions to the postcard campaign on the part of the *Fürstenberger Bürgervereinigung*. Mayor Rainer Werner's interpretation was that they were bad publicity. In his mind, any images of the city were in a sense advertisements, and postcards depicting Eisenhüttenstadt in "demolition-look" do more harm than good. See Maria Minew, "Das aktuelle Interview," *Stadtspiegel* (February/March 2006): 2-3.



**Figure 6.6** The second of several postcards designed and distributed by the *Fürstenberger Bürgervereinigung*. The greeting in the middle reads “Blooming Landscapes.” Source: Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt.

Other Eisenhüttenstadt residents’ reactions were of a more personal nature. One young Eisenhüttenstädter grew up in *Wohnkomplex VII*, but like many other young people, left the city to pursue his education. He landed in Cottbus, where he still resides, but his work and parents still bring him often to Eisenhüttenstadt. He admits to feeling a twist of bitterness that he will never be able to show his potential children the house—or apartment—he grew up in. “The entire city will always be my *Heimat*, but I have no specific place (*Ort*) to show them anymore.”<sup>95</sup> Indeed, the absence of *WK VII* and the other apartment blocks torn down over the years have left a tangible imprint of absence in the city. In a literal sense, the space where these apartment complexes once stood are now simply empty fields. In a figurative sense, even over a

<sup>95</sup> Informal interview with Eisenhüttenstadt resident, interview by the author, May 19, 2016, Eisenhüttenstadt.

decade after their demolition, residents note their absence like a recently lost tooth. In countless rides to the train station or walking tours of the city, residents always felt compelled to point out the absence that now dominates the landscape.

The demolition of *Wohnkomplex VII*, which had been the last block of apartments to actually be completed in the 1980s, symbolically epitomizes the shrinking population of the city, illustrating the change in Eisenhüttenstadt's housing problem from a shortage to a surplus. This development is contrasted, as the city's urban planners were determined to underscore, with the preservation of other portions of the city under historical preservation status, as discussed above. Indeed, Eisenhüttenstadt has the largest area of land under *Denkmalschutz* in all of Germany. This means that although the interiors of most apartments have by now been modernized, the physical facades of the *Wohnkomplexe I* through *IV* are largely preserved in order to comply with renovation regulations. This precludes the addition of elevators or balconies, and even means that the original style of single-paned windows must be used instead of more energy efficient ones that lose less heat in the winter.<sup>96</sup>

If we consider, as historian Eli Rubin has argued, ordinary East Germans' "move from mostly older nineteenth-century slum apartments to the concrete utopia of Marzahn . . . as quite the radical change in all the ways that a physical space can shape a subject's inner consciousness and sense of self," then we should also consider this process in the reverse.<sup>97</sup> Rubin characterizes East Germans' arrival at the newly-constructed, sprawling housing settlement of Marzahn on the eastern outskirts of Berlin as a type of amnesia. "Without the familiar street corners, parks, or neighborhoods, there were less opportunities for the old memories associated with those places

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with Rudi Schmidt, interview by the author, audio recording, Eisenhüttenstadt, March 31, 2016.

<sup>97</sup> Eli Rubin, *Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space, and Memory in East Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6.



to be sparked,” he argues.<sup>98</sup> How, then, are Eisenhüttenstadt residents’ senses of self and memories affected by this tension between demolition, renovation, and preservation? In Eisenhüttenstadt there is cause for potential “amnesia” given the complete demolition and erasure of apartment complexes that were brand new and highly desirable not twenty years before. At the same time, the city center’s protected historical status means that it is effectively a giant, open air museum, arguably providing an inescapable reminder of the socialist past.

This tension between demolition and preservation in Eisenhüttenstadt heightens the complicated, at times ambivalent relationship that residents have with both the East German past and with the present in a united Federal Republic. On the one hand, residents in Eisenhüttenstadt have experienced far-reaching transformations in nearly all areas of their everyday lives—from their jobs to their living situations, not to mention the ideology and cultures of life in a newly unified Germany. But on the other hand, many of the “socialist spaces” in Eisenhüttenstadt have been preserved, which serve as visual and spatial reminders of life in the GDR, reference points to another time and another Germany. While the GDR certainly failed to fulfill many of the promises that it made to its citizens, with so many reminders of the East German past, it is no wonder that Eisenhüttenstadt residents’ experiences of living in the socialist model-city during the GDR continue to inform their experiences of life in a united Federal Republic.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, city administrators and business leaders did not give up on their attempts to attract new investors in order to inject the city with much-needed new sources of capital and job security for the mounting number of Eisenhüttenstadt residents who suffered from unemployment. These efforts went largely unrewarded. But in the long-term,

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

federal efforts, like the Hartz reforms, ultimately did stabilize the unemployment rate throughout the whole country, Eisenhüttenstadt included. That the employment rate remains around 5-6 percent is simply a fact of market capitalism, but a cruel fact for those few Eisenhüttenstadt residents who still protest weekly at the reduction of social services as a result of Hartz IV, and for whom memory of guaranteed employment in the GDR is not so distant. Despite efforts to reinvigorate industrial investors in Eisenhüttenstadt, the nearly two decades of elevated unemployment rate led more and more residents to move away from the city, seeking jobs education, or social and cultural amenities elsewhere. Over time, this pattern of outmigration would reduce the city's population by nearly one half. The city development office's decision to pursue a combination of demolition and renovation in order to preserve the historic city center would leave more Eisenhüttenstadt residents with simply memories of their childhood homes

All told, over the course of the second decade of life in a united Germany, the contours of everyday life in Eisenhüttenstadt did begin to take on a new sense of normalcy. But even almost twenty-years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it can still be challenging to understand what about the process of postsocialist transition in Eisenhüttenstadt was specifically “postsocialist” and what challenges are instead endemic to market capitalism, deindustrialization, shrinking cities, and democratic government. This tangle of overlapping processes is unlikely to become fully discrete—not while demolition and renovation projects are still ongoing, or while continued employment in EKO still remains uncertainly tied to international steel politics, or while the population of the city continues shrink, or while any residents who remember life in the GDR continue to live in the former socialist model-city.

## EPILOGUE: WALKING THE CITY

Throughout the forty years of its existence during the GDR, East German citizens were drawn to Eisenhüttenstadt for a variety of reasons. Initially during early construction phases, it was one of the first secure sites of employment in the otherwise underdeveloped region of Brandenburg. The growth of *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost* continued to demand a consistent supply of skilled workers with technical expertise. As time wore on and the city's symbolic significance as an explicitly socialist model city grew, citizens came for other reasons. Many so-called “true believers” in the model of socialism were drawn to the city because of its ideological importance. And, indeed, it was considered a prestigious and desirable location for work and living, so potential residents had to be in good standing with the Party in order to secure their desired position and living accommodations. Moreover, given its privileged status, the city was typically “besser besorgt,” or better provided for than many other cities of similar size throughout the GDR, which could attract residents more interested in improving the quality of their everyday lives than in overtly ideological concerns.

By the 1970s and 1980s, everyday life in Eisenhüttenstadt had taken on a comfortable routine by most residents' standards. By the 1980s, upward of 12,000 of the city's 50,000 residents were employed in the steel mill, meaning that almost every family in the city was connected to the factory in some way. Given the centrality of the steel industry to the economic success of the GDR—a status secured in large part by its ability to produce goods for export—workers in EKO and its subsidiaries understood the economic and ideological weight of their

work. Workers throughout the various branches of the steel combine participated in the program of friendly “socialist competition” laid out by union representatives each year and intended to increase productivity and work efficiency broadly. In return, economic leaders knew they had to incentivize workers by easing the burdens of daily life, both during the workday itself, and in the expansive program of social services and leisure activities organized and subsidized by EKO. This included factory kitchens and cafeterias, a polyclinic, dentists, and daycare services. For after-work hours there was an expansive network of hobby clubs and reading groups, sports teams, and even steeply subsidized domestic and international vacations. Moreover, these expansive opportunities were complemented by other state-supported cultural programming and leisure activities, such as events in the Friedrich Wolf Theater, and in the various youth clubs and adult social clubs throughout the city. All told, by the 1970s and 1980s, Eisenhüttenstadt was very desirable place for East Germans to live.

If you visited Eisenhüttenstadt today, however, you would likely get the strong impression that the city is in transition, stuck between competing versions and visions of itself, and not quite sure of where it is has landed or where it is yet headed. Coming by train from Berlin, it usually takes two hours to reach the former socialist model-city. Though there were once plans to construct a new set of tracks to connect Eisenhüttenstadt directly with the East—and now united—German capital, those plans were long ago abandoned. As such, you must take the RE1 regional train east from Berlin to Frankfurt (Oder) and then change to the even smaller RE11 regional train that travels south an additional half an hour to Eisenhüttenstadt. Of course, this is only if there are no unforeseen disturbances along the route. Otherwise, you may have to wait hours for the *Deutsche Bahn* to clear the tracks or set up an alternate bus route to ferry passengers to Frankfurt (Oder). These logistical challenges give a sense for how peripheral the

city is in relation to the capital of Berlin, something that makes it different from prestige steelworks and socialist model cities in the Czech Republic and Poland.

Arriving in Eisenhüttenstadt, you are greeted by the somewhat dismal sight of the city's train station, barely renovated since its initial construction in the mid-nineteenth century. The ticket office has limited hours, and the convenience store hours are only slightly better. Your best bet is to exit the station from the south to reach the bus stop, taxi stand, or main road into town. Hopefully you are able to comfortably navigate the stairs—even after nearly three decades of German unification the train station is still not accessible for people in wheelchairs.<sup>1</sup> As you descend the stairs look out for the graffiti messages that often grace the walls of the tunnel under the tracks. Over the course of my 2015-2016 research year, their sentiment changed several



**Figure E.1** Image of the Eisenhüttenstadt train station facing north toward Frankfurt (Oder). Photo by the author.

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<sup>1</sup> The issue of accessibility, and the visually decrepit state of the train station, was an ongoing subject of discussion for ordinary Eisenhüttenstädters and politicians alike.

times. Initially there was the encouraging “Refugees Welcome” message tagged along the brick wall, but later the welcoming portion of the message was crossed out in favor of an English-language expletive. On the outside of the eastern side of the train station you might find a more neutral graffiti message: “Ich bin kein Rassist, ich hasse euch ALLE.”<sup>2</sup>

In order to make your way toward the city center, you could wait for the bus, which typically runs twice an hour, timed to the arrival of the regional trains. Or you can walk the 3 kilometers or so along Beeskower Street toward Lindenallee, the central promenade of the city. It is not a particularly scenic walk, but a good way to start to get a feel for the layout of the city. On the way you will likely notice some scattered *Altbauten*, built to house the workers in the glass manufacturing factory that closed during the Second World War. You will also walk by some newer businesses, such as a plumber and several used car dealerships, interspersed with abandoned, dilapidated buildings that have not yet fallen into ownership of the city, or have not yet been designated for renovation or demolition. As you are walking you might happen to look down at your feet. The sidewalks along Beeskower Street are wide in order to accommodate both pedestrians and bicyclists. In places the sidewalk has clearly been replaced, but in other areas the characteristic squares of



**Figure E.2** Insides of one of the abandoned buildings on the walk from the train station to the city center. Photo by the author.

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<sup>2</sup> In other words, “I am not a racist, I hate ALL of you.” This message was tagged along the front side of the Eisenhüttenstadt train station sometime in 2013 and remained for the better part of a year.



**Figure E.3** GDR era sidewalk and overgrown wall on Oderland Street, on the way to the Eisenhüttenstadt City Archive. Behind the wall are the gutted remains of the former industrial meat processing plant. Photo by the author.

East German cement remain primarily intact, interrupted only occasionally by grass sprouting from between the cracks or a patch of dirt where a stone is missing. If you make your way further west toward the city center, you will cross a bridge over the Oder-Spree canal. The networks of canals connecting the Oder and Spree rivers was one of the main attractions for choosing the site of the new iron and steel combine.

Eventually, as you near the intersection of Beeskower street and Lindenallee, you will come across more

conflicting artifacts of both the socialist and postsocialist past. To your left, on the north side of the street, you will see the apartment buildings that make up *Wohnkomplex I*, accommodations that befitted the first residents of the city whose hard work in the name of socialism enabled the construction of *Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost*. Indeed, this apartment block has its origins in the early 1950s when economic leaders and city planners had to solve the problem of where to house the growing workforce, not to mention how to provide them with more substantial social and cultural services. Temporary workers' barracks and dorm-style living were not sufficient for the long run. Instead, a permanent residential town had to be built. At the Second Party Congress of the Socialist Unity Party in July 1952, Party leaders had committed to a course of "building



socialism” (*Aufbau des Sozialismus*) and designated the residential town of the new steelworks as the model project of this effort—the first socialist model-city of the fledgling state-socialist regime.<sup>3</sup> As such, the town was built up according to the Sixteen Principles of Urban Development, which had been mandated in July 1950. According to these guidelines, which structured urban development throughout the GDR from 1950-1955, cities represented “the economically and culturally richest type of settlement.”<sup>4</sup> The residential settlement that received the name Stalinstadt in 1953, was thus meant to economically and culturally encapsulate the mission of building socialism in the GDR.

Over the course of following decades, Stalinstadt—which became Eisenhüttenstadt in 1961—continued to grow, its population closely mirroring the ongoing expansion or planned expansions of the steel mill. For example, in 1952 when the first blast furnaces were nearing completion, there were approximately 5,600 employees in EKO, and 13,000 residents in the town. By 1968 when the cold rolling mill went into operation, EKO employed 7,300 people and the population of the city had grown to 42,500 inhabitants. This pattern continued throughout the subsequent decades: when the factory expanded, the city grew with it, in effect binding the lives and livelihoods of thousands of workers and their families to the young socialist city. In the coming decades and even until today, the fate of the factory, the city, and its residents remain closely intertwined.

On the opposite side of the street from *WK I*, you will see two universal symbols of capitalist consumption, namely, a fast food restaurant and a shopping mall. Specifically, on the corner there is a Burger King, and behind that is the sprawling expanse of the City Center

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<sup>3</sup> Andreas Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt: Wandel einer industriellen Gründungsstadt in fünfzig Jahren* (Potsdam: Brandenburgische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2000), 48-49.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.



shopping mall, which opened its doors in 1993. These now everyday luxuries would have been unimaginable three decades previously. This is because, during the period of late-stage socialism, the East German regime became increasingly unable to satisfy their citizens' expectations regarding the pace at which their material circumstances and quality of life would continue to improve. Throughout the first two decades of its existence, the country had indeed made dramatic strides in improving living circumstances for most East Germans, particularly in comparison to the immediate postwar period. Honecker's 1971 proclamation of a "unity of economic and social policy" signaled to the population that they could continue to expect substantive improvements in housing and availability of consumer goods, among others. In so doing, however, the regime created a moving target for itself, and when it failed to keep pace with citizens' expectations, disappointment and dissatisfaction ensued.

Eisenhüttenstadt residents were no exception. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, residents in the socialist model-city found plenty of cause to be frustrated and dissatisfied with the regime's failure to uphold its promise of delivering "real existing socialism." Residents participated in a form of politically permissible criticism by writing letters to the local city council and to the mayor's office complaining of a myriad of challenges to their everyday lives. Long-wait times to upgrade to a larger apartment, the slow pace or shoddy quality of repairs, shortages of luxury items or the disappointing quality of basic consumer goods were among the topics most frequently commented upon by citizens in their petitions (*Eingabe*). Authors were careful to frame their complaints in politically palatable terms, making clear their disappointment in unsatisfactory conditions while simultaneously giving the regime the benefit of the doubt.

The inadequate improvements to East Germans' quality of life was one of several internal domestic factors (buttressed by international factors) that led to increased civic activism and

protest throughout the late 1980s. During the autumn of 1989, in particular, dissidents in Leipzig began to meet at weekly *Montagsdemonstrationen*, or Monday demonstrations. These protesters gathered to condemn travel restriction, the paucity of exit visas, rigged elections, and as time went on, to call for democratic renewal more broadly. While these protests in Leipzig and elsewhere throughout the GDR swelled to hundreds of thousands of participants by October, Eisenhüttenstadt residents were not on the frontlines of political revolt. Rather, they joined the cries for democratic renewal throughout the GDR much later and more tentatively than residents of many other cities. With the exception of one very small candle-lit march through the town square on the night before the fall of the Berlin Wall, residents of Eisenhüttenstadt were mostly silent. Whether this was testament to their satisfaction with the status quo, or their fear of speaking out, or a combination of several factors, Eisenhüttenstadt residents did not feel emboldened to protest en masse until well after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This permutation of the Peaceful Revolution on the local level in Eisenhüttenstadt departs from popular narratives of widespread dissidence and discontent, and is an important factor in understanding how the *Wende* and unification ultimately unfolded in Eisenhüttenstadt.<sup>5</sup>

In this moment of crisis when the East German state was at last forced to take seriously demands for democratic renewal, local politicians and ordinary Eisenhüttenstädters also began to realize their role in the democratic renewal of the GDR. Notably, in Eisenhüttenstadt the first widespread democratic impulses were organized not by disgruntled citizens, but by the local SED leadership themselves. Beginning in late October 1989, the city council in Eisenhüttenstadt organized a series of open forums intended to inform citizens of their plans for democratic

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<sup>5</sup> This story of political *inactivity* contributes to a growing body of literature answering Mary Fulbrook's call for a more thorough investigation of "the differential regional distribution of 'social peace' and discontent" in the revolutionary autumn. Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

renewal, as well as to create a dialogue with citizens. As direct criticism became permissible more or less overnight, ordinary residents were vociferous in articulating their disappointment, grief, and feelings of betrayal at the regime, thus contributing to the flowering of democratic discussion in a newly-freed press. Formerly subservient bloc parties in the Eisenhüttenstadt city council also made the calls for democratic renewal into reality by stepping up to the plate and challenging the ruling SED. The independence that they exerted in the period leading up to the March 1990 parliamentary elections laid the groundwork for cooperation and ultimately integration with West German branches of each bloc party, which represented in and of itself a decisive step toward unification. Once again, that this process looked different in Eisenhüttenstadt compared to other regional centers throughout the GDR, attests to the contingency of the process of German unification, and the importance of studying its permutations in locally specific contexts.

Ultimately, however, it was ordinary East Germans throughout the country, and in Eisenhüttenstadt as well, who cast their votes decisively in the first and last free parliamentary elections of the GDR for the CDU. The CDU captured over 40 percent of the vote, well above its primary competitors the SPD and the newly-rebranded PDS. This set the two Germanys on a fast-track toward unification. What happened on the national level, however, was not a perfect predictor of residents' expectations or desires on the local level. In the last local municipal election in Eisenhüttenstadt, the PDS eked out a victory over the CDU, each with approximately a quarter of the votes, but the SPD only marginally behind with 23 percent of local votes. These results attest to the uneven patterns of democratization throughout the GDR. Citizens' hopes and dreams for what the precise contours of a united Germany would look like could vary from place

to place, understandably setting up individual (former) East Germans' for different experiences of the process of German unification and everyday life in its aftermath.

The flowering of political democracy in Eisenhüttenstadt on the cusp of German unification was of course accompanied by the opening of the economy as well, and these transformations would prove to be some of the most disruptive for individual life trajectories. The biggest challenge facing economic leaders was how to transform the extensive system of state-owned industries and enterprises into private companies capable of competing in a market economy. The creation of the trust agency known as the *Treuhandanstalt*, or *Treuhand*, was intended to guide this process of mass privatization. In reality, this often necessitated the complete closure of certain branches of the East German industrial economy, a fate that EKO employees were understandably eager to avoid.

While EKO leaders were successful in quickly securing partial privatization into EKO Stahl AG, ordinary people's lives and livelihoods were still caught in the middle of high level political and economic negotiations. The initial relief at securing the partial privatization of EKO Stahl AG faded in the face of massive downsizing efforts necessary to preserve the core steel-producing functions of the factory. While EKO leaders went to great lengths to avoid officially laying anyone off, what this looked like was a process of *Ausgliederung* that decoupled the administrative apparatuses of the newly (partially) privatized EKO Stahl AG into many independent private companies. Often, the end result was the same. Many of these former subsidiaries of EKO did not survive for long, creating conditions of deep uncertainty for many individual Eisenhüttenstädters, and contributing to a cascade of other interrelated effects that had far-reaching consequences on the economic, social, and cultural life of the city.

First and foremost, unemployment became a problem in the formerly socialist-model city for the first time. From full employment in the GDR, to a modest unemployment rate in the early 1990s, the number of people seeking work in Eisenhüttenstadt climbed steadily throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, hovering at or above 20 percent well into the mid-2000s. City administrators created unemployment agencies and social services intended to support the unemployed, and the federal government initially expanded financial support. But on an individual level, many East Germans felt left behind or cast adrift in a new cutthroat employment environment, as evidenced by the widespread protests against the reforms to unemployment benefits in the mid-2000s that increased restrictions on unemployment benefits. Second, the process of downsizing in EKO had also necessitated the elimination of formerly factory-sponsored services and activities upon which residents throughout the city had relied. Formerly subsidized daycares, sports teams, cafeterias, and other clubs now required financial support from either the city or paying members. In either case, the increased financial burdens on both the city and individual Eisenhüttenstädters were often too much to bear, resulting in the dissolution of many formerly steeply-subsidized services. All told, the effects of the privatization and downsizing of EKO had truly disruptive consequences for the social and cultural fabric of the city, the everyday consequences of which are often overlooked. After all, it was the loss of these crucial social services and cultural amenities that soured the experience of German unification for many Eisenhüttenstadt residents, and former East Germans more broadly.<sup>6</sup>

Resuming your walking tour, directly behind the City Center shopping mall you will be able to see the edge of EKO's sprawling grounds and its supporting industries. Now known

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<sup>6</sup> There is more historical research to be done to connect the growth of far-right nationalist and populist movements in the former East Germany with the erosion of state supported social services and other elements of public life throughout the 1990s. See Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Blood and Culture: Youth, Right-Wing Extremism, and National Belonging in Contemporary Germany* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

officially as ArcelorMittal Eisenhüttenstadt, or AMEH, the integrated steel mill is still the largest employer in the city and one of the largest in the region, with around 2,700 employees.<sup>7</sup> The steel mill's continued operation has been called into question several times over the course of the decades, and



**Figure E.4** A view of the EKO blast furnaces are always visible from Lindenalle in the city center. Photo by the author.

as recently as the summer of 2019. Once again, in this most recent case, international steel politics left steelworkers in Eisenhüttenstadt in a state of anxiety about the future of their jobs. In this case, the United States' and China's "trade war" throughout 2019 resulted in a massive influx of Chinese steel to European markets. While production in ArcelorMittal Eisenhüttenstadt remained steady, their profits sank by over half from the first half of 2018 to the first half of 2019, making ArcelorMittal owners consider wide-scale reduced hours or even layoffs in their Eisenhüttenstadt branch. Steelworkers led several warning strikes and company leaders eventually acquiesced, but the incidence revealed the continued precarious status of the so-called "heart of the city" in a globalized capitalist economic system.<sup>8</sup>

Over the long-term, the city's inability to attract substantial new investors or employers to Eisenhüttenstadt, combined with the sustained high unemployment rate, led many Eisenhüttenstadt residents to leave the city. This process of outmigration, which began already in

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<sup>7</sup> "Brandenburg Stahlwerker soll offenbar eigenständig bleiben," *rbb24 Studio Frankfurt* (3 April 2019), <https://www.rbb24.de/studiofrankfurt/wirtschaft/2019/04/arcelor-stahlwerk-eisenhuettenstadt-eigenstaendig.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Stefan Lötsch, "Halbierter Gewinn," *Märkische Oderzeitung* (27 August 2019).

1989, continued throughout the 1990s, into the 2000s, persists until today. City administrators and urban planners, accustomed to the city's steady population growth throughout the course of the GDR, were slow to recognize the signs of shrinkage in their city, and therefore also slow to take direct action against it. It was not until 2000 that the city officially recognized the problem of shrinkage and began to take concrete steps to address its consequences. Among the most overt signs of shrinkage were the increasing volume of empty apartments throughout the city, which slowly emptied out certain less desirable *Wohnkomplexen*. In response, city administrators secured federal funding to implement their urban restructuring plan, which provided for the renovation of approximately 4,000 individual apartments, but also for the demolition of apartment buildings that were no longer in use. This resulted in the complete demolition of *Wohnkomplex VII* by 2008, which had been the last housing complex to be constructed in the 1980s. Other parts of the city continue to be painstakingly renovated in order to comply with the city center's historically preserved status. The tension between demolition and renovation in the physical spaces of the city also understandably has affected residents' experiences of living in a city that is both perfectly preserved in some areas, while completely erased in others. In the words of architecture historian Kimberly Elman Zarecor, "The focus on the political end of the regimes misses a critical aspect of the transitional decades by smoothing over the complexities of a physical space produced by socialism that is being reconfigured in the new societal conditions of post-socialism."<sup>9</sup> In other words, the fact that some socialist structures in Eisenhüttenstadt continue to exist in a postsocialist political system attests to the necessity of looking beyond the traditional caesuras of German history.

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<sup>9</sup> Kimberly Elman Zarecor, "What Was So Socialist about the Socialist City? Second World Urbanity in Europe," *Journal of Urban History* 44, no. 1 (2018): 97.

If you turn away from the EKO properties and instead make your way south, you will soon find yourself walking along the main street of the city, Lindenallee, where evidence of outmigration is all too apparent. The wide street leading from the residential heart of the city to EKO was originally designed to



**Figure E.5** View of some of the storefronts on Lindenallee. Some are empty, and others do a small but steady business, ensuring their survival on the central street. In the background is the city’s sole “high-rise” apartment complex. Photo by author.

accommodate parades and other festivities, and with an uninhibited view of the steelworks in mind. As during the 1990s, the street continues to struggle to fill its stores with appealing businesses and vendors. There are typically several empty storefronts at any one time. However, there are still some popular destinations along Lindenallee. Friedrich-Wolf-Theater, for example, hosts an attractive lineup of events every year—though these days they do also compete for attendees with the cultural event calendar out of the *Städtisches Museum* (City Museum) over in Fürstenberg. Next to the Friedrich-Wolf-Theater is a new ice cream shop, a callback to the “milk bar” located there during GDR days. *The Mocca-Milch-Eisbar* is a popular destination year-round, but if you are not in the mood for sweets you can also head several doors down to the regional-chain of *Bäckerei Dreißig*, for a more substantial sandwich, or a coffee and a pastry.

As you continue your walking tour of Eisenhüttenstadt, making your way toward City Hall and *Wohnkomplex II*, you will no doubt continue to notice visual and spatial reminders of





**Figure E.6** City Hotel Lunik is visible in the background of this photo, sharply juxtaposed with the socialist statue and thoughtful landscaping, with flowers representing the colors of the German flag. Photo by the author.

the socialist past. Take for example the crumbling remains of the City Hotel Lunik. Formerly the height of Eisenhüttenstadt luxury, Hotel Lunik is where SED Party functionaries stayed when they visited the city. It had also boasted an exclusive Intershop, where coveted West German luxury items like perfume, clothing and accessories, or West German coffee or cigarettes, had been sold for cold, hard West German cash. Over the course of the 1990s, the building changed hands numerous times between various hopeful developers. But since the end of the 1990s it has remained empty. Although the city administration considered purchasing the structure in order to renovate it as recently as 2017, these inquiries ultimately failed to materialize into anything official, and the historically-protected building continues to sit unoccupied, a visual blight on the otherwise relatively well-maintained Lindenallee. The crumbling building creates a particularly jarring contrast with the recently renovated *Rathaus* (City Hall), which sits on the opposite

corner of the relatively busy street, surrounded by well-groomed landscaping and a spacious parking lot.

If you continue your walk south, crossing Street of the Republic (*Straße der Republik*) and passing the *Rathaus* to your left, you will eventually find yourself in the heart of *Wohnkomplex II*. Given their proximity to the city center, these apartment buildings have been among the most popular since the *Wende*, especially in the wake of their near total renovation. Walking along the tree-lined streets, glancing up at the balconies and the artistic molding on the facades of the apartments, you can see why General Secretary Walter Ulbricht might have called these dwellings *Arbeiterpalast*, or workers' palaces prestigious enough to house the laborers who built the German Democratic Republic's first socialist model-city.

At this point you have reached the residential heart of Eisenhüttenstadt. Today it may be hard to imagine the streets bustling with people heading to and from their shift at EKO, or hurrying about on other tasks or errands. Cars parked along both sides of the residential streets attest to the presence of inhabitants inside the apartment buildings. But while these apartments still remain among the most desirable in Eisenhüttenstadt given their central location and renovated exteriors, you might nonetheless get a feeling at times that parts of the city are deserted. This is perhaps to be expected given that the population of the city has shrunk by over half, from its peak of 53,000 in 1988 to fewer than an estimated 25,000 in 2019. As such, you likely will not encounter many other pedestrians as you conclude your walking tour, making your way back toward the train station.

Heading east back across the canal via the bridge on Street of the Republic, you will encounter another substantial relic of the socialist past, this time in the form of an absence. A large empty field dominates the landscape to the north of the Street of the Republic. This is

where *Wohnkomplex VII* used to house to over 8,000 Eisenhüttenstadt residents. Outmigration and the prolonged empty status of many of the prefabricated-style apartments led to the city administration's decision to demolish the entire housing complex. Demolition was completed in 2008, returning the space to an empty green field (*grüne Wiese*). This particular transformation is poignantly symbolic given that SED functionaries and city planners in 1950 used precisely this phrase, *grüne Wiese*, to describe the area of land between the towns of Fürstenberg and Schönfließ upon which the massive steelworks and city were built. That certain portions of the city have returned to this state naturally makes many residents wonder how much more of their city will ultimately meet the same fate.



**Figure E.7** A poignant example of artifacts of the GDR past colliding with the postsocialist present. This quintessential East German “Trabi” passenger car was parked along the residential Saarlouiser Street, the renovated façade of an apartment house in *Wohnkomplex II* visible in the background. Various stores still occupy the ground floor of the apartment house. In this case, the storefront of Pizza Paradiso is situated in between a doctor’s office and a small knitting supply store. Photo by the author.

Much evidence of the disruptive and disorienting changes to Eisenhüttenstadt residents' everyday lives after German unification remain clearly legible in the spaces and landmarks of the city. That said, there were many positive adjustments as well, visual and spatial evidence of which can often be harder to see. After unification, Eisenhüttenstadt residents enjoyed many tremendous benefits of living in a capitalist, liberal democratic society. Besides the ability to truly participate in the democratic process, Eisenhüttenstädters have taken advantage of the ability to travel far and wide, both within Europe and throughout the world. For those who have secure employment, their jobs provide them a comfortable salary and generous vacation and sick-leave policies, allowing most Eisenhüttenstädters to achieve a quality of life above what they could in the GDR. Residents had little problems making the transition to capitalist consumer, delighted to make purchases for long-coveted luxury consumer goods like cars, fashionable clothes, and household goods. Many residents, too, have taken advantage of the availability of space and building materials to construct their own single-family homes either within the city limits or moving out into the countryside, but still commuting to the city for work. The days of lining up around the block to chase a rumor of oranges or a new pattern of house dress are long forgotten.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Eisenhüttenstadt residents were also active participants in practicing democracy in a newly united Germany. Over the decades, they have been innovative in coming up with solutions to the new challenges of living in a capitalist society, just as they were in navigating a state-socialist one. In other words, they were agents in both dismantling state-socialism and making the new system of liberal democracy work. For their efforts in the latter half of this equation, they deserve special attention. This convergence of democratic transition with rapid deindustrialization created extreme disruptions in the everyday

lives of many thousands of citizens, not only in Eisenhüttenstadt, but also residents in industrial cities in other postcommunist states. Using the lens of everyday life offers insights into the true temporal and thematic scope of these myriad transitions instigated by the collapse of communism. Moreover, on an individual psychological level, everyday life circumstances are often the most important motivator for action. As such, understanding how ordinary East Germans—or ordinary Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, or Russians, among others—experienced these massive changes in their everyday lives can go a long way in explaining the individual and collective choices they made in shaping their new cities and societies.<sup>10</sup>

What ordinary Eisenhüttenstadt residents' everyday experiences tell us about the process and results of German unification and postsocialist transition, specifically, is that there is no straight-forward answer. In other words, German unification had ambivalent results for ordinary East Germans. But these results have never been stagnant, nor will they continue to be. One elderly Eisenhüttenstadt resident still feels bitterness about how the privatization of EKO played out, but he also served as the universally respected head of Eisenhüttenstadt's democratically elected chairmen of the city council for well over a decade. Another Eisenhüttenstadt resident who was thirteen when the Berlin Wall fell, initially experienced sense of a lost future when the prospect of secure employment in the steel mill evaporated before his eyes. But he was able to travel and live abroad in Australia, expanding his world view and setting him on an alternate career trajectory in Berlin. Most individual Eisenhüttenstädters have experienced in their own life trajectories a combination of both hope and loss, both expanded and restricted opportunities. This ongoing tension between what former East Germans perceive themselves to have lost or

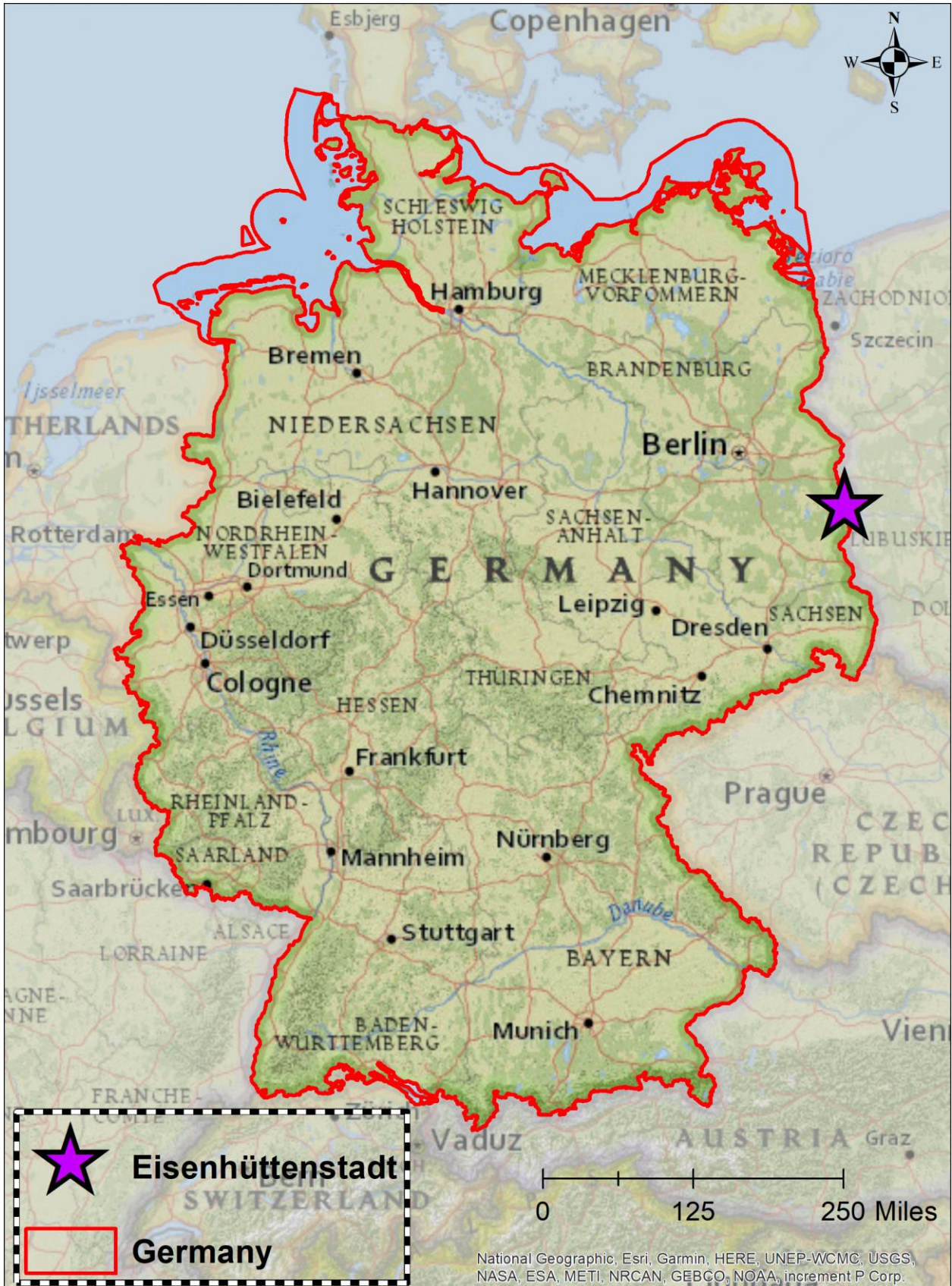
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<sup>10</sup> See Mariusz Czepczyński, *Cultural Landscapes of Postsocialist Cities: Representations of Powers and Needs* (Burlington: Ashgate: 2008).

gained as a result of German unification is what continues to color their experiences of everyday life in the Federal Republic nearly three decades later.



APPENDIX 1: MAPS









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DE 10/454

Stadtarchiv Eisenhüttenstadt

Ausschüsse

RS – Rat der Stadt

Runder Tisch

Straßenumbenennung

SVV – Stadtverordnetenversammlung

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