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Driven into Suicide by the Communist Regime of the German Democratic Republic? On the Persistence of a Distorted Perspective

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ABSTRACT. The assumption that the Communist dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) drove many people to suicide has persisted for decades, and it is still evident in academic and public discourse. Yet, high suicide rates in eastern Germany, which can be traced back to the nineteenth century, cannot be a result of a particular political system. Be it monarchy, democracy, fascism, or socialism, the frequency of suicide there did not change significantly. In fact, the share of politically motivated suicides in the GDR amounts to only 1–2 per cent of the total. Political, economic, or socio-cultural factors did not have a significant impact on suicide rates. An analysis of two subsets of GDR society that were more likely to be affected by repression—prisoners and army recruits—further corroborates this: there is no evidence of a higher suicide rate in either case. Complimentary to a quantitative approach “from above,” a qualitative analysis “from below” not only underlines the limited importance of repression, but also points to a regional pattern of behavior linked to cultural influences and to the role of religion—specifically, to Protestantism. Several factors nevertheless fostered the persistence of an overly politicized interpretation of suicide in the GDR: the bereaved in the East, the media in the West, and a few victims of suicide themselves blamed the regime and downplayed important individual and pathological aspects. Moreover, state and party officials in the GDR unintentionally reinforced the politicization of suicide by imposing a taboo on the subject, which only fueled the flames of speculation about its root causes.

Seit Jahrzehnten besteht im wissenschaftlichen und öffentlichen Diskurs die Annahme, dass die DDR-Diktatur viele Menschen in den Suizid getrieben habe. Doch die hohen Suizidraten in Ostdeutschland, die bis ins 19. Jahrhundert zurückverfolgt werden können, können kein Ergebnis eines bestimmten politischen Systems sein. Ob Monarchie, Demokratie, Faschismus oder Sozialismus—die Häufigkeit von Selbstmorden änderte sich kaum. Tatsache ist, dass der Anteil an politisch motivierten Suiziden in der DDR lediglich zwischen 1–2 Prozent liegt. Politische, ökonomische oder soziokulturelle Faktoren hatten keinen wesentlichen Einfluss auf Suizidraten. Dieser Befund wird auch durch eine Analyse zweier Teilgruppen der DDR Gesellschaft, nämlich Häftlinge und Rekruten, die aller Wahrscheinlichkeit nach von Repression betroffen wurden, bestätigt: In keinem Fall gibt es Beweise für eine höhere Suizidrate. Komplementär zu einem quantitativen Ansatz „von oben“ unterstreicht eine qualitative Analyse „von unten“ nicht nur die eingeschränkte Bedeutung von Repression, sondern zeigt darüber hinaus ein regionales Verhaltensmuster auf, das in Verbindung zu kulturellen Einflüssen und der Rolle von Religion steht—insbesondere der des Protestantismus. Mehrere Faktoren haben nichtsdestotrotz das Fortdauern einer übertrieben politisierten Interpretation von Suizid in der DDR gefördert: die im Osten Zurückgebliebenen, die westlichen Medien

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und einige Selbstmordopfer, die das Regime beschuldigten und wichtige individuelle und pathologische Aspekte herunterspielten. Hinzu kommt, dass der Staat und die Partei in der DDR unbeabsichtigt die Politisierung von Suizid bestärkten, indem sie das Thema tabuisierten, was Spekulationen über die Ursachen von Selbstmord nur weiter anstachelte.

MYTHS stemming from political taboos can have a long-lasting legacy. The history of suicide in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) provides an excellent example of this. East Germany consistently had one of the world's highest suicide rates. Some 5,000 to 6,000 people took their life every year, amounting to an annual rate of 30 to 35 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants. Compared to the Federal Republic of Germany, the suicide rate was about 50 per cent higher throughout the GDR's existence from 1949 to 1990. Unusually high suicide rates were also registered in other socialist countries, such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Some scholars have therefore attributed high suicide rates to the prevailing totalitarian atmosphere, namely, political repression, surveillance, confinement, and limits on the freedom to travel abroad.¹ One statistical survey appears to support the myth that suicide rates in Communist countries are generally higher than those in democratic countries.² One analyst even managed to identify specific links between high suicide rates and totalitarianism "traits."³ But these findings constitute a misleading hypothesis. After all, suicide is a complex phenomenon with psychological, socio-cultural, political, economic, pathological, criminal, philosophic, religious, and gender implications. Unicausal explanations should thus be taken with a grain of salt.

The topic has not received much systematic scholarly attention. Almost three decades after German reunification, there is little knowledge about suicide under socialism, at least in the English-speaking world.⁴ The works of German scholars such as Reinhard Cordes, Werner Felber, Hans Girod, Ehrhart Neubert, and the present author others have received

¹See, e.g., Ehrhart Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR 1949–1989* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 1997), 282–84; Rolf Degen, "Ex-DDR: Hohe Selbstmordrate," *Psychologie heute* 18, no. 2 (1991): 14–15; H. Hoffmeister, G. Wiesner, B. Junge and H. Kant, "Selbstmordsterblichkeit in der DDR und in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland," *Münchener medizinische Wochenschrift* 132, no. 39 (1990): 603–9; Georg Siegmund, "Die Selbstmordhäufigkeit als Index für den Stand der seelischen Gesundheitslage," *Hippokrates* 32 (1961): 895–99.

²Steven Stack, "Culture and Suicide: An Analysis of 35 nations," paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Association of Suicidology, St. Louis, April 1996, cited in Armin Schmidtke et al., "The Impact of the Reunification of Germany on the Suicide Rate," *Archives of Suicide Research* 5, no. 3 (1999): 233–39.

³Steven Stack, "Durkheim's Theory of Fatalistic Suicide: A Cross-National Approach," *Journal of Social Psychology* 107 (1979): 161–68. The author estimates the degree of political totalitarianism based on the total number of government sanctions enacted from 1948 to 1967.

⁴Two recently published books do not mention suicide: Paul Betts, Alon Confino, and Dirk Schumann, eds., *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York: Berghahn, 2011); Felix Robin Schulz, *Death in East Germany, 1945–1990* (New York: Berghahn, 2013). For a study that deals with suicide in earlier periods but not in the GDR, see Monica Black, *Death in Berlin: From Weimar to Divided Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). On the conceptualization of suicide as an artistic device, see Robert Blankenship, *Suicide in East German Literature: Fiction, Rhetoric, and the Self-Destruction of Literary Heritage* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2017).

93 minimal attention.⁵ Mary Fulbrook is the only British historian who has delved into the
 94 problem so far. But her discussion of suicide in the GDR is grounded in very few sources.
 95 She offers a mélange of shrewd observations and unsubstantiated speculations, which serve as
 96 a starting point for further inquiries.⁶

97 This article scrutinizes the impact of politics on suicide rates. It also identifies the main
 98 factors that hampered and still prevent a nuanced understanding of why suicide was more
 99 prevalent in the GDR than, for example, in the neighboring Federal Republic. The
 100 following argument is based on comprehensive discourse analysis and an examination of
 101 several thousand suicides that occurred over the forty years of the GDR's existence.
 102 Suicide is discussed, accordingly, as a statistical phenomenon at the macro-level of society
 103 and as an individual event at the micro-level. The findings are based on a variety of
 104 sources, including files from the police, the military and the Ministry for State Security
 105 (Stasi); reports by education and health authorities; published and unpublished medical
 106 studies, interviews with experts and with bereaved people; as well as farewell letters and
 107 newspaper articles. The abundance of available quantitative and qualitative sources makes
 108 it possible to go beyond unsubstantiated claims and to establish meaningful links between
 109 micro- and macrohistory, thus allowing for a nuanced explanation of the origins and
 110 persistence of Western (mis-)perceptions about suicide in Eastern Germany.

111 A Specter is Haunting the West: Academic and Popular Perspectives

112 The assumption that political repression drove many East Germans to suicide influenced the
 113 West for decades. The specter surfaced occasionally, temporarily became invisible, then
 114 returned time and again. In 1959, population scientist Roderich von Ungern-Sternberg
 115 claimed, without providing any details, that “more difficult living conditions” were the main
 116 cause of the GDR's high suicide rate.⁷ In 1963, the West German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*
 117 placed blame on the East German regime in particular for the high suicide rate of elderly
 118 people.⁸ The governing Socialist Unity Party (SED) stopped the publication of suicide
 119 rate in the GDR.⁹ Over the following decades, several authors nevertheless expressed strong
 120 views about the subject, despite the lack of sound evidence. In 1977, for example, Konstantin
 121 Pritzel suggested that “burdens caused by the Communist rulers' coercive and terrorist
 122 measures” contributed to East Germany's high suicide rate. The author, a former member of
 123 the West Berlin Untersuchungsausschuss Freiheitlicher Juristen (Investigative Committee of
 124 Free Jurists), which was partly financed by the CIA, even manipulated statistics to support his
 125 misleading claim.¹⁰ Somewhat more cautiously, a West German

130 ⁵One exception is Peter Grieder, “East German Totalitarianism: A Warning from History,” in *Totalitarianism*
 131 *on Screen: The Art and Politics of The Lives of Others*, ed. Carl Eric Scott and F. Flag Taylor IV (Lexington:
 132 University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 203–28.

133 ⁶Benita Blessing, review of Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*, on
 134 *H-German* (June 2006), (<https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11883>).

135 ⁷Roderich von Ungern-Sternberg, “Die Selbstmordhäufigkeit in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart,”
 136 *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik* 171 (1959): 200.

137 ⁸“Selbstmord. Krankheit zum Tode,” *Der Spiegel*, Jan. 30, 1963.

138 ⁹F. Unger, “Das Gesundheitswesen der DDR,” *Deutschland Archiv* 3, no. 10 (1970): 1141. Cf. Jonathan
 Steele, *Socialism with a German Face: The State that Came infrom the Cold* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), 196.

¹⁰KonstantinPritzel, “DerSelbstmordim sozialistischen Paradies,” *Berliner Ärzteblatt*90, no.24(1977): 1114.

journalist asserted in 1986 that “totalitarian Marxism-Leninism, coupled with the tradition of Prussian statism,” could have generated “considerable suicidogenic factors.”¹¹ After German unification, some scholars continued to argue that political circumstances affected the suicide rate in the GDR. In 1998, for instance, Ehrhart Neubert, a sociologist of religion, blamed the Communist regime for suicides in an essay he published in the German edition of the *Black Book of Communism*. Neubert listed a number of suicides that, he claimed, were a result of the political situation in the GDR; he also identified supposedly specific “suicidal structures” there.¹² In a similar vein in their study of unofficial literature in the GDR, Ines Geipel and Joachim Walther downplayed the private suffering of the few East German authors who committed suicide, stressing political maltreatment instead.¹³

Many East German dissidents took a comparable tack in the writing they published before 1989. Jürgen Fuchs, for instance, subtly alluded in the late 1970s to the army’s supposed responsibility for the prevalence of suicides among its recruits.¹⁴ More generally, Hermann von Berg, the author of an opposition manifesto published in 1978, asked why the German Democratic Republic had “some of the highest rates of divorce, suicide, and alcohol abuse.”¹⁵ By keeping suicide statistics secret and by practicing censorship, the SED unintentionally fueled speculations about the apparently strong correlation between suicide and Communist dictatorship. Neubert, a former member of the GDR opposition group Demokratischer Aufbruch (Democratic Awakening), captured the fears of many East German dissidents in his bold claim that there was “no other country in Europe where so many suicides” were a result of official Communist policy.¹⁶

Several films and television series from the period made similarly misleading claims. In 1966, for instance, the West German television series *Die fünfte Kolonne* presented an episode, “Das verräterische Licht,” in which an office assistant commits suicide after being forced to spy for the Stasi. The secretary, Beate Zöllner—employed by a Munich-based enterprise that carried out research for NATO—has an East German brother who has been sentenced to ten years imprisonment for helping a friend escape from the GDR. Exploiting his ill health, the Stasi approaches Fräulein Zöllner with a promise that her brother will be released if she takes pictures of secret documents. Several mishaps occur, and the deal does not work out; West German intelligence intervenes and discovers her guilt. Ashamed about deceiving her boss, who trusted her unquestioningly, and scared by the prospect of being convicted, Zöllner throws herself under a train. The episode’s message is banal: the only reason for this desperate deed was blackmail by the Stasi.

Forty years later, the box-office hit *The Lives of Others* revived the totalitarian framing of East Germany’s suicide rates. It is worth closely examining how the movie presents suicide—

¹¹Michael Haller, ed., *Freiwillig sterben—freiwillig?* (Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1986), 32–33.

¹²Ehrhart Neubert, “Politische Verbrechen in der DDR,” in *Das Schwarzbuch des Kommunismus*, ed. Stéphane Courtois et al. (München: Piper, 1998), 859. Neubert’s view implied Galtung’s concept of structural violence, which has been criticized for its lack of nuance and potential for confusion. See Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91; C. A. J. Coady, *Morality and Political Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Mark Vorobej, “Structural Violence,” *Peace Research* 40, no. 2 (2008): 84–98.

¹³Ines Geipel and Joachim Walther, *Gesperrte Ablage* (Düsseldorf: Lilienfeld, 2015).

¹⁴Jürgen Fuchs, *Gedächtnisprotokolle* (Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1977), 22.

¹⁵Manfred Wilke, “Wieslers Turn to Dissidence and the History behind the Film,” in *The Lives of Others and Contemporary German Film: A Companion*, ed. Paul Cooke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 49.

¹⁶Neubert, *Politische Verbrechen*, 859.

185 in this case, the suicide of theater director Albert Jerska, who hangs himself after being
186 banned for years from his profession. The vast majority of the film's audience apparently
187 considered suicide to be a representation—and result—of suffering in a world deprived of
188 artistic freedom. In an exemplary comment along these lines, film scholar Mary-Elizabeth
189 O'Brien commended the movie because it "does not shy away from showing the cost in
190 human lives for defying the SED dictatorship, especially in its depictions of suicides."¹⁷ It
191 should nevertheless be noted that the fictional Jerska belonged to the milieu of privileged
192 state artists, who had a good chance of escaping the regime's narrow-minded cultural
193 policies. His occupational ban dated back to the time when dozens of prominent artists had
194 unsuccessfully protested against the expatriation of singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann in
195 November 1976. Disappointed about the hardline attitude of the SED, many artists left the
196 GDR or negotiated temporary exit visas. These options did not seem to exist for Jerska
197 because he still felt strongly connected to Communist ideology and never envisaged leaving
198 the country he considered to be the better Germany. Reducing his suicide to political
199 repression disregards Jerska's personal issues and his other problems, which are also
200 portrayed in the film.¹⁸ More important, the reality for most East German dissidents was
201 different: although many had to work in undesirable jobs, some chose to emigrate when all
202 other options had been exhausted.

203 It is possible, of course, that suicide, inspired by opposition to the regime, did occur in the
204 GDR. But the film becomes utterly misleading when Jerska's individual case is linked to the
205 elevated suicide rate. In a eulogy he gives at the funeral, the fictional playwright Georg
206 Dreyman does not blame the regime directly for his friend's death, but he does accuse the
207 East German state of coldheartedly ignoring people who commit suicide. It might be, as one
208 scholar claims, that Dreyman was "drawn first to investigate and then to expose in the West
209 the high incidence of suicide in East Germany," but the film suggests a different story.¹⁹
210 There is no indication that Dreyman had access to suicide figures, which would have been
211 unrealistic. Dreyman's embittered words of farewell become source material for an essay that
212 he manages to have smuggled to West Berlin. Following its publication in *Der Spiegel*, it is
213 West German television news that connects the East German suicide rate to the recent
214 suicides of artists living there. By making this choice, the film unintentionally shows how the
215 Western media transformed individual despair in the East into a political reproach.

216 The film does contain a number of subtle details that mitigate against such an overly sim-
217 plistic interpretation. But the film as a whole conveys a fatalistic impression of life in the
218 GDR. The totalitarian atmosphere of the film, as well as the clear distinction between victims
219 and perpetrators (with one fictional character, Stasi officer Gerd Wiesler, being the only
220 exception), create empathy with the victims and convey an implicit message: "Suicide is, of
221 course, a metaphor for the tragic loss of vitality and life under totalitarianism; and underlying
222 the film, heavy as a basso continuo, is this tragic sense of loss and waste—the repression,
223 squandering, and death of talent, productivity, pleasure, and hope."²⁰ The film's
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225 ¹⁷Mary-Elizabeth O'Brien, *Post-Wall German Cinema and National History: Utopianism and Dissent*
226 (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012), 158.

227 ¹⁸His friends offer =help but he refuses, presumably because of depression. His high levels of alcohol con-
228 sumption must have further encouraged his suicidal tendencies.

229 ¹⁹Joye Weisel-Barth, "Voyeuristic Pleasures and Complexity Theory: The Lives of Others," *International*
230 *Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2008): 115.

20Ibid.

emotional effects apparently had a stronger impact on audiences than its authentic details did. The film's subtleties notwithstanding, its plot seems to suggest a link between political repression and suicide.²¹ A similar kind of reductionism is characteristic of the public discourse about East German suicides that has persisted for decades.

There were nevertheless scholarly debates about East German suicide rates that challenged such Cold War stereotypes. East and West German medical statisticians and psychiatrists discussed the issue in and around 1961, the year the Berlin Wall was built. In 1956, the GDR had begun publishing yearly suicide rates, and, in light of the high numbers, East and West German experts adopted Emile Durkheim's theory of anomie to argue that social and political changes in East Germany might have been responsible for the elevated suicide rate.²² But this claim was quickly challenged, with an eye to the fact that the GDR's geographic territory had a long history of high suicide rates.²³

Since the beginning of statistical surveys in the nineteenth century, the ratio of suicide rates in those areas that later constituted the GDR and the Federal Republic was roughly three to two, respectively. Political factors are thus very unlikely to have had a significant impact on this figure, given the relative constancy of suicide rates under monarchy, democracy, and dictatorship. Under the German Empire, the Weimar Republic, and the Third Reich, it was not the political system but rather long-term regional differences that determined the frequency of suicide over the "longue durée." In the 1960s, that insight was accepted, to some extent, among experts in the East and West, but this consensus had minimal impact on public perceptions. That held true for West Germany politicians and journalists, as well as for the leadership of the SED. The Politburo avoided any discussion of the problem for fear that high suicide rates would damage the international reputation of the GDR, a fear compounded by a slight increase in suicide rates in the 1960s. That was why statistics on suicide were classified beginning in 1963—a typical reaction.²⁴ Nine years later, as a result of a sudden rise in crime, the SED also stopped publishing annual crime rates in the official yearbook of statistics.²⁵ Attempts by East German experts to convince party officials that "the high suicide rate [was] not connected to the building of socialism" went unheeded. Psychiatrist Helmut F. Späte admonished the authorities in vain that

²¹Nick Hodgin, "'Screening the Stasi': The Politics of Representation in Postunification Film," in *The GDR Remembered: Representations of the East German State since 1989*, ed. Nick Hodgin and Caroline Pearce (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 83.

²²von Ungern-Sternberg, "Die Selbstmordhäufigkeit"; W. F. Winkler, "Über den Wandel in Häufigkeit, Bedingungen und Beurteilung des Suicides in der Nachkriegszeit," *Der öffentliche Gesundheitsdienst* 22, no. 4 (1960): 135–45; Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge, 2002).

²³For persuasive evidence that the GDR inherited regions with higher-than-average suicide rates, see Reinhard Cordes, "Die Selbstmorde in der DDR im gesamtdeutschen und internationalen Vergleich," *Zeitschrift für ärztliche Fortbildung* 58, no. 9 (1964): 985–92; Hans Harmsen, ed., *Sozialhygienische Analyse der unterschiedlichen Selbstmordverhältnisse unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, der "DDR" und West-Berlin* (Hamburg: Akademie für Staatsmedizin, 1966).

²⁴There were two exceptions: after a delay, the GDR reported the suicide rates for 1968 and 1969 to the World Health Organisation. See Statistisches Bundesamt, ed., *Statistisches Jahrbuch für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1973): 34* (sic).

²⁵Johannes Raschka, "Für kleine Delikte ist kein Platz in der Kriminalitätsstatistik." *Zur Zahl der politischen Häftlinge während der Amtszeit Honeckers* (Dresden: Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung, 1997), 15.

277 “we cannot settle the problem by locking away the documents.”²⁶ The ban nevertheless
278 remained in effect until 1990.

279 That said, research into the causes of suicide in the GDR was not entirely impossible.
280 Scholars produced dozens of regional and sectoral studies. The classification of epidemiolog-
281 ical investigations nevertheless thwarted the accumulation of greater knowledge about the
282 phenomenon and open debate. It is therefore hardly surprising that, at the time of German
283 reunification, the very same discussion began all over again. Medical scientists reiterated the
284 assumption that factors such as political stagnation and social isolation might have caused
285 higher suicide rates in East Germany.²⁷ Empirical research rejected such simplistic views,
286 but, once again, just as in the 1960s, that discussion was confined to academic circles and
287 thus had little impact on public perceptions.²⁸

288 Fact Check: Politically Motivated Suicides in the GDR

290 Before dealing with the reasons that have led to the persistence of a politicized framing of
291 suicide rates, it is necessary to determine as precisely as possible the actual impact of
292 political factors on suicide rates in the GDR, and there is sufficient data to do so. Continuing
293 a Prussian tradition, the criminal police and medical examiners both investigated unnatural
294 deaths in the GDR, and the results of their investigations allow for rough conclusions about
295 the impact of social factors. Police investigations found that conflicts in personal rela-
296 tionships were the main cause in 11–22 percent of all cases, whereas East German medical
297 studies found that mental health issues were the main cause in up to 30 per cent of all
298 suicides. Most sources attributed more than a third to serious physical diseases. By contrast,
299 investigations found that conflicts between individuals and society were evident in a far
300 lower percentage of cases: “fear of punishment” (for political or criminal offences) was
301 considered a main motivation in only 5 to 10 percent of all cases, and problems at work were
302 recorded in only 1 to 3 per cent of all cases.²⁹ Only a very small percentage of suicides
303 recognizably related to social factors had clear political causes as well.

304 There was another procedure, however, for investigating politically motivated suicides.
305 The Stasi was responsible for all unnatural deaths with possible political implications. To
306 that end, it established in the 1960s homicide squads in all East German districts (*Bezirke*) to
307 investigate all deaths that had a possible political cause. These so-called special
308 commissions (*Spezialkommissionen*) worked independently of murder investigations carried out
309 by the police.³⁰ In East Berlin, the Stasi investigated an average of thirteen suicides per year;
310 in other districts, the number was lower, between five and ten—which meant that

312 ²⁶Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv (BLHA), Rep. 401, BT/RdB Potsdam, No. 8072, 171, letter from
313 Dr. Helmut Spaete, Bezirkskrankenhaus für Neurologie und Psychiatrie Görden to Dr. Krüger,
314 Stellvertretender Bezirksarzt Potsdam, Dec. 1, 1968.

315 ²⁷Hoffmeister, *Selbstmordsterblichkeit in der DDR*, 609. See also Degen, Hohe Selbstmordrate.

316 ²⁸R. Wegener, “Suizidalität in Ost und West: Daten vorschnell interpretiert?,” *Münchener medizinische*
317 *Wochenschrift* 132, no.13 (1991): 21–22.

318 ²⁹Grashoff, *Selbsttötungen in der DDR*, 124.

319 ³⁰Bundesbehörde für die Unterlagen des Staatsicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR (BStU), MfS,
320 JHS 001, Nr. 228/78, Egon Neubauer, *Probleme des operativen Zusammenwirkens der Spezialkommission der*
321 *Linie IX des MfS mit den Militärstaatsanwälten, den Kommandeuren der NVA, den gerichtsmedizinischen*
322 *Sachverständigen und den Morduntersuchungskommissionen der Abteilung Kriminalpolizei der BdVP während der*
Aufklärung und Untersuchung von operativ bedeutsamen unnatürlichen Todesfällen in Dienststellen der Nationalen
Volksarmee (Potsdam, 1978).

323 approximately 1.4 to 2.5 per cent of all suicides had a possible political cause—in theory.
324 But these investigations found that private causes had led to the vast majority of suicides,
325 with functionaries—just like ordinary East Germans—typically committing suicide because
326 of family problems or illness.³¹

327 Because the results of the Stasi investigations were kept top secret and were only
328 accessible to a handful of top functionaries, there was little reason to manipulate entire case
329 files. Some conclusions and reports denied political motivations, but some documents in the
330 extant files—e.g., the minutes of interrogations, informer reports, recorded phone calls,
331 various internal reports, and so-called action plans—allow for a critical reading and
332 alternative conclusions. But even if read against the grain, they do not contain many hints
333 suggesting political conflicts as the roots cause.

334 Working in parallel to the special commissions, the Stasi's so-called Hauptabteilung I
335 investigated unnatural deaths in the army. For example, a noncommissioned officer who
336 served as a border guard shot himself in 1988 after having found out that his girlfriend
337 intended to apply for an exit visa: he also wanted to apply to emigrate from the GDR, but
338 knew that his chances were slim because of his status as a person who had been granted
339 access to secret information.³² As this example underscores, suspicions that the Stasi might
340 have ignored the political motivations underlying some suicides are incorrect. Because the
341 organization's main task was to identify possible threats to the dictatorship, Stasi officers
342 were eager to detect even miniscule hints of oppositional thought or ideological conflict.

343 The Stasi often presumed that political factors had led to suicide before an ensuing exam-
344 ination debunked that supposition. A striking example in this regard was the suicide of a
345 Polish student in the autumn of 1980, which the Stasi initially considered to be politically
346 motivated. It based this on the fact that the suicide had coincided with the rise of the Polish
347 opposition movement Solidarity (*Solidarnosc*), even though there was no specific evidence to
348 support this assumption. In fact, the Stasi found out that the suicide was mainly caused by
349 emotional turmoil and jealousy following a night at a disco.³³ At the same time, there are
350 records elsewhere of suicides that indeed had political implications. The police did not
351 contact the Stasi in all cases involving political motivations, as suicide reports compiled by
352 criminal police in the districts of Dresden and Potsdam suggest. There were, for example,
353 some cases of young men who had committed suicide for fear of being conscripted into the
354 army.³⁴ The police sometimes also investigated suicides by political prisoners. But all in all,
355 such cases suggest that politically motivated suicides barely exceeded 1 percent of all
356 suicides. An unofficial estimate by East Berlin's chief public prosecutor, who cited
357 "weariness of the state" (*Staatsverdrossenheit*) as the motivation in a mere 0.4 percent of all
358 suicides between 1975 and 1981, supports this conclusion.³⁵

359 Over the long term, the suicide rate of the GDR remained relatively constant but there
360 was nonetheless some fluctuation, which is why the possible impact of historical events on
361

362 ³¹ Because the victim's political role or function (e.g., a state official as opposed to a supposed enemy of
363 the state) determined Stasi involvement, the relevant files contain few politically motivated suicides.

364 ³²BStU, MfS, HA I, Nr. 14957/3, MfS-Hauptabteilung I (HA I)/Grenzkommando Nord, to HA I Berlin,
365 Chiffriertelegramm, Aug. 23, 1988.

366 ³³BStU, MfS, HA XX, Nr. 3700, MfS-Abteilung XX, Information, Karl-Marx-Stadt, Dec. 3, 1980. ³⁴For
367 examples, see the suicide reports from March 25, 1981, and Nov. 1, 1982, in BLHA, Rep. 471/ 15.2, BdVP
368 Potsdam, 1272 and 1285.

³⁵Prof. Hans Girod, telephone interview with the author, Jan. 28, 2002.

suicide also requires careful scrutiny. According to Mary Fulbrook, “suicide rates very clearly correlated with political events.” In fact, oscillations in the suicide rate can only rarely be attributed to specific historical developments.³⁶ The failed uprising of June 1953 did not lead to an increase in the suicide rate, for example, and the liberalization of economic and youth policy after 1963 did not bring a decline in its wake. Fulbrook’s misleading claim that historical changes explain the fall in suicide rates around 1968 and then again around 1989 is a particularly clear example why changes in the suicide rate should be interpreted with extreme caution. With Durkheim’s social theory of suicide in mind, it is tempting to interpret the drop around 1968 to political disturbances, most notably to Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia and its suppression.³⁷ But there is another explanation—an administrative one: the international classification of suicide changed in 1967–1968. The introduction of new official documents created uncertainty that no doubt led to underreporting; a shortage of new printed forms must have also played a role.³⁸ Likewise, it might seem obvious to attribute the decline of the suicide rate in the second half of the 1980s to the positive expectations ushered in by Michael Gorbachev’s reforms in the Soviet Union. Statistical analysis has shown, however, that the drop was actually the result of a demographic shift that gave more weight to age cohorts born after 1949: that was significant because they had a lower inclination to commit suicide than previous cohorts had.³⁹ This example also usefully reminds us that overall statistics are aggregated data. Big numbers can conceal hidden trends—for instance, a high suicide rate among a specific subgroup. The forced agricultural collectivization campaign that took place in the East German countryside in the spring of 1960 provides one example. It encouraged dozens of farmers to take their own lives, but such incidents were still too infrequent to cause a steep increase in the overall suicide rate.⁴⁰

Only in extreme situations did the coercive policies of the SED cause a statistically relevant number of additional suicides. Most notably, as Fulbrook rightly highlights, it was the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 that coincided with rising suicide rates. The increase in the average annual rate from 28.8 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants (from 1956 to 1960) to 31.6 (1961 to 1965) represents a 10 per cent increase. There were, moreover, more suicides in and around East Berlin and among young people, reinforcing the idea that those directly affected experienced the sudden border closure as a major shock.⁴¹ The months of harsh repression that followed, as well as the introduction of conscription at this time, no doubt exacerbated some suicidal impulses. The West German perception of an “epidemic” was nevertheless an exaggeration.⁴²

³⁶Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 107.

³⁷According to Durkheim, suicide rates normally drop during times of war and political crisis. See Durkheim, *Suicide*, 160–67.

³⁸Ivett Merkel, “Zur Epidemiologie der Suizide auf dem Gebiet der DDR und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von 1950 bis 1992” (PhD thesis, Humboldt University, Berlin, 1996).

³⁹Reiner Hans Dinkel, Edmund Goertler, “Die Suizidsterblichkeit der Geburtsjahrgänge in beiden Teilen Deutschlands,” *Sozial- und Präventivmedizin* 39, no. 4 (1994): 198–208.

⁴⁰Udo Grashoff, “Suizidales Klima” während der Zwangskollektivierung im Frühjahr 1960,” in *Klassenkampf gegen die Bauern. Die Zwangskollektivierung der ostdeutschen Landwirtschaft und ihre Folgen bis heute*, ed. Michael Beleites et al. (Berlin: Metropol, 2010), 33–45.

⁴¹Dietfried Mueller-Hegemann, *Die Berliner Mauer-Krankheit* (Herford: Nicolai, 1973).

⁴²Martin Pfeideler, “Tragoedien im geteilten Berlin—Hoffnung für Alte und Kranke—Keine Hoffnung für Liebende,” *Deutsche Fragen* 9, no. 1 (1963): 18–19.

415 Apart from these exceptional situations, certain submilieus in the GDR have been linked
 416 to high suicide rates. Ehrhart Neubert has claimed, for example, that there were remarkably
 417 high numbers of suicides on the part of prisoners in East German jails. But he relies on
 418 absolute numbers, which do not allow for an accurate assessment. A calculation of the
 419 annual suicide rate per 100,000 inmates reveals, in fact, that Neubert's claims are
 420 inaccurate. It was, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, not only close to the average of the
 421 GDR population as a whole, but also three to four times lower than in the Federal Republic.
 422 Apart from a poor use of statistics, the flaw in Neubert's reasoning stems from his equation
 423 of political repression and suicide. A random sample of a Stasi prison, where 20 per cent of
 424 prisoners showed suicidal tendencies but not one took his or her own life, underscores the
 425 complexity of the relationship between suicide and repression.⁴³ Whereas strict und
 426 inhumane measures in East German prisons made it almost impossible to take one's own
 427 life, the relative leniency of West German prisons facilitated the "success" of such acts of
 428 despair.⁴⁴ In addition to the strict controls there, several social factors prevented East
 429 German prisoners from committing suicide, such as collective accommodation in large cells
 430 and a requirement to work. There were statistical "effects" as well, such as the more rapid
 431 handling of criminal proceedings: this resulted in a smaller share of prisoners awaiting
 432 trial—a group generally at the highest risk of committing suicide.⁴⁵ As for "political prison-
 433 ers," the prospect of being released to the West helped many stay alive, despite the harsh
 434 nature of their current conditions.⁴⁶

435 Another submilieu with supposedly high suicide rates was the National People's Army
 436 (NVA), a site of many serious conflicts related to political repression, as well as to bullying
 437 by one's peers. Here one could expect many self-inflicted fatalities because of the availability
 438 of lethal weapons. Yet, the suicide rate of soldiers was no higher than that of the correspond-
 439 ing male age cohort in civilian society. Internal military statistics buttress the conclusion that
 440 the NVA was not responsible for driving more young men to suicide. This applies to the
 441 border guard as well. Dietmar Schultke believed that soldiers stationed directly at the Iron
 442 Curtain were particularly prone to Stasi terror, but he does not calculate the frequency of
 443 suicides, which leads him to argue that there was a high number of suicides.⁴⁷ In fact, border
 444 guards did not commit suicide more frequently than those in other units of the armed
 445 forces—or than East German civilians of the same age.⁴⁸

446 Several factors help explain this surprising outcome. Soldiers who attempted suicide were
 447 not allowed to serve at the border. The Stasi—rather than causing suicides—were at pains to
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449 ⁴³BStU, MfS, BV Halle, Abt. XIV, Nr. 863, Tätigkeitsbuch MfS-Untersuchungshaftanstalt Halle, April 26
 450 to Oct. 15, 1984.

451 ⁴⁴Udo Grashoff, "Suizide in Haftanstalten: Legenden und Fakten," *Deutschland Archiv*, Sept. 10, 2015
 452 (<https://www.bpb.de/geschichte/zeitgeschichte/deutschlandarchiv/211769/suizide-in-haftanstalten-legenden-und-fakten>).

453 ⁴⁵C. H. Eikenbusch, "Anomie als Ursache des Selbstmordes in den Haftanstalten," *Suizidprophylaxe* 4, no. 3
 454 (1977): 181–87.

455 ⁴⁶See, e.g., Ellen Thiemann, "Protokoll der 69. Sitzung," in *Materialien der Enquete-Kommission "Aufarbeitung
 456 von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland,"* ed. Deutscher Bundestag (12. Wahlperiode des
 457 Deutschen Bundestages), vol. VII/1 (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1995), 364.

458 ⁴⁷Dietmar Schultke, "Das Grenzregime der DDR. Innenansichten der siebziger und achtziger Jahre," *Aus
 459 Politik und Zeitgeschichte* B 50/97 (1997): 43–53.

460 ⁴⁸Udo Grashoff, "In einem Anfall von Depression..." *Selbsttötungen in der DDR* (Berlin: Christoph Links,
 2006), 99.

461 identify suicidal soldiers, and subsequently sent them to other units. In August 1976, for
 462 example, an informant reported that a drunken border guard had attempted suicide. He was
 463 already under surveillance because he wanted to quit the SED, and also because he had
 464 expressed sympathy for his brother, who had been sentenced for “slandering the state.” The
 465 Stasi directed the regimental commander to reassign the “unreliable” soldier away from the
 466 border.⁴⁹

467 The findings of medical research shed light on the relatively “normal” suicide rate in the
 468 army: psychopathological disposition, often stemming from mental stress in early childhood,
 469 is a graver suicidogenic factor than a temporary life crisis resulting in acute internal
 470 conflict.⁵⁰ This is not to deny the restrictions on personal freedom, pressure for conformity,
 471 or forms of repression that were all evident in the GDR’s armed forces. Yet, discipline was
 472 apparently only rarely brutally enforced, i.e., to a degree that led to the consideration of
 473 suicide. The finding that situational factors are largely of secondary importance for suicide
 474 may also help explain the negligible correlation between political repression and the overall
 475 suicide rate in the GDR.

476 If not repression, what effect did social factors such as poor living conditions and the short-
 477 age economy have on suicide rates? Scholars such as Ursula Baumann consider the East
 478 German elderly to have been victims of a society that lauded youth and neglected those no
 479 longer needed for the workforce.⁵¹ The suicide rate of pensioners was, in fact, extraordinarily
 480 high.⁵² Whereas the suicide rate of the entire GDR population was approximately 1.5 times
 481 higher than that of the Federal republic, the suicide rate of East German pensioners was
 482 slightly more than twice as high. *Der Spiegel* was not alone in blaming the SED regime for this
 483 discrepancy.⁵³ But the matter was more complex than this, as the example of Saxony shows.
 484 The suicide rate of women aged sixty to eighty in the Saxon regions of the GDR was almost
 485 double that of the former Kingdom of Saxony shortly after 1900. The suicide rate of the cor-
 486 responding male age group underwent a sharp decline, however, from 163 to 78 per 100,000.
 487 As a result, the gender difference diminished and the overall suicide rate of elderly people in
 488 Saxony slightly decreased from roughly 1900 to 1980.⁵⁴ Advantages such as the privileged
 489 ability to visit the West—and thus gain greater access to scarce goods and other items—
 490 might have offset disadvantages such as poor living conditions and inadequate health care.

492 Behavior Patterns

493 After having used the critical potential of quantitative methodology, one might ask whether
 494 such a somewhat abstract approach risks overlooking something important. Or, to put it

496 ⁴⁹BStU, MfS, HAI, Nr. 13723, 198–200, HA I/Grenzkommando Mitte/Abwehr, report, Sept. 3, 1976.

497 ⁵⁰Heinz Katschnig, “Lebensverändernde Ereignisse als Ursache psychischer Krankheiten—Eine Kritik des
 498 globalen Ansatzes in der Life-Event-Forschung,” in *Sozialer Streß und psychische Erkrankung*, ed. Heinz
 499 Katschnig (Munich: Urban und Fischer, 1980), 1–93.

500 ⁵¹See “Das Phänomen des guten Sterbens wird zunehmend an Bedeutung gewinnen.” Interview mit der
 501 Berliner Sozialhistorikerin und Suizid-Forscherin Dr. Ursula Baumann, *Ärzte-Zeitung*, May 24–25, 2002.

502 ⁵²Werner Felber et al., “Old-Age Suicide in 40 Years Former GDR,” in *Suicidal Behaviour*, ed. Klaus
 503 Böhme et al. (Regensburg: S. Roderer, 1993), 146–50.

504 ⁵³“Selbstmord. Krankheit zum Tode,” *Der Spiegel*, Jan. 30, 1963. For a more recent example, see
 505 Alexander Burdumy, “Reconsidering the Role of the Welfare State within the German Democratic Republic’s
 506 Political System,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 4 (2013): 882.

⁵⁴See Oscar Kürten, *Statistik des Selbstmords im Königreich Sachsen* (PhD thesis, University of Leipzig,
 1913); for age-specific suicide rates of the GDR, see Statistisches Bundesamt (www.gbe-bund.de).

507 differently: is there a qualitative way to relate suicide to the political culture of the GDR? In
508 fact, suicidal behavior in the GDR was not just a continuation of nineteenth-century prac-
509 tices; it was also influenced by developments and experiences under “real existing
510 socialism,” with many suicides clearly mirroring the GDR’s specific political, economic, and
511 social context. A qualitative analysis of suicides reveals a number of specific conflicts that
512 existed only under Communist regimes.

513 The files of the education authorities, for instance, contain a number of suicides caused
514 by political repression. Even if these suicides were not always recorded as political in
515 nature, the files contain clear evidence pointing in that direction—as in the 1984 suicide of
516 a female teacher. The report by education authorities that placed the blame on family
517 problems was not entirely wrong, but the primary cause of her suicide was another, namely,
518 that her husband had emigrated to the West. After recovering from a nervous breakdown,
519 she pledged to file for divorce, but then decided, a couple of months later, to apply for an
520 exit visa for herself and her two children. The authorities did not accept her private wish to
521 reunite the family and instead considered the application to be a political provocation: she
522 was dismissed from her job and then decided to take her life.⁵⁵

523 The suicide of a fourteen-year-old pupil in 1982 was similarly linked to political
524 conflict. The boy, who wanted to become a teacher, appeared to be a role model, based on
525 his performance in school and his allegiance to the regime. As a good student and as a
526 secretary of the Free German Youth, his career was as good as secure—if not for the
527 somewhat conflicting worldviews of his parents. Whereas his father supported the official
528 party line and was actively engaged on the school’s parents’ committee, his mother was
529 affiliated with the church. This was why the pupil participated in both the preparation
530 course for the secular coming of age ceremony (*Jugendweihe*, or Youth Consecration) and
531 for confirmation classes provided by the church.⁵⁶ As a concession to the mother’s
532 religiosity, his parents decided, in the end, that the son would only take part in the
533 religious confirmation ceremony and not in the *Jugendweihe*—even though his father had
534 helped prepare the local state ceremony. The extant documentation sheds little light on the
535 ensuing discussions and conflicts. On the day of the suicide, the only conspicuous sign of
536 internal turmoil was that the pupil had behaved in school in a “provocative manner” that
537 was, for him, unprecedented. He criticized, for instance, the GDR’s refusal to allow
538 citizens to choose their place of residence freely.⁵⁷

539 Conflicts within the SED leadership itself caused suicides as well. In 1958, Gerhart Ziller,
540 the economics secretary of the Central Committee, committed suicide after being accused of
541 involvement in a conspiracy against the head of the party, Walter Ulbricht. Seven years later,
542 in 1965, the head of the state Planning Commission, Erich Apel, shot himself dead on the day
543 that a trade agreement with the Soviet Union, which he had opposed, was ratified. Because
544 both officials felt mortally offended by such explicit or implicit criticism, one may consider
545 their suicides to have been a result of the dictatorial climate that prevailed within the SED. But
546 one should not forget, of course, the role of personality. The reportedly sensitive and
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549 ⁵⁵Staatsarchiv Chemnitz, BT/RdB Karl-Marx-Stadt, Abt. Volksbildung (30413), Nr. 113414, letter
550 from Bezirksschulrat Karl-Marx-Stadt to Ministerium für Volksbildung, Sept. 6 and 12, 1984.

551 ⁵⁶For conflicts about *Jugendweihe*, see chapter 2 of Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German*
552 *Democratic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵⁷BLHA, Rep. 401, BT/RdB Potsdam, Nr. 27294, report on a suicide in Potsdam, April 21, 1982.

553 emotional Ziller did not “fit the apparatchik mold,” and Apel was “an extremely ambitious
554 man who found defeats difficult to bear.”⁵⁸

555 In a similar vein, the suicides of several factory managers were linked to the pressures of
556 the command economy, which they internalized. For example, the manager of a sugar factory
557 hurled himself off a silo in the autumn of 1978: he had done everything he could to improve
558 the poor performance of the factory, but some organizational and technological problems
559 proved to be unsolvable. Despite his efforts, the district council criticized him in severe terms
560 for the serious shortcomings. The factory manager was, by all reports, a selfless,
561 conscientious, modest but also optimistic and humorous person. The police could not find
562 any personality or mental health issues that would explain his suicide, apart from a tendency
563 to ask too much of himself.⁵⁹

564 The stern and hostile atmosphere of the dictatorship might have “driven to suicide” people
565 who were unlikely to have taken their life under different political circumstances. Such
566 incidents were rare, however, and the GDR hardly created new types of conflict. After all,
567 most suicides that could be attributed to the political culture of the GDR had counterparts in
568 the earlier monarchic and democratic societies that had existed on the same territory
569 occupied by the East German state. One can legitimately accuse the GDR of having created
570 conditions that preserved the high frequency of suicide, of having provided a socialist
571 version of old conflicts, and of having failed to establish a more humane society. But the fact
572 remains that the dictatorship did not increase the overall suicide rate.

573 A qualitative approach nevertheless provides some clues pointing to a “culture of shame”
574 as one factor that helps explain East Germany’s consistently high suicide rate.⁶⁰ For example,
575 a police officer in Leipzig took his life in 1974 after his wife threatened to inform the SED
576 about his love affair with another woman.⁶¹ And a party official in the Magdeburg district
577 committed suicide in 1976 because of the shame he felt about his undignified behavior
578 during a drinking spree.⁶² In both cases, there was little specific evidence of an impact by the
579 political system as such. But these cases can nevertheless be associated with more general
580 patterns of behavior that might have increased the likelihood of suicide. Leaving aside
581 stereotypes about the supposedly “depressive-obsessive” character of Saxons, the
582 extraordinarily high suicide frequency in that southern region of the GDR suggests the need
583 for a focus on specific behavioral patterns there.⁶³ It is promising to consider unique aspects
584 of regional mentalities, notably prevailing concepts of guilt, as research on

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588 ⁵⁸Peter Grieder, *The East German Leadership 1946–73: Conflict and Crisis* (Manchester: Manchester
589 University Press, 1999), 135, 165.

590 ⁵⁹BLHA, Rep. 471/15.2, BdVP Potsdam, Nr. 1202, Kriminalpolizei Nauen, interrogations of workmates,
591 wife, and party secretary, Oct. 29 to Nov. 4, 1976.

592 ⁶⁰Haller, *Freiwillig sterben*, 43.

593 ⁶¹Staatsarchiv Leipzig, BdVP Leipzig, 24.1, Nr. 2353, Bezirksbehörde der Deutschen Volkspolizei (BdVP)
594 Leipzig, report on a suicide, Feb. 26, 1974. See also Andrew I. Port, “Love, Lust, and Lies under
595 Communism: Family Values and Adulterous Liaisons in Early East Germany,” *Central European History* 44,
no. 3 (2011): 478–505.

596 ⁶²BStU, MfS, BV Magdeburg, Abt. IX, Nr. 1259, letter from BdVP Magdeburg to MfS-Kreisdienststelle
597 [redacted], May 17, 1986.

598 ⁶³Bernhard Honnigfort, “Die wenigsten Freitode gab es zur Wendezeit,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Sept. 27,
1993.

599 Scandinavia has demonstrated.⁶⁴ Particularly relevant to the GDR is the finding that high
 600 suicide rates in Denmark can be attributed to the frequent use of guilt arousal as a childrearing
 601 practice.⁶⁵ Several scholars concur with the theory that a predominantly Protestant “culture of
 602 shame” in East Germany led to more suicides there than in West Germany.⁶⁶ The more
 603 restrained attitudes of East Germans contributed to a more “consensus-oriented culture of
 604 conflict,” and, according to Oliver Bieri, suicide rates tend to be higher in societies where
 605 aggressive behavior is frowned upon.⁶⁷

606 Since the nineteenth century, Protestant regions have had higher suicide rates than
 607 Catholic parts of Germany did. Given that most of the areas “inherited” by the GDR were
 608 Protestant—in contrast to the Federal Republic, which contained many large Catholic
 609 regions, such as Bavaria and the Rhineland—it is worth exploring the possible role that
 610 denominational differences may have played in the frequency of suicide. One explanation
 611 for such differences is the Catholic Church’s practice of confession, which can help
 612 unburden a Catholic’s conscience. Protestants (and atheists), by contrast, are supposedly left
 613 alone to deal with feelings of guilt and responsibility. Another possible explanation is that
 614 different denominations have very different attitudes toward suicide. Whereas the Catholic
 615 Church considered suicide to be a mortal sin until 1983, the Protestant Church developed a
 616 more empathetic attitude. One might question the applicability of religion to the atheistic
 617 GDR, given that the percentage of believers dropped from 91 to 30 percent over the four
 618 decades of Communist rule.⁶⁸ But there were nevertheless signs that denominational
 619 attitudes exerted a persistent influence on suicide in the GDR: whereas suicide rates in the
 620 country’s Protestant regions remained high, they were 25 percent lower in Catholic regions,
 621 such as the Eichsfeld.⁶⁹

622 Denominational differences were less relevant for the younger generations, who tended to
 623 be more atheist. But they do help explain the notable difference in the suicide rates of pen-
 624 sioners in East and West Germany. It is likely that their Christian faith mattered in particular
 625 for elderly people as they approached the possibility of dying. Felix Robin Schulz’s finding
 626 that a substantial proportion of East Germans still preferred Christian funerals supports this
 627 conclusion.⁷⁰ An additional factor—also linked to religion, to some extent—was divorce: as
 628 Durkheim has shown, high suicide rates correlate with high divorce rates, and both tend to be
 629 higher in Protestant regions.⁷¹ Saxony, East Germany’s suicide “hotspot,” had
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631 ⁶⁴Herbert Hendin, “Suicide: The Psychosocial Dimension,” *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 8, no. 2
 632 (1978): 99–117.

633 ⁶⁵Jeanne Block and Bjorn Christiansen, “A Test of Hendin’s Hypotheses Relating Suicide in Scandinavia
 634 to Child-Rearing Orientations,” *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 7, no. 4 (1966): 267–88.

635 ⁶⁶As examples, see Andreas Schulze, *Selbstmord und Selbstmordversuch in Leipzig. Zur Erklärung suizidaler*
 636 *Handlungen in der DDR* (Regensburg: S. Roderer, 1986); also see the poster by Steffen Heide and Erich
 637 Mueller, “Suizid—Sachsen bleibt seiner Tradition treu,” in Heide’s private archive.

638 ⁶⁷Oliver Bieri, *Suizid und sozialer Wandel in der westlichen Gesellschaft* (Zürich: Editions à la Carte, 2005), 183.

639 ⁶⁸Detlef Pollack, *Kirche in der Organisationsgesellschaft. Zum Wandel dergesellschaftlichen Lage der evangelischen*
 640 *Kirchen in der DDR* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994), 373. A global survey has even challenged general cor-
 641 relations between denominational differences and suicide, which underscores the importance of scrutiny. See
 642 Steven Stack, “Religion and Suicide: A Reanalysis,” *Social Psychiatry* 15, no. 2 (1980): 65–70.

643 ⁶⁹Heinz Peter Arndt, “Suizide bei psychisch Kranken im Krankenhaus und nach ihrer Entlassung” (PhD
 644 thesis, Humboldt University, Berlin, 1981), 62.

645 ⁷⁰Schulz, *Death in East Germany*, 186.

646 ⁷¹See David Childs, *The GDR: Moscow’s German Ally* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 267; Durkheim,
 647 *Suicide*, 220–39.

645 long had particularly high divorce rates. In 1910, for instance, the divorce rate there was
 646 three times higher than in mainly Catholic Westphalia, and 50 per cent higher than the
 647 average for the German Empire as a whole.⁷² Similarly, the divorce rate in the GDR was
 648 approximately 50 percent higher than in the Federal Republic.⁷³

649 The plausibility of these arguments depends, however, on the reliability of the relevant
 650 statistics. Hans Girod, a professor of criminalistics in the GDR, has claimed that higher
 651 suicide rates in East Germany were merely a result of the fact that there is a greater cover-
 652 up of suicide in Catholic regions.⁷⁴ The East-West difference was indeed arguably
 653 somewhat smaller than official figures indicate, especially given the fact that several vague
 654 categories, such as “sudden death” or “age and infirmity,” made up an extraordinarily high
 655 percentage of the causes of death in West German statistics. Moreover, the frequency of
 656 such dubious causes of death was most pronounced among older age groups, where the
 657 East-West-difference in the suicide rate was most dramatic.⁷⁵ It should also be noted that
 658 the coincidence of statistical inaccuracy and denomination was no accident. A case study in
 659 Catholic Aachen, which found that the actual number of suicides was twice as high as
 660 official figures, is an extreme example. The relatively high number of unrecorded suicides
 661 in Catholic regions is nevertheless still irrefutable, even if Girod overexaggerated its impact
 662 on overall numbers.⁷⁶ Still, the tendency to cover up the number of suicides in the Federal
 663 Republic does not provide a full explanation for the difference between official suicide rates
 664 in East and West Germany.

665 Many of the political and social factors suggested by Western authors—most notably,
 666 political repression and poor living conditions—can largely be ruled out, then, as the cause
 667 for higher suicide rates in the GDR. The number of people who would likely have chosen not
 668 to kill themselves, had political circumstances been different, was certainly small—and the
 669 factors underlying even those suicides that can be considered to have been politically
 670 motivated were often much more complex. In short, tensions resulting from the SED’s
 671 dictatorial rule increased the number of suicides only slightly. By contrast, secular
 672 differences related to mentality and denomination (e.g., the concept of guilt) are worthy of
 673 greater consideration.

674 The Persistence of a Misperception

675 If neither quantitative nor qualitative approaches support a strong correlation between dic-
 676 tatorship and suicide, why has there been such a long-lasting misperception of suicide in
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678 ⁷²Hans W. Gruhle, *Selbstmord* (Leipzig: Georg Thieme, 1940), 61.

679 ⁷³Bernhard Klose, *Ehescheidung und Ehescheidungsrecht in der DDR—ein ostdeutscher Sonderweg?* (Baden-Baden:
 680 Nomos, 1996), 289.

681 ⁷⁴Hans Girod, *Leichensache Kollbeck und andere Selbstmordfälle aus der DDR* (Berlin: Das Neue Berlin, 2000),
 682 23. The numbers presented are incomplete.

683 ⁷⁵See Statistisches Bundesamt (www.gbe-bund.de); Armin Schmidtke and Bettina Weinacker,
 684 “Suizidraten, Suizidmethoden und unklare Todesursachen alter Menschen,” *Zeitschrift für Gerontologie* 24,
 685 no. 1 (1991): 3–11.

686 ⁷⁶Armin Schmidtke, “Probleme der zuverlässigen Erfassung, Reliabilität und Validität von Suizid-
 687 und Suizidversuchsdaten als Indikatoren ‘psychischer Gesundheit’,” *Psycho* 17, no. 4 (1991): 237.
 688 Michael Zientek, “Suizide und Suizidversuche. Eine Untersuchung der Einflußgrößen und
 689 Erscheinungsformen im Gebiet der Stadt Aachen auf der Basis der Dokumentation des Notarztdienstes
 690 und weiterer Ermittlungen im Zeitraum vom 1. Januar 1978 bis 31. Dezember 1982” (PhD thesis,
 University of Aachen, 1985).

691 the GDR? In the first place, there is a long tradition of understanding suicide as a “sign of the
 692 times,” a tradition that goes back to the beginnings of systematic statistical registration in the
 693 nineteenth century.⁷⁷ Most notably, Durkheim’s conceptualization of suicide as a result of
 694 destabilized social ties influenced subsequent generations of scholars and also many
 695 publicists. During the Weimar Republic, for instance, contemporaries quickly associated
 696 suicide with a variety of factors, including national weakness, mass culture, authoritarian
 697 pedagogies, and capitalist exploitation. Both left- and right-wing organizations exploited
 698 individual cases to berate the existing political and economic order.⁷⁸ To some extent, the
 699 debate on the GDR’s suicide rate—though less intense—echoed this earlier discourse.⁷⁹

700 One should not overlook, however, the differences between the discourse on suicide in the
 701 GDR and during earlier periods of German history. The main focus of the Cold War
 702 discourse was on people supposedly driven to suicide by the SED regime. This pattern of
 703 thought emphasized “fatalistic” suicide, which appears only in a footnote in Durkheim’s
 704 study, in contrast to the prevalence of “anomic” suicide in previous debates.⁸⁰ From the scat-
 705 tered instances of suicide among dissidents, would-be émigrés, or SED officials who had
 706 fallen out of favor, the Western discourse established a slim but influential connection
 707 between suicide rates and the GDR’s totalitarian character.

708 This politicized interpretation of East German suicides was not completely farfetched.
 709 There were, in fact, several tragic, individual cases that lent it credence—cases where the
 710 individuals involved can indeed be considered as victims of repression. The suicide of
 711 Matthias Domaschk offers a prominent example. The young dissident hanged himself in a
 712 Stasi prison after being arbitrarily arrested, undergoing two days of interrogation with
 713 threats of blackmail and sleep deprivation, and signing a commitment to work as a Stasi
 714 informant. This was not the only politically motivated suicide that became well known in
 715 the West. In 1976, the Protestant clergyman Oskar Bruesewitz protested against the
 716 Communist indoctrination of the youth by carrying out an act of self-immolation. And, the
 717 following year, Western media featured a case somewhat reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet:
 718 a couple committed suicide after the young man, who had left the GDR, was not allowed to
 719 return to visit his girlfriend.⁸¹

720 Western journalists who overestimated the level of everyday terror in East German society
 721 considered such individual cases to be just the tip of the iceberg, and three main factors—an
 722 exaggerated politicization of suicides, limited knowledge about mental disorders, and the
 723 SED’s treatment of suicide as a taboo subject—all contributed to this misperception. In fact, it
 724 was often an interaction between West and East German actors wishing to level criticism at
 725 the SED dictatorship that led to a simplification of the causes of suicide. In 1977, for instance,
 726 the dissident writer Reiner Kunze—who just had left the GDR for good—gave an interview
 727 to the Hessischer Rundfunk radio station in which he mentioned the suicide of a
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730 ⁷⁷Moritz Foellmer, “Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin,” *Central European History* 42, no. 2 (2009): 220.

731 ⁷⁸Ursula Baumann, *Vom Recht auf den guten Tod* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2001); Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi*
 732 *Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

733 ⁷⁹One scholar’s work that mentioned the nexus of the GDR’s high divorce, alcoholism, and suicide rates is
 734 indicative of the long-lasting influence of Durkheim’s concept of anomie. See Roland Smith, “The Church in the
 735 German Democratic Republic,” in *Honecker’s Germany*, ed. David Childs (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985),
 736 81.

⁸⁰Durkheim, *Suicide*, 239.

⁸¹Pritzel, *Selbstmord im sozialistischen Paradies*.

737 friend of his daughter after he had been interrogated and blackmailed by the Stasi. The young
738 man's forced collaboration with the Stasi, Kunze claimed, had led him to commit suicide.⁸²
739 Yet, as his actual Stasi file clearly documents, this was not the case. The young man had
740 been under surveillance since 1975. After breaking with his father, who was loyal to the
741 regime, he joined the Junge Gemeinde, a rebellious youth organization of the Protestant
742 Church.⁸³ From the Stasi's perspective, the young man and his hippy attitude appeared to be a
743 security risk. He had hitchhiked all over the country and had talked about becoming a
744 conscientious objector. In addition, his housemate, an unofficial informant (IM), told the
745 Stasi that he had purloined some goods from work. When called out for this petty crime, he
746 quit his job as a driver and worked in a nursing home run by the church, where he had a
747 confrontation with the conservative staff. He also suffered from undesirable living conditions
748 and was unhappy in love. All this prompted him to apply for an exit visa but then, on the
749 advice of a clergyman, he decided to withdraw his application.

750 In November 1976, the young man spent some time in Jena, coinciding by chance with the
751 expatriation of the dissident singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann—which some of his friends
752 had protested by filing a petition (*Eingabe*). The Stasi responded harshly, arresting dozens of
753 suspects, including some of his friends. This almost literally scared the young man to death:
754 he responded by trying to commit suicide but was rescued. Two days later, the Stasi
755 interrogated him, an experience that seriously intimidated the young man. He was afraid of
756 being rearrested and also had vague suspicions that he was under surveillance. Yet, he never
757 suspected that his housemate had betrayed him, and that two Stasi informers had followed
758 him when he moved to East Berlin in January 1977.

759 Most of the fresh problems he faced after his arrival in the East German capital had
760 nothing to do with the Stasi, however. Rather, a private quarrel thwarted his plan to obtain a
761 residence permit by marrying a friend, for the sake of appearances. The disillusioned
762 twenty-year-old then decided to live in a shared apartment, and his roommates recom-
763 mended a church cemetery where he could be employed as a gardener. Before that, the
764 secret police had prevented him from working as film projectionist—the only provable
765 Stasi intervention in this case.⁸⁴ But that Stasi intrigue was just one in a series of mishaps he
766 suffered. It certainly did not trigger his final act of despair. Much more important was the
767 suicide of a friend: returning from the funeral in a depressive state, the young man slashed
768 his wrists because, as he told his flatmates, he wanted to suffer in the same way his suicidal
769 friend had. Later on, he gassed himself. The interrogations and clandestine actions of the
770 Stasi no doubt aggravated the young man's difficulties. But his restlessness, his pessimism,
771 and his unhappy existence could not be attributed to this alone. To blame only the regime
772 for his suicide, as Reiner Kunze did, was clearly an oversimplification.

773 It is worth noting that some East Germans who committed suicide similarly politicized
774 their suffering themselves. According to Jean Baechler, they did not misrepresent their
775

776 ⁸²“SSD trieb Freund der Familie von Reiner Kunze zum Selbstmord,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, April 4, 1977. It is
777 ironic that the person who put Reiner Kunze on the wrong track was Stasi informer Manfred Böhme. For
778 Böhme's biography, see Christiane Baumann, *Manfred “Ibrahim” Böhme. Das Prinzip Verrat* (Berlin: Lukas,
779 2015).

780 ⁸³Ehrhart Neubert and Thomas Auerbach, *‘Es kann anders werden.’ Opposition und Widerstand in Thüringen
1945–1989* (Köln: Böhlau, 2005).

781 ⁸⁴BStU, MfS, BV Gera, AOP 508/77, vol. 1, 9–17, MfS-Kreisdienststelle Saalfeld, Abschlussbericht, Feb.
782 8, 1977.

783 motivations intentionally. Rather, they projected their very private drama onto a political
784 situation, rewriting their inner thoughts and feelings as a public performance.⁸⁵ Examples for
785 this kind of individual “identity management” include the suicides of imprisoned offenders
786 who blamed the political system for their misery.⁸⁶ In the autumn of 1982, for example, an
787 inmate of the Bautzen I political prison set himself on fire. Before doing so, he tore a sheet in
788 half, wrote political protest slogans on each section, displayed one of them in the window of
789 the cell, rubbed floor polish into his skin, and then pressed the alarm button. A year earlier,
790 he had displayed another political slogan outside his cell in support of the Polish Solidarity
791 movement—which led to him being sentenced to an additional sixteen months for “slander
792 against the state.” His immediate reaction was to go on a hunger strike, where upon he was
793 transferred from a prison in Cottbus to Bautzen, where his behavior was largely
794 unobtrusive—in contrast to his prior lack of discipline and refusals to work. Only on the day
795 of his self-immolation did he refuse to fulfil his quota; the authorities sent him back to his
796 cell.⁸⁷

797 After the transfer of the severely injured man to a hospital, where he died the next day, the
798 Stasi searched the prison cell and found a suicide note behind a mirror. Some historians who
799 believe in the authenticity of suicide notes draw far-reaching conclusions from them.⁸⁸ But in
800 this case, it would be naïve to take the contents of the note seriously. The letter refers to a
801 protest leaflet that the prisoner claims to have distributed. But extensive interrogations and
802 investigations by the Stasi did not find any evidence of this. It is more likely that the protest
803 action never took place and that the prisoner used this false claim to scare the Stasi. In any
804 event, the suicide note adopts a very aggressive tone, accusing the GDR regime of Bolshevik
805 terror and criticizing it as social-fascistic. The names of West German organizations active
806 during the Cold War, such as the Kampfgruppe gegen Unmenschlichkeit (Combat Group
807 Against Inhumanity), are mixed in with all kinds of fascist vocabulary, including terms such
808 as *Führer* and *Endlösung* (Final Solution). The note even asks compatriots to commit acts of
809 sabotage and to assassinate members of the SED. It was nevertheless more an act of political
810 protest than an explanation for the suicide.

811 To what extent, however, can his suicide be attributed to political factors? Two days
812 before the prisoner died, fellow inmates had attacked him physically because of monetary
813 debts that he could not or was not willing to repay. On the morning of the suicide, two
814 prisoners insisted that he settle the debts immediately. A closer look at his biography further
815 supports the argument that the prisoner’s political provocations downplayed other factors
816 that had led to his suicide. He had been a political prisoner since 1980, of course, and had
817 even attempted to leave the country; this was considered a political crime in the GDR. But
818 the unusual harshness of his sentence—four years and eight months imprisonment—
819 resulted from the fact that he had already been imprisoned twice for fraud and robbery. In
820 fact, his life before 1980 was more or less a sequence of professional and private failures.
821 After failing to complete his vocational training as a locksmith, he began a
822

823 ⁸⁵Jean Baechler, *Tod durch eigene Hand* (Frankfurt/Main: Ullstein, 1981), 124.

824 ⁸⁶For other examples, see Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, BdVP Dresden (MUK), Nr. 5257;
825 BLHA, Rep. 471/15.2, BdVP Potsdam, Nr. 1260.

826 ⁸⁷BStU, MfS, BV Dresden, AP 2957/88, 34–36, BdVP Dresden, Dezernat I/4 Bautzen,
827 Sachstandsbericht, Oct. 25, 1982; also see the handwritten suicide note from Oct. 25, 1982, in this file.

828 ⁸⁸Baumann, *Vom Recht auf den eigenen Tod*, 340; Christian Goeschel, “Suicides of German Jews in the Third
829 Reich,” *German History* 25, no. 1 (2007): 22–45.

829 professional career in the army—but, because of serious discipline violations, the NVA
830 demoted and then discharged him. He got divorced, changed jobs frequently, and committed
831 a series of petty crimes. Released early during a general amnesty at the end of 1979, he
832 decided to move to West Germany, where he hoped to earn more money and have more
833 freedom. It is pointless to speculate about how he might have lived after a successful move to
834 the West, but it is not unlikely that new kinds of conflicts would have arisen in the Federal
835 Republic, based on the experience of a few East German mavericks who moved to West
836 Germany and then committed suicide.⁸⁹

837 It is not known why the prisoner was not released to the Federal Republic, as he had
838 hoped. Since the 1960s, there had been clandestine ransom deals, resulting in the release of
839 almost thirty-four thousand political prisoners to the West.⁹⁰ His disappointment about not
840 being considered for this was likely the main reason for the political provocations contained
841 in the prisoner's suicide note. This attempt to present his suicide in political terms obscured
842 his criminal past and created the impression that he was a victim. That was how the West
843 German media presented his case, and it did so without delving further into the man's
844 background.⁹¹ Western journalists had no access to reliable information, of course, which
845 meant that they could not verify the statements made by East German refugees. But their
846 eagerness to exploit suicides in the GDR for propaganda purposes prevented them from
847 taking a more critical stance.

848 A second factor that led to misinterpretations was limited consideration of the patholog-
849 ical aspects of suicide. In March 1977, a West Berlin newspaper quoted the fiancé of a
850 twenty-two-year-old nurse who had committed suicide in East Berlin. The fiancé, who had
851 escaped over the border one year before, attributed his partner's suicide to the Stasi
852 interrogations she had been forced to endure.⁹² After the fiancé had arrived in the Federal
853 Republic, he tried in vain to arrange for his partner to be smuggled across the border at the
854 same time that she had applied for an exit visa.⁹³ In any event, her application was rejected
855 in November 1976. This blow may have affected her mental health, but it was not the direct
856 cause of her suicide four months later. In fact, the absence of an immediate trigger provoked
857 widely differing interpretations. Her fiancé accused the East German regime, whereas
858 colleagues and members of her family blamed it on her personal issues: she had suffered
859 from depression.⁹⁴ In other words, even if she had left the country, she still may have taken
860 her own life.

861 Admittedly, for outsiders it is extraordinarily difficult to disentangle the complex set of
862 inner (mental) and outer (socio-political) factors that accounted for many suicides. The case
863 of a so-called brigadier at a Berlin-based concrete plant illustrates this. Because the man's
864 enterprise considered him to be an exemplary and conscientious worker, he

866 ⁸⁹As examples, see St., "Fehlende Wärme," *Berliner Morgenpost*, April 7, 1985; Ursula Gaerber, "Das
867 vertane Leben des Peter H.," *Schweriner Volkszeitung*, May 27, 1987; Helfried Schreiter, "Hoffentlich
868 finde ich nun endlich Ruhe," *Stern*, Nov. 5, 1987.

869 ⁹⁰Ludwig A. Rehlinger, *Freikauf. Die Geschäfte der DDR mit politisch Verfolgten 1963–1989*, rev. ed. (Halle:
Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2011).

870 ⁹¹Bernd Hummel, "'DDR' treibt Häftlinge zum Selbstmord," *Die Welt*, Dec. 20, 1984.

871 ⁹²"Aus Liebe in den Tod," *Berliner Zeitung*, March 17, 1977.

872 ⁹³BStU, MfS, AP 4267/78, MfS Berlin, Abteilung IX, Information, March 14, 1977.

873 ⁹⁴BStU, MfS, AKK 16534/77, letter from Prof. Dr. [redacted], Information, March 17, 1977; letter from
Bereich Medizin [redacted] to Parteileitung des Bereichs [redacted], March 15, 1977; letter from MfS-
874 Bezirksverwaltung Berlin, Abt. XX, Informationsbericht, March 16, 1977.

875 unexpectedly received the opportunity to buy a Russian Lada automobile—something for
876 which consumers normally had to wait ten or more years. Getting a rare and expensive
877 Lada was an extraordinary privilege, but the man realized that he did not have the money
878 to exchange his East German Trabant for a Lada. This disappointment triggered a nervous
879 breakdown: he suffered from crying fits and odd delusions—such as walking through
880 Berlin with Lenin, who showed him heaps of dirt that were to be removed. He returned
881 to work after spending two months in a psychiatric hospital, but still showed signs of depres-
882 sion. His subsequent transfer to another workplace did not ease his situation. He told col-
883 leagues there, for example, that he had sold his dacha in order to improve his financial
884 situation, and that he regretted this decision. Becoming heavily agitated after a foot operation
885 was scheduled for his son, the man went to the property of a neighbor, where he slashed his
886 wrists and died.⁹⁵ A detailed Stasi report based on a two-week investigation revealed that the
887 unexpected offer of an attractive car had triggered the man's suicidal feelings—but these were
888 not the actual cause. There had been conflicts within the family for years, and the man was
889 plagued with feelings of guilt because of his mentally handicapped daughter. After returning
890 from the psychiatric hospital, the man's pathological fears led him to believe that his son suf-
891 fered from a malignant tumor. His wife assured him that their son would only undergo a
892 harmless operation, but he nevertheless panicked and committed suicide. This case was
893 one of many suicides caused or aggravated by family conflicts and mental health issues
894 while political aspects remained superficial and non-essential. Available statistical data sug-
895 gests that it was representative of a large percentage of suicides in the GDR.

896 A third factor that helped sustain incorrect suspicions about the correlation between the
897 political system and suicide rates in the GDR was the dictatorship's own decision to treat both
898 individual suicides and statistics on suicide as taboo—a choice that often had unintended con-
899 sequences. The fact that investigations of suicide were considered a state secret not only
900 aroused suspicions but also encouraged misleading interpretations—as, for example, in the
901 case of the American singer and actor Dean Reed. The left-wing artist had lived in the
902 GDR since the 1970s and had married one of East Germany's best known actresses. He com-
903 mitted suicide in 1986, and the SED officially declared Reed's death to be a “tragic accident.”
904 The concealment of the actual cause of his death aroused suspicions of murder among his
905 friends and relatives. The Western media circulated claims that the prominent singer had
906 died after his car had plunged into a lake, and that he was found with a rope around his
907 neck.⁹⁶ That graphic account was a combination of half-truths and errors, but a more com-
908 plete picture of what had occurred failed to emerge because the Stasi homicide squad that
909 investigated the death kept all the details secret. The rumors that circulated about his
910 death were completely wrong—including one that Reed was a Western agent of, or that
911 the Stasi had murdered him to prevent him from returning to the United States.

912 The rumors could not be debunked before the opening of the Stasi archive after 1990.
913 The file on this case provides clear evidence of the role played by a private conflict. After
914 a serious argument with his wife and a first attempt to slash his wrists, Reed drove his car
915 to a lake, and damages made to the car were a strong indication of the man's excited
916 mental state. A rope was found nearby, suggesting that he had likely intended to hang
917 himself. He chose instead to take an overdose of drugs, plunged into the water and went
918

919 ⁹⁵BSStU, MfS, HA IX, Nr. 4590,21–25, Hauptabt. Untersuchung, Information zum Suicid, March 12, 1985.

920 ⁹⁶Peter Michalski, “US-Popstar von ‘DDR’-Geheimdienst ertraenkt,” *BILD*, June 24, 1986.

921 swimming—until he became unconscious and drowned. There is not the slightest hint that
922 any other person was involved. The investigation also failed to detect any political influence
923 on his decision, a conclusion supported by Reed’s suicide note. Though hastily written, the
924 fifteen-page letter highlighted Reed’s state of mind at the time he committed suicide.
925 Suggesting that he had suspected the erroneous suspicions his death would arouse, the letter
926 emphasizes his unshakeable belief in communism, and instead offers an extended criticism
927 of his wife.⁹⁷

928 Twenty-five years earlier, the tabooing of the suicide of an East German army officer had
929 provoked similar suspicions. General Vinzenz Müller died of self-defenestration on the May
930 12, 1961. He received a state funeral to maintain a pretense of normality, but that did not
931 prevent the West Berlin media from claiming that East German police officers and the Stasi
932 had driven him to suicide. According to an eyewitness account publicized in the West, a
933 prison transport vehicle had driven up in front of the retired general’s house: shortly
934 thereafter, several officers entered Müller’s house and the general jumped out the window.
935 The details of the report were close to the actual course of events, but the interpretation as a
936 whole was erroneous.

937 During World War II, Müller was one of the few high-ranking Wehrmacht officers who
938 joined the anti-Nazi National Committee for a Free Germany during his time as a Soviet
939 prisoner-of-war. He later became chief of staff of the East German National People’s Army, as
940 well as deputy minister of defense. As part of SED efforts to purge former Nazis following the
941 foundation and consolidation of the NVA, Mueller was forced to retire in 1958; he was no
942 longer invited to state ceremonies, and he was even kept under surveillance. Yet, his
943 permanent fear of arrest resulted from unjustified paranoia resulting at least in part from a
944 series of personal conflicts. Müller’s wife had committed suicide in the late 1950s, and he had
945 an uneasy conscience because of his affair with a young woman. To escape this embarrassing
946 situation, the retired general prepared to leave the GDR at the beginning of 1961, but, at the
947 very last moment, he decided to cancel his plans because of revelations in a West German
948 newspaper that he had been involved in mass shootings during World War II. Müller’s
949 situation now appeared to be precarious in both German states; he increasingly developed
950 signs of ill health and was temporarily hospitalized. On the day of his suicide, a black
951 ambulance arrived at his home; it was to bring him to the psychiatric ward of a Berlin hospital
952 reserved for government officials. Müller’s children had arranged for this under the pretense
953 that he would receive “treatment” for his kidneys. Müller was presumably suspicious and
954 misinterpreted the situation, believing that he was about to be arrested.⁹⁸

955 The SED had good reasons for silencing this suicide. Attention on a leading military figure
956 allegedly involved in war crimes was the last thing the GDR needed in its ideological battle
957 for recognition as a true “antifascist” state. Once again, however, the efforts to conceal the
958 suicide did not proceed smoothly: constant denial and the distribution of false
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960 ⁹⁷BSStU, MfS, AU 12332/86, vol. 1, 20–21, Präsidium der Volkspolizei Berlin, “Selbsttötungsversuch
961 eines Staatsbürgers der USA,” June 11, 1986; BSStU, MfS, AP 2278/92, vol. 1, 72–86, Dean Reed, hand-
962 written suicide letter to Eberhard Fensch, June 12, 1986, and MfS-Hauptabteilungen IX/7 and XX/7, Bericht
963 zu den Umständen des Todes der Staatsbürgers der USA Dean Reed, Berlin, June 18, 1986; Wolfram
964 Schröder, “Popstar Dean Rees Tod bleibt voller Geheimnisse,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, June 29, 1986; Gunther
965 Gesericke, Klaus Vendura, and Ingo Wirth, *Zeitzeuge Tod* (Leipzig: Militzke, 2003), 205–15.

966 ⁹⁸Peter Joachim Lapp, *General bei Hitler und Ulbricht. Vinzenz Müller—Eine deutsche Karriere* (Berlin:
Christoph Links, 2003).

967 information backfired.⁹⁹ Treating the suicide of prominent East Germans as taboo was, of
 968 course, grist to the mills of those in the West who were eager to attribute suicides to political
 969 conflicts—even when no reliable information was available.¹⁰⁰ Censorship, conjecture,
 970 rumor, and other factors exacerbated this tendency to politicize suicide, and, for the sake
 971 of political expediency, public discourse in the West tended to neglect the long-term cultural
 972 and pathological factors.

973 Conclusion

974
 975 The Cold War stereotype of a suicidogenic totalitarian regime has persisted in public
 976 discourse for decades, and academic debates have had little impact on this perception. The
 977 SED regime helped fuel such suspicions by making the topic political taboo. Many of the
 978 victims and the bereaved framed suicides in political terms as well, thereby providing the
 979 Western media with just the stories they were looking for. Political repression was
 980 certainly an important factor in some individual cases, but it was not the reason for the
 981 high frequency of suicides in the GDR. Contrary to superficial statistical surveys and
 982 anecdotal evidence, political conflicts played only a marginal role.

983 Both statistical data and individual case studies strongly support this conclusion. The
 984 dictatorship had no substantial influence on suicide rates in the submilieus of GDR
 985 society that were the most likely to be affected by repression—such as prisoners and
 986 military conscripts. In short, the policies of the SED regime did not significantly increase
 987 the number of people who committed suicide. Even when dozens of farmers committed
 988 suicide during the forced collectivization campaign in 1960, the effect on the overall rate
 989 was barely detectable.

990 In order to understand East Germany's high suicide rates, one has to acknowledge longterm
 991 differences between East and West Germany that are tied to *regional* patterns of behavior that
 992 existed long before 1945. Socio-cultural factors such as mentality, religious beliefs, and divorce
 993 rates played a much more important role than political repression did. Moreover, the very fact
 994 that state socialism failed to bring down suicide rates—despite full employment, low crime
 995 rates, and comprehensive social welfare—only highlights the limited extent to which a state
 996 with totalitarian aspirations was able to penetrate society and affect social developments.

997 The Western misperception of suicide in East Germany did not vanish with the end of the
 998 GDR in 1990. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was tempting to interpret the drop in suicide
 999 rates as a success of liberalization and democratization—especially since suicide rates are now
 1000 almost at the same level in the eastern and western parts of Germany. But the rapid fall of East
 1001 German suicide rates after 1990 was hardly a result of reunification.¹⁰¹ A close consideration of
 1002 the available statistics debunks the enticing idea that freedom lessens the tendency to commit
 1003 suicide. A generational breakdown of these figures reveals a creeping convergence of suicide
 1004 rates that began in the 1950s. Whereas the recorded suicides of elderly
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 1007

999“Vincenz Müller, Tod im Paterre,” *Der Spiegel*, May 24, 1961.

1000 For several examples of many, see Rainer Hildebrandt, “Grausame Schicksale in den Strafanstalten der
 1001 ‘DDR,’” *Tagespiegel*, Aug. 25, 1956; Henk Ohnesorge, “Wollte Pfarrer Günther in die Bundesrepublik?,” *Die
 1002 Welt*, Sept. 21, 1978; Franz-Josef Rickert, “Selbstmord: Jacob-Sisters trauern um ihren Pfarrer,” *BILD am
 1003 Sonntag*, Sept. 24, 1978; “Selbstverbrennung aus Verzweiflung,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, Aug. 27, 1986.

1004 ¹⁰¹See, e.g., Thomas Bulmahn, “Modernity and Happiness,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 1, no. 3 (2000):
 1005 375–400.

1013 people differed widely in the GDR and the Federal Republic, there was almost no difference
1014 for those born after 1949. This fundamental development remained hidden for decades
1015 because the relevant statistics were dominated by suicides committed by the elderly. The
1016 downward trend only first became visible during the 1980s, when those age cohorts with
1017 lower suicide rates began to have a greater demographic influence on the overall rate. It is
1018 ironic, of course, that regime-imposed restrictions on research prevented SED leaders
1019 from becoming aware of this positive trend. At the same time, anti-Communist sentiments
1020 in the West led to a similarly distorted view as well. In any event, the remarkable decrease in
1021 suicide rates in East and West Germany after 1990 has been finally recognized, at least—if not
1022 yet completely understood.
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